

*The
Winter
Logbooks*



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The Winter Logbooks

by Gixo Folio

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A sample novella written by Gixo Folio. Every person, place and event in it is invented.

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CHAPTER 1

The Logbooks Return to Ternfold

A Winter Morning at Bell Quay

BEFORE DAYLIGHT HAD PROPERLY REACHED THE INLET, IVEN Marr stood at the end of Bell Quay and checked the tide.

There was no reason to do it. No boat waited for him at the pilot steps. No master watched the shore for his signal. The little brass tide clock in the harbour office had long since been given to a nephew of the harbour board's former clerk, and the chart he kept folded in the kitchen drawer was two seasons old.

Still, he had come down with his coat buttoned to the throat and his cap pulled low, and he had stood beside the iron ring where ropes had rubbed the stone pale. The water was lifting under the quay in a slow, black movement. It brought up scraps of weed and a length of pale packing cord, then took them out again.

Iven watched the line of wetness on the harbour wall.

Half flood, he thought. Near enough.

The thought arrived with the old ease of a hand closing around a familiar tool. He did not say it aloud. The morning was too still for speech, and in any case there was no one to hear him except the gulls working above the fish sheds.

Ternfold had narrowed itself for winter. In summer, the town looked wider than it was. Doors stood open. Nets dried across low walls. Children made paths between bait buckets and stacks of lobster pots, and visitors took the uphill lane to look down at the inlet as though they had discovered it. In winter, the harbour showed its true dimensions. The sheds closed their doors. The slipways gleamed with rain. The road along Bell Quay carried only delivery vans, a post bicycle, and people who had somewhere necessary to be.

Beyond the inner basin, the inlet bent south between two dark shoulders of land. The East Cut lay hidden beyond the nearer point, a passage that had always seemed to Iven less a channel than an argument between sea and shore. On clear days, from the quay, he could see the white post on the outer marker. That morning the mist had swallowed it.

He rested one gloved hand on the cold iron ring.

A pilot learned not to trust the visible edge of things. The tide might look easy against the wall while the current tugged hard around the point. A wind that felt no more than a chill in the harbour could be shouldering into the Cut with enough force to turn a loaded vessel broadside. People ashore called this experience. It was more like paying attention for a long time.

He had retired three winters earlier. The board had given him a framed certificate and a small dinner at the Anchor Rooms. The frame had gone into the cupboard behind the flour tin. He had meant to hang it somewhere but had not found a wall that seemed to want it.

From the upper road, the windows of the Marr house faced the harbour in a row of three. The kitchen window was uncurtained. The narrow room above it had its blind down. The front room window, where Sella sometimes sat with her sewing in the afternoon, was shut tight beneath a faded blue curtain.

It was not unusual for a window to be shut in winter.

Still, Iven looked at it a moment longer than he needed to.

The house had belonged to their mother, and before that to a great-aunt whose name had been forgotten by everyone except Sella. After their mother died, Sella had stayed. Iven had taken the small cottage near the old signal yard, saying it would be closer to the harbour. That was true, but not all of it.

The distance between the cottage and the Marr house was a little under ten minutes if he walked without stopping. He had not crossed it in nearly four years.

A cart rattled over the cobbles behind him. Iven stepped aside. It was Deen Prawl from the chandlery, driving a handcart piled with coiled line beneath a canvas cover. Deen raised two fingers from the handle.

"Morning, Iven."

"Morning."

Deen looked out at the inlet, then at Iven. "You reckon it'll freshen?"

Iven watched the loose end of a flag above the net loft. It gave one hard snap, then fell back against the pole.

"Later," he said. "From the north-east."

Deen grunted, satisfied, as though Iven had done the work he had come down for. The cart went on toward the sheds.

Iven stayed where he was until the church clock above Market Lane struck eight. Its sound came thinly through the mist. He had a reason to be at the harbour office by half past. He had agreed to it yesterday, though even now the agreement sat oddly in him.

The old logbooks had been brought back to Ternfold from the regional storehouse at Larkheath. There had been talk of damp, loose bindings, pages that had begun to flower at the edges with brown stains. A young archivist had arrived with them in the back of a council van. His name was Lio Fen. He had written Iven a note in a hand that was careful without being ornamental.

He had asked for help identifying old navigation marks and local abbreviations.

Iven had read the note twice at his kitchen table. Then he had folded it, placed it by the sugar bowl, and spent the rest of the evening pretending he had not decided to go.

Now he turned from the water and walked toward the harbour office.

The building stood between the former customs shed and a disused store for lamp oil. Its upper windows were clouded from within. The lower door had been painted green once, though salt and rain had lifted the paint in scales. Iven had gone through that door almost every day for thirty-eight years.

After retirement, he had found he could pass it without looking.

That morning, he looked.

Lio Opens the Harbour Office Archive

The smell met him first: wet wool, dust, old paper, and the faint mineral cold of a room that had not yet warmed. He stood just inside the doorway, taking off his cap.

The counter where crews had once signed papers had been pushed against the wall. In its place stood two long tables, each covered with grey wrapping paper. Crates were arranged beneath them. Some were open, showing rows of ledgers packed in tissue and folded cloth.

A small electric heater glowed near the far wall without making any noticeable difference.

Lio Fen was crouched beside a crate. He looked up at the sound of the door.

He was younger than Iven had expected, perhaps not long out of his studies, though there was nothing uncertain in the way he handled the books. He wore a thick brown jumper with ink on one cuff and had tied his dark hair back from his face with a piece of twine. A pencil rested above one ear.

"Mr Marr," he said.

"Iven will do."

Lio stood. "Thank you for coming."

"I said I would."

"People often say that before they see the state of a room."

Iven looked around. "It's a room."

"That is the charitable description."

There was a dry humour in the remark, offered without pressing for a reply. Iven approved of that more than he meant to.

Lio moved a stack of folded papers from the nearest chair. "I've made some space. The main work is listing each volume, checking dates, condition, loose material, and any marks that tell us what it was used for. The books can't go back into storage until we know what needs repair."

"How long have they been there?"

"Some of them were moved out during repairs to this building. Then the repairs stopped. Then the storage place got a leak."

"That sounds about right."

Lio smiled, though only briefly. "I was told you might recognize some of the older systems."

"Might."

"I don't need a lecture. I need to know whether a mark means 'safe at this depth' or 'someone spilled tea here.'"

"Sometimes it means both."

"That is useful already."

He opened the top ledger on the table. The cover was green cloth, faded nearly grey, with a leather spine gone soft at the corners. On its front, in block letters, someone had written: HARBOUR MOVEMENTS AND WEATHER OBSERVATIONS.

Iven did not touch it at first.

The old office had kept several kinds of record. There were arrival books, outward clearance books, fuel lists, buoy inspection reports, pilot notes, and the broad daily log in which weather, tide, mishaps, and local decisions were entered by whoever had been at the desk. In later years, records had become cleaner and more regular. Forms came in triplicate. Instructions arrived from

offices elsewhere. But the older books were full of hand-drawn arrows, abbreviations, corrections in different inks, and small pieces of life that had no place in any official account.

Lio turned a page with two fingers. "This one begins in late autumn. I thought we could start there. The handwriting changes every few days."

Iven bent closer.

On the left page, rain had feathered the ink into soft black threads. The entries were ruled into narrow columns: date, wind, tide, visibility, vessels, remarks. The first hand was upright and cramped. The next slanted forward as if every word were in a hurry. Below that, a broad, deliberate script made Iven's throat tighten before he had time to prepare for it.

"That's Harl Daven," he said.

Lio looked up. "The harbourmaster?"

"Before my time as pilot. He stayed on after."

"You knew him?"

Iven kept his eyes on the page. "Everyone knew Harl."

He could see the man again without trying: the square back of him in a navy coat, his pale eyebrows, the way he held a pen as though it had disappointed him personally. Harl Daven had taught Iven to read a water surface at dusk. He had also taught him, though never directly, that a harbour could run on things people chose not to put in writing.

"This mark," Lio said, tapping the margin with his pencil, "appears beside several entries. A small hooked line and two dots."

Iven looked. "East Cut cross-set."

"Not a buoy mark?"

"No. Means the current is running across the channel. Not straight in or out. You'd see it most when the tide had turned but the wind hadn't."

"Would it stop a vessel?"

"Depends on the vessel. Depends on who was bringing her through."

Lio made a note in a small notebook. His handwriting was narrow and plain.

"And this?" he asked.

There was a faint triangle beside a line about a coastal freighter. Iven leaned closer. The mark had been made in red pencil, nearly rubbed away.

"Pilot aboard," he said.

"Why not write it?"

"Space. Habit."

"Or because everyone in the office knew?"

Iven glanced at him.

Lio did not look pleased with himself. He was merely waiting.

"That too," Iven said.

He took off one glove and laid his hand flat beside the book. The paper was rough under his fingertips. He could see where the binding had swollen from damp. Along the bottom edge, a pale grey bloom had crept into the pages.

"You'll need to keep these away from the outer wall," he said. "The rain comes through there when it drives from the east."

"I thought so. The wall feels colder."

"It is colder."

"Could you show me where the water usually gets in?"

Iven looked toward the wall. The request was practical. It required no confession, no performance of grief for a building or a former life. It offered him a task with edges.

"There's a crack behind that cabinet," he said. "And the gutter outside blocks at the joint. You'll want the crates up off the floor."

"Would you help me?"

"Now?"

"If you have time."

Iven considered telling him that retired men had too much time and distrusted it. Instead, he put his cap on the chair.

"Show me what needs lifting."

They spent the next hour moving crates onto old shelving from the chart room. Lio worked steadily and did not make a show of gratitude for every weight Iven took from him. That suited Iven. They found a roll of waxed cloth in a drawer, and Iven showed him how to lay it beneath the crates without sealing them in too tightly.

"Paper needs air," he said.

"But not weather."

"Like most things."

By ten, the room had altered. It was still cold and cluttered, but there was a clear passage between the door and the tables. The ledgers sat raised above the damp floor. Lio boiled water on a small plate near the window and poured tea into two chipped mugs.

"I can make it stronger," he said.

"This is fine."

It was weak, but hot. Iven drank it standing up.

Lio opened another book, this one smaller and thicker, its pages darkened at the margins. "Do you know the initials E.M.?"

Iven set down his mug.

"Where?"

Lio turned the ledger toward him. A note had been written beside a weather entry in blue-black ink. The letters were small, not much more than a mark.

E.M. checked outer soundings. Noon return.

Iven recognized his own hand, though it was not the hand he had now. The letters leaned more then. The final stroke of the M rose too high, as though it were trying to leave the line.

"That's me," he said.

Lio waited.

"First winter I was given the soundings alone."

"You must have been young."

"Young enough to think that was the important part."

Lio looked at the entry again, then at Iven. "Was it?"

Iven picked up his tea. "No."

The answer surprised him by coming so easily.

Outside, a vehicle passed along Bell Quay, tyres whispering on wet stone. The noise faded. In the pause that followed, Iven became aware of the building's old sounds: a settling joist, wind worrying at a window frame, water ticking somewhere in the pipes.

He had not meant to stay beyond a polite half hour.

At midday, he was still there.

Details the Records Cannot Explain

The entry for the sixth of December lay near the middle of a ledger marked with a cracked brass plate. The plate had once borne a number, but only the final figure remained clear.

Lio found it after lunch, when the light had thinned to a colourless wash over the tables.

"This looks unusual," he said.

Iven was sorting a bundle of loose sheets by size. "Most things look unusual until you know why they happened."

"And after?"

"Then some of them still do."

Lio placed a finger beside the date, careful not to touch the ink.

The writing was Harl Daven's. Iven knew it immediately. The letters sat squarely on the ruled lines, calm enough to seem almost indifferent.

6 December. Launch held inside harbour. Outer passage unsuitable. East Cut watched. No outward movement after second bell.

Below it, another hand had added a brief line in faded pencil.

Families informed at upper office.

Iven read it twice.

He remembered the day, though not at first as a whole. Memory came to him in pieces. A rope stiff with salt. The smell of diesel from the launch. A man shouting from the quay but lost under the wind. The harbour bell sounding once, then again, its note torn apart as it travelled.

"What kind of launch?" Lio asked.

"Could have been any kind."

"There's no name."

"No."

"Would that be normal?"

Iven did not answer straight away.

The logbook was clear in some ways. It recorded weather. It recorded the order to hold the launch within the harbour. It noted that the East Cut had been watched. Yet it did not say who had ordered the hold, who had been waiting to leave, or why families had been called to the upper office. The omission sat inside the entry like a closed door.

"Not normal," Iven said at last. "Not if it mattered."

Lio drew his pencil back from the page. "It sounds as though it mattered."

"Things can matter without belonging in a daily book."

"Can they?"

Iven looked at him. The question had not been sharp. That made it harder to dismiss.

"A daily book records what can be checked," he said. "Wind direction. tide height. vessels in and out. If you try to put every reason beside every action, you never finish writing."

"But someone chose to add the line about families."

"Yes."

"So someone thought it should remain."

Iven lifted the ledger gently and looked along its spine. He had done that often in his working life, checking whether pages had been added or removed. There was a slight pull in the binding between the sixth and seventh of December. Not much. A person who did not know books might never see it.

"This has been handled," he said.

"Handled how?"

"Opened hard. Folded back."

Lio leaned closer. "Could a page be missing?"

"Maybe."

The word was safer than certainty. It was also true.

Lio did not press. He made a note, then went to the crate marked DISPATCHES AND CORRESPONDENCE. Inside were folders tied with cotton tape. Some held carbon copies. Some held thin onion-skin sheets that made a dry whisper when moved.

Iven returned to the sixth of December.

The weather column read: NNE, hard. Rain squalls. Poor outer visibility.

He could feel the wind again, not as memory usually came, softened by time, but in the old physical manner: a force against his left shoulder as he climbed the path above the East Cut. He had been wearing his oilskin hood. Rain had gathered at the rim and blown in across his face. Below him, the channel had looked white at the edges and black at the centre, the current folding over itself.

He had been sent to check whether the outer marker could still be seen from the headland.

Not sent, exactly. Told to go.

He had been twenty-nine, still newly trusted with decisions that were not his. Harl Daven had stood by the office stove, drying his hands on a rag, and said, "Take the ridge path. Don't try the lower road."

Iven had gone. He remembered the hard ground under his boots. He remembered a gull pinned against the wind above the cliff grass. He remembered seeing, through rain, the outer marker disappear and return, disappear and return.

When he came back, the launch was inside the basin.

He could not remember now whether he had seen who was aboard.

That troubled him less than the fact that he had once known.

"Iven?"

Lio's voice brought him back to the table.

"What?"

"I found a reference that seems to belong with this."

Lio held out a small blue form. It was not the original but a copy, made with a pressure sheet beneath another page. The writing had transferred unevenly. At the top were the words OUTWARD DISPATCH, and beneath them a date: 6 December.

The lower half of the form was blank.

There was no vessel name. No cargo. No destination. No signature.

In the upper right corner, someone had written a file number. Beside it was a notation: see attached note.

"There's no attached note," Lio said.

Iven held out his hand. Lio gave him the form.

The paper had a distinct smell, old and faintly sour. Iven knew the file numbering system. It had been used before the harbour office adopted the later registers. The first letters indicated the

month. The final mark signified an associated communication: a message, an instruction, a weather warning, a request from a vessel, or sometimes something brought in person.

"It should be in the folder," Lio said. "Unless it was filed somewhere else."

"Could be."

"Would a dispatch note be removed if the launch did not leave?"

Iven folded the paper once along an old crease, then opened it again. "No."

"Would it be cancelled?"

"Usually."

"There's no cancellation."

"Maybe someone forgot."

Lio's expression did not change, but he set the notebook down. "Do people forget official paperwork in a harbour office?"

Iven looked through the window. The mist had lifted enough to show the roofs opposite. Water ran from the eaves in a steady thread.

"They forget what they can afford to forget," he said.

The sentence was out before he could stop it.

Lio was silent.

Iven felt the room close around him: the stacks of records, the cold wall, the old counter shoved aside. He could hear the sound of the stove in Harl Daven's office from so long ago, a faint ticking as metal cooled. He could see another man seated at the desk, shoulders bent, though the face would not come.

He set the dispatch form down more carefully than he needed to.

"You'll want to check the council files," he said. "The old harbour board minutes. There may be a duplicate in the clerk's papers."

"Those are at the town rooms."

"Then check them."

"I will."

"Good."

He began gathering the loose sheets into a pile.

Lio watched him for a moment. "You knew something about that day."

"I knew the weather."

"You said you checked the East Cut."

"I checked it more than once that winter."

"But you remember this one."

Iven aligned the papers against the table edge. "You should keep these weighted. They'll curl in this damp."

