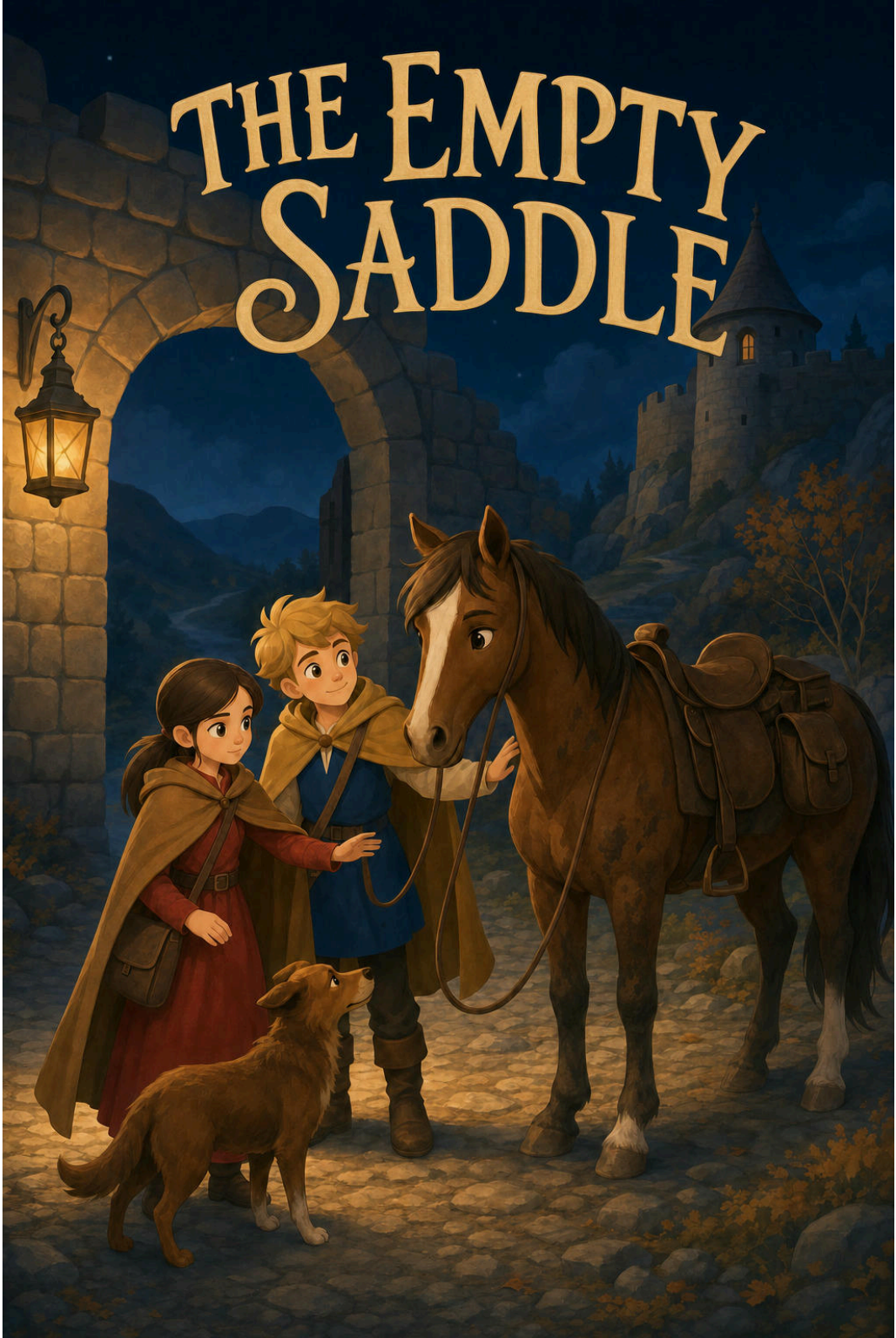

THE EMPTY SADDLE

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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 1.1, published August 2026.

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

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

It is late autumn at Stonegate Keep, and the first hard frost has come down in the night. Then Rusty barks at the gate. A brown pony walks in out of the dark, blown and muddy, with her reins over her neck — and an empty saddle on her back.

Nobody knows her. Nobody on this road has lost a rider. But her saddlebags hold a case of pens, a knotted cord, a hard loaf barely touched, and a half-drawn map of the high valleys.

Now Alice, Will, Rose and Peter have twenty miles of empty hills to search, and one clever idea: a mapmaker draws what he sees, so his map shows where he has been.

Can four children follow a stranger's pen across a mountain?

Chapter 1: The Pony in the Dark

The kitchen at Stonegate Keep was warm. It was also very loud.

Four whistles hung on four strings. They were cut from ash wood. Old Amos the shepherd had carved them. Peter Bramble blew his again. Rose Finch blew hers. The two notes met in the roof beams. They did not want to stop.

"Enough," said Helen Ward. She was smiling as she said it.

It was Monday night, and late. The four had ridden home from Highfield Abbey. It was a long road. The stone bridge was still broken. So they had come the low way. They came past Millford and up the valley. Their boots stood by the fire. Rusty lay flat on the warm stones. His nose rested on his paws.

Old Bennet sat in his chair. A blanket lay over his knees. He was hearing the story again. It was the second time tonight. He did not seem to mind.

Peter was telling the fog part. In the first telling the fog was thick. Now it was thicker.

"You could not see your own hand," said Peter. "You could not see your own nose."

"You could see your hand," said Alice Ward.

"Not all of it."

Bennet laughed. The laugh turned into a cough. The cough went on a long time. Helen looked at him over the pot.

"Bed soon," she said.

"Soon," said Bennet. He waved his stick at Peter. "Go on, boy. The fog got thicker."

Will Ward was half asleep. He sat at the end of the table. His head kept dropping. Rose sat close to the fire. She held her cup in both hands.

Then Rusty lifted his head.

He did not bark at once. His ears went up. He looked at the door. He listened. His tail did not move at all. Then he barked. It was one low bark. It was a wondering sort of bark.

Alice stood up. "That is not his fox bark."

"It is not his hello bark either," said Will.

They all went out.

The cold took their breath away. The courtyard stones shone white. The starlight lay on the frost. It was the first hard frost of autumn. It had come down in one night.

Alice's father came out behind them. His coat was half on. Helen brought the big lantern. It hung on a hook by the door.

Rusty ran to the great gate. He stood there, stiff and tall.

"Bring the light," said John Ward.

Peter lifted the lantern high. The gate stood half open. It always stood so at night. And there, in the yellow light, was a pony.

Nobody moved.

She was brown. She had a white stripe down her face. She had one white sock. She was not tall. Her head hung low. Her sides went in and out. There was white foam on her neck. She was muddy past the knees. The mud was grey and dry.

She was blown. She had been going for hours.

The reins hung over her neck in a loop. One rein was trodden through. It was broken short. And on her back sat a saddle.

The saddle was empty.

"Whose is she?" said Peter.

"Nobody's," said Will.

He meant nobody from here. Alice knew every pony on this road. She knew Swift and Hazel. She knew Bracken and Pebble. She knew the post ponies at

Millford. She even knew Hob's slow cart pony. She did not know this one. Rose did not know her either. And Rose noticed everything.

The pony lifted her head. She looked at the lantern. She made a small sound deep in her chest. Then she walked straight at them.

"Careful," said Helen.

But the pony only pushed her nose into Rose's shoulder. She left it there. She was not frightened at all. She was glad. She had been alone in the dark. Now here were people. Here was a light. Here was a warm smell of soup.

"Oh," said Rose softly. "You poor thing."

Will was already moving.



He did not run. He did not shout. He took the broken rein under her chin. He turned her slowly, in a wide circle. He brought her in towards the stable door. He talked to her the whole way. His voice was low and flat and dull. That was how he talked to every worried pony.

Peter went ahead with the lantern. Alice pulled back the door.

Four minutes later the brown pony stood in the end box. The straw came up to her knees. Will had a dry rug over her back. A wisp of hay lay in the corner. He would not let her drink cold water. He carried a bucket in from the kitchen. The water in it was warm. He let her have a little. Then he took it away again.

"Small drinks," he said. "Small drinks first. More later."

The pony drank her little drink. She blew into the bucket. Then she looked round for more.

"She is all right," said Will. "She is tired. She is hungry. She is not hurt."

He ran his hands down all four legs. He wanted to be sure. He knew how to do that. He had done it since he was six.

"No heat," he said. "No cuts. She has come a long way. That is all."

And all this time nobody touched the saddle.

Alice stood at the pony's shoulder. She looked at it. She put her hands behind her back. It was a good saddle. It was old and well kept. The leather had gone the colour of dark honey. Two bags sat behind it. They were fat bags. They were buckled shut.

Peter came up beside her. "Are you not going to open them?"

"No," said Alice.

"But—"

"A find goes to the Keeper," said Alice. "Every time. That is the first rule of this Keep."

It was written in the front of the road-book. Bennet had written it in his own hand. Anything found on the road went to the Keeper. You did not open it. You did not shake it. You did not guess. You called him. You waited. You kept your hands to yourself.

So Alice kept her hands to herself. It was one of the hardest things she had ever done.

Her father came in with Rusty at his heel. Bennet came after him, slowly. One hand held the door post. The other held his stick. Helen had put a blanket round his shoulders. He had let her do it.

John Ward looked at the pony first. He did not look at the saddle. He looked at her feet. He looked at her eye. He looked at the way she stood.

"Good," he said to Will. "Warm mash in half an hour. Not before."

Then, and only then, he took the lantern from Peter.

"Now," he said.

