THE WOODEN HORSE



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About This Book

At a Glance

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

Edition

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

About the Story

The Series

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

This Book

For forty-one years a little wooden horse sat on the high shelf of the Lost and Found Office. Nobody looked at it. Nobody came for it.

Then Max lifts it down, and Josie turns it over. Under one hoof there is a mark, burned into the wood: a letter S in a circle.

Whose mark is that? Theo, Clara, Josie and Max know how to find out. You describe a thing. You write it down. You ask questions. But the trail leads to an old man three miles out of town — a man who has not set foot on the platform in forty-one years, and does not want to talk about a horse at all.

How do you knock on a door that has been shut for forty-one years?

Chapter 1 — The High Shelf

The rain had stopped. The town had gone home.

Out on platform two, the wet stone shone in the lamplight. An hour ago the platform had been full. Now there were only puddles. There was a wet paper program on a bench. And there were four tired children.

It had rained all through the concert. Lucy Pryor had sung anyway.

"Well," said Robert Wren. "That is that."

He took out his pocket watch. He looked at it. He put it back.

"Lamps, please," he said.

Six old oil lamps hung under the canopy. Bert had lit them at dusk. Now they had to come down. They went away in their box, one by one.

Theo Wren went up the ladder. He lifted a lamp off its hook and handed it down.

"One," he said.

"One," said Clara Wren, down below.

She blew out the little flame. Then she set the lamp in the wooden box. Six holes, six lamps. Everything in the office had its place. That was Clara.

"Two," said Theo.

Josie Bell wiped each glass with a cloth before it went in. "Did you hear the whistle?" she said, for about the ninth time. "At the end? Did you *hear* it?"

"Josie. We all heard it," said Max Cotton.

"She did not know it was coming," said Josie happily. "Her face."

Max pushed his glasses up his nose. He was carrying the lamp box now. It was heavy. "My arms are coming off," he said.

"Four," said Theo.

Whistle the station cat sat on the dry stone by the office door. He watched the whole thing with one eye. He did not help.

The office was warm. It smelled of oil and old paper.

Shelves ran up every wall. Every shelf held lost things. Every lost thing had a label. A walking stick. A tin drum. One brown boot, all alone. A low row of black umbrellas, nine of them, waiting for people who never came.

The lamp box lived up high, on the top shelf, above the door.

"Steps," said Max.

Josie dragged the little wooden steps over. Max climbed up with the box in both arms. He was not tall, even on the steps. He pushed the box back into its place. Then he stopped.

"Hm," he said.

"Do not say *hm* up a ladder," said Clara.

"There is a thing up here," said Max.

"There are a hundred things up there."

"No. Behind the box." Max reached in with one hand. "Somebody put this at the back on purpose."

He came down slowly, one step at a time. He held something in both hands. He set it on the big desk under the lamp.

It was gray with dust. Thick, soft, gray dust, the kind that takes years to come. Max blew on it and they all jumped back.

"Max!"

"Sorry."

The dust cleared. And there on the desk stood a little wooden horse.

Nobody said anything for a moment.

The horse was the length of a hand. It stood on four short legs. Its head was a little down, the way a horse stands in a field. Its ears were small and sharp. Its tail was a smooth curl of wood.

There was no paint on it at all. It was only wood, brown and dry and dusty.

"Oh," said Josie softly. "Oh, look at it."

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

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

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

Josie picked the horse up in both hands, gently. "It is a horse," she said.

"Thank you, Josie."

"It is wood. It is about *this* long." She laid it along her palm. Nose to tail, it filled her hand and no more. "One hand long."

Clara wrote that down.

"Made of what?" she said.

Max took it and turned it under the lamp. He turned it round twice. Then he did something odd. He held it up and looked along it, one eye shut, the way a man looks along a plank.

"One piece," he said.

"What?"

"One piece of wood. The legs, the head, the tail, all of it." He held it out to them. "Look. No joins. Nobody glued this together. Somebody took one block of wood and cut a horse out of it."

"Carved," said Theo.

"Carved," said Max. "Yes."

Clara wrote: *Carved from one piece of wood.*

"By a machine?" said Josie.

Max shook his head. "No. Look here, along the side. Little flat marks, all over. That is a knife. A small knife, and a hand behind it." He gave the horse back to Josie. "A person made this. It took them a long time."

Josie held it against her chest. “Then I like them,” she said. “Whoever they are.”

“Now,” said Clara. “The label.”

There was a label, and none of them had looked at it yet. It hung from the horse’s neck on a bit of string. The string was gray and soft with age. The label itself was not white any more. It was the brown of weak tea.

Josie turned it over under the lamp and read it out.

Wooden horse. Found in car three.

That was all. Four words and a place.

“Car three,” said Theo at once. “That is a train. Car three of a train, on this line.” He said it the way other people say a friend’s name.

“Read it again,” said Max.

Josie read it again. Max leaned in. His nose was almost on the desk.

“That ink is brown,” he said.

“It is old, then,” said Clara.

“No. Listen.” Max sat back. “Black ink goes brown. It takes years and years. And look at the letters. Look how they are made.” He pointed, not touching. “Nobody at this station writes like that. Not your dad. Not Bert. Not you, Clara.”

“So who does?”

“Nobody,” said Max. “Not any more.” He pushed his glasses up. “This label is older than my father. I would bet on it.”

The office went quiet. Out on the line, far away, a gate banged in the wind.

Clara looked up at the high shelf, at the gap behind the lamp box.

“Then it has been up there a long time,” she said slowly. “Over our heads. Every day.”

“And nobody came for it,” said Theo.

Josie was not listening. She had the horse in her hands again, close to the lamp, turning it over and over.

"Josie?"

"There is something on it," she said.

"There is dust on it."

"No. Under here." She tipped the horse right over, feet up, and rubbed at one small hoof with her thumb. The dust came away gray on her skin. She rubbed again, harder. "Look at the neck first," she said. "Look how shiny it is, just there."

They looked. Along the top of the horse's neck the wood was smooth and dark and shiny. Nowhere else.

"That is a thumb," said Max quietly. "Somebody held this horse for years. Right there. Their thumb wore the wood smooth."

"Before it was ever lost," said Clara.

"Before it was ever lost."

"Never mind the neck," said Josie. "Look at the *foot*."

She held the little horse up under the lamp, upside down, and they all bent over her hands.

There, burned into the wood under one hoof, small and neat and black, was a mark.

A letter **S**, inside a circle.



“Now,” said Josie, “whose mark is that?”

Chapter 2 — Not for Disposal

On Monday it rained again.

It rained on the roof of the office. Out in the yard the wet leaves lay flat and yellow on the stone.

Inside, the office hour began.

The office hour was the best hour of the day. Clara sat at the big desk with the register. Josie stood at the front counter. Max had his lamp and his scales. Theo had the timetables out flat, and a pencil behind his ear.

Whistle slept in his basket by the door. He had done his part. He had come in out of the rain.

The wooden horse stood in the middle of the desk. Someone had cleaned the dust off it.

"Right," said Clara. "It has to be in the book."

"What book?" said Josie.

Clara pointed with her pen at the bottom shelf.

Down there, in a long row, stood the old registers. Big flat books with hard covers. Every few years one filled up. Then the office started a new one. The numbers began again at one. The oldest books were gray with age.

"Every lost thing on this line is in one of those," said Clara. "Since the very start."

Theo looked up. "Every single thing?"

"Every single thing." Clara said it with some pride. "That is the whole idea."

It took her an hour and a half.

She began with the newest book. That was the one with Ted's suitcase at Item 1, and Lucy's red umbrella at Item 51. Nothing. She went back a book. Nothing. She went back another.

Josie brought her tea. Theo checked old train times against the dates. He said "no" a great many times.

Then Clara stopped turning pages.

"Oh," she said.

They came round the desk. She had a thin old book open flat. Her finger was on one line. The paper was soft and yellow. The writing on it was brown.

"Two hundred and six," said Clara.

She read the entry out loud, slowly.

206. One wooden horse. Carved. Found in car three. Handed in by the guard of the evening train.

And after it, the date.

"October the fourteenth," said Clara. She looked up. "Forty-one years ago."

Nobody said a word. Out on the platform the rain came down.

"Forty-one years," said Josie at last. "It sat up there before my mother was born."

Max leaned over the page. Then he fetched the label off the desk. He held it beside the book.

"Same hand," he said. "Look. The same little tail on the *y*. The same ink." He stood up. "One person wrote both. One person, one evening."

"So who?" said Josie.

Clara turned the old book toward the lamp. Line after line went down the page, brown and neat and careful. Day after day, all in one hand.

"I do not know this writing," she said. "And I know every hand in this office."

The door opened. Robert Wren came in, shaking the rain off his cap.

"Four children indoors on a wet Monday," he said. "The office is doing well."

"Dad," said Clara. "Come and look."

He came and looked. He put a hand on the back of her chair. He leaned over the old register. He did not say a word.

Then he said, very quietly, "Well. Hello, Mother."

Clara turned round in the chair. "*Grandma?*"

"That is my mother's hand," said Robert. "Ida Wren. She kept this office for thirty years. I would know it anywhere. She taught me my letters with that pen."



