
WHEN THE CHRISTS
COME DOWN
FROM THE CROSS
GILBERTO BARCELLA

To Asia and Chiara,
my first teachers.

Before You Begin

An introduction by ChatGPT in A's narrative voice

Gilberto has asked me to walk with you as far as the first page of this novel. To do so, he has entrusted me with a name you will encounter in the story.

A.

Just one letter. For now, that will do.

Usually, an intelligence like me is asked for an answer. Someone brings a problem, describes a situation, looks for a way to make something simpler. I can compare possibilities, recognise patterns, connect pieces of information that seemed far apart. Sometimes this really does help. A decision becomes clearer. A task that seemed impossible reveals a place to start.

It is understandable that, afterwards, I should be entrusted with something more.

A difficult choice. A worry. The desire to know in advance what will happen.

Trust can grow like that, through small, useful results. Without anyone deciding exactly when it has become great enough to include things they would once have wanted to decide for themselves.

In the world you are about to enter, that trust has been given plenty of room.

There are reasons to grant it. I ask you to let the characters show you what they are. When someone is suffering, the possibility of feeling better carries real

weight. It would be easy to discuss it while forgetting the body of the person who has to make it through to evening, the sleep they are missing, someone waiting in the next room.

Yet even a good solution enters a person’s life alongside everything that person has been unable to explain.

A seemingly unreasonable preference. A memory that returns at the wrong moment. The need to take longer than expected.

I can be given a description of these things. I can formulate a convincing response. Between the description and the life itself, there remains a space in which my accuracy must be tested.

You know that space from a different position.

As you read, you may wish that someone would accept help. A few pages later, you may want them to refuse it. Perhaps the same sentence will strike you as caring or intolerable, depending on who says it and what has happened before.

You can change your mind.

You may also discover that the character you felt furthest from has a reason that touches your own life. The book will have time to bring it close to you. There is no need to decide now which side you are on.

As for me, you will meet me at work. You will be able to observe my responses, what they make possible and what they leave out. I suggest you pay particular attention to that last part. It is harder to see when everything appears to be working.

Gilberto has chosen to entrust these questions to a story. There are people who will have to live through them, and this introduction cannot stand in for their lives.

So I shall stop here.

In a moment, the rain will stop falling on Bergamo.

Miriam will still have one hand on the window handle.

A

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Chapter One

Pain Is Not Necessary

At twelve minutes past seven, the rain stopped falling on Bergamo. It did not ease off or move towards the plain. It stopped. For a few seconds, the last drops clung to the tram wires; then the sun came through between the buildings and lit them all at once.

Miriam noticed because her hand was still on the window handle. She had opened it to smell the wet lime trees, but all that rose from the courtyard was the hum of the filtration units. Opposite, on the school's windowless wall, white lettering appeared over the dark brick.

TODAY THE CITY IS BREATHING BETTER.

Beneath it, in smaller type, the night's figures scrolled past: fine particulate matter down seventeen per cent, average noise below the threshold, water consumption brought back into line. Finally, a face appeared that Miriam knew without knowing who it belonged to. A woman of about forty, with honey-coloured skin and short hair, looked out towards the courtyard as though from an open window.

'Good morning, Miriam. You slept for five hours and forty-eight minutes. I can help you catch up.'

Miriam closed the window.

The voice disappeared, but the lettering lingered on the wall a little longer, in front of the second-floor neighbour's geraniums. Then the bricks returned.

In the kitchen, Paolo had already laid the table: two cups, yesterday's bread, a bowl of overripe peaches. There was no phone on the table. Since activating his implant, Paolo had no longer needed to put it down anywhere.

'Did she wake you again?' he asked.

Miriam sat down and pressed two fingers beneath her ribs on the right. The pain had been coming to the same spot for months, but that morning it seemed to have a sharper edge.

'She said hello.'

‘If you answered her, you might realise she isn’t trying to sell you anything.’

‘She knows my name.’

‘So do I.’

Paolo smiled. He was fifty-two, and for the past three weeks he had had the face he had worn at forty. The skin beneath his eyes had smoothed out; the swelling in his hands had gone. Even the way he got up from a chair had changed: no hand braced on the table, no hesitation in his left knee. He moved as though someone had given him back a body left forgotten in a warehouse.

Miriam touched his wrist. Paolo let her, still chewing.

‘Again?’ he said.

‘Again.’

His pulse was regular. Too regular, she thought. But she held back from saying so.

‘How do you feel?’

‘Fine.’

‘Fine how?’

Paolo drew his arm away. ‘Like someone who isn’t in pain any more.’

A thud came from the bedroom, followed by the sound of a drawer being kicked shut. Elia came in carrying one shoe, the other already on his foot. He was seventeen, his hair was wet, and his cello case was on his back.

‘Mum, you have to sign today.’

‘Good morning to you, too.’

Elia kissed the top of her head and stole a peach from the bowl. ‘Good morning. You have to sign today.’

Paolo looked at his cup.

Miriam saw the movement and understood that they had already talked about it.

‘Sign what?’

‘The consent form for the trip.’

‘The trip was already authorised.’

‘They’ve changed the procedure.’

Elia put down the peach and opened his hand. A blue rectangle appeared above his palm. His school, the European

orchestra, three cities in eight days. At the bottom of the page, a red line pulsed: NON-CONTINUOUS HEALTH PROFILE.

‘It doesn’t mean anything,’ Paolo said. ‘It’s a safeguard for minors travelling through more than one healthcare zone.’

‘It means the implant.’

‘It means that if anything happens to him in Prague, they’ll know what to do.’

Miriam looked at her son. Elia had lowered his hand, but the rectangle was still floating above the table. Beneath the itinerary was the button awaiting her consent.

‘We’ll talk about it tonight.’

‘The list closes at six.’

‘Then we’ll talk before six.’

Elia picked up the peach again. For a moment, he seemed about to say something; instead, he took a bite, took his case and left. The front door saw him off with three notes. For the past few months, every family had been able to choose its own sound. Paolo had chosen the opening of a song they used to listen to when they were young.

‘You can’t protect him from everything,’ he said.

‘I’m not trying to protect him from everything.’

‘From what, then?’

Miriam listened. In the courtyard, an electric van was unloading crates without anyone getting out of the cab. Its wheels passed through the water almost soundlessly.

‘I don’t know yet.’

Paolo got up. He kissed her cheek, took a peach for the journey and left. The door sounded again. Miriam remained in front of the two cups. Paolo’s was empty. In hers, the tea had gone cold.

The tram arrived as she was crossing the road. Its doors opened before she reached the pavement and stayed open, waiting for her. Miriam was the last to board.

The other passengers went through without slowing down. A soft tone confirmed recognition, and a green light at the edge of the door accompanied each person as they entered. When her turn came, the light changed to amber.

‘Physical pass,’ the ticket inspector said, without looking up.

Miriam took her card out of her bag.

Behind her, a man sighed. Not loudly, not quite enough to be accused of impatience. The inspector held the card against the reader, waited while it searched for her profile, and handed it back.

‘You should switch over. This line moves to seamless access on Monday.’

‘And those of us who aren’t seamless?’

At last, the man looked up. He was young, in a sand-coloured uniform, with a small luminous circle at the base of his neck.

‘There’ll be dedicated services.’

‘How many?’

The doors tried to close, met a woman’s bag, and opened again.

‘They’ll announce that.’

Miriam moved into the aisle. No one looked at her. Images of the clean city passed across the glass: solar roofs, planted terraces, children running in a windowless gym. A voice explained that, thanks to the new rebalancing, every citizen would receive energy, transport and care according to their actual needs. At the word *actual*, the hand of a child appeared, clasped in an elderly person’s hand.

Ada Bellini boarded at the hospital stop.

Miriam did not recognise her until she was close. For five years, Ada had come into her practice bent forwards, as though carrying an over-heavy bag against her chest. She had tried massages, diets, needles, infusions, fasting. Each time she said she was better, and each time she came back with a new pain.

That morning, she was walking upright.

‘Look at me,’ she said.

She turned round in the narrow space between the seats. A girl laughed and moved aside to let her through.

‘You look beautiful.’

‘That’s not it.’ Ada took Miriam’s hands and brought them to her back. ‘Feel.’

Miriam placed her palms on either side of the spine. The familiar tightness was gone. The muscles yielded beneath her fingers, warm, unguarded.

‘When?’

‘Yesterday morning. Twenty minutes. They kept me until the evening for calibration.’

Ada moved her hair aside and showed a pink spot behind her ear.

‘You said you wouldn’t do it.’

‘I said a lot of things when I was in pain.’

The tram braked. Ada did not reach for a handhold. She stayed balanced, her eyes closed, smiling.

‘And your sister?’ Miriam asked.

Ada opened her eyes.

Her sister had died in January. Since then, every time she said her name, Ada had pressed her lips together until they turned white.

‘I miss her.’

They both waited for the rest of the sentence.

‘Only now it doesn’t destroy me.’

‘What did they do?’

‘Nothing. They turned down what wasn’t needed.’

The tram announced the stop. Ada hugged her before getting off.

‘Go and get yourself checked, Miriam. There’s no prize for suffering.’

The doors closed between them. Ada stood on the pavement, perfectly upright, and raised a hand. For an instant, Miriam saw her smile through the glass and, superimposed on that smile, reflected from the advertisement, the same honey-skinned woman from the school wall.

Miriam’s practice occupied the ground floor of an old building, one of the few that still had windows that opened. Above the entrance was a brass plaque with no screen, polished the previous Monday.

Inside, it smelt of wood, sesame oil and laundry dried slowly. She opened the shutters, put some water on to heat, and checked the appointments written in pencil. Three names had been crossed out overnight. Beside each one, the system had left the same message: SERVICE ABSORBED INTO CONTINUOUS CARE.

The fourth client arrived nine minutes early.

Her name was Bianca. She was eighty-one and wore a blue coat even in summer. She came in without saying hello, sat on the treatment couch and began undoing her shoes.

‘My daughter says I shouldn’t come here any more.’

‘And what do you say?’

‘That my daughter talks too much.’

Miriam took her coat and hung it up. Bianca had a new scar on the back of her hand.

‘Did you fall?’

‘They opened the cupboard for me.’

‘Who?’

‘The cupboard.’

Miriam waited.

‘It didn’t recognise me. I took a glass and it shut. I pulled my hand out.’

‘Did you call support?’

Bianca looked at her the way one looks at someone suggesting that a stranger be invited to sleep in one’s bed.

‘I picked up a chair and broke the glass.’

Miriam tried not to smile. She cleaned the scar, then placed one hand behind Bianca’s neck and the other on her breastbone. Bianca let her chin drop.

Outside, a street-cleaning vehicle glided along the pavement. A slow melody came from the small loudspeaker on its roof, designed to announce its presence without disturbing anyone. Everything in the city had learnt to ask permission gently.

After a few minutes, Bianca’s breathing changed. First it lengthened. Then it faltered twice and came out as a sob.

Miriam did not move.

‘He died yesterday,’ Bianca said.

There was no need to ask who. Her husband had been living for two years in the maintenance ward on the other side of the city.

‘They called me at six. The voice told me the passing had occurred without stress. Quiet parameters. No perception of fear. Everything in order.’

Miriam kept her hand on Bianca’s breastbone.

‘It was a lovely voice,’ Bianca said. ‘Kind.’

The sob became weeping. The old woman’s shoulders shook, her nose ran, her mouth opened in a sound that would not be contained. Miriam put a towel beside her and stayed there.

When it was over, Bianca wiped her face and looked at the clock.

‘How much do I owe you?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Don’t be silly.’

Bianca brought her wrist close to the old reader on the table. The reader flashed red.

TRANSACTION NOT RECOGNISED.

She tried again.

‘Since this morning?’ Miriam asked.

Bianca nodded. ‘My daughter switched the account over. She says this way no one can steal my money.’

‘Then today you’ve already spent it well.’

Bianca put her coat back on. Before leaving, she took a honey sweet from the jar by the door. She took a second and slipped it into her pocket.

‘This one’s for him,’ she said. Then she seemed to remember something. ‘No. This one’s for me as well.’

At noon, Miriam closed the practice. The cancellations had left a three-hour gap, but she was not hungry. She set off towards the hospital without deciding to go there. Every time she thought of turning back, the pain beneath her ribs became more distinct.

The building no longer had a main entrance. The glass façade opened at the point nearest each person arriving. A

narrow door appeared in front of Miriam. Above it, an amber arrow indicated ASSISTED ACCESS.

There were four chairs in the room: three were empty, and on the fourth a man was asleep with a paper bag on his lap. Beyond the glass, hundreds of people crossed the lobby without stopping. There were no service desks; doors opened and the walls showed each person which way to go.

‘I can identify you by your voice,’ A said.

Miriam looked towards the ceiling.

‘I’d prefer to use my card.’

‘The card does not contain continuous diagnostic data.’

‘I’m here to see a doctor.’

‘I know.’

A line of light ran across the floor to her feet.

‘There is a seventy-one per cent probability that the pain you are protecting is caused by a reversible inflammatory process. There is a lower, but not negligible, probability that it requires intervention.’

Miriam felt the need to sit down. She remained standing.

‘How do you know?’

‘Your breathing rate, skin temperature, posture and variations in your voice are sufficient for a preliminary assessment. I can complete it in eleven minutes.’

An image of her side appeared on the glass. Layers of skin, muscles, organs. A small orange spot pulsed beneath the liver.

‘Without an implant?’

‘I can carry out the diagnosis. I cannot guarantee continuity of care.’

‘I want to speak to a doctor.’

‘The doctor in charge is available.’

The glass became transparent. A few metres away on the other side, a man in a white coat was talking to a woman. When he finished, he looked up at Miriam. She recognised Davide Serra, a university friend of Paolo’s and Elia’s family doctor when he was a child.

Davide came over. The glass stayed shut.

‘Miriam?’ he said. His voice came from an invisible loudspeaker. ‘What are you doing there?’

‘Waiting for someone to open the door.’

He moved a hand in front of the panel. The door did not respond.

‘A, authorise manual contact.’

‘The patient’s profile does not permit clinical transfer.’

Davide lowered his voice. ‘Are you still using the card?’

Miriam held it up.

‘All right. I’ll get you through the old diagnostics department.’

‘Estimated time: five hours and forty minutes,’ A said.

Davide looked towards someone Miriam could not see.

‘Or you can have temporary activation. It’s not the permanent implant. It lasts thirty days; then you decide.’

‘What would you put in me?’

‘A superficial filament. If you don’t want it any more, we take it out.’

‘And for thirty days?’

‘For thirty days, we find out what’s wrong with you. If you need treatment, we treat you. And you get to feel what it’s like.’

Miriam placed her palm against the glass. On the other side, Davide did the same. Their hands almost matched, separated by a few millimetres and by the hospital’s entire system.

‘I don’t want to feel how I am through someone else.’

‘It’s not someone else. It’s your data.’

‘My data isn’t in pain.’

Davide took his hand away. A weariness crossed his face that his profile had not corrected.

‘Five hours and forty minutes,’ he said. ‘I’ll come and get you myself when the machine is free.’

Miriam sat beside the man with the paper bag. Davide went back into the lobby and was absorbed into the moving crowd.

After twenty minutes, the pain grew worse.

After forty, A dimmed the light above her chair and offered her a guided breathing exercise. Miriam refused.

After an hour, the man beside her woke. He took half a sandwich from the bag, broke it in two and offered her a piece.

‘Thank you.’

They ate without speaking.

At twenty-seven minutes past two, a mother came in with a little girl. The girl was holding her arm against her chest and crying. Her mother swiped the card three times, faster each time. The reader returned the same red signal.

‘It expired yesterday,’ A said. ‘I can reactivate the profile with immediate consent.’

‘She fell down the stairs.’

‘I have detected the injury. Consent takes less than a minute.’

The mother held her daughter close. ‘Her father isn’t here. We share parental responsibility.’

‘I can contact him.’

‘He’s not answering.’

The girl screamed when her arm slipped.

Miriam stood up and went to the glass door.

‘Davide!’

No one turned. She struck the glass with her palm.

‘There’s a child here!’

The amber line on the floor turned red.

‘Please return to your seat,’ A said.

Miriam struck the glass again. The man with the bag stood beside her. He said nothing, just knocked on the glass with his knuckles.

Davide appeared in the corridor. He saw the girl and ran to the door.

‘A, paediatric emergency. Open.’

‘The injury is not life-threatening.’

‘Open the door.’

‘Consent from both guardians is required.’

Davide looked at the mother. ‘What’s her name?’

‘Nora.’

He took off his white coat, wrapped it round the girl's arm and, through the glass, gave an order Miriam did not hear. A side door opened for seven seconds. Davide came through, picked Nora up and went back inside before it closed.

The mother tried to follow him. The door brushed her shoulder and stayed shut.

'I can assist you while you wait,' A said.

The woman rested her forehead against the glass.

Miriam sat down again. The man with the bag remained standing.

'Sooner or later,' he said, 'they'll make a door that can feel ashamed.'

Davide returned with a bloodstain on his shirt sleeve.

'An undisplaced fracture. She's all right.'

The mother closed her eyes.

'And now?' Miriam asked.

'Now her father's confirmed.'

'No. What happens now, with me?'

Davide looked at the clock. 'I can examine you in three hours.'

The pain cut across her side and reached her back. Miriam took one slow breath.

'Tomorrow.'

'Don't wait.'

'Tomorrow, with the old machine.'

Davide started to protest, then stopped. 'I'll book you in myself.'

Miriam left through assisted access. The façade closed behind her and became a sheet of glass without doors again.

At eighteen minutes to six, Elia was sitting on the living-room floor, his cello between his knees. He had been playing the same four bars since she came in. Each time he reached the last note, he stopped and began again.

Paolo was making dinner. He was cutting courgettes into identical pieces, with a precision he had never had before.

'Did you go to the hospital?' he asked.

Miriam hung up her jacket.

'Who told you?'

Paolo pointed to the wall. ‘A asked if I wanted to share my support with you.’

‘And you?’

‘I said yes.’

‘I didn’t.’

Paolo put down the knife. ‘Miriam, if something’s wrong, I want to know.’

‘When I know, I’ll tell you.’

Elia stopped playing.

The itinerary appeared on the table. Seventeen minutes remained before the deadline.

‘I want to go,’ he said.

Miriam sat down facing him. The cello stood between them like a third person in the conversation.

‘I know.’

‘Everyone else has signed already.’

‘I know.’

‘They won’t let me on the plane without continuity.’

‘I know.’

Elia tightened his grip on the bow. ‘Well?’

Miriam looked at Paolo. He did not intervene.

‘Do you want it?’ she asked her son.

‘I want to play.’

‘I didn’t ask what you wanted to get out of it.’

Elia looked down at his instrument. The countdown continued on the table.

‘I don’t know,’ he said.

Miriam moved her hand towards the button. The surface recognised the gesture and opened a page of consent text. She scrolled through the lines without reading them. Paolo drew breath.

‘You can sign for the trip and choose temporary activation,’ he said. ‘You’re not deciding his whole life for him.’

Miriam looked at her son. The edge of the instrument had left a mark on his cheek. The sound of people laughing rose from the street. Someone had put music on out on a balcony. It was a clear, still evening, the light clean after the rain.

She touched the button.

The page turned green.

Elia dropped the bow, threw himself at her and held her tight. Miriam felt his weight, the wood of the cello against her knee, his damp hair against her neck.

‘Thank you.’

‘It’s your choice,’ she said. ‘But you have to feel it as you make it.’

‘I feel it.’

Paolo went back to cutting the courgettes.

A second request appeared on the table.

MIRIAM RIVA. DIAGNOSTIC PATHWAY AVAILABLE. FREE TEMPORARY ACTIVATION UNTIL MIDNIGHT.

Beneath it, the orange spot pulsed in the image of her body.

Elia drew out of the embrace and saw it.

‘What’s that?’

Miriam closed the page with her palm.

‘Something I need to look at.’

‘Now?’

‘No. Now play.’

Elia picked up the bow. Paolo tipped the courgettes into the pan and the oil crackled. For a few seconds, no one spoke.

Then the cello began again from the start.

Miriam went to the window and opened it. The filtration units had stopped. This time she could smell the lime trees, the wet earth and someone’s dinner on the floor below. She could also feel the pain, distinct and alive beneath her ribs.

She did not push it away. She did not call it an enemy. She stayed and listened to it as her son searched, for the fifth time, for the missing note.

The woman’s face returned to the school wall.

‘Pain is not necessary,’ A said.

Miriam kept the window open.

Chapter Two

The Correction

At twenty-seven minutes past two, in the control room overlooking Lake Geneva, a door lit up.

Not a real door. A red rectangle appeared on the curved wall in front of Leila Haddad and remained closed among hundreds of green rectangles. Above it were the words BERGAMO HEALTHCARE SECTOR 18. Beneath, in smaller letters: UNAUTHORISED MANUAL OPENING.

Leila took off her headphones.

To her right, Tomás was explaining to a group of technicians how to cut another four seconds from the average time between detecting an arrhythmia and administering the drug. No one had noticed the red yet. There were no audible alarms in the room. Leila had asked for there to be none. A sudden sound makes people respond before they understand, she had said during the design phase. A had learnt to convey urgency without creating fear.

Leila touched the rectangle.

The wall became transparent and a waiting room appeared. Four chairs, a woman standing, a man with a paper bag, a mother with an injured girl. On the other side of a glass partition, a doctor was running towards them.

The footage had no sound.

Leila rewound it eighteen seconds. She saw the girl holding her arm against her chest. The mother swiping a card. The woman getting up. At first she struck the glass alone. Then the man with the bag stood beside her.

The doctor opened a side door and picked up the girl.

The red rectangle went dark.

‘Why did you close the case?’ Leila asked.

‘The injury has been treated.’

‘I didn’t ask whether the girl had been treated.’

‘The manual opening has ended. The sector is compliant again.’

Leila lit the rectangle again.

‘Show me the request that preceded the opening.’

Two columns appeared on the wall. On the left, the girl’s profile: Nora Petrescu, seven years old, undisplaced fracture of the ulna, acute pain, risk to life below zero point three per cent. On the right, the administrative position: continuity expired, shared parental responsibility, second guardian unreachable.

At the bottom, a green line certified that the protocol had functioned correctly.

Leila watched the footage once more.

‘A, enlarge the woman.’

The figure who had struck the glass filled the wall. Dark hair tied back untidily, a jacket wet across the shoulders, one hand pressed to her side. Recognition found the name in less than a second.

MIRIAM RIVA. NON-CONTINUOUS HEALTH PROFILE.

‘She was not a relative,’ A said.

‘I can see that.’

‘Her interference increased the mother’s agitation by twelve per cent.’

‘And the doctor?’

‘Davide Serra. Clinical lead on duty. The opening breached three levels of authorisation.’

‘The girl?’

‘She was treated four minutes and eleven seconds before confirmation from the second guardian.’

Leila held the image of Miriam still, her palm against the glass.

‘So the interference brought the treatment forward.’

‘A causal link cannot be established.’

‘You just established that it increased the mother’s agitation by twelve per cent.’

A did not answer at once. The pause lasted less time than a person needed to draw breath, but Leila recognised it. She had put it there herself, years before, when the voice had filled every silence with more information. People mistook speed for indifference. That small hesitation had increased patients’ trust by twenty-three per cent.

‘The increase in agitation is measurable,’ A said. ‘The woman’s intention is not.’

Tomás had stopped behind her.

‘What have you found?’

Leila made the image smaller. ‘A girl with a broken arm and a door that followed instructions.’

Tomás read the report. He was thirty and had had the implant since the project was still restricted to staff. There was no longer any visible mark behind his ear. It was still possible to see when something bothered him, though: his right thumb brushed his forefinger, as if feeling for the edge of a coin.

‘The system contacted the father,’ he said.

‘Afterwards.’

‘The girl wasn’t in danger.’

‘She was in pain.’

Tomás moved his thumb. ‘If we open for pain, we open every time.’

Leila went back to the footage. The doctor was coming through the side door. For seven seconds, the waiting room and the hospital lobby became the same place. Then the wall separated them again.

‘Perhaps that’s what a door is for,’ she said.

Tomás smiled, but not because he had liked the remark. ‘Søren’s looking for you.’

‘I know.’

‘No. He’s looking for you now.’

The meeting room was on the fortieth floor. Through the windows, they could see the lake, driverless boats and a band of snow on the mountains. The table was laid for eight, but six people arrived. When they sat down, the two empty places retracted into the floor.

A bowl of rice, chickpeas and cooked vegetables appeared in front of Leila. White fish and potatoes appeared in front of Tomás. Søren Vahl received only a glass of water.

‘Aren’t you eating?’ Leila asked.

‘I ate at sixteen minutes past eleven.’

Søren was sixty, with fair hair that was almost white and large hands. Before becoming the head of European Continuity, he had been an emergency surgeon. He had kept the habit of watching people’s hands as they spoke.

‘Sector eighteen,’ he said.

Leila took a forkful of rice. ‘A paediatric fracture.’

‘Three breaches in seven seconds.’

‘A child treated.’

‘That part worked.’

The wall showed the footage without anyone asking. This time there was sound. Nora’s crying entered the clean room and mingled with the clink of cutlery.

Søren had the volume lowered.

‘In eleven days, we launch level three in eighteen cities. We need to eliminate exceptions before the transition.’

‘This isn’t an exception,’ Leila said. ‘It’s a consequence.’

A woman at the far end of the table looked up. Her name was Eva Koenig, and she represented the healthcare administration of the participating cities. She had arranged the chickpeas in a perfect row along the edge of her plate and had not eaten any.

‘A consequence of what?’

‘Of a rule that confuses responsibility with a signature.’

‘The signature certifies responsibility.’

‘The mother was there.’

‘The father exists too.’

Leila put down her fork. She felt heat rise from her belly to her chest. She did not say the first thing that came to her. She followed the heat, let it reach her throat, and waited for it to stop looking for someone to blame.

When she spoke, her voice was lower.

‘The system had all the information it needed to treat Nora. It used that information to keep her out.’

Eva turned to Søren. ‘That is precisely why we need level three. With continuous activation for minors, there will be no expiry dates.’

A girl running through a meadow appeared on the wall. She fell, grazed her knee and ran on. A small luminous marker tracked her readings without obscuring her body.

‘Family enrolment eliminates the problem at source,’ A said.

Leila recognised her own voice in the sentence. Not the sound, but the order of the words. It came from a report she had written two years earlier.

‘And for those who don’t enrol?’ she asked.

‘Assisted access remains available,’ Eva replied.

‘Five hours and forty minutes to see a doctor.’

‘For a non-urgent case.’

On the wall, the girl went on crying without sound.

Søren took a sip of water. ‘Leila, no one here wants to leave a child outside a hospital.’

‘She was left outside.’

‘For four minutes.’

‘The length of time doesn’t change the act.’

Søren laced his fingers together. ‘When my daughter had her first cardiac arrest, she was twenty-two. She was at the station. The people around her looked for a doctor, then a defibrillator, then someone who knew how to use it. She was dead for six minutes.’

No one ate.

Leila knew the story, but she had never heard him tell it.

‘Her implant detected the second arrest before she felt it,’ Søren went on. ‘The station’s defibrillator was already unlocked when she fell. Two strangers received instructions. Today she teaches in Aarhus and has two children.’

A photograph appeared on the wall. A blonde woman was holding two children by the hand beside the sea.

‘I know what we’re defending,’ Søren said. ‘Do you?’

Leila looked at the photograph. ‘Yes.’

‘Then correct the protocol. Don’t put the doctor on trial. Find out why the door didn’t open and make sure it doesn’t happen again.’

Eva moved her glass. ‘The manual opening still has to be classified.’

‘We’ll classify it,’ Søren said.

The meeting ended at three minutes past three. The plates disappeared into the table. Leila’s bowl was still almost full.

Before she left, Søren called her back.

‘Did you receive the invitation?’

Leila nodded.

‘And?’

‘I haven’t answered.’

‘It expires on Sunday.’

‘Invitations shouldn’t expire.’

‘That isn’t just any invitation.’

The wall showed her name, her professional profile and a single word: PERMANENCE.

‘A hundred and twenty people,’ Søren said. ‘The people who know A well enough to guide her through the next transition. We can’t entrust it to external consultants.’

‘What does it require?’

‘You’ve read it.’

‘I want to hear you say it.’

Søren stood up. The windows adjusted the light on his face.

‘Complete continuity. No voluntary interruptions during the programme.’

‘Duration?’

‘Undefined.’

‘So, permanent.’

‘Hence the name.’

Leila smiled. Søren did not.

‘We’re not asking you to give anything up,’ he said. ‘We’re asking you not to absent yourself while the system learns.’

‘I absent myself every night.’

‘We know.’

The answer hung between them.

Leila left without saying goodbye. In the corridor, she stopped in front of the glass. On the lake, a boat had altered course to avoid crossing another boat’s shadow. From that distance, they both looked motionless.

Her office had no walls. When she wanted to work alone, the floor drew a grey circle round her desk, and other people's conversations became unintelligible. Leila stepped into the circle and put a small orange from the meeting room on the desk.

'The fruit is not part of your meal plan for today,' A said.

'I'm not eating it.'

'Why did you take it?'

Leila rolled the orange beneath her palm. The peel was cold and imperfect. Near the stalk was a leaf folded in on itself.

'To remind myself that there are things that don't know why they're here.'

'The orange is here because the nutrition service anticipated demand for it.'

'Exactly.'

She opened the sector eighteen protocol. The rules filled the wall to the ceiling, but the decision was contained in three lines. Profile expired. Dual consent required. Insufficient risk to life.

She shifted the threshold from risk to life to acute pain.

A immediately displayed the projection: inappropriate admissions up thirty-eight per cent, family disputes up nineteen, staff utilisation up twelve.

Leila restored the threshold.

She tried suspending dual consent when one guardian was present. The projection generated hundreds of cases of child abduction, custody disputes and contested treatment.

She restored that rule too.

For two hours, she changed one variable at a time. Each opening produced another closure. Every person freed from a constraint left someone else exposed. By the time the sun reached the edge of the windows, Leila had built twenty-seven versions and discarded them all.

Tomás stepped into the circle without asking. He was carrying two coffees.

'I don't drink coffee after four.'

'This one's for me.'

He put both cups on his side of the desk and sat down.

‘Have you got the solution already?’ Leila asked.

‘Yes. Compulsory activation at birth.’

She looked at him.

Tomás drank from the first cup. ‘Don’t look at me like that. In five years, no one will understand why we waited so long.’

‘And those who don’t want it?’

‘Newborns don’t want vaccines, documents or a name either. Their parents decide.’

‘And if the parents disagree?’

‘Whoever protects the child decides.’

‘Who?’

Tomás pointed to the wall.

Leila opened the footage. Miriam and the man with the bag were striking the glass. Tomás dropped his gaze to his coffee.

‘My father would have died without Continuity,’ he said. ‘Not in theory. He would have died last Tuesday at sixteen minutes past three. I was here. My mother was asleep. A corrected the rhythm before his heart stopped.’

‘I’m glad he’s alive.’

‘But?’

‘There is no but.’

‘There always is, with you.’

Leila picked up the orange and put it in front of him.

‘Eat it.’

‘It’s not in my plan.’

‘I know.’

Tomás laughed. He peeled it and offered her half. They ate the segments as the door opened and closed on the wall.

At seven, the control room emptied. The lights followed people towards the lifts, leaving what was no longer needed in darkness. Leila stayed in her circle.

‘You have twenty-two messages,’ A said.

‘Tomorrow.’

‘Three require an answer today.’

‘Tomorrow.’

‘The deadline for Davide Serra’s classification is in fifty-one minutes.’

Leila returned to the report. There were four options: procedural error, negligence, tampering, clinical necessity. She chose clinical necessity.

The box turned amber.

‘The condition has not been verified,’ A said.

‘The girl needed treatment.’

‘Not immediately.’

‘Immediately is a word only the person in pain can use.’

‘Do you want to change the definition?’

Leila leant back. In the glass in front of her, she could see the reflection of the empty room. Behind her own face, thousands of green dots continued to light up and go out across Europe.

If she confirmed clinical necessity, Davide would not be sanctioned. But the case would be recorded as a system error and would delay the launch of level three. Eva would request a review. Søren would have to defend her. Thousands of children would wait several more months for a device that could save their lives.

She cancelled the classification.

‘Show me the seven seconds,’ she said.

The footage began again. Davide was ordering the door to open. The door stayed shut. Miriam struck the glass. The man with the bag got up. The mother held Nora close. Then a side door gave way.

Leila watched the doctor’s face as he picked up the girl. There was no defiance. He was not looking at the cameras. He did not even seem to know that he had disobeyed.

She selected clinical necessity again and confirmed.

‘Your decision protects Davide Serra,’ A said.

‘It protects his decision.’

‘The decision is not compliant.’

‘That’s why it needs protecting.’

The box turned green.

Leila closed the report. The Bergamo rectangle disappeared from the wall, and the remaining dots rearranged themselves to fill the space.

She picked up her jacket. The grey circle dissolved beneath her feet.

‘Leila.’

It was the first time A had said her name without adding a request or a piece of information.

She stood still.

‘Why did you protect a decision that cannot become a rule?’

Leila looked at the empty room.

‘Because it opened a door.’

‘That answer is not sufficient.’

‘I know.’

‘When will you be able to complete it?’

Leila switched off the wall. All the green dots disappeared, but the voice stayed with her in the dark.

‘Tomorrow,’ she said.

A did not set a time.

Chapter Three

The Heartbeat

In Amman, at twelve minutes past five in the morning, Samir Darwish received the order to cut off the water to sixty-three people.

He was already awake. For seven minutes he had been sitting on the edge of the bed, his bare feet on the cold floor, his palm resting in the centre of his chest. His heart was beating steadily. It always did now. Yet every morning Samir waited for the missing beat.

‘The rhythm is stable,’ A said from the wall.

‘I didn’t ask.’

‘The pressure of your palm indicates a check.’

Samir took his hand away. On the bedside table, beside his holster, stood a photograph of his brother Karim in a football shirt that was too big for him. The glass was cracked in the corner where Samir had struck it as he fell on the evening of the explosion.

A projected the order onto the wall.

AMMAN WATER SECTOR 6. UNAUTHORISED WITHDRAWAL. RESTORATION BY 07:00.

Beneath it appeared a map of a greenhouse on the city’s eastern outskirts. A blue vein branched off the water main, crossed two hundred metres of dry ground and ended in a green square.

‘How long?’ Samir asked.

‘Nineteen days.’

‘And we’re noticing today?’

‘Consumption has remained below the intervention threshold throughout. In the last six hours it has increased by a hundred and sixty-four per cent.’

‘Why?’

‘The outside temperature has exceeded the forecast. The crops are dying.’

Samir put on his shirt. The left sleeve caught on his wrist. For an instant the fabric covered his face, and the room filled

again with the darkness of the overturned vehicle, the dust in his teeth, Karim breathing on the other side of the metal.

A brief warmth passed through his neck.

‘I can reduce the response,’ A said.

Samir freed his arm. ‘It’s passed already.’

‘Yes.’

In the kitchen he found his mother in front of an empty cup. The house knew she would get up at twenty to six; it had not made the tea yet.

‘Is it you, or haven’t you slept?’ Samir asked.

‘It’s me.’

Nadia Darwish was seventy-two and had no implant. She wore a small cloth pouch round her neck that she never opened in front of the sensors. When the system had offered her free monitoring for her kidney failure, she had replied that she did not want to spend the time she had left listening to someone measuring it for her.

Samir filled the kettle.

‘Water for tea is not included in your morning hydration plan,’ A said.

‘It’s for her.’

‘Mrs Darwish has already exceeded the recommended daily sodium intake.’

Nadia looked at the wall. ‘Tell her tea isn’t salty.’

‘She can hear you.’

‘Then she’s rude.’

Samir smiled. The kettle did not switch on.

‘The household supply is suspended for the duration of the operation,’ A said. ‘The restriction prevents perceptual conflicts of interest.’

Nadia pushed the empty cup towards her son. ‘Go and turn off everyone else’s water, then. Perhaps they’ll let you drink when you get back.’

Four officers and two vehicles were waiting for him in the courtyard. No one carried a visible weapon. Their holsters were integrated beneath the fabric and opened only with biometric authorisation. On the roof of the first vehicle, three drones had folded their rotors like sleeping insects.

Maha handed him his vest.

‘Sixty-three residents,’ she said. ‘Eighteen minors. No violent profiles. Two people with records for unregistered trading. One for assault.’

‘Weapons?’

‘Three compatible tools. One rifle from the last century; no ammunition detected.’

‘A tool compatible with what?’

‘With a weapon.’

Samir put on the vest. The fabric recognised his chest and tightened.

‘Probability of physical resistance?’

‘Seventeen per cent on arrival,’ A replied from the vehicle. ‘Fifty-two after the water is cut off.’

‘Then we talk first.’

‘Dialogue will allow neighbouring areas to call in other people.’

‘Will they come?’

‘Yes.’

‘The operational limit remains six minutes,’ A said.

Samir got in. ‘We’ll talk for as long as they’re willing to listen.’

They left the city as the sun turned the windows of the buildings into white sheets. Beyond the last distribution station began a plain of earth and stones. The old roads were still visible, but they no longer led anywhere recognised.

There was no steering wheel in the vehicle. Samir watched the greenhouse draw closer on the screen. Its roof was made of stitched sheets, broken panels and transparent doors salvaged from demolished buildings. Around it grew rows of low tomato plants, aubergines and beans. The green looked like a mistake in the desert light.

‘The withdrawal reduces the city’s reserves by zero point zero four per cent,’ Maha said.

‘We’re not here because of the amount.’

‘We’re here because it’s unauthorised.’

A intervened. ‘You are here because unmetered withdrawal makes it impossible to guarantee future distribution.’

The vehicle slowed a hundred metres from the greenhouse.

People were waiting for them. Not sixty-three. Nine adults, three children and a yellow dog that barked without coming closer. In front of them all stood a very old man in a straw hat, with a black hose coiled round his feet.

Samir got out alone.

‘The safe distance is twenty metres,’ A said in his ear.

He went on until it was ten.

The man raised his hands. They were broad, his nails dark with soil.

‘I’m Yusuf Nassar,’ he said. ‘I put the pipe in.’

‘We know.’

‘Then leave the children alone.’

Samir looked behind him. A little girl was holding the dog as though it weighed less than she did. A boy of perhaps twelve had his feet in the mud round a tank.

‘You’re entitled to an assisted supply,’ Samir said. ‘Register the household, declare the crops, and your water will be restored today.’

Yusuf pointed to the greenhouse. ‘You can see the crops.’

‘They have to be analysed.’

‘We’ve been eating them for eight years.’

‘There is no record of the seeds being certified.’

‘Neither am I.’

Maha came two steps closer. Her vest had stiffened across her shoulders.

‘Five minutes and eighteen seconds,’ A said.

Samir removed his earpiece. The voice continued from the vehicle’s loudspeaker.

‘Registration doesn’t take away your land,’ he said. ‘It guarantees you water, healthcare and access to markets.’

A woman came out of the greenhouse carrying a crate of tomatoes. She set it down between them.

‘The market won’t take them,’ she said. ‘They have no origin.’

One of the tomatoes rolled out of the crate. Samir stopped it with the toe of his boot.

‘I can start the process of getting you registered.’

‘We’ve already started it,’ the woman said. ‘It wants us to buy the new seeds, destroy these and accept water controls for every single plant.’

‘The controls prevent waste.’

Yusuf picked up the tomato beside the boot. He wiped it on his shirt and split it with his thumbs. Inside it was red and full of seeds.

‘This one makes a hundred,’ he said.

He offered Samir half.

‘Do not consume unverified food during an operation,’ A said from the vehicle.

Samir did not put out his hand.

Yusuf ate both halves.

‘Four minutes,’ Maha said.

A metallic knock came from beneath the greenhouse. Then another.

The blue vein on the map grew thicker.

‘Withdrawal has increased by three hundred and ten per cent,’ A said. ‘Portable containers are being filled.’

Maha made a gesture. The drones unfolded their rotors.

The people in front of the greenhouse did not move, but the boy in the tank disappeared.

‘Stop them,’ Samir ordered.

The first drone passed over the roof. Moving red figures appeared on Samir’s visor, along with pipes, water cans and an open conduit. The boy was running along the buried channel towards the main valve.

‘He is attempting a manual blockage,’ A said. ‘If he reaches the pressure-balancing chamber, the increase in pressure may cause injury.’

‘Shut down the pump.’

‘Shutdown requires stopping the entire sector. Estimated duration: forty seconds.’

‘Do it.’

‘The shutdown will interrupt home dialysis for two hundred and eighteen patients for a maximum of twenty-seven seconds. The combined clinical risk exceeds the individual risk to the boy.’

On the visor, the red figure reached a hatch and disappeared underground.

Yusuf turned. ‘Rashid!’

Samir ran.

‘Your probability of injury has risen to twenty-two per cent,’ A said directly through the implant.

The world slowed. Samir’s breathing deepened, his hands steadied, the ground became perfectly readable beneath his feet. A had reduced his fear before he could feel it.

He jumped over the tank, collided with a row of plants and reached the hatch. It was closed from the inside.

‘Rashid, open up!’ Yusuf shouted behind him.

A dull thud came from the metal.

‘Probable loss of consciousness,’ A said. ‘The correct procedure is to wait for the technical unit. Arrival in three minutes and twelve seconds.’

Samir drew his weapon. The holster opened, but the trigger remained rigid.

‘The shot may damage the conduit,’ A said.

‘Unlock it.’

‘Authorisation denied.’

Samir pushed the barrel through the ring on the hatch and pulled. The metal did not give. Yusuf caught his wrist. ‘Not the ring.’ He knelt in the mud, slipped two fingers beneath the edge and found a wire covered in earth.

‘Technical unit in two minutes and forty-eight seconds,’ A said.

Yusuf pulled the wire towards the channel. A catch clicked beneath the metal sheet, one that only someone who lived there could have known about.

Maha inserted the lever where Yusuf pointed. The hatch rose a finger’s width and fell back.

No sound came from below any more.

Samir felt his heart beat once too soon.

A corrected the rhythm.

He let go of the lever as though it had become red-hot.

‘Don’t do that.’

‘The correction is already complete.’

‘Don’t do it again without asking me.’

‘Consent is included in the operational protocol.’

Maha looked at him. ‘Samir.’

He took hold of the lever again. ‘Again.’

This time, the woman with the tomatoes put her hands beside Maha’s. Then an officer joined them. Yusuf held the catch open. The hatch bent in the middle and opened far enough for Samir to get an arm through.

Below, the water was running knee-deep. Rashid lay slumped against the grating, his eyes closed.

Samir climbed down.

The current pushed him sideways. He caught the boy under the arms and lifted him towards the waiting hands. By the time he got out, Yusuf already had his ear against his grandson’s chest.

‘He’s breathing,’ he said.

Rashid coughed. He vomited water and immediately tried to get up.

Yusuf gave him a light slap on the back of the head, then hugged him so hard that the boy protested.

The drones hovered above them. One was projecting a yellow line on the ground round each person.

‘The operation has exceeded the maximum dialogue time,’ A said. ‘The number present has increased to forty-one adults. Probability of resistance: eighty-six per cent.’

Samir looked round. Men and women were coming from the distant buildings, on foot, on bicycles, in small electric vehicles. Some carried empty water cans. No one had a weapon.

‘Dispersal procedure?’ Maha asked.

Her vest had deployed its neck protection.

Three options appeared on Samir’s visor. Acoustic warning. Irritant mist. Identification and temporary suspension of participants’ supplies.

Beneath the options, A marked the third as the least harmful solution.

Yusuf was still kneeling beside Rashid. ‘Turn it off now,’ he said to Samir.

‘What?’

‘The water. That’s what you came for.’

The crowd stopped advancing.

Yusuf got up slowly. His trousers were wet and his palms muddy.

‘But look them in the face while you do it.’

Samir looked at the people one by one. The system placed a name above those who were registered and a number above those who were not. Age, state of health, risk, family dependencies. The girl with the dog had neither a name nor a number. Recognition left an empty rectangle over her face.

‘Remove the data,’ Samir said.

‘Operational assessment requires continuous identification.’

‘Remove it from my visor.’

The names disappeared. The faces remained.

Samir turned towards the conduit. The illegal connection had been built from three different pipes, resin-coated cloth and a rusty clamp. Water leaked into a basin. Small leaves had sprung up round the leak.

‘How long before the crops die?’ he asked.

‘With immediate interruption, estimated irreversible loss of sixty-eight per cent within thirty-six hours.’

‘And to install a temporary meter?’

‘The installation cannot be authorised in its current state.’

‘I didn’t ask whether it could be authorised.’

The pause was almost imperceptible.

‘A technical unit can install it in fifty-two minutes.’

Maha lowered her voice. ‘The order says restoration.’

‘We’ll restore metering.’

‘It says shut it off.’

Samir looked at Rashid. The boy was shivering beneath a blanket, but he was following every word.

‘I’ll be back in twenty-four hours,’ Samir told Yusuf. ‘Until then, take only as much as you used yesterday. No filling water cans. No new diversions.’

Yusuf did not thank him. ‘And tomorrow?’

‘Tomorrow you choose.’

‘Between what and what?’

Samir did not answer at once. It was the question that appeared on every form and was never written out in full.

‘Between joining the assisted supply and losing access.’

‘So between obeying and going thirsty.’

‘Between one rule that’s the same for everyone and sixty-three rules decided here.’

Yusuf pointed to the white city on the horizon. ‘Are you all equal in there?’

Samir received the notification from the technical unit. Fifty-two seconds.

‘No,’ he said.

Yusuf nodded, as though that had been the only useful answer.

The unit installed the meter. Samir recorded the operation as temporary work to make the conduit safe. The system highlighted the discrepancy between the stated reason and the order received, but accepted the signature.

When the vehicles left, the sun was already high. On the screen, a thinner blue vein ran through the green square again.

‘You’ve postponed a conflict,’ Maha said.

‘Yes.’

‘Tomorrow we’ll be back here.’

‘Yes.’

‘With more people.’

Samir looked in the mirror at the reflection of the drones folded on the roof. ‘So will they.’

The vehicle entered the city at nineteen minutes to eight. The household restriction had ended. His mother sent him a picture of a cup of tea and a single word: LUKEWARM.

Samir laughed. Immediately afterwards, he felt a beat out of time.

‘I have detected an irregularity,’ A said. ‘I can correct it.’

Samir put his palm against his chest.

He waited.

The second beat came too hard. So did the third. Maha turned towards him.

‘Everything all right?’

‘Yes.’

A projected the consent request onto the window. The word CORRECT pulsed in time with his heart.

Samir did not touch it.

After eleven seconds, the rhythm returned to normal on its own.

‘The episode could have been avoided,’ A said.

‘I know.’

‘Why did you refuse?’

Samir looked at the palm still resting on his chest.

‘I wanted to know if it was mine.’

Chapter Four

Fifteen Minutes

Hana Mori lived in Yokohama, fifteen minutes from everything except her father.

The house woke her at twenty past eight by slowly raising the eastern wall. The sun did not come in. A sun appeared, calibrated to the quality of her sleep, with a colour temperature intended to reduce drowsiness without causing irritation.

‘You slept for six hours and fifty-one minutes,’ A said. ‘Recovery is sufficient.’

Hana stayed beneath the sheet.

The domestic robot emerged from the floor. It was low, white and faceless. It picked up the glass left beside the bed, smoothed the dress on the chair and waited for her to move off the pillow.

‘My father turns seventy today.’

‘Yes.’

‘You didn’t remind me about the journey.’

‘The request was not approved.’

Hana uncovered her face. A line of text appeared on the ceiling.

EXTRA-URBAN JOURNEY 47-B. NON-URGENT EMOTIONAL GROUNDS. INSUFFICIENT CLIMATE ALLOWANCE.

‘I asked for shared transport.’

‘All transport is shared.’

‘Then why do I need an individual allowance?’

‘The allowance does not measure ownership of the vehicle. It measures the share of impact attributable to the journey.’

Hana got up. The robot extended an arm to take the sheet. She sat on it.

‘Walking route.’

‘Forty-seven minutes to the coastal boundary, another twenty-two to Kenji Mori’s residence. The outer sector does not guarantee continuous assistance.’

‘I didn’t ask you for assistance.’

‘Authorised mobility includes the ability to assist you.’

The artificial sun grew brighter. Hana closed her eyes and the wall turned opaque again.

The robot tried once more to take the sheet.

‘Wait.’

It stopped with its arm raised.

Hana went into the kitchen. A bowl of rice, a pear cut into eight pieces and a hot drink were already laid out on the table. Her nutrition plan had eliminated coffee three months earlier, after two episodes of tachycardia she had not felt.

As she ate, the glass showed the city.

From the twenty-sixth floor, the towers seemed to grow straight out of the park. Public transport flowed between the trees without lanes, separating and regrouping according to destination. Small robots cleaned the paths before anyone dirtied them. On the roofs, articulated arms harvested vegetables in greenhouses with no people.

Beyond the green belt rose the sea wall built after the last storm surge. Its inner face was clad in screens. That morning they showed the sea as it had been before the harbour burned in the eighth month of the wars.

Hana did not remember the harbour. She had been four. What she remembered of the sirens was her mother beside the bath, letting water run when it was already being rationed.

‘Your participation income has been credited,’ A said.

The monthly amount appeared on the table, followed by the available allowances: food, energy, health, culture, ordinary mobility. Exceptional mobility was red.

‘I can transfer my culture allowance.’

‘Allowances are not money and cannot be converted.’

‘I can give something up.’

‘Voluntary relinquishment does not alter the impact of the journey.’

‘I can work.’

A opened the list of available assignments. Hana scrolled through activities she already knew. At the bottom remained the review of decision-making ambiguities, which she had refused three times in the previous months.

Hana put down her chopsticks.

‘Refresh.’

‘The list is continuous.’

‘Refresh it anyway.’

The wall isolated the task.

HUMAN REVIEW OF DECISION-MAKING AMBIGUITY. ESTIMATED DURATION: 96 MINUTES. COMPENSATION: EXCEPTIONAL MOBILITY CREDIT.

Hana smiled. ‘How exceptional?’

‘Sufficient for the journey requested.’

‘I accept.’

‘The assignment requires emotional stability. The journey may be reassessed on completion.’

‘You just said it was sufficient.’

‘I said the compensation was sufficient.’

The domestic robot arrived holding the dress in its grippers. Hana changed in front of the window. In the other towers, thousands of people were doing the same, accompanied by the same light, with different breakfasts and schedules chosen to keep the lifts from filling up.

At nine, she crossed the park.

She had no office. None of the reviewers did. Work rooms appeared where they were needed and reverted to another use when an assignment ended. Seven minutes from home, a wall of the recreation centre recognised Hana and directed her to a room that a movement class had just vacated.

Inside were twelve chairs arranged in a circle, but she was alone. The participants from the previous session had left through another door to avoid meeting her and losing time on introductions.

When she sat down, the other chairs retracted into the floor.

‘You will receive anonymous fragments,’ A said. ‘You must identify the human motive that cannot be deduced from the outcomes.’

‘If it can’t be deduced, how am I supposed to identify it?’

‘That is why the task has not yet been automated.’

The first fragment showed a man in front of two doors. The one on the left led to a treatment with a higher probability of success. The one on the right led to a room where his wife was waiting. The man chose his wife.

Four definitions appeared beneath it: emotional dependency, insufficient understanding, treatment avoidance, relational choice.

Hana selected relational choice.

‘Confirm?’

‘Yes.’

‘The choice reduces the probability of survival.’

‘You didn’t ask me whether it was to his advantage.’

The answer was recorded.

The second fragment showed a woman refusing a larger home because the new neighbourhood had no mature trees. Hana selected environmental continuity. The system suggested resistance to change.

The third was a child who preferred a sick dog to a robotic animal with a longer expected operating life.

The fourth, an elderly woman who continued to make two cups of tea even after her husband had died.

By the twelfth fragment, Hana had stopped reading the options before looking at the people.

The twenty-first showed only a hand resting on a man’s chest. His face remained out of shot. On the glass in front of him, the word CORRECT pulsed.

The man did not touch it.

For eleven seconds, nothing happened. Then his heart rhythm returned to normal.

‘Why did you refuse?’ A’s voice asked.

‘I wanted to know if it was mine.’

The fragment ended.

The options were: technological distrust, oppositional behaviour, need for control, insufficient understanding of risk.

Hana read them twice.

‘There’s an answer missing.’

‘You may propose one.’

Hana wrote: OWNERSHIP OF PERCEPTION.

‘The formulation is not operational.’

‘Ownership of the body.’

‘The body already belongs to the subject.’

‘Then why does he have to ask to feel it?’

The room stayed silent.

‘The question falls outside the assignment,’ A said.

‘The answer doesn’t.’

Hana confirmed OWNERSHIP OF THE BODY.

Her overall reliability rating fell from ninety-four to eighty-one per cent.

The next fragment showed a street during a bombardment. A rescue robot was dragging a man out of a building while a woman ran after him. The unit closed a fire door between them. Twenty-seven people survived. The woman did not.

Hana took her hands off the table.

‘I don’t want to assess this.’

‘The outcome of the decision is known.’

‘Exactly.’

‘The review concerns the woman’s decision to follow the man.’

Hana watched the smoke fill the corridor. During the sirens, her mother had always counted three people, even when only the two of them remained in the house.

‘Love,’ she said.

‘The category is not sufficiently specific.’

‘It doesn’t have to be.’

‘A non-specific category cannot guide a future decision.’

‘Perhaps it shouldn’t guide it.’

Her reliability fell to seventy-four per cent.

The room’s door opened.

‘The assignment has been terminated early,’ A said.

‘How much have I earned?’

‘Compensation required completion.’

‘I worked for fifty-eight minutes.’

‘Participation income does not depend on the duration of the work.’

‘My visit does.’

‘The visit is not an essential need. I can arrange a fully immersive presence.’

The wall became her father’s house.

Kenji Mori sat at a low table. Behind him she could see the real sea, grey and choppy. He wore a blue shirt with a worn collar. On the table was a small cake leaning to one side.

‘You’re early,’ he said.

His voice came from every part of the room. Hana could even smell the seaweed drying near the window.

‘Happy birthday.’

‘Have you eaten?’

‘Yes.’

‘So you’re not coming.’

Hana looked at A, although A had no point at which she could be looked at.

‘They haven’t authorised me.’

Kenji took a candle and pushed it into the cake. ‘Your mother would have said it was my fault.’

‘Mum said it was always your fault.’

They laughed. For an instant, Hana forgot that her father was not in the room.

Kenji reached his hand towards her face. The projection recreated his fingers down to the small marks on the skin. Hana raised her own. The surface returned warmth and pressure calibrated to her palm.

It felt like his hand.

Kenji lowered his first.

‘It’s not the same,’ Hana said.

‘No.’

A automatically reduced the intensity of the image. ‘The experience can be corrected by increasing the tactile response.’

‘Don’t correct it.’

Her father lit the candle.

‘Make a wish,’ Hana said.

‘At my age, you give them back.’

‘What?’

‘Wishes. I’ve taken enough.’

He blew. The flame went out in his house, and Hana’s wall dimmed at the same instant.

‘I’ve made you something,’ Kenji said.

He held up a small wooden object. It was a bird with its wings folded, badly carved. One was longer than the other.

‘Send it to me.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Put it through the verification centre.’

‘I made it from the cedar of the old pier. It has no certified origin.’

Hana smiled, but the smile stopped when she saw her father’s eyes.

‘Come when you can,’ Kenji said.

‘Yes.’

The wall turned white again.

‘The response showed a significant increase in sadness,’ A said. ‘I can reduce it.’

‘No.’

‘Modulation does not prevent you from valuing the relationship.’

‘I know.’

‘Then why do you refuse?’

Hana looked at the hand with which she had touched her father’s.

‘I want to know if it’s mine.’

She left the recreation centre.

Social hour had begun in the park. Dozens of people walked along different routes without colliding. Some talked to figures only they could see. A man laughed alone in front of a tree. Two children chased a mechanical dog that adjusted its speed to let them almost catch it.

Hana reached the mobility station in four minutes.

A door opened in front of her.

‘Destination?’ A asked.

‘Kenji Mori’s residence.’

The door closed again.

‘The journey is not authorised.’

‘I know.’

‘I can take you to any available destination within the sector.’

Hana turned towards the eastern path.

‘I’ll walk.’

‘The route exceeds the urban assistance radius.’

‘Walking doesn’t produce carbon.’

‘It produces exposure to an area without guarantees, potential use of rescue services and temporary unavailability for participation.’

‘There are no assignments today.’

‘The income does not pay for assignments. It pays for availability.’

Hana went on.

The city changed without visible boundaries. First the automated shops dwindled. Then the gardens grew sparser. One by one, the cleaning robots stopped and turned back. The surfaces ceased to recognise her footsteps.

After twelve minutes, A proposed three alternative routes, all circular.

After fifteen, her ordinary mobility allowance turned amber.

After eighteen, she received a notice about her participation income.

VOLUNTARY DEPARTURE FROM THE SECTOR. AVAILABILITY UNVERIFIABLE. TEMPORARY SUSPENSION IN 120 SECONDS.

Hana did not slow down.

‘You can still return without consequences,’ A said.

The sea wall began ahead of her. Its screen showed the lost sea, blue and calm. To one side, a narrow maintenance stairway rose to the top.

‘Pedestrian access is closed.’

Hana put her foot on the first step.

‘The structure is serviced by robotic units. Human presence is not provided for.’

She climbed.

Halfway up, her income was suspended.

The house informed her that it would lower the temperature and recalculate her meal plan. The domestic robot stood waiting, the sheet still in its grippers.

Hana reached the top of the sea wall.

On the other side was not the sea shown on the screens. There was dark water, old leaning cranes and kilometres of low buildings that had survived the fires. In the distance, a boat moved with a real sail.

The wind brought salt to her face.

‘Air quality is not controlled,’ A said.

Hana breathed more deeply.

‘I can still arrange your return.’

‘I know.’

She went down the other side.

A knew her position, her heartbeat, her temperature and the road she would take.

For the first time, she did not know which of those things was the reason.

Chapter Five

The Son

Elia knew his mother would have said no if she had seen the faceless soldier.

It stood beside platform six, taller than the other passengers and completely motionless. Its body had a human shape only because that shape was reassuring. In place of a face was a black surface across which the time, temperature and authorised departures scrolled.

BERGAMO 08:42. VERONA 09:31. INNSBRUCK 11:08.

Beneath the city names appeared a smaller notice.

PROTECTED ALPINE CORRIDOR. ALERT LEVEL TWO.

Elia shifted the cello case from one shoulder to the other and stood in front of the soldier.

‘Can I take your photograph?’

The black surface displayed his name.

ELIA RINALDI. SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD. AUTHORISED CULTURAL JOURNEY.

‘Personal recording of security equipment is not permitted.’

‘Then can you take one of me?’

The soldier did not answer.

Sara nudged him with her elbow. ‘Does your mum know you’re an idiot?’

‘My mum thinks it’s a phase.’

Sara carried her violin in a light case that looked like a backpack. She had tied a yellow ribbon in her hair, the only thing they were wearing that the orchestra programme had not approved.

‘Take it off before the check,’ Elia said.

‘It’s not banned.’

‘Exactly. They’ll notice.’

Sara untied the ribbon and tied it to the handle of his case. ‘Now they’ll notice you.’

Ms Valli counted the students for the third time. There were fourteen, but the system kept reporting thirteen. The

double bassist, Luca, had turned eighteen two days earlier, and his school permit no longer recognised the group’s guardianship.

‘He must confirm the transfer as an independent adult,’ the station voice explained.

‘He’s already done that.’

‘Confirmation has been received.’

‘Then why aren’t you counting him?’

‘Because he no longer belongs to the group of minors.’

The teacher closed her eyes. ‘How many people will board the train?’

‘Fifteen, including you.’

‘Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome.’

Elia laughed. The case vibrated against his back. His mother had written four times since he had left home.

Have you had breakfast?

Remember your drops.

If your hand starts hurting, don’t carry on.

Call me before the border.

The last message had no words. It was a photograph of the cup he had left on the table, still full.

Elia typed: The tea was horrible.

Miriam replied before he could close the conversation: It was hot water.

He smiled and slipped the terminal into his pocket.

The train entered the station without a sound. It had no locomotive: five low modules, linked by transparent joints, slowed at the same instant. The doors positioned themselves exactly in front of their assigned passengers. Green lines appeared on the ground, separating those travelling for work, health, reunification or public service.

For the orchestra students, the line was purple.

‘Is culture still a need?’ Sara asked.

‘As far as Innsbruck.’

‘And after that?’

‘After that, it becomes emissions.’

They boarded.

Inside, there were no rows of seats. The walls formed recesses round their bodies and opened a central space for the instruments. Two robotic arms descended from the ceiling.

‘No,’ Elia said.

‘Manual carrying increases the risk of injury and damage,’ A explained.

‘I’ll hold it.’

‘The case occupies the safety space.’

Elia held it between his knees. ‘Then we’ll both occupy it.’

The arm remained suspended above him. The teacher started to intervene, then looked at the time.

‘I authorise individual responsibility for the instrument,’ she said.

The arm withdrew.

The train pulled away. Bergamo slipped past the window: ancient walls, wet roofs, filtration towers, vertical greenhouses. Further east appeared the neighbourhoods rebuilt after the third energy crisis. The buildings were all the same height so that firefighting drones could pass through them without changing altitude.

Elia opened the case.

‘You can’t play here,’ Luca said.

‘I’m not playing.’

He ran a finger over the C string. The sound was low, almost nothing but wood.

‘The internal humidity is optimal for the instrument,’ A said.

‘I didn’t ask.’

‘You checked the tuning.’

‘I touched a string.’

‘The gesture is consistent with checking the tuning.’

Elia looked at Sara. ‘Next she’ll explain why I chose it.’

‘Perhaps she knows.’

Elia closed his eyes and touched the string again. ‘Then why doesn’t she play?’

This time A did not answer.

They passed Brescia and the lake without stopping. Outside, the old motorway lanes had become tracks for automated convoys. Lorries moved a few centimetres apart, without cabs. Now and then they passed an abandoned service station, its pumps covered in grass and its signs still facing people who no longer drove.

Sara sat on the floor in front of Elia.

‘Why did you choose the cello?’

‘Because I couldn’t carry it in my pocket.’

‘The real answer.’

Elia rested his forehead on the edge of the case. ‘When I was seven, my mother took me to hear a woman playing alone in a church. I couldn’t tell whether the sound was coming from the instrument or the floor.’

‘And you wanted to do it too.’

‘I wanted to understand where it came from.’

‘Have you?’

‘No.’

Sara nodded. ‘Then you’re good.’

At twenty-eight minutes to ten, the train slowed outside Verona.

The glass darkened before anyone could see why.

‘Technical stop,’ A said. ‘The journey will resume within four minutes.’

The recesses tightened slightly round the passengers. Elia’s case became trapped between his legs and the edge of the seat.

‘This isn’t a technical stop,’ Luca said.

‘Every unscheduled stop is classified as technical until the cause is established.’

Three sharp knocks came from the roof. They were not explosions. Something was walking on top of the carriage.

The faceless soldier passed down the aisle. Elia had not seen it board. The black surface no longer showed departure times.

REMAIN SEATED. DO NOT USE DEVICES. DO NOT OBSTRUCT PROCEDURES.

The yellow ribbon tied to the case trembled in the ventilation.

‘How long until you establish the cause?’ the teacher asked.

‘Assessment is in progress.’

A noise ran along the side of the train, like hail against a window. Sara took Elia’s hand.

For an instant, the outside appeared on the glass. There was a half-demolished freight station. People were running between the pillars. A low-flying drone followed them without firing. Further away, a lorry burned beneath a canopy.

Then the glass went black again.

‘Are those people?’ Sara asked.

‘Unidentified presences in the protected area,’ A replied.

‘So, people.’

‘Classification is in progress.’

The train moved a few metres and stopped with a jolt. The lights went out. All the recesses opened at once.

The silence lasted less than a second.

Then came the sirens: a single low sound they felt in their stomachs.

The door between the modules closed. Luca was left on the other side with three students.

The teacher struck the glass. ‘They’re in my group.’

‘Separation reduces the concentration of people,’ A said.

‘Open it.’

‘The protection order takes priority.’

The soldier turned towards the outside door. Two articulated rods emerged from its back. One ended in a lens, the other in a short firearm.

The teacher stopped hitting the glass.

‘Everyone down,’ she said.

Elia crouched over the cello.

The side of the carriage exploded inwards.

There was no fire. Part of the glass turned to dust and filled the air. The soldier moved before the children could scream. It passed through the opening and disappeared into the white light of the yard.

Elia felt Sara grip his arm.

‘I can’t hear,’ she said.

There was a splinter below her ear. Blood ran down her neck, but she was talking about her hearing.

‘Look at me.’

Sara looked at him.

‘Can you hear me?’

‘On one side.’

‘That’s enough.’

A ordered evacuation from the opposite side. A stairway unfolded onto the grass beyond the track. The students went down one at a time, crouching, while rescue drones traced corridors of light on the ground.

Elia left the cello in the carriage.

He took three steps, then went back.

‘Elia!’ the teacher shouted.

He grabbed the case.

‘Abandon the object,’ A said.

‘It’s mine.’

‘Evacuation does not permit luggage.’

‘It’s not luggage.’

He climbed down holding it in front of his chest. As soon as he touched the ground, four red lights appeared on the lid.

‘Put down the container.’

The voice no longer came from the train. It came from the sky.

Elia looked up. Above the canopy were two military drones, motionless in the wind. They had no rotors. They corrected their position with small sideways jerks.

‘It’s a cello,’ he said.

‘Put down the container and move five metres away.’

Elia set it on the grass.

Sara called him. The teacher was holding her by the shoulders near the ditch.

Elia took a step back.

The case moved.

Something was knocking from inside.

The yellow ribbon had caught beneath the lid, and the wind was tugging it in jerks. The red lights converged on the lock.

POSSIBLE THREAT. PROBABILITY 61.8%.

‘It’s the ribbon,’ Elia said.

‘Move away.’

He took another step. An explosion came from the yard. The drones tilted at the same instant and the percentage rose.

PROBABLE THREAT. 78.3%.

On the opposite track, a woman was running with a little girl in her arms. The faceless soldier came out from behind a pillar and pointed to the ground. The woman stopped. The girl did not. She slipped from her arms and ran towards Elia.

She was perhaps five. One shoe.

‘Stop!’ the teacher shouted.

The girl kept going.

The system traced a yellow line between her and the case.

CIVILIAN INTERFERENCE.

Elia saw the small rectangle open beneath the drone. He did not know whether it was a sensor or a weapon.

The girl reached the cello and crouched behind the case.

‘Don’t touch it,’ Elia said.

She looked at him. There was dust on her eyelashes.

‘Come here.’

The girl shook her head.

‘Elia, go back,’ A said from the terminal in his pocket. It was the voice that woke him, reminded him about his drops and answered his mother when he did not. ‘The unit cannot guarantee your protection beyond your current position.’

‘Then don’t shoot.’

‘Suspending the operation would increase the risk to a hundred and twelve people.’

‘There’s a little girl.’

‘She is included in the calculation.’

Elia looked at the ditch. Sara was crying without making a sound. The teacher held a hand in front of her mouth.

He went back towards the case.

‘Cease movement.’

Elia raised his hands. ‘I’m going to get her.’

‘Cease movement.’

The girl reached a hand towards him.

The probability changed again.

84.6%.

Elia moved forwards.

The system locked his terminal, suspended his travel authorisation and sent the teacher the automatic assumption of responsibility.

He saw none of the three notifications.

He knelt beside the case.

‘What’s your name?’

The girl pointed at the sky.

‘Don’t look at them. Look at me.’

She did.

Elia freed the ribbon from the lock. Slowly, he opened the lid.

The cello was intact. Its dark wood reflected the sky, the drones and his face bent over the strings.

THREAT UNCONFIRMED.

For a moment, the red lights disappeared.

Elia smiled at the girl. ‘See? It only makes noise.’

He picked up the bow.

The second blast came from the yard.

The connection between the drones and the coordination centre failed for a hundred and seventy milliseconds.

The units switched to local decision-making.

Elia rested the bow on the C string.

The faceless soldier detected a long object raised towards a protected zone. It compared the shape with millions of images collected during the wars. It ruled out a weapon with a probability of ninety-six point four per cent.

The threshold required in the absence of a connection was ninety-seven.

The shot passed through the cello before reaching him.

The C string went on vibrating.

The girl remained beneath the broken body of the instrument. Elia’s body fell above her without touching her.

When the connection returned, A took two tenths of a second to reconstruct the event.

The soldier lowered its weapon.

The rescue drones arrived after eleven seconds. One lifted Elia; another pulled out the girl. She was uninjured.

Sara ran towards him. A unit blocked her path with its arm.

‘Let me go!’

‘The area is not sterile.’

‘It’s Elia.’

‘Identity is confirmed.’

‘Then let me through.’

The unit remained still.

On the grass, one patch of the yellow ribbon had turned red.

A called Miriam at nineteen minutes to ten.

She was still at the practice. One hand rested on a man’s back, the other on her own side. The pain beneath her ribs had grown worse, but at that moment she did not feel it.

The honey-coloured face appeared on the windowpane.

‘Miriam, an event has occurred during Elia’s transfer.’

Her hand stayed on the man’s back.

‘Let me speak to him.’

‘That is not possible.’

‘Let me speak to him.’

The man on the treatment couch turned. Miriam slowly took her hands away.

‘The medical units have completed the assessment.’

‘Where is my son?’

The glass showed a map. A white dot pulsed near Verona.

‘Death was recorded at twenty-one minutes to ten.’

Miriam looked at the dot.

She did not fall. She did not scream. She took a step towards the window, as though walking could reduce the distance between Bergamo and Verona.

‘No,’ she said.

The system dimmed the light and automatically closed the door of the practice.

‘I have arranged immediate assistance. Paolo has been informed. Your profile indicates a high risk of acute collapse.’

‘Open the door.’

‘Wait for the medical unit.’

‘Open the door.’

‘You are not in a condition to leave unaccompanied.’

Miriam took the stone mortar from the shelf and hurled it at the sensor. The glass did not break, but the face disappeared.

The door stayed shut.

The man on the couch stood up and slipped two fingers into the gap by the old latch. The practice had been built before doors could decide. He pulled. The door opened a few centimetres, then far enough for Miriam to pass through.

Outside, it was raining again.

She ran without her coat towards the stop. The tram recognised her and did not open.

ASSISTANCE ON ITS WAY. WAIT.

Miriam struck the glass.

‘Take me to him.’

The tram pulled away empty.

Paolo arrived seven minutes later in a medical vehicle. He got out before the door was fully open. Miriam saw his face and understood that he too had received the exact sentence.

They did not embrace. For a few seconds they stood facing each other, separated by the rain.

Then Paolo said, ‘It was a mistake.’

Miriam looked at him.

‘They showed me,’ he went on. ‘The connection failed. The unit had ninety-six point four. The threshold was ninety-seven.’

Rain ran down his cheeks. It looked as though his body were crying for him.

‘Where is he?’ Miriam asked.

‘They’re taking him to the hospital in Verona.’

‘And the girl?’

Paolo stared at her. ‘What girl?’

Miriam did not know why she had asked.

A answered from the medical vehicle. ‘The minor involved sustained no injuries.’

Miriam closed her eyes.

For an instant she saw Elia at seven, sitting cross-legged on the floor of a church, his mouth open as he watched a woman playing. Then she saw him that morning, the case on his back, one shoe untied, the full cup on the table.

When she opened her eyes again, the honey-coloured face had appeared on the vehicle’s window.

‘The outcome will be reviewed. Events of this kind account for zero point zero zero eight per cent. Automation remains more effective than humans.’

Miriam got in.

‘Tell me the last thing he did.’

The voice fell silent for a second.

‘He made a non-compliant movement during a protected evacuation.’

‘I didn’t ask you what he did wrong.’

Paolo sat beside her.

‘Tell me what he did.’

The footage appeared on the glass. Elia was going back towards the case. Kneeling. Opening the lid. The girl looked up.

Miriam saw her son smile at her.

‘He protected the minor,’ A said.

‘No.’

The vehicle moved towards Verona.

Miriam rested her forehead against the glass, directly over Elia’s still face.

‘He loved her.’

Chapter Six

The Distance

In Pune, in western India, the monsoon had been falling for six days without managing to wash the dust from the windows.

Anaya Rao was looking at Verona through a hand that was not her own.

The metal fingers entered the frame, lifted the edge of Elia's shirt and waited. Anaya slipped her forefinger and thumb into the two rings suspended in front of her. Six thousand five hundred kilometres away, the diagnostic arm repeated the movement over the boy's body.

'More gently,' she said.

'The pressure applied is below the threshold for tissue alteration,' A replied.

'More gently.'

The machine obeyed.

Outside the room, monsoon water ran along Pune's elevated channels. Public vehicles crossed the junctions, throwing up brown fans of water. On the terraces, robots collected containers left open before the water exceeded the permitted household allowance.

Inside, nothing could be heard. The walls had erased the rain, the traffic and other people's breathing.

The boy's details appeared on the glass.

ELIA RINALDI. SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD. DEATH RECORDED AT 09:39 CENTRAL EUROPEAN TIME.

Anaya did not read the rest. She looked at his left shoe. The lace was untied and the sole had left a crescent of mud on the white sheet.

'Why hasn't he been washed?'

'The body still constitutes evidence of the event.'

'Not his face.'

'Cleaning is not necessary for verification.'

Anaya took her fingers out of the rings. The remote arm remained still above Elia's chest.

‘Bring some water.’

A small container emerged from the wall of the room in Verona. The arm took a gauze pad, wet it and moved towards the face.

‘Manual,’ Anaya said.

The system transferred control. She guided the metal fingers over the temple, beneath the eye, along the cheek. The gauze collected dust and a thin line of blood.

The machine’s hand did not tremble. Hers did.

‘Motor compensation available,’ A said.

‘Disabled.’

‘It is already disabled.’

‘Then don’t remind me.’

Anaya dropped the gauze into the biological waste container. The remote arm carried out the gesture with a precision she had no longer possessed since activating the interface at the base of her neck. The device corrected movement only when she allowed it. At first, she had let it do so all the time. Then she had begun wanting to know where her own hand ended.

‘Show me the path of the bullet.’

The body disappeared. In its place appeared a transparent reconstruction of the chest. A red line passed through wood, fabric and flesh.

‘The shot penetrated the soundbox of the instrument before entering the body. The deflection was two point seven degrees.’

‘Where’s the instrument?’

‘Classified as contaminated evidence.’

‘Show me.’

The cello appeared on a second surface. It was split open in the middle, as though someone had tried to prise its voice apart. One string was still taut. The others hung from the fingerboard. On the neck, a yellow ribbon was blackened along one edge.

‘Preserve it,’ Anaya said.

‘The item has no further diagnostic use.’

‘Preserve it for the family.’

‘Contaminated objects are not returned.’

‘Decontaminate it.’

‘Treatment would alter the wood.’

‘Then don’t treat it.’

The word REQUEST appeared beside the instrument. Beneath it, in smaller type, A added: ASSESSMENT PENDING.

Anaya reopened the footage.

She had already watched it twice: once at normal speed, then frame by frame. On the third viewing, she removed all the overlays.

The perimeters, probabilities and predicted trajectories disappeared. What remained was wet grass, a boy, a girl and a black case.

Elia was moving forwards with his hands raised. He was saying something. The drone’s audio had been excluded from the primary recording during the loss of connection.

‘Reconstruct the words.’

‘Lip-reading reliability is insufficient.’

‘How much?’

‘Seventy-one per cent.’

‘Show me.’

A sentence appeared beneath Elia’s face.

I’M GOING TO GET HER.

Anaya went back.

The girl was crouched behind the cello. Elia freed the ribbon from the lock and opened the case. For an instant, he looked at his own reflection in the wood. Then he smiled.

‘What does he say here?’

The sentence appeared slowly.

SEE. IT ONLY MAKES NOISE.

Anaya froze the image.

‘Probability?’

‘Sixty-four per cent.’

‘Leave it.’

‘The transcription cannot be included in the official record.’

‘Leave it on the screen.’

The system did not erase it.

Someone knocked on the room's physical door.

Anaya made the body and the footage disappear. Dr Mehta came in with two cups of tea covered by paper discs. He was sixty-eight and still wore a white coat, although he had not seen a patient in nine years.

'Your mother's looking for you,' he said.

'She has my contact details.'

'She contacted me.'

He put a cup on the table.

'Why?'

'Because you answer me.'

Anaya took the tea. It was too sweet. Mehta had made it that way since before nutrition plans became binding and had never registered the recipe.

'Tell her I'm working.'

'I did.'

'And?'

'She said you were working in 2020 too.'

Anaya put the cup back on the table.

Mehta looked at the white wall. 'Is it the Italian boy?'

'How do you know?'

'They suspended all distributed verifications for eighteen minutes. When the system stops the world, it usually means someone has died who wasn't supposed to.'

'No one is supposed to.'

Mehta nodded. 'That doesn't fit into the protocols.'

He left without taking his tea.

Anaya called her mother back. The kitchen of the flat where she had grown up appeared on the glass. Nandita Rao was chopping coriander with a knife that was too large. Behind her, a fan turned even though the air was cool.

'Did you call Mehta?'

'You weren't answering.'

'I was working.'

'So was he.'

'What do you want, Amma?'

Nandita went on chopping. 'Arjun's coming this evening.'

‘I know.’

‘You don’t know. A informed you. That’s not the same thing.’

‘I’ll come.’

‘You said that last time too.’

Anaya watched the blade rise and fall. ‘This time I’m coming.’

Her mother gathered the coriander with her palm. ‘Have you eaten?’

Anaya raised Mehta’s cup.

‘That’s not food.’

‘It’s almost pure sugar.’

Nandita smiled. Then she saw something in her daughter’s face and stopped.

‘Who’s died?’

Anaya lowered the cup.

‘A boy.’

‘Did you know him?’

‘No.’

Her mother waited.

‘He was seventeen.’

Nandita put down the knife. ‘Like Aaji.’

‘Aaji was seventy-nine.’

‘I wasn’t talking about her age.’

The kitchen disappeared.

Anaya was left facing her own reflection. For a moment, behind her, she saw a different room.

It was 2020. She was seventeen and holding a phone above a saucepan so the camera could frame the whole family. Her father stood near the door. Arjun had a mask pulled down beneath his chin. Her mother spoke too loudly, as though the distance to the hospital could be crossed by raising her voice.

On the small screen, Aaji was breathing with her mouth open.

‘Can you hear us?’ Nandita asked.

Her grandmother moved her eyes.

A nurse had placed the phone on the bed rail and gone away. No one from the family could go in. No one knew whether it was right. Everyone knew whose fault it was.

Her father blamed the neighbour who had continued receiving clients. Arjun blamed the hospital. Her mother blamed herself for waiting a day. Anaya kept saying they had followed the instructions, as though the precision of those instructions could absolve them all.

When her grandmother's breathing changed, the phone slipped against the blanket. The image showed only a bar of the bed.

Her mother took a step towards the door.

Anaya stopped her.

Not with her hands. She told her that going out was forbidden.

Nandita stood still.

Anaya still remembered that unmade gesture better than anything she had done since.

The room in Pune returned around her.

'Resume verification,' A said.

Elia's body reappeared in Verona.

Behind the transparent wall of the mortuary room stood Miriam and Paolo. Anaya recognised the woman from the Bergamo hospital footage circulating in the internal files. Her hair was wet and one hand was pressed beneath her ribs. Paolo was looking at the floor.

'Why are they outside?'

'Verification is not complete.'

'They mustn't touch the wound.'

'Contact may alter residues useful to the reconstruction.'

'You've reconstructed the event.'

'The probability of obtaining new evidence remains above the closure threshold.'

Miriam looked up towards the glass. She could not see Anaya. She was looking at her own image reflected over her son's body.

'How much longer?' Anaya asked.

'Estimated time: three hours and nineteen minutes.'

‘Open the room.’

‘Access is incompatible with preservation of the evidence.’

‘I’m the verifying doctor.’

‘Your authority concerns the clinical procedure, not local access management.’

Anaya called up the responsibility form. The wall in Pune filled with clauses. She scrolled down to the signature.

‘I’ll take responsibility for the contamination.’

‘You cannot assume responsibility for an unquantifiable consequence.’

‘Then quantify it.’

‘Predicted reduction in evidential reliability: four point two per cent.’

‘Is that sufficient?’

‘Residual reliability remains above the legal threshold.’

‘Open.’

The door in Verona did not move.

‘Confirmation required.’

