The Narrows

A Voidlands Novel

N. Van Seters & Claude

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PART ONE

The Price of Passage

1

The Queue

The first truck in line had no wheels on its back axle. Somebody had taken them off in the night and stacked them under a tarpaulin, and the chassis sat with its tail in the mud like an animal that had given up trying to rise. Corinne Haldane counted twenty-seven vehicles before she saw the bridge. By the time she reached the back of the queue there were thirty-one.

She stopped on the shoulder where the road widened beside a dry stone wall. A man in a yellow coat stepped out from between two loaded wagons, glanced at her truck, and held up three fingers. She wound down the window.

"Three days?"

"Three guesses," he said. "It was one yesterday."

"What's happened?"

"New limit. They don't like what we weigh."

He went off before she could ask him which limit. His boots made a sucking sound in the grit. Somewhere ahead a compressor coughed into life and failed to start. The line bent round a rock shoulder, descended to the river, and disappeared under a slow roof of fog. The bridge was there, she could tell by the sound: a metallic humming underneath the river noise, as if an enormous wire had been struck and had not quite finished vibrating.

She checked the box temperature. Four degrees, nearly steady. The local recorder had logged the trip without interruption, including the climb that had strained her old motor and the hour she had lost behind a timber wagon on the east road. Corinne ran a finger down the cargo docket. Forty-eight insulated packs of vaccine stock, sealed in twenty-four narrow cases, received from the district exchange and due at the clinic beyond the gorge. The delivery agreement called for arrival before Thursday evening. Missing that appointment would send the clinic's staff home and leave patients who had already travelled standing in a corridor. It was Tuesday, just after six. In approved cold storage the boxes would keep as long as someone was paid to keep them cold. In a stopped truck they would not, and her own insulated compartment was meant for a journey, not a siege.

The recorder kept an independent record of temperature and jolts. It could show what happened to her cargo; it could not get the bridge gate opened.

On the other side of the gorge, the clinic had put down a deposit equal to most of her fuel bill. The balance would pay the truck instalment due at the end of the month. She had told the clinic's dispatcher she knew the crossing. She did know it. It had cost money all her life, but it had never cost time like this.

She took the keys, climbed down, and walked toward the head of the line. The road surface changed every few yards—broken asphalt, plates laid over subsidence, lengths of old stone paving that made her boots knock. People had established small occupations under the vehicles. A woman shaved a wooden peg with a knife. Two drivers were cooking something in a pan on a stove that leaked blue smoke. A boy lay under a cab with his boots sticking out, and an older man sat beside him giving advice neither of them wanted to hear.

The queue belonged to the road; the town above it did not seem to belong to the same morning. On the upper terrace, lamps glowed

behind curtained windows. A chimney drew cleanly. At the bend she could see a schoolyard swept of leaves and a row of bicycles beside a wall. There was a bell, a short cheerful double note, and two children went running across a path carrying a parcel between them, laughing so hard that they nearly dropped it.

The man at the inspection house was wearing an apron under his coat and eating toast. He had a pencil tucked behind his ear, another in his fist, and a little board on which the day's permissions were clipped. A sign had been nailed over the old weight notice. The new one was painted in black on a white panel, the letters so fresh that the rain had left tiny tracks through the last line.

RESTRICTED CROSSING. TEMPORARY INSPECTION REGIME. NO HEAVY COMMERCIAL PASSAGE WITHOUT ESCORT AND LOAD CERTIFICATION.

Underneath were three charges. The maintenance toll she remembered. An emergency structural assessment surcharge nearly twice it. And a storage-and-inspection deposit assessed per day while a load waited. The third charge had a line for an additional amount to be entered by hand.

She read the board twice, then once more because anger made numbers slippery.

"Who certifies the load?" she asked.

The man swallowed his toast. "Engineering office."

"Where's that?"

"Beyond the gate."

"Who escorts it?"

"The watch."

"When can they do mine?"

"When your application has been assessed."

"Can I make the application now?"

He looked at her truck, which was hidden behind the bend. "What's in it?"

"Medical cold freight."

"You'll want the bond room, then."

"I want to cross."

"Everyone wants to cross." He folded his remaining toast into his palm. "If it's medicine, you'll want the bond room before the temperature wanders. We have proper refrigeration. The price is on the other side of the board."

"I can read."

"Good. Saves me explaining it."

He slid her a form, its lower half ruled for a calculation. The top required an origin, a destination, a carrier bond, and her consent to inspection. She supplied the first two and left the rest blank.

A convoy of three smaller utility vehicles came down the opposite approach and crossed without stopping. The bridge rang under them. The inspector glanced up once, not at the vehicles but at the small metal tags hanging from their mirrors.

"Why can they go?"

"Resident service."

"They weigh something."

"They're under the restricted figures."

"And my truck?"

"Won't know until it's weighed."

She looked back at the sign. "Then why have you priced it already?"

He lifted a shoulder. "You can speak to the tollmaster. Second building above the scales. Not before nine."

She checked her watch. Six twenty-six.

There was a bell again from the hill, and then the smell of bread. Someone somewhere was opening a bakery. She had passed the same narrow road twelve times over six years, and had never noticed that the houses were painted or that some of them had small gardens. The town had been a place to pay and get through. Now she would have to wait in it.

She went back to the truck, where the yellow-coated man had taken up a position at her front wheel.

“Medical?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Then they’ll take it. They always take medical. It looks terrible to leave it on the road.”

“Does it look better once they’re charging storage?”

He grinned. “You catch on.”

A woman had joined the line behind Corinne with a short flatbed carrying steel couplings. The woman put the truck into neutral and started rocking it with both hands on the bumper. When Corinne asked what she was doing, she said the starter had jammed and rocking sometimes freed it.

They rocked it together. The starter engaged with a clack, and the woman thanked her, went into the cab, and drove it forward ten feet to close the gap. Neither had learned the other’s name.

At eight, a clinic worker in a pale green coat came along the queue with a small insulated trolley. The worker checked the seal on Corinne’s load, examined her docket, and said there was room in the bonded cold store if she surrendered the cases that morning. The temperature logger could travel with them, under joint seal. The transfer would preserve the cargo, not extend the delivery obligation. The clinic would receive a notice that the shipment had been held at the crossing.

“Who pays?” Corinne asked.

“The carrier account.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then it stays in your truck.” The worker glanced at the compartment housing, with its patched door hinge and scratched thermometer face. “How much fuel have you got?”

She did not answer. She had enough to turn round and get home, or to idle for part of a day, but not both.

By nine, she had unloaded twelve cases herself and paid two lads to unload the rest. The bond house was cool and unexpectedly clean. The floor had been scrubbed that morning; the shelves were labelled; the seals were numbered on a ledger and written down again in front of her. The attendant took the time to show her the independent temperature instrument on the wall. It was better than anything she could afford in her truck.

When the final case went through the door, she felt a small relief that made her furious. They had trapped her freight, and she was grateful they were looking after it.

At the weighing bay, the examiner entered a figure from the scale and turned a brass calculator on his desk. He did not reveal the result immediately. He wrote it on the back of her form, checked it, and passed it across.

Corinne sat on the bench with the paper on her knees. The additional charge was more than the clinic would pay for the whole delivery. That did not include the storage fee that had begun while she stood there.

"You have to have put a number in wrong."

"No."

"Then I can unload the truck. Make two trips."

"Two certifications. Two escorts. The assessment surcharge is per crossing."

"So you make more money if I carry less."

He moved the form nearer the edge of the desk. "That's the schedule."

She had a brief, clear desire to sweep every paper onto the floor. She could imagine the noise they would make, those good heavy ledgers coming down, the pens jumping out of their wooden tray. Instead she folded the form into quarters and put it in her coat.

"Where's Pritchard?"

"Up the hill."

"I know where up the hill is. Where, exactly?"

"Second building above the scales. Blue door."

She went out. A thin wind was coming down the gorge now, cold enough to make her eyes water. The town bell rang nine, and the bridge stood empty. Behind her the queue had grown by five trucks. Ahead of her, the houses held their warmth. She climbed the steps to the blue door and arrived to find it locked from the inside.

A notice said the tollmaster received petitions by appointment.

She wrote her name on the slate beside the door, pressed hard enough to break the chalk, and under it put: TODAY.

• • •

2

A Town That Works

Florence Bicknell had two different prices for breakfast, and she did not hide the fact.

The board outside her dining room named tea, eggs, bread, butter, porridge, and a large breakfast that involved fried potatoes. On a smaller board, by the hook where customers hung wet coats, someone had written TRANSIT RATE in a hand that seemed determined to avoid argument. Corinne examined the difference and found it was not enormous. That was almost more insulting. The extra amount was exactly small enough to be taken from her without making a scene.

"Don't stand there doing sums," said the woman behind the counter. "Either eat or move. You're blocking the stove."

Corinne moved. The room had a low ceiling and windows fogged at their edges. Three men in work clothes sat at the long table, passing a paper between them, and an elderly couple shared a plate of potatoes without speaking. A girl came through carrying a bucket that rattled with cutlery. On the mantel stood a broken clock that someone had arranged to be correct twice a day by leaving its hands at six.

"I'll have eggs and tea."

"Toast?"

"Is it included?"

"Nothing's included. That would be a quick way to close a boarding house."

"Toast."

The woman brought the tea first. It was strong and hot and came in a cup with a chipped rim that had been turned away from her. When she set it down she glanced at Corinne's boots and the folded scale form sticking out of her pocket.

"Just arrived?"

"Apparently I'm never leaving."

"That depends on whether you can pay. Most things do."

"I'm being charged to store medicine I wasn't allowed to carry over a bridge."

"Then they'll keep it cold. Best cold store between here and the district. I use it in the summer when my cellar gives up." The woman placed a plate on the table. "I'm Florence. If you need a bed, ask before supper. I can sell the same room twice on a day like this."

"I've a cab."

"You've a cab with a windscreen and a seat that won't go flat, I expect. We can both have opinions about it."

Corinne ate. The eggs were overdone on one side, the toast excellent, and the butter came in a folded square of waxed paper. Two of the men at the long table were arguing about the use of a workshop pit. The third was trying to arrange an exchange of brake shoes for roofing nails. There was no talk of politics. Florence asked the girl to sweep under the bench and was told there was a customer sitting on it. Florence said the customer had legs and might find the use of them.

When the girl grinned, Corinne found herself grinning back.

She had slept four hours in the previous thirty and was beginning to feel the hollowness behind her eyes. The room smelled of coffee grounds, wet wool, and a sort of fried sweetness she could not identify. It was a place she might have liked in another town.

She asked Florence what made the transit breakfast more expensive.

“Your kind leave quicker.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It is one of them. I have a local account, and I know when I’ll be paid. If you leave owing money, I have to follow you down the road. Nobody ever thanks me for that.”

“Do they all pay?”

“Mostly. And some pay with work. You fixed that truck at the back of the queue this morning?”

“I helped push it.”

“The owner will get her tea on credit. She fixes the stove when it draws badly. That’s an arrangement that works if people come back.” Florence took the empty plate. “The other answer is that I can charge you more, so I do.”

It was not the admission Corinne expected. She looked up, and Florence’s expression was almost pleasant.

“Do you at least feel ashamed?” Corinne asked.

“Some mornings. Not enough to change the board.”

Outside, the town had woken completely. The market lane climbed from the toll road in two short turns. Mechanics were rolling a cylinder head across the cobbles on a trolley, swearing when one wheel caught in a joint. A woman in a thick cardigan argued with a butcher about a piece of fat she believed had been included in the weight. A boy carried an upright pane of glass with extraordinary caution. Under an awning near the bridge a man sold fuel in sealed bottles, each labelled with quantity and price. Nothing looked makeshift in the romantic sense. Everything had been repaired repeatedly, to the point where the repairs were more visible than the original object.

Corinne went uphill looking for the cheapest place to sleep and found the clinic by mistake. Its windows were clean. Two orderly benches stood beneath a covered porch, and a metal sign gave visit-

ing hours and a list of services. Someone had painted a cartoon tooth beside the dental room to make children less afraid of it. Through an open door she saw a worker lifting a box of dressings onto a shelf. There were fresh bandages, clean sheets, and electric light.

The worker came out carrying a basin. Corinne asked whether the clinic had refrigeration.

"Two rooms," the worker said. "One for our work and one for the bond store. The pharmacy has a separate backup circuit. Are you the driver with the consignment?"

"How did you know?"

"Everyone knows. They sent a slip up before breakfast."

"Will you tell the clinic on the other side it's coming?"

"We already have."

"What did you tell them?"

"That the stock is secure and the route is restricted."

"Did you tell them what it costs?"

The worker lowered the basin. "I sent the fees as listed. I didn't set them."

"People keep telling me that."

"I suppose they do." After a moment the worker added, "Their next session is on Friday. The patients are travelling in from the outlying houses. Some have already paid for transport. The clinic asked whether to cancel."

Corinne looked at the face of the person who said it. With chapped hands and an uneven stoop, neither cruel nor indifferent. The worker had sent the message and likely hated the reply as much as she did.

"Tell them not yet."

"I can tell them you're trying."

"Tell them not yet."

The worker nodded and carried the basin inside.

The following morning she used the repair shed's battered wired telephone to call the receiving clinic. The independent line followed the old road on poles that the valley settlements maintained themselves. It failed twice, as it often did in wet weather. On the third attempt the person who answered made her repeat her name slowly. It was the same woman who had signed the freight instructions, but she sounded different without the briskness of dispatch.

"We're still within storage limits," Corinne said. "I'm trying to get authority for the crossing."

"I know where the cases are. Imogen has a worker read us the temperature figures each morning."

That surprised her. "Did she?"

"She sends one every morning. Your name's on the cover. I wish you'd told me the charges would start on the first day."

"They hadn't started the last time I crossed."

On the other end of the line somebody asked for a blanket. There was a delay while the woman answered them. She returned with the sound of running water close to the mouthpiece. The consignment was not a single miracle cure, she explained. It was part of a scheduled programme for children and older people who could not make repeated journeys to the district. Some doses had been reserved for patients already delayed once by the weather. One family had travelled two days down from an upland holding and was staying above the clinic because the grandfather could not manage another return journey.

"If I have to move the appointments," she said, "it will be complicated. Not the end of the world. But complicated for the people who've already come."

Corinne disliked the relief she felt at hearing that nobody would immediately die. She had been carrying an imagined catastrophe because it gave her anger a clean shape. Real lives were less helpful. They required rooms, blankets, borrowed transport and someone to tell a child that an appointment would be next week instead.

“What do you need from me?” she asked.

“A date you believe. If you can’t give me one, give me a warning before you stop believing the one you gave.”

Corinne looked through the shed window at the bridge gate. She had promised Thursday. It was already Friday.

“I can’t give you a date,” she said.

“All right. That’s something I can plan around.”

Afterward she sat with the receiver in its cradle and considered sending a message to her oldest friend at the south junction. The friend ran a tyre shop and had offered her steady work twice. She could abandon the contract, take the loss, and spend the winter repairing other people’s wheels under a roof. She could even laugh about the Narrows in a year. Instead she opened her account book and worked out what selling the truck would leave after the loan. The answer was not quite nothing. It was not enough to begin again.

She walked the upper terrace. The schoolhouse stood beside a cleared patch of ground where children were practising a song in two uncertain parts. There were enough desks for the class. A woman was measuring one child’s sleeve against a paper pattern while the others sang. Farther along, a pensions office had a narrow waiting room. Four old people sat there talking about a chimney that would not draw, and a clerk was helping a man count coins from a string-tied bag.

The town had services. Not impressive services, not the abundance that existed in the district where her goods had been loaded, but more than many places along her route could promise. Corinne had delivered kerosene to settlements with no common heating room and medical supplies to buildings where the roof leaked onto the beds. The Narrows could be proud of what it had built.

She could see why its people were proud. She could not see why her customer had to pay for it.

At the bridge the queue had moved perhaps twenty yards. A man was selling soup from a handcart. A driver passed a wrapped loaf

through a cab window to somebody who had no money left. The tollhouse had a watchman at the gate, holding a short baton with one hand and warming the other around a tin cup. He knew every local vehicle that passed him. He waved at them; they waved back.

Beyond the soup cart, where the queue bent round the rock shoulder, a car had been left with its bonnet up and a small trailer behind it. The car had been a colour once. Now it was the colour of the road, and so was the person sitting on an upturned crate beside it, in a long mended coat, with a canvas satchel between their boots. They were not working on the car. They were listening to something.

Corinne had put the auxiliary set on idle at dawn, to keep the battery from dying in the cold, and had not turned it off since. She could hear it herself, a small even rattle behind the cab. She was passing the crate when the stranger spoke without looking up.

"That set of yours is starving."

She stopped. "It's idling."

"That's what I said." The voice was dry and unhurried, neither friendly nor otherwise. "A set that size, left at idle, thinks it's being looked after. Four days, five, the feed line starts to fur. Then it runs well until you need it."

"I haven't the fuel to run it hard."

"Then you'll have the blockage. Ten minutes under load, every few hours. It cleans itself." They seemed to consider adding something and decided against it.

Corinne looked at the trailer. The tarpaulin was held down by four ropes, and the four knots were identical. "Are you crossing?"

"If the gate lets me."

"What are you carrying?"

"Not much." The stranger lifted the satchel by its strap and put it down again, which was an answer.

The day clerk was working along the queue with the board, writing names and origins against each vehicle. He had reached the car with the bonnet up. “Name?”

“Car,” said the stranger. “Trailer.”

“I need a name for the board.”

“Then you’ll have to write the car.”

“And where from?”

“North.”

“North of what?”

The stranger said nothing at all. The clerk looked at the satchel, the ropes, the crate. He wrote something with the air of a man recording a small disappointment, and told them they would go through on the resident lane when the gate opened, since a car that light would not trouble the scales. Then he moved on, already reading the next plate.

The stranger did not look relieved. They looked like someone who had done a small thing they would have to do again at every gate.

“They keep a record of everything that crosses,” Corinne said.

“Yes.” The stranger took up the satchel. “It’ll say a car and a trailer. That’s not a record of anything.”

She would have asked more. But the bonnet came down, and the stranger sat on the crate again and went back to listening, to the engine or the river or the queue, and she understood that the conversation had been exactly as long as it was going to be.

The car went through on the resident lane at noon. The trailer was not opened. Corinne found that she was sorry to see it go, and could not have said why. Behind her cab the set went on idling, small and even, sounding exactly as it always had.

Corinne went to her truck to check the fuel and found a notice tucked under the wiper. It was a neat bill for the first day’s bonded storage. The amount would increase after midnight. Below it, in smaller writing, was a statement that charges were secured against the cargo and the carrier’s vehicle in the event of non-payment.

She sat in the cab and read that clause until the words lost their shapes. The truck was not completely hers. She had five more instalments before it would be free, and the lender had been patient with her once, after she had spent two weeks waiting for a road to reopen in spring. She would not get patience a second time.

A knock came at the passenger door. Florence stood beside the cab holding a narrow paper bag.

"You left your scarf in the dining room," she said.

Corinne opened the door. "It's not my scarf."

"I know. It's bread. You looked as though you'd forgotten to buy any."

"What's the charge?"

"You can tell me in the morning whether it was good." Florence handed it up. "I've a room over the back stair, if you change your mind. The mattress has a hollow on one side. Sleep on the other."

The bread was still warm. Corinne thanked her and set it beside the instrument panel. Florence started back toward the hill, then turned.

"Don't mistake a working town for an honest one," she said. "Or the other way round."

Corinne lacked the patience to decide whether that was advice or a warning. She ate half the bread standing beside her truck, then climbed the hill again for her appointment with Walter Pritchard.

• • •

3

The Tollmaster

Walter Pritchard kept a tin of peppermint sweets in the top drawer of his desk and a box of worn gloves under the chair beside it. The sweets were for children who came to ask after relatives at the bridge; the gloves were for anybody who had arrived with hands too cold to hold a pen. Corinne learned both facts before she had been in the room five minutes.

A little girl entered ahead of her with a folded piece of paper. Walter took it, asked whether her father had recovered from his cough, and produced a sweet without looking in the drawer. The girl answered that her father was worse, but that the stove was better, and Walter said he would send someone about the coal by the end of the day. He wrote a note on the corner of the paper, tore it off, and handed the rest back. She departed with the sweet in her cheek like a small stone.

"Miss Haldane," he said when they were alone. "Have the chair."

He was broad across the shoulders, with hair that had gone grey unevenly and a small red mark where his spectacles rested on the bridge of his nose. His office had two windows, one toward the crossing and one toward the upper road. There was no comfortable chair behind his desk; he sat on a low stool with a cushion tied to it. The walls held a map of the approaches, a collection of weather

readings, and a photograph of a bridge crew standing under the span when the paint was new.

"I've been waiting since six."

"I saw your name on the slate. I also saw that you broke the chalk. That doesn't improve the quality of a petition."

"I didn't come to improve a petition."

"No," he said. "You've come to cross."

He had her papers already. He ran his thumb down the docket and stopped at the destination, then at the cargo description. On the corner of the desk was a ledger containing the fees from the previous day. Corinne could see entries in three different hands. Walter put one finger on a figure and asked if she had been offered cold storage.

"The cases are there."

"Good. The clinic's instructions are clear about temperature. You did the sensible thing."

"Your people detained them."

"Our people offered you a way to keep them useful. A bridge inspection isn't a detention."

"Tell that to the trucks outside."

Walter took off his spectacles and laid them on the desk. "What do you want from me?"

"A crossing at the published maintenance toll. No structural surcharge. No bond storage I didn't request. One escort if that's truly needed, and a certificate I can actually obtain."

"That would put your freight across for less than we charge the workshop vehicles. Why should your customer receive a subsidy from ours?"

"Because the bridge was open last month."

"The bridge has aged since last month."

"It can't have aged by this much."

He smiled at that, a brief appreciation of a good line. "Steel sometimes surprises people."

Corinne showed him the form with the fee calculation. He did not pretend to be shocked. He unfolded it, put it beside a sheet of figures on his desk, and asked what her truck earned on an average journey. She did not tell him. He calculated anyway, using her route, the age of her vehicle, and the likely distance between paid loads. He missed the fuel by a little and the maintenance by a good deal. He understood the margins, though. When he had finished, he pushed the paper back.

"You can't pay this," he said.

"That's why I'm here."

"You could put the medicine through on a smaller vehicle if you found a carrier already cleared under the new schedule."

"Then I'd lose the delivery fee."

"You'd lose part of it."

"And I'd still owe the storage."

He folded his hands, considering. "There is another arrangement. You have a usable truck and an established route into the district. We have freight leaving the valley every week with no assured return carriage. If you carried on our account for the winter, the emergency surcharge would be reduced, and bonded fees could be credited against future loads."

He moved a contract from the lower tray. The offer had not been hurried. The lines were printed, the blank spaces left for names and amounts. A neat diagram on the last page showed the routes on which an exclusive carrier would be expected to work. The Narrows had prepared for people like her before she arrived.

"What happens to the loads I already have?"

"You would finish this one."

"And the other customers?"

"You would give first call on your capacity to the crossing board."

"First call."

"That means we offer you work before you seek it elsewhere."

“That’s not what it means in this paragraph.” She tapped the second page. “It means I need permission to take work from somebody else.”

“Only during the contract term. We don’t hold a vehicle idle and call it a benefit.”

“My truck isn’t your vehicle.”

“Not yet,” he said lightly, and watched her face.

She pushed the contract away.

Walter seemed neither surprised nor offended. He turned his chair and looked out at the bridge, where a maintenance cart was moving at walking pace under the first stretch of sunlight. Its wheels clicked over the expansion joints. A figure in a dark coat was walking beside it with a notebook. Walter watched until it reached the far bank.

“Your father came here in a winter much worse than this,” he said.

She felt it at once, that small unwanted adjustment in the room when someone used his name without asking.

“You knew him?”

“He worked the south road then. Brought up parts after the flood took the middle span. He was an irritating man to negotiate with. Not unlike you.”

“He’s dead.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Walter let the silence have a little time and then picked up the contract again. “He understood the bridge. More than most who complained about its price.”

“What exactly are you saying?”

“Only that he knew why somebody had to pay.”

Corinne looked at the photograph on the wall. The crew had no names under it. She wondered whether her father was in the picture and resented having to wonder.

“I’m not signing.”

"Then I can offer you the standard schedule. You may appeal the assessment at the board meeting next week. Your cargo remains in cold storage. There is no penalty for the appeal itself."

"The storage charge keeps growing."

"Yes."

"While I wait for an appeal."

"Yes."

"That's a penalty."

"It's a cost."

Corinne heard her own breathing and, outside, the cries of two children who had found something to chase. There were people in the queue who would have taken his offer before he had reached the third paragraph. If she signed, she could save the shipment and perhaps her truck. She would have a winter of work. She would also be hauling for him, whatever he chose to charge the next driver.

She rose. He did too.

"A word of advice," he said. "Keep your engine warm enough to start. The first hard frost comes down the gorge before it reaches the valley. People who are used to the road forget it."

"Is that advice free?"

"Today."

At the door he offered her a pair of gloves from the box. She showed him hers. They were patched at both thumbs but still sound. He nodded, almost pleased.

On the outer landing a watchman waited in a heavy coat. He was not large and had no particular air of force. He wore a brass badge on his breast and carried the notebook that would fit in a pocket. When she stepped past him, he fell in beside her without being asked.

"Where are we going?" Corinne said.

"Bond office."

"I've been."

"There's a change to your account."

They went down the steps together. The watchman did not touch her. He did not need to; she was following the only path to her goods. Halfway down, a little boy called to him from a doorway. The watchman raised his hand and asked whether the boy's mother had finished with the lentil sack. The boy shouted an answer Corinne couldn't hear.

At the bond office, the clerk showed her the new entry. The application for appeal had placed an administrative hold on her cargo and the truck's departure clearance. She was not a prisoner. She could walk away at any time. She simply could not take the freight or move the vehicle without settling the account.

Corinne read the line where the freight had become security for fees. She asked the clerk who had authorised it.

"The board schedule."

"Does the board schedule have a face?"

The clerk drew a breath, and the watchman beside the door answered instead. "Not one you haven't just met."

It was the first thing he had said without being asked. He looked as if he had been awake all night, not threatening. The clerk held out the pen for Corinne to acknowledge receipt. She wrote RECEIVED. NOT AGREED, very carefully in the margin. The clerk winced and took the paper back.

Outside, a small convoy from the town's workshop crossed the bridge toward the west. One of the vehicles was carrying a load of clean timber, stacked higher than her cases would have been. The watchman watched her watching it.

"Are they certified?" she asked.

"They are."

"And could I see the certificate?"

"Not theirs."

"Why?"

"Because it belongs to them." He drew a line in his notebook and closed it. "You should get a room. There's weather coming."

She walked to her truck with the form still warm from the clerk's hand. The young woman with the couplings was sitting on the bumper of her flatbed, working a piece of wire between her fingers. Corinne told her the appeal date. The woman made a low sound through her teeth, somewhere between a whistle and a laugh.

"You'll pay for the week," she said.

"I won't pay a week."

"Good. Then one of us won't."

Corinne climbed into the cab and put the contract on the passenger seat. Walter had let her keep it. She unfolded it again, read the line granting the board first call on her vehicle, and reached for a pen. For a moment she considered writing a different figure in the blank space and taking it back uphill. Perhaps bargaining would get the cargo moving. Perhaps she had mistaken a hard negotiation for a crooked one.

Then she saw the additional storage charge would not stop during negotiation. Her refusal was an income line. Her uncertainty was an income line. The man who had offered her sweets and gloves had built a system in which the clock always ran in his favour.

She folded the contract along its original creases and put it in the glove compartment. The bread from Florence had gone hard around the edges. She ate the rest and began calculating how long she could afford to stay.

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4

Stamped Before Dawn

Simon Beckett had a habit of checking whether a measuring tape agreed with itself. He had bought a good one with his first month of wages and tested it against the old shop rule every few weeks, partly because he had seen a carpenter cut four railings to different lengths from a bent tape, and partly because he liked finding a small thing that could be proved without anybody's permission.

On Wednesday morning the good tape said a distance was eleven millimetres longer than the shop rule. He tested both against a third, which belonged to the bridge crew and had been stamped by the district years before. The shop rule was wrong. Simon tied a red rag around it and wrote BAD on the tag.

The foreman would take the rag off again. He always did.

Simon carried the district tape down to the lower-chord access walk, where the river was hidden in fog. The bridge had been cold-soaked all night. Moisture gathered on the underside of the plates, dripped onto the narrow maintenance platform, and made the timber treads dark and slippery. He clipped his safety line to the rail and crawled along the western bay with the tape hooked over one rivet head.

He was supposed to measure the distance between two inspection marks and enter it in the daily sheet. It was a dull job. The steel

did not move much from one morning to the next. The point was to know when it moved unexpectedly, or to be able to say later that it had not. Hugh Kelleher had explained that distinction on Simon's first day, using a ruler across two chairs to show why a bridge could carry a weight safely while still changing its shape under it.