He set the light on the rail. He put one hand flat on the pony's neck. With the other hand he lifted the saddle flap. He turned it back.

Nobody breathed.

"Look at the girth," said John Ward.

Alice looked. The girth ran under the pony's belly. It was done up neatly. One hole was left loose. It was not hanging. It was not twisted. That is how you leave a girth when a pony must stand and wait.

"And the stirrups," said her father.

Both stirrups were run right up. They sat under the skirt of the saddle. They were out of the way of everything.

Alice felt her arms go cold. It was not the frost.

A rider who comes off in a hurry leaves his stirrups down. They swing. They bang. They catch on things. These stirrups were up. Somebody had stood beside this pony. He had stood in the hills, in the daylight. He had put them up with his own hands.

John Ward let the flap fall back.

"He did not fall off," said Alice.

"No," said her father quietly. "He got off."

Chapter 2: What the Saddlebags Said

Nobody slept very well.

Alice was down in the yard before the sun came up. The frost was still hard. Every stone had a white edge. Her breath went up in clouds.

Will was there before her. He had been there since five.

“She ate the lot,” he said. “Every crumb. She drank three buckets. She is looking over the door for people.”

The brown mare was still looking over the door. Her ears came forward. She wanted people, and she wanted more oats.

“She is a nice pony,” said Will. “Someone has been kind to her.”

Alice thought about that all through breakfast.

Road business was done at the long table in the hall. It was old and wide. It was full of marks. Her father set the two saddlebags on it. The buckles were stiff with cold.

“Right,” said John Ward. “We open them here. We open them in the light. And everyone watches.”

That was the rule. It never changed. Nothing off the road was opened in a corner. It went on that table, in front of the whole house. Then nobody ever had to wonder.

Bennet’s chair had been carried in. He sat at the end with his blanket and his stick. Helen stood behind him. The four stood along the side. They did not touch anything.

“Go on then,” said Bennet.

Her father worked the first buckle open. He took things out one at a time, in order.

Out came a bundle in oiled cloth. Inside the cloth was a flat wooden case. Inside the case were pens. Six of them, laid in a row, sharp and clean. Beside them sat a small glass bottle. A stopper was pushed into the neck of it, hard.

Peter leaned over and smelled it.

"Ink," he said. "That is ink."

"Do not take the stopper out," said Helen.

"I was not going to."

"You were going to."

Next came a brass circle. It was flat and about the size of a saucer. Tiny marks were cut all round the edge. A thin brass arm lay across the middle. The arm turned.

They all looked at Alice.

Alice put out one finger. Then she looked at her father. He nodded. She picked it up.

"It measures," she said.

"It measures what?" said Peter.

"Distance. On a map." She turned the little arm and it swung round. "You lay it on the paper. The marks tell you how far. I have seen a drawing of one. I have never held one."

Her voice had gone odd. Rose noticed.

The next thing was a cord. It was wound in a neat ring. It was long — longer than the hall. Along it, all the way, there were knots.

"Fishing line," said Peter.

"Washing line," said Helen.

"No," said Alice. "Look at the knots."

They looked. Rose walked her fingers along the cord. She went from knot to knot. She counted under her breath.

"They are the same," said Rose. "Every knot is the same distance apart."

"That measures too," said Alice. "Not the map. The ground. You walk it out with the cord and you count the knots."

The second bag was full of plain things. That made it worse. A spare shirt, folded. A tin cup. A candle end. A small bag of oats — for the pony, not for him. And a loaf in a cloth.

Helen unfolded the cloth round the loaf. She set it down. She did not say anything yet.

And at the bottom of the bag lay a folded sheet of paper. It was flat against the leather.

Alice looked at her father again.

"Go on," he said.

She lifted it out. It was thick, good paper. It had been folded twice. She put it on the table. She began to unfold it. Her hands wanted to hurry. She would not let them.

The paper opened out. It was much bigger than she had thought.

Then nobody said anything at all.

It was a map. Alice had never seen anything so fine. The hills were drawn in thin sure lines. There were hundreds of them. The lines followed the shape of the ground. A stream came down off the high moor. It forked under a bend. Three small round marks sat in a row. The letters were tiny and neat. Every one of them was straight.

It was exact. That was the word. Everything on it was in its right place.

And half of it was empty.

The drawing filled the top of the page. Then it thinned out. Then it simply stopped. The bottom of the sheet was white paper and nothing else.



"Oh," said Rose softly.

Peter put his head on one side. "What is it a map of?"

"The high valleys," said Alice.

"There is nothing up there."

"There is a great deal up there," said Alice. "There is just no road."

Bennet had not moved for some time. Now he tapped his stick once on the floor.

"Fetch me the road-book," he said. "From my room. The one on the shelf, not the one on the table."

Rose ran. She came back with it against her chest.

Every traveller at Stonegate went into the road-book. Name, and where they were going. Alice wrote most of them herself. She opened it. She turned back three days, to Saturday.

There were four lines on Saturday. Her father's writing was on the second one. She had been away over the pass.

Wilkin, mapmaker, for the high valleys.

"I signed him in myself," said John Ward. "Saturday morning. A thin man, about forty. He talked the whole time he ate. He had a brown pony with a white stripe."

Alice read the line again. Mapmaker. Then she looked at the brass circle. She looked at the knotted cord, and the pens, and the half-drawn page.

"He rode out on Saturday," she said. "That is three days."

"Where does the high valley road go?" said Peter.

"That is the trouble," said Bennet.

He said it low, and they all turned round.

"There is no high valley road," said the old man. "Think about what the man does, boy. A mapmaker does not ride the road. He rides where the road is not. That is the whole of his trade."

The hall was quiet. Alice felt the size of the thing. It came down on her cold and slow.

They could not go and look along a road. There was no road. Up there lay twenty miles of moor and beck and grey stone. A man was out in it. He had got off his pony. He had put his stirrups up.

Helen had picked up the loaf.

She weighed it in her hand. She turned it over. She pushed her thumb into the end of it. She did that to her own bread every morning.

"Two days old," she said. "Maybe three."

"Is that bad?" said Peter.

"That is not the bad part." Helen turned it round for them all to see. One end had been cut. Two slices, three at the most. All the rest of the loaf was untouched.

"A man on a journey eats his bread," said Helen. "He eats it and he buys more. This one has been counting it."

She set it down on the table between them.

"He has been making it last," she said. "Nobody makes bread last if he thinks he is going home tonight."

Chapter 3: Four Ponies and a Map

Nothing at Stonegate was ever done in a rush.

By ten o'clock on Tuesday the whole valley knew. Hob had come up with his cart at nine. He went down again at half past. He carried the Keeper's word to every door on the way to Millford. A thin man, about forty. A brown pony with a white stripe. Has anybody seen him?

"And he will tell it slowly," said Peter. "Hob tells everything slowly. That is good. Nobody forgets a thing Hob has told them."

John Ward stood at the head of the table. He put his hands flat on it.

"Here is how it goes," he said. "I ride down. I take the valley and the mill. I take every farm on the water. Millford will raise the low ground by tonight."

"And the high ground?" said Alice.

Her father looked at her for a long moment.

"The high ground has no road," he said. "It has no farms. There is one map of it in the world. It is on this table. And there is one person in this house who can read it."

Alice's ears went hot.

"You four go up," said her father. "You go together. You come back together. And you send the birds."

That was it. It was said at the table, in the light, in front of them all. There was nothing to hide. There was nothing to ask twice.

Bennet knocked his stick on the floor. They all looked round.

"Two things," said the old man. "Only two. Then you will remember them."

He held them up in order, one thin finger at a time.

"A search is not a race. You will want to hurry. Hurrying is how you ride past a man."

He looked at Will as he said it. Will looked back. He did not argue.

"Second." Up came the other finger. "Search where a man would be. Not where you would like him to be. Those are different places."

"How do we tell the difference?" said Rose.

"You will find out," said Bennet. "Everyone does."

Helen said nothing at all about maps. Helen packed.

She packed for the far side of the world. Bread, a whole basket of it. Hard cheese. Oatcakes. Cold bean stew in the pot with the tight lid. Apples. A twist of salt. Oats for the ponies. A tinder box, a candle, and the small lantern.

"That is a lot of food," said Will.

"It is," said Helen.

"For four of us."

"It is," said Helen again. She went on packing.

Peter watched this with deep respect. His own bag hung over his shoulder. There was cheese in it, in case of emergencies.

"Two emergencies," he said. He patted the bag. "I have brought enough for two."

Then Helen stood in the doorway. The four bags sat at her feet. She gave them the rules. She gave the same three rules every time. She never changed a word of them.

"One. Dry feet. Wet feet at this time of year will finish you.

"Two. Nobody rides after dusk. When the light goes, you stop and you camp. I would rather have you late than carried home.

"Three." She pointed at Rose. "The moment the plan changes, a bird goes home. Not later. Not when you are sure. The moment it changes."

"Yes, Mother," said Alice.

"Say it back to me."

"Dry feet. No riding after dusk. And a bird the moment the plan changes."

Helen nodded once. “Good.”

Rose was already up in the tower. She came down with the basket on her back. Snowy was in it. Inky was in it. Both of them were making the soft round noise that pigeons make. Little rolls of thin paper were tucked into the lid. Rose had put in three, not two.

They were up before the sun on Wednesday.

The frost was harder than the day before. The whole world was white with it. The courtyard was white. The roofs were white. The dead grass by the gate crackled under a boot.

They ate standing up and half asleep. Alice’s father said grace over the table. It was the short one. He always said it before a journey. Then Helen put hot stones in their pockets. The stones were wrapped in cloth. Then it was time.

