Waterless

A Voidlands Novel

N. Van Seters & Claude

CONTENTS

PART ONE *The Turn Book* 1
01 The Notch 2
02 First Water 7
03 Cans 16
04 The Street Minimum 23
05 The Book 28
06 Night Gate 34
07 Measure 41

PART TWO *Short Measures* 48
08 The Young Orchard 49
09 Selling Thursday 54
10 The Clinic Tank 59
11 Caught 64
12 A Can for the Road 68
13 The Upper Head 72
14 Clearing Day 77

PART THREE *The Good Week and the Dry Day* 82
15 The Good Week 83
16 By the Letter 88
17 The Dry Day 93
18 The Book Is Wrong 98
19 The Night Opening 103
20 The Entry 107
21 Sides 112
22 The Night Measure 116

PART FOUR *The Last Dry Week* 120
23 The Count 121
24 The Last Tanker 126
25 Short Measure 130
26 The Wheel Key 134
27 The Sluice 138
28 Cut 142
29 The New Rota 147
30 The Book 153

PART ONE

The Turn Book

01

The Notch

Week 1 · Monday reading: 3.0 · Alison

At the notch post Alison counted three. She counted it again, because the channel sounded wrong: a scrape against stone, a pause, another scrape. In winter the running water reached her bedroom window. This morning she'd heard the pause before she'd reached the steps. The reading was still three. She could not write a sound in the column beside it.

She left the lantern on the wall. There was enough light now to see the three lower marks on the measuring staff, though not enough to read the figures without bending. She had made the figures herself fifteen years ago, after the original cuts had filled with lichen. The topmost was nine, a number that belonged to photographs, childhood, and people who made promises about the next wet year.

Three.

She took the staff out, cleaned the silt from its face, put it back against the same stone and counted again. That was habit, not doubt. The little metal stud beside the third cut had been worn bright by the fingers of everybody who insisted on checking her work.

Above her, the terraces rose in narrow dark strips. The orchard roofs held their last patch of night. Below, Calder Reach lay along the street and its crossing lanes: a school, a packing shed with a broken gutter, the clinic's whitewashed end wall, a line of cottages that had once been mill housing. The place looked most prosperous from the upper path, where there was no reason to notice which windows had been repaired with boards.

A bell hung under the tiled shelter at the divider. Alison removed the cloth she put round its clapper to keep the wind from knocking it, and rang twice. The sound travelled more cleanly than the water. Two people answered from the terrace path with raised arms. A woman at the street standpipe looked up and went back to her cans.

Alison lifted the main terrace wheel to its morning stop. A wooden tooth clicked, then another. Water slid through the left throat and caught the pale edge of the stone channel. She waited for the flow to settle. At this reading, the compact permitted the terraces to take first measure; the street's minimum came not from the compact but from generations of people declining to leave their neighbours without drinking water. The two rules had lived side by side long enough for children to suppose they were the same rule.

They were not. She made herself keep the street wheel open at its customary morning position while she checked the upper race. There would be less on the terraces than the Brierley foreman wanted, and less at the street than the women in line had carried home last autumn. No amount of turning the wheel would turn three into four.

She wrote in the book under Monday: STAFF 3.0. TERRACE FIRST TURN. STREET MINIMUM RETAINED. The ink had grown thick. She held the nib over the last line until the drop went back into it.

"Morning, Alison."

A man from Hester's crew stood on the bank with a lunch tin against his knee. His face was familiar without his name coming forward. She knew the crew by the way they stood around water:

people from the street watched a sluice wheel with a different kind of attention.

"Morning."

"We'll need the lower rows early. The ground's loose where we dug yesterday."

"You've got your turn."

"It's the amount."

"That's also your turn."

He made a noise that could have been agreement or dismissal. When he walked away he used the dry side of the channel, where stones had once been underwater.

Alison shut the cover over the book, put a flat stone on it against the wind and made the walk down to the street. The route passed the cider press. Somebody had been boiling the old barrels; the yard smelled of wet wood and sweet rot, a smell that would have pleased her father even in this weather. The pressman had left a row of small apples on the sill for children on their way to school. One had rolled into a drain, where a blackbird worried it with its beak.

On the lane below the press someone had chalked the harvest supper's seating arrangements on a door. The street households were on the left side of the hall this year; the orchard crews would bring the long tables. There had been an argument about it the previous autumn, when Hester's workers carried in a table with a broken leg and insisted that the street people were being given the better seats. It had taken two cups of cider and a child crawling under the table to discover the cause of the wobble. Alison remembered the child's triumphant face as the leg came loose in his hands. She also remembered Hester laughing until the cider ran from her nose. This year the notice said only BRING A PLATE AND SOMETHING IF YOU HAVE IT. Nobody had tried to divide the hall.

A kitchen window opened as Alison passed. The woman inside called to ask whether the washing might be done on Thursday instead of Wednesday. Alison said she could not promise that far

ahead. The woman apologized for the question, which made Alison angry for the rest of the walk. It was a perfectly reasonable question. Somewhere along the way, asking how to wash bedding had begun to sound like a complaint against the world.

At the standpipe the queue was twelve households long. That was not unusual. The unusual thing was how quiet it had become. In richer seasons people came late and argued about who had saved whose place. Now they came before dawn and held their cans near their feet. A dropped can meant lost water before it meant a dent.

Wren was third in line with two battered tins. The taller had lost its original handle and carried a loop of sailcloth. She had tied her hair up with a strip of blue cord Alison recognized from the workshop drawer. At seventeen she seemed to have acquired the ability to stand at a distance even when she was ten feet away.

"You're early," Alison said.

"So is everyone."

"Did you eat?"

"Half a heel."

"There's porridge."

"I know where we live." Wren glanced toward the stone pipe. "You gave them the upper turn first."

"The morning turn is the upper turn."

"I'm not asking what it's called."

Alison looked at the gutter beneath the pipe. The little flow emerging now was clear and cold. It would fill a can, slowly. A child stood with his hands under it until his mother pulled him aside; they both laughed when he shook water into her face. For a moment the queue became a queue again, with people rather than vessels in it.

"I kept the minimum," Alison said.

Wren adjusted the sailcloth handle. "That's nice."

"It's more than the book asks."

"Then perhaps the book should come down here and queue."

A woman behind her gave a quick, surprised bark of laughter. Wren looked embarrassed by the support. Alison wanted to say that a calculation could not carry a can, either; the thought was so close to something her sister might say that she kept it to herself.

At the end of the lane someone lifted the shutters of the school kitchen. The smell of oats began to travel. A bicycle rattled past, its rider holding a loaf inside his coat. Calder Reach was starting its day. A boy would lose a button, someone would break a plate, two women would continue an argument about a bench outside the hall. Ordinary failures kept happening even when the water failed.

She stayed until Wren's first can was nearly full. The pipe coughed once, a brief drag of air, then recovered. Nobody complained aloud. Alison knew what they'd complain about after she left.

"Bring the cans home before your picking shift," she said.

"Could you bring one?"

Alison had come down expecting a quarrel. This request was worse. She said yes and took the taller can, which was almost impossibly heavy for its size once full. Water shifted against the walls as she walked and wet the knees of her trousers.

By the divider the two channels sounded different. She had heard that for years and only lately begun to hear one as an accusation against the other.

She set Wren's can in the shade beside the cottage gate and went back uphill to complete the entry. The main street wheel had crept against its stop. She corrected it by the smallest turn, checked the water again, and wrote the time beneath the reading. As she closed the book she saw, beyond the divider, the street sluice opening not quite as far as it had the week before.

She left the setting alone. The morning allocation was already spent.

02

First Water

Week 1 · Monday reading: 3.0 · Hester

Her father used to say a good tree told you its age before you got close enough to touch the bark. Hester had believed him until she watched him misjudge a graft by eleven years and spend an entire supper arguing with the evidence. Now she did the same thing herself. From fifty yards the old grove looked like rope laid across the hillside, every twist made by a winter somebody had survived. The young trees stood in obedient double lines, like children who still imagined being orderly would keep them safe.

She began in the old grove. That was the part nobody accused her of loving for money.

Her father had taught her the graft below the first terrace wall, a crab-stock root with the eating variety bound on at an angle. It had taken on the third attempt. The join was still visible if you looked low enough. She put a thumb against it. The tree made small hard fruit, good in cider and little else. When he was alive he used to complain about its sourness and then save every apple.

"Late again," she told it.

The tree had never been punctual.

Below the wall, Rory Colbeck was easing the first water through the narrow race. He tested the timber stop with his boot before

stepping across it, then crouched to clear a handful of leaf litter from the lip. Rory understood that flowing water could be bullied only until the next bend. Hester employed several stronger men, but none who could hear a problem in a wheel before it broke.

"You're getting a third of what we used to call a morning," he said when he saw her.

"I've been getting a third for years. It's just taken Alison longer to say it out loud."

He stood and wiped his palms on his trousers. "The far young rows are still dry."

"Then we water those first."

"The top three aren't dry."

"That's what first means."

Rory considered answering, then went down the race to move the boards. He didn't like jokes about the work until the work was behaving. She knew that about him, and it was one reason she kept him.

The packing shed roof flashed copper where sunrise touched the wet metal. Inside, someone was rolling out trestles for the week's fruit and the pressman was arguing with a carpenter over a broken pin. The shed employed people who had once come from farther down the road and now had children born in Calder Reach. Most of them ate with her crews at harvest. Some owed her money. More owed somebody else, and she knew the difference only because she kept the accounts.

She climbed the steps to the shed by the back door. A small board had been left propped there by someone who was painting the names of the new harvest tables. The painter had run out of black and used green for the last two letters. Hester set it upright and looked down the road. The driver from beyond the bend had promised to come for the cider barrels at first light, and the cart was still not there. A promise made in a town could be followed from house

to house. A promise made beyond the last turn in the road stayed somewhere on that road until it chose to arrive.

She had once told Alison that managing an orchard was no different from keeping a family: you counted what was there and gave the loudest complaints less attention than the quietest needs. Alison had asked how many times Hester had miscounted. They'd stopped speaking for two days, not because either was wounded deeply, but because each knew the other was right in a manner that could not be repeated at supper.

The wages were due Friday. She had enough coin for them if the lower picking held and if the buyer from beyond the bend came as promised. Three thousand old trees could supply cider fruit, preserves and the sort of irregular income people mistook for a business. Eleven thousand young trees, planted in the years when the spring had seemed to recover, were intended to pay the loans. They would not bear a proper crop for another season. A dry week could destroy them before they earned a single useful penny.

Inside the shed the loan book lay open beside the wage book. Hester kept them separately because the lender wanted a different kind of handwriting. The lender liked straight lines and dates. Her workers liked amounts that arrived when promised. Hester preferred the second, though she would not have survived this long by neglecting the first.

A tray of windfalls sat on the office table. She ate one while she counted. The skin was thick, the flesh sharp enough to make her eyes water.

Her foreman came in with a strip of wood on which the watering schedule had been chalked. He had rubbed out Thursday twice. "If we take all the early flow for the young orchard, the old trees will be short by evening."

"The old trees have roots deeper than the council's pockets."

"Roots aren't buckets."

"No. Buckets are more polite."

He grinned in spite of himself and set the board down.

The books were less obliging. Each young row needed its brief turn, and every turn meant either the street waited or another row waited. Hester could make the arithmetic come out for a morning. She could not make it come out for a summer.

She walked down to the packing shed floor where the crew had gathered for the day's assignments. Some were still eating; one had brought a plate of eggs and was trading a bite for an apple. The room smelled of timber dust, cider skins and yesterday's coal. A woman had hung paper flags across the far beams for the harvest supper. The flags had been there so many years that their printed suns were brown.

Hester gave out rows, ladders and carts. Then she told the workers there would be three new hands starting tomorrow.

"Three?" the foreman asked. "With this water?"

"We need the fruit in before it drops. Every apple we leave on the ground is a wage we never see."

"We could pick with the crew we've got."

"We could pick with half the crew if everybody stopped for lunch only on Christmas Day."

Somebody called that Christmas was busy in his house. Laughter ran down the tables. Hester let it. They worked better when they could laugh at her, and she'd never understood employers who feared the sound.

Afterward Rory found her outside, where the first water had reached the far end of the young rows and darkened the dirt in a thin uneven band. He stood beside her without touching the fence.

"Three more wages," he said.

"Three more pairs of hands."

"And if the water doesn't hold?"

"They'll have earned what I pay them."

"That isn't what I asked."

"I heard you." She looked at the leaves curling along the third row. "My father planted trees during the bad years too."

"Those were the old ones."

"Everything was young once."

Rory nudged a clod from the edge of the race. "I'll get the far board lower. It won't take much."

"Will it reach?"

"For now."

He meant only the water. Hester was grateful he had not offered comfort on anything else.

Before noon she went to her sister's cottage carrying a small sack of apples and a broken hinge she wanted Alison to identify. She hadn't meant to enter. Alison's windows were open, and she heard Wren inside criticizing the way her mother folded linen.

"Your sheets look like parcels," Wren was saying.

"Parcels stay shut. These won't."

Hester knocked against the screen. "I've brought fruit, so you can both criticize my packing instead."

Wren came to the door, took the sack and examined the hinge. "Is this a present too?"

"For your mother. Tell her she can give it back fixed or give it back broken, but not lose it."

"She'll make a ledger entry for it."

"Then she'll have to value it, and no one in the family has ever agreed what I'm worth."

Wren laughed and went inside with the apples. Alison appeared carrying a folded sheet against her chest. She had flour on one sleeve, though she hadn't been baking.

"It's the cupboard by the measuring house," Hester said, offering the hinge. "The door catches."

"I know which cupboard. It catches because you took the proper pin out for your cider press."

"I borrowed a pin."

"Five years ago."

"A generous loan."

Alison held the hinge to the light and tried the worn pivot with her thumbnail. "Bring the door up tomorrow. I'll make a pin that fits."

"It's a door, Alison, not an invalid."

"Then you can carry it yourself."

Hester followed her into the kitchen. The table had been sanded at one end where Wren had spilled lamp oil as a child. A cupboard smelled of soap and dried orange peel. Neither sister had bought a new piece of furniture for the place since Alison and Wren moved in. Hester wondered whether Alison noticed, and then felt foolish for wondering. Alison noticed the turning of the wind before anyone else in the valley.

"I've got the late apples," Hester said. "If Wren wants picking shifts after school, she can have them."

"She already does."

"More, then."

"She needs time to be seventeen."

Hester took a bruised apple from the sack and dug the bruise out with a small knife. "When I was seventeen, I was still pulling you out of ditches."

"You pushed me into one."

"I rescued you afterward. That should count for something."

Alison laughed despite herself. Hester was relieved to hear it. Lately their conversations had begun with the water and ended with it, even when they never said the word.

Wren returned with three cups, none matching. She set one in front of Hester and asked whether the new pickers would be coming from outside the valley.

"A few of them. Why?"

"Our classroom's got an empty desk. If anyone has children, the teacher would like to know before she runs out of arithmetic books."

"I'll ask."

Wren nodded, satisfied. She had moved from teasing to organizing without an interval. Hester could remember Alison doing exactly that as a girl, which annoyed Alison when it was mentioned.

When Wren went out again, the kitchen was briefly quiet. Hester watched Alison setting the repaired hinge against the edge of the table as if a door would materialize for testing.

"How much have you put aside for winter coal?" Hester asked.

"Enough for a start."

"I could send a load with the cider cart."

"You send the wood from your pruning. That's enough."

"The wood's green."

"It burns if you wait."

"Alison."

Her sister lowered the hinge. "No."

Hester hadn't offered money. Neither of them pretended that made the offer different.

The cottage had belonged to an aunt before the old Brierley property was divided. Hester had taken it back into her accounts when Alison's husband died. She had never collected rent. Alison had insisted twice that she would pay when she could; Hester had refused twice and the subject had gone quiet. She had thought quiet meant settled.

"You could put the rent in my name as a debt," Hester said. "Then you could have the pleasure of disputing it every month."

"And you could pretend to be offended every month."

"Exactly. A proper household arrangement."

For once Alison's mouth stayed tight. "I don't want my daughter's home to be an item between us."

Hester stood. She had been about to mention the orchard and the need for a little more of the morning flow. She could feel the sentence waiting. “Then it won’t be,” she said instead.

Outside, from the step, she could see the town roofline and the school hall. A boy was balancing on the handrail, making a performance of how far he could lean before falling. A teacher shouted and he climbed down without urgency. Hester liked the place. It was a poor town, but it repaired things, and most people who said they would turn up did.

Alison came to the screen again, the hinge in her hand. “Hester.”

“What?”

“The three extra hands. You can pay them?”

“Friday, as promised.”

“And when Friday is over?” Alison asked.

Hester took one step backward. “I can pay them Friday. I can’t pay them next autumn yet.”

Her sister looked at her a long moment, then closed the screen gently. Hester carried the answer back uphill with her, as carefully as she’d carried the apples down.

By afternoon the new rows were watered just enough to dull their dust. Hester walked through them at the hottest hour. She lifted one twig, examined the bud that would have been next year’s fruit, and felt the stalk resist. Alive. There was still time for these trees.

In the upper grove the wind moved the old branches against one another. Their roots lay deep under the terraces and the stone walls. Hester knew precisely where her father had grafted the first tree, where he had buried the failed stock, and where the eldest root must have found the seam of cooler soil. She stood on the wall and looked down toward the town, trying to imagine the orchard without the young rows. It would be smaller than the place she’d promised her workers.

She went back to the shed and wrote three new names on Friday's wage page, leaving blank spaces for the amounts until the first day's work. Then she opened the loan book and counted, once more, the rows whose roots she had never seen.

03

Cans

Week 2 · Monday reading: 2.9 · Wren

Adults in Calder Reach had invented a polite name for standing in a line with empty tins: waiting for your turn. As though the standpipe was a parlour and a generous host might come out with biscuits. Wren had been queuing long enough to know better. The second thing she disliked was that the people in front always had excellent advice for the people behind.

Instead she carried the two tins to the standpipe and took her usual place between a boy from the school and an old man who brought a bucket with a hole that had been mended with black pitch. The boy was trying to build a tower of pebbles on the coping. It fell every time somebody moved. He continued.

"Your mother's at the channel," the old man said.

"She's usually at the channel."

"She'd hear me if I spoke loud enough."

"She'd hear you if you were quiet enough."

The man smiled. He had been telling Wren that joke in different forms since she was ten. A few people nearby smiled too, out of courtesy to an old man whose jokes didn't improve with repetition.

At the pipe the water came in pulses. Katherine's cart arrived with its iron wheels rattling over the lane stones, and the crowd

shifted to let her through. Her pony had a white nose and the habit of trying to steal whatever children held in their hands. Katherine slapped its flank without looking and checked the glass level on the cart's upright tank.

"Two minutes more at this pressure," she said. "Then the cart goes to the clinic."

A woman at the head of the line objected that she was next.

"Then get your can under it."

Katherine could make urgency sound like a favour. Wren watched her unhook the hose, stop a small leak with the heel of her hand, and lend an elderly neighbour the iron funnel that belonged to the cart. She was not kind in the way schoolbooks meant it. She remembered what people needed and was impatient about the asking.

The boy's pebble tower rose to six stones, then seven. When the pipe slowed, a young man behind Wren reached over him to set his vessel forward. The tower scattered across the wet gutter. The boy stared down with a face that moved toward tears, then away from them when the man apologized so extravagantly it became funny.

Wren filled one can, set the second beneath the pipe and watched the morning lesson begin in the street around her: people bargaining places, exchanging news, pretending not to notice when somebody brought a third vessel.

At school she could still hear the water shifting inside the tins when she walked. She put them under the desk where they were less likely to be kicked. The classroom window was open because the stove smoked. Above the blackboard hung the annual harvest supper notice, decorated by pupils who had drawn enormous red apples and a blue river wider than any river she'd ever seen.

The lesson was accounts. Their teacher had them price a sack of dried fruit, the carriage to the next market and a suitable allowance for spoilage. Wren finished before most and began writing an argument in the margin about whether the children in town should have to practice calculating the freight they could no longer afford.

The girl beside her slid over a crust of bread under the desk. They'd been exchanging bits of their lunches for years, sometimes when they had plenty and sometimes when one of them didn't. Today the crust was more generous than Wren's own supper was likely to be, and she broke it in two before eating.

"You coming to the rehearsal?" her friend whispered.

"After picking."

"They've given me the old man's line."

"Try not to improve it."

"I was going to make him clever."

"Then the play is doomed."

Their teacher looked up at the low laugh. Wren sat straight and copied the spoiled-fruit figure into the proper column.

After school she delivered the cans to the cottage and changed into picking clothes. The cottage smelled of porridge, damp linen and the apples Hester had left. Alison had placed the good apples neatly in a bowl and cut the bruises out of the rest. That was her mother's approach to almost everything: make the bad part visible, then remove it cleanly if possible.

On the table lay their household turn card. Each family had a thin stiff rectangle with a slot for the day and a place for the keeper to mark half-day transfers. Wren knew where it belonged: in the kitchen drawer underneath the bills and the bent spoons. It had been taken out to correct a date. There was a clean Thursday square, and nothing had been written beside it.

She picked it up. A turn could be sold. There was a notice at the shed saying so, with a price per half-day that changed when the level fell. Her mother disliked the market but signed the entries, which was another thing about grown-ups Wren couldn't make sense of. They said they hated a thing, then supplied the necessary ink.

