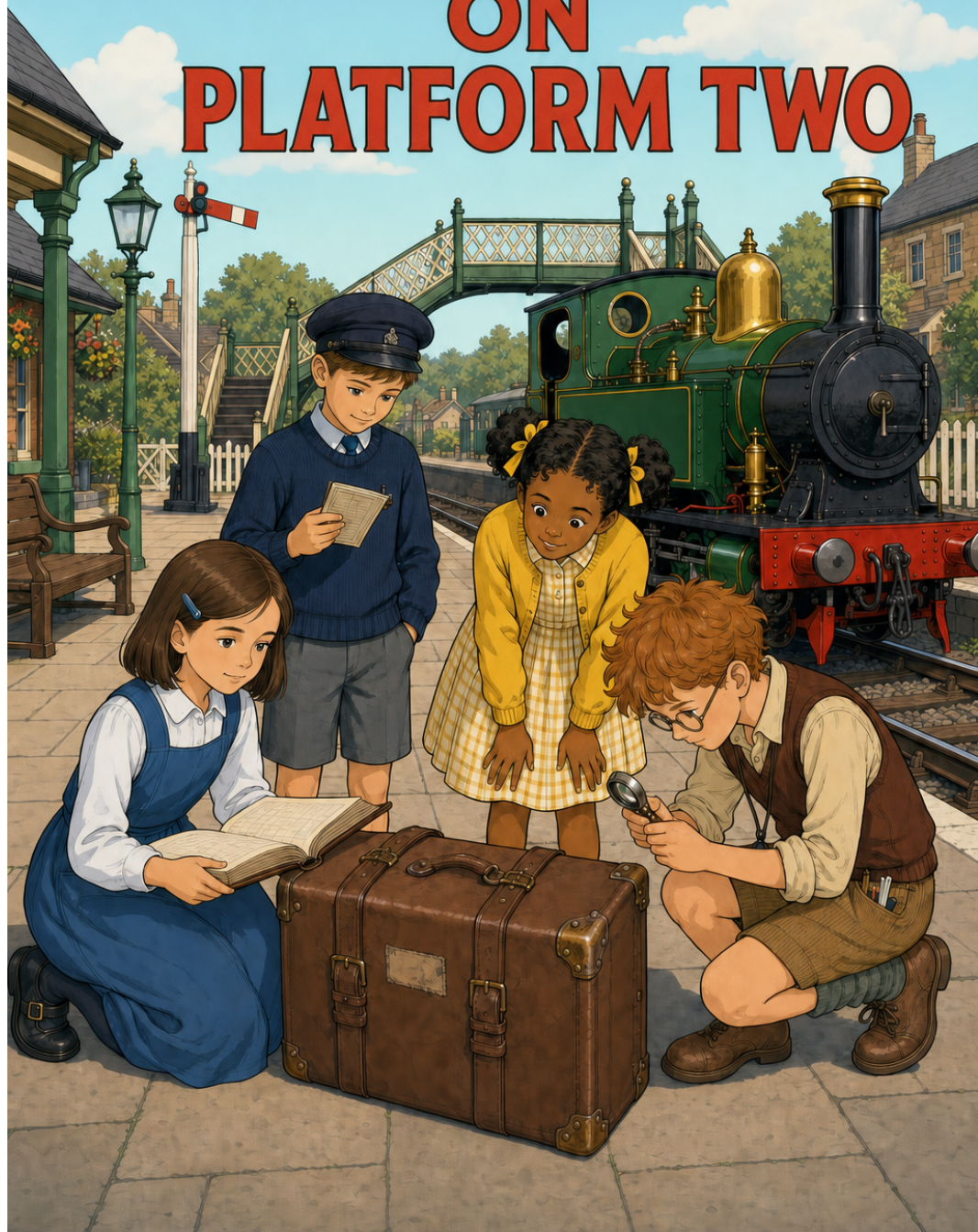


THE SUITCASE ON PLATFORM TWO



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About This Book

At a Glance

- **Reading level:** English level A2 (CEFR)
- **Age:** 8+
- **Length:** 12 chapters · ±16,000 words

The Series

Netherby is a little village on an old steam railway through the hills, kept alive by volunteers — and the Wren family keeps the station, together with the Lost Property 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

Netherby is a little village with a steam railway, two platforms, and a Lost Property Office full of forgotten treasures. When Theo, Clara, Josie and Max clear out the old depot, they find something hidden behind a cupboard: a heavy brown suitcase, locked, with two letters sewn on the side — E. A. Inside are old photographs, a notebook of beautiful pencil drawings, and a train ticket that was never used. Whose case is it? Why did it wait so long in the dark? And who packs a whole village into one small case, and then leaves it behind? Follow the four friends as they read the clues, ask the right questions, and try to send a lost treasure home. Can they find the boy who drew Netherby?

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Chapter 1: Clearing the Depot

The whistle came first, far up the line.

Theo Wren knew that whistle. It was *Firefly*, the little green engine, coming down the hill with the morning train. His mother was driving today.

“Nine minutes past nine,” said Theo. He did not look at a clock. He never had to.

It was Saturday, and Netherby station was busy. This was a volunteer weekend, and half the village had come to help. The line was fifty years old this summer. Soon there would be a big day — an anniversary — with flags, and cake, and every seat full. But first, there was work to do.

The biggest job of all was the depot.

The depot was the old store house behind platform two. For years it had held things that nobody wanted: broken lamps, bent signs, old wheels, and boxes and boxes of dust. Today, four friends were clearing it out.

“Pass me that lamp,” said Max Cotton.

Max held the lamp up to the light and turned it round in his hands. Max could look at almost anything old and tell you what it was, and how old, and what it was worth. “Eighteen-nineties,” he said happily. “And still good.” He set it gently in the box marked KEEP.

Josie Bell had a broom that was taller than she was. “This is the dustiest place in the whole world,” she said, and sneezed three times. But she was laughing. Josie could make friends with anyone — even a broom.

Clara Wren, Theo’s older sister, wrote everything down. That was Clara. She had a long list, and every box that went out of the door got a neat tick.

By the middle of the morning, the depot was almost empty. Almost.

In the darkest corner, against the back wall, stood a tall wooden cupboard. It was old and heavy, and it did not want to move.

“Give me a hand,” said Theo.

Theo and Max pushed. Josie pulled. For a moment nothing happened. Then the cupboard slid — a little, and then a lot — and behind it was something nobody had seen for a very, very long time.

A suitcase.



For a second, nobody spoke.

Josie knelt down and touched it. A suitcase is a case for carrying your clothes when you go on a journey. This one was brown and square, with two strong straps and a handle on top. The outside felt soft, and it was a little cracked, like an old shoe.

“It’s leather,” said Max quietly. He knew leather when he saw it. “Real leather, too. The good kind.” He rubbed a corner with his thumb. “Someone paid a lot for this, once.”

Theo tried the two little clasps. They did not move. In the middle, between them, was a small lock — and no key anywhere.

“It’s locked,” he said.

Josie lifted one end, and then let it down again. "It's heavy," she said. Her eyes were wide. "There's something inside."

On the end of the case was a label. Not a paper label — a small square of cloth, sewn onto the leather by hand. On it, in careful little stitches, were two letters.

E. A.

"E. A.," said Clara softly. She said it again. "Those are somebody's letters. Somebody's name."

"Let's open it!" said Josie. "Where's the key? Max, can you—"

"Wait."

The voice was calm, and it came from the doorway. The children turned round.

It was Robert Wren, the stationmaster — Theo and Clara's father. He stood in the light with his cap on and his silver watch chain across his waistcoat, and he was looking at the suitcase in the corner.

"My word," he said. "Now where did *you* come from?"

"It was behind the cupboard, Dad," said Theo. "It must have been there for years."

Robert came and looked, but he did not touch. "And what is the rule," he said, "when we find a thing that is not ours?"

Everybody knew this rule. Josie said it before anyone else. "Everything found comes to the office."

"Everything found comes to the office," said Robert, "and we do things properly. We don't break locks. We don't guess. We find out whose it is, and we give it back." He smiled. "Come along. This one goes in the register."

So they carried the suitcase, all four of them, out of the dusty depot, across the footbridge, and along platform one to the Lost Property Office.

The office was Clara's favourite room in the whole station. Along one wall were shelves and shelves of found things, each one with a label and a

number: umbrellas, a walking stick, a tin drum, a single brown boot. In the basket by the door, Whistle, the station cat, lay fast asleep. He opened one amber eye, looked at the suitcase, and went back to sleep.

On the big desk lay the great register. It was thick and heavy, and every found thing at Netherby for fifty years was written in it. Clara turned to a clean, new page and picked up her pen.

“Before we can find the owner,” said Robert, “we have to describe it. To describe a thing means to say exactly what it looks like — every colour, every mark. Clara writes it all down, and the register never forgets. So. What have we got?”

They stood round the case, and they described it.

“What colour is it?” said Clara.

“Brown,” said Josie.

“What is it made of?”

“Leather,” said Max.

Clara wrote *brown leather suitcase* in her careful hand. “How big?”

Josie held her hands apart, and Theo fetched the measure. “Long,” said Josie.

“About this long.”

“What else? Every mark.”

“Two straps,” said Theo. “A handle. A lock, but no key.”

“And the label,” said Clara, without looking up. “Cloth, sewn on by hand. The letters E and A.” She wrote it all down — the straps, the handle, the lock, the letters. Then Max leaned in close.

“There,” he said, pointing at the bottom corner. “See that? The leather has been mended. Somebody stitched this corner, a long time ago, by hand. This case was looked after. This case *travelled*.”

Clara wrote that too: *one corner mended by hand*.

Then she looked up. “Item,” she said, and read out the new number at the top of the page. It was the newest line in fifty years of found things. “Leather suitcase. E. A. Found in the depot.”

