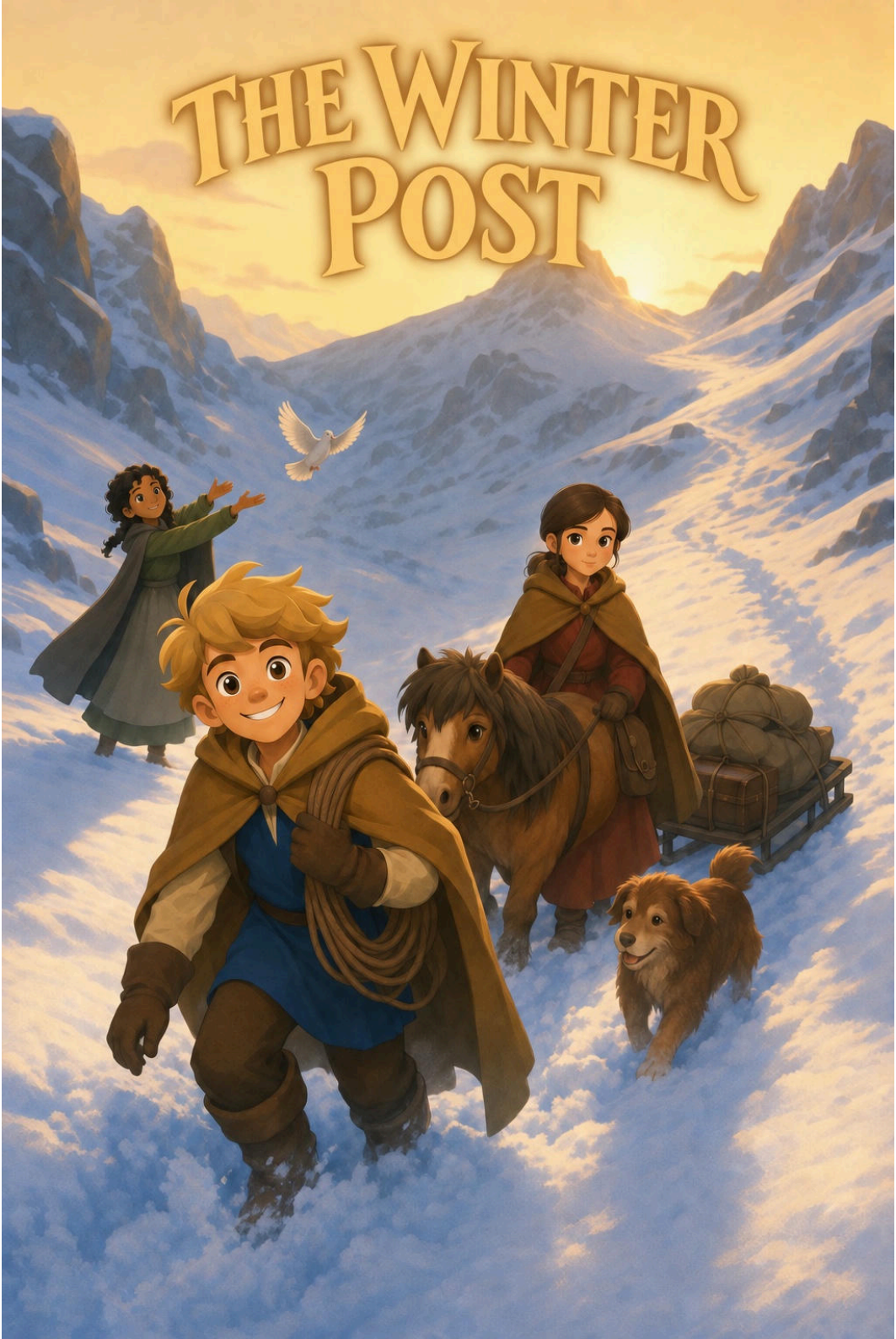

THE WINTER POST

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About This Book

At a Glance

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

Edition

This is the **first edition** — version 1.2, published August 2026.

Version	Date	Notes
1.0	August 2026	First edition.
1.1	August 2026	Language corrections
1.2	September 2026	Cover lettering added.

About the Story

The Series

Stonegate Keep is a small, friendly keep beside the King's Road, the great post road through the Grey Hills. Here the king's letters change horses, travellers find a bed, and four children — Alice, Will, Rose and Peter — learn what the Messenger's Oath really means: keep your word, tell the truth, help whoever needs you on the way, and finish what you begin.

This Book

The snow comes down into the valley in one night, a month early. It is lovely for about an hour. Then Amos walks down off the mountain on his own two feet, because no pony could get through, and asks one question: where is the winter post?

It is still in the chest at Stonegate Keep. Four months of letters for nine villages over Eagle Pass. The abbey's lamp oil. And the king's own letters, which have not even started up the road yet. Once the pass shuts, nothing crosses until March.

One rider cannot carry it. No pony ever born could. And there is a hole in every plan they make, because a pigeon only ever flies home.

So it has to go the old way — a chain of eleven doors, one stage each, and everybody home to their own bed. There is a sledge to build, a map nobody has ever drawn, and one clear day left in the sky.

If that.

Chapter 1: Snow in the Valley

Nobody said a word for a moment.

Then Helen Ward put the porridge pot down on the table.

“Five weeks is five weeks,” she said. “Eat your breakfast.”

That was Helen all over. She had fed this Keep through twenty winters. She was not going to stop for one more.

Alice ate slowly. She was thinking.

Will did not eat much at all. He kept turning round to look at the window.

Outside, the snow lay over the whole valley. It had come in one night. All of it. The courtyard was smooth and white. The wall was a long white bank. The King’s Road had gone.

Peter Bramble came in at the door. His boots were full of it.

“How deep is it up here?” he said.

“Past my knee at the gate,” said Will.

“Past mine at our door.”

“Your door is lower down.”

“My door,” said Peter, “is famous.”

John Ward stood up. He was the Keeper of the Road. He did the same things every morning of his life. Snow or no snow.

“Water first,” he said. “The troughs will be iced over. Then hay. Then you may have an hour on the slope.”

Will was out of his chair before the last word.

The troughs were iced hard. Will broke the first one with his heel. The ice came up in white plates. He laid them along the wall in a row. He had done that since he was six.

Under the ice the water was black and very cold. Swift put his nose in and blew. Then he drank a long drink.

Rose Finch went up the tower to her birds first. She always did. She came down with snow on her shoulders.

“Well?” said Alice.

“The loft is dry,” said Rose. “The birds are cross.”

“Are they ill?”

“No. They are cross about the snow. They know it is early too.”

Then they were free. They got the old sledge out of the cart shed.

It was a heavy old thing, grey with age. Nobody knew how old it was. Bennet said it had been old when he was a boy. Bennet had been a boy a long time ago.

The beacon slope above the Keep was perfect. It ran down clean and open for two hundred paces. The snow had blown smooth on it.

Rusty went mad.

He was fourteen. He went mad anyway. He bit the snow. He dug a hole in it. He put his whole head in the hole. He ran at the sledge. Then he ran away from the sledge. Then he barked at it from a safe place.

“Rusty,” said Alice. “You are an old dog.”

Rusty did not think so.

They went down four times each. Then Peter made a rule.

“New rule,” he said. “The one who gets to the bottom first carries the sledge up.”

“Why?” said Will.

“It is fair. The fastest goes down fastest. So he has the most time to walk.”

“That is not fair. That is the opposite of fair.”

“It is my rule,” said Peter. “I made it up. I am allowed.”

Will won the next run. Will carried the sledge up. Will was not pleased.

Then Peter won a run. He stood at the bottom with his mouth open. He looked up the long white slope at the sledge.

“On second thoughts,” he said, “it is a bad rule. I am taking it away again.”

Rose laughed so much she had to sit down in the snow.

They went up and down for an hour. Their hands were red. Their faces were red. The whole world was white and blue and gold. It was the best hour of the month.

“I like snow,” said Peter, on his back at the bottom.

“You have said that nine times,” said Rose.

“I mean it nine times.”



Then the hour was over. Alice went in and got the road-book.

Her father had taught her to do this. When a thing is coming, you do not guess. You sit down with the book. You count.

She spread it open on the long table. She put her finger on the day. Then she went forward. Week by week. Right to the shortest day of the year.

"Thirty-five days," she said.

Nobody answered. So she said it again, to herself. Then she wrote the number small in the corner of the page.

Thirty-five days to get the winter post over Eagle Pass.

She went to the door to look at the sky. Old Bennet was there before her.

He was standing in the doorway on his stick. He had his coat on. The cold came in past him. He had been ill since the end of the summer. He did not often come as far as the door.

"Bennet," said Alice. "You should be by the fire."

"Aye," said Bennet. "I should."

He did not move. He was looking up the valley. Past the beacon rock. Past the white shoulder of the fell. Right to the far end. Up there the road climbed. It turned. Then it went out of sight.

Down on the slope, Will and Peter were both hauling on the sledge rope. Rusty was barking at both of them.

"They are looking at the pretty part," said Bennet.

"Yes," said Alice.

"You are not."

"No."

He tapped the stick once on the step. "Good."

Alice looked where he was looking. From the Keep door you can see a long way. You cannot see Eagle Pass. The shoulder of the fell stands in the way.

"You cannot see the pass from here," she said.

"No," said Bennet. "You cannot."

Then something moved on the road, far off.

It came round the turn by the broken wall. It was black on all that white. It was a man. He was walking the way a man walks in deep snow. Up, and down, and up, and down. Slowly.

Rose saw him first from the tower. She called down.

Alice was already going. She got her boots on at the door. She went out through the gate with Rusty ahead of her. The others came off the slope in a shower of snow.

It was Amos.