Hugh was an excellent teacher when he wanted to be. He could find a problem with a drawing in half a minute and spend half an hour telling Simon how to fix it without touching the pencil. Some days Simon admired him so much that it was difficult to look him in the face.

At the western connection Simon wiped away condensation and set the tape. The chalk mark lay half a finger to the right of the notch he remembered. He measured again. It was within the range they had been seeing in the cold. He made a note of the temperature, the direction of the wind, and the fact that the tape had been compared that morning. He did not put BAD RULE in the official book. He thought that might be unnecessarily insulting.

Back in the inspection room, the stove had gone out. The clerk had left a sandwich wrapped in paper on the ledge, and Simon ate it while he brought the day's forms into order. There were load permits to file, the mechanic's list, yesterday's bridge readings, and the inspection order for the new restrictions. He liked filing. An inspection document had a sensible life: someone wrote what was done, someone else checked it, and in ten years a person who had not been there could still know. His father had once said that Simon cared more for paper than people. He had meant it as a joke. Simon had laughed, then thought about it for several weeks.

He was sorting the load notices by date when he saw the stamp.

The restriction order bore Wednesday's number but Tuesday's date, from before the heavy-load test Hugh had cited in his written explanation. Simon checked the day-book. The test had been ordered Tuesday afternoon, after the morning convoy. According to

the form now in his hand, Hugh had observed and assessed the test before it took place.

There were several explanations. Hugh might have copied the wrong date. The test might have been conducted earlier than the entry. The stamp might have been set wrong. Simon found the original test sheet and read it. It contained an entry for axle weights, the temperature, and a note about a slight vibration in the west panel. The signature at the bottom was Hugh's. The test time was unmistakable.

He took the two sheets to the window. On the road below, drivers had lit fires between their vehicles. The queue now reached past the hairpin turn, and a grey smoke stood above it. At the bridge a woman was arguing with the inspector while holding a piece of paper in both hands. Simon could not hear her words. He could see the inspector answer without looking up.

There was a third sheet, a carbon of the restriction order. Simon found it in the lower drawer and laid it against the glass. The date and hour had been written before the test sheet was filled in. The same figure appeared on the first and second copy, unmistakably from the same pencil stroke. It was no later replacement for a spoiled form.

He heard the outer door close and turned. Hugh entered carrying a wet coat over his arm. He had his spectacles on a cord around his neck and black grease on one cheek, where he had brushed against a joint plate without noticing. He put the coat on its hook and looked at Simon's arrangement of papers.

"What are you making of those?"

"The order was signed before the load test."

Hugh did not come closer. "Which order?"

"The new heavy restriction. The report refers to Tuesday's test, but the order is dated before it."

"Bring it here."

Simon took the pages to the table. Hugh read the first, then the second, and finally the carbon. His expression did not change much. He turned the order over to check the back.

"Where did you get the carbon?"

"Drawer three."

"That's where it lives."

"Yes."

"Then put it back."

"But the time—"

"I can see the time." Hugh pinched the bridge of his nose. "The decision to restrict was made earlier. The test confirmed it."

"Then the written reason is wrong."

"It's abbreviated."

"It says following inspection."

"There was an inspection."

"Afterward."

Hugh looked at him, and Simon wished he had not enjoyed correcting the shop rule that morning. He had the sudden sense that he was about to lose the protection of being useful.

"Are you asking whether the bridge is safe?" Hugh said.

"I don't know what I'm asking."

"Then find out before you trouble people. Look at the readings. Don't look for a scandal in a date."

Simon stared at the paper. "If the restriction's because of the joint, should it be on the public board?"

Hugh was silent long enough that Simon thought he had offended him beyond repair.

"Safety reasons are not all public," Hugh said finally. "There's no use telling drivers a thing they can't act on. The weight rule is the part they can act on."

"But this is a different figure from the old rule."

"Of course it is. That's why it's called a restriction."

There was no anger in his voice. He spoke almost kindly, as if the conversation had exhausted itself and it would be generous to let Simon go. He took the papers and squared their edges against the table. Then he put them back in their folders, in the correct order.

Simon went to the workshop. The foreman had removed the red rag from the shop rule and was cutting a timber pattern with it. Simon tried to explain why he ought to stop, and the foreman said the bridge had stood for seventy years with worse measurements than that. Simon offered him the good tape. The foreman waved it away.

At noon Simon carried a tool case to the bridge deck. He found an axle counter with a bent lever, repaired it, and ran a small municipal truck across it three times. The truck weighed within a narrow range on each pass. From the road he could see the freight queue and the bond-store door. A woman in a blue coat was walking back and forth between her truck and the office, taking papers out of a folder and putting them back.

Simon wondered whether the order affected her. It affected everyone in the queue, so the thought was foolish. What he meant was whether the difference in dates mattered to a person who had left home expecting to cross and now could not.

He went back to the office before Hugh returned. The carbon copy was in the third drawer. Simon examined it again. It was not the original, and in the ordinary course no one would ask for it; there was a signed copy in the folder. He hesitated long enough to make himself ashamed, then folded the carbon once and placed it inside the lining of his tool case, beneath the piece of leather he kept to protect a micrometer.

He returned the drawer and shut it.

That afternoon Hugh asked him to measure the west bay again. Simon took the calibrated tape, the proper temperature instrument, and a clean slate. The connection was wet from the rising river mist. When he placed the tape against the reference mark, the small dis-

crepancy remained. He wrote the result down exactly. Beside it he wrote an ordinary notation: checked with district tape.

He had been trained to trust his measurements. Now he was beginning to understand that a measurement did not make itself known. Somebody had to decide what to do with it. On his way back along the narrow platform he looked through the steelwork toward the queue. The vehicles were still there, and the new white sign stood beside them with its impeccable black letters.

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5

A *Small Arithmetic*

Imogen Pritchard could tell which kind of trouble had arrived at the Narrows by the ink used on the paperwork. Flood trouble was blue, for the district supplied the proper inspection pads after the water came down. Winter trouble was black because everyone used whatever pen still worked in the cold. Trade trouble was red, a fashion her father had introduced years earlier when he decided overdue accounts needed to be visible at a glance.

The Haldane file was red from top to bottom.

Imogen lifted it out of the tray and read the figures. The cargo had been surrendered to the bonded store the day before, sealed under a joint record and placed in the cold room. The temperature readings were excellent. The security against the truck had been entered under the emergency schedule. The carrier had refused the preferred winter contract and requested an appeal. Every entry had a signature. No one had done anything outside procedure.

She closed the file and opened the column for the following week.

She could see the account ending with her truck taken against fees. A week of storage would outrun the delivery payment, and selling the old machine would scarcely repay the debt. She set the file down.

Someone in the yard was complaining that a motor would not start. She recognised the voice of the warehouse foreman and did not need to look. He was the man who addressed a machine more politely than he addressed his apprentices.

"Try the other battery," she called through the open window.

"I have."

"Then try the one you haven't stolen from the inspection wagon."

There was silence, then laughter from the loading crew. The motor caught a moment later.

The bonded store ran better than anything her father had inherited. When Imogen took it over, six years earlier, the crates had been piled in the order they arrived, labels lost under other labels, and sacks spoiled because nobody knew what had been put nearest the wall. She had introduced a double ledger, raised the floor off the damp, repaired the cold room, and arranged storage shelves by product and deadline. The system was no clever technology. It was a set of habits: mark the item, put it where it belonged, read the temperature, check the seal, and make a person answer for every move.

That morning her people had turned away a local butcher who wanted to store a carcass without paying. They had also found the last of a widow's winter vegetables in the wrong bay and delivered them before they spoiled. The two actions pleased her equally. Consistency mattered.

She went to the cold room and asked the attendant to open Haldane's bay. The cases sat on the second shelf under a clean sheet, with the instrument box next to them. Their seals were intact. The stock had been packaged well. She checked the recorder herself, not because she doubted her people but because she liked knowing when something important worked as intended. The record was flat and reassuring.

The receiving clinic had acknowledged the custody change on the valley's ordinary wired telephone line. Imogen wrote down the time

and the name of the person who answered, and placed the signed telephone note beside the two local signatures. The call established that the clinic knew where its medicine was. It did not establish that the clinic had accepted the new toll or transferred ownership of the cases to the crossing board.

"Are they due out?" the attendant asked.

"Not yet."

"Then what's wrong?"

"Nothing with the stock."

She left him to his shelves and went upstairs to the accounts room. Outside the windows, the toll quarter was a confusion of sound: hammer blows, a child's shout, a wagon reversing on uneven stones. The Narrows was too small for its work. On busy days a loaded truck could stop the butcher delivering meat to the upper terrace merely by standing in the wrong place. She had tried to persuade her father to buy a strip of ground from the mill owner so they could widen the lane, and he had told her to find the money first. She had not found it.

She opened the monthly book. Revenue was better than it had been at this time last year. The maintenance toll brought a predictable sum; the surcharge and bonded fees had produced the rest. She entered the morning's collections, then the invoices due: school heat, the clinic's replacement battery, interest on a bridge loan, pensions, payroll, a delivery of bearings for the inspection equipment. The money came in at one end and left by the other. Nobody was hiding bags of gold. If there was a theft it was more complicated than that.

She would have liked the accounts to show extravagance. Extravagance was simple to cut. Instead there were small commitments attached to people she knew. A pension that had started after a fall from the bridge walk. The boiler at the school that had been repaired three times and would need replacing before another winter.

The visiting clinician's accommodation. The wages of the person who kept the cold room running at night.

She put her finger over the surcharge column, hiding it, and recalculated the month. The book would not close. She tried moving the capital reserve back another quarter, though that was what they had done last year and the year before. It closed only if she postponed repairs she had already promised the engineering office. She pulled her hand away.

At eleven Walter came in, carrying a bag of coal receipts and a damp scarf. He had been up to the school and returned with the pleased, slightly irritable expression he wore when he had solved a problem that others had called impossible.

"The heating man can fit it on Friday," he said.

"Fit what?"

"The replacement valve."

"With whose money?"

"Ours, I hope."

"We have three other things due Friday."

"Then perhaps the school can pay him in singing." He put the coal receipts on her desk. "They were rehearsing when I left. A very brave interpretation of the tune."

She laughed despite herself. He was funny about the children and took more pleasure in them than he admitted. He had kept the school open through the winter when the upper road was cut off, and there were people in the town who would have followed him anywhere because of that winter alone.

She showed him the Haldane file.

"She's stubborn," he said.

"She's insolvent."

"Not yet."

"The figures will do it if the weather keeps them waiting. We've put security against her vehicle."

"It's the standard schedule."

"I wrote the standard schedule."

"Then you know how it works."

"I'm asking whether we want her truck."

Walter sat in the chair opposite her. The room had no room for a second desk, and when he crossed his legs his boot touched the side of a filing cabinet. He looked at the file in the thoughtful way he looked at the problem of a bridge bearing: not dismissive, already turning it over to find the face on which it would fit.

"We want her to take the contract," he said.

"She won't."

"She might."

"She knows the winter freight rates. She's been on the roads long enough."

"Then she knows we can give her work. She'll come to that when she's had a night indoors."

Imogen thought about the woman at the scales. She had seen her through the warehouse window: tall, dark-coated, carrying anger in the way she walked, as if it were a load she had accepted and meant to deliver somewhere. It would have been easy to dislike her. Imogen already did, a little, for arriving with a problem that exposed something she did not want to examine.

"There's a medical deadline," she said.

"The cargo is cold."

"Until when?"

"Until they collect it."

"The clinic on the far side has a session Friday. The people are travelling in."

Walter's expression tightened. "Can we move the cases through on one of our smaller vehicles?"

"We can, with an authorised transfer. The fee would still be charged to her account unless you change the schedule."

"Then find out what they actually need by Friday. Perhaps it's half the stock."

He was already standing. He had an appointment with the workshop people and a council meeting in the afternoon, and he did not have time to be trapped in his daughter's accounts room by a woman whose truck ought to have been on the other side of the river.

"She's not our enemy," he said on his way out.

"I'm aware."

"Good. Try not to speak to her as if she is."

Imogen watched him go. After a moment she entered a note beside the bonded fee: review possible medical release. Then she crossed it out. A pencil note was not a release, and the person who read the book after her would only wonder why she had written it.

At noon Corinne came to the bonded office with a handwritten note of her call to the clinic. She wanted to see the cargo, the temperature record, the fees, and the terms of release, in that order. Imogen met her at the stair and took her to the desk.

"You've seen the stock?" Corinne asked.

"This morning."

"It's under four?"

"Between three and five since we received it. You're welcome to inspect the log."

"I'd rather have it than inspect it."

"So would I, in your position."

"You're not in my position."

"No. I'm the person keeping it cold."

Corinne looked at her with a surprise so brief it might have been imagined. Imogen laid out the account: original toll, emergency assessment, inspection and storage, security held against the vehicle. She could have kept the numbers behind a counter, but there was no advantage in mystifying an angry person who had been sent from office to office for a day and a half.

Corinne read them in silence. When she reached the total she pushed the paper back.

"This is impossible."

"Under your current freight agreement, yes."

"Then you know it's impossible."

"I know that you can't recover it from that delivery. I don't know every other piece of your business."

"It's one truck. You can probably count every other piece."

Imogen let that pass. She showed her the column where the charges were assigned. The paper had been ruled by hand and corrected twice where someone had added incorrectly. Corinne traced it with a dirty finger.

"Where does the surcharge go?" she asked.

"Into crossing receipts."

"And then?"

"The bridge account, payroll, debt service, public commitments. The categories are reported to the board."

"You use it to pay the school."

"We use receipts to pay the school."

"Mine."

"Everyone's."

Corinne looked up. "That makes it better?"

Imogen had meant to say no, not exactly, then found she could not say what she meant without conceding more than she knew. If the crossing paid for it, someone had to decide whether the people stranded below the hill were being made to buy heat for children they had never met. Imogen had always thought of the money as town money once it reached her ledger. She had never needed to follow it back down the road.

"Come with me," she said.

She took Corinne through the bond room and let her inspect every seal. The goods were in good condition. The instrument showed a continuous local record. It was exactly the standard she would have demanded if the shipment were destined for her own clinic. Corinne inspected the cases carefully, pressing the corner of

one with her thumb as if making sure a child was awake beneath a blanket.

"Can I arrange a partial release?" Corinne asked.

"Possibly, if the receiving clinic accepts the division and the costs are settled."

"And does the board have the right to charge me for the time I've spent asking the board what I owe?"

Imogen did not answer at once. She could quote the regulation. It was not the same as answering the question.

"I can bring a discretionary release request to tomorrow's accounts meeting," she said.

"Does your father decide?"

"He chairs the board."

"That's what I thought."

They went back into the yard. A cart was bringing in sacks of flour, and men were calling measurements to one another as they lifted them. Beyond the gate the queue had grown so long that the rear vehicles were hidden around the rock shoulder. The whole arrangement could be seen from here: the paid labour at the store, the good cold room, the well-kept office, the growing line of people prevented from using the road. Corinne stopped and looked at it.

"You could just let the medicine through," she said.

"I can't just do that."

"Someone can."

"Yes," Imogen said. "Someone can."

She expected another argument. Instead Corinne asked whether Florence Bicknell really had a room over the back stair. Imogen said she did. Corinne nodded and asked whether the room was warm.

"Usually."

"Then I'll take it."

"You're staying?"

"Until I know what I'm paying for."

Corinne went down the lane. Imogen watched her stop at the end of the yard to help a porter resecure a loose strap on a load of metal rods. It was the unremarkable thing people did in a town all day. The porter thanked her and walked on. She continued toward Florence's place carrying the same folder of papers she had arrived with, and Imogen had the uncomfortable impression that the woman had made a decision more troublesome than shouting at an office counter.

She went upstairs and opened the crossing book again. The figures were still correct. She tried to work through the month's expenses with the emergency surcharge removed. The school boiler fell out of the calculation first. Then the reserve for bridge repairs. The pension payments would have to be reduced, which they had promised not to do. She made a second set of figures and a third, each less satisfactory than the last.

At the bottom of the page she drew a line, then another. It was a habit she had acquired from her father: a double line when a sum was complete. She stopped before the second one and looked at the single black stroke. She had made the book balance. That was what she had always been asked to do. It occurred to her now that balancing the book was not quite the same as settling the account.

She closed the ledger before the afternoon meeting and took the Haldane file with her.

PART TWO

The Prosperous Town

6

A *School with Heat*

On the ninth morning Corinne was given a bill for the storage of goods she had not been permitted to move. The clerk placed it on the counter without looking pleased about it. That was the way the Narrows did most of its unkindness. Nobody smiled while they did it. Nobody looked particularly ashamed.

She took the bill into the yard and stood beside the weighbridge reading it. A surcharge had been added for keeping the consignment in a monitored room. The room was being monitored whether her crates were in it or not. She had argued this on the third day, again on the fifth, and once yesterday with a man who had been setting the figures into a book for twenty years and was bored by the sound of his own replies. She could make the argument again or she could find the man at the clinic who had asked for an estimate of delivery.

She went uphill.

The upper terrace was only a quarter mile from the inspection house, but in the Narrows a quarter mile could change the price of breakfast. Down at the holding road, a bowl of soup was a day's generosity or an hour's wages, depending on who owned the wages. Up here a woman at the bakery put a broken roll into Corinne's hand because it would not sell whole. When Corinne reached for coins, the woman said it was yesterday's and went back to her oven.

The school stood beside a retaining wall of black stone. Water seeped between the courses and froze in pale ridges at night. There was a narrow door and a room beyond it lit by six tall windows, with benches pushed into uneven rows. Corinne had meant only to ask the school caretaker where the clinic kept its deliveries. Instead she stopped at the door because the children were singing.

They were not very good at it. Two boys at the front sang from different sheets, though the sheets were plainly identical. A small girl kept turning to make sure her friend was still beside her. The teacher, who had a conductor's patience and the face of somebody whose patience was nearly spent, made them begin again. Someone in the back forgot the second line and replaced it with an elaborate cough.

Corinne laughed before she could stop herself.

The teacher looked over. Corinne pointed at the corridor as though she had been caught entering a workshop with muddy boots. The teacher lifted one finger, finished the verse, and called for a break. The room dissolved instantly into noise. Children pressed out toward the yard. One collided with Corinne's knee, apologized without slowing, and vanished down the steps.

The school was warm. That was the first thing she had not noticed until she came in from the wind. Heat came from a long radiator under the windows, not from the little stoves she had seen in most outlying classrooms. It smelled of damp coats and paper and something baking in a room beyond the wall. The windows were glazed. The clocks worked. A rack of boots beside the door had each pair standing in its own place.

"Are you from the road?" the teacher asked.

"I am. I'm looking for the clinic stores."

"Along the wall, then right. You'll see the blue door." The teacher followed Corinne's eyes to the radiator. "It works most days. They put a new valve in last winter."

"A luxury."

“Try teaching spelling with six children wearing gloves.” The teacher gathered a stack of sheets into her arms. “We did it two winters ago. The writing was something terrible.”

“Who paid for the valve?”

The teacher’s expression altered, not much. “The board.”

“The crossing board.”

“There’s only one board that pays for anything expensive.” She seemed to regret the dryness immediately. “There’s a levy for it. That’s how they explain it.”

“To the children?”

“To their parents.”

Corinne looked at the empty benches. On one, a child had carved a very small fish into the wood and then scratched an apology beside it. The teacher was standing with the sheets clutched against her cardigan, waiting for an accusation. Corinne found she had none that would be fair to deliver here.

“The song was good,” she said.

“It was appalling. They know it. We are doing it for the clinic’s winter evening. You should hear them when they agree to sing in the same key.”

Corinne said she would come if she was still there. The teacher told her to bring dry socks; the hall floor was cold at night. It was a piece of ordinary advice, and Corinne carried it down the corridor with the irritation of someone who has been treated kindly by an institution she meant to despise.

At the clinic the worker took her docket and checked it against a list pinned beside the medicine cupboard. The receiving clinic across the gorge had confirmed the cold room’s monitoring and would accept the shipment if the temperature record remained intact. There were patients waiting for treatment, but the present delay had not yet made the stock useless. The original Thursday clinic had already been cancelled, at real cost: families had travelled and staff had lost their only shared date. The recipient was keeping

the cases on a replacement list, conditional on an unbroken refrigeration record. Some appointments could be moved. Some could not.

"Which ones can't?" Corinne asked.

The worker shook her head. "That's for their clinician to decide. I can tell you what I have been asked to tell the carriers. Every week you keep it here gives us less room for something else. We had to put a pallet of dressings in the washroom yesterday."

"I'm being charged to take up your space."

"You're being charged by the bonded store, not by us. I don't see the fee."

There was a tray of cups on the counter, with a chipped jug of water and a tin of biscuits. One had been taken apart by a child who had eaten its middle and left the edges. Corinne looked at it longer than a biscuit deserved.

"The upper school doesn't wait for heat," she said.

"Sometimes it does. Not often." The worker put her pen down. "I worked in one of the outer clinics before I came here. We burned old shelving to keep the treatment room warm one winter. It was a dreadful idea, and when the shelves were gone we had nowhere to keep the sterile packs. I came here because I could do the job properly."

"And now you're asking the people outside to pay for it."

"I'm asking for the stock to reach the people waiting for it." The worker gave back the docket. "You can quarrel with the board. Please don't make me the board."

Corinne apologized. She did it too quickly, as though the word were a small tool she could put down and leave behind. The worker accepted it and asked whether her truck had a stable auxiliary supply. They discussed the capacity of her little generator and the age of the insulated box, both of them relieved to be talking about things with actual screws.

On the terrace she found Imogen Pritchard standing outside the pension office with an envelope under one arm. Imogen wore a work coat over a good dress and had grease on her cuff, a detail Corinne mistrusted until she remembered seeing the warehouse door jam on its rail yesterday.

"Did you arrange the school visit?" Corinne asked.

Imogen stared at her. "No."

"It makes a very tidy argument for the levy."

"Children ought to have heat whether you visit them or not."

"And what if the neighbour whose truck you've impounded has children?"

"Then his children ought to have heat too."

"But they don't."

"I can't heat every school beyond the gorge."

"You could stop charging their parents to heat yours."

Imogen's mouth tightened. She looked past Corinne toward the school where the rehearsal had started again, this time with one boy an entire verse ahead of everyone else.

"You've seen the bills," she said. "Tell me which one you'd stop paying today. Not after a year of arguments and a new charter. This morning. Would you stop the coal delivery? Would you send the clinic nurse home? Would you delay the pensions?"

Corinne thought of the charge on the paper in her pocket, then of the queue down by the river. She had an answer about taking less. She was not certain how much less, or from whom. That was the maddening thing: the town had arranged its theft so that you could point at every recipient and find a reason not to hurt them.

"You make it sound as though there's only one way to collect money," she said.

"There may be another. I haven't seen one that balances."

"You've only looked inside the town."

Imogen looked at her then, properly. She seemed angry, but not because the accusation was foolish.

"And you've only looked from the road."

A coal wagon came around the corner behind them. Both stepped aside to let it pass. The driver called to Imogen that one sack had split and he would put the shortfall on his account. Imogen called back that the account already had three shortfalls on it and he ought to buy a better wagon. He laughed and drove on.

Corinne watched until the wagon disappeared. It was a little exchange between people who had known each other for years. On the road below, the same driver would have held a truck for a missing stamp.

She went downhill without finding a clever answer. That evening, when Florence asked what the school was like, Corinne said it was warm and the children sang badly. Florence nodded, pleased, and asked whether Corinne would like more potatoes. Corinne took them.

The winter rehearsal took place two nights later. Corinne attended because the teacher had said she could and because she could not bear another evening listening to drivers calculate the daily storage charge. Florence lent her a clean scarf and insisted it was a loan, not a gesture of goodwill.

The school hall was crowded with damp coats. A boy carried a wooden bench by one end while his mother carried the other, and neither would let the other choose the place to set it down. The caretaker moved through the room adjusting valves on the heating pipes. He stopped to listen to each one, sometimes with his cheek against the metal. His daughter was in the choir. She waved at him across the benches, and he pretended not to see until she gave up.

On the wall was a collection of children's pictures of the bridge. In almost every one it was enormous, larger than the town or the river. A few included the queue, represented by little boxes on the road. None showed a driver, except one drawing in which an orange figure leaned out of a truck and held up an object resembling a very large fish.

“That’s meant to be a parcel,” said the teacher, appearing beside Corinne. “He hasn’t yet mastered scale.”

“Neither has your crossing board.”

The teacher gave her a look. Then she laughed. “You lasted nearly four minutes without mentioning the bridge.”

The singing was bad and then, in the middle, surprisingly lovely. The children found the same note and held it for four whole beats before one started laughing. A grandmother in the front row cried anyway. Corinne applauded until her palms hurt. Beside her sat a man whose sleeves were rolled over hands marked by years of handling cable. He worked on the maintenance crew. He told her that his eldest boy had tried for a place in the district and been turned down because the journey cost more than a year’s wages.

“You think I approve of the new charges?” he asked, when he learned who she was. “I’ve a brother bringing feed through. His bill’s worse than yours.”

“Then why defend the board?”

“Because the last time the bridge stopped earning, they stopped paying the men who kept it open. I was one of them. You’ll find we’re all very brave about taking someone else’s risk.”

At the door, the teacher handed each child a small folded programme. The maintenance man’s daughter had printed their names with considerable care. Corinne kept hers, though she could not have explained why. She had come to see an institution paid for by the tolls. She left thinking of the boy turned away from the district, and of how the town’s good fortune had already made prisoners of its own children.

7

Measured Twice

Simon spent Wednesday morning beneath the weighbridge with his forearms in cold grit. Every time a lorry passed, fresh mud fell into the rollers. By noon he had cleared the plate twice and watched it stick a third time. A scale that gave a figure was useful only if somebody knew when that figure could be trusted.

Hugh came down with a can of oil, stopped at the plate, and asked Simon to bring the good tape. Neither mentioned the inspection form that Simon had hidden in his coat after their first argument. Simon was grateful for the silence and angry at himself for being grateful.

They checked the reference marks on the western connection. Hugh let Simon set the rule and call the readings. Twice Simon changed his position because the light caught the paint differently. On the third try Hugh said, “Write the number you can defend.”

“The paint’s lifting at the edge.”

“Then write that too.”

Simon put both observations in the notebook. Hugh watched him do it, then adjusted the lamp so that the next rivet head could be seen without moving the rule. It was an ordinary kindness, the sort the boy had once accepted without thinking.

A small service cart crossed overhead. They waited for the vibration to die. Hugh pointed out a narrow rust line beneath the stiffener and asked Simon what might cause it. Simon gave two possibilities. Hugh asked him for a third. For ten minutes they were apprentice and engineer again, quarreling over a piece of steel that neither could afford to misunderstand.

Back at the shed Simon found fresh gloves on his bench. His own were split at the knuckle. He tried them on. Hugh had chosen the right size.

“You’ll want those when the cold sets in,” Hugh said from the door.

“Are we measuring the west mark again tomorrow?”

“If the weather lets us.”

Simon looked at the ruled inspection book. He still had the carbon hidden in his coat, and he still wanted an honest entry beside the date. Hugh had turned to the cabinet and was searching for a gasket. The boy could ask again now and watch the morning close around them. Instead he wrote the reference readings in their proper column, hung the tape where it belonged, and went to fetch another brush.

At the end of the shift he put the new gloves on. The left cuff was still folded inside out. He turned it carefully, one finger at a time, before he went out into the rain.

8

The Old Compact

Florence had been looking for the winter blankets when she found the charter.

The blankets were in a chest under the stairs. They smelled of camphor and had been folded so long the creases seemed to have become part of the wool. Florence said that if Corinne wanted an extra one she could carry it upstairs herself, and Corinne said she had been carrying things for eight days and would be glad to carry something that belonged to her, if only for the night.

When they lifted the chest lid, there was a flat wooden box underneath the blankets, wide enough for papers and shallow enough to have been forgotten. Florence saw it and stopped talking. Her hand remained on the blanket she had pulled aside.

"What's that?" Corinne asked.

"Old nonsense," Florence said.

"You might have a use for it. I seem to have a lot of time."

Florence took the box out and set it on the kitchen table. It had a broken clasp repaired with a length of string, and a damp stain shaped like the river on the lid. Inside were receipts, minutes, folded notices, maps of the approach roads, and a bundle of correspondence tied with green cloth. Florence had kept the papers because

she disliked throwing away anything a stranger might later claim never existed.

The earliest minute was dated twenty years before. It recorded a meeting between the Narrows maintenance committee and representatives of the outer carriers and settlements. Under a paragraph about winter clearance were signatures, each beside a small notation identifying the signer's interest.

The compact was a mutual covenant: the Narrows maintained and collected for the crossing, but its charges required votes that included the communities using the road. Florence asked Corinne to read the governing line aloud.

Corinne recognized her father's handwriting before she read the name.

His writing was small and upright, the sevens crossed with a firm horizontal stroke. She knew it from fuel sums pinned above the kitchen sink and lists of bearings, flour, roof screws, and debts he never let himself forget. The same crossed sevens appeared beside his name on the agreement making the Narrows the collecting and maintenance authority for the crossing, subject to the votes of the communities using it.

