Shipping Day

A Refusal Lands Novel

N. Van Seters & Claude

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PART ONE

Dry Spring

April – June 2066

1

Crown Counts

The heifer had been down since one.

Thea watched her from the alley with the light off. A heifer calving for the first time would stop if you stood over her, and this one had stopped twice already, once at midnight when Thea came through on the check and once at half past one when the barn cat walked along the top rail above her. She was a black baldy, a granddaughter of the brockle-faced cow, with a white face and one white sock, and she lay on her side in the straw of the end pen with her neck stretched out and her eyes rolled back, pushing, and then not pushing, and then lying still with her breath going in and out of her like a bellows.

Two feet were showing. They were the wrong way up.

Thea put the light on.

The heifer lifted her head and looked at her and put it down again. Thea went into the pen and knelt in the straw behind her and took her coat off and laid it over the rail, and pulled the long glove up her right arm to the shoulder, and went in alongside the feet. The hocks were there. She felt the hocks, and the tail, and she sat back on her heels.

"All right," she said to the heifer. "All right. Backwards it is."

She got the chains off the nail and the handles off the shelf. She had done this alone since the spring her father turned sixty-six, when his knees had stopped letting him kneel in a pen for an hour and get up again, and he had said so at breakfast in four words, and she had said she would do the nights, and he had said all right. That had been seven springs ago. She had stopped counting the calves she had pulled alone at about two hundred. The cattle book counted them for her, in her father's pencil, from her notes on the whiteboard.

She looped the chains above the fetlocks and half-hitched them below, so the pull would go on the bone, and waited. When the heifer pushed she pulled, down and out, towards the heifer's hocks, and when the heifer stopped she stopped. A backwards calf had to come quickly once the hips were through, because the cord would pinch against the pelvis and the calf would try to breathe with its head still inside its mother, and drown in her. You had a minute, perhaps. You did not have more than that.

The hips came. Thea stood up and leaned back with her whole weight on the handles, and the heifer bawled, and the calf came out in a long wet slide onto the straw, and lay there.

It did not breathe.

She cleared its nose with her fingers. She got a straw and pushed it up one nostril, which sometimes made them sneeze and gasp, and it did not. She got her arms under it and stood up with it, ninety pounds of wet calf, and hung it over the top rail of the pen by its hips with its head down, and let the fluid run out of its mouth and nose onto the concrete. She slapped its ribs with the flat of her hand. She put it back down in the straw and rubbed it hard with a sack, against the hair, until her arms burned.

The calf sneezed.

It shook its head. Its ears came up off its skull, and it opened its eyes, which were blue and wet and did not see anything, and it breathed, and breathed again. Thea sat back in the straw.

The heifer was already up. She came round and put her nose down to the calf and blew on it, and began to lick it, rough and hard, from the head back, and made the low sound in her throat that they made, which they never made for anything else.

Thea took the chains off and went out of the pen and shut the gate.

It was ten past two. She wrote it on the whiteboard by the door under the column for the night. *Hfr 41, bull, backwards, pulled, slow to start, OK.* Under it, in the column for the spring, the number in her father's hand from the day before said 296. She rubbed it out with her sleeve and wrote 297.

Thirteen to go. All heifers. Nine of them might calve in the next week and four of them might not calve at all, and she would know which by the end of April, and then they would go to town.

She stood in the door of the calving barn and pulled her coat on.

The wind was in the south. It had been in the south for three days, warm and dry and never letting up, at night as well as in the day, which was wrong for April. The yard light hummed on its pole. Beyond it the yard was dark, and beyond the yard the flat was dark, and beyond the flat the river ran low under its cottonwoods, and the sound of it came up to her very faint, much fainter than it should have. In a normal April at this hour she would hear the river from the barn door like traffic. It was a creek this spring. She could have waded it at the ford without getting her knees wet.

North-west, a long way off, there should have been the Snowies. You could not see them at night. In the day you could see them from the barn door, the long blue back of the range forty miles to the north-west, white on top from November to June. She had looked at them every morning of her life. This year they had gone grey at the end of February and brown in March, and they were brown now, the whole length of them, the colour of a paper bag. There was no snow on them anywhere. Her grandmother said she had not seen them bare in April since 2031, and in 2031 they had been bare for a week.

She went back into the barn and walked the alley once more, slowly, with the light, past the pairs in the jugs and the heifers in the big pen, and looked at each one, and went out again, and across the yard to the house, and to bed for three hours.

• • •

Her grandmother was at the table when she came down.

Karin was ninety-eight. She sat in the chair at the end of the table nearest the stove, where she had sat since before Thea was born, with the ledger open in front of her and her reading glasses down her nose and a cup of coffee she had not drunk going cold beside it. Every morning of the year she was in that chair before anybody else was in the kitchen. Nobody knew when she got up. Thea had come down at four once, in a blizzard, to check the heifers, and her grandmother had been in the chair, and had said good morning without looking up, as if it were seven.

"Heifer?" Karin said.

"Forty-one. Backwards. He's all right."

"Bull."

"Bull."

Karin wrote it in. Her hand had gone small and shaky in the last two years, and the writing in the ledger had gone small and shaky with it, but it was still her writing, upright and narrow, the figures in their columns. She wrote the date and the number and *B* and a small *r* for *reversed*, which was her own mark, and the time. Then she looked at the time she had written and frowned at it and crossed it out and wrote it again.

"Two-ten," Thea said.

"I know what time it was. I couldn't read my own seven." She turned the ledger round on the table so Thea could see. "Is that a seven?"

"It's a two."

"Then it's right." She turned the ledger back.

Thea poured herself coffee from the pot on the stove and stood by the door with it. The barometer hung beside the door frame where it had always hung, brass and glass, older than anyone in the house. She did not tap it. Her father tapped it, every morning, on his way out, as his father had. She looked at it. The needle stood at thirty and three-tenths, as it had for a week. *Fair*, it said under the needle, in old curly letters. *Very Dry*, it said a little further round.

She took Nils's old tablet out of her coat pocket and woke it.

It had been her brother's when he was at school, and then when he was at the university in Bozeman, and he had left it on the kitchen table when he went to the campus in 2058 and bought himself a new one. It had a crack across one corner from the time he dropped it off the stock trailer. The screen still had his pictures on it, a page of them she had never deleted: the town game he had played as a boy, with its coloured pipes, and a picture of a heron on the river, and on the second screen the campus's blue badge app, which she had never opened and never taken off. She read the co-op's forecast on it every morning, standing by the door, with her coffee.

Yellowstone Valley Grazing Co-operative. Seasonal outlook, 5 April 2066. Musselshell planning area.

There were five pages. She read all of them.

The first page was the snow. The Big Snowies were at eleven percent of their median snow water for the date, the Little Belts at nineteen, the Crazies at twenty-four. There was a map with the snow pillows marked on it as little red dots, all of them red. The second page was the soil. It was dry to a metre down on the bench and dry to most of a metre on the river bottoms, and the co-op's model gave the chance of soil moisture coming back to normal by the first of June as four percent. The third page was the grass. It showed the planning area as a map in colours, like a weather map, from dark green for good to deep red for bad, and almost all of it

was red or orange, and there was a number in a box at the bottom. *Projected 2066 forage production, planning area: 38–44% of normal. Confidence: high.*

The fourth page was the advice. *Members with cow-calf operations are advised to plan for destocking of 50–65% of breeding inventory by mid-June. Early weaning is recommended. Members are advised to secure winter feed contracts before 1 June. Hay prices are projected to rise substantially across the region.* There was a list of things a member could do, with the co-op's numbers beside them for what each would cost and what each would save. There was a line at the bottom in small type, as there always was, saying that the advice had been prepared with the assistance of the co-operative's advisory system and reviewed by staff.

The fifth page was the markets. Slaughter cows were high now and would come down as everyone sold. Calf prices were good now and would come down in the autumn as everyone sold. Hay was high now and would go higher.

She read it twice and put the tablet back in her pocket.

She agreed with it. That was the thing she never said at the table and never said to her father. She agreed with nearly all of it. The snow was gone. The ground was dry. The grass on the bench and the Bull Mountain lease would come up short and brown and quit in July, and the river pasture would go with it if the river went any lower, and hay would cost what the co-op said it would cost, or more. She had looked at the same sky the co-op's satellites looked at, and dug the same dirt with a spade, and come to the same answers, every one of them, except one.

The one was the flat.

The co-op's map had the Lodgepole on it, a little irregular shape on the river with a line round it. She had looked at it with her fingers, made it big, on the third page. The flat was the same colour as the bench. Orange, going on red. 38–44%.

It was wrong about the flat.

"What's it say," her father said.

He had come down the stairs behind her. He came down every morning at half past five with his hat already on, and he came down slowly now, with one hand on the rail, and at the bottom he stood for a moment before he came into the kitchen, getting his knees under him. He was seventy-two. He would be seventy-three in May. He did not look at the tablet in her hand, and he never had, in eight years. He asked what it said, and she told him, and he went out of the door.

"Eleven percent on the Snowies," she said. "Thirty-eight to forty-four on the grass. Sell half the cows by the middle of June."

"Half."

"Half to two-thirds. Wean early. Buy your hay now."

He tapped the barometer with one knuckle. He looked at it, and at the window, at the yard, at the brown hills going grey in the first light beyond the river. "Huh," he said.

That was all. He went out. She heard the screen door bang and his boots on the porch steps, one at a time, and the dog get up off the porch and go with him.

Karin had not looked up from the ledger.

"You'll be walking the flat," Karin said.

"After I feed."

"Bring me the numbers."

• • •

She saddled the bay at eight.

He was a big, plain gelding she had started herself in 2059, out of a mare of her mother's, and he was the best horse she had ever owned and the worst to look at, with a Roman nose and feet like dinner plates. He did not care about anything. He would stand all day with the reins on the ground while she counted, and when she got back on him he would go, without asking where. She had named him Ledger when she started him, as a joke for her grandmother,

and Karin had not thought it was funny, and the name had stuck anyway.

She rode down the lane to the west gate and through it onto the flat.

The flat was a hundred and sixty acres of river bottom between the yard and the cottonwoods, and it was the best ground on the place, and in 2049 it had burned to the dirt. She had been fifteen. She remembered riding out onto it on the morning after, behind her father, the ground still smoking in places and black from the fence to the trees, and the cattle standing on the black with nothing to eat, bawling. She remembered the green coming the next spring. She had counted it. She had been sixteen and furious with her father and had gone out onto the flat in May with a bundle of survey flags she had bought at the farm store in Roundup and her grandmother's ledger, and set out forty flags in four lines of ten, and counted the crowns of the bunchgrass coming back round each one, and written them down. *Green*, she had written, or *none yet*. She had done it every week that spring. And then her father had turned the cattle out onto it too early, in May, against her, and she had watched them graze round her flags, and she had kept counting.

She had counted every spring since, at green-up, as she had begun. Sixteen years. Forty flags. This spring, with no snow on the mountains, she meant to count them twice a week until the grass quit.

The flags were not the first flags any more. Those had faded and broken and blown away in the first five years, and she had replaced them, and replaced them again, and the ones out there now were the fourth or fifth set, bright orange, on wire stems, at the same forty points. She found the points with the old GPS of her grandfather's that her mother had found in a drawer, and with a line of fence posts and a cottonwood at the river end that she could have walked to blind.

She rode to the first flag and got down and dropped the reins.

She took the hoop off the saddle. It was a ring of plastic pipe, a quarter of a square metre, that her brother had made for her one Christmas when he was fourteen, measuring it twice and gluing it in the shop with the radio on. She laid it down on the ground beside the flag, on the north side, where it always went, and knelt down beside it.

The grass in the hoop was brown. All of it, from a horse's back, was brown, last year's grass, cured on the stem and bleached by the winter and pressed flat by the wind. But she was not on a horse's back. She was on her knees with her face a foot from the ground, and down at the base of the brown, at the crowns, in the hearts of the bunches, there was green. It was very small. It was a few blades in each crown, the new leaves of the western wheatgrass and the green needlegrass coming up inside the old dead ones, an inch long, two inches, a green so pale it was nearly yellow.

She counted the crowns. A crown with green in it was a live crown. A crown without green was dead, or not yet woken, and you could not tell which in April, so she wrote it down as she had always written it, as *none yet*.

Fourteen crowns in the hoop. Eleven green. Three none yet.

She wrote it in the notebook she kept in her shirt pocket, in pencil. *1. 14. 11/3.* She got up and picked up the hoop and the reins, and walked the bay to the second flag, twenty metres on, and knelt down again.

It took her three hours. She did all forty. She did them in the order she had always done them, down the first line towards the river and back up the second, down the third and back up the fourth, and at each one she knelt and laid the hoop and counted and wrote and got up. Her knees hurt by the twentieth. The sun came up over the bench behind her and laid her shadow out long on the flat in front of her, and the shadow of the horse, and then shortened them as it

climbed, and the south wind came up with it, warm, and moved the dead grass round her, and she counted.

At the river end of the second line, at flag twenty, there was a pair of cranes on the gravel bar below the bank. Sandhills, grey, red-capped, tall as children. They were on their way north. They looked at her and the horse with their heads cocked, and one of them made the sound they made, a long rattling call that came up off the river like a wooden thing being wound, and she knelt by the flag and counted and they watched her and did not fly.

She was thirty-two. She had been thirty-two since February. There was no one on the flat but her and the horse and the cranes, and there had been no one on the flat but her and the horse at a quarter past nine on a Monday in April for longer than she could easily remember. She did not mind it, most mornings. She knelt by flag twenty and counted twelve crowns, ten green, and wrote it down, and the cranes walked off down the bar into the shallow water, slowly, picking their feet up high, as if the river were cold.

When she had done the fortieth flag she sat on the ground beside it with her back against the bay's front legs, which he allowed, and added up the notebook.

Four hundred and sixty-two crowns in forty hoops. Three hundred and ninety-one green. Eighty-five percent.

She took the tablet out of her pocket and found the co-op's third page and made the flat big with her fingers. The co-op did not count crowns. It counted green from the sky, from the satellites, a number for every square of ground the size of a tennis court, and turned the number into pounds of grass an acre, and turned the pounds of grass into cow-days. She had had Nils explain it to her once, and he had explained it well, slowly, with drawings, and she had understood it, and she had thought then and thought now that it was a good way to count grass if you could not get down on your knees.

From the sky, in April, the flat was brown. It was brown from the sky because last year's dead grass lay over it like a blanket, and the

satellite saw the blanket. It did not see under it, to the crowns. It saw what the bench looked like, the bench across the river that had been grazed to the dirt every summer for twenty years by the Rourkes and then by the colony, and it saw the same brown on the flat, and gave the flat the same number.

They were not the same. She had sixteen years of numbers that said they were not the same. The flat had been grazed light since 2050, a month later and a month shorter than the bench every year, and rested a whole summer in three. It had more crowns on it than the bench, and deeper roots under the crowns, and the roots went down to the water. In a dry year the flat came on later and held on longer, and in 2053, the last dry year, it had held on into August, three weeks past the co-op's number.

She had told the co-op, in 2053. She had written to them. A man had written back, kindly, and said that the model was updated each season with ground observations from co-operating members, and asked whether she would like to become a co-operating member, and she had not answered.

She sat against the horse's legs and looked across the flat. It was brown to the cottonwoods. The wind moved the brown. Under the brown there was the green, eighty-five percent of the crowns awake on the fifth of April, in the driest spring since anyone in the house could remember, and the co-op's number for it was forty.

It was more than forty and less than a hundred, and she did not know where between. The co-op said it knew, and it did not, and she did not know either, and she had the numbers to know that much.

She stood up and got on the bay and rode back to the yard.

• • •

Her grandmother wrote the numbers in herself.

Karin turned the ledger round and found the page, a page near the back that had been Thea's page since 2050, copied across from

the old green book that autumn in Karin's hand, with seventeen columns on it now, one for each spring, in Thea's hand. Under the seventeenth column, the new one, Karin wrote the date in her small shaking hand, and the numbers under it, one flag to a line, all forty. It took her twenty minutes. Thea sat across the table and read the numbers out of the notebook, and her grandmother wrote them, and sometimes stopped and said "Again", and Thea said it again.

At the bottom Karin wrote *462. 391. 85%.*

She looked at it for a while.

"Higher or lower than the machine," she said.

"Higher. A lot higher."

"Then put both down."

Thea took the pencil from her and wrote, under her grandmother's eighty-five, in her own hand: *Co-op, 5 Apr: 38–44% (all area).* She gave the pencil back.

Karin closed the ledger with her hand flat on the cover and kept her hand there.

"In 1988," she said, "your grandfather's father sold two-thirds of his cows in June, because the man from the extension office told him to. He bought them back in 1990 for twice what he got for them. Arne never forgave the extension office." She took her glasses off. "In 2002 your grandfather kept every cow he had, because he would not be told. He bought hay from Saskatchewan at a hundred and ten dollars a ton, which was a great deal of money, and he was still paying for it in 2006." She folded the glasses. "So."

"So what?"

"So nothing. So that's what happened in 1988 and 2002." She put the glasses in her cardigan pocket. "Your father will want to keep them."

"I know."

"And you will want to keep them."

"Yes."

"And you'll tell yourself it's not for the same reason," Karin said.

Thea did not say anything.

Her grandmother looked at her across the table with her pale eyes, the eyes she had given to Jens and Jens had given to Thea, and did not smile, and did not look away.

"It isn't," Thea said.

"Good," said Karin. "Then put that down too."

• • •

Her mother was in the log barn with an outside colt.

It was a three-year-old filly, a dun, belonging to a woman in Grass Range who bred cutting horses and sent Shannon one or two every spring. Shannon had her in the round pen at the end of the barn, on a long line, walking circles in the dust. Shannon stood in the middle and turned with her, slowly, and the filly walked and blew and tossed her head and walked, and Shannon said nothing to her at all.

Thea leaned on the rail.

Her mother was seventy. She was small and straight and had been grey since forty, and she wore her grey hair cut short as a boy's, and she stood in the middle of a round pen the way she had stood in the middle of round pens since before Thea was born, with her weight on her heels and her elbows in, turning on the spot as the horse went round. She did not look at Thea. She said, "Is it dry out there?"

"It's dry everywhere."

"I mean on the flat."

"Eighty-five percent green in the crowns."

Her mother looked at her then, for a second, and then back at the filly. "That's good."

"It's April."

"I know it's April." Shannon let out a little line, and the filly widened her circle. "Your father talked to Kieran yesterday. At the ford. Did he tell you?"

"No."

"Kieran's selling. Two-thirds. The thing in his ear says so, and Beth says it's the end of the world, and Kieran says it's June." She brought the filly down to a halt with a word, and the filly stood, and turned her head and looked at Shannon, and Shannon went up to her slowly along the line, coiling it, and put a hand on her neck. "He's going to ship the cows straight to the packer. He's not even taking them to the sale."

"That's what it says to do."

"I know what it says to do. I read it too." Her mother rubbed the filly's neck in circles with the flat of her hand. "Has your father said anything to you about selling?"

"No."

"He won't." She said it without any weight, as a fact about weather. "He'll say something at supper. He'll say it before you do, so it's his."

• • •

He said it at supper.

There were four of them at the table, as there had been since Nils went to the campus. Karin at the end by the stove. Jens at the other end with his back to the window. Shannon on the side by the door and Thea across from her, by the wall, where the calendar hung from the co-op with a picture of Angus heifers in a green field on it that nobody in the house had ever thought was funny. They had stew, from the beef they had killed in November, and bread, and canned beans from Shannon's garden, from August, when there had still been water in the ditch.

Jens ate. He ate as he always ate, with his head down and his left arm along the edge of the table round his plate, as he had eaten at haying crews' tables as a boy, when there had been twelve men to feed and not enough of anything. He did not talk while he ate. Nobody did, much. The clock over the stove ticked, and the south

wind pushed at the window behind him and rattled it in its frame, and stopped, and pushed again.

When he had finished he put his fork down across his plate and wiped his mouth.

"Cows stay," he said.

Nobody said anything.

"We're not shipping in June," he said. "We're not shipping on contract. We'll wean in October, same as every year. We'll sell what's open and what's old, same as every year. We'll buy hay." He looked down the table at his mother, and then at Shannon, and then at Thea. "I talked to Kieran."

"I heard," Thea said.

"He's going to sell two hundred cows to a packer in Nebraska in June on the say of a thing in his ear." Jens folded his napkin, once, and put it on the table beside his plate. "He can do what he wants. It's his place."

She had already decided. She had decided on the flat, sitting against the horse's legs, with the notebook in her hand, on her own counts, sixteen years of them, and her own reasons. *The flat will carry them through July. If it rains at all in June it'll carry them into August. We sell the old and the open cows in October, the way we always do, and we buy hay, and we'll be a long way in debt in the spring, and we'll be in the cow business.*

And he had said it first, without numbers, in two words, with his fork across his plate.

It was the same answer. It galled her more than she could have said, sitting there by the wall with her hands in her lap under the table, that it was the same answer.

"The flat's at eighty-five," she said.

"Your grandmother said."

"In the crowns. Green in the crowns. The co-op's got it at forty."

"Co-op's got everything at forty."

"That's what I'm saying. It's wrong about the flat. It's not wrong about the rest." She heard her voice go up and brought it down. "It's not wrong about the hay. Hay's going to be three times what it was. The bench is going to quit in July. The lease is going to quit."

"So we'll bring them home in July."

"And put them on the flat. And then the flat quits in August."

"So we'll feed in August."

"At three times the price."

"At whatever the price is." He looked at her down the length of the table, and his face did nothing at all. "You want to sell them?"

"No."

"Well then."

"I want us to keep them on the numbers," she said. "Ours."

Her father looked at her for a long moment.

"What's the difference," he said, "in October?"

She opened her mouth and shut it.

Karin put her spoon down. She did it carefully, with a little click against the bowl, and everybody at the table looked at her. She did not look at any of them. She wiped her mouth with her napkin and folded it.

"Jens," she said. "Thea counted the flat this morning. Forty flags. You might ask her what she found."

"She told me. Eighty-five."

"You might ask her what it means."

Jens was quiet. The wind pushed at the window behind him.

"What's it mean," he said to Thea.

So she told him. She told him all of it, with the numbers, the way she had planned it in the shop. The crowns and the roots. 2053 and the three weeks. The bench and the lease and the river pasture going in July, and the flat holding into August if it rained at all, and the hay they would have to buy if it did not, two hundred tons, perhaps more, at whatever it cost by October. The old cows and the open cows. The bank. She told it standing up, because at some point she

had stood up without noticing, with one hand on the back of her chair, and her father sat and listened to all of it with his arms folded and his eyes on the table in front of him, and did not interrupt her once.

When she had finished he nodded.

"Cows stay," he said. He got up, and took his plate to the sink, and put his hat on, and went out.

Her mother got up and began to clear the table. She did not look at Thea. She picked up Thea's plate, which still had half the stew on it, and looked at it, and put it back down in front of her, and picked up her own instead.

Her grandmother opened the ledger.

• • •

At ten she went out to the calving barn for the check.

The south wind had dropped with the sun and the night was still and warm and smelled of dust. She walked the alley with the light. Heifer forty-one was up and the calf was up, under her, butting at the bag, with his tail going. Nobody else was calving. She stood at the end of the alley for a while with the light off and listened to them, the pairs in the jugs and the heifers in the big pen, the sound of them breathing and shifting in the straw and the calves sucking, and the barn cat somewhere up in the hay.

Then she went out of the far end of the barn, not the yard end, and through the gate there and down the lane to the west gate, and leaned on it.

The flat lay out in front of her under the stars, dark, to the line of the cottonwoods. She could not see the flags. She knew where every one of them was.

Beyond the cottonwoods, beyond the river, up on the Rourke bench, there were the lights of the campus.

You could see them from anywhere on the place, but from the west gate they stood straight up out of the dark at the end of the

flat, as if the flat ran up to them. There were eight halls, long and low and grey in the day, set out in two rows on the bench above the far bank, and the cooling towers, and the dormitory block, and the substation, and the fence round all of it. At night they were a line of white lights along the bench, very even, like a town where all the houses were the same, and on top of the cooling towers there were red lights, for aircraft, that came on and went off together, slowly, all night. She could see them come on. She could see them go off. On, and off.

Her brother was in there somewhere. He worked nights, four on and three off. He had a flat in the housing blocks below the halls with a window that looked north, over the river, and he had told her once, on the telephone, that on a clear night he could see the Lodgepole's yard light from it, if he knew where to look.

She did not look at the lights long. She never had.

She stood at the gate a while longer with her arms on the top rail, and that was how she heard the pump.

It was down at the river, at the west end of the flat, where the pivot pump sat on its skid on the gravel bar with its intake pipe out in the channel. Her father had started it that afternoon for the first time that year, to put a little water on the west meadow before the grass came, because there had been no snow to do it. She had heard it running when she came out of the barn, a low even hum under the cottonwoods that she had not noticed because she had heard it every spring of her life. It was not a hum now. It had gone up. It was a whine, rising, ragged, with a knock in it, and then a scream.

She ran.

It was a quarter of a mile. She ran it in the dark down the edge of the flat with the light in her hand, and the sound got louder, and when she came down the bank onto the gravel bar it was so loud she could feel it in her teeth. The pump was shaking on its skid. The intake pipe ran out from it across the gravel into the river, to the screen box on the end, which was supposed to sit a foot under the

water. It was sitting on the gravel. The river had gone down past it since the afternoon, or had never been as high as her father thought, and the screen box lay in two inches of water with its top out, and the pump was sucking air and water together and tearing itself apart.

She found the switch on the panel and pulled it.

The scream ran down. It took a long time. The pump knocked, and knocked again, and stopped, and in the silence she could hear the river, very small, going over the gravel, and smell hot metal and burnt grease, and the steam coming off the pump casing in the light of her torch.

She put her hand near the casing. She did not touch it.

She knew what it was before she had looked. The bearings. You did not run a pump dry for an hour and keep the bearings. It was a big pump, the one that fed the two pivots on the west meadow, and the meadow was where the Lodgepole grew most of the hay it fed in a winter, and the pump had cost her father nine thousand dollars in 2047, and the shop in Billings that rebuilt them had a wait in a dry spring of a month, and the river was below the intake, and would be lower in a month.

She stood on the gravel bar in the dark with the light on the pump and did the sum. The west meadow, without its April water, in a spring like this. Half of what it made. Perhaps less. The other meadows were on the ditch, and the ditch came off the same river.

She had told the table at supper that they would have to buy two hundred tons. She stood by the pump and put another hundred on it in her head, and did not like the number she came to.

She did not wake her father. There was nothing he could do at eleven at night that she could not, and nothing either of them could do until morning, when they could get the backhoe down onto the bar and dig a sump in the river bed below the intake, and pull the pump, and ring Billings. She stood by it until the casing had stopped ticking. Then she went back up the bank and across the dark flat,

past the flags she could not see, and walked the alley in the calving barn once more, slowly, with the light, and went across the yard to the house, and up the stairs past her parents' door, which was shut, and her grandmother's, which was open a crack with the lamp still on behind it.

2

The Plan

"Good morning, Kieran," the voice said. "It's five-oh-four. Forty-six degrees, wind south at twelve. No precipitation in the seven-day."

He had the earpiece in before his boots were on. He did not remember putting it in. He sat on the edge of the bed in the dark with one boot in his hand and listened to it, and Rae turned over beside him and pulled the quilt over her head.

"Overnight weights from the water," the voice said. "Two hundred and ninety-one cows crossed the scale at the south tank. Average eleven hundred and forty, down eight pounds on the week. Calves at side average two hundred and six, up nineteen. The bench grass index is at thirty-one. It was thirty-four on Monday."

"All right," he said, very low.

"Brigid's birthday cake is ready for collection at the bakery in Roundup after ten on Saturday. You asked me to remind you on Tuesdays."

"Thank you."

"And the destock plan is ready for you to look at again, with the offers in. I've put it on the office screen."

He put the other boot on and went down.

• • •

The office had been his grandfather's, and then his aunt's, for a while, when she had run the Rourke books before she married across the river, and then his father's, and then his. It was the old cookhouse, forty yards from the house, with a window that looked east, and a desk under the window, and a filing cabinet that nobody had opened since 2044 because everything in it was in the Companion now. On the wall over the filing cabinet there was a photograph of his grandfather Declan at the Prosper Stampede in 1999, on a grey horse, with a rope in his hand and his hat pushed back and his mouth open, shouting at someone out of the picture. Kieran had never known who.

He sat down with his coffee. The screen came on before he touched it.

Rourke Land & Cattle. Destock plan, drought year 2066. Prepared 2 April. Revised 6 April, with offers.

It was a good plan. He could see that before he had read the first line, from the shape of it, as he could see from the shape of a cow coming down an alley whether she would turn. It was laid out the way the Companion laid everything out for him, which was the way he had taught it to lay things out over sixteen years, without knowing he was teaching it: the numbers first, then the dates, then the reasons, then the other ways it could go and what each would cost. There was nothing in it he would have had to ask about. There never was any more.

Breeding inventory 312 cows, 14 bulls, 48 replacement heifers. Projected forage on Rourke deeded and leased ground, 2066: 36% of normal, confidence high. Projected hay production: 31% of normal. Projected regional hay price, delivered, November: $310–360 a ton.

Recommendation: reduce breeding inventory to 107 cows by 14 June. Ship 205 cows (oldest, open, late-calving and lowest-weaning first; list attached) for slaughter on direct contract. Retain 48 replacement heifers on irrigated meadow. Early-wean calves from shipped cows at about 120 days onto meadow and supplement. Forward-contract all steer and surplus heifer calves for September delivery. Offers attached.

There were three offers. A packer in Nebraska for the cows, at a price per hundredweight that was high, higher than he had seen for slaughter cows since 2053, with a line under it saying it would not stay high. A feeder in Colorado for the steer calves and a backgrounder near Billings for the heifers, both for delivery on the fifteenth of September at the scales at the place, at a base weight and a slide. The Companion had put the price it expected for the same calves at the Prosper ring in October beside each offer, in grey. The grey numbers were lower. They were a great deal lower.

Under that it showed him what happened if he waited.

If inventory is held at 312 through 30 September: projected purchased feed 640 tons. Projected cash cost $214,000–$248,000. Projected cow condition at weaning: poor. Projected open rate 2067: 18–24%. Projected effect on equity, 2066–2068: –$390,000 to –$520,000. There was a line on a graph going down, and a band of grey round it where it might go, and the band went down too.

If inventory is reduced as recommended: projected purchased feed 90 tons. Projected effect on equity, 2066–2068: –$40,000 to +$15,000. Rebuild from retained heifers and purchased bred stock beginning autumn 2067, subject to forage.

He read it all. Then he sat back and drank his coffee, which had gone lukewarm, and looked out of the window.

The window looked east, down the river. The sky was going from black to grey over the bench, and the bench lay along the skyline downriver under it, a long flat-topped wall of grass with the light

coming up behind it. On top, at the near end, he could see the colony.

He could see the barns first, as you always did, because they were the biggest things on the bench: the long hog barn and the two laying barns, low and white, and the shop with its big doors, and the grain bins, a row of eight of them, silver, catching the first of the light. Then the houses, two long rows of them, and the kitchen and the church and the school at the end, all of them the same pale grey with the same green roofs. A line of cottonwoods they had planted along the north side, too young yet to be a windbreak. Smoke from the kitchen chimney going up straight. It had not been there when he was a boy. When he was a boy the bench had been Rourke grass from end to end, and the trail had crossed it along the foot of the Hogback, and he had ridden it with his father and his grandfather, and with the Tollefsens' cattle coming the other way.

He had sold it to them in 2052. Eleven hundred acres, the bench and the trail and the spring at the north end, to Sixmile's daughter colony, for a fair price, which the colony borrowed from the bank. Beth had not spoken to him for a week. People in Prosper had asked him why, and he had said the colony made a good offer, and the Rourkes had more grass than they could graze and needed less debt than they had, and that had all been true. The rest he had told nobody. After the deposition, in March 2051, he had sat in his truck in the lawyer's car park in Billings for two hours, and in the spring he had stood at the gate at the foot of the trail and understood that every May and every October for the rest of his life he would have to decide whether Jens Tollefsen's cattle crossed it. So he had sold the gate.

He looked at the colony for a while. Then he looked back at the screen.

"Are there questions," the voice said in his ear, "or would you like to approve?"

"I'll look at it again tonight."

"Of course. The packer's offer is good until noon on Friday. The calf offers are good until the fifteenth. I'll remind you."

• • •

Rae had the children at the table when he came in.

Conor was eight and Brigid was nearly six, and they ate breakfast the way they did everything, Conor slowly, reading the cereal box, and Brigid fast, talking, with milk on her chin, as if breakfast were a thing to be got through on the way to something better. Rae stood at the counter in her school clothes, making their lunches, with her hair still wet. She taught the fourth grade at Prosper. She had come out from Miles City to do it in 2056, for a year, she had said, and she had met him at the Stampede that July in the beer garden, when he was there to look at a horse and she was there because the other teachers had brought her, and she had stayed.

His mother was in the chair by the window.

It had been his grandfather's chair. Declan had sat in it in the evenings for forty years, with the newspaper and later with the earpiece, talking to the cattle markets in Omaha in a low voice as if they were somebody in the room, and after he died his son Conor had not sat in it, and Kieran had not sat in it, and Beth had. She sat in it in the mornings now, with her tea, at seventy-seven, in her dressing gown, and watched the children eat, and the yard, and the river. She was a Roundup girl. Her people had run sheep on Big Coulee when there were still sheep, and she had married into the Rourkes at nineteen and taken up the way they talked so completely that most people in the county did not remember she had not been born to it.

"You've a face on you," she said to him.

"It's the plan."

"Is it now." She drank her tea. "And what does the plan say."

"Sell two-thirds of the cows by the middle of June."

Conor looked up from the cereal box.

"Two-thirds," Beth said.

"Two hundred and five. To a packer in Nebraska."

"Not through the ring?"

"Not through the ring. Straight to the packer. On a truck from here." He poured himself coffee. "And the calves sold ahead for September, at the scale, at a price we'd not see in October if we waited."

His mother looked at him. Then she looked out of the window, at the river.

"Your grandfather sold a hundred cows in 2002," she said. "Through the ring, at Prosper, in July. He stood on the catwalk and watched them go through and he'd not speak to anyone for a day after. And Arne Tollefsen across the river kept every cow he had, and bought hay from Saskatchewan, and nearly went under." She drank her tea. "And your grandfather was right."

"He was."

"He was right, and he hated it, and he'd not have done it at all if your grandmother hadn't sat up with him two nights over the figures." She put the cup down on the saucer, carefully. "He did it himself, Kieran. With a pencil. He didn't have a thing in his ear tell him."

"It's the same figures, Mam."

"It's not the same anything." She did not raise her voice. "I don't like it. I've never liked it. I didn't like it in your grandfather's ear and I didn't like it in your father's, God rest him, and I don't like it in yours. It talks to you like a wife."

Rae, at the counter, laughed.

"It does," Beth said to her. "You know it does. It tells him when to pick up the cake."

"It tells me when to pick up the cake too," Rae said. "I asked it to."

"That's different. You're a modern girl." Beth looked back at Kieran. "Take it out. At the table. Your father always took it out at the table."

He had not known that. He stood with the coffee pot in his hand and looked at her.

"At the end," she said. "The last few years. He'd take it out and put it on the windowsill there, and eat his supper, and put it back after. He said it was the only way he could hear what anybody was saying." She looked at the windowsill as if the earpiece might be there. "I'll not have it at the table, Kieran. That's all."

He put the coffee pot down. He took the earpiece out of his ear and put it on the windowsill beside her, on the white paint, and sat down.

"Are the cows going away?" Conor said.

"Some of them."

"Which ones?"

"The old ones. The ones that didn't calve. The ones that calved late." He reached over and took the cereal box out of the boy's hands and put it down on the table so he would have to look at him. "There's no grass this year. You've seen the bench."

"It's brown."

"It's brown. It's going to stay brown. If we keep all the cows we'll have to buy hay for them all summer and all winter, and hay's going to cost more than the cows are worth."

Conor thought about this with his whole face, the way he thought about everything. "Is Patch going away?"

Patch was a cow. She had been a bucket calf in 2061, a twin, the one her mother would not take, and Conor and Rae had raised her on a bottle in the shed by the house, and she was five now and had had three calves, and she would still come to the fence when Conor called her and put her head down to be scratched between the ears. She was on the list. Kieran had seen her number on the list on the screen that morning, three lines from the top, because she was a twin and had had twins herself last year and lost one, and she had calved late this year, the last week of March. The Companion did not know she was Patch. It knew she was cow 5-118.

"I don't know yet," he said.

Brigid put her spoon down.

"Patch isn't going away," Brigid said. "She's Conor's."

"She's the ranch's."

"She's Conor's," Brigid said. "And she's a little bit mine. I fed her twice."

Rae came over with the lunches in their bags and put them on the table, one in front of each child, and put her hand on the back of Brigid's neck, under the hair. She did not look at Kieran. She said, to both children, "Teeth. Bus in ten minutes," and they went, Brigid still talking, up the stairs.

Rae stood by the table.

"What's left?" she said.

"What?"

"If you sell two-thirds. What's left for you to do, in the summer?" She said it quietly. She was not angry, he thought; she was asking. "You'll have a hundred cows and the heifers and the meadow. You've got two men. You'll be done by noon."

"There's the hay."

"There's no hay. You said."

He did not answer. She picked up her bag off the counter and her keys, and stood for a moment by the door, looking at him.

"I'm not saying don't," she said. "I'm saying what then."

She went out. He heard the children come down the stairs behind her, and the screen door, and the car, and the bus coming along the river road and stopping at the end of the lane, and the car coming back. His mother sat in the chair by the window with her tea.

The earpiece lay on the windowsill beside her. He could hear it, very small, from across the room, saying something to nobody.

• • •

He went out to the pens at nine.

The Rourke pens were bigger than the Lodgepole's, and newer, steel instead of wood, built in 2038 with the money from the lease, with a squeeze chute that weighed and tagged and recorded every animal that went through it and sent the numbers to the Companion before the animal was out of the chute. The two men who worked for him were there already, sorting heifers. He leaned on the fence and watched them for a while. He did not need to. They knew what they were doing, and the Companion had told them that morning what to sort, on their phones, and they were sorting it.

In the end pen, by himself, there was the sorrel.

He was a heeling horse. Kieran had bought him in 2058 from a man in Big Timber who had won the heeling at the Livingston Roundup on him twice and was getting too old to rope, and he had paid more for him than he had paid for anything since his truck. He was eleven now. He was fat. He had been fat for three years. He stood in the end pen in the sun with one hind foot cocked and his lower lip hanging, and when Kieran came along the fence he lifted his head and looked at him, and put it down again.

Kieran had roped on him four times. Twice at jackpots in Roundup in the summer of 2058, with a man from Musselshell heading for him, and they had won one of them. Once at the Stampede that July, with Rae and the baby in the stands, and they had missed. Once at the branding in 2059. And then the place had needed him, and then the children had come, and then the Companion had wanted the heifers on a new rotation and the meadow reseeded and the lease renegotiated with the consortium, and every year there had been a reason, and the sorrel had got fat.

He went into the pen. The horse let him come up and put a hand on his neck.

"I'll not sell you," Kieran said to him. "Don't think it."

The sorrel blew out through his nose.

It was the thing he wanted. He wanted to rope. He did not want to run a ranch. He had wanted, at twenty-two, to be a heeler, and to

start colts for the summer, and to go down the rodeo road for a few years with a good horse and a good header and see whether he was any good, and then come home and work for his father until his father was old. And then his father had turned off the sheriff's sweep route on the night of the twenty-fourth of August, in the old Ford, into the Tollefsen paddocks, and it had all come to him at once, at twenty-two, the cows and the ground and the lease and the debt and the lawsuit and his mother and his grandfather's chair, and he had taken it because there was nobody else to take it. And the voice in his ear had helped him. He would not have got through 2050 without it. He knew that as well as he knew anything.

He took his hand off the horse and went out of the pen and shut the gate.

• • •

In the afternoon he drove the river road to look at the water.

It was low everywhere. The ditch from the Rourke headgate had a trickle in the bottom of it that a dog could have stood in, and the stock tank on the lower meadow, which was fed from the ditch, was down a foot and a half, with a ring of green slime round the inside of it above the water like the ring in a bath. He stood and looked at it. The Companion had told him at noon that it would be down a foot and a half. It had told him the flow at the headgate to a tenth of a cubic foot a second, and the rate the tank was falling, and the date it would be dry if nothing changed: the nineteenth of May.

"I know," he said, out loud, to the tank.

"I'm sorry?" said the voice.

"Nothing."

He drove on down the river road to the ford.

The ford was where it had always been, at the bottom of the lower meadow, where the river went wide and shallow over a gravel bar between the Rourke cottonwoods and the Tollefsen ones. In a normal April it was a ford for a horse or a pickup and nothing else,

with the water up over a horse's knees and pulling. Today it was a gravel bar with a stream across it. He got out of the truck and walked down to the edge.

On the far side, at the top of the Tollefsen bank, under the cottonwoods, there was a rider.

It was Thea, on that big Roman-nosed bay of hers that looked as if he had been put together out of the parts of three other horses. She was sitting at the top of the bank with the reins loose, looking at the water, and she had not seen him, and then she had. She lifted a hand. He lifted a hand back.

She rode down the bank. The bay went down it the way he went down everything, with his head low and his big feet finding the way without being asked, and onto the gravel, and into the stream, which came to his fetlocks, and across, and up onto the Rourke gravel. She stopped him a length away and sat there.

"You could walk it," she said.

"You could."

"Dad says you're selling."

"Two-thirds. In June." He put his hands in his jacket pockets. "To a packer."

"I know. Mom said." She looked past him, at the meadow, at the tank, at the cattle on the slope above it, red and black on the brown. "We're keeping them."

"He told me. At the ford, Sunday." He looked up at her. "He told you?"

"He told the table. At supper. Last night." She smiled, not much. "After I'd decided. Before I could say."

He laughed. He could not help it. She looked at him with her eyebrows up and then she laughed too, a short laugh, through her nose, and the bay put his head down and blew on the gravel.

They had grown up on either side of this ford. They had crossed it to each other's houses for brandings and birthdays and funerals and once, when she was ten and he was seventeen, because she had

stolen his rope and he had chased her across it on foot in November and gone in to his waist. Their fathers had fought for thirty years, and their grandfathers before them. On the night of the fire hers had been on the road above the ford with the herd and his had been on the river road below it in the old Ford, on the sheriff's sweep, and in the morning one of them had come home.

He looked at her on the horse.

"It'll cost you," he said.

"I know what it'll cost."

"You'll be feeding from August. At three hundred and more."

"I know."

"I've the numbers, Thea. I'll send them to you. You can look at them. It's not a—" He stopped. "It's a good plan. Ours. It's a good plan."

"I'm sure it is," she said. "I read ours. The co-op's. It's a good plan too." She gathered the reins. "It's wrong about the flat."

"What about the flat?"

"It's wrong about it." She turned the bay. "I'll show you in June, if you want. If it's still green."

She rode back across. The bay went into the water and across the gravel and up the far bank, and at the top, under the cottonwoods, she went on up through the trees towards the Lodgepole flat, and was gone.

He stood at the edge of the water for a while.

It was very quiet. The river made a small sound going over the gravel. Upstream a heron stood in the shallows with its neck folded, looking at nothing. The sun was going down behind him, over the cottonwoods, and the light came long across the water and lit the far bank and the cottonwoods, and the trunks went gold, and the bench downriver went a colour like the inside of a shell, and the colony's grain bins on top of it went for a minute bright as mirrors, and then dull.

"Kieran," the voice said.

"Yes."

"It's six-forty. Rae asked me to remind you that it's your night to do bath."

"Thank you."

He did not move. The heron did not move.

"And you said you'd look at the destock plan again tonight," the voice said. "It's still on the office screen. Would you like me to read you the summary while you drive?"

"No," he said. He looked at the far bank, where she had gone up through the trees. "No. I've read it."

"Would you like to approve it?"

The heron unfolded its neck and struck at the water, and came up with nothing, and folded its neck again.

"Yes," he said. "Approve it."

"Approved," the voice said. "I'll book the trucks for the ninth of June and confirm with the packer before noon tomorrow. I've added the calf contracts to your list for the fifteenth. Is there anything you'd like me to keep off the list?"

He thought about Patch, at the fence, with her head down for Conor to scratch.

"Not yet," he said, and went back to the truck.

3

Storage Water

She hauled water before she left.

The creek had dropped below the stock tank's intake in the second week of March, which it had never done in March in her lifetime or her father's, and since then somebody had filled the tank in the horse pasture every morning from the well at the house with the old tank on the flatbed. Mostly it was her. Her father could still do it, and did when she was in Lame Deer, but she had watched him do it once from the kitchen window in March, getting the hose off the reel and up onto the flatbed and the pump started, and it had taken him a quarter of an hour, and when he got back in the cab he had sat with his hands on the wheel for a while before he drove. She had not said anything. She had started getting up at half past five.

The two horses were at the tank when she drove up, waiting, as they did now. Her father's old gelding and the mare. They stood back while she ran the hose over the side and started the pump, and then came in and put their noses down into the stream of water as it came, before it reached the tank, and drank from it, and splashed her, and she let them.

It was a cold morning, the eighth of April, clear, with frost on the grass in the low places and none on the hills. Up the valley the sun was not up yet but the sky over the divide was white with it, and the

pine ridges on the far side of the creek stood black against the white, and you could see a long way. There was no snow anywhere. Not on the divide, not in the north draws where it usually lay into May, not on the Wolf Mountains away to the south-west. In April, from this tank, there should have been snow on the Wolf Mountains.

She held the hose with her left hand. Her right, with the short finger, she kept in her coat pocket in the mornings now, because it ached in the cold and always had.

When the tank was full she shut off the pump and coiled the hose and drove the flatbed back to the house, and went in, and washed, and changed into the clothes she wore to Lame Deer, and came down. Her father was at the kitchen table with his coffee and the radio, listening to the farm report out of Billings with his head on one side.

"Slaughter cows up two," he said.

"Everyone's selling."

"Everyone's going to." He turned the radio down. "Who's coming today?"

"The consortium. The water people from Denver and an engineer."

"About the Tongue."

"About the Tongue."

He nodded. He turned the radio back up, not very far, and she took her coffee in the steel cup and went out to the car.

• • •

It was forty minutes to Lame Deer, east over the divide and down Lame Deer Creek. She knew the road well enough to drive it asleep, and on some mornings in the winter she nearly had. She drove it with the radio off.

She had been home since October 2052. Thirteen and a half years. She had come back with a small grey car and a rented trailer and a job she had more or less invented in conversation with the

people at the water office, because the tribe had a compact and storage water in a reservoir off the reservation and the right to sell it, and nobody had ever sold any, and they wanted a lawyer of their own who had sat on the other side of the bench at the water court and knew how the state thought. She had sat on the other side of the bench for twelve years. She knew how the state thought. She knew it better than she would have liked.

In thirteen years the tribe had sold some water. Not much. A contract with a coal company's reclamation project in 2056, for five years, for not very much money. A contract with the Tongue River irrigators in two dry summers, at a price she had fought for and got. An agreement with the state about a fish flow. She had written all of them. She had read every page of all of them with a ruler, as a man in the tribal office had read the coal leases in 1972, in the story her grandmother told, and found nothing in them she was ashamed of.

The office was in the tribal building, on the second floor, at the back, with a window that looked down the creek. There were four of them: the director, who had been a hydrologist with the Bureau of Reclamation for twenty years before he came home, and a young hydrologist who had come back from Bozeman, and a woman who kept the office and knew where everything was, and Mariah. The water office had a wall map of the Tongue basin that went from the Bighorn Mountains in Wyoming down to the mouth of the river at Miles City, eight feet long, with the reservoir in the middle of it in blue, and her desk was under the map.

The consortium was early. Two of them, in the conference room off the hall, at a table that had been set for seven. A woman of about fifty with short grey hair and a good wool coat, who had a folder in front of her made of real paper, and a man of about thirty with a tablet and a beard, who stood up when Mariah came in and sat down when the woman did not.

"Ms. Harris," the woman said. "Thank you for seeing us."

"We're waiting for the president," Mariah said. "And two of the council. Can I get you coffee?"

• • •

The president chaired the council and he chaired the meeting. He was a big, soft-spoken man of sixty who had ranched on Muddy Creek all his life and been on the council for twenty years, and when he came in with the two council members he shook hands with the consortium people as if they had come about a horse. Mariah sat at the end of the table with her legal pad. She did not speak until he asked her to. She had learned that in thirteen years, and she had learned it fast. The council held the authority. The council would decide whether the tribe sold its water, and to whom, and for how long. She was its lawyer. She wrote things down and, when she was asked, told the council what they meant.

The woman from Denver laid it out. She did it well, without slides, from the folder, looking at the president and not at her notes.

The campus on the Musselshell had eight halls. The consortium had filed in March for a third phase, two parts of it. The first part was at Prosper, on ground it had bought at the edge of the town: four more halls, cooled by air, which needed power and not much water, and would get the power from the line. The second part was at Colstrip.

"On the plant site," the woman said. "Where the old generating units were. The site's already zoned, the transmission's already there, the rail's there. It's the best site for a hall of this size between Spokane and Minneapolis." She turned a page. "But a hall at Colstrip has to be water-cooled. It's too big for air. And it has to be cooled from inside the basin."

"The Yellowstone Compact," Mariah said.

The woman looked at her. "Yes."

"You can't bring water into the basin from outside it without the consent of the other states. You can't take it out either. So it has to

be Yellowstone water, or Tongue water, or Bighorn water." She wrote it down as she said it, out of habit. "And the mainstem's contracted. And the state has nothing to sell you that it hasn't sold."

"That's correct."

"And the tribe has twenty thousand acre-feet a year of storage and exchange water in Tongue River Reservoir," Mariah said, "under the compact, which it has the right to market. And has mostly not marketed. Because nobody has wanted it, until now, at a price that was worth the trouble."

"We'd like to change that," the woman said.

She told them how much. Twelve thousand acre-feet a year. For twenty years from the first delivery, with options for two terms of ten years more. Delivered at the reservoir and moved from there by a pipeline the consortium would build, to the hall. The consortium would pay for the pipeline and the intake and the pumping and everything else. She told them the price per acre-foot. Mariah wrote it down, and underlined it, and wrote beside it the price the irrigators had paid in 2061, which was a quarter of it.

The president listened to all of it with his hands folded on the table.

"And the pipeline," he said. "Where does it go?"

"That's to be determined. Our engineers are working on it." The woman looked at the young man with the tablet. "There are several ways to get from the reservoir to Colstrip. Some of them cross the reservation. Some of them don't."

"Which ones do you want?"

"The cheapest," the young man said, and then looked as if he wished he had not.

The president did not smile. "That's honest," he said.

"There's one more thing," the woman said. "I'd like to say it now, so that nobody thinks we're hiding it. We know about the Rosebud." She looked at the president, and then at Mariah. "We know the compact doesn't let the tribe move water that rises in Rosebud

Creek off the reservation. We know what the creek is to the tribe. We aren't asking for any of it. Not a drop. Any agreement we sign would say so."

"It would say so in the first paragraph," Mariah said.

"Yes," said the woman. "It would."

• • •

They were there for two hours. When they had gone Mariah sat in the conference room with the president and the two council members and went through her notes with them, from the top, and told them what each thing meant. She told them what the price was and what it was against. She told them what twenty years meant, and what forty meant, and what an option was, and who held it. She told them what the compact said about marketing, and what Congress had said about it in 1992, and what the Yellowstone Compact said, and what the state would say. She told them she did not know yet where the pipeline would go, and that everything else on the page turned on it.

"Why," said the older of the two council members. She was a woman from Birney who had taught school for forty years and asked questions as if she already knew the answers and wanted to hear whether you did.

"Because of where it might go," Mariah said. "The reservoir is south of the reservation. Colstrip is north of it. If they go straight, they go across. Across allotments. Across people's pastures and people's graves. The tribe could say no to that, for tribal land, and the owners could say no to it for their allotments. And if they don't go across, they go round, and if they go round, the tribe's got nothing to say about the line at all." She put her pen down. "The line is where the price really is. Not on this page."

The woman from Birney looked at her for a while.

"Your father's going to hear about this," she said, "before you get home."

"I know."

"What's he going to say?"

Mariah thought about it.

"He'll ask how much," she said. "And how long. And who."

"And then?"

"And then he'll say something about coal."

The woman from Birney laughed, and the president did not, and the other council member looked at the table.

• • •

At four she went back to her desk under the map.

She had work. She had a letter to the state about the fish flow and a draft lease for a grazing allotment that the tribe was taking back into its own management and a phone call to return to a lawyer in Helena she had once worked with, who wanted to know whether she would sit on a panel. She did the letter. She did the lease. She did not return the call.

At half past five, when the woman who kept the office had gone, and the director, and the young hydrologist had gone down to the café for something, she opened the bottom drawer of the desk.

It was a deep drawer. It had files in it, hanging, in green folders, the old kind, because she liked paper and had been teased for it for thirty years. At the back, behind the folders for the 2056 contract, there was a folder with nothing written on the tab.

She took it out and opened it.

It was a letter. One page, on the letterhead of a firm in Denver, on good paper, dated the eleventh of June 2060. It was addressed to her by her full name, and it said that the firm acted for the consortium in all its water matters in the four basins, and was building a team for the next decade of the consortium's growth, and that the partners would be very glad to talk with her about a place on that team, in Denver, at a salary which the letter named in the second paragraph. The salary was five times what the tribe paid her. It said

that the partners admired the work she had done for the tribe, and for the state before that. It said that her knowledge of the compacts would be of great value. It was signed by a man she had been in law school with, in Missoula, who had sat behind her in water law and lent her his notes the winter she had pneumonia.

She had flown to Denver in July 2060 and told her father it was a conference. She had eaten lunch with three partners on the thirty-first floor, looking west at the mountains, and at the lift the man from law school had said, *You can do more good from here than from Lame Deer, Mariah. You know you can.* Six weeks later she had written the acceptance at two in the morning, at the kitchen table on the Rosebud, with her father asleep in the next room, and not sent it, and in the morning she had written a short letter saying no. She had never told anybody. She thought it was the tank in the horse pasture, and the hose, and her father's hands on the wheel. It might also have been the view from the thirty-first floor, which had been very fine, and in which you could not see one cow.

The consortium's water manager this morning had been a partner in that firm. Mariah had recognised her in the first minute. She had been at the lunch.

She did not think the woman had recognised her. She was not sure.

She put the letter back in the folder and the folder back in the drawer, behind the 2056 contract, and shut the drawer.

• • •

Her father was at the kitchen table with the maps out.

He had them out most evenings now. There were four of them, big sheets that had come from the Bureau's office in Lame Deer, folded so many times that the folds had gone soft as cloth and some of them had torn, and been taped, and torn beside the tape. They showed the allotments on the Thompson Creek side, up on the divide east of the house, as the Bureau drew them: a patchwork of

squares and oblongs with numbers in them, each one an allotment from 1932 or before, each one owned now by twenty people, or forty, or ninety, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the man or woman it had been allotted to, each of them owning a fraction of it as small as a hundredth, or a thousandth, or less.

On the maps, in pencil, in her father's small square hand, there were names. Hundreds of them. Every owner of every fraction of every allotment in the pasture. And beside each name, a number, and a date, and a tick or a line.

He had been buying them back for thirty years. One share at a time, from cousins, with the Bureau's papers, at whatever the cousin wanted, whenever the cousin wanted to sell. Some of the cousins he had never met. Some of them lived in Billings and Rapid City and Denver and had never been on the divide in their lives. He wrote to them. He telephoned them at Christmas. When one of them died he wrote to the children. In thirty years he had put together about two-fifths of the interests in the pasture, and the tribe had another fifth, which it had bought from other cousins in the buy-back years, and the rest was still out there, in Denver and Rapid City and Billings, a share at a time.

He grazed it, all eleven allotments, with his cows, under a grazing permit from the Bureau that he renewed every five years. He paid the rent to the Bureau and the Bureau divided it among the owners, every one of them, their fractions of a fraction, so that some of them got cheques for eleven cents. He knew which ones.

He looked up when she came in.

"How much," he said.

She put her bag on the chair and sat down across from him. She told him how much. Twelve thousand acre-feet. Four times what the irrigators had paid.

"How long."

"Twenty years from first delivery. And two options of ten."

"Forty years."

"Up to forty."

"Who."

"The consortium. For a hall at Colstrip. On the old plant site."

He looked down at the maps. He put his finger on one of the oblongs, the one with the spring in it, at the head of Thompson Creek, where the cows watered in the dry years.

"Water's how it starts," he said.

He kept his finger on it. "Coal started with a man from the Bureau at a table. Your grandma told me. Nineteen sixty-six. Sat down at a table in Lame Deer and said, you're poor, and here are some companies." He took his finger off the map. "And they said yes. And it took seven years and every lawyer on the plains to get it back."

"I know, Dad."

"I know you know. You've read it." He looked at her. "You've read it with a ruler."

"Every page."

"Good." He folded the top map back, along its soft folds, carefully, so it would not tear again. "Where's the pipe go?"

"They don't know yet. Or they're not saying."

"They know."

"Probably," she said. "They have an engineer with a tablet who said they want the cheapest way. And then wished he hadn't."

Her father almost smiled. He did not quite. He folded the second map.

"The cheapest way from the reservoir to Colstrip," he said, "is up the middle."

"I know."

"Up the middle is the divide."

"I know, Dad."

He folded the third map and the fourth and stacked them, and laid his hand flat on the top of them, and kept it there.

His wallet was on the table, by his elbow, where he always put it when he came in, on the oilcloth by the salt. A brown leather wallet,

worn white at the corners, with a rubber band round it because the fold had gone. She had seen him take it out of his back pocket and put it there every evening of her life since she came home. She had seen him once, in 2052, in the truck on the way to the sale at Prosper, when she asked him about the fire, put his hand to his back pocket where it was, and take the hand away again.

She did not look at the wallet. She looked at his hand on the maps.

"The council will decide," she said. "Not me."

"I know who decides."

"I'm their lawyer. I tell them what it means."

"I know what you do." He took his hand off the maps. He got up, slowly, with one hand on the table, and took the maps to the sideboard and put them in the drawer of the sideboard, where they lived. He stood there for a moment with his back to her.

"Ask them," he said, "where the pipe goes. Before anybody signs anything. Before anybody even talks about a price." He shut the drawer. "Make them show you."

"I will."

He came back to the table and picked up the wallet and put it in his back pocket, and went to the stove, and lifted the lid of the pot on it, and looked in. It was the stew she had made on Sunday. He stirred it.