"Grandma Ida wrote our horse down," said Clara.

"Grandma Ida wrote everything down."

Theo was ahead of them. "Then she saw it," he said. "She held it. Forty-one years ago, someone handed her this horse. She wrote the label. She tied it on with string."

"And she put it on the shelf," said Josie. "And nobody ever came."

Robert stood up. His face had changed. "No," he said. "That is the part that will not do."

"What part?"

"Read them the rule, Clara," he said. "The front of the book."

Clara did not need the front of the book. Every child in that office knew it by heart.

"We keep a found thing for seven years," she said. "We describe it. We number it. We keep it seven years. Then it goes to the county sale in the fall. The money goes back into the line."

"Seven years," said Robert. "Not forty-one." He tapped the page. "Every fall the office clears the old shelves. My mother did it. I do it. This horse should have gone to that sale thirty-four years ago. Someone would have bought it for a nickel."

He said it plainly. It landed hard. Josie put her hand flat over the little horse on the desk. Nobody was selling this one now.

"Then why is it still here?" said Max.

Clara was bent over the page again. Her nose was almost on the paper.

"Wait," she said.

"Clara?"

"There is more." Her finger moved down under the entry. "Under the line. In the white space. There is *more*."

They crowded in. Under Item 206, in the space below it, sat three small words. Same brown ink. Same careful hand. But smaller, and set apart. Someone had added them later, and on purpose.

Clara read them out.

Not for disposal.

"Not for what?" said Josie.

"Disposal," said Max slowly. "It means throwing a thing out. Getting rid of it. Sending it off to the sale."

"So Grandma Ida wrote *do not get rid of this*," said Theo.

"She did more than write it," said Clara. She sat back. Her voice had gone slow and careful. That was her sure voice. "Look where it sits. Nobody writes that on the day a thing comes in. You do not know on the first day. She wrote this *later*. Some other day she came back to this page. She took up her pen. She decided."

The office was quiet.

"Somebody decided this one stayed," said Clara.

Robert stood with his cap in his hands. He was a man who was sure of things. He was sure of the time, and the rules, and where every key hung. Just now he looked uncertain. None of them had seen that before.

"Forty-one years," he said. "I have stood under that shelf every day of my life."

"Did she ever say a word?" said Clara. "About a horse?"

"Not one word." He turned his cap round in his hands. "I will write to her tonight. She is at the coast with your aunt. She is eighty-nine. She still writes a better letter than I do." He put his cap back on. "It is two days there and two days back. So we do not sit and wait. We work."

The door banged.

Old Bert came in out of the rain. His coat was black and wet. His cap was in his fist. "Wet," he said. "Wet, wet, wet. Is there tea?"

"There is tea," said Josie.

Bert came to the desk. He gave the horse a glance. One second, maybe a second and a half.

Then he stopped.

He did not pick the horse up. He bent over it instead, slowly, one hand on the desk. His face was not the face of a man looking at a toy.

"Turn it over," he said.

Josie turned it over. The little burned mark showed under the hoof. The **S** in its circle.

Old Bert looked at that mark for a long time. Rain ran off his coat onto the floor. He did not notice.

"Bert?" said Clara.

"I know that mark," said Bert.

"You know the horse?"

"Not the horse. I never saw the horse in my life." He put a finger near the hoof, not touching it. "The *mark*. I have seen that mark near enough every day for fifty years."

They stared at him.

"Where?" said four voices at once.

Old Bert stood up. He rubbed his white whiskers. He looked out at the rain.

"That," he said, "is the trouble. I have never once looked at it."

Chapter 3 — The Mark Under the Hoof

Tuesday came up bright and windy.

School let out at three. By ten past three all four of them were on platform two. Old Bert sat on the bench in the sun. He had the little horse in his hands.

He had been sitting there a while.

"Well?" said Josie.

"I am certain of the mark," said Bert.

"And?"

"That is the end of the list," said Bert. "I am certain of the mark. I am not certain of one other thing in the world."

Theo sat down beside him. "Bert. Fifty years. Where do you *look* every day?"

Bert pushed his cap back and rubbed his head. "Everywhere," he said. "That is the trouble with fifty years, boy. You look everywhere. And you see nothing. I have made a mistake or two in the middle of it."

"Then we hunt," said Clara.

She said it in her list voice. She was already pulling out her notebook. When Clara hunted a thing, she hunted it in order.

"Wood," said Bert suddenly. "It is on wood. I know that much. Not iron. Not stone. Wood."

Clara wrote *WOOD* at the top of the page. She drew a line under it.

"Right," she said. "This station is full of wood. Let us go and find some."

They went to the goods shed first. Bert was sure of it.

The goods shed stood at the top end of the yard. It was old and dim. It smelled of dust and sacks. The big door ran sideways on a rail. It took two of them to push it.

Inside were crates and barrels and a stack of empty milk cans. They went along every wall. Josie ran her hands over the beams. Theo climbed on a crate. Clara looked at the door frame, top to bottom.

Nothing.

"Not the shed, then," said Bert. He was not put out at all. "The coal stage. It is on the coal stage. I would say so."

So they went to the coal stage.

The coal stage was a low stone platform beyond the engine shed. Firefly stood beside it when she was hungry. The volunteers shoveled her coal up into her bunker. It was black. Everything about it was black. The stone was black. The beams were black. The air smelled of it.

Josie put both hands flat on a beam. She came away with two black hands.

"Josie," said Clara.

"It is only coal," said Josie. "Coal comes off."

It did not come off. And there was no mark on the coal stage.



"Water tower," said Bert.

There was no mark on the water tower.

"The footbridge," said Bert. "The handrail. My hand has been on that rail forty years."

They went up one side of the footbridge and down the other. They looked at every inch of the rail. Then they did the garden. Then the two benches. Then the little green gate. Clara wrote everything down and crossed everything off.

Goods shed — no. Coal stage — no. Water tower — no. Footbridge — no.

The sun went low and orange over the hills.

"I am no good to you," said Bert.

"You are the only one who has seen it at all," said Theo.

Max had not gone anywhere.

He had stayed on the bench with the horse and his little glass. He had not moved for an hour. The others came back. He did not even look up.

"Listen to this," he said.

"Max, we have hunted the whole station."

"Listen anyway."

They sat down along the bench. Max held the horse up. He turned it slowly in the last of the light. Max never gave a thing just one glance. He looked at it.

"The cuts," he said. "Look along the side. Every cut is the same size. Every one." He tipped it. "That is one small knife. And it never slipped. Not once. Not on the ears. Not on the legs, and legs are the hard part."

"How do you know legs are the hard part?" said Josie.

"I tried it," said Max. "Last night. With Dad's knife and a bit of wood." He held up his left thumb. There was a band-aid on it. "The legs are the hard part."

Josie laughed out loud. Even Clara laughed.

"So the man who made this was good," said Theo.

"No," said Max. "Better than good. This is easy work. You can see it is easy work. Nobody carves this easy on his first horse." He set it down on his knee. "Or his tenth."

"How many, then?" said Clara.

Max thought about it. He was careful now, the way he was careful with an old coin.

"A great many," he said. "Years of them."

Then he turned the horse over. He pointed at the little burned S under the hoof.

"And this is not cut," he said. "That is the other thing. This is *burned*. That took a hot iron. Somebody made that iron on purpose. He made it small, and he made it neat." He looked up at them all. "You do not go to that trouble for one horse. That is a maker's mark. It says *I made this*."

Clara wrote it all down. Then she stopped writing and looked at the page.

"So he made a great many things," she said slowly. "And he put his name on all of them."

"His name is one letter," said Josie.

"It is enough," said Clara.

The lamps came on in the office window. Bert stood up and stretched his back. He said what he always said about his back.

"Home," he said. "I shall dream about it. Sometimes it comes in the night."

"Wait," said Josie.

She was looking at him. She had her head on one side.

"Bert," she said. "Where do you go that we do not?"

"Eh?"

"Every week. Somewhere the rest of us never go. Where do you go?"

Bert took his cap off and turned it round.

"Nowhere," he said. "I go nowhere, my dear. I come up on a Friday and I do the flags. I have a cup of tea. Then I go up and give Pip's tag a rub. Then I go home for my supper."

Nobody said a word.

Then Theo stood up fast. The bench knocked.

"Pip's tag," he said.

"What about it?"

"Where is Pip's tag, Bert?"

"In the box," said Bert. "Where else? Hanging by the window in the signal box, same as always. Fifty years."

Theo was already running.

The signal box stood at the far end of platform two, up its own wooden steps. It was Theo's favorite building in the world. The lamp was lit inside. His father was up there with the duty book.

Theo went up the steps two at a time. The others came pounding behind him. They stopped at the bottom. There is a rule about the box, and everybody knows it.

"Dad!" said Theo. "Dad, can I look under the shelf?"

Robert Wren looked up from the duty book. "Under the *shelf*?"

"Please."

"Do not touch one lever," said Robert.

"I will not touch one lever."

