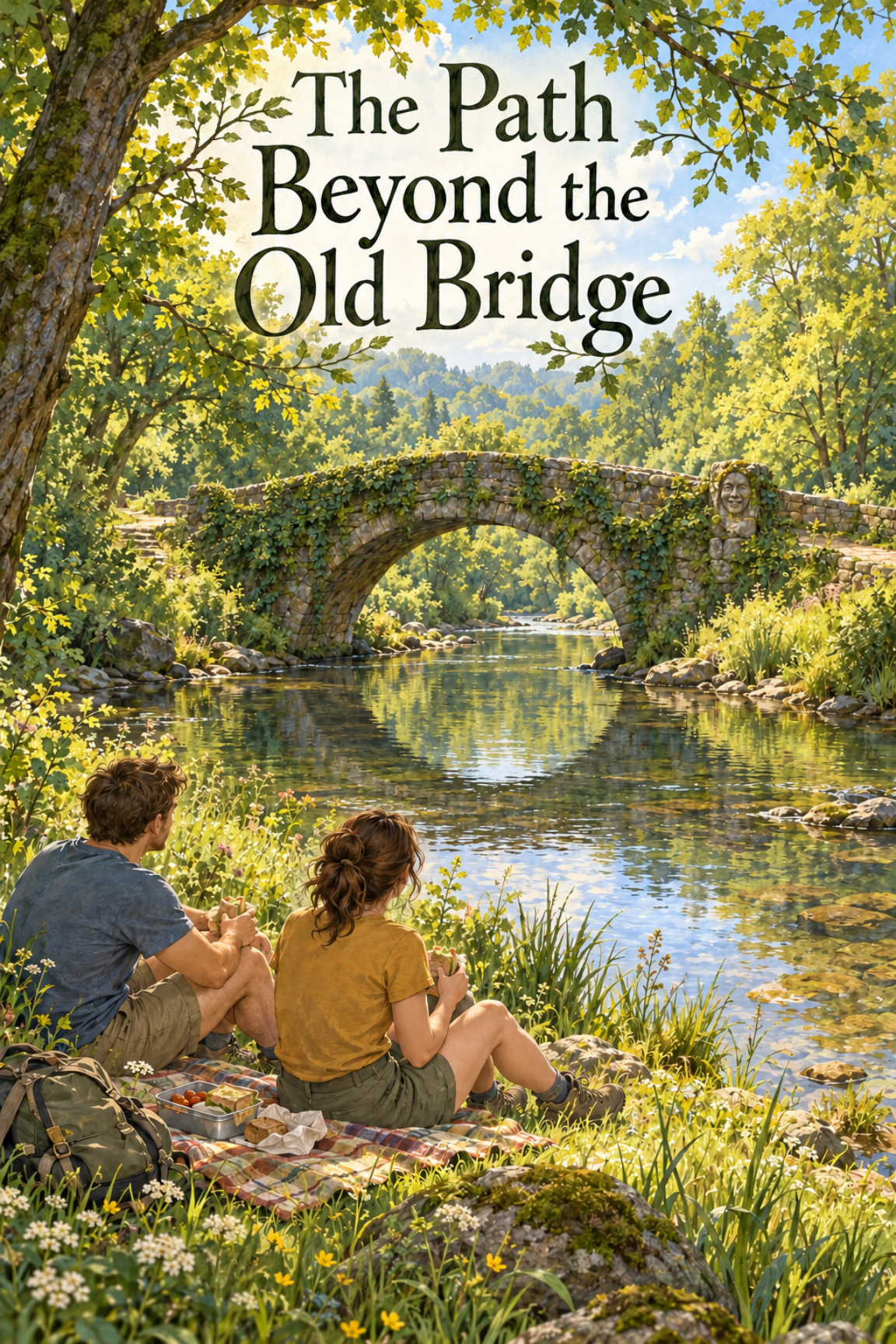


The Path Beyond the Old Bridge



The Path Beyond the Old Bridge

An illustrated novella

STRANGEWOVEN

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CHAPTER ONE

A Place for Lunch



By the time Callum suggested stopping beside a stump, Nina had begun to suspect that he regretted putting her in charge of finding somewhere to eat.

“It’s a very good stump,” he said.

She looked back along the trail. He stood beside it with one hand on the strap of their backpack, his faded blue shirt darkened slightly between the shoulders. A shaft of sunlight fell across his knees. Behind him, the stump offered a narrow seat, several ants, and an uninterrupted view of another stump.

“You said somewhere by the water.”

“I said that before I remembered the sandwiches.”

“The sandwiches are still there.”

“Exactly. Waiting.”

Nina smiled and continued downhill.

It was one of those late-summer afternoons when the shaded woods felt like a different place from the road. They had left the car in a gravel pullout beside a trail sign, its map bleached almost white beneath the scratched plastic cover. Up there, the sun had warmed the backs of their necks. Down here, beneath the broad leaves of the maples, the air smelled of dry earth and the cooler, damp places underneath it.

Somewhere below them, water moved over stones.

They had been able to hear it for the last ten minutes without finding a way to it.

Nina stopped at a bend.

“There.”

Callum caught up and followed her gaze.

Between two clumps of sword fern, a narrow opening led away from the marked trail. Grass grew along its center. A fallen branch lay across it at ankle height, and farther in, a salmonberry cane reached from one side to the other.

“Is that a path?” he asked.

“I think it used to be.”

She stepped over the branch and held the cane aside. Beneath the grass was a strip of firm earth, broad enough for them to walk comfortably in single file.

Callum ducked beneath the cane.

“If we find a better stump, I want it recorded that I was willing to compromise.”

“I’ll put up a plaque.”

The old path curved gently through the trees. They walked slowly, watching for roots beneath the grass. In places, ferns had leaned so far inward that their fronds brushed Nina's bare legs. Yet the ground remained surprisingly even. Once, Callum stopped to look at a line of stones along the downhill edge.

"Someone put these here."

Nina turned. Most were buried, but the exposed tops formed a shallow curve that followed the path.

"An old hiking trail?"

"Maybe."

He nudged a dry leaf aside with his shoe. The next stone sat neatly against the first.

They continued toward the water.

The bridge appeared through the leaves in pieces: first a line of gray stone, then sunlight on the top of a low wall, and finally the curve of an arch above the stream.

Nina stopped so suddenly that Callum nearly walked into her.

"Well," he said.

The path widened ahead of them. Three shallow stone steps descended toward the crossing, their edges rounded and partly lost beneath grass. Ivy spread over the bridge's outer walls, trailing toward the water in loose strands. Between its leaves, the masonry showed pale gray, brown, and soft patches of lichen. The arch was complete, each stone fitted tightly against the next.

On the other side, the path disappeared beneath a low ceiling of branches.

For a moment, neither of them moved.

"That," Callum said, "is considerably better than a stump."

Nina laughed, but quietly. The place seemed to invite quiet without requiring it.

Below the bridge, the stream widened into a slow reach where individual leaves drifted across the reflection of the trees. It was larger than she had expected from the sound. Clear water slipped over a gravel shelf upstream, then settled into green shade beneath the arch.

On their side, a grassy bank sloped toward the water. A patch of level ground lay a little downstream, beneath a maple whose branches reached out over the shallows.

Nina pointed.

"There. That's our spot."

They picked their way down without crossing the bridge. Callum put the backpack on a flat rock and pulled out the folded blanket. Nina took one corner, he took the other, and between them they managed to shake most of the grass off their shoes before settling down.

The blanket was barely straight before he opened the lunch box.

"We should appreciate the scenery," she said.

"I'm appreciating it."

He handed her a sandwich.

"With lunch."

From where they sat, they could see the bridge almost from end to end. Its arch framed a patch of bright water upstream. The near approach stood higher than their blanket, with the old path climbing away into the trees behind them. A bird moved somewhere inside the ivy, making the leaves tremble.

Nina took a bite and stretched her legs into the sunlight.

For a while, there was nothing to do except eat.

Callum had packed cucumber slices, two slightly bruised peaches, and more crackers than either of them needed. Nina discovered a small container of cookies beneath the napkins.

"You were going to sit beside that stump with all this?"

"I have a rich inner life."

She passed him the cucumbers.

They talked about a friend who had tried to assemble a bookshelf without consulting the instructions, then about whether the shelf would have turned out any straighter if he had. A breeze moved through the maple. Somewhere beyond the bend, a car sounded briefly on the road and faded away.

Nina looked toward the bridge again.

"How did we miss this?"

"We've never come down here."

"I know. But there wasn't anything on the sign."

"There might have been. Half the sign was sunshine."

He leaned back on one hand and studied the arch.

Now that he had stopped being hungry, he could see how much work had gone into it. Larger stones formed the lower supports. Smaller ones filled the walls above, their shapes varied but their faces carefully arranged. Along the top, broad capstones made a surface wide enough to rest a forearm.

Whoever had built it had carried a great deal of stone to this quiet stretch of water.

"It must have gone somewhere," he said.

Nina followed the line of the far path.

"It still does."

"You know what I mean."