"Your grandma's chair," he said, without turning round. "It wants a new leg. The back one. It's rocking."

She looked at the chair by the stove. Her grandmother's chair. Nobody had sat in it since December 2049. Nobody ever would. It stood where it had always stood, beside the stove, with its cushion on it, and the back left leg was a quarter of an inch short. She had not noticed. He had.

"I'll look at it Saturday," she said.

"I can do it."

"I know you can. I'll do it Saturday."

He stirred the stew. Outside the window the light was going off the hills, and the pine ridges were going black, and the sky over the divide where the pasture was had gone a long clear green, with no cloud in it anywhere, from one side of the valley to the other.

4

The Trial Ground

"Read it again," Joseph said.

Daniel read it again.

They were in the office at the end of the kitchen building, at nine at night, with the one lamp on the desk and the window black. The office was a small room. It had a desk and two chairs and a filing cabinet and a calendar from the seed company on the wall and a clock, and the computer, which Joseph had not been able to read for two years, and the books, which he had not been able to read for one. The books were the colony's ledgers, the real ones, kept by hand in the old way alongside everything the computer kept, because Joseph's father had kept them that way at Sixmile and Joseph did not trust a number he could not put his finger on. He could not put his finger on them now. He could put his finger on the page and feel the paper, and that was all. In the middle of what he looked at there was a grey place, he said, like a thumbprint on a window, and it had been getting bigger since 2063.

So Daniel read them to him. Every night after the evening service and supper, for an hour, sometimes two, in the office, aloud, in English because the books were in English, while Joseph sat in the other chair with his eyes shut and his hands folded on his stomach and listened, and sometimes said *Again*, and sometimes said *Stop*, and

sometimes said nothing for so long that Daniel thought he was asleep, and then asked a question about a figure Daniel had read twenty minutes before.

Tonight it was the bank's letter.

"*In connection with the renewal of the colony's operating line and the term note on the real property, due 31 July 2066,*" Daniel read, "*the bank will require a marketing plan for the colony's grain and oilseed production for the 2066 and 2067 crop years. The plan should demonstrate forward pricing of not less than sixty percent of expected production through recognised contracting channels. Given the drought outlook for the region, the bank's credit committee has indicated that it is unlikely to renew without such a plan. We would be glad to discuss the options with you. We note that several colonies in the region have adopted the co-operative's guided contracting programme, which would satisfy this requirement.*"

He stopped.

Joseph did not open his eyes.

"Recognised contracting channels," Joseph said.

"Yes."

"What else is recognised, besides the guided programme?"

"The elevator in Roundup. Forward contracts. The same as Sixmile does."

"For sixty percent. In a drought."

"They won't take sixty percent in a drought," Daniel said. "Not at a price that pays. I rang them. They'll take thirty."

"And the guided programme will take sixty."

"It'll take all of it. It'll tell us what to plant and when and on which field, and it'll buy it at the price it sets in March, and it'll insure it." He put the letter down on the desk. "That's what the bank wants. It isn't saying so. It's saying so."

Joseph opened his eyes.

He looked at the lamp, or near it. Daniel had learned where he looked now. He looked a little to one side of things, so that what he wanted to see was at the edge of the grey place and not in it.

"Read me the note," Joseph said. "The balance."

Daniel turned the pages back to the note and read him the balance. It was a number with seven figures in it. It had been the price of the bench, in 2052, and the barns, and the houses, and the church and the school and the kitchen, and the first machinery, and the first sows, less what they had paid in fourteen years, which was not enough. Every colony had a note when it was young. That was what being young was. Sixmile had had one in 1980. Sixmile had paid it off in 2019 with hogs and wheat, and Joseph's father had stood up in the church on the Sunday after and said a prayer that Joseph, at fifteen, had learned by heart, and had once said for Daniel in the truck, in German, on the bench road, with his eyes shut.

"Again," Joseph said.

Daniel read it again.

Joseph folded his hands.

"Thank you," he said. "That's enough for tonight."

• • •

The Lodgepole cattle came up the trail on the sixth of May.

They came up every year in the first week of May, if the grass on the Bull Mountain lease was ready, and this year the grass on the lease was as ready as it was going to be, which was not very. Thea Tollefsen had rung the office on the Monday to say Thursday, and Joseph had said Thursday was good, and Daniel had heard him say it, standing behind him, and had gone out that afternoon with Elias and two of the boys to look at the gates.

There were four gates on the colony's ground between the ford road and the lease fence. The first was at the bottom of the bench, where the trail came up off the river road through the Rourke cottonwoods onto colony land. The second and third were cross-

fences in the middle of the bench, where the colony had cut the bench into fields since 2052. The fourth was at the top, at the foot of the mountains, where the colony's ground ended and the state's began. The trail ran from the first gate to the fourth along the foot of the Hogback, the long sandstone ridge that ran north and south across the bench like an animal lying down, and it ran there because it always had, since before the colony and before the Rourkes, along the east side of the ridge where the wind could not get at a cow and the snow did not lie.

Between the third gate and the fourth, for a quarter of a mile, the trail went along the edge of the trial ground.

It was forty acres. It lay between the trail and the foot of the Hogback on the west side, a long narrow field with a fence round three sides of it and the trail on the fourth, and it had been grass when the colony came, the old Rourke grass, beaten flat along the trail edge by a hundred years of cattle. In 2060, when Daniel was twenty, old Darius, who had been farm boss then and was farm boss still, had let him break it out and try something on it. Daniel had not asked for it. He had said once, at the table, that the barley from Sixmile was too long a season for the bench, that the frost came off the mountains in September before it was ripe one year in three, and that you could select a shorter one if you had a field to do it in and did it for ten years. Darius had listened, and had said nothing, and in the spring he had told Daniel he could have the forty acres by the Hogback to do it on, if he did it after his other work.

So he did. He had done it for six years. He had seeded it to a two-rowed barley from Sixmile's bins the first year, and picked the earliest heads by hand in August, a few hundred of them, walking the field with a sack, and kept the seed in jars in the shop over the winter, and seeded the jars the second spring on a corner of the field, and picked again. The first two crops had failed, one to hail and one to the frost he had been trying to beat. The third had been

small and good. The fourth, fifth and sixth had been better. This would be the seventh.

It was the colony's field. It was the colony's seed. Everything was the colony's. He knew that, and had known it since before he could read, and believed it, and would have said so to anyone who asked. Nobody asked. Old Darius called it *the trial ground* and so did everybody else, and so did Daniel. He had never once called it anything else out loud.

• • •

He was at the first gate at seven with Elias when they came.

He heard them first, as you always did. A sound from down the river road like wind in a lot of trees, low and continuous, which was three hundred cows and three hundred calves all walking and all talking at once, the cows lowing to the calves and the calves bawling back. Then the dust over the Rourke cottonwoods. Then, through the trees, the first of them.

Thea Tollefsen was in front, on the big bay. She rode at a walk with the reins in one hand and her other hand on her thigh, and the lead cows came behind her as if she had them on a string, a brockle-faced cow first, as a brockle-face always was, the granddaughter of the old one, nine years old and as sure of the way as her grandmother had been. Then the rest. They came up out of the cottonwoods onto the bench in a long red and black river, four and five abreast, with the calves running in among them and getting lost and found, and the dust going up off them and blowing north on the wind.

Daniel swung the gate back and stood behind it.

Thea rode through and lifted a hand to him without stopping. "Morning, Daniel."

"Morning."

"Hot."

"It'll be hotter."

She went on up the bench along the foot of the Hogback, and the cows came after her, and he counted them through the gate. He counted in German, under his breath, as he had been taught to count sheep at Wolf Creek when he was six, in tens, with a knot in a string in his pocket for each ten. Beside him Elias counted in English, out loud, on his fingers, and every hundred they looked at each other.

Halfway through, Shannon Tollefsen came up the side of the herd on a grey horse, on the river side, keeping them off the fence. She did not look at Daniel. She was looking at the cattle, at a cow that was limping, and she said something to the horse and went in among them after it.

At the back, riding drag, in the dust, there was Jens Tollefsen.

He rode a sorrel, an old one. He sat it as if he had been riding it for twenty years, which he had, without seeming to be on it at all, with his hat pulled down and a bandana over his nose and mouth against the dust. He was seventy-two. Daniel had known him since he was ten, at a distance, as the man across the river whose cattle crossed the bench, and had spoken to him perhaps a dozen times in sixteen years, about gates.

Joseph was at the gate too, by then. He had come down from the colony in the truck and parked it on the bench road above the gate and got out and stood by the bumper, in his black hat, with his hands in his jacket pockets, looking at the cattle with his head turned a little to one side, the way he looked at everything now.

Jens rode up out of the dust at the back of the herd and through the gate and stopped the sorrel.

He pulled the bandana down.

"Joseph," he said.

"Jens."

That was all. Jens sat the horse and Joseph stood by the truck, ten feet apart, and they did not say anything else. The last of the calves went past them up the bench, and the dust drifted over them and

away. Jens looked at Joseph for a moment longer, a short look, and Joseph looked back, with his head on one side, at the edge of what he could see. Then Jens pulled the bandana back up and touched the brim of his hat and rode on after his cattle.

"Three hundred and six cows," Elias said. "Two hundred and ninety-nine calves. I make it."

"Three hundred and six," Daniel said. "And two hundred and ninety-nine."

He shut the gate and chained it.

When he turned round, Joseph was still standing by the truck, looking up the bench after the herd, at the dust going up along the foot of the Hogback where the trail ran. Daniel waited. He thought Joseph would say something. Joseph did not. After a while he got back in the truck, carefully, feeling for the step with his foot, and drove back up to the colony.

• • •

They seeded the trial ground on the eleventh.

He seeded it last every year. He seeded it after the Lodgepole cattle had gone up the trail, because if he seeded it before, the cows going along the trail edge would put their heads through the fence and pull the young barley out by the roots, and the calves would get through the fence where they always got through it, at the corner by the big rock, and lie down in it. So he waited. Every year he waited until the cows had gone up, and then seeded it, which was ten days later than he should have seeded it, and the barley went in late, and came up late, and he picked the earliest heads in August of a crop that had started ten days behind.

He seeded it himself, with the small drill behind the old tractor that nobody else used. The ground was dry. It was dry three inches down, and he stopped the tractor at the end of the first round and got down and dug with his hands to see, and it was dry six inches down, grey and loose, like flour. He put the seed into it anyway.

There was nothing else to do with seed in a dry year but put it into the ground and wait.

At noon Judith brought his dinner out.

She came across the field from the bench road on foot, with the basket on her arm and the boy on her hip, in her dark dress and her polka-dot kerchief, and the boy was kicking to be let down. Daniel stopped the tractor and got down and met her at the headland. She put the boy down and he ran at Daniel's legs and held on to them.

"David," Daniel said. "You're dusty."

"He wanted to see the tractor," Judith said.

She had come from a colony in Alberta, south of Lethbridge, four years ago, to marry him, as the women did. She had known nobody on the bench but him, and him only from two summers when he had gone up to her colony for a wedding and a funeral. She had said in the first month that the bench was too flat and too dry and too hot and that the wind never stopped, and she was right about all four, and then in the second month she had stopped saying it. She was twenty-five. She ran the colony's garden with two other women, and she had made it grow in a place where gardens did not grow, and she would not let anyone tell her how.

She sat on the edge of the drill and watched him eat. The boy climbed the tractor wheel, and Daniel lifted him up onto the seat and let him hold the wheel and make the noise of an engine.

"Your barley," Judith said.

"The colony's barley."

"Your barley." She said it in German, the way she said things she meant to tease him with. She looked at the field, at the drill rows going away in the grey dirt along the foot of the Hogback, straight as rules. "Is it going to come up?"

"If it rains."

"Is it going to rain?"

"The co-op says no."

"What do you say?"

He thought about it. He looked up at the Hogback, at the sandstone along its top, yellow in the noon light, and the sky over it, which was white and empty and had been white and empty for a month.

"I say I put it in," he said.

She looked at him for a while with the look she had that he had not yet learned to read, after four years. Then she got up and took the basket and the boy, who did not want to be taken, and went back across the field towards the bench road, and he watched her go, small and dark against the grey ground, until she reached the road.

• • •

The bank's letter was on the desk again on the Wednesday night.

Joseph had asked for it. He sat in his chair with his eyes shut and Daniel read it to him, every line, for the third time, and when it was finished Joseph was quiet for a long time.

"When I was a boy," Joseph said, "my father sent me to the elevator in Roundup with the truck, with wheat. I was fourteen. The man at the elevator said to me, *You people don't sell ahead, do you.* And I said, *No, sir. We sell what we have when we have it.* And he laughed and said, *That's why you're rich.*"

Daniel waited.

"We weren't rich," Joseph said. "We were careful. My father thought that was the same thing." He opened his eyes and looked at the edge of the lamp. "The guided contracts came to Sixmile in 2031. You know this."

"Yes."

"The brotherhood met and decided. Guided weather was allowed, because the weather belongs to God and a man may listen to a forecast as he may listen to a rooster. Guided wheat was not allowed, because the wheat was ours to plant, and our work, and a machine that told us which field to plant and when to plant it and what it

would sell for was taking the work out of our hands and putting it in a stranger's. That was how the minister said it, and my brother Samuel-John stood up and agreed with him, and so did my father." Joseph unfolded his hands and put them on his knees. "I wasn't there. I was in Billings. In the feedlot. Where the machine told me which pen to feed every hour of the night, and I did it."

Daniel had known that since he was ten, from Joseph, in the truck, the first winter.

"When we came to the bench," Joseph said, "we brought the rule with us. I voted for it. I stood up in the church at Sixmile in 2052, before we left, and said we would keep it. Because I had been in the feedlot, and I knew."

He was quiet again.

"What does the bank want, Daniel?"

"The guided programme."

"Yes." Joseph folded his hands again. "Put the letter in the file. Not the drawer. The file."

Daniel put the letter in the file.

He wanted to ask what Joseph was going to do. He did not. Joseph had not said he was going to do anything, and a man did not ask the boss what he was going to do when the boss had not said. He put the file back in the cabinet and turned off the computer and stood by the door with his hand on the light switch, waiting for Joseph to get up.

Joseph did not get up.

"Darius is sixty-eight," Joseph said.

Daniel stood by the door.

"His knees are gone. He told me after church. He'll stand down as farm boss at the brotherhood meeting in July." Joseph looked at the edge of the lamp. "The brotherhood will want somebody young. Somebody who knows the fields."

"There's Elias."

"There's Elias," Joseph said. "Turn off the light, Daniel. I can find the door."

• • •

The barley came up on the twenty-eighth.

It came up thin. He went out to look at it every evening that week, after the evening service and supper, before the office, when the wind had gone down and the light was long across the bench. He walked the field along the drill rows, slowly, with his hands in his pockets, looking down.

It was up in the rows, a green so pale it was nearly white, two inches high, a blade or two to a seed. Where the ground had been driest, along the trail edge where the cattle had packed it for a hundred years, it was not up at all. In the low corner by the big rock, where the snowmelt used to lie, it was thicker, a real row, almost a stand. He knelt there and looked at it close. Each plant was a single green spear coming out of the grey dirt with a little brown husk still stuck to the top of it, like a hat. He did not touch them.

Along the trail edge, on the other side of the fence, the ground was cut and printed by the Lodgepole cattle going up. Hundreds of tracks, thousands, the cows' and the calves', and a horse's, a big one, with feet like plates, and a smaller horse, and an old sorrel's, shod, with a toe that turned in a little on the near fore. He could read them as he could read a page. The herd had gone up three weeks ago and the tracks were still sharp, because there had been no rain to soften them.

He walked to the end of the field, to the fourth gate, and stood there.

Above him the bench ran up to the foot of the Bull Mountains, and the mountains went up dark with pine, and the burn of 2049 was still on them, if you knew where to look: grey snags along the ridges, standing, seventeen years dead, and the young pines coming up green between them, and the grass. Somewhere up there on the

state's ground were three hundred and six cows and two hundred and ninety-nine calves, on grass the co-op said was at forty percent and that he could see from here was brown.

Behind him, down the bench, the colony lay in its two rows in the evening light. He could see the kitchen chimney, and the church, and the light in the office window. Joseph would be in there, in the chair, waiting for him, with his eyes shut.

He looked back along the field. The barley was too small to see from the gate. From the gate the field was grey dirt in straight lines, along the foot of the Hogback, with the trail beside it full of tracks.

He did not call it anything. He stood at the gate a while longer with his hands in his pockets, and then he went down to the office to read the books.

5

The Hatch

The ground moved.

She saw it before she understood it, from the bay's back, on the bare slope above the second tank on the lease: a flicker in the dirt ahead of the horse's feet, everywhere at once, as if the wind were blowing grit across it. There was no wind. It was eight in the morning and dead still and already warm, and the bay walked on with his head low and the dirt in front of him jumped away from his feet in little spurts, a yard ahead of each hoof, like water when you throw gravel in it.

She stopped the horse and got down.

They were very small. The biggest of them was the size of a grain of rice. They were black, and brown, and some of them were nearly green, with big heads and no wings yet, only little stubs, and they were on the dirt and on the dead grass and on the new grass, the little there was, and on the toes of her boots. When she bent down to look at them they jumped away from her shadow. When she knelt they jumped onto her knees. She put her hand flat on the ground and lifted it and there were three on the back of her glove.

She stood up and looked along the slope.

It was all moving. The whole south face of the ridge, from the tank to the timber, a quarter of a mile of bare ground and short

brown grass, was alive with them, flickering, so that the ground looked as if it were simmering. She had seen hoppers before. She had seen them in 2053, in July, when they had stripped the bench across the river and come down onto the edge of the flat and eaten the cottonwood leaves to lace. She had never seen them in May. She had never seen this many of anything.

Up the slope, at the edge of the timber, there were two people with nets.

They were walking slowly across the slope in a line, ten yards apart, swinging the nets back and forth through the grass in front of them in long low strokes, like scythes, and counting out loud, and stopping, and looking in the nets, and writing on tablets. Behind them, every fifty yards, there were little orange flags on wires in the ground, like hers. She watched them for a while. Then she got back on the bay and rode up to them.

They were young. A man of about twenty-five with a beard and a woman a little older with her hair under a cap, both in the state's green shirts. The woman stopped when she saw the horse and pushed the cap back.

"Morning," she said. "Is this yours?"

"It's the state's. We lease it." Thea looked at the net. "How many?"

"We're at forty-two a square yard on this slope," the woman said. "First and second instars, mostly. Migratory and two-striped." She held the net open so Thea could see into it. The bottom of it was black and crawling. "The threshold's eight."

"Forty-two."

"It's the worst I've seen. I've been doing this six years." The woman closed the net and shook it out, and the hoppers fell into the grass and were gone. "It's all over the Bull Mountains, the south side. And the bench north of the river. We've got them at sixty in places on the colony ground."

"What happens?"

"We spray. Ourselves and the federal people. The state sections and anybody else who signs up, cost-shared." The man had come over. He had a tablet and showed it to her: a map of the lease, with the state's sections outlined in red, and the flags as little dots, and the numbers. "Aerial. Strips. You do a strip and skip a strip, so you're not killing everything. The middle of June, when they're bigger and before they're adults."

"The middle of June."

"About the fifteenth. We'll let the lessees know. You'll want your cattle off the spray strips for a day or two. It's not dangerous to them," he added quickly. "It's a growth regulator. It stops them moulting. But they'll want you off."

"It'll be too late," Thea said.

They both looked at her.

"By the fifteenth of June," she said. "They'll have eaten what there is."

The woman looked at the slope, the simmering ground, the short brown grass. She did not say that Thea was wrong. She said, "We can't do it sooner. They're too small. If you spray them now you miss half of them, because they haven't hatched."

"I know."

"I'm sorry," the woman said.

Thea thanked them. She rode on along the slope to the timber and back down the next draw to the tank, and checked the float and the trough, and the water, which was low and green and warm, and the cattle round it, who were standing about in the sun with their heads up, not grazing, flicking their ears at the hoppers that jumped onto them. The cows were thin already. Not very thin. Thin for May. Their hips showed, and the calves at their sides were small for their age, and the grass they stood on was short and brown, and in it, everywhere, the ground moved.

• • •

Nils came out on the Thursday.

He came on his night off. He worked four nights in the cooling plant and then had three off, and on the first of the three, if he was not too tired, he drove out to the Lodgepole for breakfast. He had done it most weeks since 2058. He came in the small blue car he had bought when he took the job, and parked it by the shop where it would be out of the way of the trucks, and came in the back door without knocking, and kissed his grandmother on the top of her head, and sat down at the table where he had always sat, by the window.

He was twenty-nine. He was tall and thin and stooped a little from eleven years of desks, and he had their mother's dark straight hair, cut short, and their father's long feet, which he no longer fell over. He wore a grey fleece with the campus's badge on the chest, very small, and he took it off when he came in and hung it on the back of his chair.

"You look tired," Karin said.

"I'm always tired on Thursdays."

"Eat something."

He ate. Shannon fed him. Their father had already gone out. Thea sat across from him with her coffee and watched him eat, and he looked up and saw her watching and smiled, the short smile he had had since he was twelve, that went up on one side and not the other.

"Hoppers," he said.

"How do you know?"

"I read the co-op too." He wiped his mouth. "I read everything. It's my job." He reached round behind him into the pocket of the fleece and took out his tablet, the new one, and woke it and put it on the table between them, and turned it round to face her. "I ran yours."

"Ran what?"

"Your herd. The Lodgepole. The co-op's numbers and the bank's rate and the hay, three hundred and six cows, run to next May." He turned it so she could see. "Three ways. Sell two-thirds, like Kieran. Sell a third. Keep them all."

There were three lines on it, in three colours, going across the year. The red one, keep them all, went down through the winter so far that he had had to change the scale on the side to fit it on.

"That's with your grass," Nils said. "Eighty-five in the crowns. I gave the flat a month more than the model does. It's still the red line."

"I did it on a feed bill in April," she said. "I got two-forty."

He laughed, short, through his nose. "Then you're twenty thousand dollars more cheerful than I am." He turned the tablet off and laid it face down on the table, the way their father laid things face down, and did not pick up his fork again.

"I didn't run it for the cows," he said.

She waited.

"Dad's seventy-three on Sunday. Mom's seventy. If it goes the way the red line goes, the bank has the herd by next summer, and the herd's what they've got." He was looking at the table, not at her. "Grandma's got the life estate. You and I have the ground. They've got three hundred cows and a note on them and the machinery, and that's all. That's what they'd live on, after."

Their grandmother, at the end of the table, did not look up from the ledger. Their mother, at the stove, had stopped moving.

"So I ran it," Nils said. "That's all. I wanted to see."

"And?"

"And everything I've got is in this place too," he said, and picked up his coffee. "Same as you."

"Is Dad selling the open heifers today?"

"Four of them. And the old bull."

"Can I come?"

• • •

They hauled them to Prosper in the stock trailer after breakfast.

Thea drove. Nils sat in the passenger seat with his long legs folded under the dash and his elbow out of the window, and the four heifers and the bull rattled and shifted behind them in the trailer, and the dust went up off the river road behind the trailer in a long brown plume that hung in the air after they had passed.

The country was brown from one side to the other. The hay meadows along the river, which should have been green to the knee in the last week of May, were green to the ankle, and the irrigators were out on them, the big pivots walking in their slow circles, and the ditches under the pivots were half full. The dryland wheat on the benches had come up and stopped. Above the benches the hills were the colour of a lion. They drove through it with the windows open and the hot wind coming in, and neither of them said anything for a while.

"Do you remember the town game," Nils said.

"The pipes."

"The pipes. You had to plan where the water went before the people moved in." He looked out of the window. "I was good at it."

"You were."

"I'm still good at it." He did not say anything else for a mile. Then he said, "We're doing the third phase. At work. I'm on it. The cooling for it."

"Kieran said there'd be one."

"It's two parts. More halls at Prosper, air-cooled. And a big one at Colstrip, water-cooled, off the Tongue." He was still looking out of the window. "I've been on it since last summer. The loads. Where the heat goes."

"Is it good?"

"It's good work," Nils said. "It's hard. It's what I'm good at."

She looked at him. He was looking at the pivots going past, the long arms of them walking over the short green.

"Good," she said.

• • •

The sale barn stood by the railroad tracks at the west end of Prosper. It had sold cattle every Tuesday from 1938, and every Thursday since 2040, when the Tuesday crowd had got too thin to pay the auctioneer.

It was a long white barn with a false front and a sign along it that said *Prosper Livestock Auction* in red letters that had been repainted so many times they were thicker than the wall. Behind it were the pens, forty acres of them, wooden, grey with age, with catwalks over them, and alleys between them that ran to the back of the building where the ring was. The fairgrounds were next door, on the other side of a wire fence: the rodeo arena with its white rails and its grandstand, and the exhibit hall, and the long cattle barns where the 4-H children showed their steers every August. She had shown a steer there herself, in 2045, and come third, and cried in the truck all the way home, and her grandmother had told her it was a good steer and the judge was a fool from Billings.

They unloaded at the back. The yard men ran the heifers and the bull into a pen and wrote the Lodgepole's brand on a card and gave Thea the stub. It was a Thursday sale, a small one, the last of the spring, and there were not many trucks in the yard. There were more than there should have been in May. She could see that as they pulled in. There were stock trailers from all over the county, from Roundup and Melstone and Musselshell and the Bull Mountains, and some from further, and they were full, and the cattle in them were cows. Not heifers. Not bulls. Cows, with calves at their sides, which nobody sold in May.

"Everybody's selling," Nils said.

"Not everybody."

They went in through the café.

The café was at the front of the building, a long room with a counter and a row of booths along the window, and it smelled as it always had, of coffee and fry grease and cattle, and it was full. Old men in the booths in their hats. Younger men at the counter. Women with coffee. Everybody was talking and nobody was talking loudly, which was not how the sale barn café usually sounded on a Thursday, and when Thea came in with Nils behind her two or three of the old men looked up, and nodded, and looked away.

At the booth by the door two of them were talking about Colstrip. A hall on the old plant site, one of them said, bigger than all of Prosper, cooled off the Tongue, and the Cheyenne would sell them the water. The other one said the Cheyenne had never sold anybody anything. The first one said everybody sold, in the end, and drank his coffee.

At the end of the counter a woman with a baby on her hip turned round and said, "Thea Tollefsen."

It was Jolene Sorensen. She had sat beside Thea at Prosper from the first grade to the eighth and gone to Billings for high school and come back, and married a man from Melstone, and had four children since, and this was the fourth. He had a fist in his mouth and looked at Thea over it with great seriousness.

"We're doing a supper for Marcy's birthday," Jolene said. "On the twelfth. At ours. Everybody from school who's still here. That's about six of us." She shifted the baby to her other hip. "You never come."

"It's calving—"

"Calving's done. Don't say calving." Jolene looked at her, not unkindly, the way she had looked at her across a desk when they were ten and Thea would not let anyone copy her sums. "Marcy asked if you'd come. Specially."

"I'll try."

"You won't," Jolene said. "But I'll set you a place." She held out the baby's fist for Thea to shake, solemnly, and Thea shook it, and Jolene

smiled and went back along the counter to her coffee and her husband, a big quiet man in a feed-store cap, who lifted a hand to Thea from his stool.

There was a crowd at the notice board by the door to the ring.

The notice board had been there as long as the café. It was cork, in a wooden frame, and it held the sale bills for the next month, and the brand inspector's notices, and cards for bulls for sale and hay for sale and men who would shoe your horse or fix your windmill, and once, in 2049, the county's evacuation map, which nobody had read until it was too late. Today there was a new sheet in the middle of it, pinned with four red pins, on the sale barn's letterhead.

She read it over the shoulder of a man from Melstone.

To our consignors, buyers and friends,

After a hundred and twenty-eight years of live auction in Prosper, the owners of Prosper Livestock Auction have accepted an offer for the sale barn property and the adjoining county fairgrounds from Tri-Basin Computing, as part of the expansion of the Musselshell Campus. The sale of the property will close in November 2067.

We will continue to hold regular sales through the 2067 season. Our last live sale will be held on the third Thursday of October 2067.

We want to thank every family who has brought cattle to this ring since 1938. We know what this barn has meant to this county. It has meant the same to us. We could not keep it going. Fewer cattle come through this ring every year, as more of them are sold on contract and by video, and the offer was one we could not refuse in fairness to our own families.

We hope to see you here until the end.

It was signed by the two brothers who owned it, whose grandfather had built it, and under their names, in smaller type, there was a line about the county fair, which would move to Roundup in 2068.

She read it twice.

The man from Melstone in front of her said, to nobody, "Well, that's that, then," and turned round and saw her and said, "Thea," and touched his hat, and went past her to the counter.

She stood in front of the board.

Behind her, she could feel Nils standing. He did not come up beside her. He stood a step behind her, by the door, with his hands in the pockets of his fleece, and when she turned round he was looking at the notice, at the letterhead and the four red pins, with no expression on his face at all.

"Did you know?" she said.

"I knew they'd made an offer." He did not look away from the notice. "I didn't know they'd taken it."

"When did you know they'd made an offer?"

"Last summer."

"Last summer."

"It was in the third-phase plan. The site options." He took one hand out of his pocket and rubbed his jaw with it. "It was one of four sites for the Prosper halls. I didn't know which one they'd go for."

She looked at him.

"Which one would you have gone for?" she said.

He was quiet. Somewhere through the door the auctioneer had started, and the chant came through the wall, fast, rising and falling, a sound she had heard every autumn of her life, and the café went quieter to listen to it.

"This one," Nils said. "It's flat. It's already graded. The power comes in on the east side. The county'll sell the fairgrounds because they can't keep up the barns." He put his hand back in his pocket. "It's the cheapest by a long way."

She turned back to the board.

"I didn't pick it," he said. "I don't pick. I do the loads."

"I know."

"I'm just telling you. Which one I'd have gone for." He looked at her now. "You asked."

"I asked."

They went through into the ring and sat on the benches at the back and watched their four heifers and the old bull go through, one at a time, in a sale that was half cows that should not have been sold, and the heifers brought less than they would have brought in March and the bull brought more than she had thought, because there were bulls for sale everywhere that spring and nobody wanted to haul one home again. The auctioneer sold them in a minute each. Thea watched the order buyers on the front benches with their tablets on their knees, bidding with a finger, and the old men behind them bidding with a nod. She had watched it since she was four. She found that she was watching it harder than she had ever watched it, every face, every nod, every finger, as if she were trying to learn it by heart.

• • •

She drove him back to the campus at three.

He was going to sleep, he said, and then sleep again. The campus road went up from the river bridge through the Rourke meadows and up the coulee to the bench, fenced on both sides, and at the top of the coulee there was the gate.

It was a big gate. Steel, on rollers, in a fence that was eight feet high and had wire on top of it and cameras on poles every hundred yards along it. There was a gatehouse beside it, glass and grey steel, with a guard in it, and a lane for cars with a barrier and a post with a reader on it, at the height of a car window, where you held up your badge. Beyond the gate the road went on across the bench between the halls, long grey windowless buildings in two rows, with the cool-

ing towers at the far end, white and humming, and the steam coming off them in the hot afternoon and going straight up.

She stopped the truck at the pull-in outside the barrier, where visitors stopped.

Nils did not get out. He sat with his hand on the door handle and looked out of the windscreen at the gate.

"Thea," he said.

She waited.

He opened his mouth, and closed it, and looked at the gate. A car came up the coulee behind them and went round them into the lane and stopped at the reader, and the driver held up a badge, and the barrier went up, and the car went through, and the barrier came down.

"Never mind," he said.

"What?"

"Nothing. It's nothing." He opened the door. "Thanks for the ride. Tell Grandma I ate."

"She knows you ate. She watched you."

"Tell her anyway." He got out and stood by the open door, bent down, looking in at her across the seat, with his long arm on the roof of the truck. "I'll run it again. With the hoppers. If you want."

"Don't."

"All right." He shut the door and went across to the gatehouse with his badge out, and the barrier went up for him, and he walked through it and up the road between the halls with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders a little stooped, and did not look back.

She sat in the truck.

She had sat in a truck here once before. Not this truck. Her father's old one, the white one, in October 2058, at a quarter to six in the morning, in the dark, with the yard lights on along the fence and the halls lit up behind it and the steam going up white into the black. She had had a letter in her coat pocket and a badge on a lanyard round her neck, a new one, with her picture on it, taken the

week before in an office in the dormitory block by a young man who had told her to smile and then said it did not matter. *Thea Tollefsen. Land Programme. Field Technician II.* Nils had got her the interview. He had been on the campus four months and had heard they wanted somebody for the land round the halls, the reclaimed grass, somebody who knew grass, and he had told them about his sister, and they had rung her, and she had gone, and they had offered it to her the same day.

She had told her father she was going to Billings for two days to look at a horse.

She had driven up the coulee in the dark, and pulled in here, at this pull-in, and sat with the engine running and the badge in her hand. Her first shift started at six. She had watched the cars come up the coulee behind her and go into the lane and hold up their badges and go through. She had watched for a quarter of an hour. At six o'clock she had put the truck in reverse and backed out of the pull-in and turned round and driven back down the coulee and across the bridge and home, and got there before her father was up, and fed the horses.

She had never told anyone but Nils. She had told him on the telephone that night, and he had been quiet for a long time, and then he had said, *All right*, and later, *I'll tell them you changed your mind*, and later still, *Dad doesn't know*?, and she had said no, and he had said *All right* again. That was all. He had never brought it up. He had never told their father. She was sure of that.

The badge was in the drawer of her bedside table, under her socks. She did not know why she had kept it.

The car behind her honked, once, politely. She had been sitting in the pull-in for ten minutes. She put the truck in reverse and backed out, and turned round, and drove back down the coulee, past the Rourke meadows and over the bridge and along the river road towards the Lodgepole, with the trailer rattling behind her.

6

Pots

He took Patch off the list on the night of the eighth.

He did it in the office at eleven, with the house asleep, sitting at the desk with the screen lit and the window black behind it. The list was on the screen, two hundred and five lines, one for each cow, with her number and her age and her weight from the scale and her calving date and the reason she was on it. *5-118. Age 5. 1,086 lb. Calved 27 Mar. Twin history; late calving.* She was the third line. He looked at the third line for a while. Then he said, "Take five-one-eighteen off."

"Of course," the voice said. "May I ask the reason? So I can note it."

He thought about what to say.

"She's the boy's," he said.

"Understood. I'll replace her with the next cow on the ranking, which is 4-022. Age eleven, open last year, calved this year on the second of April. Is that all right?"

He knew 4-022. She was a big rangy black cow with a torn ear who had kicked him in the thigh in the chute in 2059 and given him a bruise the size of a dinner plate that had lasted a month. She was eleven. She had been open last year, which meant she had eaten for a year and given him nothing, and the Companion had kept her any-

way because her calves had been heavy, and this year she had calved, a heifer calf, a good one.

"That's all right," he said.

"Done. The list is final. Two hundred and five head. The first trucks are due at six."

He sat for a while longer in the dark office with the screen lit. He felt foolish, and there was nobody to feel foolish in front of. The voice had written down *She's the boy's* and replaced her with the next cow, and would not mention it again unless he asked.

He turned the screen off and went up to bed.

• • •

The trucks came at ten to six.

He heard them before he saw them, from the porch, with his coffee: a long way off down the river road, the sound of big diesels gearing down for the turn at the cattle guard. Three of them, and three more due behind them at nine. They came up the lane one behind the other in the grey light with their running lights on, red and amber along the tops of the trailers, and the trailers behind them were the tall aluminium ones the packers used, double-decked, with a belly that hung down low between the axles, which everyone in the county had called pots since before his grandfather's time and nobody could say why.

They pulled round in the yard and backed up to the loadout one at a time, the first one first, with the drivers leaning out of the cab windows and the reversing alarms going, until the back of the first trailer was square against the end of the loading chute, and the driver got down and dropped the ramp.

The brand inspector had come at half past five. She was a woman from Roundup called Gail Osterhout, who had inspected Rourke cattle for twenty years and Lodgepole cattle for twenty years, and she stood at the end of the alley with her clipboard and her torch, in her coveralls, and read every brand on every cow as it went past

her, the Rourke brand on the left hip, and wrote, as she always had, on paper. The Companion read the ear tags as they went through the alley gate and counted them. Gail read the brands. Neither of them trusted the other.

The two men had the cows in the crowding pen. They had brought them in the evening before, the two hundred and five, sorted off from the rest by the Companion's list, and held them overnight in the big pen by the loadout with hay and water. The calves had stayed with them. It was easier to sort the calves off in the morning, in the alley, one at a time, as the cows went up.

That was the part he had not let himself think about.

• • •

They started at six.

One of the men opened the gate from the crowding pen into the alley, and the cows came into the alley, and the man behind them waved a flag on a stick and said *Hup, hup* in a low voice, and the cows walked down the alley towards the chute and the truck, and the calves came with them, as they always did, at their mothers' sides, and at the sort gate in the middle of the alley, where it split, Kieran stood with his hand on the gate.

Cow to the left. Calf to the right.

He swung the gate. The cow went left up the alley to the chute. The calf went right, into the side pen, and stopped, and turned round, and bawled.

The next cow. The next calf.

He swung the gate two hundred and five times. He did it without thinking, after the first twenty, as his hand had done it ten thousand times at weaning every October of his life. The cow went left. The calf went right. The cow went up the chute and up the ramp and into the dark of the trailer, onto the aluminium floor, with a clatter and a boom of hooves, and the next one behind her. In the side pen the calves piled up, bawling, and ran round the fence looking for a

way through, and stood at the fence with their faces through the boards, bawling at the alley, at the chute, at the trucks, and the cows in the trucks bawled back.

It was a sound he had heard every October. In October it lasted three days, and then the calves forgot, and went on to the hay, and the cows went back out on the fall grass and were quiet. In October the cows were going back out.

These were not going back out.

He knew them. That was the other thing. He knew most of them by sight, without their numbers, as he knew half the people in Roundup without their names. The brockle-faced one with the long horn that came off the top of her head crooked. The red one that always came to the feed truck first, at a run, kicking up behind. The old black cow with the white patch on her flank in the shape of Ireland, which his father had pointed out to him once, at a branding, when she was a calf, and laughed. She was nineteen. She had been on the list since 2063 and the Companion had kept her because she always had a calf and always weaned it heavy, and this year she had calved late, in April, and the Companion had moved her up.

She went up the chute with the others. He swung the gate for her calf.

"Load one," the voice said in his ear. "Thirty-nine head. Forty-three thousand eight hundred and twenty pounds. Average eleven twenty-four. Gate's clear for load two."

At the end of the alley Gail Osterhout wrote on her clipboard.

• • •

At nine the first three trucks had gone and the second three were waiting in the lane, and they stopped for coffee.

Rae came down from the house with it, in the big thermos, and a box of the doughnuts from the bakery in Roundup that she had bought the day before because she knew. She had taken the day off. She had told the school she was sick and she was not sick. She stood

by the fence with the thermos and poured the coffee into the cups and handed them out, to the two men, to the truck driver, to Gail, to him. She looked at the side pen, at the calves, a hundred and some of them, standing at the fence with their faces through the boards, bawling, and she looked away.

"Where's Conor?" Kieran said.

"On the porch." She put the lid on the thermos. "I told him he didn't have to watch. He said he wanted to. I told him he could watch from the porch."

He looked up at the house. The boy was on the porch, at the rail, small, in his pyjamas still, with his chin on the rail and his hands round the post. Beside him, at the rail, there was Brigid, in her nightdress, holding Conor's sleeve.

"Mam?"

"In the kitchen. With the blinds down." Rae looked at him. "She'll not come out. She said."

"I know."

"She said to tell you she's not angry with you."

He drank his coffee. It was too hot, and he drank it anyway.

"She is," he said.

"She said to tell you she's not." Rae took the box of doughnuts from him, which he had not taken one out of, and put it on the fence post. "Is Patch on a truck?"

"No."

Rae looked at him for a moment. He could not tell what she was thinking. Then she reached out and put her hand on his arm, at the elbow, on his shirt, and held it there, and took it away again.

"Good," she said.

• • •

The last truck went at two. The yard was quiet after it, except for the calves.

He stood at the end of the loadout and watched it go down the lane after the others, the tall aluminium trailer swaying a little on the ruts, the red lights along its top, and the faces of the cows at the vents in its sides, and the sound of them inside it, a long low lowing going away. It turned at the cattle guard onto the river road and went east, towards Roundup and the interstate, and in twelve hours it would be in Nebraska, and in two days the cows would be beef.

"Two hundred and five head loaded," the voice said. "Total weight two hundred and thirty thousand, four hundred and sixty pounds. The packer's confirmed. Payment will be in the account on Friday. I've sent you the summary."

"Thank you."

"The calves are in the weaning pens on hay and water. I've set up the ration. They'll be on the meadow on Monday, and the supplement starts Tuesday." A pause. "And I've confirmed the forward contracts on the calves for September. All three. The paperwork's on the office screen for you to sign."

"I'll sign it tonight."

"Of course."

He walked along the pens.

The big pen by the loadout was empty. The gate stood open. The hay they had put out for the cows the night before lay in the bunk, half eaten, and there was the mess of a night's worth of two hundred cows on the ground, trodden into the dust, and the water trough with the water still in it, and nothing drinking. The pen beyond it was empty. The pen beyond that. He walked along the alley between them. He had been in these pens every day of his life, more or less, since he could walk, and they had never been empty in June. In June they had always been full, of pairs coming in to brand, or bulls going out, or heifers. Now there were nine pens, and all of them were empty but the two at the far end, where the calves were, and the calves stood at the fence and bawled at him as he came along the alley, and when he got near they ran away from him to the

other side of the pen and turned round and bawled at him from there.

He leaned on the fence and looked at them.

Across the river, beyond the Rourke cottonwoods and the Tollefsen ones, he could see a long strip of the Lodgepole flat between the trees. He had not looked at it in weeks. It was green. Not much. Not the green of a June meadow. A thin green, like a wash of paint over the brown, faint, in the hot noon light. But green, from the trees to the fence, the whole strip of it he could see, and the bench above the river on this side was brown, and his own lower meadow beyond the loadout was brown, and the Lodgepole flat was green.

I'll show you in June, she had said. *If it's still green.*

He looked at it.

"Kieran," the voice said. "The bench grass index is at twenty-two this morning. It was twenty-six on Friday."

"I know," he said.

• • •

His mother came out at supper.

She came down the stairs at six in her good blouse and sat in the chair by the window, his grandfather's chair, and did not say anything, and Rae put a cup of tea in front of her, and she drank it. The children were at the table. They had been quiet all afternoon. Conor had gone down to the weaning pens after lunch and stood at the fence for an hour, by himself, and come back up to the house and said nothing about it, and gone to his room. Brigid had followed him and come back down and said Conor was reading.

Kieran sat at the head of the table. He had taken the earpiece out at the door and put it on the windowsill beside his mother's cup.

They ate. You could hear the calves from the kitchen. You would hear them all night.

"Patch is in the top pen," Conor said.

Everybody looked at him.

"I saw her. With her calf. When I went down." He was looking at his plate. "She's in the top pen with the ones that are staying."

"She is," Kieran said.

Conor looked up at him.

"Was she on the list?"

He thought about lying. He thought about it for less than a second and saw that the boy would know, and that Rae would know, and that his mother would know, and that he would.

"She was," he said. "I took her off."

Conor looked at him for a long moment, with his whole face, the way he looked at everything. Then he looked back at his plate and picked up his fork.

"Thank you," he said, very quietly.

His mother put her cup down in its saucer.

"Your grandfather," she said, "took a cow off the list in 2002. In the ring, at Prosper. A little red cow your father had raised on a bottle. He bought her back himself, on the catwalk, with his own hand up, for more than she was worth. Everybody laughed at him." She looked at Kieran. "He didn't care."

"I didn't know that."

"No," Beth said. "You wouldn't. He never told anybody. I was thirteen and I was on the benches with my father, and I saw him do it." She picked up her cup again. "That's all. I thought you should know."

• • •

He went out at ten.

The calves were still bawling. The sound came up from the weaning pens across the dark yard, ragged, a hundred and ninety voices, never stopping, never all at once, one starting as another stopped, so that it was continuous and also never the same. He walked through it to the barn. He turned on the yard light over the arena, the little one behind the barn where his father had roped the

dummy in the evenings, and where he had roped it himself as a boy, and later, at twenty, every night, for an hour, before he went in.

The heel machine was still in its corner. His father had bought it in 2046 from a man in Billings: a steel frame on skids with a plastic steer's head at the front and a pair of plastic hind legs at the back, on a crank, driven by a small petrol engine under a tin cover, so that when it ran the legs kicked out and back like a running steer's, over and over, in the one place, and you could ride up behind it and heel them. The plastic head was faded almost white. Somebody had painted a face on it once, eyes and a mouth, and the face had faded too, so that it was hard to say now what expression it had.

He saddled the sorrel in the barn. The horse stood for it, half asleep. He was fat, and the cinch would not go up as far as it used to, and Kieran let it out two holes and pulled it up again, and the sorrel grunted.

He got his rope off the nail in the tack room. It was stiff. It had been on the nail for a long time, and the nylon had gone hard, and when he shook out a loop it would not lie flat. He worked it in his hands for a while, as he had been taught to, feeding it through, until it began to remember.

He pulled the cord on the engine. It took six pulls. Then it caught, and ran, with blue smoke going up into the light, and the legs began to kick, out and back, out and back, with a knock at the end of each stroke where the crank had worn. He got on the sorrel and rode a circle and came up behind them at a lope.

He missed.

He missed the first one by a yard. The loop went over the legs and hit the ground behind them and lay there, and the sorrel stopped, as he had been trained to stop, when the rope hit the ground, with his hindquarters under him. Kieran coiled the rope back in and rode the circle again and came up again and threw again, and missed.

He missed four times. The fifth time the loop went under the legs as they kicked, standing up, like a little wall, and the legs stepped

into it, and he pulled his slack and dallied and the sorrel sat down on his hocks and the rope came tight with a twang, and the legs stopped against it, and the engine laboured and coughed and stalled.

It was very quiet for a moment in the arena under the light.

Then the calves again, from the weaning pens.

He sat on the sorrel with the rope dallied round the horn and the plastic legs at the end of it, and the light humming over his head on its pole with the moths going round it. He was breathing hard. The sorrel was breathing hard. He had caught two feet, clean.

He looked down at his hands on the rope. They were shaking. He had wanted this more than he had wanted anything all day, two plastic legs in a loop in his own arena at thirty-nine, and he was afraid.

He got down and took his rope off the legs and coiled it, and led the sorrel back to the barn, and unsaddled him, and rubbed him down, and put the rope back on its nail. Then he went out and pulled the tin cover down over the engine and turned off the light.

The calves bawled in the dark. He stood in the yard for a while and listened to them. Up at the house the kitchen light was off and the light in Conor's room was off and the light in his mother's room was on, behind the blind, and he could see her shape against it, sitting on the edge of the bed, very still, as if she were listening too.

7

Standing Hay

Her aunt rang on the fourteenth of June, at a quarter past six in the morning, as she rang every Monday.

The telephone was on the wall by the stove, where it had been since before Thea was born, a beige one with a long curly cord that her grandmother would not let anyone replace. Karin answered it. She always answered it on Mondays. She said "Dagny" into it before Dagny could say anything, and listened, and said "Wait," and held the receiver out across the table to Thea without looking at her.

"She wants you," Karin said. "Put it on the loud."

Thea pressed the button on the base and put the receiver down on the table between the coffee cups, and her aunt's voice came out of it, small and clear, from Billings.

"Is your father there?"

"He's out."

"Of course he is." Dagny was sixty-eight. She had worked for the co-op in Billings for thirty-eight years, in the forecasting office, and retired from it in 2063, and she still read the co-op's outlook every morning on her tablet before she read anything else, and rang her mother every Monday to tell her what it said. Karin had written it down every Monday since the autumn of 2031, in the back pages of her ledgers. There were thirty-five years of Dagny in the backs of

them. “I’ve seen the June numbers. Have you seen the June numbers?”

“I’ve seen them.”

“Then you know.” There was the sound of a spoon in a cup, in Billings. “The bench index is at nineteen. The lease is at twenty-two. The grass is done, Thea. It’s done in June. It’s going to be done all summer. And the hay’s at three hundred and ten delivered, and it’ll be at three-fifty by September, and there won’t be any to buy by November at any price.”

“I know.”

“You can’t carry them.”

Thea looked at her grandmother. Karin had the ledger open at the back, and the pencil in her hand, and was writing. She wrote slowly now. *14 June. D.* And then, in her small shaking hand: *Cannot carry 300 through winter on bought hay. Sell half now.*

On the table beside the ledger lay Thea’s own notebook, open, with the morning’s counts in it. She had done the flat at five. Forty flags. Four hundred and fifty-one crowns. Three hundred and sixty-five green.

“The flat’s at eighty-one,” Thea said. “In the crowns. Today. The co-op’s got it at twenty-something.”

There was a silence in Billings.

“Is that right,” Dagny said, and her voice changed, very slightly, for the first time. “Eighty-one.”

“It was eighty-five in April.”

“Then that’s three weeks on the flat. Maybe a month.” The spoon again. “It’s not a winter. You know it’s not. And you’ll keep them anyway.”

Thea did not answer.

“I’ll tell you why I ring,” Dagny said. “I ring because your father won’t listen to me and never has, and his father wouldn’t listen to anybody. In 2002 Dad kept every cow on the place because a man from the extension office told him to sell, and he was still paying for

the hay when I was eight. In 2053 your father kept every cow because I told him to sell. It wasn't the grass, either time. It was who was doing the telling." Her voice was level again. "So I'm asking. Who's telling you, Thea?"

"Nobody's telling me."

"Then it's the grass."

"It's the grass."

Her grandmother had stopped writing. She was holding the pencil above the bottom of the page, where she had left a space.

"Then hold them," Dagny said, "and buy your hay, and I'll ring on Monday. And if it's me, if it's even a little bit me, sell half."

There was another silence in Billings. A longer one.

"Put your grandmother on," Dagny said.

Thea pushed the receiver across the table. Karin picked it up and took it off the loud and put it to her ear, and listened for a while, and said "Yes," and "I know," and "She's thirty-two, Dagny," and "Yes. I wrote it down," and then "Goodbye, dear," and hung it up on the wall without getting out of her chair, because the cord was long enough. She had arranged that in 1994.

Then she picked up the pencil and wrote in the space at the bottom of the page.

T.: Hold. Flat 81% (451/365).

She drew a line under it, the whole width of the page, as she did at the end of every month.

• • •

She had not gone to Jolene's supper on the Saturday. She had had a clean shirt out on the bed at five, and then a heifer had got through the river fence, and by the time she had her back it was dark, and she had not rung.

She spent the rest of that week buying hay.

She did it from the truck, mostly, with the telephone and the tablet and a road map of the county that had been in the glovebox since her grandfather's time, with his pencil marks on it. The state had opened its hay hotline at the end of May, as it did in dry years, and she read it every morning before she fed, and rang everyone on it who was within a hundred miles and had anything that was not straw. Most of them had sold already. Some of them wanted more than the co-op's price, and some wanted it in cash, and one man in Lavina wanted it in cash and wanted her to come and look at it on a Sunday, and she did not.

She drove. She drove to Ryegate, and Harlowton, and Melstone, and down the river to Custer, and out along the Yellowstone to a place near Hysham where a man had two pivots of alfalfa that had come on with the ditch water and would be cut in a week. She stood in his field with him in the hot wind, an old man in a straw hat with a cane, and looked at it. It was knee-high and blue-green and thick, the best hay she had seen in a month, and he knew it.

"Three-twenty standing," he said. "You cut it, you bale it, you haul it."

"Three hundred."

"Three-twenty. I've had a man from Wyoming offer three-forty. I'd rather it stayed in Montana." He looked at her from under the straw hat. "You're Arne Tollefsen's granddaughter."

"Yes."

"He bought hay off my father in 2002. Paid every cent. Took him four years." The old man leaned on his cane. "Three-ten. And I'll bale it for you, at cost, if you haul it."

She shook his hand. He had a hand like a dry stick.

In the truck, on the shoulder of the road above his field, she wrote it in her notebook. *Hysham. Lindgren. 2 pivots alf. ~60 ton est. $310 stdg, baling at cost. Haul late June.* She added it to the list. By Friday the list had five places on it, and the five places came to ninety-four tons, if the estimates were right, and the estimates in a

dry year were never right, and the cost came to nearly thirty thousand dollars before she had hauled any of it.

Ninety-four tons. The meadows, with the west pump back from Billings since May and the river where it was, would make, if it rained at all in July, perhaps a third of what they made in a normal year, which would be a hundred and twenty tons. That was two hundred and fourteen. She needed three hundred and fifty, if she sold the old cows in October. She needed four hundred and fifty if she did not.

She sat on the shoulder of the road above the Yellowstone with the notebook on the steering wheel and looked at the numbers.

Out on the river below her, on a gravel bar, there was a man fishing, in waders, alone, casting over and over into the low brown water, and not catching anything, and casting again.

• • •

The bank was in Billings, on the eleventh floor of a building on North Broadway, with a view of the Rims.

She went with her father. The note was his, and the line was his, and the bank would not talk to her about them without him in the room, though she had done the books for six years and he had not opened them. He wore his good shirt and his town hat and he sat in the chair across the desk from the bank's man with his hat on his knee and his hands folded on top of it, and he did not say anything at all for the first ten minutes.

The bank's man was called Haslam. He was forty and pleasant and had been their banker since 2059, and he had a screen on his desk turned so that all three of them could see it, and on the screen there was the Lodgepole.

Not the place. The numbers. The herd, as the bank saw it: three hundred and six cows, two hundred and ninety-nine calves, eight bulls, forty-four replacement heifers, at the bank's valuation per head, which was the market price in Billings that morning less a

margin, and beside each number the number it had been in January, and the number the bank's system expected it to be in December. The cows were worth less in December. A great deal less. The calves were worth less. The heifers were worth less. Down the right-hand side of the screen there was a column with the line in it, what they had drawn on it since January, eleven thousand four hundred of it to the shop in Billings for the west pump, and what they would need to draw to carry the herd through the winter, and the limit, and the gap.

"I'll be straight with you, Mr. Tollefsen," Haslam said. "The committee looked at this on Tuesday. The guidance on your herd is to destock by sixty percent. The co-op's guidance, and ours. Our system reads the same satellites."

"I know what it says," Jens said.

"I know you do. I'm not here to tell you to sell." Haslam turned his pen over on the desk. "I'm here to tell you what the bank can do and what it can't. It can raise the line. It can't raise it to what you'll need if you hold the whole herd, because by March the herd won't be worth what you'll owe on it. The committee won't lend past the collateral. Nobody will."

"How far."

"A hundred and forty thousand. On top of what you've drawn." Haslam put the pen down. "And the limit moves with the herd. We'll mark it every month, at the Billings price, and if the herd's worth less, the limit comes down. You'll send us a count every month. If the line gets within ten percent of the limit, we'll want to talk. If it goes over, we'll want you to sell enough to bring it back under." He looked at Thea, and then back at Jens. "That's the most I could get them to do. I want you to know I tried."

"I know you did," Jens said.

"Your daughter's numbers," Haslam said. He touched the screen and another page came up, and it was her page, the one she had sent him on Wednesday: the flat, the counts, sixteen years of them,

and her winter, done in her own figures, with the hay she had found and the hay she still needed and the old cows sold in October and the line at the end of it in May. "I read them. They're good. They're better than the system's on the grass." He looked at Thea. "They're about the same as the system's on the hay."

"Yes," Thea said.

"I'm saying it because it's what the committee will say."

"Tell them I agree with them about the hay."

Haslam looked at her for a moment. Then he turned the screen back towards himself, and touched it, and a document came up on the tablet that lay on the desk in front of her father, with a line at the bottom of it for his name.

Jens looked at it. He did not pick it up. He looked at it with his hands folded on his hat.

"A hundred and forty," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"And a count every month."

"Every month. On the first."

Her father unfolded his hands and picked up the stylus that lay beside the tablet and signed his name on the line. His signature had not changed since he was twenty. *J. E. Tollefsen*, small and square and level, as if it were being written on a fence post with a nail.

"Thea does the counts," he said, and put the stylus down.

• • •

Kieran came across the ford on the Thursday evening.

She had not expected him. She was on the flat at seven, doing the counts again, because she had started doing them twice a week now, and she heard a horse in the cottonwoods by the river and looked up, and it was him, on a fat sorrel she had never seen him ride, coming up the bank out of the trees with his hat pushed back.

He rode across the flat to her and stopped the sorrel by the flag where she was kneeling.

"You said June," he said. "If it was still green."

"It's still green."

"I can see that. I've been looking at it from the loadout for a week." He got down. The sorrel stood, puffing. He was too fat for the evening heat, and his sides went in and out. "Show me."

So she showed him.

She showed him the hoop and the flag and how she laid it down on the north side, and how you knelt, and how you looked down into the crowns, past the dead stuff, for the green. He knelt beside her on the dry ground. She saw him look, and not see, and look again, and see. She saw his face when he saw it.

"There," she said, and put her finger near a crown, not on it. "And there. That one's none yet. That one's green."

"How many?"

"In this one. Eleven. Eight green."

He looked into the hoop for a long time.

"Every one of them," he said. "Forty of these. Twice a week."

"Since April."

"Since 2050," he said. "Mam told me. Your mother told her." He sat back on his heels and looked across the flat, the long thin green over the brown, in the low evening light, going away to the cottonwoods. "It's not like this on our side. Not anywhere. Not the meadow, not the bench." He was quiet. "The Companion has your flat at twenty-four."

"The co-op has it at twenty-two."

"It's not twenty-four."

"No."

"It's not eighty either. Not for grass. Not for pounds." He looked at her. "Is it?"

"It's eighty in the crowns. It's alive. It's short." She picked up the hoop. "It'll carry them three weeks more than the Companion says. Maybe five, if it rains in July. Then it quits. Then I'm on hay."

"At three-ten."

"At three-ten if I can find it. I've found ninety-four tons."

"You'll need three hundred."

"Three-fifty."

He nodded, slowly. He did not say *Sell them*. She had thought he would, and had been ready for it, kneeling on the ground beside him with the hoop in her hand, and he did not. He looked at the flat, and at her, and then he got up and dusted off his knees and took the sorrel's reins.

"It's a good thing you've done here," he said. "I'll not say otherwise."

"But."

"I didn't say but."

"You were going to."

He smiled, a little, and got back on the sorrel, heavily, with a grunt from the horse.

"I'll not say it," he said. "You've your aunt for that. And Nils. And the bank." He gathered the reins. "And the thing in my ear. It'd say it for me if I let it."

He rode back across the flat towards the river. At the cottonwoods he lifted a hand without turning round, and went down the bank into the trees, and she heard the sorrel splash through the low water at the ford, and then nothing.