For a moment they all just looked at it — the brown case, sitting on the desk in the quiet office, giving nothing away.

Max took off his glasses, cleaned them, and put them on again. He bent right down to the case, the way he did when something really mattered.

“What is it, Max?” said Josie.

“The straps,” he murmured. “The clasps. The shape of the handle.” He straightened up slowly. “This suitcase is from the nineteen-fifties. I’m sure of it.”

“The fifties,” said Theo. “That’s—”

“Old,” said Max. “But that is not the strange part.” He looked round at all of them. “Look at the dust. Look at where it stood — right in the corner, behind that cupboard. Nobody moved it. Nobody touched it.” He put his hand flat on the brown leather. “This case has been here, in this station, for about sixty years.”

Nobody said a word.

Sixty years. Sixty years in the dark, behind a cupboard, waiting.

And no key.

Chapter 2: Opening the Case

Nobody wanted to leave the office.

The brown suitcase sat in the middle of the big desk, and the four friends sat round it in a ring. Sixty years it had waited in the dark. And still, there was no key.

A key is a small metal thing that opens a lock. Without the right key, a lock stays shut. And this lock was little, and old, and shut fast.

“We could just—” Josie began.

“No,” said Robert, before she could finish. “We don’t break locks. You know the rule.”

“But how do we open it, Dad?” said Theo. “There’s no key anywhere. We looked and looked.”

Robert only smiled. He crossed to the far wall, where a small wooden box hung on a nail. The children had passed it a hundred times and never once thought about it. Robert lifted it down and blew a cloud of dust off the top.

“Do you know what this is?” he said.

Max leaned in close. “Keys,” he breathed. “It’s full of keys.”

Robert opened the lid. Inside, on tiny hooks, hung row after row of small keys — brass and iron, fat and thin, each one dull and dark with age.

“The master key box,” said Robert. “Every stationmaster before me looked after it. Long ago, cases like this one all had the same little kind of lock. So the railway kept one key for each kind. That way, if a case was lost, we could open it gently — and find out who it belonged to.” He ran his finger along the hooks. “Somewhere in here is a key that fits E. A.”

“Can I try?” said Josie.

“We all try,” said Robert. “But the proper way is slow. We try one key, then the next. We wait. We do no harm. If we hurry, we can spoil the lock — and then we have spoiled somebody’s case.” He lifted a small brass key off its hook. “Patience, and proof. That is how this office works.”

He slid the first key into the little lock. It would not turn.

He tried a second. Nothing.

Josie held her breath. Max, who liked lists almost as much as Clara did, wrote down each key that did not fit.

The seventh key slid in — and then it stopped.

Robert turned it, ever so softly. There was a small, tired *click*, sixty years old.

The lock opened.

For a moment nobody moved. Then Robert lifted the two clasps, one, two, and raised the lid.

A smell came out — old and dry and a little sweet, like an attic on a hot day. Inside, everything lay under a sheet of thin paper, gone yellow with time.

Clara lifted the paper away with two careful fingers.



On the very top lay a shirt. It was white, or it had once been white, folded as neatly as if somebody had pressed it that very morning. A stiff collar, a row of buttons, the sleeves folded in across the front.

“A Sunday-best shirt,” said Josie softly. Everyone knew what that meant. It was the good shirt — the one you kept for church, and for special days.

Under the shirt was a flat paper packet, tied with string. Clara untied the string, and out slid a little stack of photographs.

Photographs are pictures made with a camera. These were small, and grey, and soft at the corners — pictures from long, long ago.

“That’s the mill!” said Theo. “Look — the mill, when it was still working.” In the picture the great mill wheel turned in the river, and men stood outside in caps, and smoke rose from the tall chimney.

Josie took the next one. “And the school. That’s *our* school!” But the school in the photograph had a bell on the roof, and a line of small children at the door in old-fashioned clothes.

There was the station too — Netherby station, wrapped in a great white cloud of steam, and more people on the platform than any of them had ever seen there at once.

“This is our village,” said Clara slowly. “But years and years ago. Before we were born. Before Dad was born.”

Under the photographs was a notebook.

A notebook is a small book with empty pages, for writing or drawing in. This one had a soft grey cover, worn round the edges. Clara opened it — and stopped.

The pages were full of drawings.

They were pencil drawings, done by hand: the mill, the church, a garden gate, an old man’s face, a cat asleep on a wall. Every line was careful and sure. Whoever had held this pencil could really draw.

“These are good,” said Max, and Max did not say that about much. “These are really, really good.”

Nobody had signed the drawings. There was no name anywhere — not on the pages, not on the cover, not on the back.

And then, tucked between the last two pages of the notebook, Theo found the ticket.

A ticket is the little paper you buy so you can travel on a train, or a bus, or a ship. Theo picked it up as if it might fall to pieces in his hand. It was small and stiff, printed in ink that had faded to the colour of weak tea.

He read it out.

“Single,” he said. His voice had gone strange. “One passenger. To Southampton docks.” He swallowed. “The fourteenth of June.” He looked up at them. “Sixty years ago.”

“A single,” said Max quietly. “Not a return. One way only. There — and not back.”

Clara leaned close and frowned. “But look at it,” she said. “It’s clean. Nobody ever used it. Nobody ever punched a hole in it. This ticket never went on any journey at all.”

Theo was still staring at the little card in his hand, and his face had gone quite pale — not with fear, but with a thought too big to hold on to.

“Southampton docks,” he whispered.

“The docks?” said Josie. “What are the docks?”

“The docks are where the big ships come in,” said Theo. “Where the land stops and the sea starts. You don’t buy a single to Southampton docks to go and look at the water, Josie.” He held the ticket up to the light, and his hand was not quite steady. “You buy it to get on a ship. A ship going far, far away.”

The office went very quiet. Even Whistle, in his basket by the door, had lifted his head and pricked his ears.

“Somebody packed this case to *leave*,” said Theo slowly. “To sail away across the sea, and start a whole new life somewhere else. Their best shirt. Their photographs of the village. Their drawings, so they would never forget it.”

He turned the ticket over in the light. “They were going to emigrate. To move to another country, for good.”

“But they didn’t go,” said Clara. “The case is still here. It waited sixty years, behind a cupboard, in the dark.”

“Then they missed the ship,” said Josie.

Theo shook his head slowly, looking at the clean, unused ticket, and then at the good white shirt, still folded for a Sunday that had never come.

“Or,” he said, very quietly, “they went anyway — and left this behind.”

Chapter 3: The Drawings

The next afternoon, after school, the four friends met in the office again.

The last train of the day had gone. This was the best hour — the quiet hour, when the platform was empty and the office belonged to them. Whistle lay curled in his basket by the door, one ear turning at every far-off sound.

The case and all its things lay on the big desk, just where they had left them. The white shirt. The little grey photographs. The clean ticket that had never been used. And the grey notebook, full of drawings.

“I thought about it all night,” said Josie. “Whose is it? Who packs their whole life in a box, and then leaves it behind?”

“Let’s look again,” said Clara. “Properly, this time. One page at a time.”

She opened the notebook.

Every page was a drawing, done in pencil. A pencil is that thin wooden stick with soft grey lead inside, the kind you use at school. But these lines did not look like school. They looked alive.

The first drawing was the mill. Its great wheel turned in the river, and you could almost hear the water fall. Clara turned the page.

The church, with its square tower and its old wooden door.

The school — their school — with a bell on the roof.

A garden gate, half open, as if somebody had just walked through it.

An old man’s face, every line and wrinkle drawn with love.

A cat asleep on a warm wall, so real that Whistle might have been its brother.

Page after page, the whole village lay under their hands: the baker’s window, the footbridge, a woman hanging out her washing, a boy fishing off the riverbank.

“These are so good,” Max said, very softly. He took off his glasses, breathed on them, and cleaned them on his jumper — the thing he always did when

something really mattered. “You don’t just learn to draw like this. You’re born with it.”

Clara turned the pages slowly, right to the end. Then she frowned and turned them all back again, to the very start.

“What is it?” said Theo.

“There’s no name,” said Clara. “Not one. Look — nobody signed a single drawing.”

To sign something is to write your name on it, so that everybody knows it is yours. A painter signs a painting. You sign your name at the bottom of a letter.

“That *is* strange,” said Max. “If I could draw like this, I’d sign every page. Twice.”

“Maybe they didn’t need to,” said Josie quietly. “Maybe they made these just for themselves. To remember.”

“Remember what?” said Theo.

“The village,” said Josie. She looked down at the open page, at the old man’s kind, tired face. “Everything here. In case one day they weren’t here to see it any more.”

Nobody answered that. It was too big a thought, and the office had gone very quiet.

Max was not really listening now. He had picked up the photographs and laid them beside the notebook, one by one, looking from a photo to a drawing and back again. His face went still.

“Come and look at this,” he said. “The mill, in the photo — the wheel is turning, there’s smoke from the chimney. The mill is working. And in the drawing —” he held them side by side — “the wheel is turning too. And the school. In the photo, the bell is on the roof. In the drawing, the bell is there as well.”

“So?” said Theo.

“So the mill closed years and years ago. My grandad says it shut before he was even a boy. And the old school bell came down long before that.” Max looked up. “But here they both are — working, standing, alive — in the photos *and* in the drawings. That means they were made at the same time. The same year.” He said it slowly. “Maybe even the same summer.”

Clara wrote it down in her small, careful hand. *Same summer*. It felt important, though she could not yet say why.

“There’s one more page,” she said. “The very last one.”

She turned to it.

It was the station. Not full of steam and crowds, like the photograph — just quiet and empty, the way it was right now. Two platforms. The footbridge. The long wooden bench. And on the bench sat a small dog, its ears up, waiting for something.