He was seventy-five years old. He kept his sheep on the high shoulder above Eagle Pass. He came down twice in a year. Perhaps.

His beard had ice in it. His coat was white to the chest. He had his long staff in one hand. He was leaning on it.

And he was on foot.

"Amos," said Will. "Where is Bluebell?"

"Back at my brother's," said Amos. "Warm. She would not get through."

"Would not?"

"Could not. I would not ask her." He got his breath. "I came down by the old sheep track. It took me two days."

They got him in through the gate. Helen had the door open already. There was a chair by the fire. There was hot broth. Nobody made a fuss. Amos hated a fuss.

"Boots off," said Helen.

"I am all right."

"Boots off, Amos."

He took his boots off.

He drank half the broth. Then he put the cup down. He looked at John Ward.

"Eagle Pass is knee-deep now," he said. "Not in a month. Now."

Nobody spoke.

"I looked in at your gate as I came by," said Amos. "I will ask it plain, John. You will tell me straight."

He looked round at all of them.

"There is not one letter of the winter post in this Keep yet. Is there?"

Chapter 2: What the Winter Post Is

"No," said John Ward. "There is not."

He said it straight. That was how Amos had asked for it.

Then he went to the door and called across the yard.

That is how this Keep works. When there is a thing to say, it gets said once. At the long table. To everybody. Nobody hears it later in the stable from somebody's sister.

Alice had grown up with that. She thought every house was like it. She was nine when she found out. They are not.

So they all came in. John Ward. Helen. Old Bennet, up from his chair by the fire and along to the table on his stick. Alice, Will, Rose and Peter. Amos in his socks with his feet by the hearth. Even Hob. He had come up with a load of wood. He stayed to hear it.

"Get the chest," said John Ward.

The post chest stood in the map room. It was oak. It was as long as a man. It came up to Will's waist. It had a flat lid and two iron handles.

It took Will and Peter together to shift it. They did not shift it far.

John Ward turned the key. He threw the lid back.

Nobody said anything.

The chest was full.

It was full of letters. They lay in bundles. Each bundle was tied round twice with string. Each one had a paper label on the front. The labels were in Bennet's writing. Every label was the name of a place.

"Nine bundles," said Alice.

"Nine," said her father. "One for every place over the pass."

Will put his hand in and lifted one. It was thick. It was heavier than it looked.

"How long have these been here?"

"Since harvest," said Bennet.

"Since *harvest*?"

"Aye." Bennet sat down slowly. He put both hands on the top of his stick. "Now sit down, all four of you. You have carried post for two years. You have never carried this one. So I shall tell you what it is."

They sat down.



"The winter post is not letters," said Bennet.

Peter opened his mouth.

"It looks like letters," said Bennet. "It is a year."

He nodded at the open chest.

"Every place over that pass has four months in there. Word from their people down the valley. Who was born. Who was wed. Who is ill and who is better. A girl at Millford writes to her mother at the top of the world. Then her letter sits in that chest. It sits there till we can take it."

"Why does it sit there?" said Rose.

"They go up together, or they do not go up," said Bennet. "One rider cannot climb that pass nine times over. So we save them. Then we send them once. That is the winter post."

"And the king's letters," said Alice.

"And the king's letters." Bennet looked round at them. "Do you know what is in those?"

Nobody did.

"Grants," said Bennet.

"What is a grant?" said Peter.

"The king's yes. On paper. With his seal on it." Bennet held up one finger. "Highfield asks to hold its fair again next year. That is a grant. Millford asks to mend the mill wheel. They must take the water for a month to do it. Grant. A village asks to graze its sheep on the high ground. Grant. Every one of them comes up this road once a year. In the winter post."

"And if it does not come?"

"Then they wait."

"How long?"

Bennet looked at him.

"March," he said.

The word went round the table. Nobody liked it.

"March," said Bennet again. "Once Eagle Pass shuts, nothing goes over. Not a letter. Not a cart. Not a man on his own two feet. It shuts about the shortest day. It opens in March. That is not a rule anyone made. That is the snow."

"So if we are one day late—" said Will.

"You are not one day late," said Bennet. "You are three months late. Late is not late, boy. Late is March."

Amos spoke from the hearth. He did not turn round.

"That is the way of it," he said. "I have wintered up there. You want your letter in December. Nobody wants it in March."

Helen had been standing with her arms folded. Now she said the other thing.

"And it is not only paper," she said.

They all looked at her.

"The abbey buys down here," said Helen. "Flour. Salt. Lamp oil. They have their own beasts. They bake their own bread. But the oil comes up this road."

"So?" said Peter.

"So ask Brother Luke what an abbey does in a mountain winter with no oil."

"They sit in the dark," said Bennet.

"They sit in the dark," said Helen. "They read nothing for four months. And they are a house full of readers."

Rose had been quiet for a long time. Rose was quiet a lot. Then she said something. Everybody turned.

"Do they have birds?"

"Who?"

"The abbey. Highfield. Do they keep pigeons?"

"They do," said Bennet. "Four or five. Good ones."

Rose nodded slowly. She did not say anything else. She was looking at the table with her eyebrows down.

Alice watched her. Rose only made that face for one reason. She had found a thing nobody else had found yet.

"Now the last part," said John Ward. "It is the worst part."

He tapped the empty end of the chest.

"The king's letters are not here yet."

"Not here?" said Will.

"They never come early. They ride up from the capital with a royal rider. They come when they come."

"When, though?" said Will.

"In a good year, a day or two before the shortest day," said Bennet. "Some years, the night before. Once, the morning of. Then a rider takes them up in an afternoon and it is done by dark. That is the way it has always gone."

Alice had gone quite still.

"Say that again," she said.

"They come at the last minute. They always have."

"So the last half of the post gets here," she said slowly, "about the day it has to be over the pass."

"Aye."

"In a year when the snow is a month early."

"Aye," said her father.

Will stood up.

He had been sitting on his hands for the whole of it. Alice had seen it coming. She could always see it coming.

"Then let me take the first half now," he said. "Tomorrow. On Swift. He is fit. He is shod. He knows every stone of that road. I take five bundles up. I come back. Then I take the rest. Two loads. Two days each way. That is eight days, and it is done. The king's letters can go on their own after."

He said it fast. He meant every word of it.

Old Bennet looked at him for a long moment.

"No," he said.

Will's chin went up. "I am twelve, not six. I have been over that pass—"

"It is nothing to do with your age."

That stopped him.

"Sit down," said Bennet. "Now weigh it."

"Weigh what?"

"That." Bennet pointed his stick at the chest. "Lift all nine bundles at once. Then think of the abbey's oil on top. Then the king's own case on top of that. That is your load. Go on. Try it."

Will bent over the chest. He got his arms round the bundles. He got them off the bottom.

He could not stand up straight.

"That is not a saddlebag," said Bennet. "That is a cart-load. And no cart goes over Eagle Pass in snow."

He let it sit there a moment.

"I was on this road forty years. I never once saw a full winter post carried by one rider. Not once. And there was never a pony born that could take it."

Chapter 3: The Way It Was Done Before

The fire was built up. The lamps were lit. Outside it was dark by four.

Old Bennet sat in his chair with a blanket over his knees. He did not look beaten. He had the face of a man working something out.

“Sit down,” he said. “All of you. I have been thinking since this morning.”

They sat on the floor round the hearth. Rusty got in among them. He put his chin on Peter’s boot.



“The snow came early once before in my life,” said Bennet. “Only once. I was twenty.”

“What did you do?” said Alice.

“I did nothing. I was twenty. Old Fen Carter did it. He had done it once as a boy. The man who taught *him* was dead by then.” Bennet held up his hands and let them drop. “That is the trouble. Nobody alive has seen it but me. And they made me carry sacks.”

“But you saw it,” said Alice.

"I saw it."

He turned his stick round in his hands.

"They did not send a rider," he said. "They sent the post up in stages. Not one man going all the way. A chain."

"A chain," said Will.

"A chain of people. Every village takes one piece of the road. The piece outside its own door. They know that piece in the dark. They carry the post to the end of it. Then they hand it on to the next lot. Then they go home."

Alice had gone very still.

"Say that again," she said.

"Millford takes it from the mill to the broken wall. That is their ground. Stonegate takes it from the wall up to the shieling. Amos's people take it on from there to the pass hut. Highfield comes up the far side. They meet it at the top."

"And everybody sleeps in their own bed," said Alice.

"That is the whole trick of it," said Bennet. "Nobody is ever three hours from a fire. Nobody is out after dark. Nobody sleeps in the snow. That is why it works."

He tapped the arm of his chair.

"A chain moves a load no rider on earth can carry. And it does it with cold feet and a hot supper."

Peter put his hand up. He did it the way boys do in church.

"How many people?"

"Eleven doors," said Bennet. "That was Fen Carter's number. I have never forgotten it. Eleven doors between the mill and the top. Eleven yeses."

"And if one says no?"

"Then there is a hole in your chain. And the post stops at the hole."

Nobody said anything for a bit.

"You need three things," said Bennet. He counted them off. "You need a sledge. A real one, built for the job. You need your eleven doors. And you need one person to hold the whole of it in their head. Who is where. Who has what. What day. That last one is the hard one."

John Ward had been standing behind them the whole time.

"Then we do it that way," he said.

He came round. He stood where they could all see him.

"And I am giving the job to you four."

Will made a noise. Rose did not move at all.

"Under my eye," said John Ward. "So hear the limits. Hear them now. I shall not say them twice."

They waited.

"One. Every plan comes to me or to Bennet before it happens. Not after."

"Yes," said Alice.

"Two. Nobody rides alone. Nobody rides after dusk. That has not changed and it will not change."

"Yes."