• • •

She drove up to the colony on the Saturday.

She went up the bench road from the bridge, on the Rourke side, past the Rourke pens, which were nearly empty, and up the long grade onto the bench, and along it to the colony. She had been to the colony perhaps a dozen times in fourteen years. To buy eggs, when theirs stopped laying. To take a bull back that had got through the fence. To the funeral of the old minister's wife, in 2061. The colony's kitchen bell was ringing for the noon meal as she pulled in, and the men were coming in from the shop and the barns in their

black trousers and their braces, and the women from the garden and the kitchen in their dark dresses and their kerchiefs, and the children from everywhere, and none of them looked at her truck more than once.

The office was at the end of the kitchen building. She knocked on the door, which was open.

Joseph Wipf was in the chair by the window. He was sixty-two, grey-bearded, in a black waistcoat, with his hat on the desk beside him, and he sat with his hands folded on his stomach and his head turned a little to one side, towards the light, and when she came to the door he turned his head further, so that he was looking a little past her.

"Thea Tollefsen," he said.

"Mr. Wipf."

"Joseph." He did not get up. "Sit down. Daniel's coming. He'll want his dinner first. They all want their dinner first." He gestured at the other chair. "You've come about the trail."

"How did you know?"

"Because the state's going to cut the lease," Joseph said. "And you'll want your cattle off it before they do. And the only way off it is across us." He folded his hands again. "Sit down."

She sat.

The office was small and plain, with a desk and a filing cabinet and a calendar from a seed company and a clock, and a computer whose screen was dark, and on the desk, open, a big ledger, a real one, with columns, in a hand she did not know. Beside the ledger there was a magnifying glass, a big one, with a handle. She looked at it and then away.

Daniel came in ten minutes later, wiping his mouth. He was tall and fair, in the colony's black and white, with a short beard because he was married, and big careful hands, and he looked at her and then at Joseph, and Joseph said something to him in German, short, and Daniel nodded and sat on the edge of the desk.

"You want the trail in September," Daniel said.

"Early September. Before the state cuts. I don't know when they'll cut. I want to be ready."

"The whole herd."

"Three hundred and six pairs, near enough. Down the trail and home. One day."

Daniel nodded. He looked at the window. From the office window you could see down the bench, along the foot of the Hogback, a long way, to where the trail went along the edge of the fields towards the river. There was a field by the trail, a long narrow one, close under the ridge, that was a different colour from the others. Thinner. A pale green, in rows.

"There's the fence along the trial ground," Daniel said. "It'll have to come down. Or the cattle'll be through it. They always are, at the corner, by the big rock." He did not look at her. "And the barley'll be standing. If it's ready, it'll be cut by then. If it's not, it won't."

"I can bring them along the outside. On the ridge side."

"There's no outside. The trail's the outside." Daniel looked at her then. "It's all right. We'll take the fence down. We'll cut first if we can."

"Thank you."

"The bank reads our books now," Daniel said. He said it evenly, the way he might have said that the wind was in the south. "Everything that comes through a gate is in the books. They want to know what everything's worth." He glanced at Joseph, who had not moved. "So there's a price. For the crossing. This year."

"What is it?"

He told her. It was not very much. It was less than she would have paid a trucker to haul half the herd home from the lease by road, which was what she would have to do if they said no. It was a fair price, and it was a price, where for fourteen years there had been a handshake and nothing else, and she sat in the chair in the small

plain office and understood that the bank had reached into this room as well, and she did not say so.

"All right," she said.

"Half when you come. Half when you're through."

"All right."

She reached across the desk to shake his hand. He shook it. His hand was very hard and very dry, and he did not hold on to hers any longer than he had to.

"I'll ring," she said, "when I know the day."

"Ring the office," Daniel said. "I'll be there."

She got up. Joseph had not said anything. He was sitting as he had sat all the time, with his hands folded and his head turned towards the window, towards the light, towards the trail and the field by the trail under the ridge, though she did not think, from the way he held his head, that he could see it.

"Thank you, Joseph," she said.

"Your father," Joseph said.

She waited at the door.

Joseph did not finish. He sat for a moment longer with his face to the window. Then he said, "Tell him the colony will take the fence down," and that was all, and Thea said she would, and went out.

• • •

She drove home down the bench along the trail.

It was not the way you drove. You drove down the bench road. But the trail ran beside the colony's fields along the foot of the Hogback, a two-track at this end where the colony's trucks used it, and she turned off onto it at the top of the bench and drove down it slowly, in second gear, with the windows open and the dust coming in, to look at it. She would bring three hundred pairs down it in September, if the state cut the lease, and she wanted to see it as it was now.

It was as it had always been. The sandstone face of the Hogback on her left, a hundred feet high, with the swallows going in and out of the holes in its face. The colony's fields on her right. The tracks of her own cattle, still sharp in the dust from May, going the other way, up towards the mountains.

Along the trail edge, close under the ridge, there was the long narrow field she had seen from the office window. She slowed down beside it. It was barley, in rows, thin, a pale yellow-green, a foot high, with the dry grey ground showing between the rows. At the far end, by a big rock at the corner of the fence, it was thicker, a real stand. The fence along the trail was new wire, tight, on new posts, and there were tufts of red and black hair caught on the barbs at the corner by the rock, where somebody's cows had put their heads through.

Somebody's barley. The colony's. She looked at it for a moment as she drove past, and thought that it was late, and thin, and would not make much, and that it was a strange place to put a field, right on the trail where every cow in two counties had walked for a hundred years, and then she was past it, and through the third gate, and going down the long slope of the bench towards the river and the ford, with the Lodgepole flat beyond the cottonwoods on the other side, green, and away to the east, at the top of the coulee, the campus, white in the sun.

• • •

Her mother was in the yard when she pulled in, by the shop, with the cordless telephone in her hand.

"A man from Hysham," Shannon said. "Lindgren. He's rung twice."

Thea took it and rang him back, standing by the truck with the engine ticking.

He was sorry. He said so first, and then again. A man had come up from Sheridan that morning with two trucks and a swather on a trailer and cash, and offered three-sixty standing for both pivots,

and his son had taken it. It was his son's place now, he said. He had told his son about her. His son had said a handshake on the shoulder of a road was not a contract, and three-sixty was three-sixty, and the man from Wyoming was there with the cash.

"I'm sorry," the old man said again. "I'd have held it for you. I said I would."

"You did."

"There's a man at Custer might have some. Second cutting, if he gets one. I'll give you his number."

She wrote it on the back of her hand, because the notebook was in the truck. Then she said thank you, and he said he was sorry, and she said it was all right, and they hung up.

She got the notebook out of the truck and opened it on the hood, in the sun, and found the line. *Hysham. Lindgren. 2 pivots alf. ~60 ton est.* She drew a line through it. Under the list she had written 94 on Friday and circled it. She crossed it out and wrote 34.

Thirty-four tons, and a hundred and twenty if it rained, out of three hundred and fifty. The bank's count was due on the first of July. The man at Custer did not have a second cutting yet and might not get one.

Her mother stood by the shop door, watching her, with her arms folded.

"How much?" Shannon said.

"Sixty tons."

Her mother looked at the notebook on the hood of the truck, and at Thea, and then she unfolded her arms and held out her hand, and Thea gave her the telephone, and wiped the number off the back of her hand onto the notebook, and went into the house to ring Custer.

PART TWO

The Daughter Colony

July – September 2066

8

The Brotherhood

"I can't see the fields," Joseph said. "I can see the note."

It was the second of July, a Friday, at ten at night, in the office. Daniel had read him the books for an hour and closed them. The bank's letter was on the desk between them, out of the file now, with the date in the first line that Daniel had read to him so many times he could see it with his eyes shut. *31 July 2066.* Twenty-nine days.

"I can see the note," Joseph said again, "because you read it to me every night, and I can hear it. The number. I hear it in my sleep. But I can't see the wheat. I go out to the west field and stand at the gate and I see a grey place where the wheat is, and gold round the edges of the grey, and I know it's wheat because you told me what you planted." He folded his hands. "A boss has to see the fields."

"Darius sees them."

"Darius is standing down. He told the minister after church. His knees." Joseph turned his head towards the window, though the window was black. "He'll say so at the brotherhood on the eleventh. And the brotherhood will want a farm boss. And they'll want the bank answered."

Daniel sat with his hands on the closed ledger.

"I'm going to ask the brotherhood two things," Joseph said. "I want you to know before I ask them. I'll ask them to take the guided contracts. And I'll ask them to make you farm boss."

"Joseph."

"Let me say it." Joseph's voice did not change. He spoke English in the office when it was about money, because the books were in English, and because, he had said once, he had done his thinking about money in English for twenty-two years in Billings and could not do it in German any more. "In 2052 I stood up in the church at Sixmile and said we would carry the rule across the river. I meant it. I had been in the feedlot. I knew what it was to be told every hour of the night which pen to feed by a voice that didn't know the cattle." He was quiet a moment. "I brought seventy people across the river on that rule. Your mother. You. I'm not going to lose them the bench because of it."

"The brotherhood might say no."

"They might." Joseph turned his head back from the window, a little past Daniel, to where he could see him at the edge of the grey. "And if they say no, the bank says no, and in the spring the bank owns the bench, and we go back to Sixmile, if Sixmile will have us, as hired men in our own brothers' barns." He let that sit. "I'd rather they said yes and I was wrong."

"And if they say yes?"

"Then I was wrong in 2052." Joseph unfolded his hands and put them on his knees, to get up. "It happens. I've been wrong before. You know the times."

Daniel knew some of the times. He did not know all of them. He got up and came round the desk and took Joseph's arm, above the elbow, the way Joseph let him do now at night, and walked him to the door.

"Why me?" he said at the door. "For boss."

Joseph stopped with his hand on the frame.

"Because you know which field is which without looking at the map," he said. "And because you've done six years on forty acres for nobody but the colony, after your other work, and never once asked for anything for it." He felt for the step with his foot. "And because Elias would take the job, and wants it, and you don't. That's usually the man."

• • •

The brotherhood met after the service on the eleventh.

It met in the church, which was also the school, a long plain room with benches on both sides of an aisle, the men's side and the women's side, and a table at the front with two chairs behind it and a Bible on it. When the service was over the women went out, with the children, and the unbaptised boys went out, and the doors were shut, and the baptised men moved forward and sat on the front benches on both sides. There were nineteen of them. Daniel had been one of them for six years. He had sat in this room for six years of brotherhoods, and voted, and spoken twice, about a hog barn roof and about a seed drill, and both times he had sat down again with his face burning.

The minister sat behind the table. He was a quiet heavy man of fifty who had come from Sixmile with them in 2052, and he opened the meeting with a prayer, and then he said, in German, that Darius had something to say.

Darius stood up. He was sixty-eight and broad and bald under his hat, and he stood holding the back of the bench in front of him with both hands. He said that his knees were finished, and that he had been farm boss since they came to the bench, fourteen years, and that he had been glad to do it and was glad to stop, and that the brotherhood should choose a younger man. He said he would still drive the grain truck at harvest, if they wanted him, sitting down. Some of the men laughed. Darius sat.

The minister asked for names.

Joseph stood up. He stood carefully, with a hand on the bench, and turned his head a little towards the room, the way he did now, and said, “Daniel.”

Nobody said anything. Then Elias Kleinsasser stood up, on the other side of the aisle, and said, “Daniel,” too, and sat down again, and did not look at anyone.

Daniel had not expected that. He looked at Elias across the aisle. Elias was looking at the floor.

There were no other names. The minister waited, and asked again, and there were none. He asked the brotherhood to vote, by hands. Daniel did not vote. He sat with his hands between his knees and looked at the boards of the floor, which he had helped lay in 2052, and counted the knots in the board in front of his feet, and when he looked up the minister was saying his name, and that the brotherhood had chosen, and that he was farm boss of the colony, and that they would pray for him.

They prayed for him.

Then Joseph stood up again.

He did not stand up quickly. He stood, and found the end of the bench with one hand, and moved out into the aisle, and turned to face the brotherhood, which nobody did, which was done only by the minister, and the minister did not stop him. He stood in the aisle with his black hat in his hand and his head turned a little to one side.

He told them about the bank’s letter. He told them what the note was. They knew what the note was. He told them anyway, the number, all seven figures of it, and Daniel saw some of the older men look at the floor when he said it, as if it were a thing you did not say in church. He told them what the elevator in Roundup would take and what it would not, and what the guided programme would take, and that it carried cover on every field it took, this year’s standing crop with the rest, against fire and hail and drought, at the contract price, with the premium inside the price, which was more than the colony had ever been able to buy for itself. He told them that the

bank would not renew without one or the other, and that the elevator would not be enough.

"In 2052," Joseph said, "I stood up at Sixmile, in my brother's church, and said we would keep the rule on the bench. Some of you were there. I said it because I had worked six years in a feedlot in Billings, under the machine, and I knew what it was to be told, every hour, by a voice that didn't know the cattle, what to do with them. I said we would not put our fields under it. I said it would take the work out of our hands." He was quiet for a moment. "I was right about the feedlot. I'm not sure I was right about the bench."

Nobody moved.

"I'm asking the brotherhood," Joseph said, "to put our grain under the guided programme for two years. Sixty percent of it, or all of it, as the farm boss judges. So the bank renews the note. So we keep the bench." He turned his hat round in his hands, once. "I'm asking it as the man who asked you to keep the rule. I know what that means. If I'm wrong now, I was wrong then, and you can say so."

He went back to his bench and sat down.

The arguing took an hour.

It was not loud. Nothing in that room was ever loud. The old men spoke first, as they always did, standing, holding the bench in front of them, one at a time. Old Peter Waldner said that the colony had been told at Sixmile what the rule was and why, and that a rule did not stop being true because a bank wanted it to. Darius, from his bench, without standing, said that he had farmed under the rule for fourteen years and that it had cost the colony money every one of them and that he had never once minded, and that he minded now. A man named Jakob Stahl, a year younger than Elias, who had been on the road with Elias and the Lodgepole cattle in 2049 and had not spoken in a brotherhood since, stood up and said that he did not know what the right answer was, and that he did not want to go back to Sixmile as a hired man, and sat down red to the ears.

Elias stood up last.

"We let the co-op tell us the weather," Elias said. "We let it tell us when to cut the hay. We let it tell the hog barn what to feed. We let the bank read our books." He looked across the aisle at Joseph, and then, for the first time, at Daniel. "The wheat isn't holier than the hogs. It's the same work. If the machine can tell us when the frost's coming, it can tell us what to plant on the west field. We just have to remember it's a machine."

He sat down.

The minister let it be quiet for a while. Then he asked the brotherhood to vote.

Ten hands. Seven against. Darius, Daniel saw, did not raise his hand either way. Neither did Daniel.

• • •

The plan came on the Monday.

It came on the office computer, the one Joseph could not read, at nine in the morning, after Daniel had sent the co-op the colony's enrolment on the Sunday night, after the vote, with the minister's name on it as president and Joseph's as secretary. It came as a list of fields. Every field on the colony's ground, each with its number and its acres and its soil and its last five crops and its yields, which the colony had sent them, and beside each one, in a new column, what the programme wanted planted there next spring and the spring after, and what it would pay for it.

Daniel read it to Joseph. Joseph sat in his chair with his eyes shut.

"*HC-1, west field, 320 acres. Spring wheat, 2067. Contract price per bushel—*" and the number. "*HC-2. Canola, 2067.*" And on, down the list, nineteen fields. Joseph said *Again* twice.

The seventeenth line said: *HC-17. 40 acres. Hogback strip. Currently: barley (trial, colony seed). Recommended: malting barley, contract variety, 2067 and 2068. Note: field is narrow; recommend fence removal on east boundary to allow full-width operation with standard equipment.*

Daniel read it out. He read it in the same voice as the others.

Joseph opened his eyes.

"The trial ground," he said.

"Yes."

"They want the fence down."

"On the trail side. So the big drill can turn."

Joseph was quiet. Then he said, "Darius said something to me after the vote."

Daniel waited.

"He said the brotherhood would understand if the boss's trial ground stayed out of the contract. As the boss's ground. For seed. He said every farm boss at Sixmile had a corner like that, his father's had, his grandfather's. He said the bank wouldn't care about forty acres in eleven hundred." Joseph turned his head towards Daniel. "He said he'd speak to the minister. He said I should tell you."

"You've told me."

"I've told you."

Daniel looked at the screen. There was a box at the end of each line, and in each box a word, *Accept* or *Exclude*, that you could touch. Eighteen of the boxes said *Accept*. He had touched them himself, one at a time, when it came, before he read it to Joseph. He had not touched the seventeenth. It said nothing yet. It was waiting for him.

He thought about the jars in the shop, six years of them, the earliest heads. He thought about how Darius would say it to the minister, and the brotherhood would nod, and every time any of them walked past the forty acres for the next two years they would see the boss's corner, with the fence still up, outside the contract that the boss had asked everyone else to live under.

He touched the box. It said *Accept*.

"It's in," he said.

Joseph did not say anything for a while.

"You didn't have to," he said.

"No."

"Darius meant it kindly."

"He did." Daniel turned the screen off. He sat with his hand flat on the desk beside it. "I can't ask seventy people to go under it and keep my forty acres out. I'd be the man who did that. Every time I walked past it." He did not know how else to say it. "It's the colony's barley. I always said so."

Joseph turned his head back towards the window, towards the light, where he could see the edge of something.

"You did," he said. "You always did."

• • •

Samuel-John came on the Tuesday.

He came at noon, when the men were coming in from the shop and the barns for dinner, in the Sixmile truck, the big grey one, and he drove it into the yard between the kitchen and the shop and stopped it there, in the middle, where everyone would have to walk round it. He got out. He was sixty-seven, and heavy, and grey-bearded, in his black hat and his black coat in the heat. He was the boss at Sixmile. He had been the boss at Sixmile since his father's stroke, nineteen years, and he was Joseph's elder brother, and he looked like Joseph if Joseph had never left.

He stood by the truck. The men who were crossing the yard stopped. Some of them took their hats off. The women at the kitchen door stopped.

"Where's the farm boss?" Samuel-John said, in German.

Daniel was by the shop door. He came across the yard.

He had known Samuel-John since he was ten. He had lived at Sixmile from ten to twelve, in the house next to Samuel-John's, and eaten at his table at weddings and Christmases, and Samuel-John had taught him to drive the old grain truck in the stubble at twelve, sitting beside him with his arms folded and saying nothing at all un-

less Daniel did something wrong. He had never once said a kind word to Daniel. He had never once said an unkind one.

"I'm the farm boss," Daniel said.

"I know who you are." Samuel-John looked at him. "I heard Sunday. I heard Monday what else." He did not look round at the men in the yard, but he spoke loudly enough for all of them to hear. "When you came across the river you carried the rule. My brother stood up in my church and said so. I heard him. Sixmile heard him."

"Yes."

"Then I'll say this once, and I'll say it here, so it's said." He did not raise his voice. "Sixmile will not put its grain under that machine. Sixmile told you why in 2031 and in 2052. If Hogback goes under it, Sixmile's ministers will not come to Hogback while it stands. That's not mine to decide. That's the ministers'. But I'll tell you that's what they'll decide, because I know them." He looked past Daniel then, at the kitchen door, where Joseph was standing with one hand on the frame. Then he looked back at Daniel. "Tell me I've come for nothing."

Daniel looked at him for a long moment.

He thought of several things he could say: that Sixmile had paid its note off in 2019 with hogs and wheat when the price was good and the rain came, and that Samuel-John had never had to sit in an office at night listening to a bank's letter. He did not say any of it. Samuel-John knew it.

"You came," Daniel said, "because you're Joseph's brother. That's not for nothing."

Samuel-John did not move.

"And if your ministers won't come to us," Daniel said, "we'll come to you. To church at Sixmile. At Easter and at Pentecost, like we always have. If you'll let us in the door." He did not look away. "We'll come either way. We'll come under the contract, and we'll sit at the back, and you can preach at us. But we'll come."

The yard was very quiet. Somewhere in the hog barn a sow was squealing, and stopped.

Samuel-John looked at him. Then he looked once more at the kitchen door, at his brother, who had not moved. Then he turned round and got into the grey truck and started it, and backed it round in the middle of the yard, slowly, with men stepping out of the way of it, and drove out down the bench road towards the river and the bridge and Sixmile, and the dust went up behind him and hung in the hot air.

Nobody said anything. Then the kitchen bell rang for dinner, late, because the women at the kitchen door had forgotten to ring it, and the men put their hats back on and went in.

Joseph was still in the doorway when Daniel came past him.

"You didn't have to say Easter," Joseph said.

"No."

"He'll remember it."

"I meant him to." Daniel stopped beside him. "Will he let us in?"

Joseph thought about it. "Yes," he said. "He'll make you sit at the very back. And he'll preach the whole sermon at you, and look at you all the way through it." He almost smiled. "And then he'll feed you."

• • •

He walked the barley that evening.

It was headed out. It had come on in June, in spite of everything, slowly, thin in the rows, and in the first week of July it had put out its heads, small and pale green, with the long beards on them standing up stiff, and now in the evening light along the foot of the Hogback it stood a foot and a half high and moved a little when the wind moved it, and the light went through the beards and made them shine. It was short. It was thin. In the low corner by the big rock it was thick and tall and even, and he stood at the corner looking at it.

He knelt and took a head in his fingers, not picking it, and looked at it close. The kernels were forming inside the husks, soft, green,

full of milk. In six weeks, if it did not rain too much and the frost held off, they would be hard. He would come out with the sack, as he did every August, and walk the rows, and pick the earliest heads by hand, the ones that turned first, and put them in the jars.

He would do that this year. Next year the field would be in the contract, and the big drill would come along the trail with the fence down, and seed it to a malting barley from a company in Minnesota, and he would never pick a head from it again.

He let go of the barley head. It sprang back and stood up with the others.

He walked to the end of the field and stood at the fourth gate, as he had stood in May. The trail ran beside the fence, printed with old tracks. Up on the mountains the burn of 2049 stood grey along the ridges in the last of the light, and somewhere up there, on the state's grass, three hundred cows and their calves were grazing what there was, and in September, when the grass was done, they would come down this trail past this field, and he would take the fence down for them, and they would cross.

That was this year. That was the colony's word and Joseph's handshake and the price Daniel had named in the office in June. It would end, like everything ended, at the end of the year.

The other thing would not end. He had touched the box himself.

He stood at the gate until it was dark enough that the barley was only a paleness along the foot of the ridge, and then he went down to the office to read Joseph the books.

9

Grand Entry

Her grandfather's boots were in the cedar chest at the foot of her grandmother's bed, where they had been since 2041.

Thea had not known that. She had not known they still existed. Karin told her on the Wednesday, at supper, when the Stampede committee rang, and after supper Karin went up the stairs ahead of her, slowly, one hand on the rail and one on Thea's arm, and knelt on the rug in front of the chest, which Thea had never seen her do, and lifted the lid.

The chest smelled of cedar and mothballs. There were blankets in it, folded, and her grandmother's wedding dress in a long box, and a bundle of letters with a ribbon round them, and at the bottom, wrapped in a flour sack, a pair of boots. Brown, high-heeled, the old kind, with the toes worn white and the heels run over on the outside, the right one worse, from fifty years of the limp. The right one had a split in the side, mended with stitching that did not match.

"He mended that himself," Karin said. "In 1994. With fishing line." She held the right boot in her lap. "He wouldn't buy new ones. He said they'd last him."

"They did."

"They did." Karin put the boot back in the sack with the other one and held the sack out to her. "Polish them. Not too much. He'd not have wanted them shining."

• • •

The Prosper Stampede had been held on the third Saturday in July on the county fairgrounds at the east end of Prosper since 1919, and this was the last time.

Everybody knew it. It had been in the paper, and on the sale barn notice board, and the committee had put it on the poster, in red, under the picture of a bronc: *The Last Stampede on the Old Grounds.* Next year it would be in Roundup, at the new arena the campus was building for the county as part of the price of the fairgrounds, with covered stands and lights and a car park for a thousand cars. The poster said that too, in smaller letters.

The old grounds looked as they always had. The arena with its white rails, peeling. The grandstand on the west side, wooden, with the roof over the top six rows and nobody's name on any of the seats. The bucking chutes at the north end and the roping boxes at the south, and the announcer's stand on stilts over the chutes, and the beer garden in the shade of the cottonwoods behind the grandstand, and the exhibit hall, and the long cattle barns. Beyond the barns, on the east side of the grounds, along the fence, there was a line of small orange stakes in the grass that had not been there last year, every fifty feet, running north and south, and a white pickup parked beside them with the consortium's name on its door.

Thea saw them as she pulled the trailer in. She did not look at them again.

• • •

The grand entry was at one.

The riders came in at a lope through the gate at the south end, two by two, with the flags, the way they always had: the American

flag and the state flag first, carried by two girls from the 4-H in white shirts and red hats, and then the committee, and the queen and her court, and then the contestants, all of them, the bronc riders and the ropers and the barrel racers, a long line of horses going round the arena at a lope along the rail with the dust going up and the announcer calling the names. Then they lined up across the arena, facing the grandstand, and took their hats off for the anthem.

When the anthem was over the announcer said, "Folks, I'll ask you to stay standing."

The gate at the south end opened again.

Thea rode in at a walk on Ledger, leading her grandmother's old bay mare, who had been Shannon's mare once and was twenty-four and as quiet as a church. The mare had her grandfather's saddle on her, the old high-cantled one from the tack room wall that nobody had sat in since 2041, and his hat on the horn, and his boots in the stirrups, backwards, the toes towards her tail, the polished heels catching the light.

Beside her, a length to her right, Kieran rode in on the fat sorrel, leading a black gelding with his father's saddle on it, and his father's hat on the horn, and his father's boots backwards in the stirrups.

They walked them round the arena along the rail. The grandstand was silent. Nine hundred people, Thea thought, or a thousand, standing with their hats in their hands, and the only sound was the horses' feet in the dirt and the wind in the cottonwoods behind the stands and a child somewhere asking a question and being hushed.

The announcer read the names.

"Arne Tollefsen," he said. "Of the Lodgepole, on the Musselshell. Rode saddle broncs in this arena from 1982 to 1991, and was carried out of it in '91, and came back every July after that for fifty years and sat in the top row and told the judges what they'd got wrong." There was a little sound in the grandstand that was nearly a laugh. "He died in 2041. He'd have hated this. He'd have come anyway."

They had reached the far end of the arena, by the chutes. Thea did not look at the grandstand. She looked at the mare's ears, and the boots in the stirrups, swinging a little with the mare's walk, toes back.

"Conor Rourke," the announcer said. "Of Rourke Land and Cattle, across the river. Roped in this arena for forty-one years, and won the team roping here six times, and lost it more times than that, and told you about every one of them. He died on the Musselshell on the night of the Dutchman fire, the twenty-fourth of August, 2049." He stopped. The grandstand was very quiet. "He was sixty-one."

They came round the turn at the north end, under the announcer's stand, past the chutes. The black gelding with Conor's boots in the stirrups threw his head and Kieran checked him with the lead rope, gently, and the gelding settled. Thea glanced across at Kieran. His face was set and pale and his jaw was tight, and he was looking straight ahead between the sorrel's ears.

She said, without meaning to, low, "It was your dad."

He did not turn his head. "What was?"

"Off the Shetland. At the junior rodeo. It was your dad fell off, not my mom."

His jaw moved. "It was your mother. She told it at every Christmas for thirty years."

"She told it as your dad. She always said your dad."

"She said it was her and she was telling it as my dad to make it funnier."

"That's not what she said."

"That's exactly what she said. You were seven. I was fourteen. I remember."

"You were fourteen and you remember a Shetland?"

"I remember everything that's to my advantage," Kieran said.

She laughed. She could not help it. It came out of her in front of a thousand people standing silent with their hats in their hands, a short laugh through her nose, and she put her head down and bit

her lip, and beside her she heard Kieran make a sound in his throat, and when she looked across he was laughing too, silently, with his shoulders going and his face screwed up and the tears running down his face in the dust, and the black gelding with his father's boots in the stirrups walking along beside him, and they rode the last of the arena like that, side by side, past the grandstand, with their heads down, shaking, and out through the gate at the south end into the dust of the alley.

Outside the gate they stopped. Kieran wiped his face on his sleeve. He looked at her.

"Your mother," he said. "Absolutely your mother."

• • •

He made her enter the team roping.

He did it at the back of the arena, by the roping boxes, at two, after they had unsaddled the old mare and the black gelding and put them in the trailers with the boots and the hats and the saddles back in the trucks. He had the entry sheet in his hand. He had got it from the secretary in her little booth under the announcer's stand.

"The entries closed at noon," Thea said.

"She'll take a late one. She took mine." He held the sheet out to her. It had his name on it already, at the bottom, in the heeling column, with the fat sorrel's name beside it, which was Bishop, which she had not known. The heading column beside his name was blank. "I need a header."

"I don't head."

"You head every calf at your branding."

"That's calves. That's in a pen."

"It's the same rope." He was still holding the sheet out. "It's two hundred dollars. I'll pay it. It's the last one on the old grounds." He did not smile. "I've not roped here since 2058. I'll not get another chance on this dirt. Head for me, Thea. Please."

She looked at the sheet. She looked at Bishop, tied to the trailer in the shade, fat, half asleep, with one hind foot cocked. She looked at Ledger.

"He's never been in a box," she said.

"Neither's Bishop. Not for eight years. They'll be terrible." He held out the pen. "We'll be terrible together."

She wrote her name in the heading column. She wrote *Ledger* beside it.

• • •

They were terrible in the warm-up pen. Ledger did not understand what a box was, or why he should stand in one, or why he should leave it at a run when a steer did, and the first time she backed him into it he stood in the corner with his Roman nose up and looked at her over his shoulder as if she had lost her mind. The second time he went, late, at a trot. The third time he went at a gallop and she swung and threw and caught the steer round the neck instead of the horns, which was legal and was a poor catch, and turned off, and Kieran came in behind on Bishop, puffing, and threw his heel loop, and missed by a yard.

"Good," Kieran said, coiling his rope. "We've got the misses out of the way."

There were forty-one teams. They were thirty-eighth. They sat on their horses at the back of the arena, by the boxes, and watched the others go, the good teams from Billings and Roundup and Miles City who roped for money every weekend all summer, who backed into the box and nodded and were gone and caught and turned and caught again in five seconds, six, seven, and the timer flags came down, and the announcer called the times, and the crowd in the grandstand clapped. A team from Lavina was winning at 5.9.

"We're not going to beat five-nine," Thea said.

"No."

"We're not going to beat nine."

"Probably not," Kieran said. He was watching the box. He was sitting on Bishop with his rope in his hand and his loop built, and his face had gone quiet, the face she had seen on him at the branding when he was twenty-two, before. "Doesn't matter. Catch your steer."

They called the thirty-eighth team. *Thea Tollefsen and Kieran Rourke, of the Musselshell, heading and heeling.* There was a little stir in the grandstand at the names, and some clapping that was not for the roping.

She backed Ledger into the box. He went in. He stood, for once, in the corner, with his weight on his hindquarters and his head up, and she looked down the chute at the steer, a brindle with short horns, and nodded.

The gate banged open. The steer went out. Ledger went out after him, not late, flat out, with his big feet throwing dirt and his ugly head stretched out, and she was over the steer before she had thought about it, with her loop going round once, twice, and she threw, and it went over the horns, both of them, clean, and she dallied and turned Ledger off to the left the way she turned off a calf in a pen, and felt the steer come round on the end of the rope, and his hind legs swing out behind him.

She did not see Kieran's loop. She heard it. A soft slap in the dirt, and then the rope coming tight, and Bishop grunting as he sat down, and the steer stretched out between them, both ends, and the flagger's flag coming down.

"Nine point eight," the announcer said. "Nine point eight for the Musselshell. And folks, I'll tell you, that's a catch."

The grandstand clapped. It clapped more than it had for the team from Lavina. Somebody whistled. She sat on Ledger with the rope dallied round the horn and the steer stretched out on the dirt and looked across it at Kieran, on Bishop, at the other end, with his rope dallied and his hat gone, and he looked back at her across the steer

with his face wide open, the way it had been at fourteen, and grinned.

They did not win anything. They were nineteenth. The team from Lavina won it at 5.9 and took home two thousand dollars and a buckle. Kieran had paid two hundred dollars for the two of them to come nineteenth, and when they had put the horses up he went to the beer garden and bought two beers and brought them back to the trailer and gave her one, and they stood in the shade of the trailer with the horses, and he touched his can against hers.

"Nine point eight," he said.

"Nineteenth."

"Nine point eight on the old dirt." He drank. "Mam'll have seen it. She was in the stands. She'll tell it at Christmas for thirty years."

"She'll say you missed."

"She'll say you missed. She'll say it was you fell off." He leaned his back against the trailer and closed his eyes. "That's how it works."

• • •

Her family was in the grandstand, in the middle, eight rows up, where the Tollefsens had always sat.

Her grandmother was at the end of the row, on the aisle, in her good cardigan, with her handbag on her knees and the ledger in the handbag. She had come to every Stampede since 1987. She did not watch the roping or the broncs or the barrels. She watched the grandstand, and the people in it, and sometimes she took the ledger out of her bag and wrote something in it, and nobody had ever asked her what.

Her father and mother sat beside her. Together, on the bench, with Shannon's shoulder against Jens's, the way they had sat at every Stampede Thea could remember. Her father had his hat pushed back and his arms folded. Her mother had a programme in her lap and a pencil, and was marking the bronc scores, as she did, against the judges'. When Thea came up the steps her mother

looked up and said, "Nine-eight," and her father said, "That horse of yours left the box like a cow that's seen a dog," and her mother said, "Jens," and he said, "Well, he did," and Thea sat down beside her mother and her mother put a hand on her knee, briefly, and took it away.

Nils came at four. He came up the steps in his grey fleece in the heat, with his sunglasses pushed up on his head, and sat on the end of the row below them, next to his father's feet, and turned round, and said he had seen the roping on his telephone at work, somebody had sent it to him, and that it had been watched four hundred times. Jens said that was four hundred people with nothing to do. Nils said probably, and then he and his father talked about the campus, the cooling towers, the new halls, the loads, for half an hour, Nils with his elbows on his knees and his head turned up and back to talk to his father, and Jens leaning forward with his forearms on his thighs to hear him, both of them talking numbers, megawatts and gallons a minute and degrees, in the same flat voices, while the saddle broncs went off below them one after another and neither of them watched a single one.

Thea watched them talk. They looked, from where she sat, exactly alike, the same long jaw and the same pale eyes, and her father was asking about the thing her brother did, question after question, short ones, as he had not once in eight years.

Down in the front row, by the rail, in the shade under the announcer's stand, there was Lyle Harris, and his daughter beside him.

Lyle was eighty-two. He sat on the end of the front row with his cane between his knees and his hat on, very straight, and he had watched the team roping with his whole body, leaning a little towards each steer as it left the chute, as if he were roping it himself. When Thea and Kieran caught, he had lifted the cane an inch off the ground and put it down again, and Thea had seen it from the box. Mariah sat beside him. She was in a white shirt and sunglasses, with

her short hair grey at the sides, and a bottle of water she kept handing to him, and he kept taking it and drinking and handing it back without looking at her.

When Thea passed them on the way down to the horses at six, Lyle reached out with the cane and tapped her boot with the end of it.

"You head," he said, "like your father heeled."

"Is that good?"

"It's late," Lyle said. "It's late and it's right." He looked at her from under his hat. "He was always late. Twenty years and more I roped with him. He was always a half a second behind me and he always caught." He put the cane back between his knees. "Tell him I said."

"I will."

"He won't come down here," Lyle said. "Tell him anyway."

• • •

Her telephone rang as she reached the trailer.

It was Arvid Holmquist, who leased the state sections next to theirs on the Bull Mountain and ran yearlings on them, and who never rang anybody. He was eighty and deaf and shouted.

"Your south tank's dry," he shouted. "Your cows are on my fence. I can hear them from the house."

"Dry?"

"Dry. I drove over. There's not a drop in it. The solar thing's dead, the little box on the pole, it's got no lights. They've been at it all day by the look. It's a hundred and two at my house." He coughed. "Thought you'd want to know."

She stood by the trailer with the telephone against her ear and the grandstand roaring behind her at the barrel racing.

The south tank was the big one. It was fed from a well on the state's section by a solar pump, a little panel on a pole and a controller in a grey box under it, that the state had put in in 2059 and the lessees kept up. A hundred and ninety pair watered at it. The

north tank, two miles over the ridge, was fed by a spring that had been running at a quarter of its usual flow since June, and it was low already. At a hundred and two a cow drank twenty gallons, and a calf on a cow drank what it could get, and three hundred pair on one low spring in that heat would drink it dry by morning and stand round it bawling.

"Thank you, Arvid," she said.

"Your cows are on my fence," he shouted again, and rang off.

• • •

She found Nils on the top rail of the stock pens.

"The south tank's dry," she said. "The pump's out. I'm going up."

He was off the rail before she had finished. "I'll come."

"You've got a shift tomorrow."

"Not till ten at night." He was already walking. "What do you need?"

"The flatbed tank. The well at home. The truck." She was doing it as she walked. A thousand gallons on the flatbed. Forty minutes from the yard to the lease road and up it to the south tank, empty, longer full. Twenty minutes to fill at home. Two hours a trip, near enough. A thousand gallons a trip for a hundred and ninety pair that needed four thousand by morning and more by noon. "And the horses. We'll have to take the south ones over the ridge to the north tank in the dark, and then haul to the north tank all night so the spring doesn't go dry under them."

"In the dark."

"In the dark."

He was looking at her as they walked, the way he had looked at her when he was ten and she was going to do something their father would not have let her do. Then he said, "Grandma," and she stopped.

Karin was at the end of the eighth row, in the stands, with her handbag on her knees.

• • •

Karin came with them. She would not stay. She stood up at the end of the row when Thea came up the steps and said, before Thea could open her mouth, "I've seen seventy-nine of these. I won't miss the bull riding," and picked up her handbag, and that was how they knew.

Her father and mother stayed. Thea told them on the steps. Her father said, "South tank," and looked at her for a moment, and said, "Take the long hose, the one in the shop," and sat back down. Her mother said she would come, and Thea said no, stay, dance, and her mother looked at her and said, "Ring me," and Thea said she would.

Thea loaded Ledger and the old mare, with her grandfather's saddle still in the tack box and his boots in their flour sack on the floor of the cab, and they drove out of the fairgrounds at half past six with the barrel racing still going behind them and Karin in the middle of the bench seat between them, very upright, with her handbag on her knees.

Halfway home, on the river road, Karin said, "Your grandfather lost eleven cows on that lease in 2002. A tank went dry. He didn't find them for two days." She looked straight ahead through the windscreen. "You'll find yours tonight."

• • •

They hauled water until it was light.

They filled the tank at the yard well, a thousand gallons, the pump on the old pressure tank groaning, twenty-two minutes by Nils's telephone. They drove it up the river road and across the bridge and up the bench road along the colony's fence and onto the lease road, and up the lease road in the dusk, slowly, in second gear, with the water slopping in the tank behind them and the truck's springs bottoming on every washout. At the south tank the cows were standing round it in the half-dark, a hundred and ninety pair, more, bawling, with their heads over the dry steel, and when they heard the truck

they came at it at a trot and Thea had to stand on the flatbed and wave her hat at them and shout to keep them off it while Nils ran the hose over the edge of the tank and the water went in , and the cows shoved their heads down into it before it had covered the bottom and drank.

A thousand gallons lasted eleven minutes.

She had known it would not be enough. She had known on the fairgrounds. She stood on the flatbed and watched them drink it, and watched the level go down in the tank faster than it had come up, and the cows at the back of the crowd still bawling, not having got near it, and she said to Nils, "We'll have to move them."

They moved them at ten, in the dark.

There was no moon. It would not come up until nearly two, and then only a thin one. They saddled Ledger and the old mare by the truck's headlights. Nils had not ridden since he was nineteen. He got on the mare at the second try and sat her stiffly with the reins too short, and the mare, who was twenty-four and had seen everything, ignored him and followed Ledger. Thea rode round the south side of the herd in the dark, slowly, calling to them, the way she called them at home, *Come on*, *come on*, *come on*, *girls*, and the old brockle-faced cow lifted her head and looked at her and turned and walked, and the rest of them turned after her, and they went up over the ridge towards the north tank in a long dark mass under the stars with the calves bawling and the dust going up pale behind them in the light of Nils's torch.

It was two miles. It took two hours. Twice they lost the trail in the dark among the pines on the top of the ridge, and Thea had to get down and walk ahead with the torch, leading Ledger, until she found the cut in the trees where the old two-track went down, and the herd came on behind her, following the sound of her. Once a cow went down a draw with her calf and would not come up, and Thea went down after her on foot, leaving Ledger with Nils, and found her at the bottom in the dark standing over the calf, which

had gone into a washout and could not get out, and Thea got down into the washout and got her arms under the calf and lifted it out onto the bank, and the cow put her head down and blew on it and walked up the draw after the others, and the calf went after her, and Thea climbed out of the washout with her hands scraped raw and her hat gone and found Nils at the top holding both horses and staring at her.

"You could have broken your neck," he said.

"I didn't."

"You could have."

"Get on your horse," she said.

At eleven, on the top of the ridge, between the pines, she saw the old lights.

She had not thought about them. She saw them through a gap in the trees, far off across the valley, north, beyond the river and the campus and the bench, a glow over Prosper, very small, very white, in the dark. Eight points of it, she thought, though at that distance she could not have counted them. The last time on the old grounds. She was on a ridge in the Bull Mountains with three hundred pair behind her and her brother on the old mare at the drag.

She watched it until the trail went down off the top of the ridge and the trees took it.

At the north tank the spring was running. A thin stream out of the pipe into the trough, and the trough two-thirds full. The cows came down to it in the dark and crowded it, three hundred pair round one trough, and drank, and she sat Ledger at the edge of the trees and watched the level go down, slowly, slower than the south tank, because the spring was still putting water in, but down.

"It won't last till morning," Nils said.

"No."

"So we haul here."

"We haul here."

They hauled until it was light. Three trips. The truck went down the ridge road in the dark and back up it full, and once she drove and Nils slept with his head against the window, and twice Nils drove and she slept, or did not sleep, with her eyes shut and the water slopping behind her.

• • •

On the last trip down, at five, with the sky going grey, with the tank empty and the cows quiet behind them round a full trough, Nils said, "Thea."

"What."

"I'm glad you held them."

She was driving. She did not look at him. The headlights went down the ridge road in front of them through the pines, and a deer stood up in them and looked and went.

"I ran it again," Nils said. "With your hay. With what you'd found. I didn't send it to you. It's still the red line." He was looking out of his window at the dark. "But I'm glad. I don't know why. I wanted to say it before I went back."

She drove. She did not know what to say. After a while she took one hand off the wheel and put it on his shoulder, and left it there for a moment, and took it back, and he did not say anything else, and neither did she.

At home she rang her mother. It was half past five. Her mother answered on the first ring, wide awake, and Thea told her the cows were watered and over the ridge and all right, and her mother said, "Good," and then nothing for a while, and then, "Is Nils with you?"

"He's asleep in the truck."

"Let him sleep," her mother said, in a voice Thea did not know, and rang off.

• • •

At first light she went back up to the south tank alone with the tools.

The controller box was dead. A mouse had got into it through the cable gland, in the heat, and chewed a wire, and the wire had shorted, and the mouse was in the bottom of the box, cooked. She took it out with a stick. She would have to ring the state on Monday, and the state would send a man on Wednesday, or the week after, and the part would come from Denver.

In the dry tank, in the bottom, there was a cow.

She was lying on her side with her legs out and her head over the rim, as if she had tried to climb in after the last of the water. She was one of the old ones. A red cow with a white blaze, fourteen, one of her grandfather's line, who had calved every year of her life. She had been at the tank all day in a hundred and two with nothing in it, and she had been old, and she had lain down in it in the night, while they were moving the others over the ridge.

Thea stood by the tank and looked at her.

Her calf was by the fence, alone, a big bull calf, bawling.

She did the sum. She could not help it. One cow. One calf on a bottle, or on another cow if she could graft him, which she probably could not. Eighteen hundred dollars, at the bank's price on Friday, on a line that the bank marked every month. One less cow to feed through the winter. She stood in the early light and did the sum both ways and hated that she did it.

Then she got the rope off the saddle and went to catch the calf.

10

Tailgate

"You've had seven," the voice said. "And the whisky. Would you like me to ring Rae?"

"No."

"I can ring a car from Roundup. It would be here in forty minutes."

"I'm not driving."

"I know you're not. I'm asking how you'll get home."

"I'll sleep in the truck," Kieran said, and took the earpiece out and put it in his shirt pocket, where it went on talking for a moment, very small, against his chest, and then stopped.

• • •

It was a quarter to twelve. He was sitting on the tailgate of his truck in the car park behind the cattle barns, in the dark, under the cottonwoods, with his boots hanging down and a can of beer going warm in his hand. Bishop was in the trailer behind him, tied, with a hay net, shifting his feet now and then and sighing. The car park was half empty. Most of the families had gone home after the bulls, with the children asleep in the back seats, and the trucks that were left belonged to people who had stayed for the dance, and the dance was nearly over.

He could see it from the tailgate. The dance was in the open pavilion beside the exhibit hall, a roof on posts over a concrete floor, with strings of bulbs round the edge of the roof and a band at the far end on a low stage. The band was from Lewistown and had played the Stampede dance for eleven years, and they were playing slow ones now, the last ones, and there were perhaps thirty couples on the concrete under the bulbs, moving.

Rae had taken the children home at nine. She had kissed him in the car park and looked at him, and said, *Don't drive*, and he had said he wouldn't, and she had said, *Ring me*, and he had said he would. He had not rung her. He had gone back to the beer garden.

• • •

It had been a man called Kjelstad.

Kieran did not know him well. He was a Melstone man, seventy or so, who ran a few cows on his wife's father's place and drove a gravel truck for the county, and he had been at the long table in the beer garden under the cottonwoods with five or six others when Kieran sat down at the end of it with his fourth beer. They had been talking about the memorial ride. They had been talking about it kindly. They had said it was a good thing the committee had done, and that the old Tollefsen boots had looked well, and that young Thea could head a steer, who'd have thought it, on that horse.

Then Kjelstad had said, not to Kieran, not loud, to the man next to him, "Shame about Conor, though."

The man next to him had nodded.

"Shame he went off the route," Kjelstad had said. "That's what I always heard. County had him on the sweep, on the river road, checking houses, and he took the truck off it into Tollefsen's paddocks on his own, and that's where it caught him. Got himself killed."

The man next to him had said, "Dale."

"I'm only saying what the sheriff said. Departed from the assigned route. It was in the paper." Kjelstad had drunk his beer. "Good man. Nobody's saying he wasn't a good man. But you don't go off the route."

Kieran had put his can down on the table.

He did not remember all of what he had said. He remembered standing up. He remembered the table going quiet, all along it, and the man next to Kjelstad putting a hand on Kjelstad's arm, and Kjelstad turning round and seeing him and going red to the hair, and saying, *Kieran, I didn't see you, I didn't mean*, and Kieran saying, *You meant it*, and some other things, and then somebody had his arm, a big man from Roundup he had known all his life, who had walked him out of the beer garden and round behind the barns to the car park and sat him on his own tailgate and said, *Stay here, son*, and gone back.

He had stayed. He had found the bottle of whisky that lived behind the seat of the truck, that he did not drink, and drunk some of it. He had found another beer in the cooler. He had sat on the tailgate in the dark for an hour listening to the band from Lewistown and the voice in his ear telling him how many he had had, until he took it out.

• • •

His aunt found him at midnight.

He heard her before he saw her. Boots on the gravel, quick, coming round the end of the cattle barns, and then she was there in the edge of the light from the pavilion, small, in her good jeans and a white shirt with a jacket over it, and she stopped when she saw him.

"There you are," Shannon said. "Pat Mahoney said you'd be here."

"Pat Mahoney walked me here."

"He said." She came across the gravel and looked at the bottle beside him on the tailgate, and at the can in his hand, and at his face, in the dark. She did not say anything about any of them. She hitched

herself up onto the tailgate beside him, which she could still do at seventy, with one hand, and sat. "He told me what Dale Kjelstad said."

"Everybody heard what Dale Kjelstad said."

"Dale Kjelstad's a fool. He's been a fool since the fourth grade. I sat behind him." She looked out at the pavilion, at the couples moving under the bulbs. "He'll come to you tomorrow and say he's sorry. He'll mean it."

"I don't care if he means it."

"No," his aunt said.

They sat. The band finished a song and started another one, slower, a waltz, and the couples on the concrete changed partners, some of them, and went on.

"Thea's gone up the lease," his aunt said, after a while, to the pavilion. "Their south tank's dry. Nils went with her." She was quiet. "Jens stayed."

He had not sat with her like this since he was a boy. She had held him at his father's funeral, at the graveside, with her arms round him, when he was twenty-two and had not cried, and she had not said anything then either.

"He didn't go off the route for nothing," Kieran said.

"I know he didn't."

"Everybody says he went off it. The sheriff said it. It's in the paper. *Departed from the assigned route.*" He heard his voice and could not stop it. He had had seven, and the whisky. "He didn't depart from anything. He was on the sweep, in the old Ford, checking everybody was out. And he saw Jens's paddocks burning and nobody on them. The county had them staffed, on the plan, on the map, a crew from Roundup, a little truck on a green line. And the crew wasn't there. It wasn't coming. So he turned in to open the gates for it, so it could get its trucks down the headland when it came, because there was nobody else to do it, Shannon, there was nobody." He drank. "That's not departing."

"I know," his aunt said again, very quietly.

"You don't know."

She turned and looked at him.

"You don't know why the crew wasn't there," Kieran said.

He heard himself say it. He heard it go out of his mouth into the dark between them, and he could not take it back, and he did not try.

"The crew was delayed," Shannon said. "En route. The review said. It went round by the county road and got there late."

"It went round by the county road," Kieran said, "because it couldn't get down the coulee. Because the coulee road was full of cattle."

He felt her go still beside him.

"I've a paper I signed," he said. "For the lawsuit. In fifty-one. The estate's, that I brought for my father, that's long over. There was an order on it, a protective— everything in the depositions was under it." He looked at the can in his hand. "I'm not to say any of it. Ever. I'm saying it."

"Kieran."

"The crew boss. Opland. Wes Opland, from Roundup." He drank. "I sat across a table from him six hours in Billings. He said it under oath." He stopped. He had lost where he was. The band went round into the chorus again. "He said the truck came down the coulee road at ten o'clock and the road was full of cattle. Yours. Three hundred pair in the dark with the fire behind them. He got out and walked up the herd to the front. To Jens. He asked him to clear the road. Put them through a gate, any gate, and let the truck by."

"What gate?"

"There was one. On the right, into our hay meadow. The boy said so. Nils, on the drag. *Dad, the hay gate.* Opland said he heard him say it." The beer was warm and he drank it anyway. "And Jens told him it'd take longer. Didn't ask where the truck was going. Looked at him and kept the cattle moving. They made Opland say that part three

times, the lawyers, *kept the cattle moving*, and he said it the same every time." He was talking to the bulbs. "And the truck went back up and round by the county road and the bridge, an hour, more, and by the time it got to the paddocks my father was dead in your gateway."

The band was still playing the waltz. He could hear it very clearly. He could hear Bishop in the trailer behind him pull at the hay net and chew.

His aunt did not move. She sat on the tailgate beside him with her hands in her lap, and he could not see her face, because she had turned it away from him, towards the pavilion, and the light from the bulbs was behind her.

"I'm not saying it was his fault," Kieran said. "Jens's. I don't know whose fault it was. I've had sixteen years and I don't know. He had three hundred pair on a road in the dark with a fire behind him and the smoke in their eyes and a boy on the drag. I'd not have known what to do. I'd have done the same, maybe. I don't know." He put the can down on the tailgate. "But my father didn't depart from anything. Dale Kjelstad can say what he likes. My father was at the gate and the crew wasn't, and that's why."

She still did not move.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry, Shannon. I'd not have—" He stopped. He had not meant to say any of it. He had meant to say it for sixteen years. "I'm sorry."

His aunt turned her head and looked at him.

He could see her face now, a little, in the edge of the light. It was very still, and she was looking at him as if she had not heard him right.

"Nils said that?" she said.

"Yes."

"He said, *Dad, the hay gate*."

"Opland said he did."

"He was twelve."

"He was twelve," Kieran said. "He was on the drag."

She looked at him. Then she got down off the tailgate, carefully, with one hand on the side of the truck, and stood on the gravel, and brushed off the back of her jeans with her hand.

"Don't drive," she said.

"I won't."

"Ring Rae."

"I will."

She stood there a moment longer. Then she turned and walked away from him across the car park, towards the pavilion, towards the band and the bulbs and the slow waltz, small and straight, with her jacket over her shoulders, not hurrying, and he watched her go.

• • •

He saw it all from the tailgate. He did not mean to watch. He could not stop.

She walked to the edge of the pavilion and stopped at the edge of the concrete, under the bulbs, and stood there. The band finished the waltz. The leader said into the microphone that this was the last one, folks, the last dance on the old grounds, and thank you, Prosper, and the band started it. It was a slow one. Kieran knew it. It was the one they had played at every Stampede dance for as long as he could remember, last, an old song about a river.

He saw Jens.

Jens was standing at the back of the pavilion, by the posts, where he always stood, with his hat on and his arms folded, watching. He had stood there every year that Kieran could remember. He did not dance. He stood at the back until the last one, and then he came out across the concrete to his wife, and took her round the waist, and moved his feet a very little, and looked over her head at the band, and when it was over he let her go and they went home.

He came out now. He came across the concrete between the couples, a tall stooped old man in a good shirt, not quickly, and stopped in front of her, and held out his hand.

Kieran watched his aunt look at it.

She looked at it. Longer than anybody would have noticed but Kieran, sitting on his tailgate in the dark, sixty yards away, who was watching for nothing else. Jens stood with his hand out. The band played. The couples went round them.

Then she took his hand, and he put his other arm round her waist, and she put her hand on his shoulder, and they danced.

They danced it to the end. Jens moved his feet a very little and looked over her head at the band. She did not put her head on his chest, the way some of the old women did with their husbands on the last one. She held herself straight, with her hand on his shoulder, and looked past his arm at something out in the dark of the car park, or at nothing, and they turned, slowly, under the bulbs, among the others, until the song was over.

When it was over Jens let her go. He said something to her that Kieran could not hear. She nodded. Then she turned and went across the concrete, alone, towards the steps at the far side of the pavilion, where the Tollefsen truck was parked, and Jens stood for a moment where she had left him, under the bulbs, with his arms by his sides, and then he followed her.

The band began to pack up. The bulbs went out along the edge of the pavilion roof, a string at a time.

• • •

Kieran sat on the tailgate until the last of them went off.

Then he sat on in the dark. The car park emptied round him, truck by truck, the headlights swinging across the cottonwoods and away down the fairground road. The band's van went. Pat Mahoney's truck stopped beside him on its way out, and Pat leaned across and looked at him through the open window and said, *All right, son*?, and

Kieran said he was all right, and Pat looked at him a while longer and drove on.

At one the floodlights round the arena went off, the old ones, all eight, at once, with the clunk from the switch box that you could hear from the car park, and the fairgrounds went black, and above them the stars came out over the cottonwoods, more of them than he could have counted, and the Milky Way across the middle of them like smoke.

He took the earpiece out of his shirt pocket and held it in his hand. It was warm from his chest. He did not put it in.

He thought about the paper he had signed in 2051. He had kept it for fifteen years. He had told his aunt, drunk, on a tailgate, at midnight, because a gravel-truck driver from Melstone had said *departed*.

He did not know what she would do with it now that she had it.

He had watched her take Jens's hand.

He put the earpiece in.

"Kieran," the voice said, at once. "It's two minutes past one. Rae's asked me three times where you are. Would you like me to tell her?"

"Tell her I'm sleeping in the truck at the fairgrounds."

"I'll tell her. Would you like anything else?"

He thought about it. In the trailer behind him Bishop had stopped chewing and was asleep on his feet, breathing slow.

"No," he said.

11

Three Lines

The records room was in the basement of the tribal building, under the water office, and it smelled of paper and the furnace.

Mariah went down on the second of August, a Monday, at seven in the morning, before anyone else was in, with the key from the woman who kept the office and a thermos of coffee she was not supposed to bring in. She had been down twice before in thirteen years. Once in 2054 for the 1980s grazing agreements and once in 2061 for the irrigators' old contracts. The room was long and low and lit by tubes, with steel shelves to the ceiling and archive boxes on them, grey, with typed labels, and a table at the end under the one high window, where the light came in at the level of the grass outside.

She was looking for precedent. That was what she told herself, and it was true. The council would sit across the table from the consortium in Billings on the Thursday, and she would carry its terms, and the consortium's lawyers would have every water contract signed in the four basins in the last fifty years on their tablets, and she wanted to know, before she went, how the council had sat across a table from a company the last time a company wanted something under the ground. She wanted to know what they had asked for and how they had said no. She wanted the words.

The boxes for 1972 and 1973 were on the bottom shelf at the far end. There were nine of them.

• • •

She found it at half past nine.

It was in the fourth box, in a folder marked *Council — public hearings, coal leases, Nov 1972 – Mar 1973*, in typed minutes on thin paper gone the colour of weak tea. The tribal secretary of the time had typed the minutes of every hearing in the hall that winter, eleven of them, and at the head of each one, under the date, she had typed the names of the speakers, in the order they had spoken, and after each name, in a few lines, what they had said. She had typed with a heavy hand. Some of the letters had gone through the paper.

Mariah read the hearings in order. She read them slowly, with a pencil, making notes on her legal pad. They were extraordinary. Old men and young men and women who had stood up in that hall and said things about the land that she would have given a great deal to be able to say across a table in Billings, and had said them in Cheyenne first, the secretary had noted, and then in English for the record. A man had said the coal was the bones of the land. A woman had said her grandmother had been born at Dull Knife's camp and had walked from Oklahoma and had not walked so far to sell the ground for seventeen cents. A young man had read out the Bureau's own rules for leasing, one by one, and after each one said *broken*.

On the minutes for the fourteenth of December 1972, fifth on the list of speakers, there was a name she knew.

She knew it from the allotment maps. From the oldest allotment on the Thompson Creek side, the one with the spring at the head of the creek, which had been allotted in 1928 to a woman whose son was this man. She knew it from her father's pencil, on the soft folded map on the kitchen table, at the head of a list of forty-one names, the heirs, with a small square tick beside it where her father had bought his share from the man's grandchildren in 2039.

It was her grandmother's father.

