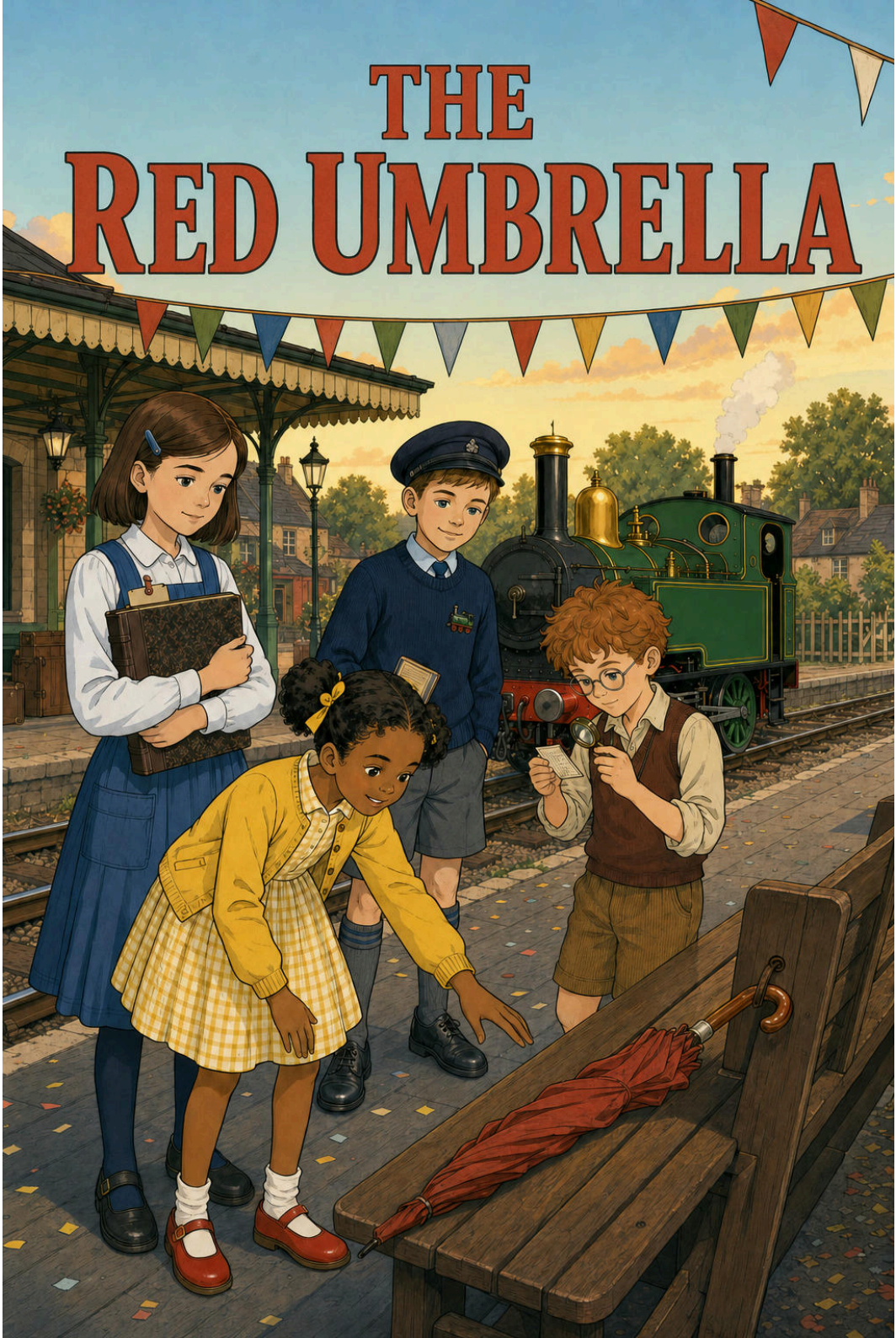

THE
RED UMBRELLA

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# About This Book

## At a Glance

- **Reading level:** English level A2- (CEFR) · American English
- **Age:** 8+
- **Length:** 12 chapters · ±15,000 words

## Edition

This is the **first edition** — version 1.1, published August 2026.

| Version | Date | Notes |
|---|---|---|
| 1.0 | July 2026 | First edition. |
| 1.1 | August 2026 | Language corrections |

# About the Story

## The Series

Netherby is a little town on an old steam railroad through the hills, kept alive by volunteers — and the Wren family keeps the station, together with the Lost and Found Office on platform one. Every book begins with one left-behind object and ends with its owner and their story. Theo knows every train, Clara keeps the great register, Josie can talk to anyone, and Max can tell you what anything is and how old. Their rule never changes: patience, and proof.

## This Book

The party is over. The flags are coming down. And on Pip's bench, in the corner, Josie finds a bright red umbrella. It has a silver band with two letters — E. P. — and, tucked in its folds, a ticket for a concert in Marlow. But the concert was last night. And the ticket was never used. Who brings an umbrella and a ticket all the way to the station, and never goes to the concert at all? Theo, Clara, Josie and Max ride the steam train down the line to follow the trail. It leads to a little cottage up the lane, and to a shy singer with one song she could not sing. Can four friends help a lost voice find its way home?

## Chapter 1 — The Umbrella on Pip's Bench

The big day was over. The sun was going down.

All day, Netherby station had been full. There were flags, and cake, and a brass band. The whole town had come. The little green engine, Firefly, had run all day. The line was fifty years old this summer, and the town had a party.

Now the town was going home. Two men on ladders took the flags down, one by one. The long roof over the platform — the canopy — held the last of the light.

Four friends sat on the office steps. They were tired. They were happy too.

Theo Wren pulled off his cap. He was twelve. He knew every train on the line. "Fifty years," he said. "And she ran on time all day. Every train. On the minute."

He meant Firefly.

Clara Wren was thirteen. She kept the great book of the office. It was called the register. Every lost thing went in it, in her neat hand. "I am too tired to write one more word," she said.

Max Cotton pushed his glasses up his nose. He was twelve. He could look at an old coin, or a button, or an old toy, and tell you its age. "I ate four bits of cake," he said.

Josie Bell laughed. She was eleven. She knew everyone in town. "I saw you eat five," she said.

"It was a good party," Josie said. "The best one ever."

"Fifty years," said Theo again. He liked that number. "And a hundred more."

Clara gave a tired smile. "Not if I have to write them all up."

Whistle, the station cat, sat on the warm stone. He was black, with a white bib. He blinked at them all. He did not care about cake.

---

Just after eight, the last train pulled out. Firefly took it slow and proud. Nancy leaned from the footplate and waved. Her whistle rang down the whole valley. The town waved the train away into the dusk.

Now the day was really done. Firefly would sleep in her shed, cooling and quiet.

Josie stood up. "I will clear the platform," she said. "Someone has to."

She walked along in the last light. She picked up a dropped flag here. A paper cup there. A lost hair ribbon. She made a little pile by the office door. The station grew still and gray around her. She did not mind. She liked the quiet too.

She came to the last bench. It stood at the end of platform two. It was Pip's bench. Long ago, a little dog named Pip had sat there and met every train. The children knew his story now. They liked to say good night to his bench.

Josie stopped.

Something stood in the corner of the bench. It was red. Bright, bright red.

It was an umbrella.



"Well," said Josie. "Hello there."

The red umbrella was rolled up neat. It leaned in the corner of the bench. Someone had set it down for a bit. And then they forgot it. It had stood there all day. All through the sun, and the flags, and the band.

Nobody looks for an umbrella in the sunshine.

Josie picked it up. It was light in her hand. It was a fine thing. Too fine to leave behind.

Then she saw it. Tucked into the folds, under the little strap, was a small white card.

"Max," Josie called slowly. "Max. Come and look at this."

Max came over. Clara and Theo came too. Max took the card. He read it. Then he pushed his glasses up his nose.

"It's a ticket," he said. "A concert ticket. The Marlow Singers." He looked up. "And it was last night."

Josie turned the red umbrella over in her hands. "So there is a person out there," she said. "They missed their own concert. And they left this on our platform."

"Then it goes to the office," said Clara. "Everything found goes to the office. Dad's rule."

"Properly," said Max, in a big deep voice. They all grinned. It was the stationmaster's word. Everything, done properly.

So they took the red umbrella inside.

---

The office was small and warm. Shelves ran up every wall. Each shelf held lost things, all with labels. A walking stick. A tin drum. One brown boot, all alone. And on one low shelf stood a row of umbrellas. Black ones. Nine of them.

Whistle came in too. He jumped into his basket by the door. He watched with one half-open eye.

Clara sat down at the big desk. She opened the register. She dipped her pen.

"Right," she said. "Describe it."

This was the old game of the office. You look at a thing. You say it out loud. Then it goes in the book.

Josie held the umbrella out flat. "It is red," she said.

"Good," said Clara, writing. "Red. What kind of red?"

Max touched the cloth. "This is silk," he said. "Not cheap cloth. Real silk. Feel it."

They all felt it. It was smooth and fine and cool. Josie had never held silk before.

"Red silk," said Clara. Her pen went scratch, scratch. "How big?"

Josie held it out at arm's length. "This big," she said.

Theo looked it over. "A grown-up's umbrella," he said. "Not a child's."

Clara wrote that too.

"Now the handle," said Max.

The handle was wood. It curved over the top, like a walking stick. Josie hooked it over her arm. Then she ran her thumb along it.

"It is smooth," she said. "So smooth."

"Worn smooth," said Max. He took it. He turned it in the lamplight. "Look. This is old wood. A hand held this for years. It rubbed the wood soft and shiny. You do not wear a handle so smooth in a week. This took a long, long time."

"Worn smooth," said Clara. She wrote it down.

Then Max went very still. "Wait," he said. "There is something here."

Near the handle sat a small band of metal. It was gray, and a little dull. Max breathed on it. He rubbed it on his sleeve. It came up bright.

"Silver," he said softly. "A little silver band. And look."

Two letters were cut into the silver. Cut deep and fine.