Josie stood very still. Then she walked to the office door and looked out, across the rails, at platform two.

“Come here,” she said. “All of you. Come and look.”

They crowded into the doorway. And there it was — the very same view: the two platforms, the footbridge, the long wooden bench where the passengers waited. The drawing and the real world were the same, line for line. The same iron lamp. The same low wall. Only the light was different, and there was no dog.



“Whoever drew this,” said Josie slowly, “sat right *there*. On our platform. On that bench, or close to it, with the notebook open on their knee.” She turned round to face them. “They sat where we’re standing now, and they drew exactly what we’re looking at. Only the dog is gone.”

For a moment nobody said a word. Then Whistle climbed out of his basket, crossed the quiet office, and hopped up onto the windowsill — right where the little drawing dog would have sat. Josie almost laughed, and almost didn’t.

Clara went back to the photographs. She liked to put things in order, oldest first, the way she ordered everything in the office. And near the bottom of the little pile she found one she had not really looked at before.

It was bigger than the others. A school photograph — the kind a whole class has taken, all together, once a year. Two rows of children stood side by side, straight and serious in their old-fashioned clothes: a back row standing, and a front row sitting on a low bench. More than twenty faces looked out at them, across sixty years.

“Turn it over,” said Max. “They nearly always wrote the names on the back.”

Clara turned it over. And there they were — the names, written in ink. Ink is the dark stuff you write with, from a pen; a wet line that dries on the paper. This ink had faded to a soft blue, but you could still read it: two long lines of names, one for the standing row, one for the sitting row.

All except one.

In the middle of the front row, one name had gone. Where it should have been there was only a smudge — a dark blue mark, where the wet ink had been rubbed, long ago, and had run into a little cloud. You could not read a single letter of it.

“Somebody rubbed it out,” breathed Josie. “Or... something spilled on it.”

“Count the names,” said Clara. Her voice had gone very quiet. “Count along the front row, and find which child the smudge belongs to.”

Max counted the faces on the front of the photo. Josie counted the names on the back. They met in the middle, at one child — a thin boy with untidy hair, sitting very straight, looking out of the picture as if he could see them.

And there, held tight under his arm, the way you hold something you love, was a book.

A book for drawing in.

A sketchbook — just like the grey one lying open on their desk.

Chapter 4: Names on the Back

The next afternoon they were back at the big desk, and this time Clara had a plan.

“We read every name,” she said. “One at a time. The back row first, then the front. If we know who everyone is, then maybe we will know who *he* is.” She meant the boy with the sketchbook — the one whose name had turned into a blue cloud.

She turned the school photograph over, names up, and laid it flat where they could all see.

“Back row,” said Clara. Her finger moved along the faded blue writing. “The ones standing up. Alfred Shaw. Then Mary Shaw — sisters, look, the same face. Peter Long. Susan Bell —”

“Bell!” said Josie. She sat up straight. “That could be *my* family. My great-aunt, maybe. I’ll ask my gran.”

“Keep going,” said Max.

“George Pike. Ann Webb. Ruth Grey. Jack Stone.” Clara reached the end of the line. “That’s the back row. Eight of them.” Her finger moved down to the second line of names. “Now the front row. The ones sitting on the bench. Little Dora Finch. Tom Pike — a Pike again, a brother. And then...” Her finger stopped. “Then the smudge.”

Right in the middle of the front row, one name was gone. The wet ink had run, long ago, into a soft blue cloud. And on the front of the photograph, that name belonged to the thin boy who held his sketchbook tight under his arm.

“We know his face,” said Theo. “We just don’t know his name.”

Max had been very quiet. Now he lifted the little magnifying glass that hung on a string round his neck — his loupe, he called it — and bent low over the smudge.

“The ink ran,” he said slowly. “But watch this. When you write with a pen, you press down. The pen digs a little line into the paper. And even when

the ink runs, that line stays.” He tilted the photo towards the window, into the light. “Come and look. You can see where the pen pressed in.”

One by one they looked through the loupe. And it was true. Under the blue cloud, faint as breath, were the tiny grooves the old pen had cut. Not letters of ink now — letters of *pressing*.

Clara read them out, very slowly, letter by letter. “E... d... w... i... n. Edwin.” She moved along. “Then a space. Then a big letter, a capital. An A.” She stopped. “And then the pen goes down into the smudge, and I lose it. Edwin A-something. That is all there is.”

“Edwin A,” said Josie softly.

For a moment nobody moved. Then Theo turned and looked at the case, standing against the wall where it always stood, with its small cloth label sewn onto the side.

E. A.

“Those are his initials,” said Clara. Your initials are the first letters of your names — the E from your first name, the letter from your second name, put together. “Edwin A. E. A. It’s *him*. The case belongs to him.”

Far down the line came a long, low whistle. It was Firefly, running home to the shed for the night. Every evening it meant the same thing: time to close the office and go up.

“We’ll never guess the second name,” said Theo. “Not out of a smudge.”

“Then we don’t guess,” said Clara. “That’s Dad’s rule. We ask someone who *knows*.”

Supper was ready upstairs, in the warm rooms above the station where the Wrens lived. Nancy had come off the engine and washed the coal dust from her hands. There was pie, and the window was gold with evening light.

They sat, and folded their hands, and Robert said grace the way he did every night — short and plain. “For this food, and this family, and the good day behind us, we thank You. Amen.”

“Amen,” said everyone. Josie and Max said it too, because they were always welcome to stay.

Then, over the pie, the whole story came out — the names, the loupe, the little grooves, Edwin A, and the smudge that hid the rest.

Nancy listened with her chin on her hand. “Sixty years,” she said. “That’s a long time for a case to sit and wait.”

Robert put down his fork. “If you want to know about this village sixty years back,” he said, “there is one man to ask. He was a boy here himself, that very summer.” He smiled under his moustache. “Old Bert. He remembers every summer since he was knee-high. Most of them the right way round, too.”

Old Bert came to the office the next afternoon, his green flag under his arm and his whiskers as white as steam. He listened to the children, took the photograph, turned it to the light — and went very still.



“Well, I never,” he said. “Netherby School. Look at them all.” His old finger touched the faces, one by one, as gentle as anything. “I knew these children.

Half of them, at least. There's Peter Long. And that little one is Dora Finch — she grew up to keep the post office." He shook his head slowly. "That was the summer everything changed."

"What happened?" said Josie.

"The mill closed," said Bert.

The mill was the tall old building down by the river, where for a hundred years the men had ground the wheat into flour. Its great wheel had turned in the water all that time. And then, one summer, it stopped. It closed. The doors were shut for good, and they never opened again.

"When the mill closed, the work went with it," said Bert. "And when the work goes, families have to follow it. There was no living left here for a lot of them." He looked round at their faces. "So they emigrated."

"They what?" said Theo.

"Emigrated," said Bert. "To leave your own country, and go and live in another one, far across the sea — for good, not just for a holiday. In those days a young country a long way off wanted workers, and it paid most of the fare. A whole family could sail for next to nothing." He tapped the photo softly. "So they went. The Longs, the Pikes, the Shaws — family after family, all in that one June. Half a class went, that summer. I stood on this very platform and waved them off. There were more goodbyes that June than in all the years before it put together."

"They sailed from the docks at Southampton," Bert went on, more to himself now. "Down this line to Marlow, and away over the sea. I remember the trains so full of trunks and cases you could hardly find a seat —"

He stopped.

His finger had come to the middle of the front row. To the thin boy with the untidy hair, and the book held tight under his arm.

For a long moment Old Bert said nothing at all. His twinkling eyes had gone soft and far away, sixty years down the line.

"Bless me," he said quietly. "The drawing boy."

“You knew him?” whispered Clara.

“Knew him? Everyone knew him. Ted, we called him.” Bert’s voice had dropped almost to nothing. “Ted, who could draw anything you asked — your face, your dog, the whole village, better than any photograph. Ted, who drew every corner of Netherby, all that long summer, before he went.”

He looked up, and there was something in his old face that they did not understand yet.

“Ted, who drew the whole village before he went,” said Old Bert. “Only... he didn’t go.”

Chapter 5: The Boy Who Didn't Go

"He didn't go?" said Clara. "But you told us the whole class went. You waved them off yourself, right here."

Old Bert sat down slowly on the office chair. He laid the photograph on his knee and looked at it for a long time.

"That's the trouble," he said at last. "My memory isn't what it used to be."

He tapped the side of his head with one finger.

"Sixty years is a long road to look back down," he said. "Some of it is clear as this morning. Some of it has gone soft and grey, like an old photograph left too long in the sun. And this bit — this bit about the boy — I never rightly knew, even then, when I was small."

"Tell us what you *do* remember," said Josie. She pulled a stool close and sat down with her chin in her hands. "Even the soft grey bits."

Bert smiled at her. "You're a good listener, young Josie. That's a rare thing."

He thought for a moment. Then he began.

"There was one big day, that June. The goodbye day. Half the village came down to the station. Mothers, fathers, aunts, little ones. Trunks and cases all along the platform, tied up with rope." His hands opened wide. "The London train came in. The families climbed aboard. And off they went, down the line to the docks, and away over the sea. The Longs. The Pikes. The Shaws. I stood on this platform and waved my cap until my arm ached." His eyes were far away. "I can see it now, clear as clear."

"And Ted?" said Theo.

Bert's smile faded.

"That's the strange part. Ted wasn't on that train. His family wasn't on the platform at all, that big day. I remember looking for him — we were friends, the way boys are — and he simply wasn't there."

"So he stayed?" said Max.

"No, no. They went too. Just — not that day." Bert frowned, reaching back into the grey. "A few days later, I think. And in a hurry. I remember my mother saying it, at our garden gate. 'Ted's family have gone, then,' she said. 'Gone in a hurry, and gone late.' Something changed their plans, right at the end. They had to leave quick — all in a rush, everything half packed." He shook his head. "That's every word I ever heard about it."