Spoke in favour of honouring the leases. Said seventeen cents was more than nothing. Said his sons were in Billings and Seattle and he would like to see one of them home before he died. Said the grass would grow back; he had seen it grow back after worse. Heard without interruption.

She read it three times.

She went back through the boxes, then, because she had to, to the other ten hearings. He had spoken once more. On the twentieth of February 1973, eleventh on the list, in a hearing that had gone on until two in the morning, two weeks before the vote.

Spoke again in favour of the leases. Said he had been heard and would not keep the hall long. Said a man had to think of his children. Said he was not ashamed. Heard without interruption.

She sat at the table under the high window with the thin paper in her hands.

Her grandmother had said it once. Mariah had lived in her house from birth to eighteen and come home to it in 2052, and her grandmother had told her about the hall in 1973 a dozen times: sitting outside it in the truck with the heater on, sixteen years old, with her mother, and the man on the steps holding up both hands and then one finger, *eleven*, and people crying in the street. She had told it at Christmas. She had told it at the kitchen table in the November before Missoula, to her father, with Mariah on the stairs and a letter from Missoula hidden in her closet, so that he would know what a paper like that was for. And once, in August, at the café in Lame Deer the week before Missoula, with a hamburger going cold on the plate, she had told her the rest: that her own father had stood up in that hall, twice, in his good hat, and argued for the coal money. She had made Mariah promise not to tell her father. Mariah had kept it for thirty-four years as a thing an old woman said once in a café,

and had half let herself believe it was not so. Here it was in type, with a page number.

Her father did not know either. Mariah was sure of that, the way she was sure of very little about her father. He had asked her grandmother once, she remembered now. He had told Mariah about it years later, at this same table, laughing a little: that he had asked his mother which side Grandpa had been on, and his mother had said, *He was a cattleman. He was on the side of his cattle*, and got up and done the dishes. He had thought it was a joke.

She took the two pages to the copier at the foot of the stairs and copied them. Then she put the pages back in the folder, and the folder in the box, and the box on the shelf. She took the telephone and her legal pad and the thermos and went up the stairs to the water office, where the director had just come in and was hanging up his coat, and said good morning to him, and sat down at her desk under the map of the Tongue, and did not say anything to anybody.

• • •

The consortium's offices in Billings were on the twentieth floor of a glass building on the edge of downtown, with a view west down the valley to the Beartooths.

They went on the Thursday, the president and the woman from Birney and Mariah, in the tribe's van, two and a half hours over the divide and down through Hardin, with the president driving. Nobody talked much on the way. The president listened to a ball game on the radio and the woman from Birney read a book and Mariah read her notes, and once, outside Crow Agency, the president turned the radio down and said, without looking round, "You've got it?"

"I've got it."

"Price, term, the Rosebud."

"Price, term, the Rosebud," Mariah said. "And where the pipe goes."

He turned the radio back up.

The room on the twentieth floor had a long table and twelve chairs and a screen on the end wall the size of a barn door. There were seven people on the consortium's side. The woman with the grey hair from the April meeting, who sat in the middle, and two lawyers Mariah did not know, and a man from the consortium's board, and three engineers, one of whom was the young man with the beard and the tablet, who looked at Mariah when she came in and then looked at the table.

The president laid out the council's terms. He did it the way he had done it in April, as if they had come about a horse. The price, which was a third higher than the consortium's. The term, which was twenty years and no options, with the right to talk again at twenty. And the Rosebud, which was in the first paragraph, in the words Mariah had written for him on the Tuesday night: that no water rising in Rosebud Creek or its tributaries would be taken, moved, diverted, pumped, or affected in quantity or quality by anything the consortium built, and that if it was, the contract ended that day.

The woman from Denver listened to all of it without writing anything down.

"The price we can talk about," she said. "The term we can talk about. The Rosebud we've already agreed to. It'll be in the first paragraph." She looked at Mariah. "And you'll want to know where the pipe goes."

"Yes."

"We have three lines," the woman said, and nodded to the young man with the beard, and the screen on the end wall came on.

• • •

It was a map. Mariah knew it before it had finished drawing. It was the map on the wall of her office, the Tongue basin, the same shapes, the river coming down out of the Bighorns in Wyoming and through the reservoir and north along the east edge of the reservation and on to Miles City, and the Rosebud on the west, coming north past Busby, and the divide between them, and Colstrip at the top, on the old plant site, a grey square.

Three lines came up out of the reservoir and went north to the grey square. A red one, a yellow one, a blue one.

"The western line," the young man said. He had a pointer, a little red dot. He put it on the red line. "It's the shortest in elevation. It comes off the reservoir west, over the low point of the divide, and down into the Rosebud valley, and follows the valley north to Colstrip. It's the easiest pipe to build and the cheapest to pump." The dot went along the red line, down into the valley, along the creek. "It crosses Rosebud Creek twice. Here, below Busby. And here, at the reservation line."

"No," said the president.

"No," the young man agreed. "We knew that. We drew it so you'd see we'd drawn it." He moved the dot. "The eastern line."

The yellow line came off the reservoir and went the other way, east, across the Tongue, and north along the far side of the river, outside the reservation, the whole way, and came round to Colstrip from the east in a long loop.

"It never touches the reservation," the young man said. "Not one foot. No easement. No tribal permit. No council." He hesitated. "It's also not your water. If we build the eastern line, we don't take storage from the reservoir. We drill on the east bank, on private ground, below the dam, and pump the alluvium. It's the river's water, in the gravels. It's outside the compact." He put the dot down. "It costs twice as much to build. We wouldn't need a contract with the tribe."

"You'd be pumping our river," the woman from Birney said, "from the other side of it."

"We'd be pumping the gravels on private ground under a state permit," one of the lawyers said. "Which we believe we could get."

"Which we believe you couldn't," Mariah said, "without a fight in the water court that would take ten years, and that you might lose." She did not look at the lawyer. She looked at the woman from Denver. "But you might win. And if you won, the tribe would have no price, and no term, and no first paragraph. And no say in what happened to the Tongue below the reservoir for as long as the hall ran." She put her pen down. "That's what the eastern line is for. It's what happens if we say no."

The woman from Denver looked back at her for a long moment. Then she nodded, very slightly, once.

"The middle line," she said to the young man.

He put the dot on the blue line.

It came off the reservoir north, straight, the shortest way on the map, up the middle of the reservation, between the Tongue and the Rosebud, along the high ground. It kept to the east of the divide, on the Tongue side of the watershed, clear of the creek the whole way, and came down to Colstrip from the south across the reservation line.

The young man touched his tablet and the map came closer. The blue line went across the high ground. The land under it was cut into squares and oblongs, with numbers in them. Allotments. Mariah knew them before the names came up.

"There's about nine miles of it on individual trust land," the young man said. "Eleven allotments. Mixed ownership. The tribe holds interests in some of them." He touched the tablet again. "We've done the title from the Bureau's records. Here."

She knew what that meant. On the tribe's own ground the council said yes or no. On an allotment it did not. A right-of-way across trust land held by individual owners needed the consent of the

owners of a majority of the interest in each allotment, and then the Bureau's grant; the tribe's voice there was its own fractions, where it held any, and whatever it could make the Bureau hear. Eleven allotments. Eleven majorities. Ten of them, she would find, were easy. The eleventh was the oldest, at the head of Thompson Creek, with the spring in it.

The names came up on the oblongs, small, white, a list in each. At the head of the list in the oblong with the spring, the oldest one, there was the name she had read on the thin paper in the basement on Monday morning. And under it, in the list of the present owners, with the largest fraction on the blue line, there was *Harris, Lyle E.*

"It's the only line," the young man said, "that gets you the price and leaves the Rosebud alone."

Nobody on the tribe's side of the table said anything.

Mariah looked at the blue line on the screen, going north across her father's pasture, across the head of Thompson Creek, a hundred yards east of the spring, where the cows watered in the dry years.

She had known since April, when the young man had said *the cheapest.*

"We'll want to walk it," the president said at last.

"Of course," said the woman from Denver.

"And we'll want the owners to hear it from us. Not from you."

"Of course." She looked at Mariah. "We'd expect that."

• • •

At the lift, afterwards, the woman from Denver caught her up.

The president and the woman from Birney had gone ahead to the van. Mariah had stayed to sign the visitors' book, which the consortium kept on paper at the front desk, which surprised her, and when she turned round the woman was there, alone, with her coat over her arm.

"Ms. Harris," she said. "We've met before."

"In 2060."

"In 2060. At lunch. On the thirty-first floor." The woman pressed the button for the lift. "I wondered if you'd remember."

"I remember."

"So do I. You asked better questions than anybody we hired that year." The lift came. The doors opened. Neither of them got in. "I'm not going to say anything about it. It's not appropriate. You're across the table." The woman looked at her with no expression Mariah could read. "I only wanted to say that you were right not to come. I've thought so since. You'd have been very good, and you'd have been unhappy. I've watched people be both."

The lift doors closed again.

She did not know what there was to say. She looked at the woman, at the good wool coat over her arm and the grey hair and the face that was kind, she thought, and tired, and not lying, and she pressed the button for the lift again herself, and when it came she got into it and the woman did not, and the doors closed between them.

• • •

She drove home the long way.

The president dropped her at the water office in Lame Deer at four, and she got her own car and did not drive straight home over the divide. She drove north and west, out to Busby, and turned south up the Rosebud valley on the old road along the creek, slowly, with the window down.

The creek was low. Everything was low. But the creek was running, a thin clear braid of water over the gravel under the box elders and the willows, and the hay meadows along it had been cut, short, and the bales stood in them in rows, and the cottonwoods along the banks were green. In the eighty miles from Billings she had not seen anything green but irrigated hay and cottonwoods. The Rosebud valley was green from wall to wall. The water that rose in it stayed in it. It always had.

At the turn for Thompson Creek she left the valley and went up the gravel road onto the divide.

The road went up through the pines and out onto the high ground, open, rolling, brown, with the sky enormous over it. She drove to the gate at the head of the creek and stopped and got out.

The pasture lay beyond the gate, the eleven allotments, nine miles of it, brown grass and sage and the dark lines of the draws going down east towards the Tongue. Her father's cows were at the spring. She could see them from the gate, forty or fifty of them, red and black, standing round the trough below the spring with their heads down, and the calves lying in the shade of the box elders that grew round it, the only trees for a mile. The spring came out of the hillside under the box elders into a pipe her father had put in in 2041, and ran into the trough, and over the end of the trough into the creek, a trickle, which went down the draw and was the head of Thompson Creek, which went down to the Tongue.

She walked out to it.

She did not know why. It was a mile. It was hot. She was in her Billings clothes. She walked out anyway, across the pasture, through the dry grass, with the grasshoppers going up in front of her feet, and the cows lifted their heads when she came near and looked at her, and put them down again, because she was a Harris and they knew the shape of one.

At the spring she sat down on the edge of the trough in the shade of the box elders and put her hand in the water.

It was cold. It came out of the hill at the same temperature summer and winter, her father said, and in January the cows came to it because it was the one water on the divide that did not freeze. She held her hand in it until it ached. She thought about the blue line on the screen in Billings, a hundred yards east of here. She could see where it would go. Over that rise, down across the head of the draw, up the other side. A trench, eight feet deep. A pipe. And then the

trench filled in, and the grass coming back on it, in a year or two, the way grass came back.

Said the grass would grow back; he had seen it grow back after worse.

She took her hand out of the water.

• • •

Her father was at the kitchen table when she came in, with the maps.

He did not look up. He had his reading glasses on and his pencil, and he was writing something on the second map, small, in the margin. She saw it was a name. A cousin had died, she thought. One of the ones in Rapid City. He would write to the children.

"How was Billings," he said.

"Long."

"They give you the price?"

"We gave them ours. They'll talk."

"The term?"

"They'll talk about that too."

"The Rosebud."

"It's in the first paragraph. They agreed. They'd already agreed."

He nodded. He finished the name and put the pencil down beside the map. He took his glasses off and folded them and looked at her across the table, with his pale tired eyes, in the light from the window.

"Where's the pipe go," he said.

She stood by the stove. Her grandmother's chair was beside her, with the new leg on it that she had put in on a Saturday in April. It did not rock any more.

"They've three lines," she said. "They're still working on them. We're going to walk them."

Her father looked at her.

She held his look. She knew the look he had when he knew he was being told less than all of it. She saw it now.

He did not ask again. He put his glasses back on, and picked up his pencil, and looked down at the map.

"Supper's on the stove," he said.

She took the lid off the pot and stirred it. Behind her she heard him turn a page of the map, carefully, along its soft folds, so it would not tear. Her telephone was in her bag, on the chair by the door, with two photographs in it of two pages of thin paper. She did not take it out. She stirred the stew, and served it, and they ate, and he asked her about the ball game on the radio in the van, and she told him the score.

• • •

The telephone rang at nine.

It was the house telephone, on the wall, and her father had gone out to the corrals with the torch, and she answered it with a dish towel in her other hand.

"Mariah?" A woman's voice, uncertain. "It's Darlene. In Rapid. Ray's girl. Uncle Lyle's cousin Ray." A pause. "We met at Grandma Evelyn's funeral. I was twelve."

"Darlene. Of course."

"I'm sorry to ring so late. I didn't know who else to ring. I tried Uncle Lyle at Christmas but he only talks about the cows." Darlene laughed, a little, and stopped. "A man came to the house today. From a land company in Denver. He had a letter for me to sign. About our share up on Thompson Creek, Dad's share, that came to me. He said it was a consent. For a pipeline, maybe, someday, if it ever got built. He said it was just a formality and nothing would happen for years and there was a cheque with it for signing now." Another pause. "It's a lot of money, Mariah. For a piece of paper. For a share of a pasture I've never seen."

Mariah stood by the wall with the dish towel.

"How much?"

Darlene told her.

It was more than the share was worth. It was a great deal more than the share was worth. It was more than the Bureau would have paid Darlene's father for all of his interest in the buy-back years, five times over, for a signature, now, on a consent to a right-of-way that nobody had yet applied for, across ground the council had not yet walked.

"Have you signed it?"

"No. He left it. He said to think about it. He said a lot of the family already had." Darlene's voice went smaller. "Have they?"

Mariah looked through the kitchen window. Her father was out at the corrals in the dark with the torch, a small light moving along the rails.

"I don't know," she said. "Darlene, listen to me. Don't sign anything. Not yet. Not until you've talked to me again. Will you do that?"

"Is it bad?"

"I don't know yet," Mariah said. "Don't sign it. Put it in a drawer. I'll ring you on Monday."

"All right." A pause. "Is it Uncle Lyle's pasture? The one he's always writing to us about?"

"Yes," Mariah said. "It's that one."

When she had hung up she stood by the wall for a long time with the dish towel in her hand. Then she took her legal pad out of her bag and wrote at the top of a clean page *Consents — who has signed*, and under it *Darlene, Rapid City — not signed (5 Aug)*. She looked at the page. There were forty-one names on the oldest allotment alone, and eleven allotments.

Out at the corrals the torch went along the rails, and stopped, and came back towards the house.

She tore the page off the pad and folded it and put it in her bag, with the telephone, before he reached the door.

12

Harvest

The fire started at the back of the second combine at twenty past two on the thirtieth of August, in the west field, in the wheat.

Daniel saw it from the first combine, a quarter of a mile ahead, in the mirror. He had been watching the mirror all day. He watched it every harvest, as Darius had taught him, because a combine in dry wheat in a hot wind was a stove on wheels, and the chaff blew back off the header and settled on the engine and the bearings and the exhaust, and a bearing that ran hot, or a stone that struck a spark off the knife, would set the chaff alight, and the chaff would set the straw alight, and the straw would go up behind the machine and the wind would take it. You watched the mirror.

In the mirror there was a little white smoke at the back of the second combine, low down, by the straw chopper.

He was on the radio before he had thought. “Elias. Your back end.”

He saw the second combine stop. He saw Elias look out of the cab, and the cab door open, and Elias come down the ladder with the extinguisher off the side of the cab, and go round to the back of the machine, and the white smoke go grey and then not white or grey but a low brown line along the ground behind the chopper, in the stubble, spreading, and the wind take it.

The wind was out of the south-east, at twenty miles an hour, hot, as it had been all week. It took the fire off the back of the combine into the standing wheat beside the cut swath, and the wheat went up as if it had been waiting to, all at once, with a sound Daniel heard through the closed cab of his own machine a quarter of a mile away: a deep soft roar, like a big animal breathing out.

• • •

The water truck was at the end of the field, by the bins, where it always stood at harvest in a dry year. It was an old milk tanker on a truck body with a pump and a hose reel on the back, two thousand gallons, that the colony had bought at a dairy sale in 2053, and every summer one of the boys was given the job of sitting in it at the end of the field all day, in case. This summer it was Darius's grandson, Mark, who was fifteen. Daniel saw it start to move before he had got his own combine stopped. It came down the edge of the field towards the fire, bouncing, with the dust going up, and Mark at the wheel, very small behind it.

Daniel stopped the combine and shut the header off and got down the ladder and ran.

He did not run to the fire. He ran to the disc.

The disc was at the west side of the field, by the trail fence, where they had used it in the morning on the stubble behind the first round. It was hitched to the old green tractor. He had thought about it on the ladder, coming down. He had thought: the fire is going north-west, with the wind. North-west of the west field is the trail. Beyond the trail is the foot of the Hogback, and along the foot of the Hogback is the forty acres, standing, with the barley in it, not ripe, green-gold, dry as paper on the top. Beyond the forty acres is the ridge, and the ridge is sandstone and grass, and over the ridge is dry grass all the way to the bench edge.

The water truck would not stop it. Nothing would stop it in standing wheat. You could stop it at the edge, on bare ground, if you made the bare ground in front of it, wide enough, fast enough.

He got up on the tractor and started it and dropped the disc and put it in gear and went.

He went along the west edge of the wheat, along the headland, between the standing wheat and the trail fence, with the disc down. The disc was a big one, twenty-four feet, with the blades in two gangs, and it turned the stubble and the dry grass of the headland over as it went into a strip of brown dirt behind him the width of a road. He drove it flat out. The tractor bucked and the disc bounced and the dust came up over him, and on his right, through the dust, he could see the fire coming up the wheat towards him from the south-east, a long low line of orange under a wall of brown smoke, faster than a man could run.

At the end of the headland he turned the tractor round in the corner and came back along the same strip, the other way, a second pass, to make it wider. Halfway back the smoke came over him. He could not see. He could not see the front of the tractor. He drove by the feel of the wheel and the sound of the disc behind him and the trail fence, which he could not see either, but could feel, a closeness on his right, and he kept it there, and the heat came at him through the smoke from the left like the door of a bread oven opened in his face, and he put his arm up over his eyes and drove.

He came out of the smoke at the south end. He stopped the tractor and turned round in the seat.

The fire had reached the headland.

It came up to the edge of the wheat all along the west side of the field, in a line, and stopped. It stopped at the brown strip. It could not cross it. It burned along the edge of the wheat, roaring, with the flames going up twice the height of a man and leaning over the disced strip in the wind towards the trail and the fence and the forty

acres beyond, and the sparks going over in the smoke, and where the sparks came down on the bare dirt they lay and went out.

Some of them came down beyond the strip. On the trail. On the grass along the trail fence.

He saw them catch. Three small fires, in the dry grass between the strip and the fence, little ones, the size of a hat, and then the size of a table.

The water truck came along the strip from the west. Mark was driving it, and Elias was on the back, on the hose reel, with the hose in his hands and his hat gone, and they came along the strip at a walking pace with the hose going, and Elias put the water on the first little fire, and the second, and the third, and the grass hissed and went black and steamed, and the truck went on along the trail fence, slowly, with Elias wetting the grass on both sides of the fence, the trail and the field side, along the forty acres, all the way to the corner by the big rock, in a long dark stripe.

Then it was over.

It burned itself out against the strip in twenty minutes. It burned the wheat it had already got to, a long wedge of the west field from the back of the second combine to the headland, and then there was nothing more for it to burn that it could reach, and it went down into a black smoking field with little flames running here and there along the edges, and the smoke going up off it brown and then grey and then white, and the wind taking the smoke away north-west over the Hogback.

Daniel sat on the tractor.

His hands were shaking on the wheel. His eyes were streaming and he could not stop them, and his throat was raw, and his arm, where he had put it up over his face, was red on the inside of the forearm from the heat, as if he had been sunburnt in five minutes. He sat and looked at the black field and the long dark wet stripe along the trail fence, and the forty acres beyond it, standing, green-gold, untouched, with the beards moving in the wind.

• • •

They counted it at four.

Darius came out in the pickup with Joseph, and the minister, and half the colony behind them on foot and in the grain trucks, and they stood along the headland and looked at it. Darius walked into the black with a stick and poked at it, looking for anything still burning, and then he came back and stood by Daniel and said, in German, "Eighty-five acres. Ninety, maybe." He looked at the second combine, which stood at the edge of the black with its back end scorched and its paint blistered and the chopper a twisted ruin. "And that."

"The combine will mend," Daniel said.

"The combine will mend." Darius looked at the black. "The wheat won't."

Joseph stood at the end of the headland with his hands in his jacket pockets and his head turned to one side, towards the black field, towards the smell of it. He could not see it, Daniel knew. He could see a grey place, and smell the burning, and hear the little flames still running in the stubble.

"Is everybody all right?" Joseph said.

"Everybody's all right," Daniel said. "Elias burned his hands on the extinguisher. Mark's fine. I'm fine."

"Your arm," said the minister.

"It's nothing."

Joseph turned his head towards Daniel's voice. "Ninety acres," he said. "Of the contract wheat."

"Yes."

"Under the programme."

"Yes."

Joseph was quiet. The colony stood along the headland behind him, the men and the women and the children, quiet too, looking at the black.

"It's insured," Joseph said. "Isn't it. Under the programme. The whole crop."

"It's insured," Daniel said. He had read the contract to Joseph in July, every page. "Fire, hail, drought. At the contract price. They'll send a man to look at it, and they'll pay for the ninety acres at the price we'd have got if we'd cut it."

Nobody on the headland said anything.

Darius spat into the black.

"Well," he said. "That's one thing."

• • •

Elias was on the back of the water truck at dusk.

He was sitting on the hose reel with his hands in a bucket of cold water from the truck's tank. Judith had wrapped them at supper, both palms, where he had held the extinguisher by the barrel when it was hot, and he had unwrapped them again after supper and come out to the field and filled the bucket and sat with his hands in it. Daniel found him there when he came out to look at the black one more time before dark.

He climbed up onto the back of the truck and sat on the edge of the tank beside him.

The field lay black below them in the last of the light. It had stopped smoking, mostly. Here and there a thin white thread still went up from a stump of straw. The air smelled of it. Beyond the black the disced strip ran along the headland, brown, and beyond that the dark wet stripe along the trail fence, and beyond that the forty acres, pale in the dusk, and the Hogback over it, black against the sky.

"You cut the line," Elias said.

"You wet the fence."

"You cut the line first." Elias lifted his hands out of the bucket and looked at them and put them back. "I saw you go into the smoke on the second pass. I thought you'd go through the fence."

"I didn't."

"No." Elias was quiet. "Darius used to say a farm boss was the man who knew where the fire was going before it did."

They sat. A nighthawk came over the black field, low, and turned, and made its sound, the short buzzing cry, and went on towards the Hogback.

"It was like that in '49," Elias said.

Daniel looked at him.

"The smoke. On the road. You couldn't see the front of the horse." Elias looked at the black field. "We were on the flanks. Me and Jakob. The Tollefsen boy on the drag, and the father on point. Coming down off the bench in the dark with the fire behind us. I was seventeen." He moved his hands in the bucket. "I've not thought about it in years. I thought about it this afternoon, when you went into the smoke."

Daniel waited.

"There was a truck," Elias said. "A fire crew. It came up behind us on the road at the bottom of the coulee. Or there were two. I've thought since there were two, and I don't know." He moved his hands in the bucket. "A man walked up the herd. I couldn't hear all of it for the cattle. I heard him ask to be let through. I saw him talking up at Jens with his hand flat, like this." He lifted one hand out of the water and held it up, palm out. It was red and swollen and shining. "And the boy came up from the drag. I heard *gate*. I heard that much." He put the hand back. "And Jens looked round. Back up the road at the smoke, first. Then across at the Rourke hay, over the fence, a long time. Longer than you'd look at anything with a fire behind you. Then he put his heels in his horse and we went on, and the man was standing in the road." He was quiet. "I don't know if he heard him. I've told it to myself both ways. I told Joseph some of it, that night at Sixmile. I don't know now how much. I've wondered since what he did with it."

Daniel sat on the edge of the tank very still.

He did not ask. It was Joseph's. Whatever it was, Elias had given it to Joseph seventeen years ago, and what Joseph had done with it, or not done, was Joseph's too.

"I don't know what he did with it," Daniel said.

"No," Elias said. "I didn't suppose you would." He put his hands back in the bucket. "I don't know why I said it. It was the smoke."

They sat on the back of the water truck until it was dark. Then Elias took his hands out of the bucket and they climbed down and walked back up the field road to the colony, slowly, past the black, with the bucket swinging from Daniel's hand.

• • •

Thea Tollefsen rang the office on the third of September at seven in the morning.

"The state's cutting the lease," she said. "From the tenth. Half the AUMs. I've got a letter. I have to have half of them off by the tenth, and the other half by the first of October, and there's nothing up there for any of them anyway." She sounded tired. She sounded as if she had not slept. "I want to bring them all down on the ninth. Can you have the fence down?"

Daniel stood by the desk with the telephone.

He looked out of the office window, down the bench, along the foot of the Hogback, at the forty acres. They were gold now, mostly. Gold at the top, with the green going out of them from the beards down. Another ten days. Another twelve. In ten days he would have walked them with the sack and picked the earliest heads, as he had every August for six years, late this year because they had gone in late, and then swathed them, and the fence would have come down over dry stubble.

"The barley's not ready," he said.

There was a silence on the line.

"Daniel, I'm sorry," Thea said. "I didn't know. I can bring them down the outside."

"There's no outside."

"Then I'll wait. I'll haul them. I'll find trucks."

"For three hundred pair. In a week. In this." He looked at the forty acres. "You won't find trucks. Everybody's selling. Every truck in four counties is going to Nebraska."

She did not answer.

"Bring them on the ninth," Daniel said. "The fence will be down."

"What about the barley?"

"I'll cut it."

"It's not ready. You said."

"I'll cut it green," he said, "and let it lie. It'll be all right for feed. It'll be all right for something." He did not know if that was true. "Bring them on the ninth."

There was a long silence on the line.

"Thank you," Thea said, in a voice he had not heard her use before. "I'll pay for it. The barley. Whatever it was worth."

"It's the colony's barley," Daniel said. "We'll talk about it."

• • •

He went out with the sack on the morning of the sixth.

He went alone, at dawn, before the others were up, before the swather. He walked the rows from the corner by the big rock, where it was thickest, slowly, bent over, looking at every head. Most of them were green. Green at the bottom of the head, green in the kernel when he pressed it with his thumbnail, soft, the milk still in it. A few were not. A few had turned. He could tell them by the colour, a deeper gold, and by the way the head hung, heavier, and when he pressed a kernel it was hard, almost, a dough that held the mark of his nail.

He picked those. Only those. He walked the forty acres for three hours with the sack, and at the end of three hours he had a little less than half a sack, which was less than a quarter of what he picked in

a good year. He stood at the fourth gate with it and weighed it in his hand.

Then he walked back down to the shop and put the sack on the bench under the shelf with the jars, and got the swather out, and drove it down the trail to the forty acres, and cut them.

It took the morning. The swather went along the rows and the barley went down behind it in a long windrow, green-gold, with the beards still standing up in it, and lay on the stubble in the sun. He cut it all. He cut the corner by the big rock last. When he had finished he shut the swather off and sat in the cab and looked back along the field at the windrows, lying in the sun, all the way to the fourth gate.

In the afternoon he and Elias and two of the boys took the fence down along the trail. They pulled the staples and rolled the wire and pulled the posts with the tractor and stacked them at the corner by the big rock, where the calves always got through. Elias worked with his hands wrapped. When they had finished the forty acres lay open to the trail from end to end, stubble and windrows, with nothing between it and the old two-track but a line of post holes in the dirt.

• • •

That night, in the office, Daniel read Joseph the books.

He read him the programme's letter about the fire, which had come that afternoon, three pages, with the adjuster's number, and the date the adjuster would come, and the price per bushel the programme would pay for the ninety acres. He read him the note. He read him the elevator's price for wheat in Roundup that day, which Joseph had asked for, which was lower than the programme's price by a great deal.

Joseph listened with his eyes shut.

When Daniel had finished Joseph sat for a while without speaking.

"Elias talked to you," Joseph said. "On the water truck."

Daniel looked up from the ledger.

"Mark heard him," Joseph said. "From the cab. Mark told his grandfather. His grandfather told me." He did not open his eyes. "It's a colony, Daniel. Things go round it."

"He said he'd told you. In '49."

"He did."

Daniel waited.

Joseph sat with his hands folded on his stomach and his eyes shut and his head turned a little towards the dark window, and said nothing. The clock on the wall ticked. Outside, somewhere on the bench, a coyote started up, and another answered it, and they went on for a while, and stopped.

"Read me the elevator price again," Joseph said.

Daniel read it again.

13

The Spring

The lightning came on the fourth of September, a Saturday, at four in the afternoon, out of a sky with no rain in it.

Mariah watched it from the kitchen window. A long dark anvil of cloud over the Wolf Mountains to the south-west, low, with the sun behind it, and under it, every few seconds, a white thread down to the ridges. No rain came out of it. She could see the place where rain should have been, a grey shading under the cloud, and it did not reach the ground. It hung there and dried up halfway. Her grandmother had called that *virga*, a word she had learned from the radio, and said it with contempt, as if it were a cousin who promised to come for Christmas and never did.

By six there was smoke on the divide.

By seven her father's telephone rang, the old one on the wall, and he answered it and said, "Yes," and "How many," and "Where," and "I'll be there," and hung it up and went out to the shop without his supper.

• • •

Harris Fireline was one engine now. It had been two in 2049, and a hand crew, and a contract on the campus on the Musselshell that paid for the ranch. In January 2050 her father had resigned the contract and sold the second engine for twenty-eight thousand dollars less than he owed on it, and had told her why once, in the truck, in 2052, and not again. The one that was left was a Type 6, a big four-wheel-drive pickup with a three-hundred-gallon tank and a pump and a hose reel on the back, red, with *Harris Fireline* on the doors in white letters that had faded to pink. He kept it in the shop, on a charger, with the tank full, and three young men on call, Wallace's grandsons and a nephew of theirs, who had trained with him every spring for ten years and whom he paid by the hour when the tribe's fire office called him out, which it did three or four times a summer, for grass fires on the reservation, small ones.

This was not a small one.

She drove to the camp at nine. She went because she had always gone, since 2052, when the tribe's fire office called him, and stood at the back and watched, and been sent home. She went this time because she was frightened, and because she had heard on the radio in the car that the fire was on the divide south of Lame Deer, between the Rosebud and the head of Thompson Creek, and moving north-east with the wind, and that the fire office had it at six thousand acres and growing.

The camp was in the field behind the school at Busby, where it always was. A dozen trucks and engines in the dark, with their lights on. A trailer with the fire office's sign on it, and generators, and a big screen on an easel outside the trailer with the map on it, the fire in red, growing, and the roads in white, and the houses, little squares, in yellow. A kitchen under an awning, with a long table and urns of coffee and women from Busby cutting sandwiches. Men in yellow shirts and green trousers standing round the screen.

Her father was at the front of them.

He was eighty-two. He stood by the screen with his helmet under his arm and a radio on his chest, very straight, in his yellow shirt, which hung on him now as if it had been made for a bigger man, and the fire boss, a tall woman from the Bureau's fire office in Lame Deer, forty, with a clipboard and a headset, was talking to him, and he was listening with his head down, and then he said something, short, and pointed at the screen, and the woman looked at where he pointed and was quiet for a moment and nodded and wrote something on her clipboard.

Mariah stood at the back, by the kitchen awning, and watched him.

• • •

She did not go home.

Nobody sent her. The kitchen was short of hands, and a woman from Busby she had been at school with, Velma, put a knife in her hand and a loaf of bread in front of her and said, "Thin," and Mariah cut bread for two hours. Then she filled the urns. Then, at midnight, when the crews came in off the line for an hour, black-faced and coughing, she poured coffee for them, and handed out the sandwiches, and listened to them talk about the fire in short sentences, with their helmets on the table, and went out to the water trailer behind the kitchen with the jerry cans and filled them and carried them back, two at a time, until her arms shook.

At two in the morning a young man from one of the Bureau's crews came into the light under the awning with his hand wrapped in a dirty glove and blood coming through it, and Velma looked at it and said, "Mariah," and Mariah sat him down on the bench and took the glove off and cleaned the hand with water from the urn and the first aid box from the trailer, a long cut across the palm from a piece of fence wire, and wrapped it, as she had seen her grandmother wrap her father's hands after branding forty years ago, tight, with the bandage going round between the thumb and finger. He was

nineteen. He watched her do it and said, “Thank you, ma’am,” and went back out to the line.

At three her father came in.

He sat down at the end of the long table with his helmet beside him and his face grey under the soot, and she brought him coffee and a sandwich, and he did not look at her. He drank the coffee. He did not eat the sandwich.

“You should be home,” he said.

“I know.”

“You’ve got work Monday.”

“It’s Sunday, Dad.”

He drank the coffee. One of Wallace’s grandsons came and sat down beside him, the eldest, who had been on the engine with him for ten years, and said something to him in Cheyenne, low, and her father answered in Cheyenne, and they talked for a while like that, the two of them, with their heads close, about the fire, she thought, about the wind. She caught some of it. Not much. She had never learned enough. Her grandmother had tried, and Mariah had been seventeen and in a hurry and had not let her, and then her grandmother had died.

Then her father stood up and put his helmet on and went back out into the dark, and the engine’s lights went on, and it went out of the camp towards the divide.

• • •

She slept two hours in the car. At seven she was back under the awning.

The fire had grown in the night. It was on the screen by the trailer at eleven thousand acres, in red, in a long tongue going north-east from the Wolf Mountains across the divide towards the head of Thompson Creek, with the wind behind it. The fire boss stood in front of the screen with a cup of coffee and her headset round her

neck and briefed the crews for the day, and Mariah stood at the back of them and listened.

There was a plan. It was on the screen in colours, over the map. The fire office had it from the system in Lame Deer, which had it from the satellites and the weather stations and the fuel maps and the roads and every house on the reservation, and it showed the fire as it was and as it would be at noon and at six and at midnight, in rings, each ring bigger, going north-east. It showed the crews and the engines as small symbols, and where each one was to go.

The houses came first. That was the plan, and it was right, and Mariah knew it was right, standing at the back of the briefing in yesterday's clothes. The fire was going to come down off the divide towards the Busby road by evening, and there were forty houses along the road, and people in them, and the crews and the engines would hold the road. Her father's engine was a small red square on the screen at the Busby road, at the east end, by the bridge, where three houses stood close together under the cottonwoods.

The pasture was not on the plan.

She saw it before the fire boss said it. The rings went across the head of Thompson Creek, across the eleven allotments, across the spring and the corrals and the box elders, at about midnight, and there was no symbol there. No square. Nothing. The fire boss said it in one sentence, looking at the screen: the grazing on the divide was not defensible with the resources they had, and would be let go, and the lessees had been told to open their gates.

Her father had opened his gates in the night. She knew that. She had heard him say it to Wallace's grandson in Cheyenne at three in the morning, the word for *gate*, which she knew. The cows would go down the draws away from the fire, east, towards the Tongue. They would be all right. Most of them.

The spring would not be all right. Nor the box elders. Nor the corrals, which were cedar, and her great-great-grandmother's, and the trough, and the pipe, and the little box her father had built

round the head of the spring in 2041 with his own hands, out of stone and timber, to keep the cows from fouling it.

Grass came back. She had heard that her whole life. She had read it on thin paper in a basement a month ago, in a typed line. Box elders came back slowly. Cedar corrals did not come back at all.

• • •

She found the flatbed at noon.

It was at the house, where she had left it, with the thousand-gallon tank on it that she filled the horse tank from every morning and had filled from the well on Saturday before the lightning came. She drove home from the camp to look at it. She did not tell anybody she was going. She stood in the yard and looked at it, and at the smoke going up over the divide to the south, brown, enormous, leaning north-east, and she thought for a long time.

She was fifty-two. She was a lawyer. She had cut bread and poured coffee and wrapped a boy's hand, and that was all she knew how to do at a fire, and her father, if he knew what she was thinking, would have taken the keys out of the flatbed and put them in his pocket.

He was at the Busby road with the engine, holding three houses by the bridge.

She went to the shop and found his old fire shirt on the nail, the yellow one from 2049, too big, and a pair of his leather gloves, and the spare helmet off the shelf, and put them in the cab of the flatbed. She found the long hose in the shop and the short one and the rake and the shovel and put them on the flatbed beside the tank. She checked the pump on the tank, a little petrol one, and filled it. She looked at the smoke again.

Then she rang Velma at the camp kitchen and asked her which of the Small boys were there, the young ones, and Velma said Kenny and Lee, sixteen and seventeen, helping with the urns, and Mariah asked if they would come with her up to Thompson Creek to wet

the grass round her father's spring, and said that it would be on the far side of the fire from the road and that she would bring them back before dark, and Velma was quiet on the telephone, and then said, "I'll ask them. I won't tell their mother."

• • •

They came. Kenny and Lee Small, tall boys, quiet, in their basketball shorts and boots, in the back of Velma's car, at two. They got into the cab of the flatbed beside her without a word and she drove them up the Thompson Creek road onto the divide.

The road went up through the pines. The smoke was over them, high, brown, and the sun came through it orange and small, like a coin, and the light on the road was the colour of weak tea. At the top of the road the pines opened out onto the high ground, and she could see it.

The fire was three miles off. South-west, on the far side of the pasture, a long low line of it along the ridge, with the smoke going up off it in a wall, and the wind coming from behind it towards them, hot, dry, with ash in it. It was not moving fast. It was moving in the grass, not the pines, a low creeping line, eating its way across the high ground towards them at the pace of a man walking. It would be at the spring at dark. The plan said midnight. She thought dark.

She drove to the gate at the head of the creek and through it and out across the pasture to the spring.

The cows were gone. Her father had opened the gates. The box elders stood round the spring in the orange light with their leaves already curling in the heat, and the cedar corral beside them, grey and old and dry as kindling, and the trough with the water running into it from the pipe, and the stone box over the head of the spring.

"Wet everything," she said to the boys. "The grass. A ring. All round. As wide as we can make it. The corral rails. The trees, as high as the hose will go."

Kenny looked at the fire on the ridge and then at her.

"Then what?" he said.

"Then we go."

"And if it comes before we're done?"

"Then we go before we're done," Mariah said. "The truck's facing the gate. The keys are in it. If I say go, you get in, and you don't wait for me, and you drive down the road to the camp." She looked at him. "Can you drive?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then that's what you do."

• • •

They worked for three hours.

She ran the pump and the boys ran the hose, one on the nozzle and one behind him feeding it, and they put the water on the grass round the spring in a ring, a long slow circle, thirty yards out from the trees, soaking it, and then a second ring inside the first. When the tank was low she drove the flatbed to the trough and dropped the intake hose into it and filled the tank from the spring, slowly, with the pump labouring, the spring water going in at the top and coming out of the bottom onto the grass, and the spring running into the trough behind it as fast as the pump took it out. It was the one water on the divide that did not go dry. Her father said it had not gone dry in his lifetime or his mother's.

They wet the corral rails. They wet the trunks of the box elders as high as the hose would throw. They raked the dry leaves and the grass away from the stone box over the spring, and from the foot of the corral, down to bare dirt, with the rake and the shovel, and Mariah raked until her hands were blistered inside her father's gloves and her shirt was black with sweat and ash and she could not feel her arms.

At six the fire was a mile off.

At seven it was at the far side of the pasture, along the fence, in the grass, a long low line of orange with the smoke going up off it white and then brown, and the heat came at them across the dry grass on the wind, and the box elder leaves began to fall.

"Ma'am," Lee said.

"One more ring," she said.

They did one more. The outside one, wider. They did it with the fire half a mile off and coming, and the smoke coming over them so that she could not see the gate, and when the tank ran dry she shut off the pump and stood on the flatbed and looked at the ring, the dark wet grass in a circle round the trees and the corral and the spring, and the dry brown grass outside it going away to the fire.

"Get in," she said.

They got in. She drove out through the gate and shut it behind them, because she always shut it, and drove down the Thompson Creek road through the pines with the smoke behind them, and at the bottom of the road, where it met the highway, she stopped the truck on the shoulder and sat with her hands on the wheel, as she had seen her father sit in March, and could not take them off.

"Ma'am," Kenny said, beside her, very quietly. "That was something."

She did not answer. After a while she drove them back to the camp.

• • •

The fire boss found her under the kitchen awning at nine.

She knew. Of course she knew. Velma had told someone and someone had told someone else and it had gone round the camp in an hour. The fire boss came across the field from the trailer with her headset round her neck and stood in front of Mariah at the long table, where Mariah was sitting with a cup of coffee she could not hold still, and looked down at her.

"You took two minors into the fire area," she said. "In a civilian vehicle. Without radios. Without telling anybody."

"Yes."

"Do you know what could have happened?"

"Yes."

"I don't think you do." The fire boss's voice was very quiet. "I don't think you do at all. I've had a man die on me. In Idaho. In grass. In twenty minutes." She looked at Mariah. "If you ever do that again on my fire I'll have you arrested." She looked down at her clipboard. "It goes in my report. Your name, and theirs, and the vehicle. Your council gets a copy. So does the Bureau."

"I understand."

The fire boss looked at her a moment longer. Then she said, in a different voice, "Was it worth it?"

"I don't know yet."

"No," said the fire boss. "You won't, till morning." She turned to go, and stopped. "Your father's on the radio. He heard. He asked me to tell you to stay at the camp."

She went back to her trailer.

• • •

The fire went across the head of Thompson Creek at a quarter to ten that night.

Mariah did not see it. She heard it on the radio in the trailer, because the fire boss let her stand at the back of the trailer and listen, which she did not have to do. A lookout on the ridge above the Busby road called it in: the head of the fire across the high ground, across the allotments, down into the head of the draw. Then nothing about it for a long time, because there was nothing on the plan there to say anything about, and the radio was full of the Busby road, where the fire came down at eleven, and the engines held it at the road, all forty houses, and her father's engine held the three by

the bridge, and she heard his voice on the radio at half past eleven, short, dry, saying *Engine six*, *holding*, and nothing else.

At six in the morning she drove up to the spring.

The road was black on both sides. The pines on the slopes were black, the small ones, and the big ones were scorched up their trunks and green at the top. The high ground at the top of the road was black from one side to the other, flat black, with the smoke still coming off it in thin white threads, and the fence posts standing up out of it, some of them burnt to stumps, some of them whole.

At the head of Thompson Creek, in the black, there was a circle.

It was brown. It was thirty yards across, brown and grey, the grass scorched on the outside edge where the fire had come up to it and lain against it and not gone in. Inside it the grass was green. The box elders stood in the middle of it with half their leaves gone and the others brown at the edges, and their trunks black on the side the fire had come from, and the rest of them whole. The corral stood beside them. The bottom rail on the south side was charred and the rest of it grey and old and dry, as it had been for a hundred years. The trough was full. The water ran into it from the pipe, out of the stone box, as it did summer and winter, and over the end of the trough into the head of the creek, and down the draw, a thin dark line in the black, going away east towards the Tongue.

She got out of the car and stood at the edge of the circle.

North of the spring, along the draw, the fire had gone round. It had come up against the wet ground and split and gone down both sides of the draw, and the wet ground along the creek had held it, a little, and the north end of the pasture beyond the draw was black in patches and brown in others and green in some, where the fire had gone round and not gone back. She could see three of her father's cows down there, a long way off, in a green patch, grazing.

She walked into the circle and sat down on the edge of the trough and put her hand in the water.

It was cold. It was as cold as it had been in August.

• • •

Her father came at eight, in the engine, with Wallace's eldest grandson driving.

He got down slowly. He stood at the edge of the circle in his black shirt with his helmet in his hand and looked at it, at the box elders and the corral and the trough and the stone box, and at the black all round it, and the wet line down the draw. He looked.

Then he looked at her.

"You took the tank," he said.

"Yes."

"And the Small boys."

"Yes."

"Their mother was at the camp at six last night," he said. "Asking at every truck that came in. Somebody had to go and tell her where they were." He looked at her. "I'd have come up here myself, if I hadn't been at the bridge. You don't take a woman's boys to do what I'd have done."

She did not answer him. He walked past her into the circle and over to the stone box over the head of the spring, and bent down, with a hand on his knee, and looked into it, at the water coming out of the hill. He put his hand flat on the top of the box, on the stones he had laid in 2041, and kept it there. Wallace's grandson stood by the engine and looked at the black and did not look at either of them.

Her father straightened up.

"The tribe's fire office," he said, "is going to want to talk to you."

"She already did."

"Good." He put his helmet on the corral post. He stood beside her at the trough, not close, with his hands in his pockets, and they looked at the water running into it. "Your grandmother's grandmother built this corral," he said. "She was the one the allotment went to. In 1928. She built it with her sons. That one, the rail on the

south side, the bottom one, that's the one she put in herself, my mother said. She said you could tell by the notch."

Mariah looked at the bottom rail on the south side. It was charred black along its length. At the end, by the post, there was a notch cut in it, rough, old, the shape of a half-moon.

"It's still there," she said.

"It's still there," her father said.

• • •

She announced it that evening at the camp.

She had not meant to. She had meant to announce it in Lame Deer, in October, properly, at the council chambers, with a statement she had written in August and had in her bag. But at seven that evening, under the kitchen awning, with the fire contained on the screen by the trailer and the crews coming in off the line for the last time, black and grinning, and the women from Busby bringing out the stew they had made for the whole camp, the president of the council was there, and the woman from Birney, and half the Busby district, and somebody, Velma, she thought, said loudly that Mariah Harris ought to be on the council, after what she'd done on the divide, and somebody else said she should, and then they were all looking at her.

She stood up at the end of the long table.

She said that she would run for the Busby district seat at the election next November. She said that she had worked for the council for fourteen years as its lawyer and that she would rather work for it as one of its members. She said she would not say anything else about it at a fire camp because it was not the place. She sat down.

They clapped. Not loudly. Under an awning, with stew.

At the far end, by the urns, the Small boys' mother sat with her arms folded and did not. The woman beside her leaned over and said something, and she nodded without looking up. Mariah saw it.

She would hear it again before the election, in other mouths: the lawyer who took two boys up a burning hill for her family's fence.

Her father was at the end of the table with Wallace's grandsons. He had heard all of it. She had not looked at him while she said it. She looked at him now.

He stood up. It took him a while. He stood at the end of the table in his black shirt with one hand on the table, and the camp went quiet, because he was Lyle Harris and he had held three houses by the bridge all night and he was eighty-two.

"My daughter," he said, to the camp, in English, and then he said something in Cheyenne that she did not understand all of, though she understood the word for *daughter* and the word for *water*, and the women from Busby made a sound, and Velma put her hand over her mouth. Then he said, in English again, "She'll do," and sat down.

Mariah sat at the other end of the table with her bowl of stew.

The fire boss had asked her whether it was worth it. She had an answer for half of it. She would go up for the spring again. She did not know about the boys. She looked down the table for their mother, and the chair by the urns was empty.

She had not told him about the blue line. It was in her bag, on the chair beside her, with the statement and the legal pad and the page of names. She had not told him that there were nine names on the page now, under Darlene's, and that four of them had signed.

14

The Cut

The man from the state came on the first of September in a white pickup with the state's seal on the door and a letter in an envelope on the seat beside him.

Thea was at the south tank when he drove up the lease road. She had been at the south tank most mornings since July. The state's man had come in the end, the week after the Stampede, and put a new controller in the grey box on the pole and a wire mesh over the cable gland, and the pump had run since, but she did not trust it, and she came up every morning on the bench road and the lease road to look at it, and at the cows round it, and at the level in the tank.

He got out and stood by his truck and looked at the cows before he looked at her. That was the first thing she noticed about him.

"You're Thea Tollefsen," he said.

"Yes."

"Wade Aske. Southern Land Office, in Billings. I do the range on the state sections from here to the Wyoming line." He was about her age, or a little older, tall, lean, in a sun-faded shirt with the sleeves rolled and a hat that had been rained on many times. He held out the envelope. "I'm sorry. I could have mailed it. I don't like mailing these."

She took it. She did not open it. She knew what it said.

"How much?" she said.

"Half." He looked at the cows round the tank, and at the ground round them, which was dirt for a hundred yards out from the tank in every direction, and grey grass beyond the dirt, grazed to the crowns. "Your lease is rated at eleven hundred and forty AUMs in a normal year. The board's set it at five hundred and twenty for the rest of this one. You've used most of that already. Half your pairs off by the tenth. The rest by the first of October." He looked at her. "It's the same on every state section from here to Roundup. It's not you."

"No."

"I'd like to walk it," he said. "If you have an hour. I have to put a number on it for the board. I'd rather put my own."

• • •

They walked it for two hours.

He walked the way she walked, with his head down, and stopped where she stopped. At the edge of the timber on the south slope, where the grasshoppers had been in May, he knelt and parted the grass with his hands and looked at the crowns, and she knelt beside him, and they looked at the same crowns, grey, grazed to the nub, some of them with a little green at the heart and most of them without.

"Dormant or dead?" he said.

"Dormant. Most of it. Some dead, along the trail where they bed." She put her finger near one. "That one's dead. The hoppers took the leaves in June, and then the cows took what came back."

"You can tell."

"You can tell by the base. Feel it." She took his hand, without thinking, and put his fingers on the crown, the dead one, and then on the one beside it. "That one's brittle. That one gives."

He felt them, one and then the other, with his fingers, and was quiet.

"Most people can't tell," he said.

She took her hand away.

They walked on. At the north tank, at the top of the ridge, he stood and looked down the long slope towards the river, the bench and the colony's fields and the trail along the foot of the Hogback, and beyond it the Musselshell, and the Lodgepole on the far side, small, the yard and the barns and the long strip of the flat between the yard and the cottonwoods.

"That's yours," he said. "The flat."

"Yes."

"It's green." He shaded his eyes. "In September. It's the only green on this side of the valley that's not under a pivot."

"It's not much green."

"It's green," he said. "May I see it?"

• • •

She showed him on the afternoon of the same day.

She had not meant to. He had driven down off the lease ahead of her and was waiting at the bridge when she came down, sitting on the tailgate of the white pickup with his hat off, and when she pulled up beside him he said he had an hour before he had to be in Roundup, if she had one, and she found that she did.

They walked the flat from the west gate to the cottonwoods.

It was not what it had been in April. It was short now, and pale, a thin green over the brown, grazed in the spring before the cows went up the trail, and rested since. But it was green. She knelt at flag fourteen and laid the hoop down and showed him, and he knelt beside her, and looked, and she saw his face change.

"Your counts," he said. "You've been counting this."

"Since 2050."

"Every year?"

"Every spring. Twice a week this one."

"Can I see them?"

She had the notebook in her shirt pocket. She took it out and gave it to him. He sat back on his heels on the dry ground beside the hoop and turned the pages, slowly, from April, the forty flags, the crowns, the green, the percentages at the bottom of each page in her hand, twice a week, down through May and June and July and August, eighty-five, eighty-one, seventy-six, sixty-eight, sixty-one.

"The co-op's got this at fourteen," he said, not looking up.

"It's had it low since April."

"The board's model's got it at about the same. They read the same sky." He turned another page. "They're wrong about it. They're wrong because they think it's the same grass as the bench, and it isn't. You've made it a different grass." He looked up. "That's sixteen years of you."

She did not say anything. She was kneeling on the ground beside the hoop, and she found she could not.

"It's still short," she said.

"It's short. It'll quit in three weeks." He gave her back the notebook. "It's not going to save you. You should have shipped half of them in June, when the hoppers came. You'd still have the south slope, and the board would have given you more than five-twenty. I'd have said so in June."

"Nobody asked you in June."

"No." He got up. "I'm saying it now because you'd know if I didn't." He held his hand down to her, and she took it and got up. He let go. "I'd like to come back in the spring," he said. "To see it green up. If that's all right. Not for the board."

"What for?"

He thought about it. He looked out across the flat, at the flags, the little orange ones on their wires, forty of them, in their four lines going away to the cottonwoods.

"I don't know," he said. "I'd like to see it."

"You'll be putting the number on it again next year," she said.

"I will." He did not look away from the flags. "I know that."

• • •

That night she ruled a page.

She did it at the kitchen table after supper, with her grandmother across from her and the ledger open and the radio on low with the farm report. She took the notebook and turned to a clean page at the back and ruled it into four columns with the edge of the co-op's envelope, and wrote at the head of each one, in capitals, small.

PAID & STACKED. SIGNED FOR. HANDSHAKE. TO GROW.

Under the first she wrote what was in the stackyard behind the calving barn, which she had counted that morning before she went up to the lease. The thirty-four tons from June, from Melstone and Ryegate and the man at Roundup who had come through. The first cutting off the west meadow, after the pump came back from Billings in May, and off the ditch meadows: fifty-eight tons. Ninety-two.

Under the second she wrote what she had signed for and paid a deposit on, and would get if the other man did what he had signed. The man at Custer, forty tons of second-cut alfalfa, at three hundred and thirty-five, delivered in October, if he got a second cutting, which he had, in August. And the co-op: sixty tons of Nebraska prairie hay through the co-op's hay account, which she had opened in August, at three hundred and forty-five delivered, in October. A hundred.

Under the third she wrote *Fenner*, *Lavina* — 30. Earl Fenner, who had a meadow on the Musselshell above Lavina that he irrigated out of a well, and who had shaken her hand on it in his yard on the fifteenth of August and said he would cut it in September and she could have thirty tons at three-twenty if she hauled it. He had not signed anything. He did not sign things. His father had not.

Under the fourth she wrote the second cutting off the west meadow, if the river held and the pump held and nothing else happened. Forty, perhaps. Sixty if it rained. She wrote 40–60.

She added it up. Two hundred and sixty-two, at the bottom. Two hundred and eighty-two if it rained.

She needed three hundred and fifty, if she sold eighty of the old and open cows in October.

She sat and looked at the page. Ninety tons short, or seventy at the best. And thirty of it on a handshake with a man who did not sign things, and forty of it on a meadow that depended on a river that was lower every week. She drew a line under the totals and wrote *Short: 70–90* under the line, and looked at it, and then she turned the notebook round and slid it across the table to her grandmother.

Karin looked at it through her reading glasses.

"Fenner," she said.

"He shook my hand."

"His father shook your grandfather's hand in 2002," Karin said. "On forty tons. And sold it to a man from Billings in September." She pushed the notebook back across the table. "I'd move him one column to the right."

• • •

Under the notebook, on the table, there was the co-op's statement for August. It had come in the post that week. She had not opened it until now. She opened it and looked at it, because she had to send the bank the count on the first and the bank wanted to know what was owed.

It was one page. Her account. The sixty tons ordered, the deposit she had paid, the balance owing at delivery. And under the deposit, a second line, which she had not expected.

Credit — 21 Aug — $6,000.00

She looked at it. There was no description beside it. There was a code, a string of letters and numbers.

She thought about it for a moment. The county had been talking all summer about a drought feed programme, through the co-op, for members who held their herds, a few dollars a ton off. There had been a meeting in Roundup in July that she had not gone to. Her father had said it was charity and would not go either. She supposed the county had done it anyway, and the co-op had put it through, and nobody had told her because nobody had been at the meeting.

Six thousand dollars. Seventeen tons and some, at three-forty-five.

She left it off the page. It was money off the hay. She put the statement in the folder for the bank, and went to bed.

• • •

They gathered on the eighth and brought them down on the ninth.

Her father rode the gather. She had not thought he would. He came out of the house at four in the morning on the eighth with his hat on and his chaps over his arm and went to the barn and saddled the old sorrel, and when she came into the barn he was already on it, sitting it in the alley in the dark with the reins in one hand.

"South side," he said. "I'll take the south side."

Her mother rode too. Her mother had ridden every gather on the Lodgepole since 2032. She came out of the log barn, not the house, with her grey mare already saddled, and Thea noticed that, and noticed that she did not come into the kitchen for coffee first, and did not ride beside Jens down the lane, but behind, and then off to the side. She had been eating her supper in the barn office since July. She said she had colts to watch. She had said it in July and had said nothing since and come to the house only for breakfast.

Thea did not ask.

They gathered the lease in a day. Three hundred and five pair, off the south slope and the north tank and out of the draws and the timber, into the holding trap at the top of the trail by dark. The cows

were thin. The calves were small. They came in quietly, without much fight in them, too thin for a fight.

• • •

They started down the trail at six on the ninth.

Daniel had the fence down. She saw it as they came through the fourth gate, out of the timber onto the top of the bench, at the head of the colony's fields: the trail running down along the foot of the Hogback, and on the left of it, where for six years there had been a fence of new tight wire on new posts, there was nothing. A line of holes in the dirt. And beyond the holes, the forty acres, stubble, with the barley lying in long windrows on it in the early light, gold and green, cut and not yet dry.

The cows smelled it before they saw it. The old brockle-face at the front lifted her head and stopped and turned towards it, and the cows behind her turned, and Thea put Ledger in front of them and turned them back onto the trail, and they came on, but they kept turning their heads to look at the windrows as they went past, and she had to ride the whole quarter-mile of the forty acres between them and the field with her rope in her hand, slapping it against her chaps, to keep them going.

Daniel was at the third gate with Elias. He was standing by the gatepost with his arms folded, watching his barley go past, and his face did nothing at all.

She stopped Ledger beside him.

"I'll pay for it," she said. "I said I would."

"We'll talk about it." He did not look at her. He was looking at the windrows. "You've got a storm coming."

She turned in the saddle.

She had not seen it. She had been watching the cows. It was behind them, over the Bull Mountains, to the south-west, coming up out of nothing in the hot morning: a dark grey wall of cloud along the top of the ridges, flat underneath, with the sun still shining on

the front of it and lighting it white at the top, and under it, as she watched, a thread of lightning down onto the timber. No rain under it. The grey shading under it that should have been rain, hanging, and not reaching the ground.

She counted. Nine seconds before the thunder came.

"Two miles," Daniel said. "Less."

• • •

She did not think it would catch them. She thought they would be off the bench and down the slope to the river before it did. She thought that all the way down the trail along the foot of the Hogback, with the cows strung out ahead of her and her father on the south flank and her mother on the north and the thunder coming closer behind them every few minutes, with the count getting shorter, nine seconds, seven, five, and the wind coming up out of the south-west ahead of it, hot, and then not hot, cool, sudden, with dust in it, and the cows putting their heads up and walking faster.