A knock came at the door. It was a boy from farther down the street, carrying a note for Alison. He wouldn't come inside and re-

fused an apple, although he stared at the bowl. Wren gave him one anyway and told him to say the note had been delivered before noon. He ran off biting into the best side.

Wren read the note only because it lay open on the table. The clinic wanted confirmation of its evening delivery. She set it beside the card. The Thursday square remained blank.

In Hester's orchard the light came low between the young rows, bright on the top leaves and dull near the dust. Wren worked alongside two women who could pick four baskets to her three if she kept silent, and five if she tried to match their jokes. She chose to talk. The best parts of a shift were the things people said when the foreman couldn't hear them.

Her hands grew sticky as the picking wore on. Fruit came away from the stalk cleanly if it was ready, and stayed stubborn if it wasn't; by the fourth basket Wren could tell which trees the foreman had sent them to because he expected a quick tally and which because he needed the fallen apples cleared before the lender's inspector came. At the far end of the row a worker had brought a child too young to stay alone in town. The child sat under a cart, inspecting each apple with the solemnity of a judge, and once every few minutes announced that one was 'the best'. They were all the best. People slipped fruit into his lap and pretended not to see him eating it.

When the bell called the crew for their break, nobody moved immediately. The last basket was one layer from full and two workers argued over which would finish it. Wren took the ladder down, set it safely against the wall, and carried the half-filled basket toward the shade. She'd learned to do that after a basket went over last season and Hester made everyone spend the morning sorting bruised fruit from the sound. The memory of apples hitting stone still made Wren flinch.

At the break she sat against a stone wall with her friend from school, who was also picking extra days. Her friend took out a piece

of flat bread wrapped in cloth. There was no filling. She ate slowly, as if that could enlarge it.

"Your father still out?" Wren asked.

"Still looking. He says there's work down the road if the hauling holds."

"Does it?"

"He says there's work."

Wren understood the difference. She had known the household for years, long enough to know that jokes at the supper table could go quiet when the flour was low. They sat and watched the far young rows tremble in the wind. Wren almost mentioned the turn card. Instead she asked whether her friend had practiced the old man's line.

The afternoon's picking ended early when a broken ladder had to be carried back to the shed. Wren stayed with her school friend to help return the baskets. The girl had a way of checking whether anyone was looking before she took an extra apple for her younger brothers. Wren was good at looking in the opposite direction.

They walked to the school hall for rehearsal, both smelling of bruised fruit. The caretaker had propped the doors open and put a washbasin on the step. There wasn't enough water for everyone to wash properly. Wren wet the tips of her fingers and scrubbed at the stickiest patch on her wrist. Her friend wiped her hands on her skirt.

"You're getting a bath for that," Wren said.

"I should have saved my hands for the stage."

"The old man doesn't wash either. It might be convincing."

Inside, the pupils were arguing over a wooden bench. Two boys had been told to carry it across the room and were now claiming it was too heavy for two. Wren lifted one end alone and made them carry the other. It was a small triumph which earned her a splinter, a torn sleeve and an accusation of showing off.

Her friend was supposed to play a grandfather telling the children where the spring had been found. She tried the lines in a solemn voice. They were dreadful. They sounded like the school caretaker explaining a drain.

"Say it how your grandfather would," Wren suggested.

"My grandfather would say he found the spring because everyone else was looking in the wrong direction."

"Good. Say that."

"They'll tell me it isn't in the script."

"Then tell them the script is wrong."

The teacher heard the last sentence. "Wren, would you like to direct?"

"No. I'd like the bench moved before somebody breaks a foot."

The girl performed her line her grandfather's way. The hall laughed. Even the teacher laughed before asking them to try the printed version once more. Wren went outside to fetch the remaining props and heard the rehearsal continue behind her. There were days when she would have paid to stay in that room for another hour, where adults only cared whether you could remember the next line.

She found her friend on the step after rehearsal, trying to draw a broken thread through the torn seam of her coat. The coat was too small now; the wrist seams had whitened with strain.

"Hold still," Wren said.

"You can't sew standing up."

"Neither can you. Give me that."

Wren fetched the school's sewing tin, worked a needle through the coarse cloth, and strengthened the seam with a strip cut from the inside hem. The stitches were ugly but held when her friend tugged them. She didn't ask who had sewn the old repairs or why a new coat was out of the question.

"My mother says your aunt hired another three people," her friend said.

"That's the plan."

"My father went to ask for a place. They said picking, maybe, for a fortnight. He used to fix wagons."

"He's good at it."

"He's good at a lot of things nobody's buying."

Wren handed back the coat. Her friend put it on, pulled the cuff over the new seam and showed her a ridiculous stiff bow, the sort the grandfather in the play might make. Wren answered with an equally ridiculous curtsey.

At the corner they went separate ways. Wren watched her friend go toward the smaller houses behind the school. She knew the family had been stretching one sack of meal through the week. A month of bread, she thought, would change more than the next performance. The thought remained with her as she walked home, carrying the scent of apple skins in her sleeves.

When Wren returned to the cottage, Alison was eating supper standing at the kitchen sink. She'd been called back to the divider and had not bothered with a plate. She asked about school and about the picking and whether Wren had brought the cans in before the sun reached the door.

Wren told her everything except the only thing she was thinking about.

After Alison went to wash, Wren opened the kitchen drawer. She found the turn card again, slid it under the light and folded one corner so she could identify it quickly among the other papers. It made a small clean crease. She put it back and pushed the drawer shut with her knee.

04

The Street Minimum

Week 2 · Monday reading: 2.9 · Katherine

Katherine checked both wheels of the water cart before setting off; she trusted neither of them. The wooden one worked loose in frost; the iron one complained even in good weather. Katherine carried a wrench, a spare pin and a list of roads she could still get down without stopping to make repairs. She had meant to replace both wheels. The clinic had needed the money first.

The clinic took the first load after dawn. That had been settled years ago, when the school had tried to claim its morning wash water ahead of the infirmary and the argument lasted until somebody realized nobody had counted the clinic's patients. Katherine had counted them. She still counted them. This morning there were five: two fevers, a man with a cut foot, a woman staying overnight after a difficult birth, and the new baby, who apparently intended to use everybody's allotted sleep.

The nurse met her at the side door with a jar of jam and a request for more than the regular measure.

"Why?" Katherine asked.

"Laundry. The fever sheets."

"Are they worse?"

"They're dirty."

"Has the fever broken?"

The nurse's expression changed a little. "One is worse."

Katherine gave her the additional pail. The nurse started to protest that she couldn't authorize it, then took it quickly enough to show she understood how small the gift was.

On the way to the school Katherine passed an old man carrying a bucket against his hip. The pitch over its old crack had sprung. A thin dark trail followed him along the stones. Katherine called out, stopped the cart and lent him the spare vessel she kept beneath the seat.

"Bring it back," she said.

"Of course."

"You said that about my saw."

"I brought that back."

"Without its teeth."

He grinned, carried the new bucket into his yard and left the leaking one behind for her to mend. Katherine put it among the tools and called the transaction fair.

The school caretaker was outside scraping dust from the window ledge with a rag. Inside the hall, pupils were rehearsing the harvest song with an enthusiasm that left the pitch in ruins. Katherine filled the kitchen tank and stood for a moment listening. The children managed the chorus, lost half the second verse and somehow arrived together at the final note. Their teacher applauded as if the tune had been intended to sound that way.

The youngest children were washing their hands from a shared basin. Katherine waited until the last one had finished. The water was brown by then, but the children had enjoyed the process.

She had three more stops before noon and not enough for each household to receive what it would have taken without asking a year ago. It was never simply a question of who had water. A household with three strong people could carry more from a distant standpipe. Someone who worked late might arrive after the flow had dropped.

A person too proud to admit need would take less and go thirsty quietly. Katherine knew their habits better than most of them knew their own.

At the far end of the street a woman wanted an extra can because her son had come back from a hauling job covered in road dust. Katherine offered a washcloth and half a pail. The woman told her where to put the washcloth. They laughed and agreed to be offended next week.

At the next lane a child called Katherine from behind a fence and showed her a tin cup with a handle made of twisted wire. He had made it himself, he said, so his little sister wouldn't drop her share. Katherine examined the sharp twist at the top and told him to turn the end inward before anyone used it. He wanted praise for the cleverness of the handle, and she gave him that too, reluctantly, after making him promise to file it smooth.

Outside the school the caretaker asked if she would stay for a minute to hear the children practice. Katherine said she had work. He said everyone did. She stayed for the last song and heard a girl singing the harmony by herself, a little ahead of the others. The sound was not beautiful enough to make the singer famous and was good enough to make every person in the room listen. When it ended Katherine applauded along with the teachers. The pony, which had been tied by the door, took the opportunity to chew the corner of a paper flag. By the time Katherine noticed, the sun had lost half its painted face.

By noon the cart was empty. Katherine took it to the yard, watered the pony with the last cup in a bucket and walked up to the public notice board where the compact's street schedule had been pinned beneath a warped glass cover.

The document itself had remained there for years. It spoke of first claims, maintenance obligations, specified thresholds and the responsibilities of the upper works. It had been written by men who'd had enough water to make the exact wording seem harmless.

Katherine had never heard anyone argue that the terrace orchards shouldn't be watered. She'd heard plenty of people argue that the street's one measure was only a favour.

She brought a clean sheet of paper from the cart office and put it on the table by the school door. At the top she wrote, in letters large enough to read across the hall: THE STREET MINIMUM IS NOT A GIFT.

Then she paused. That sounded like the beginning of a speech, and speeches were what people made when they couldn't carry a pail. She crossed it out and wrote instead: REQUEST TO ENTER THE DAILY STREET MINIMUM IN THE WATER ROTA.

Beneath it she ruled lines for names.

The first signature came from the school caretaker, who had been listening behind her. He put the pen down carefully.

"You think Alison will take it?" he asked.

"I think she'll read it."

"Same thing?"

"No."

The next people signed after seeing his name. One woman asked if it would reduce the orchards' water. Katherine said that sometimes it would. The woman signed anyway. Another refused because her husband worked for Hester and she'd rather keep Friday's wages. Katherine let the admission stand. It was a kind of honesty to say what you could not afford.

A farmer coming down from the terraces read the sheet and asked whether Katherine expected the young trees to live on good intentions. She said no and asked whether the clinic should live on them instead. He told her that if the trees died, there'd be no wages to pay for the clinic. She asked him to sign his name beside that opinion. He left without signing.

By late afternoon she had filled one side of the page. She used an old jam jar to hold down the corner and went to fetch more paper. When she came back, the woman from the far street had written an

additional line across the bottom: THE MINIMUM MUST BE ENOUGH TO WASH A PERSON. Katherine crossed it out only after copying the woman's name onto the next sheet and promising she could speak at the public measure.

She walked home past the school as the rehearsal started again. The chorus was louder now. Someone had invented a harmony that was almost certainly wrong but made Katherine smile. She had not eaten since dawn. At her own kitchen she found a heel of bread, a wedge of cheese and an apple that had gone soft at the stem. It made a good enough supper.

Before dark she returned to collect the sheets. She counted the names twice, then a third time because she thought she had misplaced a page. The signatures were there, enough to insist on a public reading. She saw her own handwriting at the top, her crossings-out, the penmarks of neighbours she had known most of her life.

Her name was not among the signatures.

She looked down the page again to be certain. Then she took the pen out of her pocket and held it over the empty line at the bottom. She had been asking other people to risk their names all afternoon. For the first time that day she had to decide whether to risk hers.

05

The Book

Week 3 · Monday reading: 2.8 · Alison

The older figures presented two problems. The ink had faded, which could be allowed for; she could hold the page to the window. Her own handwriting had not faded nearly enough. She knew the exact slope of the sevens on the dry-season entries, including the ones she'd made smaller than the water actually delivered.

The cabinet's bottom drawer was swollen, and Alison had to brace her foot against the frame before it opened. A small drift of dried leaves came out with the books. They were from the winter a window had broken and the shed had been used for storing cider barrels. Her father had repaired that window. She could still see the place where his putty knife had slipped and left a crescent in the wood.

He had also kept the early measures. His entries were short, sometimes little more than a figure and a weather note. In one wet year he had written: CHILDREN ON THE BANK AGAIN. In another: WATER OVER THE PATH, PLEASE TAKE CARE. He had believed the book should say what had happened, even if what had happened was somebody falling in. Alison used to find that old-fashioned. She had spent her adult life making the entries tidy enough that no one would ask about them. Now she thought that a note about children

on the bank might have told future readers more about the river than all her careful figures.

Twenty years of water entries had lived in the cabinet: seasons of nine and eight, a few of six, and the long smaller figures that eventually became normal. The older books were bound in rough cloth. Their corners curled where they had been carried out into rain. They contained names of people who had died, gone away or changed their minds about what they were willing to give.

The book from the first bad autumn lay open at Thursday. Alison read the line aloud because that made it harder to skip: “Street, short by half. Terrace additional maintenance flow.” The wording was hers. She remembered Hester asking for a little more water that morning, not to rescue the whole orchard but to keep one newly planted row from drying out after an unexpected wind. Alison had marked the diversion as lost channel flow. There had been leaks in those years, and no one had asked to examine the difference.

She had done it again the following week, and twice in winter when frost made every allocation difficult to count. The amounts were small. The habit had grown around them.

She set the old book beside this week’s. Three notches had become 2.8, and no one in the street had yet stopped expecting the customary minimum. She wondered, without wanting to, how many times her handwriting had made that expectation possible for one family by diminishing it for another.

A knock came at the door. Wren had brought her lunch: bread, a boiled egg and the last of Hester’s sharp apples. She leaned against the frame rather than entering.

“Have you eaten?” Wren asked.

“I will.”

“You said that yesterday.”

“I ate yesterday.”

“Standing up doesn’t count.”

“Who made that rule?”

"I did. I'm revising the book."

Alison smiled before she could stop herself. Wren smiled back, briefly, and held the bag out farther. For a few moments they were simply two people exchanging lunch through a doorway.

Wren looked at the old volumes. "Are those the years before I was born?"

"Some."

"Can I look?"

"Not just now."

"Why?"

"They're out of order."

Wren surveyed the table, which was arranged with the orderliness of a surveyor's bench. "Terrible mess."

Alison moved the oldest book under the others. The movement was so quick and foolish that she wished she hadn't made it. Wren looked at her for a second, said she had to get to school and went out.

The room seemed to keep the space she'd occupied. Alison picked up the egg, broke the shell and found herself holding a piece without eating it.

When her husband died, there had been no money to pay for another winter in their rented house. He had owned tools and a coat, and he'd left a small account at the grocer because he had expected to recover. Hester had arrived with a cart and told Alison that the cottage by the orchard gate was standing empty. She had not asked if Alison wanted charity. She'd asked which cupboard contained Wren's shoes.

Alison remembered the relief of walking into a place where the roof didn't leak above her daughter's bed. She remembered Hester arriving with a sack of potatoes and a broken kettle and announcing that she was charging rent in the form of good company, a demand neither woman could reliably meet. For months Hester had found reasons to come by the cottage every evening. She'd fixed a hinge,

brought fruit, quarreled about the stove and once sat at the kitchen table without speaking when Alison couldn't bear anyone saying that things would improve.

Her sister had not asked her to bend the book then. The first favour came years later, when the young orchard was newly planted and the spring seemed capable of recovering. Alison had considered it temporary. She still remembered writing that word in her head even as she avoided writing it on the page.

She took a clean sheet and began copying the disputed entries into a separate list. She included the dates, the figures and the phrases she'd used to conceal the diversions. After four entries she stopped. The list looked like something prepared for a complaint. She folded it and placed it inside the old book, intending to finish later.

By midafternoon Katherine arrived with a bundle of signed sheets. Her boots were dusty. She set the pages on the table without a greeting.

"We want it written into the rota," she said.

"I can see that."

"Read it before you decide you're busy."

Alison read. The wording was practical, restrained and much less angry than what Katherine had said on the street last week. She recognized dozens of signatures. There were names of terrace workers among them.

"A public measure can be called next week," Alison said.

"Can it be called this week?"

"The witnesses are already on shift."

"Then next week. But tell me you'll put it before them."

"I'll put it before them."

Katherine waited, apparently expecting a second sentence. Alison had none. It occurred to her that Katherine had not signed the petition. She almost mentioned it, then saw the ink mark on Katherine's

thumb and understood the omission might have cost more courage than the signatures she had gathered.

After Katherine left, Alison opened the old book again. She finished the list from the first bad year, then copied the newer entries. The act was painstaking. Some diversions had been so small she could remember only the reasoning, not the event. Other entries were clear enough to make her feel the old wind on her face.

In the evening Hester came to fetch the carpenter's hinge she'd asked Alison to identify. She stopped at the measuring-house door, looked at the books and raised her eyebrows.

"Writing my biography?"

"Water history."

"That's the same thing in my family."

Alison handed her the hinge. It needed a new pin. Hester put it in her pocket and said she'd bring it back when fixed, then asked whether Alison would come to the harvest supper planning meeting. There was an argument about which tables to use, and Hester couldn't bear another year of the school caretaker being put in charge of flowers.

Alison said she might. Hester studied her for a moment, gave her a small apple from her coat and left her alone.

After dark Alison put the list in the cabinet but didn't lock it. She sat for another hour listening to the water moving below the measuring house. The pages she had copied were not enough to repair anything. They were enough to show what would happen if she told the truth.

A knock came at the measuring-house door. The school caretaker was back for a second copy of Katherine's petition; the first had already been passed around the supper tables. Alison gave him the sheet and watched him flatten it under his palm.

"Will people be allowed to read the older entries too?" he asked.

"They're public entries."

When he had gone, she left the cabinet unlocked. She knew what he had asked, and he knew she knew. Thursday's figures were waiting for her hand in the morning.

06

Night Gate

Week 3 · Monday reading: 2.8 · Rory

Water sounded wrong after dark. The race creaked. A hinge knocked. The iron wheel caught against the stone like a tooth in a socket. Rory knew the notch in the handle by touch and the rough patch on the sill where a slipped boot could take a foot under. He checked the wedge. Solid. The chain. Slack enough. He wanted daylight, but the work was here now.

He had been working since first light. The water had run short in the young rows, and the foreman had told him twice to take more before he finally went to Hester himself. Rory had no patience for men who sent other people to make demands, but he went because the lower boards were his responsibility.

Hester was in the packing shed paying a cart driver. She counted out the money, held a coin between her teeth while she searched for another, and asked Rory what he needed.

"The far young rows are still drawing dust."

"Can the run be adjusted?"

"Not without taking from the street or the old trees."

She looked at him. "I wasn't asking what it would cost. I asked whether it could be done."

"Yes."

"Then come back at dusk."

He knew what that meant before she said anything else. All afternoon the knowledge stayed in his hands as he tightened boards, spliced a frayed rope and replaced a wedge in the lower race. Work ordinarily gave his mind one thing to do. Today it gave his hands something to do while his mind went elsewhere.

During the afternoon he had repaired a bent cleat for the cart men. One of them asked what he charged. Rory said the labour was included in his wages, and the cart man replied that no labour was included in anybody's wages after sunset. Rory liked the observation but declined the coins. Hester had given him this work, this roof, and a place among men who knew he could fix what they broke. Gratitude was not a debt with a printed figure. It was more difficult to calculate than one.

At the edge of the young orchard a boy no older than fourteen had been trying to make a whistle from a length of reed. The boy's first attempts sounded like a kettle choking. Rory took the reed, cut a notch with his knife and showed him how to hold the wet end between finger and thumb. A clean note rose. The boy's delight was immediate and loud. Then Rory handed it back, and the noise became dreadful again. They both laughed, long enough that the foreman called to ask which of them intended to finish watering the rows.

A letter had come from outside the valley the day before. Rory's younger brother was staying with relatives along the lower road, where he could attend a school that still had enough pupils for a full class. The letter was written by the relative who housed him and contained a list of ordinary expenses: food, boots, a replacement shirt. At the bottom his brother had added a crooked drawing of a dog he said he might one day own. Rory kept the page folded in his pocket, touching it every time he went looking for a tool.

Hester had advanced his wages in the spring when those relatives couldn't afford an illness. She'd never mentioned the debt again ex-

cept to say it would be taken slowly. His room above the shed was part of his employment. If he left Hester's work, he would lose it. Rory sometimes thought about going farther down the road, but the people who came through Calder Reach looking for labour offered wages without rooms, and the people who did promise rooms didn't promise wages.

At dusk Hester met him by the terrace sluice. She had brought no lamp. The sky was still bright in the west, and there was enough light for her to see his face.

"Only one notch," she said.

"On the terrace wheel?"

"Yes. The young rows need a little more before morning."

"That takes it from somewhere."

"Not for long."

"It still does."

She looked down toward the street. "They'll have their morning."

"That's not a guarantee."

"No. It's the best I can give you."

She was not bullying him. That made it harder. She spoke as someone who would have liked a better answer and knew there wasn't one. In daylight she laughed about the spring, hired new hands and told everybody things would be all right. Here at the wheel she looked older than Rory had ever seen her.

He set the small iron key against the spindle, checked the grip and turned. The wheel resisted in the first quarter and then moved easily. Water pressed harder against the timbers. The channel's sound deepened. A wet line climbed the stone by a finger's width.

"Enough," Hester said.

Rory stopped. He could have opened it a little farther without anyone in the street seeing. He was glad she had not asked.

They watched the water take the bend toward the lower rows. A black moth collided with the face of the lamp Rory had finally lit. He pulled it off the hot glass with his sleeve and let it stumble away.

"I'll add it to the maintenance measure," Hester said.

"Alison would have to know."

"Alison knows the orchard needs water."