Theo got down on his knees on the wooden floor. The long row of levers stood behind him, tall and shining. He did not touch one. He put his cheek almost on the boards. Then he looked up under the little shelf on the wall, the one where the duty book lived. Nobody had ever looked there. Up under it the wood was clean and pale.

And there, burned into the underside of the shelf, small and neat and black, was a letter **S** inside a circle.

Theo lay very still on the floor of the signal box.

"Clara," he called down. "Bring your notebook."

Chapter 4 — Forty Years of Quiet Nights

Robert Wren sent them all home.

He did it kindly. He did not move one inch.

"I am on duty," he said. "There is a train in ten minutes. I am not going to hunt old marks with four children round my knees." He shut the duty book. "Tomorrow. Four o'clock. All four of you, up here. And we will do it properly."

"Properly," said Max, in his big deep voice.

"Properly," said Robert. "Off you go."

They went. But they did not go far. And they did not go fast. At the bottom of the steps Josie turned round. She looked up at the little lit box on its legs.

"It has been sitting up there all this time," she said. "Same as the horse."

Wednesday. Four o'clock.

The steps up to the signal box were steep and wooden. They went up in one straight run. There were nineteen of them. Theo knew things like that.

"Boots," said Robert.

They wiped their boots.

Inside, the box was one long room. It was full of light. Windows ran the whole length of the front, from the desk to the roof. From up here you could see it all at once. Both platforms. The footbridge. The roof of the goods shed. The garden. The shining line, running away up the hill and away down the valley.

"Oh," said Clara.

"Yes," said Robert. "Now. Hands behind your backs, all of you. Off you go."

The levers stood in a long row along the front. There were twenty-four of them, tall as Josie. Each one had a number. Some were red. Some were black.

"Do not touch," said Robert. "Now look."

He took a cloth off a hook. He put it round the handle of a black lever. Then he pulled. The lever came over slow and heavy. It went home with a solid *clunk*.



"There," he said. "Out there, a wire ran along under the track. Out there, a switch moved. That is all it is. A man in a box, pulling on a piece of the world half a mile away."

"Why the cloth?" said Max.

"So the handles stay bright," said Robert. "A signalman polishes his levers. Every shift. That is how it has always been."

"What is a shift?" said Josie.

"A turn of work," said Robert. "Six in the morning to two. Two to ten. And ten at night to six in the morning. That last one is the night shift. That is the long one."

There was a bell on the wall in a wooden case. It rang twice, sharp and clear. They all jumped but Robert.

"That is Marlow," he said. "Two rings. There is a train coming up into the section."

"The what?"

"The section." Robert pointed out of the window, down the valley. "The piece of line between this box and the next box. Only one train is allowed in it at a time. That is the whole job. That is why the box is here."

Theo said it again, to nobody. "The whole job." He said it the way other people say something in church.

Then they hunted.

Clara ran it. She ran it in order, one wall at a time. And now that they knew the mark, it was everywhere.

Josie found the second one. She was flat on her back under the lever bench. Her boots stuck out. "Here!" Her voice came up out of the floor. "Under here. On the wood."

The S in its circle. It was burned into the underside of the great bench, the one that held all twenty-four levers.

Max found the third. There was a little cupboard on the end wall with a sliding door. The door ran in a groove. It went across smooth and easy. Max slid it back and forth twice, for fun. Then he ducked his head inside.

"Third," he said, out of the cupboard. "On the back. Right in the corner."

Clara found the fourth on the top step, outside the door. It was in the wood at the side. A boot would never touch it there.

And Theo found the fifth on the wooden box under the window. That was the box the duty book lived in. It had brass corners and a flat lid.

Five marks. Clara wrote them all down. *Shelf. Bench. Cupboard. Step. Box.*

Then she stood in the middle of the floor. She turned round slowly. She stopped. She did not write one word.

"Dad," she said. "Who *made* all this?"

Robert did not answer at once.

He looked at the cupboard with its sliding door. He looked at the deep shelf, and the box with the brass corners, and the step.

"None of it came with the box," he said. "You see that. A signal box comes with iron and glass and bare boards. The rest is a man's own doing."

"One man?" said Clara.

"One man." Robert put his hand flat on the lever bench. "Look at it. It all matches. Same wood. Same hand. One man made every stick of it. He made it out of what was lying about the yard. And he made it at night."

"At night?" said Josie.

"At night," said Robert. "That is the thing nobody tells you about a signal box. In the day it is busy. In the night it is quiet. Eight hours in a warm lit room. Maybe five trains in the whole of it. The rest is waiting. Some men read. Some men sleep, and they should not." He looked round the little room. "This man made things."

Nobody said a word. The stove ticked. Down the valley the freight was a small white line of steam.

Theo went to the window at the end. Pip's brass tag hung there on its nail. It was bright as a new penny. Bert had kept it so for fifty years.

"Forty years of quiet nights," said Theo.

"Dad," said Clara. "Say his name."

Robert Wren had not needed the duty book, and they all knew it. He had known the name since Tuesday evening. He had simply been waiting to be asked properly.

"Walter Sowerby," he said.

Clara wrote it down. She wrote it in big letters. Then she drew a line under it. Josie leaned over her arm to watch the letters come.

"Sowerby," said Max. "S."

"S," said Robert. "The last signalman of Netherby box. He worked it forty years."

"And then?" said Josie.

"And then he stopped. After that it was volunteers. Now it is mostly me."

Josie had gone very still.

"Mr. Wren," she said. "Is he still alive?"

Robert smiled at that. It was a small smile. It did not last long.

"He is alive," he said. "He is ninety-one years old. He lives three miles out on the Hollow Farm road. Every soul in this town knows it."

Josie let out a breath. "Then we can *go* there."

"You can go there."

He said it in a flat, careful voice. Clara looked up from her notebook.

"Dad?"

Robert Wren took out his pocket watch. He looked at it. He put it away without saying the time.

"There is a thing you should know first," he said. "Walter Sowerby has not set foot on this platform in forty-one years."

The box went quiet. Out in the valley the freight gave a whistle, small and far away.

"But he *worked* here," said Theo.

"He worked up here." Robert nodded at the floor under their feet. "Those nineteen steps come up from the yard road. He came up them at night. He went down them in the morning. He never once came round onto the

platform. Not to the office. Not to the bench. Not for a cup of tea." He put his hand on the door. "Years and years of that."

"Why?" said Josie.

"I do not know," said Robert. "I never asked him. It was not my business." He opened the door. The cold came in. "It might be yours now. Mind the steps."

Chapter 5 — Hollow Farm

They asked first. That was the rule. None of them tried to get round it.

On Saturday morning all four stood in the office. They told Robert Wren where they were going. Nancy was there too, in her overalls. She had oil on her hands.

"Three miles out and three miles back," said Robert.

"Yes," said Clara.

"Home before dark."

"Yes."

Robert looked at them for a moment. "Ask him properly," he said. "Say who you are. Say why you came. And if the man says no, you say thank you. Then you come home."

"And take the toffees," said Nancy. "Folks like toffees. Everybody does."

Josie wrapped the wooden horse in a cloth. She put it in her canvas bag. Then they set off up the yard road. The station fell away behind them.

The Hollow Farm road went up.

It went up a long way. The hedges were full of berries. The stubble stood pale gold in the sun. A wind came over the top of the hill. It pushed at them the whole way.

They walked it in an hour and ten minutes. Theo timed it, of course.

Hollow Farm sat in a dip at the top. It was out of the wind. It was a long low house of gray stone. There was a gate, and a track. Three brown hens stood in the yard. At the back stood a big shed. Its door was propped open. Smoke came out of a pipe in the shed roof.

"He is in there," said Josie.

They stood at the gate. Suddenly nobody wanted to go first.

"You," said Max. "You are the one who talks to people."

"I know," said Josie.

She opened the gate.

The shed was a workshop. It was the best room any of them had ever walked into.

The floor was deep in shavings. They were not swept into a pile. Curls of pale wood. Ankle-deep in the corners. Soft under your boots. The place smelled sweet and sharp and clean.

A long bench ran down one side. Above it hung a rack of chisels. There were twenty or thirty of them. They stood in a row, fat to thin, and every one was bright. A little iron stove stood in the corner. A kettle sat on it.

And on the far wall were shelves. On the shelves were animals.

Dozens of them. Wooden animals, all sizes. None of them painted. A hare sitting up with its ears back. An owl. A pig. A fox with its nose down. Birds and birds and birds. A whole shelf of birds.

"Oh," said Clara.

An old man stood at the bench with his back to them.

He was big. That was the first thing. He was heavy, and bent over at the top. His hair was thick and white. His hands were the biggest hands Josie had ever seen. He wore a knitted vest, gone thin with age.

He turned round. He saw four children in his doorway. He did not look one bit surprised.

"Well," he said. "Shut that door. The wind gets under my shavings."



His name was Walter Sowerby. He made them tea.

It took a long time. He moved slowly. He talked the whole way through it. His voice was low and easy. He was courteous. That is a bigger word than *polite*. It was the right one for him.

He found four cups. Two of them matched. He said sorry about that.