Lio did not speak again until Iven had put the sheets into a folder.

"All right," he said then. "We can do that."

There was no surrender in his voice. Only patience. Iven found that more difficult than insistence would have been.

At half past three, Lio suggested they stop for the day. The light had gone early, and the electric lamps gave the ledgers a yellowed, underwater look.

Iven put on his coat.

"Will you come tomorrow?" Lio asked.

"If the weather holds."

"For the books?"

"For the roof."

Lio glanced upward. "Of course."

Iven left before the younger man could smile.

Sella at the Upper Steps

The rain had eased to a fine cold drift. Bell Quay shone under the first lamps, every cobble holding a small blurred reflection. Iven walked toward the chandlery with his head down, his hands deep in his coat pockets.

He had reached the corner by the old icehouse when he saw Sella.

She was coming down from the upper steps with a roll of sailcloth over one shoulder. The cloth was patched in several places, its repaired seams darker than the original canvas. She carried it as she had carried things all her life: without fuss, balanced against her body so that her free hand could manage doors, rails, or the edge of a table.

For a moment, he did not recognize her by her face. He recognized the turn of her shoulder under the weight.

She had more grey in her hair than he remembered, though perhaps he had only seen her at a distance lately. Her coat was dark green, buttoned high. She stopped outside Deen Prawl's chandlery and shifted the sailcloth to her other shoulder.

Deen opened the door from inside. Warm light fell across the pavement.

Sella said something Iven could not hear. Deen laughed once and took one end of the roll. Together they carried it into the shop.

Iven remained beside the icehouse wall.

There had been a time when he would have crossed the quay without thinking. He would have opened the door for her, complained about the price of waxed thread, asked who had torn the sail. She would have told him it was not torn, merely neglected. They would have gone home by separate routes and met later at the Marr house, where there was always too much food on the table because Sella cooked as though bad weather might keep half the town indoors.

The memory came not from a special day but from an ordinary supper.

It had been late autumn. Their mother was still alive then, though already slow on the stairs. Iven had come in smelling of rain and engine smoke. Sella had put a dish of baked fish on the table and told him not to drip on the floor. Their mother had asked whether the mail boat was expected before dark. Iven had said no, because the wind had turned. Sella had passed him the potatoes without looking at him.

Nothing had been wrong.

Or if something had been wrong, it had not yet found its name.

He remembered the scrape of chairs, the steam on the kitchen window, the little dish of salt that Sella always set too near his elbow. He remembered being annoyed by that, and moving it. He remembered her asking whether he would be home for supper the next night.

He could not remember what he answered.

Years later, after words had been spoken and then not spoken, that supper had become unbearable in its plainness. It proved that the life between them had not been made of dramatic tenderness

or constant injury. It had been made of meals, errands, borrowed tools, remarks across rooms. Its loss had entered by degrees.

The chandlery door opened again.

Iven stepped back into the shadow of the icehouse before he had decided to.

Sella came out alone. The roll of sailcloth was gone. She pulled on her gloves, looked briefly toward the harbour, then began up the steps.

He could have called her name.

The distance was not great. The quay was quiet. A single word would have reached her.

But he pictured her stopping. He pictured her turning, not knowing what expression to prepare. He had no sentence ready that would not sound like an excuse or an accusation. How did one begin after four years? With the weather? With the condition of a window? With a question about mended canvas?

He let her go.

At the top of the steps, she paused near the rail. Her hand rested on it. From where he stood, he could not tell whether she had heard something behind her or simply needed to catch her breath after the climb.

Then she continued toward the upper road.

Iven waited until she had passed from sight.

The sensible thing would have been to go home. His cottage had a stove laid ready with coal. There was soup left from the day before. The archive would be closed soon, and Lio Fen would have no need of him until morning.

Instead, Iven turned back toward the harbour office.

The rain strengthened as he crossed Bell Quay. It ticked against his cap and darkened the shoulders of his coat. At the office door, he found it unlatched. Lio had probably gone through to the back room for more boxes, or perhaps had forgotten to turn the key in the lock.

Iven stepped inside.

The outer room was empty. The heater had been switched off. The tables lay in their new arrangement beneath the lamps, with the ledgers covered in clean cloth. Everything had the hushed order of a place waiting to be used again.

On the nearest table, the book for December lay open where they had left it.

Iven took off his wet gloves.

He did not sit. He stood over the page, looking at the square handwriting of Harl Daven and the few lines that had outlived whatever they had been meant to contain.

Launch held inside harbour. Outer passage unsuitable. East Cut watched.

The words were not false. That was part of their difficulty. They were true as far as they went.

Near the bottom of the page, where the binding pulled slightly, Iven saw something he had missed before: a narrow notch in the paper at the inner margin, cleanly cut, as though a sheet had been removed with a blade rather than torn out in haste.

He touched the space beside it but not the notch itself.

From the back room came the scrape of a chair.

Lio appeared in the doorway, carrying a box of envelopes. He stopped when he saw Iven.

"I thought you'd gone."

"So did I."

Lio set the box down. He looked at the open ledger, then at Iven's bare hand on the table.

"Did you remember something?"

Iven listened to the rain against the window. Across the harbour, unseen in the dark, the tide would be nearing its height. Water would be pressing into the basin, lifting old weed from the stones, finding every seam in the quay wall.

"I remembered the wind," he said.

Lio nodded once.

"That may be enough for tonight."

Iven looked again at the missing place in the book.

"No," he said, though quietly. "It won't be."

He did not explain. Lio did not ask him to.

For a while they stood in the old harbour office, one beside the records and one by the boxes, while the winter rain went on outside and the town kept its houses closed against the weather.

Then Iven pulled a chair to the table.

"Show me the other dispatches," he said.

CHAPTER 2

The Winter the East Cut Closed

Two Accounts of One Storm

BY THE NEXT MORNING, THE RAIN HAD TURNED TO SNOW.

It did not fall heavily. It came in thin, slanting threads that vanished against the black water and gathered only on the higher roofs, the rail of Bell Quay, the ridges of old net sheds. The harbour had taken on the quiet look it wore before a hard frost, as though each familiar thing had drawn itself inward.

Iven arrived at the office before Lio had lit the heater.

The door stuck against its frame. He put his shoulder to it, felt the swollen wood give, and stepped into the cold. The room smelled of damp paper and yesterday's tea. The December ledger still lay under its cloth at the nearest table.

Lio came in through the back room carrying a coal scuttle.

"I was beginning to think you had changed your mind," he said.

"About the roof?"

"About the other dispatches."

Iven took off his gloves. "Those too."

Lio set the scuttle down beside the stove. He did not smile, though Iven saw him register the answer. That was one of the younger man's better qualities. He let a thing be what it was be-

fore trying to make use of it.

They worked first without speaking. Lio opened boxes and placed their contents on the tables in orderly rows. Iven examined dates, spines, file marks, the faded labels pasted on folders. There were things he had forgotten existed: buoy-maintenance sheets, insurance declarations, fuel tallies, notices sent to skippers whose vessels had overstayed their berth. Some had the cramped permanence of official writing. Others were no more than a name, a time, a direction of wind.

Outside, a truck passed along the quay with chains clicking under its tyres. The sound came through the old walls in brief metallic pulses.

At last Lio brought over a narrow volume bound in cracked blue board.

"This was in the cabinet drawer," he said. "Not with the December book."

Iven looked at the label. TIDE OBSERVATIONS: INNER BASIN, OUTER REACH, EAST CUT. The cover had warped away from the pages. Someone had tied it shut long ago with linen tape, now yellowed and loose.

"Who kept that?" Lio asked.

"Different people. Whoever had the duty. Pilots, harbourmaster, sometimes the watch clerk."

"Is it a formal record?"

"Formal enough."

"Enough for what?"

Iven looked at him.

Lio was standing with one hand on the back of the chair. His pencil was tucked behind his ear, as it had been on the first day. Snow had melted in his hair and darkened the shoulder of his jumper. He looked tired already, though the day had scarcely begun.

"Enough to tell you where the water was," Iven said. "Not always why someone did something about it."

Lio nodded and untied the tape.

The book opened with a soft crackle. Its pages were filled in a smaller hand than Harl Daven's, the measurements arranged in short lines without much comment. There were dates, times, depths, the state of the tide, notes on current and visibility. Iven recognized the work before he read a word. It was the work of men standing out in weather, calling numbers over the side of a boat, trying to make a changing thing hold still long enough to be written down.

Lio turned pages slowly until he stopped.

"Here."

The date was the eighteenth of January.

For a moment Iven saw only the figures. Then the old arrangement began to yield itself. First sounding at the inner marker. Second at the bend below Greycap Point. A note on wind. A correction in darker ink. The page had been written by more than one hand.

Near the foot was an entry he knew before he read it.

18 January. East Cut impassable. Sea over outer ledge. No safe passage after surge.

He rested both hands on the table.

"That's the day," he said.

Lio did not ask which day. He had been waiting for the words to have a shape.

"The sixth of December was another storm," Iven went on. "Not the one you were looking for. The missing page may have been connected. But this is the day people mean when they speak of the Cut being closed."

"People still speak of it?"

"Not much."

"But they know it?"

"They know a version."

The office seemed colder after that. Iven could hear the small knock of snow striking the windowpane. He looked again at the entry. The words had not changed in all the years since they were written. The East Cut had been impassable. That much was true. The sea had been over the outer ledge. That too was true. Yet the sentence had always done more than record weather. It had closed a door behind the town.

Lio drew a notebook toward himself but did not write.

"What happened?" he asked.

Iven watched the pale page. "There was a northerly gale. It had been building through the night. The inner fleet was still in the basin. Two boats had been expected back from the grounds beyond the Reach. There were people at Outer Reach who needed to get to town."

"How many?"

"I don't know."

It was not an evasion. Numbers had never settled in his memory the way weather did. He remembered the hands of people waiting under oilskins. He remembered a boy in a red wool hat

standing with his mother near the signal house. He remembered a woman holding a blanket around an older man's shoulders. But he could not now have said how many stood there, or which names belonged to which faces.

"The Upper Road was still open," he said. "At least at first. But it was slow going. The lower stretch had flooded. Fallen branches came down across the track above the salt meadow."

Lio glanced at the logbook. "And the rescue launch?"

Iven did not answer.

The launch had a name. It had always had a name. Yet he found he could not bring it into the room. Names made objects too particular. They brought back paint worn from railings, the smell of wet rope in a cabin, the exact shape of a man's hand around a throttle.

Lio waited, then turned the page.

"There's another entry," he said.

It had been written on the facing page, in a different hand and at a different time. The ink was faded brown. The first line recorded the tide before dawn. The second noted wind direction. Beneath that, pressed hard enough to score the paper:

Possible water at first lift. East line holding. Examine before full surge.

Iven bent closer.

There was no signature, but he knew the hand. It was his own.

His name was not there. His initials were not there. But he had written those words. The narrow E of *examine*, the way the final letters leaned down as though pulled by a weight: they belonged to him.

For several seconds he could not make sense of what he was seeing. Then memory moved, not gently, but with the abrupt force of a wave finding an opening in rock.

He was in the little sounding boat before daylight. The tiller shook in his hand. The East Cut lay ahead, visible only in pieces between gusts of sleet. The outer marker flashed white, disappeared, flashed again. The water was rough but not yet broken entirely across the channel. He had measured depth at the inner line, then again beyond the shelf. He had known the surge was coming. Anyone who had worked that coast knew it. But before it came, there had been a passage.

Narrow. Dangerous. Brief.

A possible passage.

He straightened slowly.

"I wrote that," he said.

Lio looked at the page, then at him. "You were there?"

"I was taking soundings."

"Before the Cut closed?"

"Before the worst of it."

"Could the launch have crossed?"

Iven looked toward the window. Beyond it, Bell Quay was whitening at the edges. The harbour water had the dull, dark colour of iron.

"It might have," he said.

Lio said nothing.

"That is not the same as saying it should have."

"No."

"A passage can exist and still be wrong to take."

"Because of the weather?"

"Because of everything."

Iven pulled out the chair and sat. The legs scraped against the floorboards. He had spent much of his working life explaining water to people who wanted a simple answer. Safe or unsafe. In or out. Go or stay. They did not understand that a channel could be passable to one vessel, deadly to another, possible at one minute and impossible at the next.

"The Cut was like a gate in a bad temper," he said. "You could see the gap. You could even get through it. But the gate might swing shut before you had cleared it."

Lio's pencil moved once across the notebook. "And the harbour office was waiting for your report?"

Iven looked down at the tide book.

"Yes," he said.

He could see them now. Harl Daven by the stove. Three board men in the outer office. A constable from the town rooms, soaked through at the cuffs. The launch crew waiting at Bell Quay with their life belts on. The telephone ringing and ringing from the upper office. No one shouting. That was one of the things people later misunderstood. There had been no grand argument. No man had struck the table. The decision had come in ordinary voices, between the ringing phone and the wind against the shutters.

He had returned from the soundings and said there might be water for a crossing before the surge.

Harl had asked how long.

Iven had said he could not tell.

That had been the truth. It had also been the sentence that allowed everything else to happen.

The Choice Between Two Safe Harbours

By midday, the snow had stopped. The sky remained low and colourless. Lio made tea, stronger than the day before, and brought the mugs to the table without asking whether Iven wanted one.

Iven drank because his hands had begun to ache with cold.

They had found the harbour board minute book in a crate from the former clerk's room. It was larger than the other volumes, with a black cover and reinforced corners. The binding had split along the lower edge. Its pages carried a mixture of official business and hurried additions made during emergencies: damaged steps, lights out at the signal yard, a lost skiff recovered near the mouth.

The eighteenth of January appeared first as a blank space.

There was a meeting recorded for the week before. Another for the month after. But the relevant date had no proper heading. Only a slip of thin paper, folded twice and inserted between pages, marked the place.

Lio unfolded it with a small bone tool.

The message was brief. It bore the stamp of the town rooms and a time written beside it: 08:17.

Hold launch Bell Quay pending East Cut confirmation. Inner fleet at risk on breaking moorings. Outer Reach advised upper-road movement. Maintain shore watch.

Iven read it once. Then again.

There was no name at the bottom. No signature. But he knew the language. The phrase *pending confirmation* belonged to Harl Daven. He had used it when he wanted a decision to sound tem-

porary, even when it had already begun to harden around everyone in the room.

Lio placed a finger near the edge of the paper.

"This says the launch was held before the Cut was marked impassable."

"Yes."

"Because the inner fleet was at risk."

"Yes."

"What does that mean?"

Iven turned his mug between his hands.

"The boats in the inner basin were tied up close. If the wind turned them against each other, lines could part. A boat loose in there could break a fuel pipe, crush a smaller hull, block the entrance. The launch was the only vessel with enough power to pull them clear or get men aboard."

"So if it went through the Cut—"

"And could not get back, the inner harbour had no one."

"Were the boats crewed?"

"Some. Not all."

"Could people have been hurt?"

"Yes."

The word sat between them. It was plain and insufficient.

Iven had long believed that the town had made a choice out of cowardice. That Harl Daven and the board men had looked toward the safer streets, the insured boats, the people whose doors were nearest to the harbour office, and decided that Outer Reach could wait. It had been easier to hold that belief because it gave him a shape for his anger. The town had failed. Sella had carried the message. He had done what he was told.

But the note on the desk was not kind enough to excuse anyone, nor cruel enough to confirm him.

The launch had been held at Bell Quay because the inner fleet was breaking against its moorings. If it had left, crewmen in the basin might have been left without help. If it had crossed, it might have been unable to return. If it had gone out and failed, Outer Reach would still have been waiting, and the town would have lost its strongest boat as well.

There was no clean version of it.

"The town had two safe harbours," Iven said at last.

Lio looked up.

"Not really safe," Iven added. "That is the wrong word. But two places people thought they could protect. The inner basin, where the boats were. And the upper road, where the Outer Reach families could get inland if they moved soon enough."

"And they could not protect both in the same way."

"No."

He remembered the maps laid out in the office. One showed the harbour and its berths. Another showed the road above the marsh, the rise toward the old schoolhouse, the few cottages scattered beyond the Head. Men had pointed at both. Their fingers had moved from paper to paper. Someone had said the launch must stay. Someone else had said the road would not hold. Harl had asked Iven whether there was passage through the East Cut.

He had said there might be.

Then Harl had asked whether he would stake the launch crew on it.

That was a different question.

Iven remembered looking at the window, at the white spray lifting above the outer wall. He remembered the great tiredness that came during emergencies, not after them. The sense that every answer would be wrong in a different direction.

"What did you say?" Lio asked.

Iven took a long time to reply.

"I said no."

Lio's gaze lowered to the paper.