"Three. Nobody goes above the shieling without a grown man. Not one of you. Not for any reason."

"Yes," said Alice. Will said it half a beat later.

"Four." Their father looked at Will for this one. "If a thing goes wrong, you come home. You do not fix it up there. You come home. We fix it here."

"Yes," said Will.

"Good." John Ward went and stood by the fire. "Now. Who does what?"

Alice got up. She went out of the room. She came back with something flat under her arm.

It was Master Wilkin's sheet of paper. Thick. Cream. Blank. It had lain untouched on her table since the day he rode out.

She put it on the table. She smoothed it with her hand.

"I am going to draw the winter road," she said.

"There is only one road," said Peter.

"There is a summer road and a winter road. They are not the same road."

Alice's voice went quick. It always did when a thing was finished in her head.

"In summer you go over the top of the long shoulder. In winter the snow lies six feet deep in that dip. Nobody can see it is there. The wind scours the west side bare. The east side fills up. One side of the beck holds hard, and one does not. Where is every roof between here and the pass? That is what we need. It is not on any map. So I am going to make it."

"Can you?" said Rose.

"I can draw what I see," said Alice. "And I can ask the people up there what *they* have seen. Then I shall mark the two apart on the page. Anybody using it will know."

Bennet looked at her for a long moment.

"Wilkin has done a thing to that girl," he said.

"Peter," said John Ward.

Peter sat up.

"Eleven doors."

"Me?"

"You. You know every one of them. You know their names. Their sisters. Their dogs. You have been talking to travellers in that inn since you could stand up. Go and get me eleven yeses."

Peter went red to the ears. He did not say anything clever at all. For Peter that was rare.

"Will."

Will was ready. Will had been ready since the fire was lit.

"You go down to Millford tomorrow. To the smith. You two are building the sledge."

There was a pause.

"The sledge," said Will.

"The sledge."

"I am the best rider on this road."

"You are."

"And you want me in a shop."

"I want you building the thing that carries the post," said his father. "There is no post without it. Say it is not fair, if you think it is not fair."

Will opened his mouth. Then he shut it again.

Alice watched the whole thing happen on his face. It took about a minute.

"When do we start?" said Will.

"That," said Bennet from his chair, "was the fastest minute I have seen you manage."

And then Rose spoke.

She had not said one word since the pigeons. She was sitting with her arms round her knees. She said it quietly. Everybody heard it.

"It will not work."

Every head turned.

Rose looked at the floor. Then she made herself look up.

"Say we get the post over the pass," she said. "Say we get to the top and hand it to the abbey. Good. Now the weather turns. Now Amos's people cannot move for two days. Now we must tell Highfield to wait. How?"

"We send a bird," said Will.

"That is what I mean," said Rose. "A bird from where?"

"From up there. From the top."

"And where does that bird go, Will?"

Will stopped.

"A pigeon does not carry a letter *to* a place," said Rose. "A pigeon only ever flies home. Ours fly here. All of them. Take a bird of mine anywhere in the kingdom and let it go. It comes back to this tower."

She put her chin on her knees.

"So we can send everything up that pass," she said. "And not one word can come back."

Chapter 4: Brother Luke Comes Down

For two days nobody could solve it.

Rose said nothing about it at all. That was worse. She fed her birds. She swept the loft. She sat on the tower steps in the cold with her chin in her hands.

The others got on with it. Will was at the smith's shop in Millford with his sleeves rolled up. Peter was walking from door to door with a list. Alice was out on the road with a board under her arm. Her fingers were blue. She drew anyway.

Then, on the third morning, Rusty stood up in the yard and barked once.

He barked up the valley. Not down it.

Nothing comes down that road in November. Nothing at all. Alice was at the gate in ten seconds. The others were behind her.

Far off, the road came round the white shoulder of the fell. Something was moving on it.

It was a mule.

It came down slowly. Step by step. The snow was up to its chest. Its ears were flat. It was not enjoying itself.

In front of it came a man in a brown robe. He was breaking the way with his own two legs.

"That is Barley," said Peter.

"That," said Alice, "is Brother Luke."

They went up the road to meet him. It took time. He was further off than he looked. The snow between was deep.



Brother Luke was young. About twenty-five. He had short black curly hair with ice in it. He had a thin, tired, cheerful face. His skin was light brown. The end of his nose had gone red.

His brown habit was frozen stiff from the knee down. It rattled.

He had a big wicker basket on his back.

“Hello,” he said. “Is your kitchen open?”

“Are you all right?” said Alice.

“I am cold to the bone,” said Brother Luke. “But I am in one piece. So is Barley. So are the birds. Please take the basket first.”

Rose had it off his back before anybody else moved.

Then Helen came out. There was no more talking for a bit.

Brother Luke was put in the chair nearest the fire. His habit came off. One of John Ward’s coats went on. There was hot broth. His feet went into a bowl of warm water and he made a small happy noise.

Barley went in the end box with a rug and a bucket of warm mash. Will ran his hands down all four legs. Barley tried to eat his hair.

"Two days," said Brother Luke. "Two days from the abbey. It is three hours in summer."

"Is the pass shut?" said John Ward.

"Not shut. Nearly." He put his cup down. "I got over the top on my hands and knees in one place. A man can still do it. A loaded sledge cannot. Not now."

"How long have we got?"

"Not long. Ask the sky. Do not ask me."

Rose had gone straight to the basket. She had it open on the floor. Her head was down inside it.

"Four," she said.

"Four," said Brother Luke. "They are the abbey's own. I carried them the whole way. I did not let them out of my coat once."

"You carried them *warm*?"

"Under my arm. Two at a time. Was that right?"

Rose sat back on her heels. Her whole face had changed.

"That was right," she said.

Then she stood up and started talking. She did not stop for a long time.

"Do you know what you have done? These are yours. These live at the abbey. So these fly *to* the abbey. Not here. There."

She held the basket up.

"That is half of it. That is half of it done."

Everybody looked at her.

"Say that slowly, Rose," said her father, from the door.

Rose took a breath.

"A pigeon has one home," she said. "One. It does not learn a new one in a week. So a bird can only take a letter one way. Home. Ours all fly here, to this tower. So we could never hear a word from up there. That was the hole."

She pointed at the basket.

"Those four live at Highfield. So we keep them here. We write on a scrap of paper. We let one go. It flies up the pass. Over the top. Home to the abbey. In an hour."

"An hour," said Bennet quietly.

"Less, with the wind right."

"And back?" said Will.

"Back is the other half," said Rose. "Back is mine."

She turned round to Brother Luke. He was in a borrowed coat with his feet in a bowl. She went red. She said it anyway.

"You have to take four of mine home with you."

There was a small silence.

"Very well," said Brother Luke.

"You have to carry them the way you carried yours. Warm. Inside your coat. Not on your back in the cold. You have to feed them at the abbey. You have to keep them shut in for a day so they settle. Then you write it small and tie it on and let one go. And it comes here. To me. And we know."

"Show me," said Brother Luke.

So Rose showed him.

It went badly for about two minutes. She talked too fast. She used her own words for things — the words she used with birds when nobody was listening. He did not know them. She said "under the wing bar" and he said "the what?" and she went scarlet.

Then she stopped. She put both hands flat on her knees.

"Sorry," she said. "I will start again. Hold your hands out."

After that it was fine.

She put Inky into his hands the right way. One thumb over the tail. Two fingers up under the breast. She showed him the little paper roll and the waxed thread. She made him tie one on himself, twice. The second time was neat.

She told him how much corn and no more. She told him what a bird does when it is frightened. She told him what it does when it is only cross.

"And when you free her," said Rose, "do it with both hands open. Up. Do not throw her. Never throw a bird."

"Both hands open," said Brother Luke. "Up."

"And not in bad weather. Is it coming across the pass? Then you keep her in and you wait. A bird will try. That is the trouble with them. They will try when they should not."

Brother Luke looked at her for a moment.

"How old are you?"

"Eleven."

"You have just taught me four things I did not know," he said. "I have kept birds for six years."

Rose looked at the floor. But she was pleased. She did not hide it very well.

Then Brother Luke felt inside his habit. It was steaming by the fire. He took out a folded paper.

"The abbey's list," he said. "What we need brought over. Father Abbot wrote it out himself."

John Ward read it aloud at the table. Lamp oil. Salt. Two boxes of candles. Flour, if it can be got up. Nails. A packet of needles. The letters, of course. And every grant, if the king's letters come at all.

It was a short list. They had known most of it.

Then John Ward stopped.

He read the last line again, to himself. Then he read it out.

"*We cannot get to Cold Beck this year.*"

Nobody moved.

"Cold Beck," said Bennet.

"What is Cold Beck?" said Peter.

"The highest village on this side of the world," said Bennet. "Three hours above the abbey. Nine houses. They come down to Highfield for their post. Or Highfield goes up to them."

"And this year we cannot," said Brother Luke. "I am sorry. Our track went in the first week. We have two old brothers ill. We have one mule, and he cannot do it twice."

He looked round the table.

"So say Cold Beck's letters do not go over the pass with the rest," he said. "Then Cold Beck has no post before the spring."

Chapter 5: The Sledge

The smith at Millford was called Ned.

He was a wide, slow man with black hands. He had no small talk at all. On the first morning he looked at Will for about four seconds.

"Can you hold a thing still?" he said.

"Yes."

"Then you will do."

They built it over nine days.

Will had thought a sledge was a board with two bent sticks under it. He had been sledging on one since he was four. He knew everything about sledges.

He knew nothing at all.

"That is a boy's sledge," said Ned. "You sit on it. This one carries eight sacks and a barrel. Over rough ground. For two days. Then it comes back."

They started with the runners.