*E. P.*

"Engraved," said Max. "Someone paid to have that done. You do not engrave a cheap umbrella. This was a gift."

Clara wrote it all down. Red silk. A wooden handle, worn smooth. A silver band, engraved E. P.

She looked up at the shelf of black umbrellas. Nine sad black umbrellas, in a row.

"Nobody comes back for those," she said. "Not one. People drop an umbrella and forget it the same day."

"Not this one," said Max.

"Why not?" said Josie.

Max held it up in the lamplight. The red silk glowed. The silver band shone.

"An engraved umbrella is a given umbrella," he said. "And a worn one is a loved umbrella. Someone gave this. Someone used it for years and years." He set it down gently. "Somebody wants this back. I would bet on it."

Josie looked at the red silk. "Then why leave it?" she said. "Why leave a thing you love?"

"That," said Max, "is a very good question."

---

Theo still had the little card. He took it to the lamp. He turned it this way and that.

"Look at this ticket," he said. "There is no hole in it. No tear. Nothing."

"So?" said Josie.

"So it was never used," said Theo. "At a concert, a man takes your ticket. He tears it, or he makes a hole in it. This one is clean." He held it up in the light. "A ticket with no hole is a journey that never happened."

The office went quiet. They all looked at the red umbrella. Then at the clean, unused ticket.

"So they came all the way to the station," said Clara slowly. "With the umbrella. And the ticket. On the night of the concert."

"And never went in," said Josie.

## Chapter 2 — Admit One

Sunday was a quiet day.

The line did not run on Sundays. Firefly slept in her shed. The town went to church, and the station rested. No trains, no whistles, no smoke. Just the birds, and the long grass by the track.

The red umbrella waited too. It stood in the office, next to the black ones. It waited for Monday.

---

Monday came. The morning trains ran. Then came the quiet time — the office hour.

This was the best part of the day. The four friends met in the little office. Each one had a job.

Clara sat at the big desk with the register. Josie stood at the front, ready to talk to anyone. Max had his coins and his lamp. Theo had the timetables, all in a row.

Whistle slept in his basket by the door. He had a job too. His job was sleeping.

Outside, the summer sun was high. Inside, it was cool and still. This was the time to think.

Clara had her pen ready. Josie had her questions ready. Max had his sharp eyes. Theo had every train in his head.

"Right," said Clara. "The red umbrella. Where do we start?"

"With the ticket," said Theo. "Read it again. All of it."

Max had the little card. He held it under the lamp. He read it out, slow and clear.



"The Marlow Singers," he read. "That is a choir. A choir is a group. They all sing together."

"I have heard them," said Josie. "They are good. My gran likes them. All the town goes to a concert."

"Summer Concert," Max read on. "The Marlow Assembly Hall."

"The big hall on the square," said Theo. "In Marlow. A hall holds a lot of people. Hundreds. You go to a concert there in the summer."

"Friday," said Max. "Seven o'clock." He looked up. "And then, at the bottom, in big letters: ADMIT ONE."

"Admit one," said Josie. "What does that mean?"

"It means the ticket lets one person in," said Clara. "One ticket, one seat. You show it at the door. Then they let you in."

"One person," said Josie softly. "So they went alone."

Max turned the ticket over. There was still no hole in it. No tear. Nothing.

"Never used," he said again. "A whole concert, on Friday. And this seat was empty."

---

The door opened. Robert Wren came in. He was the stationmaster. He was Theo and Clara's dad. He had his pocket watch in his hand, as always.

"Well," he said. "How is the red umbrella?"

"Stuck, Dad," said Clara. "We know what it looks like. We do not know who it belongs to."

Robert looked at the umbrella. He looked at the shelf of black ones. Then he sat on the edge of the desk.

"This summer," he said, "we found a suitcase. It had waited sixty years. Sixty. It belonged to an old man. He was only a boy back then." He shook his head. "That was a cold trail. A long, cold wait."

"But we found him," said Theo.

"We did," said Robert. "Now, this one." He picked up the red umbrella. "This stood on our own bench two days ago. Someone set it down here. So they were here — only days ago." He put it down. "That is not a cold trail, children. That one is warm."

"A warm trail," said Josie.

"A fresh one," said Robert. "Ted's suitcase was cold for sixty years. This trail is warm now. Today. So we work it properly." He stood up. "Properly, and fast. A warm trail does not stay warm for long."

Max grinned. "Properly and fast."

"There is your rule for the week," said Robert. He looked at his watch. "I have a train at eleven." And he went out.

---

Clara stood up. She took two big sheets of paper. She pinned them to the wall, side by side.

On the first she wrote, in her best hand: WHAT WE KNOW.

On the second: WHAT WE DON'T.

"Come on," she said. "Fill them in. What do we know?"

They called it out, and she wrote.

"A red umbrella," said Josie. "Red silk."

"A wooden handle, worn smooth," said Max.

"A silver band. Engraved E. P.," said Theo.

"And the owner?" said Clara.

"They had a ticket," said Josie. "For Friday. In Marlow."

"They came to our station," said Theo.

"They never used the ticket," said Max.

"And they left it all here," said Josie. "On our own bench."

Clara's pen went scratch, scratch. The KNOW list grew.

"Now the other one," she said. "What do we NOT know?"

That list grew faster.

"Who E. P. is," said Max.

"Why they left the umbrella," said Josie.

"Why they missed the concert," said Theo.

"Missed," said Josie. She stopped. "But did they really miss it? You miss a train. You run for it, and it goes without you. But not this. They had a ticket. They came out. And then — nothing."

Clara put down her pen. She looked at both lists, side by side.

"Here is the whole thing," she said. "In one line." She thought for a moment. "Who brings an umbrella and a ticket to the station — and goes to no concert?"

Nobody spoke.

"That," said Max, "is a good riddle."

"A riddle," said Josie. "A puzzle with no answer."

"Every riddle has an answer," said Clara. "We just do not have it yet."

Josie looked at the two lists. The DON'T list was long. The KNOW list was short. That did not feel good.

Max picked up the umbrella. Then he picked up the ticket.

"We have clues," he said. "A clue is a small thing. It helps you find the answer. The silver band is a clue. The ticket is a clue." He looked at them both. "We just have to read them right."

---

Theo had gone quiet. He was down at the end of the desk, over his timetables.

"Wait," he said. "The concert was Friday. Seven o'clock. In Marlow." He ran his finger down a row of times. "So they had to get to Marlow before seven. By train."

"Right," said Clara.

"Marlow is seven miles down the line," said Theo. "You go by train. There is no other way." His finger stopped. "And on Friday, only one train got there in time. The six-ten. The 6:10 out of Netherby. It reached Marlow at ten to seven. Just in time."

He looked up.

"Every other train was too late," he said. "If they went to that concert, they were on the six-ten. On Friday. From this very platform."

The office went still.

For a moment, nobody said a word. A train, on Friday. The six-ten. It was a real thing now. Not just a card, not just a red umbrella. A train, with a time.

Then a voice came from the door. A slow, deep voice.

"The six-ten," it said. "Friday."

They all turned.

Old Bert stood in the doorway. He was the old conductor, retired now. He had worked the line for forty years. He had walked past the door, and stopped. His cap was in his hands.

"I know that train," said Bert. "I was on it. I rode the six-ten to Marlow that Friday. In all that rain."

Nobody breathed.

Bert looked at the red umbrella on the desk. His old face went soft and far away.

"And I saw the red umbrella," he said.

## Chapter 3 — The Six-Ten in the Rain

"Come in, Bert," said Clara. "Sit down."

Old Bert came in. He sat in the big chair by the window. His cap was still in his hands.

Josie made him a cup of tea. He took it. He did not drink. He looked at the red umbrella on the desk.

"Forty years I worked this line," he said. "Forty years of trains. And I remember that one. The six-ten. That Friday."

"Tell us," said Theo. "All of it. Slow."

Bert nodded. He was slow. He was always slow. That was Bert.

Whistle woke up in his basket. Even the cat came to listen.

The children pulled their chairs close. Josie sat down on the floor. Nobody wrote a thing yet. First they would just listen.

---

"It was raining," said Bert. "Not soft rain. Hard rain. It was pouring down. Pouring."

"Pouring," said Josie.

"You could not see the hills," said Bert. "The rain was loud on the canopy. All along the roof, drip and rush and roar. I came for the six-ten. I had my ticket. I was off to see my sister. She lives down in Marlow. I stood under the canopy, out of the wet."

He took a slow breath.

"And there she was," he said. "A young woman. Down at the end of the platform. Under a red umbrella." He looked at the desk. "That red umbrella. I am sure of it."

"On our platform?" said Clara. "Here?"

"Right here," said Bert. "By Pip's bench. She stood very still. She held the umbrella low. I could not see her face. Just the red, in all that gray rain."

Max leaned in. “What did she do?”

“Nothing, at first,” said Bert. “She just stood. Then the train came in. The six-ten. Firefly, wet and steaming. It stood by the platform, all ready. Doors open, all along.”

“And you got on,” said Theo.

“I got on,” said Bert. “I was by the last door. The last one, at the back. I looked back at her. She had not moved.” He set down his cup. “So I held the door. I held the door open for her. I waited.”

“And?” said Josie. Her voice was small.

“She looked at it,” said Bert. “She looked at the open door. She took one step. Just one.” He stopped. “And then she stepped back.”

“Stepped back,” said Theo.

“Back,” said Bert. “Away from the train. One step back, under her umbrella. She did not get on.”

“But why?” said Josie. “The door was right there. You held it open.”

“I do not know,” said Bert. “I have asked myself for days. She wanted that train. I am sure of it. And then she did not.”

---

The office was very quiet. Only the clock, and the birds outside.

“Then the whistle went,” said Bert. “You know the whistle. Time to go. All the doors shut.” He looked at Theo. “The six-ten left on time. Right on time. Not a minute late.”

“On time,” said Theo, soft.

“I sat down by the window,” said Bert. “The train pulled out. Slow, then faster. And I looked back. Out at the platform, in the rain.”

