The Leaving Road

A Voidlands Novel

N. Van Seters & Claude

CONTENTS

PART ONE *The visit* 1

1 The bag under the bed 2
2 The work already done 11
3 A day in the orchard 18
4 What he asked for 26
5 A room measured twice 34
6 The price of another week 43

PART TWO *Things promised* 53

7 A strap for the road 54
8 Names on the list 62
9 The deposit 68
10 His machine 74
11 A message cannot do it 83
12 The cover not collected 90
13 What they can hear 97
14 The room beyond the ridge 108

PART THREE *What staying takes* 116

15 Back at the bench 117
16 A job after supper 123
17 Terms of work 129
18 The collection run 136
19 What Ada can offer 142
20 The smaller shop 149
21 Everything then 155
22 The things with owners 163

PART FOUR *The road* 169

23 A room becoming empty 170
24 At the threshold 178
25 What can be carried 186
26 Not one last job 192
27 Opening hours 199
28 The leaving road 205

PART ONE

The visit

1

The bag under the bed

Her father had put a pot of geraniums in the place where she needed to turn the van.

Ada stopped with the front wheel in the gutter and looked at them through the windscreen. There were three pots, actually, set on a plank across two old milk crates, and the middle one had been watered recently enough for a dark puddle to spread beneath it. Behind them the service yard narrowed between the laundry wall and a stack of apple boxes. She had driven a vehicle round that corner at seventeen without stopping. It had been a smaller vehicle. It had also belonged to someone who had expected her to put a dent in it.

"Can we move the flowers?" said Nell.

"We can when I've stopped rolling backwards."

She set the handbrake a second notch and tested it with her foot off the pedal. The van held. Her daughter had already opened the door, letting the wet cold into the cab, and was looking down at a drop considerably greater than she had expected.

"Step."

"I can see the step."

"The second one. Underneath."

Nell found it, got down, and came round the front with her hands in the sleeves of her sweatshirt. Ada watched her lift the first pot against her stomach. Soil ran onto the pale cloth.

"Don't carry it by the rim."

Nell stopped and looked up.

Ada lowered her window. "They break. Put your hand under."

The old laundry door opened. A woman in a man's cardigan stood on its step with a mug against her chest and watched Nell carry the pot across the yard. Her hair was cut shorter than Ada remembered. She had a small red mark beside her nose where her glasses had been.

"Leave the one with the snail," she said. "He says it comes back if you move it."

"Hello, Shirley."

"That you?" Shirley came down the step. "I thought it was the insulation."

"It's me."

"We've been waiting for that since May." She peered into the cab and then at Nell. "You've brought someone."

"My daughter."

"Well, I'd worked that out. You'll want the back clear. There's a box behind your wheel." She put down the mug on the wet windowsill and went to move it. Ada got out.

The air smelled of apples and something being boiled in the main building. Mist had settled along the upper windows, leaving the lower half of each pane clear. In one of them a man was shaving with a hand mirror. He lifted the mirror at her without looking away from it. A length of gutter, tied to the wall with blue cord, emptied into a bath beneath a pear tree. She had forgotten the bath. She had forgotten the way voices carried in the yard, too, close and distinct without anyone being visible.

"Did you bring the square ones?" someone called.

"I brought what there was."

"They won't fit."

"Come down and tell them."

Her father came out of the workshop carrying a boot with a wooden foot inside it. He had his apron on and a thin wool cap pulled down over his ears. The cap was new to her. So were the loose folds at the back of his trousers. He stood under the lintel, getting the yard into focus.

"You found it, then."

"I used to live here."

"Road's different."

"There's a bath in it."

"That's not the road." He put the boot down inside the door and came across. She had meant to hug him carefully, to let him choose how much of his weight to give her. He put both arms round her and knocked the van key against her teeth.

"Sorry. You're tall in the wrong place."

"Same place as last time."

He smelled of leather dressing and the soap he had used since she was a child. She held him a moment longer than he expected. When she stepped away he was looking over her shoulder.

"Nell. Look at you."

"I'm mostly carrying a geranium."

"They don't like standing wet."

"You put them in the rain, Len," said Shirley.

"They were drying."

"Well, they've finished."

He took the pot from Nell and carried it back toward the plank, and Ada put a hand on his elbow and turned him. The three of them stood for a moment with the pot between them. Then Len laughed, and set it by the laundry door instead.

They unloaded the bags first. Nell's was soft and dark blue and caught the corner of the van floor when she pulled it out. Ada's had

wheels which were of no use after the first yard. Len reached for it, found the handle too low, and took the smaller bag of food instead.

"You've brought provisions."

"You said there was no decent oil."

"There isn't. There's oil that calls itself oil." He looked inside. "And coffee."

"That's mine."

"Of course it is."

The cottage abutted the old boot room, its kitchen wall shared with the workshop. At its door he stopped while Ada opened the latch. It was the same latch: lift, pull toward you, then press down with the heel of the hand. Her body did it without assistance. She had been about to tell Nell, and was glad she had not.

Her hand went to the wall beside the door and waited, as it did at home, for the light to come up and meet her. Nothing came. The lamp on the table was a lamp: you struck a match, and it was lit or it was not, and nothing remembered for you which you had meant. The kitchen was warm near the stove and cold by the door. There was a chair where the washstand used to be, and the washstand, with a plastic bowl on it, stood across half the back window. A pair of socks hung from a line above the hob. Len took the socks down before he put the kettle on, and folded them into his apron pocket.

"Which room are we in?" Ada asked.

"Upstairs."

"Both?"

"There's two beds."

"There used to be one."

"I got another." He put three mugs on the table. One had a hairline crack down the handle which Ada could see from the doorway. "You'll want tea."

"I need to turn the van before the yard fills up."

"It won't."

A small truck came through the gate behind her and stopped beside the apple boxes. Its driver wound down the window and called for whoever had left a chair in the turning place.

Ada went back out.

By the time the van was backed against the laundry wall, someone had set two sacks of potatoes beside it. She moved them to open the rear doors. Len stood with his mug and watched her take out the folded cartons, the rope, and the old blankets she had borrowed to protect furniture.

"What's all that for?"

She put the cartons against the wall. A corner of one had softened where rain had got under the door seal.

"Your things."

"What things?"

"Dad."

He looked into the van. "You've enough there to move a house."

"You said the chest. And the chair if it fitted. I measured the room."

He drank his tea. His upper lip was wet when he lowered the mug.

"I said I'd like some room. In the back. It's got on top of me a bit."

"You asked me to come and get you."

"I asked you to come."

"And get you."

The driver had got down from the truck and was moving boxes with Nell. Their voices came through the yard, his low and her bright answering one. Len watched them for a moment.

"We'll not stand in the weather," he said.

"I'm standing in the weather because you're here."

"Then come in."

He took the top two blankets, tucking his mug awkwardly into his other hand. Ada waited for him to put them back. He carried them into the cottage.

She followed with the cartons.

Nell came in after them, flushed from lifting and with a black mark on the bridge of her nose. She had been offered an apple by the driver. She washed it at the bowl and bit into it standing up. The sound filled the kitchen.

"We're upstairs," Ada said.

"I've seen. There's a mattress on the floor."

"There's a bed," said Len.

"There's bits of a bed beside a mattress."

"It only wants putting together."

Ada took her coat off. "Where's the spanner?"

"I'll do it."

"Where?"

He showed her the drawer. The spanner was under a packet of seeds, a dead battery, and a bundle of elastic bands that had melted together. She found a second spanner, the wrong size, before she found the first. Len stood beside her with the bed bolts in a saucer.

"I meant to have it done."

"When did you get it?"

"Wednesday."

It was Monday, the first of the month. She took the saucer.

The upstairs room had one narrow window and a sloping patch of ceiling where the roof came down. The old bed was under the slope. The new one lay along the opposite wall in four pieces, with a bag of nuts tied to a rail. Somebody had put two clean pillowcases over the end of the old bed. The rest of the bedding was a heap under the window.

She knelt and began fitting the rails while Nell held the far end. The wood had swollen, and the bolt would go through one hole or the other but not both. Ada loosened the first corner and tried again. Nell's apple rolled across the boards.

"Don't eat over the pillow."

"I'm not eating. I'm holding a bed."

"Then put it somewhere."

"Where?"

Ada looked round. Every surface had something on it. A jug of dried lavender stood on the little table. Three chair cushions were stacked on the chest, with a pile of blankets on top. On the sill there was a broken clock Len had taken apart, carefully arranging the screws in the lid of a tobacco tin. She lifted the clock and put the apple there.

"He'll hate that."

"He can put the bed together."

From downstairs, Len called that the tea was getting strong. Ada tightened the second corner and said nothing.

The sheet she wanted was under the old bed. She could see the striped edge folded over a low cardboard box, behind a pair of slippers. She put her cheek near the boards and reached. The dust smelled sweet and old. Her fingers caught something leather, and she drew it out far enough to see the brass clasp.

It was his travelling bag.

She knew it from the visit in summer. He had arrived with it in one hand and a paper sack of pears in the other, as if the pears justified the journey. The handles had been mended with a strip of darker hide. One of the repairs was still bright at the edges.

The bag was fastened. When she lifted it, it had the close, settled weight of clothes packed firmly. A sleeve was caught in the clasp. She freed it with a fingernail and recognised the cuff of his good shirt.

"Is that the sheet?" said Nell.

Ada put the bag back.

"Other side."

She moved the slippers and drew out the box. There was a sheet, and another pillowcase, and a towel thin enough to see the stripes on the sheet through it. She took the lot downstairs to air by the stove.

Aled had come in while they were upstairs. He stood by the table with a folded cover against his thigh and was taking a pin out of his mouth. He was broad through the shoulders, with a dark beard cut close under the jaw and a pale place on his thumb where a bandage had been. Ada remembered a thinner face and hair that fell in his eyes.

"You got here."

"So everyone keeps saying."

"We thought you might turn back at the new gate."

"I opened it."

"That's where most of them go wrong."

He held up the cover. "I brought the corners. Before you start shifting everything."

Len took it from him and rubbed the seam between his fingers. He became at once more upright. He carried it to the window, where there was little light but more than at the table, and turned the fold back.

"You've put the reinforcement too close."

"It's where you marked it."

"Then I marked it too close."

"I moved it out."

Len looked again. "You have."

Aled glanced at Ada's stack of cartons. "Good to have a start."

"That's what I thought," she said.

"I'll take the back room first. Get the stock up off the floor. There's cloth in there from before I came."

"There's nothing wrong with it," Len said.

"There's nothing wrong with a bit of it." Aled found another pin at his cuff and put it in the little tin he carried. "Tomorrow?"

Ada looked at her father. He was still studying the cover.

"Tomorrow," she said.

They ate the food she had brought because Len had planned to go for bread and had not gone. He cut the cheese thinly until Nell said

she was hungry, then cut it thick. Aled stayed standing for his, with the cover over the back of a chair. Before he went he took two empty buckets from beside the door.

"Those need doing?"

"If you're passing," said Len.

"I'm passing."

Afterward, Nell took the pillowcases upstairs and Ada washed the mugs. The cracked handle held. She put that mug at the back of the shelf, where her father would have to reach for it deliberately.

"How many jobs?" she asked.

"What?"

"Before you can stop. What needs finishing?"

Len pulled a chair out and sat, slowly, with his hands flat on his thighs. His cap had left a red groove across his forehead.

"There's the covers. A pair of boots for Thursday. The straps for Beryl. I said I'd see to the cart hood." He counted on his fingers and lost the count. "There's a few."

"Show me in the morning."

"You've only just come."

"I've three weeks."

He looked at the cartons against the wall and then up at her. For a moment she thought he would tell her about the bag.

"We'll have the good bread tomorrow," he said. "I'll go early."

2

The work already done

Aled carried the wood under his left arm and Len's breakfast in his right hand. The plate was wrapped in a cloth, with the knife tucked under a fold. At the cottage door he put it on the sill to find the latch, and the knife slid out and went point first into the mud.

He picked it up. There was a sound from inside, the short sharp knock of someone striking a jar lid with the back of a spoon.

"It goes the other way," he called.

The knocking stopped.

"I know which way a lid goes," Ada said through the door.

"Then you know more than the man who put it on."

She opened it. Her hair was loose and she had her father's apron tied twice round her waist. She looked at the wood.

"Where does he keep it?"

"Behind the washroom."

"I looked."

"That's where he keeps the wet stuff."

"Where's the dry?"

"With me."

He put the split logs beside the stove and took the knife to the bowl. Ada unwrapped the plate. There were two thick pieces of fried bread and an egg with its edges gone brown and crisp. He had made

an extra egg without knowing why, and left it in his pan. The girl was still asleep upstairs. Len was at the table holding the jar between his knees.

"I'd have done that," Len said, looking at the wood.

"I was getting mine."

"There's bread," Ada said. "He was going for it."

"I will go." Len lifted the jar. "Once this opens."

Aled took it from him, turned the lid anticlockwise, and put it on the table. Len looked inside.

"That's gone."

It was last year's plum preserve. A round white patch sat in the middle like a button. Ada took it away before he could put a spoon in.

The workshop door had swollen in the night. Aled lifted it by the handle as he pulled, feeling the lower hinge take the weight badly, and set a wedge under the bottom once it was open. Inside, the air was colder than outside and smelled of the wax he had warmed the previous evening. He unwrapped his machine's handwheel to keep the cloth dry and turned it once. The treadle moved without a sound.

His was the heavy one, bought from a canvas worker at Cross Road two years before, with a patched leather drive belt and a shuttle worn smooth on one side. He had made three journeys to look at it. On the first, the woman had asked if he intended to buy it or court it. On the second she had let him bring his own fabric. By the third he had the money folded in an envelope inside his shirt and could think of nothing to say to her until she had counted it.

It stood beside Len's original machine, which was narrower through the throat and had a presser foot Len had filed himself. Aled used that one for leather patches, small work, awkward corners. Across its bed lay his roll of weatherproof cloth, wrapped in brown paper at the exposed end. He moved the roll to the bench and took out the job he wanted to finish before the others came.

It was a carrier's cover, a broad shallow rectangle with shaped corners and an opening for the driver's hands. The old one had torn beside the reinforcement where the strain had nowhere else to go. Aled had unpicked enough to see why, cut two curved patches, and brought the new seam round the load instead of straight across it. He set the corner under the needle and put his foot to the treadle.

For the first few stitches his hands were too cold. He stopped, put them under his armpits, and watched a man go past the window carrying a toilet seat. The man looked in and lifted it in greeting. Aled nodded. Then he took his hands out and began again.

The needle made its small wet popping sound through the waxed cloth. He kept the outer layer easy, feeding it under with his left thumb so that the curve would lie without gathering when the cover was stretched. There was a place where he had expected trouble, the doubled turn at the corner. It went through cleanly. He finished, lifted the foot, and ran the seam between finger and thumb. When he pulled the cloth over the wooden form he had made, it sat exactly where he wanted it.

He took it off and put it on again.

"You look pleased," Ada said from the door.

"It fits."

"Is that unusual?"

"For the things that come in here, yes."

She bent to look. Her hair was tied now, the apron exchanged for an old shirt with a button missing at the wrist. She put a finger toward the stitching, stopped short of touching, and asked if she could.

He handed her the corner. She turned it over, pulled the two layers apart, then put it over the form herself.

"That wants some room when it's wet."

"It's got it. Underneath."

She felt for the fold and found it. "Nice."

He took it back without finding an answer. She had said it as if she knew what she was looking at, and she did.

They began on the stack beside the back-room door. Ada brought each folded piece into the light while Aled checked the name, the work agreed, and whether it had already been paid. Some had tags. Some had names written on the cloth in chalk. One had a child's drawing pinned to it, which Len said meant it belonged to the man with the large dog.

"There's two large dogs," Aled said.

"The unfriendly one."

"There's two of those."

Len took the drawing and examined it. "This one's brown."

"That's a horse," Ada said.

They found the name in a pocket sewn inside the cover. Len said he had known it all along and went to put the drawing somewhere it would not get lost. Aled watched him lay it on the shelf of sharpened knives.

The heavy bench belonged to Beryl. The sharpening wheel belonged to Beryl too, although Len had exchanged a pair of shears for it at some point and Beryl had exchanged them back. Aled knew because she had come to collect the wheel while he was working and Len had told her about a job he could do if he kept it another week. That had been in February. Beryl's name was still painted in white underneath. Ada cleared a space on the bench, stopping to ask which of the jars were useful. He said all of them, and then, under her look, took three outside.

By eleven they had a strip of bare bench and four definite jobs. They had also found a boot someone had brought to be matched, with the foot measurements written inside it, and a parcel of needles Aled had accused the supplier of failing to send. He put the parcel in his pocket. Ada looked at him.

"I'll tell her," he said.

"I didn't say anything."

"You stopped moving."

Len had a pannier on his knee by then, a good canvas bag with leather corners and a buckle rubbed bright from use. It belonged to a woman who carried bottles in it on her bicycle. She wanted a strap shortened. Len had shortened it and was now picking out the stitching where the canvas joined the leather.

"That's sound," Aled said.

"It's pulling."

"It's made to pull."

"It'll pull better if I put another row in."

Aled went over. Len had a spool of pale thread beside him, smooth and stiff, the sort that slid beautifully through a needle and then cut into canvas if it was pulled hard enough. The bag's original seam had a thicker, softer thread.

"Use the brown."

"It'll show."

"She's not wearing it to dinner."

Len held the bag up to the light. "Your mother had one of these." He looked toward Ada. "Do you remember the bicycle?"

"I remember pushing it."

"That was your choice."

"The wheel was square."

"It wasn't square."

"It had a flat bit."

"There was a man," Len said to Aled, "who sold us that bicycle as recently serviced. Said the front wheel had been trued. I got him to show me where."

Ada sat on the stool with the cover in her lap. "He stood outside the shop till they shut."

"I wanted an answer."

"You got a pump."

"I got a good pump."

"You got a pump that didn't fit the valve."

Len leaned back, smiling now. “That was why I went again.”

He told Aled about the bicycle seller, a man who had a different name on each of the two doors of his shop, and the long narrow room where he kept the machines he described as almost ready. Len had wanted a wheel. The man wanted Len to examine a sticking lock. By the time they had finished, Ada had pushed the bicycle home and Len had the lock in pieces in a paper bag.

“Did he ever do the wheel?” Aled asked.

“He said he would.”

Ada laughed into the cover she was folding. Len looked at her, then began to laugh himself. He had a laugh that seemed too large for his current chest. It ended in a cough. Ada put his tea closer, and he drank it without remarking that it was cold.

While they talked he had threaded the pale spool. Aled saw the first row go in, clean and small beside the old holes. He could have made him stop. Ada had begun asking about the covers, and the carrier wanted them by Thursday, and Aled went back to his machine.

They worked through the afternoon. The girl came in with an apple and stayed long enough to ask how a machine could work without a motor. Aled let her try the treadle with no thread through the needle. She sent it backward, forward, backward again, then got the rhythm and looked up as if somebody ought to have seen. Len had. He clapped once, loudly, and she missed a stroke.

After she went, Ada asked where to stack the finished work.

“Front room,” said Len.

“That’s full.”

“Put it on the chair.”

“The chair’s full.”

Aled went with her. They cleared a stack of magazines from a stool and put the covers there. Ada wiped the stool first with her sleeve.

“You don’t need to do that,” he said.

“They’ve just been mended.”

He stayed to help her fold them.

The driver from the covered workshop came near four, in a little pickup with a cracked side window taped across the middle. He had come for a finished bag and asked, while Aled was finding it, whether he still wanted the outside work. It was six weeks, he said. Mostly covers for delivery carts. They could use someone who knew the cloth and did not need teaching which end of a needle went down.

"When?" Aled asked.

"Week after next. You said ask again."

Len had come into the doorway. He stood with a narrow leather strip between his hands, stretching it gently.

"We're shifting things here," he said.

The driver looked at Aled.

"I know."

"He'll have the place," Len said. "Before another winter. We've talked about it."

The leather strip creaked. Aled could feel Ada watching from behind him, where she stood with an armful of covers.

"I'll not take it this time," he told the driver.

"You sure? They'll want an answer."

"I'm giving you one."

The man nodded and paid for the bag. He counted the notes into Aled's hand, took his change, and went back across the yard. Len began to tell Ada where the carrier's covers should go when they were done.

Aled put the payment in the tin. He wrote the job off, counted the change again, and found it was right. When he looked up, the pickup was turning past the geraniums, its load covered with something he could have repaired with his eyes shut.

He shut the tin and went to see what Ada needed next.

3

A *day in the orchard*

The orchard looked nearer from the window than it was. Nell had gone down in the shoes she wore for travelling, with her sleeves pushed up because the sun had come out, and by the time she reached the gate both socks were wet. The grass had brushed cold against her ankles all the way. She stopped on the bottom rail and shook one foot, which did nothing.

A woman stood beneath a tree sorting fruit from a canvas bag into three boxes. Beside her was a ladder with one short leg stood on a stone. She looked at Nell, then at the shoes.

"There's boots in the shed."

"I'm only looking."

"Then you'll have wet feet to look with."

The shed had a low door and a smell of apples so thick it seemed to have warmth in it. Inside, the floor was earth, dry along the walls and damp in the centre where people had come in. There were boots beneath a bench, some upright, some on their sides, and a pair with grass growing out of the ankle. Nell chose the least large and put her shoes on the bench. One boot had something in the toe. She turned it upside down and a walnut fell out.

"Is there a size?" she called.

"Inside."

"There's nothing inside."

"Then you'll have to use your foot."

The boots were too big, but dry. She walked back to the tree lifting her knees unnecessarily and found the woman cutting a dark patch out of an apple with a short knife. She ate the good piece and put the rest in a bucket.

"You're the granddaughter."

"Nell."

"Beryl." She pointed with the knife. "Hold that while I get up."

Nell took the ladder. The woman climbed without looking at her and stood with one knee bent against a rung, reaching into the tree. The branches shifted, shaking drops onto Nell's face. Something knocked against the ladder and she caught it: a small yellow apple, warm where the sun had reached it.

"That's a cooker. Don't eat it."

Nell took her mouth away from it.

"You can if you want. You'll remember afterward."

From the next row came a laugh. A young man in a red cap had a bag across his chest and a pair of headphones round his neck which were not attached to anything Nell could see. He was looking at her over a low branch.

"She tells everybody that," he said. "I ate one."

"He ate three," Beryl said. "Then he asked where the toilet was."

The man went back to his tree. Nell stood very carefully at the foot of the ladder until Beryl came down.

"You want a morning?"

"Doing what?"

"This."

Nell looked up the rows. There were trees far older than the neat young ones near the gate, their branches propped with poles, one of them split and tied back together with a broad strap. Red apples lay in the grass beneath them, more than she had ever seen outside a

shop. In the covered district they came in crates with the variety and the use on the side. Here they were hanging at face height.

"I've not done it."

"I can see that." Beryl put the knife away. "I'll show you. We pay by the morning till you know what you're doing. If it suits you, we talk about the rest. You don't have to decide about your life."

"I didn't say I did."

"You looked as if you might."

Nell asked the pay. Beryl told her, and told her when she would get it, and Nell said yes before she could think of a reason not to.

For the first hour she was good at it. There were three kinds of box: eating fruit, cooking fruit, and the rough low bins for pressing. Beryl showed her the dull patch that meant a bruise, how to turn an apple instead of pulling it, how to leave the stalk on if it would come with it. She had to lift the flap at the bottom of the picking bag and let the fruit roll out slowly into the crate. She did it twice while Beryl watched. Both times the apples settled with a soft hollow rumble which Nell liked.

Then Beryl went to the far end, and Nell began filling the boxes on her own.

The red-capped man was quick. He worked along a low row with the bag at his hip, moving without looking at his hands. Each time he came to empty it he said something, mostly about how the early morning had been better, or the year before, or the row he had not been given. Nell laughed and tried to think of things to say. She was still arranging them when he had gone back to his tree.

She finished one crate, then another. The third had only a few spaces round the top. She pressed an apple into each, turning it until the curve fitted. It looked good when she had done. The top was level, the colours mixed, and the empty bag hung light against her legs.

She carried the crate to the packing shed before anyone could offer to help. It was heavier than it looked. The handles cut into the

first joints of her fingers and by the door her arms had begun to shake. She put it on the bench with more of a bang than she meant.

"That one's ready," she said.

Beryl came out of the inner room with a scrap of paper in her hand. "For who?"

"I don't know. For the apples."

"Leave it there."

Nell stood back while Beryl took off the top layer. Under it, two apples had split where the ones above had pressed into them. A third had a wet brown dent beside its stalk. Beryl lifted another layer, more slowly.

"You've packed them in."

"I thought they'd move about."

"They need a little give."

The young man had come to the door behind her with his bag full. He waited. Nell could feel the warmth in her face.

"I did it like you showed me."

Beryl took an apple from the middle and held it out. The skin had a shallow crescent pressed into it.

"Did I show you this?"

"No."

"Then take it out."

The man put his fruit in the right crate and went away. Beryl set a second box beside Nell's.

"Sound ones here. The rest to pressing. Look under the stalk."

"I could do another."

"Do this one first."

She left the scrap of paper on the bench and went out. Nell could read it upside down. There was a name, a number of boxes, and a time that was sooner than she expected. She began sorting.

The marked ones were everywhere. Some would have been there before she put them in, she thought. She held one up to the window and moved her thumb round its surface. There was a place that

looked no different but gave under the pressure. She put it in the pressing box.

By noon she had less than half a crate of eating fruit. A small vehicle came up the track, and Beryl went to meet it. Nell heard the driver say he could not take half; he had promised a whole one. There was a pause. Beryl told him what else was ready. He took two cooking boxes and left without the eating fruit.

Nell stood beside the bench with her hands behind her back. Beryl came in and counted what she had sorted, then looked at the pressing box.

"You've got them now."

"I'm sorry."

"Yes. We'll put that lot through this afternoon."

"Do I owe you?"

Beryl rubbed the bridge of her nose with the back of her wrist. There was a smear of apple juice on it.

"I'll pay you the half morning. We've both spent the other half on this."

"You said a morning."

"I said a morning's work."

Nell looked at the sound apples, neatly laid in the box. "That was work."

"It was. It didn't get me the order." Beryl put the knife down. "Eat something. Think about whether you want the afternoon."

Nell went outside without taking her shoes. She crossed the grass in the borrowed boots, round the back of the shed where nobody could see her, and stood looking at her hands. The handles had left white marks across the fingers. Her right thumbnail had split along the edge. She had imagined going back at lunch with money in her pocket and something to tell her mother that her mother had not helped her do.

The kitchen door at the cottage was open. Ada stood inside with her sleeves up, washing a broad canvas cover in the bowl, and Len

was sitting at the table drawing something on the back of an envelope.

"There you are," Ada said. "How was it?"

"Fine."

"You've boots."

"Yes."

"Whose?"

"The shed's."

Len looked up. "Have you been with Beryl? She won't let you eat the yellow ones. Take one when she's not looking. They're not bad if you've something to drink."

"She's already tried," Nell said.

Ada laughed. It was worse than if she had asked what was wrong. Nell took a piece of bread from the board and put cheese on it, using the knife her mother had just set down.

"Is it paid?" Ada asked.

"It's work."

"That doesn't answer the question."

"Yes, Mum. It's paid."

"Then make sure you know what she's paying you for."

Nell ate standing up. The cover dripped steadily into the bowl, and her mother squeezed a corner and got water down the front of her trousers. Len said something about doing it on the paving outside, and Ada said she had been about to. Nell carried her plate to the table, wiped the crumbs off with her hand, and went back out.

On the way down she considered not going to the orchard. There was a path along the wall that led to the old gate. She could walk it until lunch was over, then go back to the cottage and say Beryl had finished for the day. Her mother would know, probably. Her mother knew things from how long they took.

She went through the orchard gate.

Beryl was cleaning the press. Its wooden slats lay on the grass, scrubbed pale along the edges. A basin of brown water stood beside her. She looked up and moved a bucket with her foot.

"Hold this end."

Nell held the end while Beryl took the brush along the groove. The bristles hissed against the wet wood. When they had finished, they carried the slats into the shed and stood them where the sun could get to them.

"You can do pressing this afternoon," Beryl said. "No grading."

"I can grade."

"You can learn tomorrow."

Nell wanted to say that she might not be there tomorrow. Instead she took the empty bucket.

They worked until four. Pressing fruit smelled different from the whole apples, stronger and sharp at the back of the throat. Wasps came to it in a persistent little cloud and Beryl put a saucer of juice outside the door to keep them away from the work. The man in the red cap sang half a song over and over, changing the words each time. Nell began to know which changes were worth laughing at.

At the end Beryl paid her for the afternoon and the half morning. She counted it out on a dry patch of bench, beside Nell's shoes, which were still damp.

"I don't like losing pay," Nell said.

"Neither do I."

Nell put the money in the pocket with the zip. Beryl handed her a second pair of socks, thick grey ones with different coloured heels.

"Leave the boots here. These can go back to whoever lost them when they remember."

Nell sat and changed. Through the door at the back she could see a narrow stair climbing beside the outside wall to an upper door. The young man came down with a rolled blanket under his arm and put it on the bench.

"Getting out already?" Beryl asked.

"Airing it."

"You'll not get much more sun."

"I'll take what I can."

He gave Nell a quick smile as he went past. She looked at the stair.

"Do people live up there?"

"He does. Till the nineteenth. Then he's off and I'll get the room back."

"Is it nice?"

"Ask him. I only put people in it."

Nell tied her shoes and stood. Her legs felt loose and heavy, as if the floor were coming up differently each time she put a foot down. She took the borrowed socks off again, folded them, then changed her mind and put them back on. Beryl was rolling the empty fruit sacks with quick economical turns of her hands.

"What time tomorrow?" Nell asked.

"Seven."

"Actually seven?"

"Seven here. Not seven getting up."

Nell nodded and went to find the path while there was still light on it.