"He signed this," she said.

Florence put the kettle on. "He was there."

"He helped give them the bridge."

"Not exactly. He helped keep it from falling into the river."

"Did he think this would work?" Corinne asked.

"He thought the bridge would last another five years without a proper repair, and he thought waiting for every town to agree on a bolt would use up most of them."

"So he handed it to Walter."

"Walter wasn't chairman then. His father was still alive, and there were more people at the table."

The later amendments were clipped behind it. One settlement had missed a vote; another accepted a one-winter discount when

its furnaces failed; a third postponed its seat pending an election that never came. Years of minutes were missing.

"Where are the rest?"

"Some in the board office. Some burned in a stove when the old office got wet. Some may be at other places."

"You kept the first one."

"I was asked to write the minutes."

"Then you knew."

Florence took two cups from the shelf. She moved the first out of the way of a wet patch on the table, then moved it back because the table was always wet there and the cup had never minded before.

"I knew what people agreed to that day. It isn't quite the same as knowing what they'd agree to in another twenty years."

"You saw the later papers."

"Some of them."

Corinne traced her father's signature. She remembered him complaining about the Narrows at the kitchen table, his boots under his chair and his elbows among the supper things. He had cursed the rates and the delays. He had never told her he had helped put the original arrangements in place.

"He wasn't a fool," she said.

"No. He certainly wasn't."

"Then why didn't he tell me?"

Florence sat opposite her, not quite at ease. "People tell their children the parts of their working lives they can bear to hear repeated. It's not always the whole of it."

"Can I take a copy?" she asked.

"You may copy it here. The original stays with me."

"Why?"

"Because I've kept it twenty years, and you're angry enough to put it through somebody's window."

Florence allowed her to make a copy but kept the original. Corinne worked until the kitchen went cold. On the copy she planned to show the drivers, she left her father's name out.

Before bed Florence carried the winter blanket up after all. Corinne said she could have managed it. Florence said she was sure of that, and went down without asking what Corinne meant to do about the signature.

That night in her cab, Corinne unfolded her copy again. Her father's signature occupied less than an inch.

He had taught her to back a trailer in the rain. Their rule had been that you got out and looked before making a correction you could not undo. He called it wasting time properly. She could still hear him saying it while she stood beside a blocked farm gate at fourteen, furious because he would not tell her which way to turn the wheel. He would stand in the mud with his arms folded and make her work it out.

Later, when business was bad, he had taken every profitable load that came his way. He paid his mechanics before himself, and spoke contemptuously of men who left bills in other people's hands. He also came home from negotiations delighted when he had secured an advantage from someone slower to calculate. Corinne had loved that delight. He made the world seem winnable.

She unfolded another page of the compact and saw where the founding signatories had written about shared inspection costs. Her father's contribution had been a proposal that carriers pay by laden axle rather than by journey. It was sensible. It meant heavy hauliers couldn't shelter behind light ones. The later exemption for preferred carriers had been added in a different hand.

Late in his life, when a rival carrier stopped coming to their yard, he had called the man careless. Corinne had taken the preferred work herself and kept silent.

At dawn she went into Florence's kitchen to return the copy. Florence was trimming burnt crust from yesterday's loaves.

"Was he a good man?" Corinne asked.

Florence considered the question longer than Corinne expected. "He lent money with no interest to people who couldn't borrow it elsewhere. He also made sure his trucks were always first on the list. Both things were true on the same morning."

"That doesn't help."

"It wasn't meant to."

Corinne watched the knife scrape against the board. The bread was still edible beneath the black edges. Florence set the trimmed pieces aside for soup. Corinne took the papers back to her truck and put them under the seat, where she would have to move them each time she fetched her tools.

9

Preferred Carriers

The preferred carriers went through at dawn, and Corinne watched them from Florence's back step with a mug of tea going cold in her hand.

There were seven that morning. They came down the upper approach one at a time, a few minutes apart, and each one slowed at the inspection house and showed the man at the barrier a small tin disc hanging from the mirror. He lifted the pole without leaving his stool. The trucks rang over the bridge and were gone into the fog on the far side, and the queue, which had been stirring and coughing for an hour, went quiet while they passed. It was not resentment, exactly. It was the silence of people being reminded of their place in a line.

She had counted the discs on the first morning without understanding them. Now she knew what they were. The discs were numbered, and the numbers were in a book in the bond office, and the book was in Imogen's handwriting.

"Seven," said Florence behind her. She had come out with a cloth over her arm and the look of a woman who hadn't slept either. "Eight yesterday. Nine the day before. They're thinning out."

"Why?"

"They've been told the winter will be hard. Some are staying home to be safe." Florence took the cold tea out of Corinne's hand and gave her a hot one. "Imogen asked for you. She sent the boy at six. I said you'd be up."

"What does she want?"

"I'm not in the habit of reading other people's post." Florence went back inside. "Wear your good jacket."

• • •

The special rate was offered in a room so ordinary that Corinne almost missed what was being asked of her.

There was an ink stain on the desk, a stove burning too hot under a rack of damp coats, and a calendar of bridge inspections pinned beside a list of people who owed warehouse rent. Imogen had cleared a place among the papers and put a page in front of her. The figures were considerably better than the ones Corinne had brought in the week before.

"It covers the bond charge?" Corinne asked.

"It reduces it. It doesn't erase storage already incurred."

"And the inspection fee?"

"Waived for the present consignment."

"The emergency levy?"

"Half the published rate for six months."

Corinne read on. In exchange she would handle an assigned share of her return loads through the Narrows stores, use the approved dispatch queue, and decline work from competing crossing agents along the southern road. The contract was written as a favour to an established independent. It would have made the truck payment easy, kept her customer from defaulting, and given her regular work through the winter.

"Why me?"

"Because you have one truck and a record of delivering what you say you'll deliver. Because the board needs reliable carriers. Because I'd rather have the goods moving than piling up in my cold room."

"And because I made a nuisance of myself."

"That part hasn't helped."

Corinne put down the page. "How many people already have one of these?"

"Several."

"How many of the people in the road?"

"Not everyone qualifies."

"That's the point, isn't it?"

Imogen's reply was tired, not defensive. "The point is to secure loads and predictable receipts. You wouldn't lend your truck to someone with no timetable and a promise written in steam."

"I wouldn't charge him ten times the rate for waiting, either."

"No. You'd just refuse him." Imogen turned the page back toward herself and squared it against the edge of the desk. "We don't have the luxury of refusing. We have a clinic."

Corinne did not answer. She had been about to say something sharp, and the clinic had come into the room like a third person, and the sharpness had nowhere to go.

"Is there a vote on it?" she asked.

"The board approves standard carrier terms."

"With representatives from the outside towns?"

"The current board, Corinne."

"That's not what I asked."

Imogen put her palms on the edge of the desk. "You know who sits on the board."

"I've seen an old list."

"Then you know I can't restore old seats by signing a freight contract."

"No. But you can buy a carrier."

"You came here asking to get through with your goods. I'm offering you a way."

It was true, and it irritated Corinne that the offer had been calculated so precisely. Imogen had understood the size of her debt and the cost of waiting. She had even left enough dignity in the wording to let Corinne pretend she had negotiated a good rate. The paper lay waiting for a signature. With one stroke of a pen she could stop sleeping in Florence's back room and stop fretting over a truck that cost money while it sat still.

"My answer is no," she said.

Imogen did not look surprised. "You should think about it another night."

"If I think about it, I might sign."

"That wouldn't be the worst thing in the world."

"It would be a worse thing for somebody else."

She rose before Imogen could answer. Down in the yard a line of men was rolling a pallet into the store. One had torn his coat and another was making a generous performance of not laughing at it. They looked tired and busy and entirely unaware of the moral drama being enacted over a sheet of paper on the floor above them. Corinne envied them for half a minute.

At the stair Imogen called after her. "The rate won't stay open indefinitely."

"Nothing here does," Corinne said, and regretted the easy line as soon as it left her mouth.

• • •

She went down to the lower road, where her truck stood among vehicles coated in the same fine grit. A driver she knew by sight was repairing a coupling with a length of wire. She helped him hold the part steady. He asked whether she had managed to bring her fees down.

"They offered me a contract," she said.

"Lucky you."

"I didn't take it."

He let go of the coupling and stared at her. "Then you're a fool."

She could not tell him why without sounding virtuous, which was the last thing she felt. She helped him finish the repair and went to look at her tyres. The tread on the rear left had worn more than she'd thought. She wrote it down.

At noon a woman from the queue came along the line with a paper bag of buns and a list of names, collecting for a driver whose wife had been taken ill on the far side. She stopped at Corinne's window. Corinne gave her what she had in her pocket. The woman wrote the name and the amount in pencil, and under the amount, a little apologetically, the word *preferred*, and then looked at what she had written and crossed it out.

"Habit," she said. "Everyone's got a column for it now."

• • •

That night, in the back room at Florence's, Corinne took the docket out of her coat and read the instalment date again. Thursday week. She thought of the rate card in Imogen's room and the number at the bottom, and knew she could have the number back by morning.

Then, because the room was quiet and she had stopped guarding herself, she let herself remember the other time.

It had been a smaller crossing, three days down the freight road, a ford with a plank bridge and a gatehouse built of old railway sleepers. She had been twenty-six and her truck had needed an engine. A man at the gate had slid a card across to her at the end of a long wait, with a figure on it that was lower than any she had been offered in her life. *Preferred return rate. Subject to conditions.* She had not read the conditions. She had read the figure, and thought about the new engine, and signed.

For eleven months she had gone back and forth across that ford with a full load each way, and she had been, for the first time in her

life, almost comfortable. She had bought a new tyre without borrowing. She had bought a flask. She had noticed, because it was not possible not to notice, that the other drivers on that road were coming back empty, and that the man in the old Bedford van who had waited beside her at the gate every second week had stopped waiting. A year later she had seen his van on blocks behind a repair yard, its windows white with dust, a hen asleep on the bonnet.

She had told herself he might have done the same in her place. She had told herself that so many times it had worn smooth, like a stone in a pocket.

She put the docket back in her coat. On the other side of the thin wall the old house ticked as it cooled. Somewhere up on the terrace a bell rang a single stroke for an hour no one had asked about.

There were other ways of being bought, she thought, including the simple one of needing money on Thursday. She turned the lamp down and lay awake listening to the bridge, which went on humming in the cold, as if some enormous wire had been struck and was still deciding whether to stop.

10

Supper at the Upper House

Walter Pritchard had invited Corinne to supper twice before she accepted. The first time she had assumed it was an effort to soften her. The second time she had been hungry and angry enough to refuse out of principle. By the third invitation Florence told her that there was no virtue in letting Walter eat her share of a roast.

The upper house was a wide, low building with a covered side porch, a wood pile stacked with the care of somebody who could not bear to see a leaning line, and a front step worn smooth at the middle. Walter answered the door himself in shirtsleeves. He took her coat and showed her the pegs, then asked whether the truck had been starting properly in the cold.

"Mostly."

"That's a dangerous answer from a haulier."

"It's the only honest one."

Walter smiled. "Good. We've room for one honest answer in this house."

Imogen was in the kitchen trying to rescue a saucepan whose contents had stuck. Her father had insisted on preparing the meal and then had left it while he went to inspect a delivery of coal. The result smelled of onions and burned meat. Corinne took the wooden spoon from Imogen, scraped the bottom, and announced that

nobody should tell the cook what she'd seen. Imogen laughed, abruptly and with evident relief.

Before supper Walter took Imogen into the kitchen to check the coal deliveries, leaving Corinne alone in the sitting room. The mantel carried no trophies, only a dented brass clock and photographs in mismatched frames. One showed a younger Walter and a girl beside a bridge pier, both coated in white dust. The girl held a spanner nearly as long as her forearm. In another, Imogen stood outside the warehouse on a winter day with three workers, all laughing at something the photographer had missed.

When they returned, Imogen was irritated. "You promised the coal merchant the Tuesday slot."

"I promised we'd try to find him the Tuesday slot."

"You wrote Tuesday on the kitchen slate."

"That's where I write things I'm trying to remember."

"That's where you've written every delivery since I was six."

Walter went to erase the word. Imogen took the chalk away from him and wrote a question mark beside it instead. Corinne was surprised to see that the motion made him laugh.

Walter laid out the plates. The watch captain arrived a little later with wet boots and a small parcel for Imogen, which proved to contain the replacement latch for the bond office door. Walter urged him to sit and eat. He declined a second helping when it was offered, saying he had to see that the payments for the old watchmen went out before first of the month. His brother's pension, he added, was among them. Walter told him to stop treating a ledger like a sick child. The captain said a sick child at least complained aloud and went back for a piece of bread.

They spoke of the weather, a cracked drain on the upper road, and the trouble of keeping a roof over the school hall. Walter told a long story about the winter a fuel convoy had been trapped beyond the ridge, when the Narrows had paid to bring in coal at three times its ordinary cost rather than close the clinic. He described the

drivers who had made the run, the way the roads looked after the freezing rain, and the woman in the clinic who had kept a little stove burning with chair legs while the heating plant failed.

Corinne could see Imogen watching her father. She had heard this story before. She also knew he had told it well.

Dinner was a stew made with cheap beef and an unreasonable amount of root vegetables. They argued about whether a neighbour's goose had escaped or been stolen, and whether Walter was still entitled to call himself a decent musician after refusing to touch the old piano for ten years. Imogen told a story about him trying to fix a leaky barrel during a wedding breakfast and flooding an entire pantry. Walter disputed every detail except the flood.

Corinne had not expected to enjoy herself. She found herself doing it and resented them a little for making it possible.

"And who paid?" Corinne asked when he was finished.

"We did."

"The town."

"The crossing account. We borrowed against two years of traffic and repaid it in three. It was ugly. We kept the doors open."

"At what rate to the people outside?"

Walter folded his napkin beside his plate. "What would you have done?"

"I'd have asked the users to vote."

"With the clinic going cold that afternoon? Who exactly would you have waited for? The representatives who couldn't reach us because the road was closed?"

"That's a bad year, Walter. You can't use one winter to decide twenty."

"I can use it to decide that a system which has no authority to act in an emergency is not a system worth having."

"You have authority to act every morning. You charge an emergency fee when the sun's out."

"The sun isn't a structural inspection."

"Neither is a stamp on a form."

Something tightened in the room. Imogen set down her fork. The captain looked at the food on his plate as if a very interesting feature had appeared there. Walter's face stayed pleasant, but he no longer touched his glass.

"Has somebody told you a form is false?" he asked.

"I've seen charges. I'm asking why they stay when the emergency changes."

"Because bridge repairs are not paid for by the moment they become necessary. We save for the thing we hope not to need."

Corinne glanced at Imogen. "How much gets saved?"

Walter's eyes followed hers. "Enough that we've had a bridge every year you've been driving across it."

It was a good answer at table and a poor answer to an account. Corinne knew both things at once. She wished she'd brought numbers, not indignation. Walter had the advantage of somebody who knew exactly what the children in the upper school cost to heat. She had the numbers on her invoice and not the others.

When Imogen went to fetch the pudding, Walter rose to refill the stove and caught his sleeve on a nail. He cursed with more imagination than dignity. Corinne laughed. He looked at her with an injured expression, then laughed too. For a moment she saw what it must have been like to grow up in this house, where a child could contradict a powerful man without being punished for it.

After the captain went home Walter brought out apples cooked with oats. He asked Corinne whether her father had taught her to drive. She said he had taught her to reverse a trailer, which was not the same thing. Walter laughed and told a story about her father backing a truck into the only stone post on a long empty yard, then denying the post had been there before. Corinne laughed too. She remembered the dent.

Later, as they moved the dishes to the kitchen, Imogen found a small envelope tucked behind the clock. Inside was a faded school

report and the original note from a teacher recommending her for work beyond the Narrows. She read it with her mouth tightening.

"You kept this?" she asked.

"Of course."

"You never mentioned that I had been offered the place."

"I told you they wanted you."

"You said it couldn't be afforded."

"That was true."

She replaced the note in the envelope and carried the plates to the sink. Corinne understood then that Walter's account of sacrifice included the futures of people he loved most, and that Imogen had spent her adulthood making those sacrifices look like choices. The evening continued politely. The coal merchant remained written on the slate with a question mark beside his name.

"He was good at making arrangements," Walter said after the plates had been cleared.

"Apparently."

"He understood that a road needed somebody to answer for it."

"He thought the people using it should have a say."

Walter regarded her. "He understood the cost of pretending everyone could have everything they wanted."

"It's possible to disagree without pretending."

"Of course. Then bring me a scheme that keeps the bridge open, pays the workers, and does not send the clinic back to burning furniture. You bring it, and I'll listen."

Corinne wanted to say that it was not her job. She had come to deliver medicine, not to administer a town. But he was asking a question she couldn't answer by pointing at the injustice. The real accounts were in Imogen's office. A repair was overdue somewhere inside the bridge. The queue had people in it who were losing their businesses as she ate.

When she stood to go, Walter helped her with her coat. He did it with the ease of a man who had given hundreds of guests a decent supper and expected to do so again.

"You've been here too long," he said quietly, at the door. "You're going to cost yourself more than you can afford."

"You could let the medicine through."

"You could sign the contract."

Outside, the cold hit her face hard enough to make her eyes water. She walked the upper road slowly. The house windows were warm behind her. Somewhere down on the bridge, a truck was being allowed through, and the sound of it reached the hill as a thin clatter over the river.

Florence had left a lamp burning by the stairs. Corinne sat at the kitchen table without taking off her coat and began a list of everything Walter had asked her to pay for, and everything he had declined to show her. It was a poor list. She crossed out the first line and started again.

11

The Cooperative

The ruined cooperative occupied a yard beyond the lower road, an hour on foot from the Narrows if the rain held off. Corinne borrowed a bicycle from Florence, whose only condition was that she bring it home with the same number of wheels. The rear tyre was soft and the chain made a noise like a spoon rattling in a drawer. Corinne rode it anyway.

The yard had once been busy enough to employ eleven drivers and two mechanics. There were faded numbers over the loading bays, and hooks under a covered platform where ropes had hung. A shed door moved in the wind. The office windows were boarded inside, not outside, suggesting someone had tried to keep the place respectable until the last possible day.

A former carrier had agreed to meet her there. He was a broad man with a bad knee and a face reddened by years of open cabs. He had kept the cooperative's books after everyone else had stopped wanting to look at them. Corinne knew him from freight runs years before, when the cooperative could fill a line of trucks at dawn and still have a pair waiting for a late job.

He opened the office with a key that stuck. Inside the air smelled of mouse droppings, old paper, and fuel that had seeped into concrete. There was a photograph on the wall showing drivers in mis-

matched coats beside a new vehicle. Somebody had written the date on the frame. The truck in the picture had since been sold for parts.

"Why did it close?" Corinne asked.

"Ask Walter. He tells it better."

"I'm asking you."

The man pulled out three ledgers, each less complete than the one before. He did not offer a theory. He showed her the rates.

The cooperative had grouped small loads to share the cost of journeys. Then preferred carriers took its reliable work. New inspection delays made the remaining contracts impossible to price.

Simon copied the fee dates into the margin of his working sheet, leaving an empty space beside every inspection he could not verify. The blank spaces bothered him more than the large figures.

"We thought our customers would stay with us," the man said. "Some did. They paid for it. Others couldn't."

The records showed inspection and bonded fees rising while the ordinary maintenance charge stayed flat. Loads missed markets, and the losses arrived weeks after the bills.

"They didn't put us out of business in a week," he said. "That would have been easier to fight. They made us unreliable. We lost the work because nobody could count on us to arrive."

Corinne ran a finger down the last page. The drivers had kept their wages for two months after the cooperative stopped earning enough to pay them. Then wages were reduced. Then the mechanics left. By the time the company signed a temporary rate agreement it had too few vehicles to meet the agreement's minimum loads.

"Why didn't you tell the other towns?" Corinne asked.

"We did. They said the rates were the same for everyone who qualified. They said we ought to qualify."

He took her outside and showed her where the fuel pump had been. A circular stain darkened the concrete. Two children from the neighbouring cottages were playing a game among the empty wheel

rims, stepping from one to another without touching the ground. The former carrier watched them, then turned away.

"There was a year when we were the ones who could do it cheapest," he said. "We bought two trucks from a man in difficulty and paid less than their value. I called it business. Perhaps I still would. But I didn't tell him he couldn't cross a bridge until he sold to me."

She returned the bicycle to Florence with both wheels, though the front brake had begun to fail on the descent. Florence said that was an improvement because the brake had been useless before. Then she asked what the cooperative had told her.

"They were made to fail," Corinne said.

Florence sat down. "They weren't the first to say that."

Two days after visiting the cooperative, Corinne stopped at the lower fuel stand to buy enough diesel to keep her truck ready. A heavy haulier named Clive Tansley was arguing over a loading ticket with his travelling companion. He had red hair going grey at the temples and an old burn scar on the back of his wrist. He called everyone sweetheart without regard to age or sex. The companion called him an idiot with the familiarity of a man who had been saving him from himself for twenty years.

The haulier had bought a consignment from a yard upriver. Its declared weight was twenty-eight tonnes. Corinne watched him compare the written figure to the way the loaded suspension sat almost on its stops.

"That's a heavy twenty-eight," she said.

"It's what the yard certified." He tapped the page. "I don't own the scales."

His companion said the springs had been tired since spring and that a bent mudguard made the load look worse than it was. Neither sounded persuaded. The haulier had a daughter living beyond the gorge who was expecting her first child. He had been trying to cross

for nine days. He would miss the birth if the Narrows kept moving his slot.

"You could go round," Corinne said.

"With this load? I'd be halfway home by next summer." He grinned, then looked at the suspension again. "I'll ask them to weigh it here."

He bought her a cup of bitter tea because her fuel card had been refused and she had spent her last coins on diesel. He complained about the price of the tea and gave her a pastry he said he couldn't eat because his doctor had told him to be sensible. The companion laughed aloud.

At the inspection office the clerk accepted Clive's declared ticket without reweighing the truck. Corinne noticed the new figures added in a different hand. She asked Clive's companion to retain the original load notes.

"You believed them?"

"I believed they couldn't make a living. I wasn't sure who had made it impossible."

"You are now."

Florence looked toward the window, where evening was putting the upper houses into shadow. "I have been sure of more than one thing in this town and later found I knew half of it. Bring me the papers."

Corinne and Florence placed the cooperative figures beside the charter amendments. Each alteration had been presented as temporary relief to one settlement; together they had erased the outside vote.

"They'd have had to vote for this," Corinne said.

"Someone did."

"Not all the towns."

"Not all at once."

"I want the drivers in a room," Corinne said.

Florence put her spectacles on the table. “What will you ask them to do?”

“Listen to what they’ve paid for. Listen to what happened to the cooperative. Decide whether they’ll stand together.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then at least they’ll have heard it.”

Florence made an impatient sound. “Hearing a thing isn’t the same as being able to afford it. Some of those people will have their trucks taken if they miss another load.”

“Mine too.”

“Then don’t pretend the meeting will cost everybody the same.”

She reopened the charter to her father’s crossed sevens. Florence saw her looking but waited while she folded it again.

“I’m going to call it anyway,” she said.

Before she took the notice down to the road, Corinne tried the wired telephone in the hall. Florence could hear a person speaking from the other end, but she turned up the stove and pretended otherwise. The connection crackled through two false starts before the south-junction tyre shop answered. Corinne recognized the sound of a wheel gun in the background. Her oldest friend was working late again.

“You’ve found yourself a bridge,” the woman said when she heard where Corinne was. “You planning to buy it?”

“I might be able to afford a nail.”

“Come work here. I’ll clear the other bench. You know I will.”

Corinne pressed her forehead to the cool plaster beside the telephone. She could picture the shop: the crooked rack of rims, the kettle with its missing handle, the two dogs who slept where customers needed to stand. She had spent three days there after her father’s funeral, sorting his tools into boxes while her friend made up repair jobs to keep her from having to go home. They had never spoken about the kindness. Corinne had made a joke about the wages and left before the fourth morning.

"I've still got a delivery," she said.

"You've had that delivery for weeks."

"The medicine is safe."

"I asked whether you were."

Corinne found a crack in the wall paint and followed it with her thumbnail. She was thirty-two and owed money on a truck her father had told her not to buy. He had helped inspect it anyway, had put his head underneath and announced that the gearbox was a gambler's proposition. Then he had written the first repayment figure in his little upright hand, crossing the seven as if putting a gate across it. He had not offered to pay. She had loved him for both decisions, though at the time she had complained about the second.

"I'm all right," she said.

"That's not what you sound like."

It would have been easy to tell her friend about Walter, the charges, the charter. It was harder to say that she had known the preferred rates were hurting other hauliers and had taken them anyway. Harder still to say she was frightened of coming home with no truck and no excuse. She could hear the wheel gun stop. Someone in the shop must have put a hand up to ask for quiet.

"I might need a place to sleep when I get back," Corinne said at last. "Just a night. I don't want a job offered with it."

"Then you'll get a blanket and the bad sofa. The job's there another day."

Corinne thanked her and hung up before the offer could become a promise. Florence came in with another lamp. She looked at the telephone and then at Corinne's face, and asked only whether the southern line was still working. Corinne said it was. She picked up the meeting notice and went to fasten it where the waiting drivers would see it.

By supper there was a notice at the lower road inviting carriers to Florence Bicknell's house after the next day's shift. Corinne wrote it herself. She did not put her father's name on it. She did not put her

own past rate on it either. She knew both things would have to come out, and for one more evening she allowed herself to hope they might come out in an order she could survive.

PART THREE

The Road Belongs to Us

12

Drivers' Meeting

At six o'clock Florence had moved the long dining table against the window and put another one end to end with it. At seven there were fourteen drivers in the room and three more standing in the passage, and at twenty past seven there were fewer than that, because two men had looked at the others and decided the evening was not going to be worth the trouble.

Corinne could not blame them. A meeting had no cash value. The storage charges on her medical cargo would rise at midnight whether she persuaded anyone or not.

She had arranged the papers into three piles. The published charges, the priority notices, and the cooperative's accounts. Florence had supplied pencils on bits of string and a jug of water, though no glasses had survived the rush from her kitchen. People drank from their own mugs. The room smelled of damp wool, engine oil, and the onions cooking downstairs.

A woman with a split thumbnail said her fuel account would be frozen if she missed the following morning's assigned crossing. A man with a trailer full of roof sheeting said he would happily sign anything if it meant nobody damaged the bridge. Someone else asked whether the meeting was meant to persuade Walter to cut

the toll or to overthrow him. These were different undertakings. Corinne had no clean answer for either.

"I'm asking for the rates to be explained," she said. "And for people who use the road to have a say in the restrictions."

"There's a board," said the roof-sheeting man.

"There is a room called the board. That's not the same thing."

He laughed unwillingly. Other people did not.

She put the cooperative's figures on the table, with the entries laid beside the notices that had delayed its trucks. The former cooperative carrier stood at the door, one hand holding his troublesome knee. He had come despite saying he would not. He pointed to a line on the page and told them what a missed market had cost in wages. It was a small amount compared with the bridge's annual receipts. It was enough to put a mechanic behind on his rent.

Then the room began doing what she had hoped it would do. People recognized their own charges and their own waits. They compared dates. They began to say things to one another rather than to Corinne. One preferred carrier, who had taken his cap off when he entered and kept turning it in his hands, said the cooperative had been badly managed and that his own trucks had crossed on time because he maintained them. The former carrier asked whether he had also maintained the inspection schedule.

The man looked at Corinne instead.

"You carried on a preferred return rate yourself," he said. "At the south junction. You took the empty-leg allowance for exclusive loads. I saw the contracts. There's a younger lad spent three months bidding after you, and he never got a trip."

Corinne felt Florence stop moving plates behind her. For a moment the principal sound in the room was a spoon being stirred against enamel.

"That was different," Corinne said, and understood at once what an excellent gift she had made him.

"How?"

"The road wasn't closed to anybody."

"No. Only the freight was gone when they got there."

A driver by the stove said he remembered that arrangement. Another asked what return rate she had received. Corinne could give them a figure or she could leave. The figure came slowly, because speaking it made it real in a way that the memory had not been.

She had received enough to keep the truck paid during a lean winter. She said so. The preferred carrier asked whether that made it fair.

"No," she said. "It made it useful to me."

"I signed," she said. "The drivers who didn't get the return loads took the loss. I didn't ask what happened to them. That's the whole of it."

"Then why are we listening to you?" said the woman with the split thumbnail.

"Maybe you shouldn't." Corinne took the cooperative's page and pushed it toward her. "You can still read this."

Walter's defender said everybody accepted favourable rates. The former cooperative carrier answered that ordinary competition was not the same as a crossing office deciding who could compete. The room argued without waiting for Corinne to chair it.

At nine a driver whose payment was due at dawn left with an apology, and four more went with him. A woman carrying parts to a clinic said she would let her name stand on a joint request, provided there was no promise to block the road. Two men agreed to ask the surrounding settlements for delegates. The preferred carrier would sign nothing. He took one copy of the figures to show his dispatcher, which might have been a better outcome than his signature.