Nobody breathed.

“She was still there,” said Bert. “She sat down on Pip’s bench. Right down in the rain, under the red umbrella. And she watched us go.” He shook his

head, slow. “That was the last I saw of her. The rain came down. The train went around the bend. And she was gone.”



He was quiet a moment.

“Not a face I knew,” said Bert. “In forty years, I know most faces on this line. Not that one. A stranger.”

“A stranger,” said Josie. “Someone new.”

“Someone new,” said Bert. “Or someone from far off. I never saw her before. I never saw her after. Just that once, in the rain.”

“A stranger,” said Josie again. She said it slow. “So we have no name. No face. Just a red umbrella. And the rain.”

“That is all I have,” said Bert. “I am sorry. I wish I had more for you.”

Theo sat with his timetables in front of him. He did not look at them. He looked at Bert.

“The train was on time,” said Theo again. It was not a question.

"It was," said Bert. He looked at the boy. His old eyes were kind. "Right on time, Theo. Doors shut on the second. That is the job. That is a good train."

Theo said nothing.

"And still," said Bert, slow. "Some nights I think of her. On that bench. In the rain." He turned his cap in his hands. "Some nights I wish that train had been late. Just that once. Just five minutes late."

The word hung in the room. Wish. Bert loved his trains on time. And he wished this one had been late.

Theo looked down at his timetables. On time. It was the best thing a train could be. He had always known that. Now he was not so sure.

Josie hugged her knees. "She sat there in the rain," she said. "All alone. On our bench." She looked up at Bert. "That is so sad."

"It is," said Bert. "That is why I never forgot her. A young woman, in the rain. And I rode away."

---

Max had not said a word for a long time. He had the umbrella in his lap. He had the little silver band in his hand.

He had a soft cloth too. He rubbed the band. He rubbed it round and round.

"Max?" said Clara.

"Polishing," said Max. "The band was dull. Old silver goes dull and gray. You rub it. You polish it. Then it shines. And then you can read it right."

He rubbed a little more. The silver began to shine. E. P. came up bright and clear.

"There," said Max. "Now you can read it well."

He pushed his glasses up. He held the band to the lamp. He looked at it a long time.

"This is old," he said. "This band is old. Older than it looks." He turned it in the light. "You can tell, by the silver. By the little marks on it. This umbrella is about forty years old."

"Forty years," said Clara.

"About that," said Max. "Give or take. It is a very old umbrella." He set it down. "A grown-up's umbrella. Not new. Not young."

"You are sure?" said Josie. "Forty years?"

"I am sure," said Max. "I know old silver. This is old."

Bert frowned. "But the woman on the platform," he said. "She was young. A young woman. Not old at all."

They all stopped.

"Say that again, Max," said Clara. "How old is the umbrella?"

"Forty years," said Max. "About forty."

"And the woman was young," said Clara. She looked at Bert.

"Young," said Bert. "Twenty, maybe. A little more. Not forty. No."

Clara stood very still. Then she went to the wall, to the two lists. She read them. She read them again.

"Then it does not fit," she said, slow. "The umbrella is about forty years old. The woman is young. The umbrella is older than she is."

"So?" said Josie.

"So the umbrella was not made for her," said Clara. "It is too old. It was made for someone else. Long ago." She turned around. "E. P. is not the young woman. E. P. is someone else."

The room went still.

"Two people," said Clara. "One umbrella."

## Chapter 4 — Seven Miles to Marlow

The next morning the sun was back. Not one cloud. The hills were green and bright.

Robert stood on platform one. He had his watch in his hand.

"The morning train to Marlow," he said. "A work run. Your mother is driving today." He looked at all four of them. "You may ride along with her. And ride back."

"All four of us?" said Josie.

"All four," said Robert. "There is room today. And Nancy is up in the cab." He put his watch away. "You go to Marlow. You ask your questions. Politely. Then you come home on the twelve-forty. Not a train later."

"Yes, Dad," said Clara.

"We will," said Theo. He could not stand still. "A ride on Firefly. Seven miles!"

---

Firefly stood ready at the platform. She was clean and green. Her brass shone in the sun. Nancy leaned out of the cab. She had oil on her hands and a big smile.

"All aboard!" she called. "Seven miles down to Marlow. Climb in, the four of you."

The children climbed into the first car. Whistle did not come. He never left his platform.

Theo had his nose to the window at once. He loved this. He loved every mile of it.

Firefly gave a long whistle. She pulled out, slow at first. Then a little faster. The station slid away behind them.

Down the line they went. Green hills on both sides. Steam blew back past the window, white and warm.

"Sheep," said Josie. She pointed. "A whole field of them."

"And the old bridge," said Theo. "Look. We go under it."

They went under the bridge. Firefly puffed up the long, slow slope. Puff, puff, puff, slow and strong. Then the line came down the other side.

"How far now?" said Josie.

"Nearly there," said Theo. "See the water tower? That means Marlow. We are close."

Max looked out too. "A bigger line here," he said. "More tracks. Look, they come in from the side."

"That is a junction," said Theo. "Lines meet at Marlow. Ours, and two more."

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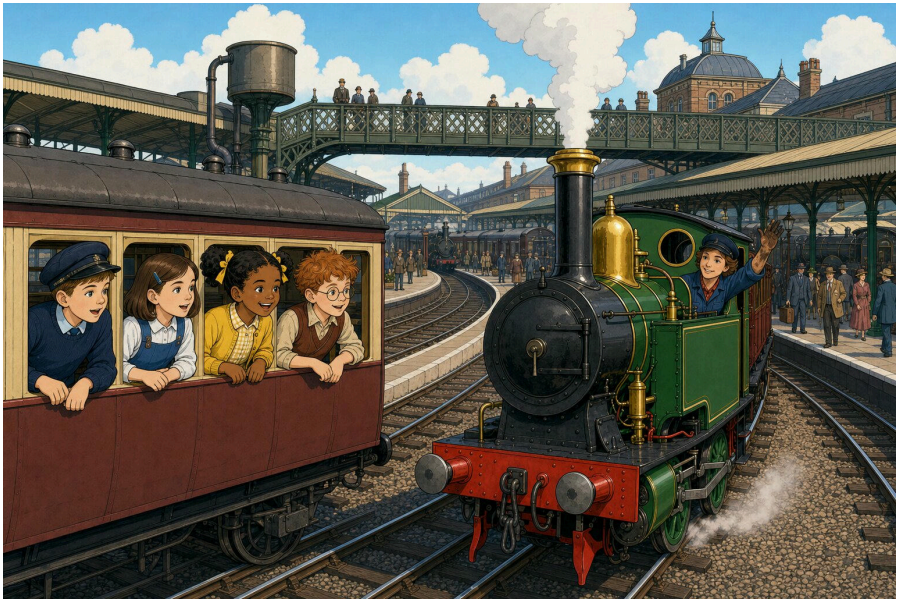
Firefly came round the last bend, and there was Marlow.

Marlow was big. Netherby had two platforms. Marlow had four. More tracks, more trains, more people. A long footbridge went over them all.

"So many platforms," said Josie. "Look at them all."

"A proper big station," said Theo. His eyes were wide. "One day I want to bring a train in here. Right up to platform one."

Firefly came to a stop. Steam and noise all round. Nancy waved to them from the cab.



"Home on the twelve-forty!" she called. "I will be right here. Do not be late."

The children got down. They walked out through the big station doors, into the town.

Outside was the square. A town square — a wide open space, with shops all round it. People walked this way and that. It was busy and bright.

"Now," said Clara. "The Assembly Hall. It is on the square, the ticket said. So it is here. Somewhere."

"There," said Max. He pushed his glasses up. "The big one. With the steps."

Across the square stood a tall stone building. Wide steps went up to it. Over the big doors, in gold letters: MARLOW ASSEMBLY HALL.

"Good find, Max," said Clara.

---

The big doors were shut. But a small side door stood open. Inside, a man swept the floor. He was old, in a brown coat. He had a broom in his hands. A ring of keys hung at his belt.

Josie went first. She always did.

"Good morning," she said. "Is this the hall where the concert was? On Friday?"

The man stopped sweeping. "It is," he said. "I am Mr. Dunn. I am the caretaker here. I keep the hall. I open it, I lock it, I sweep it, I mind the keys." He leaned on his broom. "There is a concert most Fridays. Now, what do four young people want with me?"

"We are from the station at Netherby," said Clara. "The Lost and Found Office. Someone left a red umbrella there. And a ticket for Friday's concert. We are trying to find the owner."

"Friday," said Mr. Dunn. He nodded, slow. "The Marlow Singers. Yes. I remember Friday well."

"Was it a good concert?" said Josie.

"A full hall," said Mr. Dunn. "Every seat taken. And the singing was lovely. The best all summer." He smiled. "The Marlow Singers can really sing."

"But?" said Clara. She had heard it in his voice.

"But there was one strange thing," said Mr. Dunn.

The children went still.

"What thing?" said Clara.

Mr. Dunn set his broom by the wall. "There was to be a solo," he said. "You know a solo? One singer. Alone. No choir behind her. Just the one voice, on her own."

"Yes," said Josie. "We know."

"It was printed in the program," said Mr. Dunn. "Right there in print, near the end. Her name and her song." He shook his head. "And it never happened. No solo at all."

"Never happened?" said Clara, soft.

"The singer was not there," said Mr. Dunn. "The conductor stood up. Mr. Tate — he leads the choir. He told the whole hall. He said, 'Our singer cannot be with us tonight.'" Mr. Dunn spread his hands. "That was all. 'Cannot be with us tonight.' And then no solo."

Josie's eyes were wide. "And the people?"

"Ah," said Mr. Dunn. "Now that was the thing. The people clapped." He clapped his own two hands, soft. Clap, clap. "For a singer who was not even there. They clapped for her all the same. A kind hall, Marlow."

The children looked at each other. Nobody said it, but they all thought the same thing. A singer who did not sing. And a woman who did not get on the train.

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"Mr. Dunn," said Clara. "The program. Do you have one? We would like to read it."