4

What he asked for

Douglas wanted the back of the van before he wanted Ada's company. He stood beside it at half past seven with a wooden tray in his hands and looked through the rear window at the folded cartons.

"You've room."

"For what?"

"Empty jars. They're going where you're going."

"I'm going with you."

"So you are. But you've a van."

He had a soft voice, almost apologetic, and an expression which suggested he was discussing the weather. Behind him, along the laundry wall, stood six trays of jars with folded cloth between the layers. Ada had not noticed them arrive.

"I've not driven the road in this."

"You've driven it in."

"Down is different."

He put the tray on a crate. "It is. I'll take them next time."

She waited for him to add something about the cost. He did not. He went to his own vehicle and rearranged two parcels on the passenger seat, making a space for her feet. She locked the van and took her bag.

The road dropped in a series of short steep turns, the old surface showing through the patches where rain had taken the grit away. Douglas drove without hurry, keeping his hands low on the wheel. He stopped at the new gate and got out to open it, then drove through and got out to close it. Ada had already undone her belt by then.

"I'd have done that."

"You'd have done the wrong latch."

"I opened it coming in."

"Then you know better than most."

He settled back into the seat. She watched the gate vanish in the side mirror, its unpainted bar pale against the hedge. Beyond it the land opened. The mist had lifted from the lower fields and was lying in long loose pieces along the hill. Sheep stood under a row of trees, not eating, their backs dark with water.

"How is he?" she asked.

"Your father?"

"No, the gate."

Douglas smiled without looking round. "It wants a hinge."

"Douglas."

"He's all right when I see him. He's had the boots out on time."

"That's work."

"It's mostly what I bring him."

She had wanted something she could use. She looked down at the parcels by her boots. One was tied with string that had several knots in it, joined from shorter pieces. It had her father's neat block writing on the top.

"Did you take his message?"

"I take quite a few."

"For me. Before I came."

"The envelope? Yes."

"Did he say anything?"

Douglas took the next bend in second. “Asked if I’d bring the answer.”

“Anything else?”

“Wanted me to get cheese. I got the wrong one.”

She laughed once and sat back. He had not been unhelpful. She had simply wanted him to know more than he did.

The connection point was in a roadside building with a corrugated roof, a covered bench, and an outside tap where a driver was washing mud off a handcart wheel. A square of paving had been renewed beside the entrance. The old part tilted toward the drain; the new part did not, and a puddle had collected where they met. There was room for three vehicles under the trees and two already stood there.

Douglas parked in the remaining space and switched off. The quiet was sudden. Somewhere inside a kettle clicked.

“Forty minutes,” he said. “Then I’ve a collection.”

“Will that be long enough?”

“For me, yes.” He took the parcels from her feet. “There’s another run after noon if you need it. Ask at the desk. Don’t wait for me unless you’ve asked.”

She got down and stood a moment beside the warm vehicle. In the front window a woman was taking a pair of glasses from a case, turning them over to find which way they fitted. Ada went inside.

The room smelled of coffee and floor cleaner. There were six seats along one wall, a counter, and two small rooms with doors that shut properly. The woman behind the counter asked whether Ada needed a private space. She said yes. It was available, and nobody asked her to explain why.

She sat in a chair with a clean worn armrest, set her bag on the floor, and put the interface on the small table. For several seconds she did nothing. Then the familiar presence was there, with its retained knowledge of her life, waiting for what she chose to bring back to it. Out here, past the last of the covered ground, it answered

only from rooms like this one. The connection point was where the district's reach ended, and she had stopped noticing how much of her life lay on the far side of it until she had to cross back.

"I've arrived," she said.

"You were due at Bellwether on Monday."

"Here."

"Yes."

She rubbed one thumb along the chair seam. "He says I misunderstood."

There was no request to explain who he was. That almost undid her. She had spent three days locating cups, names, remembered hooks, the correct side of doors, and nobody here needed her to begin at the beginning.

"Do you want the request?"

"In a minute. What's come in?"

There were two changes to the meal route, both already covered, and a question from the colleague whose van she had borrowed. The van's replacement booking had moved forward a morning. Could she have it back by the evening before? There was also a note about a supplier's new portion containers. Someone wanted her opinion because she had been the one to complain about the old lids.

"They'll split if they freeze them," she said, looking at the image. "That's the same hinge."

"Shall I pass that on?"

"With the picture from last time. And say the return date's all right. The evening before."

The replies went out in her name, and only the ones she had approved. She could have spent the morning catching up. It would have been pleasant to spend the morning catching up.

"The request," she said.

Len's envelope had contained a short handwritten note and permission to discuss the move through his own established contact.

She had kept the original in her bag. The later exchange, sent from the connection point on one of his trips down, had confirmed the part that mattered. She asked to hear that part again.

His voice came with a faint outside noise behind it. She remembered the day it arrived; she had been putting a tray of hot food into a trolley when the message arrived.

Come and get me, Ada. I've had enough of the room. We can sell what's in the shop, the big things. Aled knows what they are. There ought to be something left when it's done. I'd like the place you showed me, if they'll still have me. Don't leave it till winter.

She stopped it before the rest, which was about a shirt he had left in her wardrobe.

"That's not unclear."

"The request is clear."

"He says it isn't what he meant."

"Have you asked what he wants now?"

"I've asked him six things. He's answered about bread."

She looked at the closed door. On the outside someone moved a chair, a little scrape, then stopped.

"I don't want this sent to Nell."

"It isn't shared with Nell."

"I know. I'm saying it."

"All right."

She sat back and let her shoulders go. Her life had continued while she was away. Nobody had moved a door in it or put a broken clock where she expected to set something down.

The room she had reserved for Len was still held. A woman from housing joined them briefly, someone whose face Ada knew from the summer visit, and confirmed the arrival window. The deposit was already paid, and after a certain date part of it would be lost. The woman explained the alternatives without sounding as if any of them were a threat. Len could come later, if something suitable was

free then. He could stay with Ada for the first weeks. They could look again when he had decided.

"He had decided," Ada said.

"I remember. I liked him."

The woman smiled, and Ada found she could not be angry at her.

She confirmed the room for now. Then she asked for the equipment buyer whose details she had saved before coming. The buyer was out on a collection and sent a brief reply saying she could look on Sunday. She wanted the makes, working condition, and whether there was access for a loading vehicle. Ada had the makes from Len's earlier list. She sent those, described the access carefully, and said she would confirm what was working before Sunday.

"A provisional quotation only," she added.

The reply came back: Of course. I have to see them.

When she came out, Douglas was drinking coffee at the counter and eating a bun with the paper still folded under it. He looked at the time, then at her.

"You've four minutes."

"I'll get one to take."

She paid for coffee and a bun, then went back and bought a second bun for Len. At the door she stopped and bought a third for Nell. Douglas took one of his parcels outside and came back for the rest. She had her mouth full when he was ready.

They made the collection at a building farther down the road. He asked if she minded. She said she did not, and waited while two people brought out flat packages wrapped in a material that shed the rain. One of them knew her from the meals service and leaned in to ask whether she was on leave.

"Family," Ada said.

"Enjoy it."

She nodded, then laughed after the woman had gone. Douglas glanced at her as he got in.

"Something good?"

"I've been told to enjoy it."

"You might."

He started the engine.

Len was in the workshop when she got back, standing behind Aled and indicating a line on a strip of leather with the point of an unlit match. Aled was listening, his head bent, his hands quite still. She stood at the door until he looked up.

"Good trip?"

"Yes."

Len took the bag of buns from her before she had offered it. "They still do these."

"They do."

"Used to have currants."

"They've got currants."

He broke one open to look. Aled returned to his work.

She waited until Len came across to the cottage for tea. Nell had gone back to the orchard and the kitchen was empty. Ada set out the bun, cut in half because he would say he did not want a whole one and then eat the other half while she was washing up.

"The room's still there," she said.

He lifted a currant from the plate with a damp finger.

"It was a nice room."

"You chose it."

"I know I chose it."

"Then what's changed?"

"Nothing's changed. You've come with a van full of boxes and suddenly I've to do everything at once."

"I came when you asked."

He set the bun down. The kitchen window had steamed over from the kettle. He looked at the pale rectangle of it for some time.

"There's work here."

"We're doing it."

"There's people."

She waited. He picked up the bun again, turned it in his hands, and put it down without taking a bite.

"Let me tell Aled."

"Tell him what?"

"About the machines. Let me talk to him. He'll have ideas. He gets ahead of a thing."

"Have you not talked already?"

"We've talked. I want to do it properly."

"There's someone coming Sunday to look."

He nodded too quickly, then more slowly. "That's all right. They can look. Let me have till then."

Ada brought her mug to the table and sat opposite him. She could hear a treadle through the wall, its steady soft turning, then a pause as the work was moved.

"You have to tell him before anything's agreed."

"I will."

"I'm not doing that for you."

He nodded.

She would give him until the woman had looked. Nothing would be sold merely by being looked at. She had said provisional. The quotation would tell them what was possible, and Aled would know better than either of them what ought to stay.

"Sunday," she said.

"Sunday."

He reached for the second half of the bun. She moved the plate closer and began telling him about the new portion containers, because she could not bear to ask him the same question again.

5

A *room measured twice*

Shirley had the tape between her teeth when Aled came up the stairs. She stood in his doorway holding the metal end against the frame with one thumb and trying to look along the little strip of numbers which came out of her mouth.

"What are you doing?"

She took the tape out. "Thirty-one."

"What?"

"The door. I thought it was narrower."

He put down the leather roll he was carrying and came up the last step. She had moved his boot out of the way. He could see it from where he stood, upright beside the bed instead of on its side, and the sight annoyed him more than the tape.

"There's people living in here."

"There's you."

"That'll be who I mean."

"I knocked."

"I was out."

"Yes." She looked at the tape, then at the far wall. "I'll come back if it bothers you."

"It bothers me while you're here."

He waited for her to put it away. Instead she let go of the end and it sprang back into the case, narrowly missing his wrist.

"Mind that."

"I am."

His room was fourteen feet long if you counted the recess where the pipe went down and eleven if you did not. It had a narrow window over the service passage, a bed, a table with one leg shortened to suit the floor, and a cupboard he had made himself from doors that had once belonged to different cupboards. On the table stood a cup with a spoon in it, a jar of needles, and the letter about the outside work he had not taken. He went to fold the letter before remembering Shirley could have read it already.

"You'll have the cottage," she said.

"I'll have a conversation."

"He said."

"He says quite a lot."

She did not answer that. She was looking at the ceiling above his bed, where a small dark stain spread out of the corner.

"That active?"

"Not since they did the flashing."

"Ours is."

He looked at her then. Her cardigan was buttoned wrong at the bottom, leaving one side lower than the other. The shoulders had a darker look, as if she had put it on before the room had dried it.

"You've told them?"

"I've told the wall. It listens about as well."

She walked to the table without touching anything. He could see her estimating the distance from it to the bed, fitting her own chest of drawers into the space his cupboard occupied. She had a good chest, oak, very heavy, which had come with the building. He had helped her move it away from the damp twice.

"It won't go on that side," he said.

"I thought under the window."

"You'll get the draught down the back."

"I can live with a draught."

He picked up his boot. There was a split at the welt he had been meaning to sew for a week. He set it beneath the bed with its mate.

"Thirty-one at the top," he said. "Bottom's less."

She looked round at him.

"The frame comes in. Measure the bottom before you promise anyone it'll fit."

She crouched with a small effort and ran the tape across the sill. He held the end while she read it. Thirty and a quarter. She wrote it on the back of an old envelope and asked if the window opened.

"In summer."

"Does it shut?"

"In winter."

"That's two improvements."

He smiled despite himself. She put the tape away properly this time and picked up the parcel she had left on the landing.

"You taking that down?" he asked.

"It's for Ada."

"She's in the back."

"She'll find it, then."

He watched her descend with one hand on the rail. He had meant to be angry for longer. In the room, the space she had measured looked suddenly available, as if he had already begun to leave it.

He put the letter in the cupboard and took his leather down.

Ada was on the workshop floor with her sleeves rolled to the elbows, sorting buckles into an old baking tray. She had drawn a line in the dust with her finger to separate the sound ones from the doubtful ones, and Len had already put three back across it.

"They'll do for something," he said.

"Tell me what and I'll put them in a box."

"I can't tell you till the thing comes."

"Then it can wait on this side."

They worked through two trays and a paper bag of washers which had somehow got mixed in. Ada asked what he used the rectangular brass ones for. He showed her with a strip of leather, folding it back through the buckle so that the load closed the loop instead of pulling at a sewn end. She did it herself, then did it wrong deliberately to see the difference.

"You could teach the girl that," she said.

"If she wants."

"She likes doing things."

"So I've seen."

"She's not always so pleased about doing them at home."

He looked at the leather and passed her another buckle. He knew what the girl had been paid at the orchard. Nell had told him, at some length, while he was carrying a bucket past the press. He had suggested she put the work through the other way next time and see if she liked the money better. She had not laughed.

Shirley came in at noon with the parcel and put it on the clear end of the bench.

"That was under my stairs."

Ada opened the cloth. Inside was a small enamel tin, blue at the sides, white on the lid, with a dent at one corner and a worn metal clasp. She put her hand flat on the lid and left it there.

"I thought that had gone."

"It went under my stairs."

"I left it at the school."

"Probably. I've had pegs in it. You can have the pegs."

Ada opened it. There were six wooden pegs, a short candle, and a key with no label. The inside of the lid had a patch of red paint near the hinge. She scraped at it with her thumbnail, gently, as if testing whether it was still there.

"That's mine," she said.

"Well, I'm giving it you."

"The paint." She smiled without looking up. "I tried to paint the whole thing. Dad said the enamel would take it if I rubbed it down. He didn't say how long."

Len had come across to look. "You got bored."

"I got eleven."

"Same thing."

Shirley took the key out and put it in her cardigan pocket. "I'll keep this. It must open something."

Ada ran a finger round the dented corner before she fastened the tin. She put the pegs in a jar and set the candle beside the door. Aled took it to the shelf where the candles belonged, and she said sorry, quietly, and moved the tin away from his work.

By the end of Friday the workshop had a path down its middle wide enough for a person carrying something. Aled walked it twice with the cart cover, enjoying the absence of things against his knees. Len began to put a stool in the middle of it and stopped under Ada's eye.

"I'm only sitting."

"Sit at the side."

"There's no room at the side."

"There is. We made it."

She shifted a basket and set the stool in the cleared place. Len sat. Aled rolled the brown paper back round his cloth and laid it across the bed of the original machine. Ada put a pile of matching buckles beside it without asking which heap they belonged in. They were the right ones.

The next morning was bright. By ten, every window in the main block had something hung out of it: a blanket, a towel, a pair of trousers with the pockets turned outward. The new warmth lifted smells out of the grass. Someone had dragged the long table into the sheltered yard and was scrubbing it with water dark enough to leave marks.

Aled took an awning down from above the laundry door. It had sagged for months. The woman in the room beneath it came out to tell him where it leaked. He showed her the tear he was holding in his hands and she said that was it, yes, that was the one. Len, passing with an empty basket, offered to help. They got the frame free together and carried it to the workshop, where Ada was cutting patches from an old cover which had finally been declared beyond repair.

They worked at it all morning, four people when Nell came back from the orchard with a sack of windfalls. Aled put the pieces under his own machine, letting the heavy cloth move slowly through while Len held the weight off the edge. Ada stood behind with the frame. Nell fetched the right thread, then the wrong scissors, then the right ones.

The repaired awning went up before lunch. Water from a jug ran off it in a clear stream. The woman watched it fall, stepped out from under the dry strip, and asked whether they could do the one at the far end.

"Next week," Len said.

"Ask on Monday," Aled said at the same time.

They looked at each other. The woman said she would ask Monday and went in.

There was supper in the yard that evening. It had begun as Beryl bringing a pan of potatoes to cook while the main kitchen's oven was hot. Somebody produced onions, somebody had meat that needed using, and the driver with the little pickup came back with bread, stopping long enough to see if there was a place to sit.

Nell was cutting apples at the table. She had her grandfather's knife and was holding it as if he were watching, which he was, from the chair beside the stove they had dragged into the yard. A small fire burnt in it with the door open. Beryl came to inspect the apples and took one slice from the board to eat.

"These all right?" Nell asked.

"They'll boil."

"I meant how I've cut them."

"So did I."

Nell made a face after she had gone. Ada saw it and grinned, and for a little while the two of them looked the same age.

They sat wherever there was room. Shirley brought two cushions and kept the better one. Douglas ate standing against the wall until someone moved a chair for him, then said he was perfectly comfortable and sat at once. The bread was torn and passed down, leaving a line of white crumbs between the plates. Somebody had opened a jar of pickled beans whose lid refused to screw back on. The jar went all the way round the table and came back empty.

Len was good company. He had a story about the first stove in the cottage, which he and two others had carried from the main kitchen on a door. They had measured the cottage entrance, measured the stove, and gone to great trouble to take off the stove's legs. At the threshold they discovered they had measured the door but forgotten the handle, which projected six inches on either side.

"You could have taken the handle off," Nell said.

"We could have," Len said. "You weren't there to tell us."

"What did you do?"

"Carried it back."

"All the way?"

"Halfway. Then we put it down and blamed each other till dark."

Douglas said that sounded more like the start of Bellwether than any of the other stories he had heard. Len described the man at the far end of the door, who had been carrying the heavy side and would not believe there was a light one. Each time he came to the man's complaint he put his voice down into a slow indignant growl. Nell laughed so hard she had to put her cup down.

Aled had heard it before, but not for years, and Len had changed it. He was the man on the heavy side now. In the old version he had

been the one who thought of the handle. Ada caught Aled's eye over the plates and lifted a finger to her lips.

He smiled and took more potatoes.

Later, when the light had gone off the upper windows and the air had begun to come cold through the gateway, Shirley mentioned the room.

"I measured," she told Len. "The chest'll go in if we turn it."

"You'll want help with that chest."

"I'll want four people and a day without rain."

Ada looked between them. "Who's moving?"

"I am. Into Aled's."

Aled put his cup down. "When it's empty."

"I said when."

"You didn't say when."

"I'm saying it now."

Ada laughed. There was drink in her laugh, a little more than earlier. "Give him instructions and he'll fit in anywhere."

The driver laughed too. Nell looked at her mother, uncertain, and then down at the apple on her plate. Len began asking Shirley whether the damp had reached the laundry chimney. Aled picked up his cup again and found it empty.

He went inside for the jug. In the kitchen there were bowls stacked beside the sink, a puddle on the floor, and nobody else. He stood with the jug in his hands until the little movement in his chest settled. Through the open door Ada was saying something about the meal routes, the way a person could lose half an hour because a shelf had been fitted two inches too low. She could tell it well. People were laughing again.

He filled the jug and took it out.

Len caught him as he passed. "Tomorrow, we'll look at that back shelf."

"We were going to talk."

"We will. I want that small repair out first. The strap with the brass catch. It'll only take a minute."

Aled looked at the hands on his cup, the scar across one knuckle, the wax in the creases of the nails. Len reached for the jug and Aled gave it him.

"You've a clean patch," Len said, noticing the repaired cuff. "That came out well."

"It's the other shirt."

"Is it?"

He leaned forward to look. Aled held still while he examined it, then went to collect the empty plates before anyone else asked.

6

The price of another week

Ada woke with the taste of apples in her mouth and a precise memory of what she had said to Aled.

Nell was asleep on the bed they had assembled, one arm outside the blanket, her mouth open. The room smelled of drying clothes. Ada had put a cup of water on the sill the night before, moving the clock to make room, and now the cup stood in a ring of rust from the tobacco tin. She drank it anyway.

Downstairs, her father was washing plates. He had the kitchen door open and his cap on, though the stove was lit. A stack of clean dishes stood on a cloth, tilted toward the edge of the table. She moved them back as she went past.

"Leave those."

"I'm doing them."

"I can see."

He looked at her, and she smiled, unwillingly. He handed her the drying cloth.

The yard was grey with rain. Water ran off the repaired awning in a straight line, missing the woman's door by a good foot. Aled had come early to put the fire on in the workshop. Ada could see its light through the frosted pane and, every so often, the movement of his shoulder.

She dried four plates and set them where they belonged. Her father began talking about the meal, who had been there, the potatoes, the jar of beans that had been in Shirley's cupboard for three years. He had enjoyed himself. She had enjoyed herself. She could still hear the moment after her joke, the small drop in the sound at their end of the table.

She had not told him about the interview. The supervisor's post in the meal rooms had been advertised in the spring, after eleven years of waiting for the old supervisor to retire, and the panel was to sit in the second week of the month. Ada had written to ask whether her slot could move to the end of it. They had written back that they would see what they could do, which was what people wrote when they meant they would see who else was free. Every night since Monday she had set that against the three weeks, the way Len counted jobs on his fingers, and every night the sum had come out the same. She had paid for this in advance. Nobody here had been asked.

"I was unkind to Aled."

"When?"

"Last night."

"He's all right. He knows you."

She took a fifth plate. There was a patch of fat on the back which the washing had not reached. She put it in the water again.

"Do you want all this in the shop?" she asked.

"What?"

"The big things sold. Both machines. The stock."

He pushed the plate under with the brush.

"Depends what they give us."

"That isn't what I asked."

"Yes, then. If it's worth doing."

"And you've told him?"

"We've talked."

"About selling."

Len looked toward the workshop. “He knows we’re going through it.”

“Dad.”

“We’ve talked, Ada.”

She put the cloth down. “She’s coming at ten. Just to look. You need to be there.”

“Where else would I be?”

He lifted the washed plate and held it out. She took it.

Aled was not in the shop when she went over. The fire was burning, the wood stacked at the side, and the broad cover he had finished was rolled beside the door with a name tied to it. A note on the bench said he had gone to collect the cart hood and would be back after noon. It was a job booked before Ada arrived; she remembered the owner coming to confirm the collection, holding the torn piece rolled inside his fist.

She stood with her hand on the note. She could ask the buyer to wait. She could ask Douglas to tell her at the connection point. It was Sunday, and the woman had said ten. Ada had already asked for a day the woman did not ordinarily work.

Len came through the door behind her with a strip of leather and a needle. He sat at the cleared bench and found the little brass catch he had been looking for since Friday.

“Aled’s gone out.”

“He said he would.”

“You knew?”

“It’s a collection.”

She went to the original machine and folded the cloth roll away from the handwheel so she could find the make. It was heavy, dark green on one side and silver-grey underneath, with the edge wrapped in brown paper. Someone had written a length on the paper and crossed it out twice. She put it on the chair. In the drawer under the machine lay a jar of needles, a folded invoice, and a pack-

et of spare bobbins. She closed the drawer without reading the invoice.

"Is that all shop stock?"

"Which?"

"The cloth."

"It's for the covers."

She wrote cloth on her list and, beside it, ask length.

The buyer arrived at ten past ten in a covered pickup with clean straps coiled behind the seat. She wore a short waterproof coat and good boots that had been resoled once, neatly. She parked clear of the gateway without being asked and came in carrying a narrow case.

"You're Ada?"

Ada held out her hand. "Thank you for coming."

"I had something this way." The woman shook rain off her sleeve before she shook hands. She looked at Len. "And these are yours."

"They are."

"Show me what works."

Len stood at once. He took the leather from the bench, put it under the original machine, and began sewing a line along it. The machine's treadle had a faint knock near the bottom of the stroke which Ada had grown used to during the week. The buyer crouched beside it and listened. When Len stopped, she asked him to turn the wheel by hand.

He did. She watched the belt go round, touched the base where a crack had been stopped with a drilled hole, and asked what needles he used. Len named them. She took a pair from her case, checked the size, then put them away.

"Spare shuttle?"

"In the drawer."

It was in the drawer. Len held it up with a small look of satisfaction, and Ada felt absurdly proud of him.

The buyer tried the newer machine herself. She took a piece of cloth from her case and folded it four times, then six. Len began to tell her six would be too much. The needle went through it. She sewed a short line, reversed, and lifted the work.

"Who looks after this?"

"We do," Len said.

"It's been kept well."

Ada looked at the little oil can, its spout wiped clean, standing on a folded rag beside the frame. She had seen Aled use it at the end of each day.

"Aled does most of the heavy cloth."

The woman nodded. "You'll want to keep a machine back?"

Len rubbed a finger along the sewn edge of the leather. He had made a good straight line. There was one stitch a little shorter where he had stopped to speak.

"We're looking at the lot."

"Both?"

"If the price is right."

Ada uncapped her pencil. "They belong to the shop?"

"They're the shop machines."

The buyer was examining the presser foot. Ada could have asked the question again. She had asked it that morning over the plates, asked it in the cottage on Thursday, asked it before she came. She wrote both in the margin.

They went round the room. The hand tools had value in groups, the buyer said, less separately unless somebody wanted a particular size. The boot lasts were useful if they were kept as a set. The portable press wanted a new return spring, but she had one. She checked the drawers, not disturbing anything until Len opened them, and laid out the things she would include on the cleared bench.

"That wheel?" she asked.

"Been here years," said Len.

"Working?"

"It works."

He turned it. The stone went round with a soft uneven rasp. The buyer put a hand near it to feel the vibration and said she would have to see the bearing before she valued it. Ada wrote wheel, pending. She could see the underside of the bench where a white painted letter had been rubbed almost away. There were other letters after it, hidden by a crosspiece. She thought it might be the name of the man who had made it.

The woman did not want the bench. Too heavy, she said, and it would cost more to move than she could get. Ada drew a line through it, relieved. Nobody would have to take it apart.

At the back-room door the smell changed. There was damp canvas in there and a bitter note from a tin of old adhesive. The woman stayed on the dry side of the threshold while Len brought stock out to the light. Some rolls she would take. Others she asked to have opened so she could see the middle.

Ada held one end while Len unrolled the other. The outer yard was sound. Farther in, pale spots marked the folds.

"That'll wash," Len said.

"Maybe. I can't sell maybe as sound cloth."

"You could cut round it."

"Then I'd be buying what I could cut out."

He rolled it back, more tightly than before. The buyer waited. Ada wrote a question mark and turned the page.

They found two rolls that were good throughout, a box of leather scraps that the woman said she could use for patches, and four unopened packets of buckles. The woman asked whether there was customer work mixed in. Ada showed her the finished stack and the pile waiting, each with its name or description.

"Those stay."

"Good. Put them somewhere separate before I collect. People always remember a bag just as you're driving off."

"Nobody's collecting yet," Len said.

"No." She closed her case. "I'll give you a price for what I've seen. You can say no."

They went to the cottage. Ada made coffee because the woman wanted coffee, and Len said they had very good coffee now, pointing to his daughter. The woman took hers without milk and asked for paper. Ada gave her the back of an envelope and then, remembering all the good things that had been promised on envelopes in that kitchen, found a clean sheet instead.

The woman wrote while Len talked about the rivet press. He had replaced the handle himself. It had been longer when he got it, a nuisance in a small room. The buyer asked if he had kept the old handle. He said it was the old handle, shortened. She nodded and wrote something else.

When she put the pencil down, she turned the paper toward them.

"That's for the group. Both machines, the press, the lasts, the tools we marked, the sound stock. If you keep part back, I'll price the rest again. The machines are what makes the collection worth doing."

Len looked at the number. Ada watched his face rather than the paper.

"I paid more than that for one of them."

"When?"

He did not answer immediately.

"I'm buying used," she said. "I've to move them, put them right, and find somebody who wants them. If you've a buyer here who'll give you more, take it."

Len turned the paper so he could see it straight. "It's not much."

Ada looked then. It was more than she had expected after the cloth. Not enough to pay for every part of the move and the first weeks, but enough to make the arrangement she had made seem reasonable.

"What about collection?" she asked.

Ordinary collection was included in the price, the woman said: a second pair of hands, a larger vehicle, boards to get the heavy things over the threshold. If she booked them and the lot changed too late, there would be an additional wasted-loading charge. She wrote that below the price. Ada asked when too late began. The woman gave a day and a time.

"You'd have to tell me by then. I can't get the hire back once it's out."

"We'd tell you," Ada said.

Len picked a crumb off the table. There had been bread there and someone had wiped round it, leaving a crescent of flour beside the mug.

"Do you need an answer today?"

"No. Tomorrow or Tuesday. I can collect in the third week if we agree the list."

"I've to talk to Aled."

Ada looked up. Her father was looking at the buyer, and for a moment she felt the impulse to say he had already done that, to hold him to his own answer in front of another person. She put her hand flat on her notebook instead.

"Yes," she said. "You do."

The woman drank the rest of her coffee. At the door she thanked Len for showing her the machines and Ada for the coffee. Then she asked who would confirm the list.

"Both of us," Ada said.

She watched the pickup go through the yard. It passed the bath and the geraniums without touching either. The new straps were still neatly coiled behind the seat.

When she went back into the kitchen, Len had put the price face down.

"She knows what she's doing," he said.

"Yes."

"There's more in those tools."

"Then we can keep some back."

"She said that changes it."

"It does."

He got up and took his mug to the bowl. She heard him set it down without washing it. From the workshop came the sound of a door opening, then something heavy being lowered to the floor. Aled was back.

Ada went across with the coffee pot before it cooled. He had the cart hood spread over two chairs and was tracing a tear with his finger. Rain shone on the shoulders of his jacket. He looked up at her, and she found that the apology she had prepared in the kitchen would not come out as she had arranged it.

"About last night."

He looked at the pot. "There's a cup by the tin."

"The instructions. What I said."

"I heard."

"I shouldn't have."

He held the torn edge up to the light. For a few seconds she watched the thin pale line of the window through the weave.

"No," he said.

She poured the coffee. She did not tell him she had been drinking, or that she knew he worked hard, or that she had meant something else. She put the cup on the dry corner of the bench.

"She's been?" he asked.

"The buyer. Yes."

"How was it?"

"There's a list. Nothing agreed."

He nodded, still looking at the hood. "There's a lot to go through."

She nodded.

She nearly asked him what Len had said. His jacket was wet, the tear ran all the way to a seam, and her father had asked to do this himself. She took the pot back across the yard.