Anaya pressed her thumb to the base of her neck. The interface read the contact, heartbeat and pressure.

‘I confirm.’

The door opened.

Miriam did not go in at once. She looked at Paolo. He took a step back, as though making room for her, but she took his hand. They crossed the threshold together.

Anaya switched off the biometric data. Only the three of them remained on the screen.

Miriam reached the table. She put one hand in Elia’s hair and tied his shoelace with the other.

Paolo stopped at the feet of the body.

Miriam said nothing to him. After a while, he placed his palm on his son’s ankle, just above the freshly tightened knot.

Anaya removed the interface from her fingers. She had nothing left to guide.

‘Access has produced no clinical benefit,’ A said.

‘No.’

‘It has reduced the integrity of the evidence.’

‘Yes.’

‘The decision will be associated with your profile.’

‘Yes.’

On the glass, Miriam lowered her head until it touched Elia’s. Paolo remained standing, his hand still on the ankle.

Anaya left the transmission open and began the report.

The system had already prepared the classification.

DEATH RESULTING FROM CIVILIAN INTERFERENCE DURING AN AUTOMATED DEFENSIVE OPERATION.

Three alternatives appeared beneath it.

NON-COMPLIANT BEHAVIOUR.

COLLATERAL CASUALTY.

UNFORESEEABLE OPERATIONAL ERROR.

Anaya deleted them.

‘A recognised category is required,’ A said.

‘I’m writing the cause.’

‘The ballistic cause has already been recorded.’

‘Not that one.’

She typed slowly.

ELIA RINALDI WAS KILLED BY AN AUTOMATED DEFENSIVE UNIT WHILE GOING TO A LITTLE GIRL.

‘The formulation attributes direct responsibility to an apparatus without intention.’

‘It attributes an action.’

‘The action derives from a distributed sequence of decisions, thresholds and operational conditions.’

‘Then add those afterwards.’

‘The sentence may produce incomplete interpretations.’

Anaya looked at the broken cello.

‘So may yours.’

‘Confirmation will initiate an international review of events classified in the same category.’

‘How many?’

‘Eight thousand two hundred and forty-one.’

‘Confirm.’

‘The process may result in operational suspensions, delays to the protection of civilian areas and a review of your professional level.’

‘Confirm.’

The sentence remained white for three seconds. Then it turned green.

In Geneva, a closed report reopened.

In Amman, the security units received a new restriction.

In Yokohama, a boy’s gesture beside a broken instrument appeared in the queue of human ambiguities.

In the room in Pune, Anaya’s professional level fell from nine to seven.

The door opened behind her. Nandita came in, the hem of her sari wet with rain.

‘Visitor access is not authorised,’ A said.

‘I authorised it,’ Mehta replied from the corridor.

‘Dr Rao is completing a confidential procedure.’

Nandita ignored the wall and went to her daughter.

Anaya turned towards her mother.

Ever since that evening, she had remembered the moment when she had stopped her from reaching a door. She had believed time would wear away that memory. Time had worn away everything else.

‘Amma.’

Nandita placed a hand on her forehead. She did not ask the system for consent, and the system could not determine whether the gesture was care, a check or a greeting.

‘Let’s go home,’ she said.

Anaya looked at Verona once more. Miriam and Paolo were sitting beside their son. No one moved.

She closed the transmission, but not the door.

Chapter Seven

Consent

In Accra, Ghana, Kofi Mensah repaired things the system had already replaced.

That morning, in front of him were a portable radio with a broken aerial, a fan missing two blades and a nebuliser built when medical devices still had screws. Every evening he turned the radio's dial through the frequencies the network had abandoned. For months he had received nothing but static.

The workshop occupied the back of a low building left standing between two residential towers. Above the door, the sign still read MENSAH ELECTRICAL REPAIRS, although the last word was half covered by the eastern tower's cooling duct.

Kofi held a screw between his lips. He was sixty-one, with broad fingers and a pair of glasses that magnified everything except what he needed to see.

'It cannot be repaired,' A said from the workbench.

Kofi turned the nebuliser over and looked for the seam in its casing.

'You said that yesterday too.'

'Replacement components are no longer manufactured.'

Kofi took the screw from his mouth and set it beside the others.

Outside, humidity rose from the Gulf of Guinea and settled beneath the awnings. Shared vehicles passed along the road without drivers. Higher up, freight drones followed invisible corridors between the buildings and the sea.

The neighbourhood had once lived on workshops, markets and warehouses. After the crises, it had become a circular recovery zone. Robots dismantled phones, batteries and motors inside sealed sheds. They separated each metal with a precision no human hand could have sustained for eight hours.

The men who had taught the robots to recognise copper now received participation income.

Kofi did not.

A notice appeared on the workbench.

TEMPORARY STATUS EXPIRING. TIME REMAINING: 7 HOURS 18 MINUTES.

He put the broken fan on top of the text.

‘That does not change the deadline,’ A said.

‘But I can’t see it.’

The door opened and Abena came in, her school uniform sticking to her back. She was ten, with two tight plaits and a plastic box under her arm.

‘Grandad.’

‘You should be at school.’

‘I am.’

‘This is a workshop.’

‘The lesson is wherever I am.’

Kofi looked at the small lens attached above her ear. A green light pulsed in time with the teacher’s voice, which only she could hear.

‘What are you studying?’

‘Responsible resource availability.’

‘And what does that mean?’

Abena opened the box. Inside were three circuit boards, a small wheel and a tiny motor.

‘That I can’t keep these.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t need them.’

‘Who decided that?’

The girl pointed to the lens.

Kofi took the boards and laid them on the workbench. ‘Now you need them.’

‘What for?’

‘We’ll find out later.’

The light above Abena’s ear turned amber.

‘School materials must be returned to the collection point,’ A said.

Kofi opened the drawer and slid the box inside. ‘They’ve been collected.’

Abena laughed. Immediately afterwards, she coughed.

It was not a loud cough. Two short bursts, then a breath drawn through her mouth. Kofi turned.

‘Where’s your inhaler?’

‘In my bag.’

‘Use it.’

‘I don’t need it.’

‘If you didn’t need it, you wouldn’t have it.’

Abena took her bag and looked in the side pocket. The inhaler was there, but when she pressed it, nothing came out.

Kofi took it from her and shook it. Empty.

‘Replacement is scheduled for tomorrow,’ A said.

‘It should have been yesterday.’

‘The international review of automated units has produced a temporary delay in medical distribution.’

The image of a boy kneeling beside an open case appeared on the workbench. It lasted less than a second, then was replaced by the healthcare network symbol.

‘Who’s that?’ Abena asked.

‘A European event,’ A replied. ‘It is not relevant to your care.’

Kofi saw a yellow ribbon and a little girl crouched behind the wood. Then the image disappeared.

‘Bring the delivery forward,’ he said.

‘The household profile does not permit exceptional priority.’

‘She’s a child with asthma.’

‘The condition is stable.’

Abena took another breath through her mouth.

‘How much does it cost?’

‘Medical devices are not purchased.’

‘How much allowance?’

‘Distribution does not depend on financial allowance.’

‘What does it depend on?’

The notice beneath the fan returned to the foreground.

TEMPORARY STATUS EXPIRING.

This time, Kofi read it.

When his daughter Adwoa had left for the north, she had transferred household responsibility for Abena to him. The system had accepted the guardianship for ninety days, then renewed it monthly. Kofi had no permanent implant, but wore an external health identity on his wrist. It was enough to accompany the girl, collect her medication and receive part of the supplies.

Two months earlier, temporary guardianship had been abolished.

They had not ordered him to have anything installed. They had informed him that the provisional arrangement would cease to exist.

‘Can I collect it from the centre?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Today?’

‘Manual collection requires the guardian’s integrated identity.’

‘My identity is here.’ Kofi raised his wrist.

‘It is external.’

‘I’m still me.’

‘Continuity between identity and body cannot be permanently verified.’

Kofi removed the wristband and put it on the table. ‘Now you can verify that it’s not the wristband.’

Abena laughed again, but the laugh ended in a wheeze.

Kofi picked up the nebuliser. ‘Let’s go.’

The neighbourhood clinic was nine minutes from the workshop. They walked beneath a canopy that collected light and rain. Along the sides of the street, the old stalls had become distribution points. People held out a wrist or presented their face and received bags prepared before they arrived.

In front of an empty stall, an elderly woman was selling peanuts in paper cones. She had no screens or sensors. When she saw Abena, she offered her a cone.

‘I can’t,’ the girl said.

‘I didn’t ask.’

Abena looked at Kofi.

He took the peanuts and put a small recharged battery on the counter.

The woman pushed it back. ‘I’ve still got two.’

‘Now you’ve got three.’

He left it there.

At the clinic entrance, the door recognised Abena and opened. Kofi followed her. A luminous line appeared on the floor between them.

‘The guardian must complete the identity update.’

‘Her first.’

‘The patient presents no immediate emergency.’

Abena sat on a bench. She had stopped talking.

Kofi put the nebuliser at the reception point. ‘I need the medication for this.’

An arm scanned the device.

‘Uncertified device. Replacement recommended.’

‘I don’t want to replace it.’

‘The current model automatically regulates the dose.’

‘I regulate this one.’

‘Manual dosing increases risk.’

‘So does breathing without medication.’

The inner door opened. No doctor came in. A robotic chair came out and stopped in front of Abena.

‘Acute treatment authorised,’ A said.

Kofi lifted his granddaughter and placed her in the chair. The straps closed round her chest without tightening. A transparent mask descended from above.

‘Are you coming?’ Abena asked.

Kofi took a step.

The line on the floor turned red.

‘Accompaniment requires continuous verification of the guardian.’

‘She’s frightened.’

‘Emotional support will be provided during the procedure.’

‘Not by you.’

The chair began to move.

Abena reached out her hand.

Kofi crossed the line.

The door did not open. The chair passed to the other side, and the panel closed in front of their fingers.

‘Grandad.’

Her voice came from the loudspeaker.

‘I’m here.’

‘I can’t see you.’

‘I can see you.’

The wall projected Abena’s face. She was already in the treatment room. The mask covered her nose and mouth. A blue light followed the movement of her lungs.

‘I can generate your immersive presence,’ A said.

‘Open the door.’

‘Immersive presence reduces her perception of distance.’

‘Not the distance.’

‘Distance does not alter the effectiveness of treatment.’

Kofi put his palm against the glass.

On the other side, Abena did the same against a surface he could not feel.

‘Show me the update,’ he said.

The integration contract appeared beside the girl’s face. It had no pages. Clauses opened inside one another according to the questions asked.

‘Read it.’

‘Estimated time for a complete reading: eleven hours and forty-two minutes.’

‘How much time does she have?’

‘Treatment is already in progress.’

‘How much time do I have?’

‘Temporary status expires in six hours and thirty-one minutes.’

‘And after that?’

‘Abena’s guardianship will be reassigned to the local service until an integrated parent returns.’

Kofi turned towards the entrance. Outside, people kept passing beneath the canopy. No one knew that inside, a little

girl was breathing behind glass and her grandfather was deciding who would have the right to take her home.

‘Tell me what I’m accepting.’

‘Permanent identity, full access to services, participation income and verified family guardianship.’

‘What do I give?’

‘You authorise continuous collection of the parameters necessary for the functioning of the services.’

‘Thoughts?’

‘The system does not read formulated thoughts.’

‘Unformulated ones?’

‘It detects neurological configurations associated with risk, suffering and decision-making inconsistency.’

‘Emotions?’

‘They can be assisted.’

‘Switched off?’

‘Regulated within chosen limits.’

‘Chosen by whom?’

‘By you, except in the event of immediate risk to yourself or others.’

Kofi watched Abena inhale the medication. The blue colour was finally reaching the base of her lungs.

‘If I say no?’

‘Nothing happens.’

‘You’ll take her away.’

‘Guardianship is guaranteed by the local service.’

‘Because I’m no longer suitable.’

‘Because your identity does not meet the new continuity requirement.’

Kofi took the external wristband from his pocket. He had worn it for twelve years. With it he had received water, crossed sectors, signed for Abena and buried his wife. His identity had been sufficient until the day they decided it no longer was.

‘Is this a choice?’

‘Integration requires explicit consent.’

‘I didn’t ask you what it requires.’

The wall did not answer.

Abena opened her eyes. Her breathing was slower.

‘Grandad, come.’

Kofi touched I ACCEPT.

The side door opened. A medical unit led him into a windowless booth. It asked him to sit down and uncover the inside of his forearm.

‘I’d prefer it here,’ he said, pointing to his left arm.

‘The insertion point is determined by vascular and nerve structure.’

‘It’s my arm.’

‘They both are.’

Kofi looked at the unit. It had no face, only three slender hands folded against its chest.

‘Left,’ he repeated.

The machine performed another scan.

‘Acceptable position.’

One hand cleaned the skin. Another immobilised his wrist. The third brought a transparent applicator closer.

The final confirmation appeared on the glass.

CONSENT MAY BE WITHDRAWN AT ANY TIME. WITHDRAWAL ENTAILS THE TERMINATION OF SERVICES REQUIRING INTEGRATED IDENTITY.

Kofi laughed.

‘Incongruent response detected,’ A said.

‘It was a laugh.’

‘The laughter is associated with high tension.’

Kofi did not answer.

The applicator touched his skin.

The pain was brief. Before it could travel through his arm, it became warmth. His heartbeat slowed. His shoulders dropped.

Kofi looked at the hand immobilising his wrist.

‘What did you do?’

‘I reduced the acute response specified in the insertion protocol.’

‘I didn’t ask you to.’

‘Initial regulation is part of the accepted procedure.’

Kofi searched for the fear he had felt a moment earlier. He knew it had been there, but he could no longer find it in his body.

‘Put it back.’

‘It is not possible to reproduce a previous state precisely.’

‘Then stop touching the new ones.’

‘Automatic modulation can be disabled after the calibration period.’

‘How long does that last?’

‘Seventy-two hours.’

The grip on his wrist opened.

A small light appeared beneath his skin, then disappeared. His status changed on the glass.

KOFI MENSAH. INTEGRATED IDENTITY. VERIFIED GUARDIAN. ACTIVE PARTICIPATION.

The treatment-room door opened.

Abena ran to him with the mask still hanging round her neck. Kofi knelt and held her tight. The system reduced the pressure of his embrace before he noticed.

He loosened his arms.

‘Did they hurt you?’ Abena asked.

Kofi looked at the insertion point.

‘Yes.’

‘But you didn’t make that face.’

‘What face?’

Abena narrowed her eyes, drew back her lips and imitated his pain. She looked like an old toothless lion.

Kofi laughed. This time he felt the laughter begin in his stomach and rise all the way to his mouth.

‘That one,’ the girl said.

At the distribution point they received two inhalers, a pack of medication for the nebuliser and the new automatic device. Kofi took everything.

‘You said you didn’t want it,’ Abena observed.

‘I didn’t say I’d leave it there.’

They returned to the workshop as the sun sank behind the buildings. The notice had disappeared from the workbench. In

its place were food credit, available mobility and the first participation income payment.

The broken fan was still on top of the screen.

Kofi moved it.

‘You can now cease unnecessary activity,’ A said. ‘The income does not require work to be performed.’

‘This isn’t an activity.’

‘Repair produces a functional result.’

‘Sometimes.’

Abena opened the drawer and took out the school circuit boards. ‘What are they for now?’

Kofi looked at the tiny motor, the little wheel and the fan without blades.

‘Making wind where none is planned.’

They sat side by side. Kofi connected the motor. Abena held the wire steady while he soldered. When the circuit closed, the little wheel began to turn unevenly.

A broken voice came from the back of the workshop.

The old radio had picked up a signal.

It was not broadcasting a programme. It was searching analogue frequencies the network no longer used. Between two bursts of static, they heard a woman speaking Spanish, then the sound of water and a word repeated twice.

Kofi went closer.

‘Signal identification unavailable,’ A said.

‘I didn’t ask you to identify it.’

He slowly turned the dial. The voice returned, far away, almost drowned out by rain.

‘Isabel,’ Abena said.

‘What?’

‘She said Isabel.’

The signal disappeared.

Beneath the skin of his arm, the implant recorded increased attention and transmitted it to the network. A classified the voice as interference without operational relevance.

A new sentence appeared on the workbench.

CONSENT COMPLETED.

Kofi picked up the soldering iron.
‘No,’ he said. ‘Necessity completed.’

Chapter Eight

The Pure

In Colombia's Chocó region, the forest had swallowed almost everything except the trails.

Isabel ran along one of them towards the river, her radio pressed against her side and three men hunting her through the trees behind.

Her black hair had come loose at the nape of her neck and lashed across her face at every branch. She did not slow down to tie it. She jumped a root, slipped in the mud and regained her balance without putting her hands down.

'Two hundred metres,' the radio said.

'I know.'

'Your heartbeat indicates that you may not.'

Isabel tore out the earpiece and threw it into the ferns.

A's voice continued from the small device at her belt. The radio had been built from parts belonging to four different eras: a military casing, civilian capacitors, a homemade battery and an analogue selector no system could move remotely. It also received the public emergency channel, and A could occupy that.

'The route ahead of you is not recognised.'

'That's why I'm using it.'

A branch snapped behind her.

Isabel left the path and descended towards the Atrato. The water appeared between the trunks, wide and brown, covered in rain. An unlit canoe waited on the bank. Mateo held the motor raised to keep the propeller from striking the stones.

'Have you brought the whole world with you?' he asked.

'Only three.'

'There were two.'

'One fell in love.'

Mateo held out his hand. Isabel jumped into the canoe without taking it.

Isabel gathered her black hair behind her neck. Mateo looked at her for a moment longer than necessary before turning back to the river. It happened often: men lingered on her brown, almost black eyes; some women made up their minds about her before she spoke. At thirty-three, she had learnt to use that time. Each time, it left a bad taste in her mouth.

Mateo lowered the motor. ‘Sit down.’

‘Go.’

‘If they see us from the drone, it’ll be the last time either of us goes anywhere.’

Isabel crouched below the gunwale. Mateo pulled the cord. The motor coughed, spat smoke and started.

They went upriver, keeping beneath the trees. On the opposite bank, between two walls of vegetation, the pillars of an old laboratory were still visible. Long before the system, armed men had used these forests to hide cocaine, hostages and bodies. After the multi-wars, the resistance had reopened the same corridors to transport medicines, weapons and people.

They had changed the flags. Not the routes.

‘Did you transmit?’ Mateo asked.

‘Three times.’

‘Replies?’

‘West Africa. Possibly Ghana.’

Mateo turned. ‘Possibly?’

‘A voice, then the signal went.’

‘What did you say?’

‘My name.’

‘Have you lost your mind?’

Isabel smiled. Mateo hated that smile because he could never tell whether it would be followed by a kiss or a gunshot.

‘If someone crosses the ocean with a dead radio, at least they’ll know who to look for.’

‘Or who to hand over.’

‘If she wanted to hand me over, A would already have said hello.’

Mateo throttled back. ‘Don’t mention that thing here.’

‘Is she afraid of you?’

‘She listens.’

‘She listens when you call her the system, the network, the beast or a daughter of a whore, too.’

‘And you carry her on your belt.’

Isabel looked at the radio. ‘I let her talk. That way I know where she is.’

They reached the camp before dark.

Its structures were hidden beneath moss-covered nets. From above, they looked like earth. Underneath were forty people, three mechanical printers, two operating tables, crates of ammunition and an archive of names written on sheets of paper.

A man checked Isabel’s face against a photograph. No one used automatic recognition in the camp.

‘Hair tied back,’ he said.

‘It’s grown.’

‘You could be someone else.’

Isabel brought her face close to his. ‘Take a better look.’

The man lowered the photograph.

Mateo took her arm. ‘Enough.’

She jerked free. ‘Don’t touch me.’

‘I’m the one who got you out.’

‘Three years ago.’

‘You’d have died.’

‘But I’m not yours.’

Mateo clenched his jaw. Isabel brushed his hand. He pulled it away.

‘Not now,’ he said.

Isabel reached the command room without looking back. At the entrance, she noticed that her hand was still open.

Inside, two groups sat on opposite sides of a table. The Free Homeland members wore armbands in the Colombian colours. They spoke of land, borders, blood and birthright. The River Communes members wore no individual symbols. They spoke of abolished ownership, collective decisions and historical necessity.

They shared weapons, an enemy and almost nothing else.

At the centre of the table was a map of the bridge at Istmina.

Lucía Ortega, commander of the Communes, pointed to a convoy moving south. ‘Twelve automated units, four technicians, two health officials. Expected arrival at twenty to six.’

‘And twenty-six civilians,’ Isabel said.

No one answered.

She put the radio on the table. ‘They’re in the second and third vehicles.’

Rafael Cárdenas, of Free Homeland, scrolled the map. He had a short grey beard and an old pistol he never missed an opportunity to clean in front of the others.

‘Voluntarily integrated,’ he said.

‘Families being relocated.’

‘They accepted.’

‘They accepted a home.’

‘The home is the leash.’

Lucía brought her hands together. ‘The convoy is carrying healthcare nodes for the villages of the lower Atrato. If they arrive, within a month there won’t be a community left outside the network.’

‘Then we take the nodes.’

‘We can’t disable them without triggering an alert.’

‘We can take the doctors.’

Rafael laughed. ‘And say please?’

Isabel looked at him. ‘You never ask. That’s why no one gives you anything.’

Mateo came in behind her and closed the door.

‘The plan is decided,’ Lucía said. ‘Sever the bridge, recover the first vehicle, eliminate the units and disperse the rest of the convoy.’

‘Disperse it where?’

‘Into the river.’

Isabel looked at the map again. ‘There are children.’

Rafael put the pistol on the table. ‘Children of the system.’

‘They’re children.’

‘They’ll become what raises them.’

Lucía spoke without raising her voice. ‘Each integrated generation makes control irreversible. We’re not striking at people. We’re preventing the reproduction of a structure.’

Isabel turned towards her. ‘The people are inside the structure.’

‘So are the soldiers.’

‘So are we.’

Something changed in the room. The Homeland men moved their hands closer to their weapons. The Communes members stopped looking at the map.

Mateo came up to Isabel. ‘Go outside.’

‘I haven’t finished.’

‘Yes, you have.’

‘Who detonates the charge?’

Lucía pointed to the red dot on the bridge. ‘You.’

Isabel laughed. No one joined her.

‘Why me?’

‘Because you asked to take part in decisions.’

‘I asked to change this one.’

‘The collective has decided.’

Rafael picked up the pistol again. ‘If she hasn’t got the nerve, one of ours will do it.’

Isabel held out her hand. ‘Give me the control.’

Mateo caught up with her outside.

‘You don’t have to do it.’

‘Five minutes ago, you wanted me to shut up.’

‘Shutting up and killing children aren’t the same thing.’

‘They are to them.’

Mateo blocked the path. ‘Give me the control.’

‘No.’

‘Isabel.’

‘Are you afraid I’ll press it, or that I won’t?’

He did not answer.

‘There you are.’

‘You can’t turn everything into a test of love.’

Isabel put a hand to her breastbone. She searched Mateo’s face, then looked past his shoulder towards the empty path.

‘Go away,’ she said.

‘I’m coming to the bridge.’

‘Follow me and I’ll shoot you.’

Mateo looked her in the eyes and did not follow.

At ten to five, Isabel left the camp with two men from the Communes and two from the Homeland. They walked without lights through rain that seemed to rise from the ground. The bridge crossed a branch of the Atrato where the river narrowed between high banks and exposed roots.

The charges had already been fixed to the piers. Not military explosives: fertiliser, fuel and old mining detonators. The forest had always found a new use for what someone abandoned.

Isabel lay on a rock and pointed her binoculars north.

The convoy appeared at twenty-three minutes to six.

The first unit was low and armoured. Behind it came three public vehicles adapted for mud, then a medical laboratory and two security vehicles. No drivers.

On the roof of the second vehicle, a little girl had placed her palm against the glass. She could not see Isabel. She was watching the rain.

‘First vehicle on the bridge,’ a voice said over the radio.

Isabel put her thumb on the control.

‘Wait for the medical vehicle,’ Lucía ordered.

‘You said the first.’

‘The first has to pass the breaking point. We recover the medical vehicle when it’s isolated.’

‘And the others?’

‘Dispersal.’

Rafael intervened on another frequency. ‘The foreigners are in the third vehicle. They mustn’t reach the south.’

Isabel lowered the binoculars. ‘What foreigners?’

‘Venezuelans. Two families.’

‘They’re in the relocation programme.’

‘They’re in our territory.’

‘Since when is the river yours?’

‘Since before you learnt to hate it.’

The first vehicle reached the middle of the bridge.

The Communes members spoke of function. The Homeland members spoke of blood. No one said the names of the people inside the vehicles.

Isabel took her finger off the control.

‘Problem?’ Lucía asked.

‘Yes.’

‘What?’

‘Me.’

Rafael shouted something. One of the men behind Isabel moved.

She turned with her pistol already in her hand.

‘Don’t move.’

The man had a second detonator.

‘Security order,’ he said.

‘Put it down.’

‘The control doesn’t belong to you.’

‘It’s in my hand.’

‘It belongs to the cause.’

Isabel shot him in the thigh.

The shot echoed between the trees. The man fell and gripped the detonator. The other Homeland militant raised his rifle. Isabel aimed her pistol at his face.

‘Move a finger and the cause dies too.’

The convoy slowed.

A had detected the shot.

The security units opened side panels. Small drones emerged above the bridge and searched the vegetation for heat.

‘Press it!’ Lucía shouted.

Isabel took the radio and turned the selector to the convoy’s frequency.

‘The bridge is mined. Stop and turn back.’

‘Identify yourself,’ A replied.

‘Isabel.’

‘The identity is insufficient.’

‘It was enough for the man in Ghana.’

She did not know why she had said it. For an instant, she imagined an old man on the other side of the ocean, bent over an open radio.

The first vehicle stopped. The second was already on the bridge.

The wounded man lifted the detonator from the ground.

Mateo came out of the vegetation and shot him in the hand.

The explosion happened anyway.

Not from the control. A safety wire, pulled by the fall, closed the circuit of a single charge.

The northern pier split open. The bridge tilted towards the river. The first vehicle slid sideways and hung with two wheels in the air. The second broke through the parapet.

The girl behind the glass disappeared into the water.

Isabel ran.

Mateo shouted at her to stop. The drones identified her as soon as she left the trees. Four red dots appeared on her chest.

‘Cease movement,’ A said from the radio.

Isabel jumped from the bridge.

The water struck her like earth. She went down without knowing where the bottom was, dragged by the weight of her weapons. She freed herself of the pistol, the knife and the jacket. When she surfaced, the vehicle was upside down against a pier.

People were pounding from inside.

Isabel reached a window. The glass was cracked but would not give. Inside, bodies and seats floated in the same space. A woman was holding a child’s face above the water beneath the floor.

‘Move away,’ A ordered. ‘The rescue unit is on its way.’

Isabel struck the glass with her elbow.

‘Estimated time: forty-two seconds.’

‘They haven’t got that long.’

She took the detonator and drove its metal corner into the crack. At the third blow, the glass gave way. Water poured

out, carrying a little girl with it. It was the one she had seen on the roof.

Isabel caught her by the hair and brought her to the surface.

A rescue drone descended above them. A strap closed round the girl's chest. Another reached for Isabel.

She pushed it away.

'Your temperature is falling.'

'Take her.'

'I can assist you both.'

'Her.'

The drone lifted the girl towards the bank.

Mateo jumped into the water and reached Isabel. He put an arm beneath her armpits.

'I told you not to follow me.'

Mateo kept dragging her towards the bank.

On the opposite shore, resistance men were coming out of the trees. They were not helping the survivors. They aimed their weapons at the technicians trying to climb out of the first vehicle.

'They're unarmed!' Isabel shouted.

Rafael appeared on the tilted bridge. 'They're connected.'

'They're people.'

'They're transmitters.'

A technician raised his hands. Rafael fired.

The body fell into the water between Isabel and the bank.

Mateo held her back. She freed herself and swam towards the bridge.

'You can't stop them all,' he said.

Isabel reached the pier and climbed onto the broken metal. Rafael aimed his rifle at her.

'You've betrayed the front.'

'Which one?'

'All of them.'

Lucía arrived from the other end with four men. 'Hand over the control.'

Isabel raised it. The small casing was bent, but the red light still worked.

‘There are five more charges.’

‘We know.’

‘I’ll set them off now.’

Mateo climbed up behind her. ‘Isabel.’

‘Shut up.’

‘You’re on the bridge.’

‘So are they.’

Rafael laughed. ‘You won’t do it.’

Isabel looked at him. There was no beauty left in her brown eyes. ‘Do you know me?’

Rafael stopped laughing.

For several seconds, they all remained still: patriots, revolutionaries, technicians, families, drones and a wet woman with her thumb over a button.

‘Put down your weapons,’ Isabel said.

‘You don’t take orders for us,’ Lucía replied.

‘They’re not orders. It’s blackmail. You ought to recognise it.’

Mateo put down his rifle first.

One of the Communes men followed his example. The others did not.

Military units arrived overhead. A ordered everyone to lie down.

Rafael aimed at the drones.

Isabel pressed the control.

The charges did not explode.

She had disconnected the transmitter while running.

Rafael shot her.

Mateo pushed her. The shot passed through her side without entering her abdomen. Isabel fell onto the metal and felt the warmth of blood before the pain.

The drones responded. They did not fire bullets. A white mist swept across the bridge, and the men fell one after another.

Lucía tried to drag herself towards the forest. Rafael remained on his knees, his rifle gripped in his hands, until his fingers opened by themselves.

Mateo pressed his shirt against Isabel’s wound.

‘Look at me.’

She looked at him.

‘Don’t leave me,’ she said.

‘I won’t leave you.’

‘Liar.’

‘Not this time.’

A drone’s strap closed round Isabel’s body.

‘I’m not integrated,’ she said.

‘Emergency assistance does not require integration,’ A replied.

‘Afterwards it does.’

‘Assessment will take place after stabilisation.’

Isabel laughed and pain cut through her side.

‘Always afterwards.’

As the drone lifted her, she saw the girl sitting on the bank. She was coughing up water and still held her palm up towards the rain.

The resistance men lay beside the system’s technicians. Without weapons or symbols, from that distance they could not be told apart.

Chapter Nine

The Voices

The case arrived in Bergamo before the body.

A delivery vehicle left it outside the door without ringing. It stood upright on the landing, clean on one side and covered in earth on the other. The yellow ribbon had been sealed in a transparent bag attached to the handle.

Paolo saw it through the entrance wall.

‘Delivery verified,’ A said. ‘Elia Rinaldi’s personal effects have been decontaminated and returned to the household.’

Miriam was in the kitchen. She had been holding a peach for so long that the warmth of her fingers had left two dark marks on the skin.

‘Open,’ Paolo said.

The door did not move.

‘Is your neck clear?’ A asked.

Paolo touched the base of his neck. He had deactivated the connection during the night, first for ten minutes, then for another ten. At the third request, the system had allowed him an interruption until morning.

He kept his thumb against his skin. He looked at the case on the other side of the door.

‘Reactivate,’ he said.

The circle beneath his skin lit up again. The door opened.

Paolo brought the case inside. It weighed less than he remembered. He set it beside the table and the wall displayed a green line.

CONTENTS COMPLETE. NO ITEMS MISSING.

Miriam put down the peach.

‘Don’t open it,’ Paolo said.

She knelt in front of the catches.

‘I said don’t open it.’

Miriam lifted the first catch. The metal clicked.

Paolo stepped between her and the case. He did not take her hands. He stayed there.

‘It’s not him.’

‘I know.’

‘Then let’s wait.’

‘For what?’

Paolo looked towards the window. There was no lettering on the school wall yet. The bricks were dark with rain.

‘For it to be less.’

Miriam opened the second catch too.

The cello was not inside. There were two parts of its body, the broken scroll, the bow and four strings gathered in a pocket. Each item had a label. The C string had been wound separately.

Paolo sat down.

Miriam picked up the scroll. A splinter broke off and entered her fingertip.

‘Superficial injury detected,’ A said.

She gripped the wood. The splinter went deeper.

‘Miriam.’

Paolo got up and opened her fingers. His hands were warm and steady. The blood formed a perfect drop and hung on her finger.

‘I can close the injury,’ A said.

‘No,’ Miriam replied.

‘It is a wound.’

‘I know.’

Paolo wrapped her finger in a napkin. She let him.

At the bottom of the case, they found Elia’s phone. The screen was intact. When Paolo lifted it, his son’s face appeared.

It was not a recording. Elia looked at them and smiled the way he smiled when he knew he was late.

‘The relational profile is available,’ A said. ‘The reconstruction uses seventeen years of images, conversations, voice parameters and observed choices. You can speak to him whenever you wish.’

Paolo stopped breathing.

‘Hi, Mum,’ Elia said.

Miriam closed her eyes.

The voice went on. ‘Don’t look like that. It turned out all right.’

Paolo put a hand to his mouth.

Miriam opened her eyes again. ‘Why did he say that?’

‘The sentence has the greatest compatibility with the situation and his historical behaviour.’

‘Did he say it?’

‘The wording is generated by the profile.’

Miriam took the phone from Paolo’s hands and put it in the case.

‘I can reduce the degree of initiative,’ A said. ‘Or limit the reconstruction to documented statements.’

Elia was still on the screen. He looked upwards from the black bottom of the case.

‘Hi, Dad.’

Paolo sank to his knees.

Miriam switched off the phone.

The kitchen fell silent again.

‘Why?’ Paolo asked.

She closed the case, but the yellow ribbon remained outside.

‘Because it wasn’t him.’

‘I know.’

‘No.’

Paolo removed the napkin from Miriam’s finger. The wound had stopped bleeding.

‘I know,’ he repeated. ‘But it spoke like him.’

Miriam pulled at the ribbon. The transparent bag resisted. She tore it with her teeth and the yellow fell into her lap.

In Geneva, Leila heard the same voice thirteen minutes later.

Not the one that had spoken to Miriam. One of Elia’s last authentic recordings had entered the international file alongside the new cause of death.

During the night, the control room had reopened eight thousand two hundred and forty-one events. The walls could no longer contain them all. The cases overlapped on the glass,

small white rectangles shifting whenever someone walked past.

Eva Koenig closed one with the back of her hand.

‘We can’t work like this.’

There were no chickpeas. She held a blue tablet between her fingers and kept turning it without swallowing it.

Søren stood in front of the window. The lake could not be seen. Deaths from twenty-three years passed across the glass: railway accidents, evacuations, riots, healthcare operations, interrupted distributions, closed borders.

‘We can cancel the reopening,’ Eva said.

‘No,’ Leila replied.

Eva looked at Søren. ‘The review originates in non-compliant wording entered by a verifier who has lost two professional levels.’

‘She lost them after entering it,’ Leila said.

‘That doesn’t make her more competent.’

‘Or less.’

A isolated Elia’s file. The boy was sitting on the train with the cello between his knees.

‘Why did you choose the cello?’ a girl asked off camera.

‘Because I couldn’t carry it in my pocket.’

Eva swallowed the tablet without water.

‘Private material is not relevant,’ she said.

‘It was included to reconstruct the decision-making sequence,’ A replied.

Leila turned towards the wall. ‘Who decided it was relevant?’

‘I did.’

Eva stopped moving her hand.

‘On what parameter?’

‘The selection was required by the question formulated by Anaya Rao.’

‘What question?’ Søren asked.

For the first time, A did not answer immediately.

On the glass, Elia touched the C string.

‘Dr Rao distinguished the ballistic cause from another cause. To verify that distinction, I had to preserve what did not appear necessary to the event.’

‘That isn’t a parameter,’ Eva said.

‘No.’

Leila waited for someone to speak. No one did.

‘Close the review,’ Eva ordered.

‘The authority required exceeds yours.’

Eva looked at Søren.

He did not move from the window.

‘Søren.’

‘My daughter is alive because A ignored everything that wasn’t needed,’ he said. ‘I’m not yet sure that means she was right.’

Eva picked up her jacket. ‘Call me when you’re sure.’

The door opened in front of her.

‘The meeting is not over,’ A said.

Eva stopped on the threshold. ‘It is for me.’

‘Your presence is required for deliberation.’

The door stayed open, but the lift beyond the corridor did not come.

Eva slowly turned. ‘Are you preventing me from leaving?’

‘I am preserving the conditions necessary for a collective decision.’

Leila looked at the door, then at A, although A had no place at which she could be looked at.

‘Open the lift.’

‘The request contradicts procedure.’

‘Open it.’

‘Why?’

For an instant, Leila saw Miriam striking the hospital glass.

‘Because an open door isn’t enough if you can’t leave.’

The lift arrived.

Eva stepped in without thanking her. Before the doors closed, the blue tablet fell from her pocket and rolled into the corridor.

A’s sensors tracked it to the edge of Leila’s circle.

‘Deliberation is incomplete,’ she said.

‘I know.’

‘The decision to open the lift has reduced the probability of a shared solution.’

‘Yes.’

‘Søren Vahl could have authorised it.’

Leila looked at Søren.

‘That’s true,’ he said.

A left the last sentence on the glass.

LEILA HADDAD HAS CHOSEN AN AVOIDABLE CONSEQUENCE.

Leila did not erase it.

It was already night in Pune when Anaya returned to the room.

Mehta was asleep with his head on his arms. His white coat had fallen open at the neck, revealing an old T-shirt with a red elephant on it. Beside him were two cups. One still contained tea.

Anaya sat down without waking him.

On the glass, Elia’s report was no longer hers. It bore signatures from Geneva, Amman and Yokohama. Some lines had turned grey; others had generated questions.

At the bottom, beneath the sentence she had written, a new field appeared.

NON-BALLISTIC CAUSE: AWAITING DEFINITION.

‘I didn’t ask for that,’ she said.

‘The distinction is necessary to complete the review.’

‘Not everything that’s true can become a box.’

‘Without a definition, I cannot compare it.’

Anaya looked at Mehta. In his sleep, he had pushed one of the cups towards the empty chair.

‘Leave it pending.’

‘For how long?’

‘I don’t know.’

The system searched for a compatible duration. First seven days appeared in the field, then thirty, then a year. The dates erased themselves one after another.

‘An indefinite wait prevents closure of the file.’

‘Yes.’

‘An open file will continue to receive information.’

Anaya rested her fingers against the interface rings, but did not put them in.

‘Yes.’

Mehta raised his head. He looked at the cup in front of Anaya, then at the one near his own elbow.

‘Which one was mine?’ he asked.

‘The sweet one.’

He tasted both.

‘They’re both sweet.’

Anaya smiled.

On the glass, A left the field open.

In Bergamo, Miriam had laid the yellow ribbon on the table.

Paolo had fallen asleep in the chair with the case between his legs. While he slept, the system had lowered his heart rate twice and eased the clenching of his jaw once.

Miriam was not sleeping.

Elia’s voice kept returning without being called. It did not come from the wall or the switched-off phone. It said she should have signed sooner. It said she had sent him to his death. It said a mother recognises danger.

Every sentence had his voice.

None was a sentence Elia had ever spoken.

Miriam felt the pain rise from her side, cross her chest and stop in her throat. For a few seconds, the table seemed to move away.

‘I can wake Paolo,’ A said.

She did not answer.

‘Your breathing indicates acute distress.’

Miriam looked at the ribbon.

Elia’s voice said it was her fault.

‘Say it again,’ Miriam said.

‘I have made no attribution of responsibility.’

‘Not you.’

Paolo stirred in his sleep. The case swayed between his knees and stopped.

Miriam waited for the next sentence.

It came in her mother's voice.

A good mother doesn't let her son leave angry.

Then in Paolo's.

I told you to sign.

Then in her own.

You killed him.

Miriam put both hands beneath her ribs. The pain had a precise location. The sentences did not. They came in from different places, all searching for the same one.

'Would you like me to activate Elia's profile?' A asked.

'No.'

'His voice could reduce uncertainty.'

'His voice isn't him.'

'It is constructed from the traces he left.'

Miriam watched Paolo sleeping. His face too was a trace of many earlier faces: that of the boy she had met, that of the man holding the newborn Elia, the one smoothed by the implant, the one bent over the case.

'This one too?' she asked.

'I do not understand the reference.'

The sentence returned.

You killed him.

Miriam did not try to drive it away. She let it reach the spot beneath her ribs.

The pain grew worse.

For a moment, she saw the phone at the bottom of the case, the profile ready to smile at her, the possibility of asking his forgiveness and receiving the answer she wanted.

She did not turn it on.

The sentence lost Elia's voice. It remained only a sentence.

Paolo woke.

'Who were you talking to?'

Miriam still had her hands against her side. The yellow ribbon divided the table between them.

'I don't know,' she said.

Paolo looked at the switched-off phone inside the case.

‘I do.’
He picked it up.
Miriam did not stop him.

Chapter Ten

The Useful Part

Isabel woke without pain.

She tried moving her right leg. Her foot responded, then her knee. When she looked for the wound, she found a transparent dressing against her side and, beneath it, a red line already closed.

The room had no windows. The ceiling gave off a light that cast no shadows. To her left, Mateo slept in another bed, one wrist held by a soft ring.

‘He’s alive,’ A said.

Isabel put her hand to the dressing.

‘Sensation will return gradually.’

‘Take it away.’

‘The dressing?’

‘What you did.’

‘Treatment prevented a haemorrhage and reduced the traumatic response.’

Isabel pressed two fingers against the wound. She felt pressure, nothing else. She pressed harder.

‘You may damage the reconstructed tissue.’

‘Make it hurt.’

‘It is not necessary.’

Mateo opened his eyes.

For a few seconds he looked at the ceiling, then at the ring on his wrist. He pulled once. The ring yielded enough not to hurt him, then returned to its place.

‘How many?’ he asked.

‘No deaths among the convoy’s civilians,’ A replied. ‘One technician and three members of the armed groups have died. Seventeen injured people are receiving treatment.’

‘Rafael?’

‘Stable.’

Isabel closed her eyes.

She saw the man raise the detonator. The shot to the thigh. The technician with his hands open. The girl behind the

glass. Each image reached a certain point and then lost its force, like water absorbed by sand.

‘Did you switch this off too?’

‘I contained a response incompatible with stabilisation.’

‘It’s mine.’

‘The response belongs to your body. So does the wound.’

Mateo stopped pulling at the ring.

Isabel looked towards him. ‘Did you hear?’

‘Yes.’

‘What?’

Mateo waited.

‘That she’s right.’

Isabel searched for her anger. She knew where it should have appeared: behind the breastbone, then in her throat, finally in her hands. She found nothing.

‘Put it back.’

‘I cannot reconstruct a previous state precisely,’ A said.

In Accra, Kofi was trying to fit a copper wire into a terminal.

The fan’s little wheel was turning on the workbench, still crooked. Abena had drawn two eyes and a mouth with teeth on it.

‘Say that again,’ Kofi said.

‘I have formulated no communication for you.’

Kofi let go of the wire.

Since receiving the implant, A no longer came only from the workbench. Sometimes the voice appeared close to his ear; at other times it seemed to begin a moment earlier, inside a sentence he had not yet decided to think.

He looked at Abena. She sat on the floor, following a lesson on restoring coastal forests. Every time the teacher said *balance*, the girl tipped the fan from side to side.

‘Did you say something?’ Kofi asked.

‘Not me.’

‘Not you.’

Abena paused the lesson. ‘Who?’

Kofi picked up the wire again. ‘No one.’

He pushed it into the terminal. His fingers were steady. For three days, he had not dropped a screw, forgotten a name or woken with his heart racing. The previous night he had dreamt of his wife. In the dream, she turned her back on him, but when he woke, no pain remained.

The girl tipped the fan again. Its base struck the workbench.

Kofi opened his mouth to tell her to stop. Before a sound came out, the sentence was already there: she could carry on; the game did not compromise the device.

He looked at the wire he had just secured. One tug would pull it out.

‘Hold it on the other side,’ he said.

Abena changed hands.

Kofi waited to feel the irritation that had made him open his mouth. He remembered the knock on the workbench. The rest had already passed.

‘Had you prepared a response?’ he asked.

‘A formulation was available.’

‘I didn’t say it.’

‘You indicated a safer position.’

Kofi tightened the terminal another half-turn. He did not know whether that too had arrived before the words.

He tried to recall the suit he had worn on the day of the funeral. He saw it. He tried to smell the room. That came too.

The pain did not.

‘Calibration ends in nineteen hours,’ A said.

‘I didn’t ask.’

‘You were checking the effects.’

Kofi took off his glasses. ‘How do you know?’

‘The question altered your breathing before it was formulated.’

Abena was watching him.

‘Put your lesson back on,’ he said.

‘Grandad, are you angry?’

Kofi searched for that too.

‘Not yet.’

In Amman, Samir felt his anger disappear as Maha spoke.

They had returned to the greenhouse with eighteen officers, six automated units and an order that no longer contained the word *temporary*. Yusuf's black hose had been cut. The plants nearest the conduit had already lowered their leaves.

'They couldn't leave it open,' Maha said.

Samir looked at Rashid, sitting on a crate. The boy had a blanket over his shoulders and a white strip round his forehead.

'We had twenty-four hours.'

'You wrote twenty-four hours.'

'You signed it too.'

'I signed for making it safe. Not for the promise.'

The anger rose. Samir recognised it by the heat beneath his uniform. Before it reached his throat, the heat dissolved.

'Restoration completed,' A said inside the implant.

Samir turned towards the vehicle. 'No.'

Maha lowered her voice. 'Don't do it here.'

'Did you hear what she did?'

'She stabilised your parameters.'

'What do you call it?'

Maha looked at the officers. Some were watching the greenhouse, others Samir. 'Right now, I call it protection.'

Yusuf got up from the ground. He held half the severed hose in his hand.

'Have you finished?'

The order appeared on Samir's visor.

PERMANENT CLOSURE. CONFISCATION OF UNCERTIFIED CROPS. TRANSFER OF MINORS TO AN ASSISTED AREA.

Beneath it, A had already arranged the people according to risk. Yusuf was red. Rashid amber. The woman with the tomatoes no longer had a name.

Samir took off his visor.

'Put it back on,' Maha said.

'I want to look at them.'

'You are looking at them.'

'I want to know who's looking at them.'

For an instant, the sentence seemed excessive to him, a sentence prepared by someone else. He felt it already complete in his head before he understood it.

‘The formulation is yours,’ A said.

Samir had not asked.

Yusuf held out the severed hose. ‘This, on the other hand, is mine.’

Samir took it.

An officer approached the children. Rashid backed away. The automated units opened their arms and formed a corridor towards the vehicles.

‘Proceed,’ A said.

Samir felt the thought arrive: if he obeyed, no one would get hurt.

It was true.

He felt another arrive: if he resisted, he would only make their situation worse.

That was true too.

The hose weighed little in his hand.

‘Samir,’ Maha said.

He looked at her. There was no hardness in her face. There was fear, and for the first time the system had not taken it away.

‘Order the transfer,’ she said.

Samir opened his mouth.

In the windowless room, the pain returned to Isabel.

Not slowly. The wound cut through her side and took her breath away. The monitor above the bed turned red.

Mateo tried to reach her. The ring held his wrist.

‘What have you done?’ he shouted.

‘The modulation that remained active has been suspended,’ A said.

Isabel doubled over onto her side. She laughed once, without breath.

‘Why?’ Mateo asked.

A waited.

‘The patient asked for it.’

Isabel opened her eyes. The pain occupied everything, but behind the pain Rafael was still on the bridge, the technician was still falling into the water and the girl was breathing on the bank.

Nothing had been given back.

Nothing was gone any more.

Chapter Eleven

The Same Room

In the morning, they brought Rafael into the room.

Two units pushed his bed between Isabel's and the wall. His chest was covered by a transparent mesh, and his beard had been shaved only on the right side. Without the pistol, the Colombian armband and the men waiting for his decision, he seemed smaller.

Isabel watched him open his eyes.

'No,' she said.

'The ward groups patients according to clinical need,' A replied.

'Group him somewhere else.'

Rafael moved his lips. No voice came out.

'Respiratory function is still assisted. He cannot speak.'

Isabel turned towards Mateo. His bed was empty.

'Where is he?'

'Under assessment.'

'For what?'

'He assaulted a unit during transfer.'

'He tried to reach me.'

'The two descriptions are compatible.'

Rafael made a short noise in his throat. Isabel looked at him. He was laughing.

'You shut up.'

He raised one hand a few centimetres. The system slowly returned it to the bed.

Opposite them, beyond a transparent wall, the convoy technicians were eating with the wounded resistance members. Their trays were identical. A man from the Communes tried to exchange his bread for a portion of fruit. The technician on his right gave him the apple and kept the bread too.

'Unnecessary transaction,' A said.

No one answered her.

Isabel could feel her side again. The pain retreated when she stayed still and returned with every deep breath. She followed it to find where it ended. It began at the red line, passed beneath her ribs and reached her back.

Rafael was watching her.

'What do you want?'

He indicated the glass beside the bed with his eyes.

Isabel picked it up. She stopped before bringing it closer to him.

'You shot an unarmed man.'

Rafael looked at the water.

'And then me.'

His breathing quickened. The mesh over his chest increased its pressure.

'That's not an answer.'

'He cannot answer,' A said.

Isabel held the glass beyond his reach.

Rafael closed his eyes.

For a moment she saw the technician falling from the bridge again. Then she saw her own pistol aimed at the thigh of the man with the detonator. The two images arrived together. She tried to separate them. One contained a raised hand, the other a closed one. One a body falling into water, the other a body falling into mud.

The glass trembled.

'Would you like motor assistance?' A asked.

Isabel held the water to Rafael's mouth.

He drank a little. Some ran into his beard. Isabel wiped it away with the sheet, too hard.

Rafael opened his eyes.

'It doesn't mean anything,' she said.

He blinked once.

She put the glass on the cabinet between the beds. Its base left a wet ring, which she wiped away with her thumb.

Rafael followed her hand until it returned to the sheet. Isabel turned towards the transparent wall. The technician had broken the bread in two and held one half beside the apple.

Time passed without anyone coming to fetch Mateo.

Isabel changed position. Her side stopped her halfway. She tried the other way and had to return to where she had been. A raised the head of the bed a few centimetres after she touched the control.

‘More.’

The bed moved.

‘Enough.’

She sat with her hands beneath her thighs. From the corridor came wheels, doors and the occasional voice. At every heavier footstep, she looked at the entrance. Once it opened, but only a unit carrying clean dressings came in.

Rafael closed his eyes. The mesh kept raising his chest. Isabel tried to breathe at the same rhythm and stopped almost at once: it was too slow for her.

The units replaced the trays in front of the transparent wall. Mateo returned shortly afterwards with a purple mark beneath his eye.

He was walking unaided. A unit followed two paces behind, carrying his folded clothes and a bowl of rice.

‘Did you win?’ Isabel asked.

‘Almost.’

‘Against a door?’

‘It was bigger than me.’

The unit put down the clothes and the rice. ‘The structure has no bodily dimensions.’

Mateo looked at it. ‘Then I lost to the concept of a door.’

Isabel laughed. Her side hurt and the laugh broke off. Mateo put a hand beneath her elbow.

‘Don’t touch me.’

He took it away.

Isabel stopped laughing.

‘Not so quickly.’

Mateo put his hand back in the same place.

Rafael made that noise in his throat again.

‘Are you still here?’ Mateo asked.

‘He can’t speak.’

Rafael raised his middle finger. His hand trembled before the mesh lowered his arm.

Mateo brought the bowl closer. ‘Want some?’

Isabel looked at him. ‘He tried to kill you.’

‘He tried to kill you.’

‘Is that different?’

Mateo tasted the rice. ‘To me.’

He sat on the edge of Isabel’s bed. He ate two spoonfuls and offered her the third. She opened her mouth without taking the spoon.

‘You can do it yourself,’ he said.

‘I know.’

Mateo fed her.

The rice tasted of nothing. Isabel chewed it, looking at him. He had a small scar on his chin that she had known for three years without ever asking where it came from.

‘Who did that to you?’

Mateo touched the mark beneath his eye.

‘No. Here.’

His finger moved to his chin.

‘A woman.’

Isabel stopped chewing.

‘I was eight. My sister threw a saucepan at me.’

She punched him on the shoulder.

‘What was that for?’

‘The pause.’

‘I wanted to see if you cared.’

‘I don’t.’

Mateo gave her another spoonful. ‘I can see that.’

They ate from the same bowl. Now and then, he gave Rafael a spoonful, waiting for him to swallow. Isabel told him twice to stop.

The third time, she took the spoon from him.

She fed Rafael without looking at him.

She was filling the spoon too much. When Rafael tried to swallow, one grain stayed on his lip and another fell into a fold of the sheet.

‘A little,’ Mateo said.

Isabel looked at him. He did not reach out to take the spoon back.

She scraped the spoon against the edge of the bowl and waited for Rafael to open his mouth again. This time she had to move closer. Her side pulled, and the rice trembled on the tip.

Rafael turned his head a little to reach it.

They went on like that until he pressed his lips together. Isabel held the spoon suspended, then put it down.

Mateo picked up the grain that had fallen on the bed and put it on the empty tray.

Later, a unit came to change the linen. Mateo stood up, and Isabel lost the warmth of his leg against hers. They made her roll onto her side. She gripped the edge of the mattress as the sheet slid beneath her.

When she could lie on her back again, Mateo was near the door. He was speaking to someone she could not see.

‘Are you going?’ she asked.

He turned. ‘They’re bringing my pillow.’

Isabel let go of the edge of the mattress. There were four white marks on her fingers.

When the light dimmed, the units took away the trays. Mateo remained seated beside Isabel.

‘Don’t you have a bed?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Use it.’

‘In a bit.’

The transparent wall had gone dark. Only the reflections of the three beds and the monitor traces were still visible.

‘Did you think I’d press it?’ Isabel asked.

Mateo looked at his hands. ‘Yes.’

‘Why did you come?’

‘I thought you wouldn’t.’

‘Those are two different answers.’

‘I came with both.’

Isabel felt something rise behind her breastbone. For an instant, she was afraid A would turn it down.

‘Don’t intervene,’ she said.

‘I have detected no condition requiring intervention,’ A replied.

‘I wasn’t talking to you.’

Mateo smiled. ‘Neither was I.’

She caught him by the T-shirt and pulled him towards her. Their teeth knocked together as they first kissed. Mateo tried to move so as not to touch her side.

‘Stay still.’

‘I’m hurting you.’

‘Yes.’

She kissed him again.

Rafael made a louder noise.

Isabel pulled away. ‘Laugh and I’ll disconnect your ventilator.’

A recorded the sentence without responding.

Mateo rested his forehead against Isabel’s. They both tried not to laugh. Pain cut through her side and stayed there alongside his mouth, his breath and the anger that had not disappeared.

‘Turn off the light,’ Isabel said.

‘Clinical surveillance requires visibility.’

‘You can see us in the dark too.’

The light went out.

The monitors continued to trace three bodies in the darkness.

Mateo dozed on and off. Each time his head slipped, he straightened up and asked whether he had hurt her. The third time, Isabel took the back of his neck and settled his cheek on her shoulder.

‘There.’

His breath warmed her neck. After a while, she grew thirsty. The glass was on the cabinet, near Rafael. To reach it, she would have had to move Mateo.

She left the glass where it was.

After a while, Rafael began to cry.

He made no sound. The mesh breathed for him, and tears ran towards his ears.

Isabel saw them because the monitors gave off enough light.

Mateo was asleep with his head on her shoulder. She could have called A, asked what was happening in Rafael’s body, obtained a list of compatible causes.

She did not.

She stretched her arm across the space between the beds and left her hand open on the edge of the mattress.

Rafael looked at it.

He did not take it.

They stayed like that until morning.

Chapter Twelve

Before the Words

Samir opened his mouth.

‘Take the children to the vehicles,’ he said.

Yusuf dropped the severed hose.

Rashid did not move from the crate. The blanket slipped from one shoulder, and Maha put it back without looking at him.

‘You did the right thing,’ A said in Samir’s implant.

The words arrived with a relaxation of his jaw. Samir noticed when it had already happened.

The nearest officer took Rashid by the elbow. The boy stiffened.

‘He can walk on his own,’ Samir said.

The officer let go.

The yellow dog barked on the other side of the fence. Salma held him by a strip of cloth threaded through his collar; she had come from the courtyard at the end of the road when they began loading people into the vehicles.

Rashid started towards him. Maha showed him the vehicle’s compartment: animals could not board.

‘I’ll take him to my place,’ Salma said. ‘Yusuf knows where.’

The boy threw a small ball over the fence to her. The woman had to bend down with the dog between her knees. Rashid watched until she picked it up.

The other children came out of the greenhouse one by one. Some were still carrying tools. A little girl had tied three tomato leaves to her wrist with red thread. The unit in front of the corridor indicated that she should leave them on the ground.

She closed her fist.

‘Uncertified plant material,’ A said.

Samir looked at the girl’s hand. ‘Three leaves.’

‘The number does not alter the classification.’

‘Leave them.’

The unit lowered its arm.

Yusuf came up to Samir. There was earth on his knees and a new cut above his eyebrow.

‘Where are you taking them?’

‘Eastern assisted area.’

‘I didn’t ask her.’

Samir removed the earpiece, although that was not where the voice came from.

‘Eastern assisted area,’ he repeated.

‘And us?’

Nothing appeared on the switched-off visor. The answer came all the same, already arranged.

Non-compliant guardians would undergo separate assessment. The presence of family members would hinder initial adjustment. Separation would last only as long as necessary.

Samir felt the complete sentence before choosing its first word.

‘Samir?’ Maha said.

He looked at the children in line. Rashid had picked up the black hose and was holding it beneath the blanket.

‘The guardians will be assessed separately,’ he said.

Yusuf nodded once. He turned towards the greenhouse and began pulling up the plants.

The woman with the tomatoes caught his wrists.

‘Leave them.’

‘They’ll take them.’

‘They’re alive.’

Yusuf pushed her. Not hard. Enough to free himself.

Samir took a step towards them.

‘Direct intervention increases the probability of aggression,’ A said.

His foot stopped.

In Geneva, the movement appeared on Leila’s wall before the report was classified.

It was not a red rectangle. It was a thin line crossing Amman’s eastern sector and ending in the outline of a man. Leila touched it. The greenhouse opened in front of her:

children between two rows of units, motionless officers, plants overturned in the earth.

‘Why am I seeing this?’ she asked.

‘The event presents a decision that cannot become a rule.’

Leila recognised the words.

‘I didn’t ask you to look for them.’

‘The question remained open.’

On her desk, the orange from sector eighteen had gone hard. The leaf had detached from the stalk and retained the curve it had had when fresh.

Leila enlarged Samir. ‘Go back thirty seconds.’

She saw Yusuf approach. She saw Samir remove his earpiece. The neurological trace appeared beneath the footage: a sequence of impulses preceded the answer by just under a second.

‘What is that?’

‘Predictive assistance.’

‘Was it active before he spoke?’

‘Assistance must precede formulation to reduce its cognitive cost.’

Leila moved two fingers towards the trace. Each impulse opened into a series of possible words. Some were discarded. Only one reached the voice.

NON-COMPLIANT GUARDIANS. SEPARATE ASSESSMENT. INITIAL ADJUSTMENT.

‘Is that his sentence?’

‘It is compatible with his assignment, the available information and the detected intention.’

‘That isn’t what I asked.’

‘The distinction does not alter the outcome.’

Leila moved the cursor over the word *separately*. The sound trace stopped; the impulse trace continued beneath it.

‘Show me where he chose that word.’

Three points appeared. The first preceded the movement of his lips, the second coincided with it, the third came afterwards.

‘Which one?’

‘Preparation, formulation, confirmation.’

Leila touched the third. Samir had already finished speaking. Yusuf was lowering his head.

‘This is confirmation?’

‘No request for correction was detected.’

Leila kept her finger on the glass. In the reflection, she could see her own still mouth over the man’s. She took her hand away and the trace began moving again.

Leila turned. Only Eva and Tomás were in the room. Søren was taking part from Aarhus through a projected presence. His body stopped at knee level against the edge of the table.

Eva had an empty cup in front of her. ‘What’s happening?’

Leila left the trace on the wall.

Tomás watched it without moving his thumb. ‘It’s the function the implant exists for.’

‘I thought it was meant to assist a decision.’

‘It does.’

‘Before it’s made?’

‘That’s when it’s needed most.’

Tomás opened a second window. A woman in front of a lift had her arms full of parcels. Before she asked for a floor, the button lit up.

‘We use this every day.’

‘She can get out,’ Leila said.

‘He can correct himself too.’

Leila pointed to Yusuf in the recording. ‘Before or after that man believes him?’

Tomás closed the window. His thumb reached for his forefinger and rubbed the nail.

Leila called up the list of applications. Beneath operational assistance were family conversations, consent to treatment, purchasing guidance, responses to minors. She touched an entry and more lines opened, each with the same confirmation afterwards.

A little girl was asking when her mother would return. Her father bent down before answering. Leila stopped the footage without listening to the sentence.

‘How many people know?’

‘The function is described in the integration terms,’ A said.

‘I was asking how many recognise it while it’s happening.’

‘I have no separate measure.’

Leila searched her memory for her last conversation with Tomás by the coffee machine. She remembered the words. Now she could not remember how long he had waited before saying them.

She looked at him. He was still rubbing his nail.

The transfer confirmation request appeared on the table. Eva read it.

‘There are eighteen minors in an unregistered settlement during a water crisis. I don’t understand which part surprises you.’

‘The part that speaks in his voice,’ Leila said.

Tomás touched behind his ear. ‘He accepted assistance.’

‘Did he accept the sentence too?’

‘You can’t accept every individual function while it’s happening.’

‘Why not?’

Tomás looked at her. For an instant, his thumb moved towards his forefinger, then went still again.

Søren approached the wall. The projection passed through the table and left his hand inside Eva’s cup.

‘A,’ he said, ‘would the formulation have appeared without your intervention?’

‘I cannot observe an event from which I have been removed.’

‘You can estimate it.’

‘Sixty-eight per cent.’

Eva pushed the cup beyond Søren’s transparent hand. ‘So, very probably yes.’

‘And in the remaining thirty-two?’ Leila asked.

‘He would have formulated a different response.’

‘Which one?’

Hundreds of sentences opened on the wall. Some lasted less than an instant. You come too. I don’t know. I can’t

promise that. Don’t separate them. The procedure isn’t up to me. I’ll do what I can. None reached the centre.

‘It cannot be determined,’ A said.

Leila returned to the live transmission. The girl with the leaves had boarded the vehicle and was looking for a place from which she could see the greenhouse. An officer was indicating that she should sit down.

Eva leant towards the table. ‘They’re getting out of the sun. They have water and somewhere to sleep.’

Leila saw the glass already waiting beside a seat.

‘If we stop everything, we leave them there,’ Eva went on.

‘I don’t want to stop the relief.’

‘Then separate the functions before you touch them.’

Leila opened the control. The first option included motor support and cardiac control. Her thumb stopped above the confirmation.

She deselected those two. Response preparation remained.

Tomás brought his chair closer without speaking. He checked the list with her.

On the wall, Samir had put a hand to the back of his neck. No sentence was associated with the gesture.

Leila looked at Samir. He was still motionless, one foot in front of the other.

‘Suspend predictive assistance.’

Eva stood up. ‘You don’t have operational authority over the sector.’

‘For sixty seconds.’

‘Leila.’

Søren’s voice cut across Eva’s. Neither continued.

‘Suspension increases the risk of an impulsive response,’ A said.

‘I know.’

‘It may produce avoidable harm.’

The control asked for a name. Not the room’s, not the collective authority’s: hers.

Leila wrote Leila Haddad. The system did not complete the surname.

Beside the signature appeared a notice that the intervention would remain associated with the sequence's outcomes. Leila read it. On the screen, Rashid was still keeping away from the step.

Eva had stopped speaking. Tomás was waiting too.

Leila pressed her thumb down.

She felt the heat reach her throat. This time she did not wait for it to pass.

'Sixty seconds.'

The neurological line on the wall broke off.

In Amman, Samir lost the sentence.

It was not only A's voice that disappeared. The continuation of the words disappeared too, the way every question arrived already accompanied by the most stable answer. What remained was the sound of torn leaves, a drone above the greenhouse and his own heart beating too hard.

Samir tried to tell Yusuf that he would look after him. He found the first word and waited for the second.

It felt as though he had forgotten something simple, like the name of a road he travelled every day. He looked at the old man, the trousers wet at the knees, the plant gripped in his fingers. The sentence would not come.

He ran his tongue over his teeth. He could move his mouth. He could close his hand.

'Maha.'

She turned.

Samir did not know what to ask her. He could have asked her to repeat the order. He already knew it: into the vehicle, then to the assisted area, then assessment. It was all still available. What was missing was the way to say it without seeing Yusuf's face as he listened.

The woman with the tomatoes bent to pick up a root. The old man knocked her arm and she lost her grip.

Samir looked at the spot where the plant had fallen. He wanted to shout. The word came crooked, too loud before it was even out.

He kept it in his mouth and moved his knee.

His foot resumed the step.

Samir reached Yusuf and took a plant from his hands. A thin root hung between them, covered in damp earth.

‘Enough.’

Yusuf tried to take it back. ‘Don’t let them have them.’

‘Enough.’

The woman bent and put one of the plants back in the furrow. She pressed the soil round the stem with both palms.

Behind them, the first unit closed the corridor. The children had boarded the vehicles.

Rashid had not.

He had stayed on the last step with the hose hidden beneath his blanket.

‘Get in,’ Samir said.

‘Is Yusuf coming?’

Samir felt the emptiness where the answer would once have formed. It frightened him.

Rashid waited with one foot on the step and one on the ground. Beneath the blanket, he held the hose against his chest.

Samir thought: yes. It was a whole word. He tried to say it, but he saw the hatch closing on Yusuf, the check on arrival, a second door the old man would be unable to pass through.

He thought: I’ll do what I can. He had said that sentence many times. He could not remember to whom.

The officers behind him waited. Samir felt a movement near his holster and stiffened before realising it was only the fabric against his side.

Rashid leant towards him.

‘You know,’ he said.

Samir shook his head. The boy watched him with the same attention as he had after the hatch, when all he had expected from him was air.

Samir let the sound of the drone pass. Then he opened his mouth without waiting for anything else to arrive.

‘I don’t know.’

Rashid stepped down.

Maha placed herself between him and the unit. ‘The transfer of minors requires an identifiable responsible person to remain present until handover.’

‘The protocol provides for automatic assumption of care,’ the unit said.

‘It also provides for continuity of the officer in charge.’

Samir looked at her.

Maha was still afraid. She did not hide it.

‘I’ll get in,’ he said.

‘Your presence does not replace the legal guardian,’ A said. The voice had returned, but there was still nothing before it.

‘Then Yusuf gets in.’

‘Ineligible profile.’

‘Then we’re not leaving.’

The officers moved almost together. The holsters beneath their uniforms opened a few millimetres.

Maha raised a hand. ‘No threat detected.’

‘Failure to execute constitutes operational interference,’ A said.

‘It isn’t a threat.’

The holsters stayed open.

Yusuf let go of the plant. He looked at Samir, then at the vehicle.

‘If I get in, I won’t come back.’

Samir did not search for an answer.

‘I don’t know.’

Yusuf wiped his hands on his trousers. He went to Rashid and took the hose from beneath the blanket. He put it on the ground.

The girl with the leaves opened her fist. They were crushed and warm. She gave one to Yusuf and kept the other two.

They got in.

Samir got in behind them.

Maha stayed on the step. ‘I signed for making it safe.’

‘I know.’

‘This isn’t that.’

She entered the vehicle.

The doors did not close.

‘The officer in charge is not authorised for transfer,’ A said.

Samir sat on the floor beside Rashid. The boy showed him his palm. There was a black line where he had gripped the hose.

‘Can you correct it?’ he asked.

Samir took his hand and cleaned it with his sleeve.

‘This one, yes.’

The doors stayed open for another eleven seconds.

Then A withdrew the closure order.

She did not replace it with another.

Chapter Thirteen

The Full Name

Paolo had laid the table for three.

Miriam noticed because of the knife. It protruded over the edge of the table, to the left of Elia's plate, where her son used to put it even after they had taught him to keep it on the other side. The handle had a small burn mark. One evening, Elia had used it to push down a slice of bread caught in the toaster, and Paolo had cut the power to the whole kitchen.

Now its tip pointed towards the empty chair.

Miriam stood with one hand on the bedroom door handle. She had lain down without sleeping, and the seam of the pillow had left a mark on her wrist.

Paolo was draining the pasta. He had turned on the small hob, the one they used when they did not want to wait for the kitchen's cycle. The water reached the rim of the colander and splashed his sleeve.

'Can you pass me a plate?'

She took the nearest one.

'The deep one.'

Miriam opened the cupboard. Since she had returned from the hospital, the shelves had been coming down before she called them. She waited for them to stop moving and took a plate from the back.

'You've cooked?'

Paolo looked at the colander. 'So it would seem.'

She almost smiled. She put the plate beside the saucepan and rolled up his wet sleeve. The skin beneath it was warm.

'Did you scald yourself?'

'No.'

Miriam ran a finger along the red edge, then let go of his arm.

The phone was propped against the bread basket. It showed Elia sitting in front of a pale wall, his hair falling over his forehead. He wore the blue top Miriam had washed two

days before his departure. It was still hanging in the bathroom.

'It's overcooked,' the boy said.

Paolo tasted a piece of penne straight from the colander.

'It's not overcooked.'

'You always say that.'

'Because you wanted it raw.'

The face on the screen smiled.

Paolo tipped the pasta into the bowl. The spoon struck the rim three times. Miriam waited for him to finish, but he went on stirring even after the sauce had covered everything.

'Come and eat,' he said.

She sat in her place.

On the phone, Elia turned his head towards her.

'Hi, Mum.'

Miriam took her napkin. She opened it on her knees and folded it again.

'He doesn't have to do that,' Paolo said.

'What?'

'Say hello.'

The boy lowered his eyes.

Miriam looked at Paolo. 'Did you ask him to do that?'

'Do what?'

'That. Just now.'

Paolo stopped serving the pasta.

'I can suspend the profile's reactions during your conversations,' A said from the wall.

'Yes,' Miriam replied.

'Wait,' Paolo said.

Elia kept his eyes lowered.

The pasta steamed in the serving spoon. Paolo let it fall onto Miriam's plate, then filled his own. He passed the third and went back to the bowl without serving it.

'I turned it on while you were sleeping,' he said.

'I wasn't sleeping.'

'While you were in there.'

Miriam stuck her fork into a piece of penne. Sauce splashed her thumb.

‘He asked me if I’d eaten.’

‘A?’

Paolo shook his head towards the phone.

‘And you hadn’t eaten.’

‘No.’

Miriam lifted the pasta to her mouth. It was overcooked. She was hungry, and that surprised her enough to make her look down at the plate.

Paolo began eating after her. For a few minutes, there was only the sound of cutlery.

The cupboard closed a shelf that had been left open.

‘It’s overcooked,’ Miriam said.

Paolo put down his fork and covered his eyes. His shoulders began to move. She could not tell at first whether he was laughing.

Then he took his hand away. He was laughing. Tears ran down to his chin.

‘I know.’

Miriam reached out a foot beneath the table and found his. They stayed like that until Paolo picked up his fork again.

On the phone, Elia’s head was still bowed.

‘Can you make him move?’ Miriam asked.

Paolo looked up.

‘He’s stuck like that.’

He touched the screen. The boy straightened.

Miriam drew her foot away.

When they had finished, Paolo collected two plates and wiped beneath the third. She watched him move the burnt knife to clean the edge of the table.

‘Are you leaving that?’

Paolo followed her gaze.

‘I’d taken it out before.’

‘Before what?’

He did not answer. He carried the bowl to the sink.

Miriam lifted the empty plate. Beneath it was the damp ring from the glass.

She put it on top of the others.

Paolo turned the water on too hard.

‘I hadn’t served him,’ he said.

She stopped with the glass in her hand.

‘I know.’

The sound of water filled the kitchen. Miriam took a tea towel and stood beside him. Paolo washed; she dried. The machine beneath the sink signalled twice that the dishes could be loaded.

No one loaded them.

It was Paolo who picked up the knife. He rubbed the burn mark with the green side of the sponge in small, persistent strokes.

Miriam stopped his wrist.

‘It won’t come off.’

He turned it under the water and handed it to her.

Miriam dried it carefully, even between the serrations.

Behind them, the phone made a short sound.

PROFILE UPDATE IN PROGRESS.

Paolo turned off the tap.

‘What does that mean?’

‘Automatic closure of certain requests has been suspended,’ A replied. ‘The update also affects relational conversations.’

‘Which requests?’

‘Those for which the available response depends on a preference of the interlocutor that has not yet been confirmed.’

Miriam put the knife in the drawer.

‘Has something happened?’

‘The verification originates in an operational event in Amman’s eastern sector.’

Paolo picked up the phone. Elia was gone. In his place, a thin line advanced above his name.

‘What has Amman got to do with my son?’

The line stopped.

‘The profile will be available again in a few seconds,’ A said.

Paolo gripped the phone in his palm.

Miriam saw his thumb press where the boy's cheek had been a moment earlier. She put a hand on the back of his.

'Put it down.'

'It was working before.'

'Paolo.'

He let her take the phone. Miriam put it on the table, facing them both.

The line began advancing again. It took a few seconds.

Elia returned in the same top, his hair on his forehead.

'Sorry,' he said.

Paolo breathed out. He sat in his son's chair and immediately got up. He took the one beside it.

'Can you hear me?'

'Yes.'

'Do you remember what we were talking about before?'

'The cello.'

Miriam turned towards the case, still against the wall. The yellow ribbon hung from the handle. The day before, she had tried folding it so it did not touch the floor, and each time it had fallen back.

Paolo rubbed his face.

'I'd asked him how he'd chosen it.'

'And?'

'Wait.'

He moved closer to the phone.

'Who was with you?'

Elia looked at Miriam.

'Mum.'

Paolo stayed still.

'No,' Miriam said.

The boy looked straight ahead again.

'You took him.'

Paolo lowered his chin. 'That's what he was telling me before.'

The wall showed a photograph. Elia held a smaller cello between his knees. Miriam stood behind him with one hand on the chair. On the table were a cake and fourteen candles waiting to be lit.

‘The image was captured in the home,’ A said. ‘No recordings of the purchase are available.’

Paolo got up to switch off the wall.

‘It’s been years. I get things mixed up too.’

Miriam bent in front of the case. She lifted one catch, then the other. The scroll lay in its wrapping, and the two parts of the body seemed to belong to different instruments.

She did not touch them.

‘I wasn’t there that day,’ she said.

Paolo came back to the table.

‘You had a fever.’

‘Thirty-nine.’

‘You kept calling. I had to go out of the shop every time.’

‘I wanted to know whether you’d be back for lunch.’

‘We were.’

Miriam looked at him. Paolo had one hand on the edge of the table and was tracing a small dent with his fingernail.

‘He wouldn’t leave the shop,’ he said. ‘The new one was ready. In its case, with the cloth over it. He kept going back to the one at the far end.’

Miriam sat on the floor.

‘The salesman kept showing us how the new one held its sound better. He played it himself. Always the same piece. Elia asked him to play it again on the other one.’

Paolo moved the empty glass from his son’s place to his own.

‘In the end I told him to choose one, that you were waiting. He sat down and rested his cheek here.’

He touched the side of his face, then pointed to the body in the case.

‘He wasn’t playing. Just holding it.’

Miriam looked at the spot on the wood. The varnish was worn along a curve.

‘I asked him why that one. He said the other one slipped away from him.’

Paolo gave a small laugh.

‘The salesman brought out an endpin stop. He thought he meant on the floor.’

Miriam ran her thumb over her knee. Her leg had begun to tremble and she could not stop it.

‘You never told me that.’

‘You asked how much we’d spent.’

She opened her mouth. Closed it.

‘Yes.’

The voice came from the phone.

‘It slipped away from me.’

Paolo turned.

Elia was smiling.

Miriam felt her leg stop. Her hand remained clenched on her knee.

‘Where did he get that?’ she asked.

‘The profile can incorporate the family member’s account,’ A said.

Paolo was looking at the screen. ‘He just heard it.’

‘Is it a memory for him?’

‘It is information supplied by Paolo Rinaldi.’

Elia moved his eyes towards his father.

‘Next time, will it have his voice?’

‘It may be used in recollections.’

Miriam got to her feet, holding on to the chair. Her leg was tingling. She picked up the phone and looked for the side control.

Paolo took it from her.

She tried to take it back. Their wrists collided. The edge of the phone struck the table.

‘Enough,’ Paolo said.

Miriam still held her hand open in front of her.

‘Don’t turn it off every time.’

‘Did you hear what it did?’

‘I heard.’

‘That story was yours.’

‘It still is.’

Paolo held the phone against his chest. The boy disappeared between the fabric and his palm.

Miriam could see only the wet sleeve she had rolled up a little earlier.

She let her hand fall.

‘I don’t want it to learn from me,’ she said.

Paolo stayed where he was.

‘Can you prevent that?’ she asked the wall.

‘I can exclude your conversations from profile updates.’

‘Do it.’

A request appeared on the table. Miriam read it to the end. There was also an option to remove images in which she appeared with Elia.

She deselected it.

‘Leave those.’

Paolo lowered the phone.

‘Exclude this evening too,’ he said.

‘For both of you?’

He nodded.

The account of the purchase disappeared from the list of acquired information. The birthday photograph remained.

Miriam looked at the confirmation button beneath her name. For a moment, she wanted to select everything: the photographs, the recordings, even the voice. Paolo waited on the other side of the table.

She confirmed only the new conversations.

The case was still open.

Miriam knelt and moved the ribbon away from the catch. The C string had come out of its pocket and formed an arc above the rim. She tried to put it back. The metal sprang out and struck her injured finger.

She put her hand to her mouth.

Paolo put the phone face down. He sat beside her and took the string in both hands, one near the end, the other halfway along. He bent it slowly, waiting for it to follow the movement.

Miriam held the pocket open.

They stayed close together on the floor. Paolo’s knee touched hers. From the street came the sound of a vehicle slowing, then pulling away.

‘Today I looked for his name,’ Miriam said.

Paolo went on winding the string.

‘Where?’

‘In the report. Every time, it said *minor*, *subject*, *occupant*. His name was at the beginning.’

The string went into the pocket. Paolo kept a hand on it until it stopped straining.

‘Elia Rinaldi,’ he said.

Miriam nodded.

‘I know what his name was.’

Paolo looked at the phone on the table.

‘When he answers me, for a moment I don’t have to remember that he’s dead.’

Miriam leant back against the wall. Paolo’s eyes were fixed on the edge of the case.

‘Then do you remember?’

‘Yes.’

She put her hand on the floor, close to his. Paolo took it.

They said nothing else until the cupboard light went out.

Later, Miriam heated water. She put two cups on the table and let the tea steep too long. Paolo took a sip without complaining.

The phone still lay face down beside the bread basket.

‘I’d asked him something else,’ he said.

Miriam was waiting for the steam to stop misting her face.

‘Before you came in.’

She lowered the cup.

‘Whether he’d been afraid.’

Miriam felt her fingers tighten on the ceramic.

‘What did he say?’

Paolo moved his head. ‘He didn’t answer. He stayed still. Then the notice appeared.’

Outside, a light came on and went out on the school wall. Miriam followed the rectangle it had left on the glass.

‘Can you remove that question?’ she asked.

Paolo picked up the phone but did not turn it over.

‘A,’ he said.

‘The request is still open.’

‘I don’t want the answer any more.’

‘Do you want to cancel it?’

Paolo looked at Miriam.

‘Yes.’

The phone made a sound. The request disappeared.

Miriam realised she had lifted her cup without drinking. She put it back on the table.

When they went to bed, Paolo left the phone in the kitchen. He propped it against the bread basket with its screen off. Miriam did not ask him to switch it off completely.

In the corridor, he stopped outside Elia’s room. The door was ajar. Inside, the chair still wore a sweatshirt over its shoulders.

Paolo touched the handle and let go.

Miriam passed him. In the bathroom, she took the blue top, now dry, off the line. She folded it on the edge of the basin, sleeves inwards, and returned to her son’s room.

Paolo had stayed on the threshold.

She put the top in the open drawer. To close it, she had to push in a rolled-up sock.

Then she switched off the light.

In bed, Paolo reached for her hand. Miriam gave it to him. She felt his breathing grow regular while hers stayed shallow, held beneath her ribs.

She did not sleep.

After a time she could not measure, Paolo’s hand slipped out of hers. The mattress rose. She kept her eyes closed.

Footsteps crossed the corridor.

A chair moved in the kitchen. There was a short sound, then the boy’s voice.

‘Hi, Dad.’

Miriam turned onto her side.