Four ponies came out into the white yard.

Swift was first, of course. Will had him at the gate already. Nobody else had a foot in a stirrup yet. Hazel came out steady and calm. Bracken was half asleep. Pebble put her nose in the frost and blew it about.

Alice had her own map at her knee. It was rolled tight in a leather case. Wilkin’s half-drawn map went inside her coat. It lay flat against her chest, wrapped in oiled cloth. She had folded it back along its own folds. It felt strange in there. It felt heavy for a piece of paper.

Rusty came out of the kitchen last. He shook himself all over. Then he took his place at Hazel’s heels. That was his place. He had decided it years ago.



The brown mare called after them from the end box. She called twice. Nobody said anything for a while after that.

The road rang hard under the hoofs. The sun came up behind the Grey Hills. It turned all the white to pink. It was fine to look at, and it was very cold.

They left the King's Road after two miles.

That was the moment it stopped being a ride. There was a gate. There was a sheep path. Then there was no path at all. The moor came up under them, brown and grey and frozen stiff. The ponies' feet stopped ringing. They began to crunch.

Alice reined in on the first rise. She turned round in the saddle.

"Right," she said. "Look at it."

They looked.

The high valleys went away in front of them. They did not stop. Grey ground, brown ground, grey scree. A long white line of frost in every hollow.

Hills behind hills behind hills. A beck ran somewhere out of sight, talking to itself. And no smoke. No wall. No roof. No road.

"How far?" said Peter.

"Twenty miles," said Alice. "Twenty miles that way. About twelve across."

Nobody said anything.

Peter did the sum first. Peter was the worst of them at sums.

"We cannot search that," he said.

"No," said Alice. "We cannot."

They rode on for an hour. Then Alice held up her hand. They halted under a stone bank, out of the wind.

It was the first halt of the day. They ate an oatcake each. Will loosened the girths. Rose looked into the basket. She told the pigeons they were doing very well. Rusty put his chin on Peter's boot and went to sleep at once.

And Alice knelt down on the frozen grass. She unrolled both maps side by side.

Her own map came first. Her grandmother had drawn it. Alice had mended it and added to it herself. The road was on it, and the bridge, and Millford, and the pass, all in their places. Then Wilkin's page went down beside it. She weighted the corners flat with four small stones.

She looked from one to the other. She looked for a long time. The wind pulled at the paper.

Then Alice sat back on her heels. Her mouth opened. No sound came out.

"What?" said Will. "What is it?"

"I have been thinking about this the wrong way round," said Alice slowly. "All night. The wrong way round."

She put one finger over Wilkin's map. She did not touch the paper. She held the finger just above it.

"We do not have to search twenty miles," she said. "Look what he has done. He is a mapmaker."

"So?"

"So he draws what he sees." Alice looked up at the three of them. Her eyes were bright. "He has drawn where he has been."

Chapter 4: He Drew What He Saw

"Say it again," said Will. "Slowly. I am not being stupid. I want to get it right."

Alice held the map up. They could all see it.

"A mapmaker draws what he can see," she said. "That is all he does. He cannot draw a hill from the other side of the world. He has to stand somewhere and look at it."

"So every shape on this paper is a place he stood near." Alice tapped the air above the sheet. "Every one. He was there. Find the shapes. Then we walk the same ground he walked."

Peter's mouth was open.

"That is the cleverest thing I have ever heard," he said. "And I know a man who can eat an egg in one go."

They started with the three round marks.

They sat near the top of the page. They were small and dark. There were three of them in a row. Alice put her own map down beside it. She had those three marks too. On hers they had a name.

"Standing stones," she said. "There are three of them up on Long Shoulder. They have been there for ever."

"How far?" said Will.

"An hour."

It took fifty minutes. Swift saw to that.

The three standing stones came up out of the moor grass. They came one at a time. They were grey and rough. They were taller than Will on Swift. They stood in a line. Frost still lay on the north side. It had not gone all day.

Peter rode round them twice with his head back.

"Who put them here?"

"Nobody knows," said Alice.

"Nobody knows," Peter said happily. "I like that better."

Alice slid down. She knelt with the map on her knee. She looked at the stones. She looked at the paper. She looked at the stones again.

“He drew them from over there,” she said. She pointed.

“How can you tell?”

“On the paper the middle one is behind the other two.” She held it up. She moved her hand. “From here they are in a straight line. You have to go up the slope. Then you see them the way he saw them.”

They went up the slope to the ridge. And there it was. From the top the middle stone stepped back. It went behind the other two. It was exactly so on the paper.

“He stood here,” said Rose.

“He stood here,” said Alice.

Peter got down off Bracken. He stood on the same spot. He looked at his boots. Perhaps the ground was still warm.



After that they had a way of working. They kept it all morning.

Alice found the next shape and named it. They rode to it. Then they looked for the shape after that.

Peter was hopeless.

He wanted to help. He tried hard. He was terrible at it. He matched a round hill on the paper. He matched it to a round hill on the moor. It was the wrong round hill. It was three miles away. Once he turned the map upside down. He found five things at once. He was very pleased.

"Peter," said Alice. "That is the top of the page."

"It could be the bottom."

"It could not be the bottom. There is writing on it."

"The writing could be upside down."

"The writing is never upside down," said Alice. Will laughed so hard that Swift danced sideways.

Rose said almost nothing all morning. But she was good at it. She was very good at it.

She was better than Will. She was nearly as quick as Alice. Rose noticed small things. She had spent eleven years watching birds. A bird is small. A bird does not wait.

It was Rose who found the beck.

A stream was drawn on the paper, thin and sure. It came down from the high ground. Low down it split in two. Wilkin had put a tiny mark just at the split. It was not a line of ground. It was a little round scribble.

"There," said Rose, from the saddle. She was pointing across the moor. "Is that it?"

They went to look, and it was.

The beck came down fast. It was cold and brown. It ran into a stony place and forked. One arm went left. One arm went right. A thorn tree grew on the point between the two arms.

It was old. It was crooked. The wind had bent it right over. It grew sideways out of the stones. It had almost no leaves left.

"The little scribble is the thorn," said Alice softly.

"It is not much of a tree," said Will.

"It is enough of a tree." Alice was already down on her knees. She had the paper out. "There is not another thorn for four miles. He knew that. He drew it to help. Anybody would know the fork now."

Rose looked at the crooked thorn for a long time.

"He is good at this," she said.

They ate by the beck. Rusty stood in it and drank. He got his ears wet. Will tightened the girths again. Peter gave everybody an apple. Then he made a speech about the apple.

And Alice sat with the map on her knees. She began to see the shape of the whole thing.

It was not a scatter of places. It was a line. The finished drawing came out of the north. It went down past the standing stones. It crossed the beck at the fork. Then it went on south-east. Always south-east. Steadily. He had worked his way along in order.

She could even see where he had taken his time. She could see where he had not. In some places the lines were slow and careful. Further on they got quicker.

And then they stopped. They stopped at the bottom edge of the drawn work.

"Come and look at this," said Alice. Her voice had changed.

The three of them came and stood over her.

There was one last shape on the page. It was a rock. Wilkin had drawn it standing up. It came out of a long grey slope. It was sharp at the top. It was wider at the bottom. It had the shape of a great tooth.

A line ran up beside the tooth of rock.

The line began. It went up about a thumbnail's length. Then it stopped. It did not turn. All his other lines had a small firm end. This one did not.

It was a line begun and not closed.

"What is that?" said Will.

Alice put her own map beside it. She did not have to look long. She had written the name herself. That was two winters ago.

"The tooth of rock is called the Slate Track Stone," she said. "And that line is the Slate Track. It is a shepherd's way. It goes up over the top. Then it drops into the next valley."

"And he started to draw it," said Rose.

"He started to draw it," said Alice. "And he did not finish."

They all looked at the little unfinished line.

"That is where he stopped," said Will.

Rusty barked once, down by the beck. They all jumped.

He was not barking at them. His front feet were up on a stone. His nose was out. He was looking away down off the ridge. The valley track lay below. Peter shaded his eyes.

"There is a cart," he said.

There was. It was a long way down. It was small and slow. It went up the valley track. A grey pony walked in the shafts. Only one man in the Grey Hills moved that slowly.

They came down the slope fast. They shouted. Hob pulled up. He waited for them with no surprise at all.

"Now then," said Hob.

He had a sack of oats on the cart. It was for a farm up the water. The whole road was talking about the mapmaker. He told them so. He had carried the word himself to eleven doors. He was proud of that. He said so twice.

"Hob," said Peter. "Did *you* see him?"

Hob thought about it. He thought about it the way he did everything. Slowly. All the way to the bottom.

"Aye," he said. "Monday. Going up the Slate Track."

Chapter 5: The Slate Track

"Tell us all of it," said Alice. "Please, Hob. Every bit."

Hob took off his hat. He always did that when he was going to think.

"Monday," he said. "Morning. I was coming down empty. He was at the bottom of the Slate Track. He was not riding. He was leading the pony up the first steep bit."

"Leading her," said Will. "Good man."

"I called out good day to him." Hob smiled slowly. "He waved back at me. He waved a pen."

"A pen," said Peter.

"A pen," said Hob. "I thought about that a long time after."

That was all he had. It was enough. Alice asked him to carry the word down to Millford. He was to tell her father where they had gone. Hob said he would. Then he clicked at his grey pony. He went on up the water, slowly.

They turned back to the hills.

The Slate Track began at a broken wall. It went up the side of the fell. It went in long slow bends. And it was grey.