The kitchen was empty. Through the upstairs floor she heard a drawer open and close. Len was putting something away. She sat at the table, turned the buyer's paper over, and copied the items into her notebook one by one, leaving a square beside each for her father to mark.

At the bottom she wrote the collection date. Below that, smaller, she wrote Aled.

She left the square beside it empty.

PART TWO

Things promised

7

A *strap for the road*

The strap had been repaired before. Whoever had done it had used good thread and pulled too hard. Aled could see where the stitches had drawn the leather into small ridges, each ridge worn pale along its top. The new split had begun beside the last hole. It belonged to the Tender, who passed through Bellwether twice a year on no schedule anyone could name, and who stood at the bench now with rain running off their coat.

He laid it across his palm. The leather was cold from outside.

"How much shorter can it be?"

The Tender indicated a point with one finger. "About that."

"That gives me enough."

"Will it hold?"

"I'll take the old repair out. Put a piece behind it. It'll be thicker there."

They felt the split again, then laid the strap on the bench. Water ran from the end onto a scrap of canvas. It had been raining since before he got up. In his room the drops had found the metal ledge outside the window and struck it at intervals which almost made a rhythm. Each time he thought he had it, one arrived too soon.

"After three," he said. He named the price. "If I find more of it's gone, I'll leave it till you're back."

"Can you do it today?"

"Yes. After three."

Len came from the cottage with two mugs held together by their handles. The tea in one had spilled onto the other. He put both down on the folded edge of a customer's waistcoat.

"Won't take that long," he said. "We can have it by dinner."

Aled moved the mugs. "I've this to finish first."

"You've nearly done that."

He had nearly done it before Len knocked the little tin of fastenings onto the floor. Three were still missing. He had found two in the treadle frame and one in the cuff of his trousers. He did not explain this to the customer.

"After three," he said again.

"That's fine," the Tender said.

Len picked up the strap. He pulled the two ends apart gently, looked at the split, and put it down in the wrong place. Aled brought it back beside the canvas scrap.

"We used to keep more of that thickness," Len said. "Had a whole hide once. Couldn't find a bit big enough to make anything by the time we'd cut round what was wrong with it. There's leather for you."

The Tender waited.

"You looking for a machine?" Len asked.

Aled had his foot on the treadle of the original machine. The customer's waistcoat lay turned inside out over his knees; he had opened the side seam so the needle could reach the worn pocket without sewing it shut. He kept one hand beneath the lining.

"No."

"That one's a good one." Len nodded at it. "You could take it. I hardly use it now."

Aled looked up.

"It isn't ready to go."

"No use for one," the Tender said at once. "And nowhere to keep it."

Len rested his hand on the machine's head. "You could do straps."

"I can bring straps here."

There was a pause. Aled could hear somebody in the yard shaking water out of a coat. The drops hit the door like handfuls of grit.

"Well," Len said, "there's that."

The Tender glanced toward the open door. They had not taken off their outer clothing. Aled wondered whether Len would offer tea, and whether he would then be expected to find a third mug. He had put the two he used under the bench on Saturday because Ada kept washing them while he still had tea in them.

"Three," the Tender said.

"Any time after."

They went out, avoiding the low corner of the sheet hung over the entrance. Len had put the sheet there to stop rain getting onto the hinges. It caught water in a pocket and released it down the back of anyone who touched it. Aled had meant to change the slope. He had meant to do several things before lunch.

He finished the pocket. The cloth was thin beside the seam, and he laid a piece of cotton beneath it to spread the pull. It was work he preferred doing on the older machine. He knew exactly how little pressure it needed, where the feed would catch, how much weight to leave resting on his knee. He turned the waistcoat through and put his hand into the pocket. The lining sat smooth against his knuckles. There had been a time when Len would have tried it too.

Len had gone back to the cottage.

At eleven Aled cut out the old strap stitches. They came reluctantly, short hard lengths dropping into his palm. Underneath, the leather was black and soft. He cut back to sound material, laid the ends in their original relation, and measured the shortening before making any new holes. There was just enough.

Ada came in carrying a box of packing paper against her hip.

"Where's Dad?"

"Kitchen."

"I've been in the kitchen."

"He was."

She put the box on the stool, saw his empty mug, and reached for it.

"There's some left," he said.

She looked inside. A skin had formed on it.

"You're welcome to that."

"I was keeping it for you."

She smiled. It was easier with her when Len was elsewhere. She shifted the box so he could reach the drawer, asked which of the small tins ought to stay upright, and left before he had finished answering.

He put the tins upright himself. Then he made the strap repair, working the edges of the insert until there was no hard ridge to chafe through the layer above. The offcuts were too narrow to keep. He kept one anyway. It would pack a hinge.

The Tender returned a little after three. Aled had hung the strap from a hook where it could dry away from the stove. He took it down and let them bend the repaired section.

"It'll feel stiff for a while."

They ran a thumb along the edge. "That's shorter than before."

"As much as we said."

"Yes." They tested it once more. "Good."

He named the price again, the same price. They paid him. He counted the change onto a clear piece of the bench and waited while they put it away. Len was mending a catch at the far end of the room. He looked up when Aled opened the cash tin, then bent over his work.

"Don't leave it against heat when it's wet," Aled said.

"I won't."

They fitted the strap, adjusted it to account for the lost length, and left. He saw them pause outside to settle the weight before going across the yard. The gate made its usual scrape. Someone called after them to ask whether a door had been left open. There was a reply he did not catch, and then the rain covered the sound of movement.

He put their payment in the tin and entered the repair on the page beneath the waistcoat. The two jobs made a reasonable afternoon. He could have done a third if he had not had to find the fastenings.

"You needn't have done that," Len said.

Aled turned the page back. "Done what?"

"Made a thing about the machine."

"I said it wasn't ready."

"In front of someone."

He shut the tin. There was grit beneath it, and its base scratched the bench.

"You offered it while I was sitting at it."

"They didn't want it."

"You didn't know that."

"Could see they didn't want it. It was conversation."

Aled took the small cotton patch left from the pocket and folded it into the rag box. It was clean enough to wipe a needle with. He had six or seven such pieces. He unfolded it again and laid it flat.

"Are you selling the shop?"

"We're going through it."

"That wasn't what I asked."

"Don't start talking like her."

Aled looked at him. Len had the catch between his fingers, one half bright from filing. He brought the halves together and opened them again.

"I've been talking like this eight years," Aled said. "You've only just noticed."

Len put the catch down.

"You've had a place here."

"Yes."

"And work."

"Yes."

"No need to make it sound as if you've been done out of everything."

"I haven't said everything." He could feel the answer he wanted beginning to hurry him. He set the rag down. "You said when you stopped, I'd have the shop. You said the machine would stay. You said it when I bought the other one. Do you remember that?"

"Of course I remember."

"Then what are we going through?"

"Things we don't need."

"Who's we?"

Len rubbed the filed edge of the catch against his apron. Aled had seen him do that to a blade and cut the cloth. He nearly told him.

"There's a lot in here nobody needs," Len said. "You can't deny it."

"There's a broken saucepan full of screws behind you. Start there."

"Good screws."

"Start with the saucepan."

Len laughed, briefly and without pleasure. "You always did have to get the last one in."

Aled stood. His leg had gone stiff at the machine, and he waited for the feeling to ease before moving the waistcoat. It belonged on the finished hook. He checked the name on its tie, although he knew the name.

"On Tuesday," he said, "you told me I'd have the place before another winter."

"And you will."

"The shop?"

"The shop. What else do you think I mean?"

"Sometimes I don't know."

"Have a little faith, then."

Aled hung the waistcoat up. There was no room between it and a coat that had been ready for eleven days. He shifted the coat to the other hook. Len watched him make the space.

"I've had faith," Aled said. "That driver offered me six weeks."

"You wouldn't have liked being away."

"I didn't find out."

The rain had slackened. Through the window he could see Nell carrying an empty crate over her head. She had put it there to keep the rain off, but the slats let it straight through. The man beside her said something and she lowered it, laughing. Aled watched them go out of sight.

"What does Ada think?" he asked.

"About what?"

"What I'm getting."

"She wants to get me packed."

"And are you going?"

Len picked up the catch. "Not tonight."

It was almost a joke worth leaving alone. Aled sat on the stool Ada had cleared and put his hands between his knees. His trousers were damp where he had leaned against the door. He had not noticed until he stopped.

"I need to know before you agree anything."

"You'll know."

"Before."

Len looked at him with a tiredness which, on another afternoon, would have made Aled get up and put the kettle on.

"We'll sort it in the morning," he said. "Get a bit of peace first."

Ada came out of the cottage with several sheets of paper tucked beneath her arm. She crossed to the van, opened the side door, and began looking through the empty boxes. When one would not flat-

ten she stood on it. Aled could hear the snap of the cardboard through the window.

"Morning," he said.

Len nodded. He had begun filing the catch again.

8

Names on the list

Ada needed her father to remain seated for twenty minutes. She had made tea, put bread within reach, and moved the kettle off the heat so that nobody could reasonably say it needed seeing to. He was sitting at the table when she brought the list down. By the time she found a pencil, he had gone to look for a different chair.

"There's a chair under you, Dad."

"It rocks."

"It didn't rock at breakfast."

"Probably did. I was eating."

She brought the chair from beside the stove and sat on the rocking one herself. He watched the small adjustment she made with her foot.

"There."

"Yes. You were right." She laid out the sheets. "Can we do this now?"

"Where's Nell?"

"Working."

"Rain's getting into the shed."

"She's still working."

He took a piece of bread. She waited while he found the butter, removed a crumb from it, and put the crumb on his plate as if it might have a use.

"The buyer's written down what she saw. I've copied it clean. She needs us to confirm it before she books the bigger vehicle."

"She's got a vehicle."

"A bigger one. And someone to help."

"I can help."

"I know. They're bringing someone."

She read the first machine's description. There were words on the buyer's sheet she had not known how to spell, and she read those slowly, taking care not to turn the question into a test. Len interrupted to correct the age of the belt.

"That's a replacement. The old one lasted."

"Does it go?"

"Yes."

"In the sale?"

"If she's paying for it."

"The price is for the list." She touched the sheet. "This list. If we change it, she gives us another price."

"I know how a sale works."

"Then tell me if that goes."

"It goes."

She made a mark. The newer machine next. She used the buyer's description rather than the one she and Len had been calling it by. He nodded with bread in his mouth.

"And that belongs to the shop?"

He swallowed. "It's been here two years."

"Dad."

"Yes."

She kept her finger beside the line for another moment. He met her eyes, then looked away to spread butter. She marked it.

The rivet press went. The full set of lasts went, except for two odd sizes which Len said were not a set and the buyer might have if she wanted. The sound rolls of canvas went. The leather scraps went. The sharpening wheel remained pending a look at its bearing. The bench had already been struck out. She was glad of that. She had seen how it met the wall and did not want anyone telling her she had to remove a doorway.

Customer work stayed. Len identified a pair of brown boots as a pair which had been abandoned. Ada remembered a woman asking for brown boots on Friday.

"Different ones," he said.

"How do I tell?"

"Those have a patch."

"So do the others."

"Different patch."

She wrote ask owner beside both. He made a small impatient sound.

"We're leaving them, then," she said. "That's settled."

"We haven't settled what happens to them."

"We've settled they're not being sold."

He took another piece of bread. Outside, something large fell over with a sound like an entire cupboard emptying. Neither moved. After a moment somebody swore, then laughed, and Len reached for the butter again.

She got through the rest of the sheet. His private handcart was not on it. He wanted that for taking purchases back from the shops, he said, and she wrote keep at the top of a separate page. She could see it behind her own front door already, blocking the shoe shelf. She did not say so.

"Right. Is there anything here that's somebody else's?"

"The customers'."

"I've taken those out."

"Then what are you asking?"

"The machines. The press. The things we've just said."

"We've just said."

She put her pencil down.

"Have you told Aled?"

"We've talked."

"About the sale."

"He knows we're sorting it."

"You said you'd tell him."

"I have talked to him, Ada. You can't expect me to repeat every word."

She could go across the yard. Aled was in the workshop; she had seen him shake his coat out at the door. She could take the list and ask him to look. She imagined her father following her, asking why she had gone behind his back, then refusing to answer anything else for the rest of the day. She had twelve days left after this one. The van needed to be on the road on the twenty-first morning if she was to return it that evening.

"Will you sign this?" she asked.

He looked at the sheet as though she had changed the subject to something indecent.

"You want my signature?"

"She wants authority for the collection."

"Doesn't trust me."

"She's met us once."

He reached for the pencil. His fingers were clumsy first thing, but it was nearly ten. He wrote steadily beneath the list, then wrote the date without asking her what it was. She signed beside him as the person arranging it. The paper looked more serious with their names on it. It was a relief she had not meant to feel.

In the shop she cut strips from the packing paper and wrote the buyer's inventory numbers on them. She tied them loosely with spare string so they would not leave adhesive on old paint. Aled had

gone to the lower stores for something. Len stood beside the stove, turning a stocking to see where its darn began.

"Who's that for?"

"Mine."

"You can keep your own stockings."

"I should hope so."

She smiled and tied the first number to the older machine and the second to the newer one.

At the door she found two broad loading boards leaning behind a tarpaulin. They looked exactly what the buyer would need for getting over the workshop step. She brought them as far as the van, one at a time, and was trying to fit the second beneath the side shelf when Douglas came into the yard.

"Where are those going?"

"Only in here till the collection. Keeps them dry."

"They were dry."

"One end was."

He took the boards from her without ceremony and set them against his own vehicle. His hands were red, with a cut across one knuckle rubbed white at the edges.

"I should have asked," she said.

"Yes."

"Can we book them? For the collection. Her vehicle's bringing boards, but the turn at the door's awkward. I thought another pair."

"Which day?"

"The twentieth. Morning."

He considered. "I can keep that morning. Boards and me."

"I can pay once the deposit's through."

"Then I'll hold it till tomorrow evening."

"I've brought a van. That ought to make some of it easier."

"It will. You can take your dad's things."

He said it pleasantly. She could hear how she had sounded.

"I meant we can do a run together if there's something going out."

"There is. We can price that when we know what it is."

Aled came up the path carrying a replacement buckle, wrapped in cloth to keep it from rusting. He stopped by the van.

"You're moving things already?"

"Making room."

He looked past her at the packing paper.

"Has he spoken to you?" she asked.

"This morning. He said leave the smaller stock till we know what needs keeping."

"He said that to me too."

"He would." Aled smiled. "I've moved those covers out of your way."

"Thank you."

"He said we'd go through the rest when he's finished that catch."

She looked toward the cottage. Her father was standing inside the kitchen door, trying the repaired catch on his apron strap. He pulled it shut and opened it again, pleased with the movement.

"We'll get it sorted," she said.

Aled nodded and went past her into the shop. She could have called him back with the signed list. Instead she checked the time Douglas had written beside his price, and asked him whether tomorrow's run would take a message to the buyer.

"Paid at the same rate," he said.

"Yes," Ada said. "Put that down too."

9

The deposit

The buyer had written the collection date twice. Once at the top of the letter, beside the agreed price, and once below the place for Len's signature. Ada was glad of the repetition. She had spent the morning repeating a date herself and had discovered how many people could nod without hearing one.

Douglas brought the envelope back with a sack of grain and a packet of sewing needles. He put the needles straight into the shop and handed the envelope to Ada at the van.

"She's held the twentieth. Wants that copy back."

"Today?"

"Next time I go. The deposit's there."

She had expected to wait another day. She held the envelope closed while he took the sack from his shoulder, then went inside to open it on a clear table.

Her father had laid out three shirts. Two were the same pale blue. One had a cuff turned and stitched so neatly she could not immediately see which side had been the outside. The third was a brown shirt she remembered from his visit, good at the shoulders and worn transparent beside the buttons.

"Which?" he asked.

"For what?"

"Taking."

"All of them, if you wear them."

"Don't need three."

"You need more than one."

"They wash things there."

"They do, Dad. They still need to get them off you."

He smiled and put the brown one on top of the others. He had opened the travelling bag. The old coat lay folded across a chair, with a square of different fabric under its collar where the lining had worn. She recognised the coat from his summer visit. He had done it carefully.

"The buyer's confirmed."

He turned toward her. "What did she say?"

Ada read the letter. The lot was the lot on their signed list. The buyer would send a larger vehicle and an assistant on the twentieth, in the morning. The amount enclosed was one fifth of the agreed price. The rest would be paid against the agreed goods at collection. Douglas's boards and loading help were Ada's separate booking; the buyer's ordinary collection was included in the lot price. Changes needed to be discussed before the final vehicle hire became non-refundable. The exact deadline was underlined.

Len reached for the sheet. He read more slowly than she had, running his forefinger beneath the price.

"That all in?"

"Ordinary collection's included. The charge below is if we change the load too late."

"I can read it."

She let him. He went back to the top, looked at the date, and signed where the buyer had asked. Ada put his first inventory beside it and checked the lines against one another. Nothing had been added. Nothing had been taken out.

"She's sent the money," Len said.

"Yes."

He put the letter down and straightened the shirts. “We’d better make a start.”

For a moment she had no answer. He had said it so simply that she felt the last week release its hold on her shoulders. She could see him in the room they had chosen, complaining about a window that opened in a different direction from the one he expected. He would complain to her, then to someone else, and by the second afternoon he would know where to sit. He had known where to sit during his visit. He had found a place in the little garden behind the meal rooms and been annoyed when she came to fetch him.

“There’s a drawer that will take those,” she said, touching the shirts. “The big one. You don’t have to live from the bag.”

“Wasn’t planning to.”

“And the coat. There’s hanging space.”

“Needs a button.”

“I’ve seen the button.”

“It’s there. It’s hanging.”

They both laughed. She sat on the rocking chair and stopped it with her heel. He folded the brown shirt properly, sleeves inward, smoothing a crease with the edge of his hand.

“I thought we could go past the place with the soup on the way in,” she said. “If it’s not too late.”

“The one you called lunch?”

“It was lunch.”

“It was a bucket.”

“You ate it.”

“I was hungry.”

“There was a roll.”

“There was half a roll. You had the good end.”

She wanted Nell to come in. She wanted her to hear him making an ordinary complaint about a journey they would actually take. Instead she left Nell working and counted the money with Len at the table.

They counted it twice. The sum was enough to look different from the small payments that came out of the workshop tin, but not enough to settle the move. Ada separated Douglas's booking first, then packing supplies, then the materials for jobs already paid for. The supplier's needles lay unopened in the shop, and Len confirmed they were for the covers.

"Not all ours to spend, then," he said.

"No. Some of it finishes the work."

"We'll finish it."

She marked the three outgoings. Together they took three fifths of what had come. She put the remaining two fifths in a separate envelope and wrote the amount on the outside. For once she had the right number of envelopes. Her father kept things that could be written on long after there was any place left to write.

Douglas was outside inspecting a tyre. She waited until he put the cap back, then paid him. He counted with his hands still dirty and gave her a receipt from the small pad he kept inside his coat. The top page was marked with a thumbprint.

"Twentieth," she said.

"Morning. I'll be here before the other vehicle."

"Can you bring the boards the evening before?"

"Only if you've somewhere dry to put them, off the ground."

"The van?"

"That'll do."

In the shop Len had begun choosing tools from a drawer. He held up two awls, felt their points with his thumb, and put the better one back.

"You can keep a small kit," she said.

"Don't need one."

"You'll want to do something."

"Thought that was what I was getting away from."

She looked at him. He had already bent to the drawer again. There was pleasure in the way he sorted, pausing over a familiar

handle, finding a blade beneath something which had not belonged there. She could not ask him to say the last sentence again without spoiling it.

Ada moved his coat off the chair and brushed lint from its collar. The repair beneath it was soft against her fingers. He had used a piece from something striped. A shirt, perhaps. She had expected him to argue about the coat, but he had not. There would be room for it. She could hang it nearest the door so he would not have to reach.

Nell came in while Ada was putting it in the bag.

"You're packing."

"Some of it."

"Is he coming?"

"We've confirmed the sale."

"That's not the same."

"Please don't start."

"I asked."

Ada stopped with the coat half folded. Nell had an apple in one pocket and a clean cloth wrapped round a finger. It was tied too tightly; the end of the finger looked pale.

"What happened?"

"Nothing. The crate caught it."

"Let me see."

Nell held out her hand with an exaggerated patience which made Ada want to stop helping. She untied the cloth, checked the shallow scrape, and tied it more loosely. Nell looked down at her mother's split thumb.

"You've got one too."

"Yes. We should have brought someone with hands."

Nell smiled. Ada held the end of the cloth a moment before releasing it.

"There. Don't keep it wet all afternoon."

"I know."

"You don't have to say it like that."

"Like what?"

Ada put the coat down. "Are you having lunch?"

"Beryl's got something."

"Do you want me to keep you bread?"

"No. Thanks."

She took another piece anyway and went back toward the orchard. Ada watched her cross the yard. Her borrowed boots had altered the way she walked, a longer step, the ankles less free. She looked older from behind. When she glanced back with the bread between her teeth she looked about twelve.

Len was still at the shop door. He was talking to someone about a latch, showing how the bolt ought to sit, holding his hands in a shape Ada knew before she could see what he meant.

She left the bag open. There was space enough for the little tool kit if he changed his mind.

Aled came back before two. She saw him from the cottage, carrying the coarse sack he used for parts. He stopped in the workshop doorway. She lifted a hand through the glass, then realised he was not looking toward her.

He set the sack down. For a little while nothing happened. He stood beside the newer machine with his back to the window, reading the label tied to its frame. Ada could see the white rectangle beyond his arm.

Then he bent, worked at the knot, and took it off.

10

His machine

The string had been tied through the opening in the stand where Aled rested his heel. He could tell Ada had meant to be careful. She had doubled the loop so that pulling the label would tighten it without rubbing paper against the painted head. He unpicked it rather than cut it. There were scissors within reach, but he wanted the whole thing in his hand.

The buyer's name meant nothing to him. The date did.

He read the three short lines a second time, then looked at the original machine. It carried the same paper. So did the press. From the angle of the door he could see six labels. The shop looked as though somebody had been through it while he slept.

Len was at the far bench cutting a thong into narrower strips. He used the knife wrong for that cut, drawing it toward his thumb. Aled had told him before.

"What's this?"

Len looked at the paper. "For the list."

"What list?"

"The things going."

"This was on mine."

"Must have got it wrong."

Aled laid it on the machine bed. "Who's coming on the twentieth?"

"Woman who was here. Ada's been seeing to it."

"Seeing to what?"

Len put down the knife with unnecessary care. "Ask her. She's got it all written."

Aled went across the yard. The cold caught him through his damp cuffs. A crate stood outside the cottage door, and he moved it with his foot before knocking. He had never knocked at that door in the daytime. He heard himself do it, two heavy blows.

Ada opened it with a shirt over one arm.

"Has he told you?" she said.

He held out the label. "You put this on my machine."

She looked at it, then at his face. "Your machine?"

"The one I paid for. Yes."

"I asked him."

"You could have asked me."

"He said they belonged to the shop."

"The shop didn't earn the money. I did."

She stepped back. He did not want to go inside, but staying on the doorstep made it easier for her to stand between him and the papers. He went in. The shirt on her arm was one of Len's. His travelling bag stood open on the chair with the coat folded inside.

"What have you done?" he asked.

"I've arranged a sale. With his permission."

"Of my machine."

"Of what he said was his. I've got a signed list."

"Then you've got a wrong list."

"So I see."

He waited. She laid the shirt down. There was no clear place for it, and she lifted a loaf off the table before putting it there. He had watched her find a place for everything for ten days. Now she could not find one for a shirt.

"The twentieth," he said. "What happens on the twentieth?"

"The buyer collects."

"Both?"

"That's what she quoted for."

"And you agreed."

"Dad agreed."

"You're the one tying bits of paper on."

"Yes. I should have shown you the list."

He heard the admission and could not use it. It was too small for what he had walked across the yard carrying.

"You should have asked before there was a list."

She drew a breath. "Let's get him in here."

"He's over there. You can get him. I've done enough walking after him."

Ada went to the door. He looked at the table while she called. The buyer's sheet lay under a mug. He could see the top of his machine's description, and beside it the price of the lot. Below was Len's name. Ada's too. He had imagined an untidy conversation in a van, his machine mistaken for a machine which could be sold. There were signatures.

Len came in carrying the strips he had cut. He set them on the table where Ada had been writing.

"It's a label in the wrong place," he said.

"No," Aled said. "It's there as well."

He pointed at the sheet. Len glanced at it.

"We can take it out."

"You put it in."

"Must've got mixed up."

Ada picked up the strips and moved them. "I read it to you yesterday. Both machines. You said both."

"Shop machines."

"Mine is a shop machine," Aled said. "It works in a shop. I paid for it from my wages. I went and fetched it. You were there when I paid."

"I know you fetched it."

"You counted the money with me."

"Then nobody's saying you didn't."

"Two winters I put by every week for it," Aled said. "You said it was the best money I'd ever spend."

"It was."

"It was mine to spend. That's all I'm saying."

Aled took the sheet from beneath the mug. There was a wet ring over the buyer's name. He held the paper by its dry corner.

"Has she paid?"

Ada did not answer at once.

"Has she?"

"A deposit. This morning."

He looked at Len. Len picked up a strip from the table and pulled it between his hands to test its width.

"You took money."

"She sent it," Len said.

"And you sent it back?"

"No," Ada said. "We accepted it."

She said we without looking toward her father. Aled put the sheet down before his hand could crumple it.

Beryl came to the open door with a broken crate hinge. "Is the sharpening wheel going?"

Nobody answered her.

"Douglas says there's a buyer coming. Is the wheel on it?"

"Pending," Ada said.

"Pending what?"

"A bearing."

"It belongs to me."

Len let go of the leather strip. "You said we could use it."

"And you have."

"It's been here twelve years."

"It was mine twelve years ago." Beryl stepped inside. She glanced at Aled, then at the paper. "Bench too."

"The bench isn't on it," Ada said quickly. "She didn't want it."

"That's fortunate for her."

Aled laughed once. Ada looked at him. He was not enjoying it, but he wanted her to hear how close they had come to selling a bench and describing its owner's relief as good luck.

"Nothing else is moving," Ada said. "I'll stop the packing."

"That's not packing," Aled said, pointing through the door. "That's my work on a label."

"I said I'll stop."

Beryl put the hinge on the table. "I need two holes moved on that. Not now."

She stayed.

"You know I was going," Len said to Aled.

"I know you've been talking about going. You told me on Tuesday I'd have the shop."

"You'll have somewhere to work."

"With what?"

"Your machine, for a start. Since we've established it."

Aled put both hands on the table. His right palm was cold and his left was hot. He was going to say something stupid if he let Len keep making the argument smaller.

"When I bought it," he said, "you said buy it now, get used to it here, and the old one would stay when you finished. You said there was no point paying me full share while you were buying stock for the place I'd take over. You said I'd get the room as well."

Ada had stopped moving.

"He said something about the place the day after we came," she said. "I heard that. I thought he meant the cottage."

"He meant all of it. He said all of it to me."

Len frowned. “Not every nail.”

“Nobody asked you for every nail.”

“I’ve given you nails.”

“Dad,” Ada said.

Len looked away. Aled could feel eight years turning into a list of objects he would sound mean for mentioning. He had eaten in that kitchen. He had used the wood. Len had taught him to close a seam without drawing it sideways; he could still hear the old man telling him to let the thread do its own job. He could not stand there and make those things disappear. Len was relying on that.

“I took less money because you said I was working toward something,” he said. “I bought what you told me to buy. I’ve kept the place running while you went off to look at whatever somebody wanted looking at. I’ve brought you breakfast, fetched your fuel, collected work you forgot to tell me you’d taken. I thought—”

He stopped. His voice had gone where he could not bear to hear it.

Ada said, “I didn’t know about the pay.”

“You didn’t ask.”

“No.”

“You asked him. That was enough.”

“He asked me to come. He asked me to sell it. He gave me makes and descriptions before I arrived. I’ve arranged a room, I’ve taken leave, I’ve borrowed a van I have to return. I didn’t come up here and decide he’d had enough of you.”

“Nobody said you did.”

“You keep saying it as if I walked in and started stripping the place.”

He looked through the open door. From the kitchen he could see the white labels in the shop window.

She followed his look. Her face changed, but she went on.

“He told me you knew.”

“He told me you were helping.”

Ada turned to her father. “Which of us did you mean?”

Len looked at the table. “I meant it to come out right.”

“That isn’t what I asked.”

He did not answer.

Len reached for a chair. The small movement made all of them look at him. He sat and rubbed his knee, then picked up a crumb from the table and pressed it into a ball.

“There’s no need for a falling-out,” he said.

Aled stood back. He had been leaning on Len’s table as if getting closer could make the words arrive differently.

“Tell her,” he said.

“Tell her what?”

“What you told me.”

“I’ve told you both plenty.”

Beryl lifted the hinge again. “You can leave my things where they are. I need to get back.”

Ada put a hand on the sheet before Aled could take it.

“I’ll mark them out.”

“You can write me a note of what you thought you were selling. I want to see it.”

“I will.”

Beryl went. Her boots struck the step, then the stones. Len watched the door after she had gone.

“Got a lot out of that wheel herself,” he said.

Aled picked up his label. “I’m taking my stock.”

“Where?”

“Out of your sale.”

“You needn’t be like that.”

He went to the workshop. His body had become clumsy with anger. He caught his shoulder on the doorframe, kicked the sack he had left, and swore so loudly that a person across the yard turned to look. He hauled the weatherproof cloth off the older machine. Its

paper wrapper tore on the tension screw. He stopped, folded the torn edge inward, and tied it with two lengths of string.

Ada came to the door. She began taking the labels down. He let her reach past him for the one on the press.

"That can stay," Len said from behind her. "It is mine."

"They're all coming off for now," she said.

Aled gathered his tools. The two awls with the dark handles, the knife he had ground himself, the tin of needles bought with his own money. One tin held shared needles, and he left it. He left the scissors too. He could no longer remember who had paid for them.