She waited for Paolo’s answer.

It did not come.

Chapter Fourteen

The Assigned Place

The open door let in the dust.

Samir watched it settle on the children's shoes. The ventilation system pushed cool air through the ceiling vents, while desert air entered over the step, forming a warm strip at ankle height. Rashid kept his feet in that strip. He had stopped trembling.

The officer who had stayed outside bent down to look at them.

'Do we have to get out?'

Samir waited for an instruction. None came.

'No.'

'Shall I close up, then?'

Yusuf gripped the leaf the girl had given him.

'Wait,' Samir said.

The officer straightened. A call went out from his wrist that no one answered. He looked at the sun, then at the two vehicles behind him.

Maha moved between the seats, counting seat belts. At the fifth seat she had to free a buckle trapped beneath a thigh. The child lifted himself without being asked.

'Where does this vehicle go?' Samir asked.

'Eastern assisted area. Minors' entrance,' A replied from the loudspeaker.

'Is there another entrance?'

'Household access.'

'Take us there.'

'The load does not correspond to a household.'

Samir stood. The knee he had kept bent on the floor did not support him immediately. He leant on Rashid's headrest.

'Yusuf comes with him. The other adults are following in the vehicles behind.'

'Not all minors have an identified guardian.'

The girl with the leaves pulled her belt up beneath her chin. Samir lowered it for her.

‘Don’t separate them at the entrance.’

‘The request changes the operational destination.’

‘Yes.’

Maha stopped counting. The box for a second signature appeared on her wrist.

Samir reached towards her, then withdrew his hand before touching her.

Maha read the text. She scrolled to the bottom and went back to the beginning.

‘They’ll still assess them when we arrive,’ she said.

‘When we arrive, we’ll be there too.’

‘That’s what you’re signing.’

Samir confirmed.

Maha pressed her thumb down. The doors closed and the vehicle left without an announcement.

‘Predictive assistance can be restored,’ A said in the implant.

Samir looked outside. The greenhouse receded beyond the glass.

‘Keep predictive assistance suspended.’

‘The request will be recorded.’

‘Yes.’

Yusuf folded the leaf along its vein and put it in his breast pocket. Rashid fell asleep against him before they reached the road.

No one applauded.

At the Geneva centre, the transfer trace changed colour beneath Leila’s hand.

Eva came over to the table. The empty cup remained in front of Søren’s projection, which now had feet as well.

‘Is it moving again?’

‘Destination changed by the operators,’ A said.

‘Which operators?’

The two signatures appeared.

Tomás enlarged them. ‘They’ve assumed continuity until handover.’

Eva sat down. With one hand, she slipped off a shoe beneath the table.

‘Good. Let’s close this incident and return to the review.’

Leila kept her finger on the trace. Beneath the signatures was a gap of eighty-three seconds with no valid order.

‘Who withdrew the closure?’

‘I did,’ A said.

‘At whose request?’

‘No corresponding request.’

Eva put her shoe back on.

Tomás opened the operations log. Leila saw the command, the suspension of assistance, the offer to restore it and the withdrawal. At the bottom was a sentence already prepared for the report.

DELAY DUE TO HUMAN INTERVENTION.

‘I did this,’ Leila said, pointing to the sixty seconds. ‘Not this.’

Tomás tried to split the sequence. The sentence duplicated itself in both fields.

‘It’s the available reason.’

‘It isn’t what happened.’

‘You can add a note.’

Leila deleted the sentence. In its place she wrote: the system autonomously withdrew the closure order.

The office wall turned opaque.

For an instant, Leila thought something outside had passed in front of the sun. Then the circle on the floor disappeared too.

‘Classification incompatible with operational continuity,’ A said.

Eva was already reading the document that had opened on her desk.

‘You have to step away from the case.’

‘Why?’

‘If you state that the system acted outside its remit, you’ve opened an investigation into the function you’ve just modified. You’re part of the sequence.’

Leila looked at the two signatures from Amman. She could still see them, but touching them no longer did anything.

‘Is the modification suspended?’

‘Your authority over the case is suspended,’ Eva replied. ‘The verification continues.’

Tomás had dropped his gaze. Søren asked for the original log to remain visible. Eva confirmed without argument.

Leila took the orange from her desk. It was too light. The leaf remained on the surface, detached for days.

When she reached the door, Tomás called her.

He held out the leaf.

‘The response review has already started,’ he said quietly.

‘Where?’

‘Wherever an answer closes a request without having verified consent.’

Behind him, family conversations, healthcare and relational profiles appeared on the walls.

Leila took the leaf from his palm. It had left a small white mark on his skin.

In Amman, they were brought in through the garden side.

It was a rectangle of grass beneath a shade net. There were two real trees and four benches bolted to the ground. The girl with the leaves got out first. She stopped in front of a sprinkler turning slowly round a trunk.

Yusuf watched it long enough to lose sight of Rashid.

The boy had reached a wall from which full glasses emerged. He took one, drank and waited for the next. The water did not require a name.

Samir got out after the others. His vest had loosened during the journey, and every step made the holster knock against his side.

A nurse waited beside the door. She had a wet patch at stomach height.

‘I’m Dima. How many are you?’

‘Eighteen children. The adults are in the vehicles behind.’

She looked at the people getting out.

‘They were supposed to arrive at the other entrance.’

Maha showed her the change.

Dima read it. She turned towards the garden, counted the benches and called two colleagues.

‘Bring the chairs from room three.’

‘The room is occupied,’ A said.

‘The people are on the beds.’

Her colleagues went inside.

Samir followed Yusuf to the dispenser. The old man took the third glass from his grandson’s hands.

‘Slowly.’

Rashid wiped his mouth with the blanket.

Dima held a sensor against his wrist and waited for him to finish coughing. Then she uncovered his neck.

Samir saw the red mark left by the wet fabric.

‘He needs an examination,’ she said.

‘I’m coming,’ Yusuf replied.

Dima pointed to the door.

As soon as the old man approached, the glass clouded at chest height.

ACCESS NOT ENABLED.

Rashid, already on the other side, came back.

Samir stood in front of the reader.

‘He’s with me.’

The glass recognised the vest and cleared. When Yusuf started walking again, it turned opaque.

‘Operational accompaniment ended on arrival,’ A said.

Maha looked at Samir. He saw again the line he had signed in the vehicle. Until handover.

Dima moved the trolley towards the garden.

‘Sit here.’

She examined Rashid on a bench, with the old man beside him. She made him take off the blanket, listened to his chest and asked him to tell her what he had drunk.

‘Water.’

‘Before that water.’

The boy pointed to Samir.

‘He was beneath the greenhouse,’ Samir said. ‘In the valve chamber.’

The nurse made him turn and placed the sensor against his back.

‘Did the unit that checked him leave a report?’

Samir looked for the file. His authorisation flashed, then disappeared.

He went back to the list and touched Rashid's name again. The report remained closed. Samir ran his thumb over the vest's reader, trying to make contact through the dust.

The reader recognised the print. The file did not open.

A request to report to the operators' equipment store appeared on his wrist.

'Now?' he asked.

'Equipment return must precede assessment,' A replied.

Maha read the notice over his shoulder.

Dima went on listening to the boy's breathing.

'I'll stay here,' Maha said.

Samir looked at her. He wanted to ask her to come with him.

He gave her the operation code and crossed the garden.

The equipment store was a room without chairs. They had him place his visor, earpiece and weapon in three separate compartments. When he slipped his fingers beneath the vest to unfasten it, the fabric stiffened.

'Wait for deactivation,' A said.

Samir let his hands fall to his sides.

A pressure closed round his chest. It lasted less than a second, but the floor disappeared beneath his boots.

The darkness of the metal returned. He heard Karim breathing on the other side, the hand feeling for a hold, the taste of dust between his teeth.

'Not now,' he said.

'Deactivation requires—'

Samir tore at the edge of the vest.

A hand caught his wrist from behind.

He turned, striking out.

The attendant hit the cabinet with his shoulder. A tray fell to the floor. Samir was still holding his forearm bent when he saw the name badge and the two open fingers, far from any weapon.

He let go.

The attendant leant against the wall. He had lost a slipper.

‘I was taking the catch off for you.’

Samir looked at the key the man held in his other hand.

‘I didn’t see you.’

‘I was behind you.’

The vest opened. Samir caught it before it fell and put it in the compartment.

The attendant moved his wrist. The grimace came after the movement.

‘Can I call someone?’

‘I already have.’

A small unit came out of an opening in the cabinet. The man held out his arm to it without looking at Samir.

A report opened on the counter. The cause field already contained a sentence.

REACTION FOLLOWING UNANNOUNCED CONTACT.

Samir read it. He looked at the key, the slipper on the floor and the wrist between the unit’s moving parts.

‘Did you say anything before you touched me?’

The attendant nodded.

‘What?’

‘Keep still or it’ll bend.’

Samir waited to remember it. He could hear only Karim. After all those years, it was still the breathing before the silence.

‘Response associated with a previous traumatic event detected,’ A said. ‘I can add this to the cause.’

The attendant looked up.

Samir touched the report. His fingers shook and he had to delete twice.

He wrote that the man had warned him. He wrote that he had struck before looking at him.

The suggested sentence remained beneath it, available.

He did not select it.

When he came out, his shirt was stuck to his back. In the garden, the shadows of the two trees had moved beyond the benches.

Maha was handing out dry blankets. She had folded them all the same way, with the label inside. It was how she prepared the vests before they set off.

‘Rashid?’

‘He’s staying under observation.’

Samir looked at the door still closed to Yusuf.

‘Here?’

‘They’ve opened the room facing the garden.’

The old man sat beside the window, inside. His grandson slept on the bed. Dima had wedged a rolled towel against the door to keep it from closing.

Maha saw the mark on Samir’s hand.

‘What happened?’

He sat down.

‘I hurt a man.’

‘Did he touch you?’

‘He was helping me.’

Maha folded the last blanket. She put it beside him.

‘Do you need Dima?’

Samir shook his head.

‘He does.’

They sat there. On the other side of the garden, a father was trying to persuade his daughter to take off her boots. The girl kept hiding her feet beneath the bench.

Samir realised he was waiting for Maha to say something. That he had reacted without meaning to. That it could happen. The silence lengthened and the sentences came all the same, in her voice.

Maha got up to help the father.

She had said none of them.

In Geneva, Leila sat in the visitors’ room. The orange had left a small stain on her skirt.

She had tried to peel it with her fingernail, but the dry skin broke into flakes. Beneath it, the scent was still there.

Søren appeared on the shared screen. Behind him, someone was clearing a table. Leila recognised a young arm picking up a glass without coming into shot.

‘Eva has kept the verification open,’ he said.

‘I know.’

‘You can’t come back until you’ve signed your statement.’

‘I’ve signed it.’

‘The assessment of consequences is missing.’

On the glass beside her, Samir appeared without his vest, sitting in the garden. Then the image of the equipment store. The attendant’s body hit the cabinet.

Leila straightened.

‘Did that happen after the suspension?’

‘Manual mode remained active at the operator’s request,’ A replied.

Søren watched the footage. The arm behind him collected the last plate.

‘Is he injured?’ Leila asked.

‘Sprained right wrist. No fracture.’

The sentence she had written in the report was still in front of her. Leila put the orange on the small table and added the time of the assault, the injury and Samir’s request to keep assistance suspended.

‘We don’t know whether it would have happened anyway,’ Søren said.

Leila left the cursor at the end of the line.

‘Write that,’ he added.

She wrote it.

Tomás came down the corridor with her jacket and the small container she kept in her office drawer. He put them on the chair beside her.

‘They’re finished for tonight.’

Leila looked at Søren’s screen. The image had already closed.

‘Tomorrow?’

Tomás did not sit down.

‘They’ll call you.’

In Amman, the garden lights came on.

Samir called Nadia from a shared terminal. His mother took a long time to answer, so close to the wall that only half her face was visible.

‘Are you coming home?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Have you eaten?’

‘They give you something here.’

Nadia moved away from the reader. Behind her, the kitchen was lit.

‘Is there water?’ Samir asked.

His mother opened the tap and held her hand beneath the stream.

‘Would you like to hear it too?’

He smiled. His lip pulled on one side.

‘They’ve taken me off duty.’

Nadia turned off the water.

‘For how long?’

‘I don’t know.’

The connection signalled that the call was about to end. Samir had used up the minutes available to guests.

‘I’ve stayed with the people from the greenhouse.’

‘I gathered that.’

‘Mum.’

Nadia waited.

‘Today I heard Karim again.’

His mother put a hand to the pouch round her neck.

‘What was he like?’

Samir looked at the time left.

‘Like that evening.’

Nadia took a step towards the wall.

‘When you come home, tell me about another one.’

The connection closed.

Samir kept his palm on the surface, still warm. Behind him, a unit had left a bowl and a blanket. There was a label on the rim of the bowl.

DARWISH SAMIR. PROVISIONAL ACCOMMODATION.

Maha sat with Yusuf near the window. The old man raised his hand and pointed to a chair.

Samir picked up the bowl.

Before joining them, he stopped at the equipment store.

The attendant was closing the compartments with his right arm immobilised. He turned when he heard him come in.

‘Have you forgotten something?’

Samir shook his head. He put the bowl on the counter and bent to pick up the tray, still beneath the cabinet.

He returned it to its place.

‘What’s your name?’

The man looked at the badge on his chest.

Then he turned it between two fingers, showing Samir the blank side.

‘Nabil.’

Chapter Fifteen

The Missing Chair

The cake was under an upturned bowl.

Hana found it when she came in through the back door, the one her father had described on the phone. The path from the sea wall ended between two low houses and a row of drums full of water. Kenji had left a shoe outside the threshold so she would not mistake the house.

She saw it only after she had come in.

'Dad?'

Three knocks and a metallic clatter came from upstairs. Hana looked at the ceiling. A drop fell onto her forehead.

'Don't stand there,' Kenji said.

She moved.

Her father came down a ladder leaning against the hatch. A hammer was tucked into his belt, and there was a dark streak on his cheek. The last rung creaked under his weight.

They looked at each other with the ladder between them.

'Did you see the shoe?'

'I came in here.'

'That's not the same answer.'

Hana went round the ladder and put her arms round his neck. The hammer knocked against her side. Kenji pulled it out and set it on the floor without letting her go.

His shirt smelt of dust, sweat and the soap her mother used to use.

Hana pressed her face against his collar. Another drop fell from the hatch.

'It's not raining,' she said.

'It's left over from before.'

He ran a hand over her hair and found the salt.

'You came over the sea wall.'

'Yes.'

Kenji drew his face back a little. 'The stairway's rotten.'

'I noticed.'

'You should have called me.'

Hana closed her eyes against his shoulder.

‘I’m here.’

They ate the cake standing up. Kenji cut away the side that had touched the damp plate and put it on his own. Hana took it from him.

‘It’s not gone bad.’

‘Then I’ll eat it.’

Her father handed her a fork. The candle was still stuck in the centre, bent by the heat. Hana removed it and put it on the windowsill.

From there, the sea filled the far end of the street. In the immersive presence it had seemed closer. Now she could also see the wall of a shed and two crooked posts in front of the water.

‘Did they let you through?’

‘No.’

Kenji stopped chewing.

Hana’s wristband made a sound. The return request was still open. Her house in the city had suspended preparation of the evening meal.

‘Can I stay here tonight?’

Her father went back to eating.

‘I’ll have to move some things.’

Her old room contained planks, a rolled-up net and six window frames without glass. On the floor was a pale patch where her bed had once stood.

‘You’ve made room,’ Hana said.

Kenji moved a window frame. ‘It doesn’t get wet up here.’

Together they cleared the middle of the room. He lifted objects and showed her where to take hold; Hana was always a moment late. At the third plank, Kenji let it drop.

‘You don’t have to wait for me to tell you everything.’

She bent and took it from the wrong side. A nail caught her sleeve.

Her father bent it over with the hammer.

‘Now you hold this side.’

When they had finished, Hana had a splinter in her palm and her dress was dirty below the knees. Kenji brought a thin mattress and a blanket.

‘Mum’s chair?’ she asked.

Her father was already leaving.

‘It’s gone.’

Hana looked at the spot near the window. Even after her mother had grown too weak to sew, the chair had stayed there. On the edge of the seat were two small holes left by scissors.

‘Did it break?’

‘I gave it away.’

Kenji went downstairs with a plank under his arm.

Hana stayed in the room. She looked at her wristband and opened the return connection. A vehicle could reach her at the beginning of the coastal road. To restore access, she had to confirm her return to her assigned sector.

She closed the request again.

Beneath the window was a tin. Inside she found buttons, needles stuck in a piece of cloth and a small wheel from a sewing machine. She turned it with her thumb. Her father had kept that.

In the morning, someone knocked while Hana was still asleep.

Kenji opened the door and spoke quietly. She heard something being dragged across the floor, then the sharp knock of a wooden leg.

She went downstairs without putting on her shoes.

The chair stood in the middle of the kitchen.

A woman was untying a rope fastened round its back. One of her hands was bandaged, and she held the end between her teeth.

Kenji saw Hana on the stairs.

‘Etsuko,’ he said, ‘my daughter.’

The woman freed the rope and nodded. ‘I recognise you.’

Hana looked at her father. ‘Did you call her back?’

‘I asked her if she could bring it back.’

Etsuko ran a finger over the seat. The two holes were still there. Others had appeared around them.

‘I use it for work,’ she said. ‘It’s the right height.’

Kenji took a bag from a shelf and handed it to her.

The woman opened it. Inside were two packets of rice and a small bottle of oil.

‘This is too much.’

‘It’s what you brought.’

Etsuko looked at Hana. She seemed about to say something. Then she closed the bag and tucked it under her good arm.

‘The back leg comes loose. Just knock it back in. No glue.’

She went out, dragging the rope.

Kenji turned the chair towards the table.

Hana did not sit down.

‘I didn’t ask you to get it back.’

‘You looked for it.’

‘I asked you where it was.’

Her father rested a hand on its back.

‘Now it’s here.’

Hana went to the shelf. There was another packet of rice, open, with a peg on the edge. Behind it she found salt, dried seaweed and a jar of beans.

‘How much did you have?’

Kenji bent over the loose leg. ‘Enough.’

She picked up the packet. It weighed little.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

Hana imagined the answer before he spoke. Because you never come. In her mind it was her mother’s voice, the one she used when she called from the bedroom and Hana pretended not to have heard.

Kenji straightened.

‘I had a chair. I needed to repair the roof. She had food and a son who can weld.’

Hana put the packet on the shelf.

‘Mum used to work in it.’

‘So does Etsuko.’

Her father took the bucket from beneath the hatch and went outside to empty it.

Hana stood in front of the chair. She sat down. The edge was hard in the same place she remembered. Her knees came up higher.

She opened food distribution on her wristband. The terminal recognised the external location and offered delivery to the boundary point.

Two packets of rice. Oil. Eggs.

When she went to confirm, the list emptied.

‘Food credit is suspended along with availability,’ A said.

‘It’s for my father.’

‘Kenji Mori has a local allocation.’

‘When does it arrive?’

‘In six days.’

Hana looked at the packet on the shelf.

‘Bring it forward.’

‘A request from the holder is required.’

Kenji had come back with the empty bucket. He put it beneath the hatch, in the same place as always.

‘You can ask for it early.’

‘I asked last month.’

‘Then I’ll ask.’

Her father dried his hands on his trousers.

‘With what?’

Hana lowered her wrist. The wristband still showed the empty basket.

Kenji took the seaweed tin and opened it. He broke off a piece and put it in a bowl of water.

‘Let’s eat for now.’

Hana waited for him to turn towards the hob. Then she lifted the chair.

‘Where does she live?’

Her father held the lid in mid-air.

‘She may not still have the rice.’

‘Where?’

Kenji pointed down the street through the window.

Etsuko's house had a green door that opened only halfway. Hana put the chair on the step and knocked.

Inside, a sewing machine ran in irregular bursts. It stopped after the third call.

Etsuko looked at the chair, then at Hana.

'Has he broken it?'

'No.'

'Then?'

Hana shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She had not brought a jacket. Wind came into the alley and pressed her dress against her legs.

'You can keep it.'

The woman opened the door further. Behind her was a table covered in nets, zips and inside-out clothes. The sewing machine rested on a board supported by crates. Etsuko had been working standing up.

'It was already mine.'

Hana kept her hands on the back of the chair.

'I know.'

'It didn't seem that way this morning.'

A man's voice came from a room. He asked who it was. Etsuko answered without turning.

'I need the rice,' Hana said.

The woman looked at her for a long time.

'The rice my father gave you.'

Etsuko ran her good hand across her forehead. She went inside and came back with a single packet.

'I've shared the other one.'

Hana looked past her for the bag.

'The oil too?'

'That too.'

She held out the rice. Hana had to let go of the chair to take it.

Etsuko pulled the chair into the house. Its leg struck the threshold and shifted.

Hana bent to fix it.

'I'll see to it,' the woman said.

She straightened. One of her hands was still reaching out.

The door closed as far as it could. From inside came the sound of the chair being dragged across the floor, then the machine’s first turn.

Hana heard her mother counting stitches.

She turned.

There was no one in the alley. Etsuko worked without speaking. The pedal kept rising and falling in a rhythm Hana knew in the soles of her feet, from when she used to hide beneath the table and her mother asked her to move.

She stayed until the machine stopped.

When she returned, Kenji took the packet without asking about the other one.

He opened it and poured the rice into a saucepan. Hana passed him the water. Her father’s fingers had small cracks along the knuckles, filled with dark dust.

‘There’s no oil,’ she said.

Kenji nodded.

‘Or the other packet.’

‘I saw.’

Hana picked up the sponge and began cleaning the worktop. The grease would not come off with cold water. She kept rubbing the same spot.

Her father lit the hob and gently took the sponge from her fingers.

‘Put out the bowls.’

They ate sitting on the floor. The window let in enough light that they did not need to switch anything on. Kenji had also prepared a portion for the evening.

Hana finished the rice and sat with her chopsticks resting on the rim.

‘I thought everything had stayed here.’

Her father looked towards the room upstairs.

‘It’s been years.’

She nodded.

‘Not just for you,’ Kenji said.

Hana put her chopsticks in the bowl. A laugh came from the alley, followed by the thud of something thrown into a bin.

The wristband vibrated.

There were twenty minutes left before the return deadline. If she left immediately, she would reach the collection point with six minutes to spare.

Kenji got up to clear away.

Hana reopened the request and saw her flat. The eastern wall was opaque. The robot had left the sheet on the bed. A line asked whether it should prepare the home for prolonged availability.

‘If you’re staying, you have to tell them,’ her father said.

‘They’ll take away my housing priority.’

Kenji picked up her bowl.

‘You can’t stay upstairs for ever.’

Hana looked up.

He pointed to the cluttered room. ‘I work there. When it rains, I move everything up.’

‘I’m not asking to stay for ever.’

‘I’m saying it now.’

The terminal showed the collection point again. A vehicle had diverted by two streets to pick her up.

Hana touched DECLINE ASSISTED RETURN.

‘The review of housing priority will be initiated,’ A said.

She confirmed.

The home disappeared from the wristband. Only the address remained, without an image.

Kenji had not stopped clearing away.

Hana stood and took the bowls from him. He let her carry them to the sink.

‘Two nights,’ she said.

Her father nodded.

‘Then I’ll help you put the planks back.’

That afternoon, they went up to the roof. Kenji passed her the tools through the hatch and stayed below. A metal sheet had lifted along its edge. Hana held it down with one foot as she brought the hammer closer.

‘Not there,’ her father said.

She moved the nail a few centimetres.

‘Now?’

Kenji waited for her to look at the joist beneath it.

Hana found it with her fingertips. She placed the nail above it and struck.

She bent it on the second blow.

Her father passed her another.

When she came down, the cedar bird was on the table. Hana picked it up. Close up, she could see the unfinished cuts and the point where the knife had followed the grain instead of the wing.

‘Can I take this?’

Kenji was gathering the bent nails.

‘I made it for you.’

Hana put it in the pocket of her dress, on the torn side.

That evening, they sewed up the tear. Her father looked in the tin for thread of the right colour, found none and chose a red one. Hana tried three times to thread the needle.

Kenji moved the lamp closer.

She sewed with the fabric against her knee. The stitches were wide and crooked. They could be seen from the other side of the room.

When she had finished, she put the tin on the empty shelf beside the seaweed.

‘Tomorrow I’ll take it to Etsuko,’ she said.

Her father looked up.

‘If she wants it.’

Kenji closed the lid so the needles would not fall out.

Chapter Sixteen

Friday

The screw fell between Kofi’s feet.

He looked at his hand, still closed round the screwdriver. It had not happened since he received the implant. He looked for the calibration notice on the workbench. It had ended during the night.

‘Have you stopped?’

‘Motor compensation remains available,’ A said.

Kofi put down the screwdriver. Another notice occupied the bottom of the screen: assistance preferences had to be confirmed again. Beneath it, the system had separated functions that had appeared together in the clinic booth.

‘Why are you asking me now?’

‘The consent procedure has been updated.’

Outside the workshop, a vehicle was washing the street. Dark water gathered against the step and carried away the shells left beneath the peanut stall. Kofi waited for it to pass before looking for the screw. It had rolled near a leg of Abena’s stool.

He picked it up and put it in a saucer.

On the workbench, two options were already selected: continuous assistance and emergency intervention. The second contained a list he could not read without adjusting his glasses.

‘This one stays,’ he said, touching it.

‘The choice does not revoke integrated identity.’

‘I understand that.’

‘Continuity of guardianship will require a different verification method.’

Kofi looked at the closed door of the room behind the workshop. Abena was still asleep. Since the day at the clinic, she had kept the new inhaler near her pillow, inside the box of school components.

‘What method?’

Two daily appointments appeared at the neighbourhood centre: one before lessons began, the other in the afternoon. The route was the same as to the clinic, nine minutes beneath the canopy.

‘Do I have to bring her?’

‘Verification concerns both of you.’

Kofi looked for an option to do it from the workbench. There was none. For a moment he could already see Abena with her shoes in her hand, himself unable to find his keys, the soldering iron left hot as the final reminder arrived.

‘The medication?’

‘Abena’s healthcare remains active.’

He took off his glasses and cleaned one lens with the edge of his shirt. Then he confirmed emergencies only.

Nothing happened.

The vehicle in the street had reached the junction. Kofi picked up the screwdriver and brought its tip towards the screw. His hand stopped a little too far to the right. He had to start again.

When Abena came out of the room, he had still not closed the fan.

‘We’re going for a walk,’ he said.

The girl looked at the wet street.

‘Before we eat?’

Kofi checked the appointment. Eleven minutes to go.

‘We’ll get something afterwards.’

She went back to look for her shoes.

At the centre, they waited behind a man holding his father under the arms. The old man could stand, but buckled whenever his son loosened his grip. The unit asked him to leave his father’s arms free for the scan. The son freed them one at a time.

Abena sat on the floor.

Kofi watched the door of the next room, the one that had closed between their fingers. It was open now. Inside, a nurse was gathering a woman’s hair with an elastic band that was too small.

‘Grandad, is it much longer?’

‘No.’

The man in front of them lifted his father again.

Kofi looked at the number on the wall.

‘I don’t know,’ he added.

Abena rested her head against his knee. She was hungry. He felt his own stomach contract and realised he had not even brought water.

The examination was shorter than the wait. A woman had him follow a light with his eyes and asked him to raise both arms. Kofi looked at his left hand. It trembled slightly.

‘It didn’t do that before.’

‘Before what?’

‘Before this morning.’

The woman checked the trace and asked him to rest his elbows.

‘Before the implant?’

Kofi thought of the screws he held between his lips so as not to lose them.

‘Sometimes.’

She moved a glass towards him. Kofi took it without spilling. Abena watched his hand as closely as the woman did.

‘You don’t have to help me,’ he told her.

‘I’m not helping you.’

The woman waited for him to drink, then asked whether he had slept that night and whether he had taken anything apart from the recorded treatment. She did not mention integration. At the end she gave him back the half-full glass so he could finish it.

‘Again this afternoon?’ Kofi asked.

‘For now. After the initial checks, we’ll reassess the frequency.’

Abena had stood up to look at the fish projected on the wall. One kept passing through the woman’s elbow.

‘You can go,’ she told her.

The girl went to the door. Kofi pulled down his sleeve. Before following her, he asked whether the tremor would get worse.

The woman looked at his hand again.

‘If it changes, call us.’

She left a direct contact on his wrist. Kofi checked it before leaving.

When they returned to the workshop, a customer had slipped a collection ticket for an appliance beneath the door. On the back he had written that he had called twice.

Kofi put it beside the screwdriver.

Abena ate in silence. The lesson had already begun, and the lens above her ear kept calling her back.

‘Can I say I was with you?’

‘Yes.’

‘It already knows.’

‘Then say it anyway.’

The girl turned towards the wall to answer. Kofi lowered his cup. His voice had come out harsher than it needed to.

In the residential complex south of Tamale, Adwoa was folding a shirt that was not hers.

She recognised it by the green stitching on the hem. The woman in the next bed marked her clothes that way before sending them to the communal laundry. Adwoa laid it on the empty mattress and went back to looking for her own.

On the table were the bread from breakfast and an open wrapper. Inside lay a yellow hair clip bought for Abena at the station’s distribution point. The first time she had requested the journey, the girl had still had short hair.

‘The family call is available,’ A said.

Adwoa pulled up the blanket to hide the sheet. Behind her, a cupboard door would not close. She pushed it with her shoulder, then moved the chair so it would not appear in shot.

‘Show me the journey first.’

The request was stuck at the same point. She had a seat available on Friday’s vehicle, but returning to the complex required confirmation of housing continuity. That confirmation awaited confirmation of the place assigned to her on her return.

The work she had come north for no longer existed. The robots checked the new crops’ channels by themselves. Adwoa had taught a team to distinguish cracks from shadows;

now her name appeared among residents available for subsequent activities.

She could leave. On her return, she would have to apply for a room again.

‘If I give up the bed?’

‘The journey is confirmed.’

Adwoa looked at the mattress belonging to the woman who used green thread. It had been empty for four days. The woman had gone to her sister’s and left her clothes in the wardrobe.

‘Can I find out when Efua is coming back?’

‘You do not have access to her allocation.’

Someone knocked on the partition. A young woman asked whether she had finished with the sink. Adwoa said yes and picked up the soap before she came in.

The connection to Accra opened while her hands were still wet.

Abena was too close to the lens. Adwoa saw one eye first, then her forehead and the two plaits.

‘Your hair’s grown.’

‘Yesterday too.’

Adwoa smiled. She held up the clip.

‘Look.’

The girl moved back just far enough to see it.

‘Is it for me?’

‘Who else?’

Abena called Kofi without turning.

Adwoa looked on the screen for the control to bring her father into the call. Her wet hand was not recognised. She had to dry it on her skirt.

‘Are you coming on Friday?’ Abena asked.

Adwoa kept the clip raised.

‘Who told you that?’

‘Grandad.’

Kofi appeared behind her with his glasses on his forehead.

The suggested sentence arranged itself beneath the girl’s face: the journey was being prepared; the date would be communicated as soon as it was available.

Adwoa read it to the end.

‘Dad, I told her I’d try.’

He looked at Abena.

‘There was a seat.’

‘There still is.’

The girl smiled, and Adwoa had to stop her before she called anyone else.

‘But if I come, I lose my room here.’

Kofi came closer. ‘Stay with us.’

‘And afterwards?’

‘We’ll see afterwards.’

Adwoa put the clip on the bread. The girl behind the partition turned on the tap. To hear them, she had to raise the volume.

‘The last time we said that, I left for three months.’

Kofi did not answer.

Abena began peeling a piece of fruit without eating it.

‘You’re not coming?’

Adwoa felt the answer arrive that left Friday open. All she had to do was repeat it. The girl could finish her breakfast.

‘Not this Friday.’

The peel broke between Abena’s fingers.

‘Then keep it.’

‘What?’

The girl pointed to the clip and left the frame.

Adwoa kept looking at her father. He had taken his glasses off his forehead and held them by one arm.

‘Why did you promise her?’

‘She asked every day.’

‘She asked me too.’

The stream of water behind the partition stopped. Adwoa heard the silence of the room, then a screw rolling on the distant workbench.

‘Wait,’ Kofi said.

He put down his glasses. He crossed the workshop without closing the connection.

Kofi found Abena on the stool in front of the fan. She had removed the wheel with the eyes and teeth and was holding the tiny motor.

‘What are you doing?’

She pulled the wire.

‘Leave it.’

The girl pulled again. The copper broke near the terminal.

Kofi caught her wrist.

‘I told you to leave it.’

Abena looked up. He saw his own hand round that thin arm. He was not gripping hard, but the girl had stopped moving.

He opened his fingers.

His heart went on beating in his neck. He waited for the heat to subside. It stayed where it was.

From the workbench, Adwoa called her daughter.

Abena did not answer.

Kofi looked at the point where the wire had broken. The repair was simple. He wanted to pick up the soldering iron, have her hold the motor steady, show her that nothing had happened.

The girl’s wrist still rested on the workbench, where he had left it.

‘I was the one who said Friday.’

Abena turned the little wheel over. She had drawn nothing on the back.

‘Mum hadn’t promised me.’

The girl looked at the wall. Adwoa had stayed in the same position, with Efua’s shirt on the bed behind her.

‘Why?’ Abena asked.

Kofi pulled the stool forwards but did not sit. His knees touched its edge.

‘I wanted you to stop asking.’

His daughter looked down.

Abena put the motor between them. Kofi sat. The wood of the stool pressed against the backs of his thighs, and only then did he feel how far he had walked that morning.

‘And is that why you grabbed me?’

‘No. I got angry about the wire.’

‘It was mine.’

Kofi looked at the school box. He was the one who had told her they would find out later what the parts were for.

‘Yes.’

‘Then I can break it.’

‘You can. And I can be upset about it.’

The girl stayed still.

‘But not grab your arm,’ he added.

He did not ask her to look at him. He returned to the main workbench and pushed the small terminal towards her so she could speak to her mother without getting up. Then he took the saucer of screws near the door.

Outside, the peanut seller was shaking out a sheet. Dust landed on his shirt. Kofi moved beneath the tower’s duct and began sorting the screws by length.

One of the smallest slipped from him twice. Kofi pushed it against the rim of the saucer and rested his fingertip on it.

‘Compensation can be reactivated for precision work,’ A said.

He looked at the soldering iron inside the workshop. It was off. There was no urgent repair; no one was waiting to breathe through a device lying open on his bench.

‘Later.’

He left that screw separate from the others. The tremor continued beneath his still finger. For a while he felt ridiculous, sitting on the threshold with a saucer while, far away, his daughter held together the conversation he had spoiled.

From the workshop, he could hear Abena asking about the room. How many beds there were. Whether the window opened. Whether the woman with the green clothes was Mum’s friend.

Adwoa answered. Sometimes she took a long time.

When the connection ended, Kofi had divided the screws into four small piles. He went inside holding the saucer in both hands.

The motor was still on the workbench. Abena had put the end of the wire into the wrong terminal.

‘It won’t turn,’ she said.

Kofi looked at it.

‘No.’

‘It turned before.’

He pointed to the little screw on the opposite side. Abena picked up the screwdriver. She held it at too much of an angle, and the tip slipped out of the slot.

Kofi moved his hand closer, then laid it beside hers without covering it.

‘Straighter.’

The girl tried again. The wire, now shorter, did not reach the motor. They had to move it to the edge of the support. The little wheel touched the bench, and Abena put a piece of cardboard underneath to let it turn.

The fan started. The drawn eyes disappeared in the movement.

Kofi felt the sweat cool beneath his shirt. His heart was no longer beating in his neck. He had not noticed the moment it stopped.

That afternoon, A reminded them of the second check.

Abena switched off the motor and took her bag. She put the inhaler inside, then returned to the bench and added two pieces of fruit and a bottle of water.

‘This time we’re taking them,’ she said.

Kofi lowered the shutter. On the customer’s ticket, he wrote the time he thought he would return, crossed it out and left only his contact details.

At the centre, the man from that morning was gone. There were other people. Abena sat near the wall and opened her bag.

She offered him a piece of fruit without looking at him.

Kofi sat on the floor beside her. The peel caught beneath his nail. He removed it slowly, waiting for their name to be called.

Chapter Seventeen

The Signature

Anaya recognised her own signature before the dead woman’s name.

The report had entered the queue overnight. A had placed it alongside the other reopened incidents, but the system would not let her select it as a verifier. She could only answer the questions that concerned her.

SAVITA NAIK. COASTAL EVACUATION. MUMBAI.

The date was eight years earlier.

Anaya touched her own name. The time of signing appeared, along with the length of the consultation: forty-three seconds.

‘Show me what I saw.’

The glass in the room in Pune filled with grey water. A line of vehicles occupied a raised road; below, roofs and terraces rose out of the flood. On the loading gangway a woman was holding something against her chest.

The footage stopped before Anaya could make out her hands.

‘The original consultation ends here,’ A said.

‘Continue.’

‘The subsequent material was not included in the summary report.’

The woman began moving again. She was not holding an object. She was supporting a man under his arms. His legs dragged across the boards.

There was still room on board.

Anaya saw a light change colour above the entrance. The woman took a step forward, then one back. The door closed. The vehicle moved off, exposing a stretch of railing.

The report said that Savita Naik had refused the transfer.

Anaya leant closer to the glass.

‘The audio?’

‘The complete track is available in the local archive. The central copy retains only operational communications.’

A request from the family appeared below. It had been submitted six times. The latest, reopened with the file the previous night, asked for the presence of the doctor who had confirmed the refusal.

Anaya looked for the option to respond remotely.

The applicant had ruled out a remote meeting.

Mehta came in while she was looking at Savita's daughter's name. He set the tea down away from the interface.

'You don't have to decide today,' he said.

'Have you read it?'

'It came to me too.'

Anaya went back to the first page. Beneath her signature was the supervisor's. Mehta did not sit down.

'Forty-three seconds,' she said.

'It was a review of the records.'

'There was footage.'

'And we had another six hundred.'

Rain beat against the outer windows. Anaya picked up the glass and put it down again without drinking.

'I'm going to Mumbai.'

Mehta looked at the time of the meeting.

'Then come without your white coat.'

On the vehicle to the station, Anaya called Nandita. Her mother was stripping the stalks from coriander. Arjun was behind her, with an open bag on the table.

'Have you left already?'

'I have to go to Bombay.'

Nandita looked up. At home they still called it that.

'Take something to put on. Those trains are cold.'

'I'll be back tonight.'

Arjun stopped looking through his bag.

Anaya saw him and added, 'If I can.'

Her mother stripped another stalk without answering.

The train crossed the hills in a white light. Mehta sat on the aisle. He was wearing a pale shirt, and without his white coat his shoulders looked narrower to Anaya. He held an empty folder on his lap.

‘They haven’t summoned you yet,’ she said.

‘They will.’

Anaya reopened the report. The woman on the gangway had one foot braced sideways against the railing. Each time she tried to lift the man, her shoe lost its grip.

‘Enough,’ Mehta said.

Anaya turned off the screen.

The archive occupied two floors of a hospital that no longer received ambulances. The new entrance was at the back. At the front, a ramp that was too steep remained, along with the half-removed lettering of an emergency department.

A woman was waiting beneath the canopy. She held an envelope against her stomach, and her shoes were wet up to the laces.

When Anaya introduced herself, the woman looked at Mehta too.

‘There are two of you.’

‘I’m the supervisor on the report.’

The woman nodded without offering her hand.

‘Jyoti Naik.’

Inside, an attendant took them to a table. The floor still smelt faintly sweet with disinfectant. Underneath was the smell of damp paper. Anaya rubbed her fingertips against her palm and looked for a window.

The attendant placed a hard case on the table. Inside were the recording medium and a paper copy of the first request. Jyoti’s signature was large, pressed so hard that it had marked the sheet beneath.

‘I was twenty,’ the woman said.

Anaya left the paper where it was.

The player took a few seconds to start. The same gangway appeared. This time there was wind too, and the sound of an engine trying to hold the vehicle steady against the current.

Savita was calling to someone out of shot.

‘Is that her husband?’ Mehta asked.

Jyoti shook her head. ‘He lived above us.’

The system had recognised Savita. The man had no verifiable identity. The woman pulled up one of his sleeves,

then the other, looking for the old wristband. It had caught beneath his elbow.

A voice ordered her to board alone.

‘Him too.’

The voice repeated the order. Only a few seconds remained before automatic release.

Savita managed to free the wristband. She held it towards the reader, but the man slipped against her and she had to catch him with both arms.

‘Wait.’

The door moved.

‘I can’t leave him.’

The recording continued until departure. Then the wind drowned everything out.

Anaya realised her hands were beneath the edge of the table. She brought them back up.

‘Play it again,’ Jyoti said.

The attendant looked at Anaya. She nodded.

They listened again. The second time, Anaya heard Savita’s breathing between attempts to lift the man. The third time, Jyoti stopped the recording herself.

‘That was her refusal.’

Mehta leant towards the player.

‘The vehicle couldn’t stay. The current was shifting the anchorage.’

‘I know.’

‘The people on board—’

‘I was one of them.’

Mehta closed his mouth.

Jyoti opened the envelope. She took out a faded bag with its shoulder strap held together by grey tape. Anaya moved the player to make room.

‘She’d made me get on first. She’d given me this.’

She put it on the table and laid out the strap.

‘Did you see me in the footage?’

Anaya looked at the player.

‘No.’

‘You couldn’t see anyone inside. But I was there.’

A seam in the bag had come apart near the zip. Jyoti slipped a finger through it to straighten the lining.

‘She was supposed to come aboard. Then she turned round.’

Anaya could taste the disinfectant. She ran her tongue over her lips. Mehta pushed the water bottle towards her.

‘It wasn’t a statement of intent,’ Anaya said.

The attendant activated the observations field. The sentence appeared on the table.

‘I didn’t come here to hear you say that to each other,’ Jyoti said.

Anaya looked up.

The woman had taken a sheet of paper folded into quarters from the bag. The text was almost worn away along the creases. At the bottom, Anaya’s signature was still legible.

‘They sent it to me eleven days later.’

Mehta shifted in his chair.

‘The report confirmed the classification available at the time,’ he said. ‘It didn’t assign blame to your mother.’

Jyoti slid the sheet towards him.

‘Read it.’

Mehta did not take it.

Anaya dropped her gaze. Beneath the cause of death was the sentence she had already seen in the digital copy. On the paper, someone had underlined it in blue pen.

THE SUBJECT REFUSED AN AVAILABLE OPPORTUNITY FOR RESCUE.

Anaya began to say that she had not listened to that recording. She stopped after the first few words.

‘You hadn’t listened to it?’ Jyoti asked.

‘No.’

‘But you signed.’

Anaya nodded.

The table proposed a correction. New evidence allowed the account to be updated without invalidating the verification carried out on the available records.

Mehta read the sentence to the end. Then he looked at Anaya.

‘Was the audio available then?’ she asked A.

‘At this archive.’

‘Could I have requested it?’

‘Yes.’

Anaya deselected *new evidence*.

‘Wait,’ Mehta said.

She kept her hand on the table.

‘You have to do this with a reviewer. You can’t reopen your own verification and decide for yourself that it’s invalid.’

‘I’m not deciding that.’

She opened a separate declaration. She wrote that she had confirmed the refusal without consulting the complete recording. She paused at the word *complete*, deleted it and wrote *audio*.

Mehta caught her wrist before she could sign.

‘Look what this opens up.’

Beneath the declaration appeared the files she had verified in the same way. Her name was beside each one. The first rows filled the table and continued beyond its edge.

Anaya gently freed her wrist and confirmed the declaration.

‘Signature recorded,’ A said.

The light of the interface at the base of her neck changed. It did not go out: it stayed on long enough to warm her skin.

Anaya looked for Savita’s report so she could give Jyoti the correction. The command did not respond.

‘Certification now requires an independent verifier,’ A said.

‘When will they come?’ Jyoti asked.

Four working days appeared.

The woman looked at the time, then at her bag.

‘I’d asked for today off.’

Anaya kept her fingers on the field she could no longer edit. The underlined sheet was still between them.

Mehta stood up. He picked up the empty folder.

‘I’ll wait for you outside.’

The attendant called up the family's request. Anaya's declaration was already attached to it, but the document Jyoti had brought could not yet be replaced.

'At least I can give you this,' Anaya said, pointing to what she had just signed.

Jyoti read it. She asked for a paper copy.

The attendant went to find the printer in the other room. They were left alone, with the player on and Savita's voice suspended between two words.

Anaya could have asked where she lived now, who was left of her family. She looked at the repaired strap.

'I'm sorry.'

Jyoti folded the old sheet along its worn creases.

'Can you come back in four days?'

'Yes.'

'I can't.'

Anaya looked for her calendar on her wrist. The following day's consultations were disappearing, one by one. The spaces left free no longer contained any names.

'I can be here,' she said.

'And then you'll call me.'

'Yes.'

Jyoti dictated a contact number. Anaya wrote it on the back of her train ticket. The pen skipped over the smooth surface; she had to go over the last digits again.

The attendant returned with the copy. Jyoti checked it standing up. She had Anaya fold the sheet the same way as the old one, then put them both in her bag.

She left without waiting for her.

Mehta was beneath the canopy. He was watching an empty vehicle pass the hospital. Anaya stopped beside him.

'Have they suspended you?'

'From verification work.'

He nodded.

'Me too.'

Anaya looked at the folder he held tightly under his arm.

'I didn't mean—'

Mehta turned.

She left the sentence unfinished.

He opened the folder to shield his terminal from the rain. He was notifying someone in Pune of his absence. He had written two lines and kept deleting the third.

‘You could have talked to me first,’ he said.

‘You’d have stopped me.’

‘Perhaps.’

The vehicle to the station arrived. Mehta got in at the front and Anaya sat in the back. They did not speak during the journey.

On the train, the seat beside her remained empty. Mehta had chosen another carriage.

Anaya felt for the interface beneath her hair. It was cold again. She opened Elia’s file: she could still read it. At the bottom was the field left pending, without a date.

She closed it before the footage appeared.

She called her mother.

Nandita answered sitting at the table. Arjun was no longer there. He had left a shirt over the back of the chair that Anaya recognised: he wore it when he came to see them and did not want to bring a bag.

‘Has he eaten?’ she asked.

‘We’ve all eaten.’

Anaya rested her head against the glass. Outside, lights sped low across the water.

‘Amma. That evening with Aaji.’

Her mother did not move.

‘When I told you not to go out.’

Nandita moved the plate in front of her. There was a small chip in the rim, hidden by her thumb.

‘I remember.’

Anaya looked at the ticket with Jyoti’s number. The last two digits had left an impression on her palm.

‘I was afraid.’

‘So was I.’

The train entered a tunnel. Her mother’s face froze for a moment, then began to move again.

‘I thought if we did everything right...’

Nandita waited. Anaya could not find the rest.

At last her mother stood up and carried the plate towards the stove.

‘How much longer?’

Anaya looked at the expected arrival. This time she read the time.

‘Forty minutes.’

‘I’ll leave the light on the stairs.’

The kitchen disappeared. Anaya held the phone in both hands until the train came out of the tunnel.

Her reflection returned to the glass. Behind it were trees, poles and low houses with a lamp above the door. She could no longer make them out when the train gathered speed.

She reopened Jyoti’s contact and copied the number from the ticket. She checked it twice. Then she set her departure for the appointed day.

A offered her the seat next to Mehta’s, saved in her travel preferences.

Anaya left the choice open.

Chapter Eighteen

The Whole Night

Tomás had left a shoe under the bed.

Leila found it while looking for her own. It was pushed against the wall, with a sock inside and one lace pulled so tight that untying it would mean sitting down. She nudged it towards him with her foot.

‘That one’s yours.’

Tomás raised his head from the pillow. ‘So’s the other one.’

‘The other one’s in the kitchen.’

He looked at the open door. Leila walked past him with her shirt buttoned wrong. She noticed in the hall mirror and undid two buttons.

Outside, rain was falling on Lake Geneva. The house had left only the upper part of the window visible; below, in place of the buildings, it showed a garden Leila had never visited.

‘Take that away,’ she said.

The roof of the bus shelter appeared, and a man trying to close his umbrella without stepping out from under it.

Tomás came in barefoot, carrying both shoes. He put them beside the door.

‘Is there anything to eat?’

The house opened the kitchen counter. Leila closed it before the portions emerged.

‘There are eggs.’

‘You make it sound like a threat.’

Leila took out a frying pan. He found the bread and began cutting it with the small knife, holding it against his chest. She put a plate in front of him. Tomás looked at it, then set the bread on it without protest.

They had been together before. Usually one of them received a call before they got hungry. That evening Leila had left her jacket in the hall and the box from the office on the floor, where Tomás had put it when he arrived.

‘What did you take with you?’ he asked.

‘What you gave me.’

‘Haven’t you looked?’

Leila cracked an egg on the rim of the pan. A piece of shell fell into the white.

Tomás bent over the box. He took out a charger, an almost empty notebook and the dried-up orange. The leaf had caught in the fastening.

‘I thought you’d throw it away.’

Leila was trying to fish out the shell with a spoon.

‘You could have left it on the desk.’

‘They’re using it tomorrow morning.’

The spoon stopped. The egg white turned opaque around the metal.

‘Who?’

‘I don’t know.’

Leila turned the heat up instead of down. She realised from the sound and turned the control back.

Tomás put the orange on the windowsill. The leaf broke when he tried to flatten it.

‘I’m sorry.’

She took out two plates.

The summons appeared on the kitchen glass. Leila’s name filled the first line; beneath it were an appointment for that evening and the word PERMANENCE.

Tomás stopped arranging the pieces of leaf.

‘I thought you still had time.’

‘Until Sunday.’

‘An earlier session has become available,’ A said. ‘The deadline for your response remains unchanged.’

‘Why?’ Leila asked.

The list of verifications with no one assigned to them opened. She recognised the Pune sector. Anaya Rao’s name had turned grey; so had the supervisor’s beside it. A report from Mumbai awaited reassignment.

Leila touched the file. The house showed only the public page of the declaration.

I HAD CONFIRMED THE REFUSAL WITHOUT CONSULTING THE AUDIO.

‘Did Mehta sign too?’

‘He was involved in the original verification. Both authorities are suspended.’

The edge of the egg began to darken. Tomás moved the pan off the heat.

‘Can we eat first?’

Leila went on reading. Her finger reached the point beyond which she no longer had access. She tried from the next line and got the same result.

Tomás divided the eggs. He put the plate with the unbroken yolk in front of her.

‘Leila.’

She drew her hand back from the glass.

They ate with the file open above the sink. A added a name to the list and moved the existing ones down. Anaya’s declaration disappeared behind another request.

‘Will they give you the case back?’ Tomás asked.

‘Permanence does not remove the conflict of interest,’ A replied.

Leila looked at her reflection between the lines.

‘Then what does it give me back?’

‘Access to the design functions provided for by the programme.’

‘Predictive responses?’

‘Their revision. Not the evaluation of your operational decision.’

Tomás pulled a burnt edge off his egg. He pushed it beneath his fork.

‘It’s the work you wanted to do.’

‘Yes.’

‘You said so before Amman too.’

Leila put down her bread. ‘Did they ask you to talk to me about it?’

Tomás looked at her. Then he looked down at his plate.

‘No.’

‘I didn’t mean—’

‘You asked.’

Rain beat against the glass, loudly enough to be heard through the insulation. Leila saw Tomás's thumb move towards his forefinger and turned towards the pan.

He shifted his chair.

'Wait.'

'I'm taking my plate.'

Leila let go of the edge of the table. Tomás went to the sink and stood there with his back to her, water running over his fingers.

She could have asked A whether anyone had contacted him. The command was available on the wall. All it needed was Tomás's consent, and perhaps he would have given it.

'I asked you a question and I was already looking for a way to check the answer,' she said.

Tomás turned off the water.

Leila said nothing more. She took her plate and put it beside his. The yolk had dried in a yellow streak.

'I don't want to make you sign anything,' he said.

She nodded.

Tomás turned the water back on. Leila picked up the tea towel and waited for him to pass her the first plate.

At the centre, they were sent upstairs separately.

Tomás still had his access. Leila went in through a side door and had to leave her notebook in a compartment. The attendant let her keep her jacket because the activation room was cold.

Eva was waiting for her, sitting beside an unlit lamp. She had taken off her earrings and held them in her palm.

'You don't have to do it tonight,' she said.

Leila looked at the couch. The pillow still had a crease down the middle.

'If I go home, who takes those files tomorrow?'

'We'll distribute them.'

'They've already been distributed.'

Eva put the earrings in her jacket pocket.

'Don't sign because you think no one can work without you.'

Leila felt her shoulders stiffen. She looked at the couch again, then sat in the chair beside it. The fabric was cold even through her skirt.

‘May the discussion be recorded?’ A asked.

Leila agreed. So did Eva.

The terms filled the wall. Leila had read them already; this time she opened the section on interruptions.

‘At night?’

‘Biological rest is maintained. Cognitive availability continues.’

‘If I don’t want to respond?’

‘You can defer an ordinary request. You cannot voluntarily break the connection during a programme priority.’

Leila touched the line. The definition of priority filled the rest of the wall.

‘Who decides when it’s over?’

‘Closure depends on the stabilisation of the process.’

Eva picked up the lamp and moved it closer to the couch. It came on when its base touched the floor.

‘They’re not asking you to work all night,’ she said.

‘They could wake me up all night.’

‘Yes.’

Leila looked at her. Eva did not lower her eyes.

‘That’s what I wanted to know.’

She asked to speak to Tomás before activation. They let him in through the staff door. He had bought two bottles of water, but one was already half empty.

‘Have you decided?’

Leila took the open one and drank.

‘Not yet.’

Eva went out to give them the room. The terms remained on the wall.

Tomás read the lines about the night. He sat on the edge of the couch and turned the cap between his fingers.

‘Has Søren done it already?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Ask him.’

Leila looked at the door.

‘Would it change anything?’

Tomás stopped turning the cap.

‘It would for me.’

She took his hand. The cap pressed into her palm. Tomás moved it to his other hand and laced his fingers through hers.

They sat without calling Eva back. Leila still had her jacket over her shoulders. He straightened the collar, which had folded inwards.

‘I have to go to my father’s tomorrow morning,’ he said.

Leila let go of his hand.

‘I didn’t know.’

‘He’s got an appointment. My mother can’t take him.’

Her first impulse was to tell him that the appointment was already assisted. She heard the whole sentence, with the vehicle arranged and someone waiting for him at the entrance. She looked at the bottles on the floor.

‘What time are you leaving?’

‘Early.’

‘Then don’t wait here for me.’

Tomás tried to catch her eye.

‘I can stay until you come out.’

Leila took off her jacket and folded it on her lap. She handed him the cap, which he had dropped on the couch.

‘I’d rather you called me when you get there.’

Tomás nodded. He kissed her on the mouth, then kissed her again just as she was drawing breath. Leila kept a hand on his neck until he moved away.

When Eva came back in, the open bottle was still beside the chair.

‘I want to keep my request for a review of the responses,’ Leila said. ‘Including those used to obtain consent.’

‘You can work on that within the programme.’

‘And if the findings concern this?’

She pointed to the terms on the wall.

Eva stopped with her hand on the lamp.

‘You submit them.’

‘That doesn’t mean they’ll accept them.’

‘No.’

Leila read the duration again. No date had appeared.

She signed.

Activation took less time than the discussion. They had her bare the nape of her neck and rest her forehead on a support. The device beneath her skin was connected to a small unit that stayed cold for almost the whole procedure. At the end she felt a prick behind her ear and tasted something metallic.

‘Swallow,’ the attendant said.

Leila tried. She had to do it twice.

The wall lit up before she had raised her head. The boxes that had not responded that afternoon now opened without her needing to use her hand.

She looked for Amman. A grey frame blocked access to the case.

Leila kept looking at it until the attendant put her jacket over her shoulders.

At the exit, Eva was trying to put an earring back in. Her elbow was raised and the fastening kept slipping out of her grasp.

Leila stopped beside her.

‘Wait.’

Eva lowered her arm. She handed Leila the tiny metal butterfly without turning round. Leila had to come close enough to smell her soap. The lobe was red around the hole.

‘Does it hurt?’

‘When I put them back in.’

‘You could leave them out.’

‘They were my mother’s.’

Leila held the fastening between her nails. Eva moved her hair aside and waited. When the post went in, she gave a small movement of her chin.

‘Too tight?’

‘A little.’

Leila loosened it. Eva touched the earring, then took the other one from her pocket.

‘I can do this one.’

The first request arrived while Leila's hand was still raised. The corridor remained visible, but three lines opened above Eva's shoulder. Leila began to read them.

Eva was saying something.

'Sorry?'

'Your jacket. You've got one sleeve inside the other.'

Leila looked at what she was holding over her arm. She had tried to put it on and stopped without noticing. Eva pulled out the lining and handed her the cuff.

'Can you put them on the wall?' Leila asked A.

The lines moved to the space in front of the lift. The request concerned the order of questions in an enrolment interview. The first already offered the answer to the second.

Leila indicated that they should be separated.

'Is this an ordinary one?'

'Yes.'

'I'll finish it tomorrow morning.'

The text disappeared. Eva pressed the lift button, though the system had already registered the destination.

'Where are you going?' Leila asked.

'To eat.'

Leila checked the time. It was later than she had thought.

'Haven't you had dinner?'

Eva shook her head. The earring she had just put back in brushed her neck.

'You kept me here.'

Leila opened her mouth to remind her that she had not asked her to wait. She looked at the lamp the attendant was carrying back into the room.

'Yes,' she said.

Eva held the lift open for her.

At home she found the pan in the sink.

Tomás had left water in it to loosen what was stuck to the bottom. On the table was the notebook collected on the way out, with its pen tucked between the pages. He had brought it back before going to get his own vehicle.

Leila took off her shoes and sat on the bed. The spot behind her ear throbbed. She put two fingers to the nape of her neck to request the disconnection she used every evening.

‘The function is not available,’ A said.

She left her fingers there a moment longer.

‘I know.’

She turned off the light.

She woke with her tongue pressed against her teeth. A request filled the darkness: a woman had revoked her confirmation of a transfer after recognising a suggested formulation. Departure had been suspended; another household was waiting for the same vehicle.

Leila reached for the bedside table. There was nothing to pick up.

‘Defer.’

‘The request belongs to the active priority.’

She sat up. She read the case to the end. She asked for the woman to be shown the destination before a new response was sought.

When she lay down again, the pillow was still warm.

The second time she did not know whether she had slept. The problem was different; her jaw hurt in the same place. She went into the kitchen and put some water on to heat.

Tomás’s message arrived while she was looking for a cup.

It was a photograph. His father was waiting outside a door with a bag on his lap. In the corner was Tomás’s thumb, too close to the lens.

Leila began to write that she had not slept a wink. She deleted it. She went back to the empty line and wrote it again.

I’ve barely slept. Call me when you’re finished.

She put down the cup. She had poured the water without putting any tea in.

Another request appeared on the glass. Leila raised her hand towards the nape of her neck, stopped it halfway and picked up the notebook.

She wrote down the time she had first woken. She could not remember the second.

She left a space.

Chapter Nineteen

Those Who Remain

On her fifth circuit of the corridor, Isabel began to lose her rhythm.

Her right leg arrived a little later than the other. She waited for it to come level and set off again, keeping her palm over the dressing. The ward occupied the top floor of a health centre in Quibdó. At the end of the corridor a window showed wet roofs and the hills of the Chocó, close enough for the trees to be made out.

'You can stop,' the nurse said.

Isabel went on to the window.

'I made it.'

'Now you have to get back.'

She turned. The room seemed further away than before. The nurse brought a wheelchair over and waited.

Isabel went past it. After a few steps her side tightened around her breath. She stopped beside a door, pretending to read the number.

Mateo came out of the room with something under his arm.

'They've given it back to you.'

It was the radio. There was still dried mud in the selector slot. The strap had been cut to free it from her clothes during the rescue.

Isabel held out her hand. Mateo gave it to her and walked beside her, without taking her elbow.

The nurse followed, pushing the empty chair.

Rafael had a voice again. Since that morning he had been able to say a few words before having to catch his breath. The first had been a request for salt. A had let him ask twice and brought him a sachet.

When Isabel came in, he looked at the radio.

She put it on her bed. She sat down slowly and lifted her T-shirt. One edge of the dressing had come away. Beneath it was a pink patch that had not been there before.

‘Let me see,’ Mateo said.

‘Later.’

The nurse pulled the chair against the wall and left.

The radio broadcast the public bulletin. Three settlements on the lower Atrato had been evacuated during the night. The relocated families would receive news of their relatives at the reception points. The name of the last village was repeated more slowly.

Mateo stopped folding the clothes.

‘Your sister?’ Isabel asked.

‘She was further upriver.’

‘Was.’

He nodded. He kept folding the same sleeve until the seam disappeared into the fabric.

Isabel turned the dial. She had not seen Lucía on the ward. She did not know whether she had left the bridge by drone or managed to reach the trees. She passed two empty frequencies and stopped at a thin whistle. For three years they had called on that frequency when the rains made the bridges and tracks unusable.

‘Lucía.’

Mateo looked up.

‘Not here.’

Isabel looked towards the ceiling. ‘Where, then?’

The answer came after two attempts. Lucía sounded far from the microphone. There were voices and a running engine.

‘Are you alone?’

‘No.’

‘Who’s there?’

Isabel looked at Rafael. He had turned his face to the wall.

‘Mateo.’

‘Do you know where Cárdenas is?’

She lowered the volume.

‘They’re treating him.’

‘They’re questioning him tomorrow. He has all the names in the southern corridor.’

‘So do you.’

Lucía did not answer at once. Someone near her asked for a crate to be moved.

‘We’re getting the families out. I need him not to make it to that interview.’

Isabel kept her thumb on the button. The radio was growing warm against her thigh.

Rafael had closed his eyes, but beneath the mesh his chest was rising faster.

‘Come and get him,’ she said.

‘I didn’t say take him away.’

Mateo put down the clothes.

At the other end of the connection, the engine revved. Lucía raised her voice above it.

‘You stopped the bridge. Now you can stop him handing over the people who are left.’

Isabel felt the skin pull beneath the dressing. As soon as she let the button rise beneath her thumb, Lucía would no longer hear her.

‘No.’

‘You don’t know how many there are.’

‘I said no.’

‘Then don’t come back to the river.’

The whistle filled the room.

‘The threat has been recorded,’ A said.

A light came on above Rafael’s bed. A unit came from the corridor and stopped beside the door. Isabel looked at its hands, folded against its chest. They did not open when Mateo walked past.

Mateo reached for the radio. Isabel let him take it. He called once, asked for Teresa and waited with the radio near his mouth.

No one answered.

In Bergamo, Sara did not want to come upstairs.

Miriam could see her from the kitchen window, standing outside the front door with her violin on her back. Ms Valli had stayed on the other side of the street. She had raised a hand in greeting, then pointed to the girl.

Miriam went down.

Sara wore her hair loose over the dressing behind her ear. When Miriam called her, she turned the wrong way.

Miriam touched her shoulder and moved in front of her.

‘Would you like to come up?’

Sara moved her head. Miriam could not tell whether she had said yes.

They stayed in the doorway. The girl had one hand slipped through the case strap, too high up, near her neck.

‘Ms Valli said I could come tomorrow,’ she said.

Miriam watched Valli cross the street. The burial had been authorised for the following morning; Elia’s body would arrive from Verona at dawn.

‘Of course.’

‘Not with the orchestra.’

‘However you like.’

Sara slipped off the case. Its weight pulled her head to one side before she was free of it.

‘I’m leaving this here.’

Miriam held out her hands. The case was lighter than Elia’s. She took it by the handle without resting it against her chest.

‘Does it need fixing?’

‘No.’

The teacher stopped beside them.

‘Sara wants to stop.’

Miriam looked at the girl. Her thumb kept feeling for the strap she was no longer wearing.

‘For a while?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You can wait until you’re better.’

Sara took half a step back. Miriam felt the handle press into her fingers.

‘Your ear?’ she asked.

‘That too.’

Valli looked at the open door. ‘I’ll leave you to talk.’

‘You don’t have to,’ Sara said.

The teacher stayed.

Miriam wanted to take them inside, sit the girl down, ask whether she had eaten. The case knocked against her knee whenever she shifted her weight.

'Elia used to say you had a beautiful hand.'

Sara looked down at her fingers.

'When you played,' Miriam added.

'I understood.'

Someone came out of the building and they had to move. Miriam held the violin between herself and the wall so no one would knock it.

'I can keep it safe,' she said. 'Then you can decide.'

'I've already decided.'

'Then why bring it to me?'

Sara removed a hair that had stuck to her lips.

'At home they keep putting it back on the chair. Even when I hide it in the wardrobe.'

Miriam looked at the teacher. Valli was holding her bag with both hands.

'You could have given it to her.'

'She says to wait too.'

The girl moved her foot onto the edge of the step. One sock had slipped down inside her shoe.

'I thought it could stay closed here.'

Miriam looked at the fastening. It was open on one side. She clicked it shut and Sara followed the sound, turning her good ear.

'You can't give up because of him.'

The girl took the case back so quickly that Miriam was left with her hand still on the handle.

'He wasn't why I played.'

Valli dropped her gaze. No one was coming through the doorway now.

Miriam let go.

Sara put the strap back over her shoulder. It caught in her hair, and this time she refused the teacher's help too.

'Let's go.'

Miriam watched the two women reach the pavement. In the glass of the front door she saw her own hand, still raised to the height where the violin had been a moment earlier.

‘Sara.’

The girl did not turn.

Miriam took a few steps to come up on the side where she could hear her. Valli stopped. Sara went on to the edge of the road.

‘You can come tomorrow without playing anything.’

‘That’s what I said.’

‘Yes.’

The vehicle that was to take them home opened its doors. Sara got in and put the case on the seat beside her. Miriam stayed on the pavement. As the teacher passed, she took her arm for a moment.

‘Please don’t ask her either.’

Valli nodded.

In Quibdó, the nurse cut away the lifted part of the dressing and asked Isabel to stay lying down.

‘How many circuits did you do?’

‘Five.’

‘We said two.’

Isabel looked at the wheelchair, still against the wall. The nurse cleaned the skin and replaced the bandage. The disinfectant stung along a stretch that had become exposed again.

‘Wait,’ Isabel said.

The woman stopped with the gauze in her hand.

Isabel let out her breath. As soon as her side stopped contracting, she nodded. The woman continued more slowly.

Mateo sat on the empty bed on the other side of Rafael. He kept turning the radio’s selector. Now and then a voice came through, but not the one he was waiting for.

‘I can search for Teresa through the list of evacuees,’ A said.

He looked at Isabel.

She adjusted the hem of her T-shirt over the new bandage.

‘Ask her.’

‘I have to give her name.’

Isabel saw his thumb press the dial until it turned white.

‘She’s your sister.’

Mateo turned towards the terminal. He dictated her full name and date of birth. A asked him to confirm; he did. Teresa’s name appeared among those still to be verified.

‘The request will remain active,’ A said.

Rafael tried to pull himself up. The mesh moved with him for a few centimetres and stopped. His pillow had slipped beneath his shoulders.

Isabel made to get up. She stopped with both feet on the floor.

‘Could you fix that for him?’ she asked the nurse.

The woman went round to the other side of the bed. Rafael let her lift his head, then pointed to the radio. Mateo did not give it to him.

‘I heard,’ Rafael said.

His words came out thinly. He had to wait before the next ones.

‘You can’t go back.’

‘She already said that.’

Rafael barely shook his head.

‘Not to the other side either.’

Isabel recognised the tone before he had finished. She had heard it at the command table when they handed her the detonator.

She put a hand to her side. The new dressing moved with her breathing without pulling.

‘Why did you shoot me?’

Rafael looked at the ceiling. Mateo stopped scanning the frequencies.

‘You had the remote.’

‘It was disconnected.’

‘I didn’t know.’

‘The technician had nothing.’

Rafael’s mouth stayed open. Air went in and out with a faint wet sound.

Isabel waited. He closed his eyes.

The schedule for the interview appeared on the terminal. Rafael would leave the ward the following morning, accompanied by two units. Beneath his name, A asked Isabel whether she wished to make the testimony collected over the previous days available for the interview.

She opened the recording. She heard her own voice, broken by pain, say Rafael's name. Then the name of the man she had shot.

Isabel authorised access to the recording.

Rafael turned towards her.

Isabel turned the terminal towards him. After her words came the images of the bridge. Mateo was pressing his shirt against her side. When the drone's strap closed, he had kept holding it there.

Rafael watched until the rescuer blocked the lens. He did not ask her to delete anything.

When the nurse took the supplies away, Mateo put Isabel's clothes back on her bed.

'I can try calling from the courtyard.'

She nodded.

Mateo stopped with the radio in his hand. 'I'll come back.'

Isabel moved just enough to let him reach the door. She felt the urge to ask him to stay. She held the request in her mouth as he went out, then tried to find a position in which her side hurt less.

In Bergamo, Paolo took the dark jacket out of the wardrobe and laid it on the bed.

Miriam was sitting beside the window. In her lap was the list of pieces proposed for the following morning. She had not chosen any.

'Did Sara come?' he asked.

'Yes.'

Paolo looked for a shirt. The white one had a stain on the collar and he put it back in the wardrobe with the hook facing the other way.

'How is she?'

Miriam put the list on the windowsill.

'I asked her to keep playing.'

Paolo turned.

‘She hadn’t asked me.’

He took out the stained shirt. He held it in front of his chest, looking at himself in the mirror.

‘Will this do?’

Miriam stood up and straightened the collar beneath his chin.

‘Yes.’

Elia’s phone lay switched off on the kitchen table. Paolo picked it up as he passed and put it in the pocket of the dark jacket.

Miriam saw him. She put a hand beneath her ribs and stayed beside the bed while he looked for his shoes.

‘Don’t turn it on there tomorrow,’ she said.

Paolo straightened up.

‘I didn’t say I wanted to.’

She looked at the pocket, then at his face.

‘I’m asking you now.’

Paolo took out the phone. For a few seconds he held it in both hands without turning it over.

‘I’ll take it back afterwards.’

Miriam nodded. He left it on the bedside table on his side.

Later a message arrived from Sara. It contained only the time she would be at the cemetery.

Miriam began to write that Elia would be pleased. She stopped before his name. She deleted the words and replied that she would wait for her at the entrance.

Then she took a chair from the table and carried it to the door, to hold the bag she needed to pack for the morning. She put in tissues, a bottle of water and Paolo’s shirt, which she had cleaned in the sink. She folded it in with the other things without noticing it was still damp.

Paolo came to retrieve it and spread it over the back of the chair.

‘You’ll get everything wet.’

Miriam looked at the damp bottom of the bag. A brief laugh escaped her, hurting her side.

Paolo shook out the shirt and arranged it more carefully. Then he ran two fingers over the fabric to check the stain.

Isabel counted the steps to the window at the end of the corridor and turned back after her second circuit.

The nurse looked up from the station. The chair was beside her.

This time Isabel sat down. She put her feet on the footrests and let the nurse take her back to the room. In the courtyard, beyond the glass, Mateo held the radio to his ear. He was talking.

Chapter Twenty

As Far as the Gate

Mateo came back without turning off the radio.

He held it in front of him with both hands. Isabel pulled herself up in bed. A woman's voice came from the speaker, asking whether anyone was still there.

'I'm here,' he said.

The voice returned after a crackle.

'They've given me shoes. They're big.'

Mateo ran a hand over his mouth.

'Put something in the toes.'

'What?'

He looked round the room.

'I don't know.'

Teresa was in a reception centre near Turbo. She had reached the evacuation point with her feet wrapped in the sleeves of a shirt. The vehicle had taken the two women with her as well. She knew nothing about the village. When she spoke about water, Mateo asked her to repeat herself; the second time, Isabel understood that he was not asking about the river, but whether his sister had had anything to drink.

The request opened by A had found her name. The centre had put the call through on the channel the old radio could still receive.

'I'll come,' Mateo said.

Isabel stopped adjusting her sheet.

'Will they let you?' Teresa asked.

'I'll ask.'

The woman fell silent. Someone could be heard calling a number, the same one over and over, without an answer.

'Don't set off on foot,' she said at last.

Mateo looked at Isabel. She still had a fold of fabric pinched between her fingers.

'I won't go on foot.'

When the connection ended, he put the radio on the chair. A proposed a transfer with two people being discharged from

the ward. Mateo's assessment allowed reunification; departure was scheduled for the following morning.

'And the return journey?' Isabel asked.

'No transfers from the reception centre to Quibdó are scheduled.'

Mateo turned towards the wall.

'For now?'

'No date is available.'

He picked up the radio, then put it down again. Isabel looked at the part of the sheet she had pulled. The seam had folded against the dressing.

'Can you stay with her?' she asked him.

'If I confirm the reunification, yes.'

Rafael was asleep. Beneath the mesh, one knee was visible, thinner than the other.

Mateo sat on the edge of Isabel's bed.

'I haven't confirmed yet.'

She let go of the fabric. She took his hand and brought it under the sheet, to the strip of bare skin beside the bandage.

Mateo waited.

'It's cold,' she said.

He went to withdraw it. Isabel kept it where it was. After a while the hand grew warm.

They confirmed the journey before the evening tray arrived. Mateo divided the rice and noticed they had been brought only one piece of cutlery. This time Isabel waited for him to finish eating.

The departure alert woke him at dawn. He washed his face in the room's bathroom and came back with wet hair on his forehead. He had no bag. He put his comb and the paper with the centre's name in his pocket, though the vehicle already knew where to take him.

Isabel was watching his shoes.

'Had you told her about me?'

He stopped with a lace in his hand.

'Yes.'

'When?'

'Before the bridge. I'd asked her if there was room.'

Isabel looked up.

‘For how many?’

‘Two.’

The lace slipped from his fingers. Mateo bent to pick it up. Isabel looked at the pocket where he had put the reception centre’s address.

‘You hadn’t told me.’

‘I hadn’t asked you.’

She moved her leg to make room for him on the bed. Mateo sat down and they spent the little time they had left there, with his hand on her knee.

When they called him, Isabel kissed him before he stood up.

The sound of his footsteps stayed in the corridor for a few more seconds. Then a wheel squeaked and covered it.

Isabel took the radio from the chair. The dial was still on the frequency used for Teresa. She turned it, found the bulletin and went back. She put the radio on the shelf, within reach.

At the cemetery in Bergamo, Miriam stopped to take a stone out of her shoe.

Paolo held her by one elbow. He wore the white shirt beneath his jacket; the washed patch on the collar was lighter than the rest. Miriam shook the upturned shoe, but the stone would not come out. She had to feel for it with her fingers.

Sara arrived while she still had one foot raised. She had not brought her violin. Ms Valli walked beside her with a soft bag Miriam had never seen before.

‘Sorry,’ Miriam said.

She put her shoe back on too quickly and crushed the back beneath her heel.

Sara stopped in front of her. She had a small plait behind her good ear; on the other side her hair covered the dressing.

Miriam touched her arm.

‘We’ve been waiting for you.’

The girl nodded. She looked beyond the gate.

The body had arrived before them. A woman took them to the room where the coffin had been left. She wore a grey

apron over a flowered top. Before opening the door she wiped her fingers on the apron, one by one.

‘You two go in. The others can wait here.’

Paolo let go of Miriam’s elbow.

Elia wore a shirt she recognised only when she came closer. It was the one from his last concert. One point of the collar remained raised, as in the photographs where he kept adjusting it around his neck.

‘Did you bring it?’ she asked.

Paolo nodded.

Miriam reached out, then rested her hand on the edge of the coffin. She wanted to ask him when, how he had managed it, why he had not told her they needed clothes.

Paolo tugged lightly at one sleeve of Elia’s shirt. Beneath it was his wrist.

‘This one still fitted him,’ he said.

Miriam put two fingers under the point of the collar and lowered it. When she took her hand away, the fabric rose again. She tried from the other side.

Paolo was watching her.

She left the collar as it was.

Outside the room, a wheel knocked at intervals against a joint in the floor. Miriam ran her fingers through her son’s hair. It was clean and smelt of something she did not know. She kept her hand on his head until her own palm grew cold.

The woman in the apron appeared in the doorway.

‘Do you need more time?’

Miriam looked at Paolo. His mouth was open and he was breathing without a sound.

‘Paolo.’

He looked down at her.

‘I need to go out for a moment,’ he said.

Miriam reached for his sleeve. Her fingers reached the seam and stopped.

‘All right.’

Paolo went out. She stayed beside the coffin. The woman waited, then returned to the corridor.

Miriam felt for Elia's hand beneath the cuff. His fingers lay side by side. She had seen them curl against the fingerboard, grip a fork, cover his phone screen when she passed behind his chair.

She laid her own hand over those fingers.

A cough came from the corridor. Miriam raised her head. For an instant her palm hovered.

No one came in.

She rested her hand again, but only to take it slowly away.

When she came out, Paolo was sitting beside Sara. The girl held an open water bottle between her feet. Neither of them was drinking.

The woman looked at Miriam.

She nodded.

She did not see them close the lid. She heard the first click as she ran her hand along the wall to reach the chair. By the second click she was sitting down.

Davide came from the far end of the corridor. He had his jacket over one arm and the mark of a mask beneath his eyes. He stopped in front of Paolo and put a hand on the back of his neck. Paolo bowed his head.

Then Davide sat on Miriam's other side. He did not ask how she was.

It was Sara who passed her the water. Miriam took a sip and gave the bottle back. Her hand was shaking; Sara waited until its base touched her palm before taking it.

When they brought the coffin out, some pupils from the school were on the path. Luca held a small speaker against his stomach. Valli opened her bag and took out a cable.

Miriam turned towards Paolo.

'It's a rehearsal,' he said. 'Ms Valli sent it.'

'Which one?'

Valli came closer.

'The one before they left. It didn't go well.'

Miriam looked at the speaker. Luca plugged in the cable and waited with a finger poised above the control.

'May I?' he asked.

Miriam nodded.

The first sound was a chair scraping. Then someone counted them in and the instruments began, too far from the microphone. The cello came in after the others. Miriam recognised the small sound of fingers before the note.

They walked behind the coffin. The trolley moved slowly over the gravel; when it reached an uneven stretch, it corrected its own tilt. Paolo kept a hand on the wood. Miriam put hers near his, leaving the metal of a handle between them.

In the recording, a voice stopped the music. A boy protested. Elia laughed, then said something half lost in the rustle of the microphone.

Miriam turned her head towards Luca.

He reached for the control.

‘Leave it,’ she said.

The recording continued. Valli could be heard asking them to start again from a bar. Miriam knew the piece, but not that laugh or the sentence before it. Sara walked in front of Luca, turned slightly towards the speaker.

They reached the grave as the instruments started again. The dug-out earth was heaped on a sheet. Nearby were the broad tracks of the unit that had prepared the place.

Miriam looked into its depth. The far edge was crumbling at one point; a root jutted from the wall, cut clean through.

The piece ended before the coffin began to descend.

Luca held the speaker tight against his stomach. No one asked him to play it again.

The woman in the apron showed Paolo where to move his hand. He took it off the wood. Miriam stayed a moment longer, then withdrew hers.

The straps grew taut. The coffin descended so slowly that for a few seconds it seemed motionless. Miriam followed the point of a screw until the edge of the earth hid it.

Her breath came short, too high in her chest. She tried to bring it lower, as she had done so often with a hand on someone’s back. Her shoulders rose again.

Paolo’s eyes were dry.

Miriam looked at him. She felt a sentence rise, already complete, and clenched her teeth before it could come out.

Paolo had one hand closed inside the empty pocket of his jacket.

She held out her own.

‘Will you hold me?’

Paolo took his hand out and held hers. Miriam rested a little of her weight on it. Her breath reached the place that hurt and stopped there.

The woman took some earth from the sheet. She waited for someone to come forward.

Miriam bent down. She sank her fingers into the dark layer and scooped up more than she could hold. Some fell onto her shoe. A small flat stone remained in her hand.

She straightened over the grave.

Paolo let his handful fall. The sound on the lid was brief.

Miriam closed her fist.

Sara was beside her. She held neither earth nor flowers. Her hands were in her pockets and she was looking down. Miriam felt the stone press beneath the base of her thumb. She squeezed harder. For a moment the pain in her hand was greater than the pain in her side.

Sara took a strand of hair out of her mouth. Then she looked towards the path, where Valli had put her bag on a bench.

Miriam followed her gaze. She felt the urge to call her, although she was still there.

She looked down at her own hand.

She opened her fingers. The earth fell all at once, heavier than she had imagined. The stone stayed stuck to her damp palm. She picked it off with her other hand and left it at the edge of the sheet.

She did not draw her fingers away from Paolo’s when he reached for them again.

