

THE SEALED LETTER



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About This Book

At a Glance

- **Reading level:** English level A2 (CEFR)
- **Age:** 8+
- **Length:** 12 chapters · ±17,000 words

The Series

Stonegate Keep is a small, friendly keep beside the King's Road, the great post road through the Grey Hills. Here the king's letters change horses, travellers find a bed, and four children — Alice, Will, Rose and Peter — learn what the Messenger's Oath really means: keep your word, tell the truth, help whoever needs you on the way, and finish what you begin.

This Book

A king's letter comes to Stonegate Keep, sealed with white wax and the mark of the swan. It must reach Highfield Abbey, over the pass, before the bells of Sunday — but Old Bennet, who always carries the post, lies ill in bed. So the letter goes to four children instead: careful Alice, quick Will, sharp-eyed Rose, and Peter, who has a story for everything. Then the bridge washes away, thick fog rolls down the mountain, and high on the empty grey shoulder, where nobody lives, a fire begins to burn in the night. Who lit it — and can four young riders keep their word before the bells of Sunday?

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Chapter 1: The Post Horn

The autumn mist still lay on the King's Road when Alice Ward woke.

She dressed quickly in the cold and ran down the stone stairs into the courtyard. The courtyard was the heart of Stonegate Keep — a square of old grey stone. The stables stood on one side and the warm kitchen on another, and the great gate faced the road. Above everything rose the round tower, where the pigeons lived.

Stonegate Keep was not a castle for fighting. It was a post-station: a resting place on the King's Road, the long road that ran all the way across the Grey Hills. Here the king's letters changed horses. Here tired travellers found a bed for the night and a bowl of hot bean stew. The Ward family kept the Keep for the king, and Alice's father, John Ward, was the Keeper of the Road.

By the gate a merchant was loading his cart, ready to leave. Alice's mother, Helen Ward, gave him a loaf and a hard cheese for the road, and he thanked her three times. Smoke rose from the kitchen chimney, and the smell of fresh bread filled the courtyard. It was the kind of morning that felt the same as every other morning — busy, warm and safe.

Every morning at the Keep began with chores, and everyone had their own.

In the stables, Will was already busy. Will was Alice's brother, a year younger, and the best young rider on this stretch of road. He gave the ponies their hay and talked to them the whole time. His own pony, Swift, pushed a nose against his shoulder.

"Yes, yes, you first," Will laughed. "You are always first."

High up in the round tower, Rose Finch fed the pigeons. Rose was eleven, small and quick, with the sharpest eyes of them all. Her parents ran the mill down the valley, but in the week she lived at the Keep and kept the pigeon loft. Grey, the old falcon, sat on the rail like a small grey statue and watched her work. Two pigeons ate crumbs from her hand: white Snowy, and black Inky with his shining green neck. The pigeons were clever birds. If you carried one away in a basket and let it go, it would fly straight home

to the Keep with a tiny message tied to its leg. Rose loved them more than anything in the world.

Alice's own job was the road-book. In the map room she wrote down every traveller who passed — their name, and where they were going. She loved the map room best of all. The walls were covered with maps of the Grey Hills, and Alice knew every path on them by heart.

She had just dipped her pen when the gate creaked. Peter Bramble came in with a basket of warm bread. Peter lived at the Grey Goose Inn, just outside the gate, and he knew every traveller and every story on the road.

"Morning!" he called. "Mother sent bread. And I have cheese in my bag, in case of emergencies."

"There is always an emergency with you," said Alice, smiling.

It was an ordinary morning — until the horn.

The sound came from far down the road: one long, clear note, and then two short ones. A post horn. Every child at the Keep knew that sound. It meant a messenger was coming, and coming fast.

Will was out of the stable in a moment, straw in his hair. "A rider!" he shouted. "So early!" He could copy the post horn so well that Old Bennet said it was annoying. He cupped his hands and blew the answer, and far off the messenger's horn answered him back.

They all ran to the gate. Rusty, the old red-brown dog, barked and wagged his tail at the very same time. Out of the mist came a horse and rider, both wet and tired from the road. On the rider's coat shone a small silver badge — a white swan. That badge meant the king's own post. Alice had only seen it once before.

Her father was there before any of them, calm as always.

"Welcome to Stonegate," he said. "Come in and warm up."

"No time, Keeper," said the messenger. He took a leather bag from his side and drew out a letter. "This one must go on today."

Everyone leaned in to look. The letter was folded thick and heavy. On the back sat a round drop of white wax, and pressed into the wax was a stamp: a swan again, with wide open wings. A sealed letter with white wax came from the king himself. That was why the messenger would not even stop for stew.



“It is for Highfield Abbey, over the pass,” he said. “Into the abbot’s own hands. Before the bells of Sunday.” He looked at John Ward. “Your post master knows the way. Bennet, is it?”

At the name, the children went quiet.

For Old Bennet was ill.

He had been a King’s Rider for forty years, and he still carried every letter over the pass himself. But his last ride had gone through cold rain, high in the hills where the autumn storms sit, and the cold had settled on his chest. That morning he had not come down to the stable doorway to tell the children his road-stories. Instead, from an open window above them, they could hear him cough — a deep, heavy cough that did not want to stop.

Helen came out of the kitchen, drying her hands on her apron.

“Bennet is in his bed,” she said quietly. “The cold has gone right down onto his chest. That cough will keep him there all week. He is not riding anywhere.”

Alice felt cold inside. In forty years, Old Bennet had never once missed a letter. She could not remember a single day when he was not out in the yard, telling stories or mending a saddle. Above them, the deep cough came again.

The messenger frowned. “Then who will deliver it? The letter cannot wait. I still have three more keeps to reach before dark, and I cannot turn back.”

For a moment nobody spoke. The sealed letter lay in John Ward’s hand, small and white and important. Highfield Abbey was two days away, up over the broken country of the pass. Somebody had to carry it. Somebody had to deliver it into the abbot’s hands before the bells of Sunday — and the messenger was already turning his tired horse back toward the gate.

John Ward looked down at the letter. Then he looked up.

He looked at Will, with straw still in his hair. He looked at Rose in the tower window, a pigeon sitting on her hand. He looked at Peter, who still held his basket of warm bread. And he looked at Alice, who knew every path on every map in the room behind her.

Something changed in his face. It was the look he wore when he had made up his mind about something.

He turned the letter over once, so the white swan stamp looked up at them all. Then he held it out — to Alice.

The wax was cool and smooth under her fingers.

“Then the letter goes with you,” her father said. “All four of you.”

Chapter 2: The Messenger's Oath

That afternoon, the whole Keep got ready.

Alice sat in the map room with the big map of the Grey Hills open on the table. She followed the King's Road with one finger. First came the stone bridge over the Rushwater. After the bridge the road ran down along the valley, past the mill at Millford, and then up and up to the pass. On the far side lay Highfield Abbey. Two days of riding to get there.

"That is our route," she said softly. She wrote each part down in her small, neat hand. A good route was half the journey, her father always said. If you knew the way, you did not waste the light. She wanted to reach the far side of the valley before dusk on the first day.

She rolled the map and slid it into her flat map case.

Down in the yard, Will was already packing the saddlebags. A saddlebag was a leather bag that hung on each side of the pony's saddle. Four ponies would go: Swift and Hazel, and Bracken and Pebble, two steady post ponies of the Keep, for Peter and Rose. Will packed a bag for each of them, and he pushed everything in as fast as he could.

"Not like that," said Alice, coming out into the yard. "You have to pack the heavy things at the bottom, or the bag pulls to one side."

Will made a face, but he took it all out and packed it again. Rope. A tin cup each. A small bag of oats for the ponies. And two blanket rolls — a warm blanket rolled up tight and tied with a strap, small enough to sit behind the saddle. The nights up near the pass were cold, even in autumn.

"Cloaks," said Alice. "We each need our cloak. Fog comes fast on the road."

She fetched them from the hooks by the door: her own honey-brown cloak with its deep hood, Will's mustard-yellow one, Rose's grey cape and Peter's wide green cloak. A good cloak kept out the rain and the wind. They rolled them and packed them where they could reach them quickly.

Then Helen called them into the kitchen.

The long table was covered with food. Helen was packing it into Peter's food bag and a basket, and she named each thing as it went in.

"Two loaves of bread. Do not squash them. Hard cheese, that keeps for days. Apples. Cold bean stew in the little pot for tomorrow night." She wrapped one more loaf in a cloth. "And an extra loaf, in case."

"In case of emergencies," said Peter happily. "I always carry cheese in case of emergencies."

"Then you and I understand each other," said Helen.

She dried her hands and looked at all four of them, one after another. Now came the rules. Helen had three rules, and everybody at the Keep knew them.

"One. You keep your feet dry. Wet socks up in that cold, and you are asking to be ill — and I have one ill man already." Above them, as if to help her, Old Bennet coughed.

"Two. You do not ride after dusk. When the light goes, you stop and you make camp. The road does not run away in the night."

"Three." She held up one finger. "You tell me exactly where you are going, and you send a pigeon the moment your plan changes. Rose?"

"I have Snowy and Inky in the basket," said Rose. "They will fly straight home. I can send word from anywhere."

"Good girl." Helen kissed the top of her head. "Then I will always know where you are."

When the packing was done, they went up the narrow stair to Old Bennet's room.

Bennet sat up against his pillows, a grey scarf round his neck. He looked smaller in bed than he did in the stable doorway, and it gave Alice a strange feeling to see it. But his blue eyes were as sharp as ever.

"So," he said. "The road has come for you at last." He coughed, and waved the cough away like a fly. "Come here, all of you. Before you carry a king's

letter, you take the Oath. Every rider of this road has taken it. I took it when I was younger than Will."