"But *why* the hurry?" asked Clara.

"That I can't tell you." Bert spread his old hands. "I was twelve years old, same as you lot. It was summer. And a boy has his own summer, you know — the hayfields, the river, a new pup at home. A boy doesn't stop to wonder why a friend left in a rush. He just finds his friend gone one morning, and by the next week he's playing on without him." He looked down at the photo, and his voice went quiet. "I never saw Ted again. I never asked where he'd gone, or why the hurry, or how he came to leave —"

He stopped.

"— or how he came to leave his case behind," said Clara softly.

The whole room went still. Over in the basket by the door, Whistle opened one amber eye, then closed it again.

Bert turned and looked at the brown leather case against the wall, with its small cloth label sewn on the side. **E. A.**

"So that's what you children have found," he said. "Ted's case. The one that never went with him." He let out a long, slow breath. "Sixty years it's waited. And me walking past this office near every day, never once knowing it sat in there."

Clara had gone very quiet. It was the quiet that meant she was thinking hard.

"They left in a hurry," she said. "The case got left behind. That part fits." She stood up. "But it doesn't tell us *when*. And it doesn't tell us how the case came into this office in the first place."

"Does that matter?" said Josie.

"It matters," said Clara, "because of one thing this office has always done." She looked round at them. "It writes things down. Every single thing that has ever been lost and found in Netherby, someone wrote it in a book. Right back to the start."

Down the line, faint and far, Firefly gave a whistle. The last train of the afternoon was pulling out of Marlow, coming home.

Clara went to the tall cupboard in the corner — the one they hardly ever opened. Inside stood a row of great record books, leaning together like tired old men. The newest was the register she wrote in every day. But the ones behind it were older. Bigger. Thick as bricks, bound in black, their edges gone soft with age.

"These are the old ledgers," said Clara. A ledger was a record book, kept year after year — every line a date, every date a thing found. "Dad keeps them all. He says an office that throws away its past isn't worth much." She ran her finger along the spines, reading the years. "This one. Sixty years back. That's the June we want."

She lifted it down with both arms. It was heavy, and a small cloud of dust came off it. Max sneezed.

They laid the ledger flat on the desk and opened it. The paper inside was thick and yellow, and the writing —

"Look at the ink," said Max. He leaned in close over his loupe. "It's gone brown. Pale brown, almost gold." He touched the page as gently as anything. "That's old iron ink. When it's fresh it's black as night. But give it forty, fifty years and it fades — the black leaks out of it, little by little, until it's the colour of weak tea." He looked up, pleased. "You can nearly *date* a page by how faded it is."

Clara turned the stiff pages, one at a time. Every stationmaster had written in his own hand — the way a person shapes their letters, as different from the next as one face is from another. Some hands were round and slow. Some were quick and slanting.

"April," she read. "May." Her finger came down the faded lines. "June. Here we are. June, sixty years ago."

They all leaned in over the old page. Bert leaned in too, his white whiskers almost touching the paper.



Line by line, Clara read down the month. A dropped glove. An umbrella. A boy's cap, handed in and claimed the same day. A parcel of wool.

Then her finger stopped.

The ink there was fainter than the rest, thin and pale. But in a careful, old-fashioned hand — the stationmaster's own, the man who ran Netherby all those years ago — it read:

Leather case, E.A., handed in — found on platform two, 17 June.

For a moment nobody spoke.

Theo was staring at the date. His lips moved. He was counting, the way he always counted, out of long habit with times and days.

"Wait," he said. And his voice came out strange. "The ticket in the case. It was dated the fourteenth of June. A single, to the docks. That was the sailing day — the day the ship left."

"Yes," said Clara.

"But this says the case wasn't found until the *seventeenth*." Theo looked up, and his eyes were wide. "That's three days later. Three whole days *after* the ship had gone."

The office was very quiet. Outside, Firefly rumbled slowly in towards the platform, breathing steam.

Clara looked from the faded line, to the case against the wall, and back again.

"Then who," she said slowly, "left Ted's case on platform two — three days after Ted sailed away?"

Chapter 6: Three Days Late

The next afternoon, two lists hung on the office wall.

Clara had pinned up a big sheet of paper and drawn a line straight down the middle. At the top of one half she wrote **WHAT WE KNOW**. At the top of the other she wrote **WHAT WE DON'T**.

"A good register does two things," she said, tapping the paper with her pencil. "It tells you what you have. And it tells you what is missing." She looked round at the others. "Right now, we have plenty of both."

Under **WHAT WE KNOW** the list grew, line by line:

- a leather case, about sixty years old;
- a cloth label sewn on the side: *E. A.*;
- inside: photos of old Netherby, a notebook of drawings, a shirt, one ticket;
- the ticket: a single, to the docks, dated 14 June;
- the drawing boy, "Ted": first name Edwin, surname *A*— something;
- the case was found on platform two on 17 June — three days after the ship sailed.

Under **WHAT WE DON'T**, the list was shorter. But it felt heavier.

- Ted's full name.
- Why his family left in such a hurry.
- Who put the case on platform two, three days too late.

"So," said Theo, rubbing his hands together. "We guess."

"We don't guess," said Clara, in exactly her father's voice.

"All right, all right." Theo grinned. "We make a *theory*." A theory was an idea about what might have happened — a good guess that you then went out and tested, to see if it held up. "Here's mine. Ted's family got to Canada. They felt bad about the case. So they posted it back to Netherby — and it turned up on the seventeenth."

For a moment it sounded good.

Then Max shook his head. "Doesn't work. The ledger says *found on platform two*. Not *delivered by post*. And a parcel from across the sea wouldn't take

three days. It would take weeks.” He pushed up his glasses. “And there’s no post label on the case. I checked.”

“Fair,” said Theo, and he crossed his own theory out.

“My turn,” said Max. “Somebody took the case that day at the docks — took it by mistake, in all the rush. Then they brought it back to Netherby.”

“Then something would be missing from inside,” said Clara at once. “But nothing is. The shirt, the ticket, every photo — all still there, just as they were packed.” She spread her hands. “Nobody carries a case about and then hands it back completely full.”

Max thought about that. Then he crossed *his* theory out too.

They sat and looked at the two lists. The **WHAT WE DON’T** side stared back at them.

“We can make theories all afternoon,” said Clara quietly. “But a theory is only a theory until you can prove it.”

All this time, Josie had said nothing.

She was sitting on the floor by the basket, with Whistle curled warm against her knee, and she had a small, secret sort of smile.

“You’ve all been reading books,” she said. “I’ve been talking to people.”

They turned to look at her.

“When you want to find a person,” said Josie, “you don’t only look in books. You follow the *trail*.” She said the word as if she liked the taste of it. A trail was a line you followed, one step to the next — not footprints in the mud, but a trail made of people. Each old person she asked pointed her on to someone older, who remembered a little bit more.

“I started with my gran, about my great-aunt Susan in the photo,” she said. “Gran remembers Susan. But Gran was only a baby when the mill shut. So she said, ‘If it’s the mill families you’re after, go and ask old Mrs. Kettle. She’s ninety-two, and she forgets nothing.’”

“The baker’s gran?” said Theo.

“The baker’s gran.” Josie nodded. “So I went round the back of the bakery, and there she was, shelling peas in the sun. And I told her about a thin boy with untidy hair, who drew the whole village before he went away.” Josie’s eyes were shining now. “She put down her peas. And she said one word.”

“*What* word?” said three voices together.

“*Arnold*,” said Josie.

The office went very still.

“Edwin Arnold,” said Josie. “That was his name. His father worked in the mill office — did the wages, kept the papers. And when the mill shut, the Arnolds were one of the families that sailed away.” She took a breath. “Ted. Edwin Arnold. *E. A.*”

Clara let out a long breath, and wrote it on the list, under **WHAT WE KNOW**, in her neatest hand: *Edwin Arnold*.

“There’s more,” said Josie. “I told her about the school photo — the names inked on the back, and how one name is all smudged, a little blue cloud.” Her voice dropped. “And Mrs. Kettle knew about that too. She said the children wrote their names on the backs of their photos for each other, so nobody would ever be forgotten. And on the goodbye day, down on this very platform, Ted’s little sister was crying and crying — she didn’t want to leave — and her tears fell right on the back of his photo.” Josie looked at the class picture on the desk, at the small blue cloud where a name should be. “The ink ran. That smudge is a little sister’s *goodbye*.”

Nobody spoke for a moment. A goodbye — the word you say when someone goes away, and you don’t know when you’ll ever see them again.

Far off down the line, Firefly whistled, coming home.

While Josie had been talking, Max had drifted over to the case.

He wasn’t really listening any more. He was crouched down by the corner — the one that had been mended, long ago, with a small square of leather

sewn neatly over the worn-through edge. A patch. Someone had cut it to fit and stitched it on by hand, to give the tired old case a few more miles.

Max was frowning at it.

“Josie,” he said slowly. “Clara. Come here a second.”

They came.

“This patch,” said Max. He touched it with one finger. “The stitches along the bottom edge have come loose. See? It lifts.” As carefully as he could, he peeled back the loose corner of the leather.

Underneath, pressed flat and hidden away all these years, was a small paper label. It was old and yellow and half torn, so that only a piece of it was left. But there was printing on it — faded, but still there — and Max read out what he could.



“...nold ... passenger ... S.S. ...ia ... 17 June.”

Clara’s pencil stopped in the air.

“Passenger,” breathed Theo. “That’s a person who travels on a ship. And ...*nold* — that’s the end of *Arnold*.” He was already counting, the way he always counted. “It’s a shipping label. Off the boat. Somebody in the Arnold family was a passenger on a ship — the S.S. something-*ia* — sailing on the *seventeenth* of June.”