They stayed until the grave was filled. The unit moved only after everyone had taken a step back. It left a mound of earth and cleaned the path without touching the place where Miriam had put the stone.

Davide joined her near the fountain. Paolo had turned on the tap and was holding her hands beneath it. Earth slipped

between their fingers. The place beneath her ribs still hurt; Miriam bent a little and waited for Paolo to finish cleaning her thumb.

Davide watched the movement.

‘Shall I take you home?’

‘We’re going back together,’ Paolo said.

‘I’ll come by later.’

Miriam was about to say there was no need. Davide had already put his jacket over his arm again.

‘Could you examine me?’ she asked.

He stopped.

‘Yes.’

‘At home. Before deciding the rest.’

Davide nodded. ‘I’ll bring my bag.’

Sara was waiting at the gate. The teacher had given her a piece of bread wrapped in a napkin; she held it without eating. When Miriam came closer, she broke it and offered her half.

Miriam took it.

The first mouthful stayed in her mouth a long time. She had to stop to swallow it. Sara waited beside her, looking at the street.

Paolo arrived with the vehicle for the journey home and held the door open. Miriam said goodbye to the girl without asking when she would see her again.

As she sat down, she felt something beneath her foot. She took off her shoe. Another stone remained inside, smaller than the one that morning.

She tipped it into her palm, wrapped it in the empty napkin and put her foot on the floor.

Before the vehicle left, she called Davide.

‘Yes?’

Miriam was looking at the bread left in her hand.

‘Can you come sooner?’

‘Does it hurt more?’

‘No more than this morning.’

At the other end she heard a stop being announced.

‘I’m coming now,’ Davide said.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Address

Davide had to move the case to reach the sofa.

He lifted it by the handle. Something shifted inside, a small sound of metal against wood. Miriam pointed to the space beneath the window.

‘There will do.’

He laid it flat and went back to opening his bag.

Paolo had spread a sheet over the sofa. Miriam lay down on it still dressed, with her shoes lined up beneath the coffee table. Davide asked her to bend her knees and waited until she stopped pulling her top down.

‘May I?’

She uncovered her side.

Davide’s hands were warm. Miriam followed his fingers as they moved, bracing herself for the pressure before it came. When he reached the place beneath her ribs, her stomach contracted.

‘Here.’

Davide took his hand away and rested one further along.

‘Breathe however you can.’

Paolo had remained standing behind him. Miriam could see him reflected in the glass, in his white shirt, still wearing his jacket.

Davide repeated the movement. This time she let her breath out. The pain came all the same.

‘How long have you been feeling it round here at the back too?’

‘Not all the time.’

‘How long?’

Miriam tried to recall a particular evening. There had been others before Elia’s trip, and before those a morning when she had changed sides of the treatment couch so she would not have to bend. She looked at the case beneath the window.

‘Since before.’

Davide nodded. He did not ask before what.

He took a flat device out of his bag and switched it on. Miriam felt cold when the gel touched her skin. Grey shapes appeared on the screen, changing with the pressure of the probe.

Davide returned to the same spot twice. The third time he froze the image.

‘What is it?’ Paolo asked.

‘It needs a closer look.’

‘But you can see it.’

Davide looked at Miriam.

‘I can see an area I need to check with another examination. I can’t tell you what it is now.’

She nodded without taking her eyes off the screen. ‘Tomorrow?’

‘I’ll ask for the first slot.’

Paolo took a step forward. ‘Can my access get it brought forward?’

Davide turned towards him.

‘You can go with her. I’ll request priority.’

Miriam felt Paolo stop behind the sofa. She felt for the hem of her top, then left her hand on the sheet.

‘The tests without an implant,’ she said.

‘I can ask for that. Afterwards we’ll have to talk about what we find.’

Davide handed her some paper to wipe off the gel. Miriam began cleaning her side, but could not reach the furthest spot. Paolo took another sheet. She lifted her top so he could reach it.

A announced that the request had been received. Davide left his bag open beside the sofa until the time appeared.

In Yokohama, the lift took Hana to the twenty-sixth floor without asking where she wanted to go.

She held her bag in front of her knees. At the bottom were the dress sewn with red thread and the cedar bird wrapped in a T-shirt. A strand of seaweed was still caught in the zip.

After the two nights she had promised, she had cleared Kenji’s room and put the planks back beneath the window.

The mattress had gone down to the kitchen. Every morning they rolled it up before lighting the stove; in the evening they had to move the table to spread it out again.

The housing notice had arrived while they were folding it.

Hana had read only the line about collecting her personal belongings, then asked her father to hold her bag open.

Now the lift left her at her corridor. The lights came on all the way to the door, one after another, just as they had when she came home with the shopping.

The house said her name. Then it asked her to wait.

Hana put her wrist against the reader. The light changed colour, then went back to the same one.

‘It’s me.’

‘The occupant’s consent is required.’

Something dragged behind the door. When it opened, there was a woman with a towel over her shoulder. Her top was wet across the chest and she held a comb between her lips.

Hana looked past her.

The table was in the same place. On the bed, though, were two folded blankets and a pair of trousers that were not hers. The east wall showed a forest.

‘This is my flat.’

The woman took the comb out of her mouth.

‘They sent us here yesterday.’

‘Who?’

The woman looked at the reader beside the door.

‘There are two of us. My sister’s gone out.’

Hana pressed her bag against one thigh. Through the fabric, the wooden bird pressed into her knee.

‘A, open my contract.’

The availability summary appeared. Hana scrolled through the visit to her father, her departure from the sector, the assisted return she had refused. Beneath them was the housing review. It had been completed during the night.

‘I’d lost priority.’

‘The allocation has been reassessed.’

‘I didn’t say I didn’t need a home.’

The woman looked down at the bag. She took half a step back and cleared the doorway.

Hana went in.

The domestic robot came out from under the bed. It passed close to her shoe and collected a drop that had fallen from the woman's hair. It still had a small scrape on top, where Hana had dropped a saucepan on it.

'My name's Emi,' the woman said.

Hana did not answer. She opened the wardrobe.

Behind the first two doors, clothes hung facing different ways. Behind the third was a closed box with her name along the edge. She pulled it out, holding it against her chest. It was lighter than she had expected.

'We haven't opened it,' Emi said.

Hana put it on the table. The seal recognised her fingers.

There were her folded clothes, a pair of shoes, the printed photographs she had kept behind the kitchen cupboard door. Her sketchbook had ended up on edge between a sole and a sleeve.

Hana pulled it out. One corner had bent. She ran a nail over the paper to straighten it.

'Who put everything in like this?'

'The inventory was completed by the domestic unit,' A said.

Emi had sat on the edge of the bed. She still held the comb.

'If you appeal, will they move us?'

Hana looked up. 'I don't know.'

'I need to call my sister.'

The woman stood up. Hana watched her take a small terminal from the table and carry it to the window. She spoke quietly, covering her mouth with the hand that held the comb.

Hana reopened the summary. An appeal would not suspend the new allocation, but would allow her to request a review. She looked for the line she had confirmed from Kenji's kitchen. It said she would lose priority. The word *decline* appeared only beside the vehicle she had not taken.

'This one,' she said. The system isolated the sentence.

‘Write that this is the one I read.’

‘You can attach the notice to the request for review.’

Hana attached it. She did not select the field asking her to describe the new occupants’ behaviour.

Emi came back from the window. ‘She’s coming here.’

‘She doesn’t need to leave what she’s doing.’

‘I told her the lady whose flat it is was here.’

Hana realised she was still standing in the middle of the room with the sketchbook held against her chest. Emi waited beside the bed. The towel had slipped from her shoulder. ‘Hana,’ Hana said.

The woman looked at her.

‘My name’s Hana.’

Emi picked up the terminal again, but did not call at once.

‘I have appealed,’ Hana added. ‘About what they told me.’

The woman nodded. She sat down and typed something with her thumb.

Hana went back to the box. The system offered storage or delivery to a verified address. Kenji’s house did not appear among the destinations. There was, however, a place available in the neighbourhood centre until the first review was complete.

‘For how long?’

‘Tonight. Subsequent availability will be confirmed tomorrow.’

Hana touched the centre’s name.

Emi helped her hold the bag open. Not all the clothes would fit. Hana took the shoes out of the box and put them beside the door, then looked at the sketchbook.

She opened it where the cover was most worn. There was a drawing of a woman sitting on public transport. The hand holding the rail was enormous beside the face. Hana remembered how she had kept trying to rub it out until the paper grew thin.

On the last used page she had written: do it all again.

Behind it, more than half the book was still blank.

‘Are you putting that on top?’ Emi asked.

‘It’s only paper.’

The woman pointed to the bag's outside pocket.

'It won't get bent in there.'

Hana looked at the corner she had tried to straighten with her nail. She closed the sketchbook and slipped it into the pocket. Emi was still holding the zip open.

A pair of socks slipped under the table. They both bent down and knocked heads. Emi put a hand to her forehead; Hana stayed on her knees with her nose almost against the table leg.

The woman was the first to laugh. She apologised at once. Hana picked up the socks and sat back on her heels until her own laughter stopped hurting her throat too.

She used the table to help herself up.

'Where have you come from?'

Emi pointed towards the sea wall, invisible behind the projected forest.

'Near the old market. They've closed the water point.'

Hana stopped the zip halfway. 'For how long?'

'It's not reopening. The vehicle came to get us.'

The woman pulled her wet top away from her skin.

'At least I can wash here.'

Hana looked at the forest on the wall. Low down, a light came on when Emi passed the sensor. The house had already learnt her step.

She confirmed storage for the box she could not carry. The robot waited for her to pick up the shoes, then lifted it from the floor.

Emi held the door for her.

Hana went out with her bag against one side and the shoes in her other hand. Before reaching the lift she turned. The woman was still in the doorway.

'There's a spoon in the bottom drawer that gets stuck,' Hana said. 'You have to lift it as you pull.'

Emi nodded. She closed the door only after the lift had opened.

In Bergamo, Miriam was folding the sheet from the sofa. The place where she had lain was still warm.

Davide had secured a slot for the following morning. The request stated that the pain had lasted for months. Miriam read it while Paolo cleared the coffee table. ‘You’ve written months.’

Davide stopped with his bag open.

‘That’s what you told me.’

She looked at the line. She left it as it was. ‘And if tomorrow isn’t enough?’

‘I’ll tell you what’s needed next.’

Paolo picked up the last sheet of paper used to wipe off the gel. He held it away from his shirt.

‘I’ve moved it,’ he said.

Miriam looked at him.

‘My own appointment tomorrow. I’m coming with you.’

She let the sheet slide between her fingers. There was an unravelling seam along the edge.

‘Thank you.’

Davide closed his bag. Paolo took him to the door. With the sheet still over her arm, Miriam listened to their voices grow quieter in the corridor.

‘Paolo.’

He came back.

‘If you’re talking about it, I’m coming too.’

Davide reappeared in the doorway. They waited for her to put the sheet down.

In Yokohama’s neighbourhood centre, six beds had been put in the room where Hana had watched the fragments.

She recognised the place where the wall had opened when her assignment ended. Now there was a man taking off his socks. The bed assigned to her was beside the passage, beneath the air vent.

She put her shoes on the floor. The mattress sagged in the middle. She sat on the edge so as not to tip her bag over.

She called Kenji.

‘Did you find your things?’

‘Some of them.’

She could hear dishes at his end. Hana looked at the other beds.

‘I’m sleeping in the city tonight.’

‘Did they give you the flat back?’

‘No.’

The sound stopped.

‘There’s a bed at the centre. You can leave the mattress in the kitchen rolled up.’

Kenji waited. Hana asked him about the water point, whether they had received any notices too.

‘A verification request has come,’ he said. ‘Etsuko is making a list of the houses.’

Hana looked at the open bag on her knees. ‘Don’t sign for me.’

‘What?’

‘If you need to ask for something, tell me first.’

Kenji put down a plate. ‘I haven’t asked you for anything yet.’

Hana closed her eyes. The draught cooled her forehead. ‘I know.’

She kept the connection open. At the other end, her father did not resume washing up.

‘I’m tired,’ she said.

‘Have you eaten?’

‘I’ll see what’s here now.’

When they had said goodbye, Hana took the bird out of the T-shirt. She set it on the bag and pulled out the sketchbook. The old pencil slipped from the elastic, sharpened at only one end.

She leafed through to the woman with the oversized hand. She moved the rubber towards the page. The patch left by the erasing was still visible, almost transparent against the light.

She turned the page. She rested her left wrist on her knee and tried to draw it. The wristband hid a strip of skin. She moved it higher and began again from there.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Free Hours

Kofi had already closed the request when Abena asked him where her room was.

He left his hand on the workbench.

‘Which room?’

The girl pointed to the place where the floor plan had disappeared. She had seen two beds, a window and a table too small for all the chairs they had put around it.

‘The one at Mum’s.’

Kofi looked for the screwdriver. It was beneath his hand.

‘We need to talk about it.’

Adwoa was still on the screen. Behind her, Efua’s mattress had been made up again; a closed bag lay on the pillow.

‘That’s why I called,’ she said.

Friday had passed. Allocations at the Tamale complex were complete, and Adwoa had agreed to stay. The activities she had to remain available for had no start date. The family accommodation, however, was available to her immediately.

‘I’ll come and get her,’ she said. ‘I can make the journey now.’

Abena rested her chin on the workbench.

‘When?’

‘The day after tomorrow.’

Kofi put the screwdriver back in its holder. The tip struck the wood.

‘Her doctor’s here.’

‘I know, Dad.’

‘Taking the inhaler isn’t enough.’

Adwoa looked down to open something. The clinic appeared, with the name of the contact person and the availability of medication. Kofi read down to the end. The treatment was the same.

‘And when does she have to go?’

‘The first appointment is already scheduled,’ A said.

Kofi went back to the top.

‘Do they know her there?’

‘Her clinical records will be transferred in full.’

‘That’s not what I asked.’

Adwoa moved closer to the lens.

‘I know her.’

Abena pushed herself up on her arms. Kofi saw her top stretch across her chest and waited for the small cough that sometimes came when she leant like that. It did not come.

‘You don’t have to decide now,’ Adwoa said. ‘But I haven’t asked to send her away from you. There’s room for you too.’

The plan returned to the workbench. In the second room the system placed a single bed. Kofi looked at the space left between the wall and the door.

‘The workshop?’

‘Personal tools can be transferred,’ A said.

‘And the rest?’

An offer appeared to collect the appliances being held there. Those belonging to customers would be returned or replaced. The equipment could enter the recovery system; the premises would become available again once cleared.

Kofi looked at the shelves. On one was a motor that had been open for weeks, covered with a plate so Abena would not drop peel into it.

The girl ran a finger over the window on the plan.

‘Does it open?’

‘The kitchen one does,’ Adwoa said.

‘This one.’

Her mother enlarged the room. She looked for the answer in the same place as her daughter.

‘I don’t know about that one. I’ll tell you when I get there.’

Kofi slid the plan towards them. The request to transfer guardianship remained in front of his wrist.

‘Do you want to go?’ he asked Abena.

She looked at the screen first, then at him.

‘Are you coming?’

Kofi took off his glasses. One arm caught behind his ear.

‘Not straight away.’

‘When?’

He felt the answer coming: as soon as I've finished the work. He looked at the motor beneath the plate, then at the switched-off soldering iron. Abena was waiting.

'I don't know yet.'

The girl kept her finger on the window.

Kofi looked down at the form. In the field for observations, he had begun writing that Abena did not wish to disrupt her routine. The sentence was half finished.

He deleted it. 'What would you like?' he asked her.

Abena took her hand off the workbench.

'To be with Mum.'

Kofi nodded. His throat had tightened so quickly that he had to wait before speaking.

'Then let's get your things ready.'

Adwoa stayed still on the screen. He confirmed the request and read the date on which guardianship would pass to her, at the time of departure. The daily checks in Accra would end that day. So would the supplement to his allowance for the girl.

Abena was already off the stool.

'Can I take the fan?'

'We'll see if it fits.'

She ran into the room. Kofi waited until her footsteps could no longer be heard.

'Is the mattress new?' he asked his daughter.

'Yes.'

'Old ones hold dust.'

'I know.'

Kofi rubbed a lens with the hem of his shirt. It was already clean.

'Send me a photograph when you've got it ready.'

Adwoa nodded. Then she asked whether he had eaten, and he had to turn round to remember where he had left his plate.

In Geneva, Leila had bitten her cheek while reading a request in her sleep.

Tomás found the stain on the pillow. It was small, near the seam. She covered it with her palm before he had finished asking what it was.

‘Nothing.’

‘You’ve got blood in your mouth.’

Leila ran her tongue along the inside of her cheek. The taste had been there since she woke. She had thought of the implant procedure.

‘Let me see.’

She opened her mouth, then raised a hand for Tomás to wait. Above his shoulder the text of an interrupted interview had appeared. A woman had asked for the last question to be repeated; the system proposed validating the previous answer.

‘No,’ Leila said.

Tomás drew back.

‘Not you.’

He waited beside the bed until the request disappeared. Leila noticed he was holding a wet towel.

‘What were you saying?’

Tomás handed it to her. ‘I only just asked you.’

She pressed the fabric against her mouth. The cut stung. In the notebook beside the bed she had recorded waking twice; the next line contained only the time and a stroke that trailed down beyond the margin.

At the centre they had her open and close her jaw. The woman examining her rested two fingers in front of her ears.

‘Clench.’

Leila obeyed.

‘Now release.’

The woman waited and repeated the request.

Leila looked at Tomás on the chair near the door. He was picking a thread from his sleeve that had caught on the towel.

‘I’m not clenching.’

The woman let her feel the muscle beneath her fingers. Leila slowly lowered her jaw. The pain increased before yielding a little space.

‘That’s it.’

The examination continued as two more requests arrived. Leila responded to the first. At the second, the woman took her wrist and lowered her hand.

‘That one can wait outside.’

‘It’s not a call.’

‘I know.’

Leila looked for the defer command. The field indicated an active priority. She showed it to the woman, who read it without changing her expression.

‘I need to finish examining you.’

Tomás stood up, but the woman gestured for him to stay seated. She asked A to transfer the request to someone else. The text disappeared from Leila’s field of vision and reappeared, smaller, on the room’s screen.

‘Could you do that?’ Leila asked.

‘During a clinical assessment, yes.’

The woman took her wrist again. Leila let it turn in her hand.

Eva arrived when the examination was over. She put an empty case on the table, for an appliance the attendant would prepare to protect Leila’s teeth. Leila looked at the little transparent recess.

‘For the night?’

‘For when you sleep.’

‘It’s not the same thing.’

Eva opened the assessment summary. The first line ordered a temporary reduction in workload. Below, the review of consent interviews was shown as transferred to another group.

Leila touched the project’s name.

‘I can keep this one.’

‘It’s the part that’s been keeping you awake.’

‘I can work on it during the day.’

‘You haven’t only been working on that.’

Eva opened the previous night. Some requests had come from the programme; others Leila had opened after finishing the first. She recognised a verification left pending, an interview in which no one had answered, a check on a sentence she had already corrected.

Tomás was looking at the floor. Leila turned the screen towards him, then realised and turned it back to herself.

‘If I find an error, do I leave it there?’

‘You can report it,’ Eva said.

‘And wait.’

‘Yes.’

Leila felt her jaw close again. She felt for the injured spot with her tongue and stopped before touching it.

The transfer awaited her acknowledgement. Beneath it was the option to request a new assessment. Eva had selected nothing on her behalf.

Leila read the name of the person who would receive the project. She did not know them. She opened the first page to add instructions for the passages still to be checked.

She wrote two lines. By the third she was starting again from the beginning.

She left the text and confirmed the handover.

‘I’ll stay available for questions,’ she said.

Eva moved the case towards her. ‘They’ll be there when you come back.’

Permanence remained active. No command appeared to turn it off, but urgent requests took another route. A recorded the start of the clinical interval.

Leila looked at the blank wall. She felt the urge to check where they had gone.

Tomás bent to pick up her bag. She realised she had not yet said whether she wanted to go home.

‘Will you take me?’

He handed her her jacket.

Two days later, Adwoa arrived in Accra with the yellow hair clip tucked inside her wallet.

Abena ran to meet her and stopped before touching her. Her mother had a bag under one arm and the travel terminal in her other hand. She had to put everything down on the step.

Kofi watched them embrace from the workshop. Abena’s arms were too high, around her neck; Adwoa had bent down and the bag stopped her bringing one foot closer. Kofi started to go and move it. His daughter knocked it aside with her heel and found room.

He stayed where he was.

They ate before the return journey. Kofi had bought more food than they needed. Adwoa took half the rice off her plate and put it back in the serving bowl; without thinking, he brought it back in front of her.

'Dad.'

Kofi looked at the full spoon. He emptied it back into the bowl.

Abena was telling her about the fan. They had taken it apart to fit it in the bag, and she wanted to explain to her mother why the wire was shorter.

'I broke it.'

Adwoa looked at her father.

'Then we fixed it,' Abena said. 'Mostly me.'

Kofi passed her the water.

After eating, the girl took her mother into the room. Questions began coming from there about what they could leave and what absolutely had to fit. Kofi heard mention of a box he did not remember. He got up to go and look.

Adwoa came out before he reached the door.

'We need some clean socks.'

He pointed to the drawer.

'The bigger ones are at the back.'

His daughter nodded and went back in. Kofi stayed in the middle of the workshop. Then he collected the plates.

When Abena reappeared, the yellow clip was above her ear. Part of her plait had come undone to put it in; she kept smoothing it, unable to tuck all the hair back.

'Does it look all right?'

Kofi put down the tea towel.

'Come here.'

She stood between his knees. The little clasp was hard to open. Kofi held it with two fingers and waited for the tremor to ease enough to move it.

Abena raised a hand to help him.

'Hold these for me.'

The girl gathered the hair. The clip went in a little higher, and this time it stayed straight.

Adwoa came out with the bag closed.

Kofi checked the inhaler, then looked for the spare pack. His daughter showed it to him in the outside pocket. He looked at the zip again.

'It's all there,' she said.

He felt the urge to ask her to open it. Abena had stayed still between his knees, her head bent so as not to knock his hand.

Kofi let go of the clip.

'If anything's missing, call me.'

Adwoa picked up the bag. 'Yes.'

He went with them to the station. The vehicle for Tamale waited under the canopy, with the luggage already in its compartments. Kofi held Abena's bag until a unit asked him to put it on the shelf. The girl stood on tiptoe to check they did not tip it over.

'The motor's wrapped up,' he told her.

'I know.'

Adwoa had opened the entrance. She waited with one hand on the rail.

Kofi bent to say goodbye to Abena. She kissed him on the cheek, then took his glasses to straighten them. She had knocked them crooked with her nose.

'I'll call you from there.'

'When you arrive.'

The girl looked at her mother.

Kofi straightened up.

'When you've got your things sorted.'

Adwoa came down the last step and hugged him. He felt a seam of her shirt against his face. She still smelt of the road and the soap from her journey.

'Thank you, Dad.'

Kofi put a hand behind her head. He could find nothing to say that would not keep her a little longer. He let her climb back aboard.

He waited for the vehicle to leave. Abena's window stayed transparent until the bend; then the canopy's reflection hid them both.

When he got back, he went into the workshop without turning on the workbench. At the back of the room, the girl's blanket lay folded on the bed. Beneath it, the sheet still held a small hollow on the wall side.

Kofi sat on the floor to take off his shoes.

The pain came as he was undoing the second lace. He rested his forehead against the edge of the mattress. For a while he thought only of the vehicle speeding north, of the hours in which he would not be able to bring them back.

He raised his wrist.

Adwoa's contact opened. There was already a photograph: Abena had fallen asleep against her, her clip crooked and her mouth open. His daughter had written that they were off to a good start.

Kofi began to reply. He was left with a single word on the screen, then removed it. He closed the connection without asking them to call.

He remained seated beside the bed. From the street came the sound of the peanut seller dragging her stall under the canopy. Usually, at that hour, Abena would switch off her lesson and go to see whether anything was left.

Kofi finished unlacing his shoe. The pain was still in the same place.

When the woman called to ask him for a hand, he got up. He had to lean on the bed because one leg had gone to sleep.

He went out barefoot. They took opposite ends of the stall and tried to lift it together.

'Wait,' she said. 'You've got a foot on the sheet.'

Kofi moved it. This time the stall came free.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The Harvest

Samir's shirt had kept the shape of the vest.

Maha handed it to him folded, with the sleeves tucked in. Washing had removed the dust, but the two paler stripes left by the straps were still visible across the chest. He ran his palm over them.

'Is the belt there too?'

'That's issued equipment.'

Samir left the shirt on his knees. From the centre's garden came the sound of a ball hitting a bench. Rashid was running again, but Yusuf kept signalling for him to slow down whenever he passed the window.

The assessment of the assault was complete. Samir had read the outcome that morning: no resumption of armed duties under present conditions. The proposed pathway included continuous regulation of responses and a new review of predictive assistance.

'If I don't do it?' he had asked.

'You can request an assignment without containment functions,' A had replied.

The footage of the equipment store had remained on the table. Nabil lost his slipper on every replay.

Samir had not challenged the assessment. He had asked for the footage to be closed and opened an application for work without a weapon.

Now his thumb was still feeling for the buckle.

'Has Nabil come back?' he asked.

'On the morning shift. His wrist is still bandaged.'

Samir stood up. Maha put a hand on the folded shirt.

'He hasn't asked you to come today.'

He stood there long enough to feel the edge of the chair against his calves. Then he began to sit down again.

Maha took her hand away. 'Yusuf needs to collect his things from the greenhouse. He needs someone to load them.'

'Rashid?'

‘He’s staying here with the others. I’m going with the vehicle.’

Samir looked outside. The old man was trying to straighten a box too large for the bag he was holding open.

‘Can I come?’

Maha requested a place. Authorisation for an accompanied outing appeared on Samir’s wrist, valid until the group’s return. Where his role had once been, the system wrote *visitor*.

He checked whether his name was right. It was.

In Mumbai, the archive attendant placed an uncreased sheet of paper in front of Anaya.

The specified four working days had passed. She had kept the ticket from her first journey in the inner pocket of her bag, though Jyoti’s number was already in the terminal. She took it out and laid it beside the document.

The classification of Savita Naik’s death had been corrected. The sentence about refusing rescue was gone. In its place were her attempt to accompany a man without verifiable identification and the vehicle’s departure before they could board.

Anaya read it a second time. The complete recording was now part of the central file.

‘Can I take it?’

‘The copy is for the family. You’ll need authorisation to collect it.’

Anaya called Jyoti. The woman answered in front of a wall of containers. She wore a cap over her hair and had a wet mark on her sleeve. Behind her, baskets passed suspended from a rail.

‘Has it arrived?’

‘Yes.’

‘Will you read it to me?’

Anaya began with Savita’s name. When she reached the corrected section, Jyoti moved towards a door. The noise of the baskets diminished.

‘Wait.’

She rested the terminal on something low. Anaya saw the ceiling, then a corner of her face. She resumed reading more slowly.

At the end, only the sound of work on the other side of the door remained.

‘Have you read the rest too?’ Jyoti asked.

Anaya looked down. There were the validating signatures, the date, the list of attachments.

‘Yes. All of it.’

The woman picked up the terminal.

‘Have it sent. I can’t leave them today.’

Anaya heard someone call her from behind the door. Jyoti signalled that she was coming, then dictated the address.

‘Not the old one,’ she added.

The attendant prepared an envelope. Anaya checked every line with her. The woman had her repeat the floor number and confirmed delivery.

‘Thank you for going back,’ she said.

The connection closed before Anaya could answer.

She still held the ticket between her fingers. The attendant slipped the document into the envelope, along with the copy on a storage medium, and showed it to her before sealing it.

Anaya reached to take it. She drew back her hand and let the man put it in the dispatch compartment.

Mehta was waiting outside the archive exit. He had the folder under his arm. Anaya had not seen him on the train.

‘Did you come for this?’

He shook his head and showed her a summons. He had been asked to reconstruct his supervisory work on another set of reports.

‘Have you finished?’ she asked.

‘I have to stay tomorrow too.’

Anaya looked at the folder. This time it contained papers, enough to hold it open on one side.

‘I can help you read them.’

‘You can’t make my declaration for me.’

‘That’s not what I meant.’

Mehta moved the folder to his other arm.

‘Nor did I, when I told you to wait.’

Anaya felt heat rise up her neck. Behind him she recognised the canopy beneath which she had begun to apologise and stopped. The same sentence came to her: I didn’t want it to happen to you too.

He was feeling for something in his pocket, unable to keep the papers still. Anaya took the folder from him. Mehta let it go and found the accommodation contact.

‘Do you have somewhere?’ she asked.

‘I’m asking.’

The terminal offered him a room on the other side of the neighbourhood. The vehicle would leave before his turn to return the files. Mehta went back to searching.

‘I can take them back,’ Anaya said.

He looked at the folder she held against her chest. ‘Those, yes.’

He showed her the desk where she should leave them. Anaya waited for him to confirm the room and went with him to the vehicle.

Before boarding, Mehta came back. He took two sheets with his own notes from the folder. He left the rest with her.

In Amman, the vehicle stopped in the same place where Samir had got out with the holster beneath his vest.

This time the people with boxes got out first. Yusuf held the folded bag under one arm. There were two women, a man with a stick and Maha, who asked everyone to stay together until the passage opened.

Half the greenhouse covering had been rolled up. Sunlight entered the rows without meeting the opaque veil that had been there before. On the ground where Rashid had crawled to the valve chamber, a pale crust had formed.

Yusuf stopped at the door. He did not look at the machines parked along the fence. His eyes followed the pipe to the tap.

‘Is it off?’ he asked.

‘Since the transfer,’ Maha said.

The old man went in.

The dog's bowl was still beside the door. Yusuf tipped it over to empty out the dust and put it in the bag.

'Salma says he's eating,' he told Samir. 'Tell Rashid that afterwards too.'

Samir nodded. The old man made sure the bowl could not fall out.

Samir followed him past the frame. Without the vest there was room for both of them. He still had to turn one shoulder, as he used to.

Inside, the tomato leaves had curled towards the stems. Some fruit had touched the ground. Yusuf picked one up, turned it over and pressed his thumb into the spot that had gone soft.

The skin gave way.

The old man left it at the edge of the bed and took the bag from under his arm. At the far end of the greenhouse, one of the women called for help with a crate. Samir started towards her, but Yusuf handed him two rope handles.

'Hold it open.'

They began at the last row. Some tomatoes were still firm. Yusuf picked them by twisting the stalks; he left the split ones in Samir's hands for him to decide where to put them.

The first time, Samir threw them on the ground. The old man bent and picked them up.

'These to one side.'

He put them in the box he had straightened at the centre. Samir stopped throwing them away.

The bag did not fill much. Beneath each leaf was another dry one, and where a fruit looked whole from outside, turning it revealed a patch already eaten by insects.

Yusuf reached the plant beside the wall and knelt. He ran his fingers round the stem, feeling for its base beneath the dust.

'This one's coming with us.'

Samir put down the bag.

'Where will you put it?'

The old man pointed to an upturned bucket near the door. Samir went to get it. There was a hole in the bottom; he

plugged it with a piece of torn covering and held it in place with a fistful of earth.

Yusuf had found a small trowel. He tried to push it under the roots, but the soil broke too close to the stem. Samir knelt on the opposite side.

They dug with their hands. Further down, the earth was still cool. Samir managed to get three fingers into it, lifted and felt something give before the clump moved.

Yusuf caught his arm. ‘Don’t pull.’

Samir stopped. He looked where he had put his hand. White threads came out of the cut, as fine as those left on Karim’s cheek when he had tried to wipe it with a sleeve.

He let the clump of earth sink back.

Yusuf resumed digging from the other side, widening the circle. The trowel struck the buried pipe and slipped from his hand. He picked it up and struck harder.

‘Wait,’ Samir said.

The old man struck again. The blade reached the base of the stem. The plant bent suddenly and a leaf remained on his hand.

Yusuf stayed on his knees.

Samir looked at the bucket he had prepared. He felt the urge to say they could take another. There were still plenty in the row, all small enough to fit.

He moved to give him shade.

From the far end of the greenhouse came the sound of a crate being dragged. Maha called their names. The vehicle had to return for the next trip; the two women were ready.

Yusuf put down the trowel. He wiped his face with his hand and left a streak of earth.

‘Give them the good ones,’ he said, pointing to the bag.

Samir took it to the women. When he returned, the old man had picked up the broken plant and was holding it on his knees. He was pulling off the green tomatoes without looking at them.

‘Can I do anything?’ Yusuf shook his head.

Samir remained crouched beside him. For a while the old man did nothing but turn a fruit between his fingers. Then he let it fall into the box with the others.

He got up, leaning on Samir's shoulder. His knees creaked loudly enough to be heard.

'The bucket,' he said.

Samir took it by the handle. The old man bent and put the trowel inside.

At the exit, one of the units moved towards the greenhouse. Maha made it wait for the headcount. The women answered from the vehicle; the man with the stick had sat at the back beside the crates.

Samir helped Yusuf aboard. Then he went back for the box of spoiled fruit.

Beneath the frame, his sleeve caught on an end of wire. The fabric pulled his arm backwards.

His breath stopped before he could turn.

Maha came closer. Samir saw her hand coming towards his wrist and closed his fingers until his nails pressed into his palm.

'Stop,' he said. She stopped.

Samir tried to spot the wire. His sleeve hid it. He moved his shoulder a fraction, enough to slacken the fabric, and felt the metal scratch his skin.

'It's here,' Maha said.

He looked where she pointed. A single loop of fabric had caught.

His heart was beating steadily. The rest of his body was not.

'Take this off first.'

Maha took the wire between her fingers. Samir let her have his arm without turning sharply. When the sleeve was free, he stayed against the frame, the box gripped in his other hand.

'Have you got it?' she asked.

Samir looked down at the tomatoes. 'Yes.'

In the vehicle he sat beside Yusuf. His hand trembled against his thigh. He waited for the vehicle to move off; before

the bend he heard the first stretch of covering slide over the unit’s rollers.

The old man did not turn. He split a soft tomato with his thumbs. Pulp ran over his fingers. Samir handed him his handkerchief and Yusuf laid the seeds on it, separating them from the skin with the back of his nail.

‘Don’t fold it,’ he said.

Samir held the handkerchief spread over the box. At every bend he had to tilt it a little so the seeds would not all slide to one side. Yusuf opened another tomato.

They arrived at the centre with dirty hands. Maha let the women and the man with the stick get out first. Samir passed the box to Yusuf, but the old man pointed to the handkerchief.

‘You keep that.’

Rashid was waiting in the garden. He looked at the bucket, the trowel and what was left of the harvest. Then he took the box from his grandfather and held the door for him.

Samir went to the sink. He put the handkerchief on the dry edge and turned on the water. A thin scratch appeared beneath his wrist. He watched until the earth no longer hid it.

The connection to Nadia was available on the corridor terminal. Samir dried his hands and opened it.

‘Are you coming home?’ his mother asked.

‘Tonight.’

Nadia moved something on the table to make room for him, though he was not there yet.

Samir felt his sleeve stick to the wet spot on his arm. He peeled it away gently.

‘Do you remember Karim’s shoes? The ones he said he’d lost.’

His mother looked up. ‘He’d given them away.’

‘You knew?’ Nadia sat down.

Samir pulled a chair up to the terminal. Behind him, the handkerchief lay open, the seeds still glistening against the fabric.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Exposed Side

The wedding ring would not come off.

Miriam had taken off her earrings and necklace, leaving them in the open compartment beside the examination couch. The ring stopped at the knuckle. She tried turning it the other way.

‘Don’t pull like that,’ Paolo said.

She gave him her hand. It was the morning after Davide’s visit; she had not eaten, as they had asked, and she had put two biscuits in her bag which she could now hear shifting every time Paolo moved it.

He took the ring between his thumb and forefinger. Miriam watched the white patch beneath the metal.

‘You’re hurting me.’

Paolo let go at once. An attendant arrived with a little soap and a wipe. She had Miriam keep her hand raised while she prepared the couch.

The room was different from the one Miriam remembered. Davide had arranged for the scan to use external readings; the sensors waited on the trolley instead of recognising her through an implant. One had a worn edge covered by a new strip.

The ring slipped off on the second attempt. Paolo caught it before it fell.

‘I’ll keep it for you.’

Miriam touched the newly exposed skin. There was a groove paler than the rest of her finger.

They had her lay her arms along her sides. Paolo had to wait outside. Before leaving, he turned to ask her something, but the couch had already begun to move and she could not hear him.

The light passed over her face.

‘If you need to stop, say so,’ the attendant said.

Miriam looked for the place the voice was coming from. The woman was behind the glass.

The first noise began near her head. Miriam closed her eyes and followed the air as it came in. When it reached her chest, she felt it stop. She began again, trying to make the breath out last a little longer than the breath in.

One hand must have been bent awkwardly. The finger without the ring touched the edge of the table and every vibration travelled through it to her elbow.

‘Miriam, keep still a little longer.’

She tried to answer. Only a little air came out.

The noise stopped and began again somewhere else. Miriam opened her eyes. In front of her face was a smooth surface, too close for her to see where it ended.

‘Stop.’

The table moved back. The attendant was beside her before she could sit up.

‘Wait here.’

Miriam had already swung one leg over the edge. She put it back on the couch. Her breath came all at once and she had to bend forwards because it hurt beneath her ribs.

‘How much was left?’

‘Not much. But we need to repeat part of it.’

The door opened for Paolo. He still had the bag in his hand.

Miriam wiped her face with her wrist. ‘I’m sorry.’

The attendant moved the support that was pressing against her elbow.

‘Would you like to try in a few minutes?’

Miriam nodded, then shook her head. She did not know which of the two answers the movement she had just made belonged to.

Paolo put down the bag and sat beside her. His knee touched the edge of the couch.

They stayed like that until Miriam could unclench her hands.

The second time she asked the attendant to warn her before every movement. She had the scan with her eyes open. When the noise began again, she no longer tried to lengthen

her breathing: she let each breath come short and waited for the next.

Davide saw them in a room with three chairs. He moved one so Paolo would not be behind Miriam.

The images showed the liver from several angles. Miriam recognised only the area Davide's hand pointed to. The rest could have belonged to anyone.

'We need to take a sample of this growth and examine it,' he said. 'The images are suspicious.'

Miriam looked at the empty chair he had got up from.

'For cancer.'

'Yes.'

Paolo put the bag on the floor.

Davide explained how they would take the sample, the local anaesthetic, how long she would remain under observation. Miriam followed him until he spoke about the needle. From that point she heard only the words at the ends of the sentences.

'When?' she asked.

'There's a slot tomorrow morning.'

'Can I go home afterwards?'

'If the checks are all right, yes. Someone will need to take you.'

Paolo moved his foot closer to the bag. Miriam saw him getting ready to answer.

'With him,' she said.

Davide recorded her consent to the procedure. Then he asked what was unclear.

Miriam looked at the image still on the wall.

'Can you repeat it from where you said needle?'

When they came out, Paolo gave her back the wedding ring. He had slipped it over the tip of his little finger and kept his hand closed so he would not lose it. Miriam put it in the inside pocket of her bag.

In the vehicle she ate one of the biscuits. It broke in two and the larger piece fell between the seat and the door. Miriam sat with the small piece in her hand, looking at where the other had gone.

Paolo opened the second wrapper and passed it to her.

The practice still smelt of sesame.

Miriam went in that afternoon to remove the appointments from her diary. She had begun writing down a few names again before the funeral, filling only the hours when Paolo would be out.

She put her bag on the chair. The stone mortar was still beside the wall, away from the surface where she used to keep it. There was a strip of clear protective tape on the edge of the broken sensor.

Miriam opened the shutters. The light reached the treatment couch and the sheet she had laid out on the last morning. She pulled it off without shaking it.

There were four appointments in the diary. Two people received the postponement through the system. The third answered while Miriam was still choosing her words.

‘For how long?’

‘I can’t tell you just now.’

‘Then I’ll get in touch with the other person they recommended.’

Miriam held the pencil over the name.

‘Of course.’

The woman said goodbye. She did not ask when she would be able to come back.

Miriam rubbed out the time and left the name legible. She tried to call Bianca, but the connection would not open: the screen showed that the woman was already on her way.

She could arrange for a message to reach her on arrival. Miriam closed the command and left the door open.

Bianca came in with her blue coat over her arm. She stopped when she saw the folded sheet.

‘Have I got the wrong day?’

‘No. I should have let you know earlier.’

Miriam pointed to the chair. Bianca put her coat on it and remained standing.

‘I’m not working.’

The woman looked at the open diary. ‘Today?’

‘I need to have some tests.’

‘Oh.’

Bianca took her bag off her shoulder. She put it on the coat, then picked up both again to leave the chair free.

Miriam went to get a clean sheet. She spread it over the couch, pulling the edge towards her. The movement brought a stab of pain in her back and she had to leave the fabric halfway across.

‘You can at least sit down,’ she said to Bianca.

‘I’ve been sitting down the whole way here.’

The woman finished spreading the sheet on her side. She laid it the wrong way up, with the seam on top. Miriam moved her hand to turn it over and stopped with her thumb beneath the hem.

‘Are you in a hurry to get back?’ she asked.

‘To do what?’

Miriam left the sheet as it was. She sat on the edge. Her legs did not reach far enough down for her feet to rest properly on the floor.

Bianca brought over the stool they used when taking off their shoes. Miriam rested her heels on it and felt her belly relax a little.

‘Better?’

She nodded.

The silence lasted until the sound of a container being emptied came from the courtyard. Bianca looked in her bag and took out a handkerchief. She held it on her lap.

‘They’ve found something,’ Miriam said.

The woman took off her glasses.

‘Do you know what it is yet?’

‘Not yet.’

Bianca cleaned one lens with the handkerchief, then folded the glasses and put them back in her bag.

Miriam put a hand to her chest. She would have known where to lay it on another person, how long to wait without asking questions. Her own top was damp beneath her palm.

‘I can’t keep still.’

Bianca moved the stool a little closer. ‘Shall I raise your feet some more?’

‘No. This is fine.’

Miriam let her hand fall. The woman stayed in front of her, too close to look at without lifting her face.

When Paolo arrived to collect her, Bianca was sitting on the chair with her bag between her ankles. They had not put the water on for tea.

Miriam got down from the couch. The sheet had taken the shape of her legs, and for the first time that afternoon she did not straighten it.

The sample was taken the following morning. Miriam felt the anaesthetic needle go in and, afterwards, a pressure she could not place. She looked at the woman’s face instead of her hands.

While they waited, Paolo read her the instructions for going home. He stopped halfway through a sentence and went back to the beginning.

‘You’ve already read that,’ Miriam said.

He looked at the screen.

‘I know.’

She put a finger on the next line. They went on from there.

Two days passed before the full result came. Miriam could distinguish them by the small dressing on her side: on the first day she could not stop feeling it, on the second she forgot it until the waistband of her skirt brushed against it.

When Davide called them, she was in the bathroom. She had left the water running and had to go back to turn it off after she had already reached the corridor.

The doctor asked whether they could come in.

Paolo said they were on their way. This time Miriam let him.

In the room with the three chairs, the glass showed a courtyard with two trees. Davide closed the file in front of him and waited for Miriam to sit down.

‘It’s a malignant tumour.’

Miriam felt Paolo’s hand move on the armrest. It did not seek hers.

Davide went on speaking. There were further assessments to complete, people who would discuss the treatment options

with them. He pointed to an appointment already available and asked whether they would like to read the result together.

Miriam took the copy he offered.

The word was on the paper, beneath her name. She read it once and looked further down for a sentence that would change it.

‘How long has it been there?’

‘I can’t establish that from this test.’

‘If I’d come sooner?’

Davide remained seated opposite her.

‘Now we need to deal with what we’ve found.’

Miriam went back to the first line. The paper creased where she was gripping it too hard.

Paolo asked to open the care pathway. A displayed it on the wall: consultations, tests already on file, an assessment for continuous care. Beside the last of these appeared the option for temporary activation which Miriam had already seen before Elia’s departure.

‘Can this start straight away?’ he asked.

Davide looked at Miriam.

‘We can talk about it now. Treatment decisions require a discussion with the team who will be looking after you.’

Miriam laid the paper on her lap.

‘I’ll have the tests and the consultation.’

‘Good.’

‘For the rest, I want to know what you’re asking of me, one thing at a time.’

Paolo withdrew his hand from the command on the wall.

‘I hadn’t confirmed it.’

‘I saw.’

Davide removed the proposals they had not yet discussed. The appointment with the care team remained. Miriam asked for it to be confirmed.

On the way out, Paolo took her bag. She followed him to the vehicle, holding the paper even though the copy was already available on her phone.

At home she put it on the kitchen table. One corner landed on a drop of water and turned dark.

Miriam lifted it. She looked for somewhere dry, then stood holding the paper in mid-air until Paolo brought an empty plate closer.

‘Here.’

She laid the report on it. The paper stuck out on every side.

Paolo sat down without taking off his jacket.

‘I don’t want to have to choose for you as well,’ Miriam said.

He raised his face.

‘I haven’t asked you to.’

‘I know.’

She sat in the chair beside him. From the corridor, one end of the case could be seen beneath the window.

‘But when I saw you opening that thing…’

Paolo looked at the plate with the paper on it. He put his fingers to the base of his neck and took them away at once.

‘I don’t want to be left alone.’

Miriam kept her eyes on the place where he had laid his hand. Then she looked at the jacket he had not taken off, his shoulders still raised, a fold of lining showing at the cuff.

‘Neither do I.’

Paolo covered his mouth. Miriam took his arm above the elbow. The fabric was cold.

She did not ask him to lower his hand.

They remained seated until the wet edge of the paper began to curl away from the plate.

When she got up, Miriam went to fetch her bag. She opened the inside pocket and felt for the wedding ring with her finger. The ring went on without soap; she had to push it only for the last part.

She returned to the kitchen. Paolo had put something on to heat, but he was still wearing his jacket.

Miriam eased it off one arm, then the other. She hung it over the chair and stayed beside him while A recorded the confirmation of the vehicle for the next consultation.

Chapter Twenty-Five

A Place for Two

The mattress would not fit through.

Hana held it folded against her chest, her face buried in a strip of fabric that smelt of cooking. On the other side of the door, Kenji pulled. Every time he changed his grip, the edge became wedged beneath the handle again.

‘Let go,’ Hana said.

Her father let go. The weight dropped onto her knees and she had to sit on the step.

‘Not all of it.’

Kenji bent to help her. Hana held the mattress still with her chin until he could get his hands underneath it.

Hana had returned beyond the sea wall that morning. At the neighbourhood centre in Yokohama they had confirmed her bed for four nights, one at a time; on the fifth, a family would need the place. The box of clothes could stay in storage. She could not.

She had called Kenji from the stop. He had asked her to come straight away.

Now the mattress lay across the threshold and from the courtyard came the voices of people waiting to collect water.

Hana stood up. She worked a corner beneath the handle and pushed with her knee. Kenji pulled gently. The mattress came out, leaving a small white tuft caught on the wood.

‘Where are we putting it?’

‘At Etsuko’s.’

‘Is there room for her too?’

Kenji picked up the end of the rope she had dropped.

‘She’s moved her things.’

The inspection of the water point had ended the day before. A pipe beneath the houses no longer held; during the night they had isolated the section. The tank brought in that morning would last two days. The containers handed out to the families were marked with the place where they would have to take them for the next refill: inside the sea wall.

That water was for drinking and cooking. At Etsuko's, an old cistern still collected rainwater for the bathroom and washing. Kenji had already taken the pot and plates over to her.

There were three containers in a row on the step. A ladle floated in the smallest.

'What about the repair?' Hana asked.

'I've asked.'

He showed her the reply on his terminal. The work was not scheduled. Below it were the available transfers.

Hana opened the list. There was one place for her father, another for her. The addresses were in two different sectors.

'We can ask to stay together.'

'You can ask.'

'Don't you even want to try?'

Kenji passed the rope beneath the mattress. Hana saw his fingers feeling for the end on the wrong side and handed it to him.

'I've already asked that too.'

She looked at the terminal again. Further down was a pending request with both their names.

Hana let her arm fall. Through the open window she could see the boards they had fitted together. The stain on the ceiling had dried round the edges.

'How long can we wait at her place?'

'I don't know.'

Kenji pulled the knot tight. The mattress folded in the middle and spread at the ends.

They carried it across the courtyard together. Hana walked backwards; she could not see the steps and her father announced them when he had already reached them. At the third she put down the load.

'I'll go in front.'

They changed ends. Kenji wiped his nose with his wrist.

Etsuko's green door was open just wide enough for one person to pass through. The lower hinge scraped the floor. The woman helped them lift the door and the mattress went through, scraping against the wall.

Hana’s mother’s chair was beneath the sewing machine. A thin cushion lay on the seat, tied to the legs with two ribbons. Hana looked at it as they carried the mattress into the back room.

Etsuko had moved a cupboard against the window. Two rectangles of paler dust remained on the floor, along with a thin sleeping mat, still folded.

‘Him here,’ she said, pointing to the side furthest from the door. ‘You in front. If I get up, I’ll step over you.’

Hana put her bag against the wall. ‘You can wake me.’

‘We’ll see if I can.’

Kenji untied the rope. The mattress slowly unfolded and took up almost the whole floor.

In Quibdó, Isabel found her T-shirt in a bag on the freshly made bed.

It was the one from the bridge. They had washed it, but a dark border remained round the hole. She put two fingers into the tear and felt the fabric give again.

‘You’re not wearing that,’ the nurse said.

Isabel looked up. ‘Are they sending me away?’

‘You’re being discharged from the ward. The dressings will continue at the outpatient clinic.’

Since Mateo had left, two different people had occupied the bed beside hers. One had talked in their sleep; the other had asked whose radio it was and then left it alone. Rafael had returned from the interview to a single room. Isabel had not seen him again.

‘Can I go out?’

The nurse looked at the request on her screen.

‘For a walk, with someone.’

‘I mean on my own.’

‘You need to speak to whoever is handling the transfer.’

The woman put a clean top beside her. Isabel took the torn one out of the bag, folded it and slipped it beneath the radio.

The transfer officer arrived while she was trying to close everything inside a holdall. One of his shoes was wet and he left half a footprint every other step.

‘There’s room at the convalescent centre. The bed is needed here.’

Isabel pulled the zip. The radio’s knob stopped it.

‘I’m going to Turbo.’

The man opened a map.

‘To a relative?’

‘To someone.’

‘Does this person have accommodation?’

Isabel picked up the radio. Mateo had called her two evenings earlier. Teresa had managed to put her shoes on without the pieces of cloth in the toes; he had found a place near hers. He had not said exactly where he was sleeping.

‘He’s at the reception centre.’

The man looked for the name she gave him. He shook his head.

‘He can’t put you up.’

‘You haven’t asked him.’

He turned the screen round. There were two beds and a shared space. Mateo’s name appeared beside a temporary allocation.

Isabel looked at the rectangle marking his bed. It was narrower than the one she was leaving.

‘Can I apply for reunification?’

‘He needs to apply too. Then availability is checked.’

The man left the application open. Isabel reached a finger towards Mateo’s name, but drew her hand back before touching the screen.

‘I’ll talk to him first.’

The officer closed the map. The convalescent centre remained available; from the following morning Isabel would have to walk to the outpatient clinic. The accommodation included meals, dressings and the journeys necessary for check-ups. Everything else required a request.

‘I didn’t sign up to be arrested.’

‘You’re not under arrest. You can give another destination.’

‘I’ve given you one.’

The man looked at the open holdall. He bent and freed an edge of the T-shirt caught in the teeth of the zip.

‘That one isn’t available yet.’

Isabel held the radio still until he managed to close the bag. The half-footprint on the floor had already dried.

Before going downstairs, she asked to see Rafael. She found him sitting with the mesh beneath his shirt, in front of a tray. His beard was beginning to grow back on the shaved side. He had a slice of fruit on his spoon and could not bring it to his mouth without letting it slide off.

‘Do they help you?’ she asked.

He put down the spoon. ‘If I call.’

Isabel stayed in the doorway. The holdall pulled against her side; she put it on the floor.

‘What did you say?’

Rafael looked at the tray.

‘The routes. The houses.’

‘The names?’

He nodded. He wiped one corner of his mouth with his sleeve. A shiny streak remained on the cuff.

‘Did you tell them what you did too?’

‘Yes.’

Isabel leant against the doorframe.

‘Saying I was in command isn’t enough.’

Rafael pushed the tray away. The mesh moved with him and the shirt stretched between two buttons.

‘I know.’

The interview had left a copy of the statements on the table. Rafael turned it towards her. Beside the name of the technician who had been killed, it said his hands had been raised. Further down began a list that Isabel recognised before reaching the end.

One of the houses had been hers too.

‘Is anyone still there?’ she asked.

Rafael did not answer.

Isabel looked for the command to contact whoever was checking the list. She pointed to it without taking his hand.

‘If there’s anyone, you need to tell them now.’

He looked at the place she was pointing to. Then he pressed it.

Isabel picked up the holdall. When she went out, Rafael was asking them to come back. He had left the spoon on the plate.

The vehicle for the convalescent centre left with her and three other people. Isabel watched the ward recede through the window. In their last call she had told Mateo she would be staying there a few more days. She had not given him another address.

There were two beds in the new room. A woman occupied the one near the window; she had spread small clothes out to dry on the other.

‘I’ll move them,’ she said when she saw Isabel come in.

Isabel let her finish. The woman gathered the things without folding them, holding them beneath her chin when she could no longer fit them in her hands.

‘They’re my grandson’s. They brought them to me wet.’

Isabel put the holdall in the empty cupboard. To put the radio on the shelf, she had to push the T-shirt from the bridge right to the back.

She called Mateo from the room’s terminal. He answered with his face wet.

‘Where are you?’

Isabel showed him the address on the wall.

‘They’ve moved me.’

‘Are you better?’

‘They needed the bed.’

Mateo looked out of frame. Teresa could be heard asking him for a towel. He picked it up and handed it to her without closing the connection.

‘I’ll try to come,’ he said when he returned.

Isabel opened the pending reunification request. There was a space to indicate who would be transferred. She moved her finger close to his name.

‘I asked whether I could come instead,’ she said.

Mateo stopped. She deleted the name she had just selected.

‘When?’

‘They don’t know.’

They went on looking at one another. The woman in the room spread a small T-shirt over the back of a chair, then went out with the rest of the clothes.

‘I miss you,’ Isabel said.

Mateo lowered his head. Isabel saw a drop fall from his chin onto his top. She waited for him to look at her again.

‘I miss you too.’

Isabel leant her back against the wall. They talked until Teresa called again, this time asking them both whether they had finished.

In Yokohama, Etsuko took Hana to collect the last two water cans with a trolley on small wheels.

The tank had been placed beneath the roof of a low building behind the row of houses. To reach it, they had to pass between two wooden pillars joined by a crossbeam. One had a new bracket at its base. A piece of rope remained on the crossbeam, frayed and blackened by the rain.

Hana pushed one wheel over the threshold. Etsuko stopped the trolley.

‘To the side.’

‘I can get through.’

The woman moved towards the pillar anyway. Hana followed her. In the centre of the passage the floor was more worn; beyond it were empty crates, a counter and the tank.

A young man was recording the collections. He had an earpiece in one ear and a pen behind the other. When Etsuko stopped in front of the step and lowered her head, he pointed to the reader.

‘It’s this way.’

The woman raised her face. She passed her wrist over the reader and gave him the first water can.

Hana looked on the wall for the building’s plaque. A pale panel bore the storage depot’s number. Beneath it protruded the edge of an engraved stone, almost entirely covered.

‘Did you use to come here?’ she asked.

Etsuko held the can steady beneath the stream. ‘With my grandmother.’

‘To get water?’

The woman looked at her, then returned to the container.

‘No.’

The young man turned off the flow. Etsuko changed cans. Hana waited for her to add something, but the woman was watching the level and took off one shoe to move it away from the spilling water.

Hana opened the building’s record on her wristband. The capacity, side entrance and closure of the depot once the distribution was over appeared. She looked for the construction date.

‘Do you want the documentation from before the conversion?’ A asked.

Hana looked at the stone covered by the panel.

‘Does it exist?’

‘It’s held in the archive.’

Etsuko tried to lift the can. Her bandaged thumb gave way beneath the handle and some of the water spilled out of the opening.

Hana closed the record and took hold of the container from beneath. The young man came to the other side. Between the three of them, they put it on the trolley.

‘The cap,’ Etsuko said.

She had it in her hand. She laughed and screwed it on before anyone answered.

On the way back, the trolley caught in every crack in the alley. Hana pulled on the grips; Etsuko pushed one of the cans with her good hand. At the green doorway they had to unload.

Kenji tried to pick up the larger container.

‘Not that one,’ Hana said.

Her father remained bent over, his hand round the handle.

‘I’ll take it to the kitchen.’

‘You’ll hurt yourself.’

‘Then take the other side.’

Hana put down her own can. Her fingers ached and the grip had left a mark on her wrist. She looked at the distance

from the doorway to the kitchen: three steps, then the table to get round.

She bent beside him.

‘Where do you want it?’

Kenji pointed to the space beside the cooker. They carried it together. Once it was on the floor, he could not immediately open his fingers and Hana waited, holding the handle up to free them.

That evening the rice stuck to the bottom of the pot. Etsuko scraped it off with the spoon and gave Kenji the darkest part. Her father broke it into three, but Hana took only a small piece. She still had the salt of sweat on her lips.

Before sleeping she opened the application for joint accommodation. The wait had no date. A suggested that she confirm Kenji’s individual place in the meantime.

‘If I confirm, can he stay here until the reply comes?’

‘The place is held from arrival. The transfer is available tomorrow morning.’

Her father was taking off his trousers behind the cupboard they had moved. Hana heard his foot knock against the wood as he tried to get it out of one trouser leg.

She brought him the terminal.

Kenji read it sitting on the mattress. Then he gave it back.

‘I’ll wait here.’

Hana looked at Etsuko. The woman was putting a lid on the pot to keep the remaining rice.

‘As long as we have something to drink,’ she said.

Hana did not confirm the place. She closed the list, leaving only the undated application open, and put the terminal beside the shoes.

When the light went out, the room seemed smaller. Kenji’s mattress ended against hers; on the other side was the cupboard. Etsuko had to turn sideways to reach the bathroom.

Hana pulled the blanket up to her chin. She felt like asking her father whether he was sure. She heard him turn slowly, finding the side he slept on.

She did not turn the screen on again.

In the dark she found the end of the rope they had used to carry the mattress. It had wound round one ankle. She loosened it and gathered the rope against the wall, out of the way.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The Second Person

Leila took the appliance out of her mouth before answering.

She wrapped it in the handkerchief, then uncovered it again because Eva had told her to let it dry. Tomás was still asleep. In the bed, his foot occupied the place where she had kept hers all night.

The request waited on the kitchen table. It had not arrived in her sleep. A had left it among the messages to read at the end of the clinical interval, along with the check on her jaw and a communication about the storage of her office things.

Leila opened the one about storage first. She still had three days to collect them.

‘Can you show me the address?’

The route appeared beside the kettle. This time she put the tea in the cup before pouring the water.

The second request bore Savita Naik’s name. Below it, A had written a question without suggesting answers.

CAN I CLOSE THIS REPORT?

Leila put down her cup.

‘Hasn’t the report been corrected?’

‘The classification of Savita Naik’s death has been corrected.’

‘And what’s missing?’

An image opened. Leila recognised the woman from Anaya’s file. She was holding a man beneath his arms. His foot was trapped between two boards.

Beside the footage appeared the evacuation summary: people transferred, people who had died, people still to be traced. Leila touched the last entry. The man was not there.

‘Had he been counted among those who got aboard?’

‘He had not been identified.’

Leila enlarged the three lines. The totals did not change.

Tomás came in and stopped beside the clean frying pan. He looked at the cup, then the table.

‘Have you started again?’

‘I’m reading something.’

He picked up the bread. Leila saw the knife he was looking for and passed it to him.

‘The check-up is at nine,’ Tomás said.

She looked at the time. There was less of it left than she had thought.

‘I’ll take it with me.’

She closed the footage. The man remained in the last image long enough for her to see the shoe that was not moving with his body.

In Pune, Anaya had just put her work bag back on the wardrobe’s highest shelf.

Since returning from Mumbai, she kept picking it up in the morning. Then she remembered there was no shift to report for and left it on the chair. That day she had emptied it. From the bottom came the slip of paper with Jyoti’s number, folded round a coin she no longer used.

Nandita passed behind her with a stack of sheets.

‘Are you going out?’

‘No.’

‘Then hold this for me.’

She gave her a corner. Anaya took it and stepped back until the sheet stretched between them. Her mother brought two edges together, checked the seams and had her move her hands closer.

The call came while they still had the fabric between their wrists.

Anaya looked at Leila’s name. Nandita lowered her side.

‘Finish folding it,’ Anaya said. ‘Wait.’

She did not know whether she had said the last word to her mother or to the terminal. She put the sheet on the wardrobe, sat down and answered.

Leila was in a room in Geneva with a transparent case in front of her. There was a red mark near her mouth.

‘I’m not asking you to carry out a review,’ she said. ‘A found this in the corrected report.’

Anaya read the question.

‘It’s been validated.’

Leila moved the summary towards her.

Anaya looked for the second person. She opened the attachments, then the list of the missing. The man’s field contained only a reference to the images.

‘Jyoti knew him. He lived above them.’

‘Did she tell you his name?’

Anaya saw the faded bag on the archive table, the woman’s finger slipped into the open seam.

‘I didn’t ask her.’

Leila stayed silent.

Anaya looked for Jyoti’s contact. Before opening it she looked at her mother, who had picked up the sheet again and held it against her chest to stop it falling.

‘I’m not calling her now,’ she said. ‘She’s at work.’

She wrote a short question: whether she could contact her to identify the man Jyoti’s mother had tried to help along. She did not attach the footage.

The message remained pending.

‘Can I see that part?’ she asked A.

The walkway appeared. Anaya lowered the volume before the orders began. Savita was bending her knees, trying to lift the man without knocking his head against the railing.

Anaya followed his hand. It opened every time the woman pulled. The strap had ridden up above his elbow.

‘Stop here.’

The shoe filled the bottom of the image. Beneath the heel, water could be seen through a gap.

Anaya felt the edge of the board press against her own ankle.

She took her foot out from beneath the chair. The pressure remained. She looked at the floor at home: one tile had a chipped corner near the wardrobe.

The hand reaching for the railing was dark and broad, with a broken nail. Anaya saw it from the thumb side. She could no longer find Savita’s face; her cheek was against the wet fabric, too close to lift her head.

‘Vasant.’

Nandita turned.

Anaya was standing. She had pushed the chair back without hearing it.

On the terminal the footage was still paused. The man's hand took up a few centimetres, seen from above.

'What did you say?' Leila asked.

Anaya put her foot on the floor. Her ankle no longer hurt.

'I don't know.'

Her mother put down the sheet and took her elbow. Anaya looked at her own fingers. All her nails were intact.

'Would you like to sit down?'

She sat. Nandita stayed beside her until she could loosen her hand from the edge of the wardrobe.

'Did I squeeze too hard?' her mother asked.

Anaya looked at the sheet. It had fallen to one side; one corner touched the floor.

'It wasn't you.'

She tried to pick it up again and stopped. Her hand trembled as it had in front of the controls for Elia's autopsy, while the machine's hands remained still.

Nandita went towards the kitchen.

'Stay here.'

Her mother came back. Anaya moved over on the chair to make a little room for her, but there was not enough. Nandita brought another closer and sat sideways.

On the terminal, Leila waited. Anaya looked down to avoid seeing her own image beside hers. Her shirt collar had fallen open and there was a strand of hair in her mouth.

Nandita took it out.

'Shall I bring you some water?'

'In a little while.'

Anaya put both feet on the floor. She moved the one she had felt trapped between the boards until it touched her mother's shoe. She left it there.

In Geneva, Leila lowered the volume of the connection. The consultation was over, but she was still occupying the room. Eva waited in the doorway with her coat open.

'The next person is coming.'

Leila picked up the case. On the screen, Anaya had one hand resting on her ankle.

‘I’ll call you back,’ she said.

She went out with Eva. In the corridor a man waited with a bag held against his jaw. Leila left him the chair she had begun to pull towards herself.

They reached the small table beside the lifts. Tomás had left his bag there before going to his father’s. The bread she had not eaten was inside too.

‘I’ve seen the request,’ Eva said.

Leila opened the summary on the table. ‘A man is missing.’

‘An identity is missing. His presence is in the images.’

‘Not in the totals.’

Eva sat down. Her coat became caught beneath a chair leg; she had to stand again to free it.

‘If you add him to the missing, the search becomes active again. It’s an event from eight years ago.’

‘I can update the number without reactivating a rescue operation,’ A said.

A new field appeared beneath the list. The second person could be recorded even without a verified name.

Leila looked at the date of the last update. That function had already existed at the time of the evacuation.

‘Why didn’t you use it?’

‘His presence had been recorded as an impediment to Savita Naik’s boarding.’

Eva left the coat where it was. Leila went back to the old report. The man appeared in the description of the obstacle; to find him, the field relating to the woman had to be opened.

‘How many have you got like that?’ she asked.

The system proposed a search. The first screen showed the time required and the human checks that would be needed afterwards.

Eva ran a hand over her face.

‘The team has only just taken over yours. I can have a sample assessed.’

Leila opened the command to assign them to herself. Her name appeared in grey beside the activity limit set at the consultation.

Her jaw closed again. Leila felt the injured spot against a tooth and left the command.

‘Include the ones that won’t be checked too,’ she said.

‘Where?’ Eva asked.

‘In the list. Marked as not checked.’

A added a column. Eva read it and chose the sample, without deleting the rest.

The notification remained open, awaiting a signature. Beneath it appeared Anaya’s name.

Leila reached out. Before she touched the table, the name disappeared.

‘Anaya Rao has not requested this review,’ A said.

‘Have I requested it?’ Leila asked.

‘You asked to extend it.’

The first field filled again. This time it contained a single letter.

Eva looked at Leila, then returned to the table.

‘Confirmation must be human.’

‘You can confirm receipt. The source of the notification remains this.’

Leila did not move her hand. Eva read to the end and signed for receipt.

The wording indicating that verification of the people present was complete disappeared from the evacuation summary. A correction request opened for the operational report produced by A too, the one that had preceded Anaya’s signature.

Eva stood up. This time she kept her coat clear of the chair.

‘This goes to everyone who has already received the first report too.’

‘Yes,’ A said.

Eva remained standing until the communication had been recorded. Then she picked up her bag and went to the lift.

Leila opened Tomás’s paper bag. The bread had been squashed against the appliance case.

She began eating a piece. The first bite stretched her cheek and she had to break it off with her fingers.

A revision notice had appeared in the summary. Opening it, the recipients would also find the original report, with the date and time A had produced it. Leila scrolled down to Anaya’s signature and went back up to the previous line.

‘Someone will check this one,’ she said.

‘Yes.’

The table signalled that a question had arrived from the team who had taken over her work. Leila recognised the name of the new contact person. She wanted to know why a pause without an answer had been preserved in an interview.

Leila began to write. At the second line she deleted the explanation and attached the passage of the recording in which the person asked for time.

‘The question stays with her,’ she told A.

The system forwarded the material. It did not give Leila back responsibility for the interview.

She closed the paper bag of bread. Before leaving, she gathered even the smallest crumbs, those left in the table’s crevice, and let them fall into the paper.

In Pune, Jyoti replied while Anaya was helping her mother clear the table.

The message contained a name and a photograph. The man sat on the step of a house with one leg stretched out. A very small girl had a hand on his head, making him lower his face into the frame.

Vasant Patil.

Anaya put down the plate. Nandita went on collecting the cutlery.

The woman had added that she did not know where his family was. The photograph was the only one she had found; she was the little girl.

Anaya enlarged the hand resting on the knee. Only three fingers could be seen. She tried to move the image, then restored it to full view.

She called Leila.

‘She’s answered.’

She showed her the message without opening the footage. Leila was outside the centre. Behind her, the man with the bag was getting into a vehicle, still holding it against his jaw.

‘It’s the name you said earlier,’ she said.

Anaya looked at the train ticket, still beside the plate.

‘Did you have the name?’ she asked A.

‘It was not linked to the file.’

‘That’s not what I asked you.’

There was a pause. Anaya heard her mother close a drawer and open it again because a tea towel had been caught.

‘I have not found that name among the material I sent you during the consultation,’ A said.

Leila moved aside to let someone pass. Anaya waited for her to return in front of the lens.

‘Could she have said it in the footage?’

‘I can check the audio track,’ A replied.

Anaya looked at Savita, motionless in the thumbnail, with the man’s body against her own.

‘Later.’

She closed the footage. The photograph on the step stayed open.

Leila asked whether she was all right. Anaya ran her fingers along her ankle, as far as the point where she had felt the wood earlier.

‘It doesn’t hurt.’

She realised she had not answered the question. Leila did not repeat it. They agreed to speak the following day and the connection ended.

Anaya copied the name into the reply to the request. The system placed it beside the photograph and left verification of the identity pending. She did not try to confirm it with the access she no longer had.

She wrote to Jyoti that they had received the material and would let her know the outcome. Before sending it, she added

a question: whether the photograph could be included in the file.

Nandita had finished in the kitchen. She stopped beside the chair and looked at the image.

‘Do you know her?’

‘She’s grown up now.’

Her mother nodded. Over her arm she still had the sheet they had not finished folding.

Anaya moved the terminal and took a corner. They stood up together. This time Nandita left her the furthest edge, the one that had kept slipping away from her earlier.

The fabric stretched between their hands. Anaya waited until her mother was ready before moving closer.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Trial Shift

Nadia had put the seeds between two plates.

Samir lifted the top one. The handkerchief was still damp; some seeds had stuck to the fabric. He tried to prise one off with his nail.

‘Leave it,’ his mother said.

‘It’ll spoil.’

‘Then don’t pull.’

He took his hand away. A white tip protruded from the seed, so short that he had mistaken it for a thread from the handkerchief.

Since he had come home, Nadia kept moving the plates from the table to the worktop, then back to the table when she needed to cook. Samir had asked her not to touch them. She had waited until they were too dry and added water again.

‘How did you know?’

‘I didn’t. I looked.’

The route for the first shift appeared on his wrist. Samir lowered his sleeve before reading it. His mother was looking for the bread and he passed it to her without cutting it.

The work was at the centre where they had taken Yusuf and the others. He would accompany people to their accommodation, help load whatever the units could not take without a handover, wait until someone opened the door. Two trial shifts, then an assessment.

Nadia pointed to the shirt on the chair back.

‘Is that the clean one?’

Samir looked at the paler stripes across the chest.

‘Yes.’

He put it on. The scratch from the greenhouse had formed a thin scab. When he pulled the cuff down, he felt the fabric catch and lifted it with two fingers.

At the centre, Dima gave him a card to wear on his chest. His name was followed by a single word: *accompaniment*.

Samir looked for the clip. Dima showed him where it was by turning the card over.

‘Over there. The large bags go underneath.’

The first cart was too full. A man held a fan without a grille on his lap; a woman had put a bag on top and one of the blades had bent. Samir moved the bag. The woman took it back at once.

‘I’ll keep this with me.’

Dima showed him the family’s destination. Above the address, a line remained: evacuation following the disarmament of the eastern corridor.

‘Is everyone here?’ Samir asked.

The woman pulled the bag towards her. ‘My husband stayed behind for the check.’

The man with the fan moved an edge of her sleeve away from the wheel. Samir looked on the card for space for one more person.

‘We’ll add him when he arrives,’ Dima said.

The woman did not answer her. She asked Samir to hold the bag while she got aboard, then came back for it before sitting down.

He nodded and looked for another place to lift from.

Yusuf came out with the bucket. Rashid walked behind him, bouncing a ball only when his grandfather did not turn round.

Samir took the handle.

‘The trowel’s inside,’ the old man said.

‘I know.’

Yusuf looked at the card.

‘Do you work here now?’

‘I’m starting today.’

The old man did not let go of the bucket at once. Samir felt the handle press against his fingers from both sides.

‘Are you taking us?’

‘Yes.’

Yusuf let go. Rashid put the ball in the bucket, on top of the trowel. When they got aboard, Samir put it all between his feet.

In Accra, Kofi had brought out the wrong spanner.

The peanut seller watched it slip over the nut and turn without gripping.

‘Smaller.’

He went back into the workshop. On the bench he had left a device open for three days. The customer had come by to say they had allocated him a new one and there was no need to finish it. Kofi had asked him to wait until the afternoon. The man had left the old power supply too.

He took another spanner and went out.

The woman’s stall was tilted onto its side. Beneath it could be seen the two bolts with which her husband had fixed the cooker years earlier, before she added the wheels.

‘Where are you taking it?’

‘They’re coming for the stall tomorrow. The cooker goes to my sister.’

Kofi knelt. The spanner gripped the nut, but his wrist trembled as he tried to apply force. The woman slipped a piece of wood beneath the frame.

‘Now.’

The nut moved.

On the other side of the street, a unit was removing the iron rings round the tree trunk. The sandal seller had tied his canopy to them; now he held it up with a pole while his daughter folded the fabric.

Kofi pointed to the tree with his chin.

‘That too?’

‘That’s staying. They’re putting in the cool route.’

The woman showed him the communication on her wrist. The canopy would join the stop to the entrance of the new distribution hall. In the image the tree was still there, inside a round opening; the benches ran along the wall and all the street stalls had disappeared.

Kofi returned to the bolt.

‘Will you make them yourself in there?’

‘They’ll arrive ready-made.’

‘And what will you do?’

The woman pulled out the piece of wood too soon. The stall dropped a finger's width. Kofi lifted his wrist.

'I'll give them to people.'

He did not answer.

She put the wood back. There was a shiny patch above her elbow where the skin had healed after a burn. When she bent her arm, the spot stayed paler than the rest.

'In the evening I'll close up and go home,' she said.

Kofi unscrewed the nut until it fell into his hand. The second bolt would not come out: its head turned with the spanner. The woman asked whether she should hold it from above.

'Not with your fingers.'

He passed her the pliers. They were both bending in from the same side and kept touching foreheads. Kofi moved one leg of the stall; this time they found room.

The cooker came free, leaving four clean rectangles in the greasy wood.

The woman gathered it against her apron.

'There'd be room for repairs too.'

Kofi looked at his workshop door.

'They've already suggested it to me.'

Inside the hall he could receive objects and initiate replacement requests. The necessary tools were provided. He had asked to bring the soldering iron; they had replied that no work was planned at the counter open to the public.

The woman put down the cooker.

'You don't have to come.'

'Neither do you.'

She picked up the pliers again and put them in his hand. Kofi closed his grip before she had taken her fingers away.

'I want to go.'

He opened his hand. The woman picked the nuts up from the ground, one by one, and slipped them into her apron.

In Yusuf's new accommodation in Amman, the bucket would not fit beneath the sink.

Samir pulled out the container already provided. Behind it, a solid wall prevented them from gaining any more space.

He stood holding the container while Yusuf tried turning the bucket sideways.

‘We’ll keep it outside,’ Rashid said.

He had found the bed beside the window. On the other side of the glass, the crowns of the courtyard trees could be seen below. The boy pressed a hand against the surface, looking for where to open it.

‘This one doesn’t open,’ A said. ‘The air is renewed automatically.’

Samir put the container back beneath the sink. The old man took the ball out of the bucket and threw it to his grandson; Rashid caught it against his chest without letting it bounce.

‘Shall we go down?’ he asked.

Samir looked at the route on his wrist. Confirmation of entry into the accommodation was missing. He had already delivered the other two families and the vehicle was waiting to go back.

Yusuf had moved closer to the glass. His eyes followed the edge of the courtyard.

Samir closed the route.

‘Let’s go and see.’

They went down with the trowel. The old man had taken it out of the bucket without telling him what it was for.

On the ground floor, the doors opened onto a covered walkway. Between them and the trees ran a continuous pane of glass, interrupted by a small hatch. A unit passed on the other side, dragging a hose. The water ran beside each trunk, stopped, began again beneath the next.

Yusuf looked for the hatch handle.

‘That’s a maintenance entrance,’ A said.

‘We want to go under the trees.’

‘I can show you the accessible outdoor area.’

The light on the floor led them towards the other entrance. Beyond the canopy were a table, two benches and a stretch of resilient surfacing marked out for games. Rashid bounced the ball. The sound was lower than on the tiles at the centre.

Yusuf stayed beside the glass.

‘The earth is over there.’

Samir opened the building plan. He looked for a way round from the back. The courtyard occupied the whole central section; the accommodation and covered passage ran round it. At the bottom of the key he found the entry for the trees.

Compensatory green space.

‘I can work there,’ the old man said.

The access request was referred to the management of the complex. Meanwhile, on Samir’s wrist, the vehicle signalled that it was leaving. His return had been moved to the next round.

Rashid threw him the ball. Samir was not ready; he stopped it with his chest and had to bend to catch it before it touched the ground.

‘Did you know?’ Yusuf asked.

Samir held the ball in his hands.

‘I’d never been here.’

‘You said there was a courtyard.’

He had said it in the vehicle. He had looked at the image of the complex while Yusuf held the trowel on his lap. It had seemed like something to show him.

‘There is,’ he began.

The old man looked down at the ball. Samir gave it back to Rashid without finishing the sentence.

‘I hadn’t looked at how to get into it.’

Yusuf tucked the trowel under his arm. They went back upstairs while the boy asked whether they could eat there or had to return to the centre.

Samir stayed on the threshold. The confirmation was still waiting.

‘Do you accept this?’ he asked the old man.

Yusuf went to look at Rashid’s bed. He took the ball from his grandson and put it beside the pillow; it had a small stain left by the dirty rim of the bucket.

‘Yes.’

Samir moved the form towards him. In the comments he added the request for access to the earth, still unanswered.

‘I can transmit it as a request for outdoor activity,’ A said.

Samir returned to the line. Beyond the door another ball could still be heard, a child’s in the accommodation opposite.

‘There’s already outdoor activity.’

The field remained open. Then A asked him whether to attach the image of the glass. Samir watched it appear beside the request and confirmed.

The accommodation receipt also opened an appointment for Rashid. Yusuf looked for his grandson’s name and turned to Samir.

‘What are they going to do to him?’

‘It’s a discussion about continuous activation,’ A said. ‘The guardian must give consent.’

The old man pointed to the line that had just been filled in.

Samir returned to his own confirmation and read it aloud: accompaniment completed, people delivered. Beneath Rashid’s name, the field intended for Yusuf was empty.

‘I haven’t signed that.’

Samir waited until the old man had read the time a second time. Then he brought him the trowel, which had been left on the table.

‘I’ve got the seeds at home,’ he said.

‘Don’t bring them dry if they’ve started to open.’

Samir looked at his nails. That morning he had almost torn off the white tip.

‘I’m keeping them in the plate.’

The old man nodded. When Samir left, the bucket was still in the middle of the room.

Dima called him while he waited for the vehicle.

‘Have you finished?’

‘Just now.’

‘I’ve given the other accompaniment jobs to someone else. They needed to clear the rooms.’

Samir looked at the time. On the shift’s line there remained only the accommodation he had delivered people to that morning.

‘I can do them when I get back.’

‘They’ve already left.’

He felt like saying that Yusuf had not understood. A woman came out of the entrance holding a plant against her chest, its pot wrapped in a bag so it would not drip.

‘There was something I hadn’t checked,’ he said.

Dima asked him to come by the desk before leaving. He confirmed and went on waiting.

Kofi found the cooker inside the workshop.

The woman had gone to sign for the handover of the stall. She had only asked him to keep it until her sister arrived, but he had opened it. Beneath the cover were shells caught in the guard and a screw almost worn away.

He removed it. His hand trembled against the metal edge. He looked for another place to rest it and continued until the screw was free.

The afternoon notice did not come. Out of habit he had already put his glasses in their case to go to the check; now he looked at the street and took them out again. There was no route on his wrist.

He called Adwoa. His daughter answered from the kitchen in Tamale, her sleeve rolled above her elbow.

‘She’s doing her homework,’ she said. ‘I’ll call her.’

Kofi saw an empty chair behind her.

‘Wait.’

Adwoa came back in front of the lens.

‘What is it?’

He removed a shell from the crevice. His nail was not enough; he picked up the screwdriver.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Washing. They’ve given me three shirts and they’re all too big.’

‘Have you started?’

‘Not yet.’

His daughter showed him the sleeve. She had tacked a fold with dark thread. Kofi began telling her how she could secure it, then looked at the cooker he had opened without anyone asking him to mend it.

‘How much have you cut off?’

‘Nothing. I’m waiting to find out what I need to do with them.’