They stood close to the bed.

"An oath is a promise," said Bennet. "But a bigger promise. A promise you do not break — not for tiredness, not for weather, not for anything. Say it after me, and mean it."

He said it slowly, a piece at a time, and they said each piece back.

"Keep your word."

"Keep your word," they said.

"Tell the truth."

"Tell the truth."

"Help whoever needs you on the way."

"Help whoever needs you on the way."

"And finish what you begin."

"And finish what you begin."

The room was very quiet. Even Will was quiet, which did not happen often.

"That is the whole Oath," said Bennet. "It sounds easy here, in a warm room. It is not easy out on the road. But it is the best thing I know."

Then he reached down beside his bed and lifted up an old leather bag on a long strap. The leather was dark and soft with forty years of use. It was his post satchel — the one Alice had seen on his shoulder her whole life.

"Will," he said. "Come here."

Will came, and Bennet hung the satchel over his head and one shoulder.

"The letter rides in here, safe and dry, against your chest. Not in a saddlebag that can fall off. Not in a pocket. In the satchel. You are the fastest rider of the four, so you carry it — but fast is not the same as first, boy. Remember that."

Will's face went red. For once he found nothing to say. He only nodded and held the strap of the satchel with both hands.



“Now go to bed early,” said Bennet, and lay back on his pillows. “You leave at dawn.”

Supper was quiet that night. Everyone was thinking about the morning.

When the bowls were full, they stopped, and John Ward said grace, the way he did every night, simply, like laying the table.

“Thank You for this food and for this house. Keep our four safe on the road, and bring them home again. Amen.”

“Amen,” said everyone, and then the spoons began, and the kitchen felt warm and ordinary once more.

They went to bed early, while the sky was still light. Alice lay and listened to the wind and went over the route in her head until she fell asleep.

It was still dark when Helen woke them. Not night any more, but not day either — the grey, cold hour before dawn, when the first birds start.

By the time the sky turned pale, they were ready in the yard. The ponies stamped and blew clouds of warm breath. All four wore their full saddlebags and their blanket rolls. Rose held the pigeon basket, with Snowy and Inky safe inside. Rusty ran in happy circles, sure that the whole road was his. On Will's chest, under his cloak, sat the old satchel with the sealed letter inside.

John Ward checked every strap himself. Then he stepped back.

"Keep the Oath," he said. "And keep your word to your mother — a pigeon the moment the plan changes."

"We will," said Alice.

The great gate swung open onto the King's Road, grey in the first light of dawn. Alice looked back once: at her mother and father in the gateway, and at a small light burning in Bennet's window. Then she turned Hazel's head to the road.

They rode out at dawn — four children, four ponies, a dog and two pigeons — into the cold and the quiet.

The road climbed a low hill just outside the Keep. From the top you could see the whole valley open out in front of you, still grey, with the King's Road running away into the mist.

And that was when they heard it.

A sound came up from the valley, low and steady, like something big that never stopped for breath. Water. Fast water, and a lot of it.

Will pulled Swift up short. "The Rushwater," he said.

They all listened. The Rushwater was the stream that ran under the stone bridge, the very first thing on Alice's route. On a normal day you could hardly hear it from up here — a thin, friendly sound far below.

But this was not thin, and it was not friendly. It was a deep, rushing roar that filled the whole valley.

Alice felt the cold feeling come back into her stomach.

“That is much too loud,” she said slowly. “It has not rained for a week. A dry week.” She looked at Will. “So why is the stream so loud?”

Chapter 3: The Broken Bridge

The road ran down the hill in long, slow turns, and with every turn the sound of the water grew.

By the time they came round the last bend, they did not need to ask what was wrong. They could see it.

The stone bridge stood at the bottom of the valley, where it had always stood. But it was not whole.

Will pulled Swift up short. Nobody spoke.

The Rushwater bridge was very old. Its two ends were built of grey stone, strong as the hills. But the middle part — the part over the deepest, fastest water — had always been made of wood. Thick wooden planks, laid side by side, that the men of the Keep could lift out and mend. A plank was a long, flat piece of wood, and a dozen of them had crossed the gap.

This morning the planks were gone. Every single one.

Where the middle of the bridge should be, there was only empty air. And below the empty air, there was the water.

They climbed down and led the ponies to the edge. Rusty ran ahead to the lip of the stone, and Will caught his collar.

“Not you either,” he said. The old dog barked once at the brown water, as if to tell it off.

Alice had never seen the Rushwater like this. On a normal day it was a clear little stream. You could see the round stones on the bottom, and in summer Rose used to wade across it.

Now it was brown and thick and angry. It rushed under the broken bridge and carried whole branches with it, spinning them round. Somewhere far up in the high hills — where it can pour with rain for a day while the valley below stays dry — a great deal of water had come down all at once, filling the stream to the top and over, and sending it racing down the valley in the night.

“It’s a flood,” said Alice quietly.

A flood was what you called it when a stream grew huge and wild like this, far bigger than its own bed. It had come down in the dark and torn the wooden planks away like matchsticks.

Will crouched at the edge of the stone and looked down.

“Careful,” said Rose.

He picked up a short stick and dropped it in. The moment it touched the water it shot away downstream — down the valley, the way the water runs — and was gone before he could take a breath.

“That’s the current,” said Alice. The current was the push and pull of the water, the speed underneath. “Feel how fast it goes. Nothing could cross that. Not a pony, not a person, not a duck.”

Will did not answer. He was measuring the gap with his eyes.

“Swift could jump it,” he said. “Almost.”

“Almost,” said Alice.

“He’s the best jumper on the road.”

“Almost is not the same as across, Will.” Alice put her hand flat on Swift’s neck, as if to keep the pony out of it too. “Nobody jumps a flood. If you missed by that much—” she held up two fingers, a tiny space between them “—the current takes you, and it does not give you back. We are not doing that.”

For once, Will did not argue. He looked at the brown water racing under the gap, then stood and stepped well back from the edge.

“All right,” he said. “We’re not doing that.”

Peter let out a long breath. “Good,” he said. “Because I can’t swim, and neither can the cheese.”

Even Rose smiled. But the smile did not last, because now they were all thinking the same thing. The bridge was the way across, and the bridge was gone. How were they going to reach the far side, and the pass, and the abbey, before the bells of Sunday?

Everyone looked at Alice.

She felt the cold feeling come back into her stomach. This was not in the plan. In her neat plan they crossed the bridge and rode on; there was no line for a broken bridge. For a moment her mind went as empty as the gap itself.

Then she made herself breathe. She knelt, opened her flat map case, and spread the map of the Grey Hills on a dry stone. The others crowded round. A map, at least, she understood.



She put one finger on the bridge.

“Here we are,” she said. “We can’t cross here. So there are two ways to go, and we have to decide.”

Her finger went back up the road, the way they had come. “One. We go home. We tell Father. He mends the bridge, and in a day or two we start all over again.”

“That’s a whole day lost,” said Peter. “At least.”

“More,” said Alice. She did not say the rest out loud. *A day lost might be a day too many.*

Her finger moved the other way now — down, along the near side of the valley, following the water. “Or. We don’t cross here at all. We follow the stream all this way down, to Millford. There is a ford at Millford.”

“What’s a ford?” asked Peter.

“A place where a stream runs wide and shallow,” said Rose softly. It was her own village; she knew every stone. “Wide and slow, over a flat gravel bottom. You can walk a pony straight through it, no bridge needed. My father takes the cart across it every market day.”

“But a ford, in a flood—” Will began.

“The Rushwater grows wider all the way down,” said Rose. “And the wider it grows, the slower it goes. By Millford it spreads right out flat. Even now, I think the ford will still be low enough to cross. And Millford is on our road anyway.” She looked almost surprised to have said so much.

Alice nodded slowly. Downstream to the ford at Millford. It was far longer than the bridge — a long ride down the near bank, on a rough valley track instead of the good stone road. But it did not go backward. It went on.

Will’s hand went to the satchel on his chest, where the letter lay, safe and dry.

She looked up at the three faces. A moment ago she had wanted somebody, anybody, to tell her the answer. Now she saw that the somebody was her. She had to decide, and they were waiting.

Will spoke first, which surprised nobody. “On,” he said. “We keep the Oath. *Finish what you begin.*”

“On,” said Peter.

“On,” said Rose.

Alice looked one more time at the brown water and the empty gap where the planks had been. Then she rolled up the map.

“On,” she said. “The long way. To the ford at Millford.”

But there was one more thing to do first, and they all knew it. Rule Three. *You send a pigeon the moment your plan changes.* And the plan had certainly changed.

Rose lifted Inky, the black pigeon, from the basket. He sat in her two hands, warm and still, his neck shining green.

The message had to be tiny. It went into a little tube on the pigeon’s leg, no wider than Alice’s smallest finger, so there was no room for long words. Alice tore a corner off a page and wrote on it in her very smallest hand, careful and clear:

Bridge gone. Long way to Millford ford. All four well.

She rolled the tiny scrap up as thin as a straw. Rose slid it into the tube and clicked it shut.

“Off you go home,” Rose whispered. She lifted her hands and opened them.

Inky rose straight up over the broken bridge, turned once to find his way, then set off up the valley, back toward the Keep, a small dark shape growing smaller. In an hour or two, Helen would lift the tiny message off his leg and know exactly where her four had gone. That was a good feeling.

They watched until the pigeon was a speck, and then nothing at all.

And it was Peter, following the bird up into the wide sky, whose eyes went past it and kept climbing — up over the near hills, all the way to the grey shoulder of the mountain, far, far above.

“That’s funny,” he said slowly.

“What is?” said Will.