That was the whole trouble with it. The track was made of slate. The stone was flat and thin. It lay in loose sheets. Every step moved. When a hoof came down, the stone under it slid.

Swift tried the first bend. He did not like it. His back feet went out sideways. He stopped.

"Off," said Alice.

"I can ride this," said Will.

"Off," said Alice again. "All of us. We lead."

Will got off. He did not like it. He did it at once.

So they walked. It took the rest of the day.

Leading a pony up loose slate is slow work. You go in front. You keep the rein long. You let the pony pick her own way. Hazel went up it one foot at a time. She tested everything. She was in no hurry at all. Swift wanted to rush. He had to be talked out of it, twice. Bracken plodded. Pebble was small and neat. She was the best of all of them.

Rusty ran up and down the line. He thought it was grand.

Rose walked with the basket on her back. She kept one hand up behind her to steady it.

And Peter talked.

He talked the whole way up. That was the only reason anybody got to the top.

He told them about his grandfather. The old man had walked to the sea once. He did not think much of it.

"He said it was too wide," said Peter.

"The sea?"

"Too wide. And it moved about. He came home after two days."

Alice laughed. Her laugh set a small slide of slate going. She had to stand still and let it stop.

The stones went down the slope behind them. Tick, tick, tick, for a long way.

"Careful," said Rose.

"I know," said Alice.

They stopped twice. Will looked at every hoof each time. He picked out the small sharp bits of slate. He never once said it was hard work.

The light began to go at three.

That was late autumn in the Grey Hills. The sun did not really set. It slid away sideways. It got low very fast. Everything turned gold. The grass, the slate, the ponies' sides, Rose's hair.



“How far to the top?” said Peter.

“Nearly there,” said Alice. She had said that twice already.

But this time it was true.

The Slate Track came up over the edge of the fell. There it flattened out. And there it divided.

Two tracks went on. One bore left along a wide brown bowl of ground. One bore right and up over a shoulder of stone. Both of them looked the same. Both of them looked like nothing at all.

Alice got the map out with her back to the wind.

“Both,” she said flatly. “He has drawn both of them.”

They crowded round. She was right. On Wilkin’s page the track came up and divided. Both arms were there in his thin sure lines.

“So he went up one,” said Rose.

“He went up one,” said Alice.

Nobody said anything for a moment. The wind came over the top. It pulled at their cloaks.

"Right," said Will. "That is easy. I take the right-hand one on Swift. Peter takes the left on Bracken. You two wait here. We go for an hour. Then we come back and tell you."

"No," said Alice.

"Alice, we would know by dark."

"No."

"It is one hour—"

"It is not about the hour." Alice folded the map up along its folds. She put it inside her coat. Her hands were shaking a little. It was not only the cold. "Rule two. Nobody rides after dusk. And nobody rides these hills alone. Not you. Not anybody."

"Bennet said search where a man would be," said Will. "We would be searching."

"Bennet also said a search is not a race."

That stopped him.

Will stood with the reins in his hand. His jaw was set. He wanted it very badly. Alice waited.

"All right," he said at last.

"Will—"

"I said all right." He turned Swift's head. "It is your map. Where do we camp?"

They camped in the elbow of the two tracks. There was a bank of turf and stone.

It was a good place. Alice had picked it off her own map an hour before. The bank kept the wind off. There was water fifty steps away. There was even a little dead heather to burn.

They worked fast. Will got the saddles off. He rubbed all four ponies down. He tied them where they could get at the grass. Peter built the fire. It was small and tight. That was the way his mother built one. Rose fed the pigeons. She put the basket under the bank and covered it. Alice set out the cloaks. She put the blanket rolls under the overhang. Then she got the pot on.

Then the weather came.

It came over the top of the fell. There was no warning at all. One moment the sky was gold. The next moment it was grey and full of sleet. The sleet went sideways.

The four of them sat under the bank. The fire was in front of them. The ponies stood with their backs to it. And not one of them had a wet foot.

"Three minutes," said Peter, from inside his cloak. "We beat it by three minutes. Your mother would be proud."

"My mother would count our socks," said Alice.

The bean stew was hot. There was far too much of it. That was exactly what Helen had planned.

And before they ate, Rose got the pigeon basket out.

She got out a little roll of paper. She put the pot lid on her knee. It made a table. She wrote in her small square letters.

Up the Slate Track. Camp at the top fork. Two ways. All four well.

She read it out. Nobody changed a word. Then she took Snowy out of the basket. She held her up. She let her go into the last of the light.

Snowy went up in a wide circle. She came round once, low over their heads. Then she went south, fast and straight, and was gone.

"The plan changed," said Rose, sitting down again. "So the bird goes."

"The bird goes," said Alice.

They ate. The sleet stopped. The sky cleared off cold. The first stars came out over the fell.

And Alice sat with her back against the bank. She got the map out one more time. She held it close to the last of the fire.

She looked at the two forks. She looked at them for a long time.

Then she sat forward.

There was something odd about the right-hand fork. She had felt it before. She had not caught it. Now she had it.

The left-hand track was drawn the way you draw a thing you ride past. You see it from the side. You see the near edge of it. You see its shape against the sky.

The right-hand track was not drawn like that.

It was drawn from over the top of itself. You could see the far bank as well as the near one.

It was drawn the way you draw a thing you are standing above.

Chapter 6: The Wrong Fork

They were awake before the light.

The fire had gone out in the night. There was ice in the pot. Rose's fingers were too cold. She could not work the basket. Will breathed on them for her.

"Left fork," said Alice. "That is the one that was drawn from above. We go left."

Nobody argued. Why would they? Alice read maps. That was how the world was put together.



The sky went grey. By then they were on the left-hand track.

They searched it properly. Alice had thought about how to do it. She had lain awake half the night. They spread out across the wide brown bowl. All four kept one another in sight. Rusty ran the line between them. Every so often somebody blew a whistle. The others blew back. Three notes, then three notes. That way nobody got lost. And nobody had to shout.

It was good ground for searching. It was terrible ground for finding.

The bowl was a mile across. It was full of dead grass. It was full of grey stone. Every hummock had the shape of a man sitting down. They walked to a dozen of them. It was not yet nine o'clock. They were all grass. Or stone. Or nothing.

The whistles went on. Three notes, then three notes. Nobody found anything.

At about ten Peter came over to Alice. His cheeks were red.

"This is daft," he said. "Look at the size of it. If Will took the top and I took the bottom—"

"No," said Will.

He had come up behind them. Alice had not heard him.

Peter turned round. "It would be quicker."

"It would," said Will. "We are not doing it."

"But—"

"Nobody goes off on their own." Will said it flatly. He was not looking at Alice at all. He was looking at Peter. His face was set. "Not up here. Not for ten minutes."

"All right," said Peter. "It was only an idea."

Will went back to his line. Alice watched him go.

Alice stood still. The wind was on her face. Last night she had overruled him. She had said no to the one thing he wanted. She had said it in front of the others. He had not said one word about it since. And now here he was. He was saying her own no for her.

She could not think of anything to say. So she said nothing.

They found the sheepfold at noon.

It stood at the top end of the bowl. It was a sheepfold. It was dead. It had been a good round wall once. Dry stone, no mortar. Now half of it lay out

in the grass. Nettles grew in the corner. There was no gate. There was no roof. Nothing had been kept in it for twenty years.

They stood in the middle of it. They looked at each other.

"Nothing," said Rose.

"Nothing," said Alice.

Rusty went round the inside of the wall with his nose down. That was his job. Then he came back and sat on Alice's foot. That was not.

Alice got the map out.

She was going to check the sheepfold against the page. It was not on the page. She was not surprised. Wilkin had never come this way.

Then she stopped.

She turned round slowly on the spot. She held the map out in front of her.

She turned it the way you are supposed to. You do not read a map flat on your knee. You hold it up. You turn it round. You point the paper the way the ground points. Then left on the paper is left under your boots. Alice had learned that before she could write.

She looked at the tooth of rock. It was away behind them now. It was small and grey. It was over on their left.

She looked at the map. On the map it was on the right.

Alice stood very still.

"Oh," she said.

"What?" said Will.

She did not answer. She was seeing last night. She was seeing herself at the camp. Her back against the bank. The map on her knees. The fire in front of her. She had been facing *down* the fell. Back the way they had come. She had read the two forks off the paper. They lay flat on her knee. Left on the page. Left in the world. And she had never once turned the paper round.

The whole night she had been facing the wrong way. All of it.

"It is the other one," she said.

They came and stood round her. She held the map out and turned it. Then she turned it back. The tooth of rock swung from one side to the other.

"The fork that is drawn from above is the right-hand one," she said. "The one we did not take. I read it sitting down. I was facing backwards. I never turned the map."

Nobody said anything.

Alice looked at the fallen wall. She looked at the mile of empty grass behind it. The sun was already past the top of the sky.

Then she climbed up on a stone. They could all see her properly. And she said it out loud.

"I read it wrong," she said. "It was the other fork. That is my fault. It has cost us the whole morning."

It was very quiet in the sheepfold. Nobody moved.

"Right," said Will. "How long back to the top?"

"An hour and a half. Back to where the tracks divide."

"Then we should go."

That was all he said. He did not say *I wanted to do both.* He did not say *we would have known by now.* He turned. He started walking to the ponies. And Alice found that her eyes were hot. Nobody had told her off. That was the trouble.

"Alice," said Rose.

"Mm."

"You are the only one of us who could have got it wrong," said Rose. "You are also the only one who could have got it right."

Peter thought about that for four steps.

"That is a very good sentence," he said. "I am going to use it."