"What about the work?" Len asked.

"The finished covers are by the door. Waistcoat's on the hook. I'm doing the two I've got half made."

"And the rest?"

"You took it. You arrange it."

Ada said, "There are things booked."

"Then read the book."

"What about the collection tomorrow?" Len asked.

Aled had accepted that collection himself. The customer had asked him, not Len. He saw the small mark he had made beside it on the page. Then he saw his machine's label in his own hand.

"Get somebody else."

He took his cloth to the door. It was too broad to carry through straight, and for a moment the roll lodged between the jambs. Ada stepped forward to help. He said leave it, too sharply, and turned it himself.

Outside he stood the roll on end beneath the lean-to. The paper at its foot was already wet. He put his tool bag on a dry box, lifted the roll again, and carried both up to his room in two journeys.

On the second trip he did not look toward the kitchen. Len had begun telling Ada where the collection was. His voice came across the yard in practical little pieces, a gate, a turning, a man who would

be there after dinner. Aled knew the gate. He knew which track the vehicle could take.

He climbed the stairs without going back to tell them.

11

A *message cannot do it*

Ada found the returned label on the kitchen table. Aled had untied the string and threaded it back through the hole, leaving the loop intact. She put it beneath the buyer's receipt. Then she took it out again. It did not belong with things which had been paid.

Len was outside cutting kindling. He had found a branch too thick for the little axe and was making white marks on it. Each blow lodged the blade. He lifted branch and axe together, struck them against the block, and looked round to see who had noticed the result.

She went out before he could catch his foot beneath it.

"Leave that. I need you inside."

"Fire won't light on paper."

"We've enough for now."

"Enough for one."

"One, then."

He rested the axe. There was a wet patch across the front of his trousers where he had held the branch. He looked older this morning, but she had begun to distrust how readily that thought arrived whenever she needed an answer from him.

"I want Aled to hear what you sent me."

"What I sent when?"

"When you asked me to come."

He looked down at the branch.

"You've got it?"

"The part about the move. I kept it. And the letter."

"There's other things on that."

"I'm not playing anything else."

He rubbed the blunt side of the axe with his thumb. "If you think it'll help."

"I want him to hear it."

"All right. That part."

She set the axe out of the rain and went to find Aled. He had his own machine uncovered but had not started it. The cloth for one of the half-made covers lay over its frame. Her hands wanted to straighten the edge. She kept them in her pockets.

"Dad's agreed to listen with us."

"To what?"

"What he asked me."

Aled looked at the opening in the machine stand where her string had been. "I didn't say he hadn't asked you."

"I know. I still want you to hear."

He stood without replying. She waited at the door while he put the cloth where it would not slip. Yesterday she would have offered to hold it.

They sat at the kitchen table with Len between them, though Ada had not meant to arrange it that way. The device had charged overnight from the battery she used for the van. She checked its level, opened the saved exchange, and found the point she had listened to at the connection room. Aled looked toward the window while she did it. Len watched her hands.

"Just this," she said.

Len nodded.

His recorded voice was stronger than the voice he had used that morning. There was traffic behind it and a tapping sound which she

remembered as his finger against something near the pickup. He asked her to come. He said he had had enough of the room. He said the big things in the shop could be sold, that Aled knew what they were. He wanted the place Ada had shown him. He did not want her to leave it till winter.

She stopped it before the shirt.

Nobody spoke. In the quiet she could hear the damp log in the stove hissing without catching.

"That's why I came," she said.

Aled nodded once.

"He said it before I borrowed anything. Before I paid for the room. I wasn't trying to take something away from you."

"I heard."

She waited for more. He looked at Len.

"What did you tell me?"

Len touched the edge of the device. "Can you turn that off now?"

"It's stopped."

"Turn it off."

Ada closed the exchange and put the device away. Her father waited until it was in her bag before he spoke.

"I've told you both I want things sorted."

"You told me the shop would be mine."

"And there's a shop there."

"Without the machines. Without the stock."

Ada said, "One of those machines is yours. That's out."

Aled did not look at her. "The other one was promised."

"I understand that's what you're saying."

"Don't say it like you're waiting to find out whether I made it up."

She pressed the ends of her fingers against her knees. The saved instruction had done what she had wanted. There was nothing wrong with it. Aled believed her. He had believed her before she played it.

"Dad," she said, "did you promise him the other machine?"

"I said he'd be able to use it."

"You said it would be mine when you stopped," Aled said. "I asked whether you meant the room or the work. You said all of it. You said there'd be no point my learning the fittings if it all went out the door."

Len pushed his chair back a little. "I've not stopped yet."

Aled looked away. His jaw moved. Ada thought he might get up, and for a moment she wanted him to. Then she would have one person to ask instead of two answers which could not be put together.

"The buyer's got both on a signed list," she said. "I can't send her a different one till we know what's staying."

"Send her mine," Aled said. "Tell her it wasn't yours to put down."

"I will."

"And the cloth."

She took out a new sheet. He described the roll: dark green, silver-grey underside, the crossed-out measurement on the paper. The one she had lifted from the original machine. She had written shop stock beside it because Len had said it was for the covers. She remembered the folded edge against her wrist.

"I saw that," she said.

"Yes."

"I didn't know."

"No."

Len got up to put wood on the fire. The log he chose was too big to improve it, but neither of them stopped him. He crouched at the stove, holding the door half open to draw air.

They made three headings. Len's things, Aled's things, other people's. Ada began a fourth for jobs and payments. The headings were easy. Putting anything beneath them took time. Aled had receipts for his machine and some tools. Not all. Beryl's bench and wheel had a history involving a mower, a sheep trailer, and a year in which nobody had settled the difference. Len remembered the

mower. Aled remembered the trailer. Neither could say who had paid for the replacement wheelstone.

"Beryl knows," Ada said.

"Ask Beryl, then."

"I will."

When they stopped, the fire had caught and the room was too hot. Len had taken his cap off. Aled stood at the window with his back to the stove, letting his jacket warm. He had stayed longer than he intended. Ada could see him waiting to be asked for something else.

"I'll finish the two covers I started," he said. "The ones with the patched corners. I'm not putting the rest through."

"What's paid for?" Ada asked.

"Book says."

"It says a tick."

"Tick through the name means paid. Tick at the side means promised. Unless he's changed it."

Len said, "I've not changed anything."

There was a long moment in which nobody looked at him.

Aled put his jacket on properly. "The girl's boots. The narrow strap. The large cover that's not here yet. There'll be others."

"Can you sit down with me and go through them?"

"Not this morning."

"When?"

"I've got work of my own."

She folded the sheet instead of saying that so had she. It was a movement she could finish.

At lunch Len asked whether there was any soup. Ada looked in the pot and found the scrapings of what Nell had eaten before work. She had assumed there would be bread. There was half a loaf, hard on one end. She cut that end off, toasted the rest, and opened a jar from the shelf. It held pickled onions, though the label said plums.

"Who puts onions in a plum jar?"

"Someone with onions."

She laughed despite herself. He smiled at her across the table and reached for a piece of toast. She wanted to be angry without losing the ability to find him funny. It seemed an unreasonable extra task to have to do both before lunch.

In the afternoon she washed his good shirts, and then his towel, which was sour, and the pillowcase with the dark fold where his neck lay.

Nell came back to change her stockings and ate the end of the loaf Ada had cut away.

"Don't eat that."

"Why?"

"It's hard."

Nell bit it again. "It's bread."

"Are you here this afternoon?"

"Beryl wants me."

"Of course she does."

Nell stopped chewing. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Go on."

Ada wrung the towel. Water ran from her forearms onto the floor. Nell put her wet stockings near the stove and went without asking whether there was anything to carry. Ada wanted to call her back. Instead she lifted the bowl onto the stool and nudged the door open with her foot.

By four Len was cold. He put his cap on indoors and asked where they had left the kindling. Ada went out to the block. The thick branch was still there, wet and marked white. Beneath the lean-to stood a neat stack of thin split wood, but the front bundle had a piece of cloth tied round it. She recognised the cloth from outside Aled's room. She left it where it was and went round behind the workshop for the other pile.

At six she boiled potatoes in a borrowed pot without a lid.

Len asked whether Aled was eating with them.

"Ask him."

"He'll want something."

"Then ask him."

Her father went as far as the door and stood looking at the light above the service passage. After a moment he shut it again.

They ate potatoes and eggs. Nell came back late, ate standing, and said she had already had something at the shed. Ada washed three plates while Len dried two and put the third away wet. She left it. Her wrist hurt when she turned the tap.

Only after Nell had gone upstairs did Ada find the workshop book under the stack of packing paper. Len had put it there to keep it out of the way. On the open page a name had a tick beside it and the words collect Thursday, after dinner.

Today was Thursday.

She took it to her father. "Was this done?"

He looked at the page. "Aled said he wasn't."

"I know. Did someone go?"

Len reached for his glasses. She waited while he cleaned them on a shirt she had washed that afternoon.

"I thought you'd heard."

She put the book down. There was a gate to find, a track she did not know, and no daylight left for looking. The potatoes had stuck to the bottom of the borrowed pot. She could smell them when she went back to the sink.

12

The cover not collected

The man had brought the cover himself. He had rolled it badly because he had no dry place large enough to spread it, then tied it with cord which cut across the torn part. He stood in the workshop door with the bundle against one thigh and the other hand hooked through its carrying loop.

"Aled."

Aled looked up from the patched corner he was sewing. He knew the man. He had known his gait from the yard before he could see the bundle.

"You were coming yesterday."

"Ask Len."

"I'm asking you."

The cover dropped the last few inches to the floor. Wet cord struck the boards. The man straightened his fingers one at a time.

"I waited after dinner. Then I waited till dark because you've a way of turning up when people have stopped expecting you. Had the thing off and everything under it getting wet. If you couldn't come, you could've sent someone."

Aled took his foot off the treadle.

"I told them I wasn't doing collections."

"You didn't tell me."

He could see the note in the book. His own short mark, the day written beside it. He had made it while the man stood in that doorway on Monday. Not Len. Len had been at the cottage table choosing tools.

"No," he said.

"So is it being done?"

Len came through from the back room. "We've had a bit of confusion."

"You haven't had my cart sat uncovered."

"Could have left it on."

"You told me to take it off ready."

Aled got up. "Let's open it."

He carried the bundle to the clear patch of floor and cut the cord where it would no longer damage the edge. The man crouched to help unroll it. The cover had stiffened in its own damp, and each fold left a pale line as it opened. The tear ran from a fastening into the reinforced corner. There was work enough for the afternoon.

"Need to dry that first," Len said.

"I can see."

Aled heard his own tone and left the next sentence unsaid. He put two battens beneath the cover to let air reach the underside, then felt along the tear to find where the weave became sound.

"I'll bring it back before dark."

The man looked at him.

"I'll bring it," Aled said. "I know I said that before."

"I've people coming. After four."

"Before four, then."

It would take the better part of his day. The man named the turning again, the gate, the place where he could leave the repaired cover if nobody was at the house.

"I know it," Aled said, then stopped. "By the low shed. Under the overhang."

"Not the other shed. That leaks."

Aled repeated the right one. The man went, taking his cut cord. Len watched him through the door.

"No need to talk to you like that."

"He waited for me."

"We could've done with knowing he was coming in angry."

Aled lifted one edge of the cover. Water dripped onto his boot. "I'll put a sign out."

Len did not laugh.

He was halfway through drying the corner when a second customer came. This one carried the canvas pannier under her arm. Aled recognised the pale thread before she spoke.

"It's gone," she said.

Len took the bag. He pressed the seam between finger and thumb, opening the failure until Aled could see daylight through it.

"What did you have in it?"

"What I had in it when I brought it."

"It's pulled along here."

"Yes."

"You don't want to drag a thing by the pocket."

"I didn't drag it by the pocket."

Len examined the corner. "We can put that back."

She took the bag from him and opened it wide. Two apples rolled from the bottom. One was scored where it had struck gravel.

"I lost half the things between the gate and the road. Bottle broke. I've had to wash the whole inside. You said it was stronger."

"It was stronger along the seam."

"The seam came out."

"Beside the seam."

Aled pulled a chair forward before she could answer. "Leave it here."

"I need it."

"I'll do it this morning. No charge."

She looked at Len. "I paid for it last week."

"I know."

Len's hand moved toward the kettle. "Tea while you wait?"

"No."

She set the bag on the chair and took the two apples. One she put in her pocket. The damaged one she held while she went out, pressing a thumb along the mark.

Aled turned the pannier inside out. The fine pale thread had held its neat line while the cloth beside the new holes tore. At the worn corner it had then snapped. He spread it on the bench. He had told Len not to use that spool. He could hear himself saying it, could see the clean line going in, and could remember the relief of turning back to his own work.

Len said, "I'll get the other thread."

"I've got it."

"Not that one."

"This one."

"You'll need to open it further."

"I'm opening it."

He put the whole bag on the bench before he could pull it away from Len like a child taking something back. The woman had not come to see them have an argument. Her bottle had broken on the road.

Beryl came to collect her hinge. Aled had forgotten it. She saw the cover on battens and the pannier on the bench, looked at the clock, and said she could wait till tomorrow.

"The hinge," Len said. "I can do that."

"You can leave that bag alone," she said.

"I wasn't touching it."

"You told her it was stronger. She was showing me the stitches."

"There was nothing wrong with the stitches."

"Then she can carry her apples in the stitches next time."

Len turned his back. Beryl stood with her hand on the hinge, waiting as if he might turn again and give her a useful answer. He began sorting pieces of leather.

"She lost a bottle of oil as well," Beryl said to Aled.

"She can put the cost in the book."

Len looked round. "It's a bag repair."

"It was," Beryl said.

She took her hinge away, saying she would bring it back when people had time. Aled wanted to ask her to leave it. He had already promised before four and this morning. He let her go.

The pannier needed a broad patch behind the weakened corner. He found sound canvas, matched the direction of the weave, and spread the load beyond the little row of holes. He had to open a longer seam to get at it. It took most of an hour. The original repair could have taken ten minutes if Len had left the sound cloth alone.

The customer returned while he was finishing. She stood by the stove warming her hands and did not accept tea. Aled made the last row, trimmed the thread, then loaded the pannier with the smooth weights they used for holding patterns. He lifted it from the right places and let her do the same.

"That should do," he said.

"You said that last time."

He looked at Len, then back at her. "Yes."

She checked the inside. He explained the patch without defending the old repair. She asked about the bottle. He wrote its cost below the repair entry, leaving the amount to be confirmed. It belonged among the shop's debts. He did not offer money from his own pocket to make the conversation end sooner.

She took the bag. Len watched her go and said nothing.

By then the cover was dry enough to work. Aled ate bread without stopping to sit, got grease on it, cut the marked part off, and ate the rest. He opened the binding around the torn corner. The

damage looked worse with the old stitching out. There was sound cloth enough if he cut the reinforcement generously.

His own roll stood upstairs. He took a piece from stock Len had bought for customer work instead. He wrote the length on the page before cutting, so there would be no argument later about whose cloth had gone into whose promise. The pencil had a hard point and barely marked the paper. He sharpened it with the knife he owned.

Ada came in carrying a plate. There was egg on it and two small potatoes with their skins split.

"You didn't come at lunch."

"I'm going out at three."

"I know. I thought this first."

He cleared a space with his elbow. She put the plate down, then moved away from the machine without asking to help. That made it easier to say thank you.

"The other customer," she said. "I've put the oil in the list."

"She'll bring the amount."

"Beryl told me."

He pushed the needle through a test piece. Ada watched the fabric move. He could have asked her to hold the far edge as she had held the awning. He had managed covers before she came. He arranged the weight on two chairs instead.

She left the fork beside the plate and went.

He ate standing, then worked until he had a little less than an hour left for delivery. The corner lay true.

Len came to look. Aled let him. The older man lifted the edge, turned it, and ran a finger under the seam. For a while they occupied the familiar silence of two people looking at work which had gone well.

"Put it under the light," Len said. "There."

Aled moved it. A loose end showed where it had hidden against the dark cloth. He cut it flush.

"Good," Len said.

Aled folded the cover. He wanted the word to mean less than it did.

Len brought out the handcart. Its wheels were narrow, the bed just wide enough for the roll laid diagonally. Aled tied it down and put on his coat. The rain had become a fine blowing mist, thick enough to wet a face without seeming to fall.

"If you're passing the lower store," Len said, "there's a bag of kindling. They said we could have it."

Aled pulled the cart a foot to test the balance.

"I'm taking this back."

"On the way."

"I'm not getting the wood."

Len's mouth tightened. "Could've said."

"I have."

The customer was at the low shed when he arrived. It was not four yet. Aled held the cover while the man fitted it, then climbed onto the wheel hub to fasten the far corner. The new part sat under tension without puckering. They tested the fall with a bucket of water. It ran clear of the load.

"That'll do," the man said.

They settled the remaining payment at the price already agreed. There was no extra for delivery. Aled had promised delivery. He put the money inside his coat, folded the old piece of torn binding into his pocket to take away, and drew the empty cart back onto the track.

The lower store lay ahead, its door open. He could see split wood stacked under the overhang, dry and close enough to lift straight onto the cart. Someone inside called to ask whether he wanted the bag put on.

"No," he said. "Not for me." He went past with the cart empty.

13

What they can hear

Nell had folded the note twice and put it under her empty cup. When she came back, the cup was beside it and the folds were wrong.

She knew before she picked it up. She had brought the bottom edge upward first, making a neat little packet with the writing inside. Now one corner stuck out. There was a brown thumbprint beside the sentence she had spent longest choosing.

Shirley stood at the other end of the kitchen table, cutting the mould from a piece of cheese.

"Did you open this?"

"What is it?"

"My paper."

"Oh. That. I thought it was a list."

"Under my cup."

"There's cups."

Nell unfolded it. At the top she had written things to send when I get out to the connection point. It was not addressed because she had not decided whether to send it. The first part was about the orchard, the slow press, the way juice got under her nails and stayed there. Then the sentence about the man in the red cap. Not his name. She did not know what she wanted his name to do on a

page. She had written the red cap one put his hand on my back when he went past and I've thought about it a stupid amount.

Shirley could see what she was looking at.

"I was only finding whose it was."

"My cup was on it."

"We've been over the cups."

"You could have stopped when you saw it wasn't a list."

"I did stop."

Nell looked at the thumbprint low on the page.

Shirley cut a second edge from the cheese. "Nothing I haven't heard. You should put private things away."

"There isn't anywhere away."

"There's your room."

"My mum's in my room."

Shirley shrugged as if this were a difficulty Nell ought to have anticipated before bringing a mother. "Well. You're wanted at two. We're getting the chest off the wall."

"What?"

"The damp's behind it now. I've got a couple of people for the heavy end. You can take the drawers."

"I'm working."

"Only fruit. Beryl said you'd be up for your dinner."

"I came up for my food."

"That's what I said."

Nell folded the note along its old creases. Her hands felt too large for it.

"Did Beryl say I'd help?"

"She said you were coming up. I told them you could."

"You didn't tell me."

"I am telling you."

Nell put the note in her pocket. She had meant to eat at the cottage, but Ada was in the shop and Len was out of sight, and the bread had gone from the board. She took a piece of Shirley's cheese

without asking. Shirley lifted an eyebrow, then pushed the knife toward her.

"Take it from that side. I've done that side."

She could still be kind while making Nell want to throw something. Nell took more cheese than she needed and ate it on the path down to the shed.

The man in the red cap stood in the doorway with two others. The cap was off now, turned inside out on a nail to dry. His hair lay flattened at the sides. He looked different without the one thing she had called him by.

"Here she is," said the older picker. "Mind where you put your hands."

The man glanced at Nell, then away, smiling.

She stopped. "What?"

"Nothing," the picker said. "Young love."

"It isn't."

"Better tell him, then."

The man laughed and held both hands up. "I was going past."

Nell could feel her face becoming hot. She would have liked him to say something against the teasing, even something careless. He looked mostly amused. Yesterday she would have found his mouth worth looking at. Now she could not stop looking at it for a worse reason.

"You could have said excuse me," she said.

He lowered his hands. "Sorry."

"I didn't mean—"

She stopped. The older picker laughed again, not loudly enough to give her a good reason for shouting. She went past them into the shed. Her boot struck the sill and she nearly fell. Someone reached toward her elbow. She pulled away before seeing who it was.

Beryl was filling the press. She looked at Nell's face, then at the doorway.

"If you're done, those crates need shifting."

"I'm not done anything."

"I was talking to them."

The men moved. Nell found a clean bucket and put it beneath the outlet. She had set it a little too far left. Beryl nudged it with her boot without comment.

At two Nell stayed by the press. Every footstep on the path sounded as if it might be Shirley coming to fetch her. The orchard smelled sour after the rain. A worm had come up beneath the matting and lay in a bright wet curve beside the door. She picked it up on a piece of bark and put it outside, then was angry with herself for finding that a relief.

The man came in for a rope.

"You doing the chest?" he asked.

"No."

"They were asking."

"They can ask me."

He pulled the rope free of its hook. "All right."

He did not sound hurt. He sounded busy. She wished she had not imagined him wondering where she was when she left the orchard each afternoon.

"Are you still going on the nineteenth?" she asked.

"Yes. Got work lined up."

"Where?"

He told her, a place she had only passed through. He would stay with someone there. He had done the same work before and thought there would be enough for most of the winter.

"Sounds good," she said.

"Warmer."

He gave her a brief smile and went. She took the folded note out of her pocket, intending to tear it up. Then she put it back. She had written the part about the press well. Nobody else had ruined that part.

Beryl came to check the juice. Nell had been watching the bucket and changed it before the rim got sticky. The second bucket stood ready on a little raised board so she would not have to drag it through the wet patch.

"That's better," Beryl said.

"What?"

"The board. Saves carrying muck back in."

Nell looked at it. She had not asked where to put it. She had seen what needed doing and done it.

"Can you take the next turn?" Beryl asked. "I need to look at the late fruit."

Nell said yes. The screw was heavy at the end of its travel, and she had learned to put her weight into it without jerking. Her palms were sore. She liked the steady change in the sound as the pressure took. For a while she forgot to listen for people outside.

She finished after four. Beryl paid the afternoon rate and asked whether she would come in the morning. Nell said she would. They did not discuss Shirley's chest. There was a fresh mark on the shed door where the rope had rubbed, and Nell ran a finger over it as she went out, just to feel something which could not mean anything else.

At the main building, the chest stood in the corridor. Its drawers had been taken out and piled on a blanket. Shirley was drinking tea with a woman who had a wet towel around her shoulders.

"We managed," Shirley said.

"I was working."

"So were we."

Nell walked past. It took effort not to say something which would make it sound as if the chest had injured her personally. She went to the cottage for dry socks.

Ada was at the sink with her sleeves rolled. The lower edge of her shirt was soaked. A pot stood beside her, blackened underneath,

and there were three bowls waiting behind it. She had a scrubber wrapped round a finger because the bare metal hurt her skin.

"Where's Len?" Nell asked.

"Out."

"Where?"

"I didn't ask."

There was something wrong with the way she said it. Nell looked at the washed shirts on the line strung across the kitchen. One dripped into a bowl. Her mother had moved the bowl from beneath a leak to catch it, and the leak had left a new dark patch on the floor.

"Is that his pot?"

"It's borrowed."

"Why are you cleaning it?"

"Because I used it."

"You've been at that all day."

"No. I've been at other things all day. I've only just got back to it."

Nell stood with her wet socks in her hand. The irritation from the orchard had not gone anywhere. It had come home with her, and now her mother was standing in its way with a sore finger and a pot she should not have had to wash.

"Aled's stopped coming," Nell said.

"He's delivering something."

"I mean for the other things."

"I know what you mean."

"Because you're selling all his stuff."

Ada stopped scrubbing.

"His things aren't being sold."

"They were."

"They were on a list Dad told me to make."

"You keep saying that."

"Because people keep pretending I invented it."

Nell pulled the socks apart. They had stuck together at the heels.

"So you're just doing whatever he says?"

"I'm trying to do what he asked me to come for."

"And Aled loses everything."

"He isn't losing everything. His machine is his. His cloth is his. The rest isn't decided."

"But you took the money."

Ada put the scrubber down. "Where did you hear that?"

"People know."

"People seem to know things much more quickly than they come in here to help."

"That's not their job."

"Whose is it?"

"You came to help him."

"Yes, Nell. I did."

Her mother looked tired enough that Nell could have stopped. She saw the wet hem, the line of shirts, the small white split in Ada's thumb. She had been angry with Shirley for deciding what she could do at two. She still wanted her mother to be wrong about the shop.

"You can't buy him out of here with Aled's life."

Ada stared at her. Then she picked up the pot and set it on the table, farther from herself than it needed to go.

"I'm washing his bloody towel," she said. "I'm not buying his life."

"I said Aled's."

"I heard you."

Nell looked down. There was juice on the cuff of her sleeve, dried dark. She rubbed it with her thumb and made it stiff.

"Maybe he doesn't want to go."

"He asked me."

"Maybe he only said that because you kept showing him rooms."

Ada pulled her sleeves down over her wet wrists. She did not defend herself. That made Nell hear the sentence again, and it sounded worse the second time.

"I didn't mean you made him," she said.

"Then don't say I did."

Nell sat. The socks hung from her hand onto the floor.

"Shirley read something of mine," she said.

Ada looked at her, uncertain of the turn.

"A private thing. Then everyone knew. Then they told people I'd help with the chest and I hadn't even said I would."

"What did she read?"

"I don't want to tell you."

"All right."

Nell rubbed the sock heel between her fingers. She had expected a question about where she had left it. Ada did not ask.

"I said no to the chest," she said.

"Good."

"Beryl didn't mind."

"Beryl had your afternoon already."

Nell looked up sharply. Ada held her look, then sat on the rocking chair and put her heel in its familiar place.

"I'm glad you said no," she said. "I mean that."

The kitchen was quiet except for the shirt dripping. Nell put the socks on the chair beside her. She wanted to tell her mother about the board under the bucket. She wanted it to arrive without sounding like evidence in favour of the place.

"Len should tell everyone the same thing," she said.

Ada shut her eyes briefly.

"He just tells everyone what they want," Nell said. "Then they all think it's someone else."

The door moved behind her. She had not heard the footstep on the stone.

Len stood there with a small bag of kindling in his arms. His cap was wet along its edge. He looked at Nell, then at the pot on the table, and came inside without saying hello.

• • •

Ada took the pot out to the pump without being asked, and the door swung shut behind her on its own weight. That left the two of them with the shirts.

Len put the kindling down beside the stove one piece at a time, as if each might be counted later. Then he lowered himself onto the rocking chair, stopped it with his heel the way Ada did, and looked at the line of shirts dripping into the bowl.

"Those are mine."

"Mum washed them."

"She'd wash the table if I stood still." He picked a splinter off his sleeve. "You'd a good deal to say."

"I'm not sorry."

"Didn't ask you to be." He turned the splinter over. "He tells everyone what they want. I got the end of that at the door. It's fair."

Nell wrung out the sock she was holding, though it was as dry as it would get. "You weren't meant to hear."

"Nobody means me to hear most things. It's been a great help."

He nearly smiled. She sat on the other chair, the one that did not rock. The stove ticked. Outside, the pump handle began its slow iron complaint, and neither of them looked toward it.

"Do you want to go?" she said.

He took his time. He looked at the kindling, then at his hands, then at the corner of the ceiling where the damp had drawn a map.

"I want to be somewhere I'm not the reason anyone's tired."

"That isn't what I asked."

"It's the answer I've got." He rubbed his knee. "Ask me about the room and I'll say it's a good room. Ask me about the shop and I'll tell you what's in the drawers. Ask me if I want to go and I'll tell you about the bread."

"You did that to Mum."

"I did."

She had meant to leave it there. Instead she said, "Why is your bag under the bed? She found it the first day. She put it back and didn't say."

For a while the only sound was the pump.

"I packed it in July," Len said, "after I'd been down to see her. I thought if the bag was ready I'd have to go. Then I took a shirt out for a Thursday, and put it back, and took the coat out, and put that back." He looked at the bag in his mind, plainly, as he would look at a job. "Under the bed means I haven't decided. By the door means I have. I can't find anywhere to put it that says neither."

"Put it in the van."

"That says I'm going."

"It says it's in the van."

He laughed, once, and it caught and turned into a cough, and she waited it out with her hand flat on her knee because she did not know what else to do with it. When he had finished he wiped his mouth and looked at her as if she had done something unexpectedly sensible.

"And you?" he said. "Are you staying?"

"I've a place on the winter course." It was easier to say to the stove. "I sat for it in the spring. Fourth out of forty. Dee and Marit have got theirs too, we said we'd walk in together on the first morning. It starts in a bit over six weeks. If Beryl wants me till the end of the picking, I'd have to ask them to take me late. They might not."

"They might."

"That's not a plan."

"It's what a plan's made of." He said it mildly. "What do you want?"

"I want to stay." She heard it and went on quickly. "And I want somebody to say I can't, so it wouldn't be me that did it."

Len nodded slowly, as if she had read out a figure he had been working toward himself. "That's the sum I've been doing since July," he said. "Don't tell your mother I said so. She'll put it on a list."

"There's something else," Nell said. "She hasn't told you. She put off an interview to come. The supervisor's job. She told me in the van as if it was weather. She asked them to move it to the end of the month and they said they'd see."

Len did not answer at once. The splinter was still in his fingers. He put it very carefully into his apron pocket, where it would be found in a month with a button and two washers.

"She said nothing to me."

"She wouldn't."

The door scraped. Ada came in with the scoured pot against her hip and looked from one of them to the other. Neither said a word. She put the pot on its shelf as if she had noticed nothing, and Len got up and began to build the fire.

14

The room beyond the ridge

The connection room smelled of somebody else's clean coat. Ada had been looking forward to sitting down in it since before she got out of bed. Now she was there, she kept her own coat on and held her bag against her knees.