"Sit on the wood," he said. "The chair has a nail in it. I have been going to take that nail out for nine years."

They sat on a stack of planks.

"Now," he said. "You will be the station children."

"How do you know?" said Josie.

"Folk in this county know each other," said Sowerby. "And she has a stationmaster's look about her, that one." He nodded at Clara. "Straight back. Your grandmother had it too."

Clara went pink with pleasure.

Getting to the point took a while. None of them minded. He asked about Firefly. He asked if the third lever still stuck in wet weather. Theo said it did. Sowerby laughed a slow laugh. It had stuck in wet weather for sixty years, he said. It would go on doing it.

He was funny about his knees.

"I have two of them," he said. "Neither one is any good. One is worse than the other. I do not say which one. They get proud."

Josie laughed so hard. She had to put her cup down.

Then Clara took out her notebook. She said it plainly, the way the office says things.

"Mr. Sowerby, we found your mark. In the signal box. Under the shelf. Under the bench. In the cupboard. On the step."

"Ah," said Sowerby. He looked pleased. "There it is, then. That is where it all went."

"You made all of it."

"I made all of it. Forty years of nights. A man has to do something with his hands." He turned a chisel over on the bench. Then he put it back in its place in the rack. "Iron and glass and bare boards, that box was. Cold as a bucket."

"You put your mark on everything," said Max.

"A man signs his work," said Sowerby. "Same as your grandmother signed hers."

Then Josie opened her bag.

She did not mean anything by it. The whole visit had been easy and warm. She took the cloth out. She unwrapped the little horse. She set it on the end of the bench, in the light from the door.

"And we found this," she said.

Nothing happened for about two seconds.

Then everything changed.

The stove was still going. The temperature in that workshop had not moved one degree. But it went cold all the same. Every one of them felt it. None of them could have said how.

Walter Sowerby looked at the horse on his bench.

He did not pick it up. His hands stayed where they were. They lay flat on the wood, one on each side. He looked at it for a long, long moment. It was the look a man gives a thing. A thing he has known all his life.

Then he got up, slowly. He moved the kettle two inches on the stove. It did not need moving.

Nobody said a word.

And Max could not bear a silence. He had been looking at those shelves for half an hour. So Max said the exact wrong thing.

"Mr. Sowerby," he said, "do you know what a carving like this would *fetch*? A hand-cut piece. One block. A maker's mark on it. At a good sale you would get —"

And he said a number.

The number sat there in the middle of the workshop. It got bigger and bigger the longer it sat.

Josie shut her eyes.

"Max," said Clara.

"What?" said Max. "It is true. It is worth every —"

"*Max*."

Then Max looked up at the old man's face. He stopped. He understood far too late.

The visit lasted four more minutes.

Walter Sowerby was not rude. He never came close to rude. He asked after Robert. He said Nancy Wren was the best driver on that line. Josie could tell her so. Then he took his cap off its hook. He put it on. That meant *out*. They all knew it.

At the door he handed Josie back her canvas bag. The horse was inside, wrapped up again in its cloth. He had wrapped it himself, and gently.

"That is a long road down," he said. "And the light goes early now. Off you go."

They went out through the gate into the wind.

Josie could not stand it. She turned round at the fence.

"Mr. Sowerby," she said. "It was lost. It has been in our office for forty-one years. Somebody lost it."

The old man stood in his doorway. His big hands hung at his sides.

He did not look at her. He looked past her, at the top rail of his own fence. Then he said one thing. It was the only thing he ever said about it that day.

"That one was never lost," said Walter Sowerby. "I put it down."

Then he shut the workshop door.

Chapter 6 — What You Do Not Ask

On Sunday the line rests. No trains run. The station sleeps, and the town goes to church.

So it was Sunday, after church. Then at last the four of them got into the office together. Robert lit the little stove. Whistle came in. He sat on it, more or less.

On the desk lay a letter. It had come on Friday. It was written in brown ink. The hand was small and careful. Every one of them knew that hand now.

"Grandma," said Clara.

"Grandma," said Robert. "Sit down. I will read it out."

Dear Robert,

Yes. I wrote those three words. I wrote them a week after the horse came in. I had thought about it properly by then.

I am not going to tell you why. It is not mine to tell.

I will tell you this much. I knew that mark the minute I turned it over. I knew what train it came off. I did not go up to that box and ask him. I did not send word. I did not put it in the paper.

Some things you keep for a person. You keep them for the day he can come and ask for them himself. That is the whole of this office, Robert. You know it as well as I do.

Be kind to him. He is a good man and he always was.

Your mother, Ida Wren

Robert folded it up. Nobody said a word for a moment. The stove ticked.

"Forty-one years," said Clara at last. "She kept it forty-one years."

"We keep things seven years," said Robert. "And we keep our word longer."

Then Theo stood up. That was the start of the argument.

"Then we finish it," he said. "Right now."

"Finish what?" said Clara.

"All of it." Theo had his notebook out. He had clearly been at this for days. "We have a name. Sowerby. We have the year. And we know his son's family went out to Australia. Bert told us. The whole town knows it. Bert stood on that platform and waved them off."

"So?"

"So there are records," said Theo. "There always are. Ship lists. Booking books." He was going faster now. "Give me two weeks. I will find them. Then we write. We tell them the whole story. We put the horse in a box and we send it. It gets there. And it is *finished*."

Josie's face was shining. "Theo."

"It would work," said Theo.

"It would work," said Clara. "And we are not going to do it."

The office went quiet in a new way.

"Why not?" said Theo.

Clara did not raise her voice. Two old lists still hung on the wall from the summer. Then she said the office rule.

"You never show a person without their leave," she said. "Or their story. It is the same rule. Ted's drawings, this summer. We had them on that wall for a week with the faces covered up. Not one cover came off before he said yes."

"That was different. Those were his drawings."

"This is his life," said Clara.

Theo opened his mouth. Then he shut it again. He looked uncertain.

"Say we do it," said Clara. "Say we find the family. We write a nice letter. We tell them a thing about their own grandfather. A thing he has never told one soul in forty-one years. Say the letter gets there. Say they write back." She turned round. "Then someone has to go up that hill and tell him what we did."

Nobody said a word.

"He said no," said Clara. "He did not say it in words. He put his cap on. That is a no. We all heard it."

"So we do nothing?" said Theo.

"We do nothing *to him*," said Clara. "That is not the same thing."

Max had not said one word all day.

Now he did. He was looking at the floor. His ears were red.

"I am sorry," he said.

"Max —"

"No. Let me. I want to say it out loud." He pushed his glasses up his nose. "I put a price on it. In his own workshop. On his own bench. He made that horse for someone. And I stood there and said what it would fetch at a sale."

"You did not know," said Josie.

"I did not know," said Max. "But I did not need to know. That is the part." He looked up. "It was not a thing on a shelf. It was never a thing on a shelf. And I am the one here who is supposed to know the difference."

Clara wrote nothing down. Some things do not go in the register.

"You will get the chance to say that to him," she said.

"He will not let us back in," said Max.

"He might," said Josie.

They all turned round. All four.

Josie sat on the end of the desk. She was swinging one foot. She had a certain look. It came just before she said something they all thought was silly.

"We go back," she said. "Next Saturday. And we do not ask him one single thing."

"That is giving up," said Theo.

"It is the other way round," said Josie. "Listen. That floor is a foot deep in shavings. Did you see it? And he has two bad knees. He cannot get down there with a brush. He has not swept that place in a year."

Clara sat up. Slowly.

"So we go and sweep it," said Josie. "That is all. We take a broom. We sweep his floor. We hold the ends of things. We carry the heavy end up the step. And we do not say *horse* once."

"And then what?" said Theo.

"And then nothing," said Josie. "That is the whole plan. If nothing happens, we come home. And at least the man has a clean floor."

Theo looked at her. "Josie, we would learn nothing."

"We might," said Josie. "But not from asking. I have been thinking about Lucy all week. All summer I asked and asked and asked. She never said one true word to me. She said it when I stopped."

Robert Wren stood in the doorway. His cap was in his hand. None of them had heard him come in.

"Take the big broom," he said. "It is behind the lamp room door."

Saturday came bright. It came cold, too.

They walked up the Hollow Farm road. They took a broom, a dustpan, and a tin of Nancy's cookies. Josie's canvas bag was flat and empty. The horse had stayed in the office, on the desk, under a cloth.

Walter Sowerby opened his workshop door. He looked at the broom for a long moment.

"Well," he said.

"We have come to sweep your floor," said Josie. "That is all we have come for."

He stood there. He looked at the four of them. He looked at the broom.

"The corners are the worst," he said. He stood out of the way.

They worked four hours. All four of them.

They swept the shavings into a mountain and carried it out in sacks. Theo found the bottom of the floor and shouted about it. There were flagstones down there. Nobody had seen them since the spring.

Sowerby put a long plank up on the bench. He planed it. Max held the far end. The shavings came curling off the plane and onto the clean floor. They all laughed at that, Sowerby too.

Clara put the chisels back in the rack in the right order, fat to thin. Josie found the nail in the chair. She pulled it out with pliers. Nobody said a word about the nine years.