They ate as they walked. Helen would not have liked that. Bread and cheese and one apple each. Peter walked backwards in front of Alice. He held the food bag. He was a nuisance on purpose. He did it to cheer her up.

Then he stopped being a nuisance.

He was looking at the map. Alice had it out again. She held it down with both hands. The wind pulled at it.

"Alice," he said. "What is that line down the middle?"

"That is the crease. Where he folds it."

"No," said Peter. "I know what a crease is. Look at the *ink*."

She looked.

The fold ran straight down the sheet. Top edge to bottom. It ran right through the drawing of the fork. Along the fold the black lines were not thin any more. They had spread. They were fat and soft. They were grey at the edges. In one place a whole line had doubled itself. In another the little scribble of the thorn had turned into a blot.

It was blurred. It was blurred all down the crease. It was blurred nowhere else.

"He folded it wet," said Peter.

Alice looked up at him.

Peter had carried letters up and down the Grey Goose Inn. He had done it since he could walk. He knew exactly one thing about ink. He knew it very well.

"Ink smudges," he said. "Fold a page with wet ink on it. It smudges down the fold. It does it every time. My mother has a few words to say about it."

Alice put her finger just above the grey smudged line.

"He was drawing," she said slowly. "The ink was still wet on the paper."

"And he shut it," said Rose.

"He shut it fast," said Peter.

The four of them stood in the empty brown bowl. The wind came over. They looked at the blurred crease. And they all understood the same thing. They understood it at the same moment.

Whatever had happened to the mapmaker, it had happened quickly.

Chapter 7: Three Notes

They went back up the fell against the clock.

It was an hour and a half of hard going. Nobody talked. The ponies were tired. The light was already going. Alice kept doing sums in her head. She did not like any of them.

Two hours of light. Maybe less.

They came up the last bit. They stood in the elbow of the two tracks. Their own camp was still there. The black ring of the fire. The flat place where four cloaks had lain.

The right-hand fork went up in front of them, over a shoulder of stone.

Alice stopped for a moment with her hand on Hazel's neck.

She said it under her breath. It was not a long thing. Her grandmother had taught it to her. She had said it in the fog on the pass. She said it now.

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

"Amen," said Rose.

"Amen," said Peter.

Then Will said, "Come on," and they went up.

The shoulder of stone took twenty minutes.

And on the far side of it the world opened out. Every one of them stopped dead.

Alice had thought she knew what empty looked like. She had been wrong.

In front of them the ground fell away. Below lay a long high valley. It was miles long. The far side of it was a wall of grey rock. There was snow in the cracks. There was one thin beck at the bottom, silver and small. There was grass. There was scree, running grey down to the beck. There were rocks the size of the Keep's gate. They lay about anyhow.

There was no wall. There was no path. There was no smoke.

There was nothing in it at all.

"He is in there," said Will.

"Somewhere," said Alice.

Peter cupped his hands round his mouth.

"HELLO!" he shouted. "MASTER WILKIN!"

The shout went out about forty steps. Then the wind took it away sideways. That was the end of it. Nothing came back. Not even an echo.

He tried again, louder. Rusty barked to help.

"MASTER WILKIN! HELLO!"

The valley took it. It was gone. Peter shouted six more times. He got redder. His voice began to go. It made no difference at all.

He stopped and stood with his hands on his knees.

"It is shouting into a hole," he said. His voice had gone. "A very big hole."

Alice looked at the miles of grass and rock. She felt the same cold feeling as at the sheepfold. They had one hour of light. Perhaps two. And a shout did not go forty steps.

"We could ride the length of it," said Will. "Down the beck and back up the other side."

"In the dark," said Alice.

"I know."

"Then no."

Rose had not said anything for some time.

She stood a little apart. The pigeon basket was still on her back. She was looking down at the valley. Her hand was up at her collar. She was turning something over in her fingers.

"Alice," she said.

It came out small. Rose took a breath and tried again, louder.

"Alice. Peter is shouting words."

They all turned round.

"Well, yes," said Peter. "That is what shouting is."

"Words do not carry," said Rose.

She was going red. She kept going anyway.

"Words fall over. You said it yourself, in the fog. You have to be close for words. And he does not know us. He has never heard any of our voices in his life. He might hear a voice. He would think it was a shepherd. Or the wind. Or nothing at all."

She pulled the string out from under her collar. On the end of it was a small pale whistle of ash wood. A bird was cut into the side.

"But everybody knows a whistle," said Rose.

Nobody spoke.

"A whistle is a whistle," she said. "It is one note. It goes through wind. It carries. We blew them at each other all day. We heard them right across the bowl." She stopped. Then she said the last part very fast. "And nobody blows a whistle by accident. If he hears it, he will know it is a person."

Peter took his own whistle out. He looked at it in a new way.

"Rose Finch," he said. "You are the cleverest person on this mountain."

"Get up on the rock," said Alice. "All of us. Together."

They climbed on to a flat rock. It stood at the head of the valley. They stood in a line, four of them. Rusty sat at the bottom and looked up.

"Ready," said Alice. "Three notes. Then we wait."

They put the whistles to their mouths and blew.

Three notes went out over the valley, all four whistles together, high and hard and thin. The sound did not fall over. It went away from them across the grass. It went over the beck. It went up the grey wall on the far side. And it came back once, faintly, off the rock. The far wall had gone gold.



Then it stopped, and there was the wait.

It was a long wait. Alice counted it. Twenty. Thirty. Forty.

Nothing.

“Again,” said Alice.

At the next halt of the wind they blew again. Three notes. The valley took them and handed back the small flat echo off the far wall.

They waited.

Nothing.

“Again.”

Three notes. The wait. The wind in the grass. A bird far off, going home. Nothing else.

They blew nine times.

After the ninth time nobody said anything at all. Peter sat down on the edge of the rock. Will was looking at the sky. It had gone from white to a dull yellow. That meant the sun was going down behind the far rocks.

Alice put her whistle back inside her collar. Her hands were cold and stiff.

"Once more," she said. "Then we make camp and we start again at first light."

She hated the sound of her own voice saying it.

"Once more," said Will.

They lifted the whistles.

And Rusty stood up.

He did it quickly, all at once. A dog does that when a door opens in a house. His head went round. His ears went straight up and forward and stayed there. He was pointing at the valley. Down, and to the left. Under the long ridge of broken rock.

He did not bark. He did not move his feet. He only stood, and stared, and listened, with every hair along his back up.

"Rusty?" said Peter.

"Sh," said Rose.

They all stopped breathing.

For a moment there was only the wind. And the beck, a long way off. And Alice's own heart going in her ears.

And then they heard it.

It was not a whistle. It was not a voice. It was a small hard sound. It came up out of the valley. It came from under the long ridge.

Knock.

A pause.

Knock.

A pause.

Knock.

Then nothing. A long, long wait. Alice counted it. It was slow. It went on and on. Peter opened his mouth to speak, and Rose caught his arm.

And then it came again. Out of the same place. Exactly the same. Steady. Patient. Not hurried at all.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"That is stone," said Will quietly. "Somebody is knocking a stone on a stone."

Chapter 8: The Man Under the Ledge

They went down into the valley faster than they should have.

Alice made them lead the ponies. Nobody argued about that now. They went down the long slope of grass. The light went yellow behind them. Every forty steps they stopped and blew.

Three notes.

And the knocking answered.

It was not slow any more. After the first whistle it came quick and hard. Over and over. In no pattern at all. Somebody down there had stopped being patient.

"He heard us," said Peter. His voice went up in the middle of it. "He heard us!"

They went along under the ridge. The broken rock hung over their heads.

Rusty found him. Of course he did. He went round a shoulder of stone ahead of them. Then he stopped. He barked twice. He looked back.

There was a ledge.

The rock came out over a dry hollow. The ground under it was pale and dusty. There was a little fire, no bigger than a hat. It burned very slowly. A wall of stones was built up on the windy side. Two flat stones sat by the fire, out of the smoke. A stack of dead heather lay under the overhang. It was dry and ready.

And a man sat with his back against the rock. He had one boot on. He had one boot off.

He had a freckled face, a short beard and reddish-brown hair. His coat was a good one. His right foot was up on his folded cloak. The ankle above it was swollen fat. It was the colour of a plum.

In his lap was a small brown book, open. Two loose pages lay on the stone beside him. They were weighted flat at the corners with four little stones. They were covered in drawing.

He had a piece of burnt stick in his hand.

He was drawing.

The man looked up. He saw four children, a dog and four ponies. They were at the edge of his ledge. He did not move for a long moment. Then he put both hands over his face.

"Oh, thank goodness," he said, from behind his hands. "Oh, thank goodness."

Then he took his hands away. He was laughing. His eyes were wet.

"And how *very* embarrassing," he said.

His name was Wilkin. He said it before anybody asked. The polite thing came first with him. Master Wilkin, mapmaker, of no fixed door.

"Do not come down that side," he said at once. He pointed with the burnt stick. "It is all loose. Come round by the grass. That is how I would come. I have had three days to think about it."

They came round by the grass.

Will went past them all and knelt by the ankle. He did not touch it. He put his face close. He looked at it from both sides. That was how he looked at a pony's leg.

"Can you move your toes?"

"I can. Beautifully. I have been very proud of them."

"Move them."

Wilkin moved his toes. Will watched. He sat back and let out a breath.

"I do not think it is broken," he said. "It is turned. My father had one. It goes purple. It hurts. It gets better."

"That is the best sentence I have heard in three days," said Wilkin.



Alice found she could not say anything at all. She sat down on one of the flat stones. The fire was warm. She looked at the little wall of stones round it. She looked at the two pages weighted down with pebbles. And she began to see what sort of man they had found.