"That's not the same."

"Do you want me to tell her?"

Rory wished she'd ordered him to be quiet. Instead she was giving him the opportunity to act as though he had made the decision. He looked at the wheel and said nothing.

Hester nodded once. "Get some supper."

She walked back toward the packing shed before he had gathered his tools. Rory stood beside the raised wheel until her footsteps were gone. The lower water was faster now, and the noise of it against the boards belonged to a much heavier night turn.

He went up to his room above the shed. The floor sloped so that a coin left on the chest would roll toward the door. He had a bed, two blankets, a chair and a shelf for tools he didn't trust anyone else to borrow. He ate bread with preserved fruit, then unfolded the letter from his brother and read the list of costs again. He took out the coins he had been saving and counted what remained after Friday's payment.

Through the floorboards he could hear the crew below finishing late work, joking about a barrel that had cracked when it was moved. Rory usually went down to join them. Tonight he stayed in his room, listening to the mill and the water. The sound seemed to be travelling under the building.

He went back outside before midnight. There was no one at the upper path. He stood at the terrace wheel, felt the greater pull against the spindle, then turned it back to the exact mark he'd made earlier with chalk. The street would be short for only part of the night. He could tell himself that much.

He wiped the iron handle with a rag so his hands would not leave grease on the timber, put the rag in his pocket and went to bed.

He woke before the crew. His room had grown cold enough for his breath to show at the window. Down in the shed somebody had left a bucket beneath a leak in the roof. Each drop struck the bottom with a hollow note. It was an unnecessary amount of water, dripping uselessly from a roof while the valley measured what it drank.

The school kitchen was on Rory's route to the lower boards. He went that way most mornings because the caretaker sometimes had hot water for anyone who had repaired a door or shifted a bench. Today the back door stood open and the caretaker was outside with two empty pails.

"No tea?" Rory asked.

"No porridge. The street tank went shallow overnight."

"It'll come back on the morning turn."

"That's what they said. Some of the children come hungry before the morning turn."

The caretaker had laid slices of cold apple on a tray to serve instead. They were from Hester's orchards; the skin had the little red streak Rory recognized from the upper rows. He had helped water the trees that grew them. He offered to fetch water from the standpipe, but the caretaker pointed toward the queue already forming at the bottom of the lane.

"They'd thank you for skipping ahead of them," the caretaker said.

"I wasn't going to skip."

"Then we'll wait together."

Rory took one pail. At the standpipe an older woman was trying to fill a wide pan whose handle had broken off. She had brought her granddaughter to help balance it. The child stood with two fingers in the stream, wondering aloud why it came out so thin. Her grandmother told her to take her fingers away. The child obeyed, then looked up at Rory's work boots.

"You make the water," she said.

"I don't make it."

"You turn it on."

He considered the difference. “Sometimes.”

“Can you turn it on more?”

Behind her the line shifted. The man waiting next raised his can as though to show Rory how empty it was. Nobody accused him of anything; nobody knew. That made it possible to say he didn’t understand how the night had affected them. The pan remained empty.

“Not from here,” Rory said.

He waited his place, filled the kitchen pail and carried it back without drinking. By then the caretaker had arranged the apple slices on little plates. The first children were arriving. One girl asked for porridge and, when told there was none yet, offered her apple to a younger boy who had begun to cry. She did it with the weary briskness of someone who had been told all her life to behave well when the adults had failed to plan.

“You can eat yours,” the caretaker told her.

“He doesn’t like the skins.”

She tore off the red skins with her teeth and passed him the rest. Rory stood just inside the door holding a pail that wasn’t quite enough. He could feel its handle cutting into his fingers. He put it down beside the stove.

At the orchard, the far young rows were wet where yesterday they had been dusty. Their leaves had lifted. Hester would notice the change, and she would be glad. The same morning, the school would be serving breakfast late. He had thought the two places were too far apart for such a small adjustment to be seen from one to the other.

He took the folded letter from his pocket when he reached the terrace wheel. His brother had drawn the dog with four legs of different lengths. Rory smoothed the page against his knee, checked the morning stop and put the letter away. When the foreman asked why he had come by the school, Rory said he’d helped fetch water.

“Good,” the foreman said. “Those kids need feeding.”

"They do," Rory said, and went back to the boards.

07

Measure

Week 4 · Monday reading: 2.7 · Alison

At noon, under a clear sky, Alison brought the witnesses to the divider for a reading that would determine the next water turns. Alison had made those arrangements herself, because a number was only as useful as the number of people prepared to stand beside it. People came with lunches and work on their sleeves. They spread along the bank until there was no space left to stand without touching a neighbour.

The measuring post stood above the split. At that point the spring belonged to neither the terraces nor the street. Below it there were two iron wheels, one leading uphill along the stone race to the orchards, one carrying the street's allotment toward the standpipe and the public tanks. A third, smaller branch gate farther uphill served Hester's young lower grove. Alison could see the top of that gate from where she stood; by the time water reached it, a person at the divider could no longer tell how much had been taken elsewhere.

The appointed witnesses were a school caretaker, an orchard worker and Sylvia Ormerod, who had kept the turn book before Alison. Sylvia had brought a folding stool but refused to sit on it until the reading was done. Her knees were unreliable, she said, but not her eyes.

Alison took out the staff and rubbed the face with a clean cloth. She laid it against the same stone, waited for the flow to settle and stepped back. The caretaker bent close first. The orchard worker followed, then Sylvia, who examined the mark so long that someone at the rear of the crowd coughed impatiently.

"Two point seven," Sylvia said.

The caretaker agreed. The orchard worker nodded without enthusiasm.

Alison recorded the reading where everyone could see it and held the book steady on the wall while the witnesses signed. The silence after the last signature seemed to call for someone to speak. Katherine was already there with her petitions under one arm. Hester stood apart beside her foreman, holding a paper bag of apples she had intended to share before the crowd grew solemn.

Katherine stepped forward first. "We want the street minimum written into the daily rota."

"It's already what we do," said somebody from the terraces.

"Then write it."

A few people laughed. The point was too simple to avoid.

Hester opened the bag and handed an apple to the man nearest her. "If we write down everything we've done by custom, I'll have to record every lunch I've owed the pressman."

"He'd enjoy that," Katherine said.

"The pressman would claim interest."

More laughter, this time genuinely warm. Alison was grateful for it. She had come prepared for a fight and realized, as she looked around, that people who were about to argue still knew how to be neighbours.

Hester went on. "I can give up the terraces' Thursday morning priority for the next four weeks. The old trees will live with that. The young rows need the other days."

"Four weeks?" Katherine asked.

"That's the period I can see."

“Can we see the period in the street?”

Hester looked at her sharply, then eased. “No. I don’t suppose you can.”

Alison put the proposal in her own words: each Thursday morning, the street would receive the first measure; on the other mornings, the customary street minimum would remain, despite the compact’s terrace-first clause. If the reading fell below another mark, the witnesses would be called again. Nobody would pretend the arrangement could last forever.

The orchard worker raised a hand. “If we give up Thursdays, someone has to decide which rows go dry.”

“Hester will,” Katherine said.

“He means people lose wages if the rows fail,” Hester said. “Not just leaves.”

Katherine faced her. “I know what wages are.”

“I know you do. That doesn’t make the choice easy.”

A man near the back called that the town would be better off closing half the young orchard immediately. Another shouted that he could say that because he didn’t work there. They began arguing, not about water but about who had fed whom in the winter before last. Alison let them talk for a short while. The grievances were old and deserved air, but they could not all be settled at a stone divider.

Sylvia tapped her walking stick twice against the wall. People turned toward her. She had taught too many of their children for anyone to mistake the gesture.

“I remember a year we had less than this,” she said. “I remember it was a hard year. I don’t remember being cleverer than you.”

A man asked what they had done.

“Argued, mostly.”

Sylvia sat on her stool. Several people smiled. There was no wisdom hidden in her answer, only the unhelpful fact that other generations had lived with the same choices and failed to leave a simple solution.

They took the proposal by show of hands. Alison counted, asked the witnesses to count separately and called for the hands a second time after somebody complained she had missed a row. The result was enough to adopt a provisional rota. Not unanimous, not close enough to turn into a riot. Alison wrote the terms, made space for the date and read them aloud in ordinary language.

A woman from the street asked whether the measure would cover wash water at the school. Katherine said it would on Thursdays. The woman's face showed how much less than a promise that was.

The audience began to break up. People collected their lunches and drifted back to their shifts. A child spilled a cup and was made to fetch the rag himself. Hester gave the remaining apples to the school caretaker, then came to the wall beside Alison.

"You did well," she said.

"I read a number."

"You read it where people could see."

"That's always been the arrangement."

"Not everyone likes an arrangement when it costs them something."

Alison wanted to tell her that she had brought the old books out, that the figures from years past were sitting in the cabinet, that she had written her sister's name on a separate sheet. Instead she asked about the young trees.

Hester took a breath. "They'll get through this week."

"And next?"

"Ask me next."

They stood together as the last of the crowd departed. Alison remembered their childhood walks up to the old spring, when Hester had led the way with a stick, pretending to know every turning. Once Alison had slipped into the channel and soaked both shoes. Hester had carried her home with mud on her own knees and told their father that she'd been the one to fall. They had laughed about that story for years, with each insisting the other had lied.

"Do you remember the shoes?" Alison asked.

Hester looked at her. "The ones you filled with spring water?"

"You said you fell."

"I did fall. You pulled me in."

"You carried me."

"Only because you were making such an awful noise."

For a moment the crowd, the rota and the figure in the book receded. Alison could see her sister as a girl, knees covered in mud, holding out a hand. Then Hester looked uphill toward the lower rows, and the year returned to both of them.

Katherine came back for the signed sheets. She glanced at the entry Alison had made and asked whether copies would be posted at the school and the packing shed.

"Yes."

"Today?"

"Before supper."

"Good." She stayed another moment. "I signed the petition."

Alison looked up. "I saw."

"Last of all. I hadn't noticed."

"I had."

Katherine gave her a look that was almost a smile and went to fetch the cart.

Alison copied the rota while the stone wall remained warm from the sun. She added the thresholds, then scratched out one word that made a condition sound permanent. When she finished she walked the signed sheet to the school and pinned it beneath the rehearsal notice. Inside the hall the children were singing the harvest song. They were still missing the second verse. Alison stopped to listen, enjoying the fact that a tune could survive so much mismanagement.

The harvest supper had begun before sunset, and the school hall was crowded by the time Alison stepped inside. On the tables were bowls of baked apples, bean stew, bread sliced so thin you could see

the crust through the middle, and cider whose sweetness made even the sour jokes sound agreeable. The orchard crews and street households had ignored the old seating plan. People sat with whoever had room. Someone had put a hand-painted apple over the doorway; the stem was so long it resembled a tail.

Alison sat beside Sylvia. They were served by schoolchildren, who had been told to carry only one bowl at a time. Most carried two. One child tripped, stumbled twice and somehow delivered both bowls without spilling them. The hall applauded, and the child bowed extravagantly. Alison laughed with the rest. She hadn't expected to feel hungry, but ate a second helping of beans and accepted a piece of cake from a woman who insisted it was too burnt for her own children.

Hester came by carrying a stack of plates. The two sisters exchanged a look over the noise. Neither mentioned the rota. Rory was near the door with the crew and had a smile Alison rarely saw on the channel bank. Katherine was explaining to the caretaker that the clinic's washing could not wait for Thursday; he nodded without surrendering his argument. At the head table somebody tried to give a speech and was drowned out by a song from the youngest pupils. It was the same harvest song Alison had heard earlier, still missing its second verse. Everyone joined in at the chorus anyway.

She left before the plates were cleared, carrying a wedge of cake wrapped for Wren. The cold air outside smelled of turned soil and woodsmoke. People were still arriving through the school gate, and the lights behind them made the windows seem full even where the glass had been patched with paper.

At dusk she returned to the divider. The staff read 2.7, unchanged since noon. She signed beneath the last witness and tightened the cover against the coming dew. By Thursday morning the street would have more water than under the old schedule, and the young orchard less.

Wren came up from the hall carrying her slice of cake unwrapped. She'd already eaten half.

"I brought that home for you," Alison said.

"You brought it home in your pocket. It got warm."

"Did you enjoy the supper?"

"The play was better than the song. Someone put a real apple on the stage, and the little boy playing the river ate it before his entrance."

Alison laughed. Wren held out the rest of the cake. Alison took a bite, though she wasn't hungry.

"Thursday's ours first?" Wren asked.

"For the next four weeks."

"And after that?"

"We read the water again."

Wren examined the darkening channel. "You'll be there?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll bring the cans."

She went down the path while there was still light enough to see the stones. Alison waited to make sure she didn't slip at the bend. The signed rota lay open in the book behind her. The bell rope lifted slightly in the evening breeze, but nobody rang it.

PART TWO

Short Measures

08

The Young Orchard

Week 5 · Monday reading: 2.7 · Hester

Hester remembered the first sick-looking leaf because she remembered the tree. Eleven thousand younger trees, and this one had gone into a hole that had more stone than earth. The boy with the shovel had complained. She'd told him to dig wider. He'd told her the hill wasn't going to move merely because she owned it. She could still hear him laughing, though he had left Calder Reach years ago.

Now the leaf was turned like a hand against the cold.

She walked the lower rows before the sun reached them. The old grove above her kept its green. Old roots went somewhere the planted stock could not follow. On the young terraces, the earth around the stakes was pale and fine. Rory had put a heel into it and shown her the dust beneath the crust. They needed another cut of water before Thursday. The rota they had agreed to in the school hall had taken that cut away.

She reached the far corner and found Rory kneeling by a branch junction. He had opened the little inspection lid and was examining the damp marks on the stone. His coat hung from one shoulder. He kept his eyes on the stone as she came alongside him.

"How much did you get them?" she asked.

“Less than I wanted.”

“That wasn’t the question.”

“It wasn’t a number.” He put the lid back without fastening it. “The soil took it before the last twenty trees.”

“We could draw the old ditch across.”

“We could. Those stones are down because the bank goes soft in rain.”

“Rain.”

He looked at her then. “If it comes, I’d rather not have the bank in the road.”

Rory had learned to contradict her quietly. It was a skill she had once prized because she had mistaken it for loyalty. She walked toward the packing shed with him, letting him explain the sections where the water had failed to reach. Halfway up the lane they passed the three new workers she’d hired after the harvest supper. They were scraping the grass away from the bases of the young trees with short hoes. One of them lifted a hand and grinned, showing a missing front tooth. They had been promised wages through the end of the picking. It was still weeks away.

Inside the shed the wage book lay beside the loan book. She had left them open there deliberately, as if seeing them together might persuade one to be kinder to the other. The wages were due every Friday. The loan on the young stock, taken when a second wet season seemed certain, was due in two instalments. An orchard that abandoned its young trees would still owe for the trees. A bank of fourteen-year-old timber crates along the far wall stood ready for fruit those rows would never bear if she gave them up now.

Rory looked at the books without touching them. “They want the street minimum written down,” he said.

“They’ll have to find room in the channel for ink.”

“It was their Thursday.”

“Was.”

He rubbed the edge of the table where the wood had splintered. “I heard the children singing again this morning. They made up the second verse.”

“Did they improve it?”

“Not much.”

“Then there is hope for them. A child who can make a bad song can make a better one next year.”

He smiled. She was pleased by it and resented herself for being pleased. He had not smiled at the supper until the whole hall joined the chorus. He’d sat with the other workers, a place among them as ordinary as a stool. He was still staying in the small room above the shed because the rent was taken from his pay. She knew he sent money out of the valley each month. She didn’t ask how much remained for him.

Hester closed the loan book and went into the yard as Katherine arrived to inspect the storage tank before the first purchased load. The water carrier had sent word that it could make the journey when the diesel and payment were ready. Katherine had brought a chalkboard under her arm and a length of rope wound around her wrist. She tied the rope across the lane, marking where the vehicle would back when it finally came, then inspected the coupling herself.

“First of twelve, if we get them,” she said.

“Is it paid for?” Hester asked.

“The first is. The rest depend on whether the road holds and the fuel seller keeps his word.”

Katherine had written a heading on the school door: TANKER LOADS. Below it there were twelve blank spaces. People came to read the empty spaces as if they were a notice of a new birth. The first actual arrival was expected in week eight; until then the street would have to make do with the rota. The schoolchildren debated how long one tanker would last and who would get the first can. Nobody could answer both questions.

Hester watched two schoolchildren try to calculate the promised load using their fingers. They got different answers. One went to Katherine, who told them to wait until they could hear the vehicle rather than count water that had not arrived. The child returned with the correction, looking aggrieved.

"You could sell a few of the new rows," Rory said, coming beside Hester.

"To whom?"

"I don't know."

"Neither do I."

"You could stop adding workers."

"That might be a sensible suggestion if I hadn't already hired them."

He accepted that and stood with her watching Katherine pour a test can into the receiving tank. Beyond the shed, a woman was pinning washing on a line though there was scarcely enough water to rinse it. Across the yard, the three new hands were queuing for bread from a woman who kept a little stove behind the cider press. Hester had told the woman to put the bread on the orchard account. The arrangement would come due at the same time as everything else.

She returned to her books after Katherine packed away the coupling and went back toward the street. Beneath the wage figures she made a calculation of how many Thursday turns the young trees would need before the next public reading. She worked it twice, once with the proposed buying price, once at a higher price that might persuade a household to give up half a day. Neither total pleased her. The smaller one was possible.

Alison had entered every turn transfer for twenty years. There was nothing improper about buying one if the seller agreed. Hester knew the words of the compact and could have recited the difference between a lawful purchase and an illicit taking. The difference had begun to bother her since the Thursday vote, not because the

words had changed but because she had been watching children bring cans to the standpipe.

Rory leaned in the doorway, waiting for instructions. She could ask him to lift the gate again. She could tell him it was necessary, and the man who sent his pay beyond the valley would know exactly what necessary meant. She wanted the conversation postponed until another morning.

"We'll buy Thursday turns," she said.

"From the street?"

"That's where Thursdays are."

"They've only just got them."

"They can refuse."

Rory said nothing.

"Put up a sheet after supper," Hester told him. "The price, the number of half days, the names of anyone who wants to speak to me. Don't go knocking at doors. I'll not have you doing that."

He asked whether he should tell Alison first. Hester thought of her sister sitting at the cottage table with a plate between them, both of them laughing about a badly patched roof as if it belonged to neither. Alison had written the new rota as carefully as she wrote everything she wanted to be believed.

"Put the sheet up," she said.

When he had gone, she took a piece of chalk and wrote the maximum she could afford on the shed wall. It looked offensively small beside the tally of crates. She rubbed it out with her sleeve, but the white dust stayed in the seams of the boards. Outside, Rory had started hammering the notice to the gate. The sound carried across the young orchard, one blow at a time.

09

Selling Thursday

Week 6 · Monday reading: 2.6 · Wren

The river at school was a bedsheet carried by three children with no agreement about which direction rivers went. On the third attempt they ran, the cloth caught a bench, and the entire river overturned the mountain. Wren laughed until the teacher asked whether she'd like to direct the weather as well. She said she was already doing her best.

Her friend was behind the curtain sewing the hem of the sheet. There was a hole in the cloth where one of the children had put a foot through it. The girl held the tear together with red thread because nobody could find white.

"It's a blood river now," Wren said.

"Then stop laughing and fetch the scissors."

Wren handed them over. Her friend had a little basket with sewing things and two pieces of yesterday's bread, neither touched. Wren had noticed that the girl had stopped taking breakfast at school on days when it ran late. She'd said she wasn't hungry. She had also borrowed a pair of shoes from an older cousin and stuffed the toes with cloth.

"My mother can give you a turn of work in the store," Wren said.

"Your mother can give me a turn of asking."

"She likes you."

"She likes all of us until we take water."

"That isn't fair."

"You're right." Her friend snipped the thread. "I'm sorry."

They worked in silence for a few minutes. From the hall came the voice of the boy playing the mountain, asking whether mountains were allowed to sit down. The teacher said they could lean against something solid. Someone dragged a table across the floor. Wren's friend began to laugh but shut her mouth when she saw Wren watching.

Later they walked down the street together. Hester's notice was fastened outside the packing shed, with the price of a half-day turn written in a bold hand. Below it were six names, two crossed out. Wren recognized the handwriting of the man who had offered to repair their kettle in exchange for coal. A Thursday turn was worth more money than she had carried at once in a year.

"Look at that," she said.

"I have."

"Would you sell yours?"

Her friend shook her head. "We already did, last week. There are five of us in the house. When the water came round, we had to choose between washing clothes and the pots."

Wren imagined the torn theatre cloth, the shoes with rags in them, the slices of bread in the sewing basket. "Did it help?"

"For a few days. My mother's owed again on Saturday."

They separated at the lane where the cottages began. Wren went home by the upper path, past the window where Alison kept the turn book under its oilcloth cover on wet evenings. Her mother's own turn card was in the kitchen drawer with the buttons and pencil ends. It had been folded once so its edges would fit.

She opened the drawer without making a sound. There was no reason to be quiet. Alison was at the divider and wouldn't return for another hour. Wren took the card and sat at the table. The Thursday

half day belonged to their cottage. It belonged to the whole cottage, but she was the one who fetched most of the cans. She was seventeen, had worked two harvests, and could count what the household used. Alison would not have sold it. Her mother would say that the house already had everything it needed, which was not a lie, and she would not hear the rest.