Douglas had brought her on the morning run. She had booked the seat and the return time. He had asked whether she needed an extra quarter hour, and she had said yes before working out how much she could afford. There was an invoice from the buyer to answer, a room to discuss, and a message about her own work which she had not opened since the previous journey. She had eight days before they had to leave. The van had to be on the road early on the twenty-first, a Sunday.

Her familiar voice greeted her without needing an account of where she had been. It asked about her hand first. She looked down and saw that she had left a spot of blood on the bag's handle.

"It's the same split."

"Have you covered it?"

"Three times. Water gets in."

She took the small dressing from the room's supplies and wrapped it while the arrival notices appeared. The meal route had settled with the new containers. Her warning had been useful.

There was a picture of a stack of empty trays and a note saying nobody had had to prise a frozen lid off with a serving spoon this week.

She smiled. The smile surprised her enough to make her read the note again.

"Tell them I'm expecting a spoon in thanks."

"A new one?"

"A bent one. We know where we are with a bent one."

She approved the reply. For a moment she could feel the mealroom floor beneath her feet, the particular warm patch by the trolley, her colleague's coat always hanging one hook too far to the left. Work she could leave for three weeks and find still being done. She had not known how much she depended on that being possible.

"The move?" the voice asked.

"There's a problem with the sale."

"How much would you like to share?"

"The money. The dates. I don't want the argument sent anywhere."

"It won't be sent."

She opened the buyer's letter, then the inventory she had amended. She sent a reply confirming receipt of the deposit and naming Aled's machine, his cloth, and Beryl's sharpening gear as things that could not go without their owners' say-so. The disputed older machine she marked separately. What her father meant to do about it she could not yet say, because she did not know.

The buyer's response arrived while Ada was still there. She had finished an early collection and had a few minutes before the next. Her face appeared against the inside of a vehicle, collar turned up, one ear half covered by her hat.

"Which machine?" she asked.

Ada gave the description. The buyer looked down at her own sheet.

"That's a substantial part of the price."

"I understand."

"Not only its separate value. It changes what I can do with the lot. There's more than one buyer for a working pair. There are fewer for bits without the useful machine."

"The other one may stay as well."

"Then I'll have to price the things that are actually yours."

"My father's."

"Your father's, then."

The woman did not make the correction sound foolish. Ada wished she had not needed to make it.

"Has he changed his mind?"

"He's still deciding what can go."

"He signed the list."

"I know. I was there."

"I've got the booking held. I haven't paid the final vehicle hire yet. That becomes a cost after the deadline I gave you. Don't let that pass without telling me if there's a change."

"I won't."

The buyer checked a second page and named the amount already committed, then what would be added if the loading plan changed too late. Ada wrote both down. The woman asked whether the present list was a correction she could rely on or another guess.

"Correction for the things that belong elsewhere," Ada said. "Provisional on Dad's machine."

"All right. Send the corrected sheet back. I'll acknowledge it."

"I'm sorry about the first one."

"You can save me more trouble by being early with the next."

They ended the exchange. Ada sat with the pencil in her hand. She had told the buyer part of the problem. The part she could prove with names beside objects. It had felt good to send something accurate.

The woman from housing joined next. Ada remembered the warm expression and was grateful that it had not changed into one re-

served for difficult relatives. The woman asked whether Len was travelling with her. Ada said no, she had come down alone.

"We still have the room held for his arrival."

"I need the cancellation figures again."

"Of course."

"Would a later arrival help?"

"I don't know."

"We can move it if a room's available then. I can't keep this room empty and reserve a second window without charging for both. But he needn't lose access to help because this particular room doesn't work out."

"He liked that room."

"I remember. We spent some time on the chair."

"He said it was too low."

"We found another."

Ada laughed. She could see him trying chairs while insisting he did not want to inconvenience anyone. He had asked for a cup of tea and then asked where the cups were, because asking had made him feel idle. He had been taken to the kitchen and shown. Nobody had assumed the question meant he wanted to make all the tea thereafter.

"If he came to me first," she said, "how would we look again?"

The woman described it: no penalty for looking, no promise that the same room would wait, and Len could choose what help he wanted once he arrived.

"Leave the reservation for now," she said.

"Until the next review?"

"Yes. I'll answer by then."

Afterward the familiar voice asked whether she wanted the sums laid out. She did. They came up in plain rows, each payment beside its date. Nothing on it was cruel. Together the rows made her stomach tighten.

She had accepted one fifth of the original price. Three fifths of that deposit had gone: Douglas's booking and boards, packing materials, the needles and fabric for paid repairs. Two fifths remained. Removing Aled's machine took away roughly three tenths of the original lot's separate value, and the buyer had warned that separate values were not a new lot price. If Len kept the older machine too, there might be no machine in the sale at all.

Below that were the shop's remaining obligations. Some could be completed. Some might need refunds. The pannier's bottle of oil had its own line. Ada had almost left it out because it was small. She put it back.

Then Len's transport. The first weeks of his contribution to housing. The portion of the room reservation already gone. Her own costs were on a separate sheet, because she did not want to pretend that her father had agreed to all the choices she had made for him.

"Can you show me if the original machine stays?" she asked.

A second column appeared. It had an unknown amount for the revised sale price rather than an estimate dressed as certainty. Beneath it were the same costs.

"There may be more to pay from his savings," the voice said. "Or a different housing arrangement."

"He hasn't much."

"I have the figures he previously agreed you could use. Would you like those included?"

"Yes."

They did not improve the column enough.

"I could put him in my spare room."

"You could."

"I arranged somewhere he wanted."

"You did."

She rubbed her forehead with the side of the hand that was not bandaged. She had wanted somebody to say which sentence mattered more, the one her father had sent or the one Aled re-

peated in the kitchen. The figures remained figures. There was no entry for the breakfast Aled had carried, no credit for the afternoon Len had watched Nell as a child so Ada could go somewhere she had forgotten. Adding such rows would not make them calculable.

"I need something to take back," she said.

"The costs and the choices, or a message?"

"The costs. Nothing from this conversation."

She took a printout because her father would look at paper. She kept the rest private. The message about her own work she opened last, standing, with her coat still on. The panel had sat on the Tuesday without her. The post had gone to a woman from the evening line, whom Ada liked, and who had added underneath that she hoped Ada wouldn't mind. Ada found that she did not mind. A moment later she found that she minded a great deal, and that there was nobody in the room it could be said to. Then she answered the note from work about the serving spoon and found she could still write a joke which nobody would have to apologise for the following day.

Douglas was waiting with two cartons already loaded. He took the seat payment, checked the time, and asked whether she needed five more minutes.

"No. I'm done."

"All right. Hold that one till I get the door shut."

She held the carton. It was warm from the room where it had waited and smelled faintly of soap. For most of the return journey she kept her hand against it.

At Bellwether Len was trying to fit the handcart into the back of the van. He had turned the handle sideways and jammed it under the shelf. One wheel hung clear of the floor.

"It'll go," he said when she got out.

"Not like that."

"If we take this off."

"It's not our shelf to take off."

He looked at the bolts. She could see he had already considered them.

"Come inside. I've got the numbers."

He pulled the cart free and left it in the yard. She carried the cartons to the kitchen, put them where they belonged, and cleared a place for the paper. He waited while she did it. He had tea ready. Two cups, one with a crack she could see and one without. He gave her the sound one.

She read the costs, slower than she had read the inventory. This time she did not soften them with what she hoped might change. The buyer would quote again. His machine could not go until he and Aled had agreed what he had promised. Aled's machine could not go at all. The room was still reserved, but keeping it did not make the workshop sale possible.

"We can find another place," she said. "You can stay with me first. But I need to know what you want me to arrange."

Len looked at the column with the unknown price. He turned the paper a little, as if a different light might reveal the figure.

"Waste, isn't it," he said.

"What?"

"All that. For moving things about."

"Some of it finishes work people paid you for."

"They'll get their work."

"Who's doing it?"

"We will."

She let the word sit between them. He took his glasses off and folded them with both hands.

"The deposit's partly spent," she said. "That doesn't go away if you stop wanting the sale."

"I know money doesn't go away."

"Dad."

He pushed the glasses an inch across the table, then brought them back. In the yard someone called for him. A latch, perhaps, or a boot. Ada did not look toward the door.

He listened until the person called a second time.

"I'll stay, then," he said.

PART THREE

What staying takes

15

Back at the bench

By nine on Sunday there were four new things in the workshop and nobody had asked Aled to look at any of them. That was the improvement. Len had taken a pair of boots, a split tool roll, a canvas bag with its handle inside it, and something wrapped in a towel which ticked when the table moved. He was pleased to have the boots. The others had come in because the door was open.

Aled kept his jacket on. He had come for the two covers he had said he would finish. One needed a reinforced corner; the other needed binding along its lower edge. If he started before anyone wanted the stove for tea, he could get them done before lunch.

"You heard, then," Len said.

"Shirley told me."

"Could've told you myself."

"You could."

Len opened the towel. There was a little clock inside, its back missing and a piece of folded paper holding one foot level. He put a finger against the spring and listened.

"Don't want dust in that," Aled said.

"It's had worse."

"So've the rest of us. Doesn't mean we want more."

Len smiled. Aled hung his jacket on the hook beside the door. He had left his own needles upstairs, and he went back for them rather than take any from the shared tin.

When he came down again, Len had laid the boots beside his machine.

"They can wait," Aled said.

"They want them Wednesday."

"Then they'd better go somewhere they can get them done."

"Plenty of time before Wednesday."

"I'm doing these."

"So you are."

Aled put the needle packet on the machine bed. He opened it by the unbroken end, taking his time so the little paper sleeve could be used again.

"I'm not back on the old money."

Len looked up from the clock. "Nobody's said anything about money."

"That's why I'm saying it."

"We'll have work."

"How much for the boots?"

Len named the price. Aled knew the boots; the owner had brought them before. One upper needed opening beside the heel and a new piece let in. At the price Len had quoted, the shop would barely cover materials and the afternoon if nothing else went wrong.

"Who's doing them?"

"I thought we could."

"I haven't agreed to that."

"You can't take everything as an insult."

"I'm taking it as two boots. What are you paying me to do them?"

Len wound the clock half a turn. It ticked, stopped, then began again when he tilted it.

"We used to manage without all this."

Aled drew the cover across his lap. He had already worked out the repair. The corner came square to his hands, and for a few minutes he put his attention there. Len was free to talk. He could still hear him. He did not have to offer another sentence to keep him company.

"Nice to have a bit of work back," Len said.

He had work already. There were names in the book from before Ada came. Aled could have pointed at it. Instead he put his foot down and finished the row.

At ten Shirley brought a folded sheet and asked whether Ada still wanted the other bedding washed before they packed. She had soap enough for the blankets if somebody would take a turn wringing them. Len said there would be less need to pack now. Shirley kept the sheet over her arm.

"Less need for some of it," she said.

"There's time."

"For you."

She put the sheet down and went. Aled had seen her looking at the room above the passage as she crossed the yard. He had not invited her to stop measuring it. He did not know where he was going to put the cupboard if he stayed in there another winter. He had built it against the one wall that did not run with damp and made the room narrower by the depth of two doors.

He finished the first cover and began the second. The binding was stiff where someone had dressed it with too much wax. He warmed it between his hands before feeding it under the foot. Len watched a little, then returned to the bag handle. They worked side by side for nearly an hour without quarrelling. Aled felt his shoulders easing and distrusted that too.

At lunch he took his own bread outside and sat on the bench under the wall with the covers folded beside him.

Maren, who sometimes shared his bed and had never pretended otherwise, came round the end of the laundry carrying a small basin. She saw him and lifted her chin toward the space beside him.

"Wet?"

"Everything else is."

She set the basin down and sat. A strand of hair had escaped the knot at her neck. He tucked it behind her ear. She let him, then took a piece of his bread.

"I came past last night," she said.

"I was in."

"I know. I heard you put the bolt across."

"Didn't know it was you."

"You could have looked."

He rubbed bread from his palm. He had spent the evening sorting his receipts, then lying on the bed without taking his boots off. He had not wanted anyone asking what he was doing. That had included her, though he had meant to want her later.

"I'm sorry."

She ate the bread. "You always think the next week's the one when you'll have a room worth having people in."

"It's cold."

"I've been in cold rooms."

"Yours isn't."

"Because I light the fire." She leaned back against the wall. "I wasn't coming to inspect your room, Aled."

He looked at the basin. There was a shirt in it, dark with water. He could smell the soap.

"Could come up this afternoon," he said.

"You could. I've got things to do after five."

"Before five."

"That's an actual time. I'll put something out for it."

He laughed. She pushed his knee with hers, then stood, lifting the basin against one hip. He carried it as far as her door. She did not

pretend it was too heavy for her. Inside he set it on the little stand, and she took his damp jacket off the chair before he could ask where to put it.

They had an hour. There was warmth enough under the blankets, and the sound of a saucepan being scrubbed in the room next door. He laughed against her shoulder when the scrubber scraped too hard and somebody swore. She put a hand over his mouth. Later she lay with her foot on his ankle and asked whether Len really meant to stay.

"He's said he is."

"What are you doing?"

"Finishing the covers."

"After the covers."

He watched a strip of light shift on the ceiling as the tree outside moved. She waited, then reached for the shirt hanging over the chair.

"Don't tell me about another week," she said. "You've used that one."

At four he went back to his room. He did not go through the shop first. The cloth roll stood behind his chair, and he moved it far enough to sit at the table. On the back of the letter about the six weeks' work he wrote what he needed.

His own machine was his. That did not make a shop. He needed space to open a full cover without blocking the door. A sound bench. Somewhere dry for stock. He needed the older machine for work his flat bed could not reach, the heels and narrow places Len had taught him on. He could refuse that work. If he refused all of it, he would lose customers who brought both boots and canvas. Some would make one journey elsewhere and keep making it.

He needed enough leather to finish jobs before the next payment arrived. Needles of the sizes he actually broke. Thread. Wax. A way of collecting work which did not rely on Douglas happening to pass. He wrote that, then crossed it out and wrote pay Douglas.

In the yard the handcart rattled. Len had taken it down to the lower store himself. Aled went to the window and saw him lifting a sack onto its bed. He was doing it in two attempts, not well, but he was doing it. Aled stayed at the window until it was secure.

He returned to the table. The bottom of the page still held the old offer's starting date. Tomorrow. He drew a line above it and added one more thing to his list: money left after buying stock.

There was no amount beside it.

He sat with the pencil resting on the paper until someone called from below to ask whether the covers were done. He said yes, and went down to be paid for them.

16

A *job after supper*

The kitchen was warm enough for Ada to take her shoes off. She had put her stockings near the stove, filled a bowl for her feet, and only just settled them into the water when someone knocked with a pair of boots.

Len knew the woman. He had already opened the door before Ada decided whether to take her feet out. The woman stood on the step holding one boot by the back loop, the other tucked under her arm. She was wearing house shoes with thick socks inside them.

"Sorry," she said. "I meant to come earlier."

"You should've. Could've had tea."

"I've got to go first thing."

"Let's have a look."

The woman held the boot toward the light. A flap of the upper had opened above the sole, and the leather underneath was pale. Ada could see the place where a metal edge had cut it.

"Caught it on the cart," the woman said. "I put a bit of tape on. It came straight off."

"What sort of tape?" Len asked.

"Sort I had."

He laughed. "Bring it in."

Ada took her feet from the bowl. The towel lay beyond reach. She leaned for it, splashed the floor, and caught the edge of the table to stop herself tipping forward.

"Don't get up," Len said. "We're only looking."

She dried one foot and rested the other on the wet towel.

The woman needed the boots for an outside job. There was an early vehicle, a full day on her feet at the other end, and nothing else she owned which would do.

"I can get something there if I have to," she said. "They'll take it from the pay."

Len pressed the flap flat. "Won't need to."

Ada shut her eyes.

"It's a bit of stitching," he said to her.

"It's a bit of stitching in a boot you have to open first."

He looked pleased. "You remember."

"Yes."

The woman shifted the other boot beneath her arm. "If it's too much, say."

"It isn't," Len said.

Ada pulled on her stockings. They were still damp. Her feet had been warm for perhaps four minutes, long enough to make the dampness feel worse.

In the workshop Len lit the second lamp and brought the boot to the old machine. He examined the cut again. It was clean at one end and ragged at the other. He could turn a patch beneath it if he opened the lining, but reaching it without catching the heel stiffener would take time. He found the right leather on the first attempt. Ada had expected a search and was briefly ashamed of how much she had wanted one.

The woman sat near the stove. Len asked about the outside work, the person who drove them, whether the meals there were still good. She said they were good if you liked everything cooked to the same softness. He told her about a meal he had once eaten with a

knife because nobody could find a fork. She said he was probably remembering the time he had taken the forks into the workshop to bend one for a handle. He said that was why they had been missing, yes.

Ada laughed. He had not reached for a defence. He had only laughed too, holding the little leather patch up to the light.

"Hold that edge," he said.

She held it. The lining was slippery under her fingers. He cut two stitches, then asked for more light. She moved the lamp, scorched a finger on its metal rim, and set it farther away than he wanted.

"Closer."

"It's hot."

"The handle isn't."

"I've found that out now."

The woman began to stand. "I can hold something."

"You can tell him not to talk while he's got the knife," Ada said.

Len put the knife down. "There. Safe."

They worked. He opened the lining neatly, turned it clear, and showed Ada where to hold so her hand would not be in the needle's path. She had done work like this as a girl. At first her fingers wanted to keep the cloth too tight. Then she found the small slack which let him move the boot without pulling it from her. The old machine made a softer sound than Aled's. At the awkward turn her father stopped, raised the foot, and turned the wheel by hand.

"That's it," he said. "Keep it there."

She did. The needle came up through the right place. He completed the turn and let the treadle take the line again.

It was good work. Ada could see it before he set the boot down. The patch spread behind sound leather on both sides. Nothing hard would rub the woman's ankle. Len trimmed the seam, went back to a loose end he could not reach, and gave Ada the smaller scissors. She got it on the second try.

The woman tried the boot with her sock pulled smooth. She walked to the door, turned, and came back. There was a little stiffness but no pressure where she expected it. She bent her ankle several times.

"Better than what I was going to do."

"What were you going to do?" Len asked.

"More tape."

He grinned. "Keep it for something it likes."

She paid the price he asked. It was not a favour price, though it did not include Ada's evening. Her father put the money in the tin and entered the repair himself.

The woman thanked them both. Len walked her to the gate. Ada put the scissors away, collected the little scraps, and left the leather offcut on the correct shelf rather than throwing it out. It was enough for another patch.

Her father came back rubbing his hands together.

"There. Not so bad."

She hung the boot cloth on its hook.

"She needed them," he said.

"I know."

"She's got a good day's work there. Worth keeping."

"I know that too."

He took his apron off. There was a streak of polish on his chin. She remembered that from being twelve, from the same light at the same bench, and for a moment she was so tired of remembering things that she wanted to turn both lamps off and walk away.

A day's drive away, the woman from the evening line was learning the supervisor's keys. Ada pictured it without resentment, and without any success at all.

"You've done a good repair," she said. "It took the whole evening."

"We weren't doing anything."

"I had my feet in water."

"Well. Apart from that."

She looked at him. He smiled, then stopped when she did not.

"I don't want every day to end like this."

"Doesn't have to."

"It ended like this yesterday. And the day before I was sorting what people had paid for. Before that I was washing things because I didn't know they needed washing until there wasn't a clean one."

"You needn't wash everything."

"I need to wash what I'm using. I need to eat. So do you. And when someone brings a boot, you say it's only a boot, and then I'm holding it for you till ten."

He straightened the apron over the back of the chair. "I didn't ask you to get out of the water."

"You asked me to hold the lining."

"You were there."

"Yes."

He looked down at the apron, rearranged one strap, and seemed to consider whether it would be better to hang it on its hook. She could see him finding a task which would let the next minute go by.

"I got up," she said. "I did. I could have stayed in the kitchen. I could have told her you'd need longer. I didn't. But you couldn't have done that in time on your own, and you know it."

"I might."

"Then I should have let you."

He looked toward the machine. She had left the lining needle in because it suited the work. Aled would put his own back when he needed it. She had begun knowing things like that again without deciding to.

Her father said, "Nice working with you."

It struck her harder than an accusation. She took the lamp by its cool handle and set it on the table.

"It was nice. Some of it. That doesn't make it an arrangement."

He said nothing. She did not improve the sentence. She had spoken awkwardly and meant it.

In the kitchen she carried the bowl outside, emptied it into the proper drain, and wiped the floor where she had splashed it. Len came in behind her and offered to make tea. She said no. He filled the kettle anyway, perhaps for himself.

The buyer's letter lay under a plate. Ada took it out, checked the deadline once more, and put it with the corrected list. She had not cancelled the collection. Her father's staying did not decide whether he was selling the things he owned, and telling the buyer otherwise would only give her another version to undo. She would have to ask him in the morning. She had run out of sensible questions for tonight.

Someone tapped at the half-open door. A man held a child's coat with a fastening hanging from a strip of cloth. The child was not with him.

"Caught you before you shut up," he said.

Len turned from the kettle.

Ada stood with the wet bowl against her hip. She looked at the coat, then at her father.

"I'm going to bed."

"It's only—" Len began.

"I've seen it."

She put the bowl down and went up the stairs. Behind her, the man explained what had happened to the fastening. Len asked him to bring it into the light.

Ada shut the bedroom door. Nell was asleep with one arm outside the blanket.

Below, her father opened a drawer. She knew the drawer from its sound. He opened it again a little later, then there was the scrape of a chair being moved toward the lamp.

She lay down on her own bed without going back.

17

Terms of work

Nell waited until Beryl had put the knife down. She had tried asking while the knife was in use and received an answer to a question about rotten fruit.

"What happens after Sunday?"

"Monday."

"To the work."

Beryl slid the cut apple across the board. "Same work. Less of that variety. More from the far rows."

"Could I do it?"

"You do it now."

"I mean stay."

Beryl took the knife up again. Nell put one hand on the empty crate so she would have something to do if the answer was no. The apples were cold from the store. The cut faces smelled sharp and clean in the morning air.

"How long?" Beryl asked.

"Till you finish."

"That isn't a time."

"How long do you need?"

Beryl looked at her properly. "Six weeks would help. If you can work the store after the picking. There's pressing. Cleaning. People

think the apples go and then you have a holiday. The apples go and leave everything they've been in."

"I can clean."

"I've seen you."

Nell could not tell whether that was a compliment. She had worked for Beryl on most of the mornings since they arrived. Her palms had become rough where the crate handles sat. She no longer put her thumb where the press frame would catch it. She had also tipped a bucket on Thursday, forgotten a row marker, and twice left her coat somewhere that made someone else move it before they could work. She had begun to dislike being assessed by how much she liked the place.

"I'd need somewhere to sleep."

"The room's free Friday evening. If he leaves when he says."

"The nineteenth."

"Yes. He knows the date too."

Nell took her hand off the crate. "Is that something you'd let me have?"

"For the six weeks. You'd pay for it."

"How much?"

Beryl named the amount, then the week's pay. She said each again while Nell found a pencil. The room included a bed, a table, the little cupboard, and use of the shed wash place when work was not going through it. It did not include meals. There was a shelf where she could keep food without the pickers treating it as theirs, provided she put her name on it.

"And if they still take it?"

"Tell them."

"Like the note?"

Beryl stopped cutting. "Who read your note?"

"Shirley. Everyone else got the useful part."

"What useful part?"

"Never mind."

"All right."

Nell waited for more. Beryl put the cut fruit in the pressing bin. The conversation did not acquire an audience. It was such a small improvement that Nell felt embarrassed by how much she appreciated it.

"The room," she said. "Can people come through?"

"No. Stairs are outside. Bolt on the inside, key for when you're out. Don't leave the key in a boot. He did. We spent a morning finding which boot."

"Who's got the other key?"

"Me."

Nell looked at her.

"If there's smoke or water coming down," Beryl said. "Otherwise I knock. You can ask him."

"I will."

"Good."

"What about if I get a box wrong?" she asked.

"You put it right."

"And the pay."

Beryl looked at the pencil still lying between them.

"I need to know before I say yes," Nell said. "Not after."

"You'll get the rate for the hours you do. I won't pay for you to sit up there when you're due down here."

"That's not what happened before."

"No."

Nell waited. She had planned an entire speech on the way down. Without an argument to start it, the speech seemed too large to get out.

"I lost the order," Beryl said. "I was cross about it. You'd done as I said badly. That doesn't mean you hadn't been working."

"You still took it."

"Yes."

Nell pressed a thumbnail into the pencil's worn paint. Beryl did not offer to turn the first morning into a better memory. She reached for the notebook where she kept the harvest hours.

"I'll put the other half morning on this week. Don't expect another one for the conversation."

Nell nearly smiled, then decided not to make it easy for her. "Write the hours down as well."

"You can write your own hours. I'll check them."

They worked out a week. Mornings from seven. A break at noon. Afternoons back at one until four, with later work agreed beforehand if a pressing run could not be left. Rain did not mean there was nothing to do. Nell had seen that. She asked for one afternoon each week to go out to the connection point, deal with her own things, and speak to people she could not reach from the shed.

"Wednesday," Beryl said. "If we've no carrier booked. Thursday that week if we have."

"Paid?"

"For the time you're working."

She wrote afternoon off, unpaid. It looked less generous on paper than it had sounded when she imagined it. The room still cost the same that week. She subtracted the afternoon before Beryl could tell her to.

"You'll need to eat," Beryl said.

"I know."

"People say that and put no food in the sum."

Nell added food beneath the room. The pencil made a dent through the thin page, and she rubbed at it uselessly.

"What do the others spend?"

"Depends what they eat. Come when I do the order. You can see prices. You don't have to eat with them every night."

"And hot water?"

"After the shed's done. You heat what you use."

Nell wrote soap, then crossed it out and put it beneath food as a separate small cost. She did not want Beryl to think she expected someone else to buy it.

They finished the order before the carrier arrived. Nell helped lift the crates without overfilling the last one to save a journey. While Beryl counted the payment she ate a bruised apple on the step. Juice ran over her knuckles. The man who would leave on Friday came from the far row and sat on an overturned crate, keeping a strip of sunlight on his back.

"You taking the room?" he asked.

"Maybe. For a bit."

"Need to put a rag by the window when it blows from this side."

"Does it leak?"

"Air. Water if you leave it open. Like most windows."

He smiled. This time she smiled back without finding something extra in it.

"What's the key like?" she asked.

He showed her. An ordinary key, tied to a wooden offcut too long to lose in a pocket. He said Beryl did knock. Loudly, often when he had only just gone to sleep, but she knocked. Nell asked whether the bed was bad. He said it was better if you slept on the side away from the wall. He had put a folded blanket under the other side and she could keep it if she wanted.

"You're not taking the blanket?"

"It belongs here."

She nodded. She liked him better for knowing whose it was. That did not make her want him to stay.

At lunch Beryl took her up while he was out. She called from the foot of the stairs first, then used her own key after getting his shouted permission from beyond the wall. Nell heard him say to mind the bag behind the door. Beryl minded it.

The room was smaller than Nell had imagined. She had seen only its window from the ground. From the top stair the roof came down

low enough to make her duck. The bed stood along the sound wall. Its pillow was thin, the blanket faded where sunlight had reached it, and the little table had one corner packed with a folded card. There was a mark beside the window where a wet cuff had rested against the plaster. It did not smell of damp bedding. It smelled of apples, socks, and somebody else's soap.

Nell stood by the bed without sitting on it. From the window she could see the rows fall away toward the lower hedge. She could not see Len's cottage. She could hear the press frame creak when somebody leaned against it downstairs.

"No cooking up here," Beryl said. "Lamp goes on the table, not beside the bed. If the cloth catches, the stairs are the only stairs."

Nell looked at the gap under the door. "Does it bolt properly?"

Beryl let her try. It caught at first, then slid if she lifted it slightly. Nell tried again. She could do it with one hand.

"Room's yours while you're paying for it," Beryl said. "Six weeks. After that we talk again if there's work, but don't count on it. I'm doing less next year."

"Why?"

"Ladders and my knees have stopped agreeing."

She said it with no invitation to offer a plan. Nell looked at the rows she could see. One of the older trees leaned over its prop, the top still heavy with fruit. Beryl had been deciding what she could keep doing while Nell was deciding how to begin.

Downstairs they copied the terms onto a clean page. Beryl signed the hours and rate. Nell wrote the six-week end date, checked it against the date her winter course began, and found that the six weeks ran five days past it. She would have to ask the school whether a late start could be allowed. The gap was real. She had not invented it because the room had a bolt.

"Return fare first," Beryl said. "Before the room or anything else. If it goes wrong here, you don't want to borrow money from whoever you're trying to leave."

Nell counted her earnings. With the restored half morning she could put the fare aside now, though it left little for the first week. She used an envelope Beryl gave her, wrote return on it, and folded its flap inside. She would have to find out the exact price rather than use what her mother had once said a journey cost.

"Do you want an answer today?"

"I want you to talk to Ada before you tell everyone you're staying."

"I'm eighteen."

"Yes. You can manage a conversation."

Nell put the page in her pocket, separately from the old note. "I meant she doesn't have to agree."

"I heard what you meant."

They began the afternoon. Nell took the next bucket out before the rim grew sticky, washed it, and left it inverted on the board. She could feel the folded offer against her thigh whenever she bent.

At four she went up to the cottage intending to show her mother. Ada was carrying a bowl of bootlaces from the workshop. The laces had been washed for return to their owners, and she was separating them in pairs. Len followed with a story about a woman who had once used two different lengths because she liked one boot tighter.

"Can you hold this?" Ada asked.

Nell held the bowl. When she gave it back, Len had begun another part of the story, and Ada looked too tired to hear anything else properly. Nell decided to wait until morning.

18

The collection run

Douglas charged for the covers as freight and for Aled as a passenger. Aled had expected something between the two because he would be holding the covers. Douglas said the holding was welcome and did not change how much space they took.