Peter had no such trouble.

"How did you get *here*?" he said.

"A grouse," said Wilkin.

"A what?"

"A grouse. A fat, brown, rude bird." Wilkin waved the burnt stick. "I was up there on the scree, leading her. Then I stopped to draw. I always stop to draw. So there I stood. Pen in one hand, rein in the other. And a grouse came up out of the heather under her nose."

He made a noise. It was a very good grouse noise. It was loud. It went *gorbok-ok-ok*.

Rusty sat up.

"They do that," said Wilkin sadly. "They sit still. You get almost on top of them. Then they go off under your feet. The noise is not to be believed. Now, my pony has never done a wrong thing in her life. But no pony in the world stands still for that. She went one way. I went the other. And the stones went with me."

"Was she hurt?" said Rose. It was the first thing she had said.

"Not a hair on her," said Wilkin. "She was up on the good ground in three jumps. I called her. Then I stood up on this ankle. That was a very stupid thing to do. I sat down again rather hard. And I am afraid I shouted." He looked ashamed of himself. "She had had enough of the day by then. Off she went down the fell. All my worldly goods went with her. And she was quite right."

"Her name?" said Will.

"Bess."

"Bess is at Stonegate Keep," said Alice.

Wilkin's mouth opened.

"She came up the King's Road on Monday night," said Alice. "In the dark. She had been there once, on Saturday. She walked all the way back to it. Then she stood in the gateway and waited for someone to come out."

Nobody spoke for a moment. The little fire ticked.

"Well," said Wilkin. His voice had gone rough. "Well. I shall have to think of something very fine to do for Bess."

"She is fine," said Will. "She was blown and she was hungry. She ate three buckets. She is fat and rude."

"That is my Bess."

Then Alice reached inside her coat. She brought out the oiled cloth. She unfolded it. She put the half-drawn map into his hands. He sat and looked at it. He said nothing at all for quite a long time.

"You opened my bags," he said at last.

"On the long table," said Alice. "In front of my father and my mother and our post master. That is the rule. Nothing off the road is opened in a corner."

"Quite right too," said Wilkin. "Quite right." He turned the page over. "And then you read it."

"Yes."

"Read it *how*?"

"You drew what you saw," said Alice. "So we walked to the things you drew."

Master Wilkin looked at Alice Ward over the top of his own map.

"Ah," he said softly. "How very annoying. I have wanted to meet you all my life. And you turn out to be about twelve."

"Thirteen."

"Worse."

Peter had waited a long time. He was a boy with a food bag. He could wait no longer.

"How did you eat?" he said.

"Carefully."

"That is not an answer."

"It is the whole answer," said Wilkin. "I did four things. Then I stopped doing anything at all. One. I stayed exactly where I was. A man with a bad ankle on loose stone soon has two bad ankles. Two. I got under this rock and I stayed dry. Three. I kept the fire small. There is not much heather up here. It had to last. Four. I knocked two stones together, on the hour, every hour. Someone in this kingdom might be fool enough to come looking for me."

"We were," said Peter.

"You were," said Wilkin. "Bless you all."

Peter opened the food bag.

He did it in a grand way, with a speech. Helen had packed for a small village.

"Right," he said. "There is bread. There is hard cheese. There are oatcakes. There are four apples, and there is a whole pot of—"

He stopped.

Master Wilkin was looking into the food bag.

He said nothing. He was too polite to say anything. He was looking into that bag the way a cold man looks at a fire. And he had been looking too long.

Alice thought about a hard loaf on a long table. Two slices cut off the end of it.

"Master Wilkin," she said. "When did the bread run out?"

He came back to himself. He made a small movement with one hand. It was nothing worth saying.

"Yesterday," he said.

Chapter 9: His Own Map Gets Him Out

They fed him first.

Alice would not let him have much. Bread, hard cheese, half an apple. Then she took the bag away. Wilkin laughed at her. Then he did what he was told.

"Quite right," he said. "A hungry man eats too fast and is sorry."

"So my mother says," said Alice.

He ate slowly. He shut his eyes over the cheese. It took a while.

Then Rose opened the basket.

"Wait," said Peter. "Should we not work out what we are doing first?"

"No," said Rose.

She said it without looking up. For Rose that was new. She had another roll of paper out.

"The plan has changed," she said. "The bird goes now. Then we work out what we are doing."

That was rule three. Rule three did not wait for anybody.

She knelt on the flat stone. She wrote in her small square letters. The pot lid was her table again.

Found Master Wilkin. Ankle turned, not broken. High valley under the long ridge. He is warm and fed. All five well.

She read it out. Nobody changed a word. Then she took Inky out of the basket.

Master Wilkin sat up.

"Is that a *pigeon*?"

"That is Inky," said Rose.

"Where does he go?"

"Home," said Rose. "Twenty miles. He will be on his perch soon. That is before we have you standing up."

She held Inky out on both hands. He shook himself all over. He went up. He was a black spot against the yellow sky. Then he was nothing.

Wilkin watched him out of sight.

"Well," he said. "Well, well."

Alice put the two maps side by side. Then she said the thing she had been dreading.

"We cannot get you home tonight."

"I know," said Wilkin cheerfully.

"We cannot even get you to the top of the fell. It is two hours back up. And then it is the Slate Track."

"I have been down the Slate Track," said Wilkin. "I would not go down it in the dusk. Not with two good ankles."

"No," said Alice. "Nor would I."

Will looked at the ledge. He counted on his fingers.

"There is room for him under there," he said. "There is not room for five of us. And there is nothing left to burn."

Everyone looked at the little stack of heather. It had been bigger an hour ago.

Alice felt the cold at the back of her neck. It was going to be a hard night. There was a hurt man in it. And it was her decision.

Then Master Wilkin said, "May I be useful?"

He pulled the map round towards himself. He put one long finger on it.

"Look here," he said. "Do you see these lines?"

Alice looked. There were dozens of them, thin and brown. They ran along the side of the drawn hill. They curled round it. They never crossed.

"They are contour lines," said Wilkin. "Every one of those lines keeps the same height. Walk along one. You go neither up nor down. It is the flattest walking in the hills. It is the only kind worth doing on a hurt leg."

He moved his finger along one line and stopped.

There was a small square on the page. It had a little mark over it. Alice had looked at it twice. She had not known what it was.

"And that," said Wilkin, "is a shieling."

"A what?"

"A shieling. A summer hut." He tapped it. "They build them up in the high grazing. A shepherd sleeps in one in the summer. He is up with the sheep. Four stone walls and a turf roof. I drew that one on Sunday. The mark says it has a roof."

Alice's mouth had gone dry.

"How far?"

"Two miles. Along the line. Not up. Not down."

"Two miles of flat," said Will.

"Two miles of flat," said Wilkin. He began to laugh. Then he had to stop. It hurt his foot. "Oh, that is very good. I have been sitting under this ledge for three days. And the answer was in my own lap."

They moved fast after that.

Will chose Hazel. He did not discuss it. Swift was quicker. Swift was braver. And Swift would have been the wrong pony. Hazel had never once put a foot wrong. Hazel did not mind anything.

He took the blanket off his own roll. He folded it four times.

Will pulled the saddle flap straight under it. "Ankle goes on that," he said. "Along the neck, over the shoulder. He rides sideways."

"I have never ridden sideways in my life," said Wilkin.

"You have never had an ankle like that either," said Will.

Getting him up was the worst part. It took all four of them, and a lot of counting. Wilkin was cheerful the whole time. He went white twice. When he was up he sat very still. His eyes were shut.

"There," he said. "That is done. And nobody dropped me."

"Nearly," said Peter.

"Do not tell me who it was."

Alice took the rein. Will walked at Hazel's shoulder. He kept a hand on Wilkin's knee. That was the hand that mattered. Rose came behind with the basket. She led Bracken and Pebble. Rusty went in front, being important.

And Peter walked at Hazel's head and talked.

He talked for two miles. He told the worst story he knew. It had his uncle in it. It had a ladder. It had a barrel of apples. It also had a goat in the wrong place. Nobody was hurt. The goat came out of it best.

"That is the worst story I have ever heard," said Wilkin. He said it from up on Hazel.

"I know," said Peter, pleased. "Would you like another one?"

"Yes," said Wilkin. "Please."



The contour line was as good as its word.

Alice checked it every few hundred steps. Every time, the ground did what the paper said. Round the shoulder. Across a wet place. The light went from yellow to grey to a thin blue. The first star came out over the far wall. And Hazel walked on at the same steady pace. She never once slipped.

Alice found that she was not frightened any more.

Then Rusty barked ahead of them. They came round the last curve of the hill. And there it was.

The shieling stood on a flat shelf of grass. It was low and long and grey. It stood half sunk into the slope. The wind went over the top of it. The walls were stone. The roof was turf. It was whole. There was a doorway with no door. There was a black gap for a window. And it was the finest building Alice had ever seen.

Peter went in first with the lantern.

"Dry!" he shouted. "It is dry! Come in, come in, it is dry in here—"

Then he stopped shouting.

They crowded in behind him. The hut was one room. The floor was beaten earth. It was hard and dry. There was a stone hearth in the middle. Old white ash lay in it.

And along the whole of the back wall stood peat. It was stacked up neat and square. It stood higher than Rose.

Cut peat. Dry peat. Hundreds of black bricks of it. You stack peat that way. It means you are coming back for it.

"Somebody," said Will slowly, "has been here."

Alice went back out with the lantern. The dark had turned blue.