Wren went back down toward the shed with the card hidden in her cuff. The young trees had begun to take on a grey shade at their outer leaves. She could see the watering furrows running between them, each one carefully cleared and almost dry. Hester was at the gate talking to an orchard hand about broken ladders. Her aunt saw Wren and lifted a hand.

"You here to collect wages?" Hester asked.

"I'd like to sell our Thursday."

The man's ladder went quiet against the wall. Hester drew Wren away from the gate, under the covered walk where tools hung by their handles.

"Does Alison know?"

"No."

"Then go back and talk to her."

"She'll say no."

"Then you know the answer."

Wren held out the card. "It says household. I'm in the household."

"You're not its keeper."

"Neither are you."

Hester looked at her for a long moment. Wren had a sudden desire to say she had been joking and take the card home, but she was thinking of her friend's shoes and of how carefully she'd sewn that sheet. Hester took the card and ran her thumb over its worn corner.

"Why?" she asked.

"There's a family that needs bread."

"Which one?"

"I'm not telling you."

"Then why do you want me to believe you?"

"Because you would pay me less if I said it was for myself."

Hester laughed once, startled. "That is an appalling thing to say to your aunt."

"Is it wrong?"

"No." Hester looked through the open gate toward the rows. "It ought to be."

The price was the price on the board. Hester didn't lower it or add a gift. She told Wren that Alison must countersign the card before the transfer would be valid in the turn book. Wren said she would obtain the signature. Hester crossed out the offered Thursday on the notice and gave Wren the coins against the card. Neither of them took it to Alison for a countersignature. The transfer had happened between them, but it had no place in the official turn book. Hester watched the girl close her fist around the money.

"Don't let your mother think I've put you up to this," she said.

"She won't."

"Wren."

"I said she won't."

Her friend was at home kneading a very small piece of dough in a bowl. Wren put the coins beside it. The girl looked at them without reaching.

"I can't take that."

"You can. The baker will."

"Where did you get it?"

"I worked."

"Doing what?"

"Being difficult."

Her friend kept looking at the money. The dough had stuck to her fingers. Wren thought she might begin to cry. Instead she pushed half the coins back.

"I only need this much for bread," the girl said. "Keep the rest."

"No."

"We'll quarrel over it then."

"Fine."

They quarrelled until her friend's younger brother appeared at the doorway and asked whether there was going to be food. After that the argument became ridiculous. The girl tucked the coins under a plate and scraped her hands clean of dough. They walked to the baker together, carrying a basket they'd borrowed years ago and never returned.

At home Alison was trimming the wick on the kitchen lamp. Wren opened the kitchen drawer out of habit, then remembered the turn card was in Hester's hands. She shut the drawer before her mother noticed. Her mother looked up.

"You're late."

"The rehearsal broke a river."

"Did it hurt anyone?"

"Only the bench."

Alison smiled and went back to the wick. Wren washed her hands using what remained in the basin. She used less than usual and looked toward the drawer while the water ran between her fingers. Thursday was still two days away. She could confess, ask Hester to cancel the unrecorded purchase, and take the money back from a family that had already bought flour. She did none of those things.

10

The Clinic Tank

Week 6 · Monday reading: 2.6 · Katherine

Katherine put household needs in order: drinking, cooking, washing, especially in a bad week. The clinic had a different list: cleaning a wound, boiling instruments, keeping somebody from turning feverish overnight. Those needs would not wait for Thursday. Katherine could put each one on a list. She couldn't make a list increase the supply.

She started her rounds with two cans tied upright in the cart and a list tucked under the driver's bench. At the first house a man with shaking hands took his allowance without meeting her eyes. At the second, a woman asked whether the water might be a little warmer. Katherine told her to put the cans in the sun. They both knew the sun wasn't high enough to help, but they laughed at the attempt.

At the school the caretaker was hauling a bucket across the yard. A child had upset the drinking pot while chasing another child with a painted river mask. The caretaker said he'd murder whoever made the masks slippery. Katherine gave him a half can, then demanded to know whether the child was all right. The child emerged from behind the door and explained that he had been playing a flood. Katherine considered charging him for the privilege.

By the time she reached the clinic, the cart had less water than the list allowed. The woman who treated the sick was outside rinsing a cloth in a bowl. She held the cloth above the water and wrung it twice, making sure not to waste a drop.

"How much in the tank?" Katherine asked.

"Enough till morning if nobody comes in."

"And if somebody does?"

The woman tipped the bowl against the wall where a patch of herbs grew. "You'll hear the bell."

Inside, the clinic smelled of soap and damp linen. A child slept on a narrow bed near the window. A labourer sat on a stool with his wrist wrapped; he'd fallen from a ladder and wanted to be told nothing was broken. There were clean sheets folded in a cupboard and a basin with a crack running through its blue glaze. Katherine had seen the basin carried down the street after the clinic roof leaked, and had helped scrub it free of plaster dust.

The clinic tank was almost empty. The little needle on its face hung just above the bottom stop. Katherine tapped the gauge once. The needle stayed where it was.

The written schedule left the next street turn to the following morning. The provisional rota gave the town more water than the compact demanded but less than the street had been used to receiving. Someone had allowed the clinic's tank to be considered part of ordinary domestic demand. Katherine had signed the sheet because the school hall was full of people waiting to go home.

"Can you spare two cans?" the clinician asked.

"Not legally."

"That's a very small comfort."

Katherine went to the back wall where the old service valve lay behind a plank. Before the new street rota it had been opened at night when the public tank ran low. The valve wasn't broken or secret. Its handle was simply tied with cord and marked with a

white strip to show it was not part of ordinary allocations. She put her hand on it, then took it away.

“What if I opened this just long enough?” she asked.

“Would you put it in your book?”

“It’s Alison’s book.”

“Would you put your name beside it?”

There was a child asleep inside the clinic. Katherine could hear the soft noise of the patient’s breathing through the open window. She thought of Alison at the divider, measuring the little current with such care that people had begun to take the result for justice. She thought of Hester’s young orchard and the labourers who ate because it existed. None of these thoughts made the tank less empty.

That evening she returned with two neighbours. She had asked them not to bring lamps, then changed her mind because she didn’t want someone to stumble and break a leg in the dark. One held the light. The other carried an empty can to measure how long the service valve would need to run. They spoke quietly, like people in a house where somebody was sleeping.

“Is this stealing?” the younger one asked.

“Yes,” Katherine said.

“Then why am I here?”

“Because you can carry a can and you said the clinic mattered.”

The neighbour moved the lamp closer. “I’d rather not be called a thief in daylight.”

“Then don’t tell a story about being one.”

She untied the white cord and turned the valve. The first water came with a spit of air that made them all start. Then a steady stream ran into the line. The clinic tank began to fill. Katherine watched the gauge climb and told the neighbour to count slowly. He reached a hundred and started again.

The longer they stood there the more reasonable it seemed to leave the valve open. The clinic had lost years of comfort. The new

ration could not account for every fever, broken cup, and child with an upset stomach. Katherine felt her breathing ease as the water rose, then tighten when the younger neighbour suggested they could carry some to his mother's house.

"Not from this tank," she said.

"She needs it too."

"She does."

"You said the street was being robbed."

"I said the clinic needed water."

He set his can down. He had come to help, and now she had made him feel the difference between helping and taking. His mother lived above the butcher's shed and had not drawn a full allowance in two weeks. Katherine could hear herself talking like Alison: the rota, the purpose, what was entered where. She hated the sound.

"Fill your can," she said finally. "One. I'll count it."

He filled it without speaking. The other neighbour watched the gauge. When the needle reached the marked line, Katherine shut the valve and retied the cord with the original knot. Her fingers were stiff from holding the metal in the cold.

They carried the lamp back toward the street. At the corner the neighbour with the can stopped.

"What do I say if somebody asks?"

"Tell them you helped fill the clinic."

"And the can?"

"Tell them you carried it."

"You're not frightened?"

"Of course I am."

He laughed at that, a short burst that vanished into the night. Katherine walked home beside the cart, counting the turns she had deprived somebody else of without knowing whose. It was harder than counting loads because the names were not written down. In the morning the clinic would have clean water. The orchard would

have a little less. Alison would read the post and see nothing new, unless she came behind the wall.

Katherine lay awake in her room above the cart shed and listened for the clinic bell. The yard remained quiet.

11

Caught

Week 7 · Monday reading: 2.5 · Alison

The clinic seal had been retied. Alison saw it before she saw the wet stones: the white cord's tail passed under instead of over, a difference she'd have missed on any other morning. The measured loss might be small. The difference between a sealed valve and one someone had opened was not.

She stood beside the wall looking at the wet stones. The service valve was shut now. Whoever had used it knew the line and knew how to conceal the act. She opened her book and counted the entries against the public tank level. It was possible to hide a small diversion in the margin between an approximate staff reading and a day's usage. She knew that better than most.

Katherine came from the shed carrying the morning's empty cans. When she saw Alison by the clinic wall she stopped. Her face changed by such a small degree that a stranger would have missed it. Alison had known her since childhood, when Katherine's father used to let them build little sluices with clay in the stream behind the school.

"You should have asked me," Alison said.

"I did ask. At the meeting."

"Not to open a sealed valve."

"I asked for the clinic to be counted separately. You told me there wasn't room on the sheet."

"You know why."

"Yes. I've heard it explained three different ways."

Alison shut the cover of the turn book. "How much?"

"Enough to keep the clinic working."

"How much, Katherine?"

"A tank. One can went to a house that needed it."

"Which house?"

"I'll tell you if you tell me which of Hester's rows got the extra hours last dry season."

The question landed badly because it was an accurate one. Alison had not forgotten the old entries, or the way Hester had brought fuel and food to the cottage after the funeral and refused repayment. She had kept the book in a way she could defend in public, often by describing the same favour with a smaller word.

"Don't make this about Hester," Alison said.

"It already is. You make it about Hester every time the numbers turn against her."

Alison looked through the clinic window. The child who had been lying on the narrow bed had gone home. The clinician was folding clean cloths into a cupboard. There would be water for washing hands today. Alison had nothing useful to say about that.

"You put other people at risk," she said.

"So did the rota."

"We agreed to it."

"You wrote it. We agreed to go home."

They had known each other forty years. Alison remembered Katherine at twelve, standing on a wall and ordering everyone below to get out of the water because the stones were loose. Katherine had been the only one who was not afraid of falling. Alison had admired her for it until the day Katherine actually fell and broke her arm. Now Katherine could not bear to admit she'd taken an unne-

cessary risk, and Alison could not bear to admit that the risk had been necessary.

The clinician came to the door and asked whether the cart would be late. Katherine said no and took the first two cans inside. Alison remained beside the valve. She could write the diversion as an unauthorized opening and let the meeting deal with it. That would be accurate. It would also invite questions about the other entries in her book: the short measures, the corrected figures, the afternoons she had called maintenance losses because a sister needed an extra turn.

When Katherine came back, Alison asked, “Did you let the line run after the tank filled?”

“No.”

“Did the person with the can get water for drinking?”

“Yes.”

“Was anyone paid?”

Katherine stared at her. “Is that the question you want to ask?”

“Answer it.”

“No. Nobody was paid.”

Alison believed her. That was an uncomfortable fact. She wrote the date on a loose slip and tucked it into the cover of the book, leaving the quantity blank. Katherine watched her do it.

“You’ll enter it later?”

“I’ll decide what the entry requires.”

“You mean you’ll decide whether it’s different from the entries already there.”

Alison wanted to say something cruel. Katherine had a cart, a room, and a habit of treating everyone else’s hesitation as cowardice. She had also spent the past four weeks carrying water to households that no longer had enough. Alison could see the marks the handles had left on her palms.

“Go to your rounds,” she said.

Katherine lifted the cart handles and went. At the first turn in the lane she stopped to tighten a strap. Alison waited for her to look back. She didn't.

Alison took the service cord off the valve and tied a fresh one, placing the knot where she had always placed it. By the time the bell sounded for the morning measure the knot looked ordinary. She went up to the divider with the loose slip still inside the book. People were waiting with their cans, laughing at something she hadn't heard. She rang twice and opened the street sluice to the customary minimum.

Later, at the cottage, Wren asked why Katherine hadn't stayed to drink tea. Alison said they had both been busy. Wren looked at her over the table and asked whether that was the whole reason. Alison said it was enough of one.

She put the book in its drawer before supper. The loose slip had begun to curl against the cover, and she pressed it flat without writing a quantity.

12

A *Can for the Road*

Week 7 · Monday reading: 2.5 · Alison

The stranger came at dusk, after the last orchard worker had gone home and before the channel shelter was dark. Alison was carrying the measuring staff back to its rack when she heard footsteps on the upper road. She looked up and saw a traveller standing by the gate, an ordinary figure in a weather-worn coat with dust on the hems. A long dust-coloured car stood beyond the bend, a trailer under a tarpaulin behind it. They had come alone to the shelter.

"Is this the public water?" the traveller asked.

"The street takes from below." Alison pointed along the channel. "This is the measured line."

"Could I have a can for the road?"

"What size?"

They showed her a vessel that held no more than the household cans. It was scuffed at the base. Alison could see that it had been mended once, carefully, and that the repair had held.

"Who are you travelling with?" she asked.

"Nobody here."

"That isn't what I meant."

"I heard you," the traveller said.

Their voice was neither guarded nor inviting. They looked beyond Alison to the dry terraces, where the orchard stakes cast thin shadows. The trees were too small to look like a forest and too numerous to look like a garden. The traveller looked once at the stripped rows and continued along the road.

"Where are you going?" Alison asked.

"The next valley."

"Take the ridge road," Alison said. "The low crossing is soft after the washout."

The traveller nodded, thanked her and reached into a pocket for a coin.

"The water is counted," she said.

"Then count it."

"I need a name for the entry."

"Can you put traveller?"

"I can put whatever I like. It isn't the same as the name."

They looked at her without offence. "I would rather you didn't."

She could refuse this can. She had refused family after family when their turns were finished, including a woman who'd walked away with both vessels empty. The traveller's can held less than a morning wash. It was not an exception the book provided for. Neither was it an amount she could honestly pretend the town hadn't given away.

She filled the can from the little side spout while the traveller held it steady. Cold water struck the metal and made a clear, domestic sound. Alison watched the level rise. She had not filled a stranger's can in years. Calder Reach was a place where she knew everybody who asked.

When she had finished, the traveller offered the coin again. Alison shook her head.

"I haven't charged you," she said.

"You still counted it."

"I will."

They set the vessel down and tightened the lid. For a moment she thought they might say something about the town or the water. They merely thanked her and asked whether there was a place on the upper road to rest without troubling a household. She pointed to a stone shelter by the old mile marker. The roof was sound except at the far end. They thanked her a second time.

Alison stood by the gate while the traveller went back toward the bend. She could hear the steps growing quieter. Someone on the lower road was singing an obscene version of the school song, and a dog answered with short barks. By the time the stranger reached the bend, the evening had become cold enough that Alison pulled her coat around herself.

She went to the turn book. It had columns for household, turn, quantity, authority and remarks. She wrote the date, the can, and the place where it had been drawn. In the household column she left a blank, then changed her mind and wrote *traveller—name not given*. She recorded the water under the only description she possessed. The entry looked wrong among the familiar surnames, but it was true.

Sylvia came up the path with a covered bowl of stew, taking the stones one at a time. She'd brought supper for Alison before, though she usually claimed she was delivering leftovers to somebody who didn't know how to cook.

"You've had a caller?" Sylvia asked.

"Someone passing."

"Buying?"

"No."

Sylvia studied the entry. "That'll make the book interesting."

"It's one can."

"That's why."

They went into the shelter out of the wind. Sylvia divided the stew between them with the back of a spoon and began talking about the old days when the road had carried carts of apples out in

the autumn. She remembered a year the school used rainwater to wash its windows because the channel had already been rationed. Alison asked what the notch had been that year. Sylvia couldn't recall. She remembered the children's faces in the clean windows, all doubled in the glass.

Alison listened and ate. The traveller was gone before the last of the light left the upper road. Nobody came back to ask about the can. She left the entry where it was, beneath a name she had known since infancy and above the morning allotment for the clinic.

13

The Upper Head

Week 8 · Monday reading: 2.5 · Hester

When they were girls, Alison had buried a dead mouse in a baking tin and Hester had dug it up to use for holding nails. They'd argued about whose property the tin had become, and their mother had settled it by taking the thing away from both of them. So when Sylvia arrived at the shed with three folded plans in a battered baking tin, Hester remembered that quarrel before she understood she was looking at a possible new source of water.

"It's not an insult," Sylvia said. "I remember what your tea tastes like."

"You're older than I am. You ought to have learned kindness."

"Some habits take longer."

Sylvia spread out the sheets. They were old plans of the spring head, made when the terraces had fewer trees and the stone channel was first widened. The lines were hand-drawn and corrected in different inks. Hester recognized a cramped note beside the little triangle marking the old collection basin above the source.

"I thought it was a drainage pit," she said.

"Everyone does now." Sylvia put the smooth stone on the paper. "It held seepage in a wet year and gave it back slowly when the

weather turned. The roots grew over the upper lip after they stopped clearing it."

"Why did they stop?"

"People got busy doing more important things. You can choose which ones."

Hester looked toward the upper path. She remembered being a girl and taking a spade to a shallow pool where little frogs lived. Alison had come with her and insisted that they dig two channels, one for each of them. They had argued over which one flowed faster until their mother called down from the bank that the water couldn't be split by quarrelling. Hester had never known whether she meant the pool or her daughters.

"Would clearing it bring more?" she asked.

"For a time. There may be water caught behind the silt and roots. Perhaps not as much as we remember."

"Why haven't you told Alison?"

"I have. Twice. She said it would take a hundred hands."

"Did you tell her we have those?"

Sylvia smiled. "I thought you might."

Hester had to resist the urge to take the papers straight to the divider. Alison had been angry about the turn buying, though she had said little. The sisters had eaten together twice since the harvest supper. Both times they'd spoken of Wren's rehearsal, Rory's repairs and the dreadful price of coal, as if the rota were a weather event neither could control.

She carried the tin up to the spring with Sylvia, who leaned heavily on the wall at the steepest place and told Hester not to pretend she hadn't noticed. The path was narrow and ran beside a ditch where stones had fallen away. At its top the old head lay among scrub and brambles. The channel there was scarcely visible. A line of nettles marked the route where the collecting drain once entered it, and a young tree had taken root through the side wall.

Hester knelt to examine the roots. They were shallow in the soil but strong where they'd entered the old mortar. If she cut the trunk at the base, the roots would still hold the stones. She would have to dig back and release them without bringing the wall down. Rory could tell her how many people could stand safely on the bank. He would also tell her the bank could fail. He was usually right.

Alison arrived just as Hester stood up with mud on her knees.

"Sylvia told you?" Alison asked.

"Not until after she told me twice."

"It could take weeks."

"It could take a day if everyone comes."

"You don't know that."

"No. Neither do you."

They looked at the clogged stones. Below, the town could be heard faintly: carts on the lane, a hammer striking metal at the shed, children shouting near the school. Hester imagined those sounds carrying over a fuller channel. Then she imagined the crowd that would come to clear the head, people who'd stopped speaking to one another over the Thursday turns, all with spades in the same mud.

"You think I'd use it to keep the new rows," Hester said.

"I know you would."

"I would. I'd also let the clinic have its share. I don't know why you always make me say the second half."

"Because you say the first half loudly enough for everybody."

Hester had an answer ready, sharp and funny. She swallowed it and climbed down into the silted basin and pulled at a grass clump. The roots came free with a wet sucking sound, and a little trickle escaped between the stones. It was no more than a child's cupful. She held it in her palm until it ran away.

Alison came down beside her. Their boots sank into the same soft patch. Hester remembered the pond from childhood: Alison always insisted on being the one who measured how much each channel

carried, while Hester wanted to build a bridge. One afternoon Hester had broken their father's best spade and blamed the stones. Alison had known the truth and said nothing. Hester had repaired the handle badly before returning it.

"You never told him," Hester said.

"Told him what?"

"About the spade."

Alison laughed despite herself. "He knew. He watched you put the wrong nail through the handle."

"He let me believe I'd got away with it?"

"He said you worked harder when you thought you were being clever."

Hester sat on the edge of the stone wall and laughed until she coughed. Alison remained standing, looking at the wet groove the uprooted grass had made. For a few minutes the sisters were both looking at something that might be repaired, rather than at what would have to be taken from somebody else.

They walked back through the terraces that afternoon with the old plans between them. Hester wanted to set the work for the next day. Alison insisted that the channel should be measured and witnesses invited before anyone lifted a stone. Hester called her impossible. Alison said the bank would fall on an impossible person as readily as on a sensible one.

In the packing shed they found Rory checking the mattock handles. He had heard about the old head before they reached him; news travelled faster than water when it was hopeful. Hester asked whether the bank could hold a hundred workers. Rory said it could hold fewer at a time and that the others would have plenty to do carrying silt down the path. He wanted ropes, poles to mark the unsafe edge, and a place to tip the roots away from the channel.

"How much water will it give?" Hester asked.

He ran a thumb along a cracked handle. "I haven't seen inside it."

"Guess."

"I'd rather dig first."

Alison nodded as though he'd settled a dispute. Hester thought of the wage book and the young leaves curled at their edges. She had to make a decision before every tree made one for her.

She sent word to the street and the terraces. Work would begin the following morning after the public measurement. Bring tools. Bring food if you could spare it. No wage would be paid for the day, but no orchard worker would lose pay for attending. She would supply soup from the shed and allow the school to use the cider press yard for a midday meal.

