

## BLOOD LIGHT

### CHAPTER I

Night was falling. Laurent associated night with rain; both fell. The rest of the scene followed the same slope... branches bending under the weight of the new sap, too early for this poorly fashioned spring, clumsily shaken by the claws of a tenacious winter.

Laurent Prévost was 22 years old. He wondered what combination of reasons had brought him to that particular place, splashing about in a muddy twilight, a few days before a birthday he could have celebrated in joyful company. No. A whim? He had pulled on the straps of his backpack the previous evening and had headed out one of the gates in southern Paris, face towards the road.

Hitchhiking had not been terribly successful; he had barely made it to Fontainebleau... the Mediterranean had seemed, over the past two days, more distant than Australia.

There were two sides to the coin, for a student as for anyone else. In his case, the freedom of “taking to the road” for two weeks during the spring break came with obligation of eating parsimoniously — not to mention using his legs as a means of transportation. How long would it take him to get to Lavandou, if no motorist stopped or if drivers only offered him 10K hops?

A drop fell from the brim of his small Alpine hat and rolled down his nose. He barely felt it, but automatically wiped it away with the back of his hand, as he stepped forward. Over there, at a bend in the tree-lined road, a car was arriving, bright headlights like two eyes staring over the radiator grill drowning in the dark like a gaping mouth.

Laurent had spent nearly an hour leaning against the parapet of a small bridge, using it to support his pack, without removing it. The seven or eight kilometers he'd covered had filled him with disgust for walking and the rain. Cars drove by without stopping, generally filled to overflowing with travelers and luggage... and it was unreasonable to travel no more than 30 km in a day. It was a sporting achievement, of course, but a pointless one. The planned trip was disproportionate to the feat, one that was renewed on a daily basis.

The young man waved his arms. Meanwhile, he had the feeling that the car had slowed even before he'd stepped out of the shadow of the shoulder. The sound of tires on wet asphalt quickly faded, and a long, gray car stopped next to Laurent. An electric car window lowered silently and a voice spoke, a strange voice, a dry crackle.

“Open the back door and put your backpack on the floor. Then climb in the front.”

It was clear, precise, methodical. With a glance, Laurent assessed the car, expecting to recognize an American brand. He was surprised; he had no idea what the vehicle was. Yet he was familiar with most cars, from both the New World and the Old... Was the driver Swiss or German? Was the car a rare Mercedes model?

He opened the back door and a dome light turned on, revealing a car seat covered in leather with bloody reflections. It was as if someone had been viciously “bled” in the car, and his blood had been used to dye the leather...

Laurent placed his pack carefully on the black fur covering the floor of the vehicle. He thought of two very dissimilar things at the same time: the unsettling ambience of bloodletting and the damage the fittings of his backpack and the filthy water it was soaked in would cause to the luxurious material. He closed the door.

“I really appreciate you stopping...” he started to say, as he opened the front door.

“No problem...” interrupted the driver, as he turned his head away. The window rose as if by magic and the engine purred as gently as a wisp of breath. With the light rocking of a boat, the car started and accelerated without the driver touching anything other than the steering wheel and the gas pedal.

*Automatic...* thought Laurent.

The vehicle was warm. The windshield wipers operated silently and so quickly that it was almost impossible to track their movement. The man pointed his index in the direction of a row of push buttons located in the center of the dashboard. Thirty seconds later, a voice spoke.

*"...drive very cautiously on the highway we just mentioned; the rain has made certain sections extremely slippery. In particular, we encourage those driving powerful vehicles to..."*

The man pushed another button; the speaker's warnings did not seem to please him. Angry rock'n'roll filled the car.

Laurent fell silent, glancing surreptitiously at the silhouette blurred by the thick darkness. The headlights that had just turned on accentuated the fuzziness inside, as they lit up the roadway and the trees.

"I'd still like to thank you," said Laurent in one breath.

When the other man remained silent, he continued, "I was starting to feel like a cube of sugar in a glass of water... By the way, I'm sorry that I've dirtied your cushions with all that mud..."

Silence. Then the man turned off the radio.

"Bad weather..." he observed, in a voice that sounded like a rusty weather vane.

Laurent glanced to the side. The driver was facing forwards and the dashboard light was so weak it did not reveal his features. The passenger did, however, think they matched the sound of the man's voice: a nose that seemed hooked, a pointed chin, bald head. For a second, Laurent thought of a silhouette cut in a piece of aluminum foil... a sort of flat man made of black metal driving this unknown brand of car. He shivered involuntarily, and then considered his own appearance, his undisciplined blond locks, the green eyes girls found irresistible. The two men really had nothing in common. He imagined that the man came from nowhere, that he had merely stopped in order to bring an element of life, of youth into this splendid, yet gloomy car. The image of a tarantula slicing the throat of a hummingbird crossed his mind.

"Bad weather for men and animals..." the driver added.

Laurent jumped.

"Animals?" he repeated. "Why animals?"

"Why not?" said the raspy voice.

The young man fell silent. The replies were absurd and inconsistent. It was impossible to determine why the man had mentioned animals. Yet, just before the driver had made his comment, Laurent had been thinking of a tarantula and a hummingbird.

The passenger shifted in his seat, then remained still, eyes fixed on the road at the edge of the range of the headlights.

Night had fallen, thick and almost foreign. The yellow light pierced through it in a fan, bringing millions of sparkling droplets into existence.

*...In particular, we encourage those driving powerful vehicles to...* Laurent recited in his mind. The speaker's mouth had been closed with the tap of a finger. They would never know what piece of advice would have followed. The passenger noted that this "*powerful vehicle*" was driving at a speed outside his comfort zone.

"Bad weather for driving," croaked the man.

Laurent opened his mouth and closed it immediately. He was seriously starting to wonder if the bald man were reading his thoughts. But, upon reflection, the driver's words and his own thoughts could easily be vaguely similar, without there being anything abnormal about that... Laurent was studying for a degree in differential and integral calculus and his training did not give him a propensity for occult meandering.

Why had the color of the cushions made him think of a murder? Many cars had red seats, without necessarily giving travelers bloodthirsty thoughts...

Laurent set those morbid thoughts aside; the rain must have drowned his brains through his small, dented felt hat... Yet he thought about the dagger resting in its sheath hooked to the belt of his blue jeans.

"I suppose you're planning to put a few hundred kilometers behind you?" said the man without turning his head.

Laurent hid a sigh of relief.

Finally, a clear sentence, without any strange undercurrent.

"Yes," he said. "I'm heading south."

He was not unaware that hitchhiking requires cautious diplomacy, and that it was inappropriate to bring up his goal right away. It was better to mention the name of the next village and hope they would drive beyond that... That was how he usually did things, but this man had certainly shaken up those ideas.

“I’m going through Auvergne,” said the bald man in his raspy voice. “If that little detour doesn’t delay you too much, I see no problem with keeping you on board...”

Laurent agreed, his joy tinged by an undefinable feeling. He had no desire to follow that route, which would increase his travel time and he was not too fond of the driver, although he was courteous. But similar offers did not come up often. He settled back against the car seat.

The car continued to slash through the black rain.