"Did you believe it?"

"I believed the surge would shut the Cut. I believed the crew might make it out and not make it back."

"That isn't the same question."

"No."

"Did you believe the launch could cross before then?"

Iven looked at the tide note in the blue book. The words he had written were still there, as spare as a measurement: *Possible water at first lift.*

"I believed it was possible," he said.

"And you said no."

"I said I would not call it safe."

"Was that enough to hold it?"

"It was enough."

The distinction was cruel. He had spent years making it. In a harbour, a pilot's caution could save lives. A pilot who claimed certainty where there was none was dangerous. Yet caution also had consequences. It could become a shelter for those who had to decide. It could make an order sound like weather.

Lio closed the minute book.

"Do you want to stop?" he asked.

Iven almost said yes. Instead he reached for the next folder.

"No," he said. "Not yet."

They found a crew list for the launch. Five names. Two men Iven had known all his life. One was his cousin by marriage, though they had never called each other cousins. Another had been a boy in the signal yard when Iven first worked there, forever being told not to climb the railings. He had a daughter now, or had then. Iven could not remember the daughter's name.

There was also a mooring report. It recorded that three inner vessels had dragged against their lines before noon. One had struck the quay wall. Another had been pulled clear by the launch crew from the shore side. No one was injured. The record said nothing about what might have happened if the launch had been outside the basin.

"This supports the decision," Lio said.

"It supports part of it."

"You don't think that matters?"

"It matters."

Iven pushed the report away. "It does not make the people at Outer Reach less frightened. It does not make waiting easier because the reason was sound."

Outside, the church clock struck one. The notes came faintly through the snowy air.

He saw again the people on the far side of the water. They had gathered near the old stores and the roadhead, watching for the launch. They would have seen the sea. They would have seen no boat coming. Perhaps they had heard the bell at Bell Quay,

though distance and wind would have broken the sound. Perhaps they had thought, as people did, that someone in town had decided they were worth less.

For years, Iven had thought the same.

He did not stop thinking it entirely. But the papers would no longer allow him to think it simply.

Sella's Name in the Dispatch Book

The dispatch book was smaller than the others and heavier than it looked.

Its cover had once been red cloth. Damp had darkened it to the colour of old brick. The pages were ruled by hand, with columns for time sent, time received, destination, means of relay, and remarks. Many entries were ordinary enough: fuel requested, lamp glass delivered, a message for a skipper's wife, a notice that the coast road was clear after fallen stones had been removed.

Lio found the eighteenth of January late in the afternoon.

The office light had begun to fail. Snow lay in the gutter outside the window, though it had melted from the quay stones. The heater clicked on and off without making the room warm.

"There are several pages here," Lio said.

Iven came around the table.

The first entry was at 07:42. A message had been sent to the upper office asking that the road condition be checked. At 08:03, another message was sent to the signal yard requesting confirmation of the wind at the Head.

Then came the entry at 08:31.

Outer Reach: closure relayed. Hold at upper track. Move households by road to school shelter. S. Marr.

Iven did not touch the page.

He had known Sella had been involved. That was never the question. Everyone in Ternfold had known, in the loose way that towns knew things while refusing to discuss them. Sella had worked at the upper office then. She had taken messages, passed notices, kept the small register of families using the school shelter when weather made the road unsafe. People remembered seeing her in a yellow waterproof at the roadhead. They remembered her walking from house to house. They remembered that she was Iven Marr's sister.

What they did not remember was the wording.

Or perhaps they remembered it too well.

"S. Marr," Lio said quietly.

"Yes."

"Was she your sister?"

Iven gave a small nod.

Lio did not say he was sorry. There was nothing to be sorry for in a name on a page. Yet Iven felt the old pressure begin behind his ribs, the pressure that came whenever Sella's part in that day was reduced to a few public facts.

"She relayed the closure," Lio said.

"She did."

"Did she decide it?"

"No."

The answer came sharply enough that Lio looked at him.

Iven softened his voice. "No. She did not decide anything. She was the one who had to say it aloud."

The distinction had mattered to him once. He had made it to strangers. He had made it to people in the Anchor Rooms who spoke as though Sella had stood at a desk and shut the East Cut with her own hand. He had made it in his head while walking the long way around Market Lane to avoid passing the Marr house.

Yet he had not made it to Sella.

Not in the years that followed.

There was another entry at 08:49. It said that the first group had set out along the upper road. At 09:16, a message noted a tree down near the old dairy field. At 09:34, a second group was directed to wait under cover at the stores until the path could be cleared.

At 10:05, the same initial appeared again.

Eight persons reached school shelter. Two assisting elder at slope. More following.

Iven read the line until the letters blurred.

He remembered the upper road after all.

Not as a place seen from a window or described afterward by someone else. He remembered climbing it after the launch had been held. He had gone because Harl told him to check the road beyond the salt meadow. He had wanted to go because there was nothing useful left for him to do at Bell Quay except stand near the men who had listened to him.

The wind had been worse on the rise. It drove sleet straight into his face. The road was thick with grit and torn leaves. At the old dairy field, two men were hacking at a fallen limb with a hand saw. A woman in a blue coat was holding a lantern low against the wind.

It had been Sella.

He had seen her there. He knew he had.

She had called his name. He had gone to help shift branches from the track. Then he had continued toward the schoolhouse, where people had gathered in the hall with blankets and kettles. There were wet coats steaming on chairs. Children sleeping against their mothers. An old man with a bleeding hand, though it had been no more than a cut from a broken latch.

Everyone had been alive.

Everyone he saw, at least.

Why had he forgotten that?

Or had he not forgotten? Had he placed the memory somewhere he would not have to meet it?

Lio was looking at the page, not at him.

"The families reached shelter," Iven said.

"It seems they did."

"Not all at once. They were delayed."

"But they got there."

"Yes."

The word was difficult. It was relief, but not the clean relief he might have expected. It brought with it the knowledge that he had allowed the story to remain broken because its brokenness had suited the blame he carried.

Lio turned another page.

There was an entry from midday, written in darker ink. The road was closed at the lower track. School shelter full. No further movement from Outer Reach advised until weather slackened. Bell Quay launch retained for basin support.

Below that, squeezed into the margin, was a later note: All accounted at upper shelter by nightfall.

Iven put a hand on the back of the chair beside him. The room seemed to tip a little, then settle.

"All accounted," he said.

"Yes."

"That should have been in the main log."

Lio did not answer at once. "Why wasn't it?"

Iven could think of several reasons, and none of them was enough.

The daily log had recorded closure. It had recorded weather. It had reported the East Cut impassable after the surge. It had not recorded the early possible passage, the debate, the instruction to hold the launch, the damage in the basin, or the families making their way up the road. It had not recorded Sella's repeated messages. It had allowed the story to flatten into a single fact.

The Cut closed.

The launch stayed.

Outer Reach waited.

And because the people who had waited were visible, while the crew who might have been lost were only imagined, the town had found its grievance. It needed a person to carry that grievance. Sella had been available. She had spoken the words that reached the families. She had worn the office coat. She had been the sister of the young pilot whose report had helped make the decision.

"The account protected the town," Iven said.

Lio looked up.

"It made the storm responsible," Iven continued. "It made the Cut responsible. It made it sound as though no one had chosen anything."

"But people did choose."

"Yes."

"And Sella carried the message."

"Yes."

He swallowed. "So she carried more than the message."

Lio closed the dispatch book with both hands.

For a while there was only the small sound of the heater and the harbour wind moving along the outer wall.

Then Lio said, "My mother used to say records tell you what people were prepared to put their names beside."

Iven glanced at him.

"Was she an archivist too?"

"No. She worked in a housing office."

"That sounds worse."

Lio gave a quiet laugh. "Some days, perhaps."

He ran a thumb along the edge of the closed dispatch book.

"There was a building where we lived when I was small," he said. "Everyone said it had been emptied because it was unsafe. That was true. But the files said different things in different places. One note said repairs were delayed. Another said families had been offered rooms elsewhere. Another recorded that the rooms did not exist yet."

Iven listened.

"I used to think the missing part was the lie," Lio went on. "Later I thought it was often the gap between two true things. The building was unsafe. The families had nowhere ready to go. Both could be written down. Neither one, by itself, explained what happened to people."

"And what did happen?"

"Some stayed with relatives. Some went into temporary rooms. Some left the town. My mother kept a list for years. Not because it was official. She wanted to remember who had gone where."

Iven looked at the rows of old books around them.

"You learned to read gaps," he said.

"I learned that a gap can be a thing. Not empty. Just unacknowledged."

It was said without importance, as though Lio were explaining how to mend paper or keep damp out of a spine. Yet Iven felt it settle in him.

A gap could be a thing.

He thought of the four years between himself and Sella. They had not been empty. They had been filled with avoided streets, unanswered notes, things bought from shops when she was unlikely to be there. Filled with his certainty that she did not want him near her, and perhaps with her certainty that he had chosen the harbour over her once too often.

There had been a gap. He had treated it as if that were the same as nothing.

"Did Sella ever speak to you about the storm?" Lio asked.

Iven sat down again.

"At first."

"What did she say?"

"That she had done what she was told."

"And what did you say?"

The answer was not a sentence. It was a silence at the kitchen table. It was Sella taking off her coat and hanging it by the stove. It was him leaving before she could ask whether he had eaten. It was

their mother looking from one to the other, still alive then, still capable of calling them both foolish, but too tired to do it.

"Nothing useful," he said.

Lio accepted that.

Near closing time, he covered the books with clean cloth and wrote a list of files to examine the next day. Iven stood at the window. The snow had stopped for good. The clouds had lifted enough to reveal a strip of pale sky over the harbour mouth.

At Bell Quay, Deen Prawl was pulling down the shutter of the chandlery. A woman crossed the road carrying a basket of bread under her coat. Two children had made a rough slide in the thin snow beside the fish sheds, though their mother was already calling them away.

Ordinary life was continuing, as it always had. The town had not changed because a dispatch book had opened.

But Iven had.

Not enough. Not usefully enough. Still, something had shifted.

A Walk Along the Frozen Slipway

Lio locked the office at four. Iven waited beside him while he turned the key.

"You'll come tomorrow?" Lio asked.

Iven looked toward the darkening quay.

"Yes."

"For the books?"

"For the books."

Lio seemed about to say more. Instead he tucked the key into his coat pocket and went uphill toward Market Lane, carrying his satchel close against the cold.

Iven did not go home at once.

The tide had fallen. Along the edge of Bell Quay, the frozen slipway shone where water had run down it and stiffened in the afternoon cold. The old pilot steps were rimed white. Beyond them, the inner basin held its boats in a dark, cramped cluster, each one making the smallest sound against its fenders.

He walked slowly along the quay until he reached the iron ring where he had stood the morning he first came to the archive.

The harbour mouth was visible now. Far beyond the outer point, the sea lay dull under the low sky. The East Cut itself remained hidden, as it often was from Bell Quay. A person could spend a lifetime looking toward that passage and never see exactly what it was doing.

Iven put one hand on the cold iron.

He remembered the storm with more of its proper shape now. The soundings. The water lifting before the surge. Harl's question. His own caution. The launch crew waiting in their gear. Sella at the roadhead with a lantern. The upper road blocked, then cleared. The schoolhouse crowded but warm. Families arriving in ones and twos, wet and angry and safe.

Safe, he thought.

It was a word that needed care. Safe did not mean unharmed. It did not mean forgiven. Those who had waited at Outer Reach had reason to remember the waiting. The launch crew had reason to remember being held on shore while people across the water

looked for them. Sella had reason to remember repeating an order she had not made. He had reason to remember that he had helped make the order possible.

But none of it had been as simple as the town had allowed.

He had signed a log that day. He was certain of it now.

Not the tide book. Not the dispatch book. His pilot's log.

He could picture the cover: grey oilcloth, corners rubbed pale, his name written inside in the hand he had used when he still believed neatness was a kind of protection. The report would describe the weather. It would describe soundings and visibility. It would note the later condition of the East Cut. It would not mention the instruction to hold the launch. It would not mention that a possible passage had existed before the surge.

He had known, even then, that it was incomplete.

He remembered standing in the office after dark. The storm had begun to slacken. Someone had brought soup in a flask. Harl had told him to write his observations while they were fresh. Iven had done it. Then he had said the record ought to include the instruction from the town rooms.

Harl had looked at him over his spectacles.

"The dispatch book has the instruction," he had said.

"But the pilot report should show why the launch remained."

"The pilot report shows the water."

"People will ask."

"People always ask."

Iven had stood there with the pen in his hand.

Harl had not ordered him to omit the decision. Not exactly. He had merely separated the records into their proper boxes. Weather in one. Orders in another. Consequences nowhere at all.

Iven had said he would correct it later.

He remembered that now with painful clarity. He had said he would add a note when the weather settled, when the board met, when the proper copies could be checked. He had believed he meant it.

Then the days moved on. Repairs were needed. Boats had to be inspected. The road reopened. The school shelter emptied. People found their homes wet but standing. The town resumed its work. The storm became a story, and the story became a grievance. Each time Iven considered reopening the record, there seemed to be a reason to wait.

He had waited until waiting became its own decision.

Across the harbour, lamps came on in the upper windows of the Marr house.

The kitchen was bright first. Then the front room behind its faded blue curtain. Iven could not see Sella herself, only the softened movement of a shadow crossing the light.

He stood where he was.

There had been evenings when he imagined walking up the road and telling her everything at once. He would explain the report, the dispatch book, Harl Daven's manner, his own fear. In those imagined conversations, he found the correct words. They came in sensible order. Sella listened. She understood what he had failed to say.

But real people did not wait quietly for the arrangement of another person's truth.

And he did not know what Sella had lived with all this time. He did not know whether she would want the old storm opened again. He did not know whether the records would feel to her like

justice or merely another burden carried into the house.

He began walking.

Not toward the upper road. Not yet.

He walked along the frozen slipway until it ended at the low wall beside the old customs shed. There he stopped and looked back at the office. One upper window still held a trace of light, though Lio had gone. Perhaps it was only the reflection of a quay lamp. Perhaps the room had kept some of the day inside it.

Tomorrow, they would look for his pilot's log.

He would show Lio where the old reports had been stored, if they had not rotted or been thrown out in some clearance he had forgotten. He would read what he had written. He would not pretend the absence had appeared by itself.

The thought did not make him feel brave. It made him feel cold.

Still, he remained there until the first starless dark settled over the inlet.

Then he went home by the long road, with the harbour at his back and the East Cut hidden beyond the point, holding its old silence under the winter sky.

CHAPTER 3

*What the Town Chose to Leave
Unsaid*

Minutes Without a Formal Vote

THE SNOW DID NOT SETTLE THAT AFTERNOON. IT CAME DOWN in a weak, uncertain drift, whitening the harbour wall and the roofline of the net sheds before rain took it away again.

Iven left the office late, with the dispatch book still present in his mind as if he had carried it under his coat. Sella's initials had followed each instruction across the page. They had made a path from the harbour to Outer Reach. They had not explained whose path it was.

He went home by the lower lane, though the upper road would have been shorter. The lower lane kept him beside the basin, where the water lay dark between the pilings. A trawler bumped gently against the inner wall. Its ropes creaked. There was no weather in that sound now, only the ordinary movement of a boat tied where it ought to be.

For years, Iven had thought of the storm as a single decision. The launch stayed. The people at Outer Reach went by road. Sella sent the messages. A hard line, drawn in a room.

But a line on water was never as clean as it looked from shore.

By the time he reached his cottage, the light had gone. He laid coal on the stove, warmed the soup left in the pot, and ate without tasting much of it. On the table beside him lay the old folded chart he kept in the drawer. He had taken it out earlier in the winter, after Lio first mentioned the East Cut. Now he opened it again.

The chart was out of date in minor ways. A sandbar had shifted. A buoy shown near the outer shelf had long since been replaced. The road above Outer Reach had been widened after a later landslip. Yet the old shape remained. Bell Quay. The inner basin. The eastern shoulder. The Cut, narrow and stubborn between the shore and the rock shelf.

He placed his finger on the harbour office.

Then he traced the route to Outer Reach by water.

He had done it in daylight. He had done it at night. He had done it when the channel was bright and green under a summer sky, and when it was black enough to make a man doubt the edge of his own boat. A launch could pass through the Cut quickly when the sea allowed it. The upper road took longer. In fine weather, that difference seemed merely inconvenient.

In a storm, it became a question with people inside it.

He saw again the handwritten list from the household file. The names had not been marked in any order that made sense to a stranger. Some had been crossed through. Some had initials beside them. Three had remained untouched when the list was first made.

There had been a widow near the smokehouse. Two children in the Vale cottage. A man with a bad leg in the southern row. The repair-yard woman, perhaps already in labour, perhaps not. Iven

could no longer separate one anxious report from another.