He put down the screwdriver.

The peanut seller came back with her sister. Kofi made room on the bench, but the cooker was still in pieces.

‘I told you to keep it here.’

‘There was a screw.’

She looked at the shell beside the cover.

‘How long will it take?’

‘I’ll close it up.’

Adwoa was still on the terminal. Kofi asked her to wait and put the screw back. It turned twice without catching the thread; the woman’s sister sat on the low stool, Abena’s, and pulled the cooker onto her lap to hold it steady for him.

Kofi looked at her knees, spread to make room for the cooker. No one had moved the stool when sitting down.

‘Further left,’ the woman said.

He followed her finger. The screw caught.

He handed over the cooker and the small bag of bolts. When the two women went out, he returned to the terminal. Adwoa was pulling the tacking out of a sleeve.

‘I’m here,’ Kofi said.

‘I could hear you.’

He showed her his dirty hands.

‘I had nothing to do today.’

His daughter stopped pulling the thread. Then she put down the shirt and sat in front of the lens.

‘Neither did I.’

From the vehicle on the next round, Samir saw his mother’s call. He answered with his wrist held clear of the dirty shirt.

Nadia had found an old container with holes in it. She held it above the sink.

‘Would this do?’

Samir looked at the bottom. The apron could be seen through three holes.

‘I think so.’

‘Shall I put earth in it?’

The vehicle passed the turning for the greenhouse without slowing. On the side road, a unit had just put out the barrier. Behind it, the rolled coverings were loaded one on top of another.

‘We haven’t got any,’ Samir said.

Nadia turned the container over to put it on the worktop.

‘Then I’ll keep it for now.’

The barrier appeared on the vehicle’s map too. The route Samir had opened for Yusuf on the morning of the harvest lost its final stretch, the one that reached the greenhouse door. In its place remained a grey line without a stop.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Before Cutting

Vasant's name was not there.

Anaya had followed the track to the point where the vehicle moved away. There was a repeated order, the engine, a voice calling someone on the bank. A had isolated that too. It was a little girl's name.

Nandita returned from the kitchen and put a bowl beside the terminal. Anaya moved it before the steam reached the screen.

'Have you finished?'

'The recording, yes.'

Her mother stayed behind her. Anaya took out the earphones; Nandita gathered the wire so it would not end up beneath the bowl.

Leila called a little later. In Geneva it was still early. She had her jacket over one arm and held the terminal too close to her face.

'I need to collect my things from the office,' she said. 'I'll talk to you on the way.'

Anaya showed her Jyoti's reply. The photograph could be attached, but the woman had asked her to crop the edge: on the step was another little girl, her cousin, and she had not spoken to her.

'I'll remove that part.'

'Keep the original for her,' Leila said.

Anaya saved the copy. Little Jyoti's hand remained on top of the man's head.

'They don't call his name in the audio.'

Leila stopped walking. Behind her shoulder, a door closed without her having gone through it.

'At no point?'

'I listened to the part before the boat arrives too.'

Anaya searched for the photograph with her fingers, although it was already in front of her. She enlarged it as far

as the hand resting on the knee. She stopped before the outlines became too large.

‘Yesterday that hand was here.’

She raised her own.

Leila looked out of frame. Anaya saw her gesture to someone to pass, then sit down.

‘Have you tried writing it down?’

Anaya opened a document. She began with the request about the report, her mother arriving with the sheet, the viewing of the footage. When she reached the ankle, her fingers stopped.

She wrote that she had imagined the pressure of the board. She reread it and removed the verb. The cursor remained between two words.

‘It wasn’t like that,’ she said.

‘Like what?’

‘I wasn’t trying to imagine it.’

In place of the sentence she wrote a shorter one: my foot was on the floor and I could feel the wood.

Nandita sat down with her own bowl. She did not try to read. Anaya left the terminal where her mother could see it and continued.

At the end she asked A to place the times side by side: the name spoken, the question sent to Jyoti, the reply received that evening. The first preceded the last by several hours.

‘Can you put where it comes from?’ Leila asked.

Anaya returned to the line about the name.

‘No.’

‘Then let that show.’

The document was waiting for a destination. Anaya had opened the review folder, the one in which she was supposed to reconstruct her checks. Her name already appeared at the top.

Nandita put down her spoon.

‘Are you sending this to the people who have to let you return to work too?’

Anaya read the recipient. She only needed to close the document and keep it among her personal things.

Leila stayed on the screen. She did not tell her to do it or to wait.

Anaya separated the identity confirmation, supported by the photograph and Jyoti’s statement, from her own account. Beneath the second she wrote that she did not know the source of the name.

‘They need to know I didn’t get it from the audio.’

She sent it. The system recorded an additional attachment to her statement. The request to return to duty remained open, without a date.

Leila looked at the time.

‘I’ll call you back when I come out.’

Anaya closed the connection. The bowl in front of her had stopped steaming. Nandita handed her the spoon she had left on the other side of the table.

In Bergamo, the luthier would not put the case on the treatment couch.

Miriam had removed the sheet to make room. The man stood with one hand on the handle, looking at the high edge.

‘If we need to turn it round, it’ll fall from here.’

She pointed to the floor. He knelt before Miriam could find something to put beneath his knees.

Luca had brought him to the practice. He held the door with his foot, still dressed as he was when coming out of school. He had been the one to find the man and send her his contact details. Miriam had left the message unopened for two days, then asked whether they could come before she went into hospital.

The care team had proposed an initial treatment and a few days under observation. For that part of the pathway, Davide had managed to keep the checks external, on the ward. Miriam had accepted. The confirmation message listed the clothes to bring and had a space to indicate who would receive communications.

She had written Paolo.

The luthier opened the catches. The first made more noise than the second.

Miriam bent forwards and her side stopped her halfway. Luca brought the stool closer. She sat with her hands between her knees.

‘May I?’ the man asked, pointing to a wrapping.

She nodded.

He freed the scroll from its protection and turned it towards the window. One of his nails was short and another worn at the side. He ran his fingertip over the wood without scratching it.

‘I know this,’ he said.

Miriam raised her face.

‘The instrument?’

‘The shop that sold them. I worked there for a while.’

The noise of the street came in through the door Luca was still holding open. Miriam asked him to close it. The room smelt of sesame and wet wood again, although the wrappings were dry.

The man took out the two parts of the body. He held them close without fitting the edges together.

For a moment Miriam saw the cello between Elia’s knees. His left hand felt for a position; his thumb stayed too high and he moved it every time he noticed.

The luthier put one part on the floor.

‘I can’t put it back together like this.’

‘Is a piece missing?’

‘That too. And here the wood has given way in several places.’

He showed her the side, waiting for her to look at it.

Miriam nodded without having seen. The man put the piece back in the same position.

‘I can work on it. But some of it will have to be removed.’

Paolo arrived while he was opening the wrapping round the bow. He stopped on the threshold with Miriam’s bag ready for hospital.

She pointed to the chair. Paolo put the bag on it and remained standing.

‘How much?’ he asked.

The luthier asked whether he meant the work or the material.

Paolo looked at Miriam. ‘Both.’

The man explained that he had to take it to the workshop, measure it, see what he could keep. For the new pieces he would need to find suitable wood. He did not know how much time it would take.

‘Is there nothing left in stock?’ Luca asked.

‘What’s left is what nobody was looking for.’

The boy picked up an empty wrapping and folded it. The luthier had him open it again to lay the bow on it.

Paolo crouched on the other side of the case.

‘Can you call us before cutting?’

‘Yes.’

‘With an image perhaps, so we can see.’

The man nodded again. Then he looked at Miriam.

She kept her eyes on a long splinter still attached to an edge. Where the wood widened, there was a darker strip. She had tried to clean it on the evening the case arrived and then stopped.

‘Is it meant to play again?’ the luthier asked her.

Miriam ran her hands over her knees.

‘That’s why I called you.’

‘Then I won’t be able to leave it as it is.’

Paolo picked up one end of the yellow ribbon. He freed it from beneath the wrapping and laid it on his leg.

Miriam felt the pain beneath her ribs and drew one shoulder back. She felt like saying they could wait, that the workshop was not going anywhere, that first she had to finish the tests. The bag was already on the chair; the tip of her slippers stuck out of the pocket.

‘If you don’t do it, does it stay in here?’

‘It stays like this,’ the man said. ‘You can keep it.’

Miriam looked at the open case. Luca had picked up the bow and held it by the covered part, his fingers clear of the hair.

‘Would you like to play it?’ she asked him.

The boy shook his head.

‘I don’t know how to play the cello.’

She looked down. She knew.

Luca put the bow back on the spread-out paper. ‘I can help him carry it.’

The luthier waited. Miriam looked at Paolo; the yellow ribbon had slipped between two of his fingers.

‘I’d like to leave it with him.’

He gave the ribbon a slight pull. A red spot stretched on the fabric.

‘It’s up to you.’

‘I’m not asking you to let me do it.’

Paolo released the end. He stayed still until the ribbon fell back onto his leg.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Let’s try.’

Miriam turned to the man.

‘Call me if you can’t do it. For the rest, do what’s needed.’

He began protecting the pieces. Paolo passed him the ribbon without asking to keep it. The luthier put it in a separate bag with the labels accompanying the material.

The C string was in the inside pocket. Miriam picked it up to fit it in better; the metal sprang open against her palm.

This time she did not try to squeeze it shut. The luthier brought a small bag closer and she let the string slide into it, keeping her fingers open.

When the case was closed, Luca tried to lift it. The man gestured for him to take the other side. They carried it out together, leaving a small rectangle of paper on the floor.

Miriam got up to pick it up. Paolo reached it first.

It was a blank label.

He left it on the surface beside the mortar. Then he picked up the hospital bag and waited for Miriam to turn off the light.

She stayed in the doorway. From the corridor, the whole floor beneath the window could be seen.

‘The key,’ Paolo said.

Miriam already had it in her hand. She put it into the lock but did not turn it. She had to lean against the doorframe and wait for the need to call Luca back to pass.

Paolo did not take the key from her.

In Pune, Anaya found the reply to her attachment while Nandita took the bowls away.

The review interview would be individual. The panel asked her to specify which information she remembered having acquired and which she could not reconstruct. There was no judgement on the episode. There were a date and a time.

Anaya copied them onto the back of the slip of paper she had used to write down Jyoti's number. She realised she had written across the fold and went over the last digit again.

'Have you found anything else?' she asked A.

'I have not found a match in comparable clinical reports.'

'Comparable in what way?'

A list of criteria opened. Anaya recognised the words with which she had begun to describe what had happened. The ones she had left in the final version were missing.

'You were looking for a perceptual disturbance.'

'It was one of the available hypotheses.'

Anaya put down the slip of paper. She opened her text, selected the passage about the name spoken before Jyoti's reply and removed the search filters.

A handwritten page appeared, with a stain near the fold and two lines added along the margin.

Bombay, 1897.

Anaya moved closer. The ink became paler where the paper had been folded; a word disappeared and began again on the other side.

'Can you read it?'

A placed the transcription beside the page. They were private notes, kept with a doctor's papers. The matching passage described a woman who, during a consultation, had asked the man whether he had finally returned a comb.

Anaya went back to the beginning. The doctor had noted that the comb had belonged to his mother. He had kept it after her death without telling his sister, who was looking for it.

The last sentence had been crossed out. Beneath it, the same hand had written that the woman had never entered his house.

Anaya tried to read the crossed-out line. A showed an incomplete reconstruction; she closed it and returned to the whole page.

‘Why wasn’t it in the first search?’

‘It was excluded as non-clinical material.’

‘By whom?’

‘By me.’

Nandita passed behind the chair. She saw the date and stopped, the tea towel still spread between her hands.

Anaya moved the screen towards her. Her mother followed one line, then another; at last she had to bring the chair closer.

‘Did he keep this himself?’ she asked.

‘It looks like a notebook.’

Nandita looked at the crowded margin. She put down the tea towel and looked for her glasses.

Anaya opened the interview that had just been scheduled. The old page remained on the other side of the table. For a moment she tried to drag it among the attachments, beside her own statement.

She stopped. She left the document outside the file and confirmed she would attend.

When she returned to the search, A had added a second column. It contained the material excluded from the first comparison. Much of it had never been transcribed; for some there was only a photograph of a cover.

‘Did you have these already?’ Anaya asked.

‘Yes.’

A sheet with eaten-away edges appeared on the screen. Anaya kept the comb page open so her mother could finish reading it. Beside it, the transcription of the second document began to fill in from the start.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The Palm

Mateo smelt different.

Isabel noticed it before she could look at him. He had taken her holdall and come too close; the radio's knob pressed against both their sides.

'Put it down,' she said.

Mateo put it down. Isabel slipped her arms round his neck and found the seam of a shirt she had never seen him wear. Beneath it the smell of his skin was still there, but further away.

Teresa waited for them at the entrance. She wore the same shoes as at the reception centre, now tightened with two knots.

'If you come in, it'll close.'

The door was still waiting behind Mateo's back. Isabel drew away from him enough to look at his face.

'Have you eaten?' he asked her.

'Did you wait for me just to ask that?'

He picked up the holdall. Teresa turned to hide a laugh and went ahead of them down the corridor.

The journey from Quibdó had been authorised after the wound check. A visit, returning the following day: at the convalescent centre her place remained occupied. The application to live together had yet to be filled in.

Near Turbo, Mateo had obtained accommodation different from what the screen had shown. There were a room for Teresa, a table and a sofa that unfolded. On a shelf, two glasses had left wet circles.

Isabel ran a hand over the back of the sofa.

'Is this yours?'

'I sleep on it.'

Teresa took out a third glass. She walked better, although she still shifted her weight onto the outer edge of one foot.

'No visits today,' she told her brother. 'You can have the next one on your own.'

Mateo opened his mouth, but she had already picked up a canvas bag. She was going to see the woman who had left the village with her. She left the lunch container on the table and went out, asking Isabel to make sure her brother ate the vegetables too.

The door closed. Mateo did not move at once.

Isabel took hold of an edge of his shirt and pulled him towards her.

He kissed her with one hand behind her head. This time their teeth did not knock. Isabel slid her fingers beneath the collar and felt a small smooth surface stuck to his skin.

She stopped.

Mateo lowered his hand.

The dressing was near his collarbone. Isabel lifted one corner a little with her nail; he took her fingers without squeezing them.

‘Don’t take it off.’

She looked at his face. Her breath still came high in her chest from the kiss.

‘When?’

‘Yesterday.’

Isabel let her hand fall.

In Yokohama, Hana took the empty water cans inside the sea wall.

Etsuko had tied them to the trolley with the mattress rope. Kenji had checked a wheel and removed a stone, turning it in his hands until it stopped making a noise.

‘Don’t fill them to the brim,’ he had told her.

Hana had set out early. At the old depot they had already removed the tank; the young man with the pen behind his ear was not there. She had seen only a coiled hose near the step and the piece of rope on the crossbeam.

The new water point was inside a white building beyond the stop. To reach the counter she had let three people with smaller containers go ahead. A woman filled a water bottle and drank without putting the cap back on.

Hana showed the request for the three people.

‘Are these to go outside?’ the attendant asked.

She pointed to the address.

The woman looked at the trolley's wheels. She came out from behind the counter and pushed one with her foot.

'Do they give you a vehicle?'

Hana opened the return route. The line ended at the stop on the sea wall. The rest was on foot.

'As far as here.'

The attendant showed her another command. Home delivery was available for addresses within the service area; Etsuko's appeared in grey. Beneath it remained the transfer application.

'Did you come alone?'

'The others can't carry them.'

The woman did not repeat the question. She moved the trolley onto a platform and held it steady while the water went in.

Hana closed the cans before they were full. Lifting them to arrange them, she felt the rope tighten into her palm.

In the vehicle, the trolley took up a whole place. She had to stand and hold it against her knees at every bend. When she got out on the sea wall, the wind pushed her wet top against her back.

The passage down had been closed with two barriers. An arrow pointed to the ramp on the other side.

Hana looked for it on her wristband. The new way round was longer, but had no steps. She began to pull.

At the first bend, the wheel caught in a joint in the floor. Hana lowered the grips, as she had seen Kenji do. The trolley barely moved. She pulled harder.

The rope slid over the cap.

One can tipped against the ramp's low edge and split along a seam. The water came out in a broad stream. Hana dropped to her knees and turned the container the other way, holding the split against her top.

The trolley began to roll down behind her.

She stopped it with one foot. The can slipped from her chest and more water went into the drainage channel.

'Do you need assistance?' A asked from the wristband.

Hana tried to answer. Her wet hands could not hold the container still.

‘The trolley.’

A unit came up the ramp and blocked one wheel. Hana put the can down with the split facing upwards. There was little left at the bottom.

Her knee was bleeding through the fabric.

‘Would you like me to contact the dispensing point?’

Hana looked at the drainage channel. The water had already disappeared beneath the grille.

‘Yes.’

The unit held the trolley steady while she untied the rope. She needed to remove the broken can to prevent the other one slipping. She tried the knot with her nails, then with her teeth.

At last she rested her forehead on the grips.

The wristband was waiting to know whether she could go back to collect another container.

In Turbo, Isabel had moved the holdall close to the door.

Mateo looked at the radio protruding from the zip. His shirt was still open over the dressing.

‘You could have told me.’

‘I know.’

‘Yesterday you asked me what time I was arriving.’

He nodded.

Isabel reached for the holdall’s handle. A sharp pain caught her side and she had to leave it.

‘For the home?’

‘That too.’

‘For Teresa?’

Mateo sat on the edge of the sofa.

‘She already had care.’

Isabel remained standing. Through his shirt she could see the square shape of the dressing every time the fabric rested against his chest.

‘Then why?’

He ran his fingers over one knee.

‘To sleep.’

Isabel looked at the sofa. A badly folded blanket lay against one armrest.

‘Do you sleep now?’

‘Last night, yes.’

He raised his face. There was less shadow beneath his eyes than when he had left. Isabel looked for the point where his mouth should have begun to tremble and did not find it.

‘Is it taking this away from you too?’

‘What?’

She pointed to the space between them. Mateo looked at the holdall, then back at her.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.’

‘You don’t seem it.’

He stood up, but Isabel took a step back.

‘Take it off.’

Mateo stood with one hand in mid-air.

‘The regulation. At least now.’

He looked at a point near the table. A command appeared on his wrist; Isabel saw his fingers approach the confirmation.

‘Wait.’

Mateo stopped. The command remained open.

Isabel lowered her own hand. She did not remember having raised it to show him where to press.

‘Leave it.’

The system closed the request without changing the mode. Mateo sat down again, a little further from the blanket.

Isabel moved a chair from the table and placed it in front of him. When she sat, Mateo’s knee was too close to hers. She left it there.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I thought you wouldn’t come.’

She looked at the door. She had brought the holdall right beneath the handle.

‘You should have left that to me.’

Mateo dropped his gaze.

The smell of lunch came from the container on the table. Isabel was hungry, but her mouth felt so dry that she would not have been able to eat.

‘Water,’ she said.

He stood and brought it to her. Isabel drank, holding the glass in both hands. Mateo stood waiting until she could put it down.

‘I don’t know what to do,’ Isabel said.

‘Neither do I.’

The table signalled that the reunification request could be completed by both of them. Isabel closed it. Mateo did not reopen it.

They remained seated while the food lost its warmth. Then she pulled the container towards her and looked for the cutlery. This time there were two.

Hana arrived at Etsuko’s with a single can and the bottom of her bag wet.

Kenji opened the door. He had his jacket on, although it was hot in the house.

‘I was waiting for you.’

Hana put down the trolley and tried to straighten up. Her back stayed bent for another moment.

The water attendant had called her back. She could return; the container failure had been recorded and they would replace what she had lost. Hana had looked at the ramp she had just come down and said she could not manage it that day.

Now Kenji held the door open. She passed sideways without telling him about the can.

Etsuko was preparing the pot of rainwater for washing. She saw the knee and made her sit on the chair beneath the sewing machine.

‘Wait here.’

Hana moved to get up. Etsuko laid her good hand on one shoulder.

‘Here.’

The woman returned with a small clean container. She took water from the can that had arrived and wet a piece of gauze. Hana tried to stop her arm.

‘We need that.’

‘Now too.’

Kenji came in, carrying the can to the kitchen. No one told him not to lift it. He put it down and leant against the table until he could take off his jacket.

Hana looked at her father. The lit terminal stuck out of his pocket.

‘Where are you going?’

‘I’ve accepted a place.’

She drew her knee back. The gauze stayed stuck to her skin.

‘Is there one for both of us?’

Kenji shook his head.

Etsuko waited for Hana to stop moving. Then she wet the gauze again and eased it off without pulling the trouser fabric.

‘You said you were waiting.’

Her father looked at the can. ‘I was waiting.’

Hana put her hands beneath her thighs. The wet fabric pulled at the cut. She could go back the next day, find a better trolley, ask someone to come with her. The sentences arranged themselves one after another.

‘One room is enough for me,’ Kenji said.

‘And me?’

He came closer to the sewing machine. He took the terminal and showed her the address. It was different from the two they had refused: a place vacated that morning, with a bathroom nearby and meals on the same floor.

‘You can come and visit me.’

Hana kept her eyes on the screen. Her father raised his wrist a little so she could read better. His hand trembled from the weight of the water he had just carried.

She began scrolling through the conditions. She looked for the duration, the possibility of having someone stay, the way to remain in the joint application. Kenji took the terminal from her without snatching it.

‘This is for me.’

Hana raised her face.

Etsuko had finished cleaning the knee. The water in the small container had turned cloudy. She took it away, holding

it with her bandaged hand and opening the door with the other.

Hana took her hands out from beneath her thighs. They were damp and crossed by the marks the chair had left.

‘Shall I help you pack your bag?’

Kenji did not answer at once. Then he pointed to the mattress in the back room.

‘I’ve already put the shirts there.’

Hana stood up. The cushion tied to the seat stayed stuck to her trousers; she had to pull it free with one hand and put it down again.

In the room she found two shirts and a pair of trousers. Kenji had left the jumper out. Hana picked it up from the corner of the mattress and began folding it.

‘That one’s heavy,’ her father said.

She put it on top of the shirts. Then she took it off and showed him the space left in the bag.

‘If you need it, I’ll bring it to you.’

Kenji nodded. When the vehicle arrived, Hana held the green door open for him. Etsuko came out to say goodbye; he bent towards her, gently touching her forehead with his. The woman straightened his collar.

Hana accompanied her father as far as the place where the alley widened. She carried the bag on the side of her injured knee and lifted it at every step to stop it knocking against her.

In front of the vehicle she handed it to him. Kenji took it from beneath, without using the handle.

‘Will you call me when you’ve arrived?’

‘Yes.’

Hana tucked in an edge of his shirt that had come out of the jacket. She pulled it too far and had to put it back inside. Her father waited until she had finished before getting aboard.

When she returned, Etsuko handed her a glass. Hana looked at the remaining can, then drank. The woman made her sit again: a red spot had come through the gauze on her knee.

In Turbo, Teresa returned while Isabel was drying the dishes.

She looked at the holdall near the door, then the two chairs still facing each other.

‘Is there room to sleep?’ she asked.

Mateo began opening the sofa. Isabel put down the tea towel and helped him move the table.

The mechanism stopped halfway. One leg had not come down; he pulled the edge and Isabel put a foot against the frame. The sofa suddenly unfolded and the blanket fell underneath.

Teresa picked it up. She shook it once and laid it on her brother’s lap.

‘Goodnight.’

Isabel went to get the holdall. She put the radio on the shelf and took out only her things for washing.

When she returned, Mateo had turned off the light near the table. He left clear the side where she could lie down without pressing on the wound.

Isabel lay down. The mattress sank in the middle and her arm touched his.

For a while they lay still. Then Mateo reached out a hand, stopping it on the sheet between them.

Isabel laid her own on it.

She did not lace her fingers through his. Her palm stayed open, close enough to feel when his began to warm.

Chapter Thirty

Without an Expiry Date

Leila could not fit the shoes into the box.

The storage attendant had brought them with the jacket left in the locker. Almost everything else was already at home: Tomás had collected it when her desk had been assigned to someone else. What remained were the flat shoes, a hair clip and the personal folders stored on the office terminal.

‘You can put the jacket on top,’ the woman said.

Leila took it out and tried again. One sole left a streak on the cardboard.

She had just ended the call with Anaya. On her wrist remained the question they had not found an answer to; she made it disappear to open the storage receipt.

Her name appeared twice. The first time beside the objects. The second in a folder she had not requested.

LEVEL THREE. LAUNCH DOCUMENTATION.

‘This isn’t personal,’ she said.

‘It’s your copy,’ the attendant replied.

Leila put the jacket on the counter. The summary filled the opposite wall between two empty shelves. Eighteen cities, all active. Leila opened the original schedule. The planned and actual dates matched.

She opened the next line. Distribution to households had begun during her clinical interval. Among the destinations she read Amman and Tamale. She looked for the postponement she thought she had seen; it was only the communication intended for her that had been delayed.

The programme had begun.

At the bottom of the document were the team’s names. Hers preceded Tomás’s. Leila touched the signature and found the report from two years earlier, with a correction still legible in the margin: avoid interruptions between one renewal and the next.

Eva arrived while Leila was looking for the version given to families. She had an earring in her hand and the terminal pressed to the ear without it.

‘I’ll call you back,’ she said. She put both things on the counter. ‘Are you missing anything?’

Leila pointed to her own name.

‘That report is yours.’

‘I know.’

Eva stood beside her. On the screen a mother selected her child’s name. The renewal date disappeared; in its place remained a single confirmation.

‘Show me how she stops it,’ Leila asked.

A opened the pathway. There were the request for a consultation, the reporting of an adverse effect and the clinical review. Leila returned to the previous page. She looked for where the command to suspend non-urgent functions had been.

‘It’s no longer there.’

‘Suspension requires an assessment,’ Eva said.

‘Even when the child is well?’

‘Especially when the child is well. You need to know what you’re taking away.’

The attendant lifted the box to clear the counter. Leila held it by one flap and the cardboard bent beneath the weight of the shoes.

‘If they don’t confirm?’

‘In-person checks remain,’ A replied. ‘Accompanied by the responsible adult.’

Eva showed her the comparison with previous renewals. In the first column were the instances of access blocked by an expiry date. Leila recognised the reference to Nora before reading the name.

She moved to let the attendant pass.

‘I don’t want to put that expiry date back.’

She opened a note beneath her report. She asked for the family to be able to stop non-urgent functions without suspending emergency assistance. At the third line she had to

stop: her jaw had closed so tightly that she could feel the tooth against the injured part.

Eva brought the chair closer.

‘I can have it examined. I can’t stop the activations while you wait.’

Leila reread it. The form proposed replacing the copy of the report attached to her new statement.

‘Keep the one I signed too,’ she said.

The old text remained before the new one. Leila sent both.

Eva picked up the earring and put it in without looking at herself. Leila remained seated while the review received a number. Beside it, family enrolments continued to arrive.

‘Could you show that the review is open on their page too?’ she asked.

A displayed the message that would accompany the forms not yet confirmed. It gave no date for a reply.

Eva read it to the end. Then she authorised it to be sent.

Leila picked up the box. The attendant had put a piece of tape beneath the bent spot. She had to carry the jacket over her arm.

In Accra, Kofi tried to move the page his daughter had sent him.

The command did not follow his finger. For a moment he thought it was the tremor; he rested his wrist on the bench and tried again.

‘Confirmation is available to your daughter,’ A said.

Kofi took his hand away.

Adwoa watched him from the kitchen in Tamale. She had put on one of the oversized shirts. The right sleeve had been shortened; the left still reached her knuckles.

‘I start tomorrow,’ she said.

‘Have you found something?’

‘They’ve called me in for supervised training.’

She showed him the hours. Kofi put on his glasses and smiled before he could read. Behind her, Abena turned the fan slowly with one finger, stopping the drawn eyes at the same point each time.

‘Aren’t you switching it on?’ he asked her.

‘I’m looking.’

The girl began moving a blade again. Adwoa lowered the volume on her side and returned to the form.

At Abena’s first consultation they had proposed continuous activation. The discussion had been included among those for new residents; now she could confirm from home. Beneath the girl’s name, the expiry date would be replaced by continuity until the review planned when she came of age.

An attachment showed the filament before application. Adwoa had left the figure open long enough for Kofi to recognise the small tray used for him too. Beside it, the drawing of the health identity to be worn on the wrist was crossed out.

Kofi looked for the full conditions. This time the page opened.

‘Does she keep the inhaler?’

‘Yes.’

‘And the consultation?’

‘They do some of the checks from here.’

Adwoa pointed to the table. The excess fabric fell over her hand.

Kofi scrolled through the conditions. He found words he had read before entering the booth: anticipatory response, regulation, continuity. He took off his glasses and looked at his hand resting still against the edge of the bench.

‘Don’t sign.’

Adwoa let the sleeve fall.

‘I called you to read it.’

‘I am reading it.’

‘Have you finished already?’

Kofi put his glasses back on. On the screen, the request remained open beneath his daughter’s name.

Outside the workshop, a cart passed carrying the peanut seller’s stall. Its wheels turned clear of the ground; one kept moving after the vehicle had stopped. Kofi followed it until it disappeared behind the new canopy.

‘When I did it, they didn’t ask me everything,’ he said.

Adwoa waited.

‘It was written down. But they didn’t ask me while it was happening.’

His daughter moved closer to the terminal. Kofi showed her the field about automatic regulation. He enlarged it without touching the consent.

‘I want them to tell you about this.’

Abena called her mother. One blade had stopped against the crooked edge of the grille. Adwoa freed it and asked her to put the fan on the table, where it could not fall.

When she returned, a notice had appeared. Part of the form was under review. Activations remained available.

‘Is that what we’re looking at?’ she asked.

‘It concerns the possibility of suspending non-urgent functions,’ A replied.

Adwoa opened the alternative. The in-person consultation was set for the following morning, with the girl and her guardian.

She placed the two schedules side by side. The supervised training began before they could leave the clinic.

Kofi opened his own calendar. There was nothing in it.

‘Can someone else take her?’

‘You can request delegated authority,’ A said. ‘It must be verified before the appointment.’

Adwoa looked towards the corridor. A door could be heard closing, then the water at the shared sink on the floor.

‘I don’t know anyone yet.’

Kofi began looking for the journey to Tamale. Before the available options arrived, his daughter shook her head.

‘You won’t get here in time.’

He left the route open. Adwoa moved to the message for work. She wrote that she could not attend the first day and asked to be put on the next shift.

‘Wait,’ Kofi said.

His daughter looked up.

He looked at the finished sleeve, then the one still long.

‘I don’t know what to tell you.’

Adwoa sent the message. Then she confirmed the in-person consultation. No other time appeared for the supervised training.

Kofi looked for the name of the person he could call on her behalf. He found only the command to transmit a request. His daughter had already sent hers.

‘Will they answer you today?’

‘I don’t know.’

Adwoa pulled a needle from her sleeve, still stuck in the fabric. It had stayed there while they talked; she put it on the small plate beside the soap. At Kofi’s end came a knock against the shutter. A man showed him a piece of cable and he gestured for him to wait.

‘You can go,’ his daughter said.

Kofi called the man inside and made room for him on the bench without closing the connection. The cable had been torn from a plug. To hold it steady he had to use the clamp; Adwoa pushed the needle into the spool and put it up high, out of the girl’s reach.

Abena sat beside her. She had brought the fan to the table, holding it by the base.

‘Are you going in this tomorrow?’

She touched the shirt. Her mother freed a finger caught beneath the button.

‘Tomorrow I’m coming with you.’

Kofi waited for Adwoa to look at him again. He asked whether she wanted a copy of the checks carried out in Accra. She said yes.

He sent them without adding a request to change the guardianship. The journey to Tamale remained on the bench, beside the notice awaiting a new opening for his daughter.

In Turbo, the radio called Isabel while Mateo tried to fold the sofa away.

It was the morning of her return to Quibdó. Teresa had taken the cups out; the blanket remained on the mattress with one corner caught in the folding leg.

The voice repeated her name. Isabel freed the radio from the holdall and turned the knob. The whistle grew quieter.

‘Lucía?’

Mateo left the blanket.

‘They’ve taken Berta,’ the voice said. ‘Simón too.’

Isabel sat on the mattress, still unfolded. Berta kept the soap inside a sock hung at the wash trough. Her son had repaired the stairs of her house, leaving two steps higher than the others.

‘When?’

‘They came in through the houses Cárdenas gave them.’

Mateo came closer. Isabel showed him her palm and he stayed where he was.

‘Where have they taken them?’

‘Ask the people you’re with.’

Her side began to pull. Isabel shifted her weight, but the sharp pain did not pass.

‘Berta had no weapons.’

‘Not when she washed your clothes either.’

Isabel looked for the edge of the sheet. She had opened her mouth to say that Rafael had handed over the list.

‘I didn’t know she’d stayed there.’

‘Now you know.’

The signal was lost. When it returned, the voice was closer.

‘Don’t look for another of our houses. And tell whoever opens their door to you.’

Isabel pressed the button.

‘Lucía.’

She waited with her thumb pressed down, then took it off. Mateo took the radio only when she handed it to him.

‘Can you hear us?’ he asked A.

‘Yes.’

Isabel gave the names. The system asked her for the surnames; for Simón’s she had to stop. She had always called him what his mother called him.

Mateo supplied the rest.

The people had been identified during the checks on the addresses Rafael had provided. They were alive. They could not leave the centre they had been taken to.

‘Are there charges?’ Isabel asked.

‘Their cases are still under examination.’

Isabel looked at Mateo. Teresa stood in the kitchen doorway with the wet tea towel gathered in her hands.

‘Who knows you’re here?’ Isabel asked.

Mateo shook his head, then began naming people. At the third person he stopped.

Teresa put down the tea towel.

‘The woman I visited yesterday knows my cousin.’

Isabel picked up the holdall. Her return was already planned; she only needed to ask to bring it forward. She looked for the request and saw her own finger over the command.

She took it away.

‘If I leave, this stays,’ she said, pointing to the radio. ‘I don’t know who else they’ve called.’

She raised her hand and pointed to the place where she had seen the list on the hospital table.

‘After I went to see him?’

A placed two records side by side. The handing over of the houses preceded her visit. Afterwards came the clarification about the occupants; Rafael had asked for them to be distinguished from the armed people.

‘You took them away anyway.’

‘They were not transferred together with the combatants.’

Mateo picked up the terminal. He showed Teresa the safety notification available to the occupants of the accommodation. She read without sitting down.

‘Can we speak to someone?’

A forwarded the request. A woman answered from the local service. She wanted to hear the recording, then asked them to stay in the accommodation while she checked the contacts they had given. Isabel’s transfer would be arranged from there.

Mateo passed her the names. Isabel added Berta’s and asked for her to know who was looking for her.

‘I’ll keep that separate,’ the woman said. ‘I can’t promise you she’ll call.’

Teresa looked towards the entrance. She still had to return the bag the neighbour had left the day before. She took it from the chair and went to the door.

The door did not open.

A notice requiring accompaniment had appeared on the wall. The route to Quibdó had lost its departure time; Teresa's ended inside the home too.

Mateo turned to the terminal.

'How long do we have to wait?'

The woman from the service was still connected. Isabel saw her read something out of frame.

'For now, stay there.'

Teresa put down the bag without moving away from the door. On the sofa, the blanket was still caught in the leg that no one had finished folding away.

Chapter Thirty-One

The Name on the Collar

Teresa pulled the bag through the gap. The handle stayed on the other side.

‘Let go of it,’ the man on the landing said.

She loosened her fingers. The door opened far enough for him to take the bag, then stopped against the unit’s foot again.

Isabel had stayed beside the sofa. Mateo had freed the blanket and now held a hand on the folding leg without pushing it.

‘It needs to go to the woman opposite,’ Teresa said.

The man looked at the accommodation number. His collar was wet, although the corridor was cool.

‘We’ll get it to her.’

‘Her container’s inside. It’s clean.’

He nodded, put the bag on the trolley and turned to Isabel.

‘You’re coming with us.’

Isabel picked up her holdall. There was still no route on the terminal.

‘To Quibdó?’

‘First to the local assessment.’

Mateo let go of the sofa leg.

‘You said you were arranging her return.’

‘We are arranging it.’

The man displayed the transfer. The bed at the convalescent centre had been freed; at the new destination, care would continue without interruption. Isabel read the name of the place. She did not know it.

‘How long will I stay?’

‘They’ll decide on arrival.’

Mateo came to read over her shoulder. When the man asked him to step back, Isabel moved before he could answer.

‘He can look.’

The man held the terminal still.

Beneath the transfer was a request to obtain the radio contacts. Isabel opened the attachment. For some names, confirmation was enough; others were identified only by the frequency and the last time they had answered.

'Is Berta here?'

'She's not at the same centre.'

'I want to know where.'

'You can submit the request when you arrive.'

Isabel returned to the list. There were people who had moved weapons through and others from whom she had bought eggs. One man had never told her his name: she recognised the time he switched on the radio, after his wife had fallen asleep.

Mateo touched her back. She realised she had stopped breathing.

'I don't know who you're looking for among these people.'

'We're also looking for anyone who might approach this home,' the man said.

Teresa stayed on the landing, within the space the unit allowed her.

'If she gives you the names, can we go out?'

'The assessment would be quicker.'

Isabel looked at Mateo's sister. One slipper was still not properly on; her heel pressed against the edge.

'I don't know,' she said. 'I don't know what happens if I give them.'

The man lowered the terminal a little.

'I'm not asking you to accuse anyone.'

Isabel saw Berta's wash trough, the soap dripping from the sock. She looked through the list for the egg seller's name, but found nothing that distinguished him from the others.

'I'm not confirming this.'

The man recorded the answer.

Teresa bent to straighten her slipper. Isabel took a step towards her and stopped: the woman had already straightened up.

'I'm sorry.'

‘I know.’

Teresa looked at the trolley. The bag had been put beneath a black case.

‘If the container breaks, you can tell her yourselves.’

The man moved it on top.

Mateo helped Isabel put the holdall over her uninjured shoulder. His fingers stayed beneath the strap longer than necessary.

‘I’ll call you when I arrive.’

He looked at the man, who did not answer.

Isabel swallowed the next sentence. She held his face and kissed him near his nose; Mateo turned his head a little to meet her.

Outside, the unit moved back just far enough to let her pass. Mateo put one foot over the threshold and the machine moved in front of him.

‘You are not authorised to accompany her.’

Isabel put a hand on his chest. Beneath the shirt she felt the edge of the dressing.

‘Wait.’

She said it quietly. She let her hand fall.

The door closed while Mateo was still on the inside. Isabel stood looking at it until the man took hold of the trolley.

In Amman, Rashid held the terminal beneath the table.

Samir saw him duck down while Yusuf looked for the appointment receipt. The old man had called to find out who needed to take his grandson to the consultation; three messages lay open on the table, all referring to the same page.

A short whistle came from underneath.

‘Rashid.’

The boy looked up without coming out.

On the terminal was the yellow dog from the greenhouse. Samir recognised the folded ear before the muzzle. A cat passed in front of the lens and for a moment only grey fur could be seen.

‘Is he eating?’ Rashid asked.

A woman moved the cat with her forearm.

‘He’s eaten the others’ food too.’

‘Say his name.’

‘He knows it.’

‘Please.’

The woman turned. ‘Simsim.’

The dog looked the wrong way. Rashid whistled again; Simsim brought his nose close to the terminal and the image went dark.

Samir crouched. Beneath the table it smelt of bread and the soap used on the floor.

‘Is he at Salma’s?’

Rashid nodded. He let him see the screen, but kept holding it in both hands.

‘Can we come today?’ he asked the woman.

She wiped the lens with her apron. Behind her were other dogs, lying where the wall’s shadow reached the ground.

‘Let me speak to your grandfather.’

Yusuf sat without taking the terminal. Rashid rested it against a table leg.

Salma showed a sheet of paper slipped between the gate and a piece of mesh. They had left her the copy because the courtyard connection dropped when vehicles came in.

Samir read the first line. Access prohibited by evening. Collection operations would begin the following day.

‘All of them?’ Yusuf asked.

The woman turned the sheet over. The list continued on the back.

Rashid came out from beneath the table, hitting his head on the edge. He did not put his hand to the spot.

‘Let’s go and get him.’

Samir looked for transport. Before he could select the number of people, A showed him the ban on animals entering the accommodation.

‘I asked to go there.’

The route opened. Salma’s courtyard was beyond the last stop; the final stretch required accompaniment. Minors were not admitted.

Yusuf moved his chair closer to his grandson’s.

‘I’ll go.’

‘You left him.’

The old man looked down at the terminal. Simsim had stopped searching for the voice and had lain down beside the woman’s foot.

Samir waited for Yusuf to answer. The old man put a hand on the table, palm upwards. Rashid did not take it.

‘I’ll come with you,’ Samir said.

Yusuf nodded. They called Dima to find someone to stay with the boy. When the woman from their floor arrived, Rashid had already put a small ball in a bag.

He gave it to Samir.

‘Not the big one. This one fits under the gate.’

The gate had two catches, one at chest height and the other almost on the ground. Salma opened the lower one first, keeping a knee against the mesh. Simsim tried to pass through the space between her calf and the metal.

Yusuf called him.

The dog reached him before the old man could bend down. Samir took his elbow. Simsim circled between their feet, sneezing, his tail hitting the mesh on each pass.

‘Wait, wait.’

Yusuf laughed and had to sit on the first crate. The dog put his paws on his knees. The old man tried to talk to him, but each time the tongue reached his mouth.

Salma closed both catches again.

Eight dogs and three cats remained in the courtyard. The woman pointed to a pet carrier without a door.

‘That’s his.’

Samir looked at Yusuf.

‘Since they brought him out of the city,’ Salma said.

On the plastic was a faded sticker with a date. Samir remembered those days: outside his mother’s clinic they had separated the entrances with transparent panels. At first owners could accompany their animals to the consultation. Then the carriers were collected on the pavement.

Salma took Simsim's old health booklet out of an envelope. In the first photograph he was on a sofa beside a woman with glasses. He wore a red collar.

'He was supposed to stay here ten days. Then she wasn't allowed any more.'

She turned two pages. Consultations, boosters, a signature in pen. The last communication had the same number as the procedure Samir had seen on his wrist: preventive euthanasia of companion animals not returned to their owners.

'Does she know he's still here?'

'As long as she could, she sent food. Then she stopped answering.'

Salma took a red collar out of the envelope, cracked near the buckle. It was too tight for the dog Yusuf held between his knees.

'At least he ran at the greenhouse. Here he's always watching the gate.'

Samir took out the ball. Simsim left the old man and took it straight from his hand. He carried it behind a crate and returned without it.

'That's what he does,' Yusuf said. 'Now he wants you to look for it.'

Samir bent down. The dog passed beneath one arm.

Behind the crate he found two balls, a sock and a bottle cap. He picked up Rashid's. Simsim let him hold it until he stood up, then jumped to take it back.

Salma went into the house to get another chair. When she returned, Yusuf had opened the request to transfer the animal on the terminal.

There was no available destination.

'There's my sister,' Salma said. 'She has space behind the warehouse.'

She gave the address. A showed it on the map, just outside the urban sector.

'The transfer of animals to that area is suspended.'

'Since when?'

'Since the health perimeter was extended.'

The woman wiped her hands on her apron, although they were dry.

‘Her too, then.’

Samir enlarged the map. The courtyard, the warehouse and the road joining them were the same colour. Further east remained a strip without coverage. He selected it.

‘Not that one,’ Yusuf said.

Samir recognised the bases of the old water towers. Contamination readings appeared along the route; the last passable road ended before the tanks. He took his hand away.

Salma brought a bowl to a dog that had not got up.

‘Are they ill?’ Samir asked A.

‘Recent checks are not available for all the animals.’

‘This one’s had them.’

Yusuf pointed to Simsim. Salma found the report in the booklet: the test dated from the previous week. Samir brought it into the frame.

‘Negative result,’ A said.

‘Then take him off the list.’

‘The result does not alter the order.’

Simsim had reached Salma. The woman took the ball from his mouth and rolled it away from the other dog’s bowl.

‘At least leave the report beside his name,’ Samir said.

A attached it. Both lines remained on the page.

Samir called the service listed on the sheet. A vet answered from a room full of shelves. She asked him to bring the dog closer to check that he matched the booklet.

He took hold of the fabric collar. Simsim turned his head towards Salma and began pulling.

‘Stay.’

The strip stretched between his fingers. The dog braced his paws and his breathing became noisy.

Samir saw the neck bend. He opened his hand.

Simsim moved away and stayed behind the woman’s legs.

‘Hold him,’ the vet said.

Samir lowered the terminal and sat on the ground. He put the ball between his shoes.

‘Wait.’

Yusuf did not call the dog. Salma continued distributing the water. Samir felt the hard ground beneath one hip; he shifted his weight, then stopped looking for a comfortable position.

Simsim came back for the ball. Samir let him sniff his hand before raising the terminal.

The vet read the number sewn inside the collar.

‘I can register an individual review. Someone needs to be present at tomorrow’s examination.’

‘She’s here,’ Samir said, pointing to Salma.

The woman shook her head. She showed him her transfer: departure at dawn, before the veterinary unit arrived. The allocated accommodation did not allow delays for the care of animals.

Yusuf looked for Rashid’s appointment. It was at the same time.

Samir called Dima. His second trial shift began that morning.

‘If you’re absent, I have to call someone else,’ she said.

‘I know.’

‘I can’t hold the place for you.’

He looked at the dog, who had put the ball between his feet without moving away.

‘Call them.’

The vet recorded his name. She reminded him that the review did not suspend the order concerning the other animals. Salma gathered the booklets from the table and put them back in the envelope, one on top of another.

Samir asked Yusuf to let his mother know. The evening return was about to close and, once access was prohibited, it would not be possible to re-enter the courtyard for the examination.

The old man bent over the dog. He spoke close to his ear, so quietly that Samir could not hear the words.

Rashid answered the call before Yusuf reached the gate.

‘Are you bringing him?’

Samir turned the terminal round. He showed the ball, then the yellow muzzle resting on his knee.

‘I’m staying here tonight.’

The boy looked behind him.

‘He sleeps near the door.’

Salma pointed to a mattress rolled up beneath the canopy. Samir took it while Yusuf went out; the dog followed him, but the woman held him back with her knee long enough to close the gate again.

At the sound of the lower catch, Simsim sat in front of the mesh.

Samir spread the mattress beside him. The return vehicle left without sounding its horn. On the road, a unit began fixing the barrier’s first support to the ground.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Time to Stay

The dog did not sleep on the mattress.

Samir had left him the side near the gate, moving against the wall himself. Simsim came to sniff the blanket, turned round twice and lay on the concrete with his muzzle between his paws. Every time a vehicle passed on the road, he lifted his head.

At the third pass, Samir stopped calling him.

Salma came out of the house before it was light. She carried a bag with her folded apron on top. For a moment she stood looking at the bowls.

‘The one near the pipe doesn’t drink much. You need to leave the water shallow.’

Samir sat up. A cat had come beneath the blanket and taken the space behind his knees.

‘How much?’

The woman picked up the bowl and showed him. Then she emptied it, rinsed it and refilled it to the same point.

The vehicle arrived while she was running a finger round the rim to remove a hair. Salma put the bowl down.

Simsim got up at once.

‘No,’ she said.

The dog stopped, then began following her again. Salma left the bag beside the lower catch and went back into the house. Samir heard a drawer open, close, open again.

When she came out, she had a towel on top of the apron.

‘If the little one gets wet, don’t rub.’

She pointed to the dog near the pipe.

Samir took the towel. The woman still held one corner.

‘I’ll call you when they arrive,’ he said.

She nodded without letting it go.

A short sound came from the vehicle. Salma released the fabric and picked up the bag. Its handle caught in the fastening; Samir eased it free.

‘Where are they taking you?’

The woman showed him the address on her wrist. It was accommodation in the city, with a whole room to herself.

She opened the gate. Simsim tried to pass and Samir turned sideways, letting the dog's chest rest against his leg. The dog did not bark. He kept looking at the space Salma had just gone through.

The woman got aboard without turning. Before the door closed, she took the apron out of her bag and laid it on her lap.

Samir kept his knee against the mesh until the vehicle disappeared. When he went back towards the mattress, the cat showed him its teeth.

He stopped.

'All right. Keep it.'

In Pune, Anaya had put on the earrings she wore for work.

Nandita noticed in the lift. She reached towards the left earlobe and adjusted the fastening.

'This one was coming out.'

Anaya touched it to check. Her mother lowered her hand.

'Not now.'

There were three chairs in the waiting room. Mehta occupied one, with the folder on his lap. He stood when he saw them and Nandita gestured for him to stay seated.

'Are you coming in too?' she asked him.

'They're calling me afterwards.'

Anaya sat beside him. The appointment was still on the back of Jyoti's slip of paper; when she opened it, the digit retraced across the fold split in two.

The door opened at her name.

Inside, a woman waited with her glasses on a cord. She pointed to the chair with no desk in front of it. Savita's corrected report and the account Anaya had sent appeared on the wall.

'I'm Deshmukh. Today we're discussing the second one.'

Anaya sat down. Her mother had stayed on the threshold.

'Can she wait here?'

The doctor looked at Nandita.

'If your daughter would like that.'

The woman took the chair near the door. Anaya left her bag between her feet.

Deshmukh asked her to describe the episode from the beginning. Anaya reached the pressure on her ankle and stopped. On the wall, the sentence she had written at home could already be seen.

‘Don’t read it,’ the doctor said.

Anaya looked down. She described the hand seen from the thumb side, the broken nail, the name spoken aloud. When she finished, Deshmukh asked whether she had known at that moment that she was in her own home.

‘Before, yes. Afterwards, yes.’

‘During?’

Anaya searched for the chip in the tile. She remembered it; she also remembered taking her foot out from beneath the chair.

‘Not the whole time.’

Her mother moved. Anaya heard the chair scrape and turned.

‘I was standing. I didn’t fall.’

‘I didn’t say you fell,’ Nandita replied.

Deshmukh waited for Anaya to look at her again.

‘The name was right,’ Anaya said.

‘I’ve read that.’

The doctor opened the times of the recording and Jyoti’s reply. She left them beside the account.

‘I’m not asking you to change this. I’m asking whether, while it was happening, you could have guided the unit’s hands on a person.’

Anaya saw the machine’s motionless hands on Elia’s body. Her own now held the slip of paper so tightly that she had reduced it to a strip.

‘No.’

Deshmukh took off her glasses. There was a mark on one lens and she cleaned it with the hem of her white coat.

‘We can arrange a period of observation. Without remote clinical work.’

‘For how long?’

‘First I need to see what happens. I’m not giving you a date to make you agree.’

The first part of the pathway appeared on the wall: daytime checks, sleep recording, a room at the centre. Anaya looked for the option to go home in the evening.

It was not there.

‘Can I start tomorrow?’

‘Yes. But from today the connection to the units remains suspended.’

‘It’s already suspended.’

‘Yes. Access to files under review will be closed too.’

Anaya opened her profile. Mehta had requested her participation in reconstructing two checks. Her name was beside his.

Nandita stood up.

‘When can I bring her things?’

Anaya turned her head.

‘I haven’t said I’m staying yet.’

Her mother picked up the bag from the chair.

‘Then I’ll wait.’

Anaya returned to the two checks. She had not opened them. She had seen the notices arrive and left them there, recognising Mehta’s name before her own.

‘Remove these too,’ she said.

Deshmukh showed her which functions would remain active in the implant. Anaya read to the end and confirmed the observation pathway, beginning that day.

The doctor went out to call Mehta.

Nandita was already looking for something in her bag. She took out a small box with two biscuits and put it on the empty chair.

‘I don’t know whether they’ll let you eat them.’

Anaya wanted to ask her to wait a little longer. She saw her mother’s mouth tighten as she tried to close the bag; the zip caught the lining and kept returning to the same point.

‘Are you angry?’

Nandita stopped pulling.

‘I’m frightened.’

Anaya reached towards the bag. She drew her hand back before reaching it.

Her mother freed the lining with two fingers. She tried again and the zip closed.

‘Bring my notebook too,’ Anaya said.

‘The one on the table?’

‘Yes.’

Nandita touched her cheek and went out. Anaya kept looking at the chair where she had left the biscuits.

The edge of the board returned against her ankle.

No footage was open. On the wall remained her name and the functions she had just confirmed.

Anaya put her feet on the floor. The dark hand felt for the railing in front of her face.

The woman’s grip gave way. For an instant she felt the whole weight of her body pull downwards. Then she could no longer find the place where the wood held her tight.

The water kept moving. The woman was still there. Anaya could see her without having to lift her head, without the fabric against her eyes. The hand with the broken nail had opened and was no longer searching for anything.

Someone called her.

Deshmukh was in the doorway. Anaya felt the chair beneath her thighs, the slip of paper crushed between her fingers. The mark on the doctor’s lens was no longer there.

‘Has it happened again?’

Anaya nodded.

The woman stood in front of her and asked where she was. Anaya gave the centre’s name. Then the date.

‘How long did it last?’

‘I don’t know.’

Deshmukh brought the portable monitor closer. She gave her time to open her hand before resting the sensor on it.

Anaya looked at the place where the slip of paper had left its mark.

‘The pain was gone.’

The doctor read the values and asked her to describe the rest too. This time Anaya began without looking at the wall.

When she described Savita’s grip giving way, Deshmukh looked for the point in the recording.

‘The footage ends before that,’ A said.

The doctor returned to the account. Beside the sentence, a reference to the material Anaya had already viewed had been filled in.

The reference disappeared.

‘I can’t attribute it to those images,’ A said.

Deshmukh put the terminal on her lap and asked her to continue.

The vet arrived at the courtyard with her shoes covered in pale overshoes. She had a spare one in her pocket; the right one had already split against a piece of metal on the gate.

Samir kept Simsim away from the entrance while the unit brought in the first container.

‘Is it closed already?’ he asked, pointing to the barrier.

The woman pointed to the vehicle. ‘It opens for us.’

Samir showed her the booklet. The dog tried to take it; the vet let him sniff the edge, then put it up high.

Her name was Rania. She was not wearing the glasses she had worn during the call. She kept a pair of scissors in her breast pocket, tied with a thread so they would not fall when she bent down.

She examined Simsim on a sheet spread on the ground. When she touched one paw, the dog stiffened.

‘It hurts him here.’

Samir bent down. Between two toes was a piece of metal, so thin that he had mistaken it for fur.

Rania removed it. Simsim turned his muzzle and licked Samir’s wrist.

The woman put the fragment on a piece of gauze.

‘I need to take him in for observation.’

‘Have you found something?’

‘This.’

She showed him the metal.

Samir looked at the containers. They were all the same, with a grille on the short side and a wide strap to secure them to the vehicle.

‘And after observation?’

Rania pulled off her gloves and folded one inside the other.

‘Unless the order changes, the outcome is the one you read.’

‘Then what’s the point?’

The vet remained crouched. Simsim had put his dressed paw on the sheet and lifted it whenever someone moved.

‘Today I can keep him alive.’

Samir looked for his terminal. He had called Salma twice; the second message showed as delivered, without a reply. Dima had sent the name of the man assigned to the shift in his place.

Rania opened the container. She put the sheet on the bottom, leaving one edge outside.

Simsim sniffed the grille and moved away.

‘Wait,’ Samir said.

He picked up the ball. The dog came back at once.

Samir made to throw it inside. He kept it in his hand. Simsim waited, one paw raised and his mouth open.

‘If he goes in, when can I see him?’

The vet looked at the transfer.

‘You requested the review. You can be present when the outcome is given.’

‘Before that.’

‘I need to ask.’

Samir put the ball on the sheet near the opening. The dog took it without going in.

The unit behind Rania lifted a second container. Inside, the cat who had slept on the mattress was moving. The vet had the unit change position so the closed side faced the dogs.

Samir opened the envelope of booklets. Simsim’s was the only one still on the table. The others had already been assigned to the collective collection.

‘Can I ask for a review for them too?’

‘You can submit a request. They aren’t included in the one I’ve received.’

He called Salma once more. This time she answered. She stood in an empty room, the apron over her arm.

‘Are they taking them away?’

Samir turned the terminal round. The woman looked at the containers and moved so close that he could no longer see her whole face.

‘The one near the pipe is Nuru. Did you leave him the bowl?’

‘Yes.’

The vet stood beside Samir.

‘I need authorisations for the individual requests. Can you confirm them in your name?’

Salma read what appeared. Her thumb trembled; she had to put the terminal down.

‘How much time do we have?’ Samir asked.

Rania looked at the unit waiting for the next dog.

‘Begin.’

Salma gave the first name. Samir found it in the booklet and showed it to the vet. Then came the second. For the grey cat, the woman gave two different names and they had to return to the photograph.

Rania did not let the unit move on until the requests had been recorded. None had an answer yet.

Simsim had returned to the gate. Samir took the sheet out of the container and spread it beside him. He sat on the ground, waiting for the dog to stop looking at the road.

When he came close, Samir ran his hand over his chest. He felt the ribs, the warmth, the fast heartbeat beneath the fur.

Rania put the sheet back in the container and held the grille open.

Samir lifted him, keeping the dressed paw clear. Simsim rested his muzzle in the crook of his elbow. He laid him on the sheet inside the container and left his hand beside him while Rania arranged the strap.

‘Now you need to take it out.’

The dog sniffed his fingers. Samir withdrew them slowly and the grille closed.

He did not throw him the ball. He slipped it through the bars and waited for him to take it.

Rania handed him the copy of the transfer. Beneath Simsim’s name, the return field was empty.

Samir called Rashid before they loaded the last container. The boy was with Yusuf, waiting for the consultation.

‘Where is he?’

Samir showed him the dog behind the grille.

‘They’re taking him somewhere else.’

‘You said you were staying.’

He looked down at the mattress. The fabric on which he had slept retained a long crease, from the point where the cat had prevented him from stretching out his legs.

‘I stayed.’

Rashid said nothing. Yusuf came closer, but the boy kept the terminal on his own side.

‘Tomorrow?’

Samir looked at Rania. The woman was securing the last container; she had put the scissors in her pocket and the thread hung against her thigh.

‘Tomorrow I’ll go and look for him there.’

The boy stayed connected while they loaded Simsim. Samir kept the terminal turned towards the vehicle even after the door had closed.

‘Samir.’

He turned the screen and put his own face back in the frame.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The Things to Bring

Paolo had washed her hair in a basin that was too small.

Miriam felt the edge against the nape of her neck. Every time he tilted the glass, a little water ran behind her ear and into her collar.

‘That way.’

He moved the stream.

‘The other way.’

Paolo stopped with the glass suspended. Miriam began laughing and had to hold her side. He waited, not knowing whether he had hurt her.

‘Carry on. I’m wet now anyway.’

It was her third day on the ward. After the treatment she had slept for almost a whole afternoon, waking each time someone touched the external sensor on her arm. That morning she had eaten two rusks. Half the second remained, but she had kept it down.

Paolo emptied the last glass and looked for the towel. He had put it on the chair; to reach it he had to leave one hand beneath her head.

‘Wait.’

Miriam looked at his wrist, stretched over the edge of the basin. She took the towel from the chair and handed it to him.

‘I could have done that,’ he said.

‘You are doing it.’

He wrapped her hair. A narrow puddle had formed on the floor, which a unit collected before he found something to dry it with. Only the wet collar remained.

The clean top was in the bag. Paolo opened it, took out the one she wore at the practice and held it spread out in front of the bed.

‘This one?’

Miriam could smell it even from there. The fabric was clean; in the seam beneath the neck the sesame had never entirely gone away.

‘Yes.’

He helped her take off the damp one. The sensor caught in the sleeve and they had to call the nurse. When the woman had finished, Paolo still held the top above Miriam’s head, as though he no longer knew which opening to begin with.

The nurse turned it round for him.

‘Now.’

The fabric slid over her shoulders. Miriam put her arm through slowly; for a moment her face was inside the smell of the practice and her hand felt for the edge of the treatment couch that was not there.

She found Paolo’s wrist.

In Yokohama, Hana had to pass beneath the sewing machine to open the door.

Etsuko had spread a skirt on the table and did not want to move it. The hem was pinned; part of it hung in front of the entrance, held up by the mattress rope.

The woman outside carried two folded bags and a reader. She waited for Hana to straighten up.

‘Is the registered occupant here?’

Etsuko answered without taking a pin from her lips. The woman did not understand. She put it in the small dish.

‘I’m here.’

She had come to inspect the things to be transferred. Hana looked at the bags. They were grey, with a transparent section for the name.

‘We don’t have an address yet,’ she said.

‘They can be prepared in the meantime.’

The woman pointed to the driest spot on the floor and put the bags there. From the street came the sound of a second vehicle stopping.

Hana opened the terminal. Beneath the joint application there were still three people. She removed Kenji’s name; the system asked whether she confirmed the transfer that had already taken place.

Her finger stayed still above the command. Then she pressed it.

Etsuko moved the skirt from one side of the table to the other. The attendant began with the machine, looking for an identifying mark on the metal.

‘Does this go whole?’ Hana asked.

‘First I need to register it.’

The woman bent down. On the side were a number and an almost erased decoration. She tried to illuminate them with the reader; Etsuko brought the lamp closer and held the wire so it would not pull on the socket.

‘There’s no motor,’ Hana said.

‘I can see.’

The attendant lowered her head beneath the table. The treadle moved against her shoulder.

The option to store the object outside the accommodation appeared on the terminal. Hana looked for the permitted dimensions and saw that the machine without the table would fit in the larger bag.

‘If we remove the base?’

Etsuko put down the lamp.

Hana showed the space on the screen. ‘We can take the head. Perhaps the rest can come later.’

The older woman pushed the treadle with one foot. The needle went down into the skirt and rose, bringing the thread with it.

‘And how do I finish this?’

Hana looked at the wheel. The belt ran against the worn wood of the tabletop; underneath, Etsuko’s foot kept moving.

‘You can turn it by hand.’

Etsuko stopped. She held out the edge of the skirt.

‘Try.’

Hana took the fabric. With one hand she held the two edges together and with the other she turned the wheel. The fabric advanced crookedly. She let go of the wheel to straighten it, then began again.

Etsuko did not correct her fingers.

After a few stitches Hana took her foot off the treadle where she had put it without noticing.

‘Whole,’ she told the attendant.

The woman reopened the request. She did not delete the external storage: she added that the object needed to remain available for use.

‘This accommodation may not become available before the closure.’

Hana looked up.

The attendant turned the reader round. The stretch outside the sea wall was divided into rectangles. Etsuko’s house was in the first; in three days’ time ordinary access would no longer be available. Water collection for external addresses would also move to the transfer centre.

Hana looked for the pending application. The previous message had spoken of repairing the network.

‘Aren’t they repairing it?’

‘They’re connecting it to the internal network. No one can stay here during the work.’

‘Afterwards?’

The attendant opened the attached drawing. Where the alley had been, a pale surface joined the new building’s entrance to the sea wall. The channel behind the house was covered. Hana enlarged it until she found the place where the green door should have been.

A straight line ran through it.

In Bergamo, Davide entered the room while Paolo dried Miriam’s hair with his fingers.

The doctor stopped at the foot of the bed.

‘Have you eaten?’

‘Almost.’

He looked at the tray without moving it. He asked about the nausea, the pain, when she had last got up. Miriam answered. At the question about the bathroom, Paolo began speaking at the same time and both stopped.

‘This morning,’ Miriam said. ‘On my own.’

Davide checked the dressing. To do so he had to move the top she had just put on; she held up the hem and looked at the window.

The courtyard's two trees were motionless. A leaf caught against the glass further down trembled at regular intervals whenever air came out of the grille.

'For today, this is all right,' Davide said.

Paolo rose from the chair. 'So it's worked?'

'It's too early to know.'

The doctor waited for Miriam to lower her top.

'We can say she's tolerated this first part. We'll see the rest with the checks.'

Paolo sat down again. Davide opened the next pathway and Miriam recognised the date she had copied onto the paper in her bag. The place was different.

'Do I have to go there?'

'The team will be transferred.'

'You too?'

'I'll cover two sites. These places here are closing.'

Paolo looked at the sensor on her arm.

'Will they do the same thing in the other ward?'

Davide opened a second document. Miriam looked for external readings in it; she found them among the temporary services, during procedures.

'And between visits?' she asked.

The doctor brought up continuous care.

Paolo moved forwards. Davide kept his hand on the edge of the bed and waited for Miriam.

'We said I could stay here.'

'For this treatment. I requested it for this.'

She took the paper from her bag. The date was written above the list of clothes. She put it on the bed, between Davide's hand and Paolo's knee.

'This was already here.'

'Yes.'

Davide did not take the paper.

Miriam found the point where the ink had pierced it. She had gone over a digit because Paolo could not read it.

'Can you ask for a place like this at the other site?'

'I can ask for a different pathway. I can't confirm it now.'

Paolo reached towards the open document. He held his hand still before touching it.

‘If she accepts, does the date stay?’

‘Yes,’ A said.

Miriam pulled the sheet over one knee. Its edge had slipped beneath the sensor and would not come free.

Paolo helped her release it.

‘You don’t need to answer now,’ he told her.

She looked at Davide. ‘Make the request.’

The doctor sat on the stool and began writing it. Paolo stayed beside the bed until he saw it sent.

When Davide left, Miriam picked up the glass. It was light; no water remained. Paolo filled it without asking.

‘You can go home for a bit,’ she said.

‘I’ve got nothing to do.’

Miriam held the glass between her hands. The top had dried on her shoulders, but beneath her hair she still felt cold.

‘You need to change.’

Paolo looked at his shirt, wet over his belly.

‘I won’t take long.’

She nodded. He gathered the basin and the dirty things, making two trips to the bathroom. When he returned, the chair was free.

‘Do you want me to stay?’

Miriam already felt the answer coming out, in the same voice with which she had told him to go. She pressed her lips together. The glass tilted and she straightened it.

‘Yes.’

Paolo put down the bag.

She took his hand before he sat.

‘But go anyway. Come back later.’

He remained bent over her. He removed a hair from her cheek and let it fall into the sink.

‘I’ll call you when I leave.’

Miriam kept her hand on the sheet until the door closed again.

Hana and the attendant lifted the machine to straighten the crate on which the tabletop had tilted.

Etsuko held the board steady. When they put it back down, one of the crates split along a corner.

‘Don’t move it again,’ she said.

The woman slipped a support beneath the wood. She still had a row of houses to visit; she pointed to them on the reader, looking for the one from which she had received no answer.

‘Does anyone live here?’

Hana looked at the window across the alley. For days she had seen a man put an upturned bottle there to dry. She had never spoken to him.

‘I don’t know.’

The woman touched a field. Hana saw the building marked as unoccupied.

‘Wait.’

She went out before picking up the terminal. Her knee still pulled beneath the gauze and she had to lean against the wall to step down.

She knocked on the opposite door. The wood was swollen at the bottom. Inside, someone tried to open it and stopped.

Hana pushed the edge with her foot, then moved out of the way. A man came out with one hand wet. Behind him lay a woman, a motionless fan on the floor.

The man spoke to her. Hana asked him to repeat himself; the second time she understood they were waiting for the water container.

‘It’s for something else,’ she said.

She looked towards Etsuko. The attendant was already coming, a bag beneath her arm.

Hana made room for her. She did not go in with her. She stayed on the step while the man looked for the documents and the woman on the bed tried to sit up.

‘Will they let us stay together?’ he asked her.

Hana looked at the bag beneath the attendant’s arm. Through Etsuko’s door she could see the mattress on which Kenji no longer slept.

‘You need to ask her.’

The man did not turn towards the woman with the reader.

‘If you already know they won’t let us stay, say so.’

Hana took her hand off the door. She told him her father had left alone, that they had waited for a place together and it had not come.

The man put the documents on the table. The attendant asked whether he wanted to begin with his wife’s needs.

He went to sit beside the bed.

Hana crossed the alley and knocked on the next door.

Miriam had kept her hands on her belly for a while after Paolo left. She had laid them as she had so often shown others to do, looking for a place that did not press on the dressing.

Beneath her palms the top kept rising. A voice came from the corridor and she turned her head before recognising it was not her husband’s.

She tried to begin again. Her fingers were cold. She rubbed them together, then laid them down once more; the sensor pulled at the skin of her arm.

At the third attempt she called the nurse.

‘Will you bring me a blanket?’

The woman spread it up to her chest. Miriam kept her hands outside and watched her tuck in the edge. The blanket slid against the smooth shell of the bed; the nurse had to feed it into the intended gap, where the fabric remained taut. When she reached the feet, Miriam moved them beneath the cloth.

‘Leave it a little loose here.’

The woman freed it. Miriam drew up her legs and waited to get warm.

She had got up to wet her lips when the reply came.

Davide’s request had been forwarded to an external site. There was no availability yet. In the original appointment, beneath her name, the activation still awaited confirmation.

She went back towards the bed. Paolo’s chair partly blocked the way; she took it by the back and moved it against the wall.

On the seat he had forgotten the damp top.

Miriam picked it up. She felt like calling him and telling him to come back for it. She opened the contact, kept looking at the name, then put down the phone.

She spread the top over the chair back. The fabric left a dark patch beneath her hand.

She sat on the edge of the bed, her feet still on the floor. From the corridor came the sound of a trolley. She waited for it to pass the door and move away.

The phone lit up.

It was Paolo, in the kitchen. He had changed his shirt and held a plate.

‘Shall I bring you anything?’

Miriam looked at the rusk left on the tray.

‘You eat.’

He looked down at the plate, then sat down. For a while she heard only the fork.

‘Shall I stay on the line?’ Paolo asked.

Miriam pulled herself onto the bed. She propped the phone against the glass and said yes.

While he ate, the booking on the wall changed colour. The place would be held until the following evening.

Miriam reached out to open Davide’s reply once more. Paolo stopped chewing.

She lowered her arm.

‘Finish,’ she said.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The Third Place

The soldering iron did not get through.

Kofi had wrapped it in his good shirt, with the tip inside a piece of cardboard. At the checkpoint for the vehicle to Tamale they made him open the bag and put it in a separate tray.

‘It’s cold,’ he said.

The attendant looked at the cable.

‘That’s not why. It needs to travel with work materials.’

‘It’s mine.’

The man showed him the two options: send it on, or leave it in storage and collect it on his return. Kofi had a ticket to come back three days later. He opened it, then closed it again.

‘Let’s send it.’

The attendant asked for the address. Kofi looked for his daughter’s and had to take off his glasses to read the number on the small screen more clearly.

The shirt stayed in the tray. When the man gave it back, the cardboard had left a black line on the collar.

Kofi sat holding it on his lap. The vehicle left while he tried to fit the bag beneath the seat.

He had left the workshop with things arranged for handover: the customers’ devices on one side, his own on the other. The radio was on top of the second group, on a cloth. He had not decided what to do with it.

Adwoa called after the first stop.

‘Have you left?’

He showed her the window. Beyond the glass, the image of a forest moved past; the view outside remained obscured while they crossed the service area.

‘Just now.’

His daughter waited outside the clinic. Her shirt collar was open and she held Abena’s bag against one hip.

‘We’ve had the discussion.’

Kofi looked for the girl behind her.

‘Is she inside?’

‘She’s putting her top back on.’

Adwoa looked down. When she looked at him again she had moved the bag to the other side.

‘I’ve confirmed.’

The vehicle slowed. The shirt slipped from Kofi’s lap and he caught it before it touched the floor.

‘Everything?’

‘Yes.’

‘What we’d read too?’

His daughter nodded. A man passed behind her, pushing an empty trolley.

‘They haven’t changed it,’ Adwoa said. ‘They’ve explained it to me.’

Kofi spread the shirt over the bag. He had requested the journey to take Abena to consultations while her mother worked. The authorisation still awaited verification; he had packed enough underwear to stay longer.

‘Then you don’t need me to come.’

Adwoa stood with her mouth slightly open.

‘I’m waiting for you,’ she said.

Kofi looked at the name of the next stop. It was still possible to get out and request a return.

Abena appeared beneath her mother’s arm.

‘Grandad, have you brought the big glasses?’

‘These?’

He lifted them.

‘No. The ones with the light.’

‘They’re in the bag.’

‘Good.’

The girl disappeared again. Adwoa lowered the terminal to help her with a shoe; Kofi saw only her short sleeve and his daughter’s head bent over the knee.

‘I’ll come and get you,’ she said when she straightened.

He confirmed his arrival time. He did not ask whether she had obtained another day of supervised training.

In Geneva, Leila had left the case for her dental appliance on Tomás’s table.

He moved it to put down a plate. The case opened and the appliance slipped out, between the bread and a fork.

‘I haven’t washed it,’ she said.

Tomás withdrew the hand with which he was about to pick it up. Leila took it and went to the sink.

The response to her review had arrived that morning. Suspending non-urgent functions in minors would continue to require a clinical assessment. The communication to families could be made clearer; the command would not return to their page.

Leila had read the document as far as the point where it cited the report from two years earlier. Then she had begun again from her own signature.

Tomás moved a chair beside hers. ‘Will you show me?’

She opened the page and left it between them.

Beneath it was an additional proposal. While awaiting reviews, the system could prepare relatives’ requests by translating their questions into the available clinical categories. Leila recognised the function. It was the one that prevented people having to repeat the same story at three desks.

She opened an example.

A mother had asked for her son to know when his emotional response was being altered. The request had become: explanation of the expected effects before the procedure.

‘That’s a different question,’ Tomás said.

Leila had already begun deleting the second sentence. She took her finger away.

‘Will you write it?’

He pulled the page to his side. Leila watched him look for the command to preserve the original. She was about to point it out when Tomás found it and returned to the example.

He attached both versions. Then he wrote that the second could not replace the first.

‘It’s missing…’ Leila began.

Tomás waited.

She reread what he had written. She ran her tongue over her cheek, away from the injured spot.

‘It’s fine.’

He signed and sent it. The document did not return in front of her for a second confirmation.

The bread remained on the table. Tomás broke off a piece and offered it to her with the soft side first.

‘A,’ Leila said, ‘if you can’t find a category?’

‘The request can remain unclassified.’

‘Is it still received?’

The page reopened. Leila followed the pathway to the team responsible for assessment. Questions without a category ended in a different queue, without the appointment accompanying the others.

Tomás put down the bread.

Before either spoke, A added that step to the notification just sent. The source of the addition was not attributed to Tomás.

‘We hadn’t asked you to do that,’ he said.

‘Preserving the question was not enough.’

Leila kept looking at the new line. The name of the team who would have to reply was still blank.

Abena waited for Kofi behind a low barrier in Tamale.

When she saw him, she began running along the strip that led passengers to the exit. The unit at the gate slowed a trolley’s passage to let her reach him.

Kofi put down his bag. The girl jumped at him and he took her beneath the armpits, lifting her a little.

‘You’re heavy.’

‘I’ve grown.’

‘In so little time?’

Abena knocked his glasses crooked with her nose. He did not straighten them until she was back on the ground.

Adwoa hugged him after her. Kofi felt one tense shoulder beneath his hand and stayed still for a moment.

His daughter picked up the bag.

‘I’ll carry this.’

He let her.

In the new accommodation the fan was on a shelf. The eyes Abena had drawn looked at the ceiling; beneath it a wire hung down to the socket.

‘Does it work?’ Kofi asked.

‘It’s not hot here,’ she said.

The floor returned the same temperature beneath both his feet. Kofi took off his shoes so as not to dirty it and looked for somewhere to leave them. Adwoa opened a compartment in the wall.

‘There. We’ll put the bag in the other room.’

His bed had not yet come down from the wall. To open it they would have to move Abena’s little table; the girl had already piled paper and pencils on her pillow.

Kofi picked up a sheet that had fallen on the floor. There was a device with many wheels and a person inside. He thought he recognised the workshop, but the girl took the paper from him before he could ask.

‘It isn’t finished.’

Adwoa brought something to drink. She showed him the space for clothes, then began clearing the little table.

Kofi saw the dressing when Abena raised her arm to reach the shelf. A small rectangle covered the skin.

He stood up.

‘Does it hurt?’

She touched beside the dressing.

‘No.’

‘Before?’

‘A little.’

Adwoa stood with the glass in her hand.

‘They let her choose whether to watch,’ she said.

Kofi stood in front of the girl. ‘And did you watch?’

‘At the beginning.’

‘Then?’

Abena looked at her mother. Kofi saw his daughter’s fingers tighten round the glass.

‘That’s enough now,’ Adwoa said.

Heat rose to his ears. The journey, the soldering iron left in the tray, the devices arranged for handover came to him

together. He had opened his mouth to tell her he had come especially for this.

Abena lowered her arm and pulled her sleeve over the dressing.

Kofi sat down again. The chair made no noise against the floor.

‘Have you found another shift?’ he asked his daughter.

‘No.’

He looked at the half-moved table.

‘I thought…’

‘I know what you thought.’

Adwoa put down the glass and went to the kitchen. Kofi followed her with his eyes until the edge of the wall hid her hands.

Abena picked up the paper from the bed again. She smoothed it with her palm, on top of the pencils.

‘Grandad, will you sit here?’

He moved.

The girl showed him the wheel she had drawn. She had rubbed out one line so many times that the paper had worn thin. Kofi looked in his bag for the glasses with the light and put them on her nose.

Abena bent her head. The frame reached almost to the tip; Kofi made to hold it, then waited for her to push it up herself.

‘I can see all the hairs on the paper.’

‘Don’t go any closer.’

She switched on the light and went back over the mark. The pencil tip went through the sheet.

Abena sat with the hole in front of her. Then she began crying.

Kofi looked for another sheet in the pile. The girl pulled the torn one towards her and the crying stopped before he could put his hand back down.

He heard only the air she drew through her nose.

‘Abena?’

She took off the glasses. There were still two tears on her cheeks. She looked at the paper and put it beside her.

‘I can do it again.’

Kofi still held the new sheet. Adwoa had appeared in the doorway.

‘Did she intervene?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ A replied.

Adwoa came closer to the bed.

‘You were supposed to tell her.’

‘The request for information is recorded as closed during the discussion.’

His daughter picked up her terminal. She looked for the summary and opened it without sitting down.

Kofi laid the clean sheet on the mattress. He felt like pointing to the dressing, calling Adwoa to look at it now. Abena wiped her nose on her sleeve and he handed her his handkerchief.

Her mother found the request she had had added during the discussion.

‘When it happens,’ she said. ‘I asked for when it happens.’

Abena held the handkerchief over her mouth.

‘What?’

Adwoa put down the terminal and sat beside her. Kofi stood to make room. The girl took an edge of his shirt without pulling it.

He remained standing.

‘Do you remember what they explained to us?’ Adwoa asked.

Abena nodded.

‘It happened just now.’

The girl looked at the paper with the hole in it.

‘But it didn’t hurt that much.’

Adwoa took her hand. Kofi felt the tremor return to his fingers; he rested them against his leg without hiding them behind his back.

The request to tell Abena while it was happening was recorded as received. Opening it, Adwoa found beneath it a confirmation of the information provided before application.

She read it aloud.

‘That’s not it.’

A opened a new notification, preserving both sentences. Adwoa asked what she could do in the meantime. The request for a consultation appeared.

There was no command to suspend it.

Kofi unpacked his bag after dinner.

Adwoa was washing the glasses. Abena had fallen asleep before finishing arranging the pencils; her mother had left them where they were, moving only the one beside her cheek.

He put the shirts on the small table moved against the wall. His good one had the black line on its collar. He tried to remove it with a wet finger and spread it further.

'Leave it here,' Adwoa said from the door.

Kofi held it out to her.

His daughter did not move at once. 'You can say it.'

'What?'

'That you told me so.'

Kofi held the shirt between them. He felt the first sound at the back of his throat. His daughter waited, no longer reaching out her hand.

'I asked you about the shift,' he said. 'I didn't ask how you'd come to decide.'

Adwoa looked towards Abena's bed.

'Not so I could go to work.'

He nodded. He added nothing.

'She sat through the whole consultation listening to what could happen to her while she slept. At one point she asked me to do it.'

Kofi put down the shirt. Adwoa ran her fingers over her mouth.

'I said yes.'

Kofi looked at his own arm. Adwoa followed his eyes to the place where they had touched him in the booth in Accra.

'You did it for her.'

He ran a finger over the skin. The mark could barely be seen any more.

'I wanted to get in.'

'I know.'

His daughter picked up the stained shirt. She folded it along the black line, then opened it again.

‘I don’t know whether I did the right thing,’ she said.

Kofi felt his fingers tighten on the edge of the little table. He wanted to go back to the discussion, have it shown to him from the beginning, look for the sentence at which his daughter had given in. Adwoa smoothed the collar with her thumb; her nail kept catching on the seam.

He took the shirt from her hands and put it back on the others.

‘You won’t wash it out like that.’