“But the ticket in the case says the *fourteenth*,” said Clara.

They all looked at one another.

“The seventeenth,” said Josie softly. “That’s the day the case was found. Three days late.” She swallowed. “They didn’t sail on the fourteenth at all. They sailed on the very same day somebody left Ted’s case standing on platform two.”

Chapter 7: The 17th of June

The next afternoon, Clara pinned a long strip of paper along the office wall.

It was not a list this time. It was a line — one straight line, from one end of the paper to the other, with little marks along it like a ruler.

“A timeline,” she said. “A list tells you *what*. A timeline tells you *when*.” She wrote **JUNE** at one end and stepped back. “If the days won’t sit still in my head, I put them where I can see them.”

On the big desk, the grey sketchbook lay open at the last drawing — platform two, and the small dog on the bench. Whistle was fast asleep on top of it, one paw over his nose, warming the paper with his round black side. Nobody moved him. He looked as if he had always been there.

“Here’s our trouble,” said Clara. She tapped the timeline. “Two dates. And they don’t get on.”



She wrote them where they belonged.

14 June — the ticket in the case. A single, to the docks. **17 June** — the shipping label hidden under the patch. *Arnold*, *passenger*, the ship whose name ended in *-ia*.

“The ticket says the family sailed on the fourteenth,” said Clara. “The label says the seventeenth. They can’t have done both.”

Theo had been holding the little ticket up to the window for a long time, turning it this way and that.

“Look at it, though,” he said. “*Really* look. It’s clean. No hole.” On the old line, the guard clipped every ticket with his punch — a small tool that bit a neat hole in the card — the moment you climbed aboard. “A used ticket has a hole in it,” said Theo. “This one hasn’t. This ticket was bought and paid for. And then it was never used at all.”

Josie sat up. “So the family never went anywhere on the fourteenth.”

“They couldn’t have,” said Theo. “A ticket with no hole is a journey that never happened.”

For a moment nobody spoke. Because that only made it stranger. Why would a family pack a whole case, buy a ticket — and then not go?

“A train doesn’t just not run,” said Theo slowly, thinking it through the way he thought through a timetable. “But a ship...” He frowned. “A ship can be *cancelled*.”

“Cancelled.” The word came from the doorway.

Old Bert stood there, his cap in his two hands, staring at Clara’s line of paper as if it had reached out and touched him.

“Cancelled,” he said again, softer. “That’s the very word I’ve been missing for sixty years.”

He came in slowly and put one finger on **14 June**.

“I told you the Arnolds went late, and went in a hurry, and I never knew why.” He shook his old head. “Well. Here’s the why. I was only twelve, but I remember the muddle now, plain as day. The June boat never sailed.”

He tapped the date.

“There was a ship, due out of Southampton on the fourteenth, and half of Netherby was booked on her. But she wasn’t fit to go — something wrong deep in her engines, they said — so they held her back. Called the whole thing off. *Cancelled*.” Cancelled meant a thing that was planned, and then stopped before it could happen at all. “No boat on the fourteenth. Not for anybody.”

Clara drew a quiet line through **14 June**.

“So nobody sailed that day,” she said. “That’s why the ticket has no hole in it.”

“It was never used,” said Theo, and his eyes were wide, “because there was nothing to use it on.”

Bert nodded. “And the next ship out of Southampton wasn’t for three more days.” He moved his finger along the paper. “The seventeenth.”

Firefly whistled far off down the line, coming home in the low afternoon sun.

Clara began to fill in the other end of the timeline, writing small and neat.

“But if the Longs and the Pikes and the Shaws already left on the fourteenth,” said Josie, “why were the Arnolds *still here* on the seventeenth?”

“Because of Ted’s father,” said Bert. “Arnold kept the mill’s books — the wages, the papers, all of it. When a mill shuts its doors for the last time, someone has to lock up the money and the accounts, every page, all proper. That was him, right to the last day.” He smiled a small, sad smile. “The Arnolds were always going to be the last family out of Netherby. And when the boat was moved, their last day landed on the seventeenth.”

Josie closed her eyes. She was the one who could always see it.

“The morning of the seventeenth,” she said. “Right here. Platform two.”

“Crowded,” said Bert. “Oh, it was crowded.” Crowded meant full of people — so full you could hardly turn round. “The whole village came down again

to wave them off. Trunks and boxes and a great heap of luggage, and the Arnold children, and the little sister crying fit to break your heart. And Ted, with his sketchbook under his arm.”

“Four cases,” said Max quietly. He had said almost nothing all afternoon. “The label said the family was four passengers. Four cases.”

“Four cases,” Bert agreed. “And somebody set one down on the bench, just for a minute, to lift the little one up to the window. Then the guard blew his whistle. And they all climbed aboard in a rush, and the doors banged, and the train pulled out for the docks...”

He stopped.

“...and one case stayed on the bench,” said Clara.

The office was very still. On the desk, Whistle slept on, right where the drawn dog sat on the drawn bench, sixty years ago.

“The light one,” said Josie. Her voice had gone small. “The one nobody thought to count, because it wasn’t heavy with clothes. It was heavy with drawings. The whole village. His whole world.” She looked at the sketchbook under the sleeping cat. “He left the whole of Netherby behind, on a bench in Netherby, and never knew.”

“But somebody must have chased after them,” said Theo. “You can’t just *lose* a family.”

Bert gave a slow shake of his head. “By the time the old stationmaster found the case that evening, the Arnolds were long gone. Down the line, onto the ship, and out to sea.” At sea — out on the open water, far from any land, where no letter and no message could reach you for weeks and weeks. “You can’t call a ship back, lad. Not once she’s at sea.”

“So he kept it,” said Clara. “Properly. He wrote it in the ledger, and he kept it.” That was the office rule, sixty years before any of them were born: you keep what is not yours, and you keep it safe.

“He did more than keep it,” said Bert. “I saw him, that summer. Old Mr. Cray sat at that very desk and wrote a letter to send after them. I watched him

lick the stamp.” To *post* a letter is to send it away through the post office, so that it travels off to find a person, however far. “But a letter needs an address,” Bert went on. “And all anyone had was *the Arnolds, somewhere in Canada*. And Canada, my dears, is a mighty big place.” He sighed. “The letter came home again months later, with two words stamped across the front. *Not known*.”

Nobody said anything for a while.

Sixty years, the case had waited. Not because it was thrown away. Not because nobody cared. But because there had been nowhere in the whole wide world to send it.

Clara stood back and looked at her finished timeline — the crossed-out fourteenth, the busy, crowded seventeenth, the little word *cancelled* that opened the whole thing like a key.

“Well,” she said softly. “We know *how* it was lost now. Every bit of it.”

She reached out to close the sketchbook and put it safely away for the night, the way she put everything away.

“Careful,” said Josie. “Whistle.”

Very gently, she lifted the warm, sleepy cat off the drawings and set him down in his basket. He grumbled once and tucked his nose back under his paw.

Clara closed the sketchbook’s grey cover. And as she did, her fingers felt something she had never felt before — a pocket, stitched into the inside of the back cover.

There was something in it.

She drew it out slowly. It was an envelope — a folded paper cover, the kind a letter goes inside. It was old and soft and yellowed at the corners. And it was still sealed: stuck down all along the edge, shut tight, never once opened in all these years.

On the front, in a careful, sloping, boy’s hand, were seven words.

To Netherby. To whoever finds this.

Chapter 8: The Letter in the Notebook

Nobody said a word.

Clara held the old envelope flat on both hands, the way you hold something that might break. The others leaned in over it. Old Bert leaned in too, his cap forgotten in his fist.

To Netherby. To whoever finds this.

“We can’t open it,” said Josie at last. Her voice was almost a whisper. “It’s someone’s letter. You don’t open a letter that isn’t yours.”

“No,” said Clara slowly. She turned the envelope over. The seal was still stuck fast, all along the edge, shut tight for sixty years. “You don’t. But...”

“But it hasn’t got a name on it,” said Theo. “It doesn’t say *to Mother* or *to my friend*. It says *to Netherby*.”

“Fetch your father,” said Bert quietly. “This is his office. He’ll know what’s right.”

They found Robert out on platform one, turning down the evening lamps. He came at once, wiping his hands, and stood at the big desk while Clara told him all of it — the little pocket in the back cover, the sealed envelope, the seven words on the front.

Robert did not reach for it. He read the front twice, his cap pushed back.

“You were right to wait,” he said. “In this office we never open another person’s letters. A letter belongs to the one whose name is on it, and to nobody else. That rule is as old as the post.”

Josie’s shoulders dropped. So they would never know.

“But look again,” said Robert, and a small smile came into his eyes. “Whose name is on it?”

Clara read it aloud — out loud, so the whole room could hear the words, not just the reader. “*To Netherby. To whoever finds this.*”

“Netherby,” said Robert. “That’s us. *Whoever finds this*. He didn’t write it to one person. He wrote it to whoever came after — to whoever, one day, opened the case and cared enough to ask. That’s you four.” He nodded at the envelope. “He gave us leave to read it, sixty years ago. So we may.”

He took the thin paperknife from the pen tray and held it out to Clara — the little flat blade the office kept only for letters, so the paper never tore. “Gently,” he said. “It’s older than all of us put together.”

Clara slid the blade along the top of the fold. The envelope opened with a soft, dry whisper, as neatly as if it had been sealed that same morning. Inside lay one sheet of paper, folded in three, soft and yellow with age.

She unfolded it. And there, in the same careful, sloping hand as the seven words on the front, was Ted’s letter.

“Read it aloud,” said Robert. “He wrote it to be heard.”



So Clara read, and the office went very still, and this is what Ted had written.