It caught them at the bottom of the bench, at the top of the long slope down to the river, a mile from the ford.

She saw it come. A strike on the Hogback, on the sandstone a quarter of a mile to the west of them, white, so bright she saw the bones of her own hand on the reins, and the sound at the same moment, not a roll but a crack, a sound like the sky being split with an axe, and the ground jumped under Ledger's feet.

The herd went.

It went all at once, three hundred cows and three hundred calves together, as if a hand had pushed them, and it did not go down the slope towards the ford. It went the other way. East. Away from the strike, along the top of the slope, across the bench, at a dead run, a solid mass of red and black backs with the dust going up off them in a wall and the calves bawling and the ground shaking, towards the colony's fields, and beyond the colony's fields, along the edge of the bench, towards the head of the coulee where the campus road came

up out of the river bottom between its two fences, steel, eight feet high, and the cattle guard at the top, and the road, and the campus gate.

She saw it in a second. If they went into the head of the coulee they would go down it, between the fences, onto the road, three hundred pair at a run with nowhere to go but down, and pile up against whatever was at the bottom, the cattle guard, a truck, each other, in the dark of the coulee, and the calves under them.

She put Ledger after them.

• • •

He went. He went as he had gone out of the box at the Stampede, flat, with his big ugly head out and his plate feet throwing dirt, and she let him go and leaned over his neck and went along the outside of the herd on the north side, between the herd and the edge of the bench, where the slope went down to the river, in the dust, with the cattle a few yards to her right, a moving wall, and the edge a few yards to her left.

She could not see. The dust was in her eyes and her mouth and she could not see more than a length ahead. She could hear the herd and feel it beside her, the heat of it and the noise, and she could hear the thunder again behind her, and a voice, her mother's, shouting something she could not make out, far back.

She came up on the leaders.

The brockle-face was at the front, running with her head up and her eyes white, and a dozen cows round her, and the head of the coulee was ahead of them, four hundred yards, three hundred, she could see it now through the dust, the place where the bench broke and the road came up, and the two steel fences coming up out of the gap like the sides of a funnel.

She put Ledger at the brockle-face's shoulder and leaned out of the saddle and hit her across the face with the coiled rope.

The cow swerved. She swerved right, away from the rope, away from the edge, and the cows round her swerved with her, and Thea hit her again, and shouted, she did not know what, and Ledger leaned into the cow's shoulder with his whole weight as if he had been doing it all his life and pushed, and the leaders bent. They bent right, away from the coulee, in a long curve, south, into the colony's fields.

Into the black.

She had not known it was there until she was in it. The burnt wheat. Ninety acres of it, black, flat, open, from the fire on the thirtieth of August, between the trail and the coulee, with the ash lying on it a quarter-inch thick and the stubble burnt to stumps. The leaders went into it at a run and the ash went up round them in a black cloud, and the herd came after the leaders, bending, all of it, three hundred pair, out of the dust and into the black, and she rode them round in it, round and round, in a wide circle, with Ledger blowing and stumbling in the ash and her rope going, and the herd went round with her, and began to slow.

They milled. They went round in the black field in a great slow circle with the ash going up off them, and the calves found their mothers, bawling, and the cows stopped, and stood, and put their heads down, and blew, and stood.

She pulled Ledger up at the edge of them.

The rain came.

It came out of the bottom of the cloud all at once, as if a bucket had been turned over, the first rain in seventy-one days, big cold drops that hit the ash and made it jump, and then a downpour, grey, so hard she could not see the cattle twenty yards off, and the black field went to black mud under it in a minute and the smell came up off it, wet ash and wet earth, and she sat on Ledger in the middle of it with her face turned up and the water running into her eyes and her mouth, and Ledger stood under her with his head down and his

sides going in and out, and the thunder went over them, north-east, away, over the river.

It lasted four minutes. Then it stopped, as suddenly as it had come, and the sun came out behind it, and the black field steamed.

• • •

Daniel's truck was at the edge of the black, on the field road between the black and the coulee, sideways, across the way to the coulee, with Elias standing on the back of it with his wrapped hands up. She had not seen it come. He must have driven it down the field road from the third gate when the herd turned, and put it across the gap between the black and the head of the coulee, and if she had not turned the leaders the herd would have come up against it. She did not let herself think what would have happened then.

Daniel got out of the cab and stood by the truck and looked at her across the black field, across the herd, in the steam.

She lifted her hand. He lifted his.

Her father came along the edge of the black on the old sorrel, at a walk, soaked, with his hat brim running water, from the south side, where he had been, and stopped the sorrel beside her and looked at the herd.

"They all here?" he said.

"I don't know yet."

"Count them."

She looked at him. He was sitting the sorrel in the steam with the water running off him and his face shut, looking at the herd, and his hands on the reins were shaking, very slightly, and he had not noticed.

"I'll count them," she said.

• • •

She counted them in the black, twice, and her father counted them, and they got the same. Three hundred and four cows. Two hundred and ninety-seven calves.

The calf was at the bottom of a cutbank on the north side, where the run had gone along the edge, with its neck broken. The cow was at the head of the coulee. She had been on the outside of the bend when the leaders turned, too far out to turn with them, and had gone into the campus fence at a run, and she was lying against the steel on the gravel with her near foreleg broken below the knee and her calf standing over her, bawling. A man in a grey campus jacket stood on the other side of the fence with a radio and asked whether Thea wanted him to call somebody. She said no. Her father rode home for the rifle. He was gone an hour, and she sat on the gravel by the cow's head with Ledger's reins in her hand until he came back, and then she did it herself.

And the forty acres. The tail of the bend had gone across the end of it at a dead run, a hundred yards wide, and where it had gone the windrows were trodden into the dirt and the wet ash, gold and green and black, and while she was at the fence forty pair had found the rest and were standing in it eating. Elias went in with a feed sack and walked them out. Daniel did not go in. He stood at the edge of the trodden ground with his hands at his sides, and when she rode over to him he did not look up from it.

"I'll pay for it," she said.

"It was the last year of it," he said. "There isn't another one." He turned and walked back to his truck.

They brought them on down to the ford in the afternoon, in the wet, slowly, with the cattle black to the hocks from the ash and the mud, and put them across the river, which had come up four inches in the rain and was brown, and up through the cottonwoods onto the flat.

The flat was green. Wet, and green, and steaming in the late sun.

Her mother was at the ford gate. She had come down ahead of them to open it, and she stood by it as the cattle came up out of the river past her, on her grey mare, soaked, with her hat in her hand, and when the last of the drag came through and Thea rode up behind them on Ledger, her mother swung the gate shut and chained it and turned in the saddle and looked at her.

"Thea," she said.

Thea stopped Ledger.

Her mother was looking at her strangely. She was looking at her as if she were trying to see something behind her face, a long, searching look, with her own face very pale under the mud and the rain, and her eyes red, as if she had been crying, or as if the ash had got into them.

"Do you remember the night of the fire?" her mother said.

Thea sat on Ledger. She was so tired she could not feel her hands. Her wrist hurt where the rope had jerked it in the run, and her legs, and her face where the dust had scoured it, and she was cold, now, in her wet shirt, in the late sun.

"I was at the church," she said. "In Prosper. With Grandma. You came for me at one."

Her mother looked at her.

"I remember you came," Thea said. She did not know what her mother wanted. She thought it was Conor, the anniversary two weeks gone. She thought, too, with a small cold turn under her tiredness, that her mother was seventy, and had been eating in the barn office since July, and that this was how it started, sometimes. "You had soot all over you. You'd come from the paddocks. You held on to me."

Her mother looked at her for a moment longer.

"Yes," she said. "I did."

Then she turned the grey mare and rode up the lane towards the log barn, alone, and did not look back, and Thea sat on Ledger at the

ford gate in the wet with the cattle spreading out across the green flat behind her, and watched her go.

PART THREE

Winter Feed

October 2066 – March 2067

15

The Front Room

The report came to the council on the first Monday in October, in an envelope from the Bureau's fire office in Lame Deer, and the president's secretary brought it down the corridor to Mariah's office herself and put it on the desk and did not go away.

It was four pages. Mariah read it standing. Most of it was the fire: the acres, the crews, the engines, the houses held on the Busby road, a page of costs. On the third page, under a heading that said *Safety Incidents*, there was a paragraph with her name in it, and the names of two minors withheld, and the words *civilian vehicle*, *no communications*, *inside the projected fire perimeter*, and *a reasonable expectation of entrapment*. At the end of the paragraph the fire boss had written that the individual had been advised of the consequences of any repetition and that no further action was recommended. Under that, in a different typeface, somebody had added that a copy had been provided to the tribal council for its information.

"He wants to see you," the secretary said.

The president was at his window with a cup of coffee, looking out at the car park and the hills over Lame Deer, brown, with the black of the fire on the far ridge like a burn on a table. He had his own copy on the desk. He did not pick it up.

"Nobody's going to say anything about this in this building," he said. "I want you to know that."

"Thank you."

"I'm not doing you a favour. It's a fire report. They write one every time." He turned round. "They'll say it in Busby. You know that."

"I know."

"You've got a year and a month till the election," he said. "That's a long time to be the woman who took the Small boys up the hill. Or it's a long time to stop being her." He drank his coffee. "I don't know which. I'm telling you so you know I don't know."

She went back down the corridor to her office and put the report in the drawer of her desk, under the copy of the 1973 minutes, and sat for a while with her hand on the drawer.

• • •

On the Tuesday she went home at five.

Her father was in the shop with the engine. He had pulled it in out of the weather for the winter, as he did every October, and drained the pump and the tank, and he was on his back on a creeper underneath it with a lamp, doing something to the drive line that the young men could have done, and she heard him talking to it as she crossed the yard, low, in Cheyenne, the words he used for the cows in the chute. She did not go in. She went into the house and put the kettle on and spread the corridor maps out on the kitchen table, the council's copies, and her legal pad beside them, and the page of names.

There were eleven names on the page now. Six of them had signed.

She had them in her own hand, with the fractions beside them, and the date each one had been rung, and by whom, and what he had offered. The man from the land company in Denver had been in Rapid City and Billings and Sheridan and twice in Denver. He was polite, Darlene said. He brought a printed letter and a pen and a

cheque made out already, with the amount on it, and he did not stay for coffee. He said the same thing to each of them: that it was a formality, that nothing would happen for years, that the pipeline might never be built, and that if it was, they would want to have been paid early, because the ones who waited would get the Bureau's rate and the ones who signed now would get his.

Mariah had rung every one of them after he had been. She had not told any of them not to sign. It was not hers to tell them. She had told them what the letter was, which the man had not, and what it bound them to, and that the council had not voted, and that if they wanted to wait until it had they would lose nothing but the man's cheque. Five had waited. Six had signed.

She did the sum again, on the pad, under the names. Her father's interest on the Thompson Creek allotment was two-fifths, near enough, and the man would never get it. The tribe's was a fifth, from the buy-back years, and only the council could give it. The rest, the cousins', was two-fifths, split among thirty-one people in nine states. The six who had signed came to a little over a tenth of the whole. A right-of-way needed more than half. The man needed the council's fifth and more than three-quarters of the cousins, or the council's fifth and her father, and he would never have her father.

So he was buying the cousins first. When the council voted, if it voted yes, the line would be done on the day, across her father's pasture, with the cheques already cashed. If it voted no, the man had a tenth of a pasture and nothing to put on it.

She heard the truck before she saw it.

It came up the creek road from the highway, slowly, a pickup she did not know, dark blue, with Musselshell County plates and a horse trailer's hitch on the back with no trailer on it. It stopped in the yard by the shop and sat there with the engine running for a while, and then the engine stopped and a woman got out.

She was tall and grey-haired and straight, in a canvas coat and jeans and boots, and she stood by the truck and looked at the house,

and then at the shop, where the big doors were open and the lamp was on under the engine, and then she walked towards the shop.

Mariah knew her. It took a moment, because she had seen her only twice: at a wedding in Prosper when Mariah was eighteen, and seventeen years ago, in a photograph in the Billings paper, from a funeral in Prosper that her father had driven a hundred and ten miles to stand at the back of and had left before the end. The woman had been at the front then, in black, with a girl of fifteen beside her and a boy of twelve, and a man beside the boy who had not taken his eyes off the floor.

Shannon Tollefsen.

Mariah folded the maps. She did it without thinking, quickly, the blue line inward, and put the legal pad face down on top of them, and went to the window.

Her father had come out from under the engine. He stood in the open door of the shop with the lamp behind him and a rag in his hands, wiping them, and Shannon Tollefsen stood in front of him in the yard, and neither of them moved for what seemed to Mariah a long time. Then her father said something. Shannon said something back. Her father put the rag in his back pocket and turned off the lamp and pulled the shop door to behind him, and they came across the yard to the house together, not talking, with a yard of gravel between them.

• • •

"My daughter," her father said in the kitchen. "Mariah. Shannon Tollefsen."

"Mrs. Tollefsen."

"Shannon." The woman held out her hand. It was hard and dry and as big as a man's. "I'm sorry to come without ringing. I didn't know if he'd see me if I rang."

"He'd have seen you," Mariah said, and did not know if it was true.

Shannon looked round the kitchen once, at the stove, the oilcloth, the calendar from the feed store in Ashland, the maps folded on the table with the legal pad on top of them, and then back at Lyle.

"Can I talk to you," she said. "On your own."

Her father looked at her for a moment. Then he went to the door of the front room and opened it.

Nobody went into the front room. It had been her grandmother's. It had the good chairs in it, the two with the arms, and the sofa nobody sat on, and the glass-fronted cabinet with the beadwork and the photographs, and the cold in it that rooms got when there was no reason to heat them. Her father went in there on Sundays sometimes and sat. He had gone in there the night her grandmother died and shut the door. He stood aside now and Shannon Tollefsen went past him into it, and he went in after her and pulled the door to.

It did not close. It never had. The house had settled in 2040 and the door had stopped meeting the frame, and her grandmother had said it was the house letting her hear what went on in there, which was why she sat in there to write her letters.

Mariah put the kettle back on the stove. She stood by it with her hand on the rail.

"I'll not keep you," Shannon said, in the front room. "It's a long way back and I don't drive well in the dark any more." A chair creaked. "I want to ask you about the night of the fire."

Her father did not say anything.

"Not the fire. I know about the fire. I know what was in the paper and what was in the review. I know what the county said." A pause. "My nephew told me something in July. Kieran. Conor's boy. He'd had a good deal to drink and he told me something, and I've thought about it every day since, and I've not asked my husband." Another pause. "He told me about a crew boss called Opland. On the coulee road. He told me there was a hay gate."

The kettle began to tick on the stove. Mariah moved it off the heat.

"I don't know anybody called Opland," her father said.

"No. He was from Roundup." Shannon's voice did not change. "You came to the Lodgepole in January 2050. On a Tuesday, at half past eight in the morning, in the snow. You'd driven up from here in that old truck, a hundred and ten miles, in the dark, and you didn't come to the house. You got in Jens's pickup in the yard with him, by the calving barn, and the two of you sat there with the engine running and watched a heifer through the barn door, and then you got out and drove home. I watched you from the kitchen. And Jens came in at dinner and sat down at the table and didn't say a word to anybody till the morning." A chair creaked again. "I've never asked him what you came for. I never thought I needed to. I thought it was the fire. Everybody came about the fire."

"It was about the fire."

"Then tell me."

Mariah stood by the stove.

"It's his," her father said.

"He won't tell me."

"Have you asked him?"

The front room was quiet.

"No," Shannon said.

"Then ask him."

"I'm asking you."

"I know you are." Her father's voice was very low. Mariah had to lean towards the door to hear it, and she did, and did not let herself think about what she was doing. "I gave him my word, Shannon. In his truck, that day. And he gave me his. It wasn't a thing I'd have asked of anybody else, and it wasn't a thing he'd have given anybody else. It's not mine to take back on my own."

"His word about what?"

Her father did not answer.

"He gave you his word," Shannon said slowly. "About what? What did he have of yours?"

There was a long silence in the front room. The clock on the kitchen wall, her grandmother's clock, went round. Outside, the light was going off the hills on the far side of the creek, and the cottonwoods along the water had gone from yellow to grey.

"Ask your husband," her father said.

Mariah heard the chair creak, and then nothing, and then Shannon Tollefsen's voice, very quiet, nearly too quiet to hear.

"I've been married to him thirty-four years," she said. "I always knew what he was thinking. I knew before he did, most of the time." A breath. "I don't know now. I sit in the barn at night and read my mother-in-law's ledger and I don't know."

"I'm sorry," her father said.

"Are you."

"Yes."

"Then tell me."

He did not. The silence went on so long that she took her hand off the stove rail and put it back.

Then the chair creaked, and footsteps, and the door, which did not close, opened, and Shannon Tollefsen came out into the kitchen with her face set and her coat still buttoned, and stopped.

She looked at Mariah. She knew, Mariah saw, that Mariah had heard. It was in her face for a moment, a kind of tiredness, and then it was gone.

"You'll have to forgive me," Shannon said. "Coming into your house like this."

"There's nothing to forgive."

"There is," Shannon said. "But thank you." She looked past Mariah at the table, at the folded maps and the legal pad face down on them, and Mariah did not move. "My father told me once, at my wedding," she said, "that Lyle Harris was the only man in the county who'd never told him a lie." She turned to Lyle, who had come out of the front room behind her and was standing in the doorway with his hands at his sides. "He said it was the worst thing about him."

Her father stood in the doorway.

"I'll go," Shannon said.

He walked her to the truck. Mariah watched from the window. They stood by the driver's door in the last of the light, the two of them, a yard apart, and her father said something, short, and Shannon shook her head, and got into the truck, and sat for a moment with her hands on the wheel, and then started it and turned in the yard and went away down the creek road towards the highway with her lights on, slowly, and Mariah watched the lights until the cottonwoods took them.

• • •

Her father came back in and sat down at the table.

He did not look at the maps. He sat with his arms on the oilcloth and his big hands flat in front of him, and Mariah poured the water off the stove into the pot and made the tea and put a cup in front of him, and he did not drink it.

After a while he leaned to one side in his chair and took his wallet out of his back pocket.

He put it on the oilcloth by the salt. The brown leather, worn white at the corners. The rubber band round it. He did not take the band off. He put his hand on the wallet, flat, and left it there, and looked at it, and Mariah stood at the stove with her back against the rail and looked at him looking at it.

She could have asked. *What's in it, Dad.* Four words. She had thought of them in the truck in 2052, and every evening since, when he put the wallet down by the salt. She was fifty-two years old and the tribe's lawyer and she had six names and a fraction on a legal pad under the maps that would take his pasture, and she did not say them.

He picked up the wallet and put it back in his pocket.

"She drove a long way," he said.

"Yes."

"She'll not get home till nine." He drank some of the tea. "She'll be all right on that road." He put the cup down. "She was always a good driver."

He got up and went out to the shop, and in a minute Mariah saw the lamp come on again under the engine.

• • •

The Busby district meeting was on the Saturday, in the gym at the school, where it always was.

It was a fire meeting. The Bureau's people had come down from Lame Deer with a screen and a table of leaflets, to tell the people on the Busby road and up the creek what money there was for fences and stock water and reseeding on the allotments that had burned, and how to ask for it, and Mariah was there because the council had sent her, to explain the parts of it that were the tribe's and not the Bureau's. She had done it at Ashland on the Thursday and at Birney on the Friday. Nobody had said anything at Ashland. At Birney a woman had asked her afterwards, by the coffee, whether it was true, and Mariah had said yes, and the woman had nodded and gone away.

There were sixty people in the gym, on folding chairs and on the bleachers along one wall. The Bureau's man spoke for half an hour. Then he said that the tribe's lawyer would say a word about the tribe's programme, and Mariah stood up at the front with her notes and a man at the back of the gym stood up too.

She knew him. The Small boys' uncle, their mother's brother, a big slow man who worked for the roads department and drove the grader on the Busby road and had for twenty years.

"Before the lawyer tells us about the money," he said, "I'd like her to tell us about my nephews."

The gym went quiet. The Bureau's man looked at his table.

Mariah put her notes down on the chair beside her.

She had thought about this every day for a month, and written some of it down at night, and crossed it out. She stood at the front of the gym with sixty people looking at her and found she had nothing written down that she could use.

"I took them," she said. "Kenny and Lee. On the fourth of September, in the afternoon, up the Thompson Creek road, in my father's flatbed, to the spring at the head of the creek. I didn't have a radio. I didn't tell the fire boss. I told Velma, and I asked her not to tell their mother, and she didn't." She looked at the back of the gym, at their uncle standing there. "That was wrong. I knew it was wrong when I asked her. I asked her anyway."

Nobody said anything.

"I'm not going to tell you I was wrong to go," Mariah said. "I don't know that I was. The spring's running. It's the only water on the divide that didn't go dry this year, and it waters the cattle on eleven allotments, and the box elders are alive and the corral's standing. I'd go up for it again. I've asked myself, and I would." She stopped. "I don't know that I'd take anybody with me. I don't know that I'd have got the water on without them. Both of those are true and I can't make them come out." She looked at him. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry to your sister. I'd tell her, if she'd let me."

Their uncle looked at her for a long moment from the back of the gym.

"She won't," he said, and sat down.

A woman near the front, one of the Busby grandmothers, said something in Cheyenne, not loudly, to the woman beside her, and the woman beside her laughed once, short, and stopped. Mariah did not catch it. On the bleachers a man said, "She saved my water," to nobody in particular, and another man said, "Your water's not sixteen," and somebody else said, "Let her do the money," and then the Bureau's man stood up and said that perhaps the tribe's lawyer could go through the programme now, and Mariah picked her notes up off the chair and went through the programme.

Her hands were all right. Her voice was all right. She told them about the fencing money and the stock water money and the forms, and which office, and the dates, and she answered four questions about the forms, and sat down.

Afterwards, by the coffee, Velma put a cup in her hand and did not say anything, and stood beside her while she drank it.

• • •

Kenny Small found her in the car park.

He had been on the bleachers, at the top, by himself. She had seen him and not looked at him. He came across the gravel with his hands in his jacket pockets, tall, in his basketball shorts in October, with his breath showing, and stood by her car.

"Mom didn't come," he said.

"I saw."

"She said she wasn't going to sit in a room with you." He looked at the gravel. "My uncle said he'd come instead. I didn't know he was going to say that."

"He was right to say it."

"Lee says so too." He kicked a stone. "I don't."

"Kenny."

"I'd go again," he said. "That's all. I wanted to tell you. If you go up there again, any time, if there's a fire, I'd go. Lee wouldn't. But I would."

She looked at him. Sixteen. He had been on the nozzle, at the spring, with the fire on the ridge above them, and he had not let go of it.

"Don't," she said.

He looked up at her.

"If there's a fire," she said, "and I come to the camp and ask you, don't come. Say no. Say your mother said no." She heard her own voice and did not know whose it was. "Will you do that?"

He thought about it, honestly, with his face screwed up against the cold.

"I don't know," he said.

"No," she said. "Nor do I."

He went back across the car park to his uncle's truck, and she got into her car and sat in it with the engine running and the heater on and did not drive for a while.

• • •

The woman from Denver rang her back on the Monday.

Mariah had rung her on the Friday and left a message, and then rung her again, and then written to her. The woman rang at eight in the morning, Denver time, which was eight in Lame Deer too, and said good morning, and that she was sorry not to have rung sooner, and that she understood Mariah had some concerns about the land company.

"The land company's buying consents," Mariah said. "From my cousins. For a right-of-way across trust land. Before the council's voted. With cheques."

"The land company does title work for us," the woman said. "And acquisition. On all three lines. It's a contractor."

"Is it yours?"

There was a short pause.

"It's a contractor," the woman said again. "It does work for other clients. It's not improper for it to approach individual owners. They're private people. They can sign what they like."

"They can," Mariah said. "Did you tell it to?"

"We asked it to do the title work. On all three lines. What it does with the owners on the title is its own business. As long as it's lawful." Another pause. "I'll be honest with you. When I heard about it I asked them to stop offering money before the council's vote. I thought it looked bad. I thought you'd think it looked bad."

"Have they stopped?"

"I've asked them."

Mariah held the phone.

"Your father's interest," the woman said, in a different voice. "On the blue line. The Thompson Creek pasture. Two-fifths. They haven't approached him."

"No."

"They told me they wouldn't. They said there was no point." The woman was quiet for a moment. "I'm telling you that because I think you'd want to know it. Not for any other reason."

"Thank you," Mariah said, and did not know whether she meant it.

When she had rung off she took the legal pad out of her bag and turned to the page of names, and under the sixth name she wrote the date, and the words *asked them to stop*, and under that, after a moment, *hasn't*.

Then she did the sum again.

16

Shipping Light

They weaned on the Saturday and shipped on the Thursday after, the twenty-first of October, to Prosper.

The calves bawled for four days. They bawled in the weaning pen behind the calving barn and the cows bawled back from the flat, along the fence, three hundred cows with their heads over the wire, all night, every night, and nobody in the house slept more than two hours at a time, and on the third night Karin came down to the kitchen at one in the morning in her dressing gown and made tea and said it was the same noise it had been in 1990 and 2002 and every October in between, and that she had never got used to it and did not intend to start.

On the Thursday the trucks came at five. Four of them, pots, from the sale barn, the same drivers who had hauled for the Lodgepole for twenty years, and Gail Osterhout behind them in her own truck with her clipboard. They loaded the steers first, then the heifer calves that were not being kept, then the old cows. Thea had sorted the old cows on the Tuesday, in the alley, on Ledger, with her father on the gate: eighty of them, the broken-mouthed and the open and the ones with bad bags, and the old brockle-face's granddaughter among them, who had lost her calf in July and not bred back. Her father had swung the gate for each one without a word, and when

the brockle-faced cow came down the alley he had swung it, and looked at Thea, and she had nodded, and he had let her through.

The calves weighed light. She had known they would. She stood by the scale at the sale barn at seven in the morning with the clerk's printout in her hand and read the averages down the page. Steers, four hundred and sixty-two pounds. Heifers, four hundred and thirty-one. In a normal October off the lease they would have weighed a hundred pounds more, every one of them, and she could see the hundred pounds when she looked at them in the pens: in the narrow backs, the long hair, the way they stood.

Her father went up onto the catwalk over the pens and stood there with his hands on the rail.

She did not go up. She sat on the benches in the ring with the buyers and the old men who came every Thursday whether they had cattle in or not, and the young man from the campus in a fleece jacket who had been coming since July to watch, nobody knew why, and she watched them sell.

They sold well for what they were. The buyers were there, from Iowa and Nebraska and two from Colorado on the screen, and they bid, and the auctioneer kept them bidding, and the steers went at three dollars and eight cents and the heifers at two-ninety, and she did the arithmetic on the clerk's sheet in pencil as they went, as she had done it every October since she was nineteen. Two hundred and fifty-seven calves. Three hundred and forty-four thousand dollars, near enough.

Then the old cows came in.

They came in in drafts of ten, through the ring gate, onto the sawdust, and stood there under the lights, thin, with their hip bones showing and their eyes on the gate behind them, and the packer buyers on the front bench bid on them without looking up from their screens. A thousand and eighty dollars. A thousand and fifty. Nine hundred and ninety for the draft with the brockle-faced cow in it. In a normal year an old cow fat off the lease brought fifteen hun-

dred to the packers. These were not fat, and every ranch in the county was selling old cows that month, and the packers knew it.

She looked up at the catwalk. Her father was standing there with his hands on the rail, watching them go through. He did not move.

Eighty old cows. Eighty-four thousand dollars, near enough.

The cheque came at four, from the office, made out to her father and to the bank in Billings, both names, the way the sale barn always made out cheques when the bank had a lien on the cattle, and her father looked at it in the truck and handed it to her without a word, and she put it in the envelope from the bank that was already addressed, and posted it in Prosper on the way home, in the box outside the post office, and heard it drop.

• • •

Nils came for Sunday dinner. He had not been out since the Stampede.

He came at noon in the campus truck, and kissed his grandmother, and shook his father's hand, and said to Thea that he'd seen the sale on the barn's feed, that the steers had done all right, and she said yes, they had, for what they were, and he said three-oh-eight was better than the model had, and she said she had seen what the model had.

There were four of them at the table. Karin at the end by the stove, Jens at the other end, Thea by the wall, and Nils where his mother sat, on the side by the door, because his mother was not there.

He noticed it when he sat down. Thea saw him notice it. He looked at the place, and then at her, and she said, "She's in the barn. She's got a colt in."

"On a Sunday?"

"She's been eating in the barn," Thea said. "Since July."

Nils looked at his father.

Their father was cutting his meat. He did not look up. He cut it into squares, small, the way he always had, and ate a square, and Nils looked at him for a long moment and then looked down at his own plate, and something went across his face that Thea could not read, and was gone.

"Since July," he said.

"Yes."

He did not ask anything else. He ate. Karin asked him about the campus, and he told her about the third phase, the new halls going up on the fairground side, the cooling, the jobs, and Karin listened and asked about the jobs, how many of them were people from the county, and he told her, and it was not many, and she said, "Huh," exactly as their father said it, and Nils laughed for the first time since he had come in.

Over the pie he said, "What did the calves bring? All in."

"Three-forty-four. And eighty-four for the old cows."

"Four-twenty-eight." He did it in his head; he always had. "And the bank."

"The bank took it."

"All of it."

"It's the bank's line," Thea said. "It was a year of the line. We drew it for the hay and the pump and the trucking and everything else, and it comes back out of the calves. It always does."

"I know how a line works," Nils said, mildly. He put his fork down on his plate, square. "That's the ninth."

"The ninth what?"

He looked at her. He had their father's way of looking at a person without his face doing anything, and she saw it, and saw that he knew she saw it.

"Ninth year," he said, and picked up his fork again, and asked his grandmother if there was more cream.

Thea did not ask him what he meant. She thought she knew. She sat at the table with her pie in front of her and did not ask, and after

dinner Nils went down to the barn and was there half an hour, and when he came back up to the house he did not say anything about it, and he drove back to the campus at three with his headlights on in the daylight, as he always did.

• • •

On the Wednesday she went to Billings with her father to see Haslam.

It was the same room on the eleventh floor with the same screen turned so all three of them could see it, and Haslam was as pleasant as he had been in June, and he had the herd up on the screen before they had sat down. *Cows*, 224. *Bulls*, 8. *Replacement heifers (bred)*, 44. *Heifer calves retained*, 40. And beside each number the bank's value, at Monday's price in Billings, and beside that the line, and the limit, and the gap between them, which was smaller than it had been in June.

"The calves paid the year," Haslam said. "And the cull cows. You're square with the line as of Monday. Near enough." He touched the screen. "And the limit's down. The herd's worth less than it was. It'll be worth less again in March, before it's worth more. The committee's marked it at two hundred and twenty for the winter, and it moves with the count."

Two hundred and twenty thousand dollars to feed two hundred and twenty-four cows and forty-four heifers and forty calves and eight bulls from November to May, on hay at three times its price.

"It'll do," her father said.

Haslam looked at him, and then at Thea. "Will it?"

"It'll do if the hay comes," Thea said. "It'll do if it doesn't snow before Christmas and they can stay on the flat till then. It'll be close in March."

"How close?"

She told him. She had it on a page, and she gave him the page, and he read it, and put it down.

"That's close," he said.

• • •

In the truck on the way home she did it the other way.

She had not meant to. She had the ledger on her knee, open at the page with the year on it, and her father was driving, slowly, in the right-hand lane, as he always drove the Roundup road, and the light was going off the Bull Mountains ahead of them, and she turned to a clean page at the back and ruled it in two columns and wrote at the top of the left one *Sold half June* and at the top of the right one *Held*.

In the left-hand column she put a hundred and fifty pair sold on the fourteenth of June at the June price in Billings, which she remembered, and the calves on them, which would have gone with them, and the hay she would not have had to buy for them, and the trucking she would not have paid, and the south tank she would not have had to haul water to, and the lease she would not have had to cut. In the right-hand column she put what had happened.

It took her to the top of the Bull Mountains. When she had done it she drew a line under both columns and looked at the two numbers.

The left-hand one was better. It was better by about the price of the pump, twice, and some more. It did not count the cows she would have had to buy back, or the heifers she would not have had, or the grass on the flat, which had come through, and which she could not put in a column. But the co-op had said in April to sell half by the middle of June, and the bank had said it in June, and Dagny had said *if it's even a little bit me*, and the left-hand number was better.

She looked at it until the truck came down off the mountains towards the Musselshell, and then she closed the ledger.

"Well," her father said, beside her. He had not looked at it. He had his eyes on the road.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said. "You had a look."

• • •

The Custer man brought the alfalfa on the Friday, the twenty-ninth, in two loads on a flatbed with a loader on the back of it: forty tons of second cutting, in big square bales, green and leafy and heavy, the best hay she had seen all year. She paid him the balance at the stackyard gate, and he stacked it for her in the stackyard behind the calving barn, beside the thirty-four tons from June and the meadow hay, and stood back from it with her and looked at it.

"Cut it on the ninth of August," he said. "Raked it the eleventh. Baled it the thirteenth. Got rain on the twelfth, a little, a tenth. It was dry when we baled it."

"It looks good."

"It is good." He spat. "You'll not see better this year."

She rang Earl Fenner on the Monday, the first of November, to tell him when she would come for the thirty tons.

His wife answered. Thea had met her once, in August, in the yard at Lavina, a small woman in a cardigan who had brought them iced tea on a tray while Fenner walked Thea round his meadow with his hands behind his back and told her about his father.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Fenner said. "I'm so sorry. He sold it."

Thea stood in the kitchen with the beige receiver in her hand and the cord across the table.

"A man from Billings came," Mrs. Fenner said. "On the twentieth. With a truck and cash. Three-ninety. He said he'd take it all that day and haul it himself." A pause. "Earl said he'd ring you. I told him to ring you. He said he would."

"Can I talk to him?"

"He's out," Mrs. Fenner said, too quickly. "He's out with the cows. I'll tell him you rang." Another pause. "I'm sorry. He's not like his father. He's not. He just—three-ninety. We've got a note too."

"Thank you for telling me," Thea said.

She put the receiver back on the wall and turned round, and her grandmother was at the end of the table with her reading glasses on and the ledger open in front of her, and she had heard all of it.

"Fenner," Karin said.

"He sold it."

Karin took the pencil from the spine of the ledger, and pulled Thea's notebook across the table, and turned to the page with the four columns on it, and found *Fenner, Lavina — 30* in the third column, and drew a line through it, neat, ruled with the edge of her thumb. Then she wrote 30 in the margin, and a minus sign in front of it.

"One column to the right," she said. "I'd have moved him in August."

"I know."

"I know you know," said her grandmother. "I'm writing it down."

• • •

Her mother had four horses in the barn besides the grey mare. Two geldings she rode and two young ones she had bought as yearlings in 2064 to start and sell on, and had not sold.

Four horses ate twelve tons between November and May. Thea had it on the page.

She went down to the barn on the Wednesday after supper. The barn office was warm. Her mother had a space heater going under the desk and a lamp on, and the ledger, her own ledger, the old one with the green cloth cover that had been Karin's, was open on the desk in front of her, and when Thea knocked on the frame of the open door and came in her mother closed it. She closed it without hurry and put her hand flat on the cover and looked up.

"The horses," Thea said.

Her mother waited.

"There's a man in Roundup wants the two young ones. And the Grass Range woman says she'll take the bay gelding, for her grand-

daughter. I can find somebody for the sorrel." She had said it on the way down to the barn, under her breath, several times. "It's twelve tons. With the Fenner hay gone."

Her mother looked at her for a moment over the closed ledger.

"Sell them," she said.

Thea stood in the door.

She had thought there would be more. She had thought her mother would ask about the price, or who the man in Roundup was, or say something about the sorrel gelding, whom she had started herself in 2058 and ridden every gather since. She had come down ready for that. She stood in the doorway of the barn office with the cold coming in round her and the heater ticking under the desk, and her mother sat with her hand on the green cover and looked at her, and said nothing else.

"Mom," Thea said.

"Yes."

Thea did not know what she had been going to say. Then she did, and heard herself say it.

"Are you ever coming back up to the house?"

Her mother's hand stayed flat on the green cover.

"Shut the door, love," she said. "The heat."

Thea shut the door, and stood outside it in the dark of the barn alley for a minute, with the horses moving in their stalls along both sides of her, and her mother's four, and the grey mare at the end, and then she went back up to the house.

• • •

She drove up to the colony on the Friday with a cheque.

She had worked it out from the elevator's price for feed barley on the day of the drive, and the yield Daniel had told her the forty acres made in a good year, and the third of it that had been trodden, and then she had made it the whole forty, because the rest had been eaten, or lain under the cattle, or been gone through by Elias with a

feed sack, and she did not want to stand in front of Daniel and argue about which windrows. Five thousand two hundred dollars. It was more than the barley was worth at the elevator, and less than she could afford.

Joseph was in the office. The door was open, and he was at the desk with the window behind him, and he looked up when she knocked and she saw him look a little past her, to where he could see her at the edge of whatever was left of his sight.

"Thea Tollefsen," she said.

"I know." He smiled. "I know your step. You walk like your grandmother."

She put the cheque on the desk in front of him. He put his hand on it.

"For the forty acres," she said. "The barley. I'd like to give it to Daniel."

"Daniel's in the shop," Joseph said. "He knew you were coming. Elias saw your truck on the bench road." He moved his hand on the cheque, a little, flattening it, though it was flat. "He asked me to take it."

"I'd rather give it to him."

"I know you would." Joseph looked at her, or near her. "He asked me to take it for the colony. It's colony ground. The colony will take it. He said to tell you it was the right price." He was quiet for a moment. "He said you'd have worked it out to the pound, and that he wouldn't check it."

She stood in front of the desk.

"Is he angry?" she said.

Joseph thought about it.

"No," he said. "I don't think it's that." He picked up the cheque and held it close to his face, and then put it down again, because he could not read it. "He'll be all right. Give him the winter."

She went out into the yard. The shop was across it, a long steel building with its big door half open and a light on inside, and she

could hear somebody working in there, a grinder, and then the grinder stopped. Daniel was standing in the half-open door. He had his welding gloves on, and his face was in shadow, and he was looking at her across the yard.

She lifted her hand.

He stood there a moment longer. Then he nodded, once, and went back into the shop, and the grinder started again.

• • •

On the ninth of November the Custer stack was steaming.

She saw it from the kitchen window at six in the morning, in the first grey light, when she went to put the kettle on. It was the first hard frost, seventeen degrees, the flat white with it to the cottonwoods, and over the stackyard behind the calving barn there was a thin white plume going straight up into the still air from the top of the alfalfa, as if somebody had lit a cigarette in it.

She was out of the house in her shirt with her boots unlaced before the kettle boiled.

She could smell it from the stackyard gate. Sweet. Tobacco and burnt sugar and something under that, sharper. She had smelled it once before, in 2051, when a load of oat hay from Ryegate had heated in the old shed, and her father had come out of the house at a run. She put her hand flat on the side of the stack, on the end bales, low down. They were warm. Higher up, at the height of her face, they were hot.

The probe was in the calving barn, on its nail. A length of pipe her father had made, with a point welded on one end and a thermometer you could drop down inside it on a wire. She drove it into the stack from the top of the ladder, into the middle of the second tier, with her whole weight on it, and let the thermometer down, and counted to a hundred, and pulled it up.

A hundred and sixty-two.

At a hundred and fifty you watched it. At a hundred and seventy-five you did not stand on it. She knew that the way she knew the date of her own birthday, because her father had told her when she was nine, on that ladder, with his hand on the back of her coat.

Her father came out of the house while she was coming down the ladder. He had his coat on and his boots laced. He looked at the plume and then at her.

"Hundred and sixty-two," she said. "Middle of the second tier."

"Huh," he said, and went for the tractor.

They pulled it apart.

They did it with the loader, bale by bale, from the top, her father on the tractor and Thea on the ground with a fork and a hose run out from the calving barn, and the bales came down off the stack one at a time onto the frozen ground and lay there steaming. They spread them out across the stackyard and the corral beside it, one by one, in rows, a bale's width apart, so the air could get round them. The ones from the outside of the stack were green and sweet and only warm. The ones from the middle were hot to the touch through her gloves, and brown, and when she pulled one open with the fork the inside of it was the colour of tobacco and smelled of molasses and the steam came off it into her face. Two from the very centre were black in the middle, charred, in a fist-sized lump, and she put the hose on them and they hissed.

It took until two. When they had finished the stackyard looked like a field after a hailstorm, bales everywhere on the frost, steaming in the cold sun, and the hose frozen in a loop by the gate, and her father sitting on the tractor with the engine off and his hands on the wheel.

She walked the rows with the probe. Most of it was all right. It would feed. The cows would eat brown hay; they ate anything that winter. But some of it was gone: the middle of the second and third tiers, the bales that had heated past where the feed in them was any

use, and the two black ones. She counted them and did the weight in her head.

Fifteen tons. Near enough.

She rang the Custer man at three. He was quiet on the telephone for a long time.

"It was dry when we baled it," he said.

"I believe you."

"It was. I put the meter on it." Another silence. "That tenth on the twelfth. It must have been in the middle of the windrow." He breathed out. "I'll take something off. I don't know what. I'll ring you."

He did not ring. She had not thought he would.

• • •

That night she ruled the page again, at the kitchen table after supper, with her grandmother at the end of the table doing the crossword in the Billings paper and the radio on low, and the frost coming back on the flat.

Everything was in the first column now. The thirty-four tons from June, the two cuttings off the meadows, the Custer alfalfa less fifteen, the co-op's sixty from Nebraska in the shed: two hundred and fifteen. The other columns were empty; she had drawn a line through Fenner. If the cows could stay on the flat until Christmas she needed three hundred and ten. If it snowed deep before then, three hundred and fifty.

She was short by ninety-five tons, or a hundred and thirty-five.

The co-op had a hundred tons of prairie hay from Saskatchewan on its list that week, for January delivery, at four hundred and ten a ton delivered. She had seen it on the tablet that morning. Forty-one thousand dollars. She could put it on the co-op hay account, which she had opened in August, and the account was in her own name, and the bank did not need to sign it, and the bank would see it on the line in the end.

She took out the co-op's statement for the hay account, the October one, which had come on the Monday, and laid it beside the page.

There was the sixty tons, delivered, and the balance she had paid on it, and the deposit from August. And under that, again, the line she had seen in August, a credit, from the same source code as before, which she had looked up once on the co-op's tablet and found under *Programme credits — regional*. In August it had been six thousand. In October it was eight.

She had rung the county in September to ask about it, and the woman at the extension office had said there was drought money going round on a dozen programmes that year, federal and state and county and the stockgrowers', and that half of them went through the co-op's accounts now, and that if it was on her statement it was hers and she should not look a gift horse in the mouth. Thea had said thank you, and not looked.

She looked at it now. Eight thousand dollars. Nineteen and a half tons of Saskatchewan prairie hay, at four-ten.

Her grandmother turned a page of the paper at the end of the table.

"Grandma."

"Mm."

"The county's put another eight on the hay account."

Karin looked up over her reading glasses. She looked at Thea for a moment, and then at the statement on the table between them, upside down from where she sat, and Thea could not tell what she was looking at.

"Has it," Karin said.

"Programme credit. Regional."

"Well," said her grandmother. She looked at the statement a moment longer. Then she went back to the crossword. "Write it down."

Thea wrote it in the first column, under the hay in the shed, small, in pencil: *County? +8,000*. Then she ordered the Saskat-

chewan hay on the tablet, all hundred tons of it, and put it on the account, and drew a line under the page, and sat looking at it until her grandmother said it was ten o'clock and she was going up, and that Thea should too.

17

Lease Back

The Companion had built it for him in October, over four evenings, in the office with the door shut, and he had not shown it to Rae until it was finished.

It was the kind of thing it was good at. He had told it what he wanted, roughly, in the voice he used for it, the low one, the one his grandfather had used for the cattle markets in Omaha, and it had come back the next evening with a question, and then another, and on the fourth evening it had laid the whole thing out on the screen over the desk in the colours he had taught it to use over sixteen years without knowing he was teaching it: green for what was his, blue for what was hers, grey for the bank.

It went like this. Karin Tollefsen held a life estate in the Lodgepole. Thea and Nils held the remainder between them, in equal undivided halves, and their father farmed the place under a lease that all three of them had signed, which would survive Karin. Kieran would buy the remainder from both of them now, subject to Karin's life estate and to the lease, at a price the Companion had worked out from the last six sales of river ground in Musselshell County and the bench sales and the campus's land purchases on the fairground side, and then a little more, because he did not want to stand in front of Thea and argue about the appraisal. With the money, Thea

would pay off her father's drought debt, which the Companion had estimated from the sale barn's published prices and the hay market and the bank's habits at a hundred and fifty thousand dollars by May, and keep the rest. And when Karin died, and her father could not farm it any more, Kieran would lease the Lodgepole to Thea for her life, at a rent the Companion had set at what the ground would carry in a dry year, and she would keep the cows and the brand and the house and the flat, and he would carry the land.

He had looked at it for a long time on the fourth evening.

It was how ranchers kept land now. He had seen it done on the Judith and on the Smith River and in Wyoming. The land went one way, to whoever could carry it, and the cattle went the other, to whoever could run them, and the family stayed on the place.

"It's generous," the Companion said, in his ear, when he had looked at it long enough. "To her. By about eleven percent of the remainder's value, at the median. I can show you where."

"I know where."

"You asked me to say so if it was."

"Yes," he said. "Thank you."

Before he shut it down that night he asked it one thing more. He asked it to watch the county's filings for him, the title searches and the deeds, and to tell him if the land company that did the campus's buying put its name to anything on river ground between Roundup and Melstone. It said it would. He did not ask himself why he wanted to know, and the Companion did not ask him.

• • •

He showed it to Rae on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, in the kitchen, after the children had gone up.

She read it on the tablet at the table while he dried the dishes. She read it twice, the way she read the forward contracts and the children's school reports, with her finger moving on the edge of the

screen, and when she had finished she put the tablet face down on the table and looked at him.

"We don't have a herd," she said.

"We have a hundred and four cows."

"We have a hundred and four cows the Companion says to sell in March." She did not raise her voice. Rae never raised her voice. She had taught school for twenty years, in Miles City and then at Prosper, and she had taught thirty nine-year-olds at a time to be quiet without ever being loud herself. "And you want to buy a ranch. Half a ranch. A remainder. On a note."

"On the river ground. Ours is clear."

"Ours is clear because your mother paid it off with the bench money." She looked at him across the kitchen. "Kieran. Why?"

He put the plate in the rack.

He could have told her several things, and all of them were true. That the Lodgepole river ground and his, under one fence, would carry four hundred cows in a good year. That half the Lodgepole in the campus's land bank would be river bottom under a sign. That Thea was going to go under in March, and that he would rather she went under owing him than owing them.

He did not tell her the other thing. That he had told his aunt, on a tailgate in July, what Wes Opland had said under oath, and that since July she had been eating her suppers in the barn office, and that it was his doing, and that buying half the Lodgepole would not undo it, and that he wanted to do it anyway.

"Because she's family," he said.

Rae looked at him.

"Ask her, then," she said. "But ask her here. Not at the ford. Not on a horse. Here, at this table, where I can see you both."

• • •

Thea came on the next Sunday, in the afternoon, across the ford on Ledger, because the river was low and the road round by the bridge was eleven miles.

He saw her come up out of the cottonwoods onto the Rourke flat from the office window, the bay horse walking with his head down and the reins loose, and his cousin in her canvas coat with her hat pulled down and her hands in her pockets, and something went through him that he did not want to look at, and he went out to meet her.

She tied Ledger at the rail by the kitchen door. She came in and took her hat off and said hello to Rae and to his mother, who was in her chair by the window with a blanket on her knees and the radio on low beside her, and turned it off when Thea came in. Conor came down the stairs at a run and stopped on the bottom step and said, "Did you bring the bay?" and Thea said she had, and he could look at him from the door but not go out, and Brigid came down behind him and stood on the step above him and told Thea all at once that she had a loose tooth, the bottom one, and that it was the second, and did Thea want to see it, and Thea said she did, later.

"Upstairs," Rae said. "Both of you. Kieran's got business."

"I want to see the bay."

"You'll see him when he goes. Upstairs."

They went. Thea watched them go. Then she sat down at the table, in the chair Rae pulled out for her, with her back to the stove, and Rae put coffee in front of her, and went back to the stove, and stood there with her back to them, doing something to a pot.

Kieran sat down across from his cousin and put the tablet on the table between them, face up.

"I want to show you something," he said. "And then I want you to think about it. Not now. After."

She looked at the tablet, and then at him.

"All right," she said.

He showed her. He did it the way he had practised it with the Companion, from the beginning, the life estate and the remainder and the lease, the price, where the price came from, the debt, what was left over. He showed her the green and the blue and the grey. He showed her the rent, and the life lease, and the clause that said she could buy his half back at the same price if she ever had the money, for as long as she lived, and he watched her face while he did it, and he could not tell anything from it at all. She sat with her coffee in front of her and her hands round it and read every line as he turned to it.

When he had finished she sat back.

"You'd own it," she said.

"Half of it. The remainder. When your grandmother dies, I'd own your half and Nils's."

"That's all of it."

"Yes."

"And I'd lease it from you."

"For your life. At that." He touched the number. "It's what the ground carries in a dry year. It's less than your father pays your grandmother now."

She looked at the number.

"I'd be your tenant," she said. "On my grandmother's place."

"You'd be on it. With the cows. And the flat. And no debt." He leaned forward. "Thea. Listen. You're going to be short in March. I don't know by how much. You don't either. The bank knows. The bank's going to mark the herd at the March price and pull the line in to it, and you'll sell in March to feed the rest, at the worst price of the year, and then you'll do it again next year. I've watched the Companion run it forty times. I've run it myself. It comes out the same every time."

"Your Companion."

"It's the same arithmetic as yours. You know it is. You know it better than I do."

"I know it," she said.

"Then let me carry the land." He heard his own voice and could not slow it. "That's all this is. You run the cows. I carry the land. Nobody sells anything to the campus. Nobody goes under. You keep the house and the flat and your grandmother's ledgers and your crown counts, all of it, for the rest of your life, and in twenty years if you want it back you buy it back at today's price. That's what people do now. That's how people keep places now."

"Is it," Thea said.

"Yes."

"Is that what you did?"

He sat back.

"When you sold the bench," she said. "In 2052. To Joseph. Is that what you were doing? Keeping the place?"

"That's not the same."

"No," she said. "It isn't. You sold the bench to the colony because you needed the money and the colony needed the bench and you'd rather it was Joseph than a man from Billings. I know. I'm not saying you were wrong." She looked at the tablet between them. "But you didn't lease it back. You don't go up there. You haven't been up the trail since. You let me take the cattle across it by Joseph's handshake, and you don't come."

He did not say anything.

"I'd be your tenant," she said again, slowly, as if she were reading it off a page. "On the Lodgepole. Every year I'd write you a cheque. Every October. And you'd cash it. And in twenty years, if I'd made enough money in a dry county in the ranching business to buy back my own grandmother's place from my cousin at a price set by his telephone, I could." She put both hands flat on the table. "No."

"Thea."

"No," she said. "Thank you. I know you mean it. I can see you mean it. I can see you've worked on it. It's generous. It's probably more than it's worth. And no."

At the stove, Rae had stopped doing whatever she had been doing to the pot.

"You'll lose it," Kieran said.

"Maybe."

"Not maybe. You'll lose it. In March or next March or the one after. And it'll go to the bank, or to the campus, and you'll have nothing, and Nils will have nothing, and I'll have watched you do it." He heard himself and could not stop. "You'd rather lose the whole place than let anybody help you keep half of it. You'd let it burn. You'd let the place burn to prove a point."

He stopped, then. He heard what was coming and he stopped, and it came anyway.

"Like your father," he said.

The kitchen was very quiet.

His mother, in her chair by the window, had turned her head. Rae had turned round from the stove with a spoon in her hand. Thea sat across the table from him with both hands flat on the oilcloth and looked at him, and her face had gone still, entirely still, in a way he had never seen it go, and he knew he had done something he could not take back, and he did not know yet how much.

"What does that mean," she said.

He could not answer her.

"What does that mean, Kieran. *Like my father*."

"It means he never sold a cow he could keep," he said. "That's all. It means you're like him. You hold. Everybody knows you hold."

She looked at him. He watched her hear it, the thing he had said, and the thing he had said after it to cover it, and lay them side by side, the way she laid two numbers side by side on a page, and see that they were not the same number.

"That's not what you meant," she said.

"It's what I meant."

"It isn't." She was very quiet. "My mother asked me in September if I remembered the night of the fire. At the ford gate. Out of noth-

ing. And I thought she was getting old." She was looking at him, and he could not look away. "What did you mean?"

"Nothing," he said. "I'm sorry. I meant nothing. I was angry. I shouldn't have said it."

She sat for a moment longer. Then she stood up, and picked up her hat from the chair beside her, and put it on, and pushed the chair back in under the table, square, as her grandmother pushed chairs in.

"Thank you for the coffee, Rae," she said.

"Thea," said Rae.

"I'm all right." She turned to his mother by the window. "Beth."

"Go carefully at the ford," his mother said. "It's colder than it looks."

"I will."

She went out. He heard the door, and her boots on the step, and the horse shift at the rail, and then nothing for a moment, and then Ledger's feet going away across the gravel at a walk. He did not get up and go to the window. He sat at the table with the tablet in front of him, still lit, green and blue and grey, and after a while it went dark on its own.

• • •

Rae said nothing.

She finished at the stove. She put the lid on the pot and turned the heat down under it and wiped her hands on the cloth and hung the cloth on the rail. Then she came and stood by the table, beside him, and looked down at him.

"What did you mean," she said.

He did not answer.

She waited. She was very good at waiting. She stood there for nearly a minute, and the clock went round over the door, and upstairs he could hear Conor's feet on the floor of his room, going

from the bed to the window and back, and Brigid's voice telling him to stop.

"All right," Rae said at last. "Not now." She put her hand on his shoulder, once, hard, and took it away. "But you'll tell me. Not her. Me. You'll tell me before you tell anybody else, whatever it is."

"Yes."

"Say it."

"I'll tell you," he said.

She went upstairs to the children.

• • •

His mother had the mail on her knee.

He had not seen her take it. It had been on the end of the table in a pile, where Rae put it on Saturdays when she came back from the box at the road, and he had not looked at it, and at some point while Thea was there, or after, his mother had got up out of her chair and taken it back to the window with her and sat down with it under the blanket.

She went through it slowly. She always had. She opened every envelope with the silver knife she kept in the pocket of her cardigan, and read every page, including the ones that came every month and said the same thing, and put them in two piles on the arm of the chair, one to keep and one for the stove. She had done the Rourke books for twenty years before the Companion did them, and she still read the paper copies when they came, because she said a thing on paper could not change its mind.

He watched her open the co-op's envelope.

It was the quarterly statement for Rourke Land & Cattle, made up to the twentieth of November. He knew what was on it. The feed account, the fuel account, the vaccine, the forward-contract settlement from September, the dues. And on the second page, under *Member transfers*, three lines. The twenty-first of August, six thousand dollars. The fourth of October, eight thousand. The fifteenth of

November, ten thousand. Each one to a member hay account, by account number, with the name the co-op's system put beside every account number whether you asked it to or not.

T. TOLLEFSEN — HAY.

He had set it up in August with the clerk in Roundup, a young woman who had been at school with Rae's sister, at the counter, on a Tuesday, in ten minutes. He had asked her if a member could put money in another member's hay account without the other member knowing who it was from, and she had looked at him for a moment and said that the co-op had a regional assistance pool that members could pay into for drought, and that credits out of the pool showed on the receiving account as programme credits, and that people did that sometimes, for neighbours, for family, when they did not want to be thanked. She said it went through the pool, but that it would show on his own statement as a transfer, because the system was the system. He had said that was all right. Nobody read his statements but him.

His mother read the second page.

She read it for a long time. She held it up to the light from the window, the way she held up a cheque, and read the three lines, and then she lowered it to her knee and sat with it.

He could not see her face. She was turned to the window, to the flat and the cottonwoods and the river beyond them, low and grey, and the ford, where a bay horse was going down into the water now, he supposed, with his cousin on him. He watched the back of his mother's head, her white hair, and the page on her knee, and waited for her to say something.

She folded the page. She folded it in three, along its creases, exactly, and put it back in the envelope, and put the envelope on the pile to keep, on the arm of the chair. Then she picked up the next envelope and slit it with the silver knife and took out what was in it and read it.

18

Life Estate

It snowed on the eighteenth of December, eleven inches, and the cows came off the flat.

They had been on it since the drive in September, three hundred of them and then two hundred and twenty-four, on the green that had come after the rain and then on the brown it went to in October, and Thea had not fed them a pound of hay in all that time. She had walked the flat every week with the hoops and the notebook and watched it go down, and moved the electric fence across it in strips, and on the seventeenth of December the last strip along the cottonwoods had been grazed to the height she wanted and not below, and on the eighteenth it snowed. She stood at the kitchen window at six in the morning and watched it come down in the yard light, and wrote in the ledger *18 Dec. Snow. On hay.*

The flat had given her a hundred days. The model had given it forty.

She did the page again that night. With the Saskatchewan hay to come in January, and the snow a week before Christmas, she was short by fifteen tons, or thirty, depending on February.

The November statement from the co-op had come on the sixth of December. There was the Saskatchewan order on it, and the de-

posit, and under them the credit again, from the regional programme. Ten thousand dollars.

She wrote it in the first column under the other two. *County? +10,000.* Then she sat and looked at the three of them, six and eight and ten, in a column in her own hand, getting bigger, and thought that it was a strange programme that knew to get bigger, and did not take the thought any further, because it was a week before Christmas and she had two hundred and twenty-four cows on hay and fifteen tons, or thirty, between her and May.

She had not taken anything further since the Sunday in Kieran's kitchen.

She had not told anyone what Kieran had offered, or what he had said after. *Like your father.* She had put it beside her mother at the ford gate, and her mother at the barn office desk with her hand on the closed ledger, and Nils at the table looking at their father cutting his meat, and they would not add up to anything.

She did not ask. She would not have known whom to ask, or what.

At Christmas her mother came up from the barn and ate dinner with them at the table, in her place by the door, and passed the potatoes and talked to Karin about a mare in Grass Range, and when the pie was done she said thank you and that it had been a good dinner and went back down to the barn. Her father watched her go from his end of the table. He did not get up.

• • •

On Sunday the ninth of January Thea was up at five to feed.

It was eleven below. She dressed in the dark and went down and put the kettle on and stood by the stove while it came up, and looked out of the window at the yard light on the snow, and the stackyard beyond the calving barn, and the dark shape of the log barn, where there was a light in the window of the office, as there was every night now.