"A program?" He thought. "The singers hand them out at the door. Most go home in people's pockets." He went to a little shelf by the door. He moved some papers about. "But there may be a spare. One that nobody took." He looked. "Ah. Here. A spare one, for you."

He gave Clara a folded paper. On the front it said: THE MARLOW SINGERS — SUMMER CONCERT.

"Thank you," said Clara. "Thank you very much."

"You find that owner," said Mr. Dunn. He picked up his broom again. "A red umbrella. And a ticket never used. There is a sad story there, I think."

"We think so too," said Josie.

---

They went back out into the square. They found a bench by the wall and sat down in a row. Clara opened the program flat on her knee.

Song after song, all down the page in print. The children read the list together.

"There," said Max. His finger stopped near the end. "The solo. Mr. Dunn was right."

Clara read it out, slow.

"Solo," she read. "'Home by Starlight.'" She stopped. Her finger did not move. "Sung by… Miss L. Pryor."

Nobody spoke for a moment.

"L. P.," said Theo, soft.

"E. P. owns the umbrella," said Max. "E. P. — the silver band. Forty years old." He pushed his glasses up. "And now, L. P."

"L. P. was to sing the solo," said Clara. "And L. P. did not sing." She looked up from the program. "E. P. And L. P."

The square was loud and bright all round them. People and shops and sun. But the four of them sat very still on the bench.

"P and P," said Clara. She said it slow. "Two people. And the same last letter. That is not chance. Not luck. Not two strangers." She folded the program up small. "Two Pryors. One umbrella. They must belong together."

She looked at the others.

"We have two names now," she said. "And they share a name. Now we must find the family called Pryor."

## Chapter 5 — Rose Cottage

They came home to Netherby on the twelve-forty. They had two names now. But they had no house to go with them.

"Pryor," said Theo. "It is only a name. Where do we even start?"

"With Josie," said Clara. "This is her town. Josie can find anyone."

Josie grinned at that. "I know just who to ask," she said. "Come on. We are going to my gran's."

---

Josie's gran had a small, warm kitchen. A big brown teapot sat on the table. She was rolling out pastry when the four of them came in the door.

"Gran," said Josie. "We need your help. We are looking for a family. Their name is Pryor. Do you know any Pryors?"

Her gran wiped her hands on her apron. She thought for a long moment.

"Pryor," she said, slow. "I have heard that name. But my old head is no good for names now." She shook it and smiled. "You want Mrs. Kettle. Mrs. Kettle never forgets a thing. She was born in this town, and she has never once left it. Go and ask her."

"Of course," said Josie. "Mrs. Kettle. She knows everyone."

"Take her these," said Gran. She folded four warm buns into a cloth. "She likes a good bun with her tea. And she likes a visit even more."

---

Mrs. Kettle sat by her open door, in the afternoon sun. She was very old now — ninety-two, the whole town knew. Her hands were thin and her back was bent. But her eyes were still bright and quick.

Josie set the buns from Gran on her lap.

"For me?" said Mrs. Kettle. "Bless the girl. Sit, all of you. Now. You did not climb up here for nothing. What is it you want?"

"A name, Mrs. Kettle," said Josie. "Pryor. We are looking for someone called Pryor."

"Pryor," said Mrs. Kettle. She did not stop to think, not even for a second. "Elsie Pryor. Rose Cottage. Up the lane, past the chapel."

The children looked at each other. Just like that.

"The lane?" said Max.

"The little narrow road, up the hill," said Mrs. Kettle. "You go past the chapel — the small church, where we sing on Sundays. Then keep on to the top. Rose Cottage is the last house. Red roses all round the door. You cannot miss it."

"Elsie Pryor," Clara said, soft. She looked at Max. "E. P."

"She sang like a bird herself, once," said Mrs. Kettle. "In the choir, years and years back. A lovely voice." She nodded to herself. "And she is not alone up there now. A granddaughter came to live with her last year. A quiet young thing. Keeps to herself. She works over in Marlow, at the library."

Max pushed his glasses up. "The library," he said. "In Marlow."

"That is what I said," said Mrs. Kettle.

---

Outside her door, the four of them stood in a little group.

"An older Pryor," said Clara, low. "Elsie. E. P. And a young one, up at the very same house. A young one who works over in Marlow."

"And in Marlow," said Max, "a young Pryor was to sing. L. Pryor. And she did not."

"The same girl," said Theo, soft. "It must be. The granddaughter and the singer. One and the same."

"We do not know that yet," said Clara. "Not for sure. That is why we go and ask. Properly." She looked up the hill. "But first we fetch the umbrella."

They did not go up the lane. Not yet. First they went back to the station.

They told Robert all of it. He stood and listened, his watch in his hand.

"Rose Cottage," he said. "Elsie Pryor." He nodded, slow and pleased. "Good work, all of you. Then you may take the umbrella up to her." He held up one finger. "But you take it my way."

He went to the shelf and lifted the red umbrella down.

"You do not show it first," he said. "You ask her to describe it. If it is truly hers, she will know it. The red silk. The silver band. The letters. Let her tell you — and then you show her. That is how the office gives a thing back. Properly. With proof."

"Proof first," said Clara. "Then the umbrella."

"Proof first," said Robert. He put the umbrella in her hands.

---

The lane climbed up behind the town. It was narrow and green, with a tall hedge on each side. It was just wide enough for one small cart. They passed the little chapel, quiet in the sun, and kept on. Then the lane grew steep, and they slowed. At the very top stood a small stone house. Red roses grew all round the door. A wooden sign said ROSE COTTAGE.

"This is it," said Josie. "The last house. Just like Mrs. Kettle said."

Josie knocked.

"Come in," called a voice from inside. "The door is open. I cannot come to it."

They went in. An old woman sat in a chair by the window. Her white hair was neat and soft. One foot was up on a low stool. A white bandage was wrapped round her ankle, tight and clean.

"Well," she said. "Four of you. I do not get four young faces at my window. Come in, come in. Forgive me — I cannot get up to you." She looked down at her foot. "I twisted my ankle. Friday, it was, out on the step. The doctor wrapped it up tight and told me to sit still." She patted the bandage. "So here I sit."

"We are sorry about your foot," said Josie.

"It will mend," said Elsie. "Now. Who are you four young people, come to see an old one?"

Clara stepped up. "We are from the station, Mrs. Pryor," she said. "The Lost and Found Office, down at Netherby. We think we have found something of yours. But we do things properly here. So before we show you — can you tell us? Do you have an umbrella? A red one?"

Elsie went very still. Then her whole face softened.

"My red umbrella," she said. "Oh. Yes. Yes, I do." She smiled a small, soft smile. "Red silk. A curved wooden handle, worn smooth — I have held it that many years. And a little silver band, up near the handle, with two letters cut into it. E. P. Elsie Pryor. That is me." Her voice dropped low. "My husband had that band made for me. Forty years ago, near enough. He is gone now, these ten years. But the umbrella stayed with me."

Nobody spoke. Clara looked at Max. Max looked at Theo. Then Clara held out the red umbrella.



"Then this is yours, Mrs. Pryor," she said.

Elsie took it in both hands. She held it close to her, and for a moment she could not speak at all.

"Forty years," she said at last. "And here it is. On my lap again." She looked up at them, her eyes bright. "Wherever did you find it, my dears?"

"On a bench," said Josie. "At the station. It sat there all through that sunny day."

Then a shadow crossed the old woman's face. The smile faded away. She looked down at the red silk in her hands.

"On Friday," she said. Her voice was low now. "No. It was not with me on Friday. I was here, with my poor foot up on this stool. The umbrella was not with me at all." She looked up at them. "It was with Lucy."

"Lucy?" said Josie.

"My granddaughter," said Elsie. "My Lucy." Her hands closed tight round the handle. "And Lucy has not sung one note since. Not one note. Not a single note, in all this house."

## Chapter 6 — Elsie's Story

For a moment nobody spoke. The red umbrella lay across Elsie's lap. Outside, a bird sang in the roses. Inside, the little room was very still.

Then Elsie seemed to wake herself.

"Listen to me," she said. "An old woman and her troubles — and not even a cup of tea for my guests." She looked round at them all. "You will take some tea. I would make it myself. But I cannot get up." She patted the bandage. "One of you will have to be my legs."

"I can do that," said Josie. "Where is your kitchen?"

"Just through there, my dear. The kettle sits on the stove. Fill it at the tap and light the gas."

Josie went through. They heard the tap run. Then a small sound came from the kitchen. A low, soft knock, over and over. It was the kettle. That is the sound a kettle makes on the stove. The water was heating: a slow knock, knock, knock.



Elsie sat still and listened to it. Something moved in her face.

"That sound," she said, soft. "My Lucy used to sing to it. Every morning. She would stand at the stove and sing. The kettle knocked. My Lucy sang." She shook her head. "Not now. Now the kettle knocks alone."

Josie brought the tea in on a tray. The cups were old and thin, with tiny blue flowers. Max took his in both hands, careful. They found their seats. Elsie held her own cup but did not drink.

"You have been so kind," she said. "You brought my umbrella all the way up the lane. So I think you should have the rest of it. The whole of it. Let me tell you about Friday."

---

"My Lucy sings in the choir now," she began. "Over in Marlow. The Marlow Singers. And Friday was her solo. Her first one ever. One girl, alone, in front of all those people." Her eyes shone. "'Home by Starlight.' I have heard her sing it in this kitchen. A hundred times. She has a fine voice, my Lucy. Clear and high, like a little bell. Oh, I was proud. I had my ticket. A seat right at the front. I would not have missed it for the world."

She looked down at her foot.

"That afternoon I went out to the garden. Only to cut a few roses. For her, to carry up. And coming back, I came up the garden step. My foot turned right under me." She winced at the thought of it. "Down I went, on the step. By the time I was up again, my ankle was fat as a loaf. The doctor came. He wrapped it. 'You sit still,' he told me. 'No concert for you tonight.'"

"So you could not go," said Clara, soft.