She did. From their blanket, the way beyond the bridge looked no different from the woods around it. No roof showed through the trees. No sign stood at the crossing. There was only an opening among the ferns, narrower as it climbed the opposite bank.

Callum reached for his water bottle, then stopped.

"There's a face."

Nina glanced at him.

He pointed with the bottle.

"On the bridge. This end, just below the top."

At first she saw only the irregular stones and the ivy. Then the sunlight shifted as a branch moved overhead, and two shallow eyes appeared above a broad, uneven smile.

"Oh."

The face was carved into a stone near the approach, small enough to disappear among its neighbors when the light left it. One cheek was fuller than the other. A crack ran beside its mouth, giving the smile a slightly crooked lift.

Nina tilted her head.

"It looks pleased with itself."

"It got here before the sandwiches."

She laughed and leaned forward, trying to make out more of it.

There was something companionable about the little face. It seemed to be watching the same stretch of river they were.

"Someone must have had fun putting that there," she said.

Callum looked along the rest of the wall. Once he had seen the carving, every unusual stone invited another look. He found a pale oval, a dark hollow, a knot of ivy that resembled nothing in particular when the breeze moved it.

Then his gaze passed beyond the end of the bridge.

An upright length of weathered wood stood among the leaves on the far bank. He had noticed it before and taken it for the remains of a tree. Most of its lower half was concealed by fern fronds. A thin branch crossed its upper portion.

"What's that beside the path?"

Nina followed his pointing hand.

"The stump?"

"Above the fern. Look at the edge."

She shifted sideways on the blanket.

The upright wood had a deliberate outline. Beneath its rounded top, a broad plane caught the light, and below that lay a darker shape too regular to be a broken limb.

"Is that carved too?" she asked.

"I think so."

They sat looking across the water.

From this distance, Callum couldn't tell what the figure represented or how much remained hidden by the plants. He could see only that the wood had been shaped with care. The grain showed silver where the sun reached it and deep brown beneath a projecting edge.

Nina picked up her peach.

"We could go and look."

"We could."

Neither moved immediately. A small insect landed on the lid of the lunch box, reconsidered, and flew away. Callum folded the empty sandwich wrappers while Nina finished eating. She put the peach stone into the container, secured the lid, and handed him the remaining cookie.

"For strength."

"It's a long expedition."

"At least thirty yards."

He ate the cookie.

They packed away the lunch and shook out the blanket, checking the grass beneath it before folding it. Nina found a napkin caught against the rock and tucked it into the backpack's outer pocket.

As they climbed back toward the approach, the bridge changed shape. From below, it had seemed almost delicate, its arch balanced above its reflection. Up close, the parapet stones were heavy and reassuring. Tiny plants grew in the earth gathered between the paving stones, leaving a winding strip of clear footing across the middle.

Callum stopped beside the carved face.

It was smaller than he had thought. The smile occupied barely the width of his open hand. Along one side, sheltered beneath the capstone, a few short lines had been cut into the stone.

Letters, perhaps. Or a date.

He bent closer without touching it.

"Can you read that?" Nina asked.

"Not yet."

She took a photograph to examine later, then stepped beside him at the entrance to the bridge.

The river moved beneath them. Beyond the opposite parapet, the carved wooden figure stood just off the path, still partly screened by leaves.

Callum looked back once at the patch of grass where they had eaten. From here, he could see how neatly the maple sheltered it, how the bank curved away from the old crossing.

“Good choice,” he said.

Nina adjusted the backpack on his shoulder where one strap had twisted.

“You can still have a plaque.”

Then they crossed together to see what someone had made on the other side.

CHAPTER TWO

Across the Water



Halfway across the bridge, Nina stopped to look downstream.

Their picnic spot lay empty beneath the maple. From here, it looked smaller: a square of flattened grass, a pale rock, the low branches they had sat beneath. Beyond it, the river turned out of sight.

“We could have eaten and gone home,” she said.

Callum stopped beside her.

“We still can. Although there may be crumbs in the backpack.”

“I mean, we nearly didn't see any of this.”

He looked toward the wooden figure on the far bank.

“Good thing you rejected my stump.”

They crossed the last few paving stones together.

The figure stood just beyond the bridge, on a raised footing beside the path. Up close, it was taller than either of them. Ferns screened the lower portion, but the head and shoulders rose clear of the leaves. Its face had broad, deliberate planes, and the weathered grain followed the curve of one cheek. Two arms reached forward from the body, the hands open.

Callum walked a few steps past it, then turned.

"It's facing the bridge."

From the riverbank, they had seen it at an angle. Here, arriving from the crossing, they stood directly before it.

Nina looked from the open hands to the path behind the figure.

"Welcoming people?"

"Could be."

They had both seen Native carvings around the region, outside public buildings and along waterfront walks. Nina recognized something familiar in the figure's presence, but neither knew enough to identify its maker or community by looking.

A narrow metal plate was fixed to the footing. Grass hid most of it. Nina crouched and gently held a few blades aside.

"There is a name," she said. "I can't make out all of it."

Beneath the lettering, she could read two words.

SKOKOMISH ARTIST.

She took a photograph, then let the grass fall back.

"We might be able to read it on a bigger screen."

Callum stepped to one side. The figure changed as he moved: a projecting brow caught the light, a shadow under one hand

deepened. The back was shaped too. A shallow fold ran from the shoulders toward the ground, following the wood's grain.

He had expected something carved on the front of a post. Someone had thought about what a person would see while walking around it.

"There's more work on the other side," he said.

Nina joined him. Beyond his shoulder, she noticed a low stone set beside the trail.

At first, she thought someone had left a bag there.

It rested against a larger rock, its rounded flap hanging over a square body. A strap curled beside it. Moss filled the crease beneath the flap.

Then she saw that the strap and the bag were part of the same stone.

"Callum."

He followed her gaze.

"Someone's forgotten their luggage."

She crouched again, smiling.

The buckle had been carved slightly crooked. Three small marks on one side resembled stitches. Behind the bag, partly concealed by fern fronds, a pair of stone shoes stood on a low slab.

Nina leaned sideways.

The shoes belonged to a seated figure.

It was smaller than life, with bent knees and a plain coat. One hand rested on the rock beside the satchel. The other was raised toward the cedar figure, as though answering its greeting.

"Look at where they're looking," she said.

Callum stood back far enough to see both pieces.

The seated person's face was turned toward the open hands. Between the sculptures, the path broadened into a small patch of level ground.

"Do you think they're meant to go together?"

"Maybe."

Nina took a photograph that included them both.

They continued along the path.

Only a short distance from the bridge, the river became difficult to see. Leaves closed around them, turning the sunlight into scattered patches on the ground. The air was warm and still. A tiny fly persisted around Callum's ear until he waved it away and nearly walked past the next carving.

"Wait," Nina said.

A salmon lay above a shallow stone channel beside the path.

Its body curved as if caught in the act of turning upstream. The outline was clear and strong, with a broad tail and a head angled toward a small basin. Cut shapes within the body gave Nina more to examine each time she moved: the curve of the back, the arrangement around the eye, the spaces left between the carved forms. Traces of dark and reddish paint remained in sheltered recesses beneath the weathered surface.

The channel below was dry except for a little damp earth near its upper end. Fallen leaves had collected where water might once have passed beneath the fish.

Nina stood quietly for a moment.

"I'd like to see this with the water running."

Callum looked uphill. Several stones disappeared beneath a tangle of roots and groundcover. He couldn't tell whether the channel had carried rainwater or been fed from somewhere else.

"Someone planned it," he said.

There was another small plate, this one attached to the side of the base. Its lettering was dark with age. Nina photographed it without trying to scrape the surface clean.

She wanted to know the artist's name. She wanted to know whether the same person had made the cedar figure, and why the salmon had been placed here.

Before they left, she walked around to view it from the path ahead.

"Oh, that's clever."

From that angle, the salmon's curve followed the bend in the channel almost exactly. If the water were moving, a visitor walking uphill would be going with the fish.

Callum came to stand beside her.

"We keep finding the front after we've already walked past."

"Then we'll have to look on the way back too."

He checked the time on his phone.

They had most of the afternoon left. Still, they agreed to turn around by four. There would be the walk back to the marked trail, and neither had brought anything for after dark.

Nina put her phone away.

"One more bend?"

"That seems reasonable."

Around the bend, a woman made of stone held out a bowl.

They both stopped.

The sculpture stood beside a bench beneath a maple. One end of the seat had slumped, and a sapling grew through the gap between two boards. The woman herself was carved in a much looser manner than the seated traveler near the bridge. Her dress was suggested by a few sweeping cuts. Her face had laughing lines beside the mouth, and one sleeve was rolled higher than the other.

The bowl in her hands contained rain-darkened leaves.

"Lunch," Callum said.

"You're not still hungry."

"I'm recognizing a theme."

Nina went closer. Beneath the bench, two small shapes rested against the stone base.

A pair of shoes.

She looked behind the woman's skirt and found a second figure, lower and partly concealed by the bench. A familiar square satchel lay beside its knee. The buckle leaned at the same angle as the one near the bridge.

"It's the same person."

Callum bent to look.