Peter did not take his eyes off the mountain. He knew every house on these hills, every hut and every chimney, because sooner or later everyone who lived in them came down to the Grey Goose Inn. And up there, on that high grey shoulder, there was no house. There was nothing but rock and grass and sky.

But something was rising from it, all the same. Thin, and pale, and straight up into the still morning air.

“Up there,” said Peter. “Look. That’s smoke.”

Chapter 4: The Miller's Ford

The good stone road had gone with the bridge. Now there was only the track.

It ran down the near side of the valley, close to the water, thin and rough and full of stones. The ponies had to pick their way. Nobody could gallop here. Nobody could even trot for long.

On their right the Rushwater ran brown and fast, still swollen from the flood. It hurried down the valley beside them, carrying sticks and leaves, never once slowing down.

"We've lost the whole morning," Will said, more than once. He kept looking at the sun. Every one of them knew the letter had to reach the abbey before the bells of Sunday, and Sunday felt closer with every step. "We should be up at the pass by now."

"We should be a lot of things," said Alice. "We're here. On we go."

By the middle of the day the valley grew wider and greener. There were fields now, and low stone walls, and here and there a farm. They were coming down toward Millford, Rose's own village, where the mill stood by the water and the ford crossed the stream.

Then, round a bend, they found the trouble.

The track dipped into a low place, and the flood had spread across it. Not deep — but the road there had turned to soft brown mud. And in the middle of the mud stood a cart.

It was a big farm cart, heavy and wooden, piled high with fat cloth sacks. A carter is a man who drives a cart for his living, and this carter stood beside his, up to his boots in mud, pulling at the head of a tired grey horse. The horse pulled too. The cart did not move.

"He's stuck," said Peter.

Stuck he was. One big wheel had sunk deep into the mud, right up to the axle — the wooden bar that runs across under the cart and holds the wheels on. When a wheel sinks as far as the axle, no horse alive can drag it out alone.

Rose knew the carter at once. "That's Hob," she said softly. "He brings grain to our mill." Grain was the wheat and barley the farmers grew. Hob was carrying sack after sack of it down to Millford, to be ground into flour.

Will pulled Swift up and looked at the sun, and then at the cart. Alice knew exactly what he was thinking, because she was thinking it too. An hour. Helping would cost them an hour at least. Maybe more. An hour they did not have.

But there was the Oath. *Help whoever needs you on the way.* Old Bennet's words. They had said them out loud only yesterday.

Nobody even had to argue about it.

"Come on," said Will, and swung down into the mud.

Hob was very glad to see them. He was a big, slow, kind man with a red face, and he had been stuck since morning. "I can't shift her," he said. "The load's too heavy. And I won't leave good grain in the mud."

"Then we take the load off," said Alice. "Every sack. The lighter the cart, the easier it comes."

So they did. One by one they lifted the heavy sacks of grain down onto a dry bank at the side of the road — Will and Peter carrying, Alice and Rose steadying, Hob taking two at a time in his big arms. The sacks were heavy and the mud pulled at their boots, and soon they were all brown to the knees.

"So much for dry feet," said Peter, and even Alice laughed.

When the cart was empty they gathered branches and flat stones and pushed them down into the mud in front of the sunk wheel, to give it something hard to climb on. Then they tied a long rope from the cart to three ponies at once — Swift, Hazel and Bracken.

"Now," said Hob. "All together. Pull!"

The ponies pulled. The children pushed at the back, boots sliding, faces red. For a moment nothing happened at all. Then, with a great wet sucking noise,

the wheel came up out of the mud, and the whole cart rolled forward onto the stones and out the other side.



They loaded the grain back on. By the time the last sack was up, the sun had moved a long way across the sky. It had cost them the best part of an hour, just as Will had feared.

But Hob shook every hand twice. “Good children,” he said. “Finches and Wards and all. Rose, tell your father the miller I’ll bring the rest tomorrow — mud or no mud.”

And somehow, brown to the knees and an hour behind, they all felt better than before, not worse.

Millford came into sight in the late afternoon: a cluster of houses, a little stone bridge for people on foot, and below it, right beside the water, the mill.

Rose sat up straight. There it was — home. The great mill wheel turned slowly in the stream, dripping and shining, and the whole building shook with a deep, friendly rumble as the stones inside ground the grain to flour.

A miller is the man who runs a mill, and the miller of Millford was Rose's own father.

He came out to meet them, white with flour from head to boot, and his wife behind him. For a little while there was nothing but hugs and questions, and Rose laughing in a way the others hardly ever saw. She was not shy here. Not at all.

"Look at the state of you!" said her mother. "All of you. Mud to the ears. Come in, come in."

They could not stay long — the light was already turning gold, and the ford was still to cross — but Rose's mother would not let them go with empty bags. She filled them with fresh bread, still warm from the oven, and hard cheese, and a small sack of oatcakes for the road.

While she packed, the miller stood in his doorway and heard their whole story: the sealed letter, the flood, the broken bridge, Hob and his cart. He nodded slowly at all of it, the way a miller does everything, slow and sure.

"A hard road you've had," he said. "And a harder one to come, over the pass." He looked up the valley, toward the grey mountains. "Quiet up there this year, mind. Too quiet. Old Amos the shepherd hasn't been down to market these two weeks, and Amos never misses a market."

He said it the way people say small things, and then he went back to his flour, and thought no more about it.

But Rose heard.

The ford was just below the mill. Even now, swollen with flood, the Rush-water there had spread out wide and slow over its flat bed of gravel, exactly as Rose had promised on the hill. It was higher than usual, brown and quick around the ponies' legs, but it was not deep, and Rose knew every stone of it.

"Follow me," she said — and this time she did not whisper. "Straight across. Don't stop in the middle."

One by one the ponies waded in, Rose first on little Pebble, then the others, with Rusty swimming beside them and the cold water pushing at their legs. Then they were up and out on the far bank, dripping and safe, the mill behind them and the mountains ahead. Just up the bank, Millford's little inn showed a warm yellow window: a bed for the night, and dry socks at last.

The sun was down now behind the hills. Dusk was falling over Millford, soft and grey and blue.

And that was when Peter, looking up the way he always did, went very still.

"There," he said. "Look."

High on the mountain — on the same grey shoulder where he had seen the smoke that morning, where no house stood and no fire should be — a light had come. It was not the last of the sun; the sun was gone. This was a small, bright, living light, and even as they watched it grew, and flared, and burned steady against the darkening sky.

"That's a fire," said Will slowly.

"That's a beacon," said Rose.

And nobody said the next thought out loud. But they all thought it together, there on the cold bank in the falling dark: a beacon, high on the empty mountain, burning — tonight.

Chapter 5: The Inn at Millford

The inn at Millford was small and low and warm, and it had the best smell in the world.

It was the smell of stew — a big black pot of it, hanging over the fire, thick with barley and onions and little bits of meat. The four children came in out of the cold dark, wet to the knees and shaking, and the warm air met them like a hug.

Peter smiled all over his face. An inn was home to him. He had grown up in one — the Grey Goose, beside the Keep — and he knew everything there was to know about inns. He knew where to hang a wet cloak so it would dry by morning. He knew how a good guest behaves at a stranger's fire. And he knew, better than anyone, how to get an innkeeper talking.

The innkeeper here was a round, kind woman called Mistress Ada. An innkeeper is the person who runs an inn: cooks the food, keeps the fire, and gives tired travellers a bed. Mistress Ada took one look at the four muddy children and clapped her hands.

“In you come! Cloaks by the fire, boots off, sit you down.” She knew Rose at once, for everyone in Millford knew the miller's girl. And when she heard the others were from Stonegate Keep, and carrying the king's own letter over the pass, she gave them the best seats by the fireplace and would not hear one word about paying.

Soon they were dry and warm and full. Mistress Ada found them dry socks and hung their wet ones on a line above the fire, where they steamed. She filled four bowls of stew, and then four bowls more. Rusty lay by the fireplace with his nose on his paws, warm at last, and every now and then a hand dropped him a bit of meat.

Around the big fireplace sat a few other guests: a tinker with his packs, two carters going home, and one very old man in the warmest corner of all, whom everyone called old Tam.

Peter could never sit quiet for long, not in an inn. Talking to strangers by a fire was the one brave thing he never had to think about.

“We saw a fire,” he said, “up on the mountain. On the grey shoulder, above the pass. It came at dusk and burned steady.” He looked round the room. “Was that a beacon?”

The talk stopped. Old Tam lifted his head.

“A beacon,” he said slowly. “Now, there’s a word. Do you children know the law of the hills?”

They shook their heads.

“A beacon is lit only for real need,” said old Tam. “Never for fun. Never just to see by. Only when someone is in real trouble, high up, and cannot get down. When you see a beacon burning on a hill in the night, you don’t stop to ask why. You go. Every neighbour must answer it. That is the law up here, older than any of us.” He looked into the flames. “A beacon means one thing, and only one thing: help me.”



Rose sat very still, listening to every word.

“But nobody lit a beacon tonight,” said Mistress Ada, coming over with the pot. “I’d know. If a real beacon burned on that hill, half the village would be

up there by now with lanterns. And nobody has gone anywhere. We're all here, warm in bed or warm by this fire."

"Then what did we see?" asked Will.

"The old pass beacon?" Mistress Ada laughed, not unkindly. "Bless you, that old thing has been broken for years. The iron basket fell over. The wood rotted away. Nobody has lit that beacon since I was a girl." She stirred the pot. "No, no. I'll tell you what you saw. Moon on the rocks, that's all."

"Moon on the rocks?" said Peter.

"After rain the stones up there run wet," she said, "and when the moon comes out, it shines white on the wet rock, bright as any flame. Many a traveller has come down that pass sure he saw a fire on the shoulder. Beacons!" She shook her head and smiled. "Nonsense. It's the moon, and a tired man's eyes, and nothing more."