And they did not ask him anything.

Not one question. Not about the horse. Not about the mark. Not about the platform. Not about the box, or the years. Four hours.

The light went. It goes early now. The stove burned low and orange. Outside, the yard went blue with dusk. The hens took themselves off to bed.

Walter Sowerby filled the kettle at the deep stone sink in the corner.

He stood there with his back to them and the water running.

Then he said something. He said it into the sink, in a voice that was not really for them at all.

"Three," said Walter Sowerby. "I made three."

Chapter 7 — Three Horses

Nobody moved.

Josie had a sack in her hands. She put it down very slowly. You put a thing down like that near a bird.

Walter Sowerby stayed at the sink with his back to them. The kettle was full. He did not take it off the tap.

"Three," he said again. "One winter each. It is slow work, a horse. The legs are the hard part."

Max opened his mouth. Clara looked at him. He shut it.

That was the moment. All four of them knew it. And not one of them asked a single thing.

The old man put the kettle on the stove. Then he sat down in his chair. It had no nail in it any more. He looked at the clean flagstones for a long moment.

"Sit down," he said. "There is a cart coming for you at half past. There is time."

They sat on the planks.



"I had three grandchildren," said Walter Sowerby.

"Alice. Tom. And Peter. Alice and Tom are my daughter's, over in the next county. Peter is my son's boy. My son Ray."

He held up one big hand. He turned it over.

"A man works nights. You know that now. Eight hours in a warm box, and five trains in it. So I made things. I made that box into a place a man could live in. Then it was done. And I still had the nights." He almost smiled. "So I made animals."

"We saw them," said Clara. It was not a question, so it was allowed.

"You did. Well. Three winters. Three horses. Same block of oak, all three, out of a beam from the old goods shed. That is why they match."

Josie sat up. "They match?"

"To the eyelash," said Sowerby. "Brothers."

"Alice got hers on her birthday. She was seven. Tom got his the year after. He took it to bed for four years. He wore the ears off it. That is what they are for."

"And Peter?" said Josie, before she could stop herself.

There was a long pause. Josie went red.

But Sowerby only nodded slowly.

"Peter," he said. "Peter's birthday is in November."

"They sailed in October," he said.

"Ray had it all worked out. There was work out there. A house with a tin roof. Australia. Six weeks on the water, and then the other side of the world."

He said *Australia* in an odd way. It was a word he had said ten thousand times in his own head. He had almost never said it out loud.

"Tuesday the fourteenth of October. The 11:20 down to Marlow. Marlow to Southampton. And the ship on the Friday."

Theo was doing the math with his mouth shut. Item 206. October the fourteenth. The same day.

"The whole town came down to see them off," said Sowerby. "That is what this town does. You have seen it. Every soul on that platform. The porters. The shop people. Old Mrs. Kettle. And Bert, young Bert, a fool with a green flag in his hand. Flowers. Someone had made a cake. There must have been a hundred and fifty people on those two platforms."

"And you?" said Clara.

"I was on duty," said Walter Sowerby.

He said it flat. Then he said the rest of it flat too. None of them made a sound.

"I had asked for the day. They would not give it. There was nobody to cover the box. And a box is not a shop. You do not shut it and go out." He looked at Theo. "You have been up there now. You know what the bell is."

Theo nodded.

"Then you know. There was a train in my section."

"The 11:20?" said Theo.

"Before that. A freight, coming up from Marlow, running late." Sowerby's big hands lay flat on his knees. "A man cannot leave his levers with a train in the section. Not for one minute. Not for his own mother. That is not a rule they hang on the wall, boy. That is the whole job."

"I know," said Theo, very quietly.

"Every man in that box knows it," said Sowerby. "And nobody outside it does."

"So I stood up there and I watched it," he said.

"I could see the whole platform from my window. I could see the top of my son's head. I could see Dot in her good coat. And I could see Peter, down at the front, with his cap on crooked. He had nothing in his hands at all."

He stopped for a moment.

"I had the horse in my coat pocket. It had been in that pocket for a week."

The stove shifted. Nobody looked at anybody.

"The freight came up at eleven. I took it into the yard. I put the signal back. The section was clear. And I was down those nineteen stairs before the lever was cold. That man was not an old man. He was fifty. And he could not get through a crowd."

"They were all round the doors," said Josie.

"They were all round every door. Flowers and hats. People crying and people laughing. A hundred and fifty of them between me and the front of that train. I got as far as car three." He held one hand up flat in the air. It was a wall. "That far. Peter was up at the front. I could hear his mother's voice."

"Could you not shout?" said Max.

"I did shout," said Walter Sowerby.

He said it simply. It was worse than anything else in the whole afternoon.

"A whistle went. The guard had his flag up. And I had this in my hand." He looked at his own empty hand. "So I did the only thing there was. There was an open window right beside me. There was an empty seat under it, in car three. And I put the horse through that window onto that seat."

Clara let out a breath.

"It would travel with them," he said. "You see. That was the whole of my thinking. I had about four seconds to do it in. The train goes. The horse goes with it. Someone finds it. Someone says, *there is a little horse on this seat.* And Ray says, *that will be my father's.* And Peter has it in his hands before they are out of the county."

He looked up.

"That was a good plan," he said. "For four seconds, that was a good plan."

"They had moved up the train," said Walter Sowerby.

"A porter had found them three seats together in the front car, out of the wind. They moved up. I was still in the box. Ray told me after, in a letter. He did not know he was telling me a thing."

The kettle began to sing on the stove. Nobody got up.

"So the 11:20 went down to Marlow with my horse on a seat in car three. And my family in car one. And me on the platform in my shirt sleeves."

Josie had both hands over her mouth.

"And then?" said Clara.

"And then I went back up my nineteen stairs," said Sowerby. "And I did the two o'clock. And the four. And the six. A man does his shift."

He turned his head and looked at the window. Out there it was blue dark.

"And at ten past seven that evening the up train came in. And the guard got down with a little wooden horse in his hand."

Nobody breathed.

"I watched him carry it into that office," said Walter Sowerby. "I stood at my window and I watched. Ida Wren came out. She took it off him. She turned it over once. Then she went inside. She lit her lamp. She wrote out a label."

He stopped.

"And what did you do?" said Josie.

The old man looked at his own hands, forty-one years later.

"Nothing," he said. "I said nothing at all."

Chapter 8 — Why He Never Asked

Josie made the tea.

Nobody asked her to. She just got up and did it. Walter Sowerby let her. That was its own kind of answer.

The four cups went round. The stove ticked.

Then Clara said the thing the office always says. She said it gently.

"Mr. Sowerby. You knew where it was."

"I knew where it was."

"All that time."

"Every day of it," said Walter Sowerby. "It sat on a shelf two hundred yards from my window. I could have gone and got it any Tuesday of forty-one years."

Clara turned her cup round in her hands.

"Then why did you never claim it?"

The old man was quiet for a moment. He was looking for the true answer. Not the easy one.

"Do you know how a claim works?" he said at last.

"Yes," said Clara. "We do it every week."

"Then say it."

Clara sat up straight. She said it the way she says it at the front desk.

"You come to the counter," she said. "You do not point at the shelf. We ask you to describe it first. That is the rule. What color. How big. What it is made of."

"Go on," said Sowerby.

"Then we ask the other one."

"And what is the other one?"

Clara stopped.

She had asked it a hundred times. She had never once heard it before.

"*When did you lose it?*" she said.

"There," said Walter Sowerby. "There it is."

He put his cup down.

"I could have described that horse in the dark," he said. "Every cut on it. But then a woman I had known thirty years looks up over her pen. And she says, *and when did you lose it, Walter?*"

Nobody spoke.

"And I say what? I say, I did not lose it. I say, I put it through a window onto an empty seat. My son and his wife and my grandson were forty feet up that train. And I stood on that platform in my shirt sleeves. I watched it go round the bend."

He looked at the stove. He did not blame the crowd. He did not blame the railroad.

"That is a thing you have to say out loud. At a counter. In a room with people in it. And once it is out loud, it is true for everybody. Not just for me."

Max had both hands round his cup. He had not touched the tea.

"So I did not go on the Wednesday," said Sowerby. "And a week is nothing. And a month is nothing." He turned his big hand over. "And then it is a year. And a year is a wall."

"And after that?" said Josie.

"After that they were at sea. Then they were on the other side of the world. And a year was five, and five was twenty. A man cannot claim a thing he should have claimed twenty years back. He cannot even walk past the door."

That landed in the middle of the room.

"The platform," said Theo.

"The platform," said Sowerby. "The office door is on the platform, boy. There are two ways into that box. I took the other one. Every shift, for years."

Clara had gone very still.

She was not looking at Sowerby. She was looking past the window, down the black hill toward the town.

"She knew," she said.

"Eh?"

"My grandmother knew." Clara's voice came out thin, then steadied. "That is what it means. She turned the horse over. She knew what train it came off. And she knew you would not come."

"She was no fool, Ida Wren."

"So she wrote three words in the book," said Clara. "*Not for disposal.* And then she did nothing. She never sent word. She never once stopped you on the road and said, *Walter, come and get your horse.*"

"No," said Sowerby. "She never did."