This version of the traveler was made from a different stone. The face was rounder, the coat less detailed. Yet the bag, the shoes, and the little fold in the coat's collar were unmistakable once Nina pointed them out.

Here, the traveler was reaching for the bowl.

They looked back along the path. The trees hid the earlier sculptures.

"Someone arrives," Nina said. "Someone welcomes them. Then they get something to eat?"

"That's how I'd arrange a visit."

She smiled, but continued studying the figures.

There was an empty space on the bench beside the traveler, just wide enough for a person to sit. Before the boards had rotted, a visitor could have joined the scene.

She could almost picture it: someone resting there with a packed lunch while another person walked ahead and called back about what they had found.

"I think people used to spend time here," she said.

Callum was examining the ground beyond the bench.

"Quite a few people."

Through the trees lay a clearing. The path divided around a patch of tall grass, and beyond it stood a long picnic table. Its surface was almost entirely green with moss. One bench remained attached; the other lay beneath it. A second table stood farther back, tilted but upright.

Between them was an open area paved with uneven slabs. Grass filled the joints. Along one edge, a low wall curved beneath the trees, its broad top offering more places to sit.

Nina stepped into the clearing.

It was difficult to take in all at once.

A bird with folded metal wings stood on a stone plinth. Beyond it, a cluster of small figures seemed to be carrying something together. A ceramic shape gleamed beneath a shallow shelter. Near the wall, what looked like a tree root resolved into the carved back of an animal.

She turned toward Callum, then stopped again.

There was a tiny stone dog beneath the nearest table, its chin resting on its paws.

"Every time I turn around," she said.

He followed her gaze and laughed.

"Patient. Unlike me."

Nina took a few photographs, then lowered the phone. The screen kept flattening the place into separate views. She wanted to stand still long enough to understand where everything was.

The traveler appeared again among the small figures, recognizable by the satchel. This time the bag had been set aside. The traveler was helping carry one end of a carved beam.

Callum noticed it at the same moment.

"They're building something."

At the far end of the clearing, a narrow opening continued uphill. Beyond it, sunlight touched a patch of stone that was too straight to be an outcrop.

Nina moved a little to her left.

A window appeared between the leaves.

It was narrow at the bottom and wider near the top, set beneath a deep, sloping roof. Another window sat beside it at a different height. Between them, the wall curved outward around a rounded corner.

"There's a house."

Callum came beside her.

They could see only part of it. Ferns concealed the foot of the wall, and the branches of a hazel crossed the roof. A chimney rose at an unexpected angle before straightening above the ridge.

For several seconds, Callum examined the visible windows.

"I'd like to meet whoever measured that."

"You think they got it wrong?"

"I think they had something in mind."

Nina glanced back at the carvings, the bench with room for a visitor, the moss-covered tables. Then she looked again at the house beyond them.

The path went all the way to its door.

This time, when she looked at Callum, she didn't need to ask.

CHAPTER THREE

The House That Leaned Toward the Sun



The house looked different with every few steps.

From the clearing, Nina had thought its roof tilted sharply to the left. As they approached, another slope appeared behind the first, sheltering a low wing she hadn't been able to see. A rounded wall tucked beneath it, with a little window set so low that she wondered whether the room inside had been made for children.

Beside the front steps, a stone cat slept along the top of a short wall.

Callum nearly put his hand on it before recognizing the ears.

"That's two animals we've almost missed."

"Three. There was something beside the curved wall back there."

"You didn't say."

"You were looking at the bird. I thought we'd look on the way back."

He glanced over his shoulder toward the clearing.

"We may need a list."

The house stood on a low rise, its front step only a little higher than the path. One side of the porch was deep enough to shelter a bench. The other narrowed around a rounded corner, where the roof reached down toward a rain barrel filled with dry leaves.

Above the bench, a wooden board hung beneath the eaves.

VISITORS' ROOM.

The smaller line below had faded, but Nina could still read it.

PLEASE LEAVE THE GARDEN BOOK HERE FOR THE NEXT PERSON.

She looked at Callum.

"A book."

He was examining the porch posts. Each rose from a stone base, but none was quite the same shape. One had a squared shoulder. Another curved around a knot that someone had deliberately left in the wood.

"That might explain a few things."

Nina knocked on the door.

They waited. A bird called from somewhere behind the house. Nothing moved inside.

She knocked again, then stepped back from the threshold.

“Hello?”

No answer.

Through the window beside the door, they could see a small table, shelves, and sunlight on a bare wooden floor. A framed notice hung on the inside of the glass.

WELCOME. COME IN AND REST.

Beneath it, someone had drawn a teacup with a crooked handle.

Nina tried the door. It opened a few inches before catching on a pile of leaves blown beneath it.

“It looks like this part was open to visitors,” she said.

Callum looked through the gap.

Beyond the table was another door, firmly closed. A small brass plate on it read PRIVATE.

“Just this room,” he said.

They pushed the leaves gently aside with the bottom of the outer door and stepped in.

The room smelled of old wood and cool stone, with the faint dry smell Nina associated with books kept in a room that was seldom opened. A spider had strung a web between a shelf and the ceiling. Dust lay along the window ledges, but the floor beneath their feet felt firm.

Nina stayed near the entrance while her eyes adjusted.

The low window she had wondered about opened above a built-in seat. A cushion had been removed, leaving a broad wooden surface that curved with the wall. Sitting there would put a person's eyes at just the right height to look out beneath the branches.

She bent a little.

Through the glass, the woman with the bowl stood between two trunks. The traveler was visible beside her, and the empty place on the bench faced almost directly toward the house.

"Callum. Come here."

He leaned beside her.

"Oh."

From outside, the little window had seemed oddly placed. From here, it made a picture of the garden.

At the other end of the room, a taller window framed the group carrying the beam. Only two of the figures were visible at first. Nina moved sideways, and the traveler appeared at the edge of the view.

"These can't all be accidents."

Callum looked around the room again.

The ceiling rose toward the back, following the roof. Shelves occupied spaces that a square room would never have had: a shallow recess beside the chimney, a triangular corner beneath a beam, a narrow ledge that ended in a carved curl of wood.

Near the entrance, a small niche held a ceramic mouse.

He pointed it out.

Nina laughed.

"I walked right past that."

"I'm starting to think that's the idea."

Beside the inner door, a faded plan hung in a frame. It showed the visitors' room, a kitchen, a sitting room, and a small bedroom along the back. The walls curved on the drawing just

as they did in the house. In the kitchen, someone had drawn a sink beneath a window and marked a little pump beside it.

Callum followed the line of a passage with his eyes.

"It is a whole house."

"A small one."

"Bigger than it looks from the front."

Nina imagined someone waking in the back room and coming through to open the visitors' door, perhaps carrying a cup of tea while the first people crossed the bridge.

She wondered who had lived here, and when they had last done that.

Below the plan was a black-and-white photograph. The cottage stood almost bare of climbing plants, its roof bright and new. A man in rolled shirtsleeves sat on the unfinished porch with a woman beside him. Someone had balanced a broad-brimmed hat on one of the posts.

The caption read:

THE HOUSE, 1911.

Nina looked back at the photograph's windows.

"The house was here before the garden."

Callum joined her. In the picture, the clearing held stacked boards, buckets, and a trestle. None of the sculptures they had seen was there.

"Someone found a good use for the windows later."

"Or chose where to put things because of them."

They turned toward the table.

A large book rested on a wooden stand beneath a hinged glass cover. The pages were open to a drawing of the river, the stone bridge, and a curving path. Several empty spaces in the drawing had been filled with small illustrations: the cedar figure, the traveler beside the bench, the salmon above its channel.

Across the top, in careful dark lettering, was a title.

A PLACE ALONG THE WAY.

Nina took a slow breath.

“Here it is.”

Callum slipped the backpack off his shoulders and set it between his shoes.

They bent over the glass together.

The book was handmade. Thick pages had been sewn into a cloth spine, and the lettering varied slightly in size. Along one edge, a fine line of water staining had dried into a pale brown border. The glass above it was dusty, but the drawings remained clear.

The first few lines were large enough to read.

A traveler came to the crossing with a bag, a little food, and no certainty about the road ahead.

Below that, the writing curved beside the drawing of the bridge.

At the water, someone made room.

Nina glanced toward the door, as if she might see the welcoming figure from there.

“We were right about the traveler.”

Callum nodded. He was looking at the small illustrations along the path.

Different hands had drawn them. The cedar figure was carefully shaded. The woman with the bowl was sketched in a few lively strokes. Beside the salmon, someone had painted a wash of blue along the channel.

Tiny numbers stood near each image.

On the right-hand page, the path continued uphill. The traveler ate beside the woman, stopped at the water, and joined the figures carrying their beam. Farther along were scenes they hadn't found: people around a table, a figure tending a young tree, an open doorway.

"There's more," Callum said.

"Quite a lot more."

She followed the drawn path to the little house at its end.

The illustration showed its odd roof and unequal windows. A square satchel hung beside the doorway.

The last line on the open page read:

When there was room to rest, there was work worth staying for.

Nina stood upright and looked around the room.

The story had led them here, even while they were still guessing what it was.