Some of the guests nodded. It was a good, sensible answer, and it was warm by the fire, and it was easy to believe.

But the four children looked at one another, and not one of them quite believed it.

Because they had watched the light come. It had not been there — and then it had: a small, bright, living point of fire that grew, and flared, and burned steady against the dark sky. The moon did not flare. The moon did not grow.

And in Rose's head, quietly, three things had come to sit side by side.

Smoke, that very morning, from the same grey shoulder, where no house stood.

Fire, tonight, from that same lonely place.

And old Amos the shepherd, who kept his flock high on that mountain, and who had not come down to market for two weeks. *And Amos never misses a market.*

Rose opened her mouth. The three things were so close together now, almost touching, almost one whole thing —

But she was shy, and the room was full of grown-ups, and Mistress Ada had already said it was all nonsense. The words would not come. Rose closed her mouth again and looked down into the fire.

Alice saw her do it. Alice always noticed when Rose went quiet.

“Rose?” she said softly. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” said Rose. “Only... I’m thinking. That’s all.”

It was late now. Mistress Ada gave them each a candle and led them up a narrow stair to a small room under the roof, with two low beds, clean blankets, and one little window.

Alice went through her mother’s rules in her head, the way she did every night. Dry feet — yes, dry socks at last. Say where you go and send a pigeon — yes, Inky had flown home to the Keep that afternoon with the news. Snowy still slept in the basket. All well, all done.

“We’ve a hard climb tomorrow,” Alice said. “Up to the pass. And the letter must be at the abbey before the bells of Sunday.” She looked at her brother. “Slow and careful, all the way. All of us.”

“Slow and careful,” said Will — and yawned so wide he nearly blew out his own candle.

They put the candles out. Before long Peter was snoring gently, and Rose too, and Rusty thumped his tail once in his sleep on the floorboards.

But Will did not sleep well.

He never did, the night before a big ride. His legs wanted to be moving. Long past midnight he woke, and lay a while in the dark, and could not drop off again. The whole inn was still below him. So he got up quietly and went to the little window.

Outside, the night had cleared. The rain was gone. A thin moon hung over the black shape of the mountains, and the shoulder above the pass showed pale and grey, just as Mistress Ada had said it would.

Will looked at it a long time. *Moon on the rocks*, he told himself. *Only the moon.*

And then, high on that dark shoulder, a light came.

It was not the moon. It was small and orange and alive, and Will's heart began to beat hard against the dark. It grew. It flared. It burned steady — a fire, a real fire, high on the empty mountain in the middle of the night.

He stood frozen at the window, staring.

And then, all at once, the light went out.

Not slowly. Not dying down. Out — like a candle when somebody leans close and blows. One moment it was there, bright and clear. The next, the mountain was dark, and there was nothing on the whole grey shoulder but the pale, empty moonlight.

Chapter 6: The Old Beacon Path

Will was awake before the others.

He lay in the low bed under the roof and watched the little window turn from black to grey. Saturday. Only one day stood now between them and the bells of Sunday, and a hard climb lay ahead: up to the pass, over it, and down to the abbey. He should have been thinking about the road.

But he was thinking about the fire.

Downstairs, Mistress Ada already had the porridge on — thick and hot, with honey in the middle of each bowl. Rusty got the scrapings of the pot. Rose fed a crumb to Snowy, the one pigeon they still had to send home.

Peter ate two bowls and looked hard at Will over the third.

“Will Ward,” he said. “Quiet at breakfast. Are you ill?”

Will put down his spoon. Mistress Ada was over by the fire, out of earshot, and the other three were close. So he told them.

“I saw it again,” he said, low. “Past midnight. I got up to the window. The mountain was clear, the moon pale on the rocks, just like she said.” He swallowed. “And then the fire came. On the same grey shoulder. It grew and it flared and it burned steady, a real fire. I told myself it was the moon. It was not the moon. The moon does not flare.” He looked at them. “And then it went out. All at once. Like somebody leaned close and blew out a candle.”

Nobody laughed.

For a long moment nobody said anything. Then Rose set down her own spoon.

She was the smallest of them, and the quietest, and at the inn last night she had not been able to make the words come. This morning they came. Her voice was soft, but it did not shake.

“There are three things,” she said. “I have been carrying them since the mill, and I want to say them out loud.” She counted on her fingers. “One. Yesterday morning, smoke. From the grey shoulder, where no house stands. Two. Fire from that same place, twice now, at night. Three.” She took a

breath. “Old Amos keeps his flock up there. And Amos has not come to market for two weeks. And Amos never misses a market.”

She looked round at the three of them — not at the grown-ups, only at her own three.

“Somebody is up on that mountain,” Rose said. “And I think somebody needs help.”

This time she was not talking behind the others, and this time they were listening. Peter had stopped chewing; Alice leaned in across the table.

“You’re right,” Alice said quietly. “All three fit together. I should have seen it too.”

Will’s legs were already itching to move. “Then we go,” he said. “Right now.”

“Wait.” Alice held up a hand — but she was not saying no. She was thinking. “Remember what old Tam told us. Every neighbour must answer it. A beacon means one thing: *help me*.” She looked at the satchel on Will’s chest, with the king’s letter safe inside. “And the Oath says the same. *Help whoever needs you on the way*. Even when it costs us time.”

“Even when Sunday is one day closer,” said Peter, for once not joking.

“The beacon path leaves the pass road partway up,” Alice said. “I’ve seen it on the old map. It branches off to the left and climbs to the shoulder. We go up, we look, and if there’s nothing there but cold stones, we come straight down and ride on to the pass.” She stood. “But we look first.”

For once, all four of them wanted the very same thing.

They told Mistress Ada where they were going, because that was the rule and because they never hid a thing. She shook her head, but she was kind about it.

“Cold stones and a broken basket, that’s all you’ll find,” she said. “But suit yourselves. Mind, that old beacon track is steep — steep as a ladder in places. Lead the ponies, don’t ride them. And be down off the shoulder before the fog comes in.” She tucked oatcakes into Peter’s bag. “There’s always fog on that mountain by afternoon this time of year.”

The morning was grey and still when they rode out of Millford. The pass road climbed out of the valley between grey walls of rock, the four ponies — Swift and Hazel, Bracken and Pebble — going one behind the other, with Rusty trotting at the side.

Partway up, just where Alice said it would be, a narrow track broke off to the left. It was old and thin, half lost in grass, winding up toward the high grey shoulder.

“There,” said Rose. She slid down from Pebble and knelt by the track. “Someone has been up here. Look — the grass is bent this way. And that’s fresh.”

They got off and led the ponies, just as Mistress Ada had said. The track was steep at once, so steep they leaned forward and pulled themselves up by the rocks. Will wanted to hurry, but the stones were loose under their boots.

“Slow and careful,” Alice called back down the line. “Slow is sometimes the quickest way. Bennet said so.”

Up and up they climbed, until the valley was small and grey below them and the wind grew cold on their faces. And then the track flattened out onto the wide, bare shoulder of the mountain — and there stood the old beacon.

It was an iron basket on three legs, black with age and half fallen to one side — exactly the broken old thing Mistress Ada had promised. From far off it looked untouched for twenty years.

But they were not far off now.

Rose reached the basket first and dropped to her knees beside it.

“Ashes,” she said. Under the iron lay a soft grey heap of ashes — all that a fire leaves behind when the wood has burned away. She held her hand flat above them, close, the way you feel a loaf to know if it is fresh from the oven.

“Warm,” she whispered. “The ashes are still *warm*.”

Will crouched beside her and felt it too — a faint, living warmth rising off the grey. Somebody had burned a fire here, and not long ago.

“And look at this,” said Peter.

Beside the basket, out of the wind, stood a woodpile: short sticks and dry branches, laid one across another in a neat little stack, dry side up, ready for the next fire. Nobody stacks a woodpile like that by accident.

Alice was already reading the stones. On the rough grey rock, here and there, soft tufts of grey wool had caught and snagged — the wool off a sheep’s back, pulled loose as the flock pushed past.

“Sheep,” she said. “There are sheep up here.”

And Rose had found the last thing of all. In a patch of soft ground she knelt over a line of small marks pressed into the mud.

“Hoofprints,” she said. A hoofprint is the mark a hoof leaves in soft earth. But these were not like the marks their own ponies made. “Look at the shape. Round, and smooth all the way round.” She pointed to Pebble’s prints beside them, each one edged with a hard, straight line. “Our ponies wear iron shoes, nailed on. An iron shoe leaves that hard rim, see? These have none. No shoes at all.” She sat back on her heels. “This is a little pony with bare feet. *Unshod*.”

They stood together in the wind and read what the mountain told them. A small unshod pony. A flock of sheep. A fire kept ready and burned at night. Warm ashes, this very morning.



“A shepherd,” said Alice softly. “It’s a shepherd. It’s Amos. He’s been here —”
“Then where is he now?” said Will.

For the shoulder was empty. Only the four of them, the grey stones, the cold wind, and the ponies with their ears pricked. No man, no flock, no pony. Just the marks he had left, running away over the far side of the shoulder, into the rocks.

They bent low, following the prints, trying to read which way he had gone. Rose was the one who looked up first.

“Alice,” she said.

Down in the valley, where the pass road wound, something had changed. A wall of grey was rising off the ground — thick, soft, silent — and it was climbing the mountain toward them, fast, far faster than any of them could run.

Fog.

It reached the shoulder and rolled straight over it, and in one long breath the world turned white. The valley was gone. The pass was gone. And when Will turned to look for the track they had climbed up by, the track was gone too, swallowed whole, and there was nothing round them now but cold, blind, moving grey.