Amos gave the ash. He came down to the shop and stood in the door. He said one tree. The leaning one by his brother's wall. Blown down two winters back and seasoned since.

It was good wood. Ned went and looked at it. He said nothing.

"Aye," said Amos.

That was the whole thanks either of them wanted.

The runners were two long pieces of ash. They were steamed and bent up at the front. Ned shod each one with a strip of iron.

That was Will's job. He held the strip dead still on the wood. Ned drove the nails.

"Why iron?" said Will. "Wood slides."

"Wood slides for a mile. Then it wears flat. Then you are dragging a plank." Ned tapped the strip. "Iron slides all winter. And it takes the stones."



Then the body. Plain boards across, nailed down. A low rail at each side. Nothing fancy. Nothing to catch on.

Then the ropes.

"Two," said Ned. "One at the front. One at the back."

"What is the back one for?"

"Going down."

Will waited. Ned did not go on. Ned had said it once.

Hob brought the shafts. He came up on the third day with two long straight poles on his cart. He would not say where he had got them.

"Off a broken cart," he said.

"What broken cart?"

"Mine," said Hob. "It is not broken yet. It will be."

By the end of the week the sledge stood on the shop floor. It was a beautiful thing. It was as long as Will was tall. It smelled of new wood and hot iron.

Ned rubbed the runners with a lump of wax. Then he would not let anybody touch them.

That was the day Alice came down with a bag.

"Sums," she said.

"I am building," said Will.

"You are building the wrong size."

She put the bag on the bench. Out came a small balance. Two hooks of string. Six little sacks of sand.

Ned came over to watch. Ned liked this.

"A pack pony," said Alice. She hung two sacks on the balance. "That is what Swift carries on his back. All day. On a hill. In snow. Two. Not three. And he does no other work."

"He could take three," said Will.

"He could take three for an hour. Then you have a lame pony and no post."

Will shut up.

"Now the sledge." Alice hung on sack after sack. Four. Six. Eight. "Eight. On snow. With two ponies in front and a man on the back rope."

"Eight," said Will.

"Eight. That is our nine bundles and the abbey's oil in one go. That is the whole of it."

"And a man on his own?" said Ned.

Alice took the sacks off. One. Two. Three. She left three hanging.

"Three, dragging. On the level. For a short way. And he will hate it."

"He will," said Ned.

Will stood and looked at the balance for a long time. Two. Eight. Three.

He was thinking about a night two weeks back. He had stood up at that table and said it. *Give me Swift and I will take it in two loads.* He had meant it. Everyone had let him say it.

Two sacks. He had wanted to move nine bundles and a barrel of oil. With two sacks.

"Right," he said.

"Right what?" said Alice.

"Nothing," said Will. "Right."

They took it out on the fifth day of the second week. Up to the beacon slope, in hard bright cold.

Half the valley came to watch. Peter came. Rose came. Amos came and stood at the top with his hands behind his back. Ned drove up on Hob's cart. He would not admit he had come to see it.

They put Swift and Hazel in together, side by side. The load was light. Will was at Swift's head.

It was perfect.

The sledge came up over the top of the slope. It settled. It ran. The runners made a low hiss on the snow. The two ponies leaned into it and found the weight easy.

It went two hundred paces along the shoulder without one check. Peter cheered. Rose was jumping.

Will's face was the face of a boy who has been right all along.

Then the dip below the beacon rock.

It is not a big dip. In summer nobody notices it. The ground drops away for about twenty paces and comes up again. The snow had filled it. It was smooth and it was fast.

Will took it at a trot.

He knew before he was halfway down. The hiss changed. The sledge came off the weight of the ponies. It started to run on its own. It ran downhill faster than they did. It came up under Swift's heels.

Swift felt it touch him.

Now, Swift is quick. Swift is brave. Swift is not steady. He went up in front.

Hazel did not.

Hazel put her ears back and stood into it. She did not move one foot out of line. Swift came down again with her still there beside him, and no room at all to swing round.

And the back rope went tight.

Amos had it. He had walked down that whole slope behind them without a word to anybody. He had the rope in both hands and a turn of it round his fist.

He sat back on it. He dug his heels in the snow. The sledge came up short and stopped dead. Three feet behind Swift's back legs.

Nobody was hurt.

There was a lot of noise for about a minute. Then it went very quiet.

Will got Swift's head down. He stood at his shoulder. He said sorry to him about six times.

Then he ran his hands down all four legs. No heat. No cuts. A scrape of snow on one heel and nothing under it.

Hazel stood there. Hazel had not moved at all. Alice put her face in Hazel's neck and stayed there.

Ned came down the slope and had a long look at the runners. Then he went away again without a word. That was the worst part of the whole afternoon.

Amos coiled the rope up on his arm. Slowly. He did everything slowly.

"Well," said Will. "It went."

"It went," said Amos.

"It was only that dip. I know that dip. I have gone over it a hundred times on the old sledge."

"On a boy's sledge. With no ponies in front of it."

Will looked at the ground.

Amos finished the rope and hung it on the rail. Then he came and stood beside Will. He looked out over the white valley. He said eleven words.

"Fast is how you go. Quick is when you get there."

Will did not answer him.

He had heard it from his father. He had heard it from Bennet. He had heard it now from Amos, with a rope burn on his hand to go with it.

He still did not answer.

Chapter 6: The First Load

Peter got his eleven yeses on the Thursday.

He came in at the kitchen door. He had snow on his eyebrows. He put a list on the table. Then he sat down and ate. He would not say a word till he had eaten.

“Eleven doors,” he said at last. “Eleven yeses. It took four days. I have eaten nine dinners.”

“Nine?”

“You cannot ask a man for a day of his life,” said Peter. “And then leave his stew. It is rude.”

He went down the list with his finger.

Ada at the Millford inn said yes. She did not wait for the end of the sentence.

The two Croft lads said yes. Then they argued for an hour. It was about who would carry what.

Old Sarah at the ford said yes on one condition. They must all come in after. She is to be told the whole of it. In order. Nothing left out.

The eighth door was the hard one. That was Tam Rigg, up at the bend. Tam Rigg says no to things. He has said no to things for thirty years. It is his one hobby.

“What did you do?” said Alice.

“I asked him what Fen Carter did in his year.”

There was a pause.

“And?”

“His grandad was on that chain,” said Peter. “He knew the whole story. He talked for two hours. Then he said he would bring his sledge and his brother.”

“That is twelve, then,” said Will.

"That is twelve," said Peter. "I am not counting the brother. The brother is a surprise."

Then they waited a fortnight for a sky.

That was the hardest part of all. The sledge stood ready. The doors had said yes. And it blew from the north for a week, and you cannot take sixty people up a hill in that.

Will asked every morning. The answer was no every morning.

Then, on the Sunday night, the wind dropped.

They went on the Monday.

It was four weeks and a day since the snow came. There were six days left.

A month of work came down to one attempt. It was all going up at once. The nine bundles out of the chest. The abbey's oil in its barrel. The salt. The candles. The nails.

Cold Beck's bundle was tied on top by itself. It had a red cord round it. Nobody was setting that one down at the abbey. Nobody was forgetting it.

The king's letters were still somewhere on the road from the south.

Helen was up before anybody. She stood at the gate with a basket. She stopped every single person going out of it.

"Dry socks," she said. "In the bag. Not on your feet. In the bag."

"I have dry socks," said Will.

"Show me."

He showed her.

"Now the ones for later."

"Helen."

"Bag."

She put them in his bag herself.

There were hot stones out of the fire. Each one was wrapped in cloth. One for every pocket. There was bread and cheese and cold bacon. There was a small pot of honey. Nobody asked about the honey.

They left in the dark. They got down to the wall at first light.

The broken wall is where the road stops being a road. Below it there are hedges and gates and a farm. Above it there is the fell. In summer you ride past that wall and never see it.

The Millford men were there before them.

They had brought the load up from the mill. Two sledges. A cart had come as far as a cart can get. There were nine men and Ned. They had been on their feet for two hours. They were in fine spirits.

The change took twenty minutes.

It all came off the small sledges. It went on to the new one. Down under a sheet. Roped fore and aft. One man counted every bundle out loud. Another man counted it in. Alice wrote the count in her little book.

"That is ours done," said one of the Crofts. "It is your hill now."

"Thank you," said John Ward.

"Aye," said the Croft lad. "Same again for the king's letters?"

"Same again."

That was the whole of it. They turned round and went home to their breakfasts. Peter watched them go with a look on his face.

"Eleven doors," said Alice.

"Twelve," said Peter.

Then the hill.

Nobody had told them what it would be like. There is no way to tell anybody. The snow was new. It was up over the knee. There was no track in it at all.

So somebody has to make one.

That is called breaking a track. It is the hardest work in the world.

The front man puts his whole leg down through the snow. He lifts it out. He puts it down again. Then again. He does it for two steps. He does it for ten. He does it for a hundred. Behind him the rest walk in the holes he made. Their work is half of his. Less.

John Ward went first. He did a hundred steps and swapped.

Then Amos. A hundred steps. Then Ned. Then the two men from the Keep. Then John Ward again.

Will went to the front on the second turn round. He made forty steps and had to stop. He was not the only one. Nobody said a word about it. Ned took over. That is what the swapping is for.

They went up in a long slow line. The sledge was in the middle. Two ponies were in front of it. One man was on the back rope.

Rose walked with the basket on her chest. Inside her coat. Two abbey birds were in it. Warm.

And Alice drew.

She had the board on a strap round her neck. The pencil hung on a string. She drew standing up. Her gloves had the fingers cut off. It was slow. It was cold. The lines were not pretty.

But it was a thing nobody had ever done.

Where the snow lay deep, she marked it deep. Where the wind had scoured the ground bare, she marked it bare. And it was bare, in one long strip along the whole west shoulder. Hard as a road. That strip alone would save an hour.