She could hear the afternoon outside: insects in the warm clearing, a leaf brushing the porch, the river reduced to a distant sound behind the trees.

"Can we turn it?" Callum asked.

He meant the page.

The glass cover had a small catch. Nina examined it, then shook her head.

"I'd rather find someone who knows how it opens. Look at the edge of that paper."

A small split ran near the binding. Callum took his hand away from the stand.

"Photographs, then."

They took pictures from several angles to avoid the reflection of the windows. Beneath the title, a smaller line credited the garden's contributors. The names were too numerous to read comfortably through the dusty glass, but the towns stood out between them.

Several communities. Several kinds of work.

In the margin beside the cedar figure, Nina found the words SKOKOMISH CARVERS. There were handwritten additions in a different ink beneath the original lettering.

"They kept adding to it," she said.

A loose-looking slip lay under the glass at the bottom of the stand. It was a printed invitation, decorated with a small drawing of a table beneath a tree.

GARDEN WORK DAY AND SHARED LUNCH.

BRING SOMETHING TO MAKE, SOMETHING TO MEND, OR SOMETHING TO SHARE.

Below a faded telephone number was a contact name.

EDITH VOSS.

Callum read it aloud.

Nina photographed that too.

"Someone may remember her."

He checked the time.

Three forty-six.

For the first time that afternoon, Nina wished the clock would stop being useful.

"We said four," he said.

"I know."

They took one last look around. From this side of the room, Nina noticed something beneath the window seat: a shallow drawer with a wooden handle shaped like a leaf. She left it closed.

There would be more to ask about when they found the right person.

Callum lifted the backpack. At the door, he looked back toward the inner rooms.

"Whoever lived here had visitors coming right into their front room."

Nina glanced at the welcoming notice in the window.

"I think they liked that."

Outside, the sun had shifted enough to light the stone cat's face. Its eyes were half closed, and one paw extended over the wall.

They pulled the door shut as they had found it, taking care that no leaves caught beneath it. On the porch, Nina turned to look through the low window again.

This time she could see the empty seat inside and, reflected faintly in the glass, the garden behind her.

"We should find out who looks after this," she said.

"And show them the pictures."

They went down the path at an easier pace than either had intended. Nina stopped beside the sheltered ceramic work.

Callum found the animal by the curved wall: a stone otter tucked into the roots, its tail following the bend of the seat.

At the broken bench, they looked again at the traveler accepting the bowl.

Someone had once drawn that scene on a page. Someone else had chosen a stone, lifted tools, and worked until the gesture could be seen from the path.

All the way back to the bridge, Nina kept noticing the spaces left for people.

Beside a carving. Beneath a tree. At the end of a table.

When they reached the cedar figure, Callum turned for a last look uphill.

"Next time," he said, "we should bring more lunch."

Nina smiled.

"And find out who else remembers the way."

CHAPTER FOUR

Names in a Book



That evening, Nina put the photographs on the largest screen they owned.

Callum brought two mugs of tea and a plate of toast, then moved a stack of unopened mail out of the way.

“For someone who packed lunch,” Nina said, “you seem to have spent most of today finding more food.”

“Exploration requires support.”

He sat beside her.

On the screen, the little face in the bridge looked out from beneath its capstone. Enlarged, the marks beside it resolved into two initials and something that might have been a year. The last digit remained hidden by the edge of a leaf.

They moved to the cedar figure's plate.

Nina adjusted the brightness, then leaned back.

"Irene Bellamy."

Callum wrote the name on the back of an envelope.

The salmon had a different name: Corinne Bellamy. Beyond that, the lettering was too worn to read with confidence.

"Related?" he asked.

"Something else to find out."

They added Edith Voss to the envelope, then the title of the book.

A Place Along the Way.

For a while, their search produced other gardens, other bridges, and a surprising number of people who had opinions about old stonework. Then Callum found a scanned community newsletter with a little drawing of the cottage in one corner.

The article was short. Artists from several nearby towns had met to plan a walking garden, using an existing house and an old river crossing. It mentioned a summer gathering, a shared lunch, and Edith Voss, who could be contacted through the community arts group.

The photograph beneath it showed a long table covered in paper.

People sat around it with pencils, mugs, and what appeared to be a plate of biscuits. In the middle lay a rough drawing of a winding path.

"There," Nina said.

She pointed to a woman bending over the paper. Beside her elbow was the unmistakable shape of the traveler's satchel, drawn much larger than anything else.

Callum smiled.

"They really did sit down and plan it."

The next morning, Nina called the small local history room listed on the newsletter's archive page. The volunteer who answered knew the garden's name, although she had never visited it.

"Edith still lives nearby," she said. "I can pass your number along."

Nina explained what they had found and asked her to mention the photographs.

The call came that afternoon.

"Did you see the mouse?" a woman asked after introducing herself.

Nina laughed in surprise.

"In the house?"

"Yes."

"We did."

"Good. I made that one."

• • •

Edith Voss lived in a small bungalow with tomatoes growing in tubs beside the front steps. When she opened the door on Thursday evening, she was wearing a green cardigan over a summer dress and carrying a pencil behind one ear.

"Come through," she said. "I've been looking for the right box."

The box sat on her kitchen table beneath a folded tea towel. Beside it were three cups and a tin of biscuits.

Callum glanced at Nina.

She knew what he was thinking about the photograph in the newsletter.

Edith saw the glance and smiled.

"Sit down before you start being polite."

Nina had brought a tablet so Edith could see the photographs without having to peer at a phone. The first image was the bridge, taken from their picnic blanket.

Edith settled her glasses on her nose.

"Oh, the ivy has had a busy time."

She touched the edge of the tablet without moving the picture.

"The arch still looks well."

"It felt solid," Callum said. "We don't know much about bridges, though."

"Neither do I. We used to have someone who did."

Nina moved through the pictures slowly.

At the cedar figure, Edith leaned closer. At the salmon, she nodded. But it was the little dog beneath the table that made her reach across and catch Nina's wrist.

"That was my husband's."

Nina left the image where it was.

"He carved it?"

"Yes. He said every picnic needed a dog pretending it hadn't noticed the sandwiches."

Her thumb rested briefly on Nina's wrist before she let go.

"He took three months over those paws."

Callum looked again at the small carved animal, its chin resting patiently on them.

"They were worth it."

Edith smiled and reached for the box.

Inside were envelopes of photographs, a thin folder, and several notebooks with softened corners. She lifted out a picture of a younger man sitting on a low stool, a block of stone between his knees.

One small paw was already emerging from it.

"That's him. And that's the stool I kept asking him to fix."

They laughed together, and the room grew easier.

Nina asked about Irene and Corinne Bellamy.

"Mother and daughter," Edith said. "Irene made the welcome figure. Corinne made the salmon, and helped with the book. Corinne is still working. I've left her a message."

She found a photograph of the two women beside a length of cedar resting on supports. Another showed a younger Corinne drawing the curved body of the salmon on a sheet of paper.

"They were there from the planning meetings," Edith continued. "Irene had very firm ideas about where her piece should stand. She wanted visitors to meet it as they came over the bridge."

"That's exactly how it felt," Nina said.

Edith looked pleased.

From the folder, she drew a stapled copy of the garden story. The cover carried the same title they had seen beneath the glass.

"The big book is the lovely one," she said. "This is the useful one. We made copies for people who wanted to follow the whole walk."

She set it between them.

In this version, the sentences were typed. Small black-and-white drawings marked the scenes, with numbers matching the plan at the back. Beneath each was the name of the person who had made it.

"Whose story was it?" Callum asked.

"Ours, by the time we finished arguing over it."

Edith poured more tea.

"We needed something everyone could work with. We started with a person arriving somewhere unfamiliar. After that, everyone brought an idea. What would you offer? What would you want to make? How would it fit beside the next person's work?"

She turned to the page with the salmon.

"Corinne chose this part. She'll tell you about her work better than I can."

Nina read the short passage beneath the drawing. The traveler stopped beside the flowing water, listening while someone who knew the river pointed out what was moving beneath its surface. The traveler stayed long enough to begin noticing for themselves.

She remembered standing in front of the carving, then walking past it and discovering a better angle.

They read on.

After the meal, the traveler helped carry a beam. Later, people gathered around a table, mended a broken wheel, planted a tree, and made room beneath a roof during rain. The traveler

offered skills of their own, learning some tasks and making a cheerful mess of others.

By the final scene, the satchel hung beside the cottage door. Another visitor stood at the crossing.

The traveler went out to meet them.

Nina rested her hand beside the page.

"The person at the end becomes the one who welcomes someone."

"That's what we settled on," Edith said. "Then everyone went away and made something."

"All in one summer?"

Edith laughed.

"Good heavens, no."

She spread several photographs over the table. Bare ground became a path. The first sculptures appeared. Someone carried a bench between two trees. In a later photograph, the trees had grown, and children sat at a picnic table while adults worked nearby.

"Years," she said. "People had jobs and families. Some pieces took longer. Some had to be remade. We moved the table scene twice before we liked where it sat."

Callum pointed to the cottage.

"Who built the house?"