"Do you know why?" said Clara.

"I have had forty-one years to think about it," said the old man. "You tell me."

Clara put her cup down.

"If she had asked you, you would have had to answer," she said. "And she was not going to make you say it. So she just kept it. She kept it and kept it. And she never made you ask."

The room was very quiet.

"That is what our register is," said Clara. "I thought it was a list. It is not a list. It is a set of promises."

Walter Sowerby said nothing for a moment. Then he cleared his throat, twice. He looked hard at the stove.

"Yes," he said. "Well."

"I wrote to the boy," he said, a little later. "You should know that. I was not a grandfather who forgot."

"Every year?"

"Every Christmas, for years and years. Long letters. The engines. The hens. He wrote back in a great round hand. The lines went downhill." Sowerby smiled at that, properly. "He told me about a bird out there that laughs at you. A *kookaburra*. I have never gotten over that bird."

"Did you ever tell him about the horse?" said Josie.

"Not once," said Walter Sowerby. "Not one line. Not in all those years of letters."

"Why not?"

"What would I have written?" He spread his hands. "*Dear Peter. I made you a horse and you never got it.* You do not put that on a boy. He would only have felt sorry for me. That is a poor thing to send a child at Christmas."

"And now?" said Clara.

"And now the letters have stopped."

He said it with no weight at all. Somehow that made it worse.

"Nobody fell out. There was no quarrel. Ray moved for the work. There was a year I was slow. Then a year he was. And it went quiet. Things do."

He got up, slowly. He went to the shelf under the window. He came back with a tin.

It was an old cookie tin with roses on the lid. He set it on his knee. He did not open it.

"Every letter that boy ever sent me is in there," he said. "And the last one is thirty years old."

Nobody had heard the cart come up the track.

There was a knock. The door opened. Nancy Wren stood there in her coat with a lantern.

"Well," she said. "You have all been busy."

She looked round at the four faces. Then at the old man with the tin on his knee. She did not say one bright thing about any of it.

"Mr. Sowerby. Nancy Wren."

"I know who you are," said Sowerby. "You drive that engine better than your father-in-law ever did."

"That is the nicest thing anybody has said to me all year."

He put the tin on the bench. He stood up. He held on to the back of the chair.

And then Walter Sowerby asked something.

It was the first thing he had asked them, in two visits and eight hours.

"That boy," he said. "Peter. He will be forty-nine now."

"Forty-nine," said Theo.

"Is he still there?"

Nobody answered.

Josie looked at Clara. Clara looked at Max. Max looked at the floor.

Not one of them knew.

The cart went down the hill in the dark. The lantern swung.

Nobody talked much. The stars came out, thick and cold. Nancy let the pony walk.

"He thinks he did a wrong," said Nancy at last.

"He did not do anything," said Josie hotly. "He was *at work*."

"I know it," said Nancy. She kept her eyes on the road. "Listen, all of you. This is worth having. Being sorry about a thing is not the same as having done a wrong. They feel exactly alike. They are not alike at all."

"Then why does he —"

"Nobody ever told him," said Nancy. "Forty-one years he has carried the wrong one. That is a long way to carry the wrong thing up a hill."

The lights of Netherby came up below them, small and yellow.



Theo had not said a word since the tin came out. Now he sat up in the back of the cart.

"Six weeks by ship," he said. "A town. A name. A date." He was counting on his fingers in the dark. "Mom. Can we go down to Marlow on Saturday?"

Chapter 9 — Down the Line to Marlow

Theo had a list. Of course he had a list.

He read it out on the platform on Saturday morning. Firefly stood hissing at the front. Nancy leaned out of the cab above them.

"One. The booking ledgers in the Marlow office. Two. The old papers in the library."

"And three?" said Josie.

"There is no three," said Theo. "Three is lunch."

Clara had her book under her arm. She said the one thing that mattered before they got on.

"We find out," she said. "That is all we do today. We do not write to anybody. Not one word goes to Australia before that man says yes."

"He asked us," said Josie.

"He did," said Clara. "He asked us one question. We may go and answer it. That is a long way from writing to his family behind his back."

Whistle sat on the bench and watched them go. He never left his platform.

Marlow Junction came up out of the valley the way it always did.

First the water tower up the line. Then the tracks began to spread out. Then the long footbridge over the whole lot. Four platforms. Three lines running off three ways.

It was still huge. It was going to be huge.

The booking office at Marlow was a little dark room behind the ticket window. The man in it was called Mr. Ives. He was thin and gray and very tidy. Theo said the word *ledgers*, and his face lit right up.

"Ledgers," said Mr. Ives.

"Yes, sir."

"Nobody has asked me for a ledger in eleven years."

He went up a ladder. He came down with four great books under his chin.

A booking ledger is a big flat book. Every ticket the office ever sold goes in it, one line at a time. Date. Name. Where from. Where to. How much.

"Forty-one years back," said Theo. "October."

Mr. Ives spread the right book open on the counter. He turned the pages with one slow finger.

It took twenty minutes. It was dull. Josie went and looked out of the window twice. Max read the back of the door.

Then Mr. Ives said "Ha," very quiet. He put his finger flat on a line.

They all came round.

There, in faded blue ink, in a clerk's small hand:

Oct 14. SOWERBY, R. — Netherby to Southampton Docks. Through booking, 3 persons. Ship: Corinda, sailing Fri 17th.

Under it were three more lines. Three more names. Same date, same ship.

"There is no mistake in a ledger," said Mr. Ives. "The party," he said. "They went out in parties in those days. It came cheaper. And nobody wants to cross the world on his own."

Clara wrote it all down. The date. The ship. The three of them.

"Three persons," said Josie softly.

"Three," said Theo.

The library stood on the far side of the square, past the Assembly Hall.

They got two steps inside. Then someone said "*Josie Bell!*" in a whisper that carried the whole length of the room.

Lucy Pryor came round the end of a shelf. She had an armful of books. She laughed. That was still a new thing.

"What are you four doing down here?"

"Records," said Theo.

"Old papers," said Clara.

"Very old ones," said Max.

"Lucy," said Josie, "we need a friend."

So Lucy took them to Miss Rye.

Miss Rye was the librarian. She had run this place for thirty years. She looked at four children with mud on their boots the way a farmer looks at weather.

Josie talked to her for about thirty seconds.

Nobody ever quite saw how Josie did it. She did not beg. She did not put on a show. She just told Miss Rye the truth in the right order. An old man. A horse. A day forty-one years ago. And a thing nobody could answer.

Miss Rye gave her one glance, chin up. Then she heard her out.

Then she said, "Table four. Do not lick your fingers." And she gave them forty minutes of her own time. Lucy said afterward that nobody had ever had that from her.

The old papers lived at the back, in stacks.

They were bound up into great heavy books, a year at a time. They smelled of dust and glue. Miss Rye carried the right one herself. She would not let anybody help.

THE MARLOW WEEKLY.

They opened it flat on table four. They turned to October.

It was slow work. It was a treat. Every page was full of a world nobody had told them about. A cow show. A new roof for a chapel. Prices for wool. A lost bicycle.

"Here," said Clara.

Page five. Halfway down. A photograph.

It was gray and grainy. It took up a quarter of the page. Every one of them knew the place at once, even upside down.

Netherby station. Platform two. Packed solid with people.

The canopy over the top. The lamps hanging under it. The bench at the end. And a crowd so thick you could not see the edge of the stone. Hats. Coats. Flowers. Little ones up on shoulders. And behind them a train with every window down and a face at every window.

The line under it said: *NETHERBY SEES THEM OFF.*

Nobody said a word for a moment.

It was a strange feeling. They knew that platform better than they knew their own beds. And here it was, full of strangers, forty-one years back.

"Caption," said Max, in a tight voice.

A caption is the small line of print under a photo. It tells you who is in it. Clara read it out.

Four families from this town left on Tuesday for a new life in Queensland, Australia. Among them, Mr. and Mrs. R. Sowerby, with their son Peter Walter, aged eight.

Clara stopped.

She read it again. This time she read it slowly.

"*Peter Walter*," said Josie.

"They named him for his grandfather," said Clara.

Max took his glasses off and put them on again. Theo looked at the ceiling. Josie put both hands flat on the table and did not say one word. For Josie, that was quite a thing.



“Give me the photo,” said Max.

He had his little magnifying glass out on its string. It was the one he used for coins. He bent right down over the page. His nose was two inches from the paper. Then he went along that crowd, row by row.

“There are five babies in this picture,” he said. “There is a dog. There is a man asleep on a barrow.”

“Max.”

“I am *working*.” He moved the glass along. “Right. Front of the train. Car one, second window —”

He stopped.

“Oh,” said Max.

“What?”

Max did not answer at once. He moved the glass a little, twice, very slowly. You turn a screw like that at the last quarter turn.

"There is a boy," he said. "Down at the front, by the door of car one. Cap on crooked."

Josie made a small sound.

"He is right at the front of it all," said Max. "Every person round him is holding something. Flowers. A case. A cake tin. A baby." He swallowed. "He is holding nothing at all."