And in the inner harbour there had been the trawlers, tied badly because they had come in too fast. The coast boat with a loose stern line. The rescue launch, fuelled and waiting, crewed by men whose families lived within walking distance of the quay. There had been fuel stores in the lower shed. There had been a man with a split hand. There had been old Nerr Voss, who had suffered a chest complaint the week before and was helping with lines because he would not stay indoors while boats were moving.

What did it mean to say the town had chosen?

It did not mean everyone had been asked. It did not mean anyone had been content. It meant that the people in the office had known the people outside it. They had known whose children slept in which cottages. They had known the men aboard the launch by their first names. They had known which boats carried debts, which households had no spare income, which old people could not climb a drifted road without help.

That knowledge had not made the choice good. It had made it harder to put down anywhere.

In the morning, Iven found Lio already at work beneath the yellow office lamps. The younger man had put the dispatch book back in its portfolio and laid out a fresh set of records beside it. The room was warmer than it had been, though the windows still held a pale film of cold.

There were three sheets under glass weights. One was a page from the harbour board's minute book. One was a folded sketch on thin paper. The third was a narrow strip of paper with several names written across it in faded pencil.

Lio did not begin with a question. He only moved a chair out from the table.

Iven took it.

The minute book page was dated 19 January. The day after the storm had closed the East Cut.

The handwriting was not Harl Daven's. It was the hand of the board clerk, narrow and legal-looking, with every letter pressed hard enough to leave ridges on the reverse. The entry began with ordinary business: damage to the lower steps, a request for rope from the store, an account of the warning flag. Then came a paragraph that had been entered between two ruled lines, as though there had not been room for it.

It recorded a discussion concerning the previous day's closure and the means by which households at Outer Reach had been directed to shelter. It noted that the harbour launch had been retained at Bell Quay. It noted that an upper-road party had been sent. It noted that further account would be deferred until conditions permitted the gathering of fuller statements.

There was no resolution beneath it.

No recorded vote.

No names attached to a decision.

The next item concerned repairs to a gate at the fish market.

Iven read the paragraph twice. Then he read it a third time, more slowly.

"No vote," Lio said.

Iven shook his head.

"Would there normally have been one?"

"Not in the middle of a storm."

"The meeting was the next day."

"The next day people were still getting back to their houses. The road had to be checked. Boats had to be looked after."

Lio nodded. "And afterward?"

Iven rested one hand beside the page. "Afterward, they may have decided the minute was enough."

"Who is they?"

The question was quiet. It did not demand an answer. But it left no easy place to put one.

"The board," Iven said at last. "Harl. The clerk. The men who had been in the office. Anyone who thought a longer account would make matters worse."

Lio looked down at the paper. "Worse for whom?"

Iven could not say.

He had known the board clerk then. Caddo Renn was a careful man, thin-faced and soft-spoken, with a habit of cleaning his spectacles whenever discussion became difficult. He had no love of danger. He had no stomach for public quarrels either. Iven could imagine him making the entry in the minutes. He could imagine the pause before the pen went down. He could imagine someone saying they would return to it later.

Later was a word with a long life in small towns.

It could mean next week. It could mean after the worst had passed. It could mean after people had stopped asking. It could mean never, while still sounding temporary.

"There is something else," Lio said.

He unfolded the thin sketch.

At first, Iven thought it was a chart fragment. Then he saw that it had been drawn on the back of a requisition sheet. Someone had turned the paper sideways and made a rough map

in pencil. The harbour basin was marked with two square shapes for the sheds. The East Cut was a narrow slash between two darkened points. Outer Reach was indicated by several small strokes along the shore.

Across the map, three routes had been drawn.

One ran from Bell Quay through the Cut and out toward Outer Reach. It had been heavily crossed through near the shelf. Beside it, a hand had written: return doubtful after turn.

Another went inland along the upper road. Its line bent around the ridge and disappeared toward the outer houses. Beside that route were two marks: drift at north bend; cart only to ridge post.

The third route was not a route at all. It ran from Bell Quay to the inner basin, toward the trawlers and coast boat. Beside it was a note in a different hand: lines failing / launch required here if break.

The map was not official. No title. No signature. No date beyond the 18 written in one corner.

Yet Iven knew it for what it was.

It was a working paper. A sheet made while people spoke over one another. A way of holding three dangers in front of the same eyes.

He recognized the broad marks along the coast. They had been made by someone who knew how water took the shore. The narrow writing beside the upper road might have been Sella's. Or Meren Vale's. Or another hand he had forgotten.

"Where was this?" he asked.

"Inside a folder of requisitions. It was stuck to the back of a form for lamp oil."

"It should have been in the storm papers."

"Perhaps someone did not think it was a storm paper."

Iven gave a small, tired breath. "That is one way to lose a thing."

Lio looked at the crossed-through water route. "Could the launch have gone?"

"Before the surge, perhaps."

"And returned?"

"That was the question."

The room seemed to narrow around the sketch. Iven remembered the launch crew waiting in their oilskins. Perran Holt at the helm. Daro Ketch checking a line that did not need checking. The third man, young Fenn Arlo, looking toward the mouth of the harbour with his jaw set.

None of them had been strangers to Outer Reach. Perran's mother had been born there. Daro had married a woman from the southern row. Fenn had cousins near the repair yard. If the launch had gone, it would not have gone toward anonymous people.

If it had overturned, it would not have taken anonymous men.

That was the part people disliked admitting afterward. A story about neglect needed a clear line between those left in danger and those who chose safety for themselves. But the launch crew had not sheltered in comfort. They waited in the harbour because the harbour needed them. The people who kept the boat in had not been indifferent to those on the far shore.

They had been frightened for everyone at once.

"Did anyone say they wanted the launch held for the boats?" Lio asked.

"Not like that."

"How, then?"

Iven studied the pencil marks. "They spoke of keeping the basin secure. Keeping a boat ready. Watching the trawlers. They spoke of the weather. They spoke of the launch crew."

"And Outer Reach?"

"They spoke of that too."

"But not enough?"

Iven looked at him.

Lio's expression was not accusing. It was intent, and perhaps sad. He had learned enough of the town to know that a record could make a person seem simple who had never been simple at all.

"There is no measure for enough," Iven said.

"No."

"That does not make it less important."

"No," Lio said again.

Outside, someone dragged a crate along the quay. The rough sound came through the window and stopped abruptly. Iven looked down at the map.

He had spent years believing that silence concealed a single cowardice. Now he saw that it had concealed something less clean. The town had chosen to protect its harbour, its crews, its boats, and perhaps the very means by which it could help anyone later. It had also chosen a road for people who had expected a boat.

It had made one group wait while it saved another from becoming the next emergency.

That was not innocence. It was not a plot either.

It was the sort of compromise that left no one untouched, and therefore no one willing to claim it aloud.

The People Behind the Abbreviations

For the next two days, the work became slower.

The records had begun to speak to one another, but they did not agree on the order of things. Lio spread the household list, dispatch book, minute page, and rough route map across the long table. Iven stood over them with a pencil, though he did not write at first.

The abbreviations had seemed routine when he first saw them. Initials beside names. Shortened place marks. A letter for a child sent running. A pair of letters for someone who had received a message.

But Lio had begun making a separate list.

"These initials appear in more than one place," he said. "Not always with the same meaning. I thought we could identify what we can without pretending certainty where we do not have it."

Iven approved of the wording. It was cautious without being useless.

On the household list, beside the name of the widow near the smokehouse, were the letters P.H. In the dispatch book, a later note mentioned that the first road party had passed the ridge post. The initials there were again P.H.

"Perran Holt," Iven said.

Lio looked up. "The launch helmsman?"

"Yes."

"Then he left Bell Quay?"

"At some point."

Iven tried to remember. Perran had been aboard the launch while the sea was worst. Later, perhaps after the surge had begun to ease, he had gone with the cart party. Or perhaps he had sent a message through someone else. The name stirred a memory of a wool cap pulled low over a wet forehead, of Perran taking a bundle of blankets from the stores.

"He had family at Outer Reach," Iven said.

"You mentioned that."

"His mother's people. The Holts had the cottage above the old smokehouse for years."

Lio made a note. He did not write more than Iven had said.

Beside another household name were the letters D.K.

"Daro Ketch," Iven said. "Launch crew too."

"And this one?"

"M.V. Meren Vale."

"The wireless clerk."

"Yes."

"He appears beside three messages to the upper road."

"That would be right."

"And S.M. appears beside nearly all the messages sent outward."

Iven said nothing for a moment.

"Sella was the one at the exchange," he said.

Lio turned a page in his notebook. "Not only at the exchange. There is a note in the chapel supplies ledger. It says blankets received from Bell Quay and lists S. Marr beside the delivery."

Iven held out his hand.

Lio passed him the thin sheet.

The handwriting was not Sella's. It belonged to someone at the chapel room, probably old Marda Sen, who had kept a practical hand over local collections and funerals for half her life. The note listed four blankets, two sacks of coal, a kettle, lamp oil, and a crate of dry bread from the bakery store.

Beside the blankets was written: brought by I.M. and S.M.

Iven felt the paper grow strangely heavy in his hand.

He had remembered the blankets. He had remembered carrying them. But in his memory he had been alone.

He saw the upper road again: snow mixed with rain underfoot, the cart wheels sinking in the softened ground, lanterns jerking in the wind. He had carried a stack of army-grey blankets over one shoulder. Someone had been ahead of him, holding the cart rail. He had not seen a face. He had only seen a dark green coat and a pale hand reaching back to steady the load.

Sella.

Of course it had been Sella.

She had not remained at the telephone. She had relayed the messages, then gone up the road with the things people needed once the message had reached them. He had been beside her. He had forgotten that, or made himself forget it.

"You were both there," Lio said.

Iven nodded.

"Did you take the blankets from the harbour office?"

"From the stores at the lower shed."

"Who told you to?"

"No one."

He heard how flat the answer sounded. He tried again.

"There was a request from the chapel room. Sella passed it on. I was standing there. We took what we could carry."

"That seems worth recording."

Iven looked at the line: I.M. and S.M.

"It was recorded," he said.

"In a supplies ledger."

"Yes."

"Not in the harbour account."

Iven set the paper down.

There were many such fragments. A stable receipt showed that two horses had been sent toward the ridge, one with a lame fore-leg but judged fit enough for the road. A schoolroom inventory listed benches moved to the chapel room, along with cups and a tin of dried milk. A short note from the fish market mentioned that the market stove had been loaned to the outer shelter because the chapel grate drew badly in an east wind.

The town had helped itself in pieces.

No one document held the whole of it.

A person could read only the harbour log and see a launch retained at Bell Quay. A person could read only the dispatch book and see Sella Marr repeating an order not to expect passage by water. A person could read only the minutes and see discussion deferred. A person could read only the chapel lists and find blankets, coal, bread, and names written beside deliveries.

What would a stranger make of it?

What had the town made of it, in the years when those pages remained shut in a damp storehouse?

Lio sat back from the table and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "A catalogue usually wants one description for each thing."

"Does it?"

"A useful one does. Date, origin, condition, subject. It helps someone find what they need."

"And what happens when the thing is more than one thing?"

Lio looked at the books around them. "Then the description can lie by being tidy."

Iven considered this.

He had thought of cataloguing as a harmless activity. A way of putting records into order before damp took them. But Lio's work had its own form of judgment. To call the dispatch book an administrative volume was true. To call it a record of the East Cut closure was also true. To call it evidence against Sella would be false, though someone could do so if they wished.

The same page could become a different thing in different hands.

"You cannot write every life into a label," Iven said.

"No."

"And you cannot leave it blank."

Lio gave a faint smile. "That is the trouble."

Later that afternoon, they found a small envelope in the back of the harbour board minute book. It had no seal. Its flap had been tucked in rather than pasted down. Inside was a folded list of those who had taken part in the upper-road party.

The names were not formal. Some were surnames only. Some were first names with an initial. One entry read merely Deen, cart. Another read Nerr with fuel. Near the bottom were Iven M. and Sella M.

There was no author named.

On the reverse, someone had written: all accounted at chapel by 5:10 except Lorn household, later reached.

Iven knew the Lorns. The surname had belonged to the family with the two children. The small girl had been feverish. The father had refused to leave at first because he had a boat shed full of tools and feared the sea would take them. In the end, he had come with one child under his coat and the other walking between two adults, holding on to their hands.

Or had that been another family?

Iven shut his eyes briefly.

Memory did not return as a page. It returned as weather: a pressure in the body, a sound at the edge of hearing, a wet sleeve against a wrist. He could see a child's red mitten. He could see Sella kneeling in the chapel room to wrap a blanket around narrow shoulders. He could see himself feeding coal into a stove that smoked until someone opened the vent.

He could not say whose child it had been.

That failure hurt him, though he knew it should not have surprised him. The storm had happened long ago. People had moved away, grown old, died, or become the sort of names spoken only when someone pointed to a house and said who used to live there.

Yet the town had held the day close enough to blame it for years.

It had remembered the absence of the launch. It had not remembered, or had not chosen to remember, the names of those who carried blankets uphill.

That was how silence worked. It did not erase everything. It selected.

Near closing time, Lio folded the road-party list back into its envelope. "I think these should be described together," he said.

"The lists?"

"The dispatches, the route sketch, the household pages, the chapel supplies records. Not as one document. As linked records."

Iven looked across the table.

"So someone looking for the closure finds the road party too," Lio said. "And someone looking for the shelter finds the messages that sent people there."

"You can do that?"

"I can note the connection. I can note that the accounts are incomplete."

Iven looked at the books. "Incomplete is not the same as wrong."

"No," Lio said. "But it matters if people mistake one for the other."

The lamps hummed above them. In the window, the harbour had disappeared into early dark.

"Do not make it sound kinder than it was," Iven said.

Lio's pencil stopped.

"I will not."

"And do not make Sella the whole of it."

Lio met his eyes. "I will not do that either."

Iven nodded once. It was not gratitude, exactly. But it was close enough to require care.

Sella Remembers the Dispatch Room

He carried the copied entry to Sella three days later.

He did not decide to go in the way he decided to mend a fence or clear a gutter. There was no moment of purpose. He woke before dawn, heard the wind worrying the chimney, and found himself making tea in the dark. By eight, the copied page was folded inside his coat pocket.

The snow had hardened overnight. It lay in the gutters and along the upper steps in narrow grey ridges. Iven walked slowly, partly because the stones were slick and partly because there was no use arriving before he had found a reason for himself.

Sella's workroom occupied the back part of the Marr house. He knew that because Deen Prawl had mentioned it once, years ago, when he said she had repaired a torn sail better than the man who had made it. He knew that because he had seen the light in its window from the road. He knew that because some knowledge remained even when people stopped speaking.

He reached the house and stood by the gate.

The front windows were as they had been on the morning Lio first called him to the archive. The kitchen blind was raised. The front room curtain was faded blue. A small drift of snow had collected beneath the sill.

He could have turned back then.

Instead, he went around the side path and knocked at the workroom door.

For a little while, there was no answer. He heard a chair move. Then the latch lifted.

Sella stood in the doorway with a length of sailcloth over one arm. She had a pencil tucked behind one ear. Her hair was pinned up carelessly, and there was a pale smudge of chalk on the sleeve of her green cardigan.

She looked at him without surprise. Or perhaps surprise had passed too quickly to show.

Iven removed his cap.

He told her he had brought something from the harbour office.

Sella's eyes moved to the folded paper in his hand. She stepped aside.

The workroom smelled of canvas, wax, tea, and the faint hot-metal scent of the small stove in the corner. Rolls of cloth stood upright in a rack by the wall. A sail lay across the central table, marked with chalk lines and pinned patches. The room had once been their mother's washroom. Iven remembered the old sink, the shelves for jars, the cracked tile near the back wall. Sella had remade it without removing all trace of what had been there before.

He stood near the door until she indicated the chair by the stove.

He sat.

For a moment, neither spoke.

Then he placed the copied dispatch entry on the table between them.

Sella did not touch it immediately. She read the visible lines: the hour, Outer Reach chapel room, launch retained Bell Quay, gather households, await road party.

Her face changed very little. Yet Iven saw her shoulders settle, as if she had set down something she had been holding without knowing it.

She said that Lio had found the dispatch book.

Iven said he had.

She asked whether Lio had found the other records too.

Iven told her about the minute book, the route sketch, the lists from the chapel room. He did not make a speech of it. He named the things one by one.

Sella listened with both hands flat on the table.

When he finished, she looked at the copied entry again. Then she said that people had always remembered that message.

Not the road party, she said. Not the blankets. Not the second calls to the exchange. They remembered the line that told them the launch would not come.