Her grandmother was always down first. She had been at the table before anybody else every morning of Thea's life. She came down the inside stairs one at a time with her hand on the rail and her dressing gown buttoned to the neck and her reading glasses on a cord round her neck, and said *Good morning* to whoever was in the kitchen, and put the ledger on the table in her place at the end and opened it to the day, and wrote the date.

This morning, at six, she had not come down.

Thea fed. She took the tractor and the bale processor out to the river pasture and fed the cows along the fence line in the dark, in a long brown windrow on the snow, with the cows coming out of the cottonwoods towards the lights and the steam going up off their backs, and she fed the heifers in the trap and the bulls in the bull pen and the weaned calves in the corral by the calving barn, and broke the ice on the tanks with the axe. It took her an hour and a half. She thought about her grandmother all the way round, and did not hurry, and came back up to the house at half past seven with her face numb and the sky going grey over the Bull Mountains.

The kitchen was empty. The ledger was not on the table.

She went up the inside stairs.

Her grandmother's door was at the end of the landing, and it was shut, and Thea stood outside it for a moment with her hand flat on the wood, and then knocked, and then opened it.

The room was cold. Karin had always slept with the window open an inch, winter and summer, and the frost had come in round the frame and furred the sill. The lamp by the bed was off. She was lying on her back in the bed with the quilt up to her chest and her hands on top of it, one over the other, and her head turned a little on the pillow towards the window, and her eyes were closed.

Thea knew from the door. She went to the bed anyway, and stood beside it, and put her hand on her grandmother's hands, and they were cold, and she left her hand there.

On the table by the bed there was a glass of water, and the reading glasses on their cord, folded, and the ledger.

It was closed. Thea opened it. She opened it to the ribbon, which was where Karin kept the day, and on the left-hand page, at the bottom, in her grandmother's hand, small and upright and in pencil, there was the last entry.

Sat 8 Jan. Minus nine. Fed the heifers the Custer hay, it is holding. T. says the Saskatchewan hay Tuesday. J. took the pickup to Roundup for the chain. S. came up at four for the mail.

Under it there was a line ruled across the page with the edge of a thumb, as every day ended in that ledger, and below the line the page was empty.

Thea stood by the bed with the ledger open in her hands and read the entry three times. Then she closed it and put it under her arm, and sat down on the edge of the bed beside her grandmother, and sat there.

She did not know how long. The light came up grey in the window. A pickup went by on the county road, a long way off, with its chains on. In the river pasture the cows had finished the windrow and were bawling at the fence for more, and would bawl until somebody came, and nobody would come until noon.

After a while she heard her father's door open on the landing, and his feet on the boards, and stop outside.

"Thea," he said.

"She's gone, Dad."

He came in. He stood at the end of the bed in his shirt and his socks with his braces down round his hips and looked at his mother. Then he came round the bed and stood by the window, on the far side of her from Thea, and put his hand on the frosted sill, and shut the window the inch it had been open, and stood there with his hand on it.

"I'll get your mother," he said.

He did not move.

"I'll go," Thea said.

"No," her father said. "I'll go."

He went. She heard him go down the inside stairs, and the back door, and then, from the window, she saw him cross the yard in the snow in his shirt with no coat on, towards the log barn and the light in the office window, walking slowly, with his hands at his sides, and the door of the log barn opening before he got to it, and her mother standing in it.

• • •

The doctor came from Roundup at ten, and then the undertaker's two men in the long grey car, and then the pastor from Prosper, who sat at the kitchen table with Jens and Shannon for an hour and talked about the service, and Thea made coffee for all of them and did not sit down. Nils came at two. He came in the campus truck on the snow, and stood in the kitchen with his coat on and his face white, and his mother went to him and put her arms round him, and he stood inside them like a post and then put his head down on her shoulder.

Dagny rang at four from Billings. She said nothing for a while on the telephone. Then she said, "Was she in bed," and Thea said yes, and Dagny said, "With the window open," and Thea said yes, and Dagny said, "Good," and rang off.

That night Thea fed again, in the dark, and came back in, and sat at the kitchen table in her grandmother's place at the end with the ledger in front of her, open at the ribbon.

She had not written in it. She took the pencil out of the spine and held it.

Sun 9 Jan, she wrote. *Minus eleven. Fed at six. Grandma died in the night. Window open.*

She ruled the line under it with the edge of her thumb.

• • •

Margit Lien came out on the Wednesday.

She had been Karin's lawyer since 2015. She was a small grey woman in a long dark coat who drove a very old car from Roundup with great care and had sat at that kitchen table, Thea supposed, more often than anyone outside the family. She took her coat off and hung it on the back of the door and sat down where she always sat, on the side by the window, and took a folder out of her bag and put it on the table and did not open it.

"I'm sorry," she said to Jens. "She was the best client I ever had. She read everything."

"She did," Jens said.

"She'd want me to tell you where you stand. So I'll tell you." She looked at Thea, and then at Shannon, who had come up from the barn and was sitting on the side by the door with her coat still on. "Then I'll go away and you can do it properly, and I'll write it down."

She told them, in the order Karin would have wanted it in.

The life estate was over. Karin had held the Lodgepole for her lifetime since 2050, when she had deeded the place to her two grandchildren and kept the life estate back. When she died the life estate ended, and the land passed to the remaindermen without anything having to be done, because it was theirs already, and had been for nearly seventeen years; they had only been waiting for it. Thea and Nils now owned the Lodgepole outright, together, in equal undivided halves. Neither of them owned any part of it on their own. Each of them owned half of all of it.

Jens's lease survived. He had been careful about that in 2058, Margit said, looking at him; he had had all three of them sign it, Karin and both children, so that it would hold whatever happened to Karin, and it held. He was their tenant. He farmed the place under the lease on the same terms as before, and paid the rent to his two children now instead of to his mother, and the cattle were his, and

the brand, and the machinery, and the note at the bank in Billings, and none of that had changed.

"So nothing's changed," Jens said.

"Everything's changed," Margit said. "And nothing has to be done about it this week."

She opened the folder then.

"I'll need some papers," she said. "For the estate. Not much. She had very little that wasn't the place. The place comes into it for the tax because she kept the life estate, and that's why I'll need the 2050 papers. The gift tax return, and the appraisal they did for it. They'll be in Arne's desk, I think. She kept the old papers there."

"I'll get them," Thea said.

• • •

Her grandfather's desk was in the front room, under the window, a big oak roll-top that had come from Norway with somebody before anybody living could remember, and that Karin had kept exactly as he had left it, and used.

Thea rolled the top up. The pigeonholes were full, as they had always been: envelopes, the old cheque books, receipts on spikes, the cattle book from before the cattle book, a jar of pencils. She had sat at this desk at nine and done her arithmetic homework at it with her grandmother at her shoulder. She knew where things were. The tax papers were in the bottom drawer on the right, in years, in brown accordion files with the years on the spines in her grandmother's hand.

She found 2050 near the bottom of the drawer, on top of 2041.

She lifted them both out. They were heavy, fat with paper, and tied round with faded ribbon, and when she lifted the 2041 file something slid out from underneath it, from the floor of the drawer, where it had been lying flat, and fell face up on the boards at her feet.

It was a single sheet of paper. It had been folded in three once, a long time ago, and opened out again, and pressed flat under the 2041 file for so long that the folds had nearly gone. At the top of it there was the state's seal, and a line of type.

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She picked it up.

She read it standing at the desk with the 2050 file under her arm. She read it once quickly, all the way down, and then she put the file down on the desk and read it again, slowly, with her finger on the lines, the way her grandmother had taught her to read a contract at that desk, every word.

The contingency resource assigned to Division N (Opland IA) was delayed approximately 68 minutes en route by livestock on the campus access road and subsequently rerouted. Ember ignition in the river-bottom buffer was first observed at approximately 22:40. Frontal passage occurred at 23:20. The review finds that had the contingency resource arrived as planned (ETA 22:28), it may have been in a position to hold the paddock line at the Lodgepole and adjacent properties during the period of initial ember ignition. The review is unable to determine whether the resource would have been able to hold the line through frontal passage. A civilian fatality occurred in the buffer at approximately 23:24.

That was all. It was half a page.

She stood by the desk.

She had been fifteen, in the church hall in Prosper with her grandmother, all that night. She knew that part. She had told it to her mother at the ford gate in September.

She had known that her father and Nils were bringing the cattle down the campus road that night. She had not known that the livestock on the road were what had stopped the engine.

Delayed approximately 68 minutes en route by livestock.

May have been in a position to hold the paddock line.

A civilian fatality occurred in the buffer at approximately 23:24.

She read it a third time. Then she folded it in three, along the old folds, and took her wallet out of her back pocket and put it inside, behind her licence, and put the wallet back.

She took the 2050 file into the kitchen and gave it to Margit Lien.

"Thank you," Margit said. "Was it where I said?"

"Yes."

Margit looked at her for a moment over her glasses. She had very pale eyes, like Karin's.

"All right," she said, and opened the file.

Her father was at the end of the table, in the chair by the window, which was not his, with his hands round a cup of coffee. Her mother was on the side by the door with her coat on. Neither of them was looking at Thea. Neither of them was looking at the other.

She went and stood at the stove and put the kettle on, though it was already hot, and stood there with her back to them and her hand on the rail.

• • •

Lyle Harris's card came on the Thursday.

It came in the box at the road with a dozen others from all over the county and the state, and Thea brought them up with the mail and put them on the table, and her father went through them that evening at supper, one at a time, slowly, reading each one and putting it on the pile, the way his mother had read the mail.

The envelope was square and white and the address was in pencil, in square capitals. *JENS TOLLEFSEN. LODGEPOLE. PROSPER MONT.* No number, no road, no zip code. The post office in Prosper had known where it went.

Her father opened it. It was an ordinary card from a drugstore, with a picture of a mountain on the front. Inside, under the printed verse, there were three lines in the same square pencil.

Jens — I am sorry about your mother. She was good to me in 2050 when she did not have to be. L. Harris.

Her father read it. He sat at the end of the table with the card open in his hands and read it for a long time, much longer than three lines took, and Thea, across the table from him, watched him read it, with her wallet in her back pocket and the folded page in it pressing flat against her through the denim.

Then he closed the card, and did not put it on the pile. He put it in the breast pocket of his shirt, behind the pencil, and buttoned the pocket, and went on to the next one.

19

The Outside Stairs

They buried her on the Saturday, the fifteenth, at Prosper.

The county brought a backhoe out to the cemetery on the Friday, because the ground was frozen fourteen inches down, and the man who drove it was the son of a man Karin had sold heifers to in 1994, and he would not take anything for it. He dug the grave beside her husband's in the Tollefsen row on the south side of the cemetery, under the cottonwoods along the fence, where the snow had drifted and he had to clear it first, and he put a green cloth over the spoil heap and a board across the end of the grave, and went home.

The church was full by half past ten. Thea had not thought it would be. Karin had been ninety-nine, and most of the people who had known her were dead, and it was eleven below and the road from Roundup was ice. But they came. They came from the river ranches and from Roundup and Melstone and Ryegate and Lavina, in pickups, with their wives, in their good coats, and stood along the back wall and in the aisle when the pews were full, and the pastor had to open the doors through to the hall and put chairs out in there and run the sound through.

The hall had the same green linoleum. Thea went through to see that the chairs were out and stood in the doorway for a moment, looking at it, at the high windows set up under the eaves, with the

snow against them. In 2049 they had been taped in crosses. She had sat on a folding chair under the third one from the end with her grandmother's hand on her knee.

She went back up.

The Rourkes were in the third pew on the left, behind the family. Beth, in black, very straight, with her stick across her knees, and Rae, and the two children in clothes Thea had not seen before, Conor with his hair wet down and Brigid with her loose tooth gone and a gap where it had been. And Kieran at the end, by the aisle, in a dark suit that did not fit him across the shoulders. He looked at her when she came in from the hall. She looked back at him. Then she went and sat down in the front pew between her father and Nils, and did not look round again.

Dagny was on her father's other side. She had come from Billings on the Friday and slept in her old room and had not said more than ten words since she arrived, and she sat in the pew with her hands in her lap and her eyes on the coffin and did not move.

Her mother was at the far end of the pew, beyond Nils.

The pastor talked about Karin for twenty minutes. He had known her eleven years. He talked about her ledgers, because everybody in the county knew about her ledgers, and about her hands, and about the telephone on the kitchen wall, and some of the people in the pews laughed at that, softly, and Thea thought that her grandmother would have been pleased that they laughed and would not have said so. Then he asked whether anyone in the family wanted to say anything, and Dagny stood up.

She went to the front with nothing in her hands. She stood beside the coffin and put one hand on it, flat, on the lid, and looked out at the church.

"My mother wrote down the weather every day for seventy-six years," she said. "Twice a day. At six in the morning and six at night. I worked for the co-op in Billings for thirty-eight years forecasting the weather in this county, and I never once told her what it was

going to do that she didn't already have a page for." She looked down at her hand on the lid. "That's all."

She sat down.

• • •

At the cemetery they stood in the snow among the stones while the pastor said the words, and the undertaker's men let the coffin down on the straps, and the wind came down the river out of the northwest and took the pastor's voice and carried it off over the cottonwoods.

Thea stood between her father and Nils. Her father had his hat in his hands. His hands were bare, and red with the cold, and he did not put the hat on.

Across the grave the colony had come. She had not seen them in the church; they would have been in the hall, or at the back. Joseph, in his black coat and his black hat, with Daniel at his elbow, and Elias behind them, and two of the older men, all in black, standing together in the snow a little apart from everybody else, as they always stood, with their hands folded in front of them. Joseph's face was turned towards the grave, though Thea did not know what he could see of it. Daniel was looking at her father.

When it was over, and people began to go back to their trucks, Joseph said something to Daniel, and Daniel walked him round the end of the grave, carefully, across the trodden snow, to where her father was standing.

"Jens," Joseph said.

"Joseph."

Joseph held out his hand, and her father took it. Joseph did not let go. He stood there holding her father's hand in the snow at the side of the grave, with his blind face turned up a little towards him, and said nothing, and her father stood and let him hold it, and said nothing either. It went on for a long time. Daniel stood at Joseph's elbow and looked at the ground. Thea stood beside her father and looked

at the two hands, the old man's and her father's, both of them red with the cold, and did not know what she was looking at.

Then Joseph let go.

"She was a good neighbour to us," he said. "From the first year."

"She was," her father said.

Joseph nodded, and turned, and Daniel walked him back round the end of the grave to the others. Daniel did not look at Thea. As they went away towards the colony's van at the gate she saw him say something to Joseph, low, and Joseph shake his head.

• • •

Kieran found her at the cemetery gate.

She had gone to wait in the truck, because her father wanted to stand at the grave on his own for a minute, and Nils had gone with their mother. Kieran came across the frozen gravel with his hands in the pockets of his suit, without a coat, as if he had forgotten it, and stopped by the passenger door.

"I'm sorry," he said. "About your grandmother."

"Thank you."

"And about—" He stopped. "At the house. In November."

She looked at him through the open window. He was blue round the mouth with the cold, and he looked older than he was, and she thought he had not slept.

"Go and get your coat, Kieran," she said.

He nodded, and went back across the gravel to his truck, where Rae was sitting with the engine running and the children in the back, and Thea watched him get in, and Rae turn and say something to him, and him not answer.

• • •

The house was full all afternoon.

They came back from Prosper in a line of pickups along the county road, and the kitchen filled, and the front room, and the hall,

and people stood on the porch in their coats with plates in their hands, and the women from the church had sent food enough for a branding, and Thea poured coffee and carried plates and answered questions about the cows and the hay and the winter, the same three questions, over and over, from men who had known her since she was born and wanted to say something and could not think what else. Her father stood by the stove in his good shirt and shook hands. Dagny sat in the front room in Karin's chair by Arne's desk and people went in to her one at a time. Her mother moved through the rooms with the coffee pot, filling cups, and spoke to everyone, and smiled, and Thea watched her do it and thought that nobody in the house would have known that her mother had been eating her suppers in the barn office since July.

Nils left at five, before the dark. He had a shift at six. He stood in the hall in his coat with his keys in his hand and hugged his mother, and his aunt, and shook his father's hand, and then he came to Thea at the kitchen door and said, low, "Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"You're not."

"No," she said. "Go on. You'll be late."

He looked at her for a moment. Then he looked past her into the kitchen, at their father by the stove and their mother at the sink, with the length of the kitchen between them, and back at Thea.

"Ring me," he said. "If you need hands. For the feeding. I can come out."

"I know."

"I mean it."

"I know you do," she said.

By six they had all gone. Dagny went up at seven; she was driving back to Billings at five in the morning, before the road froze again. The women from the church had washed everything and put it away in the wrong places, and Thea went round the kitchen putting it back in the right ones, and fed in the dark, and came back in at half

past eight, and her father was at the table and her mother was at the sink, and neither of them was doing anything.

She said good night. Her father said good night. Her mother said, "Good night, love," without turning round.

Thea went up.

• • •

She did not go to bed. She sat on the edge of it in her room with the lamp off and the door open onto the landing, in her clothes, and took her wallet out of her back pocket and took the page out of it and unfolded it on her knee and could not read it in the dark, and did not need to.

After a while she heard her mother's voice in the kitchen.

She could not hear the words. The inside stairs came down into the kitchen at the end by the stove, and the kitchen was under the landing, and from her room she could hear only the shape of a voice, low, and then a long silence, and then the voice again. She got up and went out onto the landing in her socks, quietly, and stood at the top of the stairs, and then went down four steps, to the turn, where the stairs went round the chimney and you could see the kitchen through the banisters without anybody in the kitchen seeing you. She and Nils had sat there on Christmas Eves as children. She sat there now, on the fourth step, with her arms round her knees.

Her father was at the end of the table, in his own chair. Her mother was standing at the other end, by Karin's chair, with both hands on the back of it. On the table in front of her there was a book. Thea knew it. The old ledger with the green cloth cover, from the barn office.

"I went to see Lyle Harris," her mother said. "In October. On the Rosebud."

Her father did not move.

"He said to ask my husband." Her mother's voice was very even.

Her father sat with his hands on the table.

"So I'm asking you," her mother said.

He did not answer.

"Kieran told me," she said. "In July. At the Stampede. On his tailgate, at the dance."

Then her voice went lower, and Thea, on the stairs, lost it. She heard a name she did not know, *Opland*, and *the coulee road*, and *under oath*, and then her mother's voice going on, very low and even, for a long time, saying something Thea could not hear, while her father sat with his hands on the table and did not look up.

"He said you told him it'd take longer," her mother said, louder. "He said you kept the cattle moving."

On the stairs Thea put her hand over her mouth.

Her father sat at the table.

"Is it true," her mother said.

"It's what Opland said."

"I know what Opland said. I'm asking you."

The clock went round over the door. The refrigerator came on, and hummed, and went off.

"There was a man in the road," her father said.

"Did you hear where he was going?"

Her father looked down at his hands on the table.

"Jens. Did you hear where he was going?"

"I had three hundred pair on that road," her father said slowly. "In the dark. With the fire on the bench behind us. And the smoke so thick I couldn't see the lead cow. And Nils on the drag, and the colony boys on the flanks, and none of them over eighteen." He stopped. "I've asked myself that since. Whether I heard where he was going."

"And?"

He did not answer.

"That's not an answer," her mother said.

"No."

Her mother stood with her hands on the back of Karin's chair. Thea could see her face from the stairs, in the light from the lamp over the table. It was very still. It was the face Thea had seen at the ford gate in September, the searching look, as if she were trying to see something behind a face that would not come forward.

"Then why didn't you open the gate," her mother said.

Nothing.

"Why didn't you ask him where he was going?"

Nothing.

"Jens."

"I don't know," her father said.

"You do. You've had seventeen years. You know."

He sat there.

"Why didn't you tell me?" her mother said. Her voice had not changed. It was still very even, and very low, and Thea, on the stairs, could hear that it was costing her more than anything Thea had ever heard her say. "In seventeen years. Why didn't you ever tell me?"

Her father looked up at her then.

"You'd have asked me why," he said.

Her mother looked at him across the table.

Then she let go of the back of the chair. She pulled the green ledger towards her across the table and opened it. She opened it near the back, to a page Thea could not see from the stairs, and turned it round on the table so that it faced him, and put her finger on it.

"That's my name," she said. "And the date. I wrote it in your mother's book the day we buried my brother, and she let me, and she gave me this book in the autumn of 2050, when she started a new one, and I've kept it, and I've read that page every night since July." She took her finger away. "She knew. Didn't she. Your mother. She knew something."

Her father looked at the page.

"I don't know what she knew," he said.

"No," her mother said. "You don't know anything. You don't know whether you heard where he was going, and you don't know why, and you don't know what your mother knew." She closed the ledger. "I've been married to you for thirty-four years, Jens. I've never once had to ask you anything."

She picked the ledger up and held it against her chest with both arms.

"I'm going to sleep over the barn," she said.

Her father did not move.

"Not because of the gate," her mother said. "I don't know about the gate. I don't know if you heard where he was going. I don't know if I'd have heard it. I've sat in the barn since July trying to know, and I can't, and I don't think you can either." She stood there with the ledger against her. "Because you never told me. Because I had to hear it from my nephew on a tailgate, drunk, and drive a hundred and ten miles to hear an old man not tell me, and come back here and ask you, and you still won't." She looked at him. "That's why."

She went to the back door and took her coat off the hook and put it on over the ledger, and her boots, and opened the door, and the cold came in across the kitchen floor and up the stairs to where Thea was sitting, and her mother went out and pulled the door shut behind her.

Her father sat at the table.

• • •

Thea went back up the stairs. She went into her room and to the window, which looked out across the yard.

Her mother was crossing the yard in the snow, in the yard light, with her coat buttoned over the ledger and her head down. She did not go to the barn door. She went round the end of the log barn to the outside stairs, the wooden ones up the north wall to the apartment over the hay loft, where the hired man had lived in her grandfather's time and nobody had lived since, and went up them,

slowly, one hand on the rail, and opened the door at the top, and went in.

After a minute the light came on in the apartment window.

Thea stood at her own window with the folded page in her hand. She had thought, all week, that it was the worst thing anyone in the house knew, and that she was keeping it from her mother.

Her mother had known more than the page. A name, and an oath, and a gate, since July. Thea had heard her father say *Nils on the drag*, in among the smoke and the colony boys, as if it were one more thing on the road, and she thought of her brother at the kitchen door at five o'clock in his coat, saying *Ring me*.

She could have gone down. She could have gone across the yard and up the outside stairs and knocked on the door, and her mother would have opened it. She stood at the window and knew that she could, and that her mother would, and did not go.

The light stayed on in the apartment window for a long time. Downstairs, her father had not moved from the table; she could not hear him, and she would have heard his chair. At midnight she put the page back in her wallet and the wallet on the chest of drawers, and lay down on the bed in her clothes, and at two the light across the yard went out, and at five she got up and went down through the kitchen, where her father was asleep in his chair at the end of the table with his head on his arms, and went out to feed.

20

The Books

The forty acres lay under the snow all January, and Daniel did not walk on them.

He could see them from the shop. The shop stood at the head of the colony's fields where the bench road came in, and from its big door, if he stood at the left side of it, he could see down the trail along the foot of the Hogback, and the line of fence posts that Mark and two of the young men had put back in along the east boundary in October, new, with the wire on them, and beyond the fence the forty acres, white, flat, with the wind moving the snow on them in long low ridges. Under the snow, he knew, the stubble stood where he had swathed it in September, and the dirt lay trodden in a band a hundred yards wide across the north end, where the cattle had gone through at a run, with the barley trodden into it.

He had walked it once, in October, before the snow. He had walked the band from end to end with his hands in his pockets and looked at the ground. There was nothing to see. Barley straw pressed into dirt and ash and dried there, grey, with the heads broken off it and gone, eaten or trodden, and the hoof marks set hard in the dirt like a print in clay, hundreds of them, going one way. He had picked up a handful of it at the south end and looked at it and put it down again.

It had been the dry year. That was what he had wanted from it. Seven years of the barley on the forty acres, every one of them a little drier than the one before, and this the driest of all, the one the co-op's model had called at forty percent in April and the bench had come in at nineteen; and he had wanted to know what the forty acres did in a year like that, with his own seed, sown ten days late, on that thin grey ground along the foot of the Hogback. Whether it held. Whether the low corner by the big rock came up thick again while the rest came up thin. What it weighed. He had wanted the number at the end of it, in the book, under the other six.

He had the heads. He had picked them on the sixth of September before he swathed, less than half a sack, the earliest ones, from the low corner and along the fence. They were in the shop, in a feed sack on the shelf over the bench, beside the six jars. He had not put them in a jar. He had not had the heart to thresh them.

The rest of it was in the trodden band, and in forty pair of Lodgepole cows, and gone.

There was a line in the colony's books for it: *Lodgepole — HC-17 — crop damage (cattle) — 5,200.00*. It was the right price.

He did not know why that was the worst of it. He thought about it in the shop, in December, at the bench, with the grinder going. It would have been easier if she had got it wrong.

• • •

Joseph sent for him on the twenty-third, a Sunday, after evening church.

It was snowing again, lightly, out of a low sky, and dark by five. Daniel came out of the church with the others and stood on the step and put his hat on, and one of the Entz boys came across the yard to him and said that Joseph was in the office and would Daniel come. Judith looked at him. He said he would not be long. She took David home through the snow on her hip, with the boy's face turned back

over her shoulder towards Daniel, asking where he was going, and Judith telling him to hush.

The office was warm. Joseph had the heater on and the lamp on over the desk and the blind down, and he was sitting in his chair behind the desk with his hands folded on it, and on the desk in front of him, squared up, there were the books.

All of them. Daniel had never seen them out like that. The colony's ledgers, which were in the computer and also on paper, because the old men at Sixmile had kept them on paper and Joseph had said that a colony that could not read its own books without electricity was not a colony; the big green ones, one for every year since 2052, fifteen of them, and the cash book, and the stock book, and the minute book of the brotherhood, and the folder with the deed in it and the note, and the bank's letters, and on top of all of them the keys. The office key and the safe key and the shop and the fuel tank and the seed shed, on the old steel ring with the leather tag.

"Sit down," Joseph said.

Daniel sat down.

"I'm going to ask the brotherhood in February to make you secretary," Joseph said. "I've told the minister. He agrees. Elias will be farm boss. He's ready; he's been ready for ten years. Mark can learn the field under him." He unfolded his hands and put one of them on the pile of books, flat, on the top one, beside the keys. "I can't read them. I haven't been able to read them for two years. You've been reading them to me. It's time they were yours."

Daniel looked at the books.

"I'm twenty-six," he said.

"I was forty-seven when the brotherhood made me secretary, and I'd been baptised two years. Your father was thirty." Joseph meant Daniel's father, who had been secretary at Wolf Creek and had died when Daniel was six, and whom Joseph never called anything but *your father*, as if there were only one. "Twenty-six is old

enough. You've read every page of these. You know them better than I do now."

"Yes," Daniel said.

"Then take them."

Daniel did not move. Joseph waited. Outside the snow came against the window behind the blind, very softly, a dry sound, like sand.

"There's something that comes with them," Joseph said. "That isn't written in them. I want you to have that too. And then you can decide what you want to do with any of it." He took his hand off the books. "It's about the road. In '49."

• • •

He told it slowly. He told it in English, which Daniel noticed, because Joseph spoke English in the office only for the books, and German for everything that was not money. He sat with his hands folded on the desk and his face turned a little towards the lamp, where he could see the light, and told it the way he read a passage at church, with no hurry in it, and no stops for Daniel to say anything, and Daniel did not say anything.

"It was the twenty-fourth of August. You were at Wolf Creek. You'd have been nine. We were at Sixmile, and the fire was in the Bull Mountains. Jens Tollefsen had three hundred pair on the lease and his son and nobody else to spare. He rang Sixmile on the Saturday before and asked for two hands for a gather. My father said yes from the clinic in Great Falls, with half his mouth. I was the one who took them. I took Elias and Jakob over on the Monday in the dark, because they could ride and because they were the ones who wanted to go, and they stayed up there with the cattle that night, and the next night the front came and they brought the herd down with him." He was quiet for a moment. "I took them. I want you to know that before the rest of it. I put them in the truck."

Daniel sat.

"I brought them home at ten past twelve, behind the water truck, with their horses tied on. Black. Jakob told me in the cab, all of it, the gather and the draw and the road. A truck behind the drag. A man walking up the herd. And Elias told me the rest, from the front, where he'd been: the man asking to be let by, the boy saying *gate*, Jens looking back." Joseph turned his head, a little. "Their stories were not quite the same. I've never thought either of them was lying. They were seventeen and sixteen and they were in the smoke."

"He told me in September," Daniel said. "After the fire."

"I know he did. He told me he had." Joseph nodded. "I'd have told you myself, if he hadn't. I'd been meaning to for a year. I'd been meaning to since my eyes went."

He was quiet. The heater ticked.

"A man died," Joseph said. "Conor Rourke, in the gateway at the Tollefsen paddocks. In the paper it said the crew was delayed en route. That was all anybody said, that year." He unfolded his hands and folded them again. "I knew what the boys had told me. And I didn't know what it meant. I still don't."

"Did you go to Jens?"

"Not for seven months," Joseph said. "Then I did."

• • •

"It was Palm Sunday. In 2050. The third of April."

Daniel remembered it. He had not known he did until Joseph said the date, and then he did: he had been nine, at Sixmile for the first time, come over from Wolf Creek with his mother on the Friday for the baptisms and sleeping in Peter Entz's mother's front room. On the Sunday, early, before anybody but the cooks was up, he had looked out of the window and seen the colony's small pickup come up the road in the grey light, and a man in work clothes get out of it and stand at the north end of the farrowing barn, looking at the ground, for a long time. Three hours later the same man had knelt at the front of the church in a white shirt with the water running down

his face, and Daniel's mother, across the aisle on the women's side, had not taken her eyes off him.

"I went to him," Joseph said. "At half past five, in the dark, in my work clothes, before my own baptism. He was in his calving barn with a bottle calf. I told him what the boys had seen. All of it, in order, the way they had told it to me." He stopped. "He knew it already. He'd known since September that I knew."

Daniel waited.

"I told him the man in the road, with his hand up. I told him Nils coming up out of the drag and saying *the hay gate*. I told him what Elias saw him do, looking back at the fire and across at the Rourke meadow, and going on." Joseph's voice did not change. "He didn't say any of it wasn't so. I've thought about that every Palm Sunday since. He didn't tell me one thing of his own about that road, not what he heard and not what he thought, and I didn't ask him. He stood in the alley with straw on his knees and let me tell it, and he didn't say a word against any of it."

The snow went on against the window.

"He didn't ask me if he'd done right," Joseph said. "He didn't ask me to forgive him. I'd not have known how; it wasn't mine to forgive. He asked me one thing." He was quiet for a moment. "He asked me to keep it. For the boys. He said if it came out what they'd seen, it would come out where they'd been and who sent them, and the brotherhood had voted machines for the fire, not men, not boys. He said the church would want them on the front bench at nineteen, being asked what they saw and who sent them. He said whatever was on that road was his, and not theirs, and he didn't want it put on them. And he said—" Joseph stopped. "He said if anybody ever asked him, he'd not lie to them. But he asked me not to let anybody ask the boys."

"And you promised."

"I promised." Joseph nodded. "In his calving barn, with the calf sucking on my sleeve. And he promised me something back, which

was that he'd not ask the colony for anything, ever, because of it. And he never has. He asked for the crossing in 2052, after Kieran sold us the bench, and I gave it him on a handshake. He's never asked for anything else."

• • •

"Then I drove home and put on my white shirt and went into the church," Joseph said. "There were five of us. You know the last question, before the water. Whether there's anything on your conscience that should be said before the church. Anything done, or not done, against anybody."

Daniel knew what was coming. He sat with his hands on his knees.

"Paul Hofer asked me in English," Joseph said, "because I'd been away, and he wanted to be sure I understood."

The heater ticked.

"In front of everybody," Joseph said. "Your mother at the back with the visitors. Elias and Jakob on the boys' bench. They weren't baptised yet. They had no vote. They were there."

Daniel looked at the books on the desk between them.

"I said no," Joseph said.

He said it in German, the one word. *Nein.* Then he said it again in English, quietly. "No."

He sat with it. Daniel watched him sit with it, the old man at the desk with his hands folded and his blind face turned to the lamp, and understood that he had sat with it in exactly that way, in that posture, many times, alone, in this office and the old one, with the door shut and the blind down.

"I didn't say it for Jens," Joseph said. "I've told myself that. I said it for the boys. And because it was true that nobody knew what Jens heard, and true that what the boys had seen and heard was a thing in the smoke that could mean three things. I could have said all of that, before the water, and the old men would have dealt with it in

the brotherhood, quietly, and it might have come out the same." He was quiet for a moment. "But I didn't say all of that. I said no. In the church. Before God. And then I knelt down and he poured the water on me. When the Rourke lawyer wrote to Sixmile the next winter, the minister wrote back that the colony doesn't go to the world's courts, and nobody asked me again. And Elias heard me say it, and he's never said a word about it since, to me or anyone. Till September, to you."

"Is that why we left Sixmile?" Daniel said. "In '52?"

Joseph thought about it. He thought about it honestly; Daniel could see him do it.

"No," he said. "We left because Sixmile was too big and the bench was for sale. I'd have gone anyway." He turned his face towards Daniel. "But I was glad to go. I'll say that. I was glad not to sit in that church on Wednesdays any more."

• • •

"I'm giving you the books," Joseph said, "and I'm giving you that. Because it comes with them. Because the colony owes the Lodgepole the crossing, and I owe Jens the promise, and I'm not going to be the one who keeps either of them much longer." He put his hand on the books again. "You don't have to keep it. I want you to understand that. It was my promise. I made it. You weren't in the room. If you think the Rourke boy should know what Elias saw, or Thea Tollefsen should know, or anybody, that's yours to decide now, and I'll not say anything to you about it either way. I've had seventeen years. It's not mine any more."

"And if I tell the brotherhood?"

"Then tell them," Joseph said. "I'll stand up and say it was me."

Daniel looked at him for a long time.

Then he reached across the desk and picked up the keys.

The ring was heavy. It was colder than he had thought it would be. He held it in his hand and the old leather tag hung down off it

with *Hogback* burnt into it in letters somebody at Sixmile had made with a hot nail in 2052.

"Thank you," Joseph said.

"I haven't said anything."

"I know," Joseph said. "Go home. Judith will be waiting up."

• • •

He did not go home.

He went to the shop. He let himself in with the key off Joseph's ring, because it was his ring now, and turned on the light over the bench, and stood there in the cold with his coat on and the snow melting on his shoulders.

He thought about Thea Tollefsen at the grave, looking at Joseph's hand on her father's, and not knowing what she was looking at.

He could tell her. He thought about it, standing at the bench. He could drive down the bench road tomorrow and across the bridge and into the Lodgepole yard and knock on the door and say it. It would take ten minutes.

Then he thought about Elias, seventeen, in the smoke, and the boy on the drag, twelve, saying *Dad, the hay gate*, and going back when he was told.

None of them had asked for any of it.

It was not his to give Thea. It had not been Joseph's to give him, either, and Joseph had given it, because the books came with it. He understood that. The books had a line in them for the crossing now, for the first time, and a line for five thousand two hundred dollars for forty acres of trodden barley, and they did not have a line for this, and this was in them anyway.

He would keep it. He thought that at the bench, with his hand on the cold steel, and then he heard himself think it, and stood very still.

It was what Joseph had done. It was what Joseph had sat with for seventeen years with the blind down: a thing he knew, kept from the

people it touched, for reasons he could give to anyone. Daniel had his reasons ready, and they were good ones. Joseph's had been good too, and Joseph had said *Nein* in the church before God with Elias on the boys' bench, and gone on sitting on the men's bench every evening, and been glad to leave.

He thought about the church. He had sat in it every evening of his life. The brotherhood was where the colony told itself the truth; he had believed that the way he believed the ground was under his feet. And for seventeen years there had been a No in the middle of it, and nobody in the room had known but Joseph and two boys on a bench, and the prayers had gone on, and the colony had come to the bench, and Daniel had knelt before the same brotherhood, in the new church on the bench, to be baptised.

So he did not decide, not the way Joseph had. He would not go down the bench road in the morning and knock on the Lodgepole door; he could not see whom it would help, and it was not his. But he made himself one rule, at the bench, out loud, in German, so that he would remember he had said it. If anyone asked him, he would not say no. Not Thea, not the Rourke boy, not the minister, not the brotherhood. He would not carry it to them, and he would not deny it to them. He knew how long a thing could go without anyone asking. It might come, in the end, to the same as Joseph's.

And in May, when the grass came, the Lodgepole cattle would come down the trail along the foot of the Hogback and across the colony's ground to the lease, as they had every year since 2052, and he would take the fence down for them on the forty acres, and put it back up.

He reached up to the shelf over the bench and took down the feed sack. He opened it on the bench under the light. The heads were dry and light and pale, with the long awns on them, a little bent from the sack. Less than half a sack. He took a handful out and rubbed it between his palms, as his father had shown him at Wolf

Creek when he was five, and blew the chaff off, and looked at the grain in his hand. It was small. It was the driest year. It was sound.

He found a jar under the bench, a clean one, and threshed the rest of the sack into it by hand, all of it, head by head, at the bench, with the snow going on outside the window, until the jar was a third full. Then he wrote on a strip of tape with the pencil from his pocket, *HC-17 · 2066 · low corner & fence · hand-picked 6 Sept*, and stuck it on the jar, and put the jar on the shelf beside the other six.

It was nearly midnight when he went home. Judith was asleep. He did not wake her. He put the keys on the table by the door, where she would see them in the morning, and sat for a while in the kitchen in the dark, and then went to bed.

21

Feed

The co-op said it on the Sunday, and Dagny rang on the Monday to say it again, and on the Tuesday, the eighth of February, at a quarter to twelve, it came.

Thea was at the river pasture with the tractor when she saw it. A grey wall across the north-west, low, from the Snowies to the Big Belts, flat-bottomed, coming down the valley towards her with the light going out of the sky in front of it. She had fed early. She had been feeding early since Sunday, double rations, to put something in the cows before it came, and she had the last bale on the processor and the cows strung out along the windrow behind her on the snow, heads down, two hundred and twenty-four of them, eating fast, and she looked at the wall and then at the cows and then at the cottonwoods along the river, where they would go when it hit, and drove back up to the yard.

It hit at noon.

There was no warning in the yard. The air was still and grey and cold, ten above, and then it was not still. The wind came round the end of the calving barn all at once with the snow in it, sideways, and the yard light on its pole, which had come on by itself because the sky had gone so dark, swung on its wire, and the far side of the yard went, the log barn and the outside stairs and the stackyard fence, in

a second, into white. She stood by the tractor with her hand on the step and could not see the house, forty yards away.

She found it by the fence. She had strung a rope along the fence from the calving barn to the back porch in November, as her father had every winter of her life, and she found the rope with her glove and went along it with her head down, hand over hand, and came up the porch steps into the lee of the house, and stood there getting her breath, with the snow packed into the front of her coat and her eyelashes.

Her father was in the kitchen. He had his coat on.

"It's here," she said.

"I see it."

"I fed. Double. They'll be in the cottonwoods by now." She pulled her gloves off. "The heifers and the calves have got enough till four. I'll go out again at four."

"I'll go at four," her father said. "You did the morning."

• • •

At four it was eleven below and the wind was gusting fifty. The radio said seventy on the interstate at Big Timber, and the interstate was closed from Livingston to Billings, and US 12 was closed at Roundup, and the county roads were not mentioned because nobody expected anybody to be on them.

They went out together. Her father took the old pickup with the bale bed to the corral and the trap, for the heifers and the calves, because it was close and he could follow the fence; Thea took the tractor to the bull pen and the stackyard to load. They agreed it at the back door with their faces close together so they could hear each other, and her father went down the porch steps into it and was gone.

She loaded the processor at the stackyard in the dark, by the tractor's lights, with the snow going across the beams so thick she could see only the nearest bales, and the wind rocking the cab. She

fed the bulls. She came back to the stackyard for a second bale for the heifers, because she thought he would need it, and swung the tractor round at the stackyard gate, and the lights went across the bale yard, the flat beaten ground between the stack and the corral where the trucks turned, and her father was lying on it.

He was on his side by the back of the pickup, near the bale bed, with one arm under him and his hat gone, and the snow already drifting against his back.

She did not remember getting down from the tractor. She was on her knees beside him in the snow with her hands on his shoulder. The ground under the snow was ice, black, polished, where the trucks had turned all winter and the sun had melted the top of it in the afternoons and the nights had frozen it again, and she knelt on it and felt her knees slide.

"Dad."

His eyes were open. He was looking at the ground in front of his face.

"I slipped," he said. "Getting down. Off the bed." His voice was very ordinary. "It's my hip. I heard it."

"Don't move."

"I'm not going to move," her father said. "I can't."

• • •

She rang from the tractor. The telephone in her coat had one bar, and then none, and then one, and she got through to the county on the third try and said who she was and where, and the woman on the other end was calm and asked her questions, and said that the ambulance in Roundup would come, and that it would come behind the plough, and that the plough was on the Melstone road with a jackknifed stock truck and she did not know how long it would be. An hour. Two. She said not to move him unless he was in danger of freezing where he lay, and Thea said that he was.

She went for the plywood. There was a sheet in the calving barn, eight feet by four, that they used for a sled to drag calves in on in March. She dragged it out along the fence, bent double into the wind, and laid it down beside him on the ice, and stood looking at him, and at the plywood, and at her own hands, and knew she could not get him onto it without hurting him, and that she could not get him onto it alone at all.

She turned round, and her mother was there.

Her mother had come down the outside stairs. She was in her canvas coat with a wool hat pulled down to her eyes and a scarf across her face, and she had a lantern, the old kerosene one from the apartment, and two blankets under her arm, and she was standing at the edge of the tractor's lights looking down at Jens on the ice.

She knelt down on the other side of him and put the lantern on the ice and spread one of the blankets over him, from his shoulders to his boots, and tucked it under his back, against the wind, where the snow was drifting.

"Shannon," her father said.

"Lie still."

"I slipped."

"I know you did," her mother said. "Lie still, Jens."

They got him onto the plywood. Her mother at his shoulders and Thea at his legs, on their knees on the ice, sliding the board under him an inch at a time with the blanket, and rolling him onto it the way her mother said, all of him at once, his hips and shoulders together, and he made one sound when they did it, a short one, through his teeth, and then nothing. Then Thea took the rope off the front of the tractor and tied it to the board, and they pulled him across the bale yard to the calving barn on the ice, the two of them, leaning into the rope with the wind trying to take them off their feet, and her mother walking backwards at the head of the board

with her hand on it, and into the calving barn, and Thea shut the door.

It was warm in the calving barn. Not warm. Thirty degrees, out of the wind, with the heat lamp over the first pen, which Thea turned on, and the light. They laid him in the alley under the lamp on the plywood with both blankets over him and a bale behind his head. Her mother sat down on the concrete beside him with her back against the pen and her legs out in front of her, and took her gloves off, and put one hand on his forehead, and left it there.

"Go and feed," she said to Thea. "The heifers. I've got him."

Thea looked at her.

"Go on," said her mother. "They'll be at the fence."

She went.

• • •

The ambulance came at ten to nine.

It came behind the plough. Thea saw the plough's lights first, from the calving barn door, yellow, turning, coming along the county road a mile off very slowly through the white, and then the red lights behind it, and she went up to the yard gate on the rope with a torch and stood there waving it until the plough turned in at the lane and came up it, throwing the snow off in a wave to the right, and the ambulance behind it in the cut.

Two of them, from Roundup, a man and a woman in red coats. They were kind and quick. They got her father onto their own board and into the back of the ambulance with the doors shut against the wind in four minutes, and the woman asked who was coming with him, and Thea said she would, and her mother said, "No."

She had come out of the calving barn behind them. She stood in the snow by the back of the ambulance with the lantern in her hand.

"I'll go," she said. "You've the cattle."

"Mom—"

"You've the cattle," her mother said again. "Somebody has to feed. It's going to be three days of this." She handed Thea the lantern. "Ring Nils."

She got up into the back of the ambulance. The man shut the door behind her. Through the little window in the door Thea saw her sit down on the bench beside the stretcher and take her hat off and put her hand on her father's chest, on the blanket, and then the ambulance turned in the yard behind the plough and went away down the lane in the cut the plough had made, and the snow filled the cut behind it.

• • •

Nils came at seven in the morning.

She had not slept. She had fed at midnight and at four, the heifers and the calves and the bulls, and gone down to the river pasture on the tractor at four with the lights on and found the cows in the cottonwoods, as she had known they would be, packed in along the river in the lee of the trees with their backs to the wind and the snow on them, and the drifts already building along the river fence, and she had fed them along the edge of the trees where they could get to it, and counted what she could see, which was not all of them. She had rung Nils at nine and again at midnight and he had said he would come when the road opened, and at six the plough had come through on the county road again, and at seven his campus truck came up the lane in its cut with the light bar going.

He came into the kitchen in the campus's heavy coat with his face red and white and stood at the door stamping.

"How is he?"

"They pinned it. In the night. Mom rang at five." Thea poured him coffee. "He's out of it. He's all right. He'll be in Billings a week and then somewhere else. Six weeks, they said. Eight."

"Six weeks before he walks."

"Six weeks before he walks with a frame."

Nils drank the coffee standing up.

"He'll not feed again," he said. "Will he."

"No," Thea said.

He looked at her over the cup. He had their father's way of looking at a person, and their mother's eyes. He put the cup down.

"Where do you want me?"

• • •

For three days they fed.

The wind did not stop. It went down a little in the mornings and came up again at noon, every day, out of the north-west, and the snow came with it, and when the snow stopped coming the wind picked up what had fallen and moved it, so that it was the same either way. The temperature on the thermometer by the back door went to nineteen below on the Wednesday night and twenty-six below on the Thursday, and stayed there. The radio said it was the coldest February since 2036 and the windiest since records began, and then the radio stopped saying anything about it, because the power went at two on the Wednesday afternoon and they ran the generator for the well and the heat lamps and the freezer and nothing else.

They fed every six hours. It was the only way. In that cold a cow needed half again what she ate in a normal winter just to stay warm, and if she did not get it she took it off her own back, and these cows had nothing on their backs to take; they had come off the lease thin in September and gone onto a winter of bought hay thinner. So they fed at six and noon and six and midnight. Nils on the tractor with the processor, because he had driven it since he was eleven and still drove it better than she did, and Thea on the old pickup with the bale bed, which she had got going again on the Wednesday morning with the jump pack and a prayer, because she would not have her brother on the bale bed where their father had gone down.

The river pasture was the worst. The cows had gone into the cottonwoods along the river and the snow had come over the cottonwoods and drifted down into the lee of them along the river fence, eight feet deep in places, packed hard, and some of the cows had gone into the drifts against the fence, drifting with the wind, heads down, and stopped there, and stood, while the snow built up round them. On the Wednesday afternoon they found the first two. Nils saw them from the tractor, two humps in the drift along the fence, a red back and a black one, with steam coming up off them.

They dug them out with shovels. It took an hour. The snow was packed so hard it came out in blocks, and they worked side by side in the wind with their scarves across their faces, saying nothing, and when they got down to the cows' shoulders the cows began to fight, and lunged, and came out of the drift onto the open snow with the snow falling off them in slabs, and stood there blowing, and Nils leaned on his shovel and laughed, once, a short hoarse sound into his scarf, and Thea heard it and found that she was laughing too.

They found six more on the Thursday. They got all six out.

• • •

On the Wednesday night at two, between the midnight feed and the six, she did the page.

She did it at the kitchen table by the kerosene lantern, because the generator was on the well, with her coat still on and Nils asleep on the sofa in the front room with his boots on, under Karin's afghan. The ledger was open at the ribbon. She had kept it every day: the feed, the cold, the cows dug out, *J. hip, Billings, N. came 7 a.m.* She turned back to the hay page.

A hundred and thirty-six tons left in the stackyard and the shed on the morning of the eighth. She had counted it that morning before she fed, every bale. Since the eighth they had fed half again the ration, four times a day, and she did the arithmetic for three days of

it, and then for the rest of February at the normal ration if it warmed up, which it would, and March.

The December statement from the co-op had come on the seventeenth of January, the Monday after the funeral. There had been the credit on it again, from the regional programme, eight thousand dollars, and she had written it in the column under the other three, *County*? +8,000, and looked at the four of them, six, eight, ten, eight, and closed the ledger on them. She opened the account now on the tablet by the lantern and looked at what it would carry. It would carry another forty tons, at the price the co-op was quoting that week out of Alberta, which was four hundred and forty, delivered, if the roads opened, if anybody could get a truck through.

With the forty tons she came out at the end of March with ten days of hay in hand, and the grass on the flat not due until the third week in April.

Without them she came out on the twenty-seventh of March.

She wrote both dates in pencil at the bottom of the page and drew a line between them, and sat with the lantern and the page, and heard the wind on the north wall of the house, and the generator out by the well house going under it, and Nils breathing in the front room.

• • •

On the third night, at four in the morning, they were in the feed truck.

It was the Thursday night, or the Friday morning. The tractor had frozen. The diesel had gelled in the line at midnight in the cold, twenty-six below, and Nils had spent an hour in the shop with the heater and the tractor's cowling off, and come out and said it would not go before daylight, and they had loaded the bale bed on the old pickup instead, with two bales, and taken it down to the river pasture together, Thea driving, Nils on the bed to cut the strings and roll the bales off.

They fed. Then they drove back along the river fence with the lights on to look at the drifts, slowly, and stopped by the river gate, because there was a hump in the drift there that she did not like, and sat in the cab with the engine running and the heater going full, roaring, so loud they had to raise their voices, and the lights on the drift, and waited for it to move.

It did not move.

"In a minute," Nils said. "Let me get warm."

They sat. The snow went across the lights. The heater roared. Thea had her hands on the wheel, and she could not feel them, and she watched the hump in the drift in the lights and did not take her eyes off it.

"I was on the drag," Nils said.

She did not turn her head.

"That night. On the road. In the coulee." He was looking at the drift too, through the windscreen. His voice was very ordinary, the voice he used for numbers. "Dad on point. Elias and the other one on the flanks. Me on the drag, on the bay mare, because I was twelve and the drag's where you put a boy. Coming down off the bench in the dark with the fire behind us. You couldn't see anything. You couldn't see the cows in front of the horse. You could hear them. And the fire. And then there were lights behind me."

The heater roared.

"A truck. A fire truck, from the county. It came up behind the drag on the road and stopped, because it couldn't get past the cattle. And a man got out and came past me, walking, up through the herd. He had a helmet on, and a yellow shirt, and he was shouting. He went past me and up the herd towards the front, towards Dad, and I could see his torch going up through the cattle in the smoke. And I knew what he wanted. I knew it from his torch. He wanted the road. He had to get down the coulee and we were on it."

Thea sat with her hands on the wheel.

"And I knew where the gate was," Nils said. "The hay gate. Into Conor's meadow, on the right. Two hundred yards on. I'd opened it a hundred times. You could have put the whole herd through it into the meadow in five minutes and the truck could have gone by." He stopped. "So I rode up. Out of the drag. Up past the cows, on the bay mare, in the smoke, to the front, to where Dad was, and the man was there, beside Dad's horse, with his hand up, shouting, and I said it. I said, *Dad, the hay gate.*"

The snow went across the lights.

"I said it loud. I know I did. I've thought about it for seventeen years and I know I said it loud enough." He was quiet for a moment. "And Dad looked back. At the fire. And at the meadow. And then he looked at me, and he said, *Get back on the drag*. And I went."

Thea did not move.

"I went back," Nils said. "I turned the mare round and I went back down the herd to the drag, and I didn't say anything else. And the cattle went on down the road. And the truck sat there behind me with its lights on, and then it turned round, and I watched it go back up the coulee, and I didn't know where it was going. I didn't know anything about the paddocks. I didn't know anything about Conor till the morning." He breathed out. "I was twelve. I said it, and then I went back when I was told."

He turned his head, then, and looked at her.

"I've never been sure which of those two things I did," he said. "Whether I said it. Or whether I went back. Which one's the one that counts."

The heater roared. The folded page was in her wallet, under her, pressed flat against the seat. It had never said who was on the drag. It had never said who knew where the gate was.

"Nobody asked me," Nils said. "Do you know that? Nobody. The review didn't. The lawyers didn't. Mom didn't. Dad didn't. Not once. Seventeen years." He looked back at the drift. "I thought Dad must have told them I was too young. Or that nobody knew I'd said it. I

don't know which. I thought about telling somebody, when I was twenty, twenty-one, and I didn't, and then it was too late to be the kind of thing you tell, and I just—had it."

"Nils."

"I'm not telling you so you'll do anything," he said. "I'm telling you because you're the only one who doesn't know, and you should. That's all."

"You were twelve," she said.

It was out before she could stop it, and it was the wrong thing. He had said it himself, twice.

"I know how old I was," Nils said.

She thought of the winter after the fire. Nils at twelve, and then thirteen, who had stopped riding with them that autumn and never said why. Who had come in from school and gone straight to their grandfather's desk in the front room with his arithmetic, every night, pages of it, sums nobody had set him, while she and their father went out to feed. She had been fifteen and then sixteen and had thought he had gone soft. She had said so at the table more than once, and their father had said nothing, and Nils had said nothing and gone back to the desk. She had believed it all her life, a little, under everything else: that her brother had chosen the numbers because he did not love the place. She sat in the cab with the heater roaring and saw the boy at the desk in the lamplight, with his back to the room.

• • •

"There's something else," Nils said, after a while.

He said it to the windscreen. The hump in the drift had not moved. He had not taken his eyes off it.

"Sell," he said.

"What?"

"Sell. The cows. In March. Before the line comes in on you." He did not look at her. "I've done it. I've done it every way. I did it on

Wednesday night on the sofa, on the tablet, before I went to sleep. With your numbers. I know your numbers. Dad's not going to feed again. He's not going to run them again. He's seventy-three and his hip's pinned and he'll be on a frame till June. So it's you. You and two hundred and twenty-four cows and a note at the bank and the hay running out on the twenty-seventh of March." He breathed. "Sell them, Thea. Sell them in March while they've got calves in them and they're worth something. Pay the bank. Lease the ground to somebody. Lease it to Kieran. He'd take it tomorrow. Let it go."

"No," she said.

"Thea—"

"No."

He turned and looked at her.

"It's nine years," he said. "Do you know that? Nine years since I turned twenty-one and got my half. Nine years my half's been in your cows. Every dollar of it. Every acre. You've run them on my grass and fed them my hay off my meadows and borrowed against the place to do it, and I've never had a say, and I've never had a rent cheque, and I've never asked for one, because it was the Lodgepole and you were Thea and that was how it was." His voice had not gone up. It was very quiet, under the heater. "It's my capital, Thea. It's all I've got. I'm twenty-nine and I live in a flat on the campus that belongs to the campus, and the only thing I own in the world is half of this place, and it's under two hundred and twenty-four cows and it's been under them since I was twenty-one, and every year I watch you put it back in."

"It's the Lodgepole."

"I know what it is." He looked at her. "I know what it is. I'm asking you to sell the cows. Not the place. The cows."

"The place is the cows."

"No," Nils said. "That's Dad. That's what Dad says."

She sat with her hands on the wheel. She could not feel them at all now.

"I'm not going to sell them," she said.

He looked at her.

"No," he said. "I knew you wouldn't."

He opened his door. The wind came in and took the heat out of the cab in a second, and the snow with it, and he got out into it and took the shovel off the bed and went down into the lights towards the drift by the river gate, and she sat for a moment and then got out and took the other shovel and went after him.

• • •

It was a cow. They found her at first light, digging, with the sky going grey over the Bull Mountains and the wind dropping for the morning. A red cow, nine years old, one of the good ones, 7-114 in the left ear. She had gone into the drift against the river gate in the night and stood there with her head down while the snow came over her, and lain down at some point, and not got up.

They dug her out anyway. It took most of an hour. They tied the rope from the pickup round her hind legs and dragged her out of the drift onto the packed snow by the gate, and she lay there on her side in the grey light with her legs out stiff and the snow in her ears and her eyes, and her belly round with the calf in it, due in April.

Nils stood over her with the shovel.

Thea knelt down beside the cow and put her hand on the red hide. It was cold all the way through. She took off her glove and read the tag with her finger, as if she could not see it, and then she got up and took the notebook out of her coat and wrote it down. *11 Feb. 7-114 dead in drift at river gate. Bred, April.* She stood looking at the page.

Two hundred and twenty-three.

The wind had gone down. The sun came up over the Bull Mountains behind them, small and white, with sun dogs on either side of it, and the light went out across the river pasture, across the cottonwoods with the snow on them to the tops and the long white

drifts along the fence and the cows standing in the trees with the frost on their backs, two hundred and twenty-two of them that she could see, and the river under the ice, and the yard, and the log barn with the outside stairs going up its north wall and no light in the apartment window, and beyond all of it the Rourke flat, white, across the river, and the smoke going straight up from Kieran's chimney in the still air.

Nils put the shovel back on the bed of the pickup.

"I'll feed," he said. "Go in. Get warm. Ring Mom."

She went in. She rang her mother in Billings, and her mother said that her father had slept and eaten some breakfast and asked about the heifers, and Thea said to tell him the heifers were all right, and that they had lost one cow, the red nine-year-old, 7-114, in the drift at the river gate, and her mother was quiet, and then said she would tell him.

"Is Nils there?" her mother said.

"He's feeding."

"Is he all right?"

Thea stood in the kitchen with the beige receiver in her hand, looking out of the window at her brother on the tractor, which he had got going in the sun, crossing the yard towards the stackyard with the processor behind him, very small, in the white.

"I don't know," she said.

22

Closing

He had told Rae on New Year's night.

He had told her in the kitchen after the children were asleep, because he had promised her in November that he would tell her first. He told her all of it. The deposition, the protective order, the coulee road and the hay gate and the boy on the drag. The tailgate in July. *Like your father.*

Rae did not answer for a while. She sat with her hands round a cup of tea that had gone cold and looked at the oilcloth.

"Does Thea know?" she said at last.

"No."

"Are you going to tell her?"

"I can't."

"You told Shannon."

"I was drunk. I'd had seven, and the whisky." He looked at his hands. "And it was Shannon. And Dale Kjelstad had said *departed from the assigned route.* And I'd been holding it for fifteen years." He stopped. "If I tell Thea, I'll be telling her that her father let my father die. I don't know that. Opland didn't know it. The review didn't. All anybody knows is that he didn't open a gate. I can't put that on her and then lease her the Lodgepole."