On Tuesday he got up before the yard had light in it. He took the receipts from his cupboard, put the machine's folded invoice inside the letter about outside work, and checked the address on each cover. One customer was near the connection point. The other had agreed to meet Douglas on the road. There was a third stop booked for a repair, one Douglas had arranged with Aled's price and an allowance for time. Aled had asked twice whether they meant him to do it there. They did.

"Any other stops?" Douglas asked.

"Supplier. The shop near the point. And I want to look at somewhere."

"How long?"

"Don't know yet."

"Then find out by the time we get there."

He shut the door. Aled settled beside him with the cover against his knees. The seat was worn enough that the frame found the same place beneath his thigh each time the vehicle turned. He had ridden

in it often, usually looking out for a gate or thinking about what Len would want fetched. Today the list in his pocket had been made by him.

The first customer met them at the agreed place. She checked the new binding, asked whether the other corner would need doing soon, and accepted Aled's answer that it was sound for now. He could have sold her another repair. He was glad she had asked him about this one instead.

The second cover went to a store with a loading space broad enough to turn a full vehicle, and nobody asked him a single question.

At the third stop a cart stood on a hard apron beside a barn. Its cover had been fitted too tight across one rail. The owner had loosened it for the journey, but the strained fastening was still pulling the corner out of shape. Aled walked round the cart before opening his bag.

"Len said he could put another strap on," the owner said.

"He could."

"You think something else?"

"I think that rail's higher than the one opposite."

The man looked. "Been like that since we changed the side."

"Cover hasn't changed with it."

He undid the fastening and let the edge fall into its own shape. The difference was less than the width of his palm. It had been enough to keep every stitch under strain. He showed the owner where a small extension would give the cover room and where another strap alone would merely pull it harder.

"How long?"

"The time I quoted. If the old holes don't spread."

Douglas checked the load on his own vehicle and said he would be back after the collection next door. They had allowed that time. Aled put his bag on the cart bed, chose a needle, and began opening the binding.

The sun warmed the back of his coat. He took it off and worked in his shirt, turning his shoulder away from the wind. The canvas had kept its strength beyond the fastening. He did not need to cut the good part away. He fitted an extension from the piece he had brought, folded its edges so nothing raw would catch, and worked the thread through the old sound line.

It was slow by hand, but the corner sat well under his fingers. He could feel whether the needle had gone through both layers before he saw its point. Each pull tightened with the same small resistance. There was no voice from the kitchen, no mug moving onto the cloth, no customer asking where Len was. A dog came to sniff his bag, decided it held nothing useful, and went to sleep beneath the cart.

Halfway through, the owner brought him tea. Aled put it on the ground beyond the dog and kept working. He told the man to hold the edge while he fixed the second fastening. The man held too high. Aled showed him the level he wanted, and this time the pull came even.

"There," he said.

The man looked over his shoulder. "That much?"

"That much."

"Looks better."

"It fits now."

"You want to do the other?"

"No need yet. If that rail gets changed, measure it before cutting anything."

The man paid him. Aled counted, gave change, and wrote what he had done. The tea was still warm. He drank it on the cart wheel with his shirt sleeves rolled and felt pleased in a plain bodily way, an afternoon's worth of pleasure before noon. Douglas came back while he was putting the needle away.

"We on?"

"Yes."

The supplier was busy. Aled had always come with Len's account name or an order already made. This time he asked for prices on small quantities and found how much more a little cost than a lot. The man at the counter showed him the difference on two lengths of thread. Aled wanted the larger quantity. He had money for the smaller one and enough left for transport if nothing else needed buying.

At the connection point his own contact resumed where they had left off, with the unanswered work enquiries kept separate from the things he had asked not to receive. He looked through the dates first. One of the old jobs had gone to someone else. Another person wanted to know whether he could still quote for a winter cover. He sent a message saying when he could answer, then checked the price of the components on his list. He kept the workshop argument out of the exchange. He needed a price, not another account of why he had waited.

Douglas put his head round the door. "Twenty minutes."

"I've got to the workshop."

"Then leave yourself time to get back from it."

The workshop was a short walk along the road, behind a building which sold finished canvas goods as well as repairs. Aled had been given its address by the driver who offered the six weeks' work. The offered place had been filled. That had been made clear before he came. The woman who ran the workroom still said he could look, and she could look at the cover photograph he had brought.

She let him turn a sample beneath the foot of the machine she kept clear for awkward work. He tested the turn without threading it. She watched his hands and asked what work he did most. He answered at greater length than he meant to, describing a cover which had to fold against its own reinforcements, the places where leather wanted a different feed, how much trouble a neat row could cause if it weakened a worn edge. She asked two questions which showed she had heard him.

"There's overflow," she said. "Not a wage all winter. I pay for the finished work, at these rates, after inspection. You'd have to get here or bring it back by arrangement."

He studied the rates. They were better than what he received for the same work at Bellwether. Some of the difference was fair; she expected him to provide things Len supplied. Some remained after he allowed for that.

"A place to stay?" he asked.

"Nothing here. There are rooms. I can give you the names to ask. I don't know what they've got this week."

No cottage. No old promise. He would have to ask strangers what they charged and pay them whether there was work or not. She offered a small trial piece if he came back, something she could use without putting a whole customer order at risk. He said he would answer after the coming weekend.

"Keep the sheet," she said. "Rates won't change before then."

Outside, the wind took one corner from his hand. He caught it against his coat. For a second he saw it going down the road and himself chasing it, another thing too important to let go of and too light to hold properly.

He got back with two minutes left. Douglas was waiting beside the vehicle with a hand on the door.

"Lower store on the way?" Aled asked. "If there's room for a little leather offcut."

"Another stop's the extra rate."

"We go past."

"We go past several things. Do you want it?"

Aled looked at the prices in his hand. He had bought needles and thread. The leather could wait until he knew what he would be doing.

"No."

"All right."

Douglas opened the door. Aled held the cover bag while he climbed in and did not resent him for the price as much as he had expected to.

On the way back he used the supplier's stiff paper to make a list he could keep. His own machine. Len's machine, if Len would leave it. Permission to use the boot room. Beryl's bench by agreement. A smaller stock than he had first written, bought in pieces when the jobs paid for them. Regular freight charged to the job. The room above the passage for now, even if Shirley had measured it.

Douglas slowed for the turn into Bellwether. Aled folded the list before the paper could flap against the windscreen. His hands smelled of new thread and the dog which had slept beneath the cart. He had not touched the dog. Its hair had found him anyway.

He brushed one pale strand from his sleeve, picked up the receipts, and got out with the prices he had actually been given.

19

What Ada can offer

Ada put the van key on the table because her father kept saying there was time. He looked at it, then at the loaf she had moved to make room.

"I'm leaving on Sunday morning," she said. "Early enough to get the van back that evening. That's the date."

"I know the date."

"I need you to know I'm going on it."

He cut bread. The knife had a loose handle which he had said he would tighten. He kept his thumb on the crack while he used it.

"You'll have to eat on the way."

"Yes."

"Could take something."

"I will."

She had rehearsed this while washing the last of his shirts. In the washroom she had spoken without stopping, an entire sensible account given to a wall which never asked whether she wanted butter. Now she waited while he pushed the plate toward her.

"I'll keep making food with you until then," she said. "I'll help get the paid jobs straight. I can do the sorting and the bits I know how to do. I can't promise people work for you. I can't tell them Aled will do it. And I'm not staying on to make staying possible."

"Who asked you to?"

"Nobody asked for Thursday's washing either."

"You took that on."

"Yes. I did. I'm telling you when I stop taking it on."

He rested the knife on the board. There was no need to tell him about the handle. He knew. She had begun noticing how many things he knew and could still leave where they were.

"If you come, there's a place with me first if we need it," she said. "We can look again at a room you like. If you stay, I'll still speak to you. I'll still come when I can arrange it. But I won't ring Douglas every week to find out whether you've asked someone for fuel, and I won't get Aled to do it because you don't fancy asking him yourself."

He looked toward the yard. Aled had gone out with Douglas that morning. Len had stood in the doorway while they loaded, talking about which way the wind would meet them. He had not asked to go.

"You've been talking to him," he said.

"Not about this."

"Sounds like it."

"It sounds like me. I'm the one here."

He reached for the plate and stopped with his hand on it. Ada took a piece of bread herself; she was hungry and had not stopped being hungry because the conversation was difficult.

"I'll say the other part," she said. "If you stay, there'll be a night you want somebody at three in the morning, and I'll be a day down the road. I won't have forgotten you. I just won't be there. I want you to have that in your head before you choose, not after."

He did not look at the plate. He did not look at the yard.

"That's a hard thing to say," he said.

"Yes."

"You've never said it."

"I've never had to. I've been here."

"There's the buyer," he said.

"Yes. We need to answer her."

"You said it might be less."

"It will be less. We don't know how much."

"So no sense hurrying."

"The deadline doesn't wait till the price improves."

He began to say something, then stopped. She gave him time. Outside, somebody dragged a crate across the stones and called for another pair of hands. Len did not rise. She could see the effort it took him to remain at the table while help was being asked for in his hearing.

"I'll go through it," he said.

"With Aled."

"With whoever needs."

She kept the key where it was. There was a clear place round it and she did not fill that place with another offer.

Nell came in before the bread had been put away. She had the orchard's notebook page in her pocket and took it out while Len was still at the table.

"Beryl's agreed," she said.

Ada looked at the page. "To what?"

"The work. Six weeks. And the room after he leaves."

Len smiled. "Good room, that."

Ada had never been in it. She put down her bread.

"When did you ask?"

"Yesterday."

"When were you going to tell me?"

"I'm telling you."

"You've asked her about a room."

"Yes. That was part of it."

Len stood. He said he would put the kettle on, discovered it was already on, and went to look at something in the shop. Ada watched him go. Nell sat in his chair and laid the page flat where his plate had been.

"It's paid. There's a finish date. It's five days after the course starts, and I'm going to ask them about that."

"You were with me yesterday."

"You were busy."

"I was sorting laces."

"You looked like you didn't want another thing."

"I didn't. I still needed to hear this before your grandad congratulated you for it."

Nell drew the page toward her. "He just happened to be here."

"Who else knows?"

"Beryl. The man in the room. Shirley asked what I was doing after Sunday and I said I was looking at work. I haven't told everyone."

Ada pressed a crumb against the board. It left a dark spot where there was still butter on her finger. She had wanted Nell's interest in the orchard to be something they could laugh about in the van, a useful fortnight, sore hands, stories about apples. She had seen enough to know that was no longer what it was. She had still allowed herself to expect the passenger seat to be occupied.

"I've got leave ending," she said. "A van to return. A room held. Your grandad staying, going, staying again. I've spent this morning telling him which things I can arrange, and now I'm hearing you've arranged another one."

"It's mine."

"I know it's yours."

"You're talking like I've added it to your list."

"Have you?"

"No."

"Who's paying?"

"Me."

Ada held out her hand. Nell hesitated, then let her see the page.

The page was careful: hours, pay, the room's weekly cost, the free afternoon already subtracted, the return fare ringed twice at the

bottom. Ada looked for what was wrong and found only the gap where the weekly journeys should be.

"Contact," she said. "You've put an afternoon."

"Yes. I can go out and speak to you. Deal with my things. I need to ask the school about starting late."

"Transport?"

"Douglas goes."

"He charges."

"I know."

"How much for six journeys?"

Nell took the page back. Her finger went to the fare at the bottom, then stopped.

"That's the fare home," Ada said.

"I know what I wrote."

"Then where are the weekly trips?"

"I hadn't put them in yet."

"Beryl's said you can go. Douglas hasn't said what it costs."

"He'll tell me."

"Yes. He will."

Nell put the page down harder than she needed to. "This is what you do. I show you anything and you find the bit that's wrong."

"You want me to say yes without reading it?"

"I don't need you to say yes."

The room went quiet. Ada let her finish hearing herself. Nell looked at the key on the table, then away.

"Then what do you want from me?" Ada asked.

"To not make it horrible."

Ada stood. The loaf had gone hard on the cut face while they talked. She covered it with the cloth and went to the window. In the yard Len was talking to a man with a sack over one shoulder. Her father lifted one hand, palm up, in the gesture he used when saying something could wait without promising how long.

"I'm your mother," she said. "I want to know where you're sleeping. I want to know you can leave if you want to. And I wanted you to come home with me. I haven't had time to stop wanting that because you've got a signed page."

Behind her, Nell moved the chair.

"You left here."

"Yes."

"And now I'm doing something without you, you can't stand it."

Ada turned. "Don't give me a history of myself because you're cross about bus fares."

"I'm not cross about bus fares."

"Then don't talk like the fares are beneath you. They get you home."

Nell pressed her lips together. There was a red line across one knuckle, healing from the crate. Ada had retied that finger before the shop argument began. It seemed longer ago than six days.

"I told you about Shirley," Nell said. "I know it's not all nice."

"I heard you."

"I still went back."

"Yes. I noticed."

"I'm good at some of it."

Ada looked at her. The sentence had come out smaller than the others. Nell's hand lay over the paper as though she could keep it from being reduced any further.

"Yes," Ada said. "I've seen."

Nell stared at the table. Ada sat down again, this time in her own chair. She did not reach for the page.

They went through the room. The bolt, the key, Beryl's knock. The shelf for food. The worker leaving on Friday and the arrangement not beginning until he had gone. Nell would have to clean it and decide whether the blanket under the mattress was worth keeping. She described the low roof and the table which rocked. She did not call either charming.

"The first weeks after picking?" Ada asked.

"Store. Pressing. Washing everything. Beryl's got late fruit as well."

"And after six weeks?"

"Home. Or we talk again. But I've got the fare."

"Home first," Ada said, then caught herself. "You can tell me when you know. Before you tell the kitchen."

Nell nodded. It was not agreement to the larger thing. It was something they could both hear.

At the door a child called for Len. He had gone with the man and the sack. Ada told the child she would have to look in the main building. The child asked whether Ada could fix the torn pocket instead. She said no, she could not. The child looked disappointed and went. Nell watched without commenting.

"I can take a bundle out on Sunday," Ada said. "Things you want sent home."

"Thanks."

"I'll leave the food I brought if your grandad doesn't need it."

"Thanks."

"The trips to the connection point are yours to pay for."

Nell began to speak, then looked at the page again.

"I'm not putting them on Douglas's bill and finding them afterward," Ada said. "Price them. If it means less money left, it means less money left."

She got the pencil and placed it between them. Nell drew a line beneath the food and wrote journeys. The handwriting looked younger than the calculations above it.

Ada took her hand off the pencil. She could see how carefully most of the page had been done. She could also see the empty place waiting for the next cost. She left that place for Nell to fill.

20

The smaller shop

Shirley came for the sheet she had brought on Sunday. Aled was setting his machine square to the window and had to get out of the way before she could reach it.

"I thought that was for Ada," he said.

"It was for the clean bedding. If he's staying, he can sleep on what he's got."

She shook the sheet once and folded it over her arm. It smelled of wind and the sharp soap she used when she could get it.

"You could tell him that."

"I have. He said you'd be glad of a bit more time."

Aled put the small wedge back beneath his machine stand. The floor had worn unevenly. In its old position the machine had sat well enough; moved nearer the light, it rocked when he pressed hard on the treadle.

"Time for what?"

"He didn't get that far."

Shirley looked at the empty patch where his cloth roll had stood before he took it upstairs. Her eyes went to the doorway and back.

"I'm not washing his blankets next week," she said. "I've the wall to deal with. There's no point drying clean things in front of that."

"You got the chest off?"

"Got it off. Got no farther. Everybody can see the damp now. Improvement, apparently."

He laughed. She did not look pleased, but she did not mind the laugh. She moved the bundle out of the draught from the door and asked whether he had seen the old bit of wood which would fit behind her chest. He found it under the bench. It had a split down the middle, and he showed her which end she could use. She took it with her sheet.

He had asked Beryl to look at the bench that morning. He wanted to know whether it could stay in a smaller shop. She arrived with her coat still wet from the orchard and listened while he explained where the machine would stand, where he could open covers, which drawers he would need for stock.

"You can use the bench," she said. "Same as now. I need it for my own things when I bring them."

"I'd put a lock on the door after hours."

"You can't lock the boot room without asking the people who use it."

"I work here."

"So do other people sometimes. There's the back store. There's the sharpening. People come through."

"I don't want anyone coming through my stock at night."

"Then find somewhere for stock that isn't the passage to somebody else's things."

He looked toward the back door. It had always annoyed him when someone appeared through it and leaned against work he had laid out. He had begun imagining that annoyance ending as soon as Len said the shop was his. The doorway did not change because he called it a shop.

"Who do I ask?"

"The people in these rooms. The ones using the store. Me about the wheel. Not everybody on the estate. Just the people who'd find a locked door."

She wiped water from her forehead with the back of her wrist. "Do it before you buy a lock."

He had put a lock on the priced list from yesterday. It was one of the cheaper things. He crossed it out for now.

The first job of the morning was a cover for a small trailer. Aled had taken it on his own price with the owner's agreement. It needed an edge replaced and two fastenings moved. He laid it across his chairs, checked its width, and found he could do it with the space he had cleared. Just. Len's stool occupied the place he needed for the turn.

"Can you sit the other side?"

Len looked down as if the stool had brought him there. "Be in your way there."

"You're in my way here."

He moved. Aled drew the cover through the machine and felt the cloth settle.

This was possible. He knew the material. He knew how long the work took when he was allowed to do it. He could price the new edge, the fittings, a portion of thread, and his time without putting a cottage in the sum. He could also finish the repair he had accepted instead of taking every job which found the door.

Near midday a woman brought a boot with its side opening above the heel. She asked for Len. Len had gone to lunch, and Aled said he could look.

He examined the seam. It would suit the narrow working end of the original machine. He tried holding it at his own machine to see whether there was a way to reach without crushing the heel. There was not. He knew that before he tried. He had wanted to find that he did not need to know it.

"Can you do it?" the woman asked.

"I can do the repair. I can't promise the machine for it."

She glanced at the older one, standing beside the bench. "There's one."

"Yes."

"Broken?"

"No."

He put the boot down. She waited. The workshop smelled of wet coat and the warm motor oil someone had brought in on their hands. Aled could hear Len laughing in the kitchen.

"It's Len's," he said. "We haven't settled whether I can use it after this week."

"I need the boot after this week."

He nodded.

He gave her the name of the outside repair place and the days Douglas could take it. He did not tell her she had to go. She could ask Len, if she wanted to leave it with him. He had not agreed to finish Len's jobs for him.

"What would it cost there?"

He gave her the range and said it was not a quotation. She decided to take the boot home and ask about another pair before spending on the journey.

Len came in as she left. "What was hers?"

"Boot side."

"You can do a boot side."

"On your machine."

"So use it."

"What happens if she brings it back next week?"

"Then it wants doing properly this week."

Aled put the trailer cover back under the foot. There was a whole afternoon's argument available, and he had charged the owner for an afternoon's work. He finished the edge instead.

Ada came after lunch with a sandwich on a plate she meant to take away again. Aled had already eaten. He said he would have it later. She looked at the cover, then at the empty corner where the older machine would fit if he could put it there.

"What if Dad left that one for you to use?" she asked.

He did not answer at once.

"It stays his," she went on. "But it stays here. You could have a written arrangement about repairs and keeping it working. He could still go."

"Has he offered that?"

"We've talked about what could stay."

"Has he offered it?"

"No. I'm asking if it would work."

He rested both hands on the cover. She had brought something sensible. He could see how it might be written, how it might end with him paying to maintain a machine he had been told would be his. He could also see her wanting his yes before she asked Len, so she would have somewhere to put the next refusal.

"I've used it eight years," he said.

"I know."

"I was told it would be mine. Now I'm being asked if I'll be pleased to go on using it."

"I didn't say pleased."

"You want me to agree so you can say I agreed."

She stepped back. "I want you to be able to work."

"I'm working."

She looked at his hands on the cloth. He moved them. There was no reason to make her feel she had stopped the machine by standing near it, though that was what he had wanted the sentence to do.

"The woman with the boot," he said. "I sent her away. I can't sell her next week before I know what I've got."

Ada put the plate on a high shelf where it would not catch the work. "I should have asked him first."

"Yes."

She turned to go. He saw the paper in her pocket, the corner worn soft from folding. It might have been the same sheet with his name at the bottom. He had never asked.

"What does he actually want to keep?" he said.

She stopped.

"I don't mean for me. What's he said he's keeping if he goes? What's he said he's selling if he stays?"

"He hasn't given me a straight list."

"Then get that. I'll say what I need. He can say what he's offering. We might find something to talk about."

Ada nodded. He could see she was waiting for the rest, the condition which would make it impossible. He had put no such condition there. Whether Len would supply one himself, he could not say.

"He still has to sit down for supper," Aled said. "You can ask him while he's sitting."

She smiled, a tired movement at one corner of her mouth. "I'll try bread."

After she left, Aled took out his own list. He added the customer's boot beside the original machine, so he would remember what losing its use meant when he spoke. Beneath the room and bench he wrote ask users. Then he put the page away before returning to the paid cover.

He had an edge to finish. It would go back to its owner that evening, with a price on it and no account of Len.

21

Everything then

Ada put her own bag in the van first. She had been using it open on the bedroom floor, taking things from it and dropping them back in without folding. It weighed more than when she arrived because three of her shirts were damp. She packed them separately, in a cloth which could be washed, and put the bag behind the passenger seat.

Nell watched from the cottage step.

"Are we going today?"

"No. I'm making sure it fits."

"It fitted coming."

"More things seem to have found it."

There was a box of Len's books which he had not decided whether to keep, a small stool she remembered making with him, the lunch tin Shirley had given back. The stool was hers. She had asked him that morning, and he had said of course it was hers, she had done most of the work on it. He had not been offended by the question. He had looked offended by her surprise at the answer.

Nell brought the stool across. They tried it under the shelf, then turned it and found a better fit with the legs upward. Ada put her bag against it so it would not move on a turn.

"Anything you want sent home, put it in that box," she said.

Nell nodded. “Douglas has told me the trip price.”

“And?”

“It’s more than I put down.”

“You hadn’t put anything down.”

“I have now.”

Ada nearly asked to see the page. Nell had got as far as saying it without being made to. She let that stand.

They packed the things she knew. The bag of spare bedding. The flat empty boxes that could go back to the colleague who had lent them. Packing she had used would stay on Len’s account; clean material she could return was hers to sort. Nell held a bundle while Ada threaded a strap beneath it. The strap’s buckle was new, supplied from the shop at a price Ada had written in the book. She did not want to find later that she had accepted one more little useful thing nobody had meant to charge for.

Len came out carrying the travelling bag. It had been packed before she arrived and unpacked twice since. Now it hung open, the sleeves of a shirt trailing near the ground.

“You’re loading, then.”

“My things.”

“Could put this in while you’re at it.”

She took the bag because he had extended it and she was there. Its weight came suddenly onto her sore thumb. She put it on the step of the van.

“Is it coming?” she asked.

He looked at the bag as though it might answer for him.

“Want it in the dry.”

“There’s dry upstairs.”

“Not much.”

Nell went inside for her things. Ada waited until she had gone before lifting the trailing sleeves into the bag. The coat was beneath them. Len had put the loose button in a little paper packet rather than sew it on.

"I'm leaving space for you," she said. "I need to know what else belongs in it."

"I've not got much."

"The handcart doesn't fit with everything else. We can have it brought later, if that's what you want. Paid. It doesn't have to be decided by forcing it under somebody else's shelf."

He stood with one foot on the lower stone. His trousers were wet at the ankle. Rain had been falling all morning, a light persistent rain which found the backs of collars and the gap between a sleeve and a glove. He had no gloves on. She could see a new nick beside the old scar on his forefinger.

"What did Aled say?" he asked.

"He'll tell you what he needs. He wants to hear what you're offering."

"Had plenty to say already."

"He wants a list of things you mean to leave. Your things."

"We've got lists."

"Then answer one."

Her father looked at the open van. The bag stood beside her own. It would have fitted easily if she had closed it and slid it into the space she had kept. He could see that. So could she.

"I'll make tea," he said.

"Not yet."

"Can't stand out here."

"Then come in the cab."

She opened the passenger door. He looked at the high step, reached for the handle, and got in without her taking his elbow. She went round and sat at the wheel. Neither shut the door fully. Rain ticked against the roof and the open gap let in the smell of wet stone.

The last time they had sat in a vehicle together for a long journey, he had brought a paper bag of boiled sweets which stuck to their wrappers. She had found three in the side pocket months later. He

had told her where to turn while she was driving a road he had never used. She remembered being irritated and glad of him in the same breath.

"I'm not coming back on Monday to finish what's left," she said. "I need you to hear that. If you stay, I go."

"I heard."

"And you arrange what needs arranging here."

"You make it sound as if I've never lived on my own."

She looked through the windscreen. There was a smear outside the reach of the wiper, left by a hand trying to clear mist from the wrong side. She had meant to clean it before they left.

"You've lived here," she said.

He shifted in the seat. "I can manage."

"All right."

He looked at her. She let the claim stand. She could not know every arrangement he might make once she stopped arranging them. He had brought his own wood back on Sunday. He had also asked her where the clean pillowcase was as if its arrival had been part of the weather.

For a while neither spoke. Len pulled the seat belt out and let it return without fastening it. The reel clicked.

"You could go on without me," he said.

"Yes."

"You'd have more room."

"Yes."

He drew the belt out again. This time he held it across his lap, rubbing the webbing between his fingers.

"What if we sold it all?"

Ada turned toward him.

"The big things," he said. "Everything on the list. Get it done."

"Aled's machine isn't yours."

"Not that. Mine. All the rest."

"The old machine?"

"Yes."

"You told him it would stay."

"He's got his own."

"He bought it for different work."

"He could do plenty."

She looked at his hands on the belt. He had begun holding it the way he held a strap before deciding where to make the hole.

"If we let it all go," he said, "you could still take me."

The rain grew louder for a minute, then eased. Ada could hear somebody in the kitchen laughing at something Nell said. It seemed wrong that the sound should arrive while her father sat beside her waiting to find out whether there was room for him.

"There's room for you now," she said.

"Not in that place. You said the money."

"We can change where you stay."

"I don't want to turn up with nothing."

"You won't have nothing."

"No money, then."

"You'll have some. We'll work out what you can pay."

He let the seat belt go. It snapped back too fast, caught at the buckle, and hung beside his shoulder.

"I said everything. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"No."

"You came to sell things."

"I came because you asked me. I can't make this one sellable by asking Aled to swallow what you told him."

"He's not the one going."

"I know."

She had answered too quickly. Len looked away. She could see him trying to fit the offer into the refusal, the old machine, the money, the place she had shown him. She had wanted to take him somewhere he could rest without needing anyone's gratitude. Now

he was offering another person's future as if it were the last object she had failed to pack.

"Go and tell him what you've told me," she said. "Then we can talk about what's yours to sell."

"He'll make it difficult."

"He's allowed to answer."

Len opened the door. Ada did not follow at once. He got down with one hand on the frame and paused beside the bag.

"Want that out?" he asked.

"Leave it dry for now."

He tucked the exposed shirt inside properly, doing the small job she had done badly. Then he went to the cottage.

Douglas was taking an afternoon run, one she had booked the evening before when it became clear the lists would not settle themselves. She had paid for the seat. He would not have to wait while she decided whether to use it.

At the connection point she asked for the buyer. The familiar presence had messages waiting. The top one was the new rota, her own name in the same place it had always been. She left the rest for later. She asked only for the call and sent the corrected list the buyer already knew. Her father's offer stayed with her. He had not made it for an outside audience, and repeating it would not make the machine hers to sell.

The buyer replied from her workroom. She had a pair of gloves tucked into one pocket and a measurement written on the back of her hand.

"You've changed it?" she asked.

"It isn't agreed. The older machine. What my father told Aled. I can't confirm it."

"I had that marked provisional."

"I know. It's more than changing the list. He hasn't settled what he means to leave the shop, and I don't know what you'll find ready to take."

The woman pulled her own paper closer.

"The hire deadline was yesterday."

Ada looked at the date she had copied. She had known it all morning. Until she came into the room she had still been treating the call as if making it could move the time it was due.

"I should have answered before it."

"Yes."

"Is it booked?"

"It's booked. Vehicle, assistant, morning. I can still use the journey if there's stock and tools worth taking. I can't turn it back into a free appointment."

"I'm not asking you to."

The buyer named the charge if the original loading plan was wasted. It was more than several ordinary repairs, less than Ada's frightened guess. Ada wrote it down beside the amount already spent. They went through which parts were the buyer's costs and which were Douglas's separate booking. She would not pay the same hire twice. The woman agreed and set out the distinction without irritation. Her irritation was for the missed answer.

"What is definitely his?" she asked.

Ada named the press, the older hand tools, the set of lasts, the sound stock. Customer things stayed. Beryl's things stayed. Aled's purchases stayed. The older machine remained Len's property with a promise attached which Ada could not ask the woman to ignore.

"I don't decide that," the buyer said.

"No. We have to."

"By Saturday morning."

"Before you load."

"Before I put my people in danger trying to move a thing somebody else is hanging on to."

Ada held the pencil still. "I'll make sure nobody starts until we've said what can go."

They kept the appointment. The woman would look at the reduced lot and price what she could actually take. No promise on that price. No agreement that a more difficult sale made her assistant's morning worth less. Ada kept the confirmed costs to herself and took a paper copy back for Len.

There was time left before Douglas returned. She answered her colleague's short message confirming the van would be clear for its next booking. She said she would return it on Sunday evening as arranged. Then she sat without asking for another calculation.

Back at Bellwether the rain had eased enough for people to stand outside without coats. Nell's box was in the van. She had put her name on the top and drawn a little arrow showing which way up it needed to travel. Ada looked inside. Books, two shirts, the shoes she had arrived in and stopped wearing. The clean shoes filled the space between things with no use for them here.

She closed the box and tightened its strap. Len's bag stood beside it, closed now. He had not taken it back upstairs. She did not put it farther in.