Chapter 7: Fog

Alice had seen fog before.

On autumn mornings she had stood on the Keep's wall and watched grey mist fill the courtyard below, soft as wool, until the far tower went dim and pale. But that fog had edges. You could always walk down out of it into a clear yard.

This fog had no edges anywhere.

It pressed against her face, cold and wet. It sat on her eyelashes. She could see Hazel's nose, and her own two hands, and no more. Will stood an arm's length away, and Will was gone — just a grey shape and a voice.

"Nobody move," Alice said.

Her words came out flat and small. The fog seemed to eat the ends of them, so that *move* fell dead at her feet with no echo at all.

For one moment her mind went as white as the air around her. The plan was gone. Her map was no use now — you cannot read a map when you cannot even find your own boots. Which way was down? Which way was the track they had climbed up by? She did not know. She truly did not know, and that had almost never happened to Alice Ward in all her life.

Then a warm weight leaned hard against her leg.

Rusty. The old dog had pushed in close and stood steady as a stone, his shaggy side warm through her boot. He was not afraid of the fog. He looked up at her with calm amber eyes and gave one slow wag of his tail, as if to say, *Well? Here we all are. What now?*

That helped. Alice let out a long breath and made herself think.

"Listen to me," she said, and this time her voice held firm. "We do not ride in fog like this. Not one step. We lead the ponies, all of us on our feet. And we do not let go of each other. Not for anything."

"I can't even see Swift's ears," said Will, somewhere on her left. For a moment his free hand went to the satchel on his chest and pressed it flat, to feel that the king's letter was still safe inside.

“Then we go by touch,” said Alice.

She felt her way down the line and set them in order, the way you build a chain, link by link. She would go first with Hazel, because Hazel never slipped, and because she herself knew these hills better than any of them. Rusty would walk at her knee. Behind Hazel came Will with Swift, then Peter with Bracken, and Rose and little Pebble at the back.

“Here is the rule,” Alice said. “Each of you leads your own pony. With your other hand you hold on — the tail of the pony in front of you, or the hem of the cloak ahead. Hold tight. If it slips out of your hand, you shout, at once, and we all stop. Nobody walks on alone in this. Nobody.”

She heard them take hold. She felt Will’s hand close on Hazel’s tail.

“And I will count,” Alice said. “Every step, out loud, so you always know I am here. If my counting stops, you stop too.”

For a breath she stood still. The fog moved past them, slow and silent. Somewhere far off, water dripped off a rock. Her heart was still going much too fast.

Then, quietly, almost without deciding to, Alice said the words her grandmother had taught her — the little prayer her grandmother said at the start of any hard road. She said it low, almost to herself, but in the deep quiet they all heard it.

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

Nobody laughed. From the back of the line, so soft it was nearly not there, Rose said, “Amen.” And Peter said it too.

Alice felt something loosen in her chest. She still could not see. But she did not feel quite so alone in the grey.

“All right,” she said. “Step by step. Here we go. One.”

They began to move.

It was the slowest walking Alice had ever done. She slid each boot forward and felt the ground before she put her weight down. Rock. Grass. A loose stone she pushed gently aside with her toe. “Two. Three.” Behind her the

ponies came on, heads low, ears flat, trusting the children as the children trusted them. “Four. Five.” Rusty pressed warm against her knee at every step.

The fog turned the whole world into sound. Alice could not see, so she began to listen the way Rose always listened. She heard Hazel’s breath. She heard the little clink of a bit. She heard Peter, further back, humming under his breath to keep himself brave, and she did not tell him to stop.

She counted to forty. She counted to eighty. Once her free hand met cold wet stone — a wall of rock rising up on her right — and she was glad of it, for a wall was something sure to hold to. She kept her fingers on it and counted on.

Then, at *ninety-one*, Rose spoke from the back of the line.

“Stop.”

Alice stopped. The whole chain stopped behind her.

“What is it?” Alice said.

“Listen,” Rose whispered. “Everybody — just listen.”

They stood dead still in the white. And into the quiet, thin and far away, came a small clear sound.

Ting. Ting-ting. Ting.

“A bell,” breathed Peter.

“A sheep bell,” said Rose. There was no doubt at all in her soft voice now. A sheep bell was the little bell a shepherd hung round the neck of one sheep, so he could find his flock in the mist or the dark. “Somewhere ahead. And below us.”

They held their breath. The bell came again — *ting, ting* — and then another sound floated up out of the grey, low and long and sad.

Baaa. Baaa.

“That’s a sheep,” said Will. “That’s a sheep bleating.”

A bleat is the soft, crying call a sheep makes. And this one did not sound happy. It came once, and then many at once, a whole small chorus of them, muffled and thrown back off the hidden rocks — an echo that came thin and doubled, so you could not quite tell how far off it was.

“Sheep,” said Alice slowly, “up here on the shoulder, in the fog, where no flock has any business being.”

“Amos,” said Rose. “It has to be. His flock.”

Alice’s mind was clear now, clearer than it had been since the grey came down. They had climbed this whole mountain to answer a beacon — and here, somewhere close in the white, was the flock the beacon belonged to.

“Then we follow the bell,” she said. “Slow as ever. Keep hold. Rose, you have the best ears of any of us. Sing out the moment we go wrong.”

They turned toward the sound and felt their way on. The wall of rock stayed against Alice’s right hand. And soon the ground on her left began to change. Her leading foot found the edge of it — a drop, falling away into nothing but soft moving grey, with no bottom that she could see.

They had come out onto a ledge. A ledge is a narrow shelf of rock along a mountain’s side, just wide enough to walk on, with the cliff wall on one hand and the long fall on the other.

“Ledge,” Alice said, keeping her voice steady for all of them. “Keep to the wall. Right shoulder on the stone, every one of you. Rusty — in, boy. In by me.” The old dog moved to her wall side without being told twice.

Step by step they went along the ledge, hugging the cold rock, following the bell that rang somewhere ahead in the fog. *Ting. Ting-ting.* Closer now. The bleating grew louder, until it did not sound far away at all.



And then, out of the grey in front of them, so sudden that Alice's heart jumped into her throat, came a voice.

Not a bell. Not a sheep. A man's voice, rough and cracked and tired, calling out into the fog.

"Hello? Is somebody there?" it cried. "Oh, *please* be somebody!"

Chapter 8: The Shepherd of Eagle Pass

“We’re here!” Alice called into the fog. “Keep talking, so we can find you!”

“This way,” the voice cried. “Down off the ledge — mind your feet!”

They felt their way toward the sound. The rock wall turned under Alice’s hand, the ground sloped down — and then, quite suddenly, the fog began to thin. The wind had turned, pushing the grey up off the shoulder, and a patch of gold sun fell on the wet stones.

“It’s lifting,” breathed Rose.

Below them, just under the ridge, stood a low stone hut. A hut is a very small, plain house of one room; this one had a rough turf roof, with thin blue smoke rising from a hole in it. All around it stood sheep — a whole flock, forty or more, huddled close and calling, with one late lamb pressed against its mother. In the low doorway, leaning on a long staff, stood an old man.

He was thin and bent, with a white beard and a brown face full of deep lines. When he saw four children and four ponies walk out of the fog, his tired old eyes filled with tears.

“Children,” he said. “Oh, thank goodness.”



Peter, who could talk to anyone, went first. “Are you Amos? Amos the shepherd?”

“That I am,” said the old man. “Amos of Eagle Pass, these forty years. And who are you, come out of the fog like an answer to a prayer?”

They told him quickly – the letter, the beacon, the long climb. When Alice said, “We saw your fire from the valley,” Amos leaned hard on his staff.

“So somebody saw it,” he said softly. “I began to think nobody ever would. Come and see why I could not go down.”

Round the side of the hut was a little shelter of branches, and in it stood a small grey pony with a white blaze. She lifted her head and gave a low, unhappy whinny.

“Bluebell,” said Amos, his rough voice going gentle. “Fifteen years she has carried me over these hills.”

Will was already on one knee beside her. He was the best of them with ponies. He ran his hands down her legs – three were cool, the fourth was

not. The pony's front leg was hot and swollen, twice the size of the others. When he touched it, Bluebell flinched.

"She's lame," Will said. Lame means a pony cannot walk right, because a leg hurts too much to stand on. "How did it happen?"

"Some days back," said Amos. "The grass was good this autumn, so we stayed high past one market-day. Then, coming down in time for the next market, a stone rolled under her foot — a loose stone, no more — and down she went. Nobody's fault. But she could not walk on it, and by night it had swollen up hot, the way you see it now."

He looked out at his sheep. "I couldn't carry her, and I couldn't leave her alone up here. Nor drive the flock down without her — they always follow her. So there I was, stuck fast."

"So what did you do?" asked Rose.

"The only thing left, when you're stuck on a mountain and need help. I climbed up to the old beacon, mended the fallen basket, and I lit it."

"A beacon means: help me," said Rose softly.

"It does, lass." Amos shook his head. "But the wood up here is wet through this time of year. By day it would only smoke — great grey clouds of it, and no flame you could see far off."

"We saw the smoke!" said Peter. "Friday morning. A thin grey line, high up."

"At night it burned better," Amos went on. "But every night the mist comes down and sits on this shoulder like a lid on a pot, and it swallows my fire whole — there one moment, gone the next, like a blown-out candle. And my wood ran low, so some nights I let it die to save the last. So my beacon came and went, came and went."

Will's mouth fell open. "That's exactly what I saw — from the inn window, past midnight! It went out like a blown candle. I thought I'd dreamed it."

"No dream, lad," said Amos. "That was me. And my Bluebell."

Alice let out a long breath. Nobody had done anything wrong — only a good shepherd, his lame pony, and a fog that hid his fire. The beacon had done just what a beacon is for.