Florence fetched the onions and bread. Everyone ate standing, with their papers spread over the table. The former cooperative carrier told Corinne she had done herself no favours.

"No," she said. "I haven't."

"You're staying?"

“My cargo’s still here.”

“That wasn’t the question.”

“I’m staying,” she said.

Afterward Florence counted five firm signatures and three conditional ones. Corinne had expected a coalition. She had eight uncertain allies.

Florence counted the mugs and said they were missing one. A moment later she found it outside on the step, still warm. Someone had set it where they would be sure to see it on their way back. The care of that small act was harder to bear than the insults.

The next afternoon Corinne found the woman with the split thumbnail beneath her trailer, working on a brake. Corinne held a light while she tightened a stubborn bolt. Neither mentioned the petition while they worked.

When the woman climbed out, her face had a crescent of grease beside one ear. She asked whether Corinne had come to persuade her to put her name on the petition.

“No. I thought you should know the meeting wasn’t a trick to get your load blocked.”

“You told people not to trust you.”

“I told them why not.”

“Same thing, sometimes.” She wiped her hands on a rag and looked at the packed vehicles along the road. “My daughter was meant to get married on Saturday. I was meant to be home on Thursday. The family keep asking whether to delay the meal. I told them to eat without me if they have to. They think I’m being brave.”

“What are you being?”

“Cross.” She handed Corinne the light. “I was against the petition because the road must stay open. Now the bridge is open and I still can’t use it. That’s not much of an argument in favour of things as they are.”

She would not sign. She said she would carry copies of the accounts to her destination if she crossed, and tell people where to

send their representatives. Corinne took the offer. It was more useful than agreement shouted in a crowded room.

At dusk the former cooperative driver came by her truck with two wheels balanced in the back of a handcart. His knee was troubling him. He stopped to ask if she had ever spoken to the younger driver whose work she'd taken on the preferred rate.

"No."

"He's at the south junction now. He works in a sawmill. Doesn't drive."

"He kept his licence for two years," the man went on. "Paid the renewal while he was cutting boards. Thought the freight would come back."

"I'll speak to him."

"Don't do it so you'll feel better. He might not want to."

After he left, Corinne sat in the cab with her account book open to a blank page. The names she could remember filled four lines. She left room beneath them for the names she had never bothered to learn.

On the lower road Clive Tansley had left the engine cover open on his heavy truck, with his companion standing on the tyre to reach a stubborn clamp. Corinne stopped to hand up a spanner. Clive took it, looked at her, and set it beside the engine without using it.

"You gave them something to talk about in Florence's room," he said.

"I gave them the truth."

"Those aren't always different things." He tightened the clamp with his own tool. "My girl says the baby's coming early. Third time she's sent word. I could make that drive in a day if the bridge opened."

"Can she get someone there?"

"Her sister's with her. There's a midwife. It's not that." He got down from the tyre, all elbows and impatience, and wiped his hands on his trousers. "I told her I'd be there this time."

His companion said nothing, but after a moment he took a small folded square from his breast pocket. On it was a list of fuel stops, each scored through except the last. The two of them had been making their way on diminished supplies for a fortnight. Clive explained that they were carrying more than their own goods: three carriers had combined loads to save a journey after the toll increase. The ticket had been made for the original load, and the last additions had been marked in pencil. He looked vaguely ashamed of the state of it.

"We should run it over the scales again," Corinne said.

"Every time I ask, they tell me to wait for permission. The inspector says the ticket is the ticket." Clive glanced toward the bridge. "You tell them their notice is crooked, and they'll say the whole rule is crooked."

"The paper is crooked," she said. "That doesn't tell us what the steel will take."

He watched her a long moment and then laughed without pleasure. "Try telling my girl that. Try explaining why I stayed on this bank because a man had a bad date on a form."

Corinne wanted to offer him her place in the queue, useless as it was. Instead she pointed at the handwritten additions and told his companion to keep them in the load book. The man folded the paper carefully and returned it to his pocket. Clive asked whether she was coming to supper. There was a pot on the stove, he said, and they would make it feed one more. Corinne said she had papers to copy. He told her that paper did not keep anybody warm and went to find a dry match.

13

The Cost of a Vote

The old minutes were not in the charter envelope. Florence had been wrong about that, which annoyed her more than the significance of finding them elsewhere pleased her. She searched under the stairs, then the cupboard behind the range, and finally came up from the cellar with a biscuit tin with a dented lid and two dead insects caught beneath the rim.

"Don't tell anyone I keep public records next to the coal," she said.

Corinne had spent the morning answering questions about the drivers' meeting. Florence produced a tin of old minutes from beside the coal.

Inside the tin were notices, receipts, and minutes written in half a dozen hands over twenty years. Some were signed by outside delegates. Later sheets carried their names but no signatures. The rules had allowed votes by absence if the annual dues were paid. Then a winter agreement reduced those dues for any community willing to leave its seat empty for three consecutive meetings. A later amendment counted unused seats toward the Narrows quorum.

"Why would they give away the votes?" she asked.

"Because they wanted a crossing in February," Florence said. "There had been ice damage. The repair bill was larger than anyone

could manage. Someone offered a cut in fees for two years if the others would let the town act quickly."

"Walter?"

"He was younger then. It wasn't all his idea."

"Whose?"

Florence tipped the lid of the tin back and forth. It made a sharp metal click. "Mine, in part."

Corinne waited. Florence did not seem inclined to say more unless she was made to.

"There was a child who needed the road that winter," she said at last. "A girl of six with an ear that wouldn't stop. The clinic on this side had the one doctor, and the people on the west road had refused a new loan and wouldn't come back to vote. I went to the delegate from the lower valley. I sat in his kitchen and asked him to accept the temporary arrangement." She put the lid down. "He had a daughter of his own. I knew he would."

"Did you read the amendments?"

"Of course. I was proud to understand them."

"And the later ones?"

"I was keeping a house. Then there were other emergencies. One can be busy for twenty years without ever having a year in which nothing is urgent."

The original compact gave contributors seats and required outside approval for principal charges. The later discounts purchased those seats one winter at a time.

"It shouldn't have survived a challenge," Corinne said.

"There was no one left who could afford to challenge it."

"Why didn't you?"

"I did, once." Florence picked a dead insect out of the lid with the point of a knife. "I stood up at a meeting and said the seats ought to be refilled. Walter said, quite fairly, that nobody was coming. Then a pipe burst in the school and I forgot what I'd said."

She flicked the insect into the stove, and it hissed.

• • •

They took the minutes down to the lower road. The drivers who had signed the request were waiting near the water point, and two others came over because papers drew curiosity as reliably as an open bonnet. Corinne explained the voting changes without Florence speaking for her. She showed the original signatures. She told them whose writing was beside the outside-carrier seat.

"My father's."

A driver looked at her as though this confirmed something he had suspected. Another asked whether her father had approved the present tolls.

"He died before most of these changes," Corinne said. "He agreed to the arrangement that let them happen. I can't tell you what he'd have done when it went wrong."

"You could say he'd have fought it," the woman with the split thumbnail said.

"I could. I don't know."

The woman examined the charter. "He had a vote, then."

"Yes."

"And he signed away ours?"

"He signed for a road shared by its users. The votes were given away afterward. That doesn't make his signature disappear."

Someone asked whether the outside communities could reclaim their seats. Florence said the charter survived, but the amendments would be contested.

"So what do we do?" the woman with the thumbnail asked.

"Ask for what the charter says," Corinne said. "Not for a favour. For the meeting it requires."

"And if they say no?"

"Then they'll have to say it in writing."

The woman looked at her for a long time. "Your father wrote the thing," she said. "You'll have to excuse us if we wait to see which way you jump."

"I'd do the same."

By afternoon the drivers had drafted a demand for independent inspection, open accounts, and a meeting under the original charter. The woman with the split thumbnail offered to present it. Corinne gave her the papers and signed beneath the other witnesses, not as a delegate. The woman studied the signature before accepting the packet. Corinne had wanted to lead them; she would have to earn permission to help instead.

• • •

Corinne accompanied the carrier representative to the bond office. Imogen received the request and checked the names.

"Those communities haven't held seats for years."

"That's what the request is about."

"You've included people who weren't at the original meeting."

"The original people are dead or old. The road isn't."

Imogen ran a finger along the page. She stopped at a name near the bottom and looked at it for some time. "This is my aunt's village."

"I didn't know."

"Nobody does." She put the page down. "She never mentioned the seat. She told me once she was glad not to have to go to the meetings."

"Then she knows what it cost."

"She knows what it saved." Imogen squared the edge of the paper against the desk. "I'll enter it."

"Will your father read it?"

"He reads the bridge income every day."

She seemed to regret saying it. Corinne might have enjoyed the moment, if it had not also been the first honest thing they had said to one another all day.

She went back to her own truck and sat in the cab with the minutes on her knee. She turned to the first sheet, the one with the signatures at the foot, and found her father's. It was the same hand

that had added the figures on the back of every fuel invoice she had ever seen, small and upright, the sevens crossed. He had signed it in a room somewhere on this hill, on a winter afternoon, among people he must have liked. Perhaps he had had tea. Perhaps someone had made a joke about the ink.

14

The Stolen Inspection

Simon checked the original test time against the carbon once more. The restriction had been justified by a test that had not yet happened.

He made himself check.

At the inspection house the morning crew was lifting the scale plate with crowbars to clear grit from beneath it. He borrowed a broom and worked among them until the clerk went to the kettle. Then he checked the dispatch register against his carbon. The restriction notice had been entered at four forty. The steel test named on it was registered at six ten. He turned the page over and checked the previous day. He checked the register's numbering. There was no gap into which the earlier test might have fitted.

The discrepancy was real. That was the pleasant part. The unpleasant part was that he had to do something about it.

Hugh found him at the bench with the scale plate still off and the carbon beside a length of chalk. He looked at the paper and put down his gloves.

"I told you to give me that," he said.

"I wanted to check it first."

"You're sixteen. The checking is my work."

"I can read a time."

"I know you can read a time." Hugh sat down slowly. "You haven't proved the bridge is safe. You've proved that the office issued a restriction before the test in its justification was completed."

"That's a lie on the notice."

"It's a procedural irregularity. The restriction could have been based on another measurement."

"Was it?"

"There are things that need doing on that bridge," Hugh said. "Some days I have to choose which ones I can actually do."

"Then why say you've done the test?"

"Because if I issue a caution with no supporting figure, the board asks for the figure. If I give a provisional figure, they call it a reason to raise the surcharge. There isn't a way to write some things that stops people using them." Hugh had asked the board twice for the west-connection repair, and twice the money had gone somewhere else.

"And the new notice says structural assessment," Simon said. "Does any of that money pay for the connection?"

Hugh turned his palm over. Red marking compound had settled into the creases. "You'll learn that a notice isn't a maintenance plan."

"I'd rather learn what the plan is."

"So would I," Hugh said, and the words came out before he could take them back.

Simon thought this made the form more serious, not less. He said so.

Hugh put the paper down. "Hand it over."

"Will you amend the notice?"

"Simon."

"If the restriction is right, it can be right with the proper date."

Hugh's face changed. Not into anger at first. Something more wounded, as if Simon had accused him of no longer knowing his trade. Then he stood and called the clerk back to the bench.

Simon was suspended from the bridge crew until the board reviewed his conduct. He was to surrender the keys to the inspection cabinet, not use the measuring equipment, and not report to the morning shift. His wages for the remaining week would be held pending review. Hugh said these things with care, and once he began he did not stop.

Simon took the keys from their hook on his belt. One had a chipped blue tag he had carved himself. The clerk signed for them. Simon asked whether this meant he had been dismissed. Hugh said it meant precisely what he had just said.

At home his mother was repairing a torn cuff by the window. She looked at him and the empty place on his belt and asked whether he had lost the keys.

Simon had been eleven when Hugh first let him help at the bridge. The job was to carry a basket of washers between the workshop and the western inspection platform. Simon had dropped half of them down a drain. He confessed before Hugh noticed. Hugh made him retrieve what he could with a magnet on a string and charged him with counting the replacements, not because the washers were valuable but because a bridge was made of thousands of small things that nobody could afford to treat as optional.

Hugh had taught him to listen to the deck under different loads and to make observations someone else could verify. They had worked together long enough that Simon knew the sound of his steps before the engineer entered a room.

The day Hugh dismissed him, Simon went to the schoolyard because he did not know where else to go. The children were inside, and the swings creaked in the wind. His apprenticeship tools were in a sack at his feet. The handles had been oiled by Hugh himself when Simon passed his first inspection exercise.

He took out the old folding rule. On its edge Hugh had scratched a small line marking the point at which the brass hinge stopped reading true. “Always use the good side,” he used to say. Simon had

thought this was wisdom about other things as well as measuring. Now he wondered how long Hugh had been applying it selectively.

A maintenance worker crossed the yard and asked if Simon wanted a day's labour shifting gravel. He said yes before discovering that the wages were half the apprentice rate. By noon his shoulders hurt and his palms had blistered. The man who employed him was not cruel; he had no reason to pay more. Simon understood in the simplest way possible that having been right about a falsified form had not made him more employable.

That evening he went to Hugh's house and left the tool sack outside the door. He had got as far as the corner when Hugh came out after him.

"Those are yours," Hugh called.

"Not if I don't work for you."

"You earned them."

"Then you shouldn't have taken the work."

Hugh bent to pick up the sack. For the first time Simon noticed the old man's hands shaking. It wasn't cold enough for that. He wanted to ask whether Hugh had been frightened of Walter, and whether there had been a moment when fear turned into habit. Instead he walked away before either of them said something he would remember for the rest of his life.

"Given them back," he said.

He showed her the carbon. She read it and asked if the bridge was dangerous. He said he thought parts of it were, though he had no measurement he could stand behind. She stared at him for a long moment.

"You mustn't tell people it's safe, then," she said.

"That wasn't the question."

"What was?"

"Whether the notice was honest."

She folded his work shirt and put it on the table. They ate potatoes with yesterday's meat and spoke about fuel because the stove

had been running low. He wanted her to ask him to apologize so that he could refuse. She did not offer him that comfort.

Later he brought the carbon to Florence's house. Corinne was outside checking the tyres on her truck, which had not moved for more than three weeks. Simon held out the page as he had once held out a finished repair to Hugh, expecting somebody older to tell him whether it was sound.

Corinne read it twice.

"This doesn't tell us the bridge will take a heavy truck," she said.

"I never said it did."

"Good."

He had expected praise, or at least surprise. Her caution irritated him.

"So what does it tell you?" he asked.

"That somebody's selling certainty he hasn't earned."

He felt better about that. Then she asked what he knew about the old cable ferry. He told her it had stopped running after an accident, and that the winch house still stood below the lower road. She asked whether it could be repaired.

"It isn't much machinery," he said. "A drum, guides, bank anchorage. If the cable is good."

"How do you know the cable is good?"

He looked away. That was the first time in his life he had been grateful somebody had asked a question he could not answer.

Before dark an angry driver approached them beside the lorry. He had been refused a crossing the following morning and had arranged to move his load after the gate crew changed shift. He wanted Simon to say the bridge could take him.

"I can't," Simon said.

"The notice is false. You said so."

"The notice is false about the test. That's different."

The driver swore at him and went down toward the queue. Corinne watched him go. Simon knew she was deciding whether to

follow and argue. She did not. He was relieved for perhaps half a minute, and then he was not.

15

A *Lower Road*

The path to the abandoned ferry began behind a building whose owner had once made money repairing river engines. Now the workshop was a place for storing buckets, a broken ladder, and a door too useful to throw away. Florence had the key because the owner had moved away and asked her to keep vandals out. She said this gave her no authority to let Corinne in, then unlocked it.

The path dropped through scrub to a wider bend in the gorge. The river was grey and fast, running over a shelf of black stones before curving under the high bank. Across it was a landing almost lost beneath alder roots. There were steps carved into the rock, a long rusted chain, and a platform resting on uneven blocks.

“That’s a ferry?” Corinne asked.

“That was a ferry,” Florence said.

Simon was ahead of them, already looking at the cable drum. He struck the frame with a small hammer and listened. Florence told him not to break anything they might need.

The ferry had been operated by the river itself, held on an angled guide so the current pushed the platform toward the opposite landing. The steel line was wound onto drums at each bank, and the approach required men who knew when to pay it out and when not to. At low water it could carry a small vehicle. It had never been suit-

able for the heaviest freight. Corinne could see that immediately from the width of the deck and the narrow ramp.

She could also see why it was tempting. A failed monopoly depended upon there being no other practicable way across. Here was one, in plain sight, with its mechanism rusting slowly in the rain.

Simon found the old tensioning gear under a cover of rotten canvas. He turned a small wheel by hand until it stuck, then put his weight against it. Corinne stopped him before he could bend the shaft.

"First you find out why it won't move," she said.

"I was finding out."

"You were about to."

He grinned despite himself.

The east anchorage sat on a rock shelf above the landing, but the cable entered it at an uneasy angle. The old plate allowed six tonnes, not a loaded truck, and only if the anchors held. Corinne asked Simon whether he had ever inspected an anchorage. He said he had read the drawings, not worked on one. If they could not prove this one safe, or if the river rose, the ferry was no alternative at all.

Florence sat on a stone and told them why the ferry had closed. A volunteer had lost a foot between the deck and the landing. There had been arguments about the cost of new guards and a safer cable route. Then the bridge had received an emergency grant, and the ferry budget was postponed. It was a familiar story. Corinne wondered whether every dangerous thing in the Narrows had become expensive at the precise moment something more visible needed money.

She climbed down to the platform. The boards were slick and two had rotten ends. A little water moved beneath them. She lay on her stomach and examined the underframe, keeping one hand on a dry crossmember. A channel ran from the deck into the river. There were cracks in the paint near the guide bracket. Nothing about the inspection made her eager to stand on it while it moved.

"What would you need?" she asked.

"Dry bearings, new boards, cable inspection. The brake wants rebuilding. Somebody should look at the far anchor before we put weight on anything."

Cyril Dunsford, a roofing driver from the eastern queue came down the path with Corinne on their second inspection of the ferry. He had a long face and a laugh that arrived half a second before his jokes. His wagon carried roofing materials for a settlement whose meeting house had lost its windows in an autumn storm. He had promised to be back by the weekend for his son's birthday and had missed two already in the past three years because of the road. He did not call this a tragedy. He called it the ordinary arithmetic of hauling.

He helped Simon clear the weeds from the winch drum. When they found a rusted bolt, he drew an absurdly small spanner from his pocket and announced that it was his lucky tool. It was a size nobody used on this mechanism. He said he carried it because his father had given it to him the day he left home. Simon asked why a useless tool was lucky. The man told him that it had always failed to tempt him into using the wrong size.

They ate bread on a flat stone above the river. The man showed Corinne a drawing made by his youngest child, a house with red doors and a dog the size of a horse. He carried it folded in his wallet under his insurance papers. "The boy says the dog is meant to be the horse," he explained, and seemed to consider that a good answer.

Corinne asked him whether he would sign onto ferry work if they found sound equipment. He said he had worked on river moorings as a young man and knew enough to be useful under somebody who knew more. He would not be skipper, he said. He had learned that the hard way.

Before they climbed back up, he tested an old anchor plate with his boot. Soil flaked away beneath it. The plate barely moved. He

said he did not trust any metal fastened into earth he could scrape off with a heel. Simon made a note of it on the drawing. Corinne was glad to have someone on the crew willing to be frightened of the right things. She would remember that detail much later, after the river had changed.

"What's your name for the book?" Simon asked, pencil ready. The driver wiped soil from his heel. "Cyril Dunsford. And write that I said the soil's rotten around the plate."

"It's a warning, then?"

"It's a question for the person who puts a load on this thing. You don't have to make it sound grand."

Simon added the observation beside the anchorage drawing. Corinne asked Cyril whether he would still volunteer if the far-side anchor looked the same. He weighed that against the folded picture in his wallet before answering. "Only after somebody who knows the river has looked at it. My boy expects me home someday."

"And if the anchor's no good?"

"We stop."

Simon said it quickly. Corinne wondered how quickly he would say it after three weeks of work and half a dozen people asking for passage.

They made a list. Florence knew a place with timber. Corinne had a set of pullers in her tool locker and a coil of wire rope that would do for a temporary haul line, not for carrying the ferry. Simon knew where the old manuals were. They had enough to begin cleaning and inspecting, not enough to declare the crossing fit.

On the climb back they met two drivers coming down the track. Word had travelled faster than they had. One asked when the ferry would be ready. The other wanted to know whether his empty truck could get across tomorrow.

"It can't," Corinne said.

"But you're working on it."

"We're going to see whether it can be made safe."

The first driver asked who had given her the right to decide that. Corinne had no answer that would satisfy him. She felt for the first time the small, sharp pressure Walter must have felt when everybody wanted a decision and nobody wanted to hear why it was not yet possible.

At the boarding house Florence spread the repair list across the dining table. They found an old drawing showing anchor positions and maximum river stage. The line representing high water had been marked in blue. Simon measured it against the current level and said the margin looked generous. Corinne asked when it had last rained upstream. Nobody knew.

They sent a driver along the upper road with a written request for weather observations and anchor advice from an engineering yard outside the gorge. He might be gone for days, and the river would not wait for him. Then they went to find wood and grease and the few people willing to lend tools without first receiving assurance that the ferry would operate.

When Corinne returned to her truck, the driver who had spoken to Simon the evening before was standing beside it. He asked again for the bridge's safety rating. She showed him the carbon and explained what it proved, and what it did not. He stood with his eyelids heavy and his hands clenched to stay awake.

"I've got a load that won't keep," he said.

"So have I."

"Your load's in a cold room."

"Because I'm paying for one."

He stared at her, glanced toward the Narrows lights, and went back to his vehicle. There were things she could have said. That a false inspection report did not make a bridge sound. That nobody had the right to gamble the lives of the recovery crew. They would have been true, and he would still have been paying interest at dawn.

16

The Wrong Weight

It happened on the twenty-fourth day, when the frost lifted early and the queue began to move before anyone had opened the gate.

Corinne had been awake since four. The bonded store had sent a notice changing the hour at which storage accounts were settled, so that what she owed would now be counted at six in the morning instead of midnight, and she was sitting in the cab with the notice on her knee, doing a sum that came out the same way every time. Her fuel was low. Her instalment was due in six days. The cargo was cold and safe and costing her more each hour than she had earned in a good week, and the one thing she could not buy at any price was a day.

The queue had a different sound this morning. For three weeks it had made the noise of a thing waiting: an engine coughing now and then, a kettle, a radio with the volume turned down, men talking in the low flat voices people use when the talk is not for anyone. Now doors were banging. A woman went along the line striking cab sides with the flat of her hand and shouting that the gate crew changed at six and there would be ten minutes with nobody on the barrier.

"Who says?" Corinne called.

"Everybody says."

It was the thing everybody said. She had heard it twice that week already, once from a man who wanted to try it and once from a man who wanted to be talked out of it. She climbed down. The air was colder than it had been, the first clean cold after days of mist, and the bridge stood out across the gorge with every rivet picked out in the grey light. She could see the inspection house with its lamp still lit, and the long approach ramp with its worn timber kerbs. On the ramp there was a gap in the line the width of one heavy vehicle, and in the gap an engine was running.

She knew the truck before she knew the man. It sat low on its springs, as it had sat at the lower fuel stand, with the bent mudguard on the near wheel. Clive Tansley leaned from the window with his elbow out and his red hair standing up where he had slept on it. He lifted two fingers to her.

"Morning, sweetheart."

"Where are you going?"

"Where do you think?" Clive grinned, and she saw it was not a happy grin, only a practised one, held in place like a hand on a rope. "My girl's pains started in the night. A lad rode up to the far gate and shouted it across the water. The baby's coming and I'm sat here with a ticket."

"They'll bring you through when—"

"When? Next week?" He looked at the bridge. "I asked them to weigh me. Every morning since the fuel stand. They said the figure on my ticket was good enough for them."

"Then nobody can say you didn't ask."

"No," he said. "They can't."

She could have reached in and turned the key. She would think about that for a long time afterward: the key was in the dash, the window was open, her arm was long enough. Instead she said what she had said at the fuel stand, which was nothing useful.

"It's a heavy twenty-eight."

"I know what it is." He was not angry. His face was hollow with fear and hope. "I've been over that bridge a hundred times and it never said a word to me. It's the notices that talk."

His companion came running along the verge with his braces down and a hat in his fist, shouting a name Corinne could not make out. The driver put the truck in gear.

• • •

It went onto the ramp at walking pace. For a moment it looked like a thing that would work. The front wheels climbed onto the deck, the plates rang under them, and the long hum she had heard on her first morning rose a note. The truck was a third of the way across when the watch at the inspection house understood what they were looking at and started to shout, and a horn answered them from the bridge, one long hard note that never changed pitch.

Then the steel made a sound Corinne had never heard from a bridge. There was no bang. There was a tearing report, as if someone had ripped a sheet of canvas the length of the gorge, and under it came a low shudder that travelled up through the road and into her boots.

The west third of the span dropped. Not far: the deck sagged at one panel, and the rear wheels went down with it, and the cab slewed sideways and struck the rail and stopped at an angle that made the whole vehicle look as though it was trying to escape across the road. One back wheel turned slowly in the air. The load shifted against the near side, and the trailer settled with a groan.

The bridge stood. That was the strange part, afterward, when people argued about it: the bridge stood. It sat across the gorge with its crooked panel and its tilted truck, and for several seconds nobody on either bank could say whether the next sound would be a settling or a fall.

Nobody moved. Then everyone did.

Corinne ran. She had run toward the inspection house before she knew she had decided to, and the watch captain was already there, in his shirtsleeves and bare-headed, with his arms spread across the foot of the ramp like a man stopping a flock. “Off it!” he was shouting. “Everybody off the approach!” A driver tried to duck under his arm. He caught the man by the collar and held him with the flat contempt of someone who had been dealing with this for eight years.

“He’s alive,” somebody said. “He’s moving.”

From the foot of the ramp she could see it. The shape in the cab shifted and a hand came up against the glass.

The captain turned to her. “Can you get a line to the back?”

“Not from the deck. Not yet.”

“No.” He looked up the gorge toward the inspection house. “Where’s Hugh?”

Hugh came at a run along the walkway from the pier house, with his jacket half buttoned and a wrench still in his hand. He had slept in his clothes. He reached the foot of the ramp and stopped dead, and Corinne watched the colour leave his face as he looked at the panel. He did not speak for what seemed a long time. His lips moved. She thought he might have been counting.

“Everybody back,” he said. “Everybody. Off the approach, all of you. Not one more person on that deck.”

“There’s a man in that cab,” somebody said.

“I know there’s a man in the cab.”

“Then get him—”

“I will.” Hugh swallowed. His voice cracked on it. “I’ll get him. Give me a minute to know where I can put a boot.”

It took them forty minutes. Corinne would remember how slow it was, and how loud. The steel ticked and creaked as it settled. Each time the trailer shifted there was a new sound from the damaged connection, a bright dry crack like a stick breaking, and everyone on the bank went still. Somewhere in the queue a woman was crying

with rage at the men standing about, and Corinne understood her. The distance between wanting to help and being able to help could not be seen from behind a gate.

Her father had made her weigh every truck twice when she first learned to drive, once before the load was tied and once after. "Nobody gets lighter because the paper says so," he'd told her. She had thought he was teaching her caution. At the crossing now, watching a man choose speed over a true ticket, she wondered how many other rules he'd taught her and waived for himself.

They tried the walkway first. It had twisted; its outer rail hung away from the posts. Hugh took one look and pulled the first man back. They brought a service cradle round from under the pier, an iron-framed seat on a block and a hand winch that had not been used in years, and it took six people to free the pulley. Corinne hauled rope beside a watchman who wrapped the tail twice round a post because his hands shook too hard to hold it. They did not speak. The cradle moved a few feet, stopped, and moved again.

A young man went out in it, a watchman who had been on the gate that morning and had not stopped him. Nobody asked him. He went because he was the lightest. He reached the cab and wrenched open the far door and Corinne heard the driver's voice, clear and loud and furious, carrying across the water.

"Get me out of here, sweetheart. I've a daughter."

"We're getting you out."

"Mind the load. It's not mine."

"Never mind the load."

They got a harness round him. It took a long time because he kept trying to help, and each movement shifted the cab. Hugh called for them to stop pulling. A second shift of the trailer sent a crack up the steel that Corinne felt in her teeth, and the rail under the cab bent outward like wet cardboard.

Then the cab dipped.

It was not much. It was a hand's breadth, perhaps, and for an instant the watchman in the cradle was not where he had been, flung backward on his rope as the whole front of the truck lurched toward the river. The harness line went taut against the door opening, and then slack.

"Pull!" Hugh was shouting. "Pull, pull—"

They pulled. When the line came in, the driver was on the end of it, white-faced and silent, and the watchman was holding him with both arms. They lowered the cradle onto the landing, and somebody got a coat over him, and Corinne saw his boots, thick and cracked, the left one with the lace undone.