Iven looked at the sailcloth under her hands. It was an old sail, repaired in a dozen places. Some patches were nearly the same shade as the original. Others were darker, their seams showing plainly.

He told her that he had thought she had sent the order.

Sella looked at him then.

She said she had relayed it.

Her voice was calm. It was not forgiving. It was not angry either. It had the tone of someone setting a tool back in its proper place.

Iven said he knew that now.

Sella asked whether he did.

He could not answer quickly. The years between them were too full of quick answers. Each had been used as a wall.

At last, he said that he knew she had not made the decision alone. He knew she had been asked to speak it. He knew he had been in the room while it happened.

She looked down at the copied page.

Then she told him something he had not remembered.

When Harl Daven said the launch would stay, she had not picked up the pencil at once. She had asked what she was meant to tell Outer Reach. Harl had said to tell them passage by water was not possible. She had looked at Iven beside the chart table.

He had been wet through from the headland. He had been holding the sounding pole against the wall. Harl had asked him whether the Cut could be taken.

Iven said he remembered that.

Sella said he had told them there was a chance, but not a safe return.

He remembered saying it. He had not remembered that she heard.

She said that was why she wrote the message as she did. Not that the Cut was closed. Not at first. She wrote that the launch was retained and that no passage by water should be expected. It was the language given to her, but she had chosen the words that left room for the truth she understood.

Iven looked at the copied entry.

The difference seemed small. It was not small.

A closed Cut suggested the sea had made the decision alone. A retained launch named a human act. Yet the words did not name who had acted, or why.

He asked whether she had wanted them to know.

Sella was quiet for a while.

Then she said she had wanted the shared choice recorded. She had not wanted herself cleared by turning the rest of them into villains. That was not the same thing.

Iven watched her hands. They were older than he remembered, though perhaps both their hands were. The fingers were marked by needle pricks and work. One thumb had a small pale scar from some old injury he could not place.

She said that after the storm, people came to her because her initials were in the dispatch book. Some came with questions. Some came with anger. Some did not need to say anything. They looked at her in shops, at the market, on the road above the harbour.

Harl had died some years later. The board clerk had moved away. The launch crew had become fathers, grandfathers, men with their own stories. But Sella remained in Ternfold. Her name remained in the book.

Iven felt the old instinct to defend himself rise and fail.

He told her that people had spoken to him too.

She said she knew.

There was no accusation in it. That was worse.

He said that he had not answered them well.

Sella turned the copied page over. The reverse was blank.

She asked him what he had said.

He thought of the Anchor Rooms. The post queue. A man at the chandlery saying the launch should have gone. A woman on Market Lane saying the harbour had protected its own. He thought of himself looking away, saying the Cut had been impossible by the time anyone could judge it. He had said this because it was true. He had also said it because it was the only truth that did not require him to speak of the earlier window.

He told Sella that he had let the weather take too much of the blame.

She did not reply.

Outside, a cart passed along the upper road. Its wheels broke the crusted snow with a soft, repeated crunch.

Iven said that he had been angry with her because her name was there. He had been angry because she had carried the message, and because he could see that more clearly than he could see what he had done.

Sella's gaze returned to him.

He expected her to say that she had known. Instead, she said that anger could be useful when it kept a person from having to choose between sorrow and shame.

He looked at the stove.

The coal had settled into a dull red bed. He could hear the quiet dry tick of metal cooling and warming again.

She said she had not wanted him to declare her innocent. She did not think she was innocent. None of them had been innocent in the way people wanted innocence to work. They had chosen what they believed would leave the fewest people beyond help. They had been wrong about some things. They had been right about others. They had been frightened, hurried, tired, and responsible for people they knew.

She said that afterward, the town wanted a single person to blame because a shared burden was harder to carry.

Iven sat very still.

He could not tell whether she had rehearsed those words in the years since. They did not sound rehearsed. They sounded worn smooth by being thought many times alone.

He told her Lio wanted to connect the records without making them into one neat account.

Sella gave a small nod.

Then she said that was sensible.

"Would you want him to include your name?" Iven asked.

She considered him. "It is already there."

"In the catalogue."

"It should say what I did."

He waited.

"It should not say I did it alone."

He nodded.

For the first time since entering the workroom, he felt he had been given something practical to do. Not absolution. Not agreement. Only work with a shape.

He said he would help Lio identify the missing context.

Sella looked at him for a moment. "Without rewriting the log?"

"Without rewriting it."

The answer mattered to her. He saw that.

A logbook was not a confession. It was not a court. It was a record made in the pressure of its own hour. To alter it now would be another kind of silence, a smoother one. But to leave it alone, as if its omissions had no weight, would be a choice too.

Sella picked up the copied sheet and folded it along its existing crease.

She said that there had been a note made that morning, before the worst of the surge. She had written part of it. She did not know where it had gone.

Iven asked what it said.

She shook her head.

Not that she did not know. Not exactly.

She said it had been only a list of possibilities. A launch through the Cut. A cart on the upper road. Men kept at the inner basin. It had not been a decision. It had been a page on which they had tried to see the whole trouble at once.

Iven thought of the route sketch in Lio's office.

He said they had found something like that.

Sella's hand stopped on the folded paper.

She did not ask to see it. She only said that then it had survived better than people had.

It was the closest she came to bitterness.

After that, they spoke of smaller matters. The snow along the upper road. The roof over the harbour office. Deen Prawl's habit of selling poor twine at a good price. Sella said she had mended a sail for a boy who believed a patch could be invisible if he wished hard enough.

Iven said the boy would learn.

Sella said perhaps he would.

When he stood to leave, she did not ask him to stay for tea. He did not offer to return. The restraint between them was no longer hostile, but it was still there, like ice that had thinned without yet breaking.

At the door, he put on his cap.

He told her he was sorry that she had carried the message alone for so long.

Sella looked past him toward the snow-muted yard.

Then she said she had not carried it alone. She had carried it where people could see.

Iven understood the distinction. He wished he had understood it earlier.

They parted politely.

No promise was made about another meeting.

A Record Made of Omissions

The following week, the harbour office seemed changed by nothing more than paper.

The same cold entered around the window frames. The same heater glowed without warming the far corners. The same rain-dark wall stood beyond the tables. Yet the records no longer lay like separate objects recovered from a flood.

They had begun to gather around the storm.

Lio worked with two notebooks now. One was the formal catalogue register. The other was a rough book of connections, uncertainties, and questions that could not be answered by any single page.

Iven saw him hesitate over the description for the dispatch book.

At last Lio read it aloud in a low voice, not as a proclamation but to test whether the words could bear their own weight. He described it as a harbour office dispatch register containing outgoing communications during the East Cut storm, including notices to Outer Reach concerning the retained launch and the upper-road evacuation.

Then he stopped.

"Does evacuation make it sound too orderly?" he asked.

Iven thought of the cart in the mud, the horses, the children, the blankets. "It was orderly by the end."

"And before?"

"Before, it was people getting out of bad weather."

Lio wrote a note beside the description. He did not cross out the word. He added that the related records indicated an improvised road movement carried out under storm conditions.

"That is a long phrase," Iven said.

"It is."

"But it is nearer."

Lio smiled faintly and continued.

For the minute book, he noted the discussion of the launch retention without a formal vote recorded. For the route sketch, he noted that it appeared to compare possible water, road, and harbour-security responses. He did not name its author. He did not claim it proved a particular person had argued for one route or another.

For the chapel ledger, he noted the receipt of shelter supplies and the names of several carriers, including I.M. and S.M.

Iven watched the initials take their place in Lio's hand.

They were not an answer. They were not a repair. But they put two people back into the same line, where they had been on the road that day.

"There should be a note," Iven said.

Lio looked up.

"Not in the old book. Beside the catalogue record."

"What kind of note?"

Iven looked through the window. The outer marker was visible that morning, a small white stroke beyond the harbour mouth. The sea had quieted. It looked almost harmless.

"That the records do not contain a full account," he said. "That the closure involved the safety of Outer Reach households, the launch crew, and the vessels in the inner basin. That decisions were discussed, but no named vote was entered."

Lio waited.

"And that the messages were relayed by the people at the office," Iven continued, "not made by one person with a pencil."

Lio wrote carefully.

When he had finished, he turned the notebook so Iven could read it.

The wording was plain. It did not make anyone heroic. It did not soften the people at Outer Reach into a problem solved by blankets and coal. It did not pretend the launch's absence had not frightened them, or that the road party had erased what they had been made to endure.

It also did not let the harbour office become a place where one woman's initials stood for the burden of everyone present.

Iven read it twice.

"Is that what you mean?" Lio asked.

Iven nodded.

"Near enough," he said.

Lio put the note with the other materials. "Near enough is useful in harbour work."

"It can be."

"Not in history?"

Iven looked at the shelves, the crates, the damp-spotted ledgers. "History has to make do with what comes in."

"And what does not?"

He thought of Sella in her workroom. Her hands on the sailcloth. Her refusal to be made innocent at someone else's expense. He thought of Harl Daven, long dead, and of the clerk who had written discussion then moved on to a broken market gate. He thought of Perran Holt carrying blankets after waiting aboard the launch. He thought of the household names, crossed through one by one as word reached the chapel room.

"It should leave room for what is missing," he said.

Lio looked at him, then wrote that down too. Not in the catalogue. In his rough book.

By late afternoon, they had returned the most fragile pages to protective folders. Lio placed slips between related records so they could be retrieved together. Iven helped him lift the December ledger onto a raised shelf away from the outer wall.

The book was heavier than it looked.

As they set it down, Iven noticed the cut space in the binding again. The missing leaf remained missing. No new page had appeared to explain it. No confession had risen from the damp. The absent paper might have held a fuller account. It might have held only another message, a list, a note later judged inconvenient or unnecessary.

He no longer believed finding it would settle everything.

Some facts had been lost. Some had been omitted. Some had survived in forms too small to satisfy anyone who wanted a verdict.

But the shape of the day had changed.

Not the past itself. The past was beyond that. The launch had stayed. The road had been taken. People had waited in fear. People had carried blankets uphill. A sister had sent messages while her

brother stood close enough to see the chart table and far enough away, in later years, to let her stand alone.

Those things remained.

Yet Iven could see now that silence had not been empty. It had been full of unclaimed portions: fear, duty, loyalty, shame, pride, and the small acts of care that did not fit a story people were ready to tell.

When he left the office, the tide was on the turn.

He paused at the end of Bell Quay, as he had on the first morning Lio asked for his help. The water moved out beneath the harbour wall in a dark, steady pull. Beyond the point, the East Cut lay open under a weak strip of winter light.

It had not forgiven anyone. It had not explained itself.

It was only water, narrowing between land and rock, carrying what came through it and leaving the rest behind.

Iven stood there until the cold reached his hands.

Then he turned toward the upper road.

CHAPTER 4

Iven Names His Part in the Silence

The Harbour Holds Its Breath

BY THE TIME THE FROST BEGAN TO THIN ALONG BELL QUAY, Iven had stopped waking before daylight in order to listen for weather.

He still woke early. That was different. A man who had spent most of his life rising for tides did not easily become a man who slept until the town had started its work. But the old urgency had gone from it. He no longer lay in bed trying to judge the wind from the small tremor in the chimney. He did not picture the basin, the outer marker, the narrow water beyond Greycap Point.

On that morning, though, he put on his coat before the kettle had boiled and walked down to Bell Quay with his cap in one hand.

The stones were wet rather than white. A skin of ice remained in the shadows beside the customs shed, but the sun had reached the upper wall and had begun to loosen it. Water ticked from the iron rings. The smell of the harbour had changed almost imperceptibly. Beneath coal smoke and old fish crates, there was the dark, mineral smell of mud uncovered by a falling tide.

At the end of the quay, Iven stood beside the ring where ropes had worn the stone pale. He looked toward the harbour mouth.

The East Cut was hidden by the shoulder of land, as it usually was. Nothing could be learned from the view except the ordinary facts: the sea lay low and pewter-coloured beyond the point; gulls wheeled above the outer wall; the wind came lightly from the north-west and ruffled the water without troubling it.

Still, he could see the route in his mind.

The pilot's course had never been a straight line. A vessel leaving Bell Quay first had to ease clear of the inner basin, where moored boats narrowed the water. Then it passed the old fuel shed and the outer lamp post, keeping the deeper line beneath Greycap Point. After that came the Cut itself: rock shelf to one side, hard shore to the other, current running across the channel when tide and wind had quarrelled long enough.

He had known every alteration in it once. A new tooth of rock exposed after winter storms. A shoal that seemed to shift only because men remembered it differently. The place where the current looked harmless from shore and caught a vessel by the stern.

He walked the route now, not on water but along the quay, then up toward the signal yard. His boots found the old paths without asking him to think about them. Past the shuttered lamp-oil store. Past the low wall where crews had left coils of wet line. Past the steps used by pilots when they still boarded larger boats from the harbour launch.

At the signal yard gate, he stopped.

The gate was no longer locked. Its hinges had been oiled recently, perhaps by someone from the council yard. It opened with a reluctant, orderly sound. Inside, the old platform stood above the slope, its rail silvered by weather. The signal pole had been removed years ago, but the concrete footing remained.

From there, he could see farther out.

The inlet widened, then bent south. The sea beyond the headland showed in a narrow band. The East Cut itself was only a suggestion of darker water between the shore and the outer shelf. On a morning like this, it would have been manageable. Not easy, perhaps, but manageable. A competent launch crew could have passed through it without much ceremony.

That was the cruelty of calm water. It made memory sound unreasonable.

Iven rested his hands on the cold rail. The storm had not been calm. It had been a northerly gale, building through the dark and tightening around the harbour by morning. The Cut had changed by the minute. Water had risen over the outer ledge. The return passage had become doubtful before anyone could be certain it had disappeared.

He knew all that.

He had known it then.

Yet he had also known that there had been a brief earlier opening. He had recorded it in his sounding book: possible water at first lift. He had come back to the harbour office wet through and tired, carrying that uncertainty with him. When Harl Daven asked whether he would call the crossing safe, Iven had said no.

He had not lied.

But he had not said everything.

For years, he had treated that difference as a technical matter. A pilot was asked for judgment, not possibility. The launch crew needed more than a chance. The inner basin needed the launch. The road party needed time. There were reasons on every side of the room.

All of that remained true.

But standing above the harbour, with thaw water slipping from the rail onto the ground below, Iven understood something he had resisted because it was too plain.

His silence had not begun after the storm.

It had begun in the office while the storm was still happening.

He had let Harl's question narrow the answer. He had let the room settle around the word *safe*, because safe was a word he could defend. He had let the launch be retained without saying aloud that the water had briefly offered another, terrible possibility.

There had been good reasons for caution. There had been no good reason to make caution sound like fate.

Below him, a cart rattled along Bell Quay. Deen Prawl was hauling sacks toward the chandlery, his collar turned up against the wind. He looked small from the signal yard, and older than Iven remembered, though the town had made everyone older by degrees.

Deen saw him and raised a hand.

Iven returned the gesture.

Nothing passed between them. That was how most things passed in Ternfold. A nod. A lifted hand. A shared glance toward the weather. People made room for one another's burdens without always asking what was inside them.

Perhaps that kindness had helped the silence survive. Perhaps it had made silence easier to mistake for restraint.

Iven looked once more toward the East Cut. Then he turned downhill and walked to the harbour office.

Lio was already there, kneeling beside an open crate with a cloth wrapped around his nose and mouth. Fine pale dust had gathered on the floorboards around him.

"What have you found?" Iven asked.

Lio looked up. "Either a collection of pilot reports, or the remains of a very determined mouse household."

Iven took off his cap. "The mice would have better handwriting."

"That is what I feared."

The office had begun to look less like a place rescued from neglect and more like a place with a purpose. The crates were lifted from the damp floor. The ledgers had been grouped by type and date. Protective folders stood in neat rows along the old chart-room shelf. Lio had brought in a second heater, though it did little for the far end of the room.

On the central table lay the materials they had been working through: the dispatch register, the rough route sketch, the chapel supplies ledger, the household list, and copies of the relevant minute-book pages.

There was room among them now for uncertainty. Iven noticed that before he knew why.

Lio had placed small slips beside several papers. On one was written: *author uncertain*. On another: *sequence of events not fully established*. A third read: *later recollection differs from contemporaneous record*.

Iven stood over the table for a moment.

"You have made a good deal of room for not knowing," he said.

Lio removed the cloth from his face. "There is already a good deal of it. I thought it should be visible."

"Most people prefer a clean label."

"Most people prefer a clean room too. That does not mean everything should be thrown away."

Iven looked at him. Lio returned the look without defensiveness. His pencil was tucked behind one ear. There was dust in his dark hair.