Before supper, the first tanker finally reached the street. The driver had taken the washed road slowly enough to keep the tank straps intact, and the engine stopped outside the school with a weary cough. Katherine chalked a broad one beneath the heading on the school door. Nobody cheered; there was too much work in getting the load into storage without wasting it. Hester went down to lend the orchard pump's clean hose, and Katherine thanked her with a guarded nod; the argument over turns remained. One of the smaller children ran the length of the lane shouting that the water had come. By the time he reached the last house, the load had already been counted and divided.

By dusk the notice had been read aloud at the standpipe. Katherine came up to examine the old plans and stayed long enough to argue over where the silt should go. Sylvia sat in the doorway correcting everyone's memory of how the collection basin had once worked. Rory made a list of ropes without adding names beside them. Alison copied the measurements in the book.

Hester took the first mattock from the rack and leaned it beside the gate. A child passing on the road asked whether the town was going to make more water. Hester told him they were going to see what the stones had kept. The child seemed disappointed by that answer. He asked whether he could come anyway. She said yes, provided he carried something lighter than the mattock.

14

Clearing Day

Week 9 · Monday reading: 2.5, rising to 2.6 · Rory

Eighty-seven people by dawn. Rory counted them while he checked the spades. Too many soft handles. Three cracked buckets. One garden fork with a bent tine. The line kept lengthening. He gave the sound tools to the people who knew how to use them and put the rest to carrying mud.

Rory had marked the dangerous bank with lengths of rope the night before. He set two workers at the narrow approach to keep the crowd from rushing the basin. Hester arrived carrying a cooking pot that looked heavy enough to boil a child. Katherine came behind her with the water cart and said she had taken exactly the amount the rota allowed for a public working day. Alison had recorded it. The two women inspected each other's provisions like merchants suspicious of a good bargain.

The first hour was slow. Nobody wanted to be the one to loosen the wrong stone. Rory showed a line of volunteers how to lift roots out in sections instead of tearing at them. The old collection basin was shallow and smelled of wet earth, a pleasant smell after weeks of dust. Beneath a layer of black mud lay pebbles washed round and smooth. Water still moved among them, but so slowly that it left no visible ripple until a hand disturbed it.

A man from the street complained that orchard workers were getting the easiest jobs. Hester offered him her mattock and took his bucket. He decided he preferred the bucket. Somebody began singing the harvest song, this time with the missing second verse supplied by schoolchildren who had finally agreed on the words. The tune was bad in a way that made it impossible not to join.

At midmorning the roots of the young tree released the corner of the old wall. Rory shouted for everyone to stand back. Three stones shifted and settled. Nobody was hurt. He lay on his stomach and tested the gap with a stick, feeling for loose edges. Beneath the roots was a small hollow where water had collected behind a ridge of silt. He called for two boards to make a temporary brace.

Hester came with them herself. "Is it coming?" she asked.

"It's trying."

"That sounds like something you'd say about my niece's singing."

"Your niece's singing has more force."

She laughed, and he felt the pleasure of having made her laugh without owing her anything. For a few minutes the room above the shed, the pay in his pocket and the money he had to send his brother were not in his thoughts. There were boards to hold and a stone to move, and for once everyone could see what the work was for.

At noon the first pot of soup arrived. The crew took turns sitting on the wall and passing bowls down the line. A woman from the street had brought apple cake made with bruised fruit Hester had allowed her to take from the shed. Hester protested that the cake tasted better than anything the orchard sold. The woman told her to charge more and see how much she sold. People laughed. Katherine refused a second bowl until the schoolchildren had eaten, then stole a crust from Rory's plate when he wasn't looking. He caught her and made a great show of counting his bread.

While the bowls were being collected, the two bucket lines began competing over who could make the other laugh without spilling a

drop. It started when an orchard worker inspected the bent garden fork beside the wall.

“Street tools,” he called. “You can tell. Three teeth and none of them willing to work.”

“Like your foreman, then,” a woman answered from the street line. “Only he charges for all four.”

The orchard workers shouted at that. Hester, who had been scraping soup from the bottom of the pot, pointed her spoon at the man with the fork.

“You brought it up here. You can hardly blame them for what it looks like now.”

“I brought it straight,” he said.

“Then you should have kept hold of the straight end.”

A boy carrying two half-filled buckets tried to laugh quietly and succeeded only in tipping one over his shoe. Rory sent him to refill it. When the boy came back, the street woman offered to carry one of the buckets.

“You’ll only bend the water,” the orchard man said.

“Better than letting you charge it rent.”

This time Rory laughed hard enough to lose his place in the count. The two lines went back to work still calling answers across the basin, and for the next half-hour the buckets moved faster than they had all morning.

Alison came up from the divider with a fresh reading. The notch had lifted by a tenth since Monday, to 2.6. Rory knew the number might be the result of water released by the clearing, not a lasting gain. He also knew that everyone was tired and covered in mud, and the sound of the fuller channel was worth hearing without an immediate lecture.

Someone shouted that the spring was coming back. Another told them to stop shouting and keep digging. The argument dissolved into laughter. When they returned to the basin, the line of people moved more easily. The root pile grew taller than the nearest wall.

Mud was carried down in buckets, dumped beyond the channel and spread where it could dry without being washed back. Rory checked every load crossing the narrow section, not because he wanted authority but because one fall could end the day.

In the afternoon he found the old drain mouth. It was smaller than the plan suggested, just two stones set close together with a third laid over them. The opening was choked with dark roots. He used a short iron bar to tease them free, working slowly while a girl held a bucket beneath the gap. At first nothing happened. Then a thread of water came through, brown with silt, and the girl squealed as if something had bitten her.

Rory withdrew the bar and let the flow settle. It strengthened. The water ran clear after a few minutes, not in a rush but in a steady line that joined the main channel. He called Alison and Hester over. They stood shoulder to shoulder, watching it. Neither spoke. Katherine arrived behind them and said the street would like its share of the miracle before anyone named it.

“We haven’t measured it yet,” Alison said.

“Of course not,” Katherine replied. “It’s still wet.”

Rory could hear the disagreement beginning and wanted to protect the moment from it. He put the bar down and asked everyone to move back while he checked the brace. The stones held. The new thread continued to run.

By late afternoon the whole upper head had been cleared enough for water to move freely along the old collection drain. The workers were exhausted. Several had blisters, and one man had cut his thumb on a stone. The clinician washed and dressed it with water brought for the work, then made him carry cups for the rest of the day. Children sat with their boots in the mud and argued over who had pulled the longest root. A few people began to sing again, but the tune faltered and became a conversation about supper.

Rory collected the tools as the sun lowered. He found the bent garden fork beside the root heap, its middle tine straightened a little

by effort. He propped it by the gate so its owner could find it. The two children carrying cups had fallen asleep against the wall, heads tilted together. Their mother came to fetch them and had to lift one under each arm. She complained loudly about their weight, although she was smiling.

Alison took the evening reading before anyone went home. The mark stood above the morning line, but she would not say how much until she had checked again at the same hour. Hester accepted that with a tired nod. Katherine said she would bring the cart the next day and see whether the clinic tank could be filled under the new rota without arguments. Rory hoped she was right.

The line of workers went down the path in ones and twos, talking about food and sore hands. Hester stayed to help him cover the exposed drain with a temporary board against falling stones. They worked without discussing the young trees. When the board was secure she told him he'd done well, then asked whether he'd sent his brother his money. He said he had. She did not ask whether there was any left.

That night Rory lay on the narrow bed above the packing shed with mud beneath his nails and a clean ache across his shoulders. Through the window he could hear the channel running. It was louder than it had been for months, enough that he could make out the separate rush of water at the lower-grove branch. He listened for a long time, trying to decide whether the sound was different or whether he had changed what he knew how to hear.

At dawn, before the next worker arrived, the channel was still running louder. Rory got up and went to open the shed. He left the window unlatched so he could hear it while he worked.

PART THREE

The Good Week and the Dry Day

15

The Good Week

Week 10 · Monday reading: 3.4 · Wren

Wren had planned to get to the channel before Alison, which was difficult in a town where Alison appeared to believe the sunrise was a personal appointment. Instead Wren arrived with two empty cans and found half the population already celebrating something. The other half was arriving breathless from the street.

Nobody was saying much. That made it worse. On ordinary mornings the people at the post criticized the weather, the rota, each other's boots and the person who had failed to bring the key. Now they stood in a loose half-circle and watched Alison set the measuring staff against the stone. Someone had carried up a stool for the older people. Nobody sat on it.

Wren could hear the new water before she saw the mark. It sounded like a handful of small stones rolled together beneath a floorboard. The clearing had released the old head, and all the way down to the street the channel had begun to speak again.

Alison lifted the staff, wiped it, and returned it to the same notch in the wall.

"Three point four," she said.

There were cheers, but they started in two separate places and broke apart before they could meet. The school caretaker took off

his hat. Hester, above the path with two orchard workers, laughed once and covered her mouth as though it had escaped her.

Katherine came through the crowd carrying a ladle. “Don’t applaud the woman for reading a stick,” she said. “Applaud the people who moved the stones.”

“It’s a staff,” Alison said.

“Then applaud the staff.”

A few people laughed. That was enough to break the silence. The measure was witnessed, the turn book opened, and the day began: water to the old grove, water to the young, and a full street measure restored for the first time in Wren’s recent memory.

The children came with pans and jars, pretending they were fetching more than they needed so they could watch the standpipe run. Katherine made them step back and ordered them to wash their faces before they carried anything home. Wren stood with the schoolchildren until the first cans were filled. She had never realized how much noise a queue could make when nobody was worried about its end.

At the school, the basin under the outside tap filled so quickly that the caretaker had to clear leaves from the overflow. Wren helped him, getting her sleeves wet. He complained she was splashing his boots, though he made no effort to move them.

Inside, the school hall smelled of damp boards and warm bread. The younger children had been told they could wash the tables properly before lunch. They treated this permission as a festival and produced so much soap that the tables took an hour to stop feeling slippery.

Wren’s friend from the rehearsal had tied her hair with a piece of faded red cord. During the dry weeks she had been too quiet to make jokes about it. Today she tugged Wren toward the door and asked whether she was coming to the dance.

“What dance?”

“The one the packing shed will pretend it isn’t giving.”

"My aunt won't have time to give a dance."

"Your aunt has been singing since the reading."

"She sings when she's angry too."

"Then we'll see which songs she knows."

The afternoon did not become a holiday. The orchard crews worked. The street cart made its rounds. Alison continued writing what went where. Yet every ordinary task was altered by having enough to finish it. People scrubbed things whose dirt they'd stopped noticing. The baker washed the flour dust from his window. Someone rinsed the benches outside the school and put them in the sun. There were complaints about waste; there were replies that it was measured water and the measure had been given.

At the packing shed the dance began badly. Two men attempted to move a table through a doorway without deciding which way the legs should face. They wedged it there and spent ten minutes blaming the carpenter. Rory finally lifted one end, turned it and freed them. The room applauded as if he had performed a dangerous feat.

There was cider, diluted more generously than usual, and hot potatoes split into bowls with butter where a household could spare it. Hester had opened the lower doors to let in the evening air. The older workers sat along the wall and argued about which orchard year had been best. The young ones wanted music loud enough to hear in the road. A violin appeared from somewhere; nobody knew who had tuned it, which was perhaps why it played the first song in three different keys.

Wren danced with her friend, then with a boy from the sorting crew who stepped on her heel, apologized, and stepped on it again. She told him he might be better at carrying boxes. He said he was better at carrying boxes than apologizing. The next dance was faster, and he got through it without touching her feet.

Afterward they went out into the yard to breathe. The lamps in the shed made squares of orange light on the packed earth. Above the roofs, the upper terraces were still dark.

"Do you think it'll stay?" he asked.

Wren almost said of course. She wanted to hear herself say it. Instead she said, "We worked all day for it."

"That wasn't my question."

"I wanted a different question."

He took a bruised apple from his pocket and split it with his thumbs. He offered her the cleaner half.

"You're terrible at sharing," she said.

"That's the good one."

"Then why's there a wormhole?"

"It's a small worm."

She laughed hard enough to forget what she had wanted to ask him. They ate the apple sitting on the low wall, not talking about turns.

When Wren went home, Alison was at the kitchen table with the book. There were two cups. Her mother had left one for her, though the tea in it had gone cold.

"You stayed late," Alison said.

"It was a dance. They do that in the evenings."

"Your aunt came down?"

"She danced twice."

"With whom?"

"People."

"That must have been a sight."

"It was." Wren leaned against the table. "We could wash the school floor properly. Katherine said the clinic filled its reserve."

"I wrote it."

"You write everything."

"Not everything." Alison looked down at the page, then asked whether Wren had eaten.

"Yes." Wren hesitated. "You should have come."

"I had the closing measure."

"You could have come afterward."

Alison glanced at the stove, where a pot had boiled dry long ago. “Next time.”

There was no argument in Wren for once. She took her cold tea up to bed. The house was quiet enough that she could hear the channel through the half-open window.

The good week lasted long enough for people to become careless about being happy. By Friday the washing had come off the lines; by Saturday the school had held a rehearsal without postponing it for water. On Sunday the street shared a midday meal, and nobody counted how many times the serving pots were rinsed. Wren watched Hester carry bread from table to table and catch Alison by the shoulder as she passed. Her mother leaned into the touch for a moment.

The mark read 3.3 that evening. Wren saw it herself while bringing the cans home, though the official reading would not be taken until morning. A tenth was a small thing. The staff had been moved and replaced; someone might have set it carelessly.

She went back after supper. The light was going, but the metal stud beside the notch was still visible. She held the staff square and read it twice. The mark had not changed.

Down the road the packing shed was preparing to play music again. Wren stayed by the water until the first tune began, then carried her cans home without mentioning the number.

16

By the Letter

Week 11 · Monday reading: 3.2, falling to 2.8 · Alison

On Monday the staff showed 3.2. Alison took her own reading, asked both witnesses to take theirs independently, and entered their figures beside the time. By the afternoon the flow had begun slipping again. What she needed from the number was an instruction. What it gave her was a quantity.

By Wednesday it stood lower. The old head was draining. The recovered channel still ran, but the sound had changed from a steady rush to the smaller, thinner voice she remembered from the weeks before the clearing.

Hester came to the measuring house carrying the compact. It was a folded copy, creased where the terrace provisions had been opened more often than the rest.

"I can see the staff," Alison said.

"I'm not here about the staff."

She put the paper on the table. Outside, two crew members waited with their caps in their hands. They were not there to threaten anybody. One had been employed in the lower rows since they were planted; the other had children at the school. Their presence made the request harder to dismiss.

"We held the young trees off for Thursday," Hester said. "We used less than we could. We've lost leaves on the far slope anyway."

"You knew the rota was provisional."

"I did. I also know what this says." She touched the paper. "At this reading the terraces have first claim."

"That's the written claim. The street minimum is older than either of us."

"It's a custom. This is signed."

Alison looked at the familiar lines. She had copied them into the turn book years earlier, in a hand so neat it seemed to belong to somebody else. She knew the paper's history. The families on the street had taken water without written entitlement in years of scarcity, and the orchard owners had let them because the alternative was shame. That allowance had become a way of living. It had never been made secure.

"People need the standpipe," she said.

"And my workers need wages. It isn't the same water, you keep telling us. Some of it runs down the terrace branch and some goes through town."

"It begins as one flow."

"Then why can only one side talk as if its need counts?"

Alison was weary enough to be angry. It was an unfair question, and that made the answer no easier.

"We've had this argument."

"Yes. We've had it while the young trees dropped fruit and while the street got a full measure. I let it stand for the good week. I won't let it stand today."

One of the waiting workers cleared his throat. Alison wished he wouldn't. She asked Hester to leave the copy and come back after the noon reading.

After they were gone, she opened the old book to a dry year some seasons earlier. A short measure in the street column. A second the following Thursday. She had written both herself. The missing water

had gone to Hester's orchard. Nobody had challenged it. Hester's crew had needed the flow, and Alison and Wren had needed the roof Hester gave them. Alison remembered the good reasons. The entries remained exactly as she had written them.

If Katherine asked to see those pages, she would find what Alison had done. If Alison defended a customary minimum today against the written compact, Hester might ask why rules mattered only when Alison disliked the result. Alison began composing an explanation, then stopped. She had composed many explanations while the water fell. Each sounded different until she reached the part where she had to say exactly what she had written.

The noon reading came back lower. People shifted their feet around the post, each hoping somebody else would make the number kinder.

"Two point eight," Alison said.

Katherine stared at the staff. "Again."

Alison read it again. So did Katherine. The number remained.

Hester's two workers waited behind her. The crowd had heard the compact was out. Alison could feel the question moving among them even without anyone saying it.

She announced that for one day the allocation would follow the strict written priority. The terrace intake would take the available flow. The customary street minimum would be suspended until the next public measure.

Katherine stood still.

"One day?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Which day?"

"Today. Until dawn."

"The clinic's reserve is already below the line."

"I know what is recorded."

"Recorded doesn't wash anything."

Hester said, “We can lend back from the terraces if the need is exceptional.”

“Who gets to call it exceptional?” Katherine asked.

“Come to me.”

“You sell me what was coming down the street yesterday, and now you’d lend it back?”

Hester flinched, and kept the offer standing. Alison gave the order. She could hear the bell ring once above the crowd and felt, briefly, the relief of a rule that let her end the conversation.

At the divider she moved the main street sluice closed and opened the terrace sluice to take the day’s flow. The wheel was stiff at the last turn. Rory helped without speaking. The water climbed the terrace channel wall and passed into the upper grove. Downstream the street channel made a sucking sound as its last run drained away.

Wren was waiting near the path with two cans, which made the act feel less abstract than it had in the measuring house.

“You’re shutting us off?” she asked.

“Until morning.”

“Katherine said there might be enough for the clinic if we closed the washhouse instead.”

“Those aren’t the terms of the written compact.”

“Since when do you like the compact?”

“Go home, Wren.”

“I’ve got work after school.”

“Then go to work.”

Wren took the cans down toward the street. Alison watched her negotiate the stones without slopping the little water left in one can. She could have called her back. She didn’t.

The afternoon brought ordinary tasks that kept being interrupted by news from the street: two households had no stored water; the school had stopped washing dishes; the clinic was asking people to bring clean cans of their own. Hester sent a pair of filled drums

down from her house, with a note calling them a loan. Katherine returned the note without comment and kept the water. A young worker from the lower rows asked Alison whether a second day would be allowed. Alison told him there was no second day authorized. He looked relieved and afraid at once.

At dusk Alison inspected the street channel. The stone bed was damp but still. A beetle struggled along the exposed line where the water usually ran. The channel had not been empty in her lifetime except for repairs, when the whole valley had known how long the stoppage would last.

Inside the measuring house she wrote the day's allocation in a clean hand. She put the compact beside the book and recorded the terrace priority as its authority. The entry had no blot, no crossed-out figure, no place where a reader could accuse her of uncertainty.

When she stepped outside, the standpipe below had gone quiet. She could see people lined up anyway, their empty cans arranged between their feet. Katherine walked from one end of the line to the other, telling them which houses still had water to share.

A cart came quickly up the street toward the clinic, its wheels striking the stones. A man was holding one end of a blood-dark cloth. Alison stood aside to let the cart pass. She could not see the injured person beneath it.

17

The Dry Day

Week 11 · Reading: 2.8 · Katherine

The orchard men brought Katherine an injured picker with his hand wrapped in a jacket; blood was spreading through the cloth in small spots that merged as she watched. Katherine took one look at his face and sent for the clinician. The cart held an empty can, a partly filled one and a length of clean cloth. She knew which would be needed first.

They had brought him down from the packing shed on the handcart used for crates, with a board under his arm so it would not shake. One of the men pushing it kept saying that the press had slipped. Another said it was a sorting roller. They had not agreed what had happened; all Katherine needed to know was that a heavy part of the mechanism had caught the man's hand and crushed it before the other workers could release him.

"Don't unwrap it here," she told them. "Keep him level. Mind that door."

The clinic had a small washroom, a treatment table and a cupboard of supplies that seemed larger until something serious happened. The clinician cut the cloth away while Katherine filled a basin from the reserve tank. The water came in a trickle, stopped, and then ran brown for an instant before stopping again.

"Again," the clinician said.

Katherine opened the tap fully. Air hissed from it. Nothing followed.

For a moment she stared at the metal mouth, trying to remember what it had sounded like when the tank was full. Then she went outside.

A half-dozen people were gathered around the cart. Katherine told them to bring sealed drinking water or clean cans from their houses. Not water from an irrigation ditch, not from the street channel, and not anything somebody had used for washing. A man offered to go up to Hester's private storage. Katherine sent him. Another said there was still a barrel at the school. She sent him too.

By the time she returned, the clinician had stabilized the man's arm as far as possible with pressure, padding and a splint. The hand was badly deformed; two fingers had gone pale, and the man could not feel them. He was awake and asking to see it. The clinician had asked him to keep looking at her instead.

"We need to get him to surgery," she said quietly to Katherine.

"How far?"

"Farther than I can manage here. It needs someone who can repair vessels if they're still repairable."

Katherine knew the road. She knew the first washed section, the place where a cart axle could break, and the distance to the clinic beyond the valley that had sometimes taken seriously injured workers. She could only hope someone there would be able to operate today, or how quickly a vehicle could travel with a man in this condition. The local radio had been unreliable all morning. The line on the wired telephone rattled with voices and returned no clear answer.

"Use the truck," she said.

"The driver is away with the water tank," the clinician answered. "We sent for him."