There was work to do, and they set to it. A hot, swollen leg needs cold water. “There’s a stream,” said Rose, who heard it behind the hut before she saw it. They tore an old blanket into strips, soaked them icy cold, and wound them round and round Bluebell’s leg. To wrap means to wind cloth round and round, snug and firm. The cold, wet cloths would draw the heat out and bring the swelling down.

“When the cloth goes warm, we soak it cold again,” said Will. “All afternoon if we have to. It’ll help the leg heal.”

Meanwhile Peter had opened his food bag — the one that always held bread and cheese “in case of emergencies.” He built up the little fire, warmed the last of the bean stew, and put it all in Amos’s hands. The old man ate like someone who had not had a warm meal in days. “Bless you, children,” he said between mouthfuls.

But even as he ate, Alice felt the day pulling at her. Through the last of the fog, the sky was turning gold.

“The letter,” she said quietly.

The others went still. It had to reach the abbot’s own hands before the bells of Sunday, and the only way left was up over the high shoulder and down the far side — a road that could not wait, and could not carry a lame pony or a whole flock of sheep.

“We can’t all go on,” said Alice. “And we can’t all stay.”

Nobody argued. Each of them saw the same plain sense.

“Bluebell needs someone who knows ponies,” said Will. “That’s me. I’ll stay behind and keep the cold wraps going till the swelling’s down.”

“And I’ll stay behind with Will,” said Rose at once. She was already among the sheep, gentling the frightened lamb. “The flock will want minding. And I can send Snowy home, so the Keep and the mill know where we are.”

“Then Peter and I go on,” said Alice. “Over the shoulder. Before the bells.”

For a moment Will did not move. His hand went up to the satchel on his chest — Old Bennet’s satchel, forty years old and worn soft, that had ridden against him from the Keep. It held the king’s letter, and it had been *his* to carry. Being first was the part Will loved best of all, and he was the fastest rider of the four.

But speed was not what the mountain needed now. Bluebell needed him, and a lame pony does not care who is quickest.

So Will lifted the strap over his own head. He crossed to his sister and, with his own two hands, hung the old satchel over Alice’s shoulder and settled it against her side.

“Keep it safe,” he said. His voice was not quite steady. “Finish it. Fast is not the same as first — Bennet said so. Right?”

“Right,” said Alice softly. She laid her hand over the satchel, over the letter, and held her brother’s eyes. “Thank you, Will.”



Rose lifted Snowy from the basket. She rolled a scrap of paper thin as thread and slid it into the tiny tube on the pigeon's leg — a message made as small as it would go:

Found Amos + lame pony. All safe. Will & Rose stay. Alice & Peter go on to Abbey.

"Home, Snowy," she whispered, and opened her hands. "Straight home."

The pigeon burst up white against the gold sky, once round the hut, and then away — down the mountain, down the long valley, arrow-straight for home and everyone who loved them.

Alice turned and looked up. Above the hut the ground climbed steep and bare to the high shoulder, and a thin path wound up it, no wider than a goat-track, over the top into country none of them had ever seen. That was the way. The only way left.

Peter came to stand beside her, Bracken's reins in his hand. Rusty pushed in warm against her leg; the old dog was coming too, and Alice was glad of him.

The fog was gone now, and every stone on the high shoulder shone gold. Somewhere down the far side Highfield Abbey waited with its gate and its great bell.

Before the bells of Sunday. And the light was already turning gold.

"Come on, Peter," Alice said, and set her foot on the path. "We have to be over the other side before dark."

Chapter 9: The High Path

The goat-track climbed and climbed.

Alice went first, leading Hazel by the reins. Peter came behind with Bracken, and Rusty trotted between them, his nose low to the stones. Nobody rode now — the path was too steep and narrow, no wider than a sheep, with the mountain rising on one side and the ground dropping away on the other.

Alice's hand kept going to the map case at her hip, but there was nothing in it that could help her now. This high shoulder was blank on every map she had ever drawn — no lines to follow, no careful plan, only the mountain itself.

For a moment that frightened her. Then she made herself look. Which way did the water run? Where did the sheep tread? The mountain was telling her things, if only she read them right. A map, after all, was only somebody else's careful looking — and she could do her own.

"All right, Hazel," she said softly. "Slow and steady."

At the very top of the shoulder the wind hit them cold and clean, and the whole world opened up. Far down the far side, a river of evening mist lay in a deep green fold of the hills.

"Somewhere down there is the abbey," said Peter.

"Somewhere," said Alice. "We just have to find the way down before dark."

A little below the top the path split in two, and Alice stopped and looked hard at both.

The first way was short, straight down a steep grey slope — but the whole slope was loose stones, small broken rock that slides away under your foot the moment you trust it. The second way was longer. It bent off to the left along a narrow ledge — a shelf of solid rock winding slowly down the mountainside and out of sight.

"The short one's much quicker," said Peter. "We could be down in half the time."

Alice did not answer at once. She knelt at the top edge of the slope and picked up one of the loose stones. It rolled off the pile the moment she lifted her hand, clattering down the steep and taking three more with it. She thought of Bluebell — *a loose stone, no more, and down she went* — and a whole flock left stuck on a mountain because of it.

“No,” said Alice. “Not the short way. One slip on that and a pony breaks a leg. We saw what one loose stone did to Bluebell.”

“But it’s nearly dark,” said Peter.

“I know.” She looked along the long, safe ledge, winding away. “But slow is sometimes the quickest way. Bennet says so. The quickest way down is the one that gets us down at all.”

Peter looked at the loose stones again — really looked, the way Alice had — and nodded. “The ledge it is.”

And Alice felt something settle inside her, warm and quiet. She had chosen with no map and no one to ask — and she knew she had chosen right.

The ledge was slow going, but it was good, firm rock. They kept the wall on their right hand and the drop on their left, well back from the edge. Rusty went ahead, sure as a goat, and where the old dog trod, the ground was safe.

The light went from gold to grey. To keep their spirits up, Peter told a story.

“Did I ever tell you about the traveller who crossed Eagle Pass in the snow?” he began — Peter had a story for everything. “He came the whole way in the dark. Do you know how? He tied a lantern to his pony’s tail and walked behind the light.”

“That can’t be true,” said Alice.

“Every word of it,” said Peter — though even he wasn’t quite sure any more. “The point is, he got there. Slow, in the dark, one step at a time. Same as us.”

And somehow, listening to Peter’s warm voice go on and on, the ledge did not feel so long. That was Peter’s gift, Alice thought — not the fastest of them, or the sharpest, but the one who kept everybody walking.

They came round a great shoulder of rock, and there it was.

Below them, in the green fold of the hills, stood Highfield Abbey. An abbey is a place where monks live and work and pray together — a whole little town of grey stone, with a long church, a square tower, walls and gardens and a great gate. Warm light showed at its windows.



And then, as they watched, the great bell in the tower began to ring. It rang out slow and deep across the valley, one long note after another, calling the monks to evening prayer.

“The bells,” breathed Alice. “The evening bells.”

Not the bells of Sunday. Not yet — those would ring tomorrow morning. They had come in time, with the whole night to spare. But her eyes stung all the same. After a broken bridge, a flood, a fog and a whole mountain, the letter had nearly come home.

“Come on,” she said. “We’re almost there.”

They came down the last of the path just in time, the last light almost gone, and reached the abbey gate — tall and wooden in a high stone wall. Alice lifted the heavy iron ring and knocked.

Feet came. A small door opened in the great gate, and a young man looked out — brown robe, kind face, a lantern in his hand.

“Well now,” he said. “Two children, two ponies, and a dog, down off the mountain at nightfall — and just in time, too, before I barred the gate for the night. You’d best come in.”

He swung the door wide. Rusty went straight to him, and he laughed and rubbed the dog’s ears like an old friend.

“I’m Brother Luke,” he said. Monks live together like one big family, and they call one another *Brother*. “And you two look as though you’ve come a long, long way.”

“We have,” said Alice. “From Stonegate Keep. We’ve a letter for the abbot — for the abbot’s own hands. Before the bells of Sunday.”

Brother Luke’s face changed. “The king’s letter?” he said quietly. “We’ve been waiting for that. Come — the abbot must see you at once.”

He led them across a quiet courtyard and in at a low door. The abbot was an old man with a white ring of hair and a face as calm as still water. The abbot is the monk who leads all the rest. He rose as the children came in.

Alice lifted the strap of Bennet’s satchel over her head. Her hands were not quite steady. She opened the worn old flap, drew out the letter — thick and folded, sealed with white wax and the swan with its open wings — and laid it in the abbot’s two hands.

“From the king, sir,” she said. “Old Bennet was ill, so we brought it instead. All four of us, part of the way.”

The abbot looked down at the letter, then at the two tired children, and his calm old face grew very gentle.

“Then you have kept a great promise,” he said, “and in good time. Sit down and eat. You are safe now.”

They ate in a warm stone room — hot soup, new bread and honey — and it was the best food Alice had ever tasted. Rusty lay flat by the fire and snored, and Peter, safe and full, was already halfway into a story for Brother Luke.

And through the wall, from the chapel next door, came the monks at their evening prayer. It was a psalm — an old, old song from the Bible, sung low and slow by many voices together. Alice did not know the words, and did not need them. The sound was enough: deep and calm and old as the hills, rising and falling like quiet water. All the fear of the long day — the fog, the loose stones, the dark ledge — went out of her, and a great, warm rest came in its place.

She thought of Will and Rose at the little hut, and of home. And quietly, inside, where nobody could hear, she said a small thank-you of her own.

When the psalm ended and the monks came out of the chapel, the abbot came back into the warm room. He had the king's letter in his hand, open now, the white seal broken. He had read it.