Amos said, *that hollow fills up, do not go in it.* She wrote it down. She put a small A beside it. Told to me. Not seen.

Her father looked over her shoulder at one halt.

"Alice," he said. "Nobody has this."

"No," said Alice. "Nobody has this."

They reached the shieling at noon. It had gone well. They all knew it had gone well.

The shieling was a low grey hut, half sunk into the hill. Turf roof. A doorway with no door.

It was not the hut they had slept in with Master Wilkin. That one is miles away. It is over in the high valleys. Amos's people have huts all over these hills.

Amos's brother's men were waiting, with a dog. Hot stones came out. Wet socks came off and dry socks went on. Helen was quoted twice. Once kindly and once not.

The second change took ten minutes. It was all counted again.

Then they went on up together. All of them. Towards the pass hut. John Ward stayed with them. He did not let one child out of his sight.

It was the best afternoon of the month.

The bare strip was there. It was just as Alice had drawn it. The sledge ran on it. It hardly needed the ponies. They made a mile in half an hour.

The sky above them was high and grey and quiet. The pass came slowly nearer. At two o'clock Will could see the notch of it against the cloud.

"Two miles," he said. "Two miles. Then it is over the top."

"Do not say it," said Peter.

"Say what?"

"That. Any of that. My mother would tell you to be quiet."

Then the wind swung round.

It came off the north-west with no warning. One long push. The whole feel of the day changed in about a minute.

The snow stopped coming down.

It started coming across.

It came flat over the ground. A low white river. Waist high. You could not see your own boots. It went into the eyes. It filled the track behind them as fast as they had made it.

Amos stopped.

He stood in the middle of the line with his hand up. His beard blew sideways. He looked at the sky. He looked at the pass. Then he said one word.

"Back."

Chapter 7: Turn Back

The line stopped.

Nobody could hear much. The wind took the words out of your mouth. It threw them away down the hill. They came in close, all of them, in a huddle by the sledge.

“Back,” said Amos again.

“No,” said Will.

He said it loudly. He had to. But he did not say it in a temper. That was the trouble. Alice heard it and knew at once. Will had thought about this.

“Listen,” said Will. “Just listen. One hour.”

“Lad—”

“One hour, Amos. Look at it.” He pointed up. The notch of the pass came and went in the white. “Two miles. We have done seven. The bare strip is behind us. We made a mile in half an hour on it. That is one more hour.”

“In this,” said Amos.

“In this. Yes. It is nasty. It is not the end of the world. Ned has come up in worse. The load is *there*, Amos. It is nearly there. We take it to the top. We tip it over the far side. It is done. Then the whole valley can sleep.”

“And then?”

“Then we come down.”

“In the dark,” said Amos.

“With lanterns.”

Nobody spoke. The snow went by them sideways.

The awful thing, Alice thought, is this. He is not wrong about any of it. They had done seven miles. They were close. An hour on that strip might be enough.

“No,” said Amos.

That was all he said.

Will turned round. He turned to Alice.

"Alice. Do the sums. You are the one who does the sums. One hour."

Alice stood there with the snow going past her. Then she did the hardest thing she knew. She was no help to her brother at all.

"Amos is right," she said.

"Alice—"

"Listen to the sums, then. It is one hour up. It is three hours down. In the dark. In this. With a sledge. On a hill we have never come down in the dark. Your hour costs four. And that is if the hour *is* an hour."

Will's mouth was a hard line.

"And if the wind holds?" he said. "If it holds and the track fills, we do not get four hours. We get all night out."

"Yes," said Alice.

"So you agree with him."

"I agree with him," said Alice. "And I am sorry."

John Ward had not said a word through any of it. He had let it happen. Now he put his hand flat on the sledge top.

"Back," he said. "And well argued, Will."

That was somehow the worst part.

They did not take the load down.

That was the second hard thing. The sledge was full. The hill was long. The wind was rising. And a loaded sledge going downhill in bad light is how people get hurt.

The pass hut was four hundred paces on. Ten minutes, no more.

So they went up those four hundred paces. They put the load into the hut. Every one of them knew what that meant. It meant leaving it on the mountain.

The pass hut is a small square place of stone. Slate roof. Heavy door. It is a shelter and nothing else. Inside there is a bench. There is a hearth. There is a dark smell of old smoke.

They dragged the sledge into the lee of it, out of the wind. Then they turned it up on its side against the wall.

Then they stacked the load.

They did it properly. Ned found flat stones. He laid them out on the floor. The bundles went on the stones. Off the wet. Up out of any water. Cold Beck's bundle with its red cord went on top of the pile. The barrel of oil went in the corner. The sheet went over the whole lot. It was tucked under.

Amos wedged the door with a stone from the outside.

"It does not lock," he said. "It never has. It shuts."



Then Will did the last thing. He did it without being asked.

He went out to the wall. He cut three tall sticks from the dead wood there. He drove them into the snow, well away from the hut. They stood in a line. The line pointed at the door. He drove them deep and left them standing high.

"For finding it," he said. "After."

Rose had the basket inside her coat the whole time.

"Rose," said John Ward. "The plan has changed."

"I know."

"Then a bird goes home."

"No," said Rose.

Everybody looked at her. Rose put her hand flat on the front of her coat.

"Not in this," she said. "She would go. That is what they do. She would go and she would try. And this would beat her. A pigeon does not turn back."

She looked at her feet, and then she looked up.

"That is the rule. I am keeping it. She goes tomorrow, first thing, if it is clear. And she gets there. That is better than sending her tonight and getting nothing."

John Ward looked at her for a second.

"Right," he said. "Tomorrow."

They went down.

It took two hours and forty minutes. It was mostly downhill. Their own holes were still there under the new snow. Amos went first the whole way. He never once slipped.

Nobody talked. There was nothing to say.

They came off the fell at the broken wall as the light went. There were lanterns there. Hob had brought the cart up as far as it would come. Ada had sent broth in a covered pot. Nobody at Millford had gone to bed.

Peter told them the whole of it at the wall. He told it well. He left the good bits in. He did not make it worse than it was.

Will said nothing at all.

He did not sulk out loud. He was not rude to anybody. He took Swift's head and walked him home. He rubbed him down. He got his rug on. He did every single thing right. He did not say one word.

At the Keep, Old Bennet stood in the doorway. He had a blanket round him.

He watched them come in. He counted them. He always counted them.

"Well," he said.

"We turned back," said Will.

"Aye."

"Four hundred paces from the hut. Two miles from the top. We could see it, Bennet. I could see the notch."

"I know that notch," said Bennet.

"So say it," said Will. "Go on. Say the thing."

Bennet leaned on his stick.

"A post you lose never arrives," he said.

Will nodded once. He had known it was coming. He turned to go in.

"I have not finished," said Bennet.

Will stopped.

"You were right," said Bennet. "You were close. You were two miles off. You had one good hour of light in the sky. That is a true thing. I am not going to pretend it is not. I would think less of you if you had not said it."

Will did not move.

"Now hear the other half. Being right about *that* is not the same as being right." Bennet tapped the stick on the step. "Every man I ever knew who came to grief on that hill was right about something. Go and eat."

It began to snow at eight o'clock.

It snowed all night. Straight down. Thick and steady and quiet. There was no wind in it at all. Alice woke twice and heard nothing. That is how you know.

In the morning there was a foot of new snow in the courtyard.

They went up on to the beacon rock to look. All four of them. Nobody had eaten a thing.

The whole valley was white and new. The fell above it was smooth from the bottom to the top. There was not one mark on it anywhere. No track. No holes. No line of black dots going up.

And no way on earth to know one thing. Was the pass hut still where they left it? Was the load still dry inside? Were the three tall sticks still standing?

Chapter 8: The Bird That Flew the Right Way

Rose did not send the bird at first light.

Everybody thought she would. They stood about in the yard at half past seven. They had their hands in their sleeves. They were waiting for her to come down.

She did not come down.

She was up on the tower. Her arms were on the wall. She was watching the tops.

Alice went up.

"Rose."

"Not yet."

"Everyone is—"

"I know what everyone is." Rose did not turn round. "Look at the pass."

Alice looked. The valley was clear and blue and cold. But there was a long grey smear over the top of the fell. And it was moving.

"That is still going on up there," said Rose. "She would fly into it. So we wait."

They waited.

At twenty past ten the smear went thin. Then it went off east. Then the pass came out of it. Hard and white and sharp in the sun.

"Now," said Rose.

She had written it the night before. She wrote very small. Three lines. The paper was the size of two fingers.

Post is in the pass hut. Dry, on stones, sheet over. Door wedged, three sticks set to mark it. All of us home safe. R.

She rolled it and tied it on with waxed thread. She tied it herself. She took her time over it.

Then she took one of the abbey birds out of the basket. She held her a moment against her coat, out of the wind. Then she stood up on the step.

She opened both hands. Up.

The bird went off the tower and dropped. They always do. Everybody below made a noise. Then she caught the air. She came round the Keep once, high, in a wide ring.

Then she was gone up the valley.



"How long?" said Will.

"An hour," said Rose. "Maybe less."

"And back?"

Rose did not answer that one.

The waiting was awful.

It was a day and a half.

Nobody said the true thing out loud. So Peter said it at supper. He says things.

"She might not have got there."

"Peter," said Helen.

"No, but she might not. Say she did not. Then we are standing about looking at the sky for nothing. I would rather say it out. All of us are thinking it at each other."

"She got there," said Rose.

"How do you know?"

"I do not know. I said it anyway."

"That is not how it works," said Will.

"It is not," said Rose. "Say it with me."

"She got there," said Will.

"Again."

"She got there."