"You found the pilot reports?" Iven asked.

Lio pointed to the crate.

"There are several years mixed together. Some are water-damaged. A few have no names. But this bundle is from the right winter, I think."

Iven crouched beside him.

The papers were tied with faded blue tape. He knew the tape. It had once been kept in a drawer beneath the outer office telephone, along with seals, spare nibs, string, and a tin of rusted clips. He put one hand near the bundle but did not touch it.

"Would you like me to open it?" Lio asked.

"No," Iven said. Then, after a moment, "Not yet."

Lio nodded. He did not pretend not to understand.

Outside, a gull struck the office window with its shadow and passed on.

A Catalogue Note for the Missing Context

They opened the bundle after tea.

The papers had been folded into quarters and pressed flat by years of storage. Some bore the harbour office stamp. Others had only a date, a tide mark, and the name or initials of the person who had made the report. The pages smelled of dust, salt, and the dry bitterness of old ink.

Iven sorted them slowly.

There were routine entries first. A shallow-draft freighter delayed by fog. A buoy reported adrift after a southerly blow. A fishing boat brought in with engine trouble near the outer shelf. The language of the reports was practical and reduced. Wind. Tide. Visibility. Action taken.

He found his own handwriting before he found the date.

It leaned forward, as it had in the tide book. The letters were tighter than his present hand. He had been younger then, and still believed a report should look as if it had been made by someone who could not be shaken.

"Here," he said.

Lio moved around the table but did not touch the page.

The report was headed with the date: 18 January. Beneath it, in Iven's hand, were the weather observations. Northerly gale. Sleet. Visibility poor beyond outer line. Heavy surge anticipated. Soundings at first lift indicated variable passage at East Cut, not recommended for launch transit pending further confirmation.

He read the sentence once. Then again.

It was not the sentence he had remembered writing.

He had remembered the phrase *possible water*. He had remembered Harl asking whether he would stake the launch crew on it. He had remembered saying no.

But there it was, set down in his own hand: *not recommended for launch transit pending further confirmation.*

It was more cautious than he remembered. It was also more specific.

"That is enough to support the hold," Lio said.

Iven kept his eyes on the page. "Yes."

"Is it accurate?"

"It was accurate when I wrote it."

"And now?"

Iven put one finger beside the line, not on it. "Now I remember the water before the surge more clearly than I remembered writing this."

Lio was quiet.

"That is not the same as saying the report was false," Iven said.

"No."

"A launch could have gone through. It might even have reached Outer Reach. But I could not say it would come back. The current was beginning to turn. The sea was lifting over the shelf. If the crew had gone out and lost the channel on return, we would have had no launch in the basin and no crew to send anywhere."

"You believed that?"

"I did."

"Do you still?"

Iven looked toward the window. The harbour showed in a dull strip between the frames. A thin line of light rested on the basin, then vanished as cloud passed overhead.

"I believe it was a reasonable fear," he said. "That is not the same as knowing what would have happened."

Lio wrote nothing. His pencil lay on the table beside his notebook.

That restraint made Iven go on.

"The report was written after the surge had begun to close the Cut. Not much after. Perhaps an hour. Perhaps less. I do not know. At the time, the earlier passage already felt finished. It had become something I could not guarantee. So I wrote from where the water had got to, not from where it had been."

"And the earlier possibility disappeared from the report."

"Yes."

"Did you mean for it to disappear?"

The question did not land sharply. That made it harder.

Iven picked up the paper and held it by the edges. The lower corner had been softened by damp. A small brown bloom travelled upward into the margin.

"I meant to write a fuller account," he said. "Not there. Not in that report. There was meant to be a separate note."

"For the board?"

"For the office file. For whoever had to explain why the launch stayed. Harl said the dispatch book would contain the order. The pilot report would contain the water. At the time, it sounded sensible."

"And later?"

"Later, every record had its own little piece. No one piece held the decision."

Lio nodded slowly.

On the table between them, the harbour's official history lay in fragments. A dispatch register showing the launch retained at Bell Quay. A tide observation showing possible water at first lift.

A pilot report advising against transit pending further confirmation. A rough map showing three competing dangers. A chapel list naming those who carried supplies. A minute book deferring fuller statements until later.

Each was true.

None was enough.

Lio brought out his rough notebook. "Would you dictate something?"

Iven looked at him. "For the catalogue?"

"For a contextual note. Not a correction to the original report."

"What difference is there?"

"The report remains what you wrote at the time. A note can describe what other records show beside it. It can also make clear that later memory is not the same kind of evidence."

Iven considered this.

"You would put my memory in the archive?"

"Only if you want it there. And only as recollection. Not as a replacement for the records."

"People will read it as if it settles something."

"Some may." Lio paused. "But they will do that anyway. The question is whether we leave them only the version that makes the weather responsible for all of it."

Iven looked down at the report. His younger hand had made a clean, defensible account. That was what he had been trained to do. A pilot did not crowd a page with doubt. He judged. He advised. Others acted.

But he had been one of the others too. He had known that long before the paper found its way into Lio's hands.

"All right," he said.

Lio sat with the notebook open. "Take your time."

"No," Iven said. "If I take too much time, I will begin arranging it."

He stood at the table with one hand resting against the wood.

"Write this," he said.

Lio lowered his pencil.

"The pilot report for 18 January records conditions after the outer surge had begun to make return through the East Cut uncertain. It does not describe the earlier sounding observation that a limited passage may have existed at first lift."

Lio wrote, his pencil moving steadily.

"Add that the observation did not establish safe transit," Iven said. "Do not make it sound as though I am saying the launch should have gone. I cannot say that."

"I understand."

"No. Write it plainly. The earlier observation indicated possibility, not safety. The later report advised against launch transit. The distinction matters."

Lio looked up. "Because?"

Iven swallowed.

"Because a possible passage is not a promise. But it is also not the same as no passage."

Lio wrote again.

Iven listened to the pencil. It was an ordinary sound. It reminded him of Sella at the kitchen table when they were young, making lists for their mother: flour, soap, lamp oil, thread. It re-

minded him of the dispatch room, where pencils had moved while wind struck the shutters and men tried to decide which danger they could live with.

"Write that the decision to retain the launch involved the condition of the East Cut, the risk to the launch crew, and the failing moorings in the inner basin," he said. "Write that the records show an upper-road movement was undertaken for Outer Reach households. Write that the surviving documents do not preserve a complete account of the discussion or identify a formal vote."

Lio stopped writing.

"And?" he asked.

Iven knew what was missing.

He had made a life of knowing what was missing. A line not quite where it should be. A sound absent from an engine. A vessel moving too slowly against a current. A light that should have appeared at the mouth of the harbour and did not.

He had known what was missing from the storm account. He had known it for years.

"And write that the pilot's recollection was made later," he said. "It should not be read as exact in every detail."

Lio's expression changed, though only slightly. It became more attentive.

"You want that included?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Iven rested both hands on the table.

"Because I have forgotten things that happened beside me," he said. "I forgot Sella carried blankets with me. I forgot she was at the roadhead before I remembered the lantern. I remembered the

fear in the office and let it grow larger than the people who did other work after the decision."

The room was quiet.

"If I say what I remember," he continued, "I should say what I do not know."

Lio wrote that too, though he did not write it word for word. He read the note back in parts as he made it.

The written record had been created under storm conditions. The later recollection described remembered circumstances and omissions but did not claim complete recall. Where the record and recollection differed in emphasis, both should remain available to readers.

Iven listened.

"That is fair," he said.

"It is not meant to be kind or unkind."

"No."

"Only clear."

"Clear is hard enough."

They worked until the weak afternoon light failed.

Lio placed the pilot report in a protective sleeve. Beside it, he arranged copies of the tide entry, the dispatch-book page, and the route sketch. He did not stack them into a single story. He laid them close enough that a reader would understand they belonged together, but separate enough that each could resist the others.

"Would you put a heading over them?" Iven asked.

"In the catalogue?"

"Yes."

Lio thought for a moment. "Related records concerning the East Cut closure and Upper Road movement."

"That sounds like a shelf."

"It is a shelf."

Iven gave a small breath that might have been laughter.

Then Lio added, beneath it, in smaller writing: *Accounts incomplete; decision-making distributed across records.*

Iven read the words.

"Distributed," he said.

"Is that wrong?"

"No. It is just a word that makes a thing sound orderly."

"Would shared be better?"

"Shared can sound willing."

Lio waited.

"Leave it," Iven said at last. "It is near enough."

The phrase had become one he trusted less than before. But perhaps that was why it mattered. Near enough was not a harbour. It was not a place to stay. It was only the distance from which a person might begin to see what remained unspoken.

Tea in Sella's Workroom

He went to Sella two days later, after the morning tide had turned and the frost had disappeared from the sunny side of the upper steps.

He did not carry the original papers. Lio had made copies of the relevant records and placed them in a plain folder. The catalogue note was there as well, written in Lio's narrow hand, with spaces left where Iven had asked to reconsider a phrase.

Iven carried the folder under his coat.

At the Marr house, he stood at the side gate longer than he needed to. The garden was still winter-bare. A broken rake leaned beside the shed. The old currant bushes looked dead until he came close enough to see the small hard buds gathering along their branches.

He went around to the workroom door and knocked.

Sella opened it after the second knock.

She wore a blue apron over her green cardigan. A strip of sail-cloth was looped over one shoulder, and she held a needle between thumb and forefinger. Her hair had been pinned up at the back, though several grey strands had escaped around her temples.

She looked at the folder under his arm, then at him.

"Is this from Lio?" she asked.

"Some of it."

"And the rest?"

"From me."

She stepped aside.

The workroom was warmer than the last time he had visited. A kettle sat on the stove. The repaired sail still occupied most of the central table, but the patches had been stitched down now. Their seams showed plainly in the afternoon light.

Sella closed the door behind him.

"Tea?" she asked.

"If you are having some."

"I was going to."

He took the chair near the stove. It was the same chair he had sat in before, though he could not be certain. The room had a way of making objects look settled into their places.

Sella poured tea into two mugs and handed one to him. Then she sat across the table, with the sailcloth between them.

Iven placed the folder beside the cloth.

"Lio found my pilot report," he said.

"Did he?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"It says I did not recommend the launch go through the Cut."

Sella held her mug with both hands. "Did you?"

"No."

He waited for something in her face. Agreement. Disbelief. Anger. Nothing clear came.

"I did not recommend it," he said again. "I thought the launch might cross before the surge. I did not think I could tell them it would return. That was the truth as I understood it."

Sella looked down at the sail. "You have said that before."

"Not properly."

"No."

Her answer was calm. It did not make room for him to mistake this conversation for a kindness offered to ease his way.

He took the folder from the table and opened it.

"There is a note Lio drafted," he said. "It links the reports. It says the earlier sounding suggested a possible passage, but not a safe one. It says the launch was retained because of the Cut, the crew, and the basin. It says the road party moved people from Outer Reach. It says no formal vote was preserved."

Sella listened without looking at the copies.

"It also says your initials in the dispatch register identify you as a relay, not the sole maker of the decision."

Then she looked at him.

"Did you ask him to write that?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

He had expected the question. He had not prepared an answer that could survive being spoken aloud.

"Because I left you with it," he said.

There was a sound from the stove as the kettle shifted lightly against its ring.

Sella did not move.

"I left your name carrying the blame," Iven said. "Not only in the town. In my own mind."

Her fingers tightened once around the mug.

"You were angry with me," she said.

"Yes."

"For relaying the message."

"Yes."

"Though you were there when it was decided."

"Yes."

He did not add that he had been young, that Harl had been older, that the room had been full of men who appeared to know what should be done. None of those things changed where he had stood. None explained why, afterward, he had spoken of the weather and allowed people to make Sella into the face of a shared decision.

"I was afraid," he said.

Sella's gaze remained on him.

"Not only of the water. I was afraid of what would happen if the town began naming people. Perran had family at Outer Reach. Daro did too. The men in the basin had families. The people on the road had families. Everyone knew everyone. I thought if we began saying who argued for what, it would divide the town."

"And so you said less."

"Yes."

"Until it divided anyway."

Iven looked at the table.

The sail beneath his hands had been repaired with thread slightly darker than the original cloth. Sella had not hidden the work. The patches followed the torn places exactly. They made the damage visible, but they also made the sail usable.

"Yes," he said.

For a while, neither of them spoke.

Outside, someone walked past on the side lane. Their footsteps softened in the thawing ground. The sound came and went without either of them looking toward the door.

Sella set down her mug.

"Do you know what it was like?" she asked.

Iven raised his eyes.

"People did not always say my name," she continued. "That would have been easier, in a way. They would say the office had failed them. They would say someone should have sent the launch. They would say the town had chosen boats over people."

Her voice did not rise. That made him listen more closely.

"Then they would look at me to see whether I answered."

Iven said nothing.

"Some thought I should defend the decision. Some thought I should condemn it. Some only wanted me to tell them why they had waited. As if I had been given the reason."

"You were not."

"No."

"I should have said that."

"You should have said more than that."

He nodded.

"You knew there had been a choice before the Cut closed," she said. "You knew it was not simply weather. You knew the launch stayed because people were frightened for the crew and the basin. You knew the road party was sent because people were frightened for Outer Reach. But when they asked, you gave them the part that made the sea responsible."

"Yes."

"And I had the initials."

"Yes."

She took a breath, though not a deep one.

"That was the cost," she said. "Not only that people blamed me. It was that you let them think I had been closer to the decision than you were."

Iven's hands had gone cold despite the stove.

"I did," he said.

He wanted to say he had not understood what he was doing. He wanted to say no one had understood. Both things would have been partly true, and neither would be useful.

"I am sorry," he said.

Sella looked at him for a long moment.

"I know," she said at last. "But knowing you are sorry is not the same as having had a brother beside me when it mattered."

The sentence was quietly spoken. It did not accuse him more loudly than anger would have done. It only described a fact that had lasted too long.

Iven looked down at the copies in the folder.

"No," he said. "It is not."

He did not reach across the table. He did not ask whether she could forgive him. The question would have made a task of her pain. He had done enough of that already.

After a while, he said, "I want the archive note changed if it needs changing. I want it to say what I failed to say. Not so that you are cleared and I take everything onto myself. That would be another false account. But so no one reads your initials and thinks they have found the whole decision."

Sella looked at the open folder.

"What does it say now?"

He slid the note toward her.

She read it carefully. Her face was still, but not closed. Once, she stopped at a line and read it again.

The note did not excuse the harbour office. It did not call the road movement a success simply because most households reached shelter. It did not turn the launch crew into victims who mattered more than those waiting at Outer Reach. It said that the records preserved fear, action, and consequence unevenly. It said that no single surviving paper could carry the entire account.

Sella placed one finger beside the sentence about the dispatch register.

"This part," she said. "It says I relayed notices."

"Yes."

"I also helped write them."

Iven looked at her.

"Not the order," she said. "But the wording. I asked what I was meant to tell people. I chose the words that said the launch was retained, not that the Cut had simply closed."

"You did."

"Then it should say that I helped frame the message."

He hesitated. "Would that not give people more to put on you?"

"They have had enough years to put what they liked on me."

Her mouth moved slightly, not quite a smile.

"I do not want the archive to make me harmless," she said. "I want it to be accurate."

Iven nodded slowly.

"Then we will add it," he said.

"Not we."

He waited.

"Lio will add it," she said. "You and I can tell him what we remember."

There was no softness in the correction. But neither was there refusal.

"Yes," Iven said. "Lio will add it."

Sella read the note once more. Then she closed the folder.

"I want to see the final version," she said.

"Before it is filed?"

"Before it is filed."

"Of course."

"And I do not want the old log changed."

"Neither does Lio."

"Good."

She rested her hand on the folder.

"The old log should remain what it was," she said. "It was written by people trying to get through a storm. If we make it say what we wish they had understood, then we only make another clean story."

"I know."

Sella looked at him, measuring the answer.

"Do you?" she asked.

Iven could not say yes with confidence. Not after all the years in which he had taken one partial truth and used it as shelter.

"I am trying to," he said.

She gave a small nod.

It was not forgiveness. It was not even trust. But it was an answer.

A Small Agreement to Continue

They walked to the harbour office the following afternoon.

Sella had said she would come after finishing the sail repair. Iven had not offered to carry it for her. He knew better than to make a ceremony of assistance where none was wanted. At half past two, he saw her descending the upper steps with her work bag over one shoulder and her coat buttoned to the throat.

He waited at the bottom.

"The frost is gone," she said, looking at the wet stones.

"It will come back if the wind turns."

"You always say that."

"It often does."

"That does not improve the sentence."

He almost smiled. It was not a familiar exchange exactly. Familiarity had been damaged by too much time. But it had the shape of one.