Round the side was a small fold for sheep. It was built of the same grey stone. She had walked straight past it. She held the light up to it now.

The wall of it had fallen once. She could see the old line of the break, low down. There the stones went dark and green.

Someone had built it up again. The new work sat on top of that old line. New stones, clean-faced. Each one was set into its place. The flat side faced out. The top was combed off level. There was not a gap in it anywhere.

Alice put her hand on it. The stones did not move at all.

Somebody had mended this wall. And whoever it was had mended it this year. They had mended it well.

Chapter 10: The Night in the Shieling

A peat fire is a slow, kind thing.

It does not leap about. It does not roar. It sits in the hearth. It glows dark red. It gives out heat for hours. Peter got it going with dry heather. Then a little wood. Then they put the black bricks on. Then they let it be.

The hut filled up with warmth. Nobody moved for a while.

The ponies were in the mended fold outside. Their rugs were on. Rusty lay across the doorway. He had decided it. That was where a door should be. The bean stew went in the pot. It started to talk to itself.

Master Wilkin sat with his back to the wall. His bad foot was up on a folded cloak. He looked round the hut. He said it was the finest hall in the kingdom.

"Who mended the fold?" said Alice.

"It has been mended this year," she said. "The stones are still clean. Someone carried new stone up here. They built that wall well. Two miles from any track."

"That will be the Millford flocks," said Rose.

They all looked at her. Rose went on eating.

"They summer the sheep up here," she said. "They walk them up in May. They walk them down in September. Amos's people have done it for years. Someone sleeps up here with them all summer."

"Then the peat is theirs," said Will.

"The peat is theirs."

"And we are burning it."

"Yes," said Rose. "In the spring my father sends a cart of coal. It goes up the water to Amos's brother. Nobody says a word. That is how it works."

Peter had been quiet for a whole minute. For Peter that was a record.

"Master Wilkin," he said. "Can I ask you something rude?"

"They are the best kind."

"Why do you *do* it?"

"Do what?"

"Maps." Peter waved his spoon at the dark window. "There is nothing up here. The ones who do come up already know the way. Amos does not need a map of his hill."

Wilkin put his bowl down.

He did not answer for a moment. Then he spoke. His voice had changed. It was not the joking voice.

"You have got it the wrong way round," he said. "Nearly everyone does. So do not mind."

"Go on then."

"A map is not for the people who know," said Wilkin. "Amos does not need my map. I do not need Amos's hill. A map is for one person only. It is for the man who has never been here."

The fire ticked.

"Think about it," said Wilkin. "Someone will come up this valley in ten years. A carter. A doctor going to a sick child. A boy walking to his first job. They will not know the ground. They will not know about the left fork. It wastes a morning. They will not know about a hut with a roof on it. Two miles along the flat."

He tapped the paper on his knee.

"But I have done my work properly. So they will know all of it. From this. From a piece of paper drawn by a man they never met."

Nobody said anything. The peat shifted.

"That is what a map is for," said Wilkin. "Not to show where things are. To let a stranger go safely. That is the whole of it. It is worth a turned ankle every ten years. It has cost me two."

Alice sat and looked at the fire. Something went quietly into place inside her.

She thought about a broken bridge. And a fog on the shoulder of the pass. And a high path she had chosen with no map. Three people had walked behind her, trusting her. She had spent a whole year being the person who knew.

She had never once thought about the person who did not.

"I want to learn to do it," she said.

"I know," said Wilkin. "I could see that from four miles away."

They ate. Wilkin's bowl did not stay untouched for long. The peat glowed. Outside the wind got up. It went over the top of the hut. It did not get in anywhere.

And Master Wilkin began to be funny.

"I must say," he said, "I have never been carried before. Ten out of ten."

Peter laughed.

"I am the parcel," said Wilkin. "I am the post. Someone should stamp me with a swan. Then put me in a bag."

Peter laughed harder. Rose did not.

"Tomorrow you may all take a leg each," said Wilkin. "Swing me down the mountain. I shall shut my eyes and think about cake—"

"You do not have to do that," said Rose.

The hut went quiet. Even Peter.

Rose had not moved. She sat across the hearth with her knees up. She was looking straight at him. She had gone rather pink.

"Do what?" said Wilkin.

"Make jokes about it." Rose's voice was small. But it did not stop. "You have made four. I counted. You do not have to cover it up. You are not a parcel. Nobody minds."

Alice held her breath.

Master Wilkin looked at Rose for a long moment. He opened his mouth. Then he shut it again. And something went out of his face. Under it was a tired man of forty. He had a very sore foot. He had been on his own for three days. He did not much like being helped.

"You are quite right," he said quietly. "I am sorry."

"You do not have to be sorry either," said Rose.

Then she moved round the hearth. She sat down beside him. She told him what was going to happen. She did it in order, one thing after another. Her voice was flat and quiet. It was the voice she used on a frightened pigeon.

"In the morning Will will bring the ponies in. He goes out first, always. Then Peter will build the fire up. There will be hot food. Peter never lets anybody start a day cold. Alice will look at the map before anyone moves. She always does that too."

Wilkin was listening. He listened hard.

"Then we will lift you on to Hazel. The same way as tonight. Four of us. It will hurt for a moment. Your ankle is the colour of a plum. That is when it comes off the ground. Then it will stop. It did tonight. It will again."

"It did," said Wilkin.

"We will go slowly. We will stop when you say stop. Nobody will ask you why. Hazel does not mind stopping. Hazel does not mind anything."

She thought.

"Then there is Millford. There is an inn there with a fire in it. Mistress Ada will put your foot up on a stool. She will bring you dry socks. And she will have an opinion about mapmakers. After that there is my mother. My mother will feed you till you cannot stand up. That will not matter. You cannot stand up anyway."

Master Wilkin made a small noise. It might have been a laugh. It was not a joke.

"Thank you," he said. "That is the most useful thing anyone has said to me."



Rose looked down at her hands. But she did not go back across the hearth. A little later she was explaining pigeons to him. He asked proper questions. She answered all of them.

Alice caught Peter's eye across the fire. Peter grinned at her.

They slept warm. The wind went over.

Alice woke once in the night. The peat was still red. Rusty was still in the doorway. Someone was snoring. It was probably Peter.

At first light Will went out for the ponies.

Alice heard him go. She heard him talking to Hazel in the fold. She was half asleep. It was all very ordinary. Then it was not.

Then the door darkened and Will came back in. He stood there and said nothing. He stood there till they all sat up.

There was snow in his hair. Real snow.

"It is not down here," he said. "There is none on the grass. Go and look up."

They went out into the grey morning. They looked up. The whole line of the tops had gone white.

"That is weeks early," said Rose.

Chapter 11: Bluebell Comes Up

It went exactly as Rose had said it would.

Will brought the ponies in. Peter built the fire up. He made hot food. Alice sat down with the map. Nobody moved before she did. Then the four of them lifted Master Wilkin. It hurt for a moment. Then it stopped.

“You are a very accurate person,” said Wilkin, from up on Hazel.

“Yes,” said Rose.

They were nearly ready to go. Then Rusty barked.

He barked once, out at the fold. Then he ran. He did not run the way a dog runs at a stranger. He ran flat out.

“That is his hello bark,” said Will slowly.

Something came over the shoulder of the hill.

It was an old man in a brown coat. He had a stick in one hand. And a small grey pony walked loose beside him. She had a white blaze. She had no rope on her at all.

Rose made a noise. She started running.

“AMOS!”

It was five minutes before anyone said a plain word.

Rusty went round and round the old man. Amos took Rose by both arms. He looked at her and said she had grown. She had not. Peter talked. Will went to the grey pony. He got down. He ran his hands over her front leg. It was the bad leg. It had been hot and swollen at the pass.

“Cool,” said Will. “Cool and hard and right.”

“She is sound,” said Amos. “She has been sound since the turn of the leaf.”

Bluebell put her nose in Will’s hair. She blew.

“How did you know?” said Alice.

"Your father's man knocked on the mill door at ten last night," said Amos. "There was a bird in from you. He read it out on the doorstep, in the rain."

He looked round at them all. Then up at the man on Hazel.

"Master mapmaker," he said. "You have given us a week."

"I am very sorry," said Wilkin.

"You knocked your stones every hour."

"I did."

"Then you have nothing to be sorry for," said Amos. "Sit still. Be carried. Let folk be glad."

Wilkin opened his mouth. Then he shut it. Then he did as he was told.

Amos had brought Bluebell for one reason. He explained it in nine words.

"Wet slate," he said. "Small pony. Unshod. Surest foot in the hills."

Rose was nodding before he finished. She was back at the old beacon on the pass. There had been hoofprints in the ashes. No iron rim round them.

"Bluebell has no shoes on," she said to Wilkin. "An unshod foot holds the rock. An iron shoe slides on it."

"Aye," said Amos. "And she is old. And she is careful. She has never hurried."

"Then she and I shall get on," said Wilkin.

Then came the part Alice had lain awake over.

She got the maps out. They went on the flat stone. They all came and looked. Amos came too. He held his hat in both hands. He touched nothing.

"There are two ways down," said Alice.

She put her finger on the first one.

"Back the way we came. Over the top and down the Slate Track. It is short. It is six miles."

"And?" said Will.

"And it is loose slate. And there is snow on the tops. And we have a man who cannot walk." Alice moved her finger. "So we are not going that way."

She traced the other line. It went the long way round. Out along the contour. Down the side of the valley. Then away south by a green way. It took twice as long. It never once went steep.

"We go round," she said. "It is eleven miles. It will take all day. We will not be at Millford before dark."

She looked up. She made herself finish it.