Rose barely came off that tower. She slept in her clothes. She fed the birds twice. She swept a floor that was already swept. Helen sent food up. It came down eaten. That was all right.

Alice worked on the map. Will took the sledge to pieces. He greased the runners and put it back together. Peter went home and came back twice, with news that was not news.

And then a bird came in over the tower. Three o'clock, on the second afternoon, out of a white sky.

Rose was up there. She saw it as a speck.

"SNOWY!"

The whole yard heard that.

Snowy came round once. She dropped on to the ledge. She walked in through her own door. She had the air of a bird who has been on an errand. And who would now like her corn.

Rose had the paper off in ten seconds.

She came down those tower stairs at a run. Helen said something about necks. She came into the hall with the paper in both hands and her face wide open.

"It is Brother Luke," she said. "It is his hand."

"Read it," said John Ward.

And Rose read it out. Standing up. In front of the Keeper and Old Bennet and Helen and all of them. She did not go red. She did not look at the floor. She forgot to be shy.

Two of ours went up to the top and down to the hut. Sticks standing above the snow. Door dug clear. Load dry on the stones, sheet fast, nothing shifted. Barrel sound. Cold Beck's bundle on top with its red cord, as you said. We have put fresh wood in the hut. Well done, all of you. — Luke.

There was about half a second of silence.

Then the hall went up.

Peter shouted. Will hit the table with both hands. Helen sat down suddenly. Rusty barked at all of them. Old Bennet put his head back against his chair. He shut his eyes. He stayed that way for a long time.

"They went *up*," said Will. "They went up to the top from their side."

"A man can still cross," said Alice. "Luke said so. It is the sledge that cannot."

"It is dry," said Rose. "Every word of it is dry."

She read it again. Then Amos came in from the stable, and she read it to him. Then Ned came up from Millford, and she read it to him. By the fourth time she had it by heart. She read it without looking.

"That bird," said Bennet, "has done a new thing. No rider on this road ever did it. She has brought an answer back over Eagle Pass. In winter."

"She has," said Rose. "Her name is Snowy. Say her name."

"Snowy," said Bennet. "In forty years I never had that. Not once."

Rose put Snowy's paper flat on the table. She smoothed it with one finger.

"Then we should do it every year," she said.

The second bird came in an hour later.

It came up the valley low and fast, from below. It was Inky.

"Wait," said Will. "Inky is at the mill."

"Yes," said Rose.

"Why is Inky at the mill?"

"I put him there," said Rose. "In November. Two of mine live at the mill now. Two live at Ada's. My mother feeds them. I never told you. I should have told you. So I am telling you now."

John Ward looked at her for a moment.

"That," he said, "was well done."

The paper was not in Brother Luke's neat hand. It was in her father's. Her father wrote the way a miller writes. Big square letters. The pen pressed too hard.

ROYAL RIDER HERE AT MILLFORD. FOUR DAYS EARLY. KING'S LETTERS WITH HIM UNDER SEAL. FORD RUNNING ICE, HE CANNOT BRING A HORSE OVER. HE IS NOT PLEASED. COME AND GET HIM. — FINCH

Peter cheered.

He was the only one.

He looked round at the rest of them. Then he stopped.

"Early is good," he said. "Early is good, is it not? Early is *four whole days*."

Alice had already gone for the road-book.

She put it open on the table. She put her finger on the day. Everybody watched her hand. Nobody said one word.

"Four days early," she said, "and we still lose."

"Lose?"

"Count with me." She moved her finger along. "He is at Millford tonight. The ford is ice. So he comes round by the new bridge tomorrow. That is seven miles, not four. The king's letters are in this Keep tomorrow. That is day one."

"Yes," said Will.

"And the shortest day is in four."

Nobody moved.

"Four days," said Alice. "One of them goes on getting him up here. The load is sitting in the pass hut. The last half mile has not been touched. And there is not one clear day in that sky."

She looked up at her father.

"We have one," she said. "If that."

Chapter 9: The Rider with the Swan

They went down for him at first light.

John Ward took Hob's cart. Will came on Swift. The new bridge held hard and white under them. Seven miles down. Seven miles back.

Will saw him first, in the yard of the Millford inn.

The horse was a big bay, thin from the road. His head was low. A young man stood beside him. He was rubbing that horse down with a wisp of straw. He was doing it well. He had been at it a long time.

He looked about nineteen. He was thin-faced and fair. He had a very cold nose. On his coat there was a small silver swan.

He looked up.

"Are you the Keeper's men?"

"I am the Keeper," said John Ward. "This is my son."

"Rafe," said the young man. "King's rider. Out of the capital, sixteen days."

"Sixteen," said John Ward.

"The water was up in the south. Then it was ice. I have not been dry since the third day." He said it flat. He was not asking for a thing. "The letters are here."

He put his hand on the case.

It rode on his own back, on a strap. It had plainly not come off in a fortnight. It was dark leather with an iron lock. Over the lock, on a red cord, sat a round of white wax. A swan was pressed into it.

Will had seen that swan on the road-book a hundred times. He had never seen one on a case.



"You will come up to the Keep," said John Ward. "There is a fire in it. And a bed. And a meal."

"Thank you. Then I go on."

"On where?"

"Highfield Abbey," said Rafe.

Nobody said a word to that. Not on the road. It was seven miles home, and that is not a thing you say on a cart.

They told him in the hall, with everybody there.

Alice had the map out. Alice did the telling. She was good at it. She laid out the whole chain, stage by stage, from the mill to the top. Who carries what. Where each change is. Where the first load sits now.

Rafe listened with his hands round a cup. He said nothing at all.

Then he put the cup down.

"No," he said.

"No?"

"The valley post can go how it likes. It is your post. The king's letters do not go on a sledge with a farmer."

"Amos is a shepherd," said Peter, helpfully.

"With a shepherd, then."

"You are not carrying them yourself," said Alice. "It is not possible. The pass—"

"I have carried them from the capital," said Rafe. "Sixteen days. Through water. Through ice. Up the whole length of this road. They come off my back to sleep and at no other time. Nobody has touched that lock."

"Nobody is asking to touch the lock."

"I swore," said Rafe.

The room went quiet.

He was not shouting. He sat very still. He had gone rather red. He said it again, and it was plain he had said it to himself a great many times on that road.

"I swore it at the post-house in the capital. In front of the master. With my hand on the book. I would put these letters into the hands of the man at the abbey. Myself. Not send them. Not pass them on. Put them in his hands."

"You are nineteen," said Helen, gently.

"I am nineteen and I have never yet broken my word."

And Will, standing by the door, went cold all over.

He had heard this before.

He had heard it in the wind, two miles below a pass, out of his own mouth. *One hour. It is nearly there. Give it to me and I will do it.* The same voice. The same good, honest reasons.

Old Bennet shifted in his chair.

"Say the Oath," he said.

Rafe looked at him.

"You know it," said Bennet. "Every rider on every royal road knows it. Say it."

"Here?"

"Here."

Rafe said it.

"Keep your word. Tell the truth. Help whoever needs you on the way. And finish what you begin."

"Again. The last line only."

"Finish what you begin."

"Aye," said Bennet. "Now. Where does it say *alone*?"

Rafe opened his mouth. Then he shut it.

"Take them one at a time," said Bennet. He held up a finger for each. "*Keep your word.* Your word was that those letters reach the abbey. It was not that your two arms do every mile of it. *Tell the truth.* Then tell it now. Can you put a loaded case over Eagle Pass by tomorrow night on your own? No. Nor could I at your age. And I was on this road forty years."

"I could—"

"*Help whoever needs you on the way*," said Bennet, over him. "There are nine villages over that hill. Every one of them needs you. Not your pride. You. And *finish what you begin.* A post is finished when it is handed over, lad. Not when you are seen carrying it."

Rafe's jaw was tight.

"The road is a chain," said Bennet. "It always was. Your own letters came up here in six pairs of hands before yours. You did not carry them out of the king's room. You took them from a man at a post-house. You handed him a paper. You rode. That was your stage. This is ours."

"It is not the same."

"It is exactly the same. It is only shorter and colder."

And then Will spoke.

He had not meant to. He was still by the door with Swift's rug over his arm.

"Rafe."

Everybody turned.

"A month ago," said Will, "I stood at that table. I said give me my pony and I will take the whole winter post over the pass myself. In two loads. I meant it. I am the best rider on this road, and I was not being silly."

"Will—" said Alice.

"No. He should hear it." Will came forward a bit. "Then they made me weigh it. A pack pony carries two sacks. That post is eight. I could not have got a quarter of it up there. And I would have wrecked my pony finding that out."

Rafe looked at the table.

"And three days ago I was two miles under that pass with the load. I argued for one more hour. I argued well. I was right that we were close." He stopped. "And say they had let me have my hour. That post would be under six foot of snow now. And Cold Beck would get nothing till March."

Nobody moved.

"I know what you are doing," said Will. "You have carried it sixteen days. You cannot put it down. I know. But you are not the road, Rafe. You are one link of it. So am I."

The fire moved. Rusty sighed under the table.

Rafe put both hands flat on the wood and looked at them for a long moment.

"Then give me a stage," he said.

"What?"

"A stage. My own." He looked up at John Ward. "I am not sitting by this fire and watching it go up that hill. Give me a piece of it. Put me where you like. I can break a track as well as any man here. I would rather do that than argue."

"Can you carry?" said Amos.

"I can carry."

"Then you will do," said Amos.

"You will be roped to Ned," said John Ward. "You will do what Amos says. The case rides on your back to the top of that pass. It comes off there. Not one step before."

"To the top," said Rafe. "Yes."

"And at the top a man from the abbey takes it out of your hands. You watch him take it. Then you can write that in your own book."

Rafe let his breath out.