Nobody moved.

Then Max's hand slid up the page. Up past the train. Up past the heads and the hats and the edge of the canopy. Up to the top of the picture, where it all went pale and soft and out of focus.

At the very top, small and blurred, was the signal box.

And in the box window, high up, was a shape.

"Max," said Clara. "What is that?"

Max looked for a long moment through the little round glass.

"That," he said, "is a big man. Standing at the window. Watching them go."

Chapter 10 — One Letter

They took two things up the hill on Saturday.

The first was a newspaper. Max had gone down to Marlow on the Monday. He went on his own. He paid a nickel of his own. He had that page in a stiff brown folder. He carried it three miles. It went under his coat, flat.

The second thing was the register.

"That book has not left this office in sixty years," said Robert Wren.

"No," said Clara.

Then he wrapped it in oilcloth himself. He tied the string.

"Then it goes up a hill today," he said. "Carry it in both arms. And Clara. You do not make that man do one thing he does not want to do."

"No," said Clara. "That is rather the whole point."

Walter Sowerby said no.

He said it kindly. He said it at once. They had not even gotten their coats off.

"I know what you have come for," he said. "The answer is no. Sit down and have your tea."

So they sat down. They had their tea.

Nobody argued. Nobody pushed. Josie did not talk him round. Theo did not bring out one single fact. He had about forty of them. Max said nothing at all. The folder stayed under his arm.

They talked about the stove and the weather. They talked about the Corinda. Sowerby said she was a slow old thing. Everybody said so.

Then Clara put her cup down. She undid the oilcloth on her knee.

"May I show you something?" she said. "You do not have to do anything about it."

"What is it?"

"It is our book," said Clara.

She opened it flat on the bench. It lay under the window, in the last of the light.

Walter Sowerby did not move for a moment. Then he came over, slowly. He put both hands on the bench. One on each side of the book. He had put them like that beside the horse.

He looked down at the page.

Line after line of small brown writing. Umbrellas. A hat. A pair of boots. A tin whistle. All the little lost things of one fall, forty-one years back. All in the hand of a woman he had known thirty years.

And there, in the middle of the page:

206. One wooden horse. Carved. Found in car three. Handed in by the guard of the evening train.

And under it, smaller, in the white space, in the same ink:

Not for disposal.

Nobody said a word. Outside, a hen said something to the others.

Walter Sowerby stood over that book. He stood there a long time.

"She never said a word to me," he said at last. "In eighteen years. Not one word. She would say good morning to me on the road. She would ask after my knees."

"She was waiting," said Clara.

"She was."

He straightened up. He wiped his hand down his face. Once.

"Forty-one years," he said. "That woman held a door open for me. It would be a poor thing to walk away from it now."

He looked round at the four of them. Then he decided.

"Get me a pen," said Walter Sowerby.

The first attempt took four minutes.

An attempt is a try. You have a go at a thing. If it is no good, you have another go. Sowerby had three.

Draft one was four lines long. A draft is a first try. It comes before the real letter.

Dear Peter,

I hope this finds you well. We have had a wet fall here. The hens are laying.

Your grandfather, W. Sowerby

Josie read it upside down.

"Mr. Sowerby," she said. "That is a weather report."

"It is a letter."

"It is a weather report with a name on it."

Sowerby looked at it. Then he made a low sound in his chest. It was not quite a laugh. He turned the page over.

Draft two took an hour and a half.

Nobody spoke the whole time. The pen scratched. The stove ticked.

It ran a page and a half. Every line of it was about blame.

I should have gone. I should have made them cover the box. I should have shouted louder. I should have written the year after, and the year after that. There is no excuse for a man who —

Clara read it over his shoulder. She did not say it was good.

"May I say a thing?" she said.

"Say it."

"My mother said something in the cart," said Clara. "Being sorry about a thing is not the same as having done a wrong. They feel exactly alike. They are not alike at all."

Sowerby sat very still.

"And there is another thing," said Max. He was at the far end of the bench. "That letter is all about you. He is forty-nine. He has had a whole life out there. He will want a letter about *him*."

It was the best thing Max Cotton had ever said.

Sowerby did not answer. He put the second draft in the stove. He watched it go.

He wrote the third attempt alone.

He would not have anybody in the workshop. He sent them all up to the house. He made them eat bread and jam. He stayed out there with one lamp on. The door was shut. It took him three hours.

They never read it. Not one of them. Not ever.

He came in at nine o'clock. The letter was sealed. To seal a letter is to stick it down. Then nobody can open it. He had licked it. He pressed it flat with the side of his big fist. And that was that.

"That one goes," he said.

He made the box himself. That was on the Tuesday.

It was a plain little wooden box. The lid fit the way a good lid should. He did not paint it. He packed the horse in the middle of it. It lay in a nest of shavings off his own floor. The paper went down one side, flat. It was still in Max's brown folder.

"Keep the folder," he said to Max.

"No," said Max.

"It is your folder, boy."

"It goes with it," said Max. "That is the whole point of it."

The letter went in on top. Then the lid. Then brown paper, and string. Then a great deal of knot-work. It took two of them.

The Netherby post office is not at the station. It is in the shop on the square. In the front room. There is a counter with scales on it. A rack of stamps stands behind.

Walter Sowerby carried the parcel in. He carried it himself.

He set it on the scales. The woman behind the counter weighed it. She wrote in her book. Sowerby paid. It went into the sack with the rest. It did not look like much.



"How long?" said Josie.

"To Australia?" The woman thought about it. "By sea mail? Six weeks, my dear. Give or take."

"Six *weeks*."

"There is air mail," said the woman. "It is faster. And for a parcel that size it costs a fortune."

"Six weeks is fine," said Walter Sowerby.

He said it quite plainly. There was no fuss in it, and nothing sad at all.

"I have waited forty-one years," he said. "I can manage six weeks."

They came out onto the square. It was cold and getting dark. The lights were on in the shop windows.

Josie could not help it. She had to ask.

"Mr. Sowerby," she said. "What if he is not there any more?"

The old man buttoned his coat. Right up to the top.

"Then it will come back to me," he said. "And I shall have written it." He put his cap on. "That is a different thing from never writing it at all. Mind that."

Chapter 11 — Six Weeks

Theo made a chart.

It hung on the office wall. It sat next to Clara's two old lists. It had forty-two little squares. One for each day. Every evening someone crossed one off.

"Six weeks out," said Theo. "Then he has to read it. Then he has to write. Then six weeks back."

"That is a long time," said Josie.

"That is fourteen weeks," said Theo. "If we are lucky."

"Cross off today," said Clara.

So they crossed off today. Then they went and did the day's work. The work does not stop for anybody.

Fall came down on the line. It came down hard that month.

The trees along the cutting went gold. Then they went brown. Then they let go all at once. Leaves lay in drifts against the fence. Leaves blew along the platform.

Leaves came down on the rails in the wet. They made them slippery. The rails are the two steel lines a train runs on. Everyone knows that. What nobody tells you is how much trouble one wet leaf can be.

Firefly's wheels spun on the bank above the crossing. Twice in one week. Nancy said a few words about it.

The evenings drew in. Bert lit the six lamps earlier and earlier.

And now the chimney threw sparks. You could see them at dusk. Up and out and away over the garden. Orange, and gone. Josie could watch that all night. She often did.

"Mind your grass," said Bert. "That is half a fireman's job in a dry fall. Watch your sparks."

The office had a good month.

Three things came in.

A lunch pail, black, with a name cut inside the lid. A man from the quarry claimed it. That was on Wednesday. He was so pleased he shook every hand twice.

A knitted mitten, red. Nobody came. Clara wrote it up all the same. *Item 63. One mitten, red, child's, left hand.*

A music case with sheets in it, left on the 4:40. Josie found that owner. It took her eleven minutes flat.

And then, on the Thursday, a very great thing happened.

A man came in out of the rain. He was wet through. He asked if they had an umbrella to spare.

The four of them stood quite still.

Then Clara spoke. Her voice was careful. "We might have one or two."

They took him to the low shelf. Nine black umbrellas stood in a row, as they had since before Josie could read.

"Any of them," said Clara. "Truly. Any."

The man took the nearest one. He did not even look at it.

"Much obliged," he said. Then he went out into the rain.

The office watched him go off under it.

"Eight," said Max.

Nobody in that room stopped smiling for an hour.

Walter Sowerby came down on the second Saturday. He was ninety-one, and very much alive.

He did not come to the office. He came as far as the yard gate. Then he stopped. He put one hand on the post.

Theo saw him from the shed. He came running.

"The window in the shed sticks," said Sowerby. "Your father said so on the road."

"It has stuck since the spring."

"Bring it out here."

So Theo took the window sash off its cords. It took an hour. Then he carried it out to the gate.

Sowerby sat on the wall. He had a plane in his coat pocket. He shaved four curls off one edge. He looked at it. He shaved two more.

"Try that," he said.

It slid up and down as easy as you like. It had not done that in years.

The next week he came inside the gate.

He got as far as the engine shed doors. He stood there a good long time. He looked at Firefly. He let Nancy show him her fire. Then he went home up the road.