"I could not go," said Elsie. "But my ticket could." She smiled a small, sad smile. "I called Lucy in. By then it was pouring. Hard rain, real rain, drumming on the glass. I put my ticket into her hand. And I gave her my umbrella, the red one. I said, 'Take these. Take my seat. Give my seat to somebody kind.'"

"And she went?" said Theo.

"She went. Off down the lane in the rain, to catch the six-ten." Elsie's hands closed round the warm cup. "And I sat here, right here by this window. I kept the lamp lit for her. I kept her supper warm on the stove. And I waited to hear how my Lucy sang."

She was quiet a moment.

"She came home late. Long after dark. Wet through." She saw their faces. "Wet through. Wet to the skin, not one dry thread on her. No umbrella. And such a look on her face." Elsie's voice dropped low. "I said, 'Lucy, how did it go? Did you sing?' And she gave me three words. Only three. 'I missed the train.' Then up the stairs she went, to her bed."

"'I missed the train,'" said Max, low.

"That is all she has ever said of it," said Elsie. "And since that night — not one note. Not in the choir. Not in this house." She glanced toward the kitchen. The kettle stood quiet now. "Not even to the kettle."

---

The four of them looked at one another. Clara set down her cup. Theo gave a small nod, and Clara spoke.

"Mrs. Pryor," she said gently. "There is a thing we must tell you. About Friday. It would not be right to keep it back."

"Tell me, child," said Elsie.

"A man from the station rode the six-ten that night," said Theo. "Old Bert. He was our conductor for forty years. He knows every door on every train." He took a breath. "He saw a young woman on the platform. Under a red umbrella."

Elsie went very still.

"He held the last door open for her," Theo went on. "The train was ready. Warm and steaming. All she had to do was step on."

"But she did not," said Josie, soft. "She looked at the open door. And she stepped back. And the train left without her."

"It did not go early, Mrs. Pryor," said Theo. "It did not leave her behind. It stood and waited, with the door held open. And she stepped back from it." He said it as kindly as he could. "She did not miss the train. The train was there. She let it go."

The room was very quiet. Elsie looked out at the roses for a long, long moment.

"Ah," she said at last. She set her cup down on the sill. "Then it is worse than a train."

Nobody spoke.

"A missed train, you catch the next one," said Elsie. "But this — this is a thing inside her. I have felt it in the house all week." She folded her thin hands in her lap. "I pray for her every night. Every single night. Prayers and patience — old women are good at both."

---

She looked at each of them in turn. Something firmer came into her.

"My Lucy is a shy one," she said. "Always was, from a little girl. A shy child grows into a shy woman. She will not tell me what happened out there on that platform. She loves me too well. And I am too close to her — I am her gran."

"But you," she said. "You are new faces. Strangers, near enough. And sometimes a stranger's ear is an easier place. It is easier to tell a hard thing to someone new than to your own gran."

She leaned forward in her chair.

"Come back Thursday," she said. "Lucy is home from the library on Thursday. Come for your tea. Let her meet you. Four kind young faces. And perhaps — perhaps she will say to you what she cannot say to me."

"We will come," said Clara. "Thursday. All four of us."

"Good," said Elsie. She sank back a little in her chair. "That is good."

They stood to go. Elsie caught Clara's hand and held it.

"One thing more," she said. Her eyes were serious now. "Whatever she tells you — whatever it is — do not dare tell her it was nothing."

Clara blinked. "Nothing?"

"People will," said Elsie. "They mean it kindly. 'Oh, it was nothing, dear. Do not fret.' Do not say that to my Lucy." Her hand tightened warm round Clara's. "It was not nothing. I can see that much from my chair by this window. It was not nothing at all."

## Chapter 7 — The Girl Who Didn't Sing

Thursday came gray and still. The four went up the lane again. The hedges still dripped from the rain. At the top stood Rose Cottage. Red roses grew round the door. Josie had talked the whole way up the hill. But at the gate, even Josie went quiet.

Elsie sat in her chair by the window. One foot was still up on the stool. And this time someone new was there.

A young woman stood at the stove. She was small and neat. Her brown hair was tied back. She wore a gray dress and an apron. She did not look up at first.

"This is my Lucy," said Elsie.

Lucy turned. She gave them a small smile. "Hello," she said. That was all.

"They brought back my umbrella," said Elsie. "All the way up the lane."

"That was kind of you," said Lucy. Her voice was soft and low. Then she turned back to the kettle.

---

They found their seats. Josie sat down first. She smiled at Lucy. Josie could talk to anyone. Thirty seconds, and she had a new friend.

"It rained this morning," said Josie. "Did you see?"

"I did," said Lucy. She set out the thin blue cups.

"But it stopped," said Josie. "It might be sunny later."

"It might," said Lucy.

"Do you like rain, or sun?"

Lucy thought a moment. "Both have their use," she said. And she poured the tea. She cut some bread and set it out. She put the butter near Max. She did everything right. But she said no more than she had to.

Josie did not give up. She asked about the library. She asked about Marlow. She asked about the long walk up the lane. Every time, Lucy gave her three or four words. Polite words. Kind words. But nothing under them.

It was like knocking on a shut door. Someone was home. The door stayed shut.

Josie looked at Clara. Clara gave a tiny shake of her head. Josie understood. The questions were not working. So Josie did a hard thing. For Josie, it was very hard. She stopped asking. She sat back with her cup. She let the room go quiet.

---

For a moment nobody spoke. The kettle knocked on the stove.

Then Theo spoke. But he did not ask Lucy a thing. He just began to talk.

"There is a bench at our station," he said. "Down at the end of platform two. We call it Pip's bench."

Lucy looked up.

"Pip was a dog," said Theo. "A long time ago. He belonged to a family here. One day they had to sail away. Far across the sea. To Canada."

Lucy had her cup half up. She held it there.

"They could not take a dog on the ship," said Theo. "Not loose. They had a crate for him. A wooden box with bars. He had to ride in that."

"But Pip was afraid," Theo went on. "He looked at the box. And he would not go in. He pulled back. He ran off down the line."

Theo's voice went soft.

"And the ship could not wait. It had to sail. So it sailed without him. One small dog. All alone on the platform."

Lucy's cup was very still now.

"Did they blame the dog?" she asked.

The room was quiet.

"No," said Theo. "Nobody ever blamed Pip. Not once."

He smiled a little.

"The old stationmaster took him in. Mr. Cray. He fed him. He kept him. Pip lived here for twelve good years. He met every train. He slept in the sun on that bench. He learned the whistle codes too. He knew them better than half the men. He was the best station dog we ever had."

Theo leaned forward.

"His brass tag still hangs in the signal box," he said. "Bert keeps it bright. We know Pip's story now. And it is a happy one." He looked at Lucy. "But it started with one small, frightened dog."

---

Nobody spoke. The clock ticked on the wall. Lucy looked down into her cup. Then she began, in a small voice.

"I was on that platform," she said. "On Friday. In the rain."

Elsie went very still.

"The train stood there," said Lucy. "All ready. Warm and steaming. The last door was open. A man held it for me." She swallowed. "All I had to do was step on. One step. And I could not."

"Lucy," said Elsie, soft.

"My feet would not go," said Lucy. "I looked at the door. And I stepped back. And the whistle went. And the train left without me." She took a slow breath. "The door had been open. It was open for me. And I would not go through it."

She turned the cup slowly in her hands.

"I sat down on the bench. In the rain. Under the red umbrella. I just sat. And I watched the train go." She looked at the window. "When it was gone, I put the umbrella down. I rolled it up neat. That is how Gran likes it. The rain ran down my neck. I did not care. I do not even remember walking home. The umbrella stayed on the bench."

Her voice dropped low.

"And here is the worst part," she said. "When it left, I was glad. The train was gone. I did not have to sing. And I felt glad." She shut her eyes. "Who feels

glad of a thing like that?" She looked up at them. "I am not a bad person. But I felt a bad thing that night."

Nobody said a word.

"Gran gave me her own seat," said Lucy. "The front row. 'Give it to somebody kind,' she said. And I gave it to no one. Mr. Tate waited. The whole choir waited. All those people." Her voice shook. "And I let them down. I let them all down."

Elsie reached across. She took Lucy's hand in both of hers. She did not say it was nothing. She just held on. Her old hand was warm. Lucy did not pull away.



For a long moment there was only silence.

Then Clara spoke. She was gentle. But she did not say it was nothing either.

"You were afraid," said Clara. "Pip was afraid too. Being afraid is not a bad thing. It is only a hard thing."

"Pip ran," said Lucy. "I sat down. It is the same."

"Pip's story turned out well," said Josie. "In the end."

Lucy gave a small, tired smile. "Pip is a dog," she said. "People are harder."

The room was warm and quiet. The kettle had gone still. Lucy wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

---

She set her cup down. Something else was on her mind.

"There is more," she said. "I have not told you all of it, Gran." She looked at Elsie. "I am sorry."

"Tell it now," said Elsie.

"After that night, I wrote the choir a note," said Lucy. "I had to say something. So I sent them a note. I said I was ill. Too sick to sing." She pressed her lips together. "It was not the truth. I was not ill. I was afraid. But 'ill' was an easier word to write."

She looked at her hands.

"Now they all think I was sick," she said. "Mr. Tate. The whole choir. And they were kind about it. They sent me their good wishes. That only makes it worse."

She lifted her head.

"There is practice on Tuesday," she said. "We practice every Tuesday. And they will want me back. Well again. Singing again." Her voice shook. "But I am not ill. I never was. I have to tell them the truth. And I cannot walk in there — and stand up — and say it."

## Chapter 8 — A Concert the Size of a Bench

They walked back down the lane. The last gray light of Thursday was fading. Nobody said much at first. Lucy's words were still with them.

Then Josie stopped in the road.

"We have to fix this," she said.

"Fix what?" said Max.

"All of it," said Josie. "Lucy. The song she did not sing. We have to make it right. The office fixes lost things. Well, this is a lost thing too."

"A lost song," said Clara, soft.