"Yes," he said. "I can write that."

John Ward had gone to the door.

He stood there a long moment with it open and the cold coming in. He looked up over the wall at the sky above the fell. They all waited. Even Rafe.

Then he turned round.

"One clear day. Tomorrow. Or March."

Chapter 10: The Whole Valley Out

The word went out before dark.

Rose went up the tower first. She wrote it small. She wrote it twice, on two papers, for two birds.

Tomorrow. All of it. We start before light. Meet us at the top. R.

She sent them both. She sent them ten minutes apart.

"Why two?" said Rafe. He had come up behind her.

"One might not get there."

"Do you always send two?"

"On a day like this I would send four," said Rose. "I have three."

Rafe watched the second bird go round the tower. Then it went off up the valley.

"I have seen the king's own loft," he said. "Forty birds. Two men to keep them."

"Then they should keep four of ours," said Rose. "And we should keep four of theirs. Then the road could talk both ways."

Rafe looked at her.

"Write that down," he said. "I mean it. Write it down. I will carry it south."

Then Peter went out with Hob.

They went down the valley in the cart. A lantern each. They knocked at all eleven doors. They were back by nine. Peter came in white with cold. He would not sit down.

"Well?"

"They are all coming," he said. "All of them. Nobody said no."

"Tam Rigg?"

"Tam Rigg said, *about time*," said Peter. "Then he said we should have started a week ago. Then he asked what he should bring."

"What did you tell him?"

"Spades," said Peter. "Every spade in the valley."

The map went on the long table at ten o'clock.

Alice had done the last of it that afternoon. It was Master Wilkin's good paper. It was full now, corner to corner. The winter road. The mill to the top of Eagle Pass.

Every roof was on it. Every wall. The bare strip along the west shoulder. The hollow that fills. The two places to cross the beck. A note at each one, on the side that holds.

Down the right-hand edge, in her smallest hand, was one line. She had written it first. She had drawn a line under it twice.

Drawn from what I saw. The rest is what people who live here told me, marked with their letter.

Six grown men stood round that table.

They were men who had walked those hills for thirty years. They did not say *how nice*. They put their fingers on it. They argued.

Amos found his own name in four places and grunted. Ned found the smith's shop. He said the door was on the wrong side. The rest of them told him to be quiet.

Then Tam Rigg said, "That is wrong."

The room went still.

He put one thick finger on the fell above the wall.

"You have the deep snow all along under the crag," he said. "It is not. Never has been. The wind comes round that crag. It lifts it. It drops it. Forty paces out. That is where your deep mark goes. Along there."

Alice looked at it for about three seconds.

Then she picked up her pen.

She did not argue. She did not say sorry. She struck out her own mark. She drew the new one where his finger had been. Then she wrote *T.R.* beside it in tiny letters. She drew a small line under that too.

"What is that?" said Tam Rigg.

"Your letter," said Alice. "It says I did not see that. You did."

Tam Rigg looked at his own two letters. On the king's road. He looked a long moment. He did not say a word. Then he went and stood by the fire. He blew his nose very loudly.

The night was all hands.

Helen had the kitchen going till midnight. Meg Bramble came up from the Grey Goose. She brought two baskets of bread. She would take nothing for it. She said it was the inn's stage. She said to let her have it.

Ada sent socks. Twenty pairs of them, up the valley in Hob's cart. Thick grey wool. Some of them new.

"Who knitted twenty pairs of socks?" said Will.

"The mill did," said Hob. "This week."

Stones went in the fire at four. Every pocket got one.

They came out into the yard at half past five. It was black dark. It was hard still. It was very cold. The yard was full of people. Lanterns. Breath.

Then Alice said the prayer.

She did not make anything of it. She said it the way her grandmother had said it. Standing up. With her hood back.

"Lord, go before us in the dark, and bring us safely home."

"Amen," said Rose. And Peter said it too.

Nobody made anything of that either. A pony stamped. Bennet was in the doorway with his blanket. Helen was counting the food baskets. She got to nine.

"Right," said John Ward. "Go."

And the chain moved.

They came down to the broken wall in the last of the dark. The mill was there ahead of them. The mill had been there an hour.

They had come up with the spades.

Eleven men. Four women. A dozen lanterns. They had cut a road already. Not a track. A road. It was a trench through the drift at the wall. Four feet deep. Wide enough for the sledge. The snow was thrown up in two banks. They had done a hundred paces of it in the dark.

"Morning," said one of the Croft lads. He leaned on his spade and steamed.

Will could not say a word for a moment.



The first hand-over went in twelve minutes. Counted out. Counted in. Alice's pen going.

Then they were on the hill. And all of it came back — all they had learned in a month.

The front man swapped every hundred steps. Nobody had to be told. Rafe took his turn. Then he did another. He was quietly good at it. Hot stones came out. Socks came off and on. Nobody was cold. Everybody was wet. The day came up behind them. Grey and still and clear.

The bare strip was there. They made a mile in half an hour on it. Again.

At the shieling, Amos's brother's men were waiting. Three sledges and a line of ponies. There was a fire going in the hut. There was a pot on it. That was the second hand-over. Nine minutes.

Above the shieling the ground turns.

They went up in one long line. The Keep. The mill. Amos's people. The four. Rafe with the case on his back and Ned roped beside him. Sixty people on that hill. Every pony was led. Nobody rode a step.

Alice drew as she walked. She stopped at the last halt. She put the board inside her coat. The map was done.

At noon they came round the shoulder to the pass hut.

Nobody spoke. They all looked.

The three sticks were standing. All three. Black and thin against the white. In a line. Pointing at the door.

Will made a noise. Then he went and put his hand on the middle stick.

The door came open on the second heave. Inside it was dark. It was cold. It was dry. The sheet was flat. The bundles were on their stones. Cold Beck's red cord was on top of the pile. Not one thing had shifted.

"Luke was right," said Rose. "Every word."

The load was out and on the sledge in a quarter of an hour.

Then they all turned round and looked up.

Above the hut the ground goes up to the notch of Eagle Pass. In summer it is half a mile of stony path. Four bends in it. A pony walks up with a man whistling behind.

There was no path.

There was no bend. No stone. No line. No mark of any kind. There was one long white field. Going up. And up. And up. It was steeper than any ground they had crossed all day.

Amos looked at it for a long time.

"No sledge goes up that," he said.

Chapter 11: The Last Half Mile

"Then we carry it," said John Ward.

That was the whole plan. Four words.

They broke the load open on the snow by the hut. Alice weighed it out. She had the balance in her bag. She had been thinking about this for a week.

A man-load is not what a man can lift. It is what is still on his back at the top of a hill. Alice had asked Amos. Amos had said a sack of corn. No more. Less for most.

So they made loads.

"How much is a sack of corn?" said Peter.

"Ask your back at the top," said Amos.

The men took the barrel between two, on a pole through the hoops. Ned took the nails and the candles. Tam Rigg took salt. Every man had a bundle roped on his back. Both hands free.

The four got boy-loads and girl-loads. Nobody made a joke about it.

Will had one bundle and a coil of rope. Peter had one bundle and the food bag. Alice had two thin bundles, strapped flat.

Rose had the smallest load of all. It was not an insult. She had four birds inside her coat. They had to stay warm. They had to stay still.

Rafe had the case.

It went on his own back. On his own strap. He did up the buckle himself. He would not let anybody help him.

"You are carrying it up," said John Ward. "Not one step before the top."

"To the top," said Rafe.

The sledge stayed at the hut. It looked odd sitting there. Empty. On its side. Will patted it as he went past. He did not know he had done it.

Then they went up.

Sixty people in one line. In the snow. Up half a mile of white hill.

The front man broke the track. He changed every hundred steps. That was how they had learned it. Amos counted. Amos had counted all day.

It was the hardest half mile of their lives.

The ground went up at once. Not a cliff. Nothing you could not walk. Just up. And up. The snow came over the knee at every step. The whole hill pushed back at you.

At two hundred paces Will's legs were shaking.

"All right?" said Rafe.

"Fine," said Will.

"You are lying."

"I am. Keep going."

At four hundred paces nobody was talking.

Except Peter.

Peter talked.

He started near the bottom. He was still going at the top. In between he did not stop for one minute.

He did the story of his uncle. The ladder. The barrel of apples. The goat. Everyone at the Keep had heard it. The men from the mill had heard it twice. The Cold Beck people had not heard it at all. Peter was very pleased about that later.

Then he did his grandad. He walked to the sea once. He said it was too wide.

Then the one about Old Sarah at the ford and the pig.

Then he began on Rafe. Questions about the capital. One after another. Rafe answered them all. Then Rafe started asking him things back.

Then he did the one about Hob's cart. It is not a funny story. Peter made it funny.

Alice was three places behind him. She was watching her own boots go into the snow. She worked it out near the middle of that hill.

And it was not the goat.

She had thought Peter was being Peter.

He was not.

There was wind on the top of that pass. You could hear it from four hundred paces down. It came over the notch in a long steady moan. It did not stop. It was the coldest sound in the world. It never changed.

And nobody was listening to it.

Sixty people were listening to a boy from an inn. He was telling them about a goat.

Alice turned round and looked at him. Peter caught her eye. He did not stop talking. But he looked back at her. Half a second. One eyebrow went up. That was the whole of it.

Then he did the one about the two dogs.

They came up over the last of it. Ten past two.

The wind hit them properly at the top. It went straight through everything. Alice put her arm up over her face.

Eagle Pass is a notch between two crags. It is not wide. In summer you stand in the middle and see both ways. The valley behind. And in front, the long fall of the ground. All the way down to the abbey.

There was nothing in front. It was white and it was moving.

And then something came up the far side, out of the white.

It was a line of people.