He stood a moment by the fire, and on his old face was a slow, growing smile — the smile of a man who has just been given wonderful news.

Alice put down her spoon. "Sir?" she said. "Is it — is it good news?"

The abbot looked at the two children who had carried it over the mountains. His eyes were shining.

"Then tomorrow," he said, "everything changes."

Chapter 10: Help over the Pass

Somebody shook Alice's shoulder in the grey morning light.

"Wake up," said a soft voice. "It's first light. Time to go."

It was Brother Luke. For a moment Alice did not know where she was. Then she remembered — the abbey, the long climb, the letter safe in the abbot's hands. And, up on the cold mountain, Will and Rose and old Amos, still waiting by the little hut.

She was on her feet in a moment.

Peter was harder to wake. "Five more minutes," he said into his blanket. But the smell of new bread got him up in the end, and soon the three of them were out in the quiet courtyard, eating while they worked.

The sun was not up yet. The abbey stood still and grey, and the great bell in the tower had not yet rung.

"We must be back before the day is old," said Brother Luke. "This afternoon the whole valley comes here. The abbot has news for everyone." He smiled. "But first, we help your friend on the mountain."

In the yard stood a mule.

Alice had never seen a mule close up. It looked like a small, strong horse — but with long ears, longer than any pony's, and a wise, patient face. Its name was Barley.

"A mule is the best thing on a mountain," said Brother Luke, packing the load. "Stronger than a pony, and surer on the stones. Barley never hurries, and Barley never slips."

He tied two baskets of food across the mule's back — bread, cheese, oats and apples. Then he showed Alice a little clay jar and took off the lid.

Inside was a soft green cream. It smelled of herbs and honey.

"This is a salve," he said. "For the pony's sore leg. We rub it on where it hurts. The cold water brings the swelling down; the salve helps the leg heal." He pushed the lid back on and packed the jar in with the food.

They set off up the mountain in the first light — Brother Luke leading Barley, Alice on Hazel, Peter on Bracken, and Rusty out in front to lead the way.

Alice knew the path now. They took the long, safe ledge she had found the evening before — good firm rock, the wall on one hand and the drop on the other. In daylight it was not frightening at all. Barley walked it slow and steady, just as Brother Luke had said, and never once put a foot wrong.

Up and over the high shoulder they went, and down the far side toward the pass. And there, at last, was the low stone hut under the ridge, with grey sheep dotted all around it.

“Hello!” called Peter, standing up in his stirrups. “Hello, the hut!”

A small figure came running. It was Rose.

“You came back!” she cried. “And you brought a — what is that?”

“A mule,” said Peter grandly, as if he had known all about mules his whole life.

Will came out of the hut behind her, rubbing his eyes. He looked worn out — his hair stood up every way and there were dark rings under his eyes — but he was grinning all over his face.

“You made it, then,” he said. “To the abbey. The letter?”

“In the abbot’s own hands,” said Alice. “Before the bells. Hours to spare.”

“Hah!” Will thumped the door post. “I knew it.”

Then Alice looked properly at the two of them, and understood. They were tired but happy — that was it exactly. “You’ve been up all night,” she said.

Will and Rose looked at each other. “Most of it,” Rose admitted.

They had taken turns, the two of them, all through the dark. Every time the cold wet cloth on Bluebell’s leg grew warm, one of them had walked down to the stream, soaked it cold again and wrapped it back on — over and over, hour after hour, so that old Amos could rest.

“Come and see,” said Rose, and her eyes were shining.

Bluebell stood by the hut wall. The little grey pony turned her head as they came, and her ears pricked up. And her front leg — the hot, swollen leg — looked very nearly like her other one again.

Rose ran her hand gently down it. “Feel,” she said. “It’s cool now. And the swelling’s almost gone.”

“You did that,” said Brother Luke, kneeling by the pony. “The two of you. That is good work — better than any medicine.” He opened his little jar and rubbed the green salve softly into the leg, and Bluebell blew out a long, contented breath.

Old Amos came out into the early sun, leaning on his stick. He looked a different man from the tired, worried shepherd of the day before. He had slept, and eaten, and his flock was safe.

“So,” he said to Brother Luke, “you’ll be wondering about that beacon of mine.”

“I heard some of it,” said Brother Luke. “Tell me.”

“Simple enough,” said Amos. “My Bluebell went lame, and I couldn’t leave her, and I couldn’t drive the sheep without her — they follow her, see. So I climbed up to the old fire-basket, and I mended it, and I lit it. A beacon means one thing: help me. It was all I had left to say.”

“And the strange part,” said Peter, leaning in, “is that the fog kept eating your fire! We saw smoke by day and a light by night, and then — poof — out it went, like a candle. We couldn’t work it out at all.”

“That was the night mist,” said Amos, nodding slowly. “Sits down on the shoulder like a lid on a pot. Hid my poor fire again and again.” He shook his head. “I began to think no one would ever see it. And then four children walked out of the fog.” He looked round at them all, and his old eyes were bright. “The beacon did just what a beacon’s for.”

“It did,” said Brother Luke, getting to his feet. “And now — shall we all go down together?”

That set everyone moving.

They packed up the hut. Amos was too stiff and tired to walk the whole way, so they helped him up onto Barley's broad back, and he sat there like a king, his stick across his knees. Bluebell walked free beside the mule, carrying nothing at all — just resting her leg and keeping close to Amos, the way she always did.

Will fetched Swift from behind the hut and swung up into the saddle at last. After a whole night on his feet, riding again felt wonderful.

And the sheep? The sheep were Rose's job now — and this was Rose at her very best. On little Pebble, with Rusty running low and clever at the edges, she gathered the whole flock into one grey, woolly crowd and started them gently down the path. She did not shout. She hardly said a word. But the sheep went just where she wanted, and the youngest lamb, too small to keep up, rode across Peter's saddle and bleated happily all the way.

Slowly, all together, they started down the mountain.



Downhill was easy after the long climb up. The sun was warm now, the fog was gone, and far below, in its green fold, the abbey waited. Somewhere down there the whole valley was already gathering. And somewhere down

there, on a table, lay the king's letter — read now by the abbot, its white seal broken.

Alice thought about that letter all the way down. So did Will. So, though she said nothing, did Rose.

They were nearly off the mountain when Peter said the thing they were all thinking.

He pulled up Bracken, turned in the saddle and looked back at the whole line of them — Amos on the mule, the free pony, the old dog, the children, the flock.

“Here's what I want to know,” he said. “We carried that letter over a broken bridge, and a flood, and a fog, and a whole mountain. The abbot read it and smiled and said *everything changes*.” He spread his hands wide. “But nobody has told *us* a thing. What does it actually *say*?”

Chapter 11: The King's Answer

By the middle of the afternoon, the abbey courtyard was full of people.

They came down from every little village in the mountains. Whole families in their best clothes, old shepherds leaning on sticks, mothers with babies, and children of every size. Alice had never seen so many people in one place at once. The Sunday bells had rung that morning, deep and clear across the valley. Now, hours later, the whole mountainside had gathered to hear the abbot's news.

"Half of these folk I know," said Amos, looking round with bright eyes. "And half I've not seen since spring. That's the mountains for you. We all live so far apart."

He stood between the four children, clean and rested, his stick in his hand. Bluebell and the flock were safe in a green field beside the abbey, and for once old Amos had nothing to worry about.

Brother Luke found them in the crowd. "There you are," he said. "You should stand near the front. The abbot has an announcement — and it is partly your doing."

"Our doing?" said Will.

"You carried the letter," said Brother Luke. "Wait and see."

A hush ran through the courtyard. The abbot came out onto the steps.

He was a small, round old man in a brown robe, with a kind face and a slow, warm voice. In his hand he held a folded paper. Alice knew it at once. It was their letter — the white wax seal broken now, but still marked with the swan.

"My friends," said the abbot, and everybody grew quiet. "Many years ago, this abbey sent the king a letter of its own. We asked him for one thing — one gift for the mountains, and for the people who live in them. For a long, long time, no answer came." He lifted the paper. "It came this week. These four children carried it up to us, over a broken bridge and through the fog. Now I will read it aloud, so everyone can hear."

He read the king's words in his slow, clear voice.

The king gave his leave for a fair. From this year on, once every year, the people of the mountains might hold a great market right here, at Highfield Abbey, on this side of the pass.

For a moment nobody moved. Then one man understood, and then everybody did, all at once.

A yearly fair. A market of their very own.

The cheer that went up was so loud that the birds flew off the abbey roof. People clapped and laughed and hugged one another. Alice felt the sound go right through her.

"Do you see what it means?" said Brother Luke, close to her ear. "Until today, if a mountain family wanted to buy or sell, they walked all the way down to the town — two days there, two days back, over the pass. Now the stalls will come to them. Once a year, everything they need, right here."

Beside them, old Amos was not cheering. He stood very still, and his eyes were wet.

"Amos?" said Rose softly. "Are you all right?"

"More than all right, child." He wiped his face with the back of his hand and laughed at himself. "You don't know what this is to me. Every autumn I go down to the town to sell my wool. Two weeks I'm gone — two weeks away from my sheep, my hills, my own bed. And I hate every day of it." He looked up at the mountains behind the abbey. "Now the market comes to me. I need never leave my flock so long again. Not ever."

Then he turned and looked at the four of them, one after another.

"And you brought it," he said. "You four. That little letter you carried — it wasn't just paper. It was the fair. You carried the fair up the mountain."

Alice looked at Will, and Will looked at Peter, and Peter looked at Rose. All the way up, over the flood and the fog, they had never once known what was folded inside that white seal. Now they knew. And it had been worth every cold, hard step.

"We only carried it," said Alice. "The king wrote it."