They walked the rest of the way fast.

---

Back at the station, the office was warm. Whistle slept in his basket. The great register lay open on the desk. The four sat down. And Josie had a plan.

"A concert," she said. Her eyes shone. "A big one. We fill the hall at Marlow. The whole town comes. Every seat. Then Lucy walks in — and surprise! Everyone is there. She has to sing. She cannot say no."

Josie sat back, pleased with herself.

Nobody else spoke.

Clara put down her pen. "No," she said. Quiet, but firm.

"No?" said Josie.

"Do you remember the office rule?" said Clara. "The one Dad taught us. This summer. With Ted's drawings."

Josie thought. Then she said it. "You never show a person without their leave."

"That means you ask them first," said Clara. "You do not just show them."

"But that was for drawings," said Josie. "Not for a concert."

"It is the same," said Clara. "A surprise is a gift. You give it to someone glad. Someone ready." She looked at Josie. "You cannot give a surprise to someone afraid. You cannot surprise a person out of their fear."

The office went quiet.

"Think of it," said Clara. "A full hall. All those eyes. All that light. And Lucy in the middle. Not asked. Just — caught."

Josie's face fell. "Oh," she said. "Oh, no. I did not think of that."

"It was a kind idea," said Clara. "But a surprise you cannot say no to is not a gift. It is a trap."

---

Theo sat by the window. Something was still knotted up in him. It had been there since Bert's story. He got up. He went to find his father.

Robert stood on the platform by the lamp. His pocket watch was open in his hand.

"Dad," said Theo. "Can I ask you a thing?"

"Always," said Robert.

Theo took a breath. "The 6:10 was on time that Friday. Right to the minute. Bert held the door. Lucy stepped back. And the train left. On time." He looked up. "Was that wrong?"

Robert closed his watch. He did not answer fast.

"You have thought about this a lot," he said.

"I have," said Theo. "A train should be on time. That is the whole job. But one minute more — and maybe she gets on. Maybe she sings." He frowned. "Then was *on time* wrong?"

Robert put a hand on his shoulder.

"Listen," he said. "Trains run on minutes. That is true. A late train is a broken thing." He looked down the dark line. "But stations do not run on minutes. Stations run on people. Both matter, Theo. The minute and the person. Never just one."

Theo was quiet.

"The train was not wrong," said Robert. "And Lucy was not wrong. Sometimes a person needs a minute the clock does not have." He smiled a little. "That is the reason for benches. And the office too. For the quiet minute after the train."

Theo looked down the dark platform. He looked at Pip's bench, far at the end. Something in him began to come loose.

"Then we do not fix the train," he said slowly. "We fix the minute after."

"Now you have it," said Robert.

---

Supper was ready upstairs. The whole family sat at the table above the station. The window was open. A late bird sang outside.

They bowed their heads. Robert said grace, short and warm. "For this food, and this day, and each other — thank you." Then they ate.

Over supper the plan took shape. And it was not Josie's big plan. It was a small one.

"Not a concert the size of a hall," said Clara. "A concert the size of a bench."

Theo looked up. "Say that again."

"One song," said Clara. "Not a hall full of strangers. Just us. And a few from the town. Here. On our platform. Under the canopy. After the last train."

"The platform is quiet then," said Theo. His eyes were bright now. "There is no train to fear. It has already gone."

"Elsie in the front row," said Clara. The front row — the seats right up close. "Near the front. Lucy can see her there."

"On Pip's bench," said Josie, soft.

Theo pulled a pencil close. He began to plan it out. Like a timetable. But not for trains. For people. The time of the last train. The time to light the lamps. A ride to fetch Elsie up to the station. A place for each person to stand.

"This is a timetable," said Max, looking over Theo's shoulder.

"It is," said Theo. "A timetable for people."

---

They did not go to Lucy that night. You do not ask a big thing in a rush. Clara sent a short note up the lane. Would Lucy come to the station on Saturday? Just to sit. Just to talk. No more than that.

Saturday came bright and clear. And Lucy came.

She walked down the platform slowly. She wore the same gray dress. Her hands were folded in front of her.

Josie met her halfway. "Come and see Pip's bench," she said. "The real one."

They walked to the end of platform two. There it stood. Old wood, warm in the sun. Lucy sat down on it.

Then something small and black jumped up beside her. It was Whistle. He climbed into her lap. He turned around twice. Then he sat down on her knee. He had chosen her.



"Oh," said Lucy. Her hands went to his soft back. "Hello."

"He does not do that for just anyone," said Josie.

Lucy stroked the cat. Her shoulders came down a little. For the first time, she looked at ease.

Clara sat beside her. Gently, she told her the plan.

"One song," said Clara. "Here. On this platform. Under the canopy. After the last train. Just for a bench full of people. And Elsie in the front row."

"No hall," said Theo. "No crowd of strangers. No train to catch."

"A concert the size of a bench," said Josie. "Not the size of a hall."

Lucy said nothing. She looked down the quiet line. Whistle purred in her lap. The four waited. They did not push. They had learned that now.

It was a long, long quiet.

Then Lucy took a deep breath.

"One song," she said, at last.

Josie's face lit up.

"But," said Lucy — and Josie went still. "If Gran is here. On this bench. In the front row." She looked at each of them. "And if the train has gone first. I cannot sing with a train still there. It has to be gone."

"It will be gone," said Theo. "I will see to that."

Lucy nodded slowly. Then she looked down at her own hands, folded in her lap over the cat.

"But first comes Tuesday," she said, low.

"Tuesday?" said Max.

"The choir," said Lucy. "The truth I have to tell them." Her hands drew tight. "If I cannot tell the choir the truth, I cannot sing under any roof. Not one song. Not for anyone." She looked up. "Tuesday comes first."

## Chapter 9 — Two Conductors

Tuesday came at last.

In the evening the train stood ready. Lucy was on the platform. She wore her gray dress. Her hands were folded tight.

"You do not have to go alone," said Josie.

"I know," said Lucy. But her face was pale.

The four children climbed aboard. Lucy came too. Then a slow step came behind them. It was Old Bert, in his cap.

"Bert?" said Theo. "You are coming?"

"I am," said Bert. He sat by the window. He turned his cap in his hands. "Forty years I held doors on this line. Forty years." He looked out at the pale sky. "The one I remember is the one I let go too soon."

Nobody spoke. They all knew the door he meant. The door on the 6:10. The one Lucy did not walk through.

Lucy looked at him. Bert gave her a small nod.

"We go together," he said.

---

Firefly pulled them down the line. Seven miles to Marlow. Warm and steady, all the way.

At Marlow they crossed the square. The Assembly Hall stood tall in the evening light. But they did not go to the big front doors. Bert led them around to a small side door.

Inside, the choir was warming up.

They stood in rows. One man stood in front of them. He waved both hands, slow and even. The singers watched his hands. They hummed one long, low note. The note filled the hall. His hands came down, and the hum stopped.

"That is Mr. Tate," Josie said, low.

The children slipped into seats at the back. Lucy stood by the door. She did not go in yet.

---

Mr. Tate clapped his hands. “Good. From the top. The conductor is ready.”

Bert stood up.



“That is me,” he said.

The children stared at him.

Mr. Tate turned. “I beg your pardon?”

Bert looked around. He saw the choir. He saw Mr. Tate’s hands, still lifted. Slowly, he understood. He sat back down.

“Ah,” he said. “Not me. Him.”

Josie put a hand over her mouth. A soft laugh went around the back row.

“I was a conductor,” Bert told the children, quiet. “Forty years. Old habit. Someone says ‘conductor,’ and up I get.”

"But you ARE a conductor," said Max. "And so is he."

Theo frowned. "How? Bert works on trains. Mr. Tate sings."

"One word," said Max. "Two jobs." He counted on his fingers. "On a train, the conductor helps the people. He checks the tickets. He holds the doors. He calls out the stations." He looked at Bert. "That is Bert."

"That was me," said Bert, warm.

"In a choir," Max went on, "the conductor stands in front. He leads the singers. He tells them when to start. When to stop. He keeps them all together." Max nodded at Mr. Tate. "That is him."

Theo looked from one man to the other. "Two conductors," he said. "One word."

"Forty years I held doors," said Bert. He watched Mr. Tate's hands lift the choir. "Never once did I hold a song."

---

Then Mr. Tate saw the girl by the door.

His hands came down. The hall went still.

"Lucy," he said. His voice was kind. "You came."

The whole choir turned. They looked at her. Every face.

"Lucy!" said a woman in the front row. "We were so worried. Are you well now? Are you better?"

Lucy did not move. Her hands were tight. The kind words were the hardest part of all.

Then she stepped in. One step. Two.

"I have to tell you something," she said. Her voice was small. "And it is hard."

The hall was quiet.

Lucy took a breath.

"I was not ill on Friday," she said. "I was not sick. That was not true." She looked down. "I wrote you a note. I wrote that I was ill. But it was not true. I was afraid."

Nobody spoke.

"I was afraid to stand up and sing alone," Lucy said. "The train was ready. The door was open. And I could not get on. My feet would not go." She lifted her eyes. "So I did not sing. And I sent you a note that was not the truth. I am sorry. I am so sorry."

The silence held.

---

For a long moment, no one said a word.

Then Mr. Tate came down from the front. He stood in front of her.

"Lucy," he said. "Thank you."

She looked up, surprised.

"That was a hard thing to say," said Mr. Tate. "A very hard thing. To stand here and own up. To admit you were afraid." He shook his head, slow. "Not many people can. It takes more than a good voice."

"But I let you all down," said Lucy.

"Did she?" Mr. Tate turned to the choir. "Did she let us down?"

A tall man stood up at the back. Very tall, with a deep, low voice.

"My first solo," he said. "Ten years ago. Right here in this hall." He looked shy, for such a big man. "I was so afraid I sang the whole song to the back wall. I never once looked at a soul. My knees shook the whole time." He smiled. "I know that door, Lucy. I know it well."

"And me," said the woman in the front row. "My first time, I forgot the words. Every one. I just stood there."