"Arthur Senn. Long before our garden. The property belonged to his family, then later became the association's. His granddaughter helped start the garden with us."

Edith found a copy of the old photograph from the visitors' room.

"He built the rooms around what he wanted to do in them. A place to sit in morning light. Somewhere to put a long workbench. A bedroom that stayed cool. He wasn't terribly concerned about making the front look balanced."

"We noticed," Callum said.

"But you liked it?"

"Very much."

"So did we. We arranged some of the sculptures for those windows. The house was already teaching us where to look."

Nina glanced toward the box of photographs.

"What happened?"

Edith was quiet for a moment.

"A little at a time."

She straightened the corner of one picture.

"A wet summer when we didn't gather much. Someone moved away. Someone needed looking after. The last resident caretaker left, and nobody could take over. We still had work days, but fewer people came."

She looked at the photograph of her husband.

"Eventually I couldn't manage the path myself. Others checked the buildings when they could. We kept the roof repaired. Keeping everything going was harder."

"Who looks after the property now?" Callum asked.

"A few of us are still responsible for the association. There are records, and a little money for essentials. My nephew checks the house, but he lives two hours away."

Her eyes returned to Nina's tablet.

"I knew it was overgrown. I didn't know how much you could still see."

Nina moved back to the picture of the clearing.

"Quite a lot. And probably more than we found."

For a while, they compared the old photographs with the new ones. Callum found the ceramic shelter in a picture of people setting its roof. Nina discovered that the otter had once been visible from a second path, now hidden by bushes.

Edith wrote notes on a fresh sheet of paper.

Then she put down her pencil.

"Would you take me?"

"Back to the garden?" Nina asked.

"I'd like to see it. Slowly. If someone could walk with me."

Callum looked at the map in the booklet. A short approach ran from the road to the bridge, separate from the longer trail they had followed.

"Is this still there?"

"It should be. The old entrance is behind the bend. You probably drove straight past."

They talked through the walk, the uneven ground, somewhere to rest. Edith would ask her nephew about the entrance. They would choose a dry day and take their time.

When Nina and Callum stood to leave, Edith handed them the copied booklet.

"Keep that. There are more in the box."

At the door, Nina thanked her for the tea and the photographs.

Edith looked toward the kitchen table, still covered with pictures.

“Thank you for bringing me something new to put beside them.”

Outside, the evening was still warm. Callum carried the booklet carefully to the car.

On the envelope they had used for their notes, three names had become two carvers and a woman who made a mouse. The small stone dog had become someone's patient work, and someone's memory.

Nina looked back at the bungalow. Edith stood in the doorway and lifted a hand.

They had come home from the woods wanting to know where a path went.

On Saturday, they would help someone follow it back.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Way Back



Edith recognized the entrance by a tree.

"The maple with the split trunk," she said from the back seat.
"Slow down here."

Callum eased off the accelerator. Beyond the tree, a shallow gravel recess opened beside the road. Branches screened most of it, and a weathered wooden post leaned among the weeds. There was space to pull in well clear of passing traffic.

"We drove straight past this," Nina said.

"Most people would now."

Edith looked through the window for a moment before opening her door.

They had brought folding chairs, extra water, and enough lunch that Callum had needed a second bag. Edith's nephew had checked the short approach the previous afternoon and moved a fallen branch. From here, he had told her, it was a fairly easy walk to the bridge.

A second car arrived while Nina was unfolding Edith's walking stick.

The woman who stepped out carried a canvas shoulder bag and wore a loose work shirt with the sleeves rolled back. Her dark hair, streaked heavily with silver, was tied at her neck. She embraced Edith before turning toward the couple.

"Corinne Bellamy."

Nina introduced herself and Callum.

"I've been looking at your photographs," Corinne said. "You found quite a bit for one afternoon."

"We kept stopping."

"Good."

She took one of the folding chairs, and they set off beneath the trees.

The approach joined the old path just above the three stone steps. Nina recognized the line of buried edging stones, then the pale capstones of the bridge.

Edith stopped.

Nobody hurried her.

She stood with both hands resting on the head of her stick, looking at the ivy, the arch, and the water beneath it.

"I used to hear people coming across," she said. "When we were working up in the clearing. Especially children. They always had to stop and look over the wall."

Callum lowered his bags.

"We did that too."

"I should hope so."

At the little stone face, Edith bent as far as was comfortable.

"Still smiling."

"Do you know who made it?" Nina asked.

"Arthur. The man who built the house. He repaired this end of the bridge and left himself some company."

Callum looked at the small marks beside the cheek. The initials they had struggled over on the screen made sense now.

"How old is the bridge?"

"Older than the house. We have papers somewhere. I'll ask my nephew to find them."

They crossed slowly, pausing midway while Edith looked toward the picnic bank.

Beyond the bridge, Corinne went straight to the cedar figure.

She walked around it without speaking, examining the top, the open hands, the places where moisture had darkened the wood. At the footing, she crouched to look beneath the fern fronds.

Nina waited beside the path.

At last Corinne stood.

"My mother wanted the hands a little lower," she said. "She changed them after she brought it here. From her workbench, she hadn't seen what a child would see coming up the path."

Nina looked again. From below, the hands seemed close enough to reach toward.

"Did you help her?"

"Mostly I fetched things and had opinions."

Edith laughed.

"You had plenty of those."

"I still do."

Corinne smiled and took several photographs, including one of a narrow split near the base.

"I'd like a conservator to look at this with me before anyone cleans it. There are people I can call."

Callum glanced at the ivy trailing near the stone traveler.

"We thought we might clear a little around things."

"The path, certainly. But leave anything growing against the artwork until we've looked. Sometimes pulling a root does more damage than leaving it for another week."

He nodded.

They continued uphill, carrying the chairs between them.

At the salmon, Corinne set hers down and stood beside the channel.

"I haven't seen this in years."

The fish held its curve above the leaves. In the morning light, more of the old color showed beneath the projecting forms than Nina remembered.

"Was there always water?" she asked.

"When it rained enough. We caught runoff farther up and led it through here. It was never part of the drinking water."

Corinne traced the course in the air with one finger.

"The first time we tested it, the water missed that bend completely. We got very wet fixing it."

"You got wet," Edith said. "I supervised."

"From under an umbrella."

Nina smiled and looked from the fish to its maker.

"What did you want people to notice?"

Corinne considered the question.

"The salmon first. Then the water. Then, perhaps, the actual river they'd just walked over."

She moved a step along the path.

"People sometimes give a carving more attention than the living thing. I wanted them to leave here looking."

Nina thought of the gravel shelf beneath the bridge and how little she had examined it beyond its reflection.

Corinne took another photograph.

"The story we made together gave me a place for that. Each of us had something we wanted to say."

At the clearing, they opened two chairs in the shade. Edith sat with a small sigh of satisfaction while Callum fetched the remaining bags.

The dog waited beneath the broken picnic table.

For a while, Edith looked at nothing else.

Then she pointed to the missing bench.

"He'd have something to say about that."

"Your husband?" Nina asked.

"He built the table as well."

Callum placed a water bottle beside her chair.

"We could find someone to help repair it."

"Yes," Edith said. "I think we could."

• • •

With Edith resting, Corinne led the couple along the short loop they had missed on their first visit.

They found the travelers around the carved table. One seat in the group was empty, its stone surface broad and smooth. Beyond it, a child and an adult knelt beside a young tree that had long since grown taller than the cottage. The carved sapling between their hands remained small.

Nina stood beneath the living branches and looked up.

"They planted a real one too."

"We hoped it would grow," Corinne said. "It's done rather better than the rest of us."

A little farther on, the traveler held a wheel steady while another figure worked at its rim. The satchel rested beside a toolbox. Callum recognized the folded corner of the coat before he found the bag.

At the last bend, just below the house, a low stone doorway framed the path. Beside it hung a carved satchel. Through the opening, if Nina stood in the right place, she could see a small figure at the distant crossing between the leaves.

She stepped sideways and lost the view. Stepped back and found it again.

"The next person arriving," she said.

Corinne nodded.

"We kept trimming that gap. It must have closed over slowly."

Only a few leaves now crossed the sightline. Without Corinne, Nina might have walked through the doorway and missed its final scene entirely.

They returned to Edith and ate lunch in the clearing, using their knees for tables. Callum passed around sandwiches. Edith produced a parcel of cake from a bag Nina hadn't noticed her carrying.

"Exploration requires support," Nina told her.

"Exactly."

Callum shook his head, smiling.

Afterward, Edith took a ring of keys from her pocket.

"Would you like to see the rest of the house?"

They helped her up the path. Inside, she paused to greet the ceramic mouse, then unlocked the private door.

The kitchen was small and bright. A hand pump stood beside a deep sink, its handle curved from years of use. Shelves followed the rounded wall. In the sitting room, a wide recess would hold a worktable beneath the window. The bedroom lay beyond a short passage, cooler than the front rooms, with space for a bed and a little chest.

Callum noticed a patch of staining near the chimney. Edith's nephew had left a note on the counter about it, along with the date of his last visit.

"A friend of mine surveys old buildings," Corinne said. "She could look at the structure and tell us what needs attention."