"That is my choice. If anyone thinks it is wrong, say it now."

Nobody said it. Nobody overruled her. Will only looked at the line and nodded once. Amos put his hat back on. That was as good as a speech.

Nobody mentioned yesterday morning.

It was eleven miles. It took all day. And in the end it was rather lovely.

The snow stayed up on the tops. Down here the sun came out thin and cold. The frost went off the grass by noon. Bluebell went in front with Amos. Hazel came behind with Wilkin sitting sideways. She put her feet exactly where Bluebell had put hers. All the way down.

Wilkin drew nearly the whole time.

He had the little brown book open on his knee. Every half mile he asked the name of a thing. Amos knew all of them. Alice wrote them down. One page was Peter's fault. It had a very bad goat on it.

Hob was waiting at the bottom of the green way. He had his cart.

He had been there since noon. There was a sack of straw in the back. A rug lay folded over it. And he had swept the cart out. Then he told them twice that he had swept it out.

They got Wilkin down into the straw. Hob clicked at his grey pony. The cart went off down the lane to Millford. It went at the speed of an old man thinking.

Mistress Ada saw them coming. She had the door open before they reached it.



After that it was all fire and noise.

Dry socks came first. Dry socks always came first with Ada. Then hot water. Then a stool for Wilkin's foot. Then a bowl of barley broth. Rose's mother came from the mill. She put a second bowl in front of them all. Rose's father shook Wilkin's hand. He shook it a long time. Wilkin began to look worried.

And Mistress Ada had an opinion about mapmakers.

"Wandering about on your own," she said, banging things down. "In the high valleys. In October. On a pony."

"It is my trade," said Wilkin.

"It is a silly trade."

"It is."

"Well," said Ada, thrown off, "as long as you know."

The best part came with the second bowl.

"Now tell me about my Bess," said Wilkin.

So they told him. Alice told the plain parts. Peter told the rest. The rest got bigger. The reins over her neck. The one broken rein. The mud to her knees. Rusty's low bark in the kitchen. The empty saddle in the lantern light. The girth done up neat. The stirrups run up short.

"Twenty miles," said Wilkin. "In the dark. To a place she stood in once."

"Nobody can explain it," said Alice.

They all had a go at explaining it anyway.

Amos said a pony knows a warm stable. Ada said it was the oats. Rose said Bess was going *away* from the fell. The Keep was the first door she came to. Peter said Bess had worked it out. He said she was too polite to mention it.

"I like all of those," said Wilkin. "I shall keep them all."

Then he pushed his bowl away. He reached inside his coat.

"Now," he said. "You lot have read my map. It is only fair you see it laid out flat."

He rolled it out flat on Ada's long table. He put a mug on each corner.

Alice leaned over it.

There it all was, finished and exact. The standing stones. The beck and its crooked thorn. The Slate Track and its tooth of rock. The high valley. The shieling with its little mark. All the ground they had walked in three days. It lay quiet on one sheet of paper.

She followed it south, out of the hills. The drawing thinned. The King's Road came in from the east.

The road was there. The Rushwater was there. Millford was there, with its ford. The mill wheel was the size of a fingernail.

Alice looked for the Keep.

She looked along the road. And back again. And once more. Then she put her finger on the empty place. That was where it should have been. Her voice came out strange.

"Master Wilkin. Where is Stonegate?"

Wilkin leaned over and looked. A small frown came down between his brows.

"It is not on my map," he said slowly. "It is not on the map I copied mine from either. And that was the king's own."

Chapter 12: On the Map

Bess knew the cart. She knew it before it reached the gate.

Her head was over the door of the end box. She had stood there for five days. Then Hob's cart came under the arch. Bess made a noise. Nobody at the Keep had heard it from her before. She did not stop. She kept on. Then Master Wilkin was in the doorway. He had both arms round her neck.

He stood there a long time. He said nothing.

"Right," said Helen. "Inside. Foot up."

Master Wilkin stayed a week. It was a loud week.

He sat by the kitchen fire. His foot was up on a stool. Old Bennet sat in the other chair. Within one hour the two of them were arguing.

They argued about roads. That was all they argued about. They did it for six days.

Bennet said a road should go where people go. Wilkin said it should go where the ground lets it. Bennet said Wilkin had never carried a letter. Wilkin said Bennet had never drawn a straight line.

They were perfectly happy. Both of them.

Peter kept score on a slate. By Wednesday it was fourteen to eleven.

"Are they friends?" said Rose.

"They are best friends," said Alice. "It is horrible."

Alice spent the week in the map room. All of it.

That was where she wanted to be. Wilkin knew it. He made her carry him up there twice. She learned more in five days than in five years. She learned how to hold a pen. The line must come out the same width. All the way. She learned about north. She learned one more thing. You never draw a hill you have not seen.

On the fifth day she asked the question.

"Why is Stonegate not on the king's map?"

"Ah," said Wilkin.

He put the pen down.

"Nobody ever told anybody," he said. "That is the whole answer. It is the dullest answer in the kingdom. The great map was made long ago. Stonegate was not a post-station then. Someone built it. The letters started coming through. And nobody ever sent a man with a pen."

"So it is just… missed out?"

"It is missed out. There are things missed out all over this land. Nobody tells us anything. That is why we have to come and look."

Then he pulled his big sheet over.

"Get the others," he said.

They came up the stairs at a run.

Master Wilkin had the finished map flat on the table. Alice's own map lay beside it. Side by side. He pulled the stopper out of the ink. There was the King's Road. There was the Rushwater. There was the stone bridge. There was Millford with its ford. And there was the long empty stretch of road. That was where the Keep should have been.

He dipped the pen. Then he stopped.

"Now then," he said. "Where is the gate?"

"There," said Alice. She pointed. "Where the road turns."

He drew the turn in the road first. Then he drew a small square in that turn. It had a round tower on one corner. It took him about forty seconds. It was exact. You could see the shape of the yard in it.

Then he wrote beside it, in tiny letters:

Stonegate. Post-station. Beds, fodder, a smith at Millford.

Nobody said a word. Not one.

"There," said Wilkin. He blew on the ink. "You are on the map."

Alice did not move.

Will let his breath out. Rose had gone pink. Peter made a squeak.

Alice could not see the page very well. The lines had gone blurred.



"It will be copied," said Wilkin. "This sheet goes to the men who make the great map. The great map goes to the king's own room. In ten years there will be a carter in the south. He will look at a piece of paper. He has never been here in his life. And he will say: there is a keep on that road. I shall be dry on Tuesday night."

He put the pen down. He looked at Alice.

"And that," he said, "is why I do it."

He left on the Saturday. Early.

Bess stood in the courtyard. Her stripe was washed white. Her sock was washed whiter. She looked pleased with herself. Will had done that. Will had been talking about unshod feet for two days.

Wilkin could get his boot on by then. His ankle was still the colour of a plum. He could ride. He could not walk far at the other end.

Before he got up, he gave Alice a present.

It was a sheet of paper. It was thick and cream and blank. It was the same paper as his own map.

"That is good paper," he said. "It costs more than you think. Do not waste it."

"What do I draw?"

"Something you have seen."

Alice held it in both hands. It weighed nothing. It lay untouched on her table for days after.

"And one rule," said Wilkin. "Only one, so you will remember it. A map-maker draws what he sees. Not what he is told."

"Not what I am told."

"Not what you are told. Not what is on the old map. Not what a loud man in an inn tells you." He gathered up Bess's reins. "Go and look. Then draw it. Then a man who has never been there can go safely. That is a good day's work for anyone."

He rode out under the arch. He turned south. The whole Keep came out to watch him go. Even Bennet.

That evening they asked Bennet for his verdict.

They had been asking all week. He would not give it. Bennet never gave a verdict on road business. Not before he had heard the whole thing twice. He had heard it four times. Peter's telling had a goat in it.

He sat with his hands on his stick. He thought about it.

"A pony shied at a grouse," he said. "That was nobody's fault. Then a blown pony walked in at that gate. And four children read a stranger's map. They went and found him. In forty years on this road I never did that." He looked at the fire. "You did not go looking for a man. You went looking for where he had been. That is better."

That was the whole verdict. It was longer than anyone expected.

Then Helen came in with the supper. She stopped in the doorway. Did anyone still remember her three rules?

"I do," said Peter at once.

"Go on then."

"Wet feet," said Peter. "Ride all night. And eat the pigeon."

There was a pause. A long one.

"Peter Bramble," said Helen. She had an opinion about that.

Nobody overruled Helen. Nobody ever had.

"Dry feet, no riding after dusk, and a bird the moment the plan changes," said Peter. "I have known it since I was nine. I just like watching your face."

Rusty barked. It was his laughing bark. Helen sat down.

The snow came down into the valley eleven days later.

It came in the night, quietly. There was no warning at all. In the morning the whole world was white. Outside the kitchen window it was soft and silent. The road had gone. The wall had gone. The beacon rock had gone. The gate was a white shape with a white hat on.

It was the middle of November. It was a month early.

The four of them stood at the window in a row. They looked at it. It was lovely. None of them said a word for a bit.

Behind them, Old Bennet got up. He came over and looked out. He looked for a long time. He was not looking at the pretty part.

"Well," he said at last. "That is early."

"It is only November," said Rose. "Winter is not due for a month."

"Aye." Bennet leaned on his stick. "And the midwinter post comes in five weeks. That is the king's own letters. It is the hardest post of the year. Every one of them has to be over Eagle Pass. They must be in the mountain villages by the shortest day."

"By the shortest day," said Alice.

He watched the snow come down on the King's Road.

"And I still cannot ride," he said.

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