The week after, he mended the bench in the yard.

Nobody said one word about any of it. Not one. That had been agreed in the office. It took four seconds. There was no vote.

The harvest service is always in the goods shed.

The volunteers sweep it out on the Friday. They stack the crates against the far wall. They hang lamps along the beams. On the Saturday evening the whole town comes in out of the dark. Up the yard road, in coats and good hats. There are apples along the front. Sheaves of wheat. Jars of honey.

It is a plain sort of evening. There is a reading. Somebody says thank you for the year. And every one sings one hymn. A hymn is a song people sing together in church. This was the old harvest one. Even people who never sing know it.

Josie sang loudly and badly. Max did not sing at all. He moved his mouth. Theo sang like his mother. Very well, and rather too fast. Clara sang on the note, with her chin up.

Lucy Pryor was not there. She had sung her solo down at Marlow the week before. Elsie went with her, front row.

Robert Wren stood at the front. His cap was under his arm. He looked out over the shed as they sang.

Right at the back stood a very big bent old man. He was by the open doors, in the last of the light. His cap was in his hands.

Robert Wren saw him.

He did not say a word about it. Not then. Not after. Not to Sowerby. Not to anybody. He simply went on singing. And when it was over he went round the back way. He shook hands with him at the doors. It was the way a man says good evening to a neighbor. That is all it was.



Then it was November. The chart on the wall began to fill up.

Six weeks went by. The letter had landed. Or it had not. There was no way on earth to know.

"He has it now," said Josie. It was the forty-second day. "Right now. Today."

"Maybe," said Theo. He looked uncertain.

"Today," said Josie.

Sowerby did not ask. He came down on Saturdays. He mended things. He never once said the word *letter*. Nobody said it to him.

Clara worked it out one evening. She wrote it in her notebook. She did not show anybody.

He is not waiting for a letter. He has had the good part already. He said it out loud. And he sent it. The rest is extra.

On the fiftieth day the mail cart came up the yard road. It was half past nine.

Josie was sweeping the platform. She saw Mr. Cade get down. She saw him go round to the back of the cart. She saw him lift something out with both hands.

She stopped sweeping.

He came along with it held out before him.

It was a box. It was a big box, brown. It was done up in string and tape. It had had a hard trip. One corner was pushed in.

And it was covered in stamps. All over. In every space there was.

They were not stamps anybody in Netherby had ever seen. They were bright. There was a bird on one. There was a strange animal on another. And along the top, in blue ink, two words. Stamped over and over.

AIR MAIL. AIR MAIL. AIR MAIL.

Josie dropped her broom and did not pick it up.

The address was in a great round hand. The lines went downhill.

THE LOST AND FOUND OFFICE NETHERBY STATION

Mr. Cade set it down on the office counter. It made a solid, heavy sound on the wood.

"That has come a way," he said.

Clara looked at it. Max looked at it. Theo had gone the color of paper.

"Josie," said Clara. Her voice had gone very odd. "Josie, run and get my father."

"Why?"

"A letter does not weigh that much," said Clara.

Chapter 12 — A Bridge Across the Sea

Nobody opened it.

The box sat on the office desk all morning. It sat through the 10:15 and the 11:40. Whistle got out of his basket. He walked round it twice. Then he got back in.

Robert Wren had gone up the hill in the cart himself.

At half past twelve they heard the pony on the yard road.

Walter Sowerby came in through the office door. He came slowly. His cap was already in his hand. He had not been through that door in forty-one years. Not once.

He made nothing of it. He looked round once. At the shelves. At the labels. At the great register on the desk.

"She kept it tidy," he said.

Then he sat down in the office chair. Josie put a knife in his hand.

The string was hard work. The tape was worse. Josie helped.

Inside was a nest of torn paper. Inside that was a wooden box. It was plain. The lid fit the way a good lid should.

Sowerby looked at that lid. He looked at it a long moment.

"He made this," he said. "That lid."

Under the lid lay two things. A letter, and a photograph.

The photo came out first. It was square, with a white border.

A man stood on a wooden veranda. A veranda is a long open porch along the front of a house. It has a roof and no walls. You sit out on it in the evening.

The man was gray-haired. He was heavy across the back. He was bent a little at the top. And he held a thing in both hands. He held it out to the camera.

He was holding a small wooden horse. That was all.

Nobody in the office said one word. Not one.

Walter Sowerby held that photo in both hands. He held it at arm's length. Then closer. Then he set it down on the desk with great care. He put a hand over his eyes for a moment.

"Forty-nine," he said. "He has his mother's shoulders."

Clara read the letter out loud. Sowerby asked her to. He said his eyes were no good in this light. They all let him have that.

Dear Grandpa,

I have read your letter nine times. I am going to tell you the thing you do not know. I want it at the top of the page, not the bottom.

I always knew you ran.

Mom saw you. She was at the window in the front car. She said you were in your shirt sleeves. You had a thing in your hand. She could not get to you. You could not get to us. And then we went round the bend.

She told me that story every year of my life. She told it on my birthday. She would say it like this. Your grandfather came out of that box. He ran the length of the train for you.

She never knew what was in your hand. Neither did I. We have wondered for forty-one years. And now there it is, on my table. Your mark is under its foot.

So you have had this wrong end up the whole time. Nobody here ever thought you forgot me. I was told you ran. That is a good thing to grow up with.

Clara stopped and turned the page over. There was no blame in it anywhere. The office was very quiet.

Alice sent me a photo of her horse. I was fourteen. I sat down with a pocket knife. I made a very bad one. I have made a great many since.

The one in the box is not a copy of yours. It is mine. It was going to be for my grandson's birthday. He says he will wait for the next one. He is a good boy. Also I promised him two.

Look under the hoof.

Your grandson, Peter Walter Sowerby

Max lifted the new horse out. It came out of the shavings.

It was the same size. It stood the same way, head down. It was cut from one block. There was no paint on it. None of the cuts had slipped.

"Oh," said Josie. "Oh, they *match*."

"Not quite," said Max. He had it under the lamp. "Look at the ears. His are a shade longer. And this wood is not oak."

He turned it over. He held it up to the lamp.

Under one hoof, small and neat and burned into the wood, was a mark.

An **S** in a circle.

And beside the circle, tucked in close, was a little bird.

Nobody had to ask. Walter Sowerby was laughing, low down in his chest. His eyes were wet. His cap was crushed in his fist.

"The bird that laughs at you," he said. "Forty-one years. The rascal."

It was Theo who asked the question. He asked it without thinking. It just came out.

"Max. What is it worth?"

Max Cotton had an answer for that. He had had it ready. It was ready the moment the string came off.

Then he did not say it.

He put the little horse down on the desk. It lay next to the photo. He pushed his glasses up his nose.

"I am not going to answer that," said Max.

"Max —"

"No. Ask me about a coin. Ask me about anything else in this room. I will price it to the nickel." He put both hands flat on the desk. "Not this. This one is not a thing on a shelf."

Clara looked at him for a second. Then she wrote a line down. Nobody saw it.

Walter Sowerby stood up. He put his cap on.

"Now," he said. "I have a job. A job to do."

He went out of the office. He turned left, onto the platform.

Nobody went with him. Then Robert Wren did. He walked half a step behind, a little to the side. That is how you walk with a man who does not need helping.

It is two hundred yards. Office door to signal box.

Sowerby walked it slowly. Past the bench. Past the lamps. Past the flower tubs and the canopy. He had the new horse in one hand.



At the bottom of the steps he stopped. He looked up.

Nineteen of them. He knew the number.

He went up. Step by step.

Inside, the box smelled as it always had. He knew it at once. He put one hand on the lever bench. His own mark was burned into the underside of it. He stood there a moment.

Then he set the new horse on the shelf under the window. It stood beside Pip's brass tag.

"There," said Walter Sowerby. "That is where that goes."

Clara wrote it that evening. She used the old thin register. It went on the page in her grandmother's hand.

She used her best pen. She got it right. First time.

Item 206. One wooden horse. Returned. Forty-one years.

Under it, in the white space, three words. They still stood in brown ink. *Not for disposal.* Clara did not cross them out. Some things you leave exactly where they are.

Whistle got up on the desk. He sat on the open page. He had done it for Item 1, and for Item 51.

"Yes," said Clara. "You sign it too."

The office table was a mess.

It had been a mess since November. Mr. Ives at Marlow had sent up a bundle of old paper. Ledger leaves. Timetables. Blank ticket stock. He had thought the Netherby children might like it all.

He had been right.

"Clear that table," said Robert, "before your mother sees it."

So Theo cleared the table.

He went through the bundle sheet by sheet. Theo goes through things sheet by sheet. Paper in one pile. Card in another.

Then he stopped.

In among the blank ticket stock was one ticket. It had come home in the bundle by mistake. It was not blank.

It was printed. It was dated. It was real. It was a proper ticket, made out and ready. There was a station name on it, in small hard letters.

Theo Wren knew every station on this line. He knew them in order, up and down. He could say them in his sleep.

He had never heard of this one.

"Clara," he said. "Bring the map."

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