"Aye," said Amos, "but a letter that stays in a bag helps nobody. You finished it. That's the whole thing, isn't it?"

Finish what you begin. It was the last line of the Oath. Will grinned.

"Now then," said Amos. "I've something for you. It's not much."

He reached into the deep pocket of his coat and brought out four small things. He gave one to each of them.

They were whistles — little pipes of pale wood, each one smooth and carefully shaped.

"Ash wood," said Amos. "The best wood there is for it. A shepherd is always carving something, up on the hills, in the long quiet hours. I made these this week, while my Bluebell was healing and I couldn't sleep." He nodded at them. "One each. So that up here, or down in your own valley, you can always call to one another."

Rose turned hers over and over. On the side, someone had carved a tiny bird — for her, and her pigeons. She could hardly speak. "You carved a bird," she whispered.

"Blow it," said Amos.

She lifted the whistle and blew. A clear, high note rang out over the courtyard, bright as a real bird. Will blew his, and Peter blew his, and for a moment the four whistles sang together, and everyone near them laughed.

"Thank you," said Alice. "We'll keep them always." And she meant it. It was the finest gift she had ever been given.

Amos looked prouder than a king.



After that came the food.

The whole valley ate together in the abbey field. There was new bread and yellow cheese, hot pies, apples and honey. Somebody had a pipe, somebody else a small drum, and the little ones danced on the grass. It was, Peter said happily, the best afternoon of his whole life.

And, of course, before long, Peter was telling the story.

A ring of mountain children sat around him on the grass, and he told them everything — the letter, the broken bridge, the flood, the fog, the strange fire on the shoulder, the lame pony, the shepherd found in the mist. He was very good at it. He was so good that the flood grew wider every time he told it, and the fog grew thicker, and the mountain grew steeper.

“...and the water was up to Bracken’s neck,” he said, “roaring like a hundred angry bulls—”

“It was up to his knees,” said Alice.

Peter waved a hand. “His knees, his neck. Close enough.”

"It really wasn't," said Alice, but she was smiling. Somebody had to keep the story pointing at the truth, and it was usually her. Peter told it better than it had happened; Alice told it the way it was. Between the two of them, the mountain children got something close to right.

The sun was dropping behind the mountains now, and the air was turning cool. Brother Luke came and sat down by them.

"You'll sleep here again tonight," he said. "And tomorrow morning, you ride for home."

Will thought of the long way back — down from the pass, along the valley to Millford, and up the King's Road to the Keep. The bridge over the Rushwater was still broken. Men were already at work on it, Brother Luke said, but it would not be mended for days yet.

"It's a long way," said Will.

"It is," said Alice. "But it's downhill more than up. And we know the road now."

She thought of the Keep — of home, and her mother's warm kitchen, and her father, and Old Bennet in his chair by the fire. Bennet had handed them the letter and his trust, and then he had to lie in bed and wait. He did not know yet that the letter was safe in the abbot's hands. He did not know about the flood, or the beacon, or Amos, or the fair.

"He's waiting for the whole story," Alice said quietly.

"Then let's go and tell it to him," said Will.

Tomorrow they would ride home. And they had a great deal to tell.

Chapter 12: The Road Home

Monday morning came bright and cold over Highfield Abbey. The four children had risen before the sun. It was a long way home.

They stood in the abbey gate with their ponies, ready at last. Rusty ran in happy circles, as if he already smelled the road. In a green field behind them, old Amos leaned on his stick and watched his sheep. Bluebell stood beside him, resting her healed leg on the soft grass, her white blaze bright in the early light.

“So you’re off,” said Amos. “Down the pass, and home before dark, if the weather holds.”

“We’ll be back,” said Will. “For the first fair. You said so.”

“I did.” Amos smiled his slow smile. “And I keep my word — the same as you.” He looked at each of them. “Blow those whistles now and then, up on the hills. I’ll hear you, and I’ll know my friends are near.”

Rose could not say much. She only stepped forward and hugged the old shepherd, quick and shy, the way she did everything. Amos patted her braids with a rough, gentle hand.

Brother Luke walked with them as far as the road. He gave Peter one last warm loaf, “for emergencies,” and Peter tucked it into his food bag with great care.

“Safe road,” said Brother Luke. “Come again in the spring.”

“We will,” said Alice. And she meant it, the way she meant everything.

Then they turned the ponies down the pass, and the abbey bells rang them away.

The way home was long, but it was easier than the way up.

They rode down the pass road with the mountains at their backs. In the daylight, with the fog gone, the high shoulder looked quiet and kind — only grey rock and green grass, and somewhere up there, a mended beacon that would never frighten anyone again. It was hard to believe they had been lost up there only two days ago.

"It doesn't look scary now," said Peter.

"Nothing does, in the morning," said Alice.

They passed the very ledge where they had heard the sheep bell in the mist. Now they heard only the wind and their ponies' feet on the stones.

By the middle of the day they came down to Millford. At the inn door Mistress Ada saw them and waved her cloth. "Dry socks!" she called, laughing. "Mind you keep dry socks!"

"Too late for that," said Will, and they all laughed.

The ford was lower now. The flood had gone back up into the hills, where it belonged. Rose led them across on Pebble, calm and sure, without a whisper of fear.

At the mill her mother came running out with flour on her hands, and her father left his great wheel to wave. There was no time to stop long — home was still far, and the light would not wait — but Rose's mother pressed oatcakes into every bag and kissed the top of Rose's head.

"My girl found a lost shepherd in the fog," she told anyone who would listen. "My Rose."

Rose went pink to her ears. But she did not look at her feet. She looked up, and she smiled.

The dale road ran along the near bank of the Rushwater, climbing gently towards home. The river was quieter now, brown and full but no longer roaring.

Late in the afternoon they came to the stone bridge.

Men were working on it. Three of them stood in the shallow water with ropes and long planks, and two more worked on the bank, cutting fresh wood. The old broken planks were gone. New yellow ones lay ready in a row.

"They're repairing it already," said Alice.

"Father sent them, I'll bet," said Will.

One of the workmen looked up and knew them at once. "There they are!" he called. "The four who went over the mountain! Is the letter safe, then?"

"Safe in the abbot's own hands," Alice called back. "Before the bells of Sunday."

The workmen gave a cheer, and one waved his cap. The children rode past the repair and up the last mile, and now every stone of the road was one they knew.

Then, above the trees, they saw it: the round tower, the grey wall, the great gate of Stonegate Keep, gold in the last of the sun.

Home.

Rusty reached the gate first and barked the whole courtyard awake.

Helen was out of the kitchen before they were even down from their ponies, her apron flying, flour still on her cheek. She gathered all four muddy children into one great hug.

"Look at you," she said, half laughing, half crying. "Look at the state of you. Wet, and thin, and — oh, home. You're home."

Their father came across the courtyard. He was a quiet man, and he did not say much. He put a hand on Will's shoulder, and a hand on Alice's, and he looked at all four of them for a long moment.

"You did it," was all he said. But his eyes said the rest, and they knew.

Rose ran first of all to the pigeon loft — and there were Snowy and Inky, safe home on their perch, their little messages long delivered. She let out a breath she felt she had been holding for three days.

Then Helen fed them. She had made a homecoming supper, and she would not hear one word of the story until every child had dry boots and a full plate.

Old Bennet sat in his chair by the fire.

He was still pale, and he coughed now and then, but his eyes were sharp again, and the colour was coming back to his face. He had been getting

better all week, Helen said — though he had hated lying in bed while the letter rode off without him.

“Well,” he said, when they crowded round the fireside. “Tell me. All of it. From the first hill to the last.”

So they told him.

They told it all together, and Peter made it too grand, and Alice made it true, and Rose remembered the small things nobody else had seen, and Will kept jumping ahead to the good parts. The broken bridge. The stuck cart. The smoke by day and the fire by night. The old beacon, warm and empty. The fog. The sheep bell. Amos, and Bluebell, and the long cold night of wet wraps. The high path, and the safe ledge, and the abbey gate just in time. The king’s letter, and the fair it carried up the mountain.

Old Bennet listened like a judge. He said very little. Now and then he nodded, or his eyebrows went up, or the corner of his mouth moved. He heard how Will had hung the satchel on Alice at the shepherd’s hut. He heard how Alice had chosen the long, safe way when the map ran out. He heard how Rose had spoken her three clues out loud, and how Peter had kept everyone walking through the dark.

When they finished, he was quiet for a long time.

“Forty years I rode that road,” he said at last. “And I always wondered who would ride it after me.” He looked at the four of them in the firelight. “Now I know.”

He tapped his stick once on the floor.

“The road chose you,” he said. “That’s how it works. You don’t choose the road; the road chooses you. It gives you a flood, and a fog, and a lame pony, and it watches what you do.” He nodded slowly. “You kept your word. You told the truth. You helped who needed you. You finished what you began. From now on you are the young riders of Stonegate — all four of you. And that is not a thing I say lightly.”

Nobody spoke. Then Will, who could never sit still for long, pulled out his ash-wood whistle and blew one clear, bright note. The other three did the same, and the four whistles sang together in the warm kitchen.

Even Bennet laughed.

Outside, the last grey light was going out of the sky. It was almost dark now. Then Rusty lifted his head by the fire.

He got up. He went to the door. And he barked — not his happy bark, but a low, wondering one, at something out in the yard.

“What is it, old dog?” said Will.

They went out together into the cool evening. The courtyard was quiet. The gate stood half open, the way gates do at the end of a long day.

And there, coming slowly up the King’s Road in the very last of the light, was a pony.

It walked by itself. No one led it. No one came behind it. Its reins hung loose. On its back sat a good leather saddle, worn soft with use.

And the saddle was empty.