Edith nodded.

"I'd like that."

Behind the kitchen was a narrow washroom with a basin and space where an old bath had stood. Edith explained that the previous facilities had been taken out of use after the last caretaker left.

"Anyone living here again would need a proper bathroom," she said. "And the drainage sorted out. We can't simply turn things on and hope."

Callum looked through the rear window. Beyond the house, the ground opened before meeting the trees.

"Can workers get equipment back here?"

Edith's expression brightened.

"There's another way in. We didn't carry everything over that little stone bridge."

She directed them to a back door opening onto a small gravel yard. A narrow lane curved into the woods, hidden completely from the clearing.

While Edith rested in the kitchen doorway with Corinne, Nina and Callum followed it on foot.

Beneath fallen leaves, gravel remained. The lane descended gently and turned toward the stream. There, a plain utility bridge crossed on substantial beams, with low rails and a deck wide enough for a small maintenance vehicle. Beyond it, the lane climbed to a closed gate beside the road.

Callum stopped short of the deck.

"We'll need someone to check this too."

Nina took pictures from the bank.

From here, they could hear the river but see none of the garden. The bend, the trees, and the rise behind the cottage kept the working entrance separate from the place they had first discovered.

Back at the house, Edith explained that the association had used the lane for deliveries and repairs. Her nephew walked in that way when he checked the building.

"It could be useful again," Nina said.

"Very."

They sat on the porch while the afternoon warmed the stones.

At first, the list of work sounded daunting. The paths. The tables. The book. The cottage, the water supply, the crossings. Corinne wrote the names of people she could ask about the carvings and their materials. Edith would speak to the other association members about permissions, money, and finding the old records.

Callum offered to ask friends about clearing the paths once the work had been marked out. Nina could organize photographs and a list of the pieces, matching each one to its artist and scene.

Nobody promised it would all happen at once.

But the work began to acquire names beside it.

Edith held Corinne's notebook while she reached into her bag. A pencil rolled toward the porch edge, and Callum caught it with his foot.

"First repair," he said, handing it back. "Somewhere to keep the pencils."

"There's a drawer beneath the window seat," Edith said.

Nina laughed.

"We found it. We didn't open it."

"Full of pencils. Unless the mice have taken up drawing."

Before they left, Nina photographed the four of them on the porch, using the timer on her phone. Callum stood beside the post with the knot. Corinne sat on the bench, and Edith rested her hands on her stick. Behind them, the visitors' door stood open.

They checked the picture together.

“One for your box,” Nina said.

Edith looked at it for a long moment.

“And one for the house.”

CHAPTER SIX

Many Hands



The first person to arrive for the restoration brought no tools at all.

She brought a notebook, a camera, and a folding rule, and spent nearly twenty minutes looking at the cottage before she stepped through its door.

Callum waited beside the porch with a box of gloves at his feet.

“Is that a good sign?” he asked Corinne.

“It means she's looking.”

The building specialist had questions about the foundations, the chimney, and the stain above the kitchen. She wanted a closer examination of several places before anyone began repairs.

Later that morning, another professional walked both crossings and studied the banks beneath them.

By lunchtime, the box of gloves remained unopened.

Edith sat at a folding table with the other association members, listening while the notes were compared.

The cottage had held up remarkably well, but the flashing beside the chimney needed attention. Some timber near the back entrance needed replacing. The old stone bridge required careful masonry repairs and selective removal of ivy growing into joints. The service crossing would need work on its deck before maintenance vehicles could use it again.

"And the paths?" Nina asked.

"You can begin clearing the marked sections," Corinne said.

"Once we've finished recording the artwork beside them."

She had brought an art conservator, who was now kneeling near the stone traveler. Together, they photographed its surface, discussed the old repairs, and compared it with a picture from Edith's box.

The work list filled two pages.

"Several weekends for the main paths," Callum said, reading what they had written. "Longer for everything else."

"Months," the building specialist said. "Especially if you want the house ready to live in again. The water, bathroom, and wastewater work will need their own assessments and arrangements."

Edith drew a line beneath the list.

"Then we should make a plan for months."

• • •

The plan spent its first week on Edith's kitchen table.

The association approved the work in stages. Nina helped turn the photographs into an inventory, with a number for each piece and room beneath it for the artist's name, materials, and condition. Corinne contacted surviving contributors and families. Some answered immediately. Others took several calls and a letter forwarded by someone who remembered where they had moved.

Money arrived less neatly than offers of help. There were donations, a modest grant application, and several repairs the association could cover from its reserves. A local supplier offered timber for the tables. Skilled work still had to be scheduled and paid for, and Edith kept a separate list of things they could afford now and things that would have to wait.

The first volunteer day came three weeks after her return to the garden.

Nina and Callum brought friends. Corinne brought two relatives and someone who had once helped paint the old signs. A retired groundskeeper arrived with a trailer of hand tools and immediately asked where they intended to put the cuttings.

That question proved more useful than half the things Callum had worried about.

Before work began, everyone walked the marked route. They were shown which plants to trim, which to keep, and which areas around the sculptures to leave alone.

Then the clearing filled with the sounds of people working.

There were short bursts of conversation, the scrape of a rake, someone asking for a wheelbarrow. Farther down the path, a friend of Nina's discovered that the bushes he had expected to finish in an hour continued a considerable distance behind him.

By noon, he had revised his estimate twice.

Callum carried branches to the agreed collection point, came back for another load, and stopped.

For the first time, he could see the full curve of the path from the woman with the bowl to the gathering clearing.

It swept gently outward before returning between two trees. The bend kept the cottage hidden until a visitor reached the tables.

"That's why," Nina said beside him.

She had noticed it too.

The artists had given people somewhere to pause before showing them what came next.

They stood for a moment, seeing the place take its shape again.

Then someone called for the empty wheelbarrow.

• • •

Over the next six weeks, the garden changed in ways both obvious and small.

The paths widened. Loose slabs were reset. The service bridge was repaired and checked for the vehicles it would carry, and deliveries began coming along the back lane. From the clearing, visitors would hear very little of that work and see none of the yard behind the house.

At the old picnic table, a carpenter saved the sound parts and replaced what had rotted. He used Edith's photographs to match the missing bench. The stone dog remained protected while he worked above it.

When the table was ready, Edith sat at it first.

She ran a hand over the new board, then shifted sideways to make room for Corinne.

By the end of lunch, the entire table was occupied.

The artwork took longer.

One damp morning, Nina watched the conservator work on a small area of the traveler beside the welcome figure. From where Nina stood, the change was slight. Then she compared it with the untreated stone and saw a fold in the coat that had almost disappeared beneath the accumulated growth.

At the cedar figure, Corinne and the conservator studied Irene's old photographs before agreeing on the repairs. The figure kept its weathered color and the marks of its making. Only later did Nina realize how much work had gone into leaving it looking comfortably itself.

"People will think we hardly touched it," Corinne said.

She sounded satisfied.

The salmon's surviving paint was recorded and carefully treated. Nobody guessed at missing designs or covered the carving in a fresh version of what they imagined it had been.

Elsewhere, returning artists identified their own pieces. A woman laughed when she found the ceramic shape beneath its shelter and explained that it had begun as a much less successful bowl. The maker of the metal bird showed Callum where a small movement in the neck had once allowed it to turn in a breeze. A specialist later repaired the fitting.

One afternoon, with the bird moving gently overhead, Callum found a tiny frog carved beneath the edge of a stone seat.

He crouched to see it properly.

"How is anybody supposed to find this?"

Edith looked down at him.

"You've managed."

He took a photograph for the inventory.

That evening, Nina found him enlarging the picture.

"There's another one behind it," he said.

There was.

• • •

By late autumn, the maples had begun laying leaves across paths they had only just cleared.

Callum stood with a rake and considered this arrangement.

Nina passed him a second bag.

"Ongoing maintenance," she said.

"I was beginning to suspect."

Their ordinary weeks continued around the garden. They went to work, did laundry, visited friends who had no interest in discussing stone repairs, and sometimes spent an entire evening without opening the photograph folders.

Other evenings disappeared into lists and calls. One Saturday was lost to heavy rain. Another ended early when the materials for a repair failed to arrive.

The house work progressed in stages. After the structural repairs, tradespeople began fitting a proper private bathroom. A wastewater designer assessed the ground behind the cottage and selected space for a septic system and drainfield, away from the well and river. The installation used the service lane, with room retained for future maintenance.

The contractor checked the old water supply and arranged testing and the necessary treatment. The outdoor hand pump and the kitchen pump would stay, restored for use alongside the plumbing the bathroom needed.

At the road entrance, two portable restrooms and a covered waste-and-recycling area were placed where servicing vehicles could reach them. Timber screens and existing trees hid them from the bridge and picnic bank.

Nina and Callum saw the finished enclosure on their way in one morning. A worker closed the gate, and the facilities disappeared behind the boards.

“That will make a difference on workdays,” Nina said.

Inside the park, the greatest excitement that day was a child discovering the otter.

