The Keeper of the Pass

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The Keeper of the Pass

a novel

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Printed by Printed on demand

For those who leave a light on.

1

The First Snow

The village of Saint-Aubin fitted entirely in the hollow of a hand. A church too big for it, a fountain that froze every winter, and a single road that climbed towards the pass in bends so tight it seemed to be hesitating.

Mathilde had arrived on a Tuesday in November, with two suitcases and a letter she had never opened. The postman, who also served as mayor on market days, had watched her step off the bus the way you watch a bird that has mistaken the season.

"You've come for the house on the pass?" he had asked.

"For now, I've come for a coffee."

He had smiled, and that smile had been enough to decide the rest of her life.

The house on the pass was not really a house. It was a stone refuge, perched on the shoulder of the mountain, empty since old Barthélemy had died. People said he had kept the pass for forty years, that he knew every stone on the road and every temper of the sky. They also said he talked to avalanches, but

people said a lot of things in Saint-Aubin, especially in winter, when there was nothing else to do but talk.

On the first night, Mathilde slept at the inn. She listened to the wind beating against the shutters and wondered, for the first time, what she had come looking for so far from everything. The answer might lie in the letter. She put it on the bedside table, looked at it for a long time, then turned off the light without touching it.

* * *

By morning, snow had fallen. Not much: a white dust on the roofs, on the fountain, on the shoulders of passers-by. But enough for the village to change its face. Sounds had softened; people walked more slowly, as if they were afraid of waking something.

"It's the first one," said the innkeeper as she poured her coffee. "After this one, the pass closes. If you want to go up, it's today or in the spring."

Mathilde looked out of the window. Up there, the road vanished into a low cloud, grey and motionless.

"Then it's today."

2

The Refuge

The climb took three hours. The postman had driven her as far as the last bend a car could manage, then switched off the engine of his old van and pointed out the path with a jerk of his chin.

"After this, it's on foot. I'll be back on Thursday, if it doesn't snow too much."

"And if it snows too much?"

"Then you'll learn to make a fire."

The path climbed straight up the slope, between rocks covered in lichen and fir trees twisted by the wind. Mathilde often stopped to catch her breath. At every pause, the village looked smaller, less real, like a toy a child had forgotten at the bottom of a valley.

The refuge appeared all at once, around a last rock. It was bigger than she had imagined: a long, low building with thick walls and a slate roof the snow was beginning to whiten. The door was not locked. It had probably never been locked.

Inside, everything was in order. A table, two chairs, a cast-iron stove, shelves loaded with books and jars. On the wall, a map of the mountains covered in small pencil crosses, and dates written in a careful hand: 12 January, 3 February, 28 March… Mathilde came closer. Under each date, a name.

She understood slowly. These were not the names of places. They were the names of people.

* * *

In the evening, she lit the stove with matches she found in a drawer, and the refuge filled with a dry warmth that smelled of resin. At last she took the letter out of her pocket. The envelope bore her name, written in the same careful hand as the dates on the map.

She opened it.

3

What the Letter Said

"Dear Miss,

If you are reading these lines, it means I am no longer here to say them to you, and that you have found the way. I do not know you. I knew your grandmother, a very long time ago, when we were your age and the road over the pass was still only a mule track.

She crossed the mountain one February night, in the middle of a storm, with a child in her arms. That child was your father. I found them at dawn, half frozen, a hundred metres from my door. I did what had to be done. It was not much: a fire, some soup, a bed. But it was enough."

Mathilde stopped reading. Outside, the wind had risen, and the snow was swirling against the window.

"All my life, I kept this refuge so that others could get through. The crosses on the map are them: all those the mountain let through, because there was a light in the window. I have

no more light to give. So I am handing it to you, if you want it. You are not obliged to do anything."

She folded the letter, very slowly, and sat still in front of the stove for a long time. Then she got up, found the oil lamp on the shelf, lit it, and set it on the windowsill, facing the valley.

Far below, a light answered her. Perhaps it was the inn. Perhaps it was the postman. Or perhaps, simply, someone who had seen.