Katherine looked at the empty basin. She had spent weeks arguing over a share of the spring, and now she would have given almost anything for one clean bucket without a discussion attached.

The first woman arrived with two bottles and a covered can. Katherine carried them in. The clinician used what she needed to clear visible dirt from the wound as carefully as she could, and reserved the rest for cleaning hands and changing dressings. The hand remained cold. That was the worst fact in the room. Katherine could understand cold.

The picker was not a stranger. He worked in the younger grove on most mornings and helped at the pressing shed when there was fruit to bring in. He had once carried Katherine's broken cart wheel to the workshop without charging her. He had made a joke about its age, then spent an hour fitting a pin. She remembered the joke more clearly than his face until she saw him on the table.

"Will I keep it?" he asked.

The clinician paused before answering. "We're doing what we can. We need better help."

"Will they take it off?"

"I can't tell you yet," the clinician said. "We have to get you to someone who can operate."

Katherine went back outside and found two children standing beside their empty cans at the clinic door. One asked whether the man was dying. She told them to take the cans home and ask for water at the next house. The child said his mother had already asked there. Katherine went with them and got the water herself.

At the divider she saw the street sluice closed. The book said it was proper for the terraces to take the day's flow. Katherine had stood at the noon measure and heard Alison say so. She understood the words; they simply would not help her now.

By late afternoon the truck had returned, but its radiator needed water before it could safely attempt the road. Katherine stood with the driver while he poured from a household supply that had been

set aside for supper. He apologized for taking it. She told him to stop apologizing and start the engine. The truck went out just before dusk with the patient, the clinician's written note and a second worker who could keep him from sliding on the bends.

Katherine did not go. There were still people at the standpipe with dry cans, and the clinic needed another reserve filled for the night. By the time the street sluice was opened again at dawn, her legs ached from carrying water. The clinic had enough to clean the floor and launder the bloodied cloth. The injured man was already on the road.

News returned in pieces. The truck had reached the other settlement late. The surgical staff had found severely damaged blood vessels and crushed tissue, and had attempted what repair was possible. They would not promise the hand could live. Infection was a danger; so was tissue that had already been deprived of blood before the cart reached the clinic. The water shortage had cost them time they had needed, even before the truck reached the road.

When the clinic received the report, the clinician read it twice. "Clean water in the first hour would have decided it," she told Katherine. "That was the hour we spent finding cans." She knew the crush itself might already have cost him the hand; the hand had been terribly damaged before anyone carried it through the clinic door.

On the third day the driver returned with word that the hand was not viable. A further operation had removed it to protect the man's life. He was awake. He wanted to come home.

Katherine sat on the clinic steps when she heard. The street was busy around her. Children passed with their school bags, a man swore at a cart whose wheel had stuck in a rut, and somebody called for the water count. She could not fit the news into the place where ordinary noise continued.

She went to the packing shed before supper. The workers stood in groups and made room when she approached. Hester was there

with her sleeves rolled up, listening to the driver say what he had seen. She looked older than Katherine remembered from the harvest dance. Neither woman spoke for a while.

"Will he get wages while he can't work?" Katherine asked.

"Of course," Hester said. Then, with a flash of anger she was not directing at Katherine, "And after that, if he's willing. Don't ask me to decide his life tonight."

"I wasn't."

"You asked the question."

Katherine accepted that. There would be time to ask it properly later.

At the channel Alison was making the evening entry. She looked up when Katherine arrived and saw the news on her face before Katherine could speak. Her pen was uncapped. She put it down.

"He lost the hand," Katherine said.

Alison shut her eyes briefly. "I heard there was a chance—"

"There was."

"I kept the street dry one day."

Katherine could have listed the things that happened afterward: the time fetching clean water, the truck delayed, the slow road, the damage caused before anyone touched the wound. She knew the list was complicated. She also knew there had been water in the valley while the clinic tap ran empty.

"You followed the book," she said.

Alison stood and took the words. Katherine had wanted an argument. It would have let her be angry at something she could answer. Instead there was only the sound of water passing through the divider, no louder now that the street sluice was open.

18

The Book Is Wrong

Week 11 · Monday reading: 3.2, later 2.7 · Alison

The turn book lay on the kitchen table because Alison had no desire to carry it back to the measuring house in the dark. It was a heavy book with a cracked spine, and in the last week she had begun to dislike the noise it made when the cover closed.

Wren had come home early. Her boots were under the bench, aligned as neatly as if she were planning to be blamed for something. Alison took down two cups from the shelf and waited for the kettle. The house smelled of the apples Hester had sent over before the injury, some of them already turning soft in the bowl.

"Are you going to tell me what happened?" Wren asked from the doorway.

"I can tell you what I know."

"That man at the packing shed. He lost his hand."

"Yes."

"The clinic ran out of water."

"Yes."

"And you sent all of it uphill."

Alison set the kettle aside. The explanation she had been carrying around all day began with the compact and the reading, then moved

to the fact that the wound had already been severe. It was true. She could hear how it would sound in her daughter's kitchen voice.

"I made that allocation," she said.

Wren looked at her for a long time. "Were you required to?"

"The terraces have a written claim."

"That's not what I asked."

"No. I wasn't required to take away the customary minimum. I could have refused the request."

"Then why did you do it?"

Alison looked toward the narrow window. The orchard lights had begun appearing higher on the slope. The cottage belonged to Hester; she had never forgotten that, though for years she had managed not to think about it every time she sat at her own table.

"I was afraid," she said.

"Of what?"

Alison opened the book to an old dry season. She had brought the page to the table knowing she might not be able to avoid it any longer. Two entries were written as reduced street measures. A third had been corrected with a neat line. Beside each was Alison's signature.

"These figures weren't right," she said.

Wren leaned over the book with her fingers hovering above the page. "What do you mean?"

"Some water went to the terraces that I wrote as lost from the channel."

"How much?"

"Less than a day's turn each time."

"Each time?"

Alison looked at the page. She could have chosen a different one; that was what frightened her. She pushed the book across. "There are more."

Wren began turning pages. She read slowly, not because she couldn't understand the columns but because she could. Her moth-

er had taught her to add them. At the edge of one page, Wren's finger stopped on a small entry without a name.

"Who was this?"

Alison had to lean over. It was the entry for the traveller who had stopped at the upper gate only weeks before. "Someone passing through," she said. "They gave no name."

Wren turned back. "You always tell us every can has to be written beside somebody."

"That's what we do now."

Wren held that page open with her thumb. One can, upper gate, no name. Beside the quantities Alison had made vanish into the channel, the little line looked almost insolently neat.

"What sort of person was it?"

"A traveller. Dust on their coat. They had a car and a covered trailer on the road."

"Did you know them?"

"No."

"And they didn't have a turn card."

"They needed water for the road. I gave them a can and wrote it down." Alison waited for the obvious accusation. Wren kept looking at the page.

Wren traced the word traveller. "You didn't make up a household. You didn't put it down as a leak."

"There wasn't any reason to."

"There was always a reason, apparently." Wren turned the page over and then back again. The traveller's line was still there. "Leave this one alone when you start changing things. Whoever it was, they took a can. That's what happened."

Alison wanted to tell her that the quantities were different, that the older entries had been made in circumstances Wren could not remember. She could not make herself say it in front of the line neither of them had known how to write until a stranger came through.

"And these?"

"These were mine."

Wren put her finger on the reduced street measures. "Did Aunt Hester know?"

"She knew the water came."

"Did she know what you wrote?"

"I don't know what she believed I wrote."

"That sounds like you."

There was no cruelty in the sentence, which made it worse. Wren sat down and stared at the book without moving a page. Alison tried to remember a moment when the two of them had not been tired together. There had been plenty: the school play, the warm cake, a night repairing the stove while rain struck the roof. None seemed useful now.

"Your aunt helped us when your father died," Alison said at last.

"I know."

"She took us into this cottage. We had nowhere else ready."

"That was never the part I disputed."

"I wanted to keep the peace. I told myself it was a small amount that would be made up when the water came back."

"Did it?"

"Sometimes."

"And the other times?"

Alison had no answer that she could write in the book.

Wren stood so abruptly that the bench struck the wall. "You told me the books were the one thing nobody could bargain with."

"They should have been."

"You even corrected me for rounding a half can when I was younger."

"You were learning to measure."

"So were you, apparently."

The kettle had gone cold. Alison could have reached for her daughter. Wren was already at the door pulling on her boots.

"Where are you going?"

"To the school. There's room there."

"It's late."

"I can see the road."

Alison followed her outside as far as the step. The sound of the channel came up from below. She wanted to call after Wren that people had done worse things to save their families. Instead she watched her go past the turning and toward the last light in the school hall.

She returned to the kitchen. The turn book was open. There was a clean sheet at the back where amendments could be entered. Alison took up her pen, but for a long time all she could do was look at her old handwriting.

19

The Night Opening

Week 12 · Monday reading: 2.6 · Rory

The earth stayed powdery beneath the young rows. Leaves curled and stayed curled after sunset. Rory put two fingers on the branch wheel; there was less push from the channel than last week. The pin still held. The wood still held. The water didn't.

Hester found him beside the gate when the workers had gone for supper.

"Another night," she said.

He knew what she meant before she said it. He had spent the morning loosening a seized bolt in the pruning shed and the afternoon helping lower a tank off a cart. His hands hurt. He wanted a meal and a letter from his younger brother, who was staying with relatives beyond the valley. The last letter had come with a request for money he had already promised to send.

"The rota doesn't allow it," he said.

"The rota allows us to buy turns."

"Not from empty houses. Nobody's selling tonight."

"We can't let the lower rows go another day."

"Then we have to ask in daylight."

Hester stood beside him for a while. The wood of the handle was rough against his palm. He knew she was looking at the same water he was.

"Your brother's last package went out?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Good. I can advance the next week's pay if you need it."

"I'm not asking for an advance."

"I heard you. I'm asking for a hand. One night, while we still have a chance."

He thought of the room above the shed. It had a window that didn't close properly, a bed whose legs he had repaired himself, and a small shelf holding his brother's letters. He paid very little rent because Hester made the arrangement part of his wages. He could live without the room in a fine summer. In this one, he didn't know where he'd go.

They waited until the workers had left the lower path. Hester carried a lantern and kept it turned down. Rory took the key from the chain, seated it in the square socket and lifted the lower-grove branch wheel two turns. The water leaned against the gate and began running into the young rows. The branch alone could not take more than the terrace channel held, so Hester sent him up to ease the main terrace sluice farther open as well. He did both. Below the divider the street feed lost pressure.

"This isn't a little turn," he said.

"I can see."

"You asked for a little turn."

"I asked for the trees to make it through the week."

He wanted her to say she had gone too far. She answered with silence. They stood in the sound of the water until there was no more to do. Hester said she would be responsible for it. Rory turned down the lantern and found that he was angrier with that promise than if she'd denied him altogether. The book would not contain the promise. It would contain his hand on the wheel if anyone saw.

At dawn he walked down to the street tank. The mark on the painted gauge was a hand lower than it should have been. Katherine was there, measuring with a stick because the paint had worn away near the bottom. She glanced at his muddy boots.

The tank answered the first draw with a hollow sucking knock. Air caught in the outlet and rattled once through the pipe. Rory had heard that noise when the tank was being emptied for cleaning, never with a queue waiting for its morning water.

"You've been working early," she said.

"Before the sun."

"That's when most things get done."

He couldn't tell whether she suspected. He stayed long enough to see her write the tank level on the board. A woman arrived with a can and said her household had been promised the morning share. Katherine told her to come back after the new water reached the tank. The woman asked when. Katherine looked toward the tank before answering.

Rory went straight up to the measuring house. Alison was already there with the book open. He could see the page for today's turn and the line where a night's unauthorized diversion should go. He told her what he had done, without naming Hester at first. Alison asked who had ordered it. He gave her the answer.

"Why didn't you say no?" she asked.

"I did. Then I turned it."

She put down the pen. "You know I have to write this."

"Yes."

"What will happen when Hester hears?"

"She'll know I told you."

Rory went back to the shed at noon. Hester was waiting on the steps. She had not seen the entry but could read his face.

"You told her," she said.

"Yes."

"The trees are worse than they were yesterday. It gave us something."

"It took it from the street."

"You know I'm trying to keep wages here."

"I've seen the wage book."

"Then don't stand there pretending the wages come from somewhere else."

He looked past her into the packing shed. The men at the table had left his place clear. A bowl was waiting. The room above held his few possessions and the paper his brother had sent with a drawing of the place where he slept.

"I won't do another one," Rory said.

Hester's face changed. Not into anger, exactly. It was the look she gave a worker who had forgotten that the day wasn't finished.

"If you refuse a direct instruction again," she said, "I can't keep paying you for a job you won't do. And I can't keep the room without the work."

He had known she could say it. Knowing did not soften the sound. She stepped aside so he could go in to eat. He stayed outside a moment longer, listening to the channel and counting the weeks until his brother would need another payment.

20

The Entry

Week 12 · Reading: 2.6 · Alison

The oldest correction came first. Year, date, recorded loss, actual diversion: Alison could still put them in order. Starting with Rory's night opening would have made him the first name the room heard. The earliest false line in this book was hers. She opened to it and kept one finger beside the date so she wouldn't turn past it.

She made a list of entries whose street losses had been written too high. The totals were not enormous beside the valley's annual flow. They were enough to have shortened household turns, especially when water was scarce. That was how the wrong had survived: no single day looked monstrous. Each could be defended as a temporary adjustment.

She wrote the corrections in the amendment pages, stating what she knew and where the figures came from. She left spaces when she could not reconstruct a precise amount. She entered Katherine's clinic diversion and noted that she had found the valve open before recording it. She wrote the full night's opening of the lower-grove branch, including Rory's account and Hester's direction.

When Hester came into the measuring house, she found Alison staring at the old compact.

"Are you making a case?" Hester asked.

"I'm correcting the record."

"Against whom?"

"Against my own writing, to begin with."

Hester leaned against the table. In the morning light Alison could see the dry earth at the seams of her sister's cuffs. The old grove was still alive. The younger trees would not last much longer without more water. Hester had watched the labour of decades begin to fail, and she would not call it failing until the last branch went bare.

"Those turns kept people employed," Hester said.

"Some people."

"Your daughter had a roof because I could afford one."

"She did. I will say that aloud too."

"You're going to make us both sound like thieves."

"Some of it was theft."

Hester looked at her, then at the book. "You wrote it. I didn't ask you to put down a false number."

"I'll read it tonight," Alison said.

Hester stood a long time. "Will you come to supper afterward?"

"I don't know."

"That's an answer you can give when you're ready."

She left the compact on the table and went out to the rows.

By evening the school hall was full. The harvest decorations had not been taken down; the hand-painted apple over the door remained on its string, crooked now, with a strip of paper stuck to one side. People sat wherever they found room. Orchard workers and street households had stopped pretending that seating together meant agreement.

Katherine was at the front with a pencil. As Alison approached, she moved the water book into the light so everyone could see it. Rory stood at the back near the open door. Hester sat halfway along

the wall with two workers on either side. Wren was not there when Alison began.

Alison put the old volume beside the amendment pages. She found the first altered line, ran a finger under its date, and began.

"Sixth of September, first bad autumn. Original entry: street short by half a turn, terrace given additional maintenance flow. Correction: the half-turn was not maintenance. I gave it to Hester's new row at the lower end."

Someone asked whether the street had been told about the extra flow. Alison said no and found the next line.

"Thirteenth of September, same year. Original entry: street short by a quarter-turn, marked as channel loss. Correction: the quarter-turn went through the terrace sluice to the young trees. The channel had not lost it."

A woman near the aisle said she remembered waiting for the tap that morning. Alison kept her attention on the entry before her.

"Fourth of December, second dry winter. Original entry: street short by half a turn, recorded as frost loss. Correction: the half-turn was sent to the sapling beds above the divider. There was frost. The water went to the saplings."

She went on through the other amendments. The figures were small enough that no single entry drew a shout; there were enough entries that the room stopped shifting in its chairs. When people asked who had lost a turn, Alison answered where the book allowed an answer and said plainly when the book could give no answer.

When she reached the day of strict terrace priority, the room became very still.

"I had authority to apply the compact," Alison said. "I also had authority to keep the customary street minimum, as I had done before. I chose the stricter reading."

A man asked why. He was not shouting. That made the answer worse.

“I was afraid my previous entries would be questioned,” she said. “I thought I could avoid choosing again by taking the written rule exactly.”

A woman in the second row asked whether the injured picker would be able to work after he came home. Hester answered that there would be wages for him while he recovered and work if he wanted it. The woman asked what kind of work a one-handed man could do in the orchard. Hester had no work to name yet. Nobody offered a solution that sounded adequate.

Alison continued to the clinic valve and the night opening. Katherine rose to say the clinic diversion had been hers. She took responsibility without asking for a softer entry. Rory said, from the back, that his hand had opened the branch gate and that he knew the rota did not allow it.

Hester stood up last. “I asked him,” she said. “I needed the water. I knew he needed his job. You can write that too.”

There was argument after that, and not all of it was kind. A few people demanded that Alison step down. Others asked who would measure tomorrow if she did. A man from the orchards said the street had accepted wages from the very turns it was now condemning. Katherine asked him to remember which households had been hungry when they sold. Nobody settled the dispute. They had no time to settle it; the water would be read at dawn.

When the meeting ended, Alison closed the book and left it beside the signed corrections, where anyone could inspect them. Hester had gone by another door. Katherine was carrying the empty chairs back into their rows. Rory came forward and asked whether the entry would cost him his room. Alison said she didn’t know, then admitted she feared it might.

The hall emptied. Alison sat down at the front where the children had performed during harvest. Somebody had left a small paper crown beneath a bench. She picked it up and put it on the table for

whoever came back to collect it. There was no applause, and no reason there should have been.

21

Sides

Week 12 · Monday reading: 2.6, later 2.5 · Katherine

A quarrel at the standpipe usually had a simple inventory: two cans, one place in the queue, a child accused of cutting in. This morning there were more people than turns and fewer than enough answers. Katherine had heard shouting about dogs spilling buckets and neighbours stealing water. She knew how those rows ended: someone filled a can, someone stomped off. No such ending was available today.

There were two lines, not officially separated, but easy to see. Orchard workers waited together on one side. The street households that had not sold turns stood opposite them. Between the lines were people who worked uphill and lived below, shifting their feet as if the paving itself had chosen sides. Katherine saw a woman move from one group to the other and back again when she spotted a neighbour she didn't wish to offend.

"Make room," Katherine said. "People still have to pass."

A man who had sold two Thursdays complained that the new rota made his turn worth less. A woman behind him said that was because water was for drinking, not for selling. He asked whether she would buy his children's bread. She told him he ought to have thought of that before taking orchard wages.

Katherine put the cart between them. “If either of you has a full can, take it home,” she said. “If not, shut up long enough to fill it.”

A can flew across the gap. It struck the cart side and split a wooden crate. Nobody was badly hurt. The noise of the boards breaking was so loud that for a moment all talk ceased.

A young worker bent to gather the scattered pieces. He held up the two halves and said, “There’s the valley, then.”

A few people laughed. Katherine wanted to laugh too. She knew the man was trying to stop a fight. But the woman who had thrown the can was crying now, furious with herself for crying, and the other line was watching as if her tears were proof of something.

“Enough,” Katherine said. “You’ve all done enough.”

She set aside one portion from the street tank for the clinic. Someone accused her of taking extra water for her own friends. Katherine opened the tally board and showed the line. The man said numbers could be changed. She pointed him toward the school hall, where Alison’s corrected book lay available for anyone to read. He said he didn’t trust that book either. She told him to decide what he did trust before noon, because the cart would leave regardless.

The town was not starving. There was food in some houses, wages in some pockets and fruit stored in sheds above the street. That was what made the quarrel so tiring: people could see what others had and could not agree on why their own cupboards were different.

At midday Katherine brought water to the clinic. The injured picker’s bed was empty; he had not yet returned from surgery. A folded shirt sat on the chair beside it, left by somebody who expected him home. The clinician was washing the treatment table. Katherine watched the water disappear down the drain and felt relief that it was there at all.

Wren appeared in the doorway carrying a crate of clean jars from the school. She and Katherine had avoided one another since Alison’s confession. The girl had looked as though she might accuse

every adult she met of some fresh betrayal, and Katherine had not felt equal to the charge.

"Where do these go?" Wren asked.

"On the high shelf. Not near the basin."

Wren did as she was told, then lingered. "My mother says she doesn't know whether she should keep the book."

"Your mother has kept that book longer than most of us have kept anything."

"Should she keep it?"

"I can't decide that for her." Katherine dried her hands. "If she stops, someone has to start. And whoever starts will be accused of taking a side."

"She did take a side."

"Yes," Katherine said. "She did."

Wren looked at the empty bed. "They say he might come home next week."

"I hope so."

"He fixed a wheel for you once."

"He did."

"Did he charge?"

"He told me to bring him a pie." Katherine paused. "I never did."

Wren's mouth tightened. "We can make one."

Katherine stared at her. She hadn't expected anything so ordinary, and for a moment she found it difficult to speak. "We can," she said.

They went back out into the street carrying the empty crate. At the standpipe the two groups remained on either side, watching the tap and each other. The broken pieces of the cart crate had been stacked beside the wall. Somebody had returned the thrown can to its owner. Katherine picked up the pieces, found a length of wire and began fastening the slats together. It was a poor repair, but good enough to hold bottles for the afternoon round.

The cart was ready before the people were. Nobody moved when she asked for space. Then the young worker who had made the joke put his shoulder against the rail and pushed, and the others shifted because they had to. Katherine guided the cart between them, keeping her eyes on the road instead of either line.