22

The things with owners

Aled found the first label in the wrong box. It was the name of a customer whose harness had been laid beneath two rolls of canvas for so long that the crease showed through the leather. Ada lifted the rolls while he took the harness out. The bottom buckle had left a green mark on the cloth.

"That's his," Aled said.

"Paid?"

"Part. He paid for the replacement. Not the fitting."

Ada brought the book. They found the line, the tick through one part of it, a number beneath the other. Len remembered taking the money but said the replacement had cost more than the man expected. Aled asked where it was. Len pointed at a drawer.

The replacement was there, still wrapped. Aled put it through a loop in the harness and tied both to the customer's name. It could no longer be mistaken for spare stock. Ada carried the whole thing to the finished-work corner, then moved it to a separate chair because it was not finished.

They had begun after Ada's return, and Beryl had come up from the orchard to check what belonged to her.

There were no neat piles to begin with. There was the bench, the two machines, the shelves, the things which had been put on top of

other things to let work pass below them. Aled took down a box of rivets and found a woman's glove behind it. Len said he had kept the glove to match the missing one. Nobody could remember the woman, and there was no name on it. Ada put it with things to ask about instead of calling it abandoned.

He liked that she did that. He did not tell her. He was holding too much else to decide what such a remark might cost.

Beryl crouched to look at the underside of the bench. "There," she said.

The pale letters showed beneath a crosspiece. Aled had known they were there, but not what they said. Beryl rubbed one with her thumb, made it clearer for a moment, then gave up because the paint came off on her skin.

"From the orchard store," she said. "Before we changed the floor. The wheel came with it."

"After the mower," Len said.

"After the mower. Before you ask, you had the trailer as well."

"It wanted a tyre."

"You put a tyre on it. You didn't buy the orchard."

She got up slowly, using the bench edge for the last few inches. Aled moved a crate out of her way. The sharpening wheel remained where it was.

"Use it if we agree," she said to Aled. "Don't let it go out on a journey without asking."

"I won't."

"That goes for you as well," she said to Len.

He was opening another drawer and did not turn. "Never taken it anywhere."

"Then keep it up."

They sorted the customers' things first. A bag Len had begun taking apart without putting the loose pieces inside it turned up in two halves, one in a box of buttons and one beneath the old machine's pedal.

For a while the work carried its own agreement. If a thing belonged to a customer, it did not go to the buyer. It did not become Aled's because he would have to repair it. It did not become Len's because somebody had failed to collect it promptly. They could move it together without answering the question of who would pay for the hours still needed.

They went to Aled's things next. He had brought his machine invoice from upstairs, the folded paper soft at every crease. Len had been there when he paid; Ada knew that now. She still checked the description against the head of the machine. Aled let her. Her checking did not take it away from him.

The weatherproof roll was easy. He carried it downstairs himself, unrolled enough to show the underside, then wrapped it again. It was not going on the buyer's side. Ada wrote his name on the paper beside the crossed-out length. He disliked seeing the measurement there and turned the wrapper so the new name faced out.

He opened the needle tin, took out his private packet, and put it beside his receipt. Beneath it was a second packet with a supplier's mark from the winter order. He had written that one on his own list. He had gone out for it, remembered the cold on the road, remembered bringing it back inside his coat to keep the paper dry.

Len looked at the packet. "Those went on mine."

"I paid at the counter."

"With what I gave you for the oil."

Aled remembered the oil. He had come back with less change and explained it at that table. Len had said needles were worth buying while they had them. The receipt had stayed with the packet. He had moved it into his own cupboard because he used that size and Len kept taking them for jobs which did not need them.

He put the packet on the bench.

"Yes," he said. "That was your money."

Ada crossed the entry from his list. She did it without looking up for a reaction. Len picked up the packet as if one small correction had restored the room to order.

"Thought so."

Aled wanted to take it from him. Not to keep it. To put it where it had been before Len held it as an answer to eight years. Instead he wrote the packet on the shop-stock page and went to lift the next box.

It was heavier than he expected. The bottom had softened against the wall. He felt it begin to give and called for Ada before the contents dropped. She got both hands beneath it. They lowered it together onto the cleared floor, and Beryl brought a sound crate for the things inside.

There were tools Len had bought, tools made from other tools, a small hand clamp which had lost its screw, boot lasts in three different places. They assembled the full set by carrying each size to the bench. Len noticed a mismatched pair before anyone else. He took them apart, found the mate in a sack beneath the chair, and set the two correct pairs side by side.

"Those go together," he said.

Ada changed the ties. He watched her get one knot wrong, let her try again, then showed her how to pull it so the string stayed flat against the wood. She let him show her. The work had brought the colour back to his face. He looked less like the man who had sat beside the fire while other people named his arrangements.

Aled carried the rivet press to the buyer's side. Len owned it. The return spring wanted replacing; the buyer knew that and had priced it with the fault. Aled set its shortened handle away from the walking space. He had used the press that morning. Without it he could still do some fittings, slowly, and send others out. He took the small punches he owned from its drawer and left the rest.

The sound stock went beside it. Not all of it was sound, and what was ruined they put separately where the buyer could see.

He watched the useful stock accumulate on the sale side. It was more than he could afford to replace at once. His own roll looked narrow beside it. He had priced thread on Tuesday and had felt for a few minutes that he was beginning well. Now there were things leaving which he had always reached for without needing the money first.

"What will you need for the jobs you're doing?" Ada asked.

He named the amounts. They measured them from the stock bought for paid work, entered the lengths against those jobs, and kept the cuts separate from anything he would own afterward. He did not add an extra strip because he could see next winter in it.

Beryl went when the orchard worker came to ask about the store, telling Aled to take the door question to the people using the rooms before he bought a lock.

After she left, the three of them moved the buyer's things farther from the customer shelf. The patch of floor by the entrance was nearly clear. Aled could have spread a whole large cover there if he did not need to keep it open for loading. He thought of that, then of the workshop he had seen outside with two separate tables. He could choose to go.

Ada sat on a box to check the remaining payments. Her bandage had come loose, and she wound its end under itself instead of asking for another. Len opened the drawer where he kept his hand-stitching kit. The handles lay arranged by use, not size. He took out one which had been polished by years of his thumb and set it in a smaller bag. Then he looked at the sale pile and put it back.

"That one can go," he said.

Ada wrote it down.

The original machine remained at the edge of the cleared space. They had not labelled it for the buyer. They had not labelled it for Aled. Len went to it, lifted the loose belt free so it would not catch, and looked at the gap between the stand and the wall.

"Need it over there," he said.

Ada put the book aside. “Where?”

“Back by the bench.”

Aled had moved it twice before. There was a lip in the boards where one end of the stand would catch. He found the two short rollers kept beneath the shelf and brought them over. He did not put his hands on the machine until Len had cleared the path.

“Watch that leg,” Len said.

“I know the leg.”

They tilted it far enough for Ada to set the first roller beneath the frame. The weight came onto it with a low wooden groan. Len pushed, Aled steadied, and the machine moved from the patch beside the door toward its old working place. Ada moved the roller from behind to the front. Her sleeve caught on the belt hook and she had to stop them while she freed it.

They set it down with the narrower end toward the window. It was how Aled had used it when the Tender brought the strap. The sheet above the entrance still caught water at its lowest corner. He had not changed its slope.

“Does that mean it’s staying?” Ada asked.

Len gathered the belt in both hands. “It was in the way.”

He fitted it back over the wheel and turned the machine once by hand. The treadle moved below, empty. Aled picked up the rollers and put them under the shelf where he could find them again.

PART FOUR

The road

23

A *room becoming empty*

The worker took the good nail out of the wall before he left. Nell had been watching him pack for ten minutes, telling herself she had only come to ask when he would be finished. He laid his rolled bedding on the floor, worked the nail loose with his fingers, and put it in his pocket.

"For hanging your coat," he said. "You'll want another."

There was still a smaller nail beside the door. It bent when he tried to straighten it. He left that one.

His bag was fuller than it had looked at the beginning of the week. A shirt hung from the strap and he pushed it inside, then pulled it out again to wrap round a bottle. Nell stood against the door to let him pass. He turned sideways, lifted the bedding with his other hand, and caught its end against the frame.

"Could you—"

She took it from him. Together they brought everything down the outside steps, which were slippery with rain and old leaves. At the bottom he looked back at the window.

"Keep that shut when it blows from there." He pointed past the store. "It gets right across the bed."

"You said it was a good room."

"It is. You've seen the other one."

She had. It had a mattress standing against a wall with a dark patch behind it. Nobody was offering her that room. She did not need to be pleased with this one for it to be better.

He waited beneath the store roof for his lift. Nell put the bedding on his bag. He asked whether she would still be there when the pressing was over, and she said six weeks. She had expected him to make something of it, a joke or a warning. He only nodded and asked her to look for a sock behind the bed.

Beryl came with a box under each arm. Nell took one. They carried them into the store, went back for another pair, and only then did Beryl produce the key. Nell had thought the handover would happen on the steps with the worker watching. He was eating bread now, looking toward the access road.

"Friday to Friday," Beryl said. "Six weeks. The first payment's today."

Nell nodded.

"Room, separately from food. We went through it."

"I've got the paper."

"Bring it after dinner. I'll mark what you've paid."

Nell held out her hand. The key had a square head, tied by string to a wooden offcut. The wood was smooth against her palm. She had held larger keys to places where she could not decide when to get out of bed.

"Half an hour to get the mattress stood up," Beryl said. "Then come down. The load's coming at eleven."

"I need to wash it."

"You need to see what needs washing."

Beryl went into the store. The worker's lift arrived while Nell was still standing there. He raised a hand from the passenger seat. She raised hers too late, after the vehicle had begun to turn. Then she went upstairs.

Without his things the room seemed smaller. She had imagined the space his bag and bedding occupied would become hers. Instead

she could see the floor all the way to the skirting, the short brown hairs in the corner, the marks where the bed legs had rubbed the wall. There was a ring beneath his cup on the table. The table rocked when she touched it.

She opened the window. Water ran off its lower edge and down her wrist. The air from outside was cold but it took away the smell of sleeping clothes. She pulled the mattress up and found the sock, a dead insect, and a spoon. The spoon had green paint on the handle. She set it on the sill to ask about later.

The blanket beneath the mattress was folded in four. She put her hand on it, found it dry, and carried it to the chair while she swept. It could stay. The stiff brush made more dust than she expected. She sneezed, looked at the small heap, and swept it farther from the bed before kneeling to get it onto the pan.

She was still on her knees when Ada came up with a bucket. Her mother waited in the doorway rather than stepping across the pile.

"Beryl said you were here."

"I'm not paying you to inspect it."

"I brought hot water. You can refuse that as well if you're getting into it."

Nell moved the pan. Ada set the bucket beside the bed and put two cloths on the chair. Steam rose briefly from the water, then stopped.

"I didn't mean—" Nell began.

"There's a sock on your window."

"It's his."

"He's gone."

"I know. I'll give it to Beryl."

"She'll be delighted."

Nell laughed, though she had been preparing not to. Ada sat on the edge of the chair, keeping the clean cloths on her knee. Her hand was no longer bandaged. There was a shiny patch where the skin had closed, with dirt caught along its edge.

They washed the table first because there was nowhere else to put anything. Ada steadied it while Nell scrubbed the ring. Most of it came off. The rest was in the wood. Her mother reached beneath the short leg, found the folded scrap which had been used to wedge it, and opened it.

"That's somebody's shopping."

"Does the table need to keep it?"

"Only if you don't have anything thicker."

They folded a piece of Nell's packing card and fitted it beneath the leg. She put both hands on the table. It stayed still. Ada let go without testing it again.

The paper about the placement was in Nell's pocket. She laid it on the damp surface, then snatched it up before her mother could tell her. The added journeys had made the money left at the end smaller. She had priced them with Douglas yesterday, before he took Ada to the connection point. He had given her a price for a seat on an existing run, another for a journey made for her. She had written both down.

"Wednesday," Nell said. "On his regular run. I'll use the connection point then. If Beryl needs Thursday instead, I'll ask him before I agree."

"What time?"

"After two. He won't say exactly because of the deliveries."

"Neither will I, if I'm putting the meals out. Say between two and four. I'll leave something if I can't be there when you arrive."

"A whole thing about what you've had for lunch?"

"If it's a good lunch."

Nell looked at the line again. She had wanted a time so firm that she could use it against her mother later. This was more likely to work.

"If I miss a week?"

"Tell me the next time you can. If Douglas hasn't brought you, I can ask whether he made the run."

"You'll ask him what I've been doing."

"I can ask him whether he's driven down a road without asking him to describe your entire life."

Her mother was speaking faster. Nell could hear the quarrel they had not yet finished standing behind the small one. She rubbed a clean place on the table with the cloth.

"I'll leave a message," she said. "If he's going and I'm not."

"And after two weeks we'll talk about the room and the work. You'll have been doing both by then."

"It's six weeks."

"Yes. We can talk before the last day."

Nell put the paper down where the wood had dried. Two weeks was not a request to come home. It could become one, but she did not have to answer it now.

Her mother stood up. Nell thought they had finished. Then Ada said, looking at the mattress, "I don't like leaving you here while all this is going on."

"I'm not upstairs from Grandad any more."

"I know which room you're in."

There was no answer Nell could give that would sound as if she had heard her. She wrung the cloth with both hands. The water was brown now, with a small pale flake floating in it.

"I don't know if I'll like it after the apples," she said.

"You don't have to tell me you won't."

"I'm not. I said I don't know."

"All right." Ada picked a thread from the clean pillowcase she had brought folded beneath her arm. "I'd rather you told me that than promised to like it for six weeks."

Nell took the pillowcase. It was one of theirs from home, pale blue, with a place in the seam Ada had repaired years ago. She had not known it was in the van. She wanted to put her face against it, which would have been ridiculous while her mother was watching. She laid it on the chair instead.

They put the bed back together. Ada held the mattress upright while Nell fitted the folded blanket underneath. When they lowered it, the centre still dipped. Nell sat there and moved sideways until she found the least bad place.

"Luxury," she said.

"Don't say that. She'll put the rent up."

They laughed again. Below them somebody called Nell's name. Not Beryl. The man who drove the orchard load had come early, and there were boxes to get out before he could bring empties in.

Nell looked at the window. There was a narrow strip still to wash beneath it. Her own bag remained at the cottage, with her stockings spread over the chair to dry. The room did not yet look like a room she lived in. Ada had picked up the pillowcase again and was working its repaired seam over the thin pillow.

"I could finish this after," Nell said.

"You can."

"Are they still doing the shop?"

"Your grandad's finding a box he insists he put on top of something. Aled's gone to ask about using the room. I'm meant to be checking the rest of the customer payments."

"Will he go?"

Ada looked toward the window, though the cottage was not visible from it. "I'll be leaving on Sunday."

Nell nodded. She wanted to stay upstairs now, with the bucket cooling between them, until her mother said something else. The man called again. Beryl had given her half an hour. It had been longer than that.

"I've got to go."

"I'll take the water down."

"Leave it. I'll do it after."

Ada put the cloths over the bucket rim. "It'll still be here."

Nell took the sock and the spoon. At the door she checked that the key was in her pocket before pulling the door closed. Her moth-

er stood to one side while she locked the room, then followed her down the wet steps. Nell took the store path and Ada went across the yard. The worker's sock was still in Nell's hand when she reached the boxes. She stuffed it into her coat pocket and lifted the first one.

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She had opened the window a hand's width before bed, because the man had said the air was the only good thing in the room, and by midnight the wind had come round to the side he had warned her about and was walking straight across the pillow.

Nell lay with the blanket up to her nose and listened to the store below. A crate settled. A latch ticked. Something small went about its business under the boards without consulting her. The bolt was across. She had tested it three times, lifting it slightly the way it wanted, and it had held, and she had still got up a fourth.

At the flat she shared with Dee and Marit, the lamp came up to the level she liked when she walked in, and on Thursdays the three of them ate on the roof with their feet through the railings. She had not known she would miss the lamp. It was the lamp, of all things, that made her eyes sting.

Her mother was two hundred yards off, in the cottage, in the bed they had put together on the first day. Nell knew precisely how going down would work. The path in the dark. The latch, lifted and pulled and pressed. Ada awake before the door was open, because she had never once slept properly with Nell out of the house. There would be tea. A second blanket would be produced from somewhere, with a remark about the window that was not quite a remark. And by one o'clock Nell would be in the bed under the slope with the whole thing still to begin again in the morning.

She lit the lamp, on the table and not beside the bed, and read the school's reply once more. It was three lines. A late start could be considered. The place would be held until noon on the Wednesday

of the first week and not an hour after, and then it would go to the next name on the list. She no longer needed the lamp to read it. Six weeks ended five days after the course began. She could stay the whole six and lose the place, or ask Beryl to let her go three days early and keep it. She had not yet said any of this to Beryl.

The wind lifted the corner of the blanket. She got up and found the rag the man had left rolled on the sill, exactly where he had said, and pushed it into the gap at the foot of the window until the draught fell to something she could live with. It was not warm. It was dry, and it was hers to have done.

She turned the lamp down and lay listening to the store door. When she next opened her eyes it was grey, and somebody was already moving crates.

24

At the threshold

The buyer came in bright weather. Ada had been awake long enough to see the sun clear the roof and reach the workshop window beside the cottage. The yard had dried on top. Beneath the first board Douglas laid down, the earth was still soft.

He lifted it again and put a block under the low end. Len stood with his hands in his pockets, watching the adjustment. The original machine was back beside the bench where they had put it on Thursday. They had worked around it all Friday. Twice Ada had asked what he meant to do about it. Once he had said the buyer would want to see it. The second time he had gone to find the oil.

The vehicle filled most of the turning space. The assistant got out with gloves held between his teeth, took them out to say good morning, and went to look at the entrance.

"Where do people need to get through?" she asked.

Ada showed her the service passage. They left the near side clear. Someone came out carrying a pan and asked whether they could move a little farther back. The driver did. Len told the woman with the pan she would have trouble getting it through the kitchen door. She said she had brought it out through the kitchen door.

The buyer smiled once and came into the workshop.

Ada had the revised sheet on the chair. She moved a customer's boots before setting it down, then read the first item. The press. The set of lasts. Hand tools in the sound crate. Leather and canvas opened out so the centre folds could be seen. A few completed goods which had not been made for named customers. She spoke too quickly and stopped herself after the third entry.

"This side," she said. "Everything this side has been checked."

"By him?"

"By all of us for who owns it. He confirmed his things last night."

The buyer looked at Len. He was turning a small punch between finger and thumb.

"Those are yours to sell?"

"Yes. That one wants cleaning. It's been put away with the damp on it."

She checked the punch, put it back, and went on. Aled stood by his own machine with his folded receipts. He had shaved. It made the marks beneath his eyes more noticeable, and Ada wondered whether he had been awake before her. Beryl was not there. The bench bore her name on a fresh piece of paper because nobody could be expected to read the underside while carrying it.

The buyer tested the press. Its shortened handle stopped where they had said it would. She asked whether the spring was in the box. Len said it had never had the right spring. Ada found the small wrapped part and the buyer set it beside the machine without answering him.

They spent a long time on the stock. The buyer rubbed a roll between her fingers, named the oil Len had called wax, and put it with the lower-priced pieces.

"Still usable," Len said.

"For something. I've got to sell it for what it is."

"Never had a complaint."

Aled moved a chair to get past him. The leg scraped along the floor. He had not spoken since the buyer came in.

The assistant had taken the measurements of the two machines, though Ada said again that Aled's was excluded. Her father told him the older machine would be narrower with the little side table taken off.

"Are we looking at that one?" the buyer asked.

Ada waited for Len. He took the side table off its pegs and leaned it against the wall.

"Good machine," he said. "You don't get the feed like that now without paying."

"Is it being offered?"

"He hasn't agreed that," Ada said.

The buyer stepped away from it. "Then I'll finish the things he has."

Len put his hand on the wheel. "You can look."

"I can look at it where it is."

"Light's wrong for the plate."

The assistant had brought in the short rollers. Len pointed to the boards by the doorway, where the sun lay across the floor. For a moment Ada thought he was only doing what he always did, getting a machine between himself and a question. Then he bent to lift the stand.

"Wait," she said.

The assistant looked at the buyer. She held up a hand.

"Just into the light?" she asked Len. "Nobody's loading it until we agree."

"That's what I said."

It was not what he had said. Ada had the words ready. Aled put his receipts on his own machine and came to the other end of the stand.

"Belt first," he said.

Len pulled it free. They tilted the frame onto the roller with the assistant steadying the head. Ada took the loose belt. It was warm

where her father had been holding it, greasy along the inside. She moved the chair out of the path.

The old machine advanced less than the length of her foot at a time. Aled guided the narrow end past the corner of the bench. There was no question of wheeling it out as though it were a chair. Every turn needed somebody to stop, look underneath, and move their hands. Len told them about the leg. Aled said he had it.

The light caught the polished part of the bed. The buyer leaned to read the plate. She turned the wheel once, then asked Len to stand aside so she could see the movement from the other end.

"Do you have the other foot?" the buyer asked.

Len pointed to a tin. Ada went to it, found three attachments, and brought them over.

The buyer inspected each. "This one belongs with it. Those two don't."

"I made them fit," Len said.

"Do they feed?"

"Not for everything."

Aled took one, looked at its underside, and set it back. Ada knew he had things to say about it. He held them until the buyer finished.

"I can price it separately," the woman said. "If you decide to sell. The other lot's a different offer."

Len looked out through the entrance. Shirley had come to the service door with a sheet over her arm. She stood back to let Douglas pass. Beyond her somebody was washing a crate. There were perhaps five people close enough to hear, most of them busy with things which had nothing to do with the machine.

"Leave it there," Len said.

The assistant had already taken his hands off the head. "It's stopped."

"I mean it's not going."

Ada heard the treadle knock against the frame. Her father had put his foot beneath it without looking.

"Then it isn't in the offer," the buyer said. "We'll need the way clear for the press."

Len kept his hand on the wheel. Aled reached for a roller, stopped, and straightened again.

"You said that Thursday," Ada told her father. "You moved it back. We still need to know whose it will be."

"It belongs here."

"The room's here," Aled said. "Who owns the machine?"

Len looked at him. "You know what I said."

"I know what you told me. She needs to hear whether you meant it."

"I said he could have it," Len said.

Aled's face changed, though only around the mouth. Ada saw him press his tongue against a tooth.

"And the rest," he said.

"The work. The place. When I stopped."

"Before I bought mine."

Len rubbed the wheel with his palm. "Yes."

Ada laid the belt on the tin. Her hand had begun to shake. She kept it there until it stopped.

"Not just somewhere to put my things," Aled said. "You said your machine and the work. I asked you again when the other job came."

"I remember."

"You told me to wait."

"I did."

A woman came through the yard carrying the empty pan. Len moved as if to make room for her though she was nowhere near him. He watched until she had gone into the kitchen.

Ada said, "And you asked me to sell it."

"I wanted to come."

"You told me the list was yours. You let me sign for it."

Len turned toward the buyer then. “The other one’s his. He bought it. I knew that. I called it the shop’s because it was in the shop.”

Aled let out a breath through his nose. The buyer took her sheet from the chair and crossed the old entry again, pressing hard enough that Ada could hear the pencil.

“His is already excluded,” she said. “I’m asking about this one.”

“I’d given him my word.”

“Before I came?” Ada asked.

“Years before.”

“Did you think he’d changed his mind?”

“No.”

“Then why did you tell me—” She stopped. She had asked him why often enough to furnish him with a new answer every day. “You knew he was expecting to work here with it.”

“Yes.”

“And I was booking the move with the sale money.”

He nodded, then said yes because nobody moved at the nod.

There was a sound from Shirley at the door, perhaps the sheet slipping. Ada did not look. Her father had become small beside the machine without changing his stance. She wanted to put something in his hands. She could still have given him the belt to coil, the little domestic task which would let them speak of another thing.

“I thought when it was done,” he said, “he’d have work. There’s work enough.”

“With what?” Aled asked.

“You’ve got yours.”

“Which you put on the list as well.”

“Yes.” Len looked down at the treadle. “Yes, I did.”

He had begun to repeat himself. Ada knew the moment at which she would usually help him out of it. She would say they were all tired, or somebody should make tea. She watched her father’s fingers settle in the worn curve of the wheel.

"I wanted you to take me," he said to her. "I'd had enough of getting up and finding it all still there. You had the room. I thought if you came and did the selling—"

"That I'd do it before you had to tell him."

He did not answer at once. The buyer turned her page over, leaving them the time it took to smooth it against the chair.

"I didn't want to tell him," he said.

Aled looked away. Ada could see his shoulders beneath the clean shirt. The shirt had a small darn at one elbow, worked in a colour almost right. He rubbed the heel of his hand against his mouth.

"You could've gone," he said. "You could've said you were going."

Len looked toward the yard again. There were people who would miss him. Ada would have named them for him last week, thinking she was being kind. Nobody named them now.

"I know," he said.

The assistant shifted at the door. His glove caught on a splinter and he freed it with the other hand. The buyer asked whether she could put the table attachment beside the machine.

Len took it from her. "Yes."

"Is that a decision to give it to him?" she asked. "I need to finish the lot."

Ada looked at Aled. He was looking at Len.

"The machine," Len said. "And what we put on the paper. Not everything. We can't—"

"No," Aled said. "You can't give me the stock you're paying the jobs out of."

"I mean for after."

"I know."

Len let go of the wheel. The machine stayed at the entrance with nobody touching it. Ada picked up her sheet and found the place where she had written the sound leather. Her eyes would not settle on the line.

The buyer waited until she looked up.

"Without either machine," she said, and named the new price.

Ada knew how much had gone from the first offer. She had priced it in fragments for a week. Hearing the whole figure, she still put her thumb on the wrong column.

"Before the loading charge?"

"Before. The amount we discussed on Thursday. That comes off this. Your deposit's already paid."

Len asked her to say it again. She did, slowly, and showed him the two lines. The charge was a quarter of the new lot price. After it and the deposit, the money still to come was only half as much as Ada had received on the tenth day.

Her father looked at the rows of lasts by the wall. For the first time that morning he looked as if he were seeing them leave.

"That's what you can give?"

"For these things, in this condition, today."

Ada took the pencil when the buyer offered it. There was still a blank beneath the costs.

25

What can be carried

Aled had to move the machine back before anything else could pass. He bent for the roller, then stood up again.

"What goes on the paper?" he asked.

Len looked at Ada. She had begun adding the small payments down one edge of her sheet. She stopped when she saw them waiting.

"Your machine," Len said. "This one as well."

"Not mine. Mine doesn't go on a list of what you're giving."

Ada turned the page. "I'll put it separately. Things already yours, then what's being transferred."

"The little table. The feet which fit. The belt." Aled pointed. "The oil tin by it. I don't want to get to Monday and find you've packed the bloody belt."

Len's mouth moved. For a moment Aled thought he might laugh. "It's no use to me without the rest."

"Put it down, then."

They used half a sheet. Ada wrote, Aled checked, Len signed. The fittings went with the machine. The spare parts which could be identified went in its drawer. There was no income written underneath. No cottage or boot room which Len could grant on behalf of people who lived beside them. Aled had spoken to the occupants on

Friday. They had agreed to his working there, provided the passage stayed clear and the wheel was not used during the meal hour. One woman wanted her hook left on the back of the door. He had said yes to that before finding out she hung wet coats on it.

"And the hours before?" Aled asked.

Len had set the pencil down. He took it again without writing.

"I can't work them out now."

"I haven't worked them out either."

Ada said, "The page doesn't say you've been paid for them."

Aled read it. It said which machine Len was giving him. Eight years had made a habit of his reaching for things before asking whether they were his, and a different habit of putting them back for Len. A page would not undo either. He folded it and put it with the invoice for his own machine.

"Right," he said. "Let's get it off the path."

The assistant came back inside. This time, as they tilted the frame, Len took the loose belt and laid it where Aled told him. They set the machine by the window. Aled checked beneath the stand before drawing the rollers out. It sat solidly, with the worn leg facing the bench.

The buyer had begun counting the lasts. Aled tied the last pair, leaving the knots where the sizes could be read. He remembered every odd boot he had fitted over them.

Ada sat on the lower step to finish the costs. She had asked the remaining customers about their payments yesterday. The unfinished harness and two covers were not going to disappear because Len had spoken. Some money would be returned. One customer had agreed to Aled completing a job at the price written beside it; that amount belonged to the job, not to him for staying. The woman who had lost the oil had been paid from the money still in the deposit envelope. Beryl had brought back her mark beside the receipt.

Aled leaned to read the harness entry. "That's the fitting still. The buckle's there."

"I've got it separate."

"All of it?"

She showed him. He had asked sharply, and she had answered without saying so. He took the sheet, checked the two lengths against the tags on the covers, and gave it back.

The press went first. Len lifted its short handle out and wrapped it in old cloth. The assistant secured the moving part, then checked the cart Douglas had brought. It was the broad loading cart, with thick wheels and a low bed. Len's little handcart stood by the cottage, washed and dried for the van. Aled could see where Len had rubbed its handle clean.

"Had breakfast?" Douglas asked.

"Yes."

"Good. I'd hate to hear what you sound like hungry."

They brought it to the step. Douglas stood beside the boards, directing the wheel onto the middle. The first turn was clean. At the second the near board gave a short sharp crack.

"Stop there," he said.

They stopped. The cart remained on the lower part, with the press held by its straps. Douglas knelt, examined the grain beside the knot, and slid the spare board underneath before anyone moved. His trousers darkened at the knee. The buyer waited by the vehicle, watching his hands.

"Back, a little," he said. "Not toward you. Straight."

They came back off the split board. With a second block and the sound pair set closer, the cart crossed. It took perhaps ten minutes. Nothing fell. The press reached the vehicle and the assistant secured it against the front with the handle separately beside it.

Douglas brought the damaged board into the light. The split ran farther than Aled had thought, pale along the underside. It could be shortened for another use. It could not do this one again.