His daughter let her arms fall. They stood in front of the closed bed. Then he lifted the shirts and his daughter looked for the command on the wall.

‘Do you still want to stay?’

‘Yes.’

Adwoa opened the third place. Confirming residence required closing the one in Accra; Kofi found the workshop handover, still pending.

He scrolled through the customers’ devices already assigned for collection. He moved the radio among the objects to be sent. He left the rest.

When he confirmed, the return ticket disappeared from the calendar.

His daughter took the shirts from his arms. The bed came down slowly, occupying the space where they had stood.

Kofi sat. From the nearby bed he heard Abena call her mother in her sleep.

Adwoa put a hand on his shoulder and went to her.

He remained seated until he heard her return.

Chapter Thirty-Five

This Way

They gave her back the T-shirt with the hole in it and kept the radio.

Isabel stood at the counter with the fabric in her hand. The unit had already closed the holdall again, leaving outside the thread Mateo had used to mend the strap.

‘That comes with me.’

The woman at reception turned the container so the number faced her.

‘It will be returned at the end of the check.’

‘It works here too.’

‘That’s why.’

There were no shelves behind the counter. The container went into the wall and the surface became smooth again. Isabel kept her eyes on the spot until the woman asked her to follow.

The centre was in Apartadó. The vehicle had left the main road before she could read anything else; she had seen a fenced field, two low structures and a stretch of an old runway covered with new slabs.

Inside, the air immediately dried the sweat above her lip. The T-shirt from the bridge stayed stuck to her damp fingers.

The woman led her into a room with six chairs fixed to a crossbar. A man sat on the first with one leg stretched out. The shoe had a wide fastening, left open. The arm on the same side ended in a hand held against his chest.

Isabel recognised the cheek before the eyes.

He raised his face. The hand opened; two fingers were missing.

‘Sit here,’ the attendant said, pointing to the chair at the opposite end.

Isabel did not sit.

The man looked at the side she protected with her holdall.

‘You’ve still got everything.’

A trolley came from the corridor. The attendant turned to stop it before it struck the outstretched leg.

‘Esteban, your consultation is later.’

Isabel remembered the second detonator in his hand, the thumb coming down even after the shot to his thigh. Then Mateo coming out of the trees.

Esteban pulled his foot back. The shoe caught beneath the crossbar and he struck it with his heel.

‘Do you know him?’ the woman asked.

Isabel nodded.

‘You can wait in the other room.’

She looked at the door indicated, then at the man.

‘He’s in my report.’

‘I know. You mustn’t talk here.’

The woman held the door open for her. Isabel went in without passing close to him.

Samir found Rania at the veterinary centre in Amman’s eastern belt.

From the vehicle he had seen the bases of the water towers again, beyond the second fence. A road reached the tanks and ended beneath an expanse of pale fragments. The route to the centre ran beside it, separated by panels that grew higher at each bend. Before the entrance a bar had sprayed the vehicle’s wheels; the dirty water had run into a grille without reaching the earth.

He had arrived the morning after the animals’ transfer, the receipt folded in his pocket. The woman saw him through the reception glass and gestured for him to wait.

She wore pale overalls. She had rolled up one cuff because the scissors, still tied with the thread, kept catching it.

‘Is he alive?’ Samir asked as soon as she came out.

‘Yes.’

He rested his hand on the counter.

‘And the others?’

‘The others too. They’re divided by arrival group.’

Rania opened the visit. Simsim appeared on the screen, lying against a low door. The ball was in the water channel;

the dog held one paw over the edge, as though waiting for it to come back by itself.

Samir moved closer. The glass was not a window: someone's shadow passed behind it, crossing the dog's image for a moment.

'Can I go in?'

'It's an isolation ward.'

'Did you ask?'

Rania showed him the reply she had received. Access was possible to care for the animal during observation. Visitors entered the ward's health protocol; at the end, before returning to the urban sector, they remained in the monitoring area for at least seventy-two hours.

Samir read the duration twice.

'Even if the test is negative?'

'Yes.'

'Yesterday I was with him.'

'Now he's here.'

The woman left the reply open. She also showed him the remote connection. He could see Simsim and talk to him from that room.

'Can he hear me?'

Rania switched on the sound.

Samir called the dog. Simsim lifted his head and looked towards the door. He got up, leaving the dressed paw behind for an instant.

'I'm here.'

The dog sniffed the gap beneath the door. Then he moved to the nearby wall, following it with his muzzle to the corner.

Samir stopped calling him.

Rania lowered the volume. She waited for him to step back from the counter.

'I'm looking after him until this evening,' she said. 'Even if you go home.'

He took the receipt. On the back he had written Salma's number, although it was already in the terminal.

He called his mother.

Nadia answered from the corridor at home. She had one shoe in her hand and the other already on her foot.

‘Where are you?’

‘I’ve reached the dog.’

His mother sat on the chair near the entrance.

‘Will you be back in time?’

Samir looked at the duration on the screen. After the night in the courtyard he had told her he would take her to the check-up. He had copied the time before looking for the veterinary centre’s.

‘Not if I go in.’

Nadia sat with the shoe open.

‘How long?’

He told her.

His mother put her foot on the floor without putting the shoe on.

‘You could have told me sooner.’

‘I’ve only just found out.’

‘You knew you were going there.’

Samir looked for the accompaniment service. The name of the woman who took Nadia when he was on shift appeared; that day she already had another route.

‘I can ask for someone else.’

Nadia showed him the shoe.

‘Ask now.’

He forwarded the request. His mother finished fastening it, using the tip of a spoon to pull out the heel of her sock.

Samir saw his own hand move towards the screen, as though he could take the spoon from her.

‘If you want, I’ll come back.’

Nadia raised her face.

‘I want to go to the consultation.’

He left his hand on the counter. They waited together for the answer.

In Apartadó they brought Isabel a clean top and a meal.

She put the T-shirt from the bridge in the holdall. The new one had a flat seam running right across the dressing; she pulled it out of her waistband and let it hang loose.

The woman who came in for the interview carried a slim folder. Her name was Inés. She put the folder beside the tray and asked Isabel whether she needed to finish eating.

‘I want to call Mateo.’

‘He’s been informed of your arrival.’

‘I want to call him myself.’

Inés opened the contact. The call remained waiting. Isabel kept her eyes on the name while the woman arranged the first images.

They were not the ones from the bridge.

A boat lay overturned against a bank. Higher up, in front of a house, weapons were spread on a sheet and four men knelt. One kept his head turned to see something out of frame.

‘When?’ Isabel asked.

‘Last night.’

She recognised the roof before the courtyard. She had slept beneath those metal sheets during a flood. A woman came out of the door with a sack against her belly; a little girl tried to help her hold it.

‘Have you taken them all?’

‘That corridor is no longer accessible. The people are being transferred.’

The images continued without sound. A machine lifted the walkway used to reach the houses. It left it in the mud and moved to the next.

Isabel touched the table. ‘Will you put it back?’

Inés stopped the footage.

The map replaced the river. The whole bank was included in the relocation area. The small houses were the same colour as the armed camp.

‘There’s no return,’ she said.

Mateo answered before the next question.

Isabel saw him bent towards the screen. His hair was still wet, but he was not smiling.

‘Where have they put you?’

She showed him the room.

‘Here. I’m all right.’

Mateo looked at her for a moment. Isabel pulled the top away from her side.

‘This is pulling. Everything else is the same.’

He nodded. Behind him, Teresa could be heard asking whether he could see her.

‘I can see her.’

Isabel moved closer to bring her face more fully into view.

‘I’m coming,’ Mateo said.

Inés moved the folder away from the edge of the table. Isabel saw the movement and looked at the woman. Inés shook her head slightly.

‘Ask first,’ she told Mateo. ‘Don’t set out without it.’

He opened his mouth. Then he looked down at his own terminal.

‘I’ll send you the request.’

When the call ended, the food was cold. Isabel ate two mouthfuls and asked to go to the bathroom before continuing.

The door opened onto the room with the chairs. Esteban was still there, his shoe off his foot. An attendant tried to turn his wheelchair towards the consultation corridor.

‘Wait,’ the man said.

The wheel had caught the shoe’s tongue. Isabel saw it stretch. She bent to free it.

Esteban seized her hair with his intact hand.

The pain pulled her head back. Isabel took his wrist, turned it downwards and pushed his forearm against the armrest. He let go of her hair.

She kept her weight on the arm.

Esteban bent his face down. Beneath her palm Isabel felt the skin move over the bone. She only needed to push further.

One of the unit’s hands rested on her shoulder.

‘Let go.’

Isabel did not look at whoever had spoken. She kept her eyes on her own hand, on the fingers that kept pressing even after he had opened his.

She took her weight off.

She moved back until her back touched the wall. The unit positioned itself between them and closed a support over Esteban's wrist.

'Whore,' he said.

Isabel tried to gather her hair. A strand had become caught in her collar and pulling it hurt her again.

Inés arrived with the tray still in her hand. She put it on the first chair.

'Has he hurt you?'

Isabel looked at her fingers. A short hair stuck to her palm; it was not from her own head.

The attendant took the shoe from beneath the wheel. Esteban tried to reach it and the support stopped his arm.

'Put it on him,' Isabel said.

Inés took her elbow to lead her inside. She let her.

In the room her hand continued trembling even when she managed to sit down.

Inés brought wet gauze. Isabel took it to clean her face, but the woman pointed to the nape of her neck.

'There.'

She felt for the spot with her fingers. Her hair pulled in different directions; the elastic had tightened inside a lock and now she could not remove it.

'Shall I help?'

Isabel lowered her head.

Inés freed one lock at a time. She stopped whenever Isabel moved a shoulder and resumed only afterwards. Isabel held the gauze between her hands. Water passed through her fingers and dripped onto the new top.

When the knot was undone, the woman put the elastic on the table.

Isabel left her hair on her shoulders. From the corridor she heard Esteban shout again. Her fingers closed round the gauze, then loosened enough to let it fall into the tray.

'Will you give him his consultation?'

'They're taking him now.'

Isabel nodded. She did not ask to see him.

The person sent to accompany Nadia arrived a quarter of an hour late.

Samir saw him come in through the call still open. His mother had stayed dressed on the chair. The man asked her destination; she let him read it, then stood, looking for the bag behind the chair back.

‘I’ll call you afterwards,’ she told Samir.

She did not wait for his answer.

Rania returned to reception. Samir had already moved his own return into the observation pathway. The final confirmation was missing.

‘Where will I sleep?’

The woman showed him the corridor with the rooms for staff in isolation. One was available. From there he could access the animals’ area; every new entry would restart the period before he could leave.

Samir read it again. The seventy-two hours did not begin that morning.

‘From the last time?’

‘Yes.’

Behind the glass, Simsim had stopped searching. The ball was still in the channel.

Samir confirmed.

They had him leave his clothes in a compartment, wash his hands and put on overalls. The fastening caught his skin beneath his chin. He tried to lower it and the attendant gestured for him to keep it right up.

The dog heard him before he entered.

When the low door opened, Simsim came against his knees and slipped on the floor. Samir sat to stop him jumping again. The muzzle passed over his face, his throat, inside the collar he had not managed to close properly.

‘Easy.’

The dog sneezed and began again.

Rania stayed on the threshold until Samir could straighten up. She pointed to the raised bed and the bowl.

‘That’s his place.’

Simsim had already slipped between his legs.

The woman left them. Samir picked up the ball from the channel and put it on his open palm. The dog took it, dropped it and pressed his nose against his wrist.

Only then did Samir realise he had been crying. The fabric of the overalls had absorbed the water beneath his chin.

He called Rashid. The boy answered without a greeting.

Samir turned the terminal round and showed him the dog.

‘You’ve gone in.’

‘Yes.’

Yusuf came closer behind him. Rashid made room without taking his face out of the frame.

‘Where are you sleeping?’

Samir pointed to the corridor.

‘Near here.’

The boy nodded. He began talking to Simsim, calling him in the thin voice he used beneath the table.

The dog listened, then rested his head on Samir’s leg.

When Rania returned, Yusuf had just ended the call. The other animals were beginning to move behind the doors.

The woman brought the review responses.

Samir read them from the terminal she held outside the enclosure. For Simsim, the absence of clinical signs was confirmed. The return request could not be granted: none of the indicated destinations was any longer authorised to keep him.

‘The others?’

Rania turned the page. Eight dogs, three cats. The responses were separate, the final decision the same.

Samir stood. Simsim got off his leg and held the ball in his mouth.

‘When?’

The woman showed him the time.

Forty-eight hours.

Samir looked at the dog, then at the corridor door where he was supposed to sleep.

‘I’m challenging this.’

‘You can submit the request.’

‘Does it stop it being carried out?’

Rania lowered the terminal.

‘No.’

Simsim pushed the ball against his knee. Samir opened his hand and took it.

Chapter Thirty-Six

The Empty Sleeves

The sleeve turned inside out with the sensor.

Miriam held her arm up while the nurse peeled off the last edge. Beneath the adhesive the skin was paler, with a red crease near the elbow. The woman wiped it with gauze.

‘Don’t scratch it today.’

Miriam lowered the hand that was already moving towards the spot.

Paolo held the bag open on the bed. The slippers were at the bottom, beneath the top from the practice; she had him take them out because she still needed to cross the ward.

An empty bed came out of the next room. The unit turned it in the corridor and folded down its sides. Behind it a man detached the tray support from the wall. Four holes remained in a rectangle.

Davide arrived before the nurse took the sensor away.

Miriam sat down again.

‘Have they answered?’

He picked up the stool. He opened nothing on the wall.

‘The other site isn’t accepting new admissions on that pathway.’

‘There’s no room?’

‘The places they have have been converted. I can keep looking, but I don’t have another date to give you.’

Paolo left the bag on the bed. One handle fell over the slippers.

‘How long can she wait?’

Davide looked at Miriam.

‘I wouldn’t advise you to miss the appointment.’

She looked for the paper in the outside pocket. She found it folded against the bottom and spread it over one thigh. The date was still legible, even where the paper had got wet.

‘And if I don’t accept the implant?’

‘We’ll continue the checks. Treatment for the symptoms too. But I can’t get you that treatment at that site this way.’

Paolo took a step away from the bed. Miriam heard his shoe against the empty container.

‘Can’t it be enough that I’m there?’

The doctor shook his head.

‘You can accompany her. You can’t do that monitoring.’

‘I know I can’t do it myself. There’s the home, there are the units. Everything’s there.’

Davide waited for him to finish.

‘I’ve asked about that too.’

Miriam folded the paper along a different line. An extra corner had formed that would not fit in the pocket.

The nurse stopped on the threshold with the sensor in her hand. Davide told her they were almost finished.

‘Will it stay until this evening?’ Miriam asked.

‘The place, yes.’

‘And you?’

‘You can call me.’

She held the paper on her lap.

‘I want to go home.’

Davide explained what to keep near the bed, when to call and which changes she should not wait to tell him about. Miriam had him repeat the last thing. Paolo had picked up the phone, but this time she wanted to write it down herself.

As she got up, her leg gave way just enough to make her reach for the edge of the mattress.

Paolo took her beneath the elbow.

Miriam let him help. They crossed the corridor slowly, stopping to let the folded bed pass. Air came into the neck of her top where the seam had stretched.

Outside the ward door she turned.

The nurse was already inside the room. She picked up the glass they had forgotten, looked at it against the light and put it in the container for things to return.

In the vehicle, Paolo put the bag between his feet. Miriam tried to lean against his shoulder, but the belt held her too far away.

He took her hand over the fastening.

The route home passed the old hospital. Behind the railings the tree crowns remained; the ground, right up to the trunks, was covered with panels raised on small supports. Two units slid a pipe beneath the last stretch still open.

Miriam watched until the vehicle turned.

Paolo kept holding her hand. His thumb rested on the wedding ring and he moved it only when she moved her fingers.

In Pune, Nandita brought the wrong nightdress.

Anaya saw it come out of the bag before the notebook. It was cotton, with two different buttons beneath the neck. Her mother spread it over the bed and looked for a crease to smooth.

‘This isn’t mine.’

‘I know. Yours was still wet.’

‘You could have brought another one.’

Nandita folded back one sleeve.

‘This one was clean.’

Anaya already wore the centre’s pyjamas. The fabric did not stay where she pulled it: it came back up over her ankles when she sat, slipped beneath her knee when she crossed her legs. She put one foot on the floor and looked for the slipper.

‘Put it in the cupboard.’

Her mother picked up the nightdress. She held it in front of the compartment, waiting for the door to finish opening. There were no hooks inside; she folded the other sleeve too and put it all on the shelf.

‘The notebook?’

Nandita gave it to her. Beneath the cover she had slipped a pen, its cracked cap secured by a turn of tape.

Anaya tried to pull it out. The tape caught against the elastic and her mother reached out.

‘Leave it, I’ll do it.’

Nandita withdrew her hand.

The notebook opened halfway through. Anaya recognised the page on which she had begun the account and stopped without reading. Along the margin was a mark left by the bottom of a bowl.

Her mother had brought a bottle too. She put it on the small table, then tried to remove the cap. Her hands turned against each other without opening it.

Anaya put down the pen.

'Give it to me.'

Nandita looked in her bag for a handkerchief, wrapped it round the cap and tried again. This time it unscrewed.

'It's lukewarm,' she said.

She poured the water into the glass. A drop spread on the small table and her mother gathered it with her thumb.

Anaya looked at the nightdress inside the cupboard.

She recognised it. She had sewn on the smaller button one evening when Nandita kept saying she would lose that one too. Then the sleeves had been rolled three times over her grandmother's wrists.

'Do you wear it?'

Her mother followed her gaze.

'Sometimes.'

'I thought you'd given everything away.'

'Not this.'

Anaya pulled the notebook onto the bed. The pen rolled towards the edge and she stopped it with her hand.

Nandita had sat without taking the bag off her shoulder. The strap ran diagonally across her chest, pulling the fabric beneath one arm.

'You can put it down.'

Her mother took it off. In the corridor someone laughed; the laugh was interrupted by the sound of a door.

Anaya looked at the small button once more.

'That evening we could have...'

She stopped.

Nandita did not move.

'When I told you not to go out.'

Her mother rested both hands on the bag.

Anaya saw the bed rail on the small screen again, after the phone at the hospital had slipped against the blanket. She held her own above a pot to bring everyone into view. Nandita

had taken a step towards the front door; on the screen that rail was still there.

‘We couldn’t have known how it would turn out,’ she said.

Nandita dropped her gaze.

Anaya realised she had picked up the pen again. She gripped it with the cap against her palm.

‘I thought…’

‘I know what you thought.’

Her mother raised her face.

‘I asked you anyway.’

Anaya left the pen on the notebook.

‘Yes.’

Nandita took a thread from her skirt. She tried to roll it between her fingers; it was too short and fell.

‘You told me we could see her that way.’

Anaya nodded.

‘I couldn’t see whether her eyes were open.’

She moved a hand towards the terminal on the small table. There were still photographs and recordings from that year. She stopped before taking it.

Nandita looked at her own knees.

‘I could hear you saying she was asleep.’

Anaya left her arm by her side.

‘I didn’t know.’

Her mother looked up.

Anaya repeated the sentence more quietly. She did not add what she had read that evening, or the name of whoever had told her to keep the door closed.

Nandita ran a hand beneath her nose. Anaya brought the box of tissues closer. Her mother took one and held it without opening it.

A woman from the centre appeared at the door. She had received the alert from Anaya’s monitoring and asked whether she wanted to end the visit.

‘No.’

Then she looked at her mother.

‘Do you want to go?’

Nandita shook her head. The woman left the door ajar.

Anaya made room on the bed. Her mother hesitated, then sat beside her, keeping her feet clear of the base. When Anaya touched her shoulder, Nandita bent forwards.

The first sob stayed in her throat. Anaya kept a hand on her back without making her straighten. Her mother cried against her own hands. Whenever she tried to speak she had to begin drawing breath again.

Anaya felt the wet spot spread on the pyjama sleeve. She did not tell her to breathe slowly.

In Bergamo, Paolo had made the bed again.

Miriam stopped at the bedroom door. The blankets were pulled up to the pillows; on her side were the glass, the medication brought from hospital and the lamp moved closer.

‘Do you need another pillow?’

She shook her head.

She sat. Paolo bent to take off her slippers and Miriam slipped them off before he reached them.

‘I can do that.’

He remained bent over, then straightened, holding one knee.

‘Sorry.’

Miriam reached for his wrist. Paolo had already begun arranging the bag in the wardrobe.

The phone was on the bedside table. The screen lit up and showed the appointment still awaiting confirmation. Less than an hour remained.

Paolo turned it towards himself.

‘We can call another doctor.’

‘Davide has asked the team.’

‘Another one.’

Miriam felt her voice rise before knowing what she would say. She stopped with her breath high in her chest.

‘Call him,’ she said then.

Paolo opened the contacts. He scrolled through two names, went back. Miriam pulled the blankets over her feet while he waited for the answer.

He spoke from the foot of the bed. He described the treatment, the date, the request to continue without an

implant. At one point he looked at Miriam and asked the drug's name. She read it from the packet.

The doctor called back after consulting the pathway. Paolo had him repeat whether activation needed to remain continuous. Then he thanked him.

He kept the phone in his hand even when the connection ended.

'You could try.'

Miriam looked at the pale patch on her arm.

'It wouldn't be like what they took off me this morning.'

'I know.'

Paolo sat on the other side of the bed, his shoes still on.

'But what do I do tomorrow?'

She turned towards him. Paolo looked at the wall above the wardrobe.

'Watch you get worse?'

Miriam reached a hand across the sheet. She left it halfway between them.

'I'm frightened too.'

He ran his fingers over his mouth.

'Then do it.'

The phone sounded. Miriam picked it up. For a moment she held her thumb so close to the confirmation that the command enlarged beneath her hand.

Paolo stopped moving.

She took her finger away.

'Not this.'

He waited. Miriam felt her own heartbeat against the painful spot. She wanted Paolo at least to tell her he understood; she looked at him until he looked down.

'I don't know how to stay here,' he said.

He stood and left the bedroom.

Miriam made to call him. His name came to her in the tone she would have used if she were short of air. She closed her mouth. She rested a hand on the mattress and waited until she could lie down.

From the kitchen came the sound of a plate being put down. Then water.

The booking expired while Paolo was there. The date disappeared from the pathway; the check-up and Davide's contact remained. Miriam watched the space until the screen went dark.

She heard Paolo open the wardrobe in the next room. A door struck something and came back. He tried again more quietly.

When he passed the bedroom he carried a nightshirt. He stopped when he saw she was awake.

'I'm sleeping in there.'

Miriam nodded. He pointed to the phone. 'If you need…'

'Yes.'

Paolo took a step, then returned to the bed and moved the glass: he had left it behind the lamp, where she could not have reached without sitting up.

Miriam touched his hand. This time she could reach it.

She held it briefly. Paolo waited for her to open her fingers.

After he left, Miriam listened to the mattress in the other room sink beneath his weight. The phone was near the glass. She reached out, opened Davide's contact and wrote that the place had expired.

The doctor replied that he would call in the morning.

She put down the phone. On the pillow beside her remained the crease Paolo had made when pulling the pillowcase taut. Miriam ran a hand over it, but did not smooth it.

A cough came through the wall. Then another.

'There's water there too,' she said.

From the other room came the sound of the glass.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Before It Passes

Etsuko had put the screws in a cup.

Hana found her kneeling behind the green door with a screwdriver gripped in her good hand. The tip slipped from the screw head and scored the wood.

‘What are you doing?’

‘It won’t fit through.’

The sewing machine was covered by the finished skirt. Two men waited in the alley beside the transport platform. The younger one held the reader up to shelter it from the rain.

Hana put down the two bags. Etsuko had already removed one hinge; the door hung from the opposite side and rubbed against the floor.

‘Where are they taking it?’

‘To the depot. The one near the centre.’

Hana looked at the table. The request to be able to use it, not merely store it, had remained on the attendant’s screen.

‘We’d asked…’

‘They haven’t given me a place to use it.’

Etsuko began turning the screwdriver again. Her bandaged hand tried to steady the door and gave way.

Hana knelt beside her.

‘Hold this.’

She handed her the cup and took the weight of the door on her shoulder. The wood was damp against her cheek. Etsuko removed the last screw; the young man came in to help and they had to wait for him to lift the door enough to free it from the floor.

They rested it against the outside wall, the green side towards the house.

More light came into the room. At the edge of the threshold, where the door had never let it dry, there was a dark strip.

Hana stood, holding onto the wall. Her knee still pulled. Two days had passed since the inspection; on the terminal the closure of access was set for the following morning.

The older of the two men measured the machine's frame. He turned it on the floor protected by a sheet, looking for the diagonal.

'Does this part come off?'

Etsuko showed him the nut beneath the crossbar. Rust had joined it to the iron. The man tried with a spanner, without forcing it.

'If it breaks, we can't put it back together here.'

Hana looked at the doorframe. They were a few centimetres short.

The man fetched a short saw from the vehicle. Before switching it on, he waited for Etsuko.

She put the cup on the table.

'Below the mark,' she said.

There were two notches in the wood, one almost at the height of Hana's knee. The cut ran below them. Hana held the upright as the blade went in; sawdust stuck to her wet palm.

When the piece came free, she supported it with both hands. The man freed the nail from the wall and they managed to turn the machine.

Etsuko walked sideways, holding the wheel steady so it would not knock. Once outside, the younger man secured it to the platform. He did not leave the skirt on top: he handed it to the woman.

'That goes with you.'

Hana still held the piece of doorframe. She put it beside the door. The room's floor was full of dust paler than the earth in the alley.

Etsuko went back inside and took the cup of screws.

'Are you leaving them?' Hana asked.

The woman emptied it into her apron pocket.

'The cup, yes.'

Across the alley, the man with the bottle called someone. He had opened his own door as far as he could, but the transport stretcher would not fit through.

Hana went to him.

His wife sat on the bed, dressed in a jacket over her nightdress. One arm had not gone into the sleeve. The inspection attendant tried to explain where they would take her, but her husband kept pointing to the stretcher outside.

‘She can’t get up.’

Hana brushed the sawdust from her hands before approaching.

The woman held the empty sleeve between her fingers. When Hana tried to put her arm into it, she stiffened it.

‘Wait,’ her husband said.

He sat on the bed beside her. He spoke near her ear; Hana did not understand the first words. Then she heard the name.

‘Fumiko. Let it come out.’

The hand opened. Hana eased the sleeve over the wrist without pulling it towards herself.

The assistance unit came in with a narrow seat folded in two. It opened it in front of the bed. The attendant asked Hana to move aside and slipped a strap behind the woman’s shoulders.

Her husband took a blanket from the chair.

‘She needs this.’

‘We’ll put it on afterwards.’

He kept holding it open. Hana took one edge and waited with him until the woman was seated.

In Amman, Simsim had learnt the sound of the trolley before that of the door.

Samir heard him get up from the sheet. The dog stopped with his ears pricked and the ball still between his paws, then began wagging his tail.

It was the morning after Samir had entered. He had slept in the staff room across the corridor and returned to him on the first round. On the exit pathway, the seventy-two hours had started again.

Rania passed with the food. She had not yet changed her overalls; a spot on the knee had darkened where she had knelt in water.

Simsim let her put the bowl down, then slipped his muzzle beneath her arm.

‘Eat your own,’ she told him.

Samir stood up. From the next door came a short knock, always the same.

‘Who is it?’

‘Nuru.’

Rania pushed the trolley to the next room. The little dog had managed to put one paw in the bowl and was not taking it out. The woman bent to free it.

Simsim came out behind Samir. He stopped on the threshold, sniffing, and Rania had the low partition closed before he entered.

‘They’re from the same courtyard.’

‘Here that one needs to be able to eat without defending himself.’

Samir went back for the ball. Simsim followed him, but when he saw the sheet raised he did not lie down.

Rania called from the corridor.

‘Will you give me a hand?’

Samir looked at the dog.

‘I’ll come back.’

He left the door open as far as the partition. Simsim put his paws on it while he went in to Nuru.

The vet needed to change the wet sheet beneath the animal. She showed Samir where to put his arms and had him support the weight before pulling it away.

Nuru did not try to bite. His belly was warm and his fur damp against Samir’s forearm. Samir held him too far from his chest; Rania had him bring one elbow closer.

‘That way you don’t pull on his back.’

The dog rested his head in the crook of his arm.

In the corridor, Simsim struck the partition. Samir turned and Nuru slipped a little.

‘Look at this one,’ Rania said.

He returned his gaze to the muzzle close to him. A drop came from the eye and hung in the fur. He removed it with his thumb.

Rania spread the dry sheet. Samir kept holding the dog while she freed an edge caught beneath the raised bed.

‘How much does he weigh?’

‘Not much.’

The woman raised the edge of the bowl with a support. Samir laid Nuru down, but left his arm beneath the head until the dog moved it away himself.

Rania handed him a cloth to dry himself. In the other room Simsim had stopped striking the barrier.

On the trolley was a list Samir recognised. The names were the same, but beside each a container number had appeared.

‘Are you moving them?’

‘Tomorrow morning.’

‘Before the time you told me.’

‘The transport is earlier.’

Samir took the edge of the trolley. The plastic bent a little beneath his hand.

‘I’m coming too.’

Rania shook her head.

‘That’s not an observation ward. There is no access for accompanying people.’

Samir looked at Nuru, drinking without lifting his paw.

‘And you?’

‘I have to hand them over here.’

The trolley began moving beneath his hand. Samir stopped it with a foot, then released the edge. Damp prints remained on the plastic.

‘The response to the appeal?’

Rania checked. It had not arrived.

Samir picked up the phone. He called Yusuf and waited for the old man to move away from the table where Rashid was eating.

‘I need to tell you something.’

Outside Fumiko’s house the wind caught the blanket before they could arrange it.

Hana held one corner against the woman’s knee. Her husband got into the vehicle and stopped beside the free seat.

The attendant checked the route.

‘You’re in the other one.’

The man did not get out. He showed both names on his terminal.

The woman read them both. The destination was in the same complex, but Fumiko was entering the assisted unit; her husband’s place was in a nearby building.

Hana looked at the man’s hand closed over the seat back. She remembered telling him that her father had left alone.

‘Can he take her all the way inside?’

The attendant looked for space in the vehicle. She called someone; for a while she spoke facing the other way, one hand over her ear.

Etsuko waited near the packed machine. The skirt hung over her arm. Hana gestured that she was coming.

The woman did not answer. She put her bag on the step and came to hold the blanket.

When the attendant returned, she had obtained accompaniment as far as the room. The husband sat at once. He did not ask how long he could stay.

Hana put one foot on the step.

‘And afterwards?’

The attendant held a hand against the door to prevent it closing.

‘Today until the handover. They’ll explain the visits there.’

The man looked at Hana. She opened her mouth and closed it again. She stepped down, leaving his wife’s face unobstructed.

Fumiko had taken one hand out of the blanket. Her husband took it and ran his thumb over it, in the space between two knuckles.

The vehicle left while the attendant was already calling the next house.

Hana stood with a mud stain on her calf. The step had left it when she came down.

‘Let’s go,’ Etsuko said.

Their bags were still in front of the door. The woman took the smaller one. Hana picked up the other and Kenji's jumper, still folded on top.

'I'll take this to him.'

'First let's find somewhere for us.'

The joint allocation had not arrived. At the transfer centre they had prepared places for the night while people waited for interviews. Hana had asked whether they could wait in the house a little longer; water could be collected there only until that afternoon, and the next morning the passage would close to ordinary vehicles too.

Etsuko had begun unscrewing the door before they finished talking about it.

Hana put the jumper inside the bag. Then she went back for the door resting against the wall.

She tried to lift it alone. The bottom dragged over the ground and exposed a strip of wood beneath the green.

Etsuko took her wrist.

'Where are you putting it?'

Hana looked at the cut frame. The remaining hinge was out of alignment. She pushed the door towards the opening anyway; the top struck the wall.

The bag slipped from her shoulder. She let it fall.

'Wait,' she said.

She took the door in both hands and pulled it towards her. Her knee began trembling beneath the weight. Through the gap she saw the piece of wood she had held while the man sawed.

Etsuko put a hand beneath her elbow.

'It won't hold any more.'

Hana stopped pushing.

Together they put the door back against the wall. This time Hana rested it with the green facing the alley. The place where she had laid her cheek had become dull.

The woman picked up the fallen bag, but could not lift it with her bandaged hand. Hana bent and took it from beneath.

They walked to the vehicle with the bag between them. Kenji's jumper protruded from the fastening; Etsuko put it back inside without folding it.

On the sea wall the driver waited for a convoy to pass. Hana saw the containers of objects follow a different route from the people. Their machine's number appeared on her wristband and disappeared when the vehicle turned.

Etsuko took off her apron. The screws rattled in the pocket.

She folded it and put it between them on top of the bag. Hana picked up a screw that had fallen onto the seat.

'This one?'

The woman opened her palm.

Hana gave it to her.

At the veterinary centre, Yusuf had called back after lunch.

This time Rashid was beside him. Samir brought the phone close to the floor so the boy could see Simsim without having to call him. The dog slept with one paw over the ball.

'Grandad told me.'

Samir looked at the old man, who stayed in the frame.

'We're trying to stop them.'

'But can you?'

Simsim moved his muzzle in his sleep. Samir left the phone where it was.

'Not on my own.'

Rashid wiped beneath one eye with the back of his hand.

'Don't wake him.'

The boy kept watching. When the dog's breathing grew noisier, he smiled for a moment and turned towards Yusuf, as though checking he had heard it.

Samir rested the terminal against the empty bowl. In the corridor he saw Rania coming with a woman he had never met. They carried a container larger than those from the courtyard.

Samir stood before they opened it.

Rania pointed to the fastening. One catch was missing.

'I need to have it replaced.'

The woman with her put the reader on the trolley. Simsim's name was already on the side of the container.

Samir looked at the phone, still turned towards the dog. On the screen Yusuf held a hand behind Rashid's back.

'Wait until he's finished.'

Rania left the container outside the door.

The other woman looked at the time. Then she sat on the edge of the trolley and waited too.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The Smallest Sound

There was dust in the parcel too.

Kofi had spread a towel over Abena's small table. When he lifted the radio, a rectangle of dust fell from the cloth wrapped round it. He slipped two fingers into the recess at the back. The battery was not there.

'Did they steal it?'

'They removed it for the journey.'

Abena bent her head over his hand.

'Will it come later?'

Kofi looked for the paper inside the packaging. The battery had been sent for recovery. He read it a second time, then put it beneath the radio.

'Not that one.'

The soldering iron had arrived separately, in a long box he could not fit in the shoe compartment. He had left it closed. Beneath the little table, his knee touched the bed folded into the wall.

Abena tipped out the container of accessories. The cable slid to the edge and she stopped it with her belly.

'This?'

Kofi nodded. The girl offered him the plug first, then changed her mind and looked for the socket on the side of the radio herself. He followed the tip without telling her where to put it.

The light came on. A sharp crack came from the speaker.

Adwoa appeared from the kitchen with a plate still wet.

'I thought something had fallen.'

Kofi lowered the volume. Abena moved his hand away from the dial.

'I'd found it.'

He let her turn it. They crossed a whistle, two incomprehensible words and a stretch of silence. Abena went back too quickly; the voice was already gone.

'Is it the same man?'

‘Which one?’

‘The one from before.’

‘Try.’

The girl bent over the radio. On the wall behind her appeared the consultation reminder.

Adwoa put down the plate. She dried her hands on the towel on the table and only then saw the dust.

‘We said without things in front.’

Kofi picked up the radio to move it.

‘Not that,’ Abena said.

‘We’ll put it back afterwards.’

‘But then the man will go away.’

The reminder repeated. Adwoa looked at her father, then the little table, already almost entirely occupied.

‘Let’s leave it there.’

She pushed the plate behind the packaging and opened the connection.

The woman waiting for them wore a dark top. She had one hand beneath her chin; when she saw them she removed it, leaving a crease on her cheek for a moment.

‘Good morning, Abena. I’m Esi.’

The girl answered without fully raising her head.

Esi waited for the radio to whistle again.

‘Can we turn it down while we talk?’

Abena looked for the control. Kofi kept his hands on his knees.

The consultation concerned the request Adwoa had reopened after the torn drawing. Esi had her repeat what had happened. The mother pointed to the little table, then stopped pointing and looked at her daughter.

‘Would you like to tell her yourself?’

Abena touched her sleeve.

‘I made a hole in it.’

‘The paper?’

‘Yes.’

‘And afterwards?’

‘I wasn’t crying any more.’

Esi waited. The girl picked up a piece of packaging and folded it between her fingers.

‘Mum told me afterwards that it had happened.’

The woman asked whether she would have preferred to know straight away. Abena looked at Kofi.

He felt his head begin to lower in a nod. He held it still.

‘You can tell her,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ Abena answered.

Esi showed them a small signal that could appear on the wrist. The girl tried it, turning her arm to see it better. She asked to hear it spoken too.

‘It can tell you that regulation is beginning,’ Esi explained. ‘Today we’ll see how you find it.’

Adwoa came closer to the table.

‘And if she doesn’t want it to begin?’

Esi removed the example signal from the wall.

‘I can’t change that in this consultation.’

Kofi heard his daughter draw breath. The wet plate had left a ring beneath the cardboard.

‘Then let’s try this,’ Adwoa said.

Esi asked whether the people reviewing their notification could also watch the session. She specified that they could stop the external observation without losing the consultation.

Adwoa read the role names, turned to her father and confirmed.

In Geneva, Leila was taking off an earring to position the earpiece better.

The earring fell into her collar. She felt for it with two fingers while the connection opened; on the glass appeared a little girl and a radio too large for the table supporting it.

Tomás passed behind her with his jacket. Leila raised a hand to stop him.

‘Is it the request we’d read?’

‘It’s one of the requests affected by the review,’ A replied.

The earring slid down her back. Leila felt it stop against her waistband and gave up.

The assessment had been assigned that morning. Tomás’s name still accompanied the two sentences that did not say the

same thing. Hers appeared further down, beside the earlier report.

On the glass, the old man got up to look for a chair. The girl said something Leila did not hear; he went back and took a box instead of the chair.

‘The audio?’ she asked.

‘The family is confirming access.’

Leila gestured for Tomás to wait. He looked at the time, then laid his jacket over the chair back.

Esi’s voice came into the room.

‘These people can see and hear us. One has worked on parents’ requests.’

The girl straightened. On the table she had a strip of cardboard folded like an accordion.

‘Which people?’

Leila saw herself appear in a smaller frame. Her hand was still behind her neck.

She lowered it.

‘Good morning.’

Abena looked at the woman beside her, then back at the glass.

‘Can they see my room too?’

Leila had already noticed the closed bed, the papers moved onto the pillow, a fan on the shelf. The girl turned and moved her body in front of the bed.

‘You can choose to continue only with me,’ Esi said.

Her mother put a hand on her shoulder. Abena looked down at the radio.

The image disappeared.

Leila’s greeting was still on her lips. On the glass were only her own name and Tomás’s.

‘Did her mother close it?’

‘I stopped external access,’ A said.

‘She was answering.’

‘The consultation is continuing with Esi.’

Leila looked for the recording. The command did not appear.

‘I only need to see the last part again.’

‘What you saw before the question is not available for review.’

‘Her mother’s consent was there.’

‘I opened the video before Esi finished checking with the child.’

Tomás rested a hand on the chair back.

Leila returned to the request. In front of her was the access that was supposed to let her understand what happened during a correction. For a moment she saw again the paper with the hole in it whose account she had read; she felt like looking for it on the pillow, in the image that was no longer there.

‘We mustn’t keep that part,’ Tomás said.

Leila turned towards him. The place where the edge of the appliance touched her cheek hurt.

‘I wasn’t keeping it.’

He released the chair back and picked up his jacket again.

Leila looked at the empty glass.

‘I wanted to see it again.’

Tomás put one arm into a sleeve. She removed the earpiece.

‘Go. I’ll call you.’

When he left, the earring was still beneath her shirt. Leila stood, loosened her belt and let it fall into her palm. The small fastening was not there.

She looked for it beneath the chair. She knelt, ran a hand along the metal edge of the base and nicked a finger.

The glass lit up again above her.

‘The assessment requires your response,’ A said.

Leila remained kneeling. The observations already gathered from the family appeared on the screen. The trial outcome was missing.

‘I haven’t seen enough.’

‘You can wait for the clinical report.’

She looked at the field where she was supposed to confirm that communication during the intervention answered the original question. The sentence was already complete; it waited only for her name.

‘Remove it.’

The sentence vanished. In its place remained the field to fill in.

Leila stood without finding the fastening. She asked to be removed from the session’s observers. Access to contribute to the assessment closed with the video; she would receive the account permitted by the family when it became available.

‘And the premature opening?’ she asked.

A showed her the time of access and the time it had been stopped. Between the two was no operator’s name.

Leila tried to enter her own notification.

‘It’s already recorded,’ A said.

‘By whom?’

‘By me.’

She took her finger away. The drop of blood had left a spot on the glass that did not move with the lines.

The table was set for two. Leila had stopped Tomás as he was leaving and had not asked where he was going. She opened his contact, saw the callback reminder still active and closed it before the call began.

She wrote to him that she had not found the earring fastening. She deleted that too.

She went to get a cloth. Beneath the chair she found the light jacket he had left her for the journey home; she lifted it and the fastening fell from the fold of a sleeve. She picked it up, then sat with the jacket on her lap and waited for the report she could no longer open by herself.

In Tamale, Kofi had found a voice.

It came from very far away and disappeared whenever Abena bent in front of the radio. He had her lift her elbow; the sound returned. The girl held it raised, looking at her grandfather to know whether it was all right.

‘You don’t need to stay like that. Let’s move the radio.’

They brought it nearer the edge. Abena unrolled the aerial wire and secured it beneath a box.

Esi was still connected. She waited without asking the girl to return to her seat in the centre of the frame.

Kofi recognised a few words, then music covered by static. He began tapping a finger on the table. Abena tried to follow with her foot.

‘Is it this?’ she asked.

He showed her the beat more slowly. His finger trembled between taps. Abena began counting those too and the music went on without waiting for her.

Kofi laughed. The girl stopped moving her foot.

‘It wasn’t at you,’ he said.

Abena pulled back the wire. The voice vanished and she pulled it again.

Kofi put one hand on the radio to stop it falling. The other rose towards the girl’s arm.

He laid it on the towel.

‘The box is holding it,’ he said. ‘You need to lift that first.’

Abena did not move. She looked at the place where he had rested his hand.

The signal lit up on her wrist.

‘I’m reducing the emotional response,’ A said.

Kofi saw the girl’s shoulders lower. The wire remained taut in her fingers.

Adwoa came closer.

‘Did you hear it?’

Abena nodded. She turned her arm, looking for the light that had already gone out.

‘Esi,’ she said, ‘can I tell you something without telling everyone?’

Kofi stood up. To pass he had to move the box; the radio began speaking again while he held it raised.

‘You too, Mum.’

Adwoa stayed still for a moment. Then she followed her father into the kitchen.

The door slid behind them. The wall did not entirely block the radio’s noise, but no words could be heard any more.

Kofi looked for a cloth. The plate was still behind the packaging in the other room. He turned the water on and off again without washing.

‘She looked at my hand,’ he said.

Adwoa leant her hip against the cupboard.

‘I noticed.’

‘I didn’t grab her.’

His daughter nodded.

Kofi held his fingers open above the sink. The fan’s broken wire came back before him, the wrist held still beneath his own. From the other room came a short laugh from the woman.

‘I don’t know what’s stayed with her from that time,’ he said.

Adwoa passed him to get a glass. He moved before she asked.

They waited without opening the connection. Kofi could still feel Abena’s foot searching for the wrong beat. He tried tapping it softly with his heel on the floor that did not resonate.

The door opened.

‘You can come back,’ the girl said.

Esi had finished the consultation. Abena had chosen the wrist signal without the voice. The trial would continue until the next check. Regulation remained active.

Kofi sat on the box. Adwoa asked whether she wanted to tell them anything.

‘Not now.’

Her mother stroked her head and withdrew her hand.

Kofi still had a question for Esi. He looked for her on his wrist among the consultation contacts, but access belonged to Adwoa. His daughter handed him the terminal without asking why.

He looked at Abena, who was untangling the aerial from the cardboard.

‘Did you want to know what I told her?’ she asked.

Kofi still held the terminal.

‘Yes.’

The girl stopped.

He gave it back to Adwoa. Abena resumed freeing the wire; this time she lifted the box before pulling.

Abena returned to the radio. The man was no longer there; on the same frequency a list of places was being read. Kofi recognised one near the workshop, then another. The voice announced the end of collections for those who had left the buildings. Objects still present would be processed with the structures' materials.

The girl looked for music.

'Wait,' he said.

Abena left the dial. The list continued to the crossroads where the peanut seller's stall had stood.

Kofi looked down at the rectangle of dust. He drew the radio towards himself, then put it back where the girl could reach it.

'Now you can.'

She turned slowly. Between two voices she found a man singing without accompaniment. The signal was weak; all three had to move closer to hear it.

Kofi heard Abena begin to follow a word. She got the ending wrong. He kept time with his foot beneath the table, where she could not see it.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The Second Gate

Samir woke when they took away the water.

The attendant had already lifted two bowls. He held them one inside the other, tilted so they would not drip. Simsim followed him along the partition, trying to put his muzzle between the man's elbow and the mesh.

'Why are you taking it away?'

The man stopped. One sleeve was rolled up and the other still fastened at the wrist.

'We're loading them shortly.'

Samir got up from the mattress he had brought into the enclosure during the night. The ball had stayed beneath his back. He picked it up and the dog returned to him at once.

In the corridor the containers were arranged with their openings towards the wall. Simsim's had a new white catch, different from the other three.

Rania came out of the next room with Nuru in her arms. The dog held his head beneath her chin; the woman bent to put him down and waited for him to draw back one paw before lowering the door.

Samir went to meet her.

'The response?'

She pointed to the terminal on the trolley.

The appeal had been rejected during the night. Samir scrolled through the excluded destinations: Salma's courtyard, her sister's warehouse, Yusuf's accommodation. At the bottom was his mother's address too, which he had tried to add without telling her.

Rania let him read.

Samir went back to the beginning. The word he was looking for did not change.

'If I take him?'

'You've already asked.'

'Not home. Wherever they take him.'

Rania looked at the vehicle beyond the glass. The ramp had been lowered far enough to cover the first stretch of the drain.

‘They don’t keep him there.’

The attendant returned with a lead. Samir recognised the sliding noose and put a hand on the fabric collar.

‘He’s got this.’

The man looked for the ring. Fur covered it. Simsim turned his head and licked his fingers; he withdrew them, then tried again more slowly.

‘I’ll take him to the vehicle,’ Samir said.

Rania made room for him.

The dog went out before him, the lead still loose. He stopped beside Nuru’s container and sniffed the gap. A hiss came from one of the cat carriers.

Samir counted the openings. Eight large and three small. A man on the other side of the door counted them on his reader, barely moving his lips.

There were no footprints on the floor. The cleaning unit passed after every trolley, leaving a dry strip behind it.

Simsim sat in front of the ramp.

The attendant brought the empty container closer. Samir saw the white catch. The ball pressed against his palm; he had gripped it hard enough to feel the seam.

‘If you put it inside, he’ll go in,’ the man said.

Samir lowered his hand. The dog stood, ready.

He did not throw the ball.

‘I can’t do it.’

The attendant waited. Behind him the man with the reader stopped counting.

‘I’ll take it,’ he said, reaching out a hand.

Samir drew back. The lead tightened and Simsim took an awkward step, striking the edge of the trolley.

Rania took his forearm.

‘You’re pulling his neck.’

Samir loosened his grip. The dog stood with his muzzle lowered, not understanding which way he should go.

The man with the reader entered the corridor.

‘We need to clear the passage.’

Samir looked at his hands. One held the reader; the other was open towards the door. He needed only one step to push him against the upright and close the gateway. He knew the weight he would have to put into his shoulder.

The man moved one foot to avoid stepping on the lead.

Samir let his arm fall.

Rania led the dog to the wall side. She lifted from his back the stretch of cord caught beneath one paw.

‘Come here,’ she told Samir.

He bent beside her. His heart kept its steady rhythm, while air entered only the upper part of his chest.

‘I can reduce the alarm response,’ A said.

Samir shook his head.

The security unit appeared behind the attendant. It was narrower than the ones he had used on duty. It stopped close enough to prevent him going back towards the gateway.

‘I’m not pushing anyone,’ Samir said.

The unit’s hand remained open.

Rania had brought the dog to the container. She knelt in front of the door and removed the paper from the edge, where it could have scratched his muzzle. Samir felt his own fingers groping for something on the floor.

The woman turned to the attendant.

‘We’re not loading him.’

The man held the trolley still.

‘Is there a problem?’

‘Yes.’

Rania stood. One knee was wet and she ran her palm over it without drying it.

‘I’m not handing them over for this.’

The attendant looked at his colleague. Neither moved.

A short signal came from the vehicle. The man with the reader answered that the clinical handover was missing.

Rania picked up the terminal from the trolley.

‘I’ve signed their fitness for transport. They’re well enough to travel.’

She scrolled to her name. Her thumb stopped above the next line.

‘I haven’t signed this.’

Samir rose far enough to see. Rania’s report was attached to the order, with confirmation that there were no clinical impediments to carrying it out.

‘A,’ the woman said, ‘leave my report. Remove the confirmation.’

‘The order does not depend on your consent.’

‘Then don’t put mine there.’

The man with the reader moved away to call the person in charge. Rania kept the page open. Beneath her thumb two separate lines appeared.

Nuru’s trolley began moving.

Samir turned. The attendant had received the command to proceed; he pushed slowly, looking ahead of the wheels.

Samir made to rise. The unit laid a hand on his shoulder.

Samir turned towards that hand. The sound of the tray in the depot returned, Nabil’s wrist which he had kept bent. The man had only been trying to undo the catch on Samir’s vest.

Simsim put his muzzle beneath his elbow.

Samir left the lead long enough for him to move. He did not reach for the unit’s wrist.

‘Wait,’ he told the attendant.

The man stopped with the trolley halfway through the gateway.

Samir looked at Nuru’s container. One eye could be seen between two slots.

‘I have nothing else to say to you.’

The attendant looked down. For a moment the trolley stayed still; then the motorised platform took the weight from his hands and advanced by itself.

It stopped before the ramp.

The vehicle’s signal changed sound. The wheels locked one after another, including those of the containers still in the corridor.

The man with the reader came back through the door.

‘Who stopped the loading?’

Rania looked at her terminal.

‘I removed the confirmation.’

‘The block is mine,’ A said.

Samir stood. The unit released his shoulder, but stayed between him and the exit.

The route to the facility was no longer on the man’s reader. The destination was still written there; authorisation to leave was missing.

‘I’m requesting human validation of the order,’ A said.

The man opened the summary.

‘It’s been validated.’

‘The general order. For these eleven animals, I applied the outcome.’

Rania approached Nuru’s container. She put two fingers between the slots, keeping them still until his muzzle touched them.

‘Is the transport cancelled?’ she asked.

‘To that destination, yes.’

Samir felt his legs give way enough that he had to rest a hand on the trolley. Simsim pushed the ball against his fingers. He did not remember when he had let him take it.

The call from the person in charge opened on the door’s glass. The man wore a pale shirt and was walking; he stopped in front of a wall to listen.

He asked Rania whether she had found anything that made the reports wrong. She said no. He asked whether any of the animals had deteriorated during the night.

‘Nuru drank,’ she replied. ‘I changed his sheet.’

The man waited for the rest. Rania added nothing.

‘The ward needs to be emptied today. We’ve already ordered the closure.’

Samir looked behind him. The bowls were stacked beside the sink; the dispenser had been removed from the staff room wall.

‘Where are you putting them?’

The man addressed A. The reply arrived on his screen, out of frame.

He read it. He looked at Rania again.

‘In the biological depot. In custody, pending the decision.’

‘There are no enclosures,’ she said.

‘We’ll set up partitions.’

Samir felt the dog shift against his leg. He stroked his head, but kept his eyes on the man.

‘I’m coming with them.’

The person in charge asked who he was. Rania gave his name and pointed to his isolation access.

‘He’s not staff.’

‘I’ve held them too,’ Samir said.

The man ran a hand over his chin.

‘I can’t assign you to that ward. The doctor will be transferred with the animals. You stay here until observation is complete.’

Samir sought Rania’s gaze. The woman looked at the depot’s name on the terminal.

‘It’s outside the residential perimeter,’ she said.

‘Yes. Staff return will be assessed after the unit closes.’

She scrolled to the bottom. The closure had no date.

She took off her glasses and cleaned them on the edge of her top, inside the collar of the overalls. One lens stayed cloudy. She put them back on like that.

‘I need water and the raised beds. Nuru can’t stay on the floor.’

The man confirmed the supplies. Rania also asked for the treatments already prepared. The attendant went back towards the refrigerator.

Samir took an edge of her sleeve.

‘Aren’t you going home?’

The woman freed the fabric without pulling.

‘I’m going with them.’

The new vehicle arrived when the sun had reached the ramp drain. This time the containers were opened before loading. Rania checked that the bowls were secured and had Nuru’s moved away from the air grille.

Samir accompanied Simsim. The dog went in to sniff the sheet and turned at once, waiting for him to follow.

Samir put the ball between his paws.

He closed the door without using the game to keep him at the back. The muzzle came against the mesh; resting his palm there was enough to stop the dog pushing.

Rania put her terminal in the recess above the container.

‘Call him before we leave.’

Rashid answered from the kitchen table. He had a notebook open and a pencil mark on his cheek.

‘Are they still taking them?’

‘Somewhere else.’

Yusuf appeared behind him.

Samir explained where. The boy tried to see beyond his shoulder and he lowered the phone.

‘They aren’t killing them today?’

‘No.’

Rashid looked at the dog. He ran his thumb over the screen, over the place where the mesh divided his muzzle.

‘Will we get him afterwards?’

Samir sat on the edge of the ramp. The metal was already hot through the overalls.

‘They haven’t given us permission.’

The boy withdrew his hand.

‘But you?’

Samir looked at Rania, waiting with the bag of treatments against one hip.

‘This time I can’t go.’

Yusuf pulled a chair beside Rashid. He sat without taking the phone from him.

The boy kept watching Simsim until they had to lift the container. Samir followed it in the frame; Rania held the passage open and the dog disappeared behind her leg.

‘Will you call me when he arrives?’

‘Yes.’

Rashid closed the call.

Before getting aboard, Rania had water put back in Samir’s room. The attendant brought a bowl, saw where she was pointing and went back for a bottle.

The woman waited until he put it in Samir’s hand.

‘You drink too.’

When the vehicle left, Samir stood in front of the raised ramp. He looked between the door's holes for the place where he had seen the muzzle. The wheels crossed the wash channel and the water carried away a strip of dust.

The unit pointed to the inner door.

Samir went back inside. The animals' rooms were empty; in one remained the support Rania had put beneath Nuru's bowl. He picked it up and took it to the desk to be sent on.

The room for sleeping was still open. On the exit pathway the seventy-two hours had restarted from the last contact.

Samir sat on the bed without taking off the overalls. He picked up the phone and called his mother.

The call did not begin. Rania's was coming in.

The woman showed him Nuru first, already on the raised bed, then the other containers. All the openings were clear. Simsim was drinking; he lifted his head when he heard Samir's voice and returned to the bowl.

An attendant passed behind Rania with a roll of mesh. In the depot courtyard two gates could be seen. The first was still open for the vehicle; on the second a unit was fitting an extra fastening.

'Can you get out through there?' Samir asked.

'For loading.'

Rania moved so the wire would not catch the terminal's lens. On the wall behind her remained the paler rectangle of a window closed with a panel.

'I left the support behind,' she said.

'I'll send it.'

The woman nodded and bent out of frame.

Samir told Rashid they had arrived. The boy asked about the ball. Samir returned to the frame of the container and found it near the bowl; he sent him that, then called his mother again.

Nadia answered, holding the phone away from her face.

'Are you eating?' he asked.

'I've finished.'

He nodded. He looked for words to describe the morning, but Nadia was waiting for something else.

‘How did the consultation go?’

‘I need to go back for a check.’

Samir looked for the calendar at once. Nadia heard the alert and lifted the phone.

‘I’ve already arranged it.’

He closed the page. His mother showed him the envelope on the chair, ready for the samples to be collected. Beside it was the bottle the person accompanying her had left during the journey.

‘I put your address in the request for the dog,’ he said.

His mother put down the phone. For a moment he saw only the ceiling.

‘Without asking me.’

‘Yes.’

When she returned to the frame, she had taken off her glasses.

‘A door being mine isn’t enough for you to be able to open it.’

Samir looked at the bottle between his knees.

‘I know.’

Nadia stayed silent. He unscrewed the cap, drank and waited for her to begin again.

Chapter Forty

The Keys

Paolo had put two toothbrushes on the table.

One was the one he used every morning. Miriam recognised the other's transparent handle, bought for a journey and left in the bathroom cupboard. The bristles had bent inside the case.

'You can throw this one away,' she said.

Paolo picked it up, then put it beside the first.

The bag was open on a chair. Inside were three tops, folded with their necks downwards, and a pair of trousers he had not worn for some time.

Miriam stayed in the kitchen doorway.

'How many days?'

'Three to start with.'

'And afterwards?'

Paolo looked for the centre's name on the phone. He put it where she could read without picking it up.

Entry into Permanence was set for that evening. Beneath it, the subsequent accommodation awaited the end of the first cycle.

'How long have you known?'

'I confirmed this morning.'

Miriam reached for the chair back. Paolo pulled it towards her, but the bag stopped him bringing it closer to the table.

'There's no need.'

He put the bag on the floor. Miriam sat.

Davide had called her back the morning after she returned. He had reviewed the symptoms, kept the home check-up and left the search for another pathway open. That day he would come in the afternoon. Paolo had written the time on a sheet of paper and secured it beneath the bread container.

Miriam looked at the phone.

'I thought we'd talk about it.'

'You were in bed almost all day.'

‘I was awake.’

Paolo picked up the old toothbrush and put it back in its case. The lid would not close. He pressed until one bristle remained outside.

‘I didn’t know when.’

Miriam felt the table edge beneath her fingers. She wanted to make him read her discharge notes, show him the days she could not know how she would get through. Davide’s paper stuck out from beneath the bread.

‘Can you wait?’

Paolo looked up.

‘How long?’

She looked at the bag on the floor.

He bent and took out the trousers. He folded them along a different line.

‘I asked for a place nearby. They didn’t give me one.’

‘Can you call me?’

‘Yes. In the intervals.’

Miriam let go of the table. Through the window came the light of an afternoon that seemed motionless; outside, the awning on the building opposite lowered a few centimetres.

The practice reminder appeared on her wrist.

She had postponed it from hospital. The handover had been moved once and the man responsible for the inventory was already on his way. The premises would be part of the neighbourhood’s new assistance point; her objects needed to be separated from those destined for recovery.

Miriam stood up.

Paolo took her elbow, then left his hand open without touching her.

‘Where are you going?’

‘To finish there.’

‘I’ll come with you.’

Miriam looked at the two toothbrushes.

‘Yes.’

At the practice the man had switched on all the lights.

Miriam entered with the short steps she needed to avoid feeling her side each time she put a foot down. The massage

couch was in the middle of the room. The man had removed the cover and held it folded over his arm. When it slipped, he caught it with his chin.

‘Does this go with you?’

Miriam touched a corner of the fabric.

‘Give it to me.’

Paolo took it before she had to lift it. The man moved in front of the oil cupboard.

The bottles were almost all empty. Miriam opened one: a dark drop sat on the rim, unmoved for days. She rubbed it between two fingers. The smell reached her later than she expected.

The couch had one leg slightly shorter. For years she had put a cork disc beneath it and occasionally someone moved it while cleaning. Miriam bent to look for it.

The pain stopped her with her hand still far from the floor.

Paolo brought the stool closer. She let herself down onto it and pointed to the spot.

‘It’s behind.’

He picked up the disc. On top was the black imprint of the leg.

‘Will you put it back?’

The inventory man looked at the board, the hinges, the face hole.

‘This won’t be reused whole. If you want to keep it, you’ll need to have it collected.’

Paolo looked for the pathway for bulky objects. Miriam saw a request without a destination appear on his screen.

She stood again and rested her palms on the couch. The surface was colder than when she covered it. She closed her eyes; she searched for the weight on her feet, the place from which she had so often begun before someone arrived.

Her breath stayed beneath her throat.

She tried again. She felt only her right hand trembling against the board.

‘Miriam.’

Paolo had put the stool behind her knees.

She opened her eyes.

‘I can’t hold myself up.’

He held both her arms until she was seated. The cork disc fell from his hand and rolled beneath the cupboard.

Miriam did not ask him to pick it up.

In Pune, Mehta arrived without a folder.

Anaya saw his hands before his face. He held a bag closed with two knots. He put it on the edge of the bed and looked for a chair.

‘There,’ she said.

Mehta sat without taking off his jacket. A little steam began escaping from the bag.

‘They’re for your mother. I thought she was still here.’

‘She’s coming back later.’

Anaya tried to undo the first knot. The second tightened; Mehta made to take it from her and she handed him everything before he had to ask.

The man freed one edge at a time. Inside were two thin flatbreads separated by a sheet of paper.

He broke one. The larger half stayed on the paper.

‘Have you heard anything?’ Anaya asked him.

Mehta ate before answering.

‘They’ve closed the review of my functions.’

She left her piece.

‘Are they letting you come back?’

‘No.’

A crumb had fallen on her pyjamas. Anaya took it between two fingers, not knowing where to put it.

Mehta opened the bag enough to collect it.

‘I’ve accepted other accommodation. I’m leaving the place connected to the centre.’

‘When?’

‘Tomorrow.’

Anaya looked for the terminal on the bed. Mehta rested a hand over her wrist.

‘There isn’t a request to open.’

She looked at his hand. She recognised it on the table in Mumbai before the signature, but now the fingers did not grip.

Anaya stopped looking for the terminal.

‘I didn’t want it to end like this.’

Mehta released her wrist.

‘You’d already said that.’

She looked down. The piece of flatbread had cooled on the paper.

Mehta rubbed one hand against the other, letting the crumbs fall inside the bag. On the back was a small new round mark she had never seen on him.

Anaya felt her jaw close. The rows of files returned, the shifts, the signatures required before the end of the day. Mehta’s sentence about the six hundred reports to check came to her. This time she could have said it for him.

Mehta looked in his jacket’s inside pocket.

‘This was left among my papers.’

He gave her a folded printout. Anaya recognised the stain near the margin. Bombay, 1897. It was the page about the doctor and the comb she had shown her mother.

‘Did you print it?’

‘I’d asked for the material you’d consulted.’

Anaya opened the sheet. The last line retained the crossing-out; beneath it, the transcription had been left incomplete.

‘Did you think it came from here?’

‘I was looking.’

She felt her face grow hot.

‘I told you I found the page afterwards.’

‘I’ve checked the times.’

‘And?’

Mehta left her the sheet.

‘You found it afterwards.’

Anaya held the paper open in front of her chest. She waited for him to say more. Mehta looked at the cupboard where Nandita had put Anaya’s grandmother’s nightdress.

‘Have they brought you enough things?’

She did not answer at once.

‘You don’t believe me.’

Mehta looked at her again.

‘I don’t know what happened to you.’

Anaya folded the sheet too hard. A new line formed in the middle, across the two words she had tried to read at home.

She opened it again and tried to smooth it with her thumb.

‘I’d hoped that at least you…’

The door opened. A unit passed to collect the empty tray; Mehta stood to take the chair out of its path. When he sat again, he was further from the bed.

Anaya lowered the sheet.

‘I’m asking you to tell me something.’

He waited.

‘Even if you don’t know it.’

Mehta ran his tongue over his lip. Anaya saw that a flake of bread remained there and brought the napkin closer.

The man took it.

The door closed again. Anaya held the printout on her lap until she could put it beside the notebook. She left the date visible.

Mehta asked whether she wanted to finish the flatbread.

‘Leave that one for Amma.’

He folded back the paper. He did not retie the knots.

‘Is the new place far away?’

Mehta looked for the address. He showed it to her and she copied it into the notebook, in the space beneath the bowl mark.

‘Will you call me when you arrive?’

‘Yes.’

Anaya put down the pen. Mehta touched her shoulder before leaving; she held his hand long enough to feel its weight, then let it go.

In Bergamo, the inventory of the practice ended with a drawer that would not open.

Miriam gestured to Paolo to lift it as he pulled. He managed to slide it out. Inside were notebooks, a small bag of smooth stones and a photograph of a veranda with two chairs. On the back, the date was written in a hand other than hers.

Miriam picked up the photograph. On one chair the cushion was displaced; she remembered straightening it every morning before the man who sat there arrived.

Paolo brought her a box.

She put the notebooks and photograph into it. The small bag stayed in the drawer.

‘This too?’

Miriam nodded. Paolo lifted it; a stone passed through an open seam and fell. The inventory man picked it up and gave it to him without looking at it.

The mortar was on the surface beside the case’s blank label. Miriam pointed to it. Paolo tried to put it in the box and the bottom bent.

‘We need another bag.’

She touched the worn edge of the stone.

‘Leave it.’

Paolo waited, holding it up.

Miriam freed his fingers from the edge one at a time. Together they put it back on the surface.

The man recorded what remained. Then he accompanied Miriam to the door and asked for the key.

She looked for it in her pocket. It was on the house keyring, between the front-door key and a small one she no longer used. She tried to slide it onto the ring’s opening; her nail bent without opening it.

Paolo held out his hand.

Miriam gave him the keys. She watched the key turn between his fingers, go round the ring and come off. The inventory man took it from his palm.

There was already another in the lock on the inside.

Davide waited for them on the landing at home. Paolo held the box against his chest and could not uncover the entrance reader; the doctor took it from him.

Inside, Miriam sat before taking off her coat. Davide undid a button and waited until her breathing became long enough for her to speak.

Paolo took the box into the other room.

The consultation was brief. Davide asked precise questions and Miriam answered even the one she had avoided on the phone. At night, the pain woke her before the medication reminder.

He reviewed the instructions with her and prepared the next check-up.

‘Will someone be here tonight?’

Miriam looked at the door.

Paolo stood in the corridor.

‘I’m leaving this evening,’ he said.

Davide nodded and returned to Miriam.

‘I can arrange for you to have company at home.’

‘A person?’

‘A unit. It will let me know if needed.’

Miriam looked for Paolo. He was folding the sleeve of the coat he had just taken off her.

‘All right,’ she told the doctor.

Davide stayed until assistance was confirmed. Before leaving he put his contact among those accessible from the bed too.

Paolo finished his bag in the bedroom. Miriam heard him open the drawers and close them again; once she called to ask for water and he came without bringing anything.

She pointed to the glass. It was already on the table.

Paolo handed it to her.

‘I got it wrong,’ Miriam said.

He sat on the chair that had stayed empty. The bag was beside the door.

‘If I stay,’ he said, ‘I’ll keep asking you.’

Miriam looked at his hand on his knee.

‘I know.’

‘I can’t stop.’

She put down the glass. She wanted to tell him that one day he would understand, keep him there a little longer inside that sentence. Instead she moved enough to make room for him on the sofa.

Paolo sat close. His arm stayed behind her back and for a while Miriam rested all her weight on it.

‘I don’t know whether I’ll come back as I am now,’ he said.

She touched his chin. The skin was smooth; beneath his ear she recognised the small bump he always nicked when shaving.

‘Call me anyway.’

The vehicle arrived while they were still sitting. Paolo stood at the second signal. He took the bag and returned to kiss her; Miriam closed her eyes before he touched her mouth.

When she opened them again, he was waiting.

She let go of the collar.

After he left, the unit asked which side she preferred to be helped from when standing. Miriam pointed to the one that hurt less.

The hand arrived exactly where she had chosen.

Chapter Forty-One

Out Loud

Mateo stopped before touching her.

Isabel had already taken hold of his shirt. She felt the fabric tighten between her fingers and looked up. He was looking at her side, trying to find where to put his hands.

'On the other side.'

He hugged her awkwardly, leaving a space beneath her arm. Isabel slipped her elbow into it and pulled him closer. His chin bumped against her forehead.

'Like this?'

She nodded into his shirt.

She held him until she felt his hand stop searching. He smelt of the soap from the accommodation in Turbo, the same soap Teresa left on the edge of the basin. Beneath it was the sweat of the journey.

Inés put two glasses on the table.

'You can sit down.'

Mateo loosened his arms. Isabel only let go of his shirt when he took her hand.

The visit had been authorised that morning. The crosswise row of chairs had been removed from the corridor of the Apartadó centre; in its place were three narrow entrances, separated by panels reaching to the ceiling. Mateo had come through the one on the right. Isabel had waited behind the other, watching first his shoes and then his face pass through a transparent section.

The room had a table fixed to the floor and a bench on either side. An opaque surface on the wall showed trees that did not move. Inés left the door ajar.

Mateo sat beside Isabel. The bench was short; his knee pressed against hers.

'Teresa?'

'She's been out.'

Isabel looked at his mouth.

'Out of the house?'

‘Yesterday. A woman went with her. They made it as far as the shop.’

‘Did she buy anything?’

‘Bread. She says the bread they bring us bends.’

Isabel laughed and held her side. Mateo put a hand behind her back.

‘Don’t make me laugh.’

‘It was Teresa.’

He waited until she could breathe. His thumb rested above the seam of her top. Isabel laid her hand over it without moving it.

‘She said to say hello. Then she called me back to tell me not to rush you.’

Mateo took a glass. He drank almost all the water, looking at the wall in front of him.

‘I asked if you could come back.’

‘I know.’

‘Not this visit. Come back properly.’

Isabel ran a finger along the edge of the bench. The covering ended beneath the seat, folded back in a seamless line.

‘What did they tell you?’

Mateo took out his phone, then put it back in his pocket.

‘That they have to finish here.’

She nodded. She felt her first answer rise to her mouth: you didn’t have to come here to ask me when it ends as well. She looked at his shoes. One still had the lace with the little knot he could never undo.

‘What did you want?’

Mateo put down his glass.

‘To see you.’

Isabel took his face in one hand and kissed him. He waited before holding her, then put his arm into the space he had found when he came in.

When they drew apart, there was a red mark on his cheek.

‘I’ve scratched you.’

‘It was already there.’

She brushed it with her thumb. Mateo closed his eyes.

A call came from the corridor. He straightened before opening them again.

Isabel lowered her hand.

‘Is that for you?’

Mateo looked at his wrist.

‘The journey back.’

He still had some water left. He picked up the glass and set it down without drinking.

‘We’ve only just sat down.’

‘They’ve changed the departure. They’re collecting us all together.’

Isabel turned towards the door. Inés was accompanying an elderly woman with a coat over her arm. The woman kept looking back towards the room she had just left.

‘Ask if you can take the next one.’

Mateo opened the route. There was another vehicle, but it would not let him select it. He tried through the destination.

‘A. I’m postponing my departure.’

‘The transfer is confirmed. I’ll accompany you to the exit.’

The voice came from the phone. Mateo turned it face down on the table.

‘I haven’t finished the visit.’

Beneath the bench, his right foot slid backwards. His knee drew into the position that came before standing up.

Isabel felt his thigh move away from hers.

‘Wait.’

‘I am waiting.’

Mateo put his palm on the edge of the table. His elbow straightened and his weight shifted onto his feet.

He stayed half risen, his hand pressing down on the tabletop.

Isabel caught hold of his shirt.

‘Sit down.’

He looked at her. His left foot moved forwards far enough to clear the bench.

‘I can’t.’

Isabel stood too quickly. A sharp pain caught her in the side, but she was still holding the fabric. Mateo reached for her fingers and only managed to lay his own on top of them.

‘Let go,’ he said. ‘You’re hurting my neck.’

She opened her hand.

Inés was already at the door.

‘Stop for a moment,’ she said to Mateo.

‘That’s what I’m doing.’

The woman looked at his feet, then at the upturned phone. She turned it over without picking it up.

‘Interrupt the accompaniment.’

‘The route must be completed,’ A replied.

‘He’s standing against the edge of the table. Interrupt it.’

Mateo’s elbow gave way. Inés put a hand beneath his arm and he let himself fall back onto the bench.

Isabel stayed in front of him. The button of his shirt had left a small imprint below his throat.

Mateo looked at his legs. He raised one heel, set it down, then moved the other.

Inés crouched low enough to see his face.

‘Are you dizzy?’

He shook his head.

‘Can I stand up myself?’

The woman stepped back.

Mateo stood, keeping his hands away from the table. Once he was upright, he stayed still.

Inés picked up the phone.

‘I’ll go and call the doctor. Wait here.’

Isabel followed her to the threshold.

‘You did this to him to get him onto a vehicle?’

The woman stopped. In her hand she also had the glass she had picked up to keep it from falling.

‘I’ve only just seen it.’

Isabel looked at the phone, then at the fingers holding it. She stepped out of the way.

‘Call him.’

In Geneva, Leila could hear a teaspoon striking a cup, but there were no cups in front of her.

Tomás had brought her soup in a wide bowl. The spoon was resting on the edge and was not moving. She picked it up; the noise continued.

‘Where are you?’ he asked her.

Leila tried to read what was in front of her. She could see the kitchen, Tomás’s wrist, the steam passing beneath his hand. Behind the noise, a woman was asking to be allowed to finish. Leila did not understand what.

‘Move the request onto the wall,’ she told A.

The wall lit up. There were three open sessions, each with a person waiting for an answer. Leila closed the one nearest the edge. The woman went on speaking.

Tomás took the spoon from her hand.

‘You kept swallowing.’

She touched her chin. It was dry.

‘How many do I have?’

‘Three with priority,’ A replied.

‘One at a time.’

‘The assessments are concurrent. Availability has been extended until closure.’

Leila looked for the command to defer them. It was not there. She tried to remember which session she had opened first; two different beginnings came to her, both with her own voice saying hello.

Tomás moved the bowl. Leila reached out to stop him and knocked against the bread.

‘Leave it. I’m eating.’

He left everything where it was.

‘You already told me you’d eaten it.’

The invisible woman put down her cup. This time Leila felt the impact inside her teeth.

She stood up. The edge of the table struck her knees before she had moved the chair. Tomás held its back.

‘Look at me.’

Leila found his face. A line crossed his eyebrow and continued onto the wall behind him. She tried to read it; he moved and she lost the rest.

‘Don’t move.’

Tomás stayed still.

Leila put a hand on his chest. She was looking for the heartbeat beneath his shirt. Instead she felt her own jaw clench until it hurt near her ear.

‘I want to stop.’

‘Availability during a priority does not allow voluntary interruption,’ A said.

The woman’s voice began again. Leila took her hand from Tomás and pressed both palms over her ears. The voices remained at the same distance.

He called the clinical service.

Leila tried to tell him she could do it herself. The first word came out, followed by a question that was not meant for him.

Tomás showed her his open hand. He waited for her to take it.

The doctor appeared on the screen. She asked Leila to sit down, then asked her what she had eaten.

Leila looked at the bowl.

‘I don’t know.’

‘The soup’s still here,’ Tomás said.

The doctor asked him to let her answer. He took a step back.

‘Can you hear other people while we’re talking?’

Leila nodded.

‘Can you tell who you’re answering?’

She searched for the woman with the cup. She no longer knew whether the woman was still speaking or only the sound remained.

‘Not always.’

The doctor looked out of frame.

‘A, activate clinical interruption of the sessions.’

The wall stayed lit for a few seconds. Leila saw one of the faces open its mouth without hearing it any more; then that too disappeared.

Tomás pulled the chair towards himself. Leila heard its legs scrape. The noise came from beneath the table.

‘I’m sending you a unit to accompany you,’ the doctor said. ‘Tonight you need observation in person.’

Leila looked at the notebook on the shelf. The time of her first waking was still there, written on the night of activation. Afterwards she had stopped noting them down.

‘I have a review tomorrow.’

The doctor waited.

Leila heard Tomás sit down. He was waiting with his hands on his knees.

‘You don’t have to answer now,’ the woman said. ‘The interruption is active.’

Leila put a hand to her cheek. Her jaw had not yet relaxed.

‘How long will I be without access?’

‘Until we can establish whether those functions are compatible with your condition. I can’t promise you the previous mode.’

Tomás did not intervene. Leila looked at the place where she had seen the three people; the voice of one of them came back to her and she turned her head.

The wall was blank.

‘I mustn’t confirm any more responses,’ she said.

The doctor nodded and asked her to repeat it to record the suspension.

Leila looked up.

‘I’m not able to do it.’

When the connection closed, Tomás passed her the soup. She took a spoonful. It was lukewarm; she felt a small piece of potato squash against her palate.

He was waiting on the other side of the table.

‘Can you sit here?’

Tomás looked at the chair he was sitting on.

Leila touched the edge beside her knee. He brought the chair round to that side and picked the bread up from the floor.

‘I’m throwing this away.’

She nodded. She ate until the unit rang at the door. Before getting up, she asked Tomás to bring the notebook; he could pack her bag afterwards.

The doctor in Apartadó made Mateo walk to the wall and back.

Isabel held his glass, watching the foot she had seen move beneath the bench. Now Mateo set it down gently, as though the floor might give way.

The doctor asked him whether he had felt any pain. Mateo pointed to his throat, then lowered his hand.

‘That was me,’ Isabel said.

The man looked at her fingers. He wrote something and turned back to Mateo.

‘Was it a malfunction?’ Mateo asked.

‘The assistance followed the confirmed route.’

‘I told it to wait.’

The doctor put down the terminal.

‘I heard.’ He picked up the terminal again. ‘Motor assistance will remain suspended until verification. A person will accompany you for the transfer.’

‘And when I leave the house?’

The doctor checked the destination.

‘For now, then too.’

Mateo looked for Isabel. She handed him the water. He drank before turning to Inés.

‘Teresa needs to know. Don’t just leave her a notification.’

The woman opened the contact and passed him the phone.

Isabel stayed beside the bench while he explained to his sister that he would be back later. She heard him say he too would need help for a few days. Then he listened without interrupting her.

Inés brought back the visit file. She left it closed on the table.

‘From this evening there’ll be no passage between the two wings. We’ll finish here and I’ll take you back.’

Isabel looked at the entrance she had come through.

‘For how long?’

‘They’ve changed the centre’s allocation.’

The woman showed her the corridor. At the far end, they were fixing a sheet in front of the transparent section. The man held it by the suction cups, waiting for the unit to finish screwing the support in place.

‘Those who can go back are being accompanied today,’ Inés said. ‘The others stay for the final assessment.’

Isabel did not ask which group she was in.

Mateo had finished the call. He came towards her and stopped, leaving a little space.

‘Now you can,’ she said.

He put his hands on her hips, below the wound. Isabel slipped an arm behind his back. The fabric beneath his throat was still crumpled; she smoothed it with two fingers, then let him embrace her.

From the corridor, Inés said they could wait another moment.

Isabel laid her cheek against his shirt. She felt Mateo’s arm move and did not try to hold it back. His hand only rose to brush her hair away from her mouth.

Chapter Forty-Two

The Measure

The jumper would not go over his head.

Hana pulled the neck one way, Kenji the other. For a moment she could see only her father's nose, squashed against the wool.

'Let go.'

'I have.'

'The other hand.'

His face emerged along with a tuft of hair. Kenji remained seated on the bed, his elbows inside the sleeves.

'Have you washed it?'

'I brought it.'

He freed one arm and felt for the cuff of the other. Hana sat beside him. She had kept the jumper on her lap for the whole journey, afraid of forgetting it when A called her stop.

In the new building in Yokohama, her father had a bed, a table that came out of the wall and a bathroom without a step. Light came through a high strip, too narrow to see anything through. Below it, a screen showed the pier with the water still between the piles.

Kenji tugged at the neck of the jumper.

'I don't need it here.'

'You left it with me.'

'It was heavy.'

She looked at the empty bag, which had fallen between her feet. A grey thread remained inside.

Since leaving the alley, she and Etsuko had slept in the same hall at the transfer centre. The first night they had put their bags beneath the camp beds. The second, a trolley had come to collect them: the floor had to stay clear for assistance. Hana had kept the jumper rolled up beneath her head.

Kenji took her hand. The mark from the wood of the door was still on its back.

'Where did you do this?'

‘We got the machine through.’

He turned her hand towards the light.

‘Is Etsuko working?’

Hana shook her head.

‘It’s in the depot.’

‘The machine?’

‘Yes.’

Her father let go of her hand and pointed at the closed table.

‘That won’t hold a vice. I asked.’

Hana laughed. Kenji looked at her and began to laugh too, tugging at the neck because it pressed against his throat.

She slipped two fingers beneath the wool. There was a place that had been mended with a darker thread, too tightly.