"I could not sing at all," said another. "So I hummed. I hummed and hoped no one heard."

One by one they owned up. Half the choir, it seemed. Each with a first time. Each with a fear.

Lucy looked from face to face. Her eyes were wet now. But her shoulders had come down.

Mr. Tate lifted a hand.

"Listen," he said. "Fear is why we sing together. One voice can shake. One voice can stop. But many voices hold each other up." He looked around at them all. "That is what a choir is for. Nobody sings alone."

---

Then Josie could not hold it in.

"Lucy is going to sing," she said. "On Saturday. At our station. One song, under the canopy, after the last train."

The choir turned to her.

"A song? At the station?" said the tall man.

"For her gran," said Josie. "And the town. Just a small one."

The choir looked pleased. Then hopeful.

"Could we come?" asked the woman in the front row. "Could the Singers come too? To hear you?"

Every face turned to Lucy. And they waited. Nobody pushed. It was hers to choose.

Lucy was quiet a long moment. Then she looked up. And something in her face had changed.

"Let them come," she said. "Let them all come." She stood a little straighter. "And I will not sing a small song. I will sing the solo. 'Home by Starlight.' The one I did not sing."

The children stared.

"Lucy," Clara said, soft. "Are you sure?"

"I am sure." For the first time, her voice did not shake. "If I stand up there and stop — if the fear comes back — they will catch me." She looked at the choir. "That is what you said. Nobody sings alone. So let them come. If I stop, they will catch me."

Mr. Tate smiled.

"We will," he said. "Every one of us."

---

They rode home on the late train. Lucy was quiet. But it was a good quiet now.

At Netherby they climbed down onto the dark platform. They walked up past the signal box. The lamp glowed warm inside. The evening was clear and still. The first stars were out.

Then Bert stopped. He lifted his head. He sniffed the air, slow and deep.

"Rain," he said.

Theo looked up at the clear sky. "Rain? There is not a cloud."

"Not tonight," said Bert. "But it is coming." He sniffed again. He was sure of it. "Rain by Saturday. Real rain. I can smell it."

The children looked at each other.

Saturday night. The concert. The whole town would come out onto the open platform — and now the whole choir too.

Nobody had thought about rain.

## Chapter 10 — Rain by Saturday

All that week, the office was busy.

The concert was on Saturday. That gave them just a few days to plan it. And Theo planned every hour.

"I will make a timetable," he said. "Not for trains. This time, for people."

He took a big clean sheet and wrote SATURDAY across the top. Then, line by line, he filled it in. A timetable for people.

Clara read it over his shoulder.

"Half past seven," she read. "Sweep the platform. Who does the sweeping?"

"Josie and Max," said Theo. "The whole platform must be clean. No dust, no leaves, nothing."

Josie groaned. "A broom. My favorite job in the world."

But when Saturday came, she swept it well. She and Max swept from end to end, and not one leaf was left behind.

"Quarter to eight," Clara read on. "Light the lamps."

"There are six lamps under the canopy," said Theo. "Old ones. Robert will fill them in the day. Bert will light them at dark." He tapped the sheet. "By eight o'clock, the whole platform must glow."

"Ten to eight," Clara read. "The last train."

"That is the choir," said Theo, and he almost smiled. "The Marlow Singers ride up on the last train. All of them, together. It comes in at ten to eight. I checked the time twice."

"And then?" said Josie.

"Then the train pulls out again," said Theo. "Firefly takes the cars away, and the platform is clear. Lucy asked for that. She cannot sing with a train still there. So the train goes first. Then she sings."

Clara looked at the next line. "Eight o'clock. Elsie."

"Robert will fetch her," said Theo. "By cart, up the lane and down to the station. Right to the yard gate." The yard gate stood at the top of the platform, by the road, where a cart could come close. "No steps for Elsie. No long walk. We help her from the gate to Pip's bench. The front row."

Clara smiled at him. "You thought of everything."

"A good timetable does," said Theo.

---

Then Clara sat down at the desk with two clean white cards.

"Every guest needs a ticket," she said. "This is a concert. A concert needs tickets."

She did not print them. She drew them by hand, slow and careful, in her very best writing.

The first card was for Elsie:

PIP'S BENCH. FRONT ROW.

The second was for Lucy:

ADMIT ONE. MISS LUCY PRYOR. PLATFORM TWO. TO SING.

She held them up for the others to see.

"Hand-drawn," said Max. He pushed his glasses up. "Not printed. Hand-drawn is better. Much better."

Theo took Lucy's ticket and turned it over. He looked at it a long moment.

"Do you remember the first ticket?" he said, quiet. "The one in the red umbrella. Admit one — but no hole in it. Never punched." He remembered his own words. "A ticket with no hole is a journey that never happened."

He set Lucy's ticket down, gentle.

"This time," he said, "the ticket gets its hole."

"How?" said Josie.

"Bert." Theo grinned. "Bert kept his old punch. His conductor's punch. Forty years he punched tickets on this line." He looked round at them all. "When

Lucy steps up to sing, Bert will punch her ticket. One clean hole. This journey happens."

Nobody spoke for a moment. It was the best plan yet.

---

That evening, up in the rooms above the station, they made one more plan. A secret one.

Nancy sat at the table, and the children leaned in close.

"Firefly should be in it too," said Josie.

"How?" said Clara.

"The whistle," said Nancy, and her eyes were bright. "When Lucy sings her very last note, I pull the cord. Firefly whistles. Long and loud. All for her."

Theo thought it through. "Firefly will be here anyway. She brings the choir up. Then she waits at the far end of the platform, quiet, with her steam low." He nodded. "Yes. She can whistle."

"But Lucy must not know," said Nancy. "Not one word."

"Why not?" said Josie.

Clara answered her. "Think, Josie. If we tell Lucy, it turns into a test. Sing well enough, and Firefly whistles for you. That is not kind at all." She shook her head. "But say nothing, and it is a gift. It asks nothing of her. It just comes. After."

Josie thought about that. "A gift," she said slowly. "Not a test."

"A gift," said Nancy.

So they kept the secret. All week long, they kept it. Not one of them said a word to Lucy about the whistle.

---

And all week long, the sky stayed blue.

Every morning Theo looked up. Not a single cloud. The sun was warm, the air was still, and the hills stood bright and clear.

"Blue all week," said Josie, happy. "We are so lucky. Blue skies for the concert."

But Bert only shook his head. He stood by the signal box and looked up at the wide blue sky.

"Too blue," he said.

"Too blue?" Josie laughed. "How can a sky be too blue?"

"It can," said Bert. "This kind of blue does not last. I have seen it before." He sniffed the warm air. "The rain is out there. It waits. It waits for Saturday." He gave a small, sure nod. "It always waits for the day you want dry."

Josie looked up again. The sky was blue from edge to edge, without one cloud in it. She did not believe him.

But Bert was very rarely wrong about rain.

---

Saturday came, and all day the sky held blue.

Theo followed his timetable, hour by hour.

At half past seven, Josie and Max swept the platform clean.

At quarter to eight, Bert went along the canopy with a match, and lit the six lamps one by one. Warm and gold, all down the platform. The station glowed in the dusk.



At ten to eight, a whistle called far down the line. The last train came round the bend, warm and steaming. Firefly, and behind her the cars — full of the choir. They had all come. Every one.

The train stopped and the doors swung open. Out stepped the Marlow Singers in their best coats — Mr. Tate, the tall man, the woman from the front row. They looked round at the little station and its warm lamps, and they smiled.

Then Firefly pulled the cars away, and the platform stood clear. Just as Theo had planned.

And now the town began to come.

They came in ones and twos, through the yard gate and down onto the platform. Old Mrs. Kettle. Josie's gran. The man from the shop, and more behind him. They trickled in, slow and steady, and stood under the warm lamps and waited.

Josie looked round at them all, and her face was bright.

"They came," she said. "Look at them. It is going to work!"

Then something hit the canopy roof.

One drop. Then another. Fat and heavy, they rattled on the old roof, hard and loud.

Rat. Rat-tat-tat.

Every face turned up to the roof.

The rain had come. Real rain, at last — just as Bert had said it would.

Josie stared up at the dark sky. Her smile was gone.

"No," she said. "No, no, not now." She turned to the others, and her voice was small. "Nobody comes out in real rain. Nobody!"

The drops came faster and harder. Under the lamps, the townspeople looked up at the rain. The choir stood ready. The bench waited empty for Elsie. The lamps still glowed.

But the concert had not even begun. And now the rain was coming down.

## Chapter 11 — Home by Starlight

The rain came down hard.

Josie stood under the canopy and stared out at it. “Nobody comes out in real rain,” she said again. Her voice was very small. “Nobody.”

But Theo was looking up the platform. “Josie,” he said. “Look.”

She looked.

Up at the yard gate, a light was moving. Then two lights. Then more. Round dark shapes, out there in the rain. They came slowly down toward the platform.

Umbrellas.

A whole line of them.

They came in through the gate, one after another. Black umbrellas. Brown ones. Big ones and small ones. And under them came the town.

Wet boots. Warm coats. Bright, happy faces.

They came down onto the platform. They shook the rain from their umbrellas. And they smiled.

“They came,” Josie whispered. “In the rain. They all came.”

Max pushed up his glasses. They were spotted with drops. “Of course they came,” he said. “This is a railroad town, Josie. Rain never stopped a train here. Why would it stop us?”

Still more came in through the gate. The platform filled up. Soon it was full of people and full of umbrellas. Warm under the six gold lamps.

Old Mrs. Kettle was there, under a big black umbrella. Josie’s gran was there too. They had come in early, before the rain. And they were not going home now.

---

Then a cart came up to the yard gate.

It was Robert's cart. He climbed down and helped someone out, slow and careful. It was Elsie.

She had a blanket round her knees. One foot was still bandaged. Robert took one arm, and Old Bert took the other. Step by step, they helped her down onto the platform. Step by step, all the way to Pip's bench. The front row.

Josie ran on ahead of them. She had something red in her hand.

The red umbrella.