Ada came over before he called her. "How much?"

He named the replacement. Ada wrote the balance on her sheet, and when the buyer asked whether it was part of her loading charge, said no; these were their separate boards.

The hand tools were easier. Aled carried the sound crate outside, stopped to let the woman with the pan get through again, and set it on the tail. Len came with the box of completed goods. One bag had been worked from the same cloth as the first cover Aled had made alone. He recognised the stiff lining. Len had taken it apart twice because he disliked the way it folded.

Ada stopped him at the entrance. "There isn't enough," she said, and held out the sheet.

Len stood behind her with his empty hands hooked together. Aled waited. He had nothing to add without giving something back.

Len looked at the paper, then at Aled.

"I'm not buying the machine," Aled said.

"I wasn't asking."

"You looked."

Len turned away. Aled wished he had waited to see whether there would be a question. He did not offer to take the words back.

Douglas came past with the short sound part of the board under his arm. Len called him before he reached his vehicle.

"What would you give me for the handcart?"

Douglas put the board down. "Your little one?"

"You know it."

"I know the wheel wants a washer."

"It's got a washer."

"It's got three, one behind another."

Len went to the cottage wall and brought it forward. The empty bed was barely wider than his shoulders. He had spent years finding loads which were too large for it and tying them down until they held. Last week he had been determined that it should fit in Ada's van. Aled had heard the handle strike the shelf through the workshop window.

Douglas tipped it back and ran a wheel with his palm. He checked the weld on the underside, pressed his thumb against the centre of the bed, and named a price.

Len looked toward Ada.

"It's what it's worth to me," Douglas said. "I'm not buying the work you did on it."

"Runs better for it."

"I'll put a single washer in when I get back."

Aled almost laughed. Len did, a short breath. Then he asked for a little more. Douglas named the same price, explaining that he could use the cart on parcel runs but would have to make a bracket to carry it. Len held the handle another moment and let it settle upright.

"All right."

"Mine, then?"

"Yours."

Douglas counted the money in front of him. Ada did not take it. Len counted it himself and put it with the money for the move. Douglas wheeled the cart away to his vehicle, where the split board would now fit diagonally in its bed.

The handcart money covered the later load and the replacement board. There was still a shortfall, but a smaller one, and Ada showed it to Len without comment.

Len read the page and let it go. Aled found himself looking at Ada's coat. She had worn it for three weeks over different clothes, its pockets full of paper and string. When she first arrived he had thought she was buying her way out of a thing he would have to live in afterward. He had not asked what she had paid before she came.

They signed the revised sheet on the van shelf. Aled stood by his own machine while they did. His name appeared only where a thing was excluded. When the buyer asked him to confirm the identification, he came over and did it.

Then he helped load the rest.

He carried the good canvas without letting it drag. The buyer held a corner while the assistant secured the roll, and there was the ordinary satisfaction of seeing a heavy thing lie properly for transport. Aled knew how to make that work. He did not have to damage it to show what it had cost him.

The assistant shut the rear doors. There was no final object left on the step to begin the whole discussion again. The buyer gave Len his copy, told Ada where a later question about the payment should go, and asked Douglas to move so she could turn.

People came through the space before the vehicle had entirely left it. A child wanted the strip of packing cloth lying by the wall. The woman with the pan had found its lid and was taking both back. Shirley went to look at the cottage door, saw Len there, and carried on to the laundry without asking.

Aled went into the boot room. In the corner where the stock had been he could see the old wall colour, a dirty cream with a darker rectangle left by the shelf. He had room to cut and less to cut from. The little fittings for paid jobs lay in their own box. His private needles were in the tin. The original machine was by the window, the belt still on the chair.

He refitted it and turned the wheel. It caught once on the join, as it always had. With his foot on the treadle he brought it round again until the movement ran freely. Then he drew a scrap beneath the foot and tested the stitch.

26

Not one last job

Ada went to the connection point that afternoon in the borrowed van. Her father's travelling bag stood behind the seat, beside Nell's box. The handcart was Douglas's now. She could use the space beneath the shelf for their other things.

Len came because there was a room to cancel. He put on his good coat, took it off to look for the money he had counted that morning, and found the money in the trousers he was still wearing. Ada waited outside. When he came down she was closing the side door.

"Could've put the chest in there after all," he said.

"It hasn't grown smaller."

"Turned."

"It won't turn past the shelf with the bags in."

He went round to the passenger side. She was glad he had not asked them to measure the chest again.

At the connection point he stood outside while she went to the counter. He wanted to finish a bun he had brought wrapped in paper. Ada went in and asked for one of the private rooms. At the table she let the familiar presence return before asking for the woman from housing.

"You're both coming tomorrow?" it asked.

"Yes."

"Would you like me to change the arrival?"

"Not yet. He needs to do this with me."

She had spoken as though it were a correction. It was accepted as the limit she had given. The housing information remained where she could see it, the held room and the terms for releasing it. No new offer had appeared to make the morning less expensive.

Len came in brushing crumbs off his sleeve. He sat beside her and looked at the image of the room. The chair by the window was still there. He had sat in it during the visit, trying the adjustment until he found the position he liked.

"Nice bit of sun there," he said.

"It was summer."

"Still a window."

The woman from housing joined them. She remembered his visit and asked whether he had decided to postpone. He said he was coming to Ada's instead. When she asked whether that was an initial arrangement, he looked at Ada.

"Six weeks to start," Ada said. "Then we'll look at what's available and what he wants."

"We're not keeping this one?"

"No."

He put his hands on his knees. The woman explained what would be returned. Part of it was gone for the weeks the room had been held; the rest would come back to Ada. There was no need to decide the next housing arrangement while cancelling this one.

Len asked whether the chair belonged to the room. The woman said it did. He nodded, and Ada could not tell whether he had expected to buy it or was finding one more thing to ask before the last yes.

"Cancel it," he said. "I'm going to hers."

The woman repeated the date and the returnable amount. Len confirmed. The image closed after their goodbyes. The refund

would replace part of what Ada had put toward the shortfall, though not all of it; she asked for it to go back to her savings rather than her father's costs, then turned the display so he could see the plan for his arrival.

"The spare room," she said. "Same one you used. We'll take the little table out if you want the chair by the bed."

"Where'll the table go?"

"I'll find somewhere."

He looked at her.

"The cupboard by the front door," she said. "It fits if I move the shoes. I've measured that one."

"You want the handcart now."

She laughed in spite of herself. He smiled, watching whether she would go on.

They went through his contribution. He could pay for trips, clothes, things he wanted, without asking Ada to approve each purchase. She would not be able to take him everywhere herself.

"If I need something carried?"

"We book it. Like anyone else."

"And the big things from here?"

"Douglas will bring what's on the list. One later load. We've allowed for that. Anything else, we ask what it'll cost."

Len rubbed a crumb from his thumb. "I can do the cooking."

"Some."

"I'm not going to sit there while you do it."

"I work in a kitchen all day. If you've made something when I get home, I'll eat it. If you haven't, I'll want to know before I take my coat off."

He nodded. "You have that little oven."

"Yes."

"I liked that."

"You left a dish in it for two days."

"It hadn't burnt."

"It was empty."

He laughed, a proper laugh this time, and leaned back. Ada felt her shoulders come down. They had arranged suppers together before. It had not all been this.

"Nell says you'd a job to go for," he said.

Ada did not move. "Nell says a good deal."

"The supervisor's. She said you'd asked them to put it back."

"I did."

"And?"

She looked at the table. The message had been in her bag for a week. She had read it once, standing, and folded it into the part of herself where she kept things for later. "They gave it to a woman on the evening line."

He did not say it was only a post. He did not say she would get another. Ada watched him not say them, and understood that it was costing him something, and that he was paying it anyway.

"I'd the bag packed in July," he said. "I could have told you then I wasn't coming. Or that I was, and when. I thought I was saving you the asking." He stopped. "You've paid for it."

"Some."

"That's mine. Not the post. The not saying." He looked at the image of the room, the chair by the window, and then away from it. "I'll not say sorry. You'd put it on a list."

It nearly made her laugh. It came closer to making her cry, which would have been worse. She did not tell him it was all right. She let it stand on the table between them, and for the first time in three weeks she did not tidy it away.

The familiar presence asked whether they wanted the agreed arrival and six-week review kept. Len said yes. Only those details. His workshop list did not have to go with them. Ada watched him read the short record before he confirmed it. It was slower than doing it for him and took less effort than she had expected.

They stopped at the small shop before going back. Len bought bread with his own money, and a jar of something he had eaten at Ada's, and carried both to the van.

Back at Bellwether the sun had gone from the cottage wall. The workshop door was open. Aled was inside cutting a small piece of cloth, the long empty side of the room clear behind him. Len looked in but did not enter. He put the bread on the cottage table and went upstairs to find his other trousers.

Ada packed the plates which were travelling later, left two by the sink, and put the kettle on.

The last repair came before the kettle boiled.

A man stood in the doorway holding a child's boot. Its upper was sound and the lace had been knotted at the end to keep it from pulling through. The sole had come away at the toe. He brought it into the kitchen as if he had been invited, then stopped when he saw the boxes.

"Just this," he said. "Before you go."

Len came down with the trousers over his arm. He took the boot. Ada put the empty mugs on the table and stood with the tea in her hand.

"Other one's at home," the man said. "It's got the same thing starting. I thought you could do this and then we'd know—"

Len pressed the toe back into place. He looked at the stitching, ran a thumbnail along the edge, and pulled the sole away enough to see beneath it. He could have explained what was wrong without touching it. Ada watched his hand find the place automatically.

"Wants doing back to here," he said.

"Can you get to it this evening? Doesn't have to be pretty."

The needle tin was no longer in the cottage. Ada knew which tin he would have wanted. It was in the sound crate on the buyer's vehicle, farther down the east road now. There were other needles in the workshop. She set the packet of tea down.

Len turned the boot over once more.

"No," he said.

The man looked toward the open passage. "Aled in?"

"You'll have to ask him."

"You could tell him it's only the front. If you got it started—"

"I can't do it." Len handed the boot back, sole upward so the man could see where not to pull. "And he doesn't need me to tell him how."

The man took it. For a moment Ada expected her father to add that he would have done it if he were staying, or was sorry about the timing, or could look again in the morning. He picked up his trousers from the chair.

"Tomorrow?" the man asked.

"We're going tomorrow."

"Yes. Heard."

Len hung the trousers over the stair rail.

"Tea?" she asked.

He nodded. "I'll get the bread cut."

They ate at the table, with the plates she had nearly packed. There was a space beside the door where the handcart usually stood. Len put his empty mug there on a box, noticed what he had done, and brought it back to the sink.

Afterward he brought the travelling bag in from the van and carried it upstairs. Ada followed with the clothes still to fit. He opened the bag on the bed. It was packed more tightly than when Ada found it, with things pushed in during the week. He took out an old coat rolled round a pair of shoes. The shoes could go in the later load. The coat would have to fit. He spread it on the bed and put his hands into the pockets.

A button, a piece of cord, two washers which did not belong together. He laid them on the windowsill. Ada picked up the cord for the packing box. He kept the button and put the washers in the tin marked for Aled.

"Don't wrap the coat," he said. "I'll wear it if it's cold."

"Put it on top, then."

He packed the clothes again, properly this time, with the bread and the jar set aside to travel in the food bag.

Len folded the coat once, laid it over the clothes, and fastened the brass clasp. Nothing caught in it. He put the bag by the bedroom door.

27

Opening hours

Aled wrote the hours before there was enough light to see the pencil clearly. He put the paper against the window and went over the last line. The darker strokes were easier to read and less tidy. He left them.

Two mornings for taking work in. Afternoons for collections, except when he was out. A number beside an ordinary resole, another beside a short stitched repair. Anything larger had to be seen. He could hear Len saying that everything had to be seen. Len had once taken a commission on the strength of a man's description of a cover and spent three days making a good one for a vehicle half as wide.

He pinned the paper beside the door. The wood split at the first drawing pin. He moved it down, where a darker patch showed that something else had hung for years. The bottom corner curled out. There was no clean pin left, and he went to find one instead of letting the curl become permanent on the first morning.

The overflow woman's rate sheet was still folded in the cupboard under the letter about the six weeks. On Friday night he had sent her an answer. He would take her trial piece in January, as overflow, at her rates. It was not a way out. It was a second table, so that Bellwether would never again be the only place his work could go, and

so that, if he stayed, it would be because he had chosen the bench and not because there was nowhere else.

Nell came with her bag across her shoulder. She had slept in the packing-shed room for the second night. Her hair was still damp at the ends, and she carried two mugs by their handles in one hand.

"Mum says one's yours."

"They're both mine."

"She says that as well."

He took them. The tea had been tipped out and the insides wiped. He set them under the bench, then brought one back up. It could stay where he could reach it.

"Want a hand?" Nell asked. "Before I go down."

"With what?"

"Putting things where you want. Sweeping. I don't know."

He looked at the floor. There was dust where the stock had stood, swept clear in the middle and still thick against the wall. He had been stepping over it since yesterday.

"You're due at the shed."

"Not for half an hour."

"Go and eat something."

"I've eaten."

"Then sit down for half an hour."

She looked at the chair. It had the harness on it. He had meant her to go back to her mother, but she was quite capable of taking him literally.

"I'm not paying for somebody else in here yet," he said. "When I am, I'll ask what hours you've got."

"I wasn't asking for money."

"I heard."

She looked at him, then toward the door. He could see her deciding whether to argue. Instead she said the sign was crooked.

"It's the wall."

"That's convenient."

He moved the pin. She waited while he did it, then went back toward the cottage. He took the brush from its hook and swept the floor himself.

Len came in while he was emptying the pan. Aled held it steady so the dust did not blow back across both of them. Behind Len the van's rear doors were open and Ada was moving a box farther inside.

"Don't run that one too hard," Len said, looking at the old machine. "The screw on the bar. It drops if you work it loose."

"I check it."

"You'll hear it if—"

"I know what it sounds like."

Len nodded. He went to the drawer, opened it, and stood with his hand on the knob. Aled waited to see what he would take out.

"The short screwdriver," Len said. "For that one."

"It's underneath."

"You want it underneath?"

"I can find it there."

Len closed the drawer. He did not move the screwdriver to show where he would have put it. Aled hung the brush back beside the door.

"You'll need to oil the hinge on your bag," he said. "Not the clasp. The little hinge."

"Did it yesterday."

"Right."

There were things Aled had imagined saying when Len finally left. Some had been kind. He had spent longer on the others. Len stood beside Beryl's bench with a clean collar which still showed the old fold from storage. Aled noticed a thread at the back and did not reach to pull it.

"You going to be in the van?" he asked.

"That's the idea."

"She's leaving soon."

"So she is."

Len did not go. He stood with one hand on the edge of Beryl's bench, working at something under the paint with his thumbnail.

"I took you on the old money," he said, "and kept you on it. I knew what it was."

Aled said nothing.

"I can't pay it. I'm not saying that as if it were something. I'm saying I know."

It was not enough. It was, Aled found, not nothing, which was worse; he had come ready for the other thing.

Len put out his hand. Aled took it. The grip was familiar from passing tools, stronger across the thumb than the fingers. It lasted long enough to become awkward. Len looked at the machine instead of him when they let go.

"Take care of it."

"I need it to work."

Len said yes. He went back into the yard, where Ada asked him whether the jar was in the food bag. Aled could not hear the answer. He moved the customer's harness off the chair, set it on the shelf with its tag showing, and sat down.

Shirley found him there five minutes later.

"Your room ready?"

"No."

"Only I can get help with the chest before dinner."

"I've still got a bed in there."

"I know what you've got. I've measured round it."

He looked at her. She had brought a little roll of clean cloth and was holding it across both hands, ready to put down somewhere dry. The skin beneath her eyes was swollen. There had been rain against the laundry wall all week.

"After he's gone," Aled said. "Then I move. Then you can."

She put the roll beneath her arm. "Don't put the cupboard where I said the chest would go."

"I'm taking the cupboard."

"Good."

She went back to the passage. Aled stayed in the chair until he heard Ada shut the first van door.

• • •

Later that morning, after the van had left, Aled carried his bedding across the yard. He put it in the cottage doorway rather than taking it straight upstairs. The woman whose hook hung on the boot-room door was bringing a basket out of the main building. He asked whether the others had seen Len go.

"Hard to miss it. She's reversed out of the same space three times."

"He left the cottage key with you?"

She produced it from her cardigan pocket. "Same as we said. You keep the passage clear. If anything's getting worse in the roof, you tell us before there's a bucket in every room."

"I'll tell you."

"And Shirley gets your old one."

"When I've cleared it."

The woman gave him the key and carried on. He put the bedding upstairs, on the bed beneath the slope, and opened the window. It stuck halfway, then gave. The yard below looked unchanged from here. He had expected the angle of it to be different.

His cupboard took two journeys and another pair of hands. Maren came along as he was trying to get the doors off. She watched him drop the same screw twice, took the screwdriver from him, and told him to hold the hinge straight.

"Decent room," she said when they had carried the pieces over.

"You haven't seen the roof yet."

"I've seen the roof for years. You're the one who's new."

He fetched the last box from his old room. Shirley was already in the doorway with a man behind her and one end of the oak chest on a blanket. Aled had not taken the small patch of card from the win-

dow where it stopped a rattle. He pointed it out. Shirley looked, nodded, and told the man to lift.

Downstairs a customer was waiting. The boots were the pair Aled had repaired in the spring, worn now at the outer heel. He checked both, put his hand inside one to feel the lining, and named the price. The man looked at the sign before agreeing.

"Wednesday?"

"Thursday. After the meal hour."

The man nodded. Aled wrote the name, the work, the price, and the day. He asked about payment and took the materials portion now. There was a place in the tin for it. He had made the place before opening the door.

The boot customer was looking around the room.

"You kept his machine."

"Yes."

"Somebody said he'd sold up."

"He sold some things."

The man looked at the bare patch on the wall. "He about?"

Aled put the boots on the shelf and turned their tag outward.

"No. He's gone to stay with his daughter. You can collect these Thursday."

28

The leaving road

Earlier that morning, before Aled moved his bedding, Ada had found Nell standing at the back of the van with the food bag open. She was putting the bread on top of the jar so it would not be crushed by something heavier. There was nowhere sensible for it to go. Every place Nell tried was a place Ada had already tried.

"Give it here," Ada said.

"I've nearly got it."

"You'll squash it."

"It's bread."

Ada took her hands off the bag. Nell turned the loaf on its side and tucked a cloth between it and the glass. It fitted. Her daughter gave the arrangement a look which was entirely unnecessary.

"Right," Ada said. "Food."

"Food."

"Your box."

"Arrow upwards. You'll manage."

She had put her work clothes on before coming over, the boots wiped across the toes. Her bag was across her shoulder, with a heel of bread showing through the gap at its opening.

Ada went to close the rear door, saw the box she had not yet tied down, and opened it wider again. Nell held the strap while she

fastened it. Their hands met on the buckle. Her daughter's knuckle was almost healed, a pale line across the joint. Ada pulled the strap through and Nell checked that it held.

"Where's Grandad?"

"Looking for a case."

"What case?"

"The little brown one for his glasses. He's got the glasses."

"Then he's doing well."

Ada laughed, then felt the laugh stop too abruptly. Nell looked at the ground. They had said the useful things on Friday: when, how, whose fare, what happened if a week was missed. There was no new arrangement which would keep Nell in Bellwether and bring her home in the passenger seat.

"You can still ring before that," Ada said.

"I know."

"Not only the day we've said."

"I know."

Nell put the loose end of the strap through its keeper. Ada watched her do it. A month ago she would have reached past and finished it while talking. She wanted to reach past now for the comfort of having a reason to put her arm there.

Instead she said, "Have you got the key?"

Nell took it out. It was tied to the little wooden offcut, knocked clean at the corners from somebody else's use. She held it up as if Ada might ask to see it every morning from now on.

"That's a good size to carry into the orchard," Ada said.

"I'm putting it somewhere else."

"Good."

"I didn't get locked out."

"I haven't said you did."

"You were going to."

"No. I was going to tell you I've put the stockings on the chair. The clean pair. I didn't know which bag was staying."

Nell's face changed a little. "I'll get them."

She went to the cottage and came out with the stockings folded small. Her grandfather followed her as far as the door, bent to look on the chair, and went back in. Nell put the stockings in her bag.

Nell looked toward the orchard path.

"You've time," Ada said.

"Five minutes."

"Take them, then."

They stood by the open van. Ada wanted her daughter to be impatient to go, to prove the stay had something in it beyond refusing her. She wanted her to stay another minute. Nell rubbed the side of her boot against the other calf, leaving a pale smear on the trousers she had washed.

"I tried both sides. The bed's better by the wall for me," she said.

"You slept?"

"Some. I can hear the store door when somebody goes in."

"Tell Beryl if it keeps you up."

"She knows. She says don't sleep above the door if I don't want to hear it."

Ada felt the first quick burst of anger. Then Nell smiled, crookedly, because she had chosen the line for what it would do.

"She brought another blanket," Nell said. "It's not damp. Before you say."

"I wasn't going to."

"You were."

Ada reached for her. Nell came the last step willingly, pressing her face against Ada's shoulder for an instant before turning it sideways. She was warm through the work coat. Ada put a hand against the back of her head, felt the damp ends of her hair, and moved it to her shoulder instead. The embrace lasted until Nell tried to step back. Ada let go.

"Wednesday," Nell said.

"Between two and four."

"Depending on him."

"I remember."

"And the school's Wednesday," Ada said.

"I'll tell Beryl when I've decided."

Ada did not say which answer she hoped for. It was the hardest thing she had not said all month.

Her daughter touched the van door, an absent little pat on the metal, then went toward the cottage again to say goodbye to Len. Ada busied herself with the food bag so she would not listen. She heard Nell laugh. Her father said something about the ladder. Nell said she was not going to carry one up a tree. Then she came out and took the path by the wall, with her bread still showing at the top of the bag.

At the turn she looked back. Ada lifted a hand. It was not the look she had expected: neither brave nor stricken, only checking that her mother was still there. Nell raised her hand and went downhill out of sight.

Ada remained at the back of the van until she heard the store door close below. Then she fastened the food bag, shut the rear doors, and went inside for her father.

The cottage smelled of the fire they had let go out. He was kneeling by the chair, feeling beneath the cushion. The glasses were on his face.

"It's only a case," Ada said.

"Brown. Has a split along the side."

"I've seen it."

"Should be here."

He lifted the cushion entirely, revealing a button and a strip of thread. She took them before he could put them in his pocket, laid them on the mantel, and put the cushion back.

"Wrap the glasses in your handkerchief."

"I need them."

"Wear them, then. We'll stop before you need to put them down."

He looked around the room. There were enough things left to make a search seem reasonable. Ada had done what she had agreed. She could see at least an hour's work she had not agreed to do.

"Aled'll know," Len said.

"He might. He doesn't need to stop now and look."

"I could just—"

"No. If it's found, Douglas can bring it with the other things."

Her father looked at her. "He won't want an extra run for that."

"There won't be an extra run."

She took her bag to the door. Douglas was closing his rear doors. When she asked him, he said a small wrapped case could go with the later load if found in time. If it missed that, it would travel as a parcel, and he named the price.

"For an empty case?"

"For carrying it here to there," Douglas said. "You can put something in if you want."

Len smiled reluctantly. He came outside, took Douglas's hand, and asked him to bring the chest with its back toward the cab so the corner did not catch. Douglas said he knew the corner, and Len said yes, he supposed he did.

The cottage key went to the woman by the passage. She put it in her cardigan pocket without examining it. Len told her the latch was easier if it was lifted first. She said she had been opening that door for twelve years. He laughed, put a hand on the doorframe, and stepped down.

Ada took his travelling bag because it was beside her foot. He took it back by the handle.

"I've got that."

She let him carry it to the van. It fitted behind his seat, where they had put it yesterday. He pushed the coat down at one side and fastened the little retaining strap. The sleeve stayed inside. Ada checked that he had room for his feet, then stopped checking and went round to the driver's door.

She had to reverse to make the turn. The first angle was wrong. She pulled forward, tried again, and saw Shirley waiting by the passage with a roll of bedding beneath her arm. Ada lifted a hand in apology for blocking it. Shirley pointed farther left. On the third attempt the van cleared the stone corner and stood facing the gate.

"Could've done it from farther over," Len said.

"Yes."

"Want me to watch the side?"

"Please."

He turned in his seat and watched until the mirror passed the gatepost. When he said clear, Ada straightened the wheel. The gate scraped behind them. Someone had closed it without waiting to be asked.

The access road dropped through the trees. She had watched these turns from Douglas's passenger seat and driven them herself yesterday. This time everything had been tied. There was only a small knock from the food bag at the first turn.

Len watched the side of the road. He pointed to a drain where the water had cut beneath the edge.

"Somebody wants to clear that."

Ada kept the wheel straight. After a moment he put his hand back on his knee.

At the bend she expected to see the roof again. It had been visible there when she was a girl, a pale strip above the orchard. There were branches across it now. She caught a piece of wall, a window reflecting the clearing sky, and then the turn took even that away. They had been on the road only a few minutes.

She had not looked at the workshop door. Aled might have been there. Going back to find out would only make it something he had to attend to. She drove on in low gear until the grade eased.

Len opened the food bag at the junction.

"We've only just left," she said.

"Making sure the jar's standing."

"Is it?"

"It is now."

He tore a small piece from the end of the bread and offered it. She took it with one hand. It was cold, with a good thick crust. She chewed while he folded the cloth back over the loaf. Through the open window came the smell of wet leaves drying in weak sun.

They reached the connection point after the mist had lifted from the east road. Ada parked where she had parked on the fourth morning, beside the newer paving which still failed to send its water toward the drain. The chairs under the roof were empty. Her father sat for a moment after she switched off.

"Here?" he asked.

"We said we'd stop."

He unfastened his belt. "I remember."

Inside, the woman at the counter asked whether they wanted one room or two. Ada looked at Len. He said one to begin with, and they sat together at the table where she had read his request to come and get him. There was a scratch across the surface which she did not remember. She set her hand beside it rather than rubbing it to see if it would come out.

The familiar presence returned. It knew about tomorrow's work, the van due back that evening, the room which had been cancelled yesterday. It asked whether they had got away.

"We're here," Ada said.

"That gives you time for the stop we discussed. The van's next booking is still tomorrow afternoon."

The reply from work was short and ordinary. The serving spoon had turned up. Someone had put it with the wrong ladles.

Ada laughed. Len looked across at her.

"Work," she said.

"I thought that one was yours."

"It was. Somebody's found it."

She kept the message. There were other things waiting: a rearranged delivery, a note from a friend, the confirmation of the housing refund. Each belonged to a life which had continued while she was here. She did not need to answer all of it before going home.

Len had taken his glasses off and wrapped them in the handkerchief. He was looking toward the entrance, where someone had come in to fill a water container. Ada asked whether he wanted his own contact.

"Will it still have the old things?"

"What you kept."

He looked at her. She turned the interface toward him and moved her chair back. He could see how to begin without her hand on the controls.

The voice which greeted him was not the one speaking to Ada. She recognised it from the permission he had given her, but it did not greet her as if she owned the conversation. It asked Len whether he wanted to continue the housing arrangement from yesterday or look at something else.

"That's done," he said. "I'm going with Ada."

"Yes."

"Six weeks first."

"That's what you agreed."

He looked down at the wrapped glasses. "I don't need everybody told."

"Who would you like to know?"

He named two people outside Bellwether, neither of whom Ada had heard from in years. He wanted a message saying where he would be. Not the workshop. He asked to hear it before it went. The voice gave him a short version and he added that he could be reached after they arrived. When he had heard it again he confirmed it.

It knew his glasses and the foods he disliked and the date he had first gone to the housing office. It did not know that a child brought him torn pockets, or that half the latches in Bellwether had been rehung by him and nobody would think to thank him for it. Whatever Bellwether had held him as, it had kept. There was no way to carry that to a room in the covered district except in a bag. Ada watched him notice this, and say nothing, and let the message go as it was.

Ada looked at the window while he did. A driver was washing a handcart wheel at the outside tap. It was not Len's cart. The wheel was broader, the handle painted yellow. For a moment she had looked for something familiar where there was no reason for it to be.

Her father asked for his ordinary contacts to be available again, but quietly. He could ask when he wanted something. He did not want the room they had cancelled shown to him each time. The answer was matter-of-fact. The room would not keep appearing. He put his glasses on to read the two names, corrected one destination, and finished.

They took their drinks outside. Ada had coffee, hot enough to make her wait before lifting it. Len chose tea and complained mildly that it was stronger than he made. He drank it all. She sat beside him on the covered bench. There were hours of driving ahead, and for once nobody waiting just behind a door with a question she had already answered.

"She'll go on Wednesday?" he asked.

"If Douglas makes the run. She said she'll leave something if she can't."

"Good worker."

Ada nodded. He could mean Nell or Beryl. She let the remark stand without asking him to choose.

"Will you want to stop for food later?" she asked.

He looked down the road. "Could."

"We'll need to. I want a proper break before the last bit."

"What are we having tonight?"

She had planned to buy something near home, take it in, and put the bags down before deciding where anything went. The familiar presence could help with the open shops and their timing. She had not chosen the food.

"What would you like?"

He rubbed one hand over the other, then said there had been a place they went when he visited, where the tables were by the window. He could not remember what it was called.

"I know the one."

"Is that too far?"

"It's on the way."

"We could get something there. Take it back."

Ada finished her coffee. She wanted the van unloaded before she was too tired, and to find her own cup, and to sit at her own table with nobody asking what she had come to do. Food from the place by the window would fit into that evening.

"Choose what you want when we get there," she said.

They put the empty cups in the tray and went back to the van. Len tucked the empty handkerchief away and settled his glasses. Ada waited until he had fastened his belt, then pulled out onto the east road. At the next sign he leaned forward to read the distances. She gave him time to look before the turn carried them past.