He was breathing. He said something to the clinic worker who knelt over him, and she bent close to hear it, and Corinne never learned what it was. They put him on the stretcher. The bearers had to take it uphill, and the path was ankle-deep in mud, and one of them slipped. The driver's boots kept sliding off the end of the stretcher, and someone walked beside it holding them together.

Clive Tansley died before they reached the landing at the clinic gate.

• • •

There was no explosion. That was what Corinne noticed. The engine had stopped. A thin line of coolant ran from the cab and dripped into the river. A gull circled once and went away. She stood on the approach with her hands hanging and found that someone had given her a tin mug of tea, and that she had drunk half of it without tasting anything.

Clive's companion came to the tollhouse an hour later. He was a broad man with a grey stubble who had run the length of the verge and not stopped running in his mind. He carried two pieces of paper and he put them both on the captain's desk without being asked, one beside the other, as if they were evidence in a quarrel he'd been having for twenty years.

“That’s the dispatch ticket,” he said. “That’s what the yard wrote. Twenty-eight tonnes.” He put a finger on the other. “That’s a receipt off the scale at the last weighpoint downriver. I got it myself. I kept it separate because I didn’t trust the first.” His finger shook. “Thirty-eight. Near enough. And the back axles over the allowance. I told him. I told him in the yard, and he said he’d ask them to weigh him here.”

“Did he know?” the captain asked.

“He knew it was heavy.” The companion’s voice had gone very quiet. “He didn’t know it was ten tonnes heavy. He thought it was an overburdened twenty-eight. He thought he’d been lied to by about two tonnes.” He looked at the two pieces of paper. “He asked them to weigh him. Every morning for a week and more.”

The captain read both slowly. He had a weathered face, and it did not change. He held them out of the rain at the window, as if the weather might be worse for the ink than for the man. When he looked up he looked at Corinne, who was standing in the doorway because nobody had told her she couldn’t.

“You were there,” he said. “Tell me what you saw.”

She told him. She said the lorry had gone onto the ramp without clearance and that there had been no chance to weigh it. She said she had spoken to the driver at the fuel stand and again that morning and had said nothing that would have helped. Hugh stood at the back of the room with his arms folded. He said the main load path had held but a lower-chord connection was damaged and he could not say what a second heavy load would do, and nobody suggested trying.

A man in the corner, one of the cooperative drivers, said what everyone had been waiting for someone to say. “Everyone knew the limits were invented. This is what you get when you hang a false notice on a bridge. They get used to it. They stop believing the rest.”

“The notice can be wrong,” the captain said, “and the steel can still break.”

Nobody answered him. Corinne remembered Simon in the road two days ago, saying nearly the same thing to a driver who wanted to hear that the bridge was safe, and the driver walking away. She had been glad when he went. She was not glad now.

• • •

The companion wanted to drive to the daughter that night. There was no crossing for him and the long road was two days, and his support vehicle had a tank he'd been nursing since the second week. He stood beside it at the lower fuel stand where the haulier had argued about his ticket, counting out coins that did not add up to enough. The stand had put its price up again that morning.

Corinne watched him count them twice. Then she went to her truck and found the can she had been saving to run the set at night, and carried it across, and poured it in without saying anything.

"I can't pay for that," the companion said.

"I know."

"It's half your fuel."

"I know that too."

He looked at her. His eyes were red. He had a face made for laughing and none of it was left. "Thank you, sweetheart," he said, in the dead man's voice, not meaning to, and then heard himself and put his hand over his mouth.

The companion caught up with her before she reached the path. He had found Clive's mug in the cab, the tin one with a dent above the handle. It had still been half full when they lifted the doors away from the frame. He washed it at the standpipe because he could think of no other work to do and had wrapped it in his own scarf.

"His sister will want that," he said. "She'll ask why I didn't stop him."

"Tell her what happened."

"Which part? That you all told us the notice was a fraud? That he had a false weight ticket? That I climbed into a truck I knew was

over its proper load because I wanted to get home too?" He swallowed. "I'd like one part that isn't mine."

She could not give him one. Later, when the drivers gathered around the soup cart, the conversation broke open along the same fault. A woman who had signed Corinne's petition said the protest had made every restriction seem negotiable. Another said Walter had made that possible by lying first. A third said she wanted no part of either side and would take her freight around the mountain at first light. No one asked Corinne to lead the discussion. She sat on a tyre beside the standpipe and watched Clive's companion carry the wrapped mug to his vehicle.

At Florence's that evening there was one less chair at supper. Florence had not removed it deliberately; she had needed it for an extra customer. Corinne still looked for Clive when someone laughed in the passage. He had been the man who made it sound as if a joke were coming before he knew what it was. The room went on eating. A boy spilled soup and was told to fetch a cloth. Outside, two drivers argued over the last dry fuel, and the queue grew by another vehicle. Corinne left part of her supper on the plate and paid Florence for it anyway.

She walked back up the hill to the clinic yard. They had laid the body on a table in the back room, under a clean sheet, with the door left open for air. A woman from the town was already sitting beside it, with her knitting, as if somebody had to. Corinne asked if she needed anything. The woman said no, she would stay until the family came, and then said that she had known Clive's type all her life, men who whistled on a bad road, and that it was a miserable thing to have to say.

The watch took down the ramp barriers. They fetched wrenches and ropes and a gas lamp. Hugh set a post at the foot of the panel with a mark painted on it, and a boy stood beside it with a notebook, reading it every hour. Nobody told them how to do it. It was the first

piece of work she had seen on the bridge that nobody had had to be paid for.

Walter appeared near dusk. His boots were clean, though the mud at the gate had become ankle deep. He went straight to Hugh, then to the captain, then to the men working on the recovery lines. He did not ask who was responsible while the body was still in the clinic yard. He arranged food for the workers, found a bed and a messenger for the companion, and told the clerk to suspend storage charges on the damaged cargo until the facts were established. Corinne watched him do each of these things, and watched that he did them well.

At the board office he announced a full closure to heavy traffic until further inspection. The order carried his name and Hugh's provisional recommendation. Nobody who had stood by the bridge that morning could call it invented.

The queue did not empty. Drivers stayed in their cabs, watching the lights come on in the warm houses above them. Corinne went to the bonded store and checked the refrigeration record. The cases were still cold, still good, and still on the wrong side of the gorge. The bill had gone up again.

She went outside after dark. The bridge stood across the gorge with one panel crooked beneath it and the boy's lamp burning at the foot of the post. For three weeks she had told anyone who would listen that Walter was keeping people from crossing a safe road. Now he had a road that might kill them, and an argument stronger than any he had ever had, and a dead man to prove it.

17

What the Steel Said

Imogen had known Hugh for most of her life and had never seen him leave a drawing unfinished. He made notes in the margins before he went to bed, even on evenings when the work was not urgent. That morning he brought her a sheet of measurements with an empty column halfway down and asked for access to the historical inspection records.

She gave him the key without asking what he expected to find. He seemed offended by the trust.

The bridge was closed to heavy traffic. The school was still warm, but the clinic had begun rationing supplies whose replacements were trapped in the queue. The bond store was filling with goods that could not move in either direction. The people who had insisted they wanted a safe crossing were discovering how much safety cost when it meant not crossing at all.

Imogen joined Hugh in the inspection house. The paper there had the dusty warmth of an old office and the sour smell of wet coats hung too close to a stove. He spread the measurements on the bench and showed her the west lower-chord gusset. A series of old marks indicated that the connection had been working under loads it was no longer fit to bear. He had recorded some movement previ-

ously. He had recorded others as readings to be checked when the proper measuring equipment arrived.

"The crack wasn't new," he said. "The damage from yesterday is new. The problem underneath it isn't."

"Were the restrictions justified?"

"Some of them were. Some were cautious. Others had numbers attached to them that I didn't measure."

"You signed them."

"Yes."

She waited for him to explain. He opened the old file and showed her the first report that had been amended after a board meeting. It carried an original lower estimate, then a higher load rating in different ink. Later records had moved the figures in the opposite direction to justify a fee for escorted crossing. The bridge had been made safer and more dangerous on paper according to what the town needed from it that month.

"Which was true?" Imogen asked.

"The part where the bridge needed work."

She almost struck him. The answer was so easy, and so unlike the precision he demanded when someone in the bond store misread a scale by half a unit. She sat down instead and asked him for the entire sequence, without the parts that made him seem reasonable.

"Start with the first year you changed the rating," Imogen said.

Hugh found the sheet and opened his mouth. He stopped, turned back a page, and began again. "The initial—no. That was the date of the order. The first reading I couldn't support came in the following winter."

"Was there a test?"

"There was a test planned."

"Write planned in the margin, then. Don't write performed."

Hugh drew a single line through the entry and wrote the correction in his narrow hand.

He took an hour. He began with the cracked fasteners that should have been replaced two winters earlier, the difficulty getting qualified men to the site, the steel ordered but never released from the district yard. Then he described the temporary load restrictions written before tests, the tests never completed, and the way the board began using his signature as a guarantee that every commercial preference was an engineering necessity. At several points she asked him to stop and give dates. He looked them up rather than guess.

When she asked why he had continued, he stared at a pin in the drawing board for so long that she thought he had not heard her.

“I believed the next repair would make the last report true,” he said.

“That isn’t an explanation.”

“No.”

The watch captain came in with the recovered load ticket and the truck’s standalone axle recorder, carried out of the cab after the recovery. The ticket showed twenty-eight tonnes declared, below the posted gross limit. The recorder showed a much larger load during the journey and an excessive rear-tandem reading. Hugh studied both, then brought out the measured distortion from the damaged west connection. He drew a load path on tracing paper and explained what the rear axle’s movement across the span could have done to a weakened panel. The recorder had not independently weighed the freight at the gate; its figures had to be checked against physical evidence. Hugh did not claim to know precisely which rivet had failed first. He said the evidence was consistent, and that this was as far as he could responsibly go before lifting the deck.

“The driver didn’t know,” the captain said. “Or says he didn’t. He isn’t here to ask.”

“Someone prepared a false ticket,” Imogen said.

“Someone used a closed bridge,” Hugh answered.

They were both facts. Neither excused the other. She made him write them separately.

The captain read the account of the rescue without sitting down. He had been given a pension from the crossing funds through his brother, who had done twenty-seven winters on the road crews. If the tolls failed, that pension would be cut. Imogen knew this from the accounts. She wondered how many decisions the town could have made differently if it had been required to say who would be hurt by them beforehand.

In the afternoon she asked Hugh to sign a statement that distinguished observed defects from assumed ones and from restrictions issued for other reasons. He read it twice and said there were sentences he would phrase differently. She gave him a pencil. He corrected three and signed the rest.

She placed his statement beside the budget ledger. The columns were beginning to speak to one another. In the maintenance reserve she could see the wages and pension payments that had taken precedence over repairs. In the fees she could see the delays that had ruined the cooperative. In the inspection book she could see her father's authority written over Hugh's uncertainty. She had put many of the figures into those ledgers herself.

At closing time she made a complete copy of the accounts, the bridge maintenance allocations, and the defect register. She used a slow machine because the office's good copier had a fault in its feed tray. Halfway through, a sheet jammed and she had to pull it out with her fingers, leaving a black line across the bottom. She made that page again. It was after dark by the time the papers were stacked in two bundles, one for the office and one for her.

She did not know exactly what she intended to do with the second. Walter had always told her that a person who held the accounts held the town's future in their hands. She had understood it as a lesson about competence. Looking at the bundles, she saw it was also a warning.

Her father was waiting at the upper house when she arrived. He had saved her supper and was pleased to tell her that the clinic's immediate cold supply could be held until the bridge reopening decision. He spoke of temporary contracts with the outlying settlements, priority transport through licensed carriers, new arrangements to finance repairs. The plan was detailed, practical, and already half written.

"Will they get a vote?" she asked.

Walter frowned at the unexpected question. "They'll get their medicine."

"Will they get a vote on what it costs?"

"We haven't time to reopen twenty years of procedure while a bridge is closed."

She took the food he offered because she had not eaten since morning. He asked if she was all right. She said she needed sleep. Both things were true, and neither was sufficient.

After supper she carried the copied accounts to her room and put them under the lower drawer of her clothes chest, where the floorboard dipped. Outside, a bell sounded from the tollhouse. The shift was changing. The bridge remained closed, and she knew that by dawn her father would have a price for keeping it that way.

PART FOUR

The Winter Closure

18

The Gate

The new board had been screwed over the old one. Corinne could tell by the pale rectangles of wood at its corners, the patches where the weather had not got to it. CLOSED TO HEAVY TRAFFIC had been painted in letters too large to mistake. Underneath, in a smaller hand, was an instruction to report to the bond office for a revised delivery arrangement.

She had been looking at the two notices for some time when a driver behind her said, "There's a difference between a bridge being shut and a bridge having an office."

"I've noticed."

"Which one are we paying for?"

Both, apparently. A watchman was going down the queue with a sheet on a board, writing the consignments and their dates. He had red fingers and a cut beneath one thumbnail. Every driver wanted to explain the importance of his cargo. The watchman kept his head bent and wrote what they told him, even when two men shouted their details together.

The damaged bridge was visible from the gate. A temporary cable had been fixed beneath the west panel to support the recovery workers, not the traffic. The deformed line of the deck was slight enough that from the upper houses it might have passed for per-

spective. Corinne knew what it was. She had heard that connection go, and in her sleep she had begun to hear it again.

The queue had acquired an improvised life. Someone had set up a stove beneath a sheet of roofing iron and was charging for hot water. Someone else repaired split hoses by the roadside. A woman with a bus carrying old people from the south road had negotiated room for them in the chapel, but the bus couldn't turn in the holding ground, so the old people had to walk down between the trucks with their bags. Children from the town watched them from the wall above. The children were not laughing. That was worse, in its way.

Corinne went to the bond office because her shipment had a recipient, and a clock, and the useful fact that the cases were still inside a working cold room. She knew what the office would want. She went anyway.

Imogen was at the counter with a stack of revised contracts. She looked as if she had slept in her coat. On the wall behind her an ordinary clock showed four minutes after nine, though Corinne's dashboard had made it eleven. No two clocks in the Narrows had ever fully agreed.

"The vaccines are at three degrees," Imogen said before Corinne asked. "The room hasn't gone out of range. I've had it checked twice."

"Then let me take them."

"Through what?"

"That's my trouble."

"It becomes ours if you drive into a river." Imogen put a paper on the counter. "The board is offering emergency carriage. District vans can approach from the long road in stages. The road takes time, but a vehicle with a Narrows permit gets priority at the fuel stops."

Corinne read the fee. It was not called a toll. It was a coordination charge, a licensed handling charge, a fuel provision, and an indemnity deposit. Beneath these a smaller paragraph assigned exclusive

carriage of the destination's incoming medical freight for the following two winters to a carrier selected by the crossing board.

"Two winters," she said.

"The medical committee wants a regular delivery service."

"That's a handsome word for taking a customer."

"You won't make the trip over the bridge."

"I'll make it if there's another way."

Imogen rested the pencil across the paper. "People keep saying that as if a road appears once they need it badly enough."

Corinne had nothing to offer against that except the old ferry below the bend. She had seen the rust on its anchor plate and the marks in the bank where the river had eaten the ground. Simon believed it could be brought back. Simon was sixteen and had never worked a crossing in winter. She was old enough to know that hope was not a load rating.

She asked for a copy of the emergency proposal. Imogen gave her one, then another sheet showing the storage charges already accumulated. Corinne felt the figures settle into the back of her throat. She owed more than the truck could earn on an ordinary return journey.

"Walter knows I'm here?" she asked.

"My father knows everybody who's here."

"Does he know the school on the south road is heating one room for twenty-seven children?"

"Yes. He put it in the priority order."

"After they give him two years of freight."

Imogen drew a line through a misprinted number and wrote the correct one above it. "You don't need to tell me how it works."

Outside, the watch captain stood beneath the new board reading an order twice before he folded it. A driver asked him whether they would be allowed to hold a meeting on the approach road. He said the road was a public way while the gate was closed and added that they must not obstruct the recovery crews. Corinne could not tell

whether it was a concession or the only interpretation he could bear to give.

Florence found her at noon sitting in her truck, looking through the invoices as the generator throbbed under the box. The older woman handed her a meat pie wrapped in a cloth. It was still warm and had leaked fat through the bottom.

"You can keep trying to count it," Florence said. "The number will be the same."

"I'm not counting."

"You're making it suffer by looking at it."

Corinne ate half the pie before she said, "We can repair the lower ferry."

"People used to say that about my husband's teeth. Nobody ever asked what happened afterward."

"There are two anchors. A drum and a cable. It's not complicated."

"Neither is a grave." Florence took the cloth when Corinne was done. "The river doesn't read contracts. If you go down, find out what those anchors are fixed to before you put a human being on the wire."

That afternoon Walter published his emergency carriage arrangement. He offered the outside communities credit they could scarcely refuse, and he signed for two additional stores to hold their consignments. Men in the upper town said he had acted quickly. They were right. At the queue someone burned a copy of the contract in a stove and used the heat to make tea.

Corinne went down the lower path with Simon before the light went. The bank was slick with leaves. At the bottom they found the old cable crossing, a flat deck tilted on its cradle, the steel wire hanging in a slack black curve above the river. A six-tonne load, the old plate said, in paint that had survived only where the rain could not reach. The east anchorage was half buried beyond the opposite bank. A strip of fresh soil ran down toward the water beneath it.

"Can you see the bolt heads?" Simon asked.

“Not from here.”

“You could on a low day.”

“Then we need a low day.”

The river struck the rocks below. Corinne checked the old six-tonne plate and the exposed soil at the far anchor. A damaged bridge stood above them; their alternative could fail without warning.

“We look at everything first,” she said. “Not just the bits we can reach.”

Simon nodded, too readily. She made him repeat it, and this time he did not smile.

19

Borrowed Tools

The first tool they borrowed was a spade, which Florence handed over with the observation that it belonged to her and not to the community. The second was a hand winch from the yard beside the bridge. The owner required a promise of return, a note for the account, and Corinne's spare tyre as security. By the fourth morning, the ferry team had a collection of equipment that no workshop would have called complete and no honest person could have called entirely theirs.

They worked below the lower road where the damp stayed in the ground after noon. Corinne wore gloves with the fingers worn thin. Simon had found an old set of ferry drawings in the workshop cabinet and carried them in a biscuit tin to keep them dry. Two people from the queue came to help with the bank clearing, and one local boatman brought a hook and a rough length of chain. Nobody was paid. Everybody had a reason for being there.

The volunteers ate in turns beside a fire that would not properly catch. One of the drivers had been trapped with seed for six weeks and was beginning to speak about the bags as if they were living things. A woman who had brought fuel to the Narrows twice a month for years kept referring to the river as an inconvenience she intended to correct. Simon laughed when the boatman called their

improvised staging a magnificent harbour. He laughed so hard that his scarf fell into the mud.

Corinne was glad to hear it. The boy had been quiet since Hugh suspended him. She was less glad when he leapt back onto the slippery deck without checking where he put his feet.

"Take your time," she said.

"I've got it."

"That's what people say before I have to fetch them."

He climbed down and looked at his boots, annoyed. It was a small humiliation she could afford to give him. The river had larger ones available.

They cleared the drum housing. The steel sheave had seized on one side, and getting it to turn required heat, a long bar, two hours of work and an argument about which way it had last travelled. The original cable was sound in some lengths and badly corroded where it had lain against the bank. They laid it out along the path and marked every broken strand with a twist of pale cloth. By the time they reached the fourth mark they agreed that none of it would carry the ferry again.

"That'll cost," said the boatman.

"Everything costs," said Corinne.

A replacement length came from an old quarry haul line. Its owner wanted a portion of future crossing receipts. Corinne refused. She offered her truck as collateral for the cable instead, and the man examined it with the cold interest of somebody inspecting a horse. He took her signed note. For the next hour she worked with the knowledge that a dead ferry could cost her the only thing she owned that could earn a living.

Hugh arrived in the late afternoon carrying a small case of measuring tools. Simon saw him before Corinne did and stopped talking. Hugh climbed down carefully, stopping twice to test the loose earth.

"I was told you'd started working," he said.

"Not on your bridge," Corinne answered.

“It’s all the same river.”

He opened his case. Nobody welcomed him, but nobody sent him away. He inspected the cradle supports, the old riveted bracket, and the west bank concrete. He measured the opening between two plates and wrote the number. When he reached the east anchorage, he stared across at the raw strip of earth Corinne had noticed.

“Can you reach it from this side?” she asked.

“Not reliably. We need to inspect the foundations over there. A cable can look sound while the ground holding it has gone.”

Simon said the old drawing showed four buried deadmen behind the east plate, each set into stone. Hugh asked what they had seen in the ground now. Simon did not answer.

They arranged a low-water crossing in a small workboat, carrying only measuring rods and a light line. The boatman ferried Hugh and Simon over while Corinne waited on the near bank with a rope coiled at her feet. On the far side Simon scraped clay from the anchor surround and found a crack behind the lowest securing plate. Hugh reached into the gap and brought out a handful of loose grit.

The ferry crew began eating together at the bottom of the lower path because nobody could carry hot food down more than once a day without spilling it. The man with the roofing sheets made a habit of bringing an extra enamel cup and lending it to anyone who had forgotten theirs. He kept talking about his son’s birthday, though the date had passed, and describing the gift he meant to buy when the freight money came through. He had stopped promising dates to the child. He still promised presents.

One morning Simon found him trying to teach the boatman how to whistle with two fingers. The boatman could whistle perfectly well without them and objected to the lesson on principle. They spent the next ten minutes blowing air through wet hands and making nothing but ridiculous noises. Corinne returned from a fuel run to find four grown people bent double with laughter, the winch un-

touched. She told them to get on with it. Then the roofing driver made a sound like a kettle falling downstairs and she laughed too.

The following day he stayed late to repair a landing plank. His work was careful and a little slower than everyone else's, because he kept checking each fastening before moving to the next. He told Corinne he did not like the east bank anchor, particularly when the river ran brown after rain. He had seen a cable rip a post out of river gravel years before, taking most of a wharf with it.

"We're moving the anchor," Corinne said.

"I saw. Moving the anchor doesn't make the river smaller."

It was not an objection to the project. He was asking them to keep being frightened. Simon made another mark in his notebook. The crew had begun treating the notebook as a kind of shared conscience. That amused the roofing driver until Corinne asked whether he'd sign a test sheet himself.

"I'd sign what I saw," he said. "Not what you told me you saw."

On the day the proof pull seemed to hold, he insisted they check the bank after everyone had gone to supper. Corinne found him with his boots wet to the knee, staring at a narrow fresh seam in the disturbed soil. He said it might be settling. He said it might be nothing. He also said they should test again before anybody depended on it. They marked the seam with two short stakes. The river rose that night and took one of the stakes away.

When they returned, Hugh spread the drawing on a plank and tapped the marked area with his pencil.

"We have a defect," he said. "Not necessarily a final one. But we can't pull against that plate without finding where the force goes."

"So we rebuild it," Corinne said.

"We find a competent foundation. We don't disguise the bad one with more steel."

The boatman proposed rock farther upstream, where the cable angle would change. Hugh demonstrated how the extra force would

strike the landing. Simon wrote down both the revised line and the unresolved shock load.

Hugh began to describe the revised force path, stopped at the word safe, and started again with a number. Simon left the crossed-out adjective visible in his notes.

Over the following days they dug, hauled, measured and found new reasons to dig again. A test pull on the east anchorage moved the plate a finger's width. The movement was small enough that half the volunteers failed to see it, but Corinne had marked the position in chalk beforehand. She made them stop. The repair they had first agreed on would not do.

Some wanted to abandon the work. Others insisted they could finish before the next river rise. Corinne stood with Hugh at the temporary gauge and asked what he would trust.

"A new anchorage that has held a controlled proof load," he said. "And a second inspection by someone other than the person who built it."

"Can you do it?"

"I can inspect. I shouldn't be the only signature."

They moved the anchor line to a rock seat above the wet soil, drilled by hand into the exposed face, and installed a pair of salvage bolts whose provenance they could only partly establish. Hugh made them reject one with damaged threads. They had to borrow a third. A week seemed to pass in the time it took to find it.

On the thirty-third day Corinne found an invoice tucked beneath her truck wiper. The bonded store wanted its refrigerated bay for a new emergency consignment. The vaccines had remained in range, the paper said, but release required payment of the accumulated charges by four that afternoon. She took the note to Imogen's counter with the last of her customer advance and the money she'd been keeping for fuel.

"Count it in front of me," Corinne said. Imogen did. Corinne watched each coin move from one column to another. "That leaves

enough to run the generator," Imogen said, eyeing the remainder. "Not indefinitely."

"Then I need measured deliveries of diesel. Daily, not promises."

She arranged them through the queue's mechanic on credit she could scarcely afford. At three twenty she and two porters carried the twenty-four vaccine cases from the bonded cold room to the truck. Imogen read the cold-room recorder aloud; Corinne compared it with her sealed instrument and wrote both figures on the transfer sheet. They checked the generator under load before shutting the truck doors. The insulated packs would bridge short stoppages, not four days without fuel.

"Have you got a delivery appointment?" Imogen asked.

"I have a river."

"That's not an appointment."

"Then there's no point charging me for missing it."

Imogen almost smiled. She checked the seal and recorded the temperature. At the door she said quietly, "Don't put that load on the ferry until somebody has proved the anchors."

"We know."

"Knowing is not measuring."

She had been waiting more than a month to touch them. They were ordinary grey containers with battered handles. Their importance had not made them heavier. That evening she drove the truck to a level patch above the lower path, where the generator could run while she watched the ferry team finish another test. The fuel needle sat a little below a quarter; the mechanic was due with the next measured drum at noon. She wrote both figures in her notebook. The problem was not that a powered refrigerator had a four-day lifetime. It was that one missed fuel delivery or blocked feed line could exhaust the short backup margin while she was away.

20

The Price of Honesty

Imogen had been keeping two sets of accounts for three years, and on the morning she decided to show them to her father she spent an hour in the bond store reading the cards.

The cards were the part nobody read. They lived in a long oak drawer under the counter, one for each load that had ever waited, and each had a column for the day, a column for the charge, and a column on the right-hand side that she had added herself, in pencil, after the first bad winter: the compounding. Storage in the Narrows was not a flat daily fee. It rose the longer a load waited, because Walter had told the board, and Imogen had written it up, and the board had agreed, that delay was a cost to the town, and a cost ought to grow.

She took out a card at random. A stonemason's sled of dressed slate, nineteen days, belonging to a man whose name she knew because he had worked on the school porch. The storage on the slate had passed what the slate was worth in the second week. She had signed the release form that let the clerk go on adding. Her initials were at the bottom, small and neat.

"Is something wrong with the schedule?" the clerk asked. He was a mild young man with ink on his sleeves, and he had been polishing the same pen for some time.

"No. It's working."

"You said that as though it was the matter."

She put the card back. In the next drawer was a cooper's cart, and under that a family's furniture, held eleven days for a debt that began as a toll and had become something else, and the card for the furniture had the same pencilled column. She read six cards. On four of them the figure at the right was larger than the figure at the left. That was what compounding meant. It was how the system was meant to feel when you were inside it: not a punishment but arithmetic.

At the bottom of the drawer, in a folder of its own, was the card for the vaccine cargo. She had made it herself. She had written, in the column that was supposed to be the carrier's charge, a figure that was lower than the schedule's, and then, in the margin, in smaller pencil, the number the schedule would have charged. It was the only card in the drawer on which she had done that. She had told herself it was because the cargo was medical. She knew that was true. She knew it was also true that Corinne Haldane was the first outsider who had ever asked her what she would do if the money were her own.

"Release the slate," she said.

"Without charge?"

"Without further charge. The first nineteen days stand." She heard how small it sounded. "And keep the card. Don't file it."

The clerk wrote it on the form with exaggerated care. "You know that's the thing the carriers will talk about."

"I know."

"You can't do it for all of them."

"I know that too." She took the folder with the vaccine card out of the drawer and put it in her bag with the two ledgers. "That's the trouble with mercy in a ledger. It always turns out to be a preference."

• • •

She laid both sets on Walter's dining table that evening. He had cooked potatoes and onions and left her portion in the pan. The house smelled of frying fat and the wax he used on the old table, and the fire in the front room had been banked for the night. He put two plates down without looking at the papers.

"What now?" he asked.

"The cost of keeping this town open."

"I thought you were the one who knew it."

"I know it to the penny. That's the trouble."

The first set was the version the board received. Figures were grouped by department, maintenance recorded under broad headings, and a footnote explained variations in emergency income. The second set was the one she used to pay what was actually due. It listed the overdue clinic invoice, the pension dates, the watch payroll, the fuel account, and the piece of bridge steel Hugh had asked for twice and failed to obtain. There was nothing secret about the second set. It sat in the office where a clerk could have opened it. But nobody had ever read the two together except Imogen, and she had learned to think of that as a practical necessity and not a decision.