She opened it up wide and held it high over the bench. Bright red, right over the front row. The rain ran off it and away.

Elsie sat down and looked up at the red silk. Her old eyes went soft.

"My umbrella," she said. "All the way back to this bench. This is where Lucy left it." She patted the seat beside her. "Round and round, and home again."

Then Whistle the cat came out from his basket. He did not like the rain. But he did not want to miss this. He hopped up onto the bench, next to Elsie, and sat down dry and pleased.

---

Now it was time.

Up at the top of the platform, by the last lamp, Lucy stood very still. Her gray dress was neat. Her hands were tight. In her fingers she held a small white card. Her ticket.

Old Bert came up to her. He had his old punch in his hand. The conductor's punch, forty years old.

"Ticket, please, miss," he said, soft and warm.

Lucy gave it to him. He read it out loud, slow.

"Admit one. Miss Lucy Pryor. Platform two. To sing." He looked at her over the top of the card. "The first ticket had no hole in it," he said. "That was a journey that never happened." He lifted the punch. "This one is going to happen."

Click. The punch bit down. One clean hole, right through the card.

He gave it back to her. "There," he said. "Now it is punched. Now you go and sing."

---

Lucy walked out under the lamps. The whole town watched her. All the umbrellas. All the faces. Over her head the rain drummed on the canopy roof. Rat-tat-tat. Hard and steady. It did not stop.

She came to the front and turned round. And the fear came up in her.

Her breath went short. Her hands began to shake. For one long moment she could not do it. She looked down at her own two feet. On this same platform, one rainy Friday, they would not go.

Then, behind her, the choir began to hum.

Soft and low, all together, they hummed the first line of the song. No words. Just the tune, low and warm, to show her the way in.

Lucy lifted her head.

Her eyes went out over the crowd. They looked, and they found the bright red umbrella. Under it sat Elsie. Her gran. Watching her. Waiting for her. And Elsie gave the smallest nod.

Lucy took a deep breath. She opened her mouth. And she sang.

---

The first note came out clear and true. Then the next, and the next. The song was "Home by Starlight" — an old, soft song. It is about a long road home, in the dark. Only the stars light the way.

The rain did not stop for her. It drummed on the canopy, hard as before. No wind dropped. No cloud broke. There was no magic in the sky.

But Lucy's voice went up and over the rain. Clear and high, it carried all the way down the platform. It carried over the drumming and out into the dark night. That is a thing a true voice can do. A true voice carries.

Nobody moved. Under all the umbrellas, the town stood still and listened. Elsie's lips moved with every word. She knew them all by heart. Max stood

by the office door and did not move. Theo forgot all about his timetable. They only listened.

Lucy sang on, alone and clear. She was not one bit afraid now. Her starlight song filled the little station and the whole rainy night.



---

Then came the last note. Long and high and sweet. Lucy held it, and held it, and let it go.

For one breath, everything was still. There was only the rain.

Then, far down at the dark end of the platform, Nancy pulled the cord.

Firefly whistled.

Long and loud and joyful, her whistle rang out over the whole station. It was not a going-away whistle. It was a whistle just for Lucy. All for her.

Lucy's head came up. She had not known. Her eyes went wide — and then she laughed. A real laugh, right there in the rain. Half a laugh, and half a happy cry.

And now the town began to clap.

Hands came out from under the umbrellas. They clapped, and clapped, and clapped. The applause rolled all down the platform, warm and loud. It rolled over the rain and under Firefly's whistle. All for Lucy. All for the song. It almost did not happen at all.

Elsie clapped too, under the red umbrella, with tears on her happy old face. Josie clapped hardest of all. "She did it!" she cried. "She did it!"

The clapping went on and on. Lucy stood in the middle of it, red-cheeked and glad.

---

Then a tall man came toward her through the clapping. It was Mr. Tate, the choir leader. He had come up on the train with all the rest. He stopped in front of Lucy, and he was smiling.

"Miss Pryor," he said. All around them the town still clapped. "That was worth the wait."

Lucy could not find one word. She only shook her head and smiled.

"We sing again at harvest," said Mr. Tate. "In the fall, with the apples in. The whole choir together." He stopped a moment. "And the solo, Miss Pryor…?"

The clapping went on and on. Lucy looked at him. She looked out at the town. At the red umbrella. At her gran.

And her answer would have to wait.

## Chapter 12 — Returned

The rain grew soft.

It fell slow now, quiet on the canopy roof. The hard drumming was gone. The song was over. The night was calm.

One by one, the town went home. They put their umbrellas up at the yard gate and walked out into the soft rain. "Good night!" they called. "Well sung, Miss Pryor! Well sung!"

Lucy stood by the office door. She thanked every one of them. Her face was warm and glad.

Old Mrs. Kettle went by on her slow feet. "Your gran sang like that once," she told Lucy. "Now you do too." Josie's gran gave Lucy's arm a soft squeeze. "Lovely, dear," she said. "Just lovely."

Then Mr. Tate came to her. The whole choir waited behind him. Their train stood ready to take them back down to Marlow.

"Well, Miss Pryor?" said Mr. Tate. He was smiling. "We sing again at harvest. And the solo?"

Lucy did not look down this time. She looked him right in the eye.

"Yes," she said. "I will sing it."

Mr. Tate's smile grew wide. Behind him the whole choir began to clap, soft and warm, one more time.

"The truth made it better," Lucy said. "All of it. I was so afraid to tell you. And now…" She looked out at them all. "Now you are my own people. I am not afraid to sing for my own people."

Mr. Tate held out his hand. Lucy shook it.

"At harvest, then," he said. "Home by Starlight, one more time."

"One more time," said Lucy.

---

Later the choir train went off down the line. And the little office was warm and full.

Robert made cocoa for everyone. He set the pot on the stove and stirred it slow. Soon it was hot. He poured it into cups — brown and sweet, with steam rising up. Cocoa, warm all the way down.

They all crowded into the office. Elsie sat in the big chair by the desk. Lucy sat close beside her. The four children found seats. Whistle the cat curled up in his basket by the door. Everyone held a warm cup.

Elsie held her cup in both hands. She looked round at the four children. "You found more than my umbrella," she said. "You found my Lucy her song." She could not say more. Her old eyes were bright.

Old Bert sat by the window with his cocoa. All night he had held Lucy's ticket, and punched it, and given it back. Now he watched her over the top of his cup. "Forty years I held doors open," he said. "Tonight I held the right one." And he smiled down into his cocoa.

Outside, the soft rain fell. Inside, it was warm and gold and happy.

---

A little later, Robert brought the cart round again. It was time to take Elsie home.

They all came out onto the platform. The red umbrella still leaned by Pip's bench. Josie had left it there. Elsie picked it up. She held it a moment and looked at it.

Then she gave it to Lucy.

"Here," she said. "Take it."

Lucy looked at her. "Gran, it is yours. Grandpa gave it to you."

"And now I give it to you," said Elsie. "It kept the rain off me for forty years." She patted Lucy's hand. "It waited on this bench a whole long day, just for you. Now it is yours. Put it up, and walk me to the cart."

So Lucy opened the red umbrella wide. She held it over them both. And the two of them walked slow down the platform, under the bright red silk, out of the rain.



Josie let out a long, happy breath. “That is the best thing we ever found,” she said. “A whole song.”

---

Max watched them go. He pushed up his glasses.

“That silver band,” he said. “I could tell you the price. To the dollar.” He was quiet a moment. “A band like that, forty years old — I know the price.”

Clara looked at him. “And?”

Max shook his head. “It is not for sale,” he said. “It never was.” He watched the red umbrella move down the platform. “A thing like that is worth its story. And you cannot buy a story. Not for one dollar. Not for a thousand.”

---

Robert stood by the office door with his pocket watch in his hand. He was not checking the time. He was only holding it. Theo came and stood beside him.

“Everyone got here,” Theo said. “Everyone got home. And the song happened.” He almost smiled. “That was the plan.”

Robert closed the watch. Click. He put a hand on Theo's shoulder.

"You planned tonight like a timetable, Theo," he said. "For people." He looked out at the platform, at Lucy and the red umbrella at the yard gate. "That is the best kind of timetable there is."

---

Back inside, Clara opened the great register. She turned to the right page. There it was, in her own careful hand:

*Item 51. One red umbrella. Red silk. Curved wooden handle, worn smooth. Silver band, E. P.*

She dipped her pen. At the end of the line she wrote one word: *Returned.* Then, under it, she wrote a little more: *One song: delivered.*

She read it out loud, soft. "Item fifty-one. One red umbrella. Returned. One song: delivered."

Then she took Elsie's ticket. It was the little Marlow ticket, still with no hole in it — never used. Clara had a small pot of paste. She spread a little on the back. Then she pasted the ticket down on the page, right beside the words. Proof. The office always keeps its proof.

"There," said Clara. "The case is closed."

And then Whistle jumped up. He landed on the open register and sat down, right on the page. He always did this. He had done it for Item 1, too.

Clara laughed. "Yes, Whistle," she said. "You sign it too."

---

Now it was late. The station was quiet. Time to put things away.

Max carried the concert lamps back inside, two by two. He set them on the low shelf by the door. Then he reached up for the high shelf, to make room.

His hand touched something up there. Something small and hard. He lifted it down.

It was a little wooden horse.

It was old — very old. Years of dust lay gray on its back. Someone had carved it by hand, long ago: four small legs, a fine little head, a carved mane. Max blew on it. The dust rose up in a cloud.

A label hung from one leg. He read it.

"Wooden horse," he read. "Found in car three." That was all. No name. No date. Only dust.

The others came over to look. Clara leaned in. Theo leaned in. Even Whistle lifted his head from the register.

Max turned the little horse over in his hands. He looked at the bottom of each hoof.

Under one hoof there was a tiny mark. It was burned into the wood — small and dark and clear. A little sign. A maker's mark.

A new thing. And a new question. Come down off the high shelf, after all these years.

Max pushed up his glasses. He looked closer.

"Now whose mark is that?" he said.

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