The solar installation was still ahead. Panels would go in a sunny opening near the rear of the house, with batteries and wiring planned for household needs and restrained lighting along the paths. Edith wanted lamps that helped people find their footing without washing out the woods.

“We should still be able to see the evening,” she said.

They chose a spring reopening. Some specialist work would continue over winter, and the association wanted time to finish properly rather than invite everyone through while tools and temporary barriers remained.

By then, three months had passed since the picnic.

. . .

On the last mild Sunday before a run of cold weather, Nina and Callum stayed after the other volunteers left.

They had been helping put the visitors' room in order. The large book was away being cared for by a paper conservator; a clearly marked reading copy now rested beneath the cleaned glass. Edith had brought back cushions for the window seat, and the photograph of their first return stood on a shelf.

When they finished, Callum suggested supper beside the river.

"I brought the blanket."

Nina looked toward the darkening trees.

"And something warm?"

He lifted a flask.

"I'm learning."

They settled beneath the maple in sweaters, their shoes resting where grass had covered the bank in summer. Above them, the branches were almost bare. The bridge showed more clearly through them now, its stonework repaired, enough ivy remaining to soften the outer walls.

Nina wrapped her hands around a cup of soup.

For a while, they talked about the day. A missing name had finally been added to the inventory. Someone had found an old photograph showing the second frog. The repaired bird had turned its head while Edith was passing and startled her into laughing.

Callum set his cup down.

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you."

She looked at him.

His hand had gone to the pocket of his sweater. He drew out a small box, then paused with it resting between his palms.

"I had a much longer version of this in my head."

Nina's expression changed slowly. Her cup came to rest on the blanket.

"You can tell me the long version."

He smiled, nervous now in a way she rarely saw.

"I like our life. Ordinary days, difficult days. You stealing the warm side of the bed. Finding out where something goes because you can't leave a path alone."

"You wanted to cross too."

"I did."

He opened the box.

"I've wanted to ask since before we found this place. I love you, Nina. Will you marry me?"

"Yes."

She said it before he had quite finished taking a breath.

Then she laughed and said it again, and he was holding her instead of the box. For a moment they forgot the ring entirely.

When they remembered, his fingers were clumsy with cold and excitement. Nina held her hand steady for him.

They sat close afterward, looking at it, talking a little and then falling quiet. A leaf drifted beneath the bridge and turned slowly in the current.

"Who do we tell first?" she asked eventually.

That led to a discussion, and the discussion led to retrieving their cups before the remaining soup went cold.

They packed up as the light began to leave the bank.

On the path, Nina stopped beside the little stone face. She held out her hand once more, catching what remained of the daylight.

Callum waited beside her.

Then they walked back to the car together, with people to call and an evening still ahead of them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Way Is Open



Through winter, the garden appeared in Nina's photographs in pieces.

A repaired window beneath wet eaves. Water finding its way around the bend below the salmon. A work boot beside the service gate, nearly hidden beneath the mud someone had carried out on it.

There were fewer people in the pictures now. Some weeks, there was nobody at the cottage except a tradesperson and whichever association member had come to open the door. The volunteers returned when weather and daylight allowed, and work that could be done indoors moved to kitchen tables and workshops.

Nina spent two evenings matching names to old photographs. Callum helped sand signboards in a friend's garage. Corinne brought the conservator's final notes to an association meeting, along with photographs showing the repairs.

Once, Edith telephoned to report that she had found another envelope of receipts.

"Anything useful?" Nina asked.

"We apparently bought a tremendous amount of cake."

"That sounds accurate."

The garden's story booklet was reprinted with a clear plan, the artists' names, and a few recollections they had agreed could be included. Corinne checked the entries for her work and her mother's. Other contributors and families checked theirs. Space remained at the back for information they had yet to recover.

By the time the first new leaves opened, the book had become something visitors could take home again.

• • •

The kitchen pump worked on a Thursday.

Nina had come after work to drop off the finished booklets. She found Edith watching a contractor put away his tools while Callum stood beside the sink, trying not to look as pleased as he felt.

"It's ready," he said.

The water supply had been repaired, tested, and fitted with the treatment it needed. The private bathroom was finished, and the new wastewater system was in use. A folder on the counter held the instructions and records that someone would need to keep looking after it all.

Nina put down the booklets and worked the pump handle.

At first she could hear only the movement inside it. Then water ran into the deep basin.

She laughed.

"I don't know why that's so satisfying."

"Because it didn't work before," Callum said.

He passed her a glass.

She filled it, took a drink, then handed it back for him to try.

Edith watched them over the top of the instruction folder.

"I wanted to ask you both something."

They turned toward her.

She set the folder down.

"The association is looking for resident caretakers. We've talked about what the role would involve, and we'd like you to consider it."

Nina's hand remained on the pump handle.

Callum looked through the kitchen doorway toward the sitting room. The last time they had discussed that room, they had been deciding where a damaged section of skirting should be repaired.

"Living here?" he asked.

"If you wanted to. You needn't answer today."

Edith took two printed sheets from her bag. They described the routine work, the support the association would provide, and how the private rooms would remain separate from the visitors' room. The garden would still have volunteer days, professional maintenance, and people who could cover when the caretakers were away.

"Nobody expects you to do everything," she said. "Or to stop having your own lives."

They took the papers home.

Over the next fortnight, the question followed them into ordinary conversations. Could they manage their journeys to work? Where would they keep things? How would they feel about opening the visitors' room on a morning when they wanted to stay in bed?

They asked about the less charming parts too. Winter access. Repairs. Time off. Who to telephone when something stopped working.

One evening, Nina set her mug beside the papers.

"I can picture the first week," she said. "I'm trying to picture February."

Callum nodded.

They drove out on a wet afternoon, let themselves in with Edith's permission, and spent an hour in the kitchen while rain moved across the windows. No workday, no friends, no lunch spread on the tables outside.

He sat in the window recess. She stood by the shelves, looking at where they curved around the wall.

"The saucepan won't fit there," she said.

"Which one?"

"The big one."

"We could put it underneath."

She looked at him, then down at the lower shelf.

They stayed another hour.

A few days later, after agreeing the arrangements with the association, they said yes.

They would move in after their wedding, once the garden had reopened and the last work around the house was finished. Until then, there were invitations to send, boxes to sort, and several months of their present life still to live.

On their next visit, Callum brought a tape measure.

Nina caught him measuring the lower shelf.

“Well?”

“The saucepan can come.”

• • •

The first evening the lights worked, nobody wanted to go home.

The solar installer had finished earlier that day. Behind the cottage, panels caught the sun above a low sweep of grass, screened from the sculpture paths by the rise and existing planting. The house's wiring and battery system were ready, and the last shaded path lamps had been fitted.

The volunteers gathered for supper to try them.

As daylight thinned, the cottage porch light came on. A little later, warm pools of light appeared at the steps, the path junction, and the approaches to the bridge. The lamps shone down where feet needed to go. Beyond them, the woods grew dark.

From the table, Nina could still see the evening sky between branches.

Edith looked toward the house. Light lay across the visitors' room window seat, and the little mouse occupied its familiar niche.

“That looks right,” she said.

Someone passed her the bread.

After supper, Callum and Nina walked the loop to check the route in the fading light. At the carved table, they paused beside the empty stone seat. From the clearing came the sounds of people collecting plates and arguing amiably about who had brought which container.

Nina rested a hand on Callum's arm.

"Could we get married here?"

He looked back toward the gathering space.

They had discussed dates and numbers, and whether to invite a few more people than they first intended. They hadn't yet found a place that either felt excited about booking.

"I was hoping you'd ask that," he said.

They stood together a moment longer, picturing it.

Then someone called to ask whether the empty soup flask was theirs.

It was.

• • •

The new sign went up at the hiking-trail junction on a bright spring morning.

Callum held the board while Nina stepped back to see whether it was straight.

OLD STONE BRIDGE.

Below it, a smaller line read:

A PLACE ALONG THE WAY - ARTISTS' GARDEN.

An arrow pointed down the path they had first followed through the ferns.

"A little left," Nina said.

He moved it.

"Your other left."

He looked over the top of the board.

"I only brought the two."

She laughed, and they fixed it in place.

At the roadside entrance, another sign welcomed visitors and showed the public facilities and the way to the bridge. The service gate farther down the road remained closed. Near the garden's first carving, a simple notice asked people to leave the artworks in place, stay on the paths, and carry their rubbish back to the collection area.

Beneath that, Edith had added a sentence of her own.

TAKE YOUR TIME. THERE IS MORE TO SEE.

The reopening was set for the following Saturday.

No one could quite agree on how many people would come.

. . .

The first visitors arrived before the booklets were straight on the table.

They were an older couple with a canvas lunch bag and a granddaughter who stopped beside the bridge to look over the wall.

Nina saw Edith notice.

"There," Edith said softly.

By midmorning, people were moving along the paths in small groups. Some had come because they knew an artist. Others had

seen the notice at the library or followed the new sign from the hiking trail.

There were people who remembered the garden, and people who had never heard of it until that week.

A man stood before the woman with the bowl and showed his sister a photograph on his phone. In it, their mother worked at the same stone, younger than either of them now. They stayed there talking for a long time.