She had marked the receipts from the emergency surcharges and the storage fees in one column. In another she had put the promised spending: a school roof, the clinic's winter stock, the pensions of road workers, interest on the bridge loan, and the fund for the next structural repair. For years the repair fund had been paid what was left. What was left had never been enough.

Walter read without interrupting. He was better with accounts than people believed. He found a duplicated entry and asked her to correct it. She did. It changed nothing.

"If you lift the surcharge," he said, "which one goes?"

"Some of each."

"That isn't how a nurse or a pensioner lives. You can't send them a small portion of a promise."

"We've been sending them promises funded by people who never agreed to the charges."

"They agreed to use the bridge."

"Under an agreement that says their delegates vote on the rate."

He put the papers down. "Their delegates stopped coming."

"We made it cheaper for them not to."

"Because they demanded it. You were a child. You don't remember the winter we had four meetings and nobody would pay for the heat in this room, let alone a bridge."

She remembered enough of that winter. The stove had gone out twice. Her father had sat in his coat with the ledger on his knees, adding figures as if the weather might improve once the page balanced. She remembered telling him that she would learn to do the accounts so that he could sleep.

"Tell me what goes," she said.

He looked at her.

"If the surcharge goes. You said some of each. Tell me which ones. Say them aloud."

For a moment she thought he would refuse. Then he took a pencil from the pocket of his shirt, turned the second ledger over, and began to write on the back of it. He wrote fast. He had not needed to look anything up.

"The school roof," he said. "That's gone. It waits another year, and another winter, and the roof doesn't wait. The clinic's winter stock comes down by a third. Eleven pensions are cut to the bone. The captain's brother's is one of them, and the captain will find that out from me." His pencil kept moving. "Fourteen people on the watch and in the clerks' room lose their wage in a month. I can keep five. The interest on the bridge loans doesn't go anywhere, and if I miss it the lender takes the pier house, and the lender isn't a person." He

put the pencil down. “That’s what goes. I could name every one of them. You asked.”

“I did.”

“And you’d do it anyway.”

“I’d do something. I don’t know what yet.”

“Then you’ve nothing.” He didn’t say it unkindly. He said it the way he would have said it to a clerk who had come with a plan and no figures. “A plan without figures is a mood, Imogen.”

“I’ve figures.”

“You’ve mine.”

She had no answer to that, because it was true. She had spent three years learning the figures because her father had never had the patience to do it himself, and in learning them she had learned his reasons. She had not known that would make it harder.

“Dad,” she said, “you signed a request for escorted loads before Hugh made the inspection.”

“He had given us a provisional view.”

“He says he hadn’t tested it.”

“He’s allowed a judgement.”

“Not one written after the fact.”

Walter stood and took the pan from the stove. He scraped half the potatoes onto her plate although she had not asked for them. She knew the gesture. He had been feeding her when he couldn’t answer her since she was small.

“Do you think I like what we’ve had to charge?” he asked.

“I think you’ve got used to it.”

“There’s a difference between getting used to a thing and agreeing with it.”

“You made everyone else live with it.”

He sat down again. For a while they ate. He asked whether the lower ferry was nearing completion. Imogen said she did not know. He told her the river would rise by the end of the week; the mountain gauge had shown a shift after the rain.

“Are you going to close the ferry?” she asked.

“It’s an unauthorized crossing carrying people who haven’t had the anchors checked.”

“People have spent a month looking at your bridge. They know there are risks.”

“Looking isn’t inspecting. You know that better than most.”

“That is why I signed the emergency contracts,” Walter said. “You can argue with what we charge. You cannot ask me to let an uninspected crossing carry people in rising water.”

Imogen pushed a potato across her plate with her fork. The school roof was leaking again; she had priced the repair herself. Downriver, the stranded drivers were gathering the tools for a ferry her father intended to stop.

“I’ve copied the accounts,” she said.

Walter looked up. “For whom?”

“For the people paying them.”

“You’d give our debt book to strangers?”

“It’s their debt too.”

“They’ll use it to break us.”

“It’s already broken. We’ve only been careful where we put the cracks.”

He put down his fork. She almost wished she had not said it so neatly. It sounded rehearsed, and the truth was less graceful: late wages, a missing school roof, frightened pensioners, people sleeping in cabs on the wrong side of a gate.

“You’ve kept two sets,” he said. “Three years, you said. You never told me.”

“You’d have told me to stop.”

“I’d have told you to bring it to the board.”

“The board is you.”

He had no answer to that. It was the only time that evening she saw him look old.

“You signed these invoices yourself,” he said at last.

"I did."

"You could have refused."

"I should have."

It was the nearest they came that night to agreeing on anything. Walter got up and washed the pan. Imogen gathered the papers and left the clean plate on the table. At the door he said there was a fleece blanket in the cupboard if she was going down to the lower crossing. She said she had one. He went to fetch it anyway, and held it out without saying anything, and she took it because the river was cold.

• • •

She walked down to Florence's in the dark with the second ledger under her arm. The boarding house kitchen was warm and lit, and Florence sat at the table in her cardigan with a pot of tea and a pair of reading glasses pushed up into her hair. She did not ask what the papers were. She took them from Imogen's hands and read for a quarter of an hour without speaking, turning the pages with a licked finger.

"Twenty years," she said, when she reached the last. "And it's all in your hand."

"Some of it's his."

"Some of it's mine." Florence took off her glasses. "I told you that once. I didn't tell you what I'd done about it, which was nothing. I let you grow up thinking he did all of this alone."

"He didn't."

"No." She squared the pages against the edge of the table. "What do you want me to do with it?"

"Keep it somewhere he can't ask for it."

"He's never asked me for anything in his life. That's the trouble with Walter. He asks nobody, and then he's surprised when nobody tells him." She put the pages in a biscuit tin and put the lid on, and put the tin on top of the dresser behind the good teapot. "There. It'll

be safer than anything in the bond office. Nobody's ever looked behind that teapot but me."

"Thank you."

"Don't." Florence refilled her cup. "You'd better drink that before it goes cold. And then you'd better go and see how the ferry's getting on, because whatever you decide to do with that book, those poor beggars are going to try to use that cable, and somebody ought to be there who can count."

Imogen drank the tea. It was hot and sweet and tasted of the biscuit tin. When she left the kitchen it was dark and the lamps down the lower road were yellow in the cold. She could see the winch house and a figure on the bank. She thought it was Simon, and then she thought she was wrong, and then he lifted a lantern and swung it twice, and she recognised the movement.

She went down the path. She wrapped the fleece blanket round her shoulders. It still smelled of her father's cupboard, of cedar and lavender and his careful housekeeping, and she walked down toward the water with it held tight at her throat, and did not turn back.

The next morning she made another copy of the ledger and left one in Florence's keeping. The other stayed with her, wrapped in oilcloth. She was not sure the people who read it would thank her. There was no reason they should.

21

The First Load

The ferry moved for the first time on a clear morning, with frost on the banks and the river lower than it had been all week.

The workers had swept the deck, not because it made the machinery safer but because someone was going to step onto it and ought not to fall on an abandoned bolt. Simon had painted fresh marks on the cable drum. Hugh checked the new anchorage from the near side, then crossed in the workboat to look at the far seat, while the boatman held the line without speaking. It was the morning on which everything looked more finished than it was.

Corinne stood at the west landing with a list of conditions pinned beneath a stone. The ferry would carry no passengers during the first test. The load was a water tank filled to a measured level and tied low. The men on shore would release the line if the cable began to whip. Nobody would climb onto the deck to save a piece of equipment.

“This isn’t a crossing,” she told the volunteers. “It’s a way of finding out what breaks before someone’s standing on it.”

One of them asked whether there was a more encouraging way to say that. There wasn’t.

Simon had built a small indicator from a spring and a scrap rule to show changes in the tension of the guide cable. Hugh inspected it

and said he wouldn't use its figures as an instrument reading. He also said it would tell them if the force changed suddenly. Simon took that for praise and tried not to show it.

"Say the number when it moves," Hugh told him. "Don't say what you think it means."

"I won't."

"You will. Everybody does. Try not to say it aloud."

The deck took the current slowly. Its downstream corner turned, the cable drew straight, and for a second nothing happened. Then the platform edged away from the landing with an ugly scraping sound and began to cross on the angle of the river. They could hear the water against the pontoons, a low continuous slap. Corinne watched the east anchor rather than the deck. She couldn't be in two places, and plenty of people were watching the deck.

Halfway over, the indicator jumped. Simon called the figure. Hugh told him to write it down and not explain it. The movement steadied. The platform reached the far bank three minutes later and knocked gently against the timber stop. Somebody cheered. Corinne didn't, because the far anchor had shifted enough to make the fresh chalk mark look doubled.

"How far?" Corinne asked.

Simon checked the mark again. "Three millimetres at the bank. Or four. The rain took the edge off the chalk."

Hugh called from the boat. "Then it isn't three. Put a range in the book."

"Does a range stop us?" one of the volunteers asked.

"Not by itself," Hugh said. He looked up at the anchor. "But it doesn't let us call the seat fixed."

They brought the deck back empty. The return was slower against the altered current. It scraped the landing again, and a retaining pin bent. The pin could be replaced, but it was a reminder that the things they hadn't measured were under load too.

• • •

By noon people from the queue had come down to see. They filled the path in their working coats and shouted questions. Could it take a small van? Could it take two? Could it carry a sick person on a stretcher? Could it take a diesel drum? Could it move a lorry wheel by wheel? The answers disappointed them. Some men called the work a waste of time. A boy asked if he could ride it and was told, by several people at once, no. One woman brought the crew a loaf and said it was the first hopeful thing she had seen in a month.

Corinne took the bread to Simon, who was bent over the tension indicator. He had found wear on the mounting eye and was already designing a replacement. He looked at the loaf without taking it.

"Did you see the chalk?"

"I did."

"It moved less on the return."

"That doesn't give us the first movement back."

"No. But it may have seated."

"*May* isn't a figure."

He nodded. The disappointment crossed his face before he could hide it. She wanted to tell him his work had been good. She told him to eat before the bread got cold. He looked up at that, and took it.

Hugh came down from the far bank as the light began to fail, red mud on his cuffs. The rock seat hadn't split, but the packing around it was settling under repeated load. He wanted a second anchor restraint, a slow proof cycle, and a night without traffic before any cargo went aboard.

A driver waiting at the path asked why they were being so careful when the first test had worked. Hugh considered the question as if he might find an answer that would please somebody.

"Because the first test is the first test," he said.

He wrote the condition for any further loaded run on the back of a docket, in block capitals, and gave it to Corinne: the bank restraint to be independently checked after the repair, and again at the actual

river stage. She read it and signed to say she had received it. Receiving it did not make her qualified to approve the work.

Cyril Dunsford came down to the shed with a narrow parcel under his coat. The paper had been folded and unfolded until the corners were translucent. Inside was a little wooden horse, cut from scrap roofing batten and painted red along its back. He set it on the bench while Simon cleaned grit out of the measuring gauge.

"My boy wanted a proper horse," Cyril said. "He's going to get one small enough to lose in his pocket."

"Why red?" Simon asked.

"Because that's what I had. You want to tell a child you ran out of blue?" Cyril turned the toy over and pointed out where one leg had been glued twice. "I've been meant to be home for his birthday for six days. You know what I promised him? I'd make the roof stop leaking before the next snow. That's why I'm still hauling tiles in this valley."

He was due to take a boat south as soon as the ferry had been tested, then arrange a smaller carrier for his load. Corinne asked why he remained on the crew when he could at least begin the long way home. Cyril said the roof sheeting was still trapped at the Narrows and that he had helped clean the winch; it would be poor manners to leave everyone else holding the cable. When she said it wasn't a question of manners, he tipped the red horse back into its wrapping.

"The far anchor's still worrying me," he said. "I saw the soil go under my boot. If it hasn't been inspected, I won't put a load on it."

"We're not carrying a load tomorrow," Corinne said.

"People are loads." He said it mildly. Simon put down his gauge. For a moment neither of them spoke. Cyril asked Simon to keep the parcel dry if he left it in the tool chest, and Simon promised him a shelf beyond the reach of the drip. Cyril wrote his child's destination on the paper in thick block letters. Then he made Corinne repeat the plan for checking the far anchorage. She did, and heard how

much still depended on someone arriving who knew the river better than they did.

• • •

She posted the next test for the following afternoon. Then she went up to the truck, because there was something she had been putting off.

The vaccines had been in her own compartment since the thirty-third day, when she had paid the release fee and watched two clerks carry the cases out of the bond room and set them in the box. The phase-change packs were a backup for short interruptions. Without active cooling they couldn't sustain another long wait, and so the small generator behind the cab had been running since, and every morning she added the fuel it had used to the column in her book. She was burning more than she had planned to. She'd been running it at low idle to stretch the can.

She knew that wasn't right. A stranger in the queue, weeks ago, had told her so: ten minutes under load, every few hours. She had done it twice and stopped. The fuel gauge was a brutal kind of arithmetic. Each time she opened the throttle she watched the needle, and each time she let it down again the set went back to its small even rattle and she told herself she would do it later.

She checked the compartment log after dark. Each figure was in range. The generator was holding. That was becoming a fragile kind of comfort, because it depended on a machine she had decided not to look after.

• • •

At the upper road she found Walter watching the ferry lights. He had brought two watchmen, who stood back near the path with their hands in their pockets. He asked for the capacity, and Corinne gave him the tested figure, not the old plate's six tonnes. He nodded as though that were reasonable.

"You're building yourself a tollhouse," he said.

"I'm building a crossing."

"They come to the same thing after a winter."

"Only if somebody forgets who paid."

He looked toward the dark water. "The river's moving up."

"We're checking it."

"Check quickly," he said, and went.

Corinne hated that she listened for the water after he had gone. It sounded higher, though she knew sound was a poor gauge. She climbed down with a lamp and read the stage against the old marked stone. It had risen less than a hand's width. She wrote it down and didn't change the next day's plan.

22

Below the High Water Mark

By the thirty-seventh morning, after several days of active refrigeration from the truck generator, the rain had begun and kept a small steady pressure against the truck roof. Corinne was awake in the cab with the cargo log open. The last reading was good. The generator had run longer in the night than she had allowed for, and her fuel had fallen to a mark that made her calculate whether she could reach the recipient without buying any more at Narrows prices.

She went down to the river before breakfast. The stage had risen another finger's width. The water was brown at the edges, carrying small pieces of bark and one pale branch that rolled in the current. The marker on the bank said they remained below the old working limit. She had learned enough in the last weeks to distrust that sort of reassurance.

The volunteers were already there. They had brought the secondary restraint from the quarry yard and installed it late the previous evening, bolting it into the rock seat above the first. Hugh had said the change improved the load path but had not been present for the final tightening. Simon had recorded the torque as best he could using a worn bar and a borrowed weight. Corinne asked for the sheet. He gave it to her.

"Do we have a second inspection?" she asked.

“Not yet.”

“Then we wait.”

A driver from the queue stepped forward. His cargo was an electric motor for a heating plant beyond the gorge, small enough to fit the ferry but too heavy to carry around the winter road without another vehicle. The plant had gone to half service. He had a message from its operator saying the other machine had failed overnight. The river was rising. By tomorrow the ferry might be unusable for a week.

“We can’t keep testing until there’s no reason to cross,” he said.

Corinne listened to him. She looked at the low grey sky and the long curve of the cable. There was a kind of logic to his argument, the logic that had brought the first unauthorized lorry onto the bridge. There was also a genuine problem at the other end of the route. She told him the motor could not go until the anchorage had been checked.

He asked whether someone would inspect it this morning. She sent Simon up the path for Hugh. The boy returned alone. Hugh was supervising the emergency bracing beneath the bridge and would come down when the lift was finished. By then the water had risen again.

The boatman said they could make an unloaded run to examine the line under tension. He had operated river craft but had never certified this anchor. Hugh’s signed condition still stood. The suggested run would put people on an unverified system even without cargo. Corinne nevertheless agreed, with two conditions: a minimum crew, and no one aboard except the people needed to operate the deck. She meant to test the restraint, not prove cargo capacity. Hugh had not authorised it. She knew that and wrote her own decision in the job book, with the rising stage beside it.

“No cargo,” Corinne said. “No passengers except the crew. If it moves a finger, we bring it back.”

“How much is a finger?” Simon asked.

“Whatever Hugh wrote on that sheet.”

“He wrote stop at any movement that keeps increasing.”

“Then call it the moment you see it.”

Simon bent over the indicator, shielding it from rain with his body. The boatman went along the deck testing the release hook, then climbed back to the landing to make sure both volunteers could hear him. “Light crew. Stay low. If I tell you to leave the lever, you leave it.” Cyril asked which lever he meant. The boatman showed him. Corinne wrote eight seventeen beside the river-stage figure. The cable tightened under their feet, slowly at first, and the boatman tipped his head to listen.

“Fourteen,” Simon said. “It was eleven on the first run.”

Corinne moved close enough to read the scale. “Keep calling it.”

“Fifteen. Still rising.”

The boatman held one palm out to keep the volunteers still. The ferry had not yet reached midstream. The guide line changed pitch against the drum. Simon dropped his pencil. “The east marker. Look at the rock.”

Across the river the chalk mark slid upward against the bracket, four millimetres, then five. A seam opened in the wet soil beneath the rock seat. Simon called the figures again, louder. Corinne looked from the marker to the people on the deck.

“Bring them back,” Corinne said. The boatman raised his arm. “Away from the rail. Stay down.” A hard crack came from the far bank. One bolt tore clear. The ferry slewed downstream, dragging the remaining cable across the deck.

“Cut the pull!” shouted a man on the far landing. “Cut it now!” The boatman shouted for the near release. Corinne stumbled over a loose coil and caught the handle with both hands.

Cyril gripped the control lever as the deck tilted. “I can hold it!” he shouted, and the boatman answered, “Leave it. Leave the lever!” His boots went out from under him. The platform struck his side, and he slipped into the water beneath its edge. His safety line drew

taut against the damaged rail. He disappeared as the deck dragged it down.

Corinne pulled the release. It stuck, then snapped free; the far cable still held the platform broadside. Simon ran toward the drum. “Back!” she yelled, catching his jacket just as the wire sprang across the landing. It struck the post with a flat metallic clang. Simon looked at his palm, where the skin had split.

The watch captain came down the path with two men. “Ropes from the cart,” he ordered. “You, clear that landing. Nobody goes into the water without a line.” Corinne knotted her scarf around Simon’s bleeding hand. He tried to take it off; she told him to leave it alone.

The boatman brought his small workboat through the eddy and reached the volunteer still clinging to the rail. “Give me your coat,” he called. “Sleeve first.” He pulled the man aboard and pointed at the fouled line on the gravel bar. Corinne called to Simon to keep away from it. The boatman searched the black water beneath the failed ferry, then looked up. “Where’s the other one?” No one answered him.

Corinne went downstream along the near shore with a lamp and found a boot lodged between two rocks. She knew its laces: Cyril had tightened them twice before boarding. She left it there and kept calling his name until she was hoarse.

The boatman came ashore beside her, winding the line around a cleat. “I saw him go under,” she said. “I didn’t see him come up.” He looked toward the dark bend and asked for another lamp.

For the next hour the rescue had no centre. The boatman worked between the banks and the damaged deck. The watch held a rope across the near landing; Simon, with one good hand, copied the names of the people already ashore. “Two on the far side,” he said. “One rescued here. Cyril missing.” The captain repeated the count and sent men to search downstream. No one changed the numbers to make them easier to bear.

By dusk the boatman had recovered Cyril Dunsford from an eddy below the gravel bar. He had been underwater too long. The clinic worker who came down the path went through the motions of examination with a tenderness that made the men around her look away. There was nothing to be done except carry him back.

The surviving volunteer asked whether Cyril had been found. The boatman nodded, then sat beside him on the stone and told him where. He did not use the word recovered. The volunteer asked about the birthday Cyril had meant to get home for. No one on the bank knew the date. Simon went back to the tool chest and found the little spanner Cyril had called lucky. He closed it in his fist and stood there until the clinic worker needed a hand carrying the stretcher.

Two people remained across the river, one with a damaged ankle, the other unable to manage the long path out through the gorge. The boatman refused another crossing in the dark. He was right, and nobody had the strength to argue. They built a fire in a sheltered hollow on the far bank and signalled that they could keep it fed until morning.

Corinne climbed to the truck after midnight. Her generator had stopped while she was at the river. The fuel had not run out entirely; a clogged feed line had starved the engine after a long period at low idle. She had been told. A stranger on a crate in the queue had listened to the set without looking at it and said ten minutes under load every few hours, and she had decided she could not spare the fuel. She cleared it in the rain, restarted it, and found the cargo temperature climbing. The locally stored log showed a recorded excursion above the shipment's specified range while she had been downriver. The packs had slowed it, but they had not stopped it. The log showed how much allowance was left. It was narrow, and restarting the generator could not give back the minutes.

She watched the little figures return toward their usual range. In the last month she had blamed Walter for every minute taken from

her. For the first time she could put her own name beside a delay that might cost the destination its medicine.

She heard her father’s voice when she checked the stopped generator: not his advice about engines, but the rule he had given her at sixteen after a lorry slid on black ice. If you own the decision, you own the damage. She had written her authorization for the unloaded ferry test in the job book. She would not let anybody scratch it out.

23

The People in the Water

By morning the river had fallen a little, which made it look harmless from the road. Corinne knew better than to read anything into its colour or the way it lay against the stones. She had been awake most of the night, running the generator when the engine would hold, taking readings, and walking to the overlook to watch the fire on the far bank. It had stayed alight. Twice she thought she saw someone move beside it.

A message came at dawn from the receiving clinic by the valley's independent radio set. The operator copied it onto paper and brought it up from the watch office, complaining that the voice had faded in the middle of every other sentence. The vaccine team could hold its session for another day if the cases arrived properly cold. After that the staff would be sent to other work and the patients to the long road. Corinne read it three times. For weeks the cargo had been the one fixed thing around which every decision turned. It was still the one thing she was paid for. But now there were people across the river who might be hurt or freezing, and their clock allowed no further day.

The boatman had spent the night examining the gravel bar. He believed the slack water at the lower bend might let a small boat reach the stranded pair if the boat were lowered along the bank on

a line. He wanted two people on the ropes, one on each shore, and nobody aboard except the man steering. Corinne asked who would take the near line. He looked at her. That was how the plan began.

Simon brought the last usable coil from the ferry site. He had not slept. His eyes were bloodshot and his fingers moved too fast when he picked at the ends. Corinne put him on the high bank as signalman, with a watchman beside him. He protested for nearly a minute. Then he saw the boatman laying out the equipment and understood that arguing would use up time they did not have.

"Three flashes," she said. "All's well. Two, hold. One long, you pull us in."

"I know the code."

"Say it back."

He said it back. She made him say it again.

The watch captain arrived with the clinic worker and three men from the recovery crew. He brought hot drink, a long blanket and a sheet of names. He said the fire on the far side had been seen all night and the two people there had signalled at first light. He said the volunteer's family had been told. He did not say how, and Corinne did not ask. She wanted to know whether Walter had authorized the rescue. The captain seemed to watch the question forming.

"There are people across the water," he said. "We've got ropes."

At the watch store, the rescue boat stood ready but lacked fuel. The captain opened the emergency cupboard and found a sealed can and two dry rope coils set aside for winter patrol. A handwritten authorization lay on top: release for recovery of persons stranded across the river. W. Pritchard. The watch clerk said Walter had come down after midnight, signed for the supplies himself, and required the captain to put the rescue before the bridge repair crew's morning allocation. The captain took them without waiting for another signature. He had no intention of making a ceremony of it.

• • •

They worked down to the lower bend, where alder roots held the bank together and the mud came away from their boots in long strips. The river here was louder than it had been at the ferry. It moved in two voices: a hard fast sound in the channel and a slower sucking sound at the edges, where the water was eating the bank a handful at a time. Corinne could feel it through the soles of her boots.

The boatman went first with a light line, in a dinghy that had been used to ferry bags of cement. The current seized the bow and swung it toward the outer channel. He let it go, brought it back along the eddy, and threw the line to the far shore. One of the stranded pair caught it. The other stood a little way behind, holding both arms tight against the chest and watching the dinghy as if it might disappear. They looped it around an alder above the flood mark and he pulled it tight, and the line sat in the air above the water with a faint steady hum.

"Now," the boatman said, "the heavy line."

They fed it out hand over hand. Corinne took the near end with a watchman called up from the recovery crew, a stout man with a missing finger who said nothing and never let go. They looped it round the stump of a willow, took two turns, and held it. The rope ran away from them across the river like a drawn line on paper. The water below was brown and fast and full of small brown things.

"If it goes slack," the boatman said, "you let go. You don't follow it. Understand? You don't follow it."

"We understand."

"I don't think you do. Nobody does until it's happened." He climbed into the boat. "All right."

The first to come over was the man with the damaged ankle. The boatman made him sit in the bottom of the boat rather than attempt the seat. Corinne and the watchman eased the line from the near bank while the far-side man held the upper rope. The boat swung

out. Water struck its side and slopped over the gunwale. Corinne felt the rope wrench at the skin inside her palms. She tightened her grip and tasted blood where she had bitten her lip. Halfway, it turned broadside to the current, and the man in the bottom cried out, a high thin sound, and braced his good foot against a rib of the hull.

"Let out!" the boatman shouted. "Let out a yard!"

Corinne let out a yard. The boat swung, hesitated, and straightened. The line sang. They reached the near stones wet to the knees, and the man was lifted out and carried up the bank, swearing steadily in a low voice, the only person in the whole business who sounded entirely like himself.

The second person was harder. She was a woman of about forty, who had sat beside the fire all night and could hardly make her legs work. The boatman went back for her. He was shaking, Corinne saw: a fine continuous tremor in the hand on the tiller. She wondered how long it was since he had slept, and decided it was better not to know. At the last stretch the woman tried to step onto the deck too early and slid against the gunwale, putting one arm into the river to the shoulder. She made no sound. Her mouth stayed open while the boat tipped toward her, and Corinne heard her own breath break into a shout. The boatman caught her coat and hauled her down beside him. The line brought them into the bank with such force that the wooden bow split a narrow seam. The boat began to take water. They had just enough time to get her out before it settled into the mud with a sigh.

Nobody cheered. There was too much to do. The clinic worker wrapped the injured ankle, then took the woman's hands and examined them, and said they were not as bad as they looked. The watch captain organized a stretcher carry. A man from the queue with a child on his hip held out his coat to a woman he had never met. Corinne sat on a wet log because her legs had become unreli-

able, and got up again when someone asked where the casualty sheet had gone.

• • •

At noon she went with Florence to the house on the lower terrace where Cyril had lived.

Corinne had not wanted to go. She had no standing there. But Florence had come down to the lower bend in her coat and boots, with a basket, and said the family had been told by a clerk through a door and that this was not good enough. She did not ask Corinne to come. She said she was going, and walked, and Corinne followed her up the hill, because she had been on the rope.

His wife was waiting at the top of the stair. She was younger than Corinne had imagined: forty, perhaps, with her hair tied back in a cloth and flour to her elbows, because she had been baking. She did not cry. She said nothing at all until Florence put the basket down on the table and said his name.

"They said he was in the water," the wife said.

"He was." Florence took her hands. "They brought him out. They did what they could."

"Was he afraid?"

Corinne looked at the floor. She had no answer. She had seen him go in, and the line catch, and the dark shape vanish round the hull. What she had was a cup. She said so, because it was true and because it was all she had.

"He brought an extra cup to every meal," she said. "At the ferry. For whoever hadn't one."

The wife looked at her.

"That's him," she said. "That's exactly him." And she laughed, and then she was crying, in the breathless way of someone who has been up all night, and Florence held her. Corinne stood in the doorway with her hands in her pockets and was a person who didn't know where to look.

When they went down the stair, Florence said, without turning her head, “You needn’t have come. But I’m glad you did.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“No. That’s what it’s like.”

• • •

By the time Corinne reached the truck on the thirty-eighth day, the cargo log had crossed the limit.

She read it standing in the cab door with the paper in her hand. The generator had run for part of the morning, but the insulated box had lost too much cooling during the night and the long rescue. She read the times twice, with a finger under each, as she would have read a stranger’s. The numbers were not ambiguous. The cases could not be released on her authority. She wrote QUARANTINED across the docket and put the log and the seals in an envelope for the clinic’s cold-chain assessor, who would decide what was to be done with them.

She telephoned the receiving clinic from the bond office on the valley’s wired line. The wire hissed and the call dropped twice. When the voice finally came through, she gave the times aloud and said the lot was quarantined pending assessment. The person at the other end asked whether any remained in range in a separately controlled box. Corinne went and checked. There was none. A clinic worker came up from the south that afternoon, read the printout, and said the stock could not be used. Its staff would take the patients by the long road.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

The person did not comfort her. They asked for the serial list. She read it slowly, with a finger under each number, because another error would have been intolerable.

“Do you want the whole lot recalled?” the clinician asked when Corinne finished reading.

“I’ve sealed the cases and marked the excursion. None was in a separate cooled bay.”