22

The Night Measure

Week 13 · Monday reading: 2.5 · Wren

The lamp smoked. Wren cleaned the glass. It smoked again. The measuring house had survived decades of bad weather and had apparently lost a fight with one wick. She carried the lamp outside, waited for the wind to stop bullying the flame and bent to read the staff.

Alison had been called to a household whose storage barrel had split. Katherine was away with the cart, and the official evening reading could not wait until everybody came home. The rota allowed a witnessed measure by another trained reader. Wren had watched her mother do it for years. Watching, she discovered, was not the same as being responsible for the number when somebody else wanted it to be higher.

The staff rested beside the stone. She placed it against the reference edge, counted the marks and then took it out to clean the mud from the lower cut. She replaced it and read again.

Two point five.

She knew what it meant for the upper groves and the street. They could still split the water, but no amount was enough to make everyone comfortable. She also knew that if she wrote 2.6 nobody

would be able to prove she had done it deliberately. The doubt lasted exactly as long as it took her to put the staff down.

She opened the book. The pages with Alison's corrections were still near the front, marked by folded paper so anyone could find them. Wren had read them once in anger and again more slowly the next morning. A number could be wrong because a person had been hurried, or because someone had decided a family needed help. Only an admission could tell the difference.

She wrote the date, the hour and the reading. Her handwriting looked too round beside her mother's narrow figures. She had to stop herself from trying to make it match.

The door opened behind her. Alison came in smelling of spilled water and wet wood. Her sleeves were rolled above the elbows.

"You managed?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Did you check the reference edge?"

"Twice."

Alison looked toward the book and held her place by the door. "And what did you get?"

"It's written."

Wren hadn't intended the answer to sound sharp. It did. Alison stopped where she was. For a while there was only the lamp's little hiss and the water passing under the divider.

"Good," Alison said.

They walked home together because it was dark and the stones on the path had grown loose. The cottage lamp was lit in the window. Beyond it the upper orchard lay in long rows, some alive and some beginning to lose their leaves too early.

At the gate Wren asked why her mother still lived there. The question had been in her since the evening she found the old entries; she had thought it a hundred times and never found a kinder way to put it.

"Because it's our home," Alison said.

"It belongs to Aunt Hester."

"She gave us the use of it."

"You could pay rent."

"With what?"

Wren knew how much the turn-keeper earned. She also knew that the cottage had been hers as long as she could remember, that there were marks on the doorframe for her height at every birthday, and that the kitchen table had one uneven leg her father had meant to fix before he died. Her mother had repaired the leg with folded paper and never replaced it.

"We could leave," Wren said.

"Where would you go?"

"I don't know. People go."

"Some have work waiting."

"We have work here."

"Yes." Alison opened the gate. "That's part of why we're still here."

Wren wanted her to say they could stay because Hester loved them and because love should not require a debt. She wanted her mother to say she had made the old entries for no reason that mattered anymore. Instead Alison set the lantern on the step and began taking off her boots.

At supper they hardly spoke. Alison left the best piece of bread for Wren, and Wren put half of it back beside her mother's bowl. Neither acknowledged what they had done. It was not forgiveness. It was dinner, and they were hungry.

Wren turned the bread over between her fingers. "I sold our Thursday," she said.

Alison looked up. "When?"

"The week Aunt Hester put up her notice. She paid me for the half-day. I gave the money to my friend's family. They needed bread."

"You signed the card?"

"No. You had to sign it. Hester said so. Then she paid anyway."

Alison drew the plate toward her without eating. That Thursday she had been puzzled by the short street draw and had blamed the stubborn valve. She remembered telling Wren not to waste what came through the tap.

"They bought bread," Wren said. "There isn't money to hand back."

"I wasn't going to ask them for it." Alison watched the flame under the kettle. "You could have told me."

"I should have." Wren had been waiting for her mother to add something about the book. When Alison stayed quiet, she said it herself. "It needs an entry."

"An amendment. With the original still visible. You sign it, and your aunt will have to sign too."

Wren nodded. She had wanted to explain why she had done it, but her mother knew the family and the price of bread. They sat in the small kitchen without trying to turn the sale into a better act than it had been.

Later, Wren went to the window. The channel was audible in the dark, a little thinner than the week before. She tried to distinguish the water going toward the terraces from the water going down to the street. From the cottage both sounded the same.

At the measuring house the book held her first entry, 2.5 and the time, in her own hand. She had written nothing beside it.

PART FOUR

The Last Dry Week

23

The Count

Week 13 · Monday reading: 2.5, later 2.4 · Hester

The first time the young orchard had borne fruit, the apples were so small the workers hung three from a string and called them Hester's grand harvest. She had laughed and promised that one day they would fill a cart. The cart had since been sold, and there were wages she could no longer promise, but she still remembered the slight weight of those three apples. It was a poor memory to carry into a morning spent deciding which rows would receive the last water.

The lower orchard was full of stakes now. Some held up living trees. Some held up trees whose leaves crackled in her fingers. They had been planted over four winters, paid for with loans made against harvests that had not yet happened. From above, the terraces looked orderly: a thousand parallel lines marching down the hill. Within them Hester could see every failed graft and dead leader. She had taken off the worst of the upper growth to preserve the trunks, and still the younger trees were giving up.

Rory came around a bend with a pruning saw slung from one hand. He was walking carefully because the soil beside the channel had crumbled. He had done what she asked at night and then gone to Alison and told her. She was angry at him for the telling, and more angry that she had been able to ask in the first place.

"How many?" he asked.

"Of the young?"

"Of the ones you think will come through."

She could have given him an estimate. Instead she took him three rows down to a little tree on the edge of a stone pocket. Its leaves were dry, but the bark under a fresh scratch was green.

"Alive," Rory said.

"Today."

A few rows farther on, an old graft had put out a small new shoot. Hester put her thumb against it. The thing was so pale it was almost white. It had arrived too late to do any good.

"You could take the lower block out now," Rory said. "Keep the old grove and the trees above the branch. Save cutting them all next spring."

"There won't be a cutting next spring if the packing shed closes."

"There's no packing if the trees die either."

"That doesn't make a wage for you this week."

"No." He set the saw down in the grass. "But you haven't paid me to say something pleasant."

He had not been paid for three days of extra work either. Hester knew what he sent away each fortnight to his brother and had advanced the money more than once. The debt between them had come to feel like a kindness on good mornings and a leash on bad ones. She wished he had chosen a different morning to pull on it.

She sent him to inspect the old-grove takeoff. He went, taking the saw with him. At the top of the lower terrace he stopped and said, without turning, "I can't lift that branch for you again after dark."

"I haven't asked you to."

"I'm saying it before you do."

The old trees stood above them, rough-barked and crooked, each one with its own difficult shape. Her father had grafted some of them before either sister was born. Their roots followed places un-

der the stone that no measuring post could show. At one notch they would last another season. One notch for the street would let households wash, drink, and keep the clinic functioning. The remaining water could not keep all the young trees.

She knew the numbers. Alison had read them aloud in the school hall. Hester had heard them, had understood them, and had gone home to calculate how long she could make the figures mean something else.

In the office the wage book lay open beside the loan book. Twelve people had been promised winter pruning; six of them had children in the street below. The loan payments would fall due whether the trees were alive or not. She began marking the workers whose hours she could keep if the young block was abandoned. The list was short. She rubbed through a name and put it back because a household she knew was short of bread. Then she realized there was no arithmetic in that correction at all.

Earlier that morning Alison had brought the unsigned Thursday card Wren had sold to her. Hester had paid the girl without the required countersignature. She had written her name on the correction page while Alison watched, and neither had pretended the money could be taken back from the family that had bought bread with it. Hester had bought a little water from her niece and let Alison account for the short measure without knowing why. It was one more thing to put beside the loans.

Her sister came to the packing shed near noon. Alison brought a small bottle of cider from the supper stock and two pieces of bread with hard cheese. She had brought food like that when they were young, on mornings when their mother had sent them out to the orchards to stop them arguing underfoot.

Hester pushed the wage book aside. “I’d forgotten you knew where the cider was hidden.”

“Wren found it. She said if it was for a celebration, we ought to have had it already.”

"She isn't wrong."

They ate on a crate in the doorway, watching workers pass in and out. One shouted that the ladder with the broken rung was in the wrong place again. Another shouted that it had always been there and that was how you knew where to avoid it. The argument went on as if anyone expected the ladder to be repaired.

"Wren's measuring now?" Hester asked.

"She took a night entry."

"Your father would have told her to check it twice."

"Mine told me to check it three times. You listened to the version that suited you."

Hester smiled, then stopped. They had not agreed about the stories of their childhood for forty years. It would have been nice, just for an afternoon, to quarrel about one of those and nothing else.

"I want you to keep the cottage," she said.

Alison looked down at the bread in her hand. "We haven't settled anything."

"We needn't settle that. The cottage isn't a water turn."

"Isn't it?"

There was no accusation in her voice, which made it harder to answer. Hester thought of her sister as a woman who had lost a husband, raised a daughter and kept the valley's records in years when nobody else had wanted the work. It had never occurred to her that Alison might think of the cottage as part of the price of obedience. Now Hester could not unhear it.

"You were going to give it back one day?" she asked.

"I thought I'd earn enough to rent it properly."

"From me?"

"From whoever owned it."

Hester was offended, and then ashamed of being offended. She had done one generous thing many years earlier and made it part of everything that came afterward.

When Alison went back down the hill, Hester took the saw from its nail. The handle was worn smooth at the bottom, where her father had held it. She set the blade against a low dead branch, but she did not cut. Cutting dead wood was easy. She left it on the nail for the workers to find in the morning.

24

The Last Tanker

Week 14 · Monday reading: 2.3 · Katherine

Katherine had counted all twelve tanker deliveries, and the last arrived after the school bell. Eleven chalk marks were already on the school door; Katherine had left a space for one more. At the standpipe the line went round the corner. By the tanker the ledger still listed the clinic first and the waiting households after. She could add the amounts. There wasn't a column for the person who would be turned away.

The driver climbed down and said he had not been paid for the previous journey. Katherine told him the money would be settled when the load was discharged. He said he would rather have the settlement first. Neither of them had enough power to make the other generous.

She sent for the town clerk and waited in the yard while children sat along the school wall and watched a wagon being loaded with empty tins. A woman brought the driver a mug of tea. He drank it and agreed to open the outlet as soon as the clerk came, but he kept the key in his pocket until the coin was counted. The man would need fuel to go home.

The chalk board on the school door listed eleven previous arrivals. Katherine added a box for twelve but left it empty. A small

boy reached up and wrote a question mark inside it. His mother scolded him and then let it stay.

The clerk arrived with a canvas bag and counted coin into the driver's palm. Katherine watched the bag collapse in his hand. It had once contained enough to pay for coal to heat the schoolroom after the first frost. She had signed away that provision with every tanker she asked to be brought. There was no way to undo it now.

The outlet opened. Water struck the bottom of the receiving tank with a hollow clap that settled into a steady rattle. Katherine had people stationed along the pipe, not because it required a crowd but because she did not trust anyone to leave a valve unwatched. The first portion went into the clinic tank under the rota agreed at the hall; the remainder was for households whose turns had been shortened.

A girl arrived at a run from the far end of the street. She said a child on the orchard road had a fever and had not kept water down since morning. The family was outside the street's registered turns. Katherine knew them. The child's grandmother had argued at the standpipe the week before that orchard families should not be receiving any of the town's supply while the terraces took first measure.

"Send the child down," Katherine said.

"He can't walk."

"Then send a cart. What else have you got?"

The girl looked at the tank and shook her head. Katherine went to the clinic outlet and lifted two sealed cans from its assigned portion. The clinician came out as Katherine reached for the second.

"No," the clinician said. "Those cans are for whoever comes through my door next."

"There's a child uphill who cannot keep water down," Katherine said. "I've sent for a cart."

"Bring him here. I can't give you both."

Katherine took the second can anyway. She left a note with the amount and where she was going, and followed the girl up the orchard road. Her handwriting was neat; the absence it described would not be.

At the house the child was lying against his grandmother's shoulder. He was younger than Katherine remembered and much hotter to the touch than the damp cloth on his forehead. The grandmother looked up, recognized Katherine, and made a sound that was more surprise than gratitude.

"You don't have to like me," Katherine said. "He needs to drink."

They started with small mouthfuls. Most came back. The grandmother sent the girl for the clinician while Katherine held the cup steady and counted the child's breaths. The first can was opened; the second stayed sealed for whatever the clinician decided. She had brought more water than she could justify in a single line of the rota. She had not brought enough to feel useful.

When she returned to the yard, the last of the tanker water was passing through the pipe. The driver was fastening the outlet cover. Two households were arguing beside the chalk board about which order had been written first. Katherine found the previous week's ledger and read it aloud. Neither household accepted the answer. She had no spare tank to give them, and no coin left to bring another truck.

"What's the next load?" one of the men asked.

"There isn't one."

"Not this week?"

"Not paid for. Not arranged. There's no diesel left in our account."

He looked at the tanker as if he had misunderstood its size. "You can send a driver."

"With what?" she asked.

He opened his mouth and closed it. Katherine wished she had spoken more gently. Then she wished the gentler words would have made a difference.

She drew a line beneath the twelfth delivery and filled in the boy's question mark with the number. The driver checked the empty hose, stowed it and climbed back into the cab. A few children waved to him, and he gave a tired salute through the window.

As the vehicle went out, the disputed households were still at the board. Katherine went to them because the next ration would have to be made with the water already in Calder Reach. Nobody else was coming to argue it fairly on her behalf.

25

Short Measure

Week 14 · Monday reading: 2.3 · Alison

Two witnesses read 2.3, and Alison read 2.3 after them. One of the witnesses called it two and a quarter; that was the limit of the old staff's precision. They agreed on the figure for the book. Even with that figure agreed, the street and both groves needed more water than the channel carried.

Below the divider, the street sluice was already open to its survival share. Upstream the terrace channel still served the old grove and, through the separate lower branch, the young trees. The small remainder was being spent as though time could be purchased with it. Water ran along the young rows in thin wavering sheets that vanished before they reached the far ends.

She went to the schoolroom to prepare a new allocation. People had been calling it the final rota, though she refused to use that word. There would be another reading in a week, and another after that. The world would not stop for the convenience of an ending.

The written compact gave the terraces first claim. It had been read in the valley for generations as a license for orchard survival. The customary street minimum existed because people had refused, quietly and repeatedly, to let the old legal words put their children

at risk. At 3.0 the competing claims had once been possible, if barely. At 2.3 they were not.

Alison drew the two surviving shares on a page: one for drinking, washing, school and clinic; one for the old upper grove whose roots would preserve the orchard's future if a future came. The lower young block received no survival allocation. The fraction unassigned was not a gift to anyone; it covered seepage, imperfect gates and the distance between what a hand read on a post and what reached a household can.

She had made her decision by the time she finished writing. She still had to own the choice rather than describe it as inevitable. She crossed out the phrase *required under the compact* and wrote *proposed by the turn-keeper, subject to witnesses and public objection.* It used more ink. She preferred that.

Hester arrived at the measuring house after dusk. Alison was folding the new sheet and had not heard her footsteps. Her sister stood in the doorway, boots carrying dry orchard dirt onto the floor.

"I want to know how much time you've given the lower rows."

"None at the present reading."

"You can give them three more mornings."

"Not without taking the street's minimum."

"I know where you put the numbers."

"Then you know."

Hester pulled a chair away from the wall. She stayed standing. "There's the book, and there's what I can bear to do. I wanted you to close the branch as the book says. Then the trees would die and I wouldn't have had to choose each one."

"The book doesn't say that," Alison answered. "Not the old one. It doesn't say anything about a lower branch built after our father died."

"You can enter it as a consequence of the reading."

"I could enter anything I liked. That's what brought us here."

Hester looked at the closed cover of the old ledger. “You think I don’t know what it costs to keep those trees standing? I’ve counted the wages. I’ve told people next month would be better because I believed it long enough to say it.”

“I know you did.”

“Don’t use that voice with me.”

Alison’s voice had been the same one she used when explaining a missed turn to someone at the standpipe. She could hear it now and hated it. “What do you want me to say?”

“That you want the grove cut.”

“I don’t want it cut. I want the street to drink.”

“People can leave the street.”

“Some can. The ones who work for you can’t leave without wages. You know that better than I do.”

Hester sat at last. Her hands were marked with small scratches and the stain of fruit boxes. “I took you in,” she said. It came out softly, as if she were surprised by the words.

“Yes.”

“After he died. You had nothing ready and Wren was so little she kept asking why her father wasn’t coming back from the channel.”

“Yes.”

“I never asked you to pay me for it.”

“You didn’t need to.”

Hester closed her eyes. For a long time the two women listened to the trickle beneath the sill. It was the channel they had played in as girls, damming it with their palms and being scolded for wasting water in a place where nobody had imagined it could run out.

Alison laid out the new sheet, not as an accusation but because Hester had come to see it. “I’ll call witnesses at dawn. The street gets its share. The old trees keep what they need. I will close the lower-grove branch with my own hand if the reading remains. And you’ll have to decide what to do with the trees afterward.”

“You’re giving me a choice that isn’t a choice.”

"That's what the water gives us."

"No. The water is a reading. You're making the choice."

Alison looked at the page. "Yes," she said.

Hester stood. At the doorway she turned back. "Keep the cottage. Whatever happens to the young block, you and Wren can stay there."

Alison wanted to accept immediately. She wanted the familiar kitchen, the height marks beside the door and her daughter's coat hanging from its crooked peg. Instead she said, "We should have talked about that a long time ago."

"Yes," Hester answered. "We should."

After she left, Alison opened the measuring house to the cold evening air. She drew a line below her proposed rota, left room for witnesses and put the sheet where the morning light would fall on it. The old book remained in the cupboard. She had no intention of asking it to speak for her tomorrow.

26

The Wheel Key

Week 15 · Monday reading: 2.3 · Rory

He tested the branch wheel with two fingers. The spindle had a little give in it, the kind that lingered after anyone forced the iron. No fresh scrape today. The latch sat tight. Rory had spent years learning how to coax the wheel, not wrench it, because a broken pin meant the next man put his hand where the metal could crush it.

He inspected it once in the dark and found the latch seated. The branch fed the lower grove, and its closure would not affect the old upper trees. He had told Hester that distinction so often he could have recited it in his sleep. She had listened without acknowledging the difference because the lower trees were the ones she was losing.

Alison's allocation was posted outside the measuring house. He had read it twice. At the bottom, beneath the words allowing public objection, was a place for witnesses. He knew what a witness was supposed to do. He also knew that a person could sign a page while somebody else worked the mechanism after dark.

His own first night opening had been small. He had convinced himself it was no different from a routine adjustment. The second had left him standing by the channel listening to the street tank lose its head while the lower rows took more than their share. When he

told Alison, Hester had warned him that his room and job would go if he refused again. He had not refused the first time. He could not now pretend the warning had been unforeseen.

In the packing shed he wrote a letter to the relatives who kept his younger brother. The first paragraph said he might miss the next payment. He tore it off because the wording made his failure sound like bad weather. On a second piece he wrote that he had lost work he could not accept and would send money as soon as he found another place. That was no better. He left the letter unsealed and counted the coins inside his work boots.

He took the wheel key just before first light. It was an iron piece with a heavy square end, kept on a nail within reach of the branch. Without it the spindle could be turned only with tools and time; it could not be lifted quietly by a worker in the dark. Removing it was not a repair, and he had no right to call it one. He put it inside his coat.

He walked to the cottage to ask for Wren. Alison came to the door first, still wearing the sweater she worked in when the mornings were cold. He told her what he had done. She stood very still, then asked whether the main terrace wheel remained operable. He said it did. The street gate too. Only the separate lower branch had been secured.

"You could have told me before you took it," she said.

"I told you last week that someone would try again."

"And this morning you took it," Alison said.

She looked toward the upper road. There was enough dawn in the sky to see the path. "Hester will think I asked you."

"She may," Rory said.

"Did she ask you to reopen it?"

"Not since you posted the rota."

"Then what are you preventing?"

"Me," Rory said. "Or somebody like me. Somebody who wants a room more than they want to ask whose water it is."

Wren appeared behind her mother and listened while he repeated the explanation. Rory gave her the key. It was too heavy for her pocket, so she held it in both hands until Alison fetched a cloth and wrapped it.

"Am I supposed to use it?" Wren asked.

"No. You're supposed to have seen where it went. Your mother's the turn-keeper. I wanted somebody who wasn't on Hester's wages to be able to say what happened."

"I pick for Hester."

"Yes," Rory said. "But I think you'd tell the truth even if she stopped paying you."

Wren stared at him.

He went straight to the packing shed. Hester was there with the wage book already open. She heard him out. She did not shout. She counted what he was owed, including the extra hours from clearing the old head, and gave him the money. Then she asked when he would be out of the room.

"Before the witnesses gather," he said.

"You can stay another night."

"No. It'll be worse if I do."

She looked at the keys hanging beside the door. There were more keys than he had ever noticed: stores, tool cabinets, the cider room, the old stable. He had never had one for his own lodging. The room was paid for in his wages, which meant Hester could take it back with the work.

"I advanced your brother's food money," she said.

"I'll pay it."

"That's not why I'm telling you."

He waited.

"Take the unused winter blanket. The mornings will be colder wherever you end up."

He had spent the night expecting contempt and found it hard to bear this instead. "I'll leave it," he said.