Tonight is my last night in Netherby. In the morning we go on the train, and then on the ship, and then we live in Canada, which is a very long way off.

Mother says pack only what you truly need. But how do you pack a whole village? You cannot fold a hill and fit it in a case. You cannot tie up the mill with string. So I did the only thing I could think of. I drew it. All of it. The mill, and the school bell, and the church, and the garden gate, and the station, and my dog on the bench.

Grown-ups say that when you go far away, in the end you forget — that home goes soft and grey in your head, until you can't quite see it any more. So if we forget Netherby, then these drawings are for remembering. When I am old, I will open this case and remember exactly how home looked.

But cases get lost. So if it is not me who opens this one day, but somebody else — if you have found it, and you are reading this now — then please, take care of them. Look after them well. They are the whole of my village, and I could not carry it home any other way.

Ted. (Edwin Arnold is my proper name, but everyone calls me Ted.)

For a long moment nobody moved.

Then Josie let out a slow breath. "It was never lost property at all," she said.

"No," said Clara softly. She looked at the grey sketchbook, and the folded Sunday shirt, and the little packet of photographs. "We kept calling it a lost case. But Ted didn't lose it by mistake. He *made* it — on purpose, drawing by drawing, so that he would never forget."

"It's a time capsule," said Max. He was turning his loupe over and over in his fingers, and for once he was not thinking about what anything was worth. "You know — when someone shuts things away in a box to keep for years and years, so that later on you can open it and see just how life used to be." He swallowed. "Only this one is real. And he wanted it *kept*."

“And it has an owner,” said Theo. “Not a maybe-owner. A real one, with a name. Edwin Arnold. Ted.” He said it as if the name had weight in it. “He might still be alive. An old man now, somewhere across the sea — and all this time he never knew his whole village had waited here for him.”

Old Bert wiped his eye with the back of his hand and said nothing at all. He had waved that boy off from this very platform.

Robert laid his hand flat on the sketchbook’s grey cover.

“Then we do what this office has always done,” he said. His voice was quiet, but it filled the room. “We keep things seven years — that’s the rule, written down plain. A lost umbrella, a walking stick, a single boot: seven years we hold them, and then we let them go.” He looked round at each of them. “But a promise is not an umbrella. We keep things seven years. We keep our word longer.”

He tapped the letter, ever so gently.

“This boy asked whoever found his case to take care of it. Well — we found it. So we’ll take care of it, and keep it safe. And more than that: we shall try to give it back.”

Clara turned to a clean page in the great register and picked up her pen. But this time she did not write down the colour of a case, or its straps, or its lock. At the top of the page, in her best and steadiest hand, she wrote three words: *Find Edwin Arnold.*

The search had begun — the long, careful looking that would not stop until they found him.

They were putting the sketchbook away for the night when Max stopped dead.

He had it open at the very last page — platform two, the quiet bench, the small dog. He was not measuring it now, or dating it, or saying what it might fetch. He was only looking, the way Ted himself must have looked, on his last evening, at the place he loved best in all the world.

Then he did the one thing that none of them had thought to do in three whole afternoons.

He turned the page over.

On the back of the last drawing, faint but clear, written small in pencil, were a few words and a number. Max read them out slowly, and the office went quiet all over again.

“Uncle H. Arnold. Four, Mill Cottages.” He looked up. His eyes were wide behind his glasses. “That’s not Canada. That’s not across any sea at all.” He tapped the pencilled line. “Mill Cottages is *here*. It’s ten minutes up the lane.”

Josie’s mouth fell open. “An uncle,” she said. “Ted had an uncle who *stayed*.”

Not every Arnold had sailed away, after all. Some Arnolds had stayed right here, in Netherby — and one of them had once lived, plain as anything, at number four, Mill Cottages.

Chapter 9: Mill Cottages

Mill Cottages stood at the top of the lane — four little houses in a row, with red doors and small front gardens full of beans and roses.

The four children walked up together after school. Theo went fastest. He wanted to knock on the door of number four, ask his question, and get his answer.

“Slow down,” said Josie.

“Why?” said Theo. “We knock, and we ask. *Do you know Edwin Arnold? Easy.*”

Josie shook her head. “That’s not how you do it,” she said. “You don’t run at people with a question. You knock, you say hello, and then you *listen*. People tell you far more when you let them talk.”

“Sometimes slow is faster,” she added, and she led the way to the red door of number four.

She knocked. After a while the door opened, slowly, and there stood a small old woman with soft white hair and kind eyes. She had a watering can in one hand.

“Hello,” she said. “Now — whose children are you?”

“I’m Josie Bell,” said Josie. “These are my friends. We’re from the station, from the Lost Property Office.” She smiled. “What a lovely garden. Those are the reddest roses in the whole village.”

“Bless you,” said the old woman, and she smiled back at once. “I’m Mrs Gale. Come in out of the wind, all of you.”

Inside, the little front room was warm. Mrs Gale gave them each a glass of milk and a biscuit, and she sat in her chair by the window and talked.

She talked about her garden. She talked about the wet spring. She talked about the price of butter. Theo shifted in his seat and looked at Josie, as if to say, *ask her, ask her*. But Josie only nodded, and said “mm” in the right places, and let the old woman go on.



At last Josie said, gently, “Mrs Gale — has your house always been yours?”

“Oh no, dear. This was an Arnold house once. Old Mr Arnold lived here before me — Uncle Herbert, everyone called him. A kind old man, always a sweet in his pocket for the children.” Her face went soft and far away. “He’s been gone a long time now. I took the cottage after him, and I’ve kept his roses growing ever since.”

Theo sat very still. So did the others. *Arnold.*

“Did he have family?” asked Josie, in the same easy voice.

“Family? All over,” said Mrs Gale. “Half the Arnolds sailed to Canada, the year the mill shut. I was only a girl. But some stayed. I was neighbour to his cousin Ivy for thirty years — Ivy Arnold, right in the house next door.” She pointed her thin hand at the wall. “A good neighbour is worth gold, you know. We shared a washing line and a hundred cups of tea. Ivy moved down to Marlow, in the end, when her legs grew tired.”

“Ivy,” said Josie softly. Beside her, Clara had quietly taken out her little notebook and was writing every name down.

“Did the family in Canada ever write?” Josie asked.

“Every Christmas,” said Mrs Gale at once. “Without fail. A card every single year, all the way across the sea. Ivy kept them all — she never threw one away. A whole box of Christmas cards, going back years and years.” She chuckled. “They were her family, on paper.”

Theo could not hold it in any longer. “Mrs Gale — is there an *address* on the cards? Where in Canada they live?”

“Theo,” said Josie, half a warning.

But Mrs Gale did not mind. She looked at their four hopeful faces, and something clever woke up behind her kind eyes.

“You’re not here about my roses at all, are you?” she said. “You’re looking for the Arnolds.”

So Josie told her. She told it plainly and slowly — the suitcase in the depot, the drawings, the letter, the boy called Ted who did not go. And Mrs Gale listened the way Josie had listened.

When Josie finished, the old woman sat quiet for a moment. Then she got up, went to the hall, and picked up her telephone.

“Ivy will have that address,” she said. “If it’s anywhere in the world, it’s in Ivy’s box. Let’s ask her.”

They heard only Mrs Gale’s half of it — *Ivy, it’s Edith... now listen, I’ve four children here from the station...* — but it was enough.

Ivy Arnold, seven miles down the line in Marlow, went to find her box of Christmas cards.

It took a while. Then Mrs Gale said, “You have? Good. Now — can you send it up on the last train? Give it to the guard. These children will be waiting at Netherby.” A pause. “Bless you, Ivy. Yes. I’ll tell them.”

She put the telephone down, and she was smiling.

“The newest card,” she said. “The last one Ivy had. It’s coming up on the evening train, in the guard’s own hand. Off you go, and thank her when it comes.”

They thanked Mrs Gale until she laughed and shooed them out. But Josie stopped on the step.

“Thank you for talking to us,” she said. “Really. Nobody else knew about Ivy. We’d never have found her.”

“You found her because you sat still and let an old woman ramble,” said Mrs Gale, and she patted Josie’s cheek. “Not many children do. Off you go.”

The last train up from Marlow steamed into platform one just after six, with Firefly panting and puffing and pleased with herself.

Old Bert climbed down from the guard’s van, a small brown envelope in his hand. His face was strange — half a smile, half something older and sadder.

“Marlow sent this up,” he said. “For four detectives, they told me.” He held it out, but did not quite let go. “I waved that boy off from this platform, sixty years back. And now his card comes home on the same line. Funny old world.”

Clara opened the envelope with the office paperknife, careful as ever. Inside was a Christmas card — a robin on a snowy branch, the colours gone soft with age.

She opened it. And the whole platform went still.

Inside, in neat blue ink, was a short message and a name. But it was the handwriting that stopped them. Every letter was careful, even, beautifully made — drawn, almost, the way a person draws who has spent a lifetime with a pencil in his hand.

A happy Christmas to you all, from across the sea. — Edwin Arnold.

And under it, an address in Canada, written just as carefully.

“That’s him,” breathed Max. He turned the card over. “And look at the stamp. This card’s only a few years old. Not sixty. A *few*.” He looked up, his eyes

huge behind his glasses. "A few years ago, Edwin Arnold was alive and well, and still sending Christmas cards. In that careful hand."

The drawing boy had grown up. And he still wrote as if every word were a little drawing.

Up in the office, Robert set a clean sheet of paper on the desk.

"We write to him," he said. "Properly, but not all in a rush. First we draft it."

"Draft?" said Josie.

"A draft is a try," said Robert. "Not the real letter yet. We write it out, we read it aloud, and we change what's wrong or unclear. Then we copy it out neat and clean, and *that* one we send."