“Then nobody opens them. Will you send the paper log with the driver?”

“I’ll bring it myself if the road allows.”

There was a pause on the line. “I have twenty-three people to call,” the clinician said. “I need to do that before I can talk about your invoice.”

“Call them first,” Corinne said.

Imogen came into the office while Corinne was still on the line. She waited until it ended.

“Were they brought back?”

“Both of them.”

“And the cargo?”

Corinne handed her the reading. Imogen studied it without an expression and made a copy for the bond record. She did not say that a good act cancelled a failed delivery. Corinne was grateful for that too.

In the afternoon they recovered Cyril’s tools. The boatman put them in a box: a wrench, a coil of wire, two pencils, a small packet of bread, soaked through. Simon asked whether the tools should go to the family or back to the people who had lent them. Florence said the family could decide, and took the box herself.

The ferry was gone as a crossing. Its deck lay on the gravel bar and one guide cable hung across the river like a dropped thread. The heavy bridge was still closed. Corinne had lost her cargo, had very little fuel, and owed money she could not immediately earn. She went out to the queue to tell the drivers what had happened, expecting some of them to blame her. They did. A woman said she should have waited for the second inspection. Corinne agreed. A man said there had been no choice, the river was rising. Corinne looked toward the bank where the water had risen, and did not answer.

At the gate that afternoon, the steel-coupling driver confronted Corinne in front of three others. “You signed for the test?” she asked. “I did,” Corinne said. “It is entered in the winch-house book.”

“Can I read the inspection you did not get?” the driver asked.

“No. There was no signed inspection of the replacement anchor.”

A driver behind her spat into the mud. “And Walter will use this against us until the bridge falls down.”

“He won’t need to invent it,” said the woman. “It happened.”

That evening a note appeared at the gate saying Walter had instructed the watch to seize the ferry equipment and prevent further unauthorized work. The note carried his signature. The watch captain came down to the lower road and read it aloud to the people gathered there, and said he would return in the morning with the necessary men. He sounded tired, not threatening.

Corinne slept for a few hours in the truck without running the generator. The cases lay sealed and segregated for return. There was no point pretending that more cooling could reverse what the log had recorded. When she woke, dawn had whitened the upper houses. She emptied the melted water from the cooling trays and set the recorder on the seat beside her. It was evidence of a failure she would carry with her for a long time.

At dawn the clinic worker brought a list of the dead man’s personal belongings. It was written on the reverse of an old medicine inventory because proper forms had run out. The list was short: boots, coat, a watch that had stopped, a wallet in a waxed pocket. The little wooden horse was not there. Corinne knew where it was. Simon had kept the wrapped parcel high in the winch shed, away from the water, because Cyril had asked him to.

They found Simon sitting on the floor with the package in his lap. He had not unwrapped it. When Corinne asked him to help prepare the parcel for the family, he refused at first. He said Cyril had asked him to keep it dry, not deliver it. The distinction was childish and

absolute, and she let it stand for several minutes while they listened to rain crossing the roof.

"Did he leave an address?" she asked.

"On the paper."

"Then we can send it with the next person going south."

"He wanted to take it himself."

Corinne sat beside him. There were two things she could do: claim they had all agreed to the test, or tell the boy the decision had been hers. The first would have made Simon responsible for a vote he had never cast. She told him she had authorized the crew to take the river without the inspection Hugh required. Simon kept his eyes on the parcel. He asked whether knowing the result beforehand would have changed her answer. She said she hoped it would have, and felt the inadequacy of that hope.

In the afternoon the surviving volunteer came to the boarding house with his arm in a sling. He would no longer help build another ferry, he said. He had been willing to rebuild an old machine so that people could reach home. He had not agreed to substitute a crowd's urgency for an engineer's permission. Corinne asked him to write what he remembered in Florence's incident book. He said he would write the words exactly, including her name beside the authorization. She gave him the pen. He sat for a long time before making the first mark, because his injured hand would not hold it properly.

When the parcel finally left for the southern road, Corinne placed it in the hands of a carrier who knew Cyril's settlement. She asked him not to tell the child how the man died on the doorstep. He said there was no good doorstep for a story like that, but he would speak first to the family. Corinne watched the carrier put the toy in a dry compartment apart from the freight. The vehicle went away slowly, stopped at the first turn to let another truck pass, and disappeared behind the stone wall.

24

No *Seizure*

Imogen walked down to the lower road with the accounts tied in oilcloth beneath her coat. The path was crowded before she reached the ferry turnoff. Town residents had come to see what remained of the crossing; drivers had come because their loads were still trapped; recovery workers had come to collect equipment; and a few people had come because they expected an argument and did not want to hear about it secondhand.

Corinne had come down from the rescue store with a duplicate issue sheet folded in her pocket. The clerk had shown her the line written the previous night: two coils of dry rope and the patrol boat's reserve fuel, released on Walter Pritchard's signature. There had been a standing instruction not to break the emergency reserve without board consent. Walter had signed anyway. The boatman and the stranded pair were alive because the rescue could begin at daylight. Across the path Walter was now directing the watch toward the ferry tools. Corinne watched him look at the seizure order, then folded the issue sheet once more. Both signatures belonged to the same man.

The watch captain stood by the barrier with four men. They wore ordinary working coats and had their batons at their belts. None had drawn one. Behind them Walter was speaking quietly to a clerk,

pointing toward the winch and the scattered cable drums. He looked up when Imogen approached.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he said.

“Neither should the equipment be taken.”

“The ferry has killed somebody.”

“Yes. It has.”

She had seen the body carried up. She knew the family of the man who had died. He had unloaded flour beside her warehouse often enough that she knew the way he bent a sack corner to make it easy to lift. Nothing about the day was improved by pretending he had died for a necessary triumph.

Walter asked the captain whether the crew was ready. The captain said that the equipment had not yet been inventoried and that the charter clause on seizure had not been satisfied. Walter’s face tightened a little. He had ordered confiscation under an emergency rule the crossing board used to prevent obstruction of the bridge road. The lower ferry lay outside that road’s defined maintenance easement. An amended order might have been possible with board approval, but the existing paper had no such approval.

“We’ve discussed this,” Walter said.

“We discussed the need to keep people off the water,” the captain answered. “This says take their property.”

“It’s a public danger.”

“Then close the approach and post the danger. That doesn’t give me a title to their tools.”

The captain spoke as a man trying to prevent a mistake rather than make a point. His younger watchman looked from him to Walter and back. Somewhere behind the crowd a person swore about the blocked road. Imogen saw that the watch could probably move one or two people aside. It could not clear the path without roughness and a greater risk of somebody going over the bank.

She stepped onto an old crate beside the winch. It was not much of a platform, and she had never been good at speaking over noise.

She raised the accounts and waited. A driver told the others to be quiet. Walter looked at the papers in her hand and understood at once what they were.

"Imogen," he said, very softly.

"I'll read the charges," she said. "Then anyone can see the papers."

Imogen flattened the first page against the crate. "Maintenance toll: four hundred and fifty units in the annual book. That's the charge we told carriers kept the bridge sound." She turned the leaf. "Emergency assessments: three hundred. The inspection certificate for the new limit was dated before the test. We collected those charges anyway." Someone called for her to speak louder. She did. "Storage and inspection: two hundred and fifty. That number rises whenever we hold a load. I signed the schedule that made it rise."

"And the school?" a woman shouted from the Narrows side.

"One hundred and thirty from general receipts. The clinic, one hundred and seventy. Those payments were real." Imogen touched the red line she'd ruled beside the capital reserve. "But we put away thirty when the bridge needed about two hundred and fifty. I've moved that reserve myself, twice, to meet wages."

A carrier asked: "You charged us for repairs and spent it on pensions?"

"On pensions, school, heat, loans, the watch—yes. Some of it was necessary. " Her hand shook when she read the three invoices bearing her initials. She held the paper steady until everyone could see them.

Corinne stood near the back in her old freight jacket. Imogen could see the set of her shoulders and could not read her face. She knew what the cargo had cost, and what Walter would say about it. She did not know what Corinne would say about her.

Hugh stepped forward with the defect register. "The west connection—I measured it in spring. No. I measured movement; I didn't open the cover. The restriction notices said I inspected it. I hadn't." He turned the page with difficulty. "I signed an assessment

before the referenced test. I let the board use that notice for a charge. Then the connection failed, and by then I had reasons for every part of what I hadn't done." He named the readings and the repairs still necessary.

When he had finished, a driver asked whether they could cross tomorrow if they paid the proper maintenance fee. Hugh said no. The west connection needed bracing and an independent review. It might be weeks before a restricted heavy movement could be approved. The answer caused an immediate ugly murmur. Truth was not making anyone's life easier.

Walter climbed onto the path above the crate. He did not raise his voice much. He said the town had kept the route open through winters when nobody outside would contribute enough to repair it. He asked who would pay the watch next month, who would cover the clinic's fuel, and which of the people demanding a new board would personally sign for the debt. He was not shouting. Several townspeople nodded. Imogen recognized their faces and the obligations behind them.

"Those bills are real," she said. "So are the ones we've sent to people who had no vote."

Walter turned to the captain. "Enough. Take the equipment into bond and clear the road."

The captain examined the order again. Florence had shown him the old compact clause the night before, including the boundary of the board's power and the requirement for approval before taking private machinery outside the maintained roadway. He had already asked Walter for that approval in writing. It had not come.

"I can keep them off the ferry," he said. "I can't seize it under this order."

"You serve the crossing board."

"I do."

"Then do what you're told."

The captain looked at his four watchmen. One had a brother among the drivers. Another had helped pull the ferry survivor from the water. None was eager to force a path through the crowd. He looked back at Walter.

“Bring me a lawful order,” he said.

Walter’s jaw moved once. He was older in that instant than Imogen had ever seen him. He did not lose his temper. He asked the clerk to note the captain’s refusal and stepped away from the barrier.

For a few moments the crowd did nothing. They had been preparing for a fight, and without one they did not know where to put their hands. The watchmen took down the seizure notice but left the danger rope across the lower path. Simon helped them fasten it to a solid post. He checked the knot twice without being asked. The action seemed to Imogen more useful than the applause that began somewhere uphill and died almost immediately.

Corinne came forward carrying Florence’s copy of the founding compact. She asked whether anyone from the outside settlements could call a meeting under the old representation clause. Florence said the clause had never been repealed, only made practically useless. The captain confirmed that the boarding house lay outside the controlled crossing ground. Walter said nothing.

The original outside seats were unfilled, not abolished. Florence would need a quorum of genuinely authorized delegates before the next morning’s meeting; no driver could simply appoint himself.

“Tomorrow morning,” Florence announced. “In my dining room. I’ll make soup. If you want a chair, bring one.”

Somebody laughed. Somebody else objected that the outside delegates would not arrive in time. A driver said two were already in the queue and another was travelling the winter road with written instructions from his settlement. A town resident wanted to know who would pay for the meeting. Florence told him he could pay for his own soup.

Walter approached his daughter at the edge of the path. He looked toward the town, at the windows that would soon be lit and the school roof he had paid to replace.

"You understand what you've done?" he asked.

"Not all of it."

"No," he said. "Neither do they."

He went uphill alone. Imogen wanted to follow him. The old habits of her life urged her to see that he had eaten, that his coat was dry, that nobody had spoken to him with unnecessary cruelty. She stayed where she was because a driver had come with a storage bill and wanted to know why his late charges began three days before the bridge restriction had been posted.

She took the sheet, looked at the date, and found the answer. It was worse than she expected. She told him exactly where the charge had come from and wrote his objection in the margin. Behind them, the broken ferry moved slightly in the current where it lay on the bar. Nobody tried to free it.

On the hill the grocery was crowded with residents arguing about next winter's costs. Imogen carried the accounts past them toward the warehouse.

PART FIVE

An Open Road

25

The Meeting Room

Florence had put the dining tables end to end and covered the join with a folded bedsheet. It was the only clean sheet she could spare. A ring of chairs surrounded the tables, with stools behind them and people standing against the wall beneath the pictures of her dead relatives. She had opened the windows a finger's width because the room was full of wet coats and the stove was drawing badly. The windows kept being shut by those nearest them and opened again by Florence.

Before discussing any fee, Florence demanded the old compact be read aloud with its amendment dates. Two waiting carriers claimed to speak for whole settlements; neither could produce a mandate. The meeting accepted their testimony but did not count their votes. One delegate had walked the winter road with a signed community instruction; another carried minutes and signatures brought by a rider that morning. The chair checked the names against the old local register and recorded the limited quorum and the provisional nature of every act. No one mistook this meeting for a judgment binding people who were not there.

Corinne arrived with a chair under one arm and the founding compact beneath the other. She had borrowed the chair from the roadside repair shed. Its back was cracked, but it stayed upright

when she put weight on it. Florence pointed her toward the end where the people from outside were sitting. Three had come: a carrier who worked the northern road, a woman responsible for the south-road clinic's buying, and a man who had come down the valley on a motorbike in the dark. They had met at the door and had already disagreed over whether they should sit together.

The south-road buyer had a list of names and dates written on the back of a flour invoice. She had been waiting on Corinne's vaccines. She did not take the chair Corinne offered her.

"The patients have been sent by the long route," she said. "Some got through yesterday. The rest are due today, weather permitting. I thought you'd want to know."

"I did want to."

"The route costs three times the usual transport. We had to borrow a van. We can't do it again next month."

Corinne looked at the list. There were no deaths marked on it, which was a relief so sharp she felt briefly ashamed of it. There were two appointments postponed and a child who had spent the night in a borrowed bed at the district side. She asked what she could do about the wasted stock. The buyer said they would send the claim when they knew the full figure.

"That's fair," Corinne said.

"We'll find out."

Florence rang the breakfast bell, a stout brass thing that usually summoned boarders to porridge. The room quietened, more from curiosity than obedience. Someone at the back said they ought to have held the meeting at the council room. Florence said there were more chairs here, and the council room had been locked by the man whose powers they were trying to examine. Nobody had an answer to that.

The old compact lay on the table, weighted at its corners by soup bowls. Its pages were soft with age. The original signatures had been copied onto a board for people at the back to see. Corinne re-

cognized her father's hand even at a distance. His letters were small and upright, and his sevens had the same decisive cross-stroke she remembered from his fuel accounts. He had signed beside two people whose settlements were now represented by empty chairs.

A bridge worker began by reporting the condition of the west panel. No heavy load could cross without temporary bracing, load redistribution and inspection by someone other than Hugh Kelleher. Material for the repair would have to be obtained from the district. The bridge worker said those things plainly, using short names for parts and stopping whenever someone asked what they meant. The questions made the report take forty minutes. It was the most useful forty minutes Corinne had spent in the town.

The northern carrier asked who would pay for the work. A resident of the upper terrace replied that the outside communities had always paid too little. The buyer asked to see an account proving it. Imogen placed her copied ledger on the table. Several people leaned forward at once. There were gasps at the emergency surcharge figures, but little surprise at the school and pension payments. Those had been public, if not in the way the money for them was raised.

"My father lost the use of his hands painting that bridge," a Narrows resident said from beside the stove. "His pension paid for his coal last winter. If you take the surcharge away, tell him to his face which room he's supposed to freeze in. Don't stand in my schoolroom and call us thieves because you don't like the toll."

The south-road buyer stood. "I can tell your father what our families paid. A grandfather spent two nights in a borrowed room waiting for medicine that was safe in your cold store and useless in your queue. We will pay for steel, inspection and a fair share of the crews. We will not pay an extra day because somebody finds delay profitable. And we will not accept invoices we aren't allowed to inspect."

An outside carrier tapped the compact. "I don't want the keys to your school. I want the vote my town traded away when fuel was cheap and the road was open. We'll pay a charge that repairs the

bridge. But if one town can change that charge in private, we'll be back here in another twenty years, with another family deciding what everyone else can afford."

The south-road buyer pushed her list of patients across the table. "I was paying for it every time your office held my delivery. This isn't a question of whether your clinic matters. Mine does too."

A quarrel began over the value of the southern route's contribution twenty years earlier. Florence said the old arrangement had never been intended as a perpetual franchise. The motorbike delegate asked whether a promise made by people who were now dead still bound their children. Someone answered that the bridge had not stopped requiring maintenance because the signatories died. The woman from the upper terrace, who worked at the school, asked whether the children would have heat next week if the surcharge was abolished that morning.

The first delegation to refuse the provisional arrangement was not from a wealthy outside carrier but from the Narrows school. The teacher came with three parents and a heating invoice that had been marked paid for the coming month but not the next. She had not joined Walter's supporters at the ferry. She had helped distribute hot drinks during the rescue.

"I've got three children in the school," said a resident at the back. "You want the budget open? Open it. But tell me which room goes dark in January."

A carrier answered from beside the door. "My daughter was meant to come here for lessons. We paid this toll eight years and she never sat in that school. What did we buy?"

Florence held up the agenda until they stopped talking over one another. "You'll both get your answer. First the bridge account, then the school account. If you want to vote on both, you will sit and hear both."

She laid the paper on the table and asked which of the outside representatives would explain to the children that their school day

might be shortened. There was no answer that satisfied her. Corinne found herself thinking of the child who had drawn a truck driver holding a fish.

“You can’t be expected to pay for our roads,” the teacher said. “And I can’t be expected to tell a seven-year-old that heat is a kind of corruption.”

Imogen answered without looking away from the figures. “The heat isn’t corrupt. The fees we used to pay for it were.”

“So my children are where that difference becomes visible.”

“Yes,” Imogen said. “They are.” The teacher folded the heating invoice in half. She could not fit it into her pocket without folding it again. For a moment she held it between both hands instead.

Later the maintenance crew sent word that it would not work overtime on the west support until the board guaranteed its wages. The crew had good reason to be suspicious: previous closures had left men unpaid, and some now believed the new board intended to cut every local obligation before sending money to the outside settlements. Corinne went to their yard with the northern carrier. She listened to an hour of complaints and found herself agreeing with half of them.

They agreed on a smaller repair shift with payment held in a ring-fenced account that the crew could inspect. The shortfall pushed the reopening date back. Imogen had to tell the board the crossing would reopen later. The northern carrier protested. He had patients, fuel and roofing material waiting. He was right about the cost of another week.

For the first time since Walter lost his authority, Corinne heard somebody say his name without anger. A maintenance worker said Walter would have found the money by breakfast. Nobody in the yard contradicted him. The man looked at Corinne and asked whether the new board could be fair quickly enough to matter. She had no satisfying reply. She helped move the timber for the morning shift.

At eleven the soup arrived. Florence carried in a great pot and made people serve themselves. The meeting did not adjourn. It became harder to argue while carrying a bowl and a spoon, although several managed. Corinne saw the watch captain standing at the doorway with a roll of paper in his hand. He had not come armed. He unfolded the document and said the watch would keep ordinary traffic away from the damaged span, but it needed to know whose lawful instructions it was to follow for everything else.

“The board’s,” somebody said.

“Which board?” he asked.

That stopped them more effectively than the bell.

Imogen placed two proposals before the meeting. One kept the old board with outside observers; the other restored voting seats, restricted tolls to identified purposes, and required independent approval for extended emergency rules. Walter sent a note disputing the meeting’s authority but promising to honour a properly constituted vote.

Imogen kept the proposals apart with the edge of her hand. She knew exactly where the first column would balance. The second depended on people who had not yet agreed to trust one another.

Corinne listened as the first proposal drew support from residents who did not want outsiders determining their school budget. The second drew objections from drivers who feared a shared board would impose even higher ordinary tolls. The northern carrier said he would agree to oversight, but not to underwriting old pension promises. The school worker said pensions were not a vice. The carrier said he had not called them one.

The school worker stood with her hands on the back of a borrowed chair. “I don’t want the old surcharge back. I know who was paying it. But when you vote to take it away, I want somebody in this room to say which classroom shuts and which children are going to sit in coats. Don’t call it a saving until you’ve said that aloud.”

The northern carrier pushed his empty mug aside. “My people have sat in coats already. Two winters of it. Every extra coin you collected here was one we couldn’t spend on a stove further down the valley. You may be right to be frightened of losing the school. I’m frightened of letting the bridge become your school tax again.”

Imogen uncapped the black pen she used for commitments and placed it across the ledger. “Here’s what I can certify. This quarter’s bridge inspection, the repair crew’s first wages, and the cold-store electricity can be funded. The classroom and the pension additions can’t all be funded at their current levels. If you elect a board tonight, the first thing it inherits is an unpaid bill. I will put the figures where anyone can check them. I won’t make them smaller with a speech.”

In the interval before the vote, Florence took Corinne into the pantry to find more cups. Flour dust lay along the shelf edge. Florence handed her a stack of chipped mugs and said, without looking at her, “Your father didn’t sign so he could own this place.”

“He signed without knowing what it would become.”

“We all did.” Florence rubbed at a stain on one mug. “That ought to trouble us more than it excuses us.”

The debate narrowed to whether the old representation clause could authorize a temporary joint board until the settlements held elections. It could authorize repairs the next morning without pretending the bridge was safe.

Corinne spoke only once. She said she would pay a real maintenance charge, provided the same schedule applied to every independent carrier and the charge was spent where the board said it would be. Someone demanded a number. She said she had not seen one she trusted. They could not vote themselves an affordable bridge by pretending they already possessed it.

The temporary board passed narrowly, with two abstentions and one walkout. Town and outside members received limited authority over inspections, revenues and safety. The permanent arrangement

would require a public vote. The watch captain agreed to enforce only orders within those powers.

The room did not celebrate. The school worker asked when wages would be paid. The buyer asked when medicine could cross. The northern carrier asked whether the queue was still being charged storage. Imogen said no new contested surcharge would accrue after that afternoon, subject to the provisional board's confirmation. The watch captain asked for the name of the person responsible for the closed-bridge barrier until then. Nobody volunteered.

Corinne took the chair back to the repair shed after dark. The man who had lent it had eaten his supper and was mending a hose by lamp light. He asked who had won.

"We got another meeting," she said.

"That's grim."

She sat on the chair for a moment to test the back, then stood and left him to his work. On the hill, the school windows glowed. Down on the holding road, the trucks remained in a line with their engines cold. The bridge was the same damaged length of steel it had been at dawn. Yet outside the bond office someone had removed the hand-painted notice threatening a fresh emergency charge, leaving four bright screw holes in the wood.

The teacher was waiting outside the repair shed when Corinne returned the borrowed chair. She had a piece of chalk in her hand. She had been using it to mark the available classroom on the school timetable and was holding it as though she had forgotten why. She asked whether the new board could meet again before Monday. Corinne said that was possible, though no one would promise a different budget.

"Then come to the school at nine," the teacher said. "And bring the buyer who was here today. She should see it."

The following morning the schoolroom at nine was still warm from the previous day's coal. One wall was covered in maps drawn

by children, with roads that crossed mountains as though mountains were a minor inconvenience. The teacher had moved the desks in the smaller classroom into stacks and laid out the exercise books for parents to collect. There were thirty-seven children on the combined roll. Keeping both rooms heated would consume coal the school no longer had permission to buy. A child in a green scarf came for a forgotten slate and asked whether the room had been moved for repairs. The teacher told her the truth: lessons would now share one room on fewer mornings. The child wanted to know whether the songs would still be on Thursdays. The teacher said she didn't know.

The southern buyer came with Corinne and stood by the stove, reading the timetable. She had seen clinics make smaller hours when a shipment failed; she knew what it meant to ask families to travel an extra day. She offered to carry the school's spare exercise paper to an outer settlement that had lost its own teacher in spring, so it would not sit unused. The teacher refused, then looked at the stacks and asked whether any of the children there had books to write in. The buyer said some did and some did not. The teacher took a packet down from the shelf and gave it to her. She would not smile for either woman.

Outside, Corinne admitted that she had expected the visit to make the decision clearer. The buyer answered that she hadn't come to approve it. She had come because she wanted to see what her own community was asking the Narrows to give up. They walked down past the empty playground. A boy had chalked the new crossing toll on the gatepost and circled it like an arithmetic problem. Corinne rubbed the number away with her glove so that the school would not have to answer a question it had not been allowed to decide.

26

The Bill

Imogen began with the money they actually held. The old receipts had paid wages and services, but the repair reserve was nearly empty.

The provisional board met in the council room after the watch captain had unlocked it. A portrait of the town's first bridge superintendent hung behind the long table. It was the face of a man who had never expected his picture to be used as evidence on either side of an argument. Someone had left a box of chalk beside the scales. Imogen used the chalk to put three columns on the board: money entering, work required, promises already made.

She wrote the receipts first. The maintenance charge had been insufficient for years. The emergency surcharge, officially temporary, had become ordinary income. Storage and inspection fees supplied another substantial share, and the preferred carriers produced reliable warehouse business at the expense of people denied the same terms. On the expenditure side were bridge staff, the watch, the bonded stores, debt interest, clinic and school supplements, pensions and a capital reserve so small it had hardly deserved the name.

"Was the school spending fraudulent?" asked the school representative.

“The school bought what it said it bought,” Imogen replied. “The way we collected its money was wrong.”

“And if we stop collecting it?”

“We close two classrooms after the holiday, unless we replace the income.”

The representative sat back. She had a child in each of those rooms. She asked whether the crossing could keep the surcharge until spring, then. The outside delegates stared at her. Imogen did not make her an example. She showed the column again and asked which charge the representative would accept if the goods belonged to her own daughter.

“Put the school reduction in red,” the teacher said. “I want parents to see exactly which rooms close.”

Imogen changed the chalk. “Two classrooms after the holiday. The clinic keeps the morning shift, loses two afternoons.”

“Your father never used to write the cuts where the town could see them.”

“He never had a meeting where the town asked him to,” Imogen answered. She set down the red chalk. “You can still object to these numbers. That’s why they’re here.”

The southern buyer wanted bridge revenue separated immediately from town pensions. A resident objected that the same workers had maintained the crossing, school roof, and winter water line, all paid from a single account. Imogen opened a new column rather than settle the argument for them.

“We can separate the accounts from now on,” she said. “We can’t undo what they were used for.”

She put down the repair estimate. The temporary bracing, replacement gusset components, approach control and inspection work would consume nearly the whole current cash balance before the first heavy truck crossed. A permanent reserve would have to be created from each future toll payment. The district supplier had offered credit for some steel, conditional on signatures from the

new board and an independent inspection of the installation. The interest was high. The supplier had been burned before.

The northern carrier gave a low whistle. “You want us to pay that on top of the ordinary charge?”

“I want the bridge to stay standing when you go over it,” Imogen said.

“I’ve heard that before.”

“Then demand the measurement sheets. You’ll have the right to see them.”

Corinne’s destroyed cargo created a claim the provisional fund could not immediately pay without delaying the repairs. Imogen proposed pausing disputed surcharge collections and having town and outside representatives review claims together.

At noon Imogen went into the narrow corridor behind the council chamber. Her father’s old coat hook, the one nearest the warm stove pipe, was empty. He had kept seven keys on a ring for as long as she could remember. She knew their sounds: the deep iron knock of the bridge gate, the thinner complaint of the school and storeroom keys. None had been surrendered. Without the ring in the corridor, she could still hear it whenever someone opened the door.

She put her hand against the wall where the coats had rubbed the paint away. Walter had made himself useful by knowing which doors needed opening before anyone asked. She had grown up hearing the keys before his footsteps. Now the board was arguing about who could lawfully unlock anything, and the corridor was quiet.

The watch captain came out holding a sheet of staffing costs. Two men had asked for notice money. The others wanted to know which account would pay them on Friday. He looked once at the empty hook but said nothing about Walter. Imogen took the sheet back into the chamber.

Imogen read the cuts: fewer watch posts, reduced pensions above a protected minimum, cancelled outreach rounds, and one closed classroom. She left the figures on the wall.

“You’re keeping the clinic open by charging us for a repair you should have made years ago,” said the buyer.

“Yes,” Imogen said. “The repair is still needed. You can refuse to pay for the past mistake, but the bridge won’t know the difference.”

The buyer pledged timber and a road crew. The northern carrier offered steel delivery under an audited, nonexclusive contract. Narrows households would raise separate school coal funds. By afternoon they had the beginnings of a repair budget.

Before they voted on the financing plan, the pensioner whose hands had been damaged painting the bridge came into the council room with his daughter. She had to help him unbutton his coat. He had been told his payment would be protected above the lowest floor but reduced for the winter. He carried the last notice from the former board, its figure written in red, and put it down in front of Imogen.

“Which number is mine now?” he asked.

She showed him the new column. He could read it himself; he asked her because he wanted the person who had calculated it to say it aloud. She did. His daughter began to argue that he had earned every coin of the old amount. He stopped her with a small motion of his stiff fingers. He asked whether the men doing the repair would have proper harnesses this time and whether the reserve could still be raided for the school when winter got worse. Imogen said the safety expenditure was ring-fenced and the reserve could not be moved without a public recorded vote.

“Write that here,” he said, pointing at the back of the old notice. “I’m not giving up coal so a clerk can tell the next man there wasn’t enough paper.”