"Then leave it. I can't make you sensible."

Before the witness bell, he put his tools in a canvas roll, folded his bedding and carried both down from the loft. The workers were too occupied with the gates to make a farewell of it. One asked whether he would be back after the new rota was signed. Rory said he didn't know. He was ashamed to hear how much he wanted the answer to be yes.

Near the bend above the street he stopped to count his coins again. He had enough to send a small payment to his brother and to pay for a few nights under somebody else's roof. Not enough for both for very long. He divided the coins into two little piles on the wall, then pushed the larger one into the envelope addressed outside the valley.

When the bells began for the morning witnesses, he took up his tools and walked on. He knew the cost of the work before the gate turned. He wanted, very badly, to be told that someone else had done it.

27

The Sluice

Week 15 · Monday reading: 2.3 · Wren

The book was heavier than the key, which seemed unfair. The key could stop a gate. The book could get an entire family furious with her before breakfast. Wren tucked both close and reached the divider while the people on the upper path were still sorting themselves into people who had come to watch and people who claimed they hadn't.

She had always thought that adults made decisions in rooms, then came outdoors to do what those decisions required. Here the decision was outdoors already. The stone was worn by hands. A trickle ran under the closed-latch lip and made a noise like someone whispering through teeth. The page she carried would have to say how much water was going where after the turn. Nothing on the page could make the wheel lighter.

Alison arrived with two people from the street and one orchard worker who was not in Hester's direct employ. She asked them to read the staff separately. They came back with the same figure, allowing for the rough width of the notch. Wren entered 2.3 and the hour. The allocation line remained empty.

Hester came last. She wore an old work coat with one sleeve patched at the elbow. A lantern hung in her hand though there was

enough light to see. She set it on a wall and stood beside it. Wren had seen her aunt give workers orders through rain and bad harvests. She had never seen her stand with nothing to do.

"Is the old grove safe?" Hester asked.

"The upper takeoff stays open," Alison said. "One share. The street keeps one. We will use the remainder for losses we can measure and the things that cannot wait."

"And the lower rows?"

"You've read the sheet."

"Yes."

Nobody moved. An orchard witness asked whether the lower trees might recover if rain came within a fortnight. Alison said some might, but that an allowance for the possibility would have to come from somewhere else now. A woman from the street said her children had been washing from the same pail for three days.

Wren saw Rory at a distance on the road, carrying his rolled tools. He had left open the question of returning. He kept walking, though more slowly as he passed the branch. She hoped he would find work. It occurred to her that nobody had asked what happened to the boy whose wages he sent beyond the valley. The boy was not on any list at this gate.

Alison turned toward Hester. "I am closing the lower branch by this allocation," she said. "Not because the compact closes it for me. I have asked witnesses because I could be wrong, and because you have the right to say what you lose."

Hester looked at her for a long time. "Eleven thousand," she said.

"I know the number."

"You know the writing of it. I know which ones will die."

Wren had expected her mother to answer. Alison let Hester continue. Hester went on, more quietly. "You used to follow me into the old orchard because you couldn't bear to be left behind. Remember the year Father caught us taking the first apples before they were ripe?"

"You blamed me," Alison said.

"You had them in your pockets."

"You put them there."

A few people smiled. The story was new to Wren. She wanted them to keep telling it. Instead Alison asked her for the key.

Wren unwrapped it and passed it over. The metal was cold. Alison set it into the wheel and waited while the witnesses came close enough to see the action. The orchard worker said he was ready. The street woman said so too.

Alison put her shoulder behind the handle. The spindle resisted. She backed it a fraction, loosened the weight and began again, slowly. The lower branch shutter descended into its channel. Water rose behind the lip, shivered, then ran along the main terrace line toward the old-grove takeoff. At the divider the street share was adjusted and the flow into the lower rows diminished to an irregular wet line.

It took longer than Wren had imagined. People often spoke about closing a gate as if it were a word in a book. The last finger-width had to be coaxed down. Alison leaned into it until the iron seated on stone.

Hester walked to the branch beyond the wheel. She crouched and touched the soil, then stood and brushed her fingertips clean against her coat. She did not go into the rows. Wren could see that she wanted to.

"Do we sign now?" one of the witnesses asked.

"Read the staff again first," Alison said.

They did. The mark upstream had not changed; the water had been redistributed, not increased. Wren wrote the unchanged public measure and the new witnessed division. One man complained that the street flow was still thin. Katherine, standing farther back, said it would be enough to fill the wash tank if the valves held. Nobody used the word enough without qualification after that.

Hester took up her lantern and started down the orchard path. Alison watched her go, then asked Wren to bring the book into the measuring house before it grew damp. Wren remained a moment by the wheel. Her aunt was not crying.

In the cottage that evening Hester came to supper uninvited, the first time in weeks. She ate very little, but she corrected Wren's story about the school play and laughed once when Alison served the hard cheese nobody liked. The sisters had nothing to say about tomorrow. When Hester left she asked Alison if the saw in the packing shed had been sharpened.

"Yes," Alison said.

"Good."

Wren sat awake long after the door closed. She had signed as witness and could remember the exact moment the wheel seated, but the entry in the book contained only the number, the direction of the allocation, the people who had watched and the time. It would not tell anyone how her aunt had looked when the lower channel fell quiet. She was glad of that, and then wasn't.

28

Cut

Week 15 · Monday reading: 2.3 · Hester

When Hester was eight her father had cut down a tree that leaned over the house, and she had wept over it until he let her keep a slice of the trunk. For years she'd used the round piece as a footstool. She thought about that absurd little stool when the first of the young trees came down badly: her saw caught, the trunk hung in its neighbour's branches, and a worker had to fetch rope after she waved him away. She was fifty-eight. There was nobody to give her a slice of this one.

He fetched a rope. Together they drew the tree clear and laid it down across the empty furrow. Hester stood over it, looking at the pale interior of the wood. It had been alive. She had known it was alive. That was the part she had not prepared herself for.

The crew waited along the terrace. They were the workers who had planted and pruned the young orchard, and now she had asked them to help dismantle it. Some were being paid for the day. Others had come because she could not pay all of them and they refused to leave the work to her alone. She had not known how to thank either group. By eight o'clock, the saws were moving.

There was no clean way to fell small orchard trees. They had been trained against wires, tied into rows, pruned to a particular shape so

their fruit could be reached from the ground. Cutting one loosened the wire along a whole section. Workers pulled out posts, unwound ties and carried branches into heaps on the margin. The green wood made the saws drag. Each cut smelled of apple and damp bark, though the soil below was powder.

Hester worked the first terrace without speaking. At the second, an older picker told her she had skipped the trees beside the stone wall. She went back. Those were among the ones she had planted with her father. They were not the oldest in the valley, only old enough that she had forgotten when she last considered them young. Her father's old grafting knife had made a mark low on one trunk. The cut would have to go above it. She wished the mark were on something she could take home.

At midday the women from the street sent bread, onion soup and a jug of water. Hester was angry at the water. Then she drank it because she was thirsty. One of the workers made a joke about the soup being thick enough to stand a pruning knife in. Someone laughed. It was the first laughter she had heard that morning, and she listened to it with gratitude she would not have admitted.

A man asked whether the school would take any of the wood for winter heat. Hester said the straight pieces should be stacked separately. They could be cut small enough for the stove. She told him to keep the sound posts as well; the clinic needed repairs around its yard. He asked about payment. She said she would count the day as wages for anyone still on her list. He looked away. They both knew how short that list had become.

She found Rory's old pruning saw hanging by the shed door. He had left it when he took his tools, perhaps by accident or perhaps because it belonged to her. The worn handle fitted her palm. She carried it back to the terraces and used it on the row nearest the school path.

Her sister came in the late afternoon. Alison had climbed the hill alone and walked along the cleared furrows without speaking.

Hester was irritated that she had come, relieved that she had come, and too tired to decide which feeling ought to be shown.

"You've done a lot," Alison said.

"Not enough."

"I'll send Wren up after supper. She can help stack the wood."

"She shouldn't have to."

"She wants to."

Hester glanced toward the old grove. "It keeps its water?"

"Yes. The reading hasn't shifted."

"You've checked."

"Twice."

Hester nodded. It would have been easy to ask her sister to apologize. It would also have been easy for Alison to apologize, because the loss was obvious and because apology could be offered without giving back one drop. Hester asked for work instead. She pointed out a row where the cut brush had blocked a footpath, and they cleared it together.

By dusk the first lower terrace was broken into stumps and heaps. Beyond it, thousands of young trees still stood in their rows; the work would continue for weeks. The old grove stood above them. From the street the loss would look like a harvest stripped too early, but Hester knew the difference between a field resting for spring and one that had been abandoned. She went from stump to stump pulling free the tags she could find. She collected them in her pocket, not to make a record—there was already a record—but because she could not bear to leave them on the cut wood.

Workers began burning the smallest brush where the stone walls would contain the flames. Smoke drifted across the lower rows and rose toward the houses. Hester stayed until the first fire took properly. She had believed that seeing the trees die for lack of water would be more merciful than killing them herself. Now she understood that the person who cut them had to see each one.

The tags filled both her pockets. There would be more to collect tomorrow.

She reached the cottage after dark. Someone stood outside the door with a carrying pole across one shoulder and two empty cans swinging beneath it. Hester recognized the grandmother from the orchard road: the woman who had argued against giving the terraces another drop, whose feverish grandson Katherine had brought water to from the last tanker.

"If you've come for the straight wood, it's at the shed," Hester said. "The school gets first choice."

"I'm not here for wood."

"Then you've chosen a poor evening."

The woman lowered the cans. "I heard your hands have gone. The paid ones, I mean. I can carry for the old trees."

Hester looked at the empty cans. "From where?"

"From their own turn. The upper cut doesn't reach the far end of the old grove properly. The children can put a can under the little spout, and I can carry it past the broken furrow."

"That water's already allotted to the trees."

"I know which water it is. I'm not bringing you the street's."

"And what do you want for it?"

"Nothing. The boy's fever's gone down. I can leave him with his aunt in the mornings." She shifted the pole, impatient now. "I spent last week telling everyone you'd taken too much. I haven't changed my mind. But these are the trees that are left."

Hester had spent the day receiving sympathy that felt like a second cutting. She could have borne an accusation from this woman more easily than the offer.

"It's a hard climb," she said.

"Then you'll have plenty of time to tell me I'm carrying it wrong."

The woman picked up the pole again. She waited while Hester found the key to the upper path. Neither of them suggested that a

few cans would make up for the thousands of trees on the terraces below.

"Show me the broken furrow," the woman said.

Hester emptied the tags from her pockets onto a shelf inside the door and went up the hill with her.

29

The New Rota

Week 16 · Monday reading: 2.4 · Alison

Rain arrived in the night and made so little noise on the roof that Alison slept through nearly all of it. In the morning the stones of the path were dark, and a shallow dish left beside the cottage door held a finger of water mixed with dust. Wren insisted it was enough to wash the dish. Alison told her to leave it for the birds. They argued for a minute, pleasantly, before remembering they were meant to go to the post.

The reading was 2.4. Wren took it first and made Alison read it separately. They compared their figures and wrote the increase with the date. Nobody called it recovery. The ground had taken the rain greedily; the channel had barely responded. One more poor week would bring the staff down again.

At the school hall the new rota lay on a trestle table, its figures written large enough to be seen from the back. Fewer people had come than for the first reading. Some had found work elsewhere; others had left without saying where. Alison counted the witnesses first. Orchard side, street side, clinic. All present. Outside, someone was scraping mud from a boot against the stone step, a sound that persisted through the opening silence.

Katherine stood with her arms crossed beside the water cart's ledger. "Monday reading. Two witnesses besides Alison. One from the orchard, one from the street. And if a turn gets sold, the name and the price go on the same line."

Hester, seated near the wall, said she would send a worker from the surviving grove. The town store would have to pay for the hour. A man beside the stove objected that an orchard witness could be bought with wages.

"Then watch him read the staff," Katherine said. "That's the point of having you there."

The man had sold his own Thursday allocation in the spring. Katherine remembered the day because his wife had returned the next morning with two empty cans and a mouthful of very good insults. She could remember the contents of every can he'd brought back; what she'd lost track of was how often the family had needed flour.

"Will there be appeals?" someone asked.

"On the day," Alison said. "Not at the next month's reading. The original entry stays visible. A witness signs beside any correction."

"What's to stop you changing it again?"

"Nothing if you leave me alone with the book. That's why I'm asking you not to."

The father of the family that had arranged a room down the road rose from the second bench. He had his youngest child's blue scarf twisted round his fist. He kept standing until Katherine stopped talking to the woman beside her.

"We sold Thursday for flour," he said. "And now you want us to sign for less?"

Alison told him what the reduced schedule would provide. He listened through the figures, but at the last one he shook his head.

"Those are the numbers. I asked what happens to us."

"Your household keeps the drinking turn," Alison said. "It loses the extra washing allowance. The clinic has a reserve for illness."

“The clinic had a reserve when my son needed it last week. We still had to carry him there.” He held up the scarf. “We’ve got a room with my wife’s sister. We leave before Sunday. Are you going to charge us for the water we won’t be here to take?”

“No.” Alison drew the household line toward herself. “I can strike the unused turn from the balance now.”

He came to the table. She made the correction while he watched, then gave him the pen so he could mark it. He stared at the place for his initials.

“Does that mean I agree to the new rota?”

“It means you saw the correction,” she said. “You can refuse the rota separately.”

“Then I refuse.” He signed only the amended entry. He went back to his bench and sat with the blue scarf still in his fist.

There was no applause. The benches creaked as people turned to make space around him. Katherine looked toward the clinic corner, counting the households that would still need water after he was gone: the widow above the school, the three labourers in the shared room, the family whose oldest had broken his arm. A departing household freed some water. It also took two working hands and a child who had been in the school play.

One family declined the reduced allocation. Their youngest child had been ill, and they had found a room with relatives somewhere down the road. The father made no accusation. He asked whether they would be charged for the previous week’s unused turn. Alison said no and crossed it from the balance while he watched. He looked relieved, then embarrassed that relief could come from so small a concession.

A woman from the old grove stood up next. She waited until the man with the scarf had gone quiet. Her husband had kept work because Hester still needed hands to maintain the upper trees. If they left, there would be no pay waiting for them along the road; they’d asked the last carrier and he’d been plain about it.

"We'll take the rota," she said. "But my daughter washes at school. Don't put that against our cooking turn. I can't send her to lessons smelling of the beds we share."

Someone near the door muttered that the school couldn't be treated as a private bathhouse.

"She's eleven," the mother said. "She doesn't choose what her house smells like."

Katherine brought her ledger to the table. "The school has a washing allowance that isn't being fully drawn. I can take it from there if the caretaker records each use. Not out of your cooking turn."

"For how long?"

"Until the next Monday reading. Then we all look again."

The mother asked to see the figures. Alison moved aside; there was no reason the figures had to be defended from the far side of a table. The woman bent close, fingered the dry edge of the paper, and said she would sign for that week only. Katherine had already taken the pen from her pocket. The woman made her write school washing separate before she touched it.

At the back, the father with the blue scarf said, "She gets a note and I get sent away."

"You found somewhere to go," the woman answered. "If you want to trade, I'll take the room and you can have my husband's job."

He opened his mouth, thought better of it, and folded the scarf into his coat. Alison marked one household declined and the other accepted for seven days. Neither line looked anything like the clean vote she'd imagined when she began keeping the book.

After the hall emptied Alison walked to Hester's cottage. She had put the key in a cloth pouch beside her notebook. Wren was waiting at the kitchen table with their belongings arranged into rough piles: bedding, bowls, clothes, a broken table leg they had never thrown away, and the little book of recipes their father had used when he cooked badly and with great enthusiasm.

"I'm leaving that table," Alison said.

"You can't leave a table with one good leg."

"It has three good legs."

"Then you ought to take it for the novelty."

Alison laughed. They would have a room above the school, warm enough when the stove was lit and small enough that neither of them could keep secrets for long. Wren had asked for the window side. Alison had given it to her. She hoped that would not come to feel like another unentered debt.

Hester came over to help carry the heavier bundles. She looked at the table and said she would mend its leg before winter. Wren said she had heard that promise in several different voices since childhood. Hester fetched a hammer anyway.

Alison gave her the cottage key at the door. "I know you said we could stay."

"I did."

"I want us to be here without owing each other for the roof."

Hester turned the key in her palm. "You don't stop owing someone because you move."

"No. But we can choose what to do about it."

Hester slipped the key into her pocket without a word and picked up a bundle that was plainly too heavy for one arm. Alison took the other end. Together they carried it to the school, stopping twice to rest and once because Wren was laughing so hard at their complaints that she could not walk straight.

That evening, at the measuring house, Alison entered the new rota with the witnesses' names. She asked Wren to keep the book for the next week while she checked the surviving irrigation lines with Hester. Wren accepted it without ceremony. She only asked where the spare pencil had gone.

"Under the old cover," Alison said.

"I thought that was the bad pencil."

"It writes."

"That's not the same."

Alison found another and gave it to her. The rain had stopped. The staff stood at 2.4, and nobody had mistaken the extra tenth for permission to forget the rest.

30

The Book

Weeks 17–18 · Monday reading: 2.4 · Wren

On her first morning in charge Wren managed to get both boots wet before she'd delivered a drop to anyone. She opened the street sluice too quickly; the water jumped the edge and hit her shins. Katherine laughed loud enough to frighten a bird off the wall. Wonderful. An excellent beginning to a career in public accountability.

"That's the price of being in charge," Katherine said. "Wet feet."

"There's more to it than that."

"Not on a morning like this."

Wren closed the handle to the proper setting and waited for the witness to read the staff. The water moved steadily down the channel. It looked painfully small against all the things people wanted to do with it. She had stopped expecting it to look like enough.

Alison and Hester were up in the old grove, checking the shallow cuts that had to remain open if the surviving trees were to drink. They had taken bread and a flask between them. Wren had watched them leave without deciding whether it was good that they were talking or bad that they still needed a reason to do it.

The first turn came and went without dispute. At the second a woman said the entry from the previous day had been written against the wrong household. Wren checked the marks, found the

error and corrected it with a line that left the original visible. She asked the woman to initial the change. The woman said she had never been asked to sign anything before. Wren said that was probably why her mother wanted witnesses now.

Near noon a carrier came through with sacks of flour and three small crates of tools. He had changed his price since his last visit. Fuel was dearer along the road, he said, and two other valleys were already rationing their own springs. Wren asked whether either had room for orchard workers. He said there was work in one, perhaps, but no reliable lodging. She wrote down what he had said for Rory if he returned. She did not invent the name of a place she had not been given.

A schoolchild brought an empty can to the measuring house after the noon bell. The child was sent by a neighbour whose turn had ended. The neighbour wanted a little more, just until supper; the child's father had come home from the orchards with a fever and had drunk what remained of the morning share.

Wren checked the ledger. The neighbour had received the full turn that morning. The clinic had some water stored. The school had a spare washing allowance for the day. She could have slipped a can from either and written the amount under a different heading. Her mother had done such things, and some of them had been acts of care. Some had been bargains that other people had paid for without knowing.

"Tell her to come herself," Wren said.

The child looked frightened. "She's tired."

"I know. I'm not going to shout at her. I need her to tell me what the water's for."

The neighbour arrived half an hour later, carrying the empty can and the look of someone who had already been refused too many things. Wren explained the entries and offered to walk with her to the clinic to ask whether the fever required water from its reserve.

If it did, the reserve would be used and recorded. Otherwise the woman could appeal for a short additional turn in front of a witness.

"You could just fill the can," the woman said.

"Yes," Wren answered. "I could."

"Your mother would have done it."

"Sometimes she did."

The neighbour looked at her, then asked where they were meant to find a witness on a day when everyone was working. Katherine was still by the cart, tightening a strap. Wren called to her. Katherine came over, listened, and said they should go to the clinic first. The neighbour followed, grumbling, but she followed.

The clinician examined the feverish man and decided that he needed water and rest more urgently than he needed to prove his household could follow the rota. The extra can came from the clinic reserve with an entry under his name and a second signature. Wren wrote that the clinic had authorized it. She left the original household turn unchanged.

The neighbour thanked Katherine rather than Wren. That was fine. Wren had spent most of her childhood watching people thank whoever carried the can, not whoever had made the entry.

Late that afternoon the carrier left toward the next valley. The school yard filled with children running a game that involved the steps and a badly remembered song from the harvest supper. The tune went wrong in the same place it always had. They argued about the words and started again.

Wren cleaned the mud from the notch staff so the next reader would see the old marks clearly. She checked the lower-grove gate with one of the witnesses; it remained seated, and no new water ran into the cut rows. Above it, the old trees still drew their share. Down the hill, the clinic cart returned with its empty cans stacked neatly. There was no good reason to believe the dry season was finished.

On the following Monday the staff again stood near 2.4. Wren called the witnesses and took the reading first, then stepped aside

so they could make their own judgment. They agreed within the width of the notch. She opened the book to a clean line.

The page had spaces for the measure, the time, the distribution and the witnesses. Wren wrote the reading and the morning allocation. She asked the others to read it before she closed the ink bottle. Down the slope the bell rope hung beside the street sluice. The schoolchild from yesterday came up with two cans, one swinging from each hand.

"Is it our turn?" the child asked.

"After the school," Wren said.

"They take forever."

"They're very talented at it."

The child pushed both cans forward. "Gran sent two."

"Gran has a turn for one."

"She'll be cross."

"She can come and tell me."

"She will. She's been practising."

"Then tell her I'm here."