So they drafted it together, all five of them, and Clara wrote the good copy in her steadiest hand:

Dear Mr Arnold,

We are the children who look after the Lost Property Office at Netherby station.

Sixty years ago you left a suitcase on platform two. We have found it. Your drawings are safe, and your letter too. We have taken good care of them, just as you asked.

We would very much like to send your village home to you. Please write back to us.

Yours truly, Clara, Theo, Josie and Max
Netherby Station Lost Property Office

On the front of the envelope, Clara copied the Canadian address, letter for letter. On the back she wrote their own, so Edwin would know where to write. Robert checked it twice, licked the stamp, and pressed it down flat.

Then he walked out to the red postbox by the station gate, and posted it into the dark slot, and it was gone.

“There,” he said, coming back in and dusting his hands. “It’ll cross the sea now.”

Clara looked at the empty desk where the letter had been. “And now,” she said slowly, “comes the hardest part of all this detective work. Harder than the drawings. Harder than the ledgers.”

“What’s harder than all that?” said Theo.

Clara looked out at the dark line, running away toward the sea and the wide world beyond.

“Now,” she said, “we wait.”

Chapter 10: While They Wait

The letter was gone across the sea, and now there was nothing to do but wait.

Waiting, Clara soon found, was the hardest work of all. A drawing you could study. A ledger you could read. But you cannot hurry a ship, or a postman on the other side of the world. You can only get on with your days, and try not to look at the postbox every five minutes.

So they got on with their days.

And there was plenty to get on with, because the big day was coming. In two weeks the line would be fifty years old, and all of Netherby was getting ready.

Theo got ready by driving everybody a little mad with the timetable.

The anniversary day was not a normal day. There would be extra trains, full trains, trains meeting trains at the little stops up the line. Every one had its own time, and Theo meant to know them all by heart.

He pinned the special timetable to the office wall and read it out loud, again and again, until Josie put her hands over her ears.

“Nine-fifteen up. Nine-forty down. They pass at Marlow at nine-fifty,” he said. “The band comes on the ten-twenty. Then—”

“Then I go home,” said Josie.

But Robert only smiled. “Let him learn it,” he said. “On the day, when a hundred people are asking questions, one Wren will know exactly where every train is. That is worth a great deal.” He put a hand on Theo’s shoulder. “Steady and sure, that’s the way. A good railwayman is never in a panic. He knows the times, and he keeps a steady head.”

Steady. Theo liked the word. He said the timetable more slowly after that, and got it right every time.

Down in the engine shed, Nancy was getting Firefly ready.

An old engine does not shine by herself. Every evening after the last train, Nancy and two of the other volunteers rubbed and polished until the green paint gleamed and the brass shone like gold. They cleaned the red buffer-beam. They oiled every joint. They swept out the cab.

“She has to look her very best,” Nancy said, wiping her hands on an oily rag. “Old as she is, and not a mark on her. On the day, she’ll be the brightest thing in the whole valley.”

The children helped when they could. Even Max, who cared more for old buttons than for engines, spent a happy hour polishing brass until he could see his own face in it.

But the best idea of all was Clara’s.

It came to her one quiet afternoon, looking at the notebook of drawings. Such good drawings — the mill, the school, the church, the garden gate, all the old faces. And nobody could see them but the four of them.

“These shouldn’t sit in a case,” she said suddenly. “Ted drew them so people would remember. Let’s show them.”

“Show them where?” said Max.

“Here. In the office.” Clara looked round at the bare wall by the window. “We’ll pin them up, all in a row, like a little exhibition.”

“A what?” said Josie.

“An exhibition,” said Clara. “It’s when you put things out for people to look at, the way a museum does. Pictures on a wall, each one with a card telling what it is.” She was already tidying the desk. “Netherby, sixty years ago, drawn by a boy who loved it. People will want to see that.”

They all wanted to, at once. But Clara held up her hand.

“Wait,” she said. “Some of these are drawings of *people*. Real people, with real faces. We can’t put a person’s face on the wall for the whole village to stare at — not without asking the family first. That wouldn’t be proper.”

Robert, passing with a mug of tea, stopped and nodded. “Quite right,” he said. “You never show a person without their leave. When Edwin writes back, we’ll ask him. Until then—”

“Until then, we cover the faces,” said Clara.

So that is what they did. For every drawing of a person, Clara cut a small square of soft paper and used it to cover the face — gently, so the pencil underneath was not smudged. A card beside each one said only: *A face from old Netherby. To be shown by kind leave, when it comes.*

The mill they left uncovered. The school, the church, the station, the garden gate — all the places went up on the wall for everyone to see. Only the faces waited, quiet under their little paper covers.

The exhibition opened on a Saturday, and the village came.

They came in twos and threes, in from the platform, in out of the rain. Old men in caps. Old women with shopping bags. They stood in front of the wall, and something happened that the children had not expected.

They began to remember.



“The mill!” said one old man, and his finger came up to the drawing of the great turning wheel. “Look at that. I worked there as a lad. That wheel — you could hear it from my bed at night. Round and round, all summer long.”

“And the school bell,” said Mrs Kettle, who was ninety-two and forgot nothing. “There it is on the roof, just so. It rang at nine, and if you were late up the lane you ran for your life.”

“That’s the Finches’ gate,” said somebody else. “And the crooked post beside it! However did the boy remember the crooked post?”

On and on it went. Every drawing set an old memory loose. People who had not spoken of the mill in sixty years stood and named every stone. They laughed. Once or twice, quietly, someone wiped their eyes.

Old Bert came, and stood the longest of all in front of the drawing of platform two — the quiet platform, the empty bench, the little dog sitting on it. He looked at it for a long time and said nothing at all.

And they came back. That was the strange, lovely thing. The same people came again the next day, and the day after, bringing others. *You must see the drawings up at the station.* Netherby was remembering itself.

“This is what Ted wanted,” said Clara softly, watching an old man point out his own front door to his grandson. “‘If we forget, these are for remembering.’ He’s sixty years and a whole ocean away — and he’s making the village remember.”

It was on the Friday, nearly two weeks in, that it came.

Josie was first into the office after school, as always. She stopped in the doorway so fast that Max walked into the back of her.

“What?” said Max. “What is it?”

Josie did not answer. She could not seem to get a breath. She only pointed.

There, on the register desk, propped against the great book, was an envelope. A thin one. Pale blue, edged all round with little stripes of red and blue, and covered in stamps they had never seen before. Across the top, in printed letters, ran one word: *AIRMAIL*.

“Airmail,” breathed Theo. “That’s the post that flies. Across the sea. By plane.” He swallowed. “That’s come from—”

“Canada,” whispered Josie.

Nobody moved. Then Clara stepped forward, and she was very calm, though her heart was beating fast.

“Properly,” she said, to herself as much as to them. “We do this properly.”

She took the office paperknife from the drawer — the good one, kept so that paper never tore. She turned the blue envelope over. She slid the knife under the flap, steady and slow, and opened it along the fold without a single tear.

Her hands, everyone saw, did not shake at all.

She drew out a single sheet of thin blue paper, unfolded it, and read the first line aloud in a small, careful voice.

“Dear children of the Lost Property Office...”

Chapter 11: The Answer from Canada

Clara read the first line, and then she stopped.

She looked up from the thin blue paper. “This is too big to read on my own,” she said quietly. “Everyone should hear it. Dad. And Old Bert.”

Josie was already gone. She ran out onto the platform, where Bert was rolling up his green flag after the last train, and she came back with him by the sleeve. Robert came down the office stairs with his cup of tea still in his hand.

Old Bert saw the blue envelope on the desk, and his eyes went soft under their wild white brows.

“So,” he said. “It came at last.” He lowered himself onto the stool by the window, the flag across his knees. “Go on then, lass. Read it out.”

And Clara read.



“Dear children of the Lost Property Office,

Your letter came all the way across the sea, and I have read it ten times. My old hands shook when I opened it. Thank you. Thank you for finding my case."

Clara turned the page over. The room was so quiet you could hear Whistle purring in the basket.

"I am seventy-two years old now. I was twelve when I left Netherby, the same age as some of you. That is a long time to remember a village — but I have never forgotten it, not for one day.

I have thought about that case every year of my life. My whole village was packed inside it, in pencil and paper, and I left it on a bench. I have never stopped being sorry."

"He was sorry," Josie whispered. "All this time. He thought he'd lost it for good."

"After we came to Canada, I kept drawing. I never stopped. And when I grew up, do you know what I became? I became an art teacher. For forty years I stood in front of children with a pencil in my hand, and I taught them to look, and to draw what they saw. Every one of them, I taught the way I once taught myself, on a bench on platform two."

Max took off his spectacles and cleaned them very slowly.

"The drawing boy," he said. "He grew up, and he taught drawing. For his whole life."

"You wrote that you covered the faces in my drawings, and would not show them without my leave. Dear children — show them. Show them all, the faces too. Take the little papers off. I drew those faces so they would not be forgotten. Let Netherby look at them again."

Clara set the letter down for a moment. She got up, crossed to the wall of drawings, and stood before one of the covered ones — a kind old face under its small square of soft paper. Gently, so gently, she peeled the paper away.

An old man looked out at them from sixty years ago, half smiling, drawn line by careful line.

“By kind leave,” Clara said softly, and she meant it like a promise. Then she went back to the desk and read on.

“How I would love to come and see you all. But I am too old now to cross the sea. The doctor shakes his head at me, and I think this once he is right. My travelling days are behind me.”

“He can’t come,” said Theo. His shoulders dropped. “After all that.”

“Wait,” said Clara. “There’s more.”

“But my granddaughter is coming — my son’s girl, Grace. She is seventeen, and she is braver than the whole family put together. She has bought her ticket already. She is flying to England for your fiftieth anniversary, to stand on platform two for me.