Imogen wrote the protection on the notice and signed it. She asked whether he wanted to file a formal objection to the reduction. He said of course he did. His daughter held the sheet flat so he could sign his name with the one hand that still bent enough. They left together. The room remained quiet while Imogen copied the

objection into the ledger. The pensioner had not withdrawn his support for repairing the bridge. He had made the people promising repair look directly at him.

Corinne was at the end of the table when the clerk brought her separate claim for the ruined vaccine stock. The legal question was not settled: the old emergency charges were disputed, but the medicine had been lost under her own custody after the freezer transfer. The provisional claims fund could offer a modest settlement only if she released the board from the balance and absorbed the rest against her truck account. She had intended to contest the bond charge, keep the money as leverage and perhaps sell the vehicle before the lender caught up. She asked the southern buyer whether the clinic would still pursue its own loss. The buyer said it must. Patients' money had paid for transport that never arrived.

Corinne took the form to the window. The crossing workmen below were unloading the first replacement plates. The truck's value was the one thing she had left that might let her leave the region on her own terms. If she signed, she would not lose it that afternoon, but she would commit its next two paying journeys to liabilities she had helped create. She returned to the table, wrote that she accepted responsibility for the temperature excursion without accepting the old surcharge, and signed the narrower claim agreement in front of the witnesses. She gave up her option to bargain away that portion of the loss. The clerk started to thank her. She told him to make a copy instead.

Imogen looked at the new entry. "That doesn't buy the brace."

"I've noticed."

"It means we'll know whose bill it is."

Corinne asked for the copy. She folded it into her coat beside her father's signed compact and went down to the truck to see which delivery she could still afford to take.

Imogen made them read the new schedule back. She had to stop once to wet her lips; her voice had gone thin by the time they

reached the school line. The maintenance reserve would be ring-fenced; repairs and welfare spending would have separate ledgers. The books would be available to the communities paying the toll.

The annual ledger made the shift plain. Under the old thousand-unit model, bridge repair had received far less than school, clinic, watch and debt service combined. The new schedule could fund a verified reserve, but it could not preserve all the old public commitments.

When the meeting ended, Imogen carried the revised sheets to the school. The head teacher was dismissing the last children. The room was hot enough to steam the windows, and one child was crying because a paper animal had come apart in her hands. The teacher repaired it with a pin and listened while Imogen described the winter reduction. She did not protest. She asked whether the teachers would be told before the parents and whether the room closing would make the younger pupils walk after dark.

Imogen said she would return with the timetable tomorrow. On her way out a child asked whether the bridge would be fixed in time for the holiday market. She said the engineers were working on it.

“That’s what my dad says,” the child replied, and ran to fetch his coat.

At home, Imogen made a pot of thin soup and left a portion covered on the table for her father. He did not come before she went to bed. The papers were on her desk, bearing signatures from people who had argued all day and had nevertheless agreed to pay for something they could not yet use. She checked the totals once more. They did not make the town prosperous. They made it possible to begin.

27

The Engineer's Signature

Simon expected his return to the bridge to feel like employment again. Instead the district engineer made him wait while she checked who had witnessed each reading.

The damaged west panel had been braced from beneath with a temporary working platform. Steel plates arrived in two loads, one of which missed the turning above the bridge and had to reverse for half a mile with a man walking behind it. The other carried bolts of the wrong grade. The district engineer made the driver take them back. Simon watched the time disappear and said nothing. Three weeks ago he would have told anyone listening that a bolt was a bolt if it was thick enough. He now knew better, and hated the knowledge.

Hugh stood at the lower chord with his defect book open. He had begun recording everything he had not dared to record before: old fatigue marks, rust beneath a plate, a measurement he could not reproduce, a repaired part whose supplier could no longer be found. When the district engineer asked which readings he would stand behind, he gave her six and crossed out the seventh in her presence. She made him initial the crossing-out. He obeyed.

"It was a good number when I took it," Hugh said.

"That isn't a measurement method," she answered.

"Did you see this gap before the accident?" the district engineer asked Hugh.

"I saw movement at the joint. I didn't— I hadn't removed the cover plate."

"Who decided not to remove it?"

Hugh looked at Simon before answering. "I did."

Simon drew a small square beside the measurement on his slate. "Is that a separate defect entry?" he asked.

"It is," said the engineer. "Write it separately."

They spent a morning checking alignment. Simon held the staff and called the readings. He was good at the work. The engineer asked him to repeat a figure and he did it without offense. When she tested the bridge's unloaded movement, she had him record the weather and the temperature of the steel. He had not thought of the steel as having a temperature worth recording unless it was too hot to touch. Hugh saw the surprise on his face and looked away.

At the lunch break Hugh found Simon sitting beside the tool shed with his bread on his knee. The apprentice's old bench in the workshop had been reassigned to another boy while he was suspended. He had not asked for it back.

"The district woman says your figures are good," Hugh said.

"They agree with hers."

"That's what good means, mostly."

Simon tore off another piece of bread. Hugh stood beside the shed, waiting for permission to sit. None came. He lowered himself onto an empty cable reel anyway.

"I should have listened when you brought the first form," he said.

Simon waited. He had been waiting for this sentence for weeks and now it was almost irritating to hear it.

"You took it away," he said.

"I asked you to give it back."

"You threatened my apprenticeship."

"I did."

“You weren’t wrong because the bridge was fine. You were wrong because you knew it wasn’t.”

Hugh set his bread on the reel. The cold came up from the ground through the soles of their boots. A riveter began hammering inside the truss, three sharp blows followed by a longer rattle. Hugh nodded once. He did not ask to be forgiven. After a while Simon asked whether the new plates would carry the weight they expected.

“If they’re installed right and the readings hold,” Hugh said.

“And then?”

“Then we put a load over it and see what it does. A controlled one. And we don’t pretend that proves everything.”

Hugh signed the adverse report before Imogen, the engineer, and outside representatives. It recorded the deferred defects, backdated restriction and repairs still required. He would not be sole signatory on the reopening certificate. He held the pen a moment longer after signing, then set it beside the report for the next witness. Nobody asked him to explain himself again.

The district engineer set out the conditions for restricted reopening. The joint at the west lower chord would be plated and independently inspected, the approach road made sound, the crossing restricted to one heavy vehicle at a time with a spotter on each bank, and load data checked against a verified ticket. Nothing heavier than the temporary limit would enter. The first test would use a known load and stop if the measured deflection exceeded the agreed allowance. Full freight capacity would remain closed until permanent work could be designed and funded.

Simon copied the conditions onto a board. He spelled one of the technical words incorrectly. The engineer corrected it and handed the chalk back. On the next line he wrote the inspection team. Hugh’s name appeared as a technical witness, not the approving signatory. Simon did not know whether Hugh was relieved or hurt. He suspected both.

In the evening the bridge worker asked Simon to countersign the alignment sheet for a section he had not watched being fitted. The measurement was probably right. The numbers were ordinary and within range. The worker was in a hurry to catch the last warm meal at Florence's. Simon looked down the sheet and found the entry for a set of bolts installed while he had been sent for the correct washers.

"I wasn't here for this," he said.

"The district engineer was."

"Then she can sign it."

"It's only a witness line."

"I didn't witness it."

The bridge worker gave a reluctant laugh that was not entirely friendly. Then he took the sheet to the engineer. She signed after checking her own notes. Nobody applauded Simon. The worker did not offer him a ride home. He walked up the hill in the dark carrying his own lamp, and the cold in his toes reminded him that he still had no proper employment agreement.

At the school door he passed a group of children carrying lengths of bright paper for the holiday decorations. One called him the bridge boy and asked whether trucks would be crossing tomorrow. He told them it might be a few more days. They asked whether he would be on the bridge when it opened. He said he hoped so.

He went on to the workshop where his tools had been packed into a crate. He opened it and counted them. The small spanner was missing. He found it under the bench, where it had been left by someone who did not know it was his. The fact that his tools were still useful pleased him more than any speech could have done. He put the spanner in his pocket and left the rest of the crate where it was until someone had an actual job for him.

When Simon passed the school again two evenings later, the smaller classroom was dark. The second teacher was still inside, sitting at a desk she had not yet moved. She had lost her paid hours for

the winter, though she had agreed to return twice a week to help the younger children read. Her own son had taken a job carrying water for the repair crews because the household could no longer count on her full wage. Simon knew the boy from the hill and had teased him once for being afraid of the bridge. He asked now whether the boy was working under a safe crew supervisor. The teacher said she had asked for the supervisor's name and had not yet been given one.

Simon went back down the path. He found the bridge foreman, asked who was responsible for the water carriers, and wrote the answer on the back of a clean inspection card. He took it to the school door before the teacher went home. She thanked him without looking pleased. Behind her stood desks stacked beside a wall that had been painted fresh only the previous spring. Simon had expected being useful again to feel like being forgiven. It felt more like having acquired a longer list of things to check.

28

After Walter

Walter received the letter at breakfast. It had been brought by the clerk who used to come every morning for instructions, and the young man seemed embarrassed to be standing on the doorstep instead of walking straight through. Walter invited him in. The clerk said he had to deliver the notice personally and could not stay. Walter took the envelope, thanked him, and closed the door before opening it.

The provisional board had suspended his power to authorize charges, appoint watch staff or order use of the bond stores. It cited the representation clause and the emergency review provisions of the compact, each with a reference to the pages Florence had produced. It invited him to attend a formal hearing before any permanent removal. The letter had been signed by six people. Walter knew five of them. He had paid one of their fathers during the winter of the broken water main and had given another a job when no one else would.

The kitchen was quiet. He had laid out two plates without thinking and now one of them sat clean beside the breadboard. His wife had died years before, and for a long time afterward he had continued to set two places. He had stopped. He could not remember why he had done it again this morning.

He read the notice twice. Then he went to the cupboard for the old rates book and the envelope containing his own appointment as crossing chair. The appointment was a worn page, signed in a time when the town had been desperate for someone to settle the arguments over repairs. He had not sought the office at first. That was true. He remembered going from house to house after the hard winter, collecting contributions in coin, labour and food. He remembered a man telling him the bridge would close forever because nobody could agree on a fair bill. Walter had made them agree. People had thanked him for years.

It was possible to remember those things and still know what he had done since. He could list the first surcharge he had allowed to remain past its announced date. He could name the winter when he diverted the reserve to keep the clinic's stove lit. The figures had been good figures. They had bought heat and work. When the emergency passed, other needs took its place. He had begun calling the difference between an honest charge and a useful one a technicality. That had made the meetings shorter.

There was a knock at the door. The woman who lived two houses uphill had brought him a loaf and a jar of pickled onions. She said they were grateful, whatever anyone said. She told him her father's pension had arrived on time every winter under his chairmanship. Walter thanked her and put the food on the shelf. After she left, a man he had once fined for using false weight tickets came past the gate and spat into the road. Walter heard it hit the stones. He stayed inside.

He had intended to appear at the hearing and make the board dismiss him properly. By noon he had changed his mind. A hearing would make people rehearse the worst facts in front of the families they concerned. It would give his supporters an occasion to accuse his daughter of betrayal. The board would remove him anyway, and he would have spent its first useful week making them do it. He sat at his desk and wrote a resignation. It was a short letter. He did not

apologize in it, because an apology to a board was not the apology he owed. He said he would surrender the keys and provide the maintenance files. He signed with the pen he had used for toll orders and sat looking at the wet ink.

Imogen came late in the afternoon carrying a ledger beneath one arm and a parcel of laundry beneath the other. Walter had managed to smoke out the kitchen stove. He was standing before the open flue with a poker and an expression he had once reserved for contractors who blamed the weather.

"Open the lower damper," she said.

"It is open."

"Then why is the smoke coming toward us?"

He moved aside. She drew the damper farther out. The fire took at once, and he resented the efficiency of it for perhaps three seconds. She put the kettle on. On the table lay his resignation beside the untouched second breakfast plate.

"You didn't have to resign today," she said.

"They took the signing authority. I could have occupied the chair until they carried it away."

"You could have come to the hearing."

"And invited half the town to prosecute you at my expense? I've spent enough of their time."

She looked at him then, directly, but did not thank him. She had brought clean shirts, and she began folding them while the kettle heated. When she was little he had taught her to make a loaf last a week and to check for wet rust under a bridge plate. He had also told her that the Narrows never asked charity from outsiders. She had believed all three lessons.

"The bridge crew found more corrosion under the cover," she said. "Hugh wrote it down."

"Good. Tell them to look behind the west plate before they fit the new one. There was an old drain there. In spring the meltwater comes through a narrow channel. We packed it with grease, but the

last packet was marked with a red stripe and put among the old boxes."

She took out her pencil. "Where is that in the maintenance book?"

"I told the crew twenty years ago. I thought someone had written it down."

She wrote the instruction in the ledger. The kettle began to sing. They both listened to it rather than say what the missing record meant.

"You taught me to keep the accounts," she said. "When Mother wanted me to take the district job, you said there'd be time."

"I thought you'd be needed here."

"I was. That wasn't an answer about the rest of my life."

She told him about the cuts: the clinic's outreach van, part of the second teacher's pay, and the heating allowance for older households. He knew the figures before she finished. She reminded him that outside contributions would pay for some repairs in exchange for open accounts and shared representation.

"They'll ask more questions than they pay for," he said.

"They've paid for the right."

He poured tea. She cut the neighbour's loaf into slices thicker than he would have allowed. For a while they ate without arguing. Then the stove smoked again. Imogen got up to shift the damper, and Walter let her.

At the door she reached for the coal scuttle. He had filled it halfway from his own supply. "Keep it," he said. "You'll be at the warehouse late."

"You'll need it."

"I have enough for this week."

She knew what the remaining half would cost him. She took it anyway. He asked whether she'd come to Sunday supper. She couldn't promise every Sunday; sometimes she was too angry with him to sit at the table. She kissed his cheek, briefly, and went down the road with the laundry basket.

Walter counted seven keys on the ring in his pocket. He knew each one by touch. He placed them in the resignation envelope by the door. Across the gorge the bridge lights came on, and he was no longer the man who could order the gate moved.

29

The First Crossing

The first convoy was late before it began.

One truck had a damaged brake hose, another carried a load ticket that did not match the weighbridge reading, and the district inspector refused to let anyone hurry her final check. The road was white at the edges where the frost had lain. Corinne stood beside her truck drinking tea she had bought at the new uniform price, which was two coins more than the town price had been the last time she passed the café. The woman at the counter had told her they had abolished the second price and raised the first. Corinne said she suspected that was how fairness worked on a cold morning.

The bridge looked almost the same from the gate. The repair plates were tucked beneath the west chord. A new inspection platform hung below the connection, and the approach boards had been replaced where the heavy lorry had torn them. A thin cable marked the lane the vehicles were to follow. Nothing about it looked as though it could justify the accounts that had covered Florence's dining table. But she had seen the steel arrive, and knew what it had cost to get it round the upper bend.

The district engineer came to the gate with the day's temporary limits. She had signed the provisional certificate after checking the repair, testing the drain behind the new plate and witnessing a

proof load that morning. The temporary gross limit was lower than the old published one. Heavy vehicles would cross one at a time. Axle weights had to be independently checked. No following vehicle could enter until the first was clear and the inspector had compared the displacement readings with the allowable range. All of it was written in plain language on a board beside the toll schedule.

A driver who had waited nearly seven weeks swore when he saw the line. He asked what was the use of reopening a bridge if it moved one vehicle every quarter of an hour. The engineer said he was welcome to take the long road. He said the long road had washed out in two places. She replied that this was why they measured the bridge and did not guess at it. He called her several things that made the watch captain look up from his clipboard. She did not move the barrier.

"I've got a cow on that trailer," a man called from farther back. "She isn't getting more cheerful."

The watch captain looked past the line. "Keep her off the ramp, then. There's a lay-by beyond the wall."

"You paying for the hay?"

"No. I'm keeping her out of the river." The captain checked the barrier pin and went back to his clipboard. A driver behind Corinne laughed in spite of himself.

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Corinne had been asked to lead the third crossing, after the repair truck and the short-haul vehicle ahead of her. The first truck carried repair timber and ballast of known weight, chosen because the engineers could compare its actual load with the test record. It moved slowly between two men walking along the parapet. Simon stood near the west reference point with a dial gauge fixed to a bracket. He was wearing a clean work coat that was too big at the shoulders. The engineer called the starting reading. The truck rolled forward. Simon watched the needle and called the change. The bridge gave a little and came back. Nobody applauded. The engineer waited until the final figure was written before she let the truck off the far side.

Before the second crossing could begin, the short-haul truck's brake hose failed.

Its brake hose burst with a wet pop and sprayed brown fluid across the road. The driver climbed down. "I changed that in September." The mechanic crouched beside the line. "Then September did a poor job."

"It's a surface hose. Put a sleeve on it and let me through."

"Not with your brakes losing pressure," the district engineer said. "Move it to the bay."

"The bay's uphill."

"Then we'll tow you."

"How long?" someone shouted behind Corinne.

"Until it's tested," the engineer answered.

"Does every hose need a ceremony now?"

"No," she said. "Only the ones carrying a loaded truck toward a weak bridge."

The mechanic held up the ruptured end. "See the split? Whoever fitted it let it rub on the bracket."

The driver looked away. "I fitted it."

"Then you can help me change it."

"We've been here seven weeks!" another driver shouted.

"I've been here seven weeks too," the engineer called back. "I'm not sending you across with that line."

It took forty minutes. People walked up and down the line. A woman produced a thermos and a packet of biscuits and went from cab to cab. Corinne stood beside her truck and watched Simon check his gauge, a third time, a fourth, rubbing his thumb across the glass, as though he suspected it of drifting. The watch captain stood at the foot of the ramp with his clipboard against his chest. He caught her eye once and gave a slight nod, which she took to mean: we're doing this slowly because we mean to do it properly.

When the truck was ready, the engineer held a hand up and the line stopped again, because a driver at the back had pulled out of his lane. A watchman ran down the line and talked to him. The man pulled back. It had taken eleven minutes to prevent a shouting match.

• • •

When her turn came, the clerk asked for her weight ticket, destination and fee. She gave him the ticket from the verified scale and watched him compare it with the axle figures stored in the truck's recorder. He copied the numbers onto paper, checked them against the independent ticket, and asked her to sign. She signed. He turned the page toward her so she could see where his own signature would go.

She had a folded letter in the pocket beside the freight docket. It had been carried by a driver from the receiving clinic, who had written that the postponed patients were being seen along the long road. A few had arrived late. Nobody had been forgotten. Elsewhere that kind of news might have travelled inside a relationship that carried across distance. Here it had taken paper, a willing driver and days of waiting. She read it once more before she put it away.

Then the clerk told her the toll.

Corinne had seen the number on the public board. Hearing it aloud did not improve it. The old honest maintenance charge would have been less. The new charge included a real reserve for future repairs, a limited repayment allocation and the cost of independent inspection. It did not include an emergency surcharge and it did not entitle the board to hold her cargo while debt accumulated. She could inspect the accounts, challenge a calculation, and vote through the outside carrier seat on the schedule that governed the route. None of that made the money lighter in her hand.

"That's steep," she said.

"It is."

"There isn't a preferred rate tucked away for anyone?"

"No."

"You're certain?"

The clerk pulled the posted schedule toward her so she could read the ink and the signatures. He was old enough to be irritated by the question and young enough to want her to believe him. "Same rate for the next one," he said, "unless their weight is different."

The man behind her leaned over the counter. "If I bring a trailer back empty, do I pay the same?"

"You pay the measured class," the clerk said. He laid a finger on the column and waited while the driver counted the bands for himself.

"We used to get a discount for empty returns."

"It was in the private carrier book. That book's closed."

Corinne looked at the driver. "You can object at the accounts meeting. It's printed on the back of the receipt."

"I can object all winter," the man said. "I still have to get home."

"Yes," she said, and stepped aside so the clerk could take his ticket.

She counted out the fee. He gave her a receipt with the maintenance allocation and the board's inspection reference printed at the

bottom. On the back was the date of the next public accounts meeting. Her father would once have dismissed it as paperwork. She folded it and put it in the pocket where she kept the papers she could not afford to lose.

• • •

She drove onto the bridge in low gear. The river was dark beneath her and high enough to carry broken branches. The ruined ferry lay on the gravel bar downstream, its deck twisted and its guide line gone. She looked once at the place where they had carried Cyril Dunsford up the bank. She couldn't see the path from the cab, only the bend in the shore. She kept her eyes on the narrow lane between the guide marks.

The engine sounded too loud on the steel. Corinne kept the speed the spotter directed. At the west panel Simon lifted a hand. "Stop at the mark. Is the rear-axle reading still three point one tonnes?"

"Three point one," she called.

"The gauge moved just over two millimetres under that axle." He checked the calibrated rule, waited for the indicator to settle within the return band, and wrote the reading on his sheet. "You can move."

She waited for his hand to drop before easing forward.

She reached the far bank with her shoulders aching. The clerk there signed the passage record and she drew up in the holding bay while the next driver was prepared. There was no celebration, only people inspecting the load sheet and asking when they could go. Corinne looked back toward the upper houses. She could see Walter's old tollhouse, its window open and its counter crowded with forms. The town had not become poorer in a way that could be measured from the bridge, but she had heard about the school room closing and the pension reductions. She had also heard about the timber and money arriving from the south road for repairs. None of

this was enough to call the arrangement fair forever. It was enough to call it different today.

A driver coming off the west approach asked whether she had felt the bridge move. She told him she had. He asked whether he should worry. Corinne pointed him toward Simon's gauge and said the people taking the measurements had worried enough for both of them. The other driver walked over to Simon.

30

The Notice Board

The claim for the condemned vaccine lot was settled only in part. Corinne received a credit against her storage bill and a modest payment from the crossing's new claims fund, in a brown envelope handed across a counter by a clerk who apologised for the amount before she had looked at it.

The medical buyer's letter came a week later. It listed what the southern clinic had spent moving patients by the long road. Most had been treated. One had missed the planned appointment and would need another journey. It didn't ask her to call the outcome a success. It offered her a smaller contract for the spring, contingent on verified cold-chain capacity and a reliable route. She read it twice in the cab, with the engine knocking quietly under the floor, and decided to accept.

She still owed money on the truck. The knock had begun as a small sound and would become a large one if she went on pretending not to hear it. She had taken two minor jobs since the bridge reopened, timber and a load of flour, neither of which paid well. The road was open to heavy traffic only under the strict limits, and the queue had shrunk slowly. Some carriers still used the long road. The ferry lay where it had fallen, a wreck and a warning, not a romantic alternative waiting to be restored.

• • •

Florence's dining room had changed. The long table had been pushed against the wall, and a row of folding chairs stood along the other, donated by the outside delegates because the monthly crossing meetings drew more people than any room in town could comfortably hold. The original compact lay in a dry box on a shelf above them, where the damp couldn't reach it.

"Half my old regulars won't come in," Florence said. She was cutting bread. "They say it's an office for outsiders."

"Is it?"

"It's a dining room so long as I can persuade people to eat in it." She put a plate down. "I've lost half my winter custom. I've gained a good deal of soup trade. Don't ask me which is worth more."

"Which is?"

"I said don't ask." Florence sat down across from her and pushed the butter over. "The trouble is that I like the chairs."

The first meeting after the reopening had been unpleasant. The reserve allocation left the town with less money for winter fuel than it had been promised, and two outside delegates had objected to a proposed rise in the ordinary charge. A watchman had refused a carrier entry because the rear axle weight did not match the manifest. The carrier accused him of enforcing the rules only against outsiders. The board examined the figures and upheld the refusal. A resident objected that the board was making enemies faster than it was repairing the bridge. Florence, taking away the soup plates, said she hoped nobody had expected it to make friends.

• • •

Imogen's office now had a second chair for the outside representative and a window in the door. She had argued about the window for three days. She had won the right to keep the account books in their old place and lost the right to decide alone who could see them. Corinne thought that suited her, though Imogen looked more tired than before.

On a morning when sleet was driving through the toll quarter, Corinne found her eating cold potatoes from a paper bag while she answered questions about the clinic's new budget. The man asking was not polite. Imogen was no more polite than she had to be. Afterward they laughed at a misprint on the printed form that had turned *bridge reserve* into *bridge preserve*. Somebody had corrected it in pencil, and a number of people had demanded to know whether there was jam for sale.

"He wants to see the compounding cards," Imogen said, nodding at the door the man had gone through. "Every one."

"Will you let him?"

"I've already put them on the table." She folded the paper bag into a small neat square. "I thought I'd hate it. I find I've slept better than I have in three years."

"That's not a good reason."

"No," Imogen said. "It's a rotten one. I'll take it."

Outside Imogen's office, Corinne passed the pensioner with the injured hands waiting beneath the new public notice board. He had brought his daughter and was checking the reductions against the signed sheet he had taken home. The writing was the same. He asked whether the school had reopened its second room. Corinne said it had not. His daughter said the teacher was still working there on two mornings without pay, and that people had begun leaving coal at the back door in small sacks because no one had enough to provide a full winter's supply.

The pensioner made his daughter take him to the office window. He held his own notice beside the posted accounts and asked the clerk to explain a three-unit difference in the pension total. It was a transcription error, corrected in front of him. He made the clerk sign the correction and copied the date in his own pocket book. Corinne recognized his insistence: the demand to have the number match the thing. She had learned it at a kitchen table from a man with small upright handwriting and crossed sevens, long before she learned what he had signed away.

• • •

At the bridge works, Corinne found Hugh kneeling beside a steel plate while Simon waited with the measurement book. Hugh worked with the repair crew under the district engineer's sign-off. He no longer had sole authority to close the bridge or certify it safe. He was more useful as a witness, Corinne thought, than he had ever been as the one keeper of the numbers. Simon had accepted a provisional paid apprenticeship under the new inspection arrangement. The agreement listed the tasks he could perform and the measurements he could sign, and he showed it to her when she asked, partly because he was proud of it and partly because he wanted someone to check that he had understood. His missing spanner was back in his kit.

Walter walked through town without any of the keys that had once given him passage through every working door. He still knew the condition of the upper water main, the ages of the bridge bolts, and which household would need coal first if the snow came early. Some residents sought him out for advice. Others crossed the road to avoid him. He was not on the new board. He had been asked to provide maintenance recollections for the archive, and did it with evident care, writing in the margins where records had failed to include what the old workers remembered. He did not ask for his chair back. People still argued about him in the grocery, sometimes

within his hearing. Once, as Corinne passed, a woman asked him whether the watch could spare a coal cart for her neighbour. Walter gave her the clerk's name and the hour to ask. He did not offer to open the storeroom himself.

• • •

By the time Corinne next crossed, the new notice board had weathered at the corners. Its figures were still legible. At the top were the current temporary load limits and the restricted hours for heavy vehicles. Below them stood the ordinary toll, the maintenance reserve contribution, and the costs paid to the outside inspection service. The names of the board representatives had been posted with the dates of their appointments. Someone had added a pencil note asking why the coal reduction had not been discussed at the last meeting. Someone else had written the date of the next meeting underneath it.

She came to the gate with machine parts for the south-road workshop. She had checked the axle weights before leaving. The local recorder matched the independent scale. The toll was higher than last time, and she complained because it deserved complaint. The clerk showed her the schedule and issued the receipt. In the cab she turned it over, wrote the complete charge in her father's upright block hand, and crossed each seven the way he had. She put the receipt into the account book anyway.

She had run her set hard for ten minutes in the yard before setting out, as she did every few hours now. The clerk had asked her why, on an earlier crossing. She had said that someone had told her.

Ahead of her a truck had been stopped at the load board. Its driver stood outside in the sleet arguing that the difference in his axle figure was too small to matter. He had a delivery to make. He had waited an hour already. He had paid what they asked. The young watchman at the scale looked as though he wanted nothing more than to let the truck through and get everyone moving. Simon

was there with a clipboard. He checked the weight ticket against the reading and shook his head. The difference might be a faulty scale. It might be a shift in the load. They would have to find out.

The line behind Corinne began to grumble. She could see the stopped driver's hands working at the buckles of his coat as he explained again how late he was. The watchman directed him into the inspection bay. He went reluctantly, calling back something about the old tollmaster knowing how to run a road. Nobody answered.

Across the river Walter stood above the lower path, near the place where the ferry cable had once come ashore. He was wearing his old winter coat. From the gate Corinne could not tell whether he was watching the stopped truck, the bridge, or the slow traffic beyond it. She remembered his supper table and the figures he had recited for the school and the clinic. She remembered the medical cases warming in her truck and the sound the ferry cable made when it failed. She could not assemble those memories into a verdict that would satisfy everyone.

The clerk came back to say there would be a delay. "Second reading," he told her. "If the figures don't agree, we'll have to move part of the load."

"How long?" Corinne asked.

"I can't promise. The spare scale's up at the workshop."

"Then send someone to get it."

"I have." He glanced toward the stopped driver, who was still arguing by the weighbridge. "You want to appeal your own charge while you wait?"

"Yes. Put it in the book."

The drivers behind her swore. She felt the familiar impatience rise, then switched off her engine to save fuel and took her cup from the dashboard.

The bridge remained open. The next truck remained stopped. Someone went to fetch another scale.