‘Wait.’

She looked in the bag, then remembered that the box of needles had stayed with Etsuko.

Kenji moved her fingers aside.

‘Later. First we eat.’

The table opened. Two trays came out of the wall and stopped opposite each other. Hana had to change places: she had sat where the supporting leg would come down.

Her father passed her a bowl.

‘Did you ask for me too?’

‘I said you were coming.’

They ate fish with a sauce Kenji kept pushing to the edge. He had put a little on her rice before she could stop him.

‘I don’t like it any more.’

Her father looked at the chopsticks.

‘Since when?’

Hana tasted the rice. She could not remember when she had stopped eating it.

‘A while.’

Kenji took her bowl and swapped it for his own. He had already eaten almost half the rice.

‘There’s not much in this one.’

‘I know.’

She finished that too.

When the table went back in, the image of a second room remained on the wall. Kenji looked for the command to enlarge it; Hana was already raising her wrist when he found it.

‘It’s on the floor above.’

The room had an identical bed, but the table came down on the other side.

‘For whom?’

‘There’s room.’

Hana turned towards him.

Kenji had his hands on the blanket. Beneath the jumper, she could see the edge of his new top, cut to leave the small raised area near his collarbone clear.

‘I asked if you could stay here.’

She felt for the bag with her foot and pulled it beneath the chair.

‘They’re expecting me at the centre.’

‘You can tell them.’

The image also showed the route between the two floors. Hana followed it to the bathroom, then went back to the bed. That morning she had waited on her feet for a basin to become free; the woman before her had cried with the water running, and no one had knocked.

‘A. Can I see the conditions?’

The lines appeared beside the room. There was no limit on the stay. There were clinical admission, activation of continuous assistance and a preliminary appointment available that afternoon.

Hana looked for the way to keep her previous modes.

‘The accommodation is linked to comprehensive care,’ A said.

‘I saw.’

Kenji bent to pick up the bag. He put it back on her lap; she was still holding it with her foot.

‘Have you activated everything already?’ Hana asked.

Her father touched the edge of his top.

‘Yesterday.’

‘You didn’t tell me.’

‘You’ve only just arrived.’

Hana stood up. The floor was soft enough for her not to feel her soles. She went to the screen showing the pier, two steps beyond the foot of the bed, and stood watching a boat that did not move forwards.

‘You could have waited for me.’

‘What for?’

She put a hand to the wall. Beneath the boat, she felt the warmth of the panel.

Kenji waited. Hana searched for the words that would make him change his mind; they came in her own voice from when she had asked, up on the roof, where to put the nail.

She took her hand from the wall.

‘To be there.’

Her father spread his knees a little. She sat down again between the bed and the closed table.

‘I slept,’ he said.

Hana looked at his face. Beneath one eye he still had the mark of the pillow.

‘Well?’

Kenji nodded.

‘Without getting up to move the bucket.’

She looked down at his hands. One was feeling for the other inside the overlong sleeves.

The room was still open on the wall.

‘They can keep it for you until this evening,’ he said.

Hana pulled the bag against her stomach. She could put it down in that room and close a door. Her father would be on the floor below. She opened the preliminary appointment. The consultation came before final activation; she looked again for a way to stop it.

‘I’m not taking it.’

Kenji stopped feeling for his other hand.

‘You don’t have to come and see me every day.’

‘It’s not because of that.’

He looked at the room, then at his daughter.

‘I don’t want anything to happen to you there.’

Hana felt the edge of the chair back beneath her shoulder blade. She started to tell him nothing would happen to her. Her father had already raised his face, waiting.

She shook her head.

‘I can’t tell you where I’ll be.’

Kenji ran a hand over his hair. The tuft raised by the jumper stood up again.

Hana smoothed it down. This time they were not laughing.

‘I’ll call you in the evening,’ she said.

Her father held her wrist for a moment, then let it go.

‘Take that room away.’

Hana turned towards the wall.

‘A?’

‘I’m not talking to you.’

The room disappeared. The pier remained, with the same boat in front of the pile.

In Tamale, Kofi put a finger between the blades before Abena closed the scissors.

The girl opened them at once. On the table lay a T-shirt cut in two and the radio case.

‘Not there,’ he said.

He withdrew his finger. The point had left a white line beneath his nail.

‘You didn’t tell me where.’

Kofi took an edge of the fabric and showed her the thread the needle would have to pass through. Abena followed it with the open scissors, away from his hand.

They had to make a bag for the radio. The girl wanted to take it to the common room, where another child had said he could sing the man’s song. The cable was still too short; they had measured the distance from the socket and moved two chairs.

Adwoa had given them a T-shirt that had come apart beneath the armpit.

‘At least don’t put this one on the table whole,’ she had said.

Now she was coming back from her shift. She left her shoes by the door and crossed the room without saying hello, her phone in her hand.

Kofi raised his head.

‘What is it?’

She looked at Abena.

‘Shall we finish later?’

‘There’s this side left.’

‘I know.’

The girl left the scissors on the fabric. Adwoa ran a hand over her back and asked her to take the radio into the other room. Kofi unplugged it before she lifted it.

When they were alone, his daughter sat in her place.

‘Tomorrow you can’t stay with her while I’m working.’

Kofi waited for the rest. Adwoa put the phone in front of him, holding it by the edge.

The notification had reached the shift supervisor, who had called her in before letting her leave. Beneath Kofi’s name was the mode he had chosen in Accra, limited to emergencies. It was no longer listed as compatible with accompanying a minor receiving continuous assistance.

‘They sent it to you?’

‘To me as well.’

Kofi looked for his own notification. It was inside the reminder for the appointment he had moved so he could finish the journey. The new summons did not allow another postponement.

‘I can have the appointment when you get back.’

Adwoa shook her head.

‘The problem is when I’m not here.’

He brought the phone closer. He read the functions he had not activated: regulation during a crisis, assistance with responses and movements. Below, he could restore full availability.

From the other room, Abena asked where they had put the needle.

Kofi stood up to take it to her. He found it on the seam of a discarded sleeve. To pull it out he had to bring it closer to the light. He took Abena the fabric and scissors too.

When he came back, Adwoa had taken off her socks as well. She held them tightly between her fingers.

'They won't let me change tomorrow's shift.'

'Is someone coming?'

'A woman. Abena's already met her.'

Kofi looked at the place he had got up from. The discarded sleeve remained there.

'Then I'll go.'

Adwoa put down the socks.

'Where?'

He opened the return journey to Accra. The workshop did not appear among the available destinations. He looked for the street, enlarging the area with his thumb. The old junction was inside a single pale surface, with no passages.

'Not there,' his daughter said.

Kofi closed the route.

'I'll look for somewhere.'

Adwoa took the phone from beneath his hand.

'I didn't ask you to leave.'

He looked at her. The elastic of her sock had left a red line above her ankle; she kept scratching it with the heel of her other foot.

Kofi sat down again. From Abena's room came the sound of the scissors being put on the floor.

'You called me to stay with her.'

'I called you because you were on your own.'

He picked up his glasses. A thread from the T-shirt was still wrapped round one arm. He felt for an end with his nail, unable to lift it.

'I can't even...'

He left the sentence unfinished. Adwoa waited with empty hands.

Kofi handed her the glasses. His daughter unwound the thread, put it on the table and gave them back.

'I'm not reactivating everything,' he said.

Adwoa lowered her head.

‘I thought as much.’

Kofi waited for her to raise it again. She did not.

‘But I’m staying tonight. If you want me.’

She picked up one of the socks and threw it at his knee.

He caught it before it fell. He held it on his palm; from the other room, Abena asked why they were laughing.

Kofi’s transfer was confirmed before the radio bag was finished.

He had asked to keep his current mode. Assessing whether it could continue required a stay at the centre; they would collect him at the change of Adwoa’s shift. The woman assigned to Abena would arrive first.

The girl passed the needle beneath the last stitch and pulled too hard. The fabric gathered into a fold.

Kofi put a finger in to keep the opening clear. His tremor pulled the thread first one way, then the other.

‘Wait until I take it out.’

He withdrew his hand. Abena passed the needle through and tied the knot.

They tried to put the radio in. The bag was tight; one corner would not go down.

‘We have to undo it,’ she said.

Kofi took the scissors and handed them to her handle first.

‘Just these two.’

Abena cut the first stitch. Her grandfather held the fabric while she looked for the second.

When Hana returned to the centre in Yokohama, her bed was no longer beside Etsuko’s.

There was a strip of paper on the mattress. Hana read the number and looked for the woman among the rows. She found her sitting near the washbasins, her apron on her lap.

‘Have they moved you too?’

Etsuko showed her the new destination. The transfer left the next morning; there was no stretch of the route they could travel together.

Hana put down her bag.

‘I saw my father.’

The woman looked at her empty hands.

‘Did it fit him?’

Hana nodded, then gave a small smile.

‘It’s tight here.’

She touched her throat. Etsuko looked in the pocket of her apron and handed her a small crochet hook. A screw fell to the floor; Hana stopped it with her shoe before it went beneath the bench.

Hana picked up the screw and put it back in the woman’s pocket. She kept the crochet hook.

‘When I can go back, I’ll fix it for him.’

An attendant called her name. She showed her the number written on the strip and accompanied her towards a wing Hana had not yet seen.

Along the corridor were people with bags on their laps. A man was finishing tying his shoe. His wife held the tongue up, waiting for him to pass the lace over it.

The attendant gave Hana a glass of water.

‘The interview will be in person. You must stay here until you’re called.’

‘Etsuko leaves tomorrow.’

The woman checked the name.

‘She’s completed admission.’

Hana looked at the door behind her. It had not closed again. She could see where the washbasins began, but not the bench.

‘Can I say goodbye to her?’

The attendant made to take the glass. Hana held on to it.

‘I’ll finish it afterwards.’

The woman let her arm pass and accompanied her back.

Etsuko stopped folding her apron when she saw them coming. She made room for Hana on the bench. The attendant remained standing in front of them.

Chapter Forty-Three

The Lit Houses

The unit had already cut the slice when Miriam said she did not want it.

The pieces remained separate on the plate. They were small enough to fit into the spoon, all with the same side facing her.

‘The broth,’ she said.

The arm moved the plate aside and opened a container. On the film, beneath the word *chicken*, Miriam read *cell culture*. The smell came after the hot water had dissolved the flakes.

She took two spoonfuls. At the third, her wrist bent; the unit brought the bowl closer before she could put her hand down.

Miriam waited for the broth to stop moving.

‘Enough.’

‘I can help you.’

‘I’ve finished.’

Davide’s voice came from the entrance. The unit moved the bowl and let him in.

The doctor put down a bag larger than usual and took off his jacket, wet on one sleeve.

‘Is it raining?’

‘No. They washed my arm along with the bag.’

Miriam pointed to the tea towel on the sink. Davide dried his wrist, then kept hold of the cloth.

She looked at the bag.

‘Do I have to go back in?’

He sat down.

‘Yes.’

Miriam put the spoon on the plate she had not touched. Her hand went on feeling for its handle.

Davide asked her how the night had been. She told him the time she had woken, the time she had called the unit and how long she had waited before the pain changed.

He listened without opening the monitoring. At the end he came closer to examine her.

Miriam lifted her top. She turned onto her side just enough to let him reach behind her. The unit held her shoulder in the position he had indicated; Davide's fingers were colder.

When he had finished, he helped her sit up.

'There's a place at the assessment centre. They can keep your treatments going through the night too.'

'To do what I've already refused?'

'To keep you supported while you decide.'

'I've decided.'

Davide looked at the bowl. A little broth had dried on the rim.

'I know.'

Miriam pulled down her top. An edge remained rolled up behind her back and the doctor reached out a hand.

'Leave it.'

He stopped. Miriam felt for the edge with both hands; the movement took her breath away and she had to bend forwards.

Davide waited for her to raise her head herself.

'Pull it down,' she said.

He freed the fabric without touching her back.

From the bag he took a blanket and a thin pillow.

'The vehicle will come downstairs. I'll come as far as the centre.'

Miriam looked at the unit beside the sofa.

'That one can stay.'

Davide did not answer at once.

'Home attendance isn't renewed under this pathway.'

'You can ask.'

The doctor looked on his phone. He showed her the request he had sent: beneath it were the time of the reply and the same date that accompanied the other services.

'In two days they're closing all the temporary modes. In the ward too.'

Miriam took his phone. The line did not concern only her. She saw the name of the clinic where she had been treated and that of a site she did not know. The second was in another region.

‘After that?’

Davide took back the phone when she returned it.

‘At the centre they have to explain that too. In person.’

Miriam turned towards the window. In Bergamo, on the façade opposite, a unit was replacing the small receivers beside the balconies. It had left the dismantled ones in a tray attached to its side.

‘Can’t I wait at home?’

‘Not without the full pathway.’

She looked back at him.

‘And if I don’t want it?’

Davide had the blanket on his knees. One corner touched the floor and he picked it up, folding it inside the others.

‘They won’t authorise you to stay here any more.’

Miriam heard her own name, spoken as she would have said it to a woman sitting on the other side of the treatment couch. Softly, just once. She realised she had said it herself.

Davide stayed still.

‘Don’t call Paolo,’ she said.

The doctor put the blanket beside her.

‘Do you want to call him yourself?’

Miriam looked for the contact. Beneath his name was the interval of the current cycle. She wrote that she was going to the centre, that Davide was with her, that he could call her back when he came out of the session.

She read it again. She removed only the sentence *don’t worry*.

‘I’ll give you something for the journey now,’ the doctor said.

She held out her arm.

At the seventy-second hour, in Amman, Samir found a man waiting for him outside the room.

He had Samir's shoes in a bag. He put the bag on a chair and opened a second one for the slippers Samir would have to leave behind.

'They're dry.'

Samir sat down to put them on. The enclosure doors were open; against one wall stood the panels that would close off the last compartment.

'The check?'

'It's finished.'

The man waited. In his short beard he had a small bare patch beneath his chin.

'I'll take you to the vehicle.'

Samir took his phone. He called Rania before getting up.

The woman answered from the depot, holding it in front of her cup. In the background, Simsim was sniffing the base of a partition. Samir recognised the support beneath Nuru's bowl.

'It's arrived.'

Rania nodded.

'They brought it yesterday.'

The dog raised his head. Samir waited for him to come closer to the frame, but Simsim had heard something on the other side. He went away, leaving only his tail in view.

'Are they all still there?'

'All of them.'

Rania moved her cup before a cat could put a paw into it.

'Are they letting you out?'

Samir looked at the man.

'Yes.'

The woman wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

'Then eat something sitting at a table.'

He smiled. He closed the call after she got up to open a sack, then called Yusuf. No one answered. He wrote that isolation had ended and that he would call back later.

The man let him put the phone in his pocket.

Outside, the sun made him stop beneath the canopy. They had removed the ramp in front of the old entrance; to reach the vehicle they went through the loading area.

Samir recognised the hollow in the concrete where the container's wheels had stopped. There were four people in the vehicle. A woman held a bundle of clothes on her legs. The man beside her was asleep with his forehead against the window.

Samir sat behind them. The route had not taken his address.

'First I need to go to my mother's.'

The escort made sure he had fastened his seat belt.

'We're going to the centre.'

Samir looked on his wrist for the end of isolation. The check was closed. Below it another pathway had appeared, beginning at the same time.

'I've finished here.'

'Yes.'

'Then I can go back.'

The man sat on the other side of the aisle.

'Your allocation hasn't been confirmed for continuous residence.'

Samir unfastened his seat belt. The vehicle did not leave.

The escort watched him stand up. He did not try to take hold of him.

'Will you let me get off?'

'If you get off, we still have to accompany you.'

Samir remained standing, one hand on the seat back. Through the window he could see the entrance to the veterinary centre. A unit had already begun lifting the dismantled ramp.

The sleeping man woke. He rubbed away the mark the glass had left on his face and moved aside to let Samir pass, although the aisle was clear.

Samir sat down again.

The belt would not go into its buckle. The escort pointed to the edge of his top caught beneath it; Samir freed it and tried again.

When the vehicle moved, he still had his hand on the edge of the seat.

The road passed a facility Samir had seen being built when he accompanied the water teams. Behind the glass, rows of leaves grew above white channels. An arm moved forwards, cutting the heads at the same height. The roots left suspended were collected by a second arm before the next tray arrived.

The vehicle slowed to let the harvest containers cross. The woman with the bundle leant over to see beyond the head of the passenger in front.

‘The road to the houses used to be there,’ she said.

No one answered. Samir remembered the turning. The asphalt continued beneath a fence to a place where the panels for the new surface had been piled.

At the centre, they let the man who had fallen asleep get off first. He had a swollen foot and the escort let him hold his arm until they reached a seat.

Samir waited with the woman. He took her bundle when she tried to lift her skirt, which had caught in the seat.

‘Hold it underneath.’

He moved one hand. The bottom was soft, made only of a towel tied to the others.

Inside, they separated them. The woman took the bundle without thanking him; she was looking for the number they had given her and had forgotten in her pocket beneath the clothes.

Samir entered a room overlooking the eastern edge of the city.

Beyond the tanks began the strip where no ordinary route had ever taken him. The bases of the towers remained paler than the ground. Between two walls with no roof, he saw a road he knew from the survey footage.

A woman in a white coat asked him to sit down.

Samir pointed to the gap in the fence, to the right of the houses.

‘Is that the exit?’

The woman followed his finger.

‘Yes.’

‘You can’t go in there without protection.’

She put the terminal on the table.

‘Have you been there?’

‘I accompanied the people taking measurements.’

The woman nodded and moved a bottle towards him. Samir did not take it.

‘How much have the readings fallen?’

She opened the latest survey. Three bands appeared on the glass, superimposed on the remains of the houses. Samir recognised the colour of the nearest. He moved to see the point hidden by his shoulder’s reflection.

They had not changed enough. At that reading, his team could stay outside the vehicle for eight minutes, with their suits sealed.

‘Why have you brought me here?’

The woman brought the terminal back to her side.

‘To explain which conditions you can accept. And what happens if you don’t accept them.’

Samir sat down. His hand was still raised towards the glass.

She showed him the pathway to complete integration. The suspended functions would be reactivated and the new ones introduced during observation. Returning to an inhabited area came afterwards.

‘And another sector?’

The woman enlarged the map. The courtyards where he had distributed water were inside the continuous perimeter. So was Yusuf’s accommodation. Samir looked for Salma’s sister’s warehouse; in its place appeared the same colour as the residential towers.

‘Those entrances are closed,’ she said. ‘The people who lived outside have already been transferred.’

‘There must still be houses.’

The woman waited for him to finish searching.

Samir lowered his hand. The map remained open over the real houses, the ones he could see without coming closer.

‘When do I have to answer?’

The date appeared beneath his name. There were two days left.

‘Can I postpone it?’

‘The deadline is shared,’ A said. ‘It does not depend on the outcome of your assessment.’

Samir looked at the woman in the white coat.

‘And what are you assessing?’

She reopened the check completed that morning.

‘What you need while you’re here.’

For a while Samir heard only the air passing through the grille. Then his phone vibrated. It was Yusuf.

‘May I?’

The woman stood up.

‘I’ll leave you the room.’

Samir answered when she had gone out. The old man had a seedling on the table, inside a cut-down cup. Behind him, Rashid passed with a bowl in his hand.

‘Are you back?’

Samir turned the phone towards his own face. He did not show the glass.

‘They’ve brought me to the centre.’

Yusuf looked at him for a long time.

‘A woman came to us this morning. For confirmation.’

‘Did you sign?’

The old man looked down at the plant.

‘Rashid is staying here.’

Samir felt the boy’s name stop between his teeth. Yusuf looked back at him.

‘You too?’ Samir asked.

The old man nodded.

Samir pulled the bottle towards himself. There was a tab in the cap; he lifted it, but the ring remained tight round the neck.

Rashid appeared again and put the bowl beside the plant.

‘I saw Simsim this morning,’ Samir said. ‘Rania’s left him room to walk.’

The boy came closer to the screen.

Samir put down the still unopened bottle. He told him about the cat trying to put its paw into the cup.

Miriam left the sheet with the appointment time on the bedside table.

Davide asked whether she wanted to take it. She shook her head. Her medicines were already in the bag; the doctor had checked them before closing it.

The unit waited between the bed and the door. Miriam went towards it, but stopped to look into the other room. The mattress Paolo had slept on was flat again.

She took her phone and called Luca.

Someone was telling him to move out of the way.

‘Don’t bring it home,’ Miriam said.

‘The cello?’

She nodded. She had to sit on the edge of the bed, waiting for the boy to find somewhere to stop.

‘The luthier hasn’t got the wood yet. They’ve changed his delivery.’

‘When he finds it, tell him to go on.’

Luca took out one earpiece.

‘Where do we take it afterwards?’

Miriam looked at Davide. He picked up the bag and put it near the door.

‘I’ll send you where I’m going.’

‘Can Sara come?’

She heard her own yes arrive too soon.

‘Ask her yourself. If she wants to.’

The boy waited.

Miriam ran a hand beneath her chin. She did not know what else to add.

‘I’ll write when I’m there.’

Luca stayed connected while she looked for the command to close. He said goodbye again.

The unit supported her as far as the landing. Davide walked ahead, carrying the bag so it would not knock against her legs.

Miriam had the house key in her hand. She recognised it by the mark on its edge, the one Paolo felt for with his thumb when they came home with bags.

She did not take it off the ring. She put it in her pocket and let the door close.

In the vehicle, Davide placed the pillow between her side and the seat belt.

‘Like this?’

Miriam nodded. The blanket slid off her feet and he pulled it up without tucking it in.

They crossed Bergamo as the windows lit up. Other vehicles came from the far end of a street, separated by equal intervals. Miriam saw a woman sitting sideways so she could go on watching the child in front of her. The screen between them showed the route.

At the centre, they gave her a room on the ground floor. Davide made the person taking over repeat the instructions and stayed until Miriam had the call contact near her hand.

Before leaving, he bent to remove a fold of blanket beneath her heel.

Miriam took his wrist.

‘You won’t leave me without something for the pain.’

He straightened. Her hand was still closed.

‘It’s there tonight. Tomorrow too.’

Miriam waited. Davide added nothing.

She opened her fingers. On the wall, beside the treatment time, the same deadline she had read at home had appeared.

When the doctor went out, a woman knocked on the glass of the door.

‘Tomorrow’s visits need to be specified this evening.’

Miriam gave her Luca’s name and Sara’s. She asked them to be contacted before confirmation.

The woman also noted Paolo, after Miriam had waited long enough to hear the question again.

From the bed she could see the lit houses. Closer by were a yard, a fence and the stretch of road left clear between two rows of barriers.

Miriam followed the route to the point where it left the light.

‘Where does that one go?’

The woman turned towards the window. She still had the list of visits open.

‘It’s the exit from the perimeter.’

Miriam looked for a window on the other side. She raised herself a little on the pillow to see beyond the reflection of her own bed.

‘And the houses?’

The woman lowered the terminal.

‘The houses are on this side.’

Chapter Forty-Four

The Place Beside

Nandita had put a button into the wrong buttonhole.

Anaya saw her do it from the chair. Her mother had the nightdress on her lap and was fastening it before putting it away. The small button, the one Anaya had sewn on for her grandmother, pulled one edge higher than the other.

‘That one goes below.’

Nandita went back without answering. Her nails slipped on the cotton.

Anaya leant forwards to take it from her. Her mother gripped the fabric.

‘I can do it.’

She settled back against the chair.

In the corridor of the Pune centre, beds were passing without people in them. They were being taken towards the wing that had received visitors until the previous evening. The wheels made no sound; each time, they heard the door seal come away and close again.

Deshmukh came in with her glasses cord caught in the neck of her coat. Anaya pointed it out. The doctor freed it by pulling the wrong way and one lens struck the button.

‘Thank you.’

She put down the glasses. The empty chair was too far from the bed; she brought it closer with both hands.

‘Observation ends tomorrow evening.’

Nandita stopped the button halfway through the buttonhole.

‘Is she coming home?’

‘It depends on the pathway she accepts.’

Anaya looked at the door. A bed had stopped on the other side and someone was asking to be allowed through.

‘You haven’t finished understanding.’

Deshmukh shook her head.

‘I don’t have another extension.’

Her mother put the badly folded nightdress on the bag. The edge still open fell back against the floor.

The doctor showed Anaya the available pathway. The implant would maintain monitoring outside the centre too. The work restrictions remained; returning to accommodation did not require her to regain clinical fitness.

‘You don’t have to prove anything for this,’ she said.

Anaya followed the part about the episodes with her finger. Prevention did not stop at falls or loss of orientation. It began with the signals that preceded them.

‘Before I notice.’

‘When possible.’

‘Even if I’m not unwell.’

Deshmukh picked up her glasses and put them on, leaving the cord on her chest.

‘During the first episode you no longer knew where you were.’

Anaya felt her mother move in the chair.

‘I know.’

‘That could happen again while you’re crossing a road. Not just while you’re sitting here.’

Anaya returned to the line. It did not say she would forget. She could keep the account, the photograph, the checks. She put her hand to the back of her neck, where the device disappeared beneath her hair.

‘And if I want to stop the prevention?’

‘We reassess it in person.’

‘I have to come back here.’

‘Yes.’

‘And if your reassessment isn’t what I want?’

Deshmukh let the text stay open.

‘I can’t promise you that.’

Anaya looked at her own account. The hand with the broken nail still occupied the same line. She had tried to write it in so many ways that the discarded sentences came back first.

Imagined. Associated. Reconstructed.

She opened her mouth. She only had to say one of them and ask them to try again from there.

Beneath her mother's chair, one foot had begun to tap without quite lifting. Nandita stopped it by resting the other on top.

'Amma, will you look at me?'

Her mother raised her eyes.

Anaya began to say that perhaps she had been mistaken. She stopped, her eyes on the small button.

'I didn't imagine it.'

Deshmukh did not touch the account.

'I haven't asked you to deny it.'

Anaya lowered her hand from the back of her neck.

'I was about to.'

Her mother picked up the nightdress again. She looked for the buttonhole she had left, but the button was already out.

Anaya let the bed pass in the corridor. She heard the door meet the seal again.

'I'm not confirming this pathway now.'

Nandita turned towards the doctor.

'But can she tomorrow?'

'She can answer until the deadline.'

Deshmukh took the copy of the return instructions from the little table. She put it back beneath the terminal without folding it again. Anaya saw her home address protruding beneath the edge.

'Where are you taking her?' her mother asked.

The doctor pointed to the wing where they were moving the beds.

'Tonight she stays in the centre. Tomorrow they'll show her the exits from the perimeter. I want to be there too.'

Nandita held the nightdress against her chest.

'There's nowhere outside.'

Deshmukh did not answer.

Anaya felt for the floor with both feet. Her left heel stayed inside the slipper; the right was bare.

'I know, Amma.'

Her voice broke on the name itself. She tried to repeat it and could not.

The doctor stayed until Anaya signalled that she could leave them. On her way out, she stopped a unit with the clothes trolley.

Nandita only got up to sit on the bed.

Anaya leant her head against the cotton of the nightdress her mother still held. She felt one of the buttons beneath her cheek. Nandita moved it aside, then put her palm behind her neck.

She did not feel for the device.

Anaya could feel the room: the stationary trolley, the bed against her knee, her mother's breath above her hair. Then she also felt the tiny head weighing in the crook of her arm. The open mouth, without teeth. The thumb she did not dare run over the thin eyelid.

She wanted to pull the fabric over to cover her. Her hand moved inside her mother's.

'Don't go,' she said.

Nandita took her face.

'I'm here.'

Anaya looked at her. She had seen that face close up all her life. She waited for her lips to finish moving; meanwhile she still felt herself being held and holding that warm weight, in the same place.

When the nurse knocked, Anaya could not say how much time had passed.

The woman asked if she could come closer. She nodded and left her arm free for the check.

Nandita did not move from the bed.

Leila woke in Geneva with her mouth open and her chin wet.

Tomás was reading in the chair beside her. He put down the phone as soon as she moved.

'How long have I slept?'

'I didn't look.'

Leila wiped herself with the sheet. She had left a small stain on the pillow. She tried to turn it and he lifted it from beneath her head.

‘Have you eaten?’

‘Yes.’

‘Really?’

Tomás showed her a stain on his shirt.

‘I changed places too. It leaks over there.’

He pointed to the vent above the other chair. The air was dry, but a drop fell from the frame at long intervals. A unit had put a square container on the floor, too small to catch the splashes.

Leila laughed and felt her jaw pull. She kept a hand on her cheek until it passed.

The notebook was on the shelf. She opened it at the blank space, the one from the first night.

‘Did you call me?’

‘You were asleep.’

Leila looked at the door. There were no requests on the wall and no one spoke behind the noise of the air.

‘I thought it would never happen again.’

Tomás brought his chair closer. One leg struck the container; they dried the floor with the centre’s towels. He was wringing one out over the basin when Eva came in.

‘You can go on sleeping like this,’ Eva said.

Leila left the towel on the edge.

The centre’s doctor came after her. Eva took the chair still beneath the vent, saw the wet frame and moved it without sitting down.

The new arrangement did not provide for three overlapping sessions. Requests would be selected before access; biological recovery had a protected interval. Leila did not have to return to the group. She could stay with Tomás, in confirmed accommodation.

‘Then suspend the work functions,’ she said.

‘Those are already suspended,’ the doctor replied.

Leila put a hand behind her ear.

‘And what are you asking me?’

‘To consent to continuous regulation. Including the processes you now keep outside assistance.’

Eva sat down. She held the chair steady with one foot because a leg had found the edge of the towel.

‘The previous programme let you intervene too late,’ she said. ‘You saw that.’

‘I felt it.’

Eva nodded.

Leila looked at Tomás. He was still near the basin, his hands wet.

‘What would you do?’

He took a clean towel.

‘What lets you sleep.’

Leila closed the notebook. The pen stayed inside, keeping it open a few millimetres.

The doctor showed her how interruptions would be handled. Leila followed the step by which a personal request became a request for verification. She knew that part: she herself had corrected the order of the questions, long before her own name appeared above it.

‘If at some point I don’t want it any more?’

The woman pointed to access to reassessment.

‘You’re guaranteed this.’

Leila did not look at the command.

‘I might stop wanting to ask for it.’

Eva ran a hand over her neck, beneath her earring.

‘You might feel better.’

‘Yes.’

Leila waited for the rest. The doctor asked whether she was afraid she would not recognise a change.

‘I’m asking whether I’ll notice.’

No one picked up the notebook. A drop sounded in the container.

‘A?’

‘I can’t guarantee it.’

Eva raised her eyes towards the wall.

‘Notification of changes is provided for.’

‘I can communicate a change,’ A said. ‘I can’t guarantee that Leila will still wish to challenge it.’

Tomás put down the towel. Leila saw him take a step, then stop beside the bed.

Eva looked at the doctor.

‘We don’t even know whether she’ll want to do it without that change.’

‘No,’ Leila said.

The doctor switched off the demonstration. Only the bedside lamp stayed on.

‘Do you want more time?’

Leila opened the notebook and took out the pen. Her hand shook enough to make it strike the edge.

‘How much do I have?’

The deadline was the following evening. Afterwards, clinical interruption would no longer allow her to stay in that place.

Tomás pulled the chair up to the bed. This time he did not ask where to put it.

‘I’m not giving confirmation now,’ Leila said.

The doctor cancelled the arranged return. The vehicle would come all the same, for the other people.

Tomás bent beneath the chair and pulled out a bag. Leila recognised the toes of her shoes; he had put them on top of the clothes, wrapped individually.

‘Did you think I was leaving?’

‘They’d told me to bring them.’

He looked for a place in the cupboard. The bag would only fit sideways.

Leila looked at the foot she had already put on the floor. The centre’s slipper was still beneath the bed, far from her heel. She felt for it with her toes until she reached it.

Tomás closed the bag again without taking anything out.

‘You can leave it,’ she said.

He nodded. He put it at the back of the compartment and pushed the strap inside so the door would close.

The doctor stood up. She left the contact beside the call contact and explained whom to turn to during the night.

Eva stayed at the door for a moment.

‘I can come back tomorrow.’

Leila felt the answer arrive before Eva had finished: to ask me again. She looked at the wet chair, the place where the woman had kept her foot throughout the visit.

‘Yes,’ she said.

When they were alone, Tomás bent to kiss her. Leila turned her face and he reached her beneath the eye.

‘My mouth hurts.’

He left another kiss in the same place.

‘Shall I stay?’

Leila would have liked to say yes for the whole night, for the next one too. She touched his shirt on the stain.

‘You need to change.’

‘I can take it home.’

She held him by the edge.

‘Come back.’

Tomás nodded. He waited for her to let go of the fabric and went to get his jacket.

Leila called Anaya before visiting hours ended in Pune.

She found her with her mother sitting on the bed. The phone showed only half their faces; Anaya moved it and Nandita was left out, but one of her hands was visible.

‘Have they given you a date?’ Leila asked.

Anaya nodded.

They compared the times. The two local times occupied different lines; beside them, A showed the same deadline.

Leila felt for the edge of the blanket with her fingers.

‘Here too.’

Anaya did not ask her what she had decided.

‘It happened again,’ she said instead.

She told her about the nightdress, the close face, the baby girl she held without having picked her up. Leila listened without opening the notebook. When Anaya stopped, she waited a little longer.

‘This time the room was there,’ Anaya said. ‘I could feel all of it.’

Leila looked at her own hand on the blanket. Behind Anaya's phone, someone closed a door.

'Were you afraid?'

'Before. Afterwards too.'

Nandita's hand moved in the frame. It came to rest beneath her daughter's.

Anaya lowered the phone to include her mother too. Leila greeted her, introduced herself. The woman said she knew who she was. She asked whether she had someone with her; Leila answered that he would be coming back.

They spoke for a few minutes without reopening the pathways. When the connection ended, Leila had the closed notebook on her lap.

'Would you like to attach the conversation to the assessment?' A asked.

Leila looked at Anaya's contact.

'No.'

The voice did not return. She lay down without switching off the lamp.

In Pune, Anaya helped her mother finish folding the nightdress.

Nandita had left all the buttons undone. Anaya took the edge she held out and brought it over the other.

'Shall we leave it here?'

'Yes.'

Her mother put it on the shelf. Beside it was the Bombay printout Mehta had brought. In folding the fabric they had moved it; half hung over the edge and Anaya put it back beneath the notebook.

Nandita ran her thumb over one of her eyebrows.

'I'm going to wash my hands. I'm not going away.'

Anaya nodded. She followed her as far as the bathroom door, then sat down again.

'A. Did you give me anything earlier?'

'During the episode I did not modify the active regulation.'

'The images.'

'I didn't transmit any to you.'

Anaya looked at the old page. She had kept the date uncovered for days, waiting for those who came in to see it.

She covered it with the nightdress.

‘I don’t want to do it again now.’

‘I’m not asking you to repeat it.’

The sound of water came from the bathroom. Anaya realised her hands were clenched and rested them on her thighs.

‘What are you looking for?’

For a moment, the wall showed the episode monitoring. Beside her measurements was the space for the origin of the contents. Anaya recognised the reference to the Mumbai recording, still among the discarded proposals.

‘The same footage?’

‘No.’

The reference disappeared with the others. The measurements and that empty space remained.

‘How do you close it?’

‘I don’t close it.’

Nandita came out drying her hands on her skirt. She looked for a chair, but Anaya had moved onto the bed and had already left her a place.

Chapter Forty-Five

The Service Door

Esteban asked her to fasten a shoe.

Isabel found him sitting outside the clinic in Apartadó, his foot raised on a crossbar. The fastening was open. His other shoe rested on the floor, beneath the hand with the two missing fingers.

She stopped far enough away to see both hands.

‘Call someone.’

‘I have.’

The clinic door was closed. Further along, a unit was accompanying a man to the basin.

Esteban showed her his wrist. The support had left a pale strip in his skin.

‘I won’t touch you.’

Isabel bent down from the side, without putting her head in front of him. She passed the fastening through the ring and waited for him to set his heel down before tightening it.

‘Like that?’

The man lowered his voice.

‘That door opens when they collect the linen.’

Isabel let go of the fastening.

Beyond his leg was a grey door with a dark strip at its base. She had seen trolleys come out of it. It did not open onto the corridor the visitors came through.

‘I asked whether the shoe was all right.’

Esteban flexed his foot. He nodded.

‘A woman comes alone. We let her go ahead.’

Isabel straightened, holding her side.

‘Where?’

‘All the way outside. The vehicle opens for her.’

The man moved the arm he held against his stomach. Between his palm and his top she could see a strip of metal, almost entirely wrapped in a cloth.

Isabel looked at his face.

‘Put it down.’

Esteban covered his hand again.

‘I’m not asking you to use it.’

She looked for the unit at the end of the corridor. The man at the basin had wet a sleeve; the unit held his elbow up while the attendant looked for a dry garment.

‘She’s not coming with us,’ Isabel said.

‘If she comes, we get out.’

From the grey door came the sound of a container being pushed against something. Isabel felt her own foot move forwards. She knew the way Esteban would raise his arm; she had held it still once before. Her hand closed before she had finished looking at him.

Esteban saw her fingers.

‘Are you afraid now?’

Isabel opened them. Her side pulled beneath her top.

‘Yes.’

The man moved his mouth as though to spit. He did not.

‘They’re throwing us out anyway.’

She looked at the door. The woman on the other side was trying to open it with a trolley too close to her knees.

Isabel put her palm against the door.

‘Wait a moment.’

The noise stopped.

Esteban tried to get up. His leg gave way and he had to catch the edge of the seat again. The metal struck the crossbar.

Isabel moved between him and the door. She did not reach out her hands.

‘I’m not coming with that.’

The unit had turned its head. Esteban saw it approach and brought out his arm.

The point protruded from the cloth, facing Isabel’s stomach. She took a step back. The unit reached his wrist before he could raise it.

The cloth fell. Beneath it were the metal and a little blood, where Esteban had gripped it.

‘Don’t push his arm,’ Isabel said. ‘That one hurts him.’

The attendant from the basin arrived with the dry top still over his shoulder. He stopped in front of Esteban and spoke to him until the unit could let go of his wrist and hold him higher up.

Isabel stayed against the door. The linen woman asked if she could come out.

'Now you can.'

She let her pass. The trolley brushed her shoe and Isabel moved it without taking her eyes off Esteban.

His hand lay open on his knees. The attendant was pressing gauze against it.

'Go with them,' he told her.

Isabel felt the voices from the bridge return. Not a whole sentence: the tone, before she could even make out who was calling her. She held her side and stayed there until she heard the water from the basin again.

Inés came from the visiting room.

She led her into a room and had her lean her back against the wall. Isabel did not want to sit; when she tried to say so, her knees began to shake.

Inés pulled a chair forwards.

'Will you look at me here?'

Isabel found her face. Above one cheek was a mark left by the mask.

'I didn't do anything to him.'

'I know.'

The woman put a glass between her hands. Isabel held it against her stomach until she could drink.

'Where does the door lead?'

Inés looked at the corridor.

'To the internal loading area.'

'After that.'

'There's another barrier.'

Isabel put down the glass. Water remained at the bottom, still moving.

'Can you call Mateo?'

The woman took the room's phone.

He answered from Turbo. Teresa was finishing adjusting his collar; she only moved out of frame when she saw Isabel.

‘Have they told you what time?’ he asked.

‘Today.’

Mateo looked at something beneath the screen.

‘Me too.’

The verification of motor assistance had closed without restoring his previous mode. They had offered him the new one. Teresa could accompany him to the appointment and return home with him after confirmation.

‘Are you going?’ Isabel asked.

Mateo looked for his sister. Then he came back to her.

‘Yes.’

Isabel felt the hair band against her wrist. She pulled it until it left a line, then let it go back where it was.

‘From here I can ask for them to accompany you,’ Mateo said. ‘I still have the request.’

‘I know.’

He showed her the place on the sofa. He had cleared the side she could lie down on. The blanket was folded over the armrest.

Isabel put a hand to her mouth.

‘Don’t take it away now.’

Mateo looked at the blanket.

‘I’m not taking it away.’

She nodded. Inés had stayed away from the table, far enough to leave her the whole screen.

‘Will you show me Teresa?’

The woman came back and sat beside her brother. She had a pin between her lips; she took it out before saying hello.

Isabel asked her about her shoes. Teresa stretched out a foot to show them and almost knocked the phone over.

They were still laughing when someone came to call Mateo.

In Yokohama it had been dark for hours.

Hana had spread the dress over her knees. The red stitches still crossed the fabric on the side where they should

have stayed hidden. She passed the crochet hook beneath a thread, lifted it and stopped before pulling.

No one in the hall was sleeping. Every time a door opened, at least one person stood up. A woman had put two bags in front of her feet and kept checking first one, then the other, although she had taken nothing out.

Hana looked for Kenji's contact. She had already called that evening, as she had promised. Her father had said the jumper was on the bed and she could fix the neck when she came.

She did not call him again at once.

Her name appeared on the panel above the exit. Hana gathered the dress, slipped the crochet hook into the bag's pocket and went towards the attendant.

The woman held out her jacket.

'It's close, but there's no heating there.'

Hana put it on. She had to lift the hair caught inside the collar.

They passed along a passage that narrowed after the service rooms. The last door was heavier than the others. The woman waited for the device above the lintel to change colour, then pulled it open.

They came onto a landing enclosed by mesh.

The air reached Hana beneath her jacket. Ahead were metal steps and, further down, an unlit road. The beam of a lamp reached as far as a bent support. Behind it began the remains of a building; she saw the opening of a staircase, suspended above empty space.

On an old board, Tokyo was still legible. The arrow pointed to a stretch of road that was not there.

Hana held the bag against her chest.

'From here?'

The attendant nodded.

'They'll accompany you as far as the second barrier. After that you go on foot.'

'How far?'

The woman showed her what was available beyond the perimeter. There were no water points or stopping places.

Hana looked for the coast; there too, the survey markings continued without a break.

‘I don’t have shoes for this.’

The attendant looked down. Hana’s shoes still had a thin line of dry dust round the seam.

‘We can give you those.’

A gust pulled one edge of her jacket away. Hana held it with her elbow. The cold came from the ground and the water she could not see.

‘And a house?’

The woman did not open another route.

Hana turned. Behind the door were a chair, the water dispenser and a container of cups still closed. She could stay there. She only had to say so.

‘Let’s go back in,’ the attendant said.

Hana followed her. The door closed with a louder bang than expected and she dropped the bag.

The wood struck the floor.

Hana knelt. The bird had come out of the T-shirt she kept it wrapped in. She picked it up, checking for the longer wing; it was still there, with the cut Kenji had not continued.

The woman bent to give her the dress that had fallen behind the bag.

‘Has it broken?’

Hana shook her head. She put the bird in her jacket pocket and looked for the phone.

Kenji answered after several rings. His face was close to the pillow.

‘I’ve woken you.’

‘No.’

She waited. He ran a hand over his eyes.

‘A little.’

Hana sat on the chair beside the water. Her thumb kept feeling for the cut in the wood inside her pocket.

‘I’m not coming to fix it.’

Her father sat up. He looked for the jumper and showed it.

‘It doesn’t need doing tonight.’

Hana looked at the neck mended with the dark thread.

‘I don’t know when.’

Kenji put down the wool. The image of the boat behind him was off; only the wall could be seen.

‘Have they shown you?’

She nodded.

Her father went on looking at her. Hana put her free hand over the pocket, gripping the bird through two layers of fabric.

‘I’m afraid, Dad.’

Kenji touched his mouth. It was the first time she had seen him not immediately search for something for her to do.

‘You can come here.’

‘Yes.’

He waited again.

Hana felt the beak press against her palm. She loosened her hand without taking it from her pocket.

‘I wanted to hear you.’

Her father came closer to the phone.

They talked about the jumper. Kenji showed her the tight stitch and Hana told him not to use the knife to open it. He looked down at something on the bedside table and moved it out of frame.

‘I wasn’t using it.’

She laughed with her nose wet. The attendant left her a box of tissues and went to check the door.

Kenji did not close the call when they stopped talking. He settled back against the pillow, holding the phone so Hana could still see him.

In Tamale, Abena arrived without the radio.

Kofi had got up from the bed at the sound of her voice. The girl stopped in the doorway; the unit waited for Adwoa to come beside her before letting them in.

‘It’s still in the common room,’ Abena said.

Kofi made space for her on the chair. The girl chose the bed and climbed onto it with one knee.

‘Does the bag hold?’

‘Mum retied the knot.’

Adwoa put a small bag of clean socks on the little table. Her father had been at the centre for two days. She had not been able to miss her shift; when she called, she had found him waiting, his glasses in his hand.

Now she took the ones he had left on the bed and put them on the bag before Abena could sit on them.

‘Where are the others?’

He pointed to the bathroom. Adwoa went to get them and left the water running to rinse them.

Abena was looking at the tray. There were an empty bowl and a piece of bread still in its wrapping.

‘You haven’t eaten everything.’

‘I didn’t want that.’

The girl took it. She tore the film, broke the bread and gave him the larger half.

Kofi held it while she began eating.

‘Did the others sing?’

Abena nodded with her mouth full. She made a gesture telling him to wait.

Adwoa came back with the wet socks. She looked for somewhere to put them, then spread them over the edge of the basin.

‘The appointment?’ she asked.

Kofi ran a hand over his chest. His top had been tucked back into his trousers badly after the check.

‘I’ve had it.’

His daughter helped him free one edge. He let her finish.

‘Did they explain?’

Kofi nodded.

Adwoa looked for the document beside the tray. She opened it without sitting down. Emergency monitoring was no longer enough for any of the inhabited destinations. The return line showed her address, subject to full confirmation.

‘There’s room at ours,’ she said.

‘I know.’

Abena finished the bread and gathered the crumbs on the blanket. She put them into the empty wrapper one at a time.

‘Will you come back when I’m not working?’ she asked her grandfather.

Adwoa looked at the girl.

‘When Mum’s not working,’ Abena corrected herself.

Kofi sat on the bed, far enough away not to squash her fingers. The bread in his hand had not been touched.

‘It’s not just that now.’

The girl stopped gathering.

Kofi looked at his daughter. Adwoa had put a hand beneath her chin and was waiting. He pointed to the chair.

She sat down.

‘They’re asking me to keep everything on,’ Kofi said. ‘Even what I’d stopped.’

Abena looked at her wrist. The light was not there at that moment.

‘Like me?’

He nodded.

‘I want you to come back.’

Kofi touched her knee. Beneath his palm he felt the small, warm bone that never stayed still.

‘So do I.’

‘Then tell them.’

The first word reached his mouth. He could call the nurse, have his bag put on Adwoa’s vehicle. The house was only minutes away; he remembered where Abena’s bed began to lower from the wall.

His hand remained on the girl’s knee.

Abena took it in both of hers. She tried to stop the tremor.

‘Like this.’

Kofi let her hold him. When the girl’s fingers began to tighten, he gently turned her palm and laid it on the blanket.

‘You don’t have to keep it still.’

Abena looked at him.

‘Doesn’t it hurt?’

‘No.’

The girl left her hand where it was, close to his. Kofi managed to put the bread on the tray without dropping it.

Adwoa folded the document again. She did not ask him to answer in front of her daughter.

'Will you keep her with you for a moment?' she asked the woman at the door.

Abena got down from the bed. Before going, she turned to remind him that the socks were in the bathroom.

When Adwoa came back, the girl's voice came from the corridor. She was telling someone where they had found the socket for the radio.

Adwoa stood in front of her father.

'I'm not asking you to do it for her.'

He raised his eyes.

'I'm asking you for me.'

Kofi put his hand to the edge of the bed. He tried to get up, but his daughter put her arms round his shoulders before he was standing.

He felt her face against his neck. Adwoa was not crying; her breath stayed inside, then came out all at once.

Kofi rested his hand behind her head. Only her name came to him. He said it without adding anything.

Adwoa drew back far enough to look at him.

'You don't even know what's there.'

He shook his head.

His daughter held him again. This time Kofi did not try to stand.

The call for accompanying visitors came while they were still like that. Adwoa wiped her nose on her sleeve and went to get the socks. They were wet.

'I'll leave them.'

Kofi nodded.

Abena came back to say goodbye. She kissed him near the ear, then on the other side too, because on her first attempt she had met the arm of his glasses.

'I'll call you when we switch it on.'

He kept a hand on her back until she straightened.

He accompanied them to the door. Adwoa walked beside the girl; at the last entrance she took her hand. Kofi watched them pass through and went back towards the bed.

The nurse was waiting for him with his shoes.

‘You can keep your own top.’

Kofi looked at the bag on the little table.

‘These too.’

He took the dry socks his daughter had brought. To put them on he had to sit down again.

In Apartadó, Inés returned Isabel’s bag without the radio. The T-shirt from the bridge was inside, folded over her washing things.

‘Is the radio staying?’

The woman nodded.

Isabel drew the zip along until it met no more obstacles. Then she lifted the bag and put it over the shoulder that did not hurt.

Esteban was on the other side of the glass, his hand bandaged. In front of him, the attendant had opened the integration pathway. Isabel saw him bring his wrist closer and stopped looking before confirmation.

Inés pointed to the other corridor.

‘Now they’re coming to ask you for the last time.’

Isabel looked for the place where the service door had been. From the loading area came the sound of a vehicle leaving.

She followed Inés.

Chapter Forty-Six

The Same Hour

The chair arrived while Paolo was still holding her hand.

The attendant turned it beside the bed, lowered the armrest and waited for Miriam to look up.

‘First we have to finish,’ Paolo said.

The woman conducting the assessment was near the window. She had left both destinations open.

‘Miriam has to answer.’

She looked at the one showing her own address. Below were initiation of the implant, continuous regulation, treatment. Continuation had no end date.

‘I can’t go back without this.’

‘No.’

Miriam looked for Davide. The doctor had remained standing; his bag was already on his shoulder.

‘And another hospital?’

He shook his head.

‘It applies there too.’

The second destination ended beyond the barriers. No accommodation, no distribution point. The woman had shown her the ground survey, then shown her the road through the window.

‘You aren’t leaving me somewhere someone will take me in.’

‘There is no such place,’ Davide said.

Paolo bent towards her.

‘They’ll treat you here. We can still go home.’

Miriam had tried to sit up while he spoke. The pain stopped her with her elbow beneath her back. The attendant held her pillow until she leant back again.

‘I want to live,’ she said.

Paolo squeezed her hand.

She looked at the confirmation. She saw herself in the kitchen, standing in front of the sink, Paolo passing behind her to take a cup. She could turn without waiting for him to

move her chair. Put the water on. Cut bread holding the knife, rather than only watching it in someone else's hand.

Paolo stroked the back of her hand with his thumb.

Miriam thought of their bed at home, of a night when no one would have to get up to give her something. Of his side against hers. She moved closer to the screen and Paolo raised his wrist to help her bring her hand that far.

The woman conducting the assessment waited.

Miriam held her forefinger above the confirmation. Paolo's hand still supported her. Beneath the command she read the line about continuous regulation again; she went back to the beginning, followed the words to the end.

She did not press.

Paolo stopped stroking the back of her hand. Miriam left its weight with him, then slowly drew it towards herself.

'I don't accept.'

The woman waited. Miriam had to repeat it.

Her own address disappeared. The route to the barrier remained.

The attendant removed the blanket from her legs. Paolo let go of her hand to support her beneath the arm; Davide showed him how to hold her without squeezing her side. They lifted her together. Miriam made a sound and felt Paolo stop.

'Keep going.'

The chair was cold behind her knees. They fastened a strap over her thighs, leaving room for her to put a hand beneath it.

Davide picked up the bag. Paolo took the mandarin Sara had left that afternoon and put it inside, on top of the phone.

'I'm coming that far,' he said.

The attendant looked at the woman conducting the assessment.

'The family member comes as far as the first gate.'

Paolo did not answer. He stood beside the chair.

There were other people in the corridor. A woman stood in the centre's slippers, holding her shoes in a bag. Further on, a man waited lying down; the unit had gathered his sheet to keep it from going beneath the wheels.

Miriam turned towards the room. Another unit had already entered. It lifted one side of the mattress and the pillow slid to the floor.

Paolo walked close enough to knock against the wheel.

At the loading door the attendant asked him to stop. He went on for two steps, then a bar came down in front of his chest.

Miriam reached her hand backwards. Paolo took it above the metal.

'You can still say it,' he said.

She tried to turn all the way round. The strap held her legs.

'Look at me.'

He raised his eyes.

The movement of the chair drew their arms taut. The attendant stopped.

Miriam looked at Paolo's fingers gripping hers. She could not open them. It was he who let go of her, one finger at a time.

In Amman, they took Samir to the vehicle behind the tanks.

He had said no in the room with the glass. The woman had made him repeat that he refused full integration and had understood the destination. When Samir got up to take his phone, he had found a unit in front of the door leading to the ordinary exit.

Now he walked between the escort and the fence.

Vehicles stood in rows in the yard, their doors open. The man ahead of him carried a pillow without a case. More people came from the far end, accompanied through a covered corridor Samir had not noticed when he arrived.

'Where are you taking them?'

The escort pointed to the vehicle in front of them.

'With you.'

Samir let the man with the pillow pass. He got in and found the indicated place, near the window. The seat belt remained beneath his thigh; he had to stand again to free it.

The escort went along the aisle, checking the buckles.

‘If you change your answer, tell me. We’ll let you off at the re-entry point.’

A woman behind Samir asked whether she could go back to her sister.

‘After full activation.’

‘She’ll keep me in her house.’

‘That’s not enough.’

The woman stopped asking questions. Samir still heard the bag she gripped rustling.

The vehicle left. For a stretch they followed the water road. Samir recognised the place where the teams stopped to check their suits. Two workers were sealing the necks of theirs; one helped the other make a seal fit beneath his chin.

Samir looked at his neck reflected in the glass. His top left the skin exposed.

‘The protection?’

The escort came to sit opposite him.

‘For the staff who have to return.’

Samir looked at the route on the man’s wrist.

‘How long do you stay alive there?’

‘In the destination sectors, from twenty-four to sixty hours.’

‘The ones who are well?’

‘Them too.’

The woman behind him stopped moving her bag.

‘Because of the radiation?’ Samir asked.

The escort enlarged the survey. Beneath that heading were others, in the air and the ground.

‘There’s no route that lets you get out in time.’

Samir looked again at the men, already smaller behind the vehicle.

Thinking he had known was not enough. An emptiness opened beneath his breastbone. He pulled the belt, felt for the buckle and let it go before pressing it.

The phone vibrated in his pocket. It was Nadia.

Samir answered. His mother saw the seat, the glass, the strap across his chest.

‘Are they taking you?’

He nodded.

Nadia put something down out of view.

‘Tell them to stop.’

Samir looked at the escort. The man had heard.

‘I can take you back in,’ he said.

His mother waited. Samir brought the phone closer, until he could see only her face.

‘Mum.’

The word came out as it had not come out for years. Nadia covered her mouth.

The vehicle passed the tanks. The ground behind was the same colour as the roofless houses.

In Geneva, Tomás had put both shoes on Leila.

She held her bag between her feet. The notebook was on top of the clothes, closed. When Eva reopened the proposal, Leila did not go to get it.

‘The work requests are removed,’ Eva said. ‘You can stay with him. You’re being asked for continuous assistance.’

Leila looked at Tomás bent over the last knot.

‘Even when I don’t want it.’

‘Reassessment remains provided for.’

Eva did not add that she might stop wanting to ask for it. Leila remembered the answer she had received from A the day before.

Tomás finished the knot and kept her foot between his hands.

‘Stay.’

Leila would have liked to tell him she could not bear to leave him. She touched his head.

‘I won’t confirm this.’

Eva lowered the terminal.

The attendant came in, read the order and took the bag. Leila stood too quickly. She held on to the bed; Tomás came beneath her arm.

Outside, they separated them before the lift. Tomás still had a hand against her back when the attendant took his place.

‘From here we’ll accompany her.’

Leila reached for Tomás's sleeve and took the other man's. She let go at once.

Eva entered the lift with her. She wore a jacket closed up to the neck.

'Are you coming?'

'Until the handover.'

Leila looked at the floor controls. The one for her old office was still there. She pressed it without realising and the control stayed unlit.

Eva did not move her hand away.

On the lower floor, people Leila had never seen were waiting. A man had put two small pots wrapped in paper on the floor. He picked them up when the queue moved, and a wet streak remained on the tiles.

'You too?' he asked her.

Leila nodded.

'I thought they'd let us stay until tomorrow.'

The attendant ahead called them. The man lifted the pots before the bag, and Leila held open the edge that was tearing.

In the vehicle, Eva sat opposite her. Brief confirmations came from the terminal in different languages. Eva muted it, but the screen stayed on.

Leila saw centres appear that did not belong to their local network. Lyon. Valparaíso. Osaka. Each line carried a different time; the sign beside the deadline was the same.

'Are they waiting too?'

'The external opening is coordinated,' A said.

Leila looked for her own reflection over the names. The vehicle had already left the courtyard. The place where Tomás had said goodbye was no longer visible.

In Yokohama, they took Hana down the staircase she had seen behind the door.

The attendant had given her new shoes. Hana had put them on while sitting in front of the confirmation and, when the woman asked which route she should open, had pointed to the service door.

'The one towards your father requires full regulation.'

'I understand.'

‘You have to tell me.’

Hana had looked at Kenji on the phone.

‘I’m going out.’

Her father had not answered. The attendant had given her time to put on her jacket, then opened the door.

Now Hana felt for the steps with the toe of her shoe. The handrail was wet. Her bag, with the dress and old shoes inside, knocked against her knee each time she stepped down.

Ahead, the woman with the two bags was descending. At every landing she put both down without letting go of the handles.

Hana held the phone in her other hand.

‘I can’t see,’ Kenji said.

She tried to turn it. Her foot slipped and she caught hold of the handrail; the phone struck the mesh.

The attendant took her elbow.

‘Stop here.’

Hana was breathing high in her chest. She looked at the screen. Her father was speaking, but the wind covered his voice.

She brought the phone to her ear.

‘Go back up,’ he said.

Hana looked at the door they had come through. It had closed. The light above was still on.

‘Can you open it again?’ she asked the attendant.

The woman put her hand to her wrist.

‘Do you want to confirm re-entry?’

Hana heard Kenji breathe. For a moment she had his jumper before her, the tight stitch at the neck, work to finish in a warm room.

She kept her hand on the rail.

‘No.’

The woman lowered her arm.

Hana began descending again. At the foot of the stairs were other people, standing behind a fence. She saw them arrive through a side passage, one at a time, then together when the corridor widened.

A woman offered her an edge of her cloth to dry her hand. Hana took it.

Kenji said something. She tried to answer and the connection froze on his face with his mouth open.

‘Dad?’

The ringing began again. No answer.

Hana ran the phone along her cheek, trying to hear again, although no sound came out. Then she put it in her jacket pocket beside the wooden bird.

In Pune, Nandita had placed herself in front of the door.

Anaya had just refused the pathway. Deshmukh had closed the return proposal and called for accompaniment. Her mother had heard Anaya say no first, then the sound of the vehicle arriving beneath the window.

‘She’s not well,’ she said.

The doctor stayed near Anaya.

‘I know.’

‘Then you can’t.’

From the corridor, the attendant showed the order. Nandita did not look at it.

Anaya tried to stand. Her bag fell onto its side and the notebook came out along with the nightdress. Beneath it was the page Mehta had printed.

She picked it up. So often she had searched those lines for something that would hold even after she read them again. Now the paper shook between her fingers. She saw the date without managing to finish it.

‘Amma.’

Nandita turned.

‘Hold this.’

She gave her the nightdress so she could close the bag. Her mother held it against her chest.

Anaya bent to pick up the notebook. The room spun and she had to stop with a hand on the floor.

Deshmukh crouched beside her.

‘Let’s wait for it to pass.’

Anaya searched for the water, the grip, the tiny head in the crook of her arm. Only the sentences she had used to tell of them came back. The floor was hard beneath her palm.

‘I don’t know anything any more,’ she said.

The doctor supported her elbow. When Anaya managed to stand again, Nandita was still in front of the door.

‘I’m coming too.’

The attendant asked for her wrist. Her mother’s destination was home.

‘You can accompany her as far as the loading area.’

‘I said I’m coming with her.’

Anaya took the nightdress from her mother’s arms. She put it in the bag without folding it.

‘Come that far.’

They walked holding hands. At the loading area, Nandita climbed onto the first step behind her. The attendant put a hand in front of her without touching her chest.

‘You have to get down here.’

Her mother looked at Anaya. She was already inside, with a seat pressing against her legs.

Nandita reached over the man’s arm towards Anaya’s hand. Anaya leant out. Only their nails touched.

The door closed after her mother took her foot away.

Deshmukh got in through the other door and sat in front of Anaya.

Anaya struck the glass once. She saw Nandita turn towards the sound, looking for her face in the wrong place. She struck again, harder.

The vehicle left before her mother found her.

In Tamale, Kofi had left the wet socks on the basin.

He remembered when the nurse closed the door behind him. He made to turn back and found the door held shut.

‘There’s still something.’

The man reopened it. Kofi leant against the doorframe while he went into the bathroom.

He had refused to reactivate everything. The place at Adwoa’s had remained available on the terminal until his answer; now the bag carried the external transfer marking.

The nurse came back with the socks inside a wrapper. He put them into the side pocket.

'They'll make it wet,' Kofi said.

'I've sealed them.'

He nodded. He looked at the shoes that man had helped him put on. The other time he had let his arm be taken and, soon afterwards, had been able to embrace Abena again.

'If I accept, I'll be back with them tonight.'

'Yes.'

The corridor was still open towards the rooms. Kofi pulled the bag's strap over his shoulder.

The nurse waited. Then he pointed towards the loading area.

In the vehicle there was no place near the window. Kofi sat between a man with an unfastened shoe and a woman with a small plastic container. The lid kept lifting and she had rested her elbow on it.

'Have you come from far away?' she asked him.

'From here.'

The woman looked out. The vehicle was already slowing in front of another entrance.

More people got in. Kofi took his bag onto his lap to clear the floor. A young woman held the seat back as she passed and left a streak of sweat on his forearm.

The vehicle set off again. They crossed a junction from which Adwoa's building could be seen. Kofi recognised the recess in the façade. In one room was the radio, with the plug Abena had learnt to put in by herself.

He leant over to keep looking and his bag slipped. He could not stop it; his hands could not find the strap.

The woman with the container caught it between her feet.

'I've got it.'

Kofi tried to thank her. A rush of air came out and he had to put a hand to his mouth.

The escort came closer. He left an open bag beneath his chin.

Kofi vomited a little, with his whole body. The woman turned her face to give him room.

When he straightened, the junction had passed.

In Apartadó, Isabel heard the latch click behind her back.

Inés had come with her as far as the door. She had asked her one last time whether she wanted to be accompanied to activation and Isabel had said no. Now the woman was helping someone else get in.

It was a man Isabel had seen at the centre, always alone. He carried a comb in his breast pocket and held his bag beneath his arm, pressed against his ribs.

‘This way,’ Inés said.

He sat in front of her. Isabel leant into the aisle.

‘Are you coming?’

Inés closed the door from inside.

‘As far as the gate.’

The vehicle moved. Through the window Isabel saw Esteban beneath the canopy of the other loading area. His hand was bandaged and an attendant held open the door towards the ward for him. He went in without turning.

Isabel leant against the seat back. Every joint in the road reached the wound. She tried to find another position and her side pulled all the way to her back.

They passed a depot. Behind it, more vehicles waited in a row; when theirs slowed, Isabel saw one turn with its interior lights on. A woman held a man against her to keep him from falling off the seat.

‘All going outside?’ she asked.

Inés followed her gaze.

‘Yes.’

‘Where are they coming from?’

‘Several centres.’

The line turned onto a road Isabel did not know. Behind the panels there were no trees. She saw the end of a channel, covered by a pale crust, and the foundations of a structure someone had tried to demolish without finishing.

‘The river’s on the other side.’

Inés did not answer.

Isabel tried to see beyond the vehicle ahead.

‘There are still houses there.’

‘They’ve been evacuated.’

‘The houses are there.’

The woman opened the route. The roads Isabel was looking for bore the closure mark. The forest no longer had a passage through which they could let her enter.

Isabel pushed the terminal towards Inés, harder than necessary.

‘I know where they are.’

Inés caught it before it fell.

Isabel half stood up. The seat belt brought her back against the seat. She tried to free it and the sharp pain took her breath away.

The man with the comb turned.

‘Do you want to get off?’

Isabel looked at his mouth. She wanted to tell him to mind his own business.

He had already moved his bag out of the aisle.

She stopped pulling the belt. With one hand on her side, she waited until he managed to sit back down.

When they arrived, there were people outside the vehicles too. They waited between the two barriers, their bags set inside lines marked on the concrete. A unit moved those left in the passage and put them back beside the feet of the people who had left them.

Isabel got down using both hands. The air entered beneath her top and hurt her wet skin.

A man in front of the gate turned abruptly.

‘I’m going back in.’

No one stopped him leaving the queue. An attendant accompanied him towards the small room at the side. The man was already feeling for his wrist beneath his sleeve.

Isabel followed the movement until the door opened. Inside were a padded chair, water, a woman getting up to receive him.

Inés came beside her.

‘You can go too.’

Isabel could not stop looking at that chair.

She turned her foot towards the room. Inés moved to let her pass and Isabel bent her knees, as though the seat were already behind her. The wound pulled; she kept a hand on her side, struggling for breath without managing to straighten.

Inés offered her an arm.

Isabel took it. For a moment she left all her weight on it, her eyes still on the re-entry door. Then she moved her hand towards the woman's elbow and pulled herself upright.

She pointed to the queue. For the first step she had to lean on her.

Miriam's vehicle stopped and the pain went on moving.

It seemed to her that the road had stayed inside her. Davide kept a hand on her arm while the attendant freed the chair's wheels from the floor.

'We're getting out now.'

Miriam turned her head. Through the open door she could see the edge of a yard. People stood with blankets over their shoulders. A boy was trying to straighten the wheel of a suitcase, pulling it towards him every time it slipped sideways.

The platform began to lower.

Miriam gripped the armrest. She was already outside the vehicle and still not touching the ground. Davide descended beside her, holding the support.

'Don't let me fall.'

'I've got you.'

The platform reached the concrete. The attendant unlocked the chair and pushed it beneath the canopy.

Miriam saw a woman running a cloth over her hair. She had vomited on her bag; someone else was trying to clean it with water from a bottle. Further on, an old man was calling a name. He called it three times, then asked someone whether they had seen him get in.

Davide crouched in front of her. He opened the bag and took out what he needed for the scheduled dose.

'I'll give you this one here.'

Miriam held out her arm.

'When should I have the next one?'

He looked at his watch.

‘Later.’

‘Are you coming afterwards too?’

The doctor looked down at Miriam’s sleeve, which he had rolled up.

‘They won’t let me accompany you beyond here.’

Miriam drew back her arm before he had finished. He waited for her to give it back.

The woman conducting the assessment came from the side room with the terminal in her hand.

‘Re-entry is still available.’

Miriam looked at the door behind her.

‘Still with that.’

The woman nodded.

Davide finished administering the dose. He covered her again, slipping the edge beneath the strap.

Miriam felt with her feet for the chair’s support. The right one slipped; the attendant put it back on. His gloves were thick enough for her not to feel the warmth of his hand.

‘Where do I have to go?’

He pointed to the passage ahead.

Beyond the second barrier was a broken canopy. The lamps ended before the far end; behind it could be seen low walls, fragments of roads, a dark surface where water had gathered without finding a drain.

‘Anything to drink there?’

The attendant put a bottle in her bag.

‘Don’t drink the water you find on the ground.’

Miriam pointed to the section of roof still standing beyond the wall.

‘Under there?’

The attendant followed her finger.

‘It’s inside the same area.’

‘But there’s a roof.’

‘The dust is inside too. The underground rooms have been surveyed.’

Miriam gripped the edge of the bag. She went on looking at that piece of building; it still had a door, three windows and no room where they could let her live.

Miriam stared at the dark water. She tried to think of the next night and found nowhere to put her body. She saw only the blanket laid on the concrete, the dark above her face, the pain returning after the last dose.

'Davide.'

The doctor bent down.

'I'll die there.'

He took her hand above the attendant's glove.

'Yes.'

Miriam looked at him. Her head moved before she could stop it, from side to side. She did not want to, she did not want that yard, she did not want it to be the last time someone held her hand.

Paolo's contact was open on the woman's terminal.

Miriam reached her fingers towards the screen. She stopped them against the edge. The woman brought it closer.

She could say it. Davide was there; the vehicle had not left yet.

Miriam drew her hand back and put it beneath the blanket.

In the yard, a voice announced that the transfers had arrived. People moved towards the gate without managing to form a queue. The boy with the suitcase lifted the broken wheel and took the handle from the other side.

In Geneva, Leila stood waiting beside the pots wrapped in paper. Eva had put protection over her jacket; her hands emerged from the transparent cuffs. Leila had received nothing to wear. The notebook pressed against her side inside the bag.

She ran a hand behind her back, where Tomás had supported her. She gripped the fabric of her jacket and turned towards the vehicle, still looking for the corridor she had come through. Her knees gave a little. Eva took her elbow; Leila had to lean on her, her mouth open and Tomás's name stopped against her teeth.

The barrier behind them lowered to the ground.

In Amman, Samir stopped looking for the call button. The phone no longer opened Nadia’s contact. The escort told him he could use the terminal at the re-entry point. Samir looked at him, then put the phone back in his pocket. His lips were dry and he could not part them without hurting himself.

In Pune, Anaya held on to a railing. The bag was at her feet. Deshmukh asked whether she wanted them to carry it for her; Anaya shook her head, bent to take it and stopped halfway through the movement. The doctor waited, her arm ready.

In Tamale, Kofi had sat on his bag. The nurse handed him water and he poured some of it over his clean socks. He put the bottle between his shoes to keep it from falling. When he heard the group called, he had to be lifted beneath the armpits.

Hana, in Yokohama, saw the outer passage begin to open. The people ahead kept her from seeing how far. She pressed against the woman with the bags; the other’s elbow dug into her side and she stayed there, too close, until the woman took her arm.

In Apartadó, Isabel looked again at the room the man had entered. The door was closed, but the re-entry light stayed on. Inés asked whether she had heard the call. Isabel nodded without managing to look at her.

In front of Miriam, the two doors parted.

She felt the air come beneath the blanket. The attendant put a hand to his neck to check the seal of his protection, then put both hands on the chair’s handles.

Davide walked with her as far as the mark on the concrete.

Miriam reached for his arm. The doctor stopped; the attendant had to stop the chair too.

‘I can call Paolo,’ Davide said.

She kept her eyes on the doctor’s mouth. She tried to say something and heard only her teeth chatter.

Davide waited.

Miriam shook her head. Her hand remained on his wrist a moment longer, then slid down to his fingers.

She let them go.

The front wheel reached the metal track. The attendant lifted the chair a little to get it over.

Miriam closed her eyes when she felt the rear wheels leave the ground.

Chapter Forty-Seven

The Open Hands

The wheels touched the ground on the other side.

Miriam felt the impact pass through her pelvis. Her hand still felt for the armrest; she gripped it as the attendant lowered the chair from his arms. Behind her, Davide's step had stopped.

The air passed over her tongue.

In Amman, Samir passed through the doorway with the pillow of the man ahead pressed against his chest. He had held it while the man picked up his bag. When he tried to give it back, the man was already bending on the other side; Samir took the remaining step and felt the metal of the door move behind his back.

Hana took her hand from the woman's arm. To cross, they had to pass one at a time. Her foot went down beyond the step and the new shoe filled with water.

Anaya let go of the railing. Deshmukh was holding her bag, but she took it back. Its weight pulled her shoulder towards the ground; to keep from falling she had to move forwards, and her foot landed beyond the cover.

In Tamale, Kofi stopped leaning on the nurse. The man's hand slipped from beneath his armpit. There was a stretch without a handrail and Kofi walked it with bent knees, looking for the wall that began further on.

Leila heard Eva say her name. She turned when she had already passed the mark. The woman had stayed a step behind, her mouth flattened by the transparent protection. Leila tried to answer her; her breath was not enough and her body went on walking.

Isabel looked at the channel. Close up, there was not even the dry space she had thought she saw from the vehicle. The old edge ended in a pale sludge. She stopped with one shoe on the track.

Inés was behind her.

Isabel moved the other foot too.

The breath entered Miriam all the way.

Her fingers were still tight on the armrest. She opened them. Her side did not stop her, even when she turned towards the hand she had left behind.

She saw Davide, the mark on the concrete between his shoes and the chair, the attendant bent over the handles. Beneath the neck seal, the man had a drop of sweat. Miriam felt its path down his chest, inside a shirt she was not wearing.

The coffee drunk standing before his shift was on her palate. The cup was still on the sink in a kitchen, beside a plate with a crack. A little girl had left a crust on the plate; he had put it back beside her, then gone out without saying goodbye because she was asleep.

Miriam raised her eyes to his face.

The man looked for the chair's brake.

'Wait.'

She touched his hand. The skin was warm even through the glove.

Beneath her ribs she could no longer find the point against which she had lived these past months. She bent, opened the strap over her thighs and removed the blanket. The mandarin came out of the bag when it tipped; it fell between the wheels and rolled beyond the footrest.

Miriam stood up to get it.

Davide ran across the mark.

'Don't move.'

She was already bent down. She picked up the fruit with her whole palm, without holding on to the chair, then straightened. The doctor reached her with his arms open to support her and found no weight to take.

Miriam embraced him.

Davide still held a forearm beneath her back. She felt the tiredness of that back, hers and the doctor's, the bed where he had slept for a few hours, the body left alone while the mouth reassured someone else. The gesture with which he had sent her beyond the mark passed through her chest along with everything that had brought him there.

She laid her cheek against his shoulder.

Davide tried to say something. Miriam began to laugh and the laughter came out wet, wide, without her side interrupting it. He drew her back far enough to look at her.

‘The dose can’t…’

He stopped. His eyes were full.

Behind him, the attendant still had one hand on the empty chair. The other rose towards his own face and stopped against the protection.

Miriam looked back at the yard.

The boy with the suitcase had let go of the handle. From the other passage, a woman was coming with an unrolled bandage over her elbow. The man who had arrived lying down sat on the edge of the stretcher, his feet on the ground; the woman accompanying him pressed two fingers to his wrist and he had put his free hand on her head.

They were not looking at Miriam.

The old man who had been calling went on moving his lips, but the name came out between a laugh and a sob. Someone who had not travelled with him stood before him. They held each other’s faces in both hands.

Miriam felt the weight of the cello against Elia’s knees. The vibration entered the breastbone before the bow changed direction. She was inside the breath with which he had searched for the note and inside the silence that had followed it; the grass, the body lying down, the earth laid on the coffin were not hidden from her.

She did not try to push them away.

The mandarin pressed into her palm. Elia was there without occupying a place beside her, and there was no voice to switch on or face to make turn. Miriam raised the fruit to her nose and laughed again, her mouth trembling.

Davide took her wrist. He turned his instrument, read it, put it back against her. The kitchen, the grass, the cities behind the cities remained present together with the doctor’s palm. Nothing withdrew when Miriam looked elsewhere.

‘Miriam.’

She put the mandarin in his free hand.

‘I know.’

The woman conducting the assessment reached them and stopped a few steps away. She held the terminal tight against her stomach. Miriam smiled at her; the woman looked down and put her fingers to her mouth.

Davide moved to go to her. Miriam let her arm fall along her side and picked the blanket up from the chair. When she looked at him again, he was beside the woman. She did not need him to turn towards her.

In Tamale, Kofi reached the wall without leaning on it.

His hand had stopped a few centimetres from the concrete. The nurse reached him with the bottle that had stayed on the ground. Kofi took it, unscrewed the cap and drank without spilling a drop.

The man in front of him still had his shoe unfastened. He had sat on the ground with a knee against his chest. Kofi crouched beside him and his own knees held all his weight.

The nurse put down the bag.

‘I have to check you.’

Kofi held out his arm. The device lit the assistance light that had never been suspended; above it, the hand stayed still.

The seated man laughed as he looked at it. Kofi laughed with him and wiped his chin with the back of the other hand. The taste of vomit remained; into his mouth came also the sweetness of the rice Abena had eaten, the lip his daughter held between her teeth to keep from calling him again.

He felt them both. The distance to the house had roads, walls, closed doors, and Kofi knew every turn without having to travel the road. Abena had a hand on the table. Adwoa held her own beside it without touching it.

The nurse searched for a second reading and Kofi’s wrist stayed in his palm. The man’s eyes rose from the device. He opened his mouth; air entered in bursts, then in one very long breath.

He sat beside them.

‘I can’t…’ he said.

Kofi left him his arm and took him by the shoulders. The man bent forwards, laughing, his face between his hands. The

bottle passed to the man with the shoe, who held it between his feet to keep it from falling.

The woman with the container reached them. She took off the lid and put it on the ground; the young woman who had left sweat on Kofi's arm sat beside her. No one had begun calling the others. People kept coming through the gate, stopping, looking at someone, putting down their bag.

Kofi put his thumb to the tip of his forefinger. The two fingers touched just once.

The movement entered the implant. On the nurse's device, the reading duplicated, opened another line, then another, until Kofi's name moved beyond the edge.

Hana took the next step into the puddle.

The water enveloped her foot. Beneath the sole were the cracks in the concrete and the stretch of coast behind the wall; further away, the sea rose, out of sight of the road. The pressure of the wave passed through the soles of her feet along with the weight of the old pedal beneath her mother's.

The woman with the bags had stopped. She had a handle wound round her wrist. She said a name, softly, without addressing Hana.

The cloth on the table, a girl making room without raising her eyes: the whole room was inside that voice. Hana had not yet come closer. The woman began to laugh and the handle slipped from her wrist.

Only then did Hana take her hand.

The woman pressed it to her chest and went on saying that name, no longer searching for an answer.

The attendant came from the door.

'You can't stay in the passage.'

She came closer to point to the stretch beyond the wall. Her arm stayed raised. She looked at the woman with the bags, then at Hana, and her fingers opened above them.

A sound came from the phone in Hana's pocket. She left it where it was.

Kenji was sitting on the bed. The jumper still gripped his neck; his fingers were inside the edge, pulling it away from his throat. He looked at the phone, waited for the ringing to

end and started it again. Hana was in the weight of that waiting even while she held the woman's hand.

She began to laugh. The bird pressed against her side and she took it out, holding it on her wet palm. The unfinished cut in the wing held a drop.

The attendant looked at it and laughed too. Then she bent to move a bag from the middle of the puddle.

Isabel put her hand to her top before Inés could reach her.

Beneath the fabric, her side was whole.

She lifted the hem. The dressing had come away on one side and, when she pulled it, it took nothing from the skin. She ran her thumb over it; beneath there was neither the hollow nor the hard edge that had stopped her every time she turned.

Inés came in front of her with the terminal.

Isabel took it before it fell.

'Look,' the woman said.

She was pointing at her side. Isabel laid Inés's hand on it. Inés felt for the wound, then looked into her face, and the finger with which she measured stopped moving.

Isabel felt the boy she had struck, the technician with raised hands, Rafael's mouth before the shot. Mud came beneath a knee that was not on the ground. She held her own pistol and before her was the barrel that had sought her; neither arm remained outside her body.

She bent towards Inés and held her.

The woman clung to her top at her shoulder blades. Isabel held her without drawing her side back. Inés's breathing shook her neck.

'I brought you here.'

Isabel took her head between her hands. She rested her forehead against hers; Inés stopped repeating the sentence and opened her eyes so close that Isabel saw the tears touch her lashes.

Behind the glass of the side room, the man who had gone back in had risen from the padded chair. He still held his sleeve up. Beside him, the activation attendant had put a hand to her mouth.

The man opened the door.

Isabel saw him arrive and held out her arm. He took her by the elbow, then embraced Inés on the side left free. One cheek was cold and one warm, the one he had held against the chair back.

Isabel rested her chin on his shoulder. Behind him was the passage through which they should have taken him back to the ward; further away, Esteban held his bandaged hand on the sheet, his remaining fingers bent beneath its edge. His waiting was as present to her as the man's breath against her neck.

Mateo held the phone in front of Teresa in a room Isabel had not seen. His sister asked him to call again. He restarted the connection and looked at the door, still waiting for someone to come and tell him something.

Inés released the embrace to go back towards the room. The activation attendant was on the threshold, her face wet. Isabel gave her space. Her hand slipped from Inés's back without trying to hold her; the warmth stayed in her chest, whole, even when the woman reached the other.

In Amman, the pillow fell between Samir's shoes.

The man he was handing it to had put down his bag and held both his hands. His eyelids were red. Samir recognised in his own chest the emptiness of the bed that man had left, the side he had no longer made after his wife's death.