And she is bringing me something back. Grace has a little camera, and she films everything. Do you know what that means — to film? She points her camera, and it keeps a place moving and alive, so that you can watch it again and again. She will film Netherby for me. The station. The garden. The bench. She will film it all, and carry my whole village home to me across the sea — moving and real — after more than sixty years.”

“She’ll film it,” breathed Josie. “So he can see. So he can really see it, from his chair in Canada.”

Robert set down his tea. He did not say anything, but he nodded slowly, the way he did when something was being done properly.

“I must tell you one last thing. I have prayed for that little case more times than you would guess — that it might be safe somewhere, and not thrown away. To know it waited all these years, and was found by good and careful children — I thank God for it. He does not forget the small things. And neither, it seems, does your good office.

Your friend,

Edwin Arnold

(the boy they called Ted).”

For a moment nobody spoke. The letter had come from an old man in a garden on the other side of the world, and yet he seemed to be standing right there in the office with them.

“Grace,” said Josie, trying the name. “She’s coming here. For the anniversary.” She looked as if she might burst. “We’re going to *meet* her.”

“And we can show the faces now,” said Clara. She looked at the wall, at all the little paper squares still waiting. “Every one of them. By his kind leave.”

Theo let out a long breath. “That’s the best letter I’ve ever heard in my—”

“Wait,” said Clara.

She was looking at the bottom of the page. Below the name, below everything, there was more writing — but different. Smaller. Shakier. As if the old man had signed his letter, and set down his pen, and then thought of one more thing, and picked the pen up again.

“There’s a P.S.,” she said.

“A what?” said Josie.

“A P.S. It’s what you put right at the very end, after your name, when you’ve finished the letter but you’ve thought of one more thing to say.” Clara held the page closer to the light. “This one’s hard to read. His hand was shaking.”

She read it slowly.

“P.S. Look after the dog on the bench drawing. That was my dog, Pip. When we sailed, they made us put him in a crate — a wooden box, with bars, for animals on the ship. But Pip would not go in. He was frightened. He ran, and there was no time left, and we sailed without him. I have wondered about him every day of my life. Whatever became of Pip?”

Clara lowered the letter.

The office was very still. On the wall, the drawing of platform two looked back at them — the quiet platform, the empty bench, and the little dog sitting on it, ears up, waiting.

“Poor Pip,” Josie whispered. “Left behind. Just like the case.”

But Clara was not looking at the drawing. She was looking at Old Bert.
Because Old Bert had gone very quiet.

He sat on his stool by the window with his green flag across his knees, and he was staring at the little drawn dog as if it had spoken his own name out loud. His old face had changed. It had gone still, and soft, and far away, all at once — the face of a man looking at something a very long way off, and finding it closer than he thought.

“Bert?” said Josie.

Old Bert did not answer. He only went on looking at the dog on the bench.

He knew. They all saw it in his face, plain as the flag on his knees.

Old Bert knew what had become of Pip.

Chapter 12: Platform Two

The morning of the anniversary came bright and clean. Flags were strung all along both platforms, and the smell of cake drifted down from the kitchen.

But before any of that, before the crowds came, Old Bert took the four of them aside.

He had said he would. On the evening the letter came, Bert had only shaken his old head. “Not now,” he’d said. “This one I’ll tell you proper. On the platform. On the day.” And Bert always kept his word.

Now he led them down platform two, to the bench — the very bench in Ted’s last drawing, where a small dog once sat with his ears up.

“You want to know what became of Pip,” said Bert.

Nobody breathed.

“He stayed,” said Bert. “That’s the whole heart of it. When the Arnolds sailed, Pip ran off down the line, frightened of that crate, and by the time anyone caught him the ship was long gone. One little dog, all alone on the platform.” He smiled under his wild white brows. “But not for long. Old Mr Cray — he was the stationmaster then, the same man who found the case and wrote it in the book — Mr Cray took him in. Fed him. Kept him.”

“Here?” whispered Josie. “Pip lived *here*?”

“Right here. Twelve good years.” Bert’s eyes shone. “Pip was the station dog. He met every train. He slept in the sun on this bench, and he learned the whistle codes better than half the guards. Twelve happy years he had, on the very platform his boy drew him on.”

Theo swallowed. “And we kept something of him?”

“We did.” Bert reached into his waistcoat pocket. “His collar had a little tag on it — a round piece of brass, with his name scratched deep.” He held it up on its worn strip of leather so they could all read the one word cut into the yellow metal.

Pip.

“Brass doesn’t rust, you know,” said Bert softly. “It only wants a rub now and then to shine. Mr Cray hung this in the signal box, and there it has hung ever since. I’ve kept it bright with my own thumb.” He closed his hand around it. “It has a part to play today. You’ll see.”

By ten o’clock the platform was full. The whole village had come. There was a brass band, cake on long tables, and Robert in his best uniform.

Then, far down the line, came a long whistle.

“Here she comes!” shouted Theo.

A cloud of white smoke rose above the trees. Firefly steamed in slowly, proudly, with all her brass polished till it burned in the sun and her red bufferbeam gleaming, pulling three full carriages of cheering passengers. Nancy leaned from the footplate, coal dust on her cheek, grinning like a girl.

And beside her on the footplate stood someone new. A girl of seventeen, with the same thoughtful eyes as an old man in an old drawing.

The train hissed to a stop. The girl climbed down and looked around at the flags and the faces and the little green engine as if she could not quite believe any of it was real.

“You’re Grace,” said Josie, before anyone else could get a word out. Of course it was Josie.

“And you’re the ones who found my grandfather’s case,” said Grace. Her voice wobbled. “He talks about you every single day.”

They took her into the office first.

On the wall hung all of Ted’s drawings — and not one face was covered now. The little paper squares were gone. Every face from old Netherby looked out into the room, uncovered at last, exactly as the old man had asked. Grace walked along them slowly. At the platform-two drawing, with its quiet bench and its small dog, she stopped for a long, long time.

Out on the platform, the case itself stood open on the bench, in the very spot where it had waited sixty years. Its grey photographs, its notebook of drawings, the folded shirt, the unused ticket — all laid out in the sun.

Then Grace did the thing nobody expected.

She reached into her bag and took out her telephone — a small flat one that can hold a moving picture in its screen.

“Grandpa asked me to film it all,” she said, “and carry it home to him across the sea.” She smiled, and her eyes were wet. “But I thought — why wait? Why not let him see it *now*?”

She pressed the screen. It buzzed, and clicked. And then a voice came out of it, an old, warm voice, full of wonder.

“Grace? Grace, is that — am I — well, I never. Is that the *station*?”

Everyone crowded close. On the little screen, in a sunny garden on the far side of the world, sat an old man, leaning forward with both hands pressed to his mouth.

It was Edwin. It was Ted. Seventy-two years old, and seeing Netherby for the first time in more than sixty years — live, and moving, and real.

“I’ll show you, Grandpa,” Grace whispered. “All of it.”

And she carried him round his own village.

She held the phone up to the flags, the cake, the band. She turned it slowly along the platform, along the flower beds. “The garden,” breathed the old voice. “The garden’s still there.” She showed him Firefly, hissing gently, her brass shining. “That’s never little Firefly? She was old when I was a boy!” She showed him the wall of drawings, face by face, and the old man named them one by one in a voice that shook. “Dora Finch. Oh, Dora. And little Tom Pike. They’re all still here.”

Then the case on the bench. On the screen, the old man went silent. He only looked, and looked.

“My whole village,” he said at last, very quietly. “You kept it. All this time, you kept it.”

And then Old Bert stepped forward. He held the little piece of brass close to the screen, so the old man could see the name scratched deep in it.



Pip.

“Your dog stayed, Ted,” Bert said gently. “Mr Cray kept him. Twelve good years he had, right here — the best station dog this line ever knew. This was his tag. It’s been waiting for you too.”

On the screen, the old man could not speak. He pressed one hand flat against his heart, and nodded, and nodded, while the tears ran down into his smile.

That evening, when the crowds had gone home and the flags hung still, Clara sat down at the great register with the whole office in a warm hush around her.

Grace would carry the case home across the sea in the morning — to her grandfather, where it belonged. But first there was one thing to write.

Clara turned to the very first page, to the oldest entry of all, in Mr Cray’s faded hand: *Leather case, E.A., handed in — found on platform two, 17 June.*

Under it, in her very best writing — slow, careful and proud — she added one word more. She read it aloud as her pen curled the last stroke.

“Item one. Leather suitcase. E. A.” She lifted her pen. “*Returned.*”

They all looked at it. Theo and Josie and Max, Robert with his hand on Clara’s shoulder, Nancy still in her overalls, and Old Bert by the window with Whistle winding round his boots.

“Sixty years,” said Robert quietly. “And we returned it properly. Patience, and proof.” He looked round at all of them, and there was something in his face they did not often see. “I’m proud of this office. Every one of you.”

Whistle jumped up onto the open register and sat down squarely in the middle of the page, as if to sign it too. Everybody laughed.

The last train of the day pulled out just after eight, Nancy’s whistle ringing down the whole valley, and the village waved it away into the dusk.

Josie walked along the emptying platform, picking up a dropped flag here, a paper cup there. And on the end bench — Pip’s bench — something made her stop.

An umbrella. A red umbrella, rolled neat, leaning in the corner as if someone had set it down for a moment and forgotten to come back for it.

She picked it up. Two letters were stamped near the handle. And tucked into its folds was a small printed card.

“Max,” Josie called slowly. “Max. Come and look at this.”

Max came. He read the card, and pushed his spectacles up his nose.

“It’s a concert ticket,” he said. He looked up. “For a concert. And it was *yesterday.*”

Josie turned the red umbrella over in her hands. Somewhere out there was a person who had missed their own concert — and left their umbrella on platform two.

The Lost Property Office was never really shut.