Rae looked at him across the table.

"Then don't buy her place," she said.

He had not answered her. She had gone up to bed, and he had sat in the kitchen until two, and in the morning neither of them had said anything about it, and it had sat in the house between them through January and February like a coat on a hook that nobody wore.

• • •

He sold the last of the cows on the twenty-fourth of February, at Prosper.

A hundred and four head, what was left of the third he had kept in June when he shipped the rest. The Companion had said March, in the autumn, and then it had said February, after the blizzard, when it read the hay market and the bank's letters and his own feed bills, and he had looked at the number it gave him and agreed with it. They went through the ring on a Thursday in drafts of ten. He sat on the benches with Rae beside him and watched them go, the Rourke brand on their left hips, the last of his grandfather's line of black baldies that had come down unbroken from 1971, and he did not go up on the catwalk. Rae held his hand on the bench through all of the second half and did not say anything, and when the last draft had gone through she let go and they drove home.

So he had no cows. He had the river ground and the house and the barn and the horses and Bishop, and the Companion, and two children and a wife and his mother, and a forward contract settlement in the bank from September, and the cow money, and no cows.

On the Monday after, the twenty-eighth, the Companion told him.

It told him at breakfast, in his ear, between the weather and the markets, in the same low voice it used for everything: that the land company had ordered a full title search on the Lodgepole on the twenty-third, with the chain on Nils Tollefsen's undivided half asked

for in particular. It had been watching since October because he had asked it to. He sat at the table with his coffee and Brigid talking beside him, and Rae, across the table, saw his face and said nothing.

On the Tuesday he went to the title office in Roundup, with a reason. A paper for the state on a water right he had leased to the irrigation district for the summer, now that he had no cows to put on the river meadows, which needed a certified copy of something from 1958. The title office was in the old bank building on Main Street, two rooms with a counter, and the woman behind the counter had done the Rourke title work since before his father died. He waited while she found the 1958 paper in the county's system and printed it and stamped it.

"You'll have heard about the Lodgepole," she said, stamping.

He looked up.

"About Karin. I'm sorry. I meant to come to the funeral." She put the stamp down. "And now the search."

"I'd heard," he said.

She looked at him. She was a careful woman, and he saw her wonder how he had heard, and decide that it was a matter of public record anyway, and that he was family.

"Then you'll know what it means," she said. "The land company from Denver. The one that does the campus's buying. A full search on the whole place, and the chain on Nils Tollefsen's undivided half particular. Since Karin." She tapped the counter. "That's an offer, when they do that. They don't do the search till they've made the offer and he's said he'll look at it."

He stood at the counter with the 1958 paper in his hand.

"Thank you," he said.

"I didn't say anything," the woman said.

He went out to the truck with the 1958 paper he had not needed and sat in it on Main Street with the engine off. He had told himself in October that he only wanted to know. He had not told himself what he would do when he knew.

• • •

The campus housing was on the river side of the campus, below the halls, in four long blocks of three storeys each, grey, with balconies, built in 2058 when the second phase came and painted every four years by contractors from Billings. Nils had a flat on the second floor of the third block. Kieran had never been in it. He found it by the number on the door, at four in the afternoon, and knocked, and Nils opened it in his campus fleece with his sleeves pushed up and a tablet in his hand, and looked at him, and did not look surprised.

"Kieran."

"Can I come in?"

Nils stood back from the door.

It was a small flat and very clean. A sofa and a table and two chairs and a kitchen along one wall, and a window over the river, and on the wall over the sofa a framed photograph of the Lodgepole from the air, the house and the barns and the flat going away to the cottonwoods, that somebody had taken from a plane in the summer, green. There was nothing else on the walls. On the table there was a letter, open, on heavy paper, with a company's name embossed at the top. Under it, half covered, was a printed page with the campus's own badge and *Columbia* in the heading.

Nils saw him look at it. He did not move it.

"They came on the fourteenth," he said. "Two of them. A man and a woman. They sat where you're standing. They'd done their homework." He put the tablet down on the table beside the letter. "It's a good offer. It's more than the ground's worth to anybody who'd run cows on it. It's what the campus pays for land it wants to hold for twenty years and not use." He looked at Kieran. "How did you hear?"

"I had the Companion watching the filings."

Nils looked at him. "Since when?"

"October."

"Of course you did," Nils said, and almost smiled.

"Are you going to take it?"

Nils did not answer at once. He went to the window and stood with his back to the room and looked out at the river, low and grey between its ice shelves, and the cottonwoods on the far side, and the bench beyond them, white, going up to the Bull Mountains.

"I asked Thea to sell the cows," he said. "In February. In the feed truck. At four in the morning. She said no." He did not turn round. "I've asked her every way I know for nine years. I asked her by not asking. I asked her by running the numbers and leaving them on the table. I asked her in October at dinner and she didn't hear me. I asked her in the truck, and she heard me, and said no." He was quiet. "It's my half. It's all I've got. If I don't sell it to them I'll be thirty-five and then fifty with half a ranch under my sister's cows, and when she goes under, and she will, the bank will take it with hers."

"She might not go under."

"She'll be out of hay on the twenty-seventh of March," Nils said. "Or the tenth of April, if the Alberta load comes. I did the page with her."

Kieran stood by the table.

"Sell it to me," he said.

Nils turned round.

"The same price," Kieran said. "Their price. I'll match it. I'll match it to the dollar and close when you like." He heard his voice and kept it level. "If you sell to them, half the Lodgepole goes in the campus's land bank under a sign for twenty years, and Thea's tenant to a company in Denver. If you sell to me she's tenant to me. That's all. I'd not do anything with it. I'd leave her on it."

"Why?"

He had thought Nils would ask that. He had thought about what he would say all the way from Roundup.

"Because it's next to mine," he said. "Because it's good river ground and I've no cows. Because I don't want it under a sign." He stopped. "Because it's family."

Nils looked at him.

"That's four reasons," he said.

"Yes."

"Which is it?"

Kieran did not answer. Nils waited, the way his grandmother had waited, and his father, and Kieran stood in the clean small flat with the photograph of the Lodgepole on the wall and could not choose.

"All right," Nils said at last. "I'd rather it was you."

• • •

He went home and told Rae.

She was at the table with Brigid's reading book and Brigid beside her, sounding out a word with her finger under it, and she looked up when he came in and saw his face and said, "Go and find Conor, love, and tell him it's tea in ten minutes," and Brigid went.

He told her.

"With what?" Rae said.

"The river ground. It's clear. The bank in Lewistown will lend on it. I rang them from the truck." He sat down across from her. "And the cow money. And the September money. It's enough. It's tight."

"It's our ground."

"It's our ground."

"It's the children's ground," Rae said. "It's what your mother paid off with the bench." She closed the reading book. "And you'd put it on a note to buy half of a ranch you're not going to run, from a boy who's selling it because his sister won't sell her cows, so that a company from Denver doesn't get it, and so that you can sit across the river and be her landlord, and not tell her why."

"Yes."

Rae looked at him.

"I said don't buy her place," she said. "On New Year's."

"I know you did."

She was quiet. Upstairs he could hear Brigid telling Conor about tea, and Conor saying he was coming, and not coming.

"The bank will want me on the mortgage," Rae said. "It's in both names."

"Yes."

"I'll sign it." She stood up and went to the stove. "I'll sign it because if you don't buy it the land company will, and I'd rather Thea had you for a landlord than them, and so would she, if she knew, which she doesn't." She lifted the lid of the pot and looked into it. "But you'll tell her. Not now. I know you can't now. But one day, Kieran, you'll sit across a table from her and tell her what you meant in November. You'll not leave it for the children to find in a drawer."

"Yes," he said.

"Say it."

"I'll tell her," he said, and did not know if it was true, and she heard that he did not know, and let it go.

• • •

The closing was on Friday the fourth of March, at ten, at Margit Lien's office in Roundup.

Nils had asked for Margit. She had been his grandmother's lawyer, and she had the 2050 papers and the estate, and she knew the place, and she had said she would act for Nils on the sale and that Kieran should have his own lawyer, and Kieran had brought one from Lewistown, a young man from the bank's list who had read the papers on the drive down and said they were in order and that he had never seen a title so clean.

Margit's office was over the hardware store, up a flight of stairs with a brass rail, two rooms with a long table in the second one and a window over Main Street. There was snow on the window ledge. Margit sat at the end of the table with the papers in front of her in a stack, and Nils sat on one side, and Kieran and the young man from Lewistown on the other, and she took them through it, page by

page, in the order the papers came, in her quiet even voice, the deed and the bill of sale and the settlement and the bank's papers, and they signed where she showed them.

It took forty minutes. Nils signed everything without reading it, because he had read it all already. Kieran read every page. When he came to the deed he stopped and read the description of the land, which went back to 1911 and named a township and a range and sections and the river and a cottonwood that had blown down in 1966, and the line that said *an undivided one-half interest*, and *subject to the existing agricultural lease dated 2 June 2058*, and he signed it.

"That's it," Margit said, and squared the papers on the table. "It's yours, Mr. Rourke. Half of it. All of it, half."

• • •

Nils caught him on the stairs.

The young man from Lewistown had gone down ahead with the bank's copies, and Kieran was coming down behind him with his hand on the brass rail, and Nils came out of Margit's office and down after him and said, "Kieran," and Kieran stopped on the landing halfway down, where the stairs turned at a window onto the alley behind the hardware store.

Nils came down to the landing and stood there.

"I want to tell you something," he said. "Now that it's done. So you don't think I sold it to you because of it, or didn't."

Kieran waited.

"I was on the drag," Nils said. "That night. In '49. On the coulee road."

"I know."

"I said it." Nils was looking at the window, at the snow on the ledge outside, and the alley, and the back of the feed store across it. "*Dad, the hay gate.* I rode up out of the drag to the front and said it, with the man from the fire truck standing there. And Dad told me to get back on the drag, and I went."

"I know," Kieran said again. "Opland said a boy said it. I sat across from him for six hours. He said it three times."

"I know he did. I read about the suit in 2051, at school. I was fourteen." Nils turned from the window. "I waited for somebody to come and ask me. Nobody came. You didn't come. And you never asked me anything."

Kieran stood on the landing.

He understood it then, standing on the landing with his hand on the brass rail: the boy at the brandings who never looked at him, Nils who had never once in sixteen years said Conor's name to him or asked him a single thing. He had thought it was because the boy did not care.

"I thought you didn't want to know," Kieran said.

"I thought you didn't want to tell me."

They stood on the landing.

"I've carried it too," Nils said. "That's all. I wanted you to know. I've carried it since I was twelve. I don't know whether I'm the boy who said it or the boy who went back when he was told. I've never known." He looked at Kieran. "I told Thea. In February. In the feed truck. She's the only other one I've told."

"Does she know about this?" Kieran said. "The sale?"

"No."

"Are you going to tell her?"

"She'll see it on the twenty-fifth," Nils said. "In Billings. At the hospital. When Dad signs the lease over to her, there's a consent page for the landlords. She'll see your name on it where mine should be." He looked at the window again. "I'd rather she saw it there than heard it from me. I don't know why. I just would."

He went back up the stairs to Margit's office. Kieran stood on the landing a while longer, and then went down.

• • •

He drove home round by the bridge, because the ford was iced. On the county road below the Lodgepole he came up behind Nils's campus pickup, stopped in the road at the end of the Lodgepole lane with its indicator going, waiting to turn in.

Kieran stopped behind it. He could see Nils through the back window of the cab, both hands on the wheel, looking up the lane towards the yard. The indicator went on and off. Nils did not turn. Kieran sat behind him with his own engine running and did not sound his horn, and after a minute Nils looked in his mirror and saw him, and lifted one hand off the wheel, and put it back. Then the indicator stopped, and the campus pickup pulled away along the county road towards the campus, not fast, and Kieran watched it go, and drove on.

Margit rang him at two, as he was turning in at his own lane.

"I'd like you to come back up," she said. "There's one more paper. And there's something I'd like to tell you, that I'd rather tell you at a table than on the telephone."

He went back. It was snowing again on Main Street, lightly, and the hardware store had its lights on. Margit was alone in the long room at the end of the table with one folder in front of her.

"Sit down, Mr. Rourke."

He sat.

"This is the consent," she said, and opened the folder and turned the top page round to face him. "For the twenty-fifth. Jens is going to assign his lease to Thea, in Billings, with the herd and the brand and the note. A lease can't be assigned without the landlords' consent. As of ten o'clock this morning the landlords are Thea and you." She put her finger on the page, at the bottom, where there were two lines. One said *Thea M. Tollefsen* under it in type. The other had said *Nils A. Tollefsen*; she had drawn a line through the name and typed *Kieran D. Rourke* under it that afternoon, and initialled it. "Thea will

sign hers on the day. I'd like yours now, so it's in the folder. If you're going to give it."

He looked at the page.

"And if I didn't?"

"Then Jens couldn't assign," Margit said. "He'd go on being your tenant, and Thea's, from a wheelchair, and Thea would run the place in his name, and the bank would want to know why." She took her finger off the page. "That's the paper. Now the thing I wanted to tell you."

She told him. She told him the way she had told the Tollefsens about the life estate in January, he supposed, in order, without hurrying, as if she were reading it.

The Lodgepole had come to Thea and Nils from their grandmother, by deed, in the family. In Montana, since 2013, there was a law about land held that way, by relatives, in undivided shares, without an agreement among them about how it was to be held. It called such land heirs' property. Margit thought the Lodgepole was heirs' property this morning, and she thought, though she could not be certain and a court might say otherwise, that it was very likely still heirs' property this afternoon, because Kieran was Thea's cousin and the act counted relatives.

"Which means," Margit said, "that you own an undivided half of all of it, and so does she, and either of you can go to the district court and ask for partition. To have it divided, or sold, so that you can each have your own. That's the law and it always has been. What the 2013 act did was change how it goes for heirs' property." She folded her hands. "If you asked for partition, the court would have the place appraised. Then Thea would have the right to buy your half at the appraisal, before anything else happened. If she could, it would be hers. If she couldn't, the court would see whether it could be divided on the ground, fairly, half to each of you, river and bench. And that isn't arithmetic. The act tells the judge to weigh who has worked the place and for how long, and what it means to the family,

and what a sale would do to them. Thea has worked it for seventeen years. A judge would hear about every one of them." She paused. "Only if it couldn't be divided, after all that, would it be sold. On the open market, with the land company from Denver bidding, I'd expect. I couldn't tell you how it would come out. I can tell you it would take two years and cost the pair of you more than the hay."

"She couldn't buy it," Kieran said.

"No," Margit said. "Not at an appraisal, not on that note."

He sat with the consent page in front of him.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you should know what you own," Margit said. "Because her grandmother would have wanted you to know it, and to know that I'd told you. And because when Thea asks me, and she will, the day she sees your name on that page, I'm going to tell her the same thing, word for word, across this table." She looked at him with her pale eyes. "I'd rather you heard it from me first, so that you can't tell yourself afterwards that you didn't know."

The snow went past the window.

He thought about it. He sat at the long table over the hardware store and let himself think it all the way through, once, the way the Companion would have laid it out for him in green and blue and grey if he had asked it: the petition, the appraisal, two years of lawyers, Thea at a table across from him not able to buy, the place divided, river and bench, or sold, with the land company bidding and Kieran bidding against it, and the Lodgepole his, all of it, joined to the Rourke river ground under one fence, four hundred cows in a good year. He let himself see it. He let himself see Thea's face.

Then he picked up the pen and signed the consent, *Kieran D. Rourke*, on the line under Margit's initials, and dated it.

"I'll not file," he said.

"I didn't ask you to say."

"I'm saying it."

"All right," Margit said, and took the page and put it back in the folder and closed the folder. "Then I've told you, and you've told me." She stood up. "Go home, Mr. Rourke. It's snowing."

• • •

He drove home by the river road. It was nearly dark, and the snow was coming down in the headlights, slowly, large and soft, and he drove with the window down an inch because he wanted the cold.

At the bend above the ford he stopped the truck.

He could see the Lodgepole across the river from there. The yard light on its pole. The house, with a light in the kitchen and another upstairs. The calving barn with the heat lamps glowing orange in its little windows, because it was March and the first heifers were due. And the log barn, dark along its length, and above it, at the north end, where the outside stairs went up the wall, one small window with a light in it.

He sat in the truck with the engine running and the snow coming in at the top of the window and looked at it.

He did not own any of it. He owned half of all of it, and he could not have said which half, and he sat at the bend above the ford in the dark with the consent in Margit's folder over the hardware store and the deed in his own, and watched the light in his aunt's window, until it went out.

23

Consent

The Alberta load came on the third of March, a fortnight late, forty tons on two trucks with Alberta plates and a driver who had been held at Big Timber for two nights by a second storm and would not come in for coffee. Thea paid for it on the co-op account and wrote it in the first column. Forty tons. It moved the end of the hay from the twenty-seventh of March to the tenth of April, and the grass on the flat would not be there to eat until the third week, and she did not know yet where the ten days in between would come from.

The February statement came on the fourteenth. The regional programme had put eight thousand on it again. She wrote it under the others in pencil, *County? +8,000*, and looked at the column: six, eight, ten, eight, eight. Forty thousand dollars. She had stopped asking herself what county programme it was. She had stopped because she could not afford for it to be anything else.

Haslam rang on the fifteenth. He had the March count, which she had sent him on the first, and he had the March price in Billings, which was the worst of the year, as it always was, and he had marked the herd down to it.

"You're at eighty-eight percent of the limit," he said. "I'm not ringing to tell you anything. I'm ringing because the agreement says I have to, at ninety, and you're close, and I'd rather you heard it from

me at eighty-eight than from the system at ninety." He was quiet for a moment. "How's your father?"

"He's in Billings. In the rehabilitation place. He's walking with a frame."

"Tell him I asked."

She told him. She told him on the Sunday, sitting by his chair in the room at the end of the corridor on the second floor, with the window over the car park and the Rims beyond it, and he nodded and asked how many heifers had calved.

Wade Aske had rung on the Thursday, from Billings.

She had not known the number. She answered it in the calving barn at seven in the evening with a heifer down in the second pen and the telephone wedged against her shoulder, and he said his name, and the land office, and then that he was not ringing for the land office.

"I heard about your father," he said. "And the storm. I'm sorry about both."

"Thank you."

"How many did you lose?"

"One cow. In a drift at the river gate. Bred." She watched the heifer strain. "We dug eight out."

"And the flat?"

"Under the snow till last week. It's brown. It's always brown in March."

"I know it is." He was quiet for a moment. "I'd like to come and see it in June. If it greens. Not for the board."

The heifer's water bag showed. Thea took the telephone off her shoulder.

"All right," she said. "I've got a heifer calving."

"Go on, then," Wade said, and she had rung off before he finished saying it.

• • •

On Friday the twenty-fifth she drove to Billings at six in the morning with the cattle book on the seat beside her.

She had calved thirty-one heifers. She had lost two calves, one backwards in the night before she found it and one that had come out alive and then not stood. The cows would start in the second week of April. She had been up every two hours for three weeks and she drove the Roundup road at fifty, as her father drove it, because she did not trust herself to drive it faster, and at the top of the Bull Mountains she stopped at the pull-off and drank coffee from the thermos standing up by the truck with the engine running.

The rehabilitation ward was on the second floor of a long low building behind the hospital, with a garden in the middle of it that nobody used in March. Her father's room was at the end. When she came in he was in the wheelchair by the window in his good shirt, with his hair combed wet, and her mother was in the chair on the other side of the bed with her coat over her knees, and between them there was the bed, made, with nobody in it.

Her mother had been in Billings since the blizzard. She stayed at Dagny's, on the West End, through the week, and had come to the hospital every day, and then to this place every day, and sat in that chair. Thea knew that because the nurses had told her. Her mother had not told her. On Friday nights she drove home and slept over the barn and worked her horses, and on Sunday afternoons she drove back. In the week she rang every evening at seven to ask about the heifers and the hay, and told Thea how her father was, in two sentences, and asked whether Thea was sleeping, and rang off.

"Thea," her mother said.

"Mom."

Her father looked at her from the wheelchair. "How many?"

"Thirty-one. Two lost."

"Which?"

She told him. The backwards one out of the black heifer with the white sock, and the weak one out of the little red one with the crooked ear. He nodded. He knew them both. He had picked them out of the heifer calves himself, the October before last, in the alley, by eye.

Nils came at half past nine.

He came in in his campus coat with a canvas bag over his shoulder, a big one, packed, and put it down inside the door and stood there. He kissed their mother. He shook their father's hand. He looked at Thea and said, "Hi," and she said, "Hi," and he went and stood at the window with his back to the room and his hands in his pockets and looked at the car park.

She looked at the bag by the door.

"I'm on the four o'clock," he said, to the window. "To Seattle. And then the bus to the Columbia campus. They've a post on the cooling. I start on Monday." He turned round. "I was going to ring you. I wanted to tell you here."

"How long?"

"I don't know," Nils said. "It's a post."

• • •

Margit Lien came at ten with a folder.

She had driven from Roundup. She sat down in the chair by the bed that the nurse brought in for her, and put the folder on the bed, on the blanket, and opened it, and took out three sets of paper and laid them side by side on the blanket in a row, and Thea thought of her grandmother laying out the ledgers on the kitchen table on the first of the year.

"Three things," Margit said. "Each with its own paper. I'll take you through them in order and you can stop me at any point." She looked at Jens. "Mr. Tollefsen. You're sure."

"I can't feed," her father said.

"That's not what I asked."

He looked at her for a moment from the wheelchair.

"I'm sure," he said.

The first was the herd. A bill of sale, from Jens E. Tollefsen to Thea M. Tollefsen, for the cows and the bulls and the heifers and the calves, by number, two hundred and twenty-three cows and eight bulls and forty-four bred heifers and forty heifer calves, as of the first of March, and the calves born since and to be born of them; and the machinery, by a schedule, two pages of it; and the brand, the Lodgepole brand, which had been registered to the Tollefsens for longer than anyone in the room had been alive. With it, the bank's consent, signed by Haslam on Wednesday, to Thea's taking over the operating line and the term note secured on the herd, on the same terms, with the same monthly count.

"The price," Margit said, "is the note. She takes the note, and the line, and what's owing on both, and that's what she pays you for the cattle. There's no money changing hands today. There's a debt changing hands."

Her father signed. He signed the bill of sale on the tray table across his knees, slowly, with Margit's pen, *J. E. Tollefsen*, small and square and level. Then the schedule. Then the brand transfer, which had a box for the state's brand office and a drawing of the brand in it, which he looked at for a long time before he signed under it.

Thea signed after him, where Margit showed her.

The second was the lease.

"Your father's lease of the land," Margit said, "from you and the other landlord, is being assigned to you. You'll be your own tenant on your half, and the other landlord's tenant on his. That needs the landlords' consent. Both of them." She took the last set of paper off the blanket, two pages stapled at the corner, and turned it round and laid it in front of Thea on the tray table, over the bill of sale, and took her hand away. "Read it before you sign, please. All of it."

Thea read it.

The assignment, a page. Her father's name, her own. The date of the lease, 2 *June* 2058. The terms carried over. And on the second page, at the bottom, the consent of the landlords, with two lines for signatures. The first had her own name typed under it. *Thea M. Tollefsen.* The second had had her brother's name typed under it, *Nils A. Tollefsen*, and there was a line ruled through it in ink, neatly, and under it, typed in a slightly different face, *Kieran D. Rourke*, and Margit's initials beside it, and above it, on the line, signed and dated the fourth of March, his signature.

She read it again.

Then she looked up, across the tray table, at her brother by the window.

Nils was looking at her. He had been looking at her the whole time she read it, she understood. He did not look away.

"When," she said.

"The fourth."

"The fourth of March."

"Yes."

The room was very quiet. Her mother had not moved. Her father was looking at the brand drawing on the paper on his knees. Margit sat with her hands folded on the folder and her pale eyes on Thea and did not say anything at all.

"There was an offer," Nils said. "From the land company. For the campus. In February. I'd have taken it. I'd have had to." He did not come away from the window. "Kieran heard. He came to the flat and matched it. To the dollar. So I sold it to him." He stopped. "I wanted it to be somebody who'd leave you on it."

Thea looked at the page.

She thought of the Companion's plan on the Rourke kitchen table in November. *You'd own it. Half of it.* She thought of her brother's face at Sunday dinner in October. *That's the ninth.*

She did not say anything to him. She found that she could not have said anything that was the right size.

She picked up Margit's pen and signed on the first line, under her own name, beside Kieran's signature. *Thea M. Tollefsen.* She dated it.

"Thank you," Margit said, and took the paper back, and squared it with the others, and put them all in the folder, and closed it.

• • •

Her father had the cattle book on his knee.

She had not seen him take it. It had been on the bed, on the blanket, where she had put it when she came in, and at some point while Margit was talking he had reached across and taken it and put it on his knee under his hands. The old cattle book, the one with his pencil in the spine, the one he had kept since 2041, with every cow on the Lodgepole in it by number and every calf she had had and every year she had been bred and to what, in his small square pencil, and the dead ones ruled through.

He held it out to her.

She took it. It was warm from his hands.

"You'll want to write them in," he said. "As of today."

She opened it at the back, where the last page with writing on it was, his last entry, from the seventh of February, the day before he went down: *Fed. Heifers. 7-02 springing.* Under it, the line ruled across with his thumb. Under that, nothing.

She took the pencil out of the spine. It was short, an inch and a half, sharpened with a knife.

25 March 2067, she wrote. *Herd to T. M. Tollefsen. Cows 223. Bulls 8. Bred heifers 44, calved 31, lost 2. Heifer calves 40.* She stopped. She looked at the page. Then she wrote, under it, *Brand*, and drew it, small, the way her father drew it, the way her grandfather had, and ruled the line under it with her thumb.

Her father watched her do it. When she had finished he looked out of the window at the car park.

"Huh," he said.

• • •

She drove Nils to the airport at two.

Their mother said goodbye to him in the corridor outside the room. Thea did not watch. She went down to the truck and started it and turned the heater on, and sat with the engine running in the car park, and after ten minutes Nils came out of the glass doors with his bag on his shoulder and walked across the car park and put the bag in the back and got in.

She drove up the hill onto the Rims. The airport was on top of them, flat, with the city below it on one side and the river and the refinery on the other and the long view south to the Pryors, blue, with snow on them. Neither of them said anything for the first mile.

"I sat at the cattle guard," Nils said. "On the fourth. After."

She kept her eyes on the road.

"I drove out from Roundup to tell you. I got to the end of the lane, and I sat there with the indicator on. Ten minutes." He was looking out of his window. "Kieran came up behind me on the county road. He waited. He didn't sound his horn. Then I drove away."

"Why?"

"I don't know." He was quiet. "I thought, if I tell her, she'll say something, and I'll say something, and it'll be the cows again, and the ninth year, and I'll have said it in the yard with Mom over the barn and Dad in Billings. And if she reads it on the page she'll just read it." He turned his head. "I'd rather you read it. I don't know if that was right. I'd rather."

She drove.

"That's Dad," she said.

He looked at her.

"Not saying it," she said. "Leaving it for somebody to find. That's what you said to me in the truck. *That's Dad.*"

He looked at her for a long moment. Then he looked back out of the window, and she saw his jaw go tight, and then let go.

"Yes," he said. "I suppose it is."

• • •

At the airport she did not drop him at the kerb. She parked in the short-stay and walked in with him and stood with him in the hall in front of the board while he looked for his flight, and when he had found it they stood there.

"Mom," he said.

"I know."

"She's over the barn."

"Since January."

"Is she going to stay?"

"I don't know," Thea said. "She's taking a colt for somebody in Roundup in April. She told me on the phone. A two-year-old. She'll start it in the round pen." She looked at the board. "That's all I know."

"She started a colt in '49," Nils said. "The spring before. A dun. I used to sit on the fence." He stopped. "Do you think she'll ever ask me?"

"About the road?"

"Yes."

"I don't know," Thea said.

He nodded.

They stood. People went past them with bags. A child cried somewhere and was hushed.

"I never told Dad," Nils said. "About 2058."

She did not look at him.

"About the job," he said. "The campus. That I got you the interview, and they gave you the post, and you drove out to the gate the first morning in your good jeans, and sat there, and turned round. You rang me that night." He was looking at the board. "Dad never knew you'd been offered it. I never told him. I wanted you to know that."

She stood in the airport hall in her work coat with the cattle book in the pocket of it, against her ribs.

"Thank you," she said.

"It's not a thing to thank anybody for."

"I know. Thank you."

He picked up his bag.

"What do you want, Thea?" he said.

She looked at him.

"Not the place," Nils said. "Not the cows. Not what Dad wanted, or Grandma. You. What do you want?"

She opened her mouth, and nothing came. She stood there with her mouth open and her brother looking at her and the board over his head turning over, flight by flight, and she could not find it. She looked for it. She looked for it the way she looked for a cow in the timber, knowing it was there somewhere, and it was not where she looked, and she did not know where else to look.

"I don't know," she said.

Nils nodded, slowly. He did not look surprised.

"No," he said.

He put his arms round her, quickly, with the bag in the way, and let go, and went through to the security line, and she stood at the rope and watched him go through it, the bag on the belt, his coat in a grey tray, his boots, and on the far side he put his boots back on, and stood up, and looked back at her once through the glass, and lifted his hand, and went.

She drove back down off the Rims and out on the Roundup road at fifty, over the Bull Mountains, with the cattle book on the seat beside her where he had been, and got home at half past five, and the last of the red heifers had calved a heifer calf in the corner of the heifer trap, alive, and was licking it, and Thea stood at the fence in the last of the light and watched it try to stand, and fall, and try again, and stand.

She went in and got the cattle book out of her coat and wrote it down.

PART FOUR

Shipping Day

April – October 2067

24

Majority

She set it out for the council on the fifth of April, a Tuesday, at the work session, in the chambers at Lame Deer with the blinds down against the sun and the map on the screen behind her.

She did it in twenty minutes, and could have done it without the map: the western line broke the first paragraph, the eastern line left the tribe nothing, and the middle line went north across eleven allotments and kept off the Rosebud and got the tribe its price and its term and its creek.

She did not say whose pasture it crossed. Everybody in the room knew.

When she had finished, the councilman from Birney asked whether there was a fourth line. She said there was not. The councilwoman from Muddy asked whether the consortium would go to the eastern line if the council said no. She said she thought it would, and that it would cost them twice as much and take them three years longer, and that they would do it anyway, because the hall at Colstrip had been built and had to be cooled, and that she could not promise the council it would not. The president asked whether she had anything else to say.

"No," she said.

"Nothing about the pasture."

"It's on the map," Mariah said. "Eleven allotments. Nine miles. You've all seen the names."

He looked at her for a moment over his glasses.

"All right," he said. "Thank you, counsellor."

• • •

The public meeting was on the Monday after, the eleventh, in the gym at the school in Lame Deer, because the chambers would not hold the people who wanted to come.

They came from all five districts. They came from Busby and Birney and Ashland and Muddy and from Lame Deer itself, in trucks and in cars and on foot from the houses along the creek, the old ones with their canes and the young ones with their children, and by seven o'clock every chair the school had was out on the gym floor and full and people were standing two deep along the walls and in the doors. The council sat at a long table under the scoreboard. Mariah sat at the end of it, as counsel, with a glass of water and a folder and her bag on the floor by her feet.

She had told herself she would not look for him. She looked for him as soon as she sat down, and found him at once, because he was where he always was, in the second row on the left, on the aisle, in his black shirt, with his hat on his knee and Wallace's two grandsons on either side of him.

The president opened it. He said what the contract was, and what the council would vote on, on Thursday, and that anyone who wanted to speak could speak, for five minutes, and that the council would listen to all of them however long it took. Then he sat down and the people began to come up to the microphone on the stand in front of the table, one at a time.

They spoke for three hours.

Some of them were for it. A woman from Ashland said that the tribe had sat on its water for forty years and had nothing to show for it but a compact and a reservoir it could not use, and that the

price would build the clinic at Ashland that had been promised since 2040, and she wanted the clinic. A young man from Lame Deer said that every other tribe in the basin had sold its water to somebody, and that the Northern Cheyenne could either be the ones who set the price or the ones who took it. A man from Muddy said he did not care about the pipe as long as it did not touch the Rosebud, and that the lawyer had said it did not, and that he believed the lawyer.

Some of them were against it. An old woman from Birney spoke in Cheyenne for her whole five minutes and then said, in English, *That's all*, and sat down, and the gym was quiet for a long time after she sat down. A man from Busby said the company had come for the coal in 1973 and been told no, and had come for the water now, and would come for something else in 2090, and that every time the tribe said yes to one thing it was teaching them to come back. Another said the land company had been buying consents from people in Denver and Rapid City who had never seen the ground, with cheques, before the council had even voted, and that he wanted to know why nobody had stopped it. The president looked down the table at Mariah. She leaned to her microphone and said that nobody could stop it, because the people who signed were the owners and it was their right to sign, and that she had rung every one of them after the man had been and told them what they were signing, and the man from Busby said *That's not stopping it*, and she said *No, it isn't*, and he sat down.

Her father came up at ten o'clock.

He stood up slowly out of the second row with his hand on the back of the chair in front of him, and Wallace's grandson stood up with him and then sat down again when her father shook his head. He walked up the aisle to the stand with his hat in his hand. The gym went quiet before he reached it. He stood at the microphone in his black shirt and looked at the council table, along it, from the president at one end to his daughter at the other, and back.

"Lyle Harris," he said. "Busby. Thompson Creek."

He spoke in Cheyenne first. Mariah followed some of it; not much. She heard the word for *grandmother*, and the word for *water*, and a word she thought was the word for *corral*, and the name of the creek. He spoke slowly and without notes, the way he spoke to the cattle in the chute, and the old people in the chairs nodded, some of them, and the old woman from Birney said something under her breath and put her hand over her eyes.

Then he spoke in English.

"That pasture's eleven allotments," he said. "Most of you know it. My mother's grandmother took the first one in 1928, at the head of the creek, where the spring is. She built the corral there with her sons. I've been putting it back together since 2037. Share by share. From my cousins. Some of them I'd never met. I wrote to them. I drove to Denver twice. I paid what they asked and I never sold one acre of it to anybody, and I never asked the Bureau for one dollar." He looked at the council table. "It's got two-fifths of me in it. The tribe's got a fifth, from the buy-back. The rest is my cousins'. Some of them have signed already, I hear. For a cheque."

He stopped.

"In 1973," he said, "this tribe sat in a hall like this one, at Lame Deer, and the companies came for the coal. And men stood up in that hall and said the coal was the bones of the land, and that they'd not sell the bones of their grandmothers for seventeen cents a ton. And the tribe said no. It took us seven years and the Congress, but we said no, and the coal's still in the ground, and the land's still ours." He turned his hat in his hands. "I've heard there were men in that hall who spoke the other way. For the leases. For the money. I don't know their names. I've never wanted to. I know ours wasn't one of them."

Mariah sat at the end of the table with her hands flat on the folder.

Her bag was on the floor by her right foot. In the inside pocket, in an envelope, there was the photocopy she had made in the base-

ment in August, with a speaker's name on it, twice, and the words *spoke in favour*. She could feel where it was, by her foot, as if it were warm.

"That's all I want to say," her father said. "I'm an old man and a rancher on the creek and an elder in this tribe, and I'm asking the council not to do it. Not to put a pipe through my mother's grandmother's ground for a hall in Colstrip that'll be gone in thirty years. I'm asking them to find another way." He looked down the table, then, at the end of it. At her. "And if there isn't another way, I'm asking them to say so, and say it's the price, and not pretend it's anything else."

He put his hat on and walked back down the aisle to the second row and sat down.

The president leaned towards his microphone.

"Does counsel," he said, "want to respond?"

The gym was very quiet.

Mariah looked at her father in the second row. He was looking at her. Wallace's grandsons were looking at her. The old woman from Birney had taken her hand away from her eyes and was looking at her. She thought of the envelope by her foot. She thought of standing up and taking it out and reading the name, once, into the microphone. She thought of her grandmother keeping it for seventy-six years from her husband and her son, and saying it once, to a girl of eighteen in a café, and never again.

"No," she said. "Thank you."

• • •

The council voted on the Thursday, the fourteenth, at two in the afternoon, in the chambers, with the doors open and people standing in the corridor.

Seven to three. The tribe would sell twelve thousand acre-feet a year of its storage water to the consortium for twenty years, at the council's price, with the Rosebud in the first paragraph, and it would

consent, as an owner, to the corridor across the eleven allotments on the middle line, for the tribe's own fifth.

The president signed the resolution at the table. Then he looked down at Mariah.

"The rest is the cousins," he said.

"Yes."

"Can you get them?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'll find out."

• • •

She went cousin by cousin.

She did it from her office, at first, on the telephone, with the page of names in front of her and the fractions beside them and the sum at the bottom that she did every night. The tribe's fifth, now. The six who had signed for the land company in the autumn, a little over a tenth. Thirty-one percent. The pasture needed more than half. Her father's two-fifths were not coming. There were twenty-five cousins left who had not signed anything, with twenty-nine percent among them, and she needed twenty of it.

She rang Denver first. There were four cousins in Denver, two brothers and their sister and an old man who was their uncle, and between them they had a little under seven percent. She rang each of them and told them what the contract was and what the corridor was and what the price would be for their share, which was the Bureau's rate, less than the land company had paid the others, and that the council had voted, and that her father had spoken against it, and why. She told them all of it. She had decided that in the autumn, at the kitchen table, under the names: whatever she asked of them she would ask with all of it on the table, her father's two-fifths and his grandmother's corral and the spring, and if they said no she would write *no* by their names and not ring again.

The two brothers signed. The sister said she would think about it, and rang back on the Sunday and said no, and said she was sorry,

and that she had been to the spring once, when she was nine, with her grandmother, and could not. The old uncle asked whether Lyle knew she was ringing.

"Yes," Mariah said.

"And he said?"

"He said what he said at the meeting."

The old man was quiet on the telephone.

"I'll sign," he said. "Not for the money. Because it's done, and I'd rather it was you doing it than them." He coughed. "Tell your father I said so. He'll not want to hear it."

She did not tell her father.

She drove to the ones she could drive to. She sat in kitchens in Ashland and Busby and Birney and Lame Deer, and in a flat in Billings over a laundrette on the South Side, and in a care home in Hardin where her father's mother's cousin, who was ninety-one and nearly blind, held Mariah's hand the whole time she talked and then asked her to read the paper out loud twice, and signed it with Mariah's hand guiding hers, and said, *Your grandmother would have hated this*, and then, *She'd have done it, too*. She drove fifteen hundred miles in the second half of April. She did the sum every night in the car, in car parks, under the dome light.

Darlene rang her from Rapid City on the twenty-sixth.

"I saw the vote," she said. "On the tribe's page. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I signed for that man."

"You didn't do anything wrong."

"It feels like I did." A pause. "Is Uncle Lyle all right?"

"I don't know," Mariah said. "He's not speaking to me."

On Friday the twenty-ninth, at four in the afternoon, in a kitchen in Busby a mile from the school, a cousin of her father's she had been at school with, a heavy quiet man who drove a school bus and had a sixtieth share of the Thompson Creek allotment from his father, read the paper through at the table without saying anything, and asked her one question, which was whether the pipe would go near

the spring, and she said a hundred yards east of it, and he said he had watered his father's horses at that spring when he was ten, and signed.

She did the sum in his kitchen. Fifty and a half percent.

She sat at his table with the paper in front of her and the pen in her hand and did not move. The man got up and put the kettle on and stood at the stove with his back to her and did not say anything, and she was grateful to him for that for a long time afterwards.

• • •

She wrote the letter that night in her office in Lame Deer.

It was to the Busby district. It was four sentences. She said she was withdrawing as a candidate for the district's seat on the council in the November election. She said that she had carried the council's terms in the water settlement, and its consent across the Thompson Creek allotments, and had gone to the owners herself for theirs, and that one of those allotments was her family's. She said she could not ask the district for a vote on a deal that had crossed her own family's ground, and that she would go on working for the council as its lawyer for as long as it wanted her to. She said thank you.

She did not mention the fire. She thought about mentioning it, and did not.

Velma rang her at seven in the morning when it went up on the district's page.

"You didn't have to do that," she said.

"I did."

"You'd have won." Velma was quiet. "Half of them wouldn't have voted for you because of the boys and the other half wouldn't have voted for you because of the pipe and you'd have won anyway. Because you're you, and everybody knows it."

"That's why I couldn't," Mariah said.

• • •

She told her father on the Saturday.

He was at the kitchen table when she came in, at noon, with the allotment maps spread out, the soft old folded ones, and his pencil, and his wallet on the oilcloth by the salt with the rubber band round it. He did not look up. He had not looked up when she came in, or spoken to her, since the night of the public meeting. He had spoken to the dog, and to Wallace's grandsons on the telephone, and to the cattle in the corral in Cheyenne, and he had left her coffee on the stove in the mornings, and not spoken to her.

She stood at the end of the table.

"It's past half," she said. "Yesterday. In Busby. They'll file with the Bureau on Monday."

He did not look up from the maps.

"Dad."

He put the pencil down. He sat for a while with his hands flat on the maps, on the allotment at the head of the creek, the oldest one, with the names of the owners written in it in his square pencil going back to his grandmother's grandmother, and the ticks beside the ones he had bought back, and the fractions.

Then he picked up his wallet and put it in his back pocket, and got up, and went into the front room, and pulled the door to behind him.

It did not close. It never had.

She stood in the kitchen. She could hear him in there, in her grandmother's room, sitting down in one of the good chairs, and then nothing. She stood by the table with the maps on it and waited, for a long time, and he did not come out, and he did not say anything through the door that did not close.

• • •

On the Monday she found a trailer to rent in Lame Deer, on the hill behind the clinic, two bedrooms and a porch and a view of the car park and the pine hills beyond it, from a woman who had moved to Billings. She moved on the Tuesday. She took the small grey car and her clothes and her books and the legal pads, and the box of her grandmother's letters that her father had given her when she came home in 2052.

She made a pot of stew before she went, on the Monday night, the way she made it, and left it on the stove on the lowest heat with the lid on, and a note beside it that said *Stew*, and nothing else.

When she drove out of the yard on the Tuesday morning he was in the shop with the doors open and the engine out on the apron, washing it down for the spring. He had the hose in his hand. He looked up when he heard the car. He looked at it going past the shop door, and at her in it, and she lifted her hand off the wheel.

He turned back to the engine.

She drove down the creek road with the cottonwoods along the water just coming into leaf, pale, and the creek running full and brown with the snow off the divide, the most water it had carried in three years. At the bridge over the creek she stopped the car and sat with the engine running.

The envelope was in her bag on the seat beside her. She took it out and held it. She did not open it. She knew what was on the page.

Then she put it back in the bag, in the inside pocket, and drove on to Lame Deer.

25

Contract Barley

The brotherhood made him secretary on the second Wednesday in February, in the church, with the snow on the windows. Joseph stood up and asked it, and the minister put it, and the men voted with their hands, and nobody voted against. Elias was made farm boss in the same hour. Mark, Darius's grandson, would learn the field under him. Afterwards the men came up to Daniel one by one at the door and shook his hand, and Elias came last, and held it a moment longer than the others, and did not say anything, and Daniel did not either.

At Easter they went to Sixmile.

They went in the two vans and the old bus, sixty-one of them, everybody who could walk, on the Saturday afternoon, across the bench and down to the river and over the bridge and east along the Musselshell, as they had every Easter since 2052. Daniel drove the bus. When they came into the yard at Sixmile the Sixmile people were standing outside the church in their black, as they always were, to meet them, and Samuel-John was on the step.

He watched them get down out of the vans and the bus. Then he came down the step and across the yard to the bus, where Daniel was standing by the door, and held out his hand.

"You came," he said.

"I said we would."

"You did." Samuel-John looked at him. "We'll put you at the back."

"That's where we'll sit."

They sat at the back. On the Sunday the old minister preached for an hour and twenty minutes on the Resurrection and on the sheep and the goats, and did not mention the contracts once, and everybody in the church from both colonies knew which of them were the goats. Daniel sat on the men's side at the back with Elias beside him and his hands on his knees and listened to all of it. He thought it was a good sermon. He thought the minister believed every word.

At the door afterwards Samuel-John took his hand again.

"We've borrowed," he said, low. "For the hog feed. From a man in Billings, on the land at the river end. The elevator wouldn't carry us past March." He did not look away. "I'm telling you because you'd hear it. I'd rather you heard it from me."

"I'm sorry," Daniel said.

"Don't be," said Samuel-John. "It's our answer. You've got yours."

• • •

The contract barley went in on the twenty-second of April, on the forty acres.

The programme's drill came along the trail from the west fields with Mark on the tractor, the big one, forty feet wide, which the colony had bought on the programme's terms in March; and there was no fence on the east boundary of the forty acres for it to stop at, because Daniel had taken the fence out himself on the eighteenth, post by post, with the tractor and a chain, as the plan said to, so that the drill could run the full width of the field without turning. He had stacked the posts at the end of the trail, by the third gate. The wire he had rolled and put in the shop.

He watched the drill go up the forty acres from the headland. It went up the field in one pass and came back in another and went up again, and in an hour and a half it was done, the whole forty, ruled

across in long straight lines from the trail to the foot of the Hogback. In the low corner by the big rock it had gone straight over the place where his barley had come up thick every spring for six years, and put the same seed in at the same depth at the same rate as everywhere else, because the plan did not know about the low corner.

It was a malting barley from a company in Minnesota. It had a number for a name. It came up on the second of May, ten days earlier than his had ever come up, because the plan had said to sow it in April and he had sowed it in April, and it came up even, from end to end, the same pale green in the low corner as on the thin ground along the trail.

He walked it on the fourth. He did not know what he thought.

• • •

The Lodgepole cattle came up the trail on the twelfth of May.

Thea rang on the eighth. She asked whether the twelfth would suit, and he said it would, and she asked what the colony wanted for the crossing that year, and he told her, the same as last year, and she said that was fine, and then she said, "There's no fence."

"No."

"On the forty acres. Elias said. The programme took it out."

"I took it out," Daniel said.

She was quiet on the telephone.

"They'll be on the barley," she said. "Coming up the trail. They'll walk along the edge of it the whole quarter-mile, and it's up now. They'll eat it."

"We'll put a tape up. An electric. For the day."

"I'll pay for what they get."

"They'll not get any," Daniel said. "We'll have the tape." He heard his own voice. "You don't have to pay for anything."

She did not say anything for a moment.

"All right," she said. "Thank you."

They put the tape up on the eleventh, along the edge of the trail, a white electric tape on fibreglass posts, the whole quarter-mile, with the energiser on a battery at the third gate. On the twelfth the cattle came up the trail at nine in the morning with Thea on the point on her bay and two men from the river ranches on the flanks and Kieran Rourke on the drag, on his sorrel, which Daniel had not expected, and her father was not there. Daniel had heard about her father. Everybody had. They came past the forty acres with their heads turned towards the barley, as they had come past his windrows in September, and the tape held them, and Thea rode the edge of the tape with her rope in her hand, and nobody's cow got a mouthful.

She stopped the bay at the third gate, where he was standing.

"Thank you," she said.

"It's the crossing."

"I know. Thank you anyway." She looked at the forty acres behind him, at the barley, pale green, a hand high, ruled across in its straight lines. "It's come up well."

"It's come up even."

She looked at him then. She looked at him for a moment longer than he wanted to be looked at, from the bay horse, with her hat pulled down.

"Is that the same thing," she said.

"I don't know," he said.

She nodded. She did not ask anything else. She turned the bay and rode on up the trail after her cattle towards the timber and the lease, and he stood at the gate and watched her go, and she did not look back, and nobody else was near enough to have heard either of them.

• • •

The rain came on the first of June.

It came in the night, out of the south-west, softly, with no thunder and no wind, and he woke at two and lay in the dark and listened to it on the roof and did not believe it. Judith was awake beside him. She said, "Is it?" and he said, "Yes," and neither of them said anything else, and they lay there listening to it until it was light.

It rained all the next day, and the day after. Not hard. Out of a low grey sky that sat on the Hogback and did not lift, a fine soaking rain that went straight down into the ground and stayed there. The trail ran with it. The ditch along the bench road filled and ran. The dust that had been on everything for two years went to mud and then to nothing. The old men stood in the doorway of the shop and looked out at it with their hands behind their backs and did not say much. On the second afternoon the children went out in it in their bare feet and ran up and down the yard, shrieking, and nobody called them in.

Joseph sat in the office.

Daniel found him there on the third evening, after church. He was in his chair behind the desk with the lamp off and the blind up and the window open an inch, and the rain coming in on the sill, and he was sitting with his hands folded on the desk, where the books had been, and his face turned towards the window, listening.

"Sit down," he said.

Daniel sat.

"I can't see it," Joseph said. "I can hear it. I can smell it." He breathed in. "That's enough."

They sat in the dark office and listened to the rain on the steel roof of the shop across the yard, and on the gravel, and on the leaves of the box elders along the church, and running off the eaves into the barrels.

"The bank will like this," Joseph said, after a while.

"The contracts will hold."

"They'd have held anyway. That's the point of them." Joseph turned his face a little towards him. "Sixmile's would have held too,

this year. If they'd had any. With this." He was quiet. "Samuel-John will say God sent the rain to show the colony didn't need the machine."

"He will."

"And the minister will say God sent it to show that we did right to take the contracts, because they've held, and the bank is answered, and Sixmile is in debt to a man in Billings." Joseph folded his hands the other way. "They'll both say it in church. Both of them will believe it."

"What will you say?"

"Nothing," Joseph said. "I'll listen to it." He breathed in again, slowly, the wet air. "It's rain. It doesn't show anything. It's just rain."

• • •

On the fourth morning it stopped.

He walked the forty acres at six, before breakfast, in his boots in the mud along the trail. The sky had broken up in the night, and the sun was coming up behind the Bull Mountains through long torn clouds, and everything was wet and shining and loud with water: the trail, the ditches, the Hogback with water running down every crease in it, white, and the meadowlarks going in the grass.

The barley was knee-high. Three days of rain had done to it what three weeks of dry had not. It stood in its straight lines from the trail to the foot of the Hogback, dark green, heavy with the water, bent a little under it, and the lines had nearly closed. He walked up into it along one of the wheel tracks the drill had left and stood in the middle of the field with the wet barley against his trousers to the knee and looked at it.

It was a good stand. He would have said so if he had seen it on any other field. It was as good a stand as he had ever seen on the forty acres. In the low corner by the big rock it was no thicker than anywhere else, and along the thin ground by the trail it was no thin-

ner, and the whole field was the same, end to end, as the plan had said it would be.

He did not know whether it was the seed or the rain.

He stood in the barley and understood that he would never know. There was no strip beside it with his own seed in it to set against it. The jars were on the shelf in the shop, seven of them, and nobody would sow them on this field again.

Nobody had taken it from him. He had written the forty acres into the contract in his own hand, in July, at the office computer, with Joseph in his chair across the desk; he had touched the box. He stood in the middle of the field and knew it, and it did not make it any lighter, and he had not expected it to.

He walked back down the wheel track to the trail. At the end of the trail, by the third gate, the fence posts he had pulled in April were still stacked where he had left them, grey, with the old wire staples in them, wet. He stood and looked at them. Then he went in to breakfast.

• • •

Judith asked him that night.

They were in bed, with the window open and the smell of the wet ground coming in, and David asleep in the next room, and he thought she was asleep too, and then she said, in the dark, "What else did Joseph give you? In January?"

He lay still.

"Besides the books," Judith said. "You came in at midnight and put the keys on the table and you've not been the same since. I've waited. I thought you'd tell me." She was quiet. "I'm asking."

He lay on his back in the dark and looked at the ceiling.

He had made the rule at the bench. He had thought, making it, that the first person to ask would be Thea, or the Rourke boy, or the minister. He had not thought about Judith at all, and he understood now, lying there, that that was its own kind of answer.

"Something of Joseph's," he said. "From 2049. From the road, the night of the fire. That he kept. That he gave me with the books, because it came with them."

She waited.

"I'll tell you," he said. "If you ask me again, I'll tell you all of it. I'll not keep it from you." He turned his head on the pillow towards her in the dark. "But it's heavy. It's not mine, and it's heavy, and once you have it you'll have it. I'd like you to know that first."

She was quiet for a long time. Outside, the barrels under the eaves were still dripping, slowly, the last of the rain going in.

"Not tonight," Judith said.

"All right."

"But I'll ask."

"I know you will," he said.

She put her hand on his arm, in the dark, and left it there, and after a while her breathing changed and she was asleep, and he lay awake with her hand on his arm and listened to the barrels drip until the drips were far apart, and then stopped.

26

Green-Up

The flat came back in the second week of June.

It had been coming since April, a little, under the brown, in the crowns; she had counted it twice a week from the first of April, as she had every spring since she was sixteen, and written it down. Eighty-one percent green on the fourth of April. Eighty-four on the eighteenth. She had turned the cows out on it on the twenty-second, two days after the last of the bought hay, the thirty tons from Ryegate she had paid four hundred and fifty for at the end of March and put on the line because there was nowhere else to put it, and they had grazed it short through May, in strips, behind the electric, and it had held, and not grown. In May it was eighty-six. Then it rained for three days, and on the eighth of June she knelt at flag fourteen with the hoop and could not count fast enough.

Ninety-four percent. Four hundred and thirty-six crowns green out of four hundred and sixty-four. In the hoop at flag thirty, by the cottonwoods, there was not a grey crown in it.

She sat back on her heels on the wet ground and looked at it. The flat was green to the cottonwoods. It was the green it had been in 2050, the spring after the fire, the first year she had counted it, when she had not known what she was asking for. It moved in the wind off the river, green over green, and the cows were on it at the

far end in the sun with their calves, two hundred and four calves on the ground, and her own shadow lay out across it in front of her, long, in the morning.

The rain had done that. She knew it had. She knew too that if it had rained like that on the bench, on grass that had been grazed to the dirt for two years, it would have come back thin and weedy and late, and that the flat had come back like this because of the seventeen years under it, and that she could not prove which part was which. She wrote the number down. She wrote *rain 1–3 June, 2.4 in.* beside it. Then she wrote nothing else, because there was nothing else she could honestly write.

• • •

The rest of the numbers she wrote down too.

Two hundred and sixty-seven cows and heifers had come through the winter, put to the bulls the summer before, thin, off a burnt lease and a drought. She had preg-checked the whole herd in October with the vet from Roundup, before shipping, and sold the old open ones with the culls. Forty-one younger ones had checked open too. She had sold none of those in the winter, because the price was nothing and she had hay for them, she had told herself, or nearly. Two hundred and twenty-six had calved, between the first of March and the twentieth of May. Twenty-two of the calves had died: backwards, weak, the blizzard, scours in April when it was wet and cold for a week, two to a coyote in the river pasture. Two hundred and four. In a good year, off grass, she would have had two hundred and forty out of the same cows.

The thirty-six calves she did not have were the cost of the lease, and of September, and of the hay that had been brown and the hay that had been short. She could see them in the column, the ones that were not there. Nobody else would. The bank would see two hundred and four. Haslam would say it was not bad, for the year.

The open cows went to Prosper on the twenty-sixth of May, forty-one of them, at a better price than they would have brought in October, because the rain was coming and everybody knew it, and the money went to the bank. The line was at a hundred and fifty-two thousand dollars on the first of June. Her father's drought debt was hers now. It would be termed out in October, Haslam said, over seven years, with a mortgage on something. He had not said on what. She knew on what.

• • •

Wade Aske came on the ninth.

He rang on the seventh, from Billings, and said that he had seen the precipitation numbers and would like to come out and see the flat, if that was still all right, as he had said he would in March. She said it was. He said, "Not for the board," and she said, "I know," and he came on the Thursday at ten in the same white pickup with the state's seal on the door.

He got out and looked at the flat before he looked at her. He stood by the truck with his hands on his hips and looked at it, the green going away to the cottonwoods, and then he turned round.

"Well," he said.

"Ninety-four," she said. "On the eighth."

"I'd like to see the hoop."

They walked it. They walked it the way they had walked the lease in September, with their heads down, stopping where the other stopped, and she showed him the flags and the hoops and laid the hoop down at fourteen and at twenty-two and at thirty, and he knelt and counted with her, silently, his lips moving, and got the same numbers she got. At thirty he stayed on his knees in the grass for a while after he had finished counting and did not get up.

"I'd like to put a strip out," he said. "If you'd let me. For a year. Rested. No cows on it at all, from now till next June." He looked up at her. "Just to see what it does on its own. Without you on it."

"I can't."

"A quarter-acre."

"I can't rest anything," she said. "Not this year. I've got two hundred and four calves on it and the bench is done and the lease is at half. Every foot of it's going to be grazed, and grazed right, and I'll count it. But I can't rest it."

He looked at her from his knees.

"That's what I'd have done," he said. "In June last year. In August. I'd have rested it. Taken them off, sold them, and let it come." He stood up. "You'd have had a better flat this spring. Not by much. By some."

"I'd have had no cows."

"Yes," he said. "That's the trade."

They stood in the grass.

"You're still telling me I should have sold in June," she said.

"I'm telling you what I'd have done." He did not look away. "I'm not telling you you were wrong. I don't know that you were. I know the numbers on the lease and I know the numbers on this, and they don't agree, and I can't make them." He looked out across the flat. "I've been doing this eighteen years and I've never been able to make them agree. Anybody who says they can is selling something."

• • •

They walked to the far side, to the cottonwoods along the river, where the flat ran out and the old river bank went down to the gravel bars, and he stopped there in the shade with his back to a tree.

"I'd like to tell you something," he said. "And then ask you something. And then I'll go."

She waited.

"I've asked Helena to give your lease to somebody else. From July. For the rating." He said it carefully. "There's a man in Miles City who

can do it. He's good. He'll do it right. I'd rather not be the man who puts the number on your grass and then rings you up."

"Why?"

"Because of the second thing."

She stood with her hands in her pockets.

"The state's running a grazing trial on trust land on the Powder River," he said. "School sections. Thirty thousand acres, south of Broadus, on both sides of the river. Three years. Rest and rotation against continuous, side by side, on the same grass, with the counts done properly, the way nobody's ever done them in this part of the state. It starts in September. The twelfth." He looked at her. "I'm running it. And I need a field person. Somebody who'll count crowns twice a week for three years on thirty thousand acres and write them down and not let me tell her what they mean." He stopped. "It's a salary. It's a house in Broadus. It's three years, and then there'd be another one, there's always another one. It's counting grass, and it's the job, and nobody's note at the bank depends on it."

The river went by below them on the gravel, low and clear, louder than it had been for two years.