They came up out of the cloud in ones and twos. Bent forward. All in a row. In brown and grey. At the head was a young man in a brown habit. He had a rope over his shoulder.

"LUKE!" screamed Rose.

Brother Luke came up the last of the pass. He stood in the notch. There was ice in his hair again. He looked at all of them. Then he laughed out loud. Nobody had ever heard him do that.



"You came," he said.

"You said meet at the top," said Rose.

"I did. I did say that." He held up her paper. He had carried it up with him. "Twice."

Behind him came the brothers of the abbey. Twelve of them. The Abbot was at the back. The Abbot is seventy. He had two of them at his elbows the whole way. He had come up all the same.

And behind the brothers came other people.

They were not from the abbey. They were in old coats. They had wool over their heads. Their boots were bound round with rag. There were nine of them. They had been walking since before light.

"Cold Beck," said Brother Luke.

"Cold Beck came *down*?" said Will.

"Cold Beck came down for the shortest day. They have been with us two nights." Luke got his breath. "This morning they would not sit by a fire. Not with their own post coming up a hill. They have broken the track from the abbey to here. All of it. We walked up in their holes."

The chain closed on the top of Eagle Pass at twenty past two.

There was no cheering. Everybody was too tired. The wind would have taken it anyway.

What there was, was this. Two lines of people met in a notch of rock. They shook hands. The loads came off backs. They went on to other backs. Alice had her little book out in the wind. Her pen was going. Every single bundle was counted out and counted in.

Rafe went to the Abbot.

He got the strap over his head. He held the case out in both hands, flat. That is how you hold a thing that matters.

"From the king's post-house," he said. "Sixteen days. Seal not broken. Into your hands."

"Into my hands," said the Abbot. "Well carried."

"Thank you," said Rafe.

Rafe watched him take it. Then he stood there a moment. There was nothing on his back at all. He looked ready to fall over.

"Write it in your book," said Will.

"I shall," said Rafe.

Then Rose let a bird go from the top of Eagle Pass.

She got in behind a rock, out of the wind. She took one of her own out of her coat. She warmed it in both hands. Then she turned it to face down the valley.

She opened her hands. Up.

The bird went off the top and dropped away below them. Then it caught something. Then it went. Straight down the line of the valley. Faster than anything on legs. Home to a tower it could not see.

Rose watched it out of sight.

"Bennet will have that in twenty minutes," she said.

The last thing over the top was Cold Beck's bundle.

It came up on Will's back. It went from him to Amos. From Amos to Brother Luke. And Brother Luke turned round with it. He put it into the hands of a woman in a grey shawl. She had been standing there waiting for it.

Her name was Nan. She was about fifty. She had walked four hours in snow that morning. From the abbey up to this notch. To fetch her village's letters.

She took the bundle in both arms. She held it against herself.

Then she looked up at them all. She asked one question. She asked it in a very ordinary voice. It was the voice you use about the weather.

"Is there anything in it from my son?"

Chapter 12: The Shortest Day

They did not all go the same way off the top.

John Ward worked it out in the wind. He had Alice's map in his hands. Home was four hours down the near side. The light went at four. The abbey was two hours down the far side. And nine people from Cold Beck had broken that track.

So the rule sent them the wrong way. Down was safer than back.

The mill turned round. They went home in their own trench. Downhill. In the last of the light. Amos went off to his brother's. Ned shook hands with everybody twice.

And the four went down the far side with the abbey.

None of them had ever been over the top in winter. Not once.

The abbey is grey stone in a hollow. There is a wall round it and a bell tower at one end. There were lamps in every window. Someone had been watching the hill since noon. The gate was open before they got to it.

Rose sent a bird home from the abbey wall. She did it before she ate.

Over the top. All well. All fed. Nine bundles counted in. Home when the weather lets us. R.

"Is there food?" said Peter.

"There is soup," said Brother Luke.

"How much soup?"

"All of it," said Brother Luke.

They slept nine hours.

They laid the post out the next morning. On the long table.

It took two brothers and all four of them. It took the best part of an hour. Bundle by bundle. Village by village. Every village had its own place along that table. Each place had a piece of slate. The name was chalked on it. The letters went out flat, in rows.

Nine villages. Four months.

"It does not look like much," said Will.

"No," said Alice. "It is a whole year."

People came in all day. They came down off the fell in twos and threes. They stood in the doorway. They looked at that table. They did not say much.

Alice stood by the wall and watched. She had thought this part would be loud.

It was not.

It was very quiet, and it went on for hours.

A man read a letter twice. Then he put his hand over his eyes. Two sisters read one letter together. Their heads were touching. An old man could not read. He asked Brother Luke to do it for him. Brother Luke read it out in a level voice. It was about a cow.



Then came the shortest day of the year. They rang the abbey bell. Four in the afternoon.

It went out over the snow. It came back off the crags. The whole hollow stopped for the length of it. Then they all went back to their letters.

Nan of Cold Beck came at noon. She came for her village's bundle.

They had put it in its own place. Right at the far end. COLD BECK on the slate. It was the biggest bundle on that table. It was tied with a red cord.

She sat down with it. She did not open it in a hurry.

Rose was near enough to see. Alice was not. Alice did not go closer. She did not let Peter go closer either.

Nan went through it once. Then she went through it again, slower.

Then she stopped. She put one letter on the table in front of her. Flat. Both hands on it.

She did not say a word to anybody.

Then she got up. She went out into the yard with it. She stood by the wall in the cold, on her own.

"Yes, then," said Peter, very quietly.

"Yes," said Rose.

And that was all any of them ever said about it.

Except once, at home, weeks later. Peter asked Bennet a question.

"Was it worth it? All of it. For one letter?"

"It was worth it for the letters that were not there," said Bennet. "Nan knows now. She is not waiting any more. That is what a post is for."

They came home on the second day after.

The morning was clear and cold. The track over the pass was still there. Sixty pairs of boots had cut it deep. It had not filled in.

Brother Luke walked them to the top and no further.

"I shall see you in the spring," he said.

"You will see us before that," said Rose. "You have four of my birds."

"So I have."

"Feed them. Not too much. Do not let them get fat."

"How would I know if they were fat?"

"You would know," said Rose.

Rusty came out first. Rusty always came out first.

Then Old Bennet came out to the gate.

He came the whole way from his chair. On his stick. Across the yard. He stood at the great gate in the cold. He waited there for them.

Helen stood behind him. She did not tell him to go in. That is how they all knew it mattered.

They gave him the whole of it in the doorway. All four talking at once. He did not stop them.

Then they asked him for his verdict.

He looked at the four of them for a long moment.

"I have waited forty years for that," he said.

That was the whole verdict. Seven words. Peter has said them again about nine hundred times since.

The lasting things came after, in the quiet week.

Rose brought the abbey's birds home over the pass, warm inside her coat. Four of the abbey's live in the Keep's loft now. Four of the Keep's live at the abbey. Rose feeds the abbey's birds. Brother Luke feeds Rose's. Word can cross Eagle Pass all winter. It never could before.

"How long will you keep it up?" said John Ward.

"For ever," said Rose. "Ask me again in April."

Alice's winter road went into the road-book.

Her father put it in himself. On the first page. Before anything else. Under it he wrote three words in his own hand. *The winter road.* Then he wrote her name.

Under that, in Alice's hand, is the line off her map. *Drawn from what I saw. The rest is what people who live here told me, marked with their letter.*

Tam Rigg's two letters are on it in four places. He has been up to look at them. Twice.

Rose taught six grown people to handle a pigeon. All in one winter. She counted them. She can say so out loud now. And she does.

Peter is famous. He talked for four hours going up a mountain. The story has grown since. He has stopped putting it right.

And one day Will went out to the tack room. On his own. He oiled Swift's tack. All of it. The way he does.

Alice went past the door and heard him say something.

He was not talking to her. He was not talking to the pony. He had a rag in one hand. He was rubbing oil into a strap. He said it to nobody at all.

"Fast is how you go."

Alice did not go in.

Rafe rode out on the Friday.

He signed the road-book first. He put the day and his name. *Rafe, King's rider.* Then he asked a question. Might he write more than the one line?

"The book is for what happened on the road," said John Ward.

"Good," said Rafe. "Then it will fit."

So he wrote four lines. He wrote what he saw. Sixty people. One hill. The post handed on from the mill to the top. The seal not broken. Then he signed it again.

Then he got up on the big bay. He could not get away. Helen had food for him. Peter had questions.

"Rose," he said, from the saddle. "The pigeons. Both ways. I am telling them in the south. Somebody there ought to be doing it."

"Tell them to write to me," said Rose.

Rafe laughed. Then he stopped laughing.

"Ah," he said. "I have forgotten something."

He turned round to John Ward.

"I was told to say it at every post-station up this road. I said it at every one but this. Then it snowed and it went out of my head."

"Go on," said John Ward.

"The Royal Inspector is coming to this road this year."

"He comes most years," said John Ward.

"He comes early this year." Rafe gathered up his reins. "He is going round in a different order. Nobody is being told the day. And he will want the books."

"He always wants the books."

"He wants three years of them," said Rafe. "That is the new part."

Then he was gone under the arch and away south. The yard went back to normal. It took a minute.

That evening Old Bennet asked for the road-book.

He had it on his knees by the fire. There was a lamp at his elbow. Alice was at the table doing her own work. She looked up after a bit. Then she noticed.

He was not on this year's pages.

He had gone back. A long way back. The book was open at a page from years back. He was looking at it. He was not turning over.

He sat like that for a long time.

"Bennet?" said Alice.

Old Bennet shut the book.

"Bed," he said. "It is late."

So Alice went to bed.

She took the lamp. She looked back once from the stairs.

He had opened it again.

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