They walked along Bell Quay together.

Neither touched the other. Their shoulders remained a careful distance apart. Yet Iven noticed that Sella did not take the upper edge of the pavement to avoid him, and he did not slow enough to fall behind.

At the harbour office, Lio looked up from the table as they entered.

He did not appear surprised to see Sella. Perhaps he had expected her. Perhaps he had learned that expectation was not the same as assumption.

"Mrs Marr," he said.

"Sella," she replied.

"Sella," Lio said. "Thank you for coming."

She took off her gloves. "Iven says you have a note that needs correcting."

Lio glanced at Iven once, then opened his rough notebook.

"It needs reviewing," he said. "Correction may be part of that."

Sella gave him a brief look of approval.

They sat around the long table. The records lay in their protective sleeves. The pilot report was on one side. The dispatch entry bearing Sella's initials was on the other. Between them lay the route sketch, with its three paths: water, road, inner basin.

Lio read the contextual note aloud.

He read slowly. When he reached the paragraph about the dispatch messages, Sella stopped him.

"Not 'relayed by S. Marr,'" she said. "That is too narrow."

Lio set down his pencil. "How would you put it?"

Sella considered the page.

"Say that the notices were drafted and relayed through the upper office by S. Marr, acting within instructions issued from the harbour office and town rooms."

"Does that sound accurate?" Lio asked.

"As accurate as I can make it."

Lio looked to Iven.

Iven thought of the storm room. Sella standing near the telephone. Harl turning from the chart table. The words passed to her in fragments. Her pencil waiting above the paper. Her question: what am I meant to tell them?

"Yes," he said. "That is accurate."

Lio wrote the revision.

"There is another part," Sella said.

He waited.

"Do not say the road party 'evacuated' Outer Reach households. Some people left. Some waited. Some had to be persuaded. Some carried what they could. Some came later. It was not one movement."

"Would 'staged road movement' be better?" Lio asked.

Sella shook her head. "That sounds as if we had planned it."

Iven looked at the household list. Names crossed through. Notes in pencil. A child feverish. An elder assisted at the slope. A family reached later.

"Say 'successive road parties,'" he said. "That is what it was."

Sella turned toward him.

"Yes," she said. "That is nearer."

Lio wrote: *surviving related records indicate that Outer Reach households reached shelter through successive road parties under changing conditions.*

He paused after writing it.

"Does that leave too much out?" he asked.

"Yes," Sella said.

Then she added, "But it does not pretend otherwise."

Lio nodded.

They went through the note line by line.

There were points Sella remembered differently from Iven. She believed the first road group left before the launch crew had fully secured the basin. Iven thought the groups overlapped. Neither could prove it. Lio marked the sequence uncertain.

Sella remembered Harl Daven saying that the launch would be retained "for now." Iven remembered him saying it would stay until the Cut could be confirmed. The difference was small, but the meaning was not. Lio wrote that the order's exact spoken wording was not preserved.

Iven remembered carrying blankets with Sella. Sella remembered that they had first carried lamp oil and only later returned for blankets. The chapel ledger listed both but did not establish the order. Lio made no attempt to settle it.

"You are leaving it untidy," Iven said.

Lio looked up. "Yes."

"Good," Sella said.

It was the first time Iven heard them agree without qualification.

By the end of the afternoon, the note had changed in small ways. Yet the changes altered its balance. Sella's name remained visible. So did Iven's. So did the names and roles of those who could be identified from the records: the launch crew, the upper-office staff, the road-party carriers, the people whose signatures or initials had survived in margins and ledgers.

No one name carried the whole storm.

No one paper carried it either.

Lio copied the revised note in a clean hand. He left the final page unsigned, apart from the catalogue reference. When he had finished, he slid it across the table to Sella.

"Would you read it once more?" he asked.

She did.

Iven watched her face, though he tried not to. He saw no moment of release. Nothing in her softened suddenly. The lines around her mouth remained. The old distance between them did not vanish because a note had become more accurate.

But when she reached the end, she placed her palm flat on the paper.

"File it," she said.

Lio did not move at once.

"Are you certain?"

Sella looked at Iven, then back to the page.

"No," she said. "But file it."

Lio nodded. He placed the note with the linked records, not inside the original logbook and not over the old report. It would sit beside them. It would be available to anyone who came looking for the storm, or the retained launch, or the households of Outer Reach, or the name S. Marr.

It would not settle the past.

It would make it harder to pretend the past had settled itself.

When they left the office, the light was already fading. The harbour lamps had not yet come on, but their glass tops held the last grey of afternoon. The tide was rising. Water moved beneath Bell Quay with a low, steady sound.

Lio locked the office behind them.

"Thank you," he said to Sella.

"For what?"

"For reading it closely."

"That is what paper is for," she said.

Lio smiled. "Among other things."

Sella put on her gloves. Iven put on his cap. Then the three of them stood for a moment in the cold, looking out toward the harbour mouth.

The East Cut could not be seen from there. Only the outer point, dark against the paling sky, and the strip of sea beyond it.

"It looks quiet," Sella said.

Iven followed her gaze.

"It is quiet," he said.

She glanced at him. "For now?"

He looked back at the water.

"For now," he said.

She did not say the sentence had failed to improve.

They began walking up Bell Quay together. Lio turned toward Market Lane after the customs shed, lifting a hand in farewell. Iven and Sella continued toward the upper steps.

At the foot of them, Sella stopped.

"I have work tomorrow," she said.

"So do I."

"At the archive?"

"For part of the day."

She nodded.

"There are other records," she said. "Not only storm records."

"There always are."

"Yes."

It was not an invitation. It was not a promise. But it was a small agreement that the work could continue, and that neither of them needed to make the next step larger than it was.

Sella started up the steps. Iven walked beside her for the first few stones, then slowed where the path narrowed. He did not offer his arm. She did not ask for it.

They climbed in the same direction, a little apart.

Behind them, the harbour held the last of the day's light. Ahead, the windows of the Marr house were beginning to glow through the thinning winter dusk.

CHAPTER 5

First Thaw at the Harbour Mouth

Reading the Account Together

SELLA'S HAND REMAINED ON THE PAGE.

The workroom had gone quiet except for the stove. Outside, water ran from the eaves in a slow, regular thread. It had been thawing since dawn. The sound was too slight to call rain, yet it seemed to enter every pause between them.

Iven looked at the note in front of her. The sentences were plain. That had been Lio's doing, mostly. Plain sentences had a way of leaving a man nowhere to stand except inside them.

"I knew that," Sella said at last.

He did not ask what she meant.

"Not all of it," she went on. "Not in the words you have used. But I knew you had found a way to let the storm be the speaker."

"Yes."

"It was convenient for everyone. The sea could not answer back."

"No."

She turned the page over. His own handwriting looked clumsy beside Lio's narrow script. He had copied the note twice before he brought it. The words had seemed steady enough at his kitchen

table. Here, with Sella reading them, they looked like a man's late attempt to make a shape around what he had failed to say.

"You have written that you were relieved when Harl made the order," she said.

"I was."

"Do you know why?"

He considered this. There was an answer that would have sounded respectable. He could have said he was young, that Harl was harbourmaster, that the weather had been worsening by the minute. Each thing was true. None reached the centre of it.

"Because I did not want to make a choice that could kill somebody," he said.

Sella looked at him.

"And because," he added, "once Harl had said it, I could tell myself I had only read the water."

Her gaze lowered again. "You did read it."

"Yes."

"You were not inventing danger."

"No."

"But you knew there had been a chance before the surge."

"I knew there had been a chance."

She nodded once. There was no release in the motion. It was only an acknowledgement that a difficult thing had been placed between them without being knocked aside.

"I did not know whether you wanted the launch to go," she said.

"Neither did I."

"That is not quite the same thing."

"No."

He had no defence for it, and after a while Sella seemed to see that he would not offer one. She folded the copy along its old crease. Her fingers were careful. She had always handled paper carefully, even when she was young and impatient with almost everything else.

"Lio asked for me to come to the archive," she said.

Iven looked up.

"Not today. Tomorrow morning."

"He asked you?"

"He sent a note through Deen. A proper note, with the time written on it."

"That sounds like Lio."

A small change came over her face. It was not quite a smile, but it was near one. "He says he has a question about a sequence in the dispatch book. He says he would rather ask than guess."

"That sounds like him too."

"Will you be there?"

The question did not contain an invitation. It contained a practical concern, which was safer. Iven understood that safety was all she had offered.

"If you want me to be," he said.

Sella rested her hand on the folded paper. "I think you should be. It is your account as well."

He nodded. He did not thank her. Gratitude would have made too much of a small permission, and he did not want to turn her caution into generosity for his sake.

They drank their tea after that. The workroom was full of ordinary objects: scissors, waxed thread, a box of brass sail rings, a patched length of canvas weighted at the corners. Iven found he

could look at these things without needing them to become symbols of repair. They were tools and materials. They had work to do.

Before he left, Sella said, "Do not make the note kinder because I read it."

"I will not."

"And do not make it crueler either."

"No."

She looked at him a moment longer. "Those are not always different things."

He carried that sentence down the side path and all the way to Bell Quay. The thaw had reached the gutter stones. Small runnels crossed the road, gathering grit and straw before vanishing into the drains. The harbour water was high and dark. Above it, the air had a softness that did not belong to winter, though winter was plainly not done with them.

At the office the next morning, he arrived early. He told himself this was because the cold was easier to bear while walking. In truth, he did not want Sella to find him waiting outside the door like a man who had come to be judged.

Lio had set three chairs at the long table.

The room had altered since the first day Iven came. There were still crates along the wall and the same heater glowing weakly by the window. The old counter still sat displaced beneath a cloth. But the ledgers now rested in labelled folders or on raised shelves. Each had a place. The work had not made the office warm, exactly. It had made it legible.

Lio looked up from a sheet of notes. "Morning."

"Morning."

"I have put out the dispatch book, the household list, the chapel ledger, and the route sketch. I thought we should keep the question narrow."

"That would be wise."

Lio gave him a brief look, as if he understood the effort required for Iven to say so.

Sella came in a few minutes later. She had not put on her work coat. Instead she wore the dark green one Iven had seen her in at the chandlery weeks before. Her hair was pinned more neatly than it had been in the workroom, but a loose strand had already escaped near her temple. She greeted Lio by name, then looked at Iven.

"Morning," she said.

"Morning."

Nothing in the word promised ease. Still, she had said it to his face. He took the small fact as it was.

Lio poured tea for all three of them. Then he sat at one side of the table, leaving Sella the chair opposite Iven. He had laid the dispatch register open beneath a glass weight. The page from the eighteenth of January held its old lines of urgency: times, destinations, instructions, initials.

"I am trying to establish the order of the messages," Lio said. "Not to force them into a certainty they do not have. Only to make clear what can be known."

Sella leaned forward. "Which part?"

"The first notice to Outer Reach. The dispatch book has an entry at 11:18 about the lower track. Then the chapel message at 11:31 says the launch was retained and households should gather."

"Yes."

"The route sketch seems to have been made before the launch was formally retained, or at least before that message was sent. The question is whether the road party was already being prepared."

Sella looked at the sketch. Her eyes moved over the three pencilled lines. For a moment, Iven thought she might not speak.

"The cart was called for before the message to the chapel," she said.

Lio picked up his pencil. "You are sure?"

"As sure as I can be."

"What makes you sure?"

"Because I sent Deen Prawl's boy to the stable yard. Or I asked him to go." She paused. "He may have gone before I asked. He was always halfway out the door when there was weather."

Iven saw it then: a narrow boy in a wool cap, moving through the office with his shoulders hunched against the cold. He could not remember the boy's face. He remembered wet footprints on the floorboards and the office door banging shut behind him.

"What did you send him for?" Lio asked.

"For horses. And the cart."

"Before Harl made the decision?"

Sella did not answer quickly.

"Before he said it aloud," she said.

Iven felt the distinction settle in the room.

"Who told you to call the cart?" Lio asked.

"I do not know."

"You do not remember?"

"I remember needing it."

Her fingers lay beside the dispatch book. The knuckles were marked by years of needlework and lifting. Iven watched them tighten once and loosen.

"Meren may have said the upper road would be the only route," she continued. "Or Harl may have told me to get things moving. It might have been Iven."

He looked at her.

"I do not think it was," she said. "But I will not say it was not."

He understood the care in that. She was refusing to improve her memory simply because a cleaner version might help him. It was a kind of fairness he had not earned, though he recognized it as hers.

"I remember the horses being mentioned," he said. "Not by whom."

Lio nodded and wrote nothing for several seconds. Then he made a note in the margin.

"I can record that preparations for the upper-road response may have begun before the dispatch at 11:31," he said. "The precise instruction and sequence remain uncertain."

"That is right," Sella said.

"It sounds weak on paper," Iven said.

"It is not weak," Lio said. "It tells the reader where the ground is firm and where it is not."

Iven looked at the route sketch again. For years he had thought of that day as if every person had stood waiting for Harl Daven's word. But the cart had been called. The road had begun to enter the decision before the decision had been spoken. People had acted within uncertainty because weather did not allow them the luxury of waiting for a complete account.

Sella touched the 11:31 entry.

"This one needs a correction," she said.

Lio shifted closer, but did not crowd her.

"The chapel room was not told to gather all households," she said. "Not at first. The first message was for the houses nearest the wash and the southern row. The others were told to wait for word."

"The book says 'gather households,'" Lio said gently.

"Yes. Because I shortened it."

"Why?"

Sella gave a faint, tired breath. "Because the telephone line kept cutting. Because I had already said too much to the exchange. Because I thought the chapel would understand what I meant."

"Did they?"

"Mostly."

That single word carried the old danger in it.

She explained without enlarging it. The chapel room had sent a woman and two older boys down the road to call at houses. Some people had come quickly. Others had waited for family members who were out in the sheds or working near the shore. The Lorn household had delayed because the father would not leave the tools in his boat shed. The widow near the smokehouse had refused to go until someone came for her dog. A man in the southern row had thought the water would turn before it reached his yard. It did not.

"I thought the first message had reached everyone," Sella said. "It had not."

Lio looked at the household list. "The uncrossed names."

"Some of them, yes."

Iven remembered the pencil marks beside the names. He had seen them as a record of what had been done. Now he saw the spaces between them differently. A list did not show the minutes when no one answered. It did not show a receiver lifted in an empty room, or a child sent along a road into sleet, or a person choosing to wait for one more sound from the sea.

"Did anyone fail to reach shelter?" Lio asked.

"No," Sella said. "Not that day."

"But some came later."

"Yes."

Lio made another note. He did not change the record's wording. He added an attached description: the dispatch register recorded a condensed instruction, while later materials suggested that the movement to shelter had occurred in stages and had not reached all households at once.

Iven watched Sella read it. She nodded.

"There is another thing," she said.

Her voice had altered. Not much. Still, Iven heard it.

"When Harl said the launch would stay, he did not say there would be no boat for Outer Reach at all."

Lio looked up.

"He said the launch would stay until the surge passed or the channel could be read again. He thought there might be another chance."

Iven held still.

"Did he say that?" Lio asked.

Sella's eyes remained on the page. "I think so."

"You think?"

"I remember hearing it. But I have heard it so often in my own mind that I cannot tell whether it was said then or became something I needed him to have said."

The office was quiet. A drip struck the outside sill, then another.

Iven could picture Harl Daven with his palms on the desk. He could picture the wet shoulder of his navy coat. He could picture the harbourmaster looking toward the basin, then toward the soundless grey beyond the window. But he could not recover the sentence.

"I cannot say," he told them.

Sella nodded. "Neither can I."

Lio's pencil rested above the page.

"Then leave it uncertain," Sella said.

He looked at her.

"Do not put it in because it makes him better," she said. "And do not leave it out because it makes him worse. It may have been said. It may not."

"All right," Lio said.

He wrote a short note for his rough book, not the catalogue: possible recollection of an intended later reassessment; not corroborated by surviving record. Then he closed the book.

"That is enough for now," he said.

But Sella did not move from her chair.

"No," she said. "There is one more thing you should have."

She opened her handbag and took out a folded piece of paper. It had been folded so often that the creases had gone soft. Iven had not noticed her bring it in.

"I found this after our mother died," she said. "It was inside one of Father's old chart cases."

She placed it on the table.

It was not an official document. The paper was a torn half-sheet from a message pad. On it, in Sella's upright hand, was a list. The first line read: launch / Cut before turn. The second: road / cart to ridge. The third: basin / lines and men. Beside each was a small mark, perhaps a question, perhaps the start of a cross. At the bottom, in a different hand, someone had written: no clean way.

Iven did not touch it.

"Is that Harl's writing?" Lio asked.

Sella shook her head. "No."