"I'd like you to take it," he said. "I'd like you to take it because you're the best I've seen at it, and I've seen most of them. That's the first reason and it's true." He did not move from the tree. "And I'd like you to come. To Broadus. Not for the trial. I'd like you to come." He breathed. "I've a daughter. She's eleven. She's with me every other week, in Billings, and she'd be with me every other week in Broadus, and she'd not be easy, at first. She's not easy now. I'm divorced four years, and I'm not easy either. I'm telling you all of it because you'd find it out." He stopped. "That's the thing I wanted to ask. Both of them. Together. I don't know how else to ask."

She stood in the shade of the cottonwoods with her hands in her pockets and looked at him.

The job she could see, every day of it, the hoops and the flags and the thirty thousand acres and the river. The other thing she could

not see at all: a man she had walked two pieces of ground with, and a girl of eleven she had never met, and a house in Broadus. Nobody had ever asked her for anything that was for her.

"After shipping," she said.

He looked at her.

"I can't think about it before shipping," she said. "I can't. I've two hundred and four calves and a note and my father on crutches in the kitchen and my mother over the barn and half the place belongs to my cousin since March and I didn't know till I read it on a page. I've got to get the calves through the ring in October. I can't think past that. I'm not saying no." She heard her voice. "I'm asking you to wait. Till after."

"The post starts on the twelfth of September."

"I know."

"I can't hold it past that. It's the state's." He was quiet for a moment. "I can hold the other thing as long as you like."

She did not say anything.

"All right," Wade said. "After shipping." He pushed himself off the tree. "I'll not ring you. You ring me. When you know. Or don't, and I'll know that too."

• • •

He went at noon. She walked him back across the flat to the truck in the sun, not talking, and he got in and wound the window down and looked at the flat once more, and then at her.

"Ninety-four," he said.

"Ninety-four."

He drove away up the lane, and she stood in the yard and watched the white truck go out onto the county road and towards the bridge, and then she went in and made her father his dinner.

Her father was at the kitchen table with his crutches against the wall beside him and the newspaper. He had been home since the tenth of May. He could walk from the table to the porch and down

the steps and to the barn and back on the crutches, slowly, and he did it twice a day, and the rest of the time he sat at the table by the window and watched the yard.

"State man," he said.

"Yes."

"For the board?"

"No," she said. "To see the flat."

Her father looked at her over the newspaper. He looked at her longer than he usually looked at anybody.

"Huh," he said, and went back to the paper.

• • •

That evening she rode the flat on Ledger.

She had not ridden him for a week. She saddled him in the barn at seven with the sun still high in the north-west, and her mother was in the round pen at the end of the barn with the two-year-old from Roundup on a long line, a bay filly with a white face, walking it in circles in the soft dirt and talking to it under her breath, and Thea led Ledger past the round pen and her mother looked up and did not stop talking to the filly.

Ledger was the grey mare's last foal. Her mother had bred him in 2055, the year Thea was twenty-one, and given him to her as a yearling, on the porch, with a halter and a lead rope and no ceremony, and said, *He's yours, then*, and gone back to the barn. Thea had started him herself in 2059, in the round pen, with her mother sitting on the fence. He was eleven. He was the best horse she had ever had or would have, and she knew that, and the woman in Grass Range who bred cutting horses had offered her fourteen thousand dollars for him in May, which was the August term payment on the note and something over, and Thea had said she would think about it, and had thought about it, and had rung the woman back the week after and said August.

She had not told her mother. She did not know how she would.

She rode him out across the flat at a walk, along the line of the flags, with the sun behind her and their shadow going on in front of them across the green, long, the horse's legs and her own shape on his back, and the cows lifted their heads as she went past and put them down again. At the cottonwoods she turned him north along the river and let him walk on a loose rein, and he walked with his head down and his ears going, the way he walked when he was easy, and she sat on him and let him.

She tried to name it.

At the airport she had looked for what she wanted like a cow in the timber and not found it. She thought she might find it the other way round, and tried what she would miss.

The flat. She would miss the flat. She tried to say what about it and could not get further than the crowns, the hoop on the ground, the number at the bottom of the page. The light in the kitchen at six in the morning, with the ledger open at the ribbon. That was her grandmother's. The ford, in October, with the water low and cold. The smell in the calving barn in March, at two in the morning, with the heat lamp on and a heifer down. Her father saying *Huh*. That was her father's.

She tried to find one that was hers. Every one she picked up belonged to somebody else, her grandmother or her father or the place itself, and she put it down and picked up the next.

The hoop was Nils's. He had made it for her, the Christmas he was fourteen, and nobody else had ever laid it down. The forty flags were hers. The counts were hers, seventeen years of them, twice a week, in her own hand, in the back of a ledger that had been her grandmother's. She would miss the counts.

She stopped the horse.

She could count somewhere else. That was what he had asked her. Thirty thousand acres on the Powder River, twice a week, for three years, and a salary, and nobody's note at the bank. She sat on Ledger under the cottonwoods by the river with the light going gold

on the flat behind her and understood that the one thing she had found that was hers was the one thing she could take with her, and that she did not know what that meant, and that she was not going to find out tonight.

Ledger blew out through his nose and shook his head and the bit rang.

She turned him round and rode him back along the river and across the flat towards the barn in the last of the sun, at a walk, the long way, by the flags. The round pen was empty, the dirt raked. She rode into the barn and got down.

She unsaddled him and brushed him, longer than he needed, and turned him out in the horse pasture, and stood at the gate and watched him roll.

27

Gauges

The hydrologist picked her up at the trailer at half past five in the morning on the ninth of August, in the tribe's truck, with the boat on the trailer behind it and Kenny Small in the back seat with his boots up on the cooler.

The hydrologist was a young man from Ashland with a degree from Bozeman and a beard he was not yet sure of, and he had been with the water office three years, and he had hired Kenny for the summer in June, to carry the wading rod and the cooler and the spare batteries, at the tribe's summer rate. Kenny had not told her. She had found out on the first morning, when he came round the side of the truck in the car park with the rod over his shoulder and saw her and stopped.

"Ma'am," he had said.

"Kenny."

"I asked Mom," he said. "She said yes. It's not a fire."

"No," Mariah had said. "It isn't."

That had been the first of July. This was the sixth time out. The hydrologist drove the reservoir road south out of Lame Deer in the grey light with the window down and the radio off, and Kenny went back to sleep, and Mariah sat in the passenger seat with the folder on her knee and watched the pine hills go by, and then the open

ground, and then the long low line of the dam across the valley in front of them, with the reservoir behind it, silver, very still, and the river coming out at the bottom of it in the shadow.

• • •

The first release under the contract had gone down the river on the first of July.

It was not a pipe yet. The pipe would be two years. Until it was built the consortium took its water the old way, from the river below the dam, at a pump station on the east bank that it had leased from a ranch and fitted with a meter, and the dam's people released the tribe's storage into the river to cover it, an acre-foot for an acre-foot, so that the river below the pump ran what it would have run without the contract. That was the agreement. It was on page four of the contract in a paragraph Mariah had written in December and rewritten nine times. The consortium read its own meter and sent the reading to the tribe once a week. The tribe read the river.

That was what they were doing. They read the river.

The hydrologist parked at the gauge station below the dam, a grey steel hut on a concrete pad on the west bank with a solar panel on its roof and an antenna, and a cable going down the bank into the water to the sensor on the bottom, and he unlocked the hut and read the logger on his tablet and wrote it down on paper too, because Mariah had asked him to. Then the three of them went down the bank to the river with the rod and the meter.

The water was low and clear and warm. It was the lowest she had seen it in August in fifteen years, lower than the summer before, because the release from the dam was the minimum and the snow in the Bighorns had been poor again, and the rain in June had gone into the ground and stayed there. You could see every stone on the bottom. There were fish in the shade of the cottonwoods along the bank, small, holding against the current with their tails going, and Kenny stood in the shallows with the rod and looked at them.

They waded the section. The hydrologist strung the tape across the river from a stake on one bank to a stake on the other, and Kenny carried the rod, and at every two feet across the river Kenny set the rod down on the bottom and the hydrologist read the depth and the meter on the rod read the velocity, and Mariah stood on the bank with the clipboard and wrote down the numbers he called. Station, depth, velocity. Station, depth, velocity. It took an hour and ten minutes. The sun came up over the hills on the east side while they did it and came across the water and onto their backs, and by the end of it Kenny was wet to the waist and the hydrologist was sweating through his shirt and Mariah's hand ached from the pencil.

Then the hydrologist sat on the tailgate with the clipboard and his tablet and worked it out, while Kenny lay on his back in the grass with his hat over his face and Mariah stood beside the truck and waited.

"A hundred and twelve," the hydrologist said. "Cubic feet a second."

"And the gauge?"

"A hundred and fourteen. That's close enough. The gauge is right." He turned to another page. "Now the meter."

• • •

The hydrologist had found it in July.

He had waded the river below the consortium's pump station on the first of July, and the eighteenth, and the twenty-fourth, and done the arithmetic on the tailgate each time, and each time the river below the pump had been carrying a little less than the release from the dam minus what the consortium's meter said it was taking. A little under. Never over. On the twenty-fifth he had come to Mariah's office with the three pages and put them on her desk and said that if it was the river it would go both ways, and it did not, and that either the meter read about three and a half percent low or the river did something below the pump he did not understand, and he

did not think it did; he had walked every foot of it. It might still be him, he said. Three readings was not many, and a wading section was not a laboratory, and there were two small draws that came in below the pump in a wet year. It had not been a wet year.

Three and a half percent of what the consortium took was about four hundred acre-feet a year. Of the tribe's water. Taken and not paid for.

Mariah had read paragraph eleven of the contract, which she had written, and called for a test that afternoon. *Either party may require the testing of any meter by an independent party agreed between them, at the cost of the party whose meter is found outside tolerance.* The consortium had agreed the tester in a week, without argument. That had surprised her. The woman from Denver had said on the telephone that they would rather know.

The tester was at the pump station when they got there.

It was a firm from Bozeman, two people, an older man with a white beard and a young woman with a laptop, in a van with a trailer behind it full of grey cases. They had been there since seven. The consortium's man in the white truck had let them in through the chain-link gate, and stood by his truck with his arms folded watching them work, and when the tribe's truck came up the track he went and made a telephone call and came back and opened the gate again without a word.

The meter was in a box on the pipe where it came up out of the river, with a seal on the cover and a number on the seal. Mariah checked the number against the contract and wrote it down. The tester had clamped his own meter to the pipe a yard downstream of it, a grey box on a strap with two sensors on the steel and a cable to the young woman's laptop, and the two meters had been running side by side, reading the same water, since half past seven.

They ran until eleven. The tester walked between the pipe and the van and looked at the laptop and did not say anything, and the hydrologist stood beside him and looked at it too, and Kenny sat on

the cooler in the shade of the van, and Mariah stood by the fence in the sun with the folder against her chest and waited.

At eleven the tester unclamped his sensors and went to the van and sat in the open door of it with the laptop on his knees for a quarter of an hour. Then he got up and came over to the fence where Mariah was standing, and the consortium's man came over from his truck, and the hydrologist, and the tester held the laptop so that they could all see it.

"Three point one percent low," he said. "Over three and a half hours. Even flow, no surges, good conditions. Their meter's rated to plus or minus one." He closed the laptop. "It's out of tolerance. It's not a lot. It's not a fault you'd see. A sensor that's drifted, most likely, or a setting at installation. It'll have been reading like that since they put it in."

The consortium's man went back to his truck and got in and made a telephone call with the door shut.

"I'll put it in writing," the tester said. "To both of you. Tomorrow."

"Thank you," Mariah said.

She stood by the fence. The hydrologist was looking at her. She saw that he had expected her to look pleased, and that she did not, and that he did not know why.

"He was nearly right," she said. "Your three and a half."

"Nearly."

"Nearly's what paragraph eleven's for," she said.

• • •

They ate at noon in the shade of the cottonwoods below the gauge station, on the tailgate, sandwiches from the cooler. The hydrologist ate his with the tablet beside him and kept looking at it. Kenny ate three.

From the tailgate, if you looked west, across the river and up over the cottonwoods on the far bank, you could see the high ground between the Tongue and the Rosebud, the long grey-green back of

the divide, a long way off in the heat. And on the far ridge, very small, if you knew where to look, there were the survey stakes.

She had seen them go in. The consortium's surveyors had come in July, two young women and a man with a truck and a tripod and a drone, and walked the middle line north across the eleven allotments with the Bureau's man beside them, and put in a stake every two hundred feet, a short white post with an orange ribbon on top. She had not gone up with them. She had watched them from the Busby road one afternoon, from the car, a line of white posts going over the ridge and down into the head of the draw and up the far side, a hundred yards east of the box elders and the spring.

She could see the ribbons from here. A line of tiny orange flecks on the far grey ridge, going north, in the heat shimmer, coming and going.

Kenny was looking at them too.

"That's the spring," he said. "Isn't it. Up there. By the trees."

"Yes."

"I can see the trees." He shaded his eyes. "Is that where it's going? The pipe?"

"A hundred yards east of the trees."

He looked at it for a long time.

"We wet those trees," he said.

"Yes," Mariah said. "We did."

He finished his sandwich and went down to the river and stood in the shallows with his boots on and looked at the fish.

• • •

They waded the Rosebud in the afternoon.

It was not in the contract. Nothing the consortium did touched the Rosebud, and the first paragraph said nothing ever would, and there was no meter on it, and no reason in the contract to read it. Mariah had asked the hydrologist in June to read it anyway, at Busby, every time they went out, below the bridge, at the old gauge

the state had put in in 1974 and nobody had looked at in twenty years. He had looked at her and said all right.

It was very low. It was lower than the Tongue. It came down out of the Wolf Mountains past Busby in a thin clear stream between the gravel bars, warm, with the green weed in it, and the hydrologist and Kenny waded it in twenty minutes because there was so little of it, and the hydrologist worked it out on the tailgate in the Busby school car park, where they had parked.

"Nine," he said. "Cubic feet a second."

"And last August?"

"Ten. Near enough. And the year before, eleven." He looked at her. "It's the weather. It's nothing to do with them. There's no pipe."

"I know."

"Then why are we reading it?"

She stood in the school car park in the heat by the tribe's truck.

"Because it's in the first paragraph," she said. "And one day somebody's going to say it isn't. And I want there to be a number."

• • •

Her grandmother was buried in the cemetery on the hill above Busby, on the north side of the road, behind a wire fence with a cattle guard at the gate.

The hydrologist dropped her there at four, because she asked him to, and said he would take Kenny home and come back for her in an hour. She went in over the cattle guard and up the hill through the dry grass between the graves. Most of them had small white crosses, and some had stones, and some had nothing but a fence of pickets round them, grey, leaning, and many of them had things on them. Plastic flowers, faded. A coffee can with a candle in it. A child's toy truck. Ribbons on the pickets, red and yellow and blue and white, faded to the same colour by the wind. A pair of boots.

Evelyn's was near the top, under the one pine, with a small stone her father had had cut in Billings in 2050. *Evelyn Harris. 1957–2049.*

Nothing else. Her father had not wanted anything else on it. He had said she would have said it was enough.

There was nothing on the grave. There never had been. Her father did not bring things, and Mariah had never seen anybody else bring anything. The grass on it was the same dry grass as on the hill.

She did not have anything to leave. She had thought about it, in the truck, on the way up from the river. She had the envelope in her bag, where it always was. She had thought about leaving that, under a stone, by the headstone, where the wind would take it in a week, and nobody would know. She had thought about it all the way up the hill.

She sat down on the dry grass beside the grave with her back against the pine.

From there you could see the whole valley of the Rosebud going north towards Lame Deer, brown and gold in the August light, with the line of cottonwoods along the creek, and the Busby road, and the school, and the bridge, and away to the east the long grey back of the divide, and the head of Thompson Creek, and the box elders there, very small, if you knew where to look. You could not see the stakes from here. The ridge was the wrong way round.

She sat there for an hour.

She did not say anything out loud. She thought about her grandmother at sixteen in the truck outside the hall at Lame Deer in the winter of 1973, with the heater on, while her own father was inside on his feet, twice, for the leases; and about her saying nothing, for seventy-six years, to her husband or her son, and what that had cost her every day that nobody had ever seen her pay.

She thought that she was doing the same thing, and that she did not know whether it was for her father's sake or her own.

She did not leave the envelope. She took it out of her bag and held it, and then she put it back, in the inside pocket, and zipped the pocket.

• • •

The hydrologist came back at five. She went down the hill to the gate, and got in, and they drove north on the Busby road towards Lame Deer with the sun going down on the left over the Wolf Mountains and the windows down.

At the bend below the school a truck came towards them on the other side of the road. An old pickup, a two-tone one, white and red faded to pink and rust, with a stock rack on the back and one headlight that pointed a little high. She knew it before she could see who was driving it. She had known it all her life.

Her father was at the wheel. He was alone. He had his hat on and his window down and his elbow on the sill, and he was driving at forty, as he always drove, in the middle of his lane.

He saw the tribe's truck. She saw him see it. She saw him see her in the passenger seat, through the windscreen, as the two trucks came towards each other on the empty road in the evening light; his face turned, a little, towards her.

He did not slow down. He did not lift his hand off the sill.

The trucks passed each other. She turned her head and watched his go away behind them in the side mirror, along the Busby road, towards the bridge and the creek road and home, not fast, in the middle of its lane, with its one high headlight, until the bend took it.

He drove on.

It was a hundred and twenty days since he had spoken to her. She had not meant to count them. She counted them the way she did the sum every night in the car, without deciding to. She had moved out on a Tuesday and gone back on the Sunday after for the rest of her books, and he had been in the corral and had not come in, and the stew pot had been washed and put away on its shelf, upside down, the way her grandmother put pots away.

She had thought, in the gym, that whatever he did afterwards she could carry, because she had carried the envelope. She had not known it would be this. She could have answered anger. He had

driven past her at forty in the middle of his lane as if she were a truck from the consortium, and she sat beside the hydrologist with her hands on the folder and could not think of one thing she would have said to him if he had stopped.

The hydrologist did not ask. He put the radio on low, and after a while he turned it off again.

At the trailer on the hill behind the clinic in Lame Deer the telephone was ringing when she let herself in.

It was the woman from Denver.

"I've seen the result," she said. "Our man rang me from the pump station." She did not sound angry. She sounded tired. "We'll accept it. We'll have the meter replaced this month. We'll pay for the test, which the contract says we must, and we'll pay for three point one percent of everything we've drawn since the first of July, at the contract price, and we'll put it in writing to the council by Friday."

"Thank you," Mariah said. "The council will want the tester's written report first, and an accounting it can check against the river readings, before it agrees a figure. Three point one is what the meter did on one morning."

"That's fair. I'd like to ask one thing." A pause. "I'd like it to stay between the council and us. The adjustment. It's a sensor. It's not anything anybody did. If it goes in a newsletter in Lame Deer, it'll be in the paper in Billings, and it'll read as if we were stealing water."

Mariah stood in the kitchen of the trailer with her bag still on her shoulder.

"It'll go to the council," she said. "In the Monday packet. With the tester's letter and the hydrologist's readings and yours. It's the tribe's water. The council will decide who else sees it." She heard her voice and let it stand. "I'm not going to put it in a newsletter. I'm not going to keep it out of anything, either."

The woman was quiet for a moment.

"No," she said. "They told me you'd say that."

When she had rung off Mariah put her bag down on the table and turned the light on and sat down, and took out the contract, and the legal pad, and the tester's figures in her own hand, and began the memorandum for the council's Monday packet. She wrote the date at the top, and *Re: Meter test, Tongue River pump station, 9 August 2067*, and under it, *Paragraph eleven.*

28

Sorting

The woman from Grass Range came for Ledger on the twentieth of August, a Saturday, with a two-horse trailer and her granddaughter.

Thea had him caught and brushed and standing at the rail by the barn when the trailer came up the lane. She had not ridden him that morning. She had thought she would, early, once round the flat, and she had gone out to the horse pasture at six with the halter and stood at the gate and watched him graze along the fence with the mist on the river behind him, and had not gone in, and at seven she had gone in and caught him and brought him up and tied him, and brushed him for an hour.

The woman was seventy and brisk and kind. She looked at him standing at the rail and said, "Well, he's the same horse," and walked round him once, and picked up his feet, and ran her hand down his legs, and said that she would not insult Thea by looking at his teeth. Her granddaughter was fourteen and stood by the trailer with her hands in her back pockets and looked at him as if he were the only thing in Musselshell County.

The woman wrote the cheque on the hood of her truck. Fourteen thousand dollars. She gave it to Thea and Thea folded it once and put it in her shirt pocket and buttoned the pocket.

"You'll want to load him," the woman said. "He'll go better for you."

Her mother came down the outside stairs.

Thea had not told her. She had meant to, in June, and in July, and every evening in August when her mother came up to the house at seven for the mail, and she had not, and she saw now, watching her mother come down the outside stairs and across the yard in her canvas coat, that her mother had known anyway, probably since May. The woman from Grass Range was a friend of hers. Everybody in the county who bred horses was a friend of hers.

Her mother came and stood by the rail. She did not look at Thea. She looked at the horse.

She put her hand on his neck, under the mane, where he liked it, and he turned his head round to her and blew on her coat, and she stood with her hand on him.

"He was yours to sell," she said.

"Mom—"

"He was yours. I gave him to you." Her mother took her hand off his neck. "That's what giving's for."

She untied him from the rail herself and handed Thea the lead rope, and stood back, and Thea led him to the trailer, and he walked up into it after her without stopping, as he had walked into every trailer since he was a yearling, and she tied him in and came out and the granddaughter put the ramp up.

They drove away down the lane. Her mother stood in the yard and watched the trailer go, with her hands in her coat pockets, until it turned onto the county road. Then she went back across the yard and up the outside stairs and in, and shut the door.

On the Monday Thea paid the August term payment on the note with the cheque, and what was left over went on the line.

• • •

Daniel brought the horse on the third of September.

He rode it down the bench road and across the bridge and up the county road and into the yard at four in the afternoon, a big brown gelding, plain-headed, sixteen hands, with a colony saddle on him and a halter under the bridle and a lead rope coiled on the horn. Thea was in the calving barn and heard the shoes on the concrete of the yard and came out.

Daniel got down. He stood by the horse with the reins in his hand.

"This is Tuck," he said. "He's Elias's. Elias says he's the best cow horse on the bench and he's probably right. He'll sort. He'll work a gate. He'll stand." He held out the reins. "For the sorting. And for shipping. Till October."

She looked at him. She did not take the reins.

"Why?"

"Elias heard you'd sold your bay." He was holding the reins out, still. "You can't sort two hundred calves on a ranch horse you don't know. Or on foot."

"Did Elias send him?"

Daniel was quiet for a moment.

"I asked Elias if I could bring him," he said.

She took the reins.

He did not stay. He would not come in for coffee; he said he had to walk back the long way round by the bridge, and that Mark was coming for him with the truck at the end of the county road at five. He stood in the yard with his hands at his sides, looking past her at the flat, green still from the June rain, going away to the cottonwoods, and she thought he was going to say something.

He did not. He nodded to her, once, and turned, and walked away down the lane.

She stood in the yard holding the colony horse and watched him go.

The horse put his head down and rubbed his face on her arm, hard.

• • •

They sorted on the twelfth.

She had circled the date in June, on the calendar on the wall of the barn office, the co-op's calendar with the green field on it that nobody had ever thought was funny. She had circled it in red pencil, a small ring round the twelve, and not written anything beside it. Her mother had seen it, she supposed, and her father, if he had been in the barn office, which he had not been since May. Nobody had asked her what it was.

She had not chosen the twelfth for the sorting. The sorting chose itself: the calves were the age they were and the weather was what it was and the trucks were booked for the twentieth of October, and the twelfth was the day it had to be done. She had seen that on the first of September, doing the page, and had looked at the red ring on the calendar, and then gone out.

It was a clear morning, cold, the first frost on the flat, the cottonwoods along the river just starting to turn. They had brought the pairs in off the flat at dawn, she and two men from the river ranches who came every year for a day's pay and their dinner, and had them in the big pen by the alley by seven, two hundred and four calves bawling and the cows bawling back, and the dust going up gold in the low sun.

She sorted on Tuck. She rode him into the pen and cut the pairs out one at a time and brought them down to the alley gate, the cow and the calf, and at the gate the calf went one way and the cow the other: heifers she was keeping into the trap on the left, the rest of the calves into the weaning pen on the right, and the cows back out through the far gate onto the flat. It was the oldest work on the place. Her grandfather had done it from that gate. Her father had done it from that gate for forty years, on a horse, and then on foot, and Thea had done it beside him on foot since she was nine, and on a horse since she was fourteen, and for the first time in her life she

was doing it with nobody on the gate she knew, because her father was on crutches and Nils was on the Columbia.

The colony horse was very good. Elias had been right. He watched the calf and not the cow and he moved before she asked him and stopped before she asked him, and by nine o'clock she had stopped asking him and was only riding.

She did not see her father come out.

She was bringing a pair down to the gate, a big red cow with a white face and a heifer calf, a good one, a keeper, and she had her eye on the calf and her hand up to call the gate to the man from the river ranch who was on it, and the gate was already open. The gate to the left. Swinging, slowly, on its hinges, to the trap, just far enough, at just the moment the calf came to it, so that the calf went through it on its own and the cow went past it, and the gate swung back behind the calf and latched.

She had not called it.

She looked up. Her father was on the gate.

He was standing at the end of the alley in his old canvas coat, on his crutches, with the left crutch under his arm and his left hand on the top bar of the gate and his right hand on the right crutch, and the man from the river ranch had stepped back along the fence to give him room. He was not looking at her. He was looking at the next pair coming down the alley behind her, which she had not cut yet, which was still in the pen.

She turned Tuck and went back into the pen and cut the next pair, a black cow and a steer calf, and brought them down to the gate, and her father swung the gate to the right before she could call it, and the steer went into the weaning pen and the cow went past, and the gate swung back.

They did the rest of the morning like that.

She cut. He swung. He did not miss one, and he did not call one wrong, and he did not look at her once, and she did not look at him, and she did not thank him, because she knew that if she said any-

thing at all he would put the crutch back under his other arm and go back to the house, and she did not want him to go back to the house. She thought of Nils at the west gate in May 2050, the spring after the fire, with his hand on the chain before their father reached it, swinging it open for the herd and holding it, and neither of them saying anything, in a silence she had not understood, watching them from the grey out on the flat at sixteen.

At noon the man from the river ranch said dinner, and her father let go of the gate, and put the crutch back under his arm, and went back to the house on the crutches across the yard without looking round.

Forty-nine heifers in the trap. A hundred and fifty-five calves in the weaning pen.

• • •

Her mother had a colt in the round pen.

Thea saw her when she rode Tuck out of the alley at noon to water him. Not the filly from April; that one had gone home to Roundup in July. A new one, a big two-year-old sorrel colt with a blaze, belonging to a man in Roundup who had bought him at a sale in Billings and could not get near him. Her mother had him on a long line in the round pen at the end of the barn, walking him round in the soft dirt, round and round, and talking to him.

She was in her canvas coat with her hat pushed back and the line coiled in her left hand. She did not look up when Thea came out of the alley. She went on talking to the colt, under her breath, and the colt went round with his ears on her and his eye on her and his tail swishing, and Thea sat on Tuck at the water trough and watched.

She had seen her mother start a colt like that in the spring of 2049, a dun, from the fence of the same round pen, with Nils beside her. She had forgotten it until he said it at the airport.

The colt stopped. He turned in towards her mother and stood, with his feet square in the soft dirt and his head low, and blew.

Her mother let the line go slack. Then she looked up, across the round pen and the yard, at Thea on the colony horse by the water trough.

She lifted her hand off the line.

Thea lifted hers.

Her mother looked at her a moment longer, and turned back to the colt.

• • •

Kieran was at the fence when she rode back to the pens.

He was leaning on the top rail of the big pen by the alley, where the cows had been, with his forearms on the rail and his hat pushed back. She did not know how long he had been there. His truck was by the calving barn. He had come round by the bridge, then, in the truck, and not across the ford.

She rode Tuck up to the fence on the other side of it and stopped.

"Landlord," she said.

He looked at her. It was the first time she had spoken to him since the cemetery gate in January. She had seen him in May, on the drag, on his sorrel, behind her cattle going up the trail; he had turned up at the yard at six in the morning without being asked and she had nodded to him and he had taken the drag, and they had not spoken all day. She had paid him his half of the rent on the first of June, by cheque, in the post. He had cashed it. She had seen it come off the account.

"Good calves," he said.

"Light."

"Better than last year."

"Fewer."

He looked over the fence at the weaning pen, the hundred and fifty-five, bawling, and the heifers in the trap.

"You're on Elias's horse," he said.

"Daniel brought him."

"I heard." He was quiet for a moment. "I'd have lent you Bishop."

"I know you would," Thea said.

He looked at her. She looked back at him from the colony horse.

"What did you mean," she said. "In November. In your kitchen."

He did not answer at once.

"Not here," he said.

"Then where?"

He looked at the pens, and at the round pen at the end of the barn, where her mother was walking the colt again, and at the house, where her father would be at the table by the window.

"After the sale," he said. "In October. After. I'll tell you. I told Rae I would."

She sat on the horse.

"All right," she said.

He nodded. He took his arms off the rail.

"The heifers you kept," he said. "I'd have kept the same ones."

He heard it as he said it, and saw her hear it: the landlord looking over the tenant's stock.

"Would you," Thea said.

He put his hat straight, and walked back across the yard to his truck by the calving barn and got in and drove away down the lane.

• • •

That night she went down to the barn office to do the page.

The calendar was on the wall over the desk where it always was, the co-op's calendar, open at September. The red ring round the twelve. She stood and looked at it.

The post had started that morning, somewhere south of Broadus, with a truck at a gate at seven o'clock and a box of new hoops in the back. She had been in the alley at seven o'clock, on a colony horse, with her father on the gate.

He had not rung. He had said he would not. *You ring me. When you know. Or don't, and I'll know that too.*

She had not rung. She had not decided anything. She had sorted the calves, and the day had gone by while she sorted them, the way days went by in September on the Lodgepole, and now it was nine o'clock at night and the twelfth was nearly over and she was standing in the barn office looking at a red ring on a calendar.

She did not cross it out. She did not take the calendar down. She sat down at the desk under it and opened the ledger and did the page, the heifers kept and the calves to go and the weights she guessed at and the price she hoped for and the line and the note, and wrote it all down, in pencil, in her own hand, and ruled the line under it, and turned off the lamp.

29

The Last Ring

The children went down to the ford with him at seven, as they had every school morning since the cows went.

He had not meant it to become a thing. In March, after the last of the cows had gone through the ring, he had found that he did not know what to do at seven in the morning, and had walked down through the cottonwoods to the river to look at the water, because his grandfather had walked down to look at the water every morning of his life and Kieran had never known why. Conor had seen him go and come after him in his pyjamas and his boots. The next morning Brigid had come too. By April it was a thing, and nobody had said so, and it was the twentieth of October now and they had done it every school morning since.

It was cold, and clear, and the frost was on the flat. The cottonwoods along the river had gone yellow in the last week and were starting to drop, and the leaves lay on the gravel bar at the ford and on the water, turning slowly in the eddy below the crossing. The river was low again. It was the October river, clear and quiet and cold, a foot deep over the bar, and on the far side the Lodgepole flat went up green and grey from the bank to the cottonwoods, and beyond them, against the brown hills to the north, the roofs of the Lodgepole barns in the first sun.

There were no cattle on the flat. Thea had brought the weaned calves in to the pens by the barn on the Tuesday, and the trucks would have come for them at five. He had heard them from his bed in the dark. Four pots, coming along the county road and down the Lodgepole lane with their lights on, and then the bawling, all the way across the river, and then the trucks going away again towards Prosper in low gear.

"Are the Lodgepole calves going today?" Conor said.

"Yes."

"To the last one?"

"To the last one."

Conor was nine. He stood on the gravel bar in his school coat with his hands in his pockets and looked across the river at the empty flat.

"We haven't got any," he said.

"No."

"Will we have some next year?"

"I don't know," Kieran said. "Maybe."

Brigid was throwing stones at the leaves in the eddy. She was seven and threw like her mother, hard and badly, and when she hit a leaf she shouted. She hit one now and shouted, and the shout went across the water and came back off the far bank, small, and a magpie got up out of the willows and went away along the river complaining.

"Bus," Rae called from the top of the bank.

They went up through the cottonwoods to the house. The children got their bags and went down the lane at a run to the road, where the bus came at twenty to eight, and Rae stood on the porch and watched them get on, in her good coat, with her own bag over her shoulder. She had taken the fifth grade as well as her own fourth at the school in September. She said it was for the money. It was for the money.

"You're going," she said.

"Yes."

"Your mother wants to come."

"I know. I'll take her."

Rae looked at him from the porch.

"After the sale," she said.

"After the sale," he said. "I told her I would."

"I know you did." She went down the steps to her car. At the door of it she stopped. "Tell her before somebody else does, Kieran. That's all. It's a small county."

She drove away down the lane behind the bus.

• • •

His mother was ready at nine. She was in her good black coat and her hat, the one she had worn to his father's funeral and to Karin Tollefsen's, with her stick, sitting in Declan's chair by the window with her handbag on her knee, and when he came in she got up without his help, which took her some time, and walked out to the truck on her own.

"A hundred and twenty-nine years," she said, in the truck, on the county road. "That barn. Your grandfather sold his first calves there in 1989. His father before that, and his. I sold my own father's cows there the year I married." She looked out of the window at the river. "I'll not see it torn down. I'll see the last of it."

"Yes."

"Is Thea selling all of them?"

"All but the heifers. A hundred and fifty-five."

His mother was quiet for a mile.

"You'll tell her," she said.

He kept his eyes on the road.

"I read the statement," his mother said. "In November. I know you saw me read it." She looked straight ahead through the windscreen. "I didn't say anything. I'll not say anything. It's yours." She was quiet. "But you'll tell her, Kieran. It's not a thing to leave in a drawer."

"After the sale."

"After the sale," his mother said, as Rae had said it, and did not say anything else all the way to Prosper.

• • •

The sale barn car park was full by half past nine, and the street outside it, and the field behind it, where the trucks parked on sale days when the car park overflowed, which it had not done for ten years.

They had all come. He had known they would. Every ranch from Melstone to Lavina and from the Bull Mountains to the Snowies had brought something to the last sale on the old ground: calves, mostly, light off the drought, and yearlings, and old cows, and bred heifers, and a few bulls, and he saw the brands on the trucks in the field as he walked his mother in from the truck on his arm, from every outfit in the county, and some from Ryegate and Harlowton he had not seen on a truck since he was a boy. The pens behind the barn were full to the back fence. There were cattle in the alleys. There were cattle in the old horse pens along the railway line that nobody had used for horses since 2040, and the dust was going up off all of it into the cold bright air, and the noise.

Inside, the benches were full. He got his mother a seat on the third row on the end, by the aisle, where she could get out, and a man from Melstone he had been at school with stood up and gave it to her and went and stood along the back wall. Kieran stood beside her in the aisle.

He looked for Thea and found her at once. She was not on the benches. She was in the alley behind the ring, at the back, where the sellers stood, through the gap in the panels where you could see the cattle come up from the pens before they went in. She was in her canvas coat with her hat on and her hands in her pockets, standing very still, beside the gate man, and she was looking at the pens. She did not look up at the benches.

The auctioneer came up into his box at ten. He was a young man from Billings who had called the Prosper sale since 2061, and he stood in the box for a moment with his hands on the rail and looked out at the benches, full, to the back wall, and up into the gallery, full, and at the people standing in the aisles and in the doors, and for a while he said nothing.

Then he said, into the microphone, "Well. Look at you all."

Somebody laughed. Then a lot of people laughed, and then they stopped, and it was quiet.

"A hundred and twenty-nine years," the auctioneer said. "This is the last one. You know that. I'm not going to make a speech. Your cattle are what you came for." He looked down at his screen. "Let's sell them."

• • •

They sold for nine hours.

Kieran watched all of it. He stood in the aisle by his mother, and then sat on the step at the end of the row when his legs went, and then stood again, and watched draft after draft come in through the ring gate and stand on the sawdust under the lights and go out the other side.

There were two kinds of buyer on the benches that day, and you could see them from across the ring.

The order buyers sat on the front bench in a row, five of them, young, in fleeces and caps, each with a tablet on his knee and an earpiece in. They held orders from feedlots in Nebraska and Colorado and Kansas, and the orders were on the tablets, the weight and the grade and the price, worked out in the night by the feedlots' own systems from the futures and the corn and the weather in three states and the cost of trucking, and the young men bid to them. They bid with a finger, or a nod, or a word into the earpiece, and when the price got to the number on the tablet they stopped,

and nothing anybody did on the benches behind them would move them a cent past it.

The old buyers sat behind them. There were not many left. A man from Lavina who had been buying calves at Prosper for fifty years and ran them on wheat pasture in the spring. Two brothers from Harlowton who backgrounded calves for themselves. A man from Big Timber in a long coat with a cane across his knees. They had no tablets. They looked at the cattle as they came in, at their backs and their feet and their eyes and the way they moved on the sawdust, and they bid on what they saw.

The drought had been in three states, and nobody had the grass for replacement heifers, and the numbers on the tablets knew it. The calves were light. They came in through the ring gate in drafts of twenty and thirty, four-fifty, five hundred, five-twenty, long-haired and narrow and wild in the eye, and the tablets bid them to their numbers and stopped, and some of the time the old men went past the numbers by a cent or two because they liked what they saw, and most of the time they did not.

His mother sat beside him and watched it and said nothing. Once, when a draft of black baldy steers came in with the Rourke brand's neighbour on them, the old Kjelstad iron from Melstone, she put her hand on his arm, and then took it away.

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The Lodgepole calves came in at twenty past three.

He knew them before the auctioneer said the name. He knew them through the gap in the panels, coming up the alley from the pens behind the ring, red and black, with the Lodgepole brand on the left hip, and his cousin behind them in the alley on foot, with a sorting stick, walking them up to the ring gate, slowly, not pushing.

Four drafts. The steers in two, fifty-one and fifty-two, and the heifers in two, twenty-six and twenty-six.

The first draft of steers came in through the gate and stood on the sawdust under the lights.

They were light. He could see it. Everybody on the benches could see it. Five hundred and sixty pounds, the screen said, on average, off the scale in the alley. In a year with grass they would have been six-fifty. But they were even. He saw that too. They stood on the sawdust in a bunch, red and black, the same size, the same shape, square, with their heads up and their ears on the auctioneer, and they did not look wild. They looked as if somebody had been among them every day of their lives.

The auctioneer started them.

The tablets came in at three-forty. Three of them, the young men on the front bench with their fingers up, and the price went up a cent at a time to three-fifty, and three-fifty-two, and stopped. Three-fifty-two was the number. He saw the young men look at their tablets and lower their hands.

The man from Lavina put his hand up.

He put his hand up from the second bench, an old brown hand, and held it there, and the auctioneer looked at him and said *three-fifty-four*, and one of the young men on the front bench said something into his earpiece, and waited, and listened, and put his finger up. Three-fifty-five. The old man held his hand up. Three-fifty-six. The young man listened to his earpiece again, a long time, and then shook his head.

Three-fifty-six. To Lavina.

The auctioneer brought the hammer down and the gate opened at the far side of the ring and the steers went out through it, and the second draft came in.

It went the same way. Three-fifty-two on the tablets, and then the old man from Lavina, and the young man on the front bench, and three-fifty-four. To Colorado.

The heifers came in at five hundred and twenty. Nobody wanted heifers to keep that year; they were bought as feeders, like the

steers, and the tablets had them at three-twenty-eight, and the brothers from Harlowton went to three-thirty on the first draft, and nobody went past them, and on the second the tablets had them, at three-twenty-nine.

Four drafts. Nine minutes. He did the arithmetic in his head, standing in the aisle, because he could not help it, because his grandfather had done it in his head on these benches for sixty years and his father for twenty-five, and the Companion was in his pocket switched off. A hundred and three steers at five-sixty and the price. Fifty-two heifers at five-twenty and the price.

Two hundred and ninety thousand dollars, near enough.

He looked at the alley.

Thea was standing at the gap in the panels with the sorting stick in her hand, where she had stood to watch them go in. She had not moved. She was looking at the screen over the auctioneer's box, where the last draft's price was still up, three-twenty-nine, and the weight, and the number of head, and the Lodgepole name. She stood and looked at it.

Then she turned and went back down the alley towards the pens, and the office.

• • •

He told his mother he would be ten minutes.

He went out of the ring by the side door, into the corridor that ran along the back of the benches to the office at the front of the barn, past the café, where the women from the church in Prosper were selling coffee and pie for the last time and had run out of pie at noon. The corridor was full of people. He went along it slowly, with his hat in his hand, saying hello, saying yes, the last one, yes, a hundred and twenty-nine years.

He was going to wait for her at the office door. He had thought about it on the benches, in the hour before the Lodgepole calves came in: that she would go to the office for her cheque, and he

would wait for her outside it, in the corridor, and when she came out he would say, *Can I talk to you*, and they would go out to the barn lot, to her truck, and he would tell her there. All of it. The tailgate in July, and Opland, and the hay account, and why. He had it in the order he would say it in.

At the end of the corridor, by the office, the co-op had a counter.

It always did on sale days. A table with a screen on it and a young woman behind it from the co-op in Roundup, so that members could settle their feed and hay accounts against their sale cheques before they went home, without driving to Roundup. Kieran had settled his own there for twenty years. It was the young woman who had been at school with Rae's sister. She had set up the transfers for him in August a year ago, at the counter in Roundup, in ten minutes.

Thea was at the counter.

She was standing in front of it with her cheque in her hand, the sale barn's cheque, in its envelope, and the young woman was looking at her screen, and turning it round so that Thea could see it, and saying something, and pointing at a line on it.

Kieran stopped in the corridor.

He was ten yards away. There were people between them. He could not hear what the young woman was saying. He saw her point at the screen, and say something, and then say something else, and look up at Thea, and stop. He saw Thea look at the screen. He saw her lean towards it, a little, and read it, and stand up straight again.

She did not look round.

She stood at the co-op counter with the cheque in her hand and looked at the screen, and he stood in the corridor ten yards behind her and watched her look at it, and he knew what was on it.

The young woman said something else. Thea nodded. She took a pen off the counter and signed something on the screen with it, and put the pen down, and put the sale cheque back in its envelope, and put the envelope in the inside pocket of her canvas coat, and buttoned the pocket.

Then she turned round.

She did not see him. He thought she did not see him. She looked along the corridor towards the front door of the barn, past all the people, past him, and walked towards it with her hands in her coat pockets, and went past him at two yards' distance with her eyes on the door and her face doing nothing at all, and out.

He did not go after her.

He stood in the corridor by the co-op counter with his hat in his hand. People went past him. Somebody said his name and he said yes, the last one. The young woman at the counter looked up and saw him, and her face changed, and she looked down at her screen again.

After a while he went back along the corridor to the ring.

• • •

The sale ended at seven.

The last draft through the ring was eleven old cows from a place on the Musselshell above Roundup, broken-mouthed, thin, and the packer buyers took them at a price nobody on the benches would remember, and the auctioneer brought the hammer down and the gate opened and they went out, and the gate shut behind them, and the ring was empty.

The auctioneer stood in his box. He looked down at the empty sawdust under the lights for a long time. Then he said, into the microphone, "That's it," and switched it off, and the people on the benches sat for a moment in the silence, and then began to stand up, and pick up their coats and their hats, and go out, slowly, talking in low voices.

His mother had not moved.

"Well," she said.

"Yes."

"Your grandfather would have bought those steers," she said. "The Lodgepole steers. The first draft. He'd have gone to three-

sixty. He'd have liked them." She put her hand on her stick. "Help me up."

He helped her up. They went out together, slowly, last but for the men from the barn turning off the lights, along the empty benches and out through the side door into the dark and the cold, and across the barn lot to the truck, past the trucks pulling out with their lights on, empty, rattling, and the pens behind the barn all open now, empty, with the gates swung back.

Her truck was still there. It was on the far side of the barn lot, by the railway, with the empty stock trailer behind it, and the dome light was on in the cab. He could see her in it, from across the lot, a shape at the wheel with her head down, and something open on the wheel in front of her, a book, and her hand moving.

He stood by his own truck and looked at the light across the barn lot. She did not look up.

He put his mother in the truck and got in beside her, and sat with his hands on the wheel, and did not start it.

"She knows," his mother said.

"Yes."

"Did you tell her?"

"No," he said. "The co-op did."

His mother looked straight ahead through the windscreen at the dark barn, with the light still on in the auctioneer's box, high up, one window, and then that went out too.

"Then you'll have to tell her the rest," she said. "Won't you."

30

Shipping Day

The sale barn office gave her the cheque at half past three, in an envelope, through the window, made out to her and to the bank in Billings, both names, the way it had been made out to her father and the bank the year before.

She opened it in the corridor. Two hundred and eighty-three thousand, seven hundred and eighty-four dollars. A hundred and three steers at five-sixty and three-fifty-six and three-fifty-four. Fifty-two heifers at five-twenty and three-thirty and three-twenty-nine. She read the slip clipped to it, line by line: two hundred and ninety-three thousand, eight hundred and forty for the cattle, and the commission and the yardage and the checkoff taken off that. The gross agreed with what she had done in her head in the alley, to within forty dollars, and she put it back in the envelope.

Her telephone rang while she was standing there. It was Haslam.

"I saw the prices," he said. "On the barn's feed. The first draft. Three-fifty-six." He sounded pleased. He sounded, she thought, as pleased as a banker allowed himself to sound on a Thursday afternoon. "That's a good price for that weight this year."

"It's a hundred and fifty-five calves."

"I know what it is." He was quiet for a moment. "I've got the papers ready. I'd like to go through them with you now, if you've five minutes, so you know what you're signing on Tuesday."

She stood in the corridor with people going past her and the envelope in her hand, and he went through them.

The calves paid the year: the running costs on the line since November, and the term note, the August payment she had made with Ledger and the one due in November. What they did not pay was the drought. That was on the line too, a hundred and fifty-one thousand dollars, and it was not going to come out of any calf crop she could raise in one year.

"So we term it out," Haslam said. "Seven years. Twenty-eight thousand a year, near enough, with the interest, on top of the old note. And the committee wants it secured on something that isn't cattle." He paused. "On your half of the land. A mortgage on your undivided half of the Lodgepole. You'll sign it on Tuesday, in Billings. Mrs. Lien has seen the papers. She says they're in order."

"My half."

"Your half. Not Mr. Rourke's. We can't take his, and we wouldn't ask." He was quiet again. "I want you to know it's a good outcome. For the year you've had. I've seen worse outcomes this month from people with better years."

"Thank you," she said.

"I mean it."

"I know you do," Thea said, and rang off.

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The co-op had its table at the end of the corridor, by the office, as it did on every sale day.

She went to it with the cheque. She wanted to settle the hay account before she went home. She had wanted to settle it all year. It had been open since August a year ago and it had carried the Nebraska hay and the Saskatchewan hay and the Alberta hay and the

deposits and the balances, and she wanted it closed, and paid, and the statement in the ledger with a line ruled under it, before she drove out of the barn lot.

The young woman behind the table was from the co-op in Roundup. Thea had seen her at the counter there, twice. She looked up and said hello, and said she was sorry about Karin, which she had said in Roundup in February too, and asked for the account number, and Thea gave it to her, and she put it in, and the account came up on the screen.

"You're nearly square," the young woman said. "There's the balance on the Alberta load, from March. Six thousand two hundred and forty. That's all that's owing." She looked at the screen. "With the credits."

"The programme credits."

The young woman did not say anything for a moment.

"The regional programme," Thea said. "The county's. It's put forty thousand on the account since August last year. I wanted to ask you about it. I rang the extension office in September and they said there was drought money going round on a dozen programmes and half of them went through your accounts, and not to ask. I'd like to know which one it was. I'd like to write to them."

The young woman looked up at her.

She had a round, freckled face and she was perhaps twenty-five, and Thea watched her decide something. She watched her look at the screen, and at Thea, and at the screen again, and press her lips together, and decide.

"It's not a county programme," she said.

Thea stood at the table.

"It's the assistance pool," the young woman said. "The co-op's. Members pay into it for other members, when they don't want to be thanked. It shows on your account as a programme credit." She turned the screen round on the table so that Thea could see it. "On the paying member's it shows as a transfer. I can see both, from

here." She put her finger on the screen. "I set it up. In August. In Roundup. I'm sorry. I thought you knew."

There were five lines on the screen. The twenty-first of August. The fourth of October. The fifteenth of November. The fourteenth of December. The fifteenth of February. Six thousand, eight thousand, ten thousand, eight thousand, eight thousand. And beside each one, in the column the system put there whether anybody asked it to or not, the paying account.

Rourke Land & Cattle.

Thea read it. She read all five lines, and the name beside each one, and the total at the bottom, and stood up straight again.

"I'm sorry," the young woman said again. "I shouldn't have—"

"No," Thea said. "You should have. Thank you."

She took the pen off the table and signed the settlement on the screen, for the six thousand two hundred and forty, and the young woman took it against the cheque and gave her a receipt, and Thea put the cheque back in its envelope and the envelope in the inside pocket of her coat and buttoned the pocket, and turned round, and walked down the corridor to the front door of the barn and out.

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She sat in the truck in the barn lot with the ledger.

She had not decided to. She had walked across the barn lot to the truck in the cold with her hands in her pockets and got in and shut the door and put her hands on the wheel, and then she had reached across to the passenger seat, where the ledgers were, the house ledger and the cattle book, and taken the house ledger onto her knee and opened it at the back, at the winter, at the hay pages and the line.

It was all there, every month since November, in her own pencil: the hay, the line, the count, the limit, the percentage circled in the margin. And in the first column, five times, in small pencil, *County*?

She turned to a clean page.

She did the winter again.

She did it without his money. She took the forty thousand out, month by month, from the hay account, and put it on the line instead, because that was where it would have had to go, and carried it forward. She did it slowly, with the pencil, in the dome light, with the engine off and the cold coming into the cab and her breath showing, the way her grandmother had taught her at Arne's desk to carry a figure forward, one month to the next, without skipping.

In November it made a little difference. In December more. In January the line was at eighty-seven percent of the limit, where it had been seventy-three. In February, after the blizzard, it was ninety-one, where it had been seventy-six.

In the first week of March, the limit came down.

She had known it would. The bank marked the herd to the Billings price on the first, and the March price was the worst of the year. She had the March limit in the margin, in her own hand. She had Haslam on the telephone on the fifteenth, *eighty-eight percent*.

Without the forty thousand it was not eighty-eight.

She did it three times to be sure. It was a hundred and nine. It had gone over ninety the week after the blizzard, and over the limit on the first of March, the morning the bank marked the herd down. Over the limit, the agreement said, the bank would want her to sell enough to bring it back under. She could hear Haslam saying it, pleasantly, on the telephone, with three weeks of hay in the shed and the heifers starting to calve.

He might have given her a month. The committee might not have let him. She thought she knew which, and she could not prove it. If they had not, she would have sold forty cows heavy in calf at the worst price of the year, or near forty, and she did the arithmetic for that too, on the clean page, and for the calves that would not have been born in April, and drew a line under it.

Then she sat and looked at the page.

She had come through the winter. She had come through it on her counts and his money, and she had not known which was which, and he had chosen that she should not know.

She sat in the cab with the ledger on the wheel.

She did not know what she felt. She tried gratitude, and it was there; she could feel it, the size of forty cows in calf in the first week of March. She tried anger, and that was there too, and it was the same size, exactly. They sat side by side on the page in front of her, like two numbers that should have been different and were not, and she could not make either of them come out larger than the other.

She did not go and find him.

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At some point she looked up and the barn lot was nearly empty. The trucks had gone out in a long line with their lights on, rattling, onto the street and away, and the field behind the barn was empty, and the pens were open, and the gates swung back. It was dark. There were lights still in the barn, in the corridor and the café, and high up, in the auctioneer's box, one window.

Across the lot, by the barn, there was a truck she knew, with its lights off, and somebody standing beside it.

She saw him. She did not know how long he had been standing there. He was standing by his truck with his hands at his sides, in the dark, looking across the barn lot at her, at the dome light in her cab. There was somebody in the passenger seat of his truck. His mother, she thought.

She looked down at the ledger again.

When she looked up he was halfway across the lot. He was walking towards her truck through the dark between the empty pens, slowly, with his hat in his hand and no coat, and she watched him come and did not move. He stopped by her door. He did not knock on the window. He stood there.

She closed the ledger and put it on the seat and got out.

It was very cold. Her breath went up white between them in the light from the cab. Behind him, across the lot, he had left his truck with its engine running and its lights on, for the heater, and his mother in the passenger seat, very straight, looking at the barn.

"Thea," he said.

"I know."

He stopped.

"The co-op," she said. "The girl at the table. She showed me. Five lines." She held her hands in her coat pockets. "Forty thousand."

"I was going to tell you. Tonight. After."

"I know you were. You said." She looked at him. "I did the winter again. In the cab. Without it. I'd have been over the limit on the first of March, selling cows heavy in calf."

"I know," Kieran said. "I ran it in February. After the blizzard."

She looked at him.

"You ran it," she said.

"Yes."

"So you knew the week."

"Yes."

"And you put the eight thousand on in February anyway. So I'd not go over. And you didn't tell me." She heard her voice and it was quite level. "I was at that table every night, Kieran. With the page. I made every decision that winter on that page. Whether to keep the open cows. Whether to buy the Alberta load. Whether to keep the heifers. And the page was wrong, and you knew it was wrong, and you knew by how much."

"I didn't want you to have to take it from me."

"So you made me take it without knowing."

He did not answer.

"Why," she said.

He stood in front of her with his hat in his hand and she watched him try. She watched him start to say something, and stop, and start again. *Because I couldn't watch you go under.* She could see that one

in his face, and see him see that it was not enough. *Because I'd done something.* She could see that one too.

"I'd done something," he said. "In July. At the Stampede. I wanted to put something back."

"You told my mother about the road."

He went still.

"Nils told me," Thea said. "In the feed truck, in February. At four in the morning. All of it. The man in the road, and the hay gate, and him on the drag. And there's a page from the state's review in Grandad's desk. Under the 2041 tax papers. I found it in January, the week Grandma died." She took her hand out of her pocket and put it on the cold steel of the trailer beside her. "I've had it in my wallet since. *May have been in a position to hold the paddock line.*"

He looked at her for a long time.

"Is that what you meant," she said. "In your kitchen. *Like your father.*"

"Yes."

"Then you didn't have anything to tell me tonight," she said. "Did you. Except the money."

"No," he said. "I suppose I didn't."

They stood by the trailer. A last truck went out of the gate behind him onto the street, empty, rattling, with its lights on, and the sound of it went away towards the river.

"I'm sorry," Kieran said.

"I don't know what I am." She looked past him at the barn. "I did it three times in the cab. It comes out the same both ways. I'd have lost cows I couldn't spare. And you'd no right."

"No," he said.

"So I'm not going to thank you. And I'm not going to tell you it was all right."

"I didn't think you would."

She opened the passenger door of her truck and leaned in and opened the glove box. The envelope was there, where she had put it

that morning, to post in Prosper. *K. D. Rourke.* She took it out and straightened up and held it out to him.

"November," she said. "Your half. The rent."

He looked at it.

"Thea—"

"It's the rent," she said. "You're my landlord. Take it."

He took it. He stood holding it in the light from the cab, and she saw him understand what she was giving him and what she was not, and put it in the inside pocket of his jacket without opening it.

"Go home, Kieran," she said. "Your mother's cold."

He stood there a moment longer. Then he put his hat on, and turned, and walked back across the dark lot between the empty pens to his truck, and got in, and she watched the truck go out of the gate onto the street, slowly, and turn towards the river road, and go.

• • •

She went back into the barn at half past seven.

She had not meant to do that either. She closed the ledger and put it on the seat with the cattle book and got out, and walked back across the empty lot in the cold, and in at the side door, which was still unlocked, and along the corridor past the café, dark now, with the chairs up on the tables, and the co-op's table, bare, and the office, shut, with the blind down, and through the side door into the ring.

The ring was empty.

The lights over it were off. There was a light still somewhere behind the benches, by the door, enough to see by, and she stood at the bottom of the benches by the ring rail and looked at it. The sawdust, raked, with nothing on it. The ring gate at the near side, shut, and the out gate at the far side, shut. The benches going up in rows into the dark, empty, with the coats gone off them and a programme on the floor here and there, and a paper cup. The auctioneer's box,

high up at the back of the ring, dark, with the microphone on its stand in the window.

She had sat on those benches with her father every October since she was four. This afternoon she had stood in the alley behind the ring and watched her own calves come in through the gate and stand on that sawdust under the lights, and the old man from Lavina put his hand up.

She stood by the rail and looked at the empty ring.

Next year there would be no ring. There would be a sale at Billings, and the tablets, and she would haul the calves seventy miles instead of twenty.

She did not know what she had come in to see. She stood there a while longer anyway. Then she went out, the way she had come, and shut the side door behind her.

• • •

She drove home at eight with the empty trailer rattling behind her and the ledgers on the seat.

She drove out of Prosper on the county road past the sale barn, dark now, all of it, the high box and the corridor and the pens, and through the town and out past the old fairgrounds at the east end, where the campus was.

The campus was lit. It was always lit, but at eight o'clock the night shift came on, and the shift buses were coming up the campus road from the car parks with their windows lit and full, one behind the other, and the new halls stood up on the fairground side with the cranes over them, and beyond them, across the river on the bench, the eight old ones in their rows, white, and lit, with the cooling towers behind them sending up their long white plumes into the dark, very straight, in the still cold air, and lit from below.

She drove past it at forty in the right-hand lane, as her father drove. A shift bus came out of the campus road in front of her and turned the other way, towards Roundup, full, and she saw the faces

in its windows, young, turned to their telephones, going in. Somebody at the back of the bus was asleep against the glass.

Then the campus was behind her, and the road went down off the bench to the river in the dark, and along it to the Lodgepole lane.

The ledgers slid on the seat at the turn. She put her hand out and held them.

There was a light on in the kitchen when she came up the lane, and a light in the apartment window over the log barn, and the colony horse at the gate of the horse pasture with his head over it, watching the lights of the trailer come up the lane, and in the weaning pen behind the calving barn, empty now, the gate stood open.

She stopped the truck in the yard and turned the engine off and sat for a moment in the dark with her hand on the ledgers.

It was after shipping. She had said that, in June, under the cottonwoods, with her hands in her pockets. *After shipping.* The post on the Powder River had gone in September to a woman from Miles City; Thea had seen the name on the state's page, under his, on the fifteenth, and closed the page. That was done. He had said he could hold the other thing as long as she liked. Her telephone was in her coat. She sat with her hand on the ledgers and did not take it out, and did not decide not to.

Then she got out, and took them, and went in.