Near the cedar figure, Corinne spoke with a family about Irene's work. She showed them a photograph of her mother carving the hands. Later, Nina found her beside the salmon, listening while a child explained what he had noticed in the channel.

"Have you looked at the river yet?" Corinne asked him.

He shook his head.

"Perhaps on your way back."

At the picnic tables, sandwiches appeared. The stone dog received considerably more attention than it had ever pretended to want. In the visitors' room, the original garden book lay protected in its repaired display, with a reading copy close by so people could follow the whole story without touching the fragile pages.

Nina watched someone discover the window seat.

The woman sat down, glanced outside, then leaned forward as the bowl and traveler came into view. She called her companion over.

Nina left them to it.

The gathering at noon was brief. Edith thanked the artists, their families, the specialists, the volunteers, and the people who had helped pay for the work. She thanked Callum and Nina for the photographs that had started the conversations again.

"I hope you'll keep coming," she said. "And I hope you'll bring someone."

Then she invited everyone to eat before the food went cold.

By late afternoon, Callum had answered the same question about the stone house several times, Nina had misplaced and found her water bottle twice, and someone had already written to offer help at the next workday.

There would be another workday. The garden had made that clear.

As the last visitors left, Nina walked down toward the bridge with Edith.

The little girl from the morning was crouching beside the parapet. She looked up as they approached.

"There's a face."

Her grandfather bent to look.

Nina smiled and waited while they found the crooked mouth and the shallow eyes.

Farther upstream, the metal bird moved in a breeze they could barely feel beneath the trees.

Behind them, Callum was carrying a stack of empty trays to the cottage. He stopped at the porch and looked back.

Nina lifted a hand.

For once, there was nothing she needed to point out. He could see it too: the people on the bridge, the open door, and Edith walking slowly home through her garden.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Something They Hadn't Seen



On the morning of the wedding, someone found a rake behind the place where Callum and Nina were supposed to stand.

"I wondered where that went," Callum said.

His friend lifted it clear of the ferns.

"Would you like it in the photographs?"

"Probably not."

They carried it to the tool shed, then returned to the clearing, where chairs had been arranged along the paved area. The garden needed little decoration. A few jars of flowers stood on the picnic tables, and someone had tied a small bunch beside the porch. Everything else had been there before the invitations went out.

It was early summer. The maple leaves had deepened, and the river had settled into its slower season. Sunlight moved across the tops of the sculptures while the gathering space remained comfortably shaded.

Callum wore a pale shirt with the sleeves neatly fastened at his wrists. He had changed his shoes only after helping carry the last chairs.

Nina arrived along the path with her family, wearing a simple cream dress and shoes she could walk in. A small spray of flowers held back part of her hair. When she saw him, she smiled in the familiar way that usually meant she had noticed something he hadn't.

He glanced down at himself.

"What?" he whispered as she reached him.

"Nothing. You look nice."

Then she straightened his collar.

The ceremony was short.

Their friends and family sat among people who had helped restore the garden. Edith had a seat near the front. Corinne sat beside her, with the printed program folded in her hands. Beyond the chairs, the traveler still helped carry the beam, its little stone satchel resting on the ground.

Callum and Nina made their promises in ordinary words. Once, his voice caught, and she held his hand more firmly. When they exchanged rings, the breeze moved a leaf across the paving between their feet.

Afterward, everyone ate at the tables and talked.

Several guests walked the garden with booklets. Others stayed in the shade, making room whenever another person approached with a plate. Someone took a photograph of Edith

showing a child the dog beneath the table. The child had been told it was made of stone and still wanted to check whether it was sleeping.

Near the end of the afternoon, Nina found Callum beside the metal bird.

"There you are."

He moved aside so she could stand with him.

A breeze turned the bird's head a little toward them.

"I was wondering whether it would do that today," he said.

She slipped her arm through his.

They stayed until someone came looking for them with two pieces of cake.

• • •

They moved into the cottage the following week.

The largest things came along the service lane in a small hired vehicle. Boxes followed, carried by friends who had already given up several Saturdays to the place and now claimed to know every uneven bit of the back path.

The saucepan fitted where Callum had measured.

The bookcase did not.

They tried it in two places, took out one shelf, and eventually carried it home with the friend who had brought it.

"The house has opinions," he said.

By evening, there was a bed in the bedroom, a table in the sitting-room recess, and a row of their mugs beside the kitchen sink. Someone had left bread on the counter. Corinne had brought a small vase, made by the potter whose work stood

beneath the garden shelter. Edith supplied two cushions she said were more comfortable than they looked.

When everyone had gone, Nina found one unopened box beneath the table.

"What's in this?"

Callum read the label.

"Things we couldn't decide where to put."

"An excellent system."

They left it there for the night.

Later, while he washed their plates, she opened the back door and listened. No traffic was visible through the trees. A single vehicle sounded somewhere on the road, then passed beyond hearing.

Inside, the kitchen light fell across the curved wall. Their damp shoes stood together near the door.

She came back in and took a towel from the hook.

"I'll dry."

• • •

Living at the garden began with learning its hours.

In the morning, light reached the high window before it touched the path outside. Birds worked the leaf litter near the cottage steps. Sometimes the first visitors arrived while Callum was still finishing breakfast, and Nina would open the visitors' room while he put their dishes away.

On other days, they left early for work and another volunteer came to open up. The notebook in the visitors' room held names, questions, and messages about things that needed attention.

Once, a whole page was devoted to a missing pair of children's sunglasses, which turned up beneath the window-seat cushion.

There were branches to pick up after wind and paths to check after rain. A lamp needed adjustment. The waste service arrived on its scheduled days at the road entrance, and the gate at the service lane opened for deliveries and maintenance, then closed again.

When work exceeded what they knew how to do, they called the person whose name belonged beside it in the folder.

They learned to keep a clean shirt somewhere other than the chair where they dropped their gardening clothes. They learned that the private-room door needed to be properly latched if they wanted to finish supper without a visitor wandering in to ask about the washroom.

They learned to leave days free too.

The first time they went away for a weekend, Edith made them promise not to telephone twice a day.

"We managed before you found us," she said.

Corinne, standing behind her, raised an eyebrow.

"Mostly," Edith added.

They went.

When they returned, the garden had acquired a new entry in the notebook, three questions for the inventory, and a drawing of the metal bird by a visiting child. Nina pinned a copy beside the reading book, with the family's permission.

The space they had left for new information was beginning to fill.

• • •

One warm afternoon, nearly a year after their first visit, they packed a picnic.

Callum put sandwiches in the same lunch box. Nina folded the blanket. There were peaches, cucumbers, and a small container of cookies, which he made no attempt to conceal beneath the napkins.

Someone else was covering the visitors' room for a few hours.

They followed the path down past the traveler, the woman with the bowl, and the salmon. Water moved through the channel after rain earlier in the week. Corinne was there with a friend, looking at a place where the flow divided around a stone.

She lifted a hand as they passed.

At the bridge, Nina stopped beside the welcome figure.

From this direction, they saw the turn of the shoulder first, then the open hands as they walked around it.

Callum waited while she looked.

"Ready?"

She nodded.

They crossed and made their way down to the grassy bank beneath the maple.

The flat rock was where they remembered it. Grass brushed their shoes, and a few low branches needed holding aside while they spread the blanket. Nina sat down facing the bridge.

For a moment, the view was so familiar that she could recall the first afternoon almost exactly: the sandwich in her hand, Callum pointing with his water bottle, the small face becoming visible between leaves.

Now a family was crossing above the arch. The children walked ahead, stopped at the other end, and called for the adults to catch up.

Beyond them, the path curved into the garden.

Callum passed her lunch.

“Good choice of spot.”

“You said that last time.”

“Still true.”

They ate and talked about ordinary things. A friend's new job. Whether the shelf beside the bedroom door would hold another row of books. The afternoon they had promised themselves for a longer hike.

Sunlight reached beneath the arch as the river lowered toward its summer level. Nina watched a patch of reflected brightness tremble against the stone.

Something interrupted it.

She leaned forward.

“Callum.”

He followed her gaze.

Low on the inside of the arch, above the water and beneath a projecting stone, was a shallow carved shape.

At first it looked like a knot in the masonry.

Then the light moved, and a small bird appeared.

Its head turned toward the river. In its beak, it held a twig.

They sat looking at it.

“Was that there before?” she asked.

Callum laughed quietly.

"It must have been."

The bird was no bigger than his hand. They had inspected the bridge, photographed its face, watched repairs, crossed it hundreds of times. From above, the carving would be invisible. From most of the bank, the projecting stone would hide it.

Nina reached for her phone and took a photograph to show Edith.

"Do you think Arthur made it?"

"Maybe. We'll ask."

She lowered the phone.

For once, she didn't enlarge the picture or open the inventory. The bird remained there above its reflection, holding its small piece of the woods.

Across the bridge, someone paused at the cedar figure. A companion came back to stand beside them, and together they followed the path between the ferns.

Callum opened the cookies.

Nina settled against his shoulder, looking toward the old arch.

They stayed until the sunlight moved and the little bird disappeared into the stone again.

The End