Iven knew it. The letters were broad, impatient, and pressed too hard into the paper. He had not seen that hand in years, but he knew it because it was his own.

"I wrote that," he said.

"Yes," Sella said.

He looked at the three lines again. It was the route sketch reduced to words. Water, road, harbour. There was no clean way.

"I do not remember writing it," he said.

"I remember you did."

"When?"

"Before you went out again. You were by the chart table. I had written the first three lines. You took the pencil from me."

He felt shame rise in him, but it was not sharp. It was older and heavier than that. He had spent years telling himself he had not been part of the decision. Yet here was his hand beside the choices, not deciding among them perhaps, but seeing them. He

had known there was no route without cost. He had known it before the surge, before the final message, before he went out to measure water as if measurement could absolve him.

"Why did you keep it?" he asked.

Sella looked at the paper.

"Because it was the only thing that showed we had seen all three."

Lio did not speak. He sat with his hands folded beside the closed notebook, giving the moment the room it required.

"May I catalogue it?" he asked after a while.

Sella looked at Iven.

The question was not really his to answer. Yet she had brought the paper to a table where he sat. She had allowed him to see the old handwriting. That allowance was not nothing.

"It belongs with the other records," Iven said.

"It belonged to Father," she replied.

"Then it is yours."

"I know."

He heard no rebuke in the words. Only fact.

Sella turned to Lio. "You may make a copy. The original stays with me for now."

"Of course," Lio said.

"And the description should not call it a decision."

"No."

"Call it a working note. Possible responses under consideration."

Lio nodded. "With uncertain authorship for the first lines and identified later notation by Iven Marr, if you both agree."

Iven looked at Sella.

"That is accurate," she said.

He could not remember the last time they had agreed upon a sentence. The fact was too modest to celebrate. Still, he felt it settle somewhere in him.

The Families Remember Differently

By noon, the weak sun had found the office windows. It showed every streak in the glass and laid a pale square of light across the floorboards. Lio made a careful copy of Sella's note, then returned the original to her. He did not ask whether he could photograph it or keep it overnight. His respect for the paper's owner was not ceremonial. It was part of the work.

When Sella put the note away, Lio brought out a card that had arrived at the office two days earlier. It was addressed in an uneven hand to the harbour archive. The return address was from a town inland, beyond the ridge roads.

"This came after the notice about the logbooks went up at the town rooms," he said. "I wrote back to ask whether the sender would be willing to speak. They said yes."

"Who is it?" Sella asked.

"Nera Lorn."

Iven knew the name at once. The Lorn family had been among the last to leave the southern row. There had been two children then. One feverish, according to the shelter note. He could not have said which child was Nera.

"She lived at Outer Reach?" Sella asked.

"At the far end, near the boat sheds," Lio said. "She was small at the time. She says she remembers the shelter more clearly than the harbour office."

He unfolded the letter. There were no dramatic revelations in it. Nera had written that she remembered being carried uphill under a coat that smelled of smoke and wet wool. She remembered a dog barking beneath a cart. She remembered the chapel room, where too many people sat close together and the windows ran with steam. She remembered someone giving her sweet tea in a chipped cup. She did not remember who had decided that the launch should stay at Bell Quay.

She remembered waiting for it.

She remembered adults saying it could not come.

She remembered, later, that people in Ternfold talked as though Outer Reach had been abandoned, while people in her family talked about those who came by road and got them out.

The letter ended by saying that both memories seemed true to her, though neither was sufficient on its own.

Lio laid the paper down.

"She has agreed to let us add a summary to the linked records," he said. "Not as proof of official motive. As a recollection of shelter and waiting."

Iven looked at the page.

For years, he had heard Outer Reach spoken of as a single injured place. That was not false. But the letter returned people to it: a child under a coat, a dog under a cart, steam on the chapel windows, a cup held in both hands. It did not forgive the har-

bour. It did not accuse it in the hard, simple terms he had expected. It only refused to make official motive the centre of a child's memory.

"What does she say about the road party?" Sella asked.

"That they arrived wet through," Lio said. "That one of the men had blood on his sleeve from handling rope. That someone brought coal too late for the first stove, so they used broken furniture until the fire caught."

Iven looked at Sella. She was staring at the table.

"The blood would have been Nerr Voss," he said. "His hand was split."

"Or Daro Ketch," Sella said. "He cut his palm on the cart chain."

"Nerr's was worse."

"I do not remember."

He almost said that he did. Then he stopped. He remembered a wrapped hand, darkened cloth, a man refusing to sit down. He did not know whose it had been.

"It could have been either," he said.

Sella glanced at him. "Yes."

Lio made no correction. He added no name to the note. The unnamed injured man remained unnamed, as he should.

"Nera is coming to Ternfold next month," Lio said. "She wants to see the chapel room, if it is still open."

"It is," Sella said. "The roof leaks at the back, but it is open."

"She says she may bring her brother."

Iven knew that, too. The feverish child had been a boy, then. Or perhaps the child had been Nera and the brother had been older. He did not know. The names in the ledger offered no

answer.

"Will you meet them?" Lio asked.

The question was directed to both of them. Iven felt Sella's attention shift toward him without her turning her head.

"If they want to speak to me," he said, "I will meet them."

"And if they do not?"

"Then I will not make them."

Lio nodded.

Sella said, "I will be there if they want someone from the dispatch room."

Iven looked at her. She did not look back. Yet the sentence joined their names to the same possible future, however cautiously.

They spent the rest of the afternoon working through the catalogue note together.

Lio read each section aloud. He had revised the language after Sella's corrections. The note now described the January storm records as related but incomplete accounts: harbour logs, dispatches, road-party lists, chapel supplies, a working note of possible responses, and later recollection from a former Outer Reach resident. It said that the records documented a retained launch, a dangerous crossing, a road movement toward shelter, and ongoing uncertainty about sequence and intention.

It did not name a villain.

It did not use the road party as an excuse.

It did not let the official record pretend that survival had made the choice harmless.

"There should be a line about the families," Sella said.

Lio looked up. "What line?"

"That people who were there remember different parts."

"Could you say more?"

She considered. "The harbour families remembered what might have happened if the launch went out. The Outer Reach families remembered what did happen when it did not."

Iven heard the truth in it and also the danger. It divided the town neatly along an old seam. Yet the seam had been there.

"Not all harbour families," he said. "Perran Holt's people were from Outer Reach."

"I know."

"And not all Outer Reach families wanted the launch sent."

"I know that too."

He waited for anger. None came.

"Then write that the memories cannot be sorted by address," Sella said. "But they do not have to agree before they are kept."

Lio's pencil moved. He paused, then read back what he had written.

"Surviving records and later recollections preserve differing accounts of risk, waiting, shelter, and responsibility. These accounts cannot be reduced to a single shared memory, but are retained together to reflect the event's human consequences."

Sella nodded.

Iven read the sentence. It did not settle the storm. It did not even settle the archive. But it made room for a truth he had spent years resisting: different memories could stand beside one another without one being forced to drown the other.

"Leave it," he said.

A Walk Beyond the Breakwater

They left the office near dusk.

Lio remained behind to cover the open books and return the smaller papers to their folders. He said he would finish the entries before he locked up. There was work in his voice, but not impatience. He had made a place for their memories without asking them to finish the work of being family before he could proceed.

At the door, Sella paused.

"I am walking home by the harbour," she said.

Iven put on his cap. "So am I."

They went out together.

The thaw had strengthened through the afternoon. Water ran along Bell Quay in shining threads. The frost had withdrawn from the sunward stones, though pale ridges remained in the shade of the sheds. The harbour smelled of wet rope, seaweed, coal smoke, and the old mineral smell of the quay after ice had lifted.

They walked without hurrying.

At first they spoke only of practical things. Sella had a sail to finish for a fisherman from South Point. The seam needed another strip of backing because the cloth around the tear had gone thin. Iven said it would tear again if the man kept pulling it too tight over the boom. Sella said the man would keep doing exactly that.

"He has always thought force was a substitute for judgment," she said.

"He has always been wrong."

"That has never troubled him."

Iven found himself smiling. Sella did too, briefly. Then the smiles passed, leaving no embarrassment behind.

They reached the old breakwater path. Beyond it, the harbour mouth opened toward the East Cut. The sea was calmer than it had been in weeks, though a low swell still moved beyond the outer marker. The western sky held a thin band of colour, dull gold behind cloud.

"Do you remember Father's boat?" Sella asked.

Iven looked at her.

"The old blue one," she said. "Before he bought the larger hull."

"The *Marrel*."

"That was its name, yes."

"I remember it."

"You used to say the engine was sound."

"It was sound."

"It coughed every time he took it out."

"That was the fuel line."

"It was the engine."

"The engine was good. The fuel line was poor."

Sella gave him a sideways look. "You have waited a long time to make that distinction."

"It matters."

"Of course it does."

They stopped near the rail where the path looked down toward the lower steps. Iven could see the boat as it had been: blue paint worn to grey along the gunwale, a patched canvas cover, the little brass fitting on the cabin door that their father polished

when he was worried about money. The *Marrel* had never been much to look at. It had carried pots, provisions, tools, children, and more arguments than any boat deserved.

"Father always kept the spare plug in the biscuit tin," Sella said.

"Not the biscuit tin. The tobacco tin."

"It had biscuits in it once."

"Before he used it for plugs."

"You are impossible."

"You asked."

"I did not ask for correction."

"That is not how memory works."

She was quiet. Iven thought he had gone too far. Then she said, "No. It is not."

They stood looking at the water.

"I remember one time the engine stopped near the eastern shelf," Sella said. "You were frightened."

"I was eight."

"You said the boat was sinking."

"It was taking water."

"Through the plug you had forgotten to put in."

He looked at her.

"You had taken it out when you cleaned the bilge," she said.

"Father made you bail with the old soup pot."

"He made us both bail."

"I had put the plug in."

"You had not."

"I had."

He could see the scene in fragments: the boat lifting in a gentle swell, water around his ankles, the soup pot cold in his hands. He remembered Sella laughing at him. He remembered their father not laughing at all until they were safely tied up again. But who had removed the plug? Who had put it back? The question was almost absurd after the day they had spent with old records and larger failures.

Still, it mattered in its small way.

"Perhaps you did," he said.

Sella looked out over the harbour mouth. "Perhaps I did."

It was not agreement. It was not surrender. It was simply a place where neither of them needed to win.

They began walking again.

"The *Marrel* had a good bow," Iven said after a while.

"It did," Sella said.

"Better than Father admitted."

"He knew it."

"He complained about it enough."

"That was how he praised things."

Iven nodded. Their father had been dead many years. He had not lived to see the storm become silence between his children. Or perhaps he would have seen it forming long before either of them did. Iven did not try to decide.

At the fork where the upper road rose toward the Marr house, Sella stopped.

"I have to go this way," she said.

"Yes."

"Iven."

He waited.

"I am not ready to say everything is different."

"I know."

"I do not know what I am ready to say."

"You do not have to say it."

She looked at him with an expression he could not quite read. Tiredness, perhaps. Caution. Something gentler that did not yet trust itself.

"Will you walk this way again?" she asked.

The question was modest. Its modesty made it difficult to answer without damaging it.

"Yes," he said. "If you want."

"Not tomorrow," she said.

"All right."

"Sunday, perhaps. After midday."

"All right."

"Do not bring papers."

"I will not."

"And do not think it means we have settled anything."

"I will not think that."

Sella nodded. Then she turned toward the upper road.

Iven watched until she reached the first bend. She did not look back. He did not expect her to. The road took her past the baker's yard and toward the house where their mother's blue curtains still hung in the front room. A small distance. Less than ten minutes if he walked without stopping.

He stood at the fork a while longer, feeling the thaw drip from the guttering onto the road beside him.

The Logbooks Rest on the Shelf

Over the next days, the harbour office came gradually to its final order.

Lio worked without ceremony. He did not announce that the catalogue was complete. Instead, Iven arrived one morning to find the December ledger wrapped in a clean protective cover and placed on a shelf above the reach of damp. Beside it stood the dispatch register, the household list, the board minutes, and folders containing copies of the route sketch and Sella's working note.

Small slips linked one record to another.

The links did not turn them into a single story. They made it possible for a future reader to follow the threads: from the launch at Bell Quay to the messages sent outward; from the messages to the chapel supplies; from the supplies to the road-party list; from the list to Nera Lorn's remembered shelter; from Iven's later account to the limits of his own memory.

Lio had placed a note at the beginning of the group. It did not call the storm a tragedy, though fear had been real. It did not call the road movement a success, though everyone had reached shelter. It described the records as partial accounts of an emergency in which the harbour, Outer Reach, and the upper road had all made claims on the same small number of people.

Iven read it standing beside the shelf.

"Will it be enough?" he asked.

Lio was at the table, tying cotton tape around a folder.

"Enough for what?"

Iven considered. "For someone who comes later."

Lio looked at the shelf. "They will still have questions."

"Yes."

"They should."

"That is not always a comfort."

"No."

Lio finished the knot. "But they will not have to begin with only the shortest version."

Iven looked again at the books. The shortest version had been easy to repeat. The Cut was closed. The launch stayed. Sella sent the message. It had been neat enough to live in people's mouths for years.

These records were less neat. They had weather in them, and frightened people, and bad roads. They had a harbourmaster's authority and a pilot's hesitation. They had a woman's initials in a dispatch book, then her name beside blankets carried to shelter. They had families whose memories did not match, because no two people had stood in exactly the same place when the water rose.

"You have made a lot of work for anyone who wants an easy answer," Iven said.

Lio's mouth moved slightly. "That seems fair."

"It is."

On Saturday, Lio locked the final folders into the cabinet at the rear of the office. He had finished the condition notes, the cross-references, and the temporary shelf list. The records would remain in Ternfold rather than being sent away again, at least for the present. A future reader would have to ask for them. That seemed right to Iven. The books had waited long enough in darkness. They did not need to be left lying open to every careless hand.

"I may come back in spring," Lio said as he put on his coat.

Iven looked at him. "For more books?"

"For the roof, perhaps."

"The roof will still be leaking."

"Then I will know where to begin."

Iven nodded. He understood that Lio had work elsewhere and a life beyond the harbour office. The thought gave him an unexpected sense of relief. Lio had not come to Ternfold in order to become part of its old wound. He had come to do his work well. In doing it, he had made a space where certain things could be said.

That was enough. More than enough.

"Sunday," Lio said. "You are walking with Sella?"

Iven glanced at him.

"Deen told me," Lio said. "He told everyone, probably."

"It is not a public event."

"No," Lio said. "I am aware."

Iven put on his cap. "You are learning."

"Slowly."

They left the office together and went their separate ways at Bell Quay.

Sunday brought a morning of thin sun and a wind from the west. The thaw had opened the gutters and darkened the road edges. In sheltered places, snow remained as grey heaps under walls. At the harbour mouth, the tide was easing out.

Iven went first to the tide steps.

He had told Sella he would wait there after midday. He arrived early because he always arrived early when something mattered, though he had spent much of his life pretending this was only

good harbour sense.

The old steps were wet above the waterline. Green weed clung to the lower stones. The iron ring beside him had begun to dry in patches. He rested a gloved hand on it and looked toward the East Cut.

The channel was open. Not safe in every condition. Not forgiving. Not changed into anything gentler by the fact that he stood watching it. The sea beyond moved under a pale sky. A gull crossed low above the water, then turned inland.

He waited.

He did not rehearse what he would say. They had agreed on no conversation. They might speak of their father's boat. They might speak of Sella's work. They might walk in silence. None of that would settle the years between them.

Forgiveness, he understood now, was not a door that opened because someone had finally found the right sentence. It might not be a door at all. It might be a path walked more than once, in weather that changed but never entirely cleared.

Behind him, footsteps sounded on the quay.

He did not turn immediately. The sound came closer, unhurried and familiar. Then Sella stopped beside him.

"You are early," she said.

"The tide was turning."

"Of course it was."

He looked at her. She wore her green coat and a wool scarf tucked close at the neck. Her cheeks were pink from the walk down. In one hand, she carried nothing.

"Shall we go?" she asked.

"Yes."

They set off along the harbour path.

Behind them, the office held its repaired shelves and its linked records. Ahead, the breakwater curved toward the harbour mouth. Water moved out through the Cut, dark and steady between land and rock.

The first thaw had not made the town new. The old decisions remained. The missing page remained missing. The people who had waited at Outer Reach had waited, and those who had stayed in the harbour had been afraid for reasons that did not erase anyone else's fear.

But the burden no longer belonged to silence alone.

Iven walked beside his sister, keeping pace with her without trying to lead. Above the quay, water fell from the eaves in bright, intermittent drops. The sound followed them a little way, then was lost beneath the wind from the open sea.