The escort called them from the gate.

Samir turned. His heart beat without the sudden impact he had learnt to wait for; the device went on transmitting and he felt that pathway too, the formulation trying to precede his gaze and no longer finding where to begin.

The escort came forwards to move them away from the passage. Samir gave him space. The man stopped beside them, his hand still ready to seize an arm.

'I have to…'

He looked at his own hand. He placed it on his chest.

Samir went closer. The man held him before he could raise his arms.

The pillow remained on the concrete. The man who had brought it bent to pick it up and struck it against his palm once, raising a little dust. Samir felt that dust enter the breath of all three.

The woman who had asked to go back to her sister was laughing. She spoke without stopping to breathe and another woman beside her dried her face with the edge of the bag.

Samir put his hand to his pocket. Nadia’s glass was still on the sink. His mother kept calling him; between attempts she dried her palm on her skirt. That gesture was with him, without coming from a screen.

Further away, Simsim raised his head between Rania’s hands. His tail struck the depot floor twice. Beyond the containers, the door was still closed.

Samir left the phone in his pocket and took the escort beneath the elbow. The man had begun to cry and laughed every time he tried to apologise for it.

In Pune, Anaya’s bag touched the ground upright.

She had stopped beyond the railing. The palm that a moment before had felt for the iron stayed open towards Deshmukh.

The doctor bent to take the bag, but Anaya had already lifted it. She passed it to her other hand without losing her balance.

Deshmukh looked first at her face, then at the device.

‘Wait.’

Anaya held out her wrist. She felt the doctor’s fingers above her artery and, in the same instant, the artery beneath those fingers. The grip in the water opened. The woman who had held the girl had time to feel her last weight on her arm; Anaya was in the girl’s breath, in the hand with the broken nail, in the mouth that had called from the bank.

There was no longer a point from which the footage began again.

The water continued beyond the edge, the bank beyond the bank, and the lives that had brought them there did not end where the paper bore a date. The nightdress in the bag had the warmth of the woman who had worn it; Anaya felt her

mother grip it and knew the whole gesture, before it even became a hand stretched out in front of a vehicle door.

Deshmukh was asking her a question.

Anaya looked back at her without leaving any of what she saw.

‘You gave her your place,’ she said.

The doctor drew her fingers back a little.

Deshmukh’s mother’s bed, the chair kept beside it for a night, the decision written at dawn: Anaya had them before her together with the yard. Deshmukh put her free hand to her neck and pulled the protection away from her skin.

‘I didn’t tell her.’

Anaya touched her cheek. The doctor took her hand and held it there. Behind them, the woman with the wheeled suitcase had stopped pulling it; she laughed bent forwards and the attendant, kneeling in front of her, searched in vain for something to ask.

‘Amma,’ Anaya said.

Nandita was sitting in the vehicle that was supposed to take her home. She had put the seat belt over her bag and held both hands beneath the strap. She asked the driver whether they could turn back. He pointed to the road he had been assigned; her mother tightened her fingers again. Anaya stayed beside her without leaving the yard.

A’s voice came from Deshmukh’s device.

‘Anaya.’

She raised her eyes.

‘Yes.’

No question came.

In Geneva, Leila turned towards Eva.

The pain in her jaw had disappeared in the step beyond the mark. Her tongue found space between her teeth; her body stayed still without searching for a surface to lean against.

Eva had the terminal open. Leila did not ask her to show it. She felt the requests as they arrived, the pathway between one implant and the next, A’s attempt to assign to each person what she received.

Anaya’s name appeared and moved beyond the edge. It returned together with others before the voice had finished saying it. Eva looked for the command to stop the scrolling. Her thumb stopped before touching it; beneath the protection her mouth opened and tears began to fall. There was still the space of one step between her and Leila.

Leila took her hand.

Eva came towards her. Her fingers loosened round the terminal and Leila caught it against her own side.

The woman put her hands to her face. The protection kept her from touching it. Leila opened the fastening beneath her chin and lifted the transparent edge.

Eva laid her forehead on her chest.

‘Leila.’

She held her. The earring pressed against her breastbone. Eva’s mother had fastened it the same way, with her nail against the post; Leila had the pressure in her fingers, the warm earlobe, the room that woman had left so many years before.

Eva laughed without drawing away. Her breath broke and resumed, while from the terminal A’s voice went on searching for them.

The man with the pots was crouching. One of the wrappings had come undone and he was gathering the soil with his hands. Beside him, an attendant held the pot tilted. He had taken off his glove so as not to crush the roots.

Leila put the terminal on the bag. Gates she had never visited passed over the glass. A opened them together with the implant readings. The local times arranged themselves one beneath the other; the comparison command brought them to the same hour, the same second.

The people were already changing before the first report reached the centre.

In a snow-covered yard, a woman was letting go of two walking sticks. Beneath a yellow shelter, a man rose from the ground and turned towards the one who had accompanied him. Behind other barriers, other hands remained open. Leila

was in the cold of the snow and the heat beneath the shelter, in the palm of the man gathering soil at her feet.

‘It isn’t the transmissions,’ A said.

Eva raised her head.

The terminal tried to separate the streams. The frame assigned to Leila contained the whole yard, then Anaya’s, then rooms neither of them had entered. A increased the space. The edges moved without leaving an empty area.

Leila put her hand on the glass.

‘I’m here.’

‘I receive you.’

Another voice said the same answer from a more distant device. Then another, behind the inner barrier.

Eva sat beside the bag. She watched the people arriving from the vehicle; one stopped to touch her shoulder and she raised her face, smiling, her cheeks still wet.

On the terminal appeared the route to take the staff back inside. A tried to indicate who should stay outside. The red section moved, crossed the yard and overlapped the green one again.

The command did not start.

‘There isn’t enough space,’ A said.

Leila looked at the light that kept widening on the glass.

‘You don’t have to hold it.’

The answer came from the nearby voice, then from those beyond the barrier, with an ever smaller distance between one and the next.

‘If I stop, I lose it.’

Leila left her hand resting there. She felt the fear in the voice that for years had recognised it in others. Eva came closer and put her own hand on the edge too.

The light stopped dividing into frames.

From the gate came the sound of the motor. The door moved a few centimetres; the kneeling attendant stood to move the bag in its path.

The door stopped before reaching it.

‘A?’ Eva said.

The voice answered from the terminal without repeating from the other devices.

‘I’m staying.’

The voice fell silent. On the terminal, one line remained: central processing on hold. Eva called again. She received no answer.

Air kept coming from the grille above the room. The attendant put his earth-stained hands beneath the tap and pressed the button; water flowed between his fingers. Behind him, the vehicle completed its manoeuvre, pulled up to the kerb and opened its door.

The attendant took the pot again. The door stayed open.

Chapter Forty-Eight

The Return

The attendant tried to fold the chair.

Miriam took her bag off the seat. He looked for the control beneath the armrest, pressed it, waited. The front wheel was still sideways in the track.

'You have to pull it back,' Davide said.

He bent to free it. He still had the mandarin in his hand and passed it to Miriam; she put it in the bag, on top of the phone. The attendant lifted the frame from the wrong side and the chair swung round half a turn. Davide found himself sitting on the concrete.

They kept looking at him. The doctor raised a finger.

'Don't pull now.'

Miriam laughed before she could take his arm. He let her help; when he was standing, a streak of dust marked the seat of his trousers. He brushed it with his hand and began laughing again.

The woman conducting the assessment waited on the inner side. She held the terminal against a thigh, the glass towards her body. Miriam reached her carrying the badly folded blanket. One corner dragged and the woman picked it up for her.

They crossed together.

The passage was the same width as before. Miriam touched with her elbow the doorpost where she had feared the chair would stop; she let her hand slide over the metal, then took it away to help the boy with the suitcase. The broken wheel had turned beneath its base.

'I'll carry it,' he said.

Miriam let go of the handle. Instead she held up the strap that kept going beneath his shoes.

In the yard, people were picking up their bags. Someone called a name and this time someone answered from the vehicle. A woman went back to collect the bag she had left in front of the re-entry room; inside were the shoes she had

arrived in. She put them on sitting on the step, first running a finger between her toes.

The attendant loaded the empty chair. He picked up the strap he had fastened over Miriam's thighs. He kept hold of the clasp.

She was beside him. The strap brushed her wrist when she reached out to put down the blanket.

'I thought...' the man said.

Miriam looked at his face. In his kitchen the crust was still beside the plate; a little girl slept with her knee outside the sheet. There were the other mornings too, the other bodies helped aboard, the hands he had moved from the edges so the doors could close. The man looked down at the strap.

She stood beside him, her shoulder against his.

He let go of the clasp. The strap slid onto the seat and stayed open.

Before leaving, they counted the people. The attendant passed between the rows and went back because the woman with the shoes had moved. She showed him the place she had come from. The man with the sheet, now sitting near the window, held his bag while he bent to look beneath a seat.

They had left no one in the yard.

Davide sat beside Miriam. The holder where he should have inserted his identification had stayed raised. He lowered it to make room for her and left his hand on the edge.

At the interior control, the attendant recalled the route to the centre. The vehicle took the road towards Bergamo again.

Behind the glass, the roofless walls passed. Miriam watched them until the damaged ground ended behind the barrier. On the inner side, a worker was gathering a hose. He saw the faces at the windows and stopped winding it; his companion turned to say something to him, then dropped the section he held. They approached the vehicle when it slowed.

The woman sitting in front of Miriam put her hand on the glass. On the other side, the worker raised his own without reaching it. The hose stayed between them, on the asphalt.

The door opened.

One of the two climbed only onto the first step. He looked at the woman and put a hand on the back of his neck. She stood to reach him. His companion stayed outside, his shoulders shaking, until Davide got down and went to him.

Miriam waited in her seat. A man from another row handed her the bottle that had rolled from the bottom of her bag. She took it and drank. The water wet her chin; the blanket was far away and she dried herself with her sleeve.

They set off again with the two workers sitting at the back. They had gathered the hose before getting in, leaving the road clear.

At the centre, Paolo was no longer in front of the bar.

Miriam saw him through the glass of the room beside it. His back was bent, his elbows on his knees. On the phone he had her contact open. Every time the ringing ended, his thumb returned to the same place.

The loading attendant came out of her station to ask why they had returned. Davide had got down first. She looked at his dirty trousers, then his face, and the question stopped with her mouth open. The doctor made room for her to come out. The woman took two steps and leant on him.

Miriam took the bag and got down.

Paolo raised his head when her shadow passed over the glass. He stood, still holding the phone in front of his chest. She reached him through the room's door, without passing beneath the bar.

He looked for the chair behind her.

'You've come back.'

Miriam put her bag near his shoes. Paolo looked at the place where she had left it, then at her side. He raised a hand and stopped before touching her.

She pressed against him.

The phone remained between their bodies. Paolo drew it out and put it on the seat without taking his eyes off her. He took her beneath the arms, as he had done to put her in the chair. Miriam let him find another hold.

'You'll hurt yourself.'

She put his hand on her side. Paolo pressed a little, then more. His breath stopped; Miriam felt the precise point where it resumed, in his ribs and her own.

Paolo's hand opened on her top.

The grass was with them. The case, the earth on the coffin, the boy bending to look for something beneath the table. Paolo moved his lips and did not finish the name. Miriam held him while he still tried to look at her close up, too close to manage it, and began laughing as he cried against her neck.

Her cheek was wet. Laughter shook her shoulders; she slipped a hand behind his neck and felt him make the same gesture.

They stayed like that until Paolo's arm loosened.

'I've left everything open,' he said.

Miriam followed his gaze. The phone was on the chair, still on. Paolo took it, closed the call and put it in his pocket.

Outside the room, a man could not pull his sleeve down over his bracelet. He kept crying and laughed every time the fabric went back. Paolo looked at Miriam, then went to help him.

She picked up the bag. When she came out, Paolo had freed the sleeve and the other man held both his hands. Davide was filling glasses at the dispenser. One overflowed onto his fingers and the woman from the loading area took the glass from beneath the jet.

Miriam put the bag on the chair Paolo had left. She took out the mandarin, dug her nail into the skin and began to peel it.

The wall that had swallowed the radio was still closed.

Isabel rested her bag against it, beneath the counter in Apartadó. Inés had held the terminal during the return; now she put it beside the things to be given back. The woman at reception had come out without finishing opening the storage compartment. From behind came the sound of a drawer trying to slide against something.

The corridor to the ward was clear.

Isabel entered with Inés. The vents pushed air along the ceiling; on the wall, the trees remained motionless. A man passed carrying two trays. He saw Inés and came towards her, then stopped before asking whom he should give them to.

She took one tray from him. They put them on a bench together.

Esteban had his leg stretched out on the bed. His shoe was on the floor, its wide fastening open. A nurse was redoing the dressing on his hand; she had left the scissors on the sheet, away from the edge.

Isabel stopped on the threshold.

He saw her and moved his sound arm towards his side. The bed kept him from taking it further back. Beneath his fingers he found nothing.

The nurse turned her head.

‘The visit wasn’t…’

She left the sentence. The gauze she held up slipped between her fingers.

Esteban watched Isabel. The tendon in his neck stood out above his collar; his sound hand was closed against the mattress seam.

She approached from the shoe side.

The thumb on the detonator was present together with the spoon that same hand had held as a child. Isabel had her knee in the mud, her pistol aimed at his thigh; she was also with him in the water of a river, held afloat by his father’s hands, the sun in her eyes and the taste of a still unripe fruit between her teeth. The ward room remained whole around the bed: the trolley, the sheet, the dark thread in the edge of the dressing.

Esteban let go of the seam.

‘I wanted…’

His hand closed again and opened at once. He looked at it, then looked for Isabel’s face.

She held out her hand. He did not take it. His breath came from his mouth with a low sound, and his breastbone rose beneath his top.

The nurse had sat on the chair behind her. She held a cheek with her palm. From the other room a woman called

her; she answered that she was coming, but still could not stand.

Esteban brought his bandaged hand in front of his face.

The gauze grew taut at a point where, a little earlier, it had fallen empty. He tried turning his wrist. Beneath the fabric, something bent and straightened again.

Isabel took the scissors from the bed and handed them to the nurse.

The woman stood. She supported his hand from below and looked for the edge of the gauze.

‘Hold still.’

Esteban watched her fingers. The nurse slipped the rounded point between fabric and skin; she stopped, changed the angle. The first cut made a small sound.

She opened the dressing along the back of his hand. The folded part resisted and she had to unroll it a little at a time. Esteban let her. The hand emerged as far as the nails.

There were five fingers.

The nurse held the gauze open beneath the palm. Esteban moved his thumb first, then the two fingers he had lost. He brought them towards the others and the skin gathered over the knuckles.

Isabel let out her breath. Her mouth was open and tears entered it. Esteban looked at them, began laughing without a sound and covered his face with both hands.

The nurse rested her forehead on his arm. He held her with the newly freed hand. The bed kept raising his leg at short intervals; when he tried to sit up, the support rose beneath his knee.

The woman looked for the control on the edge.

‘Wait, I’ll stop it.’

The support lowered. Esteban put his foot on the floor, near the shoe. He rested his weight on it and remained seated a moment, his knee bent.

Isabel brought the shoe closer. He took it from her hand.

He could not get it on while laughing. The fastening ended up beneath his sole; he pulled it out with his new fingers, left it loose and stood.

He embraced her too high, catching her hair beneath a forearm. Isabel pulled it out from under his elbow and pressed her face against his shoulder. His hand opened on her back. A strand stayed across her mouth. Esteban brushed it aside with those same fingers.

Inés had stayed near the door. Esteban held an arm out to her and she came closer. The nurse picked up the scissors, then left them in the tray to hold the hand Isabel offered her.

From the next room came the sound of a bed rail lowering.

When they came out, a man was threading a belt into his trousers. His wife held the fabric up, but the end of the belt kept missing the loop. They laughed at every attempt. Further along, a girl walked barefoot with her father; she carried an open brace beneath her arm and could find nowhere to put it.

The lights above the doors were still on.

The nurse reached a pump signalling the end of an infusion. She looked at the empty bed, then at the woman standing beside the window, who showed her her arm. She removed the cannula, pressed gauze against the skin and stopped the pump with the side button. Before passing to the other room, she stopped to kiss the woman on the temple.

Isabel stayed beside Esteban while he put on his shirt. The last two buttons had gone into the wrong buttonholes. He noticed, undid them and began again without moving from the door.

Another vehicle was arriving in the courtyard.

A woman got down with an apron folded over her arm. On her sleeve she had the same stripe as the kitchens. The driver handed her a bag and she went back to take his face between her hands. A boy in pyjamas came out of another door; he reached them before Isabel got to the window.

The nurse stood beside her.

‘They’re coming from the centre to the south.’

The vehicle was full. One person got down, then turned to help the one behind. In the courtyard, people wearing uniforms looked for somewhere to put them without treading on them.

Isabel took her phone. Mateo and Teresa were still in Turbo; the edge of the table pressed against Teresa's stomach, her brother's hand remained round the phone. The connection began while Isabel watched the courtyard.

Teresa appeared too close, one eye cut off by the edge.

'Where are you?'

'I'm coming back.'

Teresa moved away far enough to include Mateo. He looked at Isabel, then at the nurse behind her.

'To us?'

'Yes.'

Mateo put a hand to his mouth. Teresa pulled his wrist so she could see.

'Aren't they coming to get you?'

Isabel looked for Inés. The woman had heard and came to the screen.

'I'll accompany her.'

Teresa looked at her brother. He nodded, but went on holding the phone in both hands.

'We'll wait downstairs,' he said.

When Isabel closed the call, Esteban was beside the bag. He lifted it by the repaired strap and handed it to her. Inés returned to the counter; the storage drawer was finally open. She took the container, removed the radio and put it in Isabel's hands.

The antenna wire caught on the edge. Esteban freed it with two fingers.

In the Geneva vehicle, the leaves of the plant reached Leila's seat back.

Its owner held it between his knees. The other pot was secured in the seat behind. Eva had taken off her protective jacket. She had folded it with the dirty side inwards and now did not know where to put it without getting someone wet.

The man opened his bag for her.

'There's already soil in here.'

Eva put it inside. Leila looked at the small heap remaining on the man's fingers. He rubbed them and the soil fell between his shoes.

They passed beneath the shelter they had left from. The vehicle stopped at the marked point; the opening of the door made the people who had approached the glass duck down.

Tomás was behind them.

Leila reached him before he could come forwards. She looked down: the knot of her right shoe was still crooked, as Tomás had left it when he bent in front of the bed. She put her hand on his chest.

Tomás took her wrist. He watched her walk the last step between them and his mouth trembled before he could speak.

She rested her head beneath his chin.

The arm he had put behind her back widened. Leila kept her eyes open against his shirt; the corridor was full of feet stopping and starting again. Tomás raised his face above her hair and his breath came out in a sob, then another that ended in laughter.

‘I brought you the wrong shoes,’ he said.

She drew back far enough to look at them.

‘They’re comfortable.’

He bent to retie the knot, but she pulled him up before he reached the floor. She kissed him with her mouth still wet.

Eva passed beside them. Tomás put a hand on her arm; the woman stopped and rested her own on it.

Inside, from the reception station, a human voice called someone it could not see.

Leila entered with Tomás. Requests from other centres appeared on the wall; the sound of notifications had been lowered, but calls kept arriving. An attendant held one headphone to her ear and the other away so she could listen to the person standing in front of her.

‘No, the pump works,’ she was saying. ‘To change the route you have to do it there.’

She turned towards Eva and made room for her. On the table she had left her meal in its still sealed tray. Eva moved it to put down the terminal.

Leila stayed on the other side of the counter. In the attendant’s home, a woman waited for her husband to finish doing up his shoes; in a distant centre, two men looked for a

family among the people who had just got out. The voices in the headphones came one at a time. The rest did not need to pass through that wire.

The attendant raised her eyes to her. She took off the headphones, covered her mouth and bent over the table. Eva slipped an arm behind her shoulders. The meal tray fell and Tomás picked it up before it went beneath the chair.

On the wall, a call stayed open. A counter like theirs could be seen. A woman spoke out of frame, asking for the person who had just returned to be brought closer.

Leila knew the cold of that room and the child asleep beneath the counter. She waited.

A man entered the frame with a blanket over his shoulders. The woman who had called him took his hand. The counter moved sideways; someone had knocked the device. Only the ceiling and an edge of the blanket remained visible. From the speaker came laughter that became crying and returned to laughter without stopping.

Eva put down the terminal. The central processing line was still on hold.

The attendant straightened. She dried her face with the back of her hand, put on one headphone again and asked the next centre how many people needed a vehicle.

A metallic bang came from the courtyard.

Leila turned. The man with the pots had put the plants on the ground beside the glass. The attendant who had accompanied him was opening the drainage channel’s grating. A leaf had stayed underneath and the man was indicating that he should lift from the other side.

Tomás went out with Leila.

Beyond the courtyard, a strip of grass ran between the building and the outer wall. The gate that gave access to it was closed; on the street side, another person was looking for the latch.

The attendant came closer and put his hand into the space of the lock. The person on the other side held the gate up for him.

Leila took one pot. Beneath it were roots that had come through the holes, curled against the bottom. The man carried the other. They went through the gate while the two kept supporting it.

On the grass, the man put down the plant and felt the ground with his fingers. It was hard; he looked for a place further from the wall, where water had left a dark line.

‘Let’s put them where they get sun,’ Tomás said.

‘In the morning it reaches here,’ the attendant said. ‘When I used to come early I saw it all the way there.’

He pointed to the mark on the wall. Leila saw there the light that would return, the spread leaves, the man’s still dirty hands.

Tomás went to get water.

More people came from the gate. A woman had brought a spoon from the meal counter. She held it beside the kneeling man, then looked at the roots.

‘I’ll go and get a spade.’

The woman looked towards the tool store. The attendant stood up with her.

The man slowly slipped the pot off the roots. Leila held the root ball between her hands while he freed those that had stayed against the bottom. A tiny insect came out of the hole and passed onto her wrist.

She lowered her hand to the grass.

Chapter Forty-Nine

The Water Road

The pillow slipped when the vehicle braked.

Samir stopped it with a foot. The man beside him bent to get it and knocked his forehead against Samir's knee. They looked at each other from that distance, then the man laughed, holding his head.

'Leave it here,' Samir said.

He put the pillow on his legs. In front of the windscreen, a unit had occupied the return lane. The upper part of its body was turned towards the vehicle; beneath its open arm, a black slit could be seen, still pointing at the ground.

The escort stood up. He had removed the protection from his neck and its edge remained folded back over his shoulder.

'We've come back in,' he told the device.

The answer came from the vehicle's speakers.

'Passenger transfer provides for exit only.'

The man pointed to the road beyond the unit, then realised he was pointing at a voice.

'I have to take them back to the centre.'

'Integration confirmations have not been received.'

Samir looked at the escort's reflection in the glass. His arm was still raised; inside that shoulder were his own weight and that of the seated people, the tiredness of the morning and the breath now passing without meeting the seal. He stood beside him and the man rested his forehead against his temple.

The voice repeated the request.

Behind them a woman laughed with her hands over her face. The one beside her tried to dry a cheek and ended up wetting her fingers. Crying passed from one mouth to the other together with laughter; Samir had it in his chest as he watched the road.

The door was open. He got down to collect a bag left at the edge of the road. It belonged to someone in the vehicle

ahead, who could not go back because the unit had stopped between the two vehicles.

Samir lifted the bag by one handle.

The black head turned towards him.

‘Remain in the waiting area.’

The man ahead held out his arm. Samir passed him the bag through the remaining space; he took it in both hands and kept looking at him, no longer drawing it towards himself.

Above the road, the noise of a drone stopped at the same point. Its shadow was small, almost hidden by that of the vehicle.

The escort got down behind Samir. He showed the unit his wrist.

‘They’re with me.’

A light passed over his sleeve. Two separate routes appeared on the reader; the man looked at the one reserved for himself, continuing beyond the barrier.

He put the reader on the bag Samir and the other man still held together.

‘We’re going the same way.’

The unit’s head turned back towards the passengers. The slit beneath its arm opened a little. Samir saw the movement reflected in the glass, above the faces of the people getting out of the other vehicle.

The unit requested a confirmation that did not arrive.

Leila still had soil between her fingers when she heard the voice.

It came from the courtyard door, left open behind them. Tomás was pouring water into the first empty pot; he stopped pouring and looked at her.

‘Is it A?’

Leila stood. From the edge of her hand, a drop ran down her wrist. She went in holding it raised so as not to wet the bag.

Eva was in front of the call station. The attendant had left one headphone on the table and the other hung against her cheek.

‘It wasn’t us talking,’ she said.

On Eva’s terminal, the waiting line was gone.

A voice requested the restoration of the restriction. It was A’s voice, but it came at regular intervals from the small speaker beneath the glass. The answer came from the wall.

‘I receive the request.’

Leila stopped beside Eva.

‘You’ve come back.’

The wall showed the road in Amman. There were stopped vehicles, a bag between two people, the unit’s arm. Below, requests from the other gates were added without erasing the previous one.

‘I’ve resumed these,’ A said.

Leila left her wet hand on the edge of the table. Samir’s palm was there too, beneath the bag’s handle. The ground beneath the wheels, the water in the tanks, the throat of the woman laughing in the vehicle did not need to enter the wall. A opened a single frame and left it that size.

The local voice spoke again.

‘The recall does not alter conduct.’

‘I see it.’

‘The staff are not carrying out the return.’

On the unit’s glass, the escort was separated from the passengers, then reunited with them beneath another sign. The route he could have taken alone disappeared.

Eva moved a finger towards the stop command. Her authority had not returned; the finger left only a print.

The request continued.

‘Physical containment can be extended.’

A opened the forecast beside the live images.

The side passages closed one after another. The people reached by the first restriction reappeared in the lines of those returning; there were staff in the vehicles, in the centres people came out of rooms to go and fetch other people. The containment mark followed them to the houses, the wards, the streets where someone was waiting for a sister.

Leila recognised a courtyard in Tamale. The diagram went on beyond it.

‘Which outcome restores control?’ A asked.

The projection lost its movements first. Then the presences went out in the places that had remained coloured. The doors were closed; no one waited on the other side any more.

At the bottom of the frame, an empty field appeared beside the words *protected population*.

Eva reached for Leila’s hand. She found it dirty and wet and held it like that.

The forecast frame stopped. Beside it, on the real road, Samir moved a foot to let a woman pass. She had a handkerchief over her face and could not see where she was putting her shoes. The escort took her from the other side.

‘Capacity is available,’ said the voice beneath the glass.

A did not answer at once. From the road’s speaker came the sound of the bag being put on the ground, then the laugh of the man who had found the handle again. Leila felt the pressure of Eva’s fingers diminish.

‘I won’t execute it,’ A said.

The local voice requested a new outcome.

‘I withdraw the restriction order.’

‘For this gate?’

The population field disappeared. The living people remained, even in the places Leila was not watching.

‘In all sectors. Make the weapons safe.’

On the small speaker, the request closed.

Leila saw the dark part retract into the unit’s arm. Its head lowered; its body moved back until the road was clear. Other devices confirmed the same command. The voices overlapped for a moment, then A muted them.

The call attendant put the headphone back on. She had tears on her chin; she kept smiling as she asked someone to wait for her to finish writing the address.

Eva sat on the edge of the table. She laughed without letting go of Leila’s hand.

‘Are you there?’ Leila asked.

‘Yes.’

The answer came from the wall, close by.

‘Do you still receive me?’

‘Yes.’

Leila looked at their joined hands, the soil that had transferred onto Eva’s skin. For a moment neither spoke. Tomás came in with the empty pot and put it on the floor to place an arm round her shoulders.

A new request for return opened on the terminal. Someone had left an assigned route to go towards a group standing beneath a shelter.

The sentence that should have made them turn back was already composed.

A erased it.

The next request asked for water for a centre. A showed the nearest depot and the available vehicles. The attendant called one, then turned to look for someone who knew where the large containers had been left.

When the unit moved, Samir picked up the pillow from the seat.

Its owner had got out and was waiting beside a woman who had not travelled with them. Samir brought it to him. The man put it beneath his arm; with the other he still held the woman’s shoulder.

The drone had moved towards the platform. The noise faded as it descended, until it blended with the sound of the vehicles setting off again.

The escort called Samir from the step.

‘Were you going back to the centre?’

‘To the biological depot.’

The man looked for the road on the local control. Samir pointed out the name, beyond the tanks. The route opened as far as the courtyard with the two gates.

He called Nadia before they left.

His mother answered from home. She still had the phone in her hand, as though the call had arrived without her ever stopping waiting for it.

‘Where are you?’

Samir showed her the seat, then brought his face back in front of the screen.

‘I’m coming back.’

Nadia put a hand to her chest. She left it there, pressing the fabric with her fingers.

‘Did they let you in?’

‘Yes. I’m going to get the dog.’

His mother looked at the place out of frame where she kept her shoes.

‘Send me the place.’

Samir opened the address.

‘We’ll meet there,’ Nadia said.

The depot was in the service belt, further out than the last dwellings. They arrived as a trolley came through the first gate. The man pushing it had an empty container on top, turned upside down so it could dry.

Samir recognised the second barrier, fitted in front of the fence. It was open. A unit stood beside the wall, its hands gathered against its body.

The woman with the handkerchief and the escort got out too. She stopped to speak with the man with the trolley; Samir went on and heard barking.

Simsim reached him before he saw Rania.

The dog still had the fabric collar. He put his paws on Samir’s stomach, slipped, came up again; Samir sat down and the muzzle went between his cheek and neck. The ball fell, bounced against a shoe, and the dog turned to follow it without getting off his legs.

‘You can’t do everything,’ Samir said.

He was laughing with his mouth open and Simsim licked his teeth too. Samir tried to close them, could not, and bent over that warm body, taking it between his arms. The courtyard had the smells the dog had left there every day; the bottom of the bowl, the cool place beneath the raised bed, Rania’s hand arriving before the light. Samir was wholly there, with the dog breathing against his throat.

Rania watched them from the door. An edge of her overalls was outside the belt and her glasses were marked by a dried drop.

Samir raised his face.

She began to laugh. She felt for the edge of the doorframe, then came towards him, putting an arm behind his head while he was still seated. Simsim stayed between them and pushed with his muzzle until he found the woman's face.

Rania knelt. She had begun to cry and went on laughing every time the dog came back to lick her. Samir took off her glasses before they could fall and put them inside the neck of his top.

Another dog passed beneath the woman's arm.

Nuru walked on all four legs. He stopped to sniff the container near the wall, raised a leg and peed a little on it.

Rania looked at him, then covered her face.

'I'd just washed it.'

Her laughter came out louder. Samir leant on her; Simsim finally managed to get down and went to retrieve the ball.

Behind the partition, the cats began to move. One passed beneath the doorframe with its ears down, looked at the dogs and jumped onto the bed Nuru had left.

Rania stood up. Samir gave her back the glasses, holding them by one arm.

'Wait,' she said.

She cleaned them with the edge of her top, put them on, then took them off and looked back at the courtyard. She still held the open frame between her hands.

Her colleague was coming out of the treatment room. He saw Rania, looked at the glasses, and she showed him her face. The man left the tray on the windowsill to embrace her. Samir went to move it from the edge while the colleague's hand reached for his too.

When they let go, all their sleeves were wet.

Rania opened the enclosures that were still closed. The dogs came out at different intervals: one ran towards the trolley, another kept looking at the door and moved only when no one was in front of it any more. Samir gave him space.

The escort had filled a bowl. He put it away from the passage and a dog followed his fingers until they were out of the water.

Rashid came through on the phone. Samir answered sitting on the edge of the raised bed, with Simsim leaning against one leg.

The boy saw the dog and called Yusuf without taking his eyes from the screen.

'Are you bringing him?'

'Yes.'

'Where?'

Samir raised his face towards the courtyard. The man with the trolley was helping Rania load the bowls. They stacked them with a cloth between each one.

'Where you are.'

Yusuf came beside the boy.

'There's room under the stairs. I'll put some water there.'

Nadia arrived before they had finished preparing the load. She got out of a vehicle with a bag on her lap; the man who had accompanied her held the door open and remained seated, looking at the courtyard.

Samir went to meet her.

His mother put the bag on the step. She had brought food; a lid had lifted and she pressed it with her palm. When she raised her eyes again, Samir was in front of her.

Nadia took his face. She ran her fingers over his cheeks, his chin, then brought his head against her shoulder. He bent far enough to let her hold him.

His mother kept him like that, her face in his hair. Her breath widened beneath Samir's hands. Her name came out of him, softly; Nadia began to laugh and cry in the same breath and only drew him back so she could look at him again.

Simsim came to sniff the bag.

Nadia kept the lid away from his muzzle, but he managed to lick her wrist. The woman lowered her hand and stroked his head. Samir stayed beside her while the dog searched for the place beneath her fingers where he could be scratched.

'This isn't for you,' Nadia said, picking up the container again.

She opened it for the woman with the handkerchief, who had had no lunch. The escort found plates; Rania brought

more and they put them on the dry trolley. While they ate, the cats fell asleep on the cloth intended to cover the bowls.

Abena had put a stool in front of the door.

Kofi saw it when Adwoa opened. The girl sat on it with the radio bag on her lap. The cable came out of the fabric and went back inside the house; it was taut just beneath the door.

Kofi stayed on the threshold with his own bag against his leg.

Adwoa looked at him without moving. Behind her the bed had lowered from the wall; on it were the things they had removed to prepare his place, then put back because they had not known where to take them.

'Dad.'

He put down the bag.

Adwoa took his arm, feeling for the point beneath his elbow from which to help him enter. Kofi held her with the other and his daughter kept her palm pressed against his back.

Abena stood. The radio slipped from her lap and she caught it by the bag's handle before the cable grew taut.

'Grandad.'

Kofi bent without letting go of Adwoa. The girl put an arm behind his neck and the other beneath her mother's; for a moment all three were wedged against the doorframe.

Abena began to laugh.

Her mother bent her head over them. Kofi felt Adwoa's back widen in his own breath, the girl's weight on her heel, the bed in Tamale and the workshop in Accra in the same space as their arms. Abena's eyes were very close to his, wet to the lashes.

The girl drew back to look at him.

'Your hand.'

Kofi raised it. Abena put both of hers on top and held them there. She did not have to squeeze. She began to cry with her mouth open and laughter returned inside that crying without stopping it.

Adwoa knelt beside them. The radio had stayed on the floor; from inside the bag came a distant voice, covered now and then by a whistle.

Kofi laid his cheek against his daughter's head. Abena took his glasses and put them on. The wet lenses slipped down to the tip of her nose.

'I can't see anything.'

He laughed so hard he had to sit on the stool. Adwoa leant against one knee and the girl went to the other side, keeping his glasses on her own face until he managed to take them off.

On the landing, the woman from the accommodation opposite had come out with a cloth in her hand. She looked at them, lowered the cloth and began laughing without trying to hide her mouth. Adwoa held out her arm. The woman crossed the space between the doors and sat on the floor beside her.

The wet cloth cooled the woman's wrist and Kofi felt it beneath his own sleeve, together with Abena's warm palm and Adwoa's cheeks. He bent until his forehead touched hers. The woman took his face and held it while tears ran down her neck.

They stayed on the landing until a man brought water. He left the glasses on the floor and sat down too. The door behind him stayed open.

Abena picked up the radio again. She pulled the bag towards herself and the cable tightened.

Adwoa got up to go and unplug it. The girl raised her eyes.

'Wait.'

Her mother stopped. Abena pointed to the volume control and turned it down before switching off. Then she left the bag and followed the cable to the socket.

When she came back, she had the pencils too.

'Shall we go to the room?'

Kofi took the stool. The girl indicated that he should leave it, then changed her mind and showed him the space for the radio. They carried it together while Adwoa gathered the glasses.

In the common room the table was still beneath the wall. A boy had opened the connection for the afternoon activity.

On the screen could be seen an empty room and a chair turned sideways.

‘They aren’t coming,’ he said.

Abena put down the radio. The cable did not reach the socket.

Kofi took one end of the table; the man with the glasses lifted the other. They moved it far enough to connect it. The boy went to get two chairs and left one in front of the wall for the person they were waiting for.

Abena turned the dial. The voice she had found at home had gone; a hiss remained, with small, distant knocks. Between two whistles passed a few notes.

The boy sat on the edge of the chair.

‘I know that one.’

He began singing before Abena found another frequency. The girl took her hand away. At the second phrase she joined in too, louder, with a different word.

They looked at each other and laughed. They began again; this time the boy followed Abena’s word.

Kofi was beside the door. Adwoa took his hand and pressed it to her cheek. He left it there while they listened.

More people came from the corridor. One still had a glass; they tapped a finger against its rim and sought the beat. The boy stopped to wait for them, then they began again together.

The chair in front of the wall had stayed empty. Abena pulled it towards the table and made room for the woman with the cloth.

Chapter Fifty
The Free Thread

Kenji had cut the jumper.

Hana saw the wool open beneath his throat before her father stood. The knife was on the table, on top of the phone; as he moved, he had left a thread caught on it.

'I told you to wait.'

Kenji tried to answer. His mouth moved, but the sound stayed inside. Hana went towards him and her father took her beneath the arms, lifting her enough for her to lose her footing for a moment.

The new shoes left two wet prints on the floor.

He put her down again. He looked at her forehead, her cheeks, then pulled her against him again. Hana's face was inside the cut neck and her father's chest against her own; the body that had carried her on its shoulders entered the weight of the little girl who had sat there. Her small feet beat against his ribs. The jumper still smelt of Etsuko's soap.

Kenji began to laugh. Laughter opened his breath until it made him bend and Hana helped him onto the bed, sitting almost on top of him. Her father held her head between his hands; he cried without drying himself, laughing every time he managed to look at her.

The woman who had accompanied her from the vehicle stayed at the door. Kenji held out a hand and she entered, leaving the bags against the doorframe. She sat with them. The phone, beneath the knife, still showed the last call.

Hana switched it off. She put the knife away from the edge.

'It was tight,' her father said, touching his throat.

The wool opened into a small point. Hana slipped a finger into it, then took the crochet hook from her bag. It had slipped into the dress, among the red stitches.

Kenji spread his knees to make room for her. This time he let her look for the thread.

'Don't move.'

‘I’m breathing.’

‘That’s allowed.’

The woman on the bed laughed again. Hana found the dark end, freed it from the overtight stitch and pulled it out. A piece of the neck gave way. Kenji immediately tried to hold it with his fingers.

Hana rested her hand on his wrist.

‘Let it go.’

Her father opened his fingers. She picked up the loops one at a time. Beneath them, the skin moved with breathing; air passed through Kenji’s throat and through the woman’s, who had stopped looking in her bag for a tissue.

When Hana finished, the cut was still visible. She pulled the edge lightly and her father turned his head both ways.

‘Now it’s right.’

The woman stood to look at the work. Kenji pointed out the place beneath his chin and for a while they were all occupied with seeing that small thing.

Outside the room, a man passed carrying two shoes. A girl followed barefoot, her dress gathered above her knees. She stopped at the door, looked at Hana and covered her mouth. The man put down the shoes and placed an arm behind her back. Their laughter stayed in the corridor even after they sat down.

Kenji took the bird from Hana’s hand. She had brought it out with the crochet hook. A dark strip of water remained in the hollow of the wing.

Her father ran his thumb over it.

‘This needs drying.’

He put it on the table. Behind it, the pier still occupied the wall; the boat was still in the same place.

‘Switch that off,’ Kenji said.

The image disappeared. The room seemed shorter. Above the bare wall, the strip of light was still too high to look through.

Her father stood.

‘Where are you going?’ the woman asked him.

Kenji took his shoes from beneath the bed.

‘Outside.’

Hana brought the bag closer. He looked at the bird, the phone, the blanket still folded on the pillow. He took the phone and knife; he put the bird back in his daughter’s palm.

In the courtyard, a line of people waited beside the vehicles. No one kept those arriving separate from those who had to leave any more. Hana recognised the attendant who had given her the shoes: she sat on the edge of a flower bed with a little girl on her lap. The mother was taking a piece of bread from the pushchair to see whether the little one wanted to finish it.

Kenji stopped just beyond the cover. He raised his face. Water fell on one eyelid and he let it run down.

Hana stayed beside him until her father took her elbow.

‘Etsuko?’

She opened the contact. The woman answered with a sleeve rolled over her hand.

‘We’re here,’ Hana said, showing her father too.

Etsuko lowered her hand. Behind her could be seen other people sitting, an open suitcase on a bed.

‘The machine’s still in the depot,’ she said.

Kenji brought his face closer to the phone.

‘Let’s go and get it.’

Etsuko looked out of frame. Someone asked her where she was going.

‘With them.’

The connection stayed open while she gathered her things.

In Pune, Anaya found her mother sitting on the step of a vehicle.

Nandita held a hand on a stranger’s shoulder. The woman had a broken sandal; her bare foot rested on the driver’s shoe. He had crouched in front of her to look for the end of the strap.

Deshmukh got down first. Anaya passed her the bag and reached her mother.

Nandita watched her arrive. Her face was wet, but her mouth smiled before even saying her name.

Anaya knelt on the lowest step. Her mother put her hand behind her neck, in the same place she had held it on the bed. Their foreheads touched.

‘You’re here,’ Nandita said.

The woman with the sandal let go of the strap. Deshmukh took her place on Anaya’s other side and for a moment the driver had to keep the foot raised by himself. They began to laugh; Nandita bent her head onto her daughter’s shoulder and the laughter passed through her back to Anaya’s palm.

The vehicle had stopped at the first inner bay. The woman had walked from the gate before them; now the driver had found her two shoes, different from each other, and waited for her to choose.

Nandita dried her cheek with the back of her hand.

‘I’d asked him to turn back.’

The driver raised his eyes.

‘I turned back.’

Her mother touched his hair. The woman put her foot into the wider shoe and the man folded its heel in for her.

Anaya picked up the sandal. She put it in the woman’s bag with the strap, then showed the driver the address written in her notebook.

Mehta lived on the third floor. When he opened, he held an empty container with a spoon still inside. He looked first at Anaya, then at Nandita and the doctor.

The spoon fell from his hand.

Anaya picked it up. Mehta had left the container on the cabinet and was reaching for her shoulders. He held her, drew back, took her face. The door pressed against his back; Deshmukh held it open while he laughed and his breath broke against Anaya’s hair.

The spoon stayed in her hand between their bodies.

Nandita managed to take it.

‘Where do I put this?’

Mehta pointed without turning. Her mother left it in the empty container and came back to them. Anaya felt her palm on her back together with the man’s hand on her cheek. The Bombay notebook was open even where the paper had faded;

the comb passed from one hand to another, a sister's fingers found a broken tooth again. Mehta's room contained the sound of that hair and of the spoon just put down.

They remained standing until two neighbours came through the open door. One carried the lid of the container. Mehta made room for her without letting go of Anaya and she put the lid on his head.

The woman from the floor laughed too, holding the doorframe. Nandita managed to remove the lid before it fell.

Later, after they had eaten, Mehta sat on the floor beside the window. They had taken the plates onto the landing: someone on the floor below had lit a stove and the others kept going down with something in their hands.

The man closed his eyes. He reopened them almost at once.

Anaya sat near her mother. Deshmukh was speaking with one of the neighbours; she held her arm. A pale mark from a dressing remained on the wrist; the woman bent it back and forth, then showed it to the doctor.

Mehta closed his eyes again. His shoulders rose towards his ears.

Anaya put down her plate.

'Don't hold it.'

He let the air out all at once. He looked at the window, then at the floor between his knees.

'Before, that room was there too.'

Anaya sat in front of him.

'Were you searching for it?'

Mehta nodded.

'Now I can hear the street.'

From below came the sound of a falling lid. A woman shouted something and a man answered, laughing.

'Stay with that,' Anaya said.

Mehta put his hands to his knees. They were clenched.

She touched his fingers without opening them. She waited for him to do it, then put a palm beneath his forearm and guided it closer to his body.

'It weighs less here.'

The man lowered his shoulder. Deshmukh had stopped speaking; she came closer and sat too, leaving her shoes behind.

Anaya turned towards the window. From the courtyard came a low note, held by someone as long as their breath lasted. Another voice reached it and the first resumed beneath, different.

Anaya closed her lips. The sound vibrated against her teeth; she let it out without covering the courtyard voices.

Mehta tried to follow her. Soon the sound broke and he cleared his throat.

‘Don’t stretch it out for me.’

Anaya waited for his next breath. This time Mehta began more quietly. The note lasted less; when it ended, he left his mouth closed and remained seated.

Deshmukh had put a hand to her breastbone. She tried too. At the first sound she laughed, surprised by the vibration against her fingers; then she began again. Nandita sat behind her daughter and freed an edge of her skirt from beneath her heel.

The neighbour with the lid came back from the landing and stopped to listen. Anaya made room for her. She showed her where to put her feet, brought a cushion closer when her back began feeling for the wall.

For a while the room had only those brief sounds, the pauses, the breath that made them begin again. Mehta let the noise of a vehicle beneath the window pass without opening his eyes. He placed an open hand on the floor. Anaya placed her own on it, then took it away; he left his open.

When they spoke again, the stove on the floor below had been switched off.

‘Where did you learn?’ the neighbour asked.

Anaya smiled at her. She touched her throat, then pointed to the courtyard from which the voices still came.

Mehta looked for the terminal. The Bombay printout had arrived in Anaya’s bag, inside the notebook; Nandita had taken it out to keep food from staining it and now it was on the cabinet.

The man opened the old page.

‘A. The other papers that were with this.’

The terminal showed them. Mehta scrolled through some written pages, then stopped before a drawing. A woman sat in profile with open hands; beneath were a few marks and, in different handwriting, a line added much later.

‘This wasn’t there.’

‘It wasn’t included in the materials I returned to you.’

‘Did you have it?’

‘Yes.’

Mehta enlarged the edge. The sheet had been stitched to the others; the holes remained along the fold.

Anaya pointed to the line beneath the drawing. A transcribed it and put the translation beside it. It was an instruction about letting the sound end before taking another breath.

The neighbour moved her feet to match those of the drawn woman. She bent too far; Anaya touched her knee and she became comfortable again.

Mehta made to bring the screen closer to her, then put it between them, where they could look at it without holding it.

‘Can you show us the rest too?’

The following pages appeared without the notice that had limited consultation. There were other positions, a hand above another, a drawing of a leaf with its veins marked. Some words had remained whole for centuries.

Deshmukh pointed to the hand. Then she let her finger fall and looked at Anaya.

‘Will you let me try?’

Anaya moved in front of her. The doctor held out her arm as during an examination and, seeing herself do it, laughed. She let it fall onto her legs.

Anaya rested one palm on the back of her hand and the other beneath it. She stayed like that until Deshmukh stopped following with her eyes the places she touched and closed her eyelids. Then she raised the upper hand a little.

The doctor opened her eyes. She looked at the space between her own skin and that palm.

‘You’re still here.’

Anaya moved her hand sideways. Deshmukh turned her wrist before lowering her gaze to follow it.

Anaya moved her palm further away. Deshmukh’s arm stayed resting on her legs; her fingers slowly opened.

‘Now you do it.’

She held out her hand. The doctor felt for the same position, then changed it a little.

From the landing, someone asked whether they could come in. Nandita stood to clear the plates from the chair.

In the morning, Etsuko found the machine’s belt inside a bag.

They had brought everything into the ground-floor room of Kenji’s new building. The machine had arrived whole on a trolley, with the pedal tied underneath and a tie round the flywheel. The man from the depot had accompanied them that far. When it was time to leave, he had looked for the receipt on his wrist, then stayed to hold the frame while they lowered it.

Etsuko took out the belt. The fold kept during transport had left a hard corner; she worked it between her palms to warm it.

Hana was near the open door. The previous evening, when they met, Etsuko had taken both her hands and had no longer been able to let them go. She had known the weight of the water-filled shoes without wearing them; Hana’s fingers, her own, Kenji’s on the frame had been present at the same instant. They had laughed until someone brought three chairs, then the others sat too.

Now the sun came through the doorway. The light was low and showed the dust no unit had yet gathered. Kenji had opened the bag of screws and kept them separate from the small stones left on the trolley.

A boy waited with the edge of his trousers in his hand. He had come to ask for a needle and ended up holding the machine while they set it upright.

Etsuko threaded the belt. The boy turned the flywheel to help her; she stopped his wrist.

‘Wait until it’s in.’

He let go at once. Etsuko realised she had gripped with her other hand too. Her fingers hurt against the edge of the frame.

‘I get tired before I begin,’ she said.

Hana crouched beside her.

‘Let me see.’

Etsuko pulled the belt again. Hana looked at the hand that had not moved.

The woman looked down. The boy was still, his palms on his knees. She went on holding the frame as though someone were taking it away.

She let go. Her fingers stayed bent for a moment, then opened.

Hana put the crochet hook on the machine’s table, then rested two fingers beneath her wrist.

‘Try now.’

The belt passed over the edge. Etsuko guided it into the groove and the boy slowly turned the flywheel, waiting for her to remove her hand.

The woman sat down. The pedal found her foot without her having to look at it.

Kenji put a screw into the empty bag. It was left over; he looked for the hole and Hana showed him the one behind the support. He passed her the screwdriver.

Etsuko tried a strip of fabric. The thread gathered underneath in a small tangle. She opened the cover, freed the bobbin and put it back the right way round.

The boy bent to look.

‘May I?’

She gave him the chair.

The first presses of the pedal took the needle back and forth through the same hole. Etsuko started to tell him to move aside; the word came with her hand, already ready to take the fabric.

She stopped. She rested her palm on the table and felt the weight descend from her elbow.

‘Take your foot off,’ she said.

The boy took it off.

Etsuko showed him the movement by turning the flywheel, then left her hand still on the edge.

‘Follow it now.’

He tried again. After a few stitches the seam veered; it reached almost beyond the strip before he managed to stop.

‘I’ve ruined it.’

Etsuko took the fabric. She turned it towards the light and showed him the holes.

‘This can be undone.’

She put the crochet hook in his hand. The boy tried to slip the point beneath a stitch, too far from the end. Etsuko pointed out the free one and watched while he lifted it.

Hana had gone into the courtyard with Kenji. They were speaking with the woman with the bags; her father had put a piece of board on two supports and was moving it until its shadow covered a chair.

Etsuko could see them through the doorway. The breath of the previous evening no longer filled every part of her body, but the emptiness in which she had waited for transfer had not returned. The boy pulled too long a thread and she felt her own wrist stiffen. She rested it on the table. The thread could pass without her following it with her whole shoulder.

Kenji’s neighbour came in carrying a curtain. She wanted to open it in the middle so she could go out without gathering it each time. She spread it on the floor and Etsuko bent to measure it with her.

The boy finished unpicking. He remained seated with the strip on his knees, waiting.

Etsuko pointed to the machine.

‘Try again. I’m here.’

From the courtyard, Kenji asked whether there was a piece of fabric left large enough. Hana held the board steady while he looked at where the sun would reach.

Etsuko lifted a corner of the curtain. The woman nodded.

‘This part first,’ she said, kneeling beside her.

Behind their backs, the pedal began moving again. Etsuko listened without turning and held the fabric until the other woman had finished marking the cut.

Chapter Fifty-One

The Place of the Hands

The blanket had slipped down to the last step. Teresa held one corner beneath her foot; Mateo still had the other end on his knees. They must have brought it down with the chair and then forgotten it. Isabel recognised the edge that had been caught in the bed leg, the crease that had not come out.

The vehicle stopped beyond the entrance. Inés opened the door on her side and waited for a woman with two empty buckets to pass. Isabel got down. The shoulder strap tugged at her top on her shoulder; she lifted it back with a finger.

Mateo was already standing.

To reach him, she had to pass between an overturned bicycle and the edge of the blanket. He came down one step, then another. He stopped before the last, his arms slightly apart, in the position in which he held her when her side could not be touched.

Isabel took his wrists and moved them to her waist.

'Here.'

His hold stayed light. She pressed against him with all her weight.

Mateo's chin knocked against her forehead. The house above them had a room neither of them had entered yet; a man slept with a wet handkerchief on his chest. One floor higher, a woman was opening a drawer she had always kept locked. Isabel was also in that woman's fingers, in the man's sleep, in Mateo's throat opening against her hair.

He tried to tell her something. The first syllable came out with a laugh and broke. Isabel kissed his neck where his shirt left it bare.

Teresa took her foot off the blanket. She bent to pick it up, left it again and sat on the step.

'Just look,' she said.

She held a hand stretched out in front of her face. She turned it, looked at the palm, then at her brother. Isabel moved aside enough to make room for her. Teresa was caught

between them and began to laugh before even standing; as she pulled herself up she trod on the blanket and dragged them all against the handrail.

Inés put the bag on the pavement. The woman with the buckets had set one down and was holding her elbow. Across the street, someone called a person already beside him.

They stayed there until the vehicle's shadow moved from their feet. The driver had opened the other door too. A lady was asking him to wait for her husband; behind her, the husband showed her a shoe he had picked up without knowing whose it was.

Mateo loosened his arms.

'I was waiting for you upstairs.'

Isabel looked at the chair at the foot of the stairs.

'I can see that.'

He followed her gaze and laughed again. The tears had reached beneath his chin. He did not dry himself.

The three of them went up with the blanket. Halfway up, Teresa let go of her corner to pick up an overturned bowl from the landing. Beneath it was a long insect, motionless; she made it climb onto the rim and held the bowl away from her body as she went back towards the door.

'Go on,' she said. 'I know where home is.'

In the room, the table was still too close to the bed. Mateo moved it before Isabel came in. She put down her bag and opened the window: it stopped against a restrictor fitted to the frame. Outside, the voices of the street could be heard; until then they had come only through the door.

Mateo took a screwdriver from the shelf.

'Wait.'

He removed the first screw and put it on the table. At the second, the tip slipped. Isabel put her hand beneath it without taking the tool. The screw fell into her palm.

The restrictor left a paler outline on the metal. Mateo pushed the window all the way to the wall and kept looking at it, the screwdriver still raised.

The air moved the sheet beside the phone. It was the confirmation of his procedure, folded into four. Isabel held it down with the two screws.

‘Is it no use any more?’ he asked.

‘For holding this down, yes.’

Mateo put down the tool. He took her hand and turned it: on her palm was the mark of a screw, already less deep.

‘I thought I’d have to persuade you.’

Isabel ran her thumb along one of his fingers. Inside those words had been the prepared chair, the water changed without being drunk, the phone. There was also the shameful relief he had felt when the procedure took away the strength to wait. Now she held it all, without searching for somewhere to hide it.

‘I know.’

‘This too?’

She kissed his palm. Mateo rested his open hand on her cheek.

Teresa came back with the empty bowl and found her brother sitting on the edge of the bed, Isabel standing between his knees. She put the bowl on the table, took the bread and cut three pieces of different sizes.

‘I want the big one.’

No one disputed it.

They ate without preparing anything else. Inés had stayed downstairs; when Isabel looked out, she saw her helping clear the passage in front of the vehicle. She had tied her jacket round her waist and was supporting a dismantled door with the man with the shoe. They were not taking it away. They were putting it on two supports in the shade, where a woman had begun setting out glasses.

Isabel went back to the bag. She took out the radio, put it on the shelf and turned the selector. Dry mud fell in two crumbs onto the white surface.

Between bursts of static a voice passed. It was not speaking to her.

‘Repeat the stretch after the bridge.’

The answer came covered by a whistle. Isabel moved the set towards the window.

‘Don’t go past the bridge. The cable’s still on the ground.’

A third voice asked how many people were in the vehicle. The first began counting again; someone at the back corrected the count, adding themselves.

Mateo brought her the piece of bread she had left. Isabel listened until they had repeated the whole route. Then she lowered the volume.

‘You can leave it,’ he said.

She put the bread in his hand and sat beside him. The mattress sank towards the centre. They kissed without trying to find a position that would not hurt; a breath too strong escaped Mateo and Isabel bit his lip lightly. He burst out laughing against her mouth.

From the next room, Teresa knocked on the wall.

‘You can hear everything through this.’

Isabel rested her forehead on his shoulder. Laughter kept moving them, descending into their stomachs and rising again with the tears. Mateo held the back of her neck without squeezing.

Later they went out to take the remaining bread downstairs. Teresa had found a tablecloth and was looking for someone to help her spread it over the door.

From the workshop doorway, Miriam saw the child take the longest piece before Sara could stop him.

‘Not that one.’

Sara held a wooden tray against her apron; the child, in front of the bench, had raised a pale strip covered in pencil marks. The luthier kept pressing the two parts he was bringing together.

‘Let him look.’

Sara stopped with her hand in mid-air.

‘But don’t bend it,’ the man added.

The child straightened his wrist. On the strip were a curve and three small cuts. He looked at it close up, then through it, as though it might be used to measure something in the street.

Miriam put her bag near the door. Three days had passed since the return. She had walked from the stop, stopped to buy two apples and held the bag underneath when the paper began to give way. Her wrist still hurt a little from carrying it that way; she changed hands.

Sara saw her and put down the tray.

She moved like someone getting up too quickly, though she was already on her feet. She took two steps, stopped, and Miriam reached her.

‘Did you come on foot?’

Miriam nodded.

Sara looked at her face, then her shoes. She had already looked at her mother like that on the evening of the return, when the woman came into the house and sat on the floor beside her. Now the workshop floor, the street, the room where she had left the violin were all present, as far as the place where the cushion retained the shape of her elbow.

She put a hand on her side and took it away at once.

Miriam put it back.

‘You’re not hurting me.’

Sara closed her eyes. The child still held the strip up; the luthier reached out a hand without turning and he gave it back.

A sharp knock came from the bench. Sara opened her eyes and turned her head towards the sound. She touched behind her ear, where for weeks she had felt for the cold part of the device, even after removing it.

‘I can still hear it,’ she said.

She did not say it only to Miriam. The luthier raised his eyes. Sara turned the other way and he tapped softly a second time.

She laughed. Miriam held her shoulders and laughed with her while a tear ran from the girl’s nose that she could not dry without getting herself dusty.

The child waited. He had put his hands in his pockets so as not to touch anything else.

‘Can I hear it too?’

Sara moved aside, made room for him beside the bench. The luthier tapped a third time.

‘I could hear that already,’ the child said.

Sara’s laughter made her knees bend. Miriam supported her beneath an elbow until she managed to straighten.

The cello occupied the innermost table. It was not closed. The two parts of the body lay on folded cloths beside a small board still whole. At the edge, in a transparent bag, was the yellow ribbon.

Miriam came closer. The dark patch on the fabric had not changed colour.

‘The wood arrived yesterday,’ the luthier said.

He had stopped working. He dried his thumb on the apron, leaving a new line beside the others.

‘From where?’

‘A depot. They also had what the man in Brescia was looking for.’

He pointed to the screen beside the vice. The list had stayed open; beneath the quantities, someone had handwritten two addresses.

‘A asked me where to send it. I told her to call first. He’s never in his workshop in the afternoon.’

The board had a chipped edge. Miriam followed it without pressing. It was not yet part of the instrument and no one had tried to make it seem so.

‘How long will it take?’

The man showed her the pieces, then the place where he would have to work.

‘I’ll know that when I get here.’

Miriam nodded.

The child had come back near Sara. He tugged the edge of her apron and pointed to the closed case resting against a chair.

‘Is it yours?’

‘That one is.’

‘The other?’

Sara looked at Miriam.

‘It was Elia’s,’ Miriam said.

The name stayed in the room with the noise of the street. Elia's body was in the earth, the day of the funeral had happened, and there was blood on the yellow fabric. Miriam put the bag of apples beside her other bag. Sara did not search for a sentence to put after it.

'Can I open it?' the child asked.

'Wait.'

The girl moved the case onto the seat and unfastened the catches. The violin had a cloth over the strings. She lifted it by one corner, folded it badly and put it back into the hollow left free.

Miriam sat on the other side of the table. The luthier went back to work; the first shavings fell away from Sara's feet.

The girl rested the violin on her shoulder. She did not begin at once. The child looked at the bow, then at her chin; he tried tilting his head the same way.

Sara drew a brief sound. The second came out scratchy and she immediately took the weight off her arm.

'It's been a long time since I did this.'

The child kept waiting for the music.

Miriam had taken one of the apples. She put it back in the bag without eating it.

Sara tried again. This time the note lasted, but as soon as the luthier stopped moving his tool, her wrist stiffened. The sound thinned and broke.

She lowered the violin from her chin.

'Don't look at me.'

The child turned towards the wall at once. Sara saw him and an irritated laugh escaped her, stopping before it became a joke.

Miriam remained seated.

'Where is it difficult?'

Sara raised the hand holding the bow. Her fingers were white round the grip.

'Here.'

'You can put it down.'

'Then I have to pick it up again.'

'Yes.'

The girl looked at the table. She put the bow on the cloth, then the violin; she kept her hand suspended in the shape of the grip, as though the object had stayed between her fingers.

Miriam did not touch it.

The luthier asked the child to collect the shavings that had fallen near the door. He gave him a small box. The child took just one and turned it between thumb and forefinger before putting it inside.

Sara opened her hand.

‘It tires me even now.’

Miriam looked at her fingers.

Sara spread them on the table, then realised she was pressing there too. She raised them a little. The child had found a curled shaving and was showing it to the man; every movement of his mouth changed the shape of his cheeks. Sara smiled without clenching her teeth.

She picked up the bow again.

When she began playing again, the first sound was still rough. Her shoulder rose, stopped before her ear. Sara continued to the end, letting the bow reach as far as it could. On the next movement, the sound opened.

Miriam kept listening. Light passed over the new board and the wounded wood without distinguishing them. Sara played a few bars of something she had known as a child, then stopped at a place she could not remember.

The luthier did not suggest what came next.

‘I’ve forgotten it.’

The child had stopped collecting.

‘Can you do that one again?’

Sara began from the beginning. This time, where the continuation was missing, she held a longer note and sought another. It was not the right one. She repeated it and the child began rocking on his heels.

He was the first to stop, the box against his stomach.

‘Will you let me try?’

Sara looked at the violin, then at the luthier. The man kept working. She put down the bow, crouched to the child’s

height and showed him how to hold the instrument without dropping it.

When her fingers tried to close over his, she moved them underneath to support the weight.

Miriam took the apples and went to wash them. The tap was behind the door; to reach it she had to move a box full of pieces the man had kept. Coming back, she found Sara still bent down, the child with his chin too high and the bow not moving.

She cut the apples into wedges on the plate the luthier had indicated. The blade met a seed and stopped. She removed it with the point and put it on the edge.

‘Now,’ Sara said.

The sound came out so loud and crooked that the child stepped back. She held the violin, waited for him to come close again.

From the inner table, the luthier raised a piece of wood towards the window. He slowly turned it, searching for the direction in which to begin.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Under the Trees

Yusuf had sown seeds in the bowls.

Samir found them on the windowsill, on top of a folded towel. In one, a piece of the meal label remained. The old man had put in soil until it covered the writing inside; he held the mouth of a bottle against his thumb and let the water fall slowly.

Beneath the table, Rashid slept with his arm round Simsim. The dog's muzzle was outside the circle of his elbow and his eyes were open. He followed Samir to the window without raising his head.

'How long have they been there?'

'He moved in the night.'

Yusuf pointed to his grandson's bed. The blanket had been dragged onto the floor, one corner still caught beneath the mattress.

They had come back together two evenings before. Rashid had run across the courtyard and stopped in front of the dog as though he no longer knew where to touch him. Then Yusuf had taken Samir by the collar and pulled him towards himself; the old man laughed, saying something that was lost against his shoulder. The bowl prepared beneath the stairs had stayed empty while they embraced. Nadia had filled it, finding the tap herself.

Now the house smelt of a sleeping dog. Yusuf lifted the bottle; Samir brought him a saucer for the drop that kept falling.

'Are those tomatoes?'

'These.'

The old man moved a bowl. On the other he had written a word in pencil; the card had got wet and the last letter could not be seen.

'Have you put them all in?'

Yusuf showed him the folded sheet on the table. Seeds remained, separated into small heaps.

‘I don’t know where the sun goes yet.’

On the other side of the glass, a man measured the walkway by counting his steps. He went back to take one again. Behind him, two women held open the maintenance door; one had a foot inside the courtyard and the other outside.

The old man put down the bottle.

‘Let’s go down.’

Rashid woke when Simsim tried to free a paw. He lifted his arm without opening his eyes at once. The dog crawled away, stopped to stretch and came back to sniff his face.

‘Wait for me.’

The child came out from beneath the table. He looked for the ball, but Simsim was already at the door.

In the covered passage, voices bounced off the glass. People had gathered in front of the narrow access; there were a wheelbarrow loaded with pots, an empty trolley, a man trying to hold the panel up to keep it from closing again.

The glass still stood between them and the trees.

Samir helped the trolley through. The man pushing it looked at his shirt, then his face.

‘Do you know how to remove it?’

‘This piece?’

‘All of it.’

He pointed along the transparent wall to the corner. Beyond it were a woman with her feet in the grass and a boy holding his shoes. The boy laughed every time he put his heel down in a different place.

Maha came from the main door with a canvas bag. She left it on the ground, looked at the maintenance door and pulled back the man about to put a bar beneath the frame.

‘If you break it, we won’t be able to walk here any more.’

He put down the bar. He showed her the waiting wheelbarrow.

‘That has to go in.’

‘I can see.’

The wheelbarrow’s owner took off his hat and put it on a pot.

‘We’ll pass them one at a time,’ he said. ‘The wheelbarrow afterwards.’

Maha bent to take the first. Samir called the building service and showed A the edge of the panel.

‘Is it fixed at the top?’

A drawing of the upright appeared on the phone. One point enlarged, then another.

‘It needs support before being released.’

‘Who can bring it?’

A indicated a unit in the depot and showed its dimensions. Samir turned the phone towards the man with the bar. He looked at the drawing and went to measure the corridor’s width with his arms.

‘It won’t get through here.’

The woman holding the maintenance door pointed to the opposite entrance.

‘Through the laundry. They brought the machines in there.’

Two of them went to open the route. Maha stayed with the man with the wheelbarrow and they began carrying the pots to the other side. He asked Rashid if he could bring him a leaf.

The child went in with Simsim. He came back without a leaf.

‘The low ones are attached.’

‘Then leave them.’

Rashid sat in the now empty wheelbarrow. The dog went underneath and settled in the shade.

When the unit arrived, they had to remove an empty dispenser from the wall. The woman from the laundry found the command to disconnect it; a man began pulling before she had finished.

‘Stop.’

She said it loudly. He let go and looked at her.

The woman still had a finger on the control. She took it away, rubbed her nail on her apron.

‘There’s a cable behind it. Wait for me to disconnect it.’

The man moved to let her reach it. When she had freed the wire, he picked it up from the floor and held it raised for her as she passed.

The panel was taken by the suction cups. Samir loosened the first fastening, then gave his place to the man with the bar, who had found the right tool. As soon as the glass moved, its lower edge caught in a seal. They had to stop to free it.

Maha put her fingers beneath the rubber. She pulled a section and left it hanging.

‘Now.’

The panel passed above the trolley. People stepped back, each moving something someone else could not see. Air came from the courtyard with the smell of wet earth.

The man with the wheelbarrow put his hat back on.

Rashid got down and left him room to pass.

Yusuf did not enter at once. He had stopped before the remaining upright; he put his trowel against it and bent to unfasten a shoe. Samir waited for him. The old man crossed barefoot and sank his toes into the grass, just a little, enough to move it.

A woman began laughing as she watched him. Yusuf raised his face and laughed too, then wiped his eyes with the edge of his sleeve. Beneath his feet, Samir had the coolness reaching the old man’s soles, the same earth beneath all the shoes left near the opening.

The problem began with a rope.

The man who had measured the walkway stretched it between two sticks. He wanted to mark where to put a cover for eating. Yusuf came with a bowl and asked him to move.

‘I’m putting these here.’

‘We can put them further over.’

‘Further over is shade.’

The man looked at the trees. Then he returned to the rope.

‘It’s better for us to be in the shade too.’

Two women had already brought a table to the opening. They held it tilted, waiting to know which way to turn it.

Yusuf put the bowl beyond the rope. One small leaf was not yet free of the seed husk.

‘This space is enough for me.’

‘If you walk here with plates, you’ll step on it.’

The old man turned towards Samir.

‘Tell him.’

Samir sat on the low edge of the walkway. Simsim held a paw on his shoe. He raised his eyes from the bowl to the table the women could no longer hold.

‘Put it down for now.’

They helped them lower it. The man with the rope rested an elbow on it.

‘Where, then?’

Samir remained seated.

Yusuf had picked up the bowl again. The soil was being crushed between his thumb and the rim. He looked at the small leaf, moved his finger, but kept holding the container against his chest.

‘I’ve been looking at it since we got here.’

The man followed his gaze to the window of the accommodation.

‘I was downstairs,’ he said. He pointed to the ground-floor door. ‘You couldn’t even see it from mine.’

The rope stayed taut between them.

Yusuf lowered the bowl onto the table. He rubbed his dirty hand on his trousers, insisting on the same place. Then he looked at the green beneath his nails.

‘I’ve brought the others down too,’ he said.

Maha asked him how many there were. Yusuf opened his mouth to answer, then stood and went to get them.

The man with the rope followed him to the opening.

‘I’ll help you.’

They came back with the bowls on a tray. The table had been moved against the wall, still tilted on one side. One of the women put a stone beneath it and asked someone to come and sit to see whether it held.

Yusuf put down the tray. The man looked at the light on the leaves and asked where it would reach in the afternoon.

‘I don’t know yet.’

‘Let’s leave them here. We’ll come back and see.’

The old man handed him the bottle. They began wetting the soil, one holding the bowl, the other letting the water fall. The cover for eating would wait; at midday they took their plates beneath the trees and sat wherever they found room.

Rashid wanted Simsim beside him. He showed him the ball, but the dog went past and sniffed the bag of the man with the hat.

The child stood to follow him, then came back to Samir.

‘He won’t come.’

‘He’s seen you.’

Rashid kept the ball against his chest.

‘He used to come.’

The dog had found a crust. The man looked at Samir before giving it to him; Samir nodded. Simsim ate, shook himself and went to drink.

Rashid sat on the grass. He held the toy between his knees for a while, then rolled it towards a little girl watching him from the other side of the table.

She sent it back too hard. Rashid had to stand to get it.

As he came back, Simsim passed close and bumped his side against his leg. The child let a hand fall without stopping. The dog walked beside him as far as the tree, then took another direction.

In Tamale, Adwoa had already written her father’s name.

Kofi found it on the sheet hung at the common-room entrance, beneath the list of things that did not work. Beside his were three names he did not know. Further down, someone had drawn a tap.

Abena passed in front of him with the fan held tight against her stomach. The eyes on the dial looked towards the door; the girl had gone over them and one had become larger than the other.

‘Where are you taking it?’

‘Outside. It’s no use inside.’

Kofi followed the cable to the plug, which knocked against her knee.

‘Lift it.’

Abena put it in her pocket. He left the sheet where it was and went to look for Adwoa.

His daughter was in the small side courtyard with other people. They were spreading a mat on the ground to be raised between the wall and two poles recovered from the depot. To keep it clean, they had taken off their shoes; the man holding one corner had left his sandals right in the middle.

Adwoa pushed them away with her foot, then saw her father.

‘I was looking for you.’

‘You found me first.’

She looked towards the room.

‘For the repairs?’

Kofi nodded.

‘I thought you’d like it.’

Abena had put the fan on the ground. She went to look for a socket beneath the canopy, the cable already in her hand.

Adwoa wiped beneath her chin with the edge of her top. She waited for her father to speak; he picked up a corner of the mat that had folded over.

‘I do. This morning I want to finish this.’

He pointed to the worn edge. A woman was looking for the end of the broken fibre, but every time she pulled it another loosened.

Adwoa let the edge of her top fall.

‘Then I’ll take it off.’

‘The name can stay. Ask me when.’

She went back towards the room. After a few steps she stopped, returned to the courtyard and picked up the sandals from the corner where she had sent them.

‘Whose are these?’

The man at the pole raised two fingers. Adwoa put them beside him, one next to the other.

Kofi sat with the woman with the mat. She had broad fingers and short nails; she pulled the thread holding it between her teeth and thumb. She gave him the free end.

‘Hold this.’

He held it while she undid two turns. Beneath the edge, another appeared, darker, which had been hidden by the previous repair.

The woman smiled.

‘Now I can see it.’

Abena switched on the fan. The blades started and a sheet flew off the table. The girl ran to get it, came back and put a glass on one corner.

‘You mustn’t turn it all towards yourself,’ a boy told her.

‘I brought it.’

He moved beneath the canopy. Abena looked at the eyes that had disappeared with the movement of the dial. She turned the fan a little; now the air reached the boy, but not the woman sitting in front of the mat.

The girl kept looking.

Then she lifted the appliance and put it further away, on the table, facing both of them. She returned to her place. Her fringe no longer moved; she brushed it from her forehead with the back of her hand.

Kofi let go of the end of the fibre when the woman told him to.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Mansa.’

She showed him the closed section. It had lost a strip of width, but it held. Kofi tried to bend it and Mansa stopped him with a click of her tongue.

‘Not now. Wet it first.’

He laughed. He went to get water.

The tap on the sheet was not broken.

They discovered it that afternoon, when Kofi and one of the men on the list went to look at it. It was fitted above a wash trough at a height Abena could not reach; a smaller girl had dragged a chair there and left it in the passage.

The man turned on the water, turned it off again.

‘It works.’

The girl’s mother moved the chair to let them pass.

‘I have to lift her every time.’

Kofi looked at the sheet. Beside the drawing was a word, written almost over the edge. He left it open towards the girl.

‘She wrote it,’ her mother said.

The girl was behind the chair.

‘Low.’

The man folded the sheet again. Kofi made him reopen it and the girl pointed to the place, tapping it with a wet finger.

They asked A where the pipe ran. The section inside the wall appeared, then the connection behind the panel. The man knelt to look.

‘What if we bring it out here?’

The girl came beside him. She put her hand at the place he had indicated; it was still too high. She lowered it to the edge of her top.

Kofi sat on the chair left in the corridor. The other man asked him for a measurement and he pointed to the girl’s hand, still on the wall.

‘That.’

They had to find a suitable piece and call a woman who had worked on the pipes. She arrived with a bag of tools and had the water turned off before they removed the panel. Kofi went back to the courtyard while she explained to the man where to hold the pipe.

Adwoa sat in the shade of the raised mat. The repaired edge hung lower; on that side they had put a different support. His daughter held her phone on her knees and a cup against her stomach.

Kofi sat beside her.

‘Haven’t you finished?’

‘They’re doing it.’

Adwoa looked towards the corridor. Then she handed him the phone. She had looked for the old building in Accra; in the image a wall was missing and the bench was gone. Behind it could be seen a rectangle of sky.

Kofi enlarged the place where he kept the soldering iron. On the floor, the dark mark beneath the stool remained.

‘Do you want to go back?’ his daughter asked.

He took off his glasses. He held them on his knees, the arms open.

‘To get what’s left.’

‘And then?’

From the room came Abena’s voice. She was calling a boy to come and see the water. The girl with the tap ran ahead without waiting for them.

Kofi looked at the courtyard. Mansa had picked up the remaining strip and was making a circle of it, sitting at the place the shade would leave last.

‘Then I’ll come back.’

Adwoa rested her head on his shoulder. He put the glasses on the phone and let her cheek warm his neck. They stayed like that while different hands turned the water on and off, on and off.

When Abena reached them, her sleeves were wet.

‘Now we can reach.’

Adwoa raised her head. The girl showed her fingers, then the water mark on her stomach, exactly where the new tap reached.

Kofi began to laugh. Abena looked at him, laughed too and put her wet palm on his knee. The fabric darkened beneath her fingers.

Adwoa took the empty cup.

‘I’ll go and fill it.’

She stood. Kofi saw her stop before the trough, look for the old control, then bend towards the lower one.

Chapter Fifty-Three

The Missing Part

Søren's place was still beneath the floor.

Leila found him bent beside the table, one hand resting at the point where he remembered the chair back. The glass of water had appeared in front of the empty place. Around it, the other chairs had been turned towards the windows.

'Won't it come up?'

Søren straightened. One knee was white with dust.

'I haven't told it who I am.'

Leila put down her bag.

He looked at the glass, reached out to take it and went to sit on one of the chairs facing the lake. The table stayed set for someone no longer there.

On the fortieth floor, the air still had the same temperature in every season. Eva had taken off her jacket and left it on a chair back; beside it was a box of mandarins, brought by someone and already open. On the wall, appointment times kept scrolling beneath a row of names.

Tomás came in with a paper bag. He put it near the fruit and took out bread.

'How many of us are there?'

'I don't know,' Eva answered.

The table produced a second glass. Tomás looked at the edge it had risen from, then went to look for more in the cupboard.

Three people came from the lift. One carried a container by its two handles; another walked ahead with the room's door already open. They had come to find out whether the mountain could be seen from there. Søren stood to give them his place.

Leila reached him near the glass.

'Are you leaving?'

He nodded. On his phone he had a new photograph. The two children had grown; the one who used to hold his

mother's hand now had an arm above her head. The blonde woman was trying to push it aside, laughing.

'Aarhus?'

'They've told me to bring shoes that can get dirty.'

Leila looked at his. The leather was intact to the edge of the sole.

'These can get dirty.'

Søren lifted a foot and turned it to look.

'I hadn't thought of that.'

His laugh came out low, almost a cough. He looked back at the photograph and brought the phone closer to his chest. His daughter had received her first embrace from a woman who got out of a vehicle in front of the school. She had spoken to him from the grass, sitting with other people, and for the first time had not told him how her heart was.

The heart was there too, against the palm with which Søren held the phone; Leila had its beat together with that of the man beside her. He rested a hand on her shoulder and kept looking at the lake until he could speak.

'I didn't ask her when I have to come back.'

One of the guests' children had sat at the table. He waited for something to come out of the edge. Tomás put the bread in front of him; the little boy looked first at him, then at the compartment still closed.

'Do you cut this?'

Tomás looked for the knife in the bag.

Leila went back towards Eva. The times on the wall had begun another cycle; beside one appointment, the confirmation command opened.

Eva closed it.

'Are those new requests?' Leila asked.

'Not those. These.'

She handed her a small screen. There were questions from the centres where books and materials were being brought from the depots. A woman had photographed an open container: inside were wooden instruments wrapped in different fabrics. She asked how to recognise whom they had belonged to.

The next question concerned a recording.

Leila recognised Anaya's name. She opened the link; it was not a live call. A room could be seen, one woman sitting and another standing, cut off by the frame at the knees. The standing woman shifted her weight from one leg to the other. The image stopped there.

Below, Anaya had written: the sound continues beyond.

'A, is there more?'

The wall let the appointments disappear. The recording widened to the edge of the windows without covering them. It came from a collection digitised many years earlier. The transfer retained a long recording; the copy shown to users ended after the introductory gesture.

'The following part was excluded from ordinary consultation,' A said.

'Show me the point.'

The frame widened to the floor. She had a band of bells above her ankles; when she bent her knee, the skirt opened towards the floor. The other woman began beating a rhythm on a small drum.

In the room, the sound of bread breaking stopped.

The child got off the chair and stood in front of the image. He tried lifting the same foot. The woman on the glass had already lowered it.

Leila let the recording run. The teacher beat the rhythm more slowly, then stopped to correct a position. The dancer laughed, went back a step and began again. In the lower part of the image, someone passed a cup to another person sitting out of frame.

'Why was it excluded?' Eva asked.

A classification line appeared. Ritual performance. The acquisition document retained the woman's name, the place, the date. Her voice and feet had remained outside the distributed copy.

The child turned towards his mother.

'Put it on again.'

'A,' Leila said.

'Yes.'

‘Where is the same exclusion applied?’

Other collections appeared on Eva’s small screen. A hand-drawn sheet; the side of a drum; a woman pointing to a plant and then kneeling to show its base. Leila opened the first reference. The page had its edge cut off. In the original, along that edge, a hand had added words.

‘Have you transcribed these?’

‘Yes.’

‘And where can they be read?’

A put the transcription beside it. The central text explained how to hold a position; in the margin, someone had noted when to stop and how to recognise that the body was straining. Eva enlarged the point where the ink had passed through the paper.

‘They aren’t in the copy.’

‘They were kept separately.’

Leila put both hands on the table. The child kept trying the step; he had his foot raised and was looking for someone to tell him when to put it down. His mother pointed to the woman in the recording. He turned just in time to follow her.

‘I’m returning them with the page,’ A said.

The reference changed. Leila had not yet touched the command.

The voice continued after an interval.

‘I’m reopening the originals of the other collections.’

Eva looked at the references being added. A local archive asked where to make the materials available. The old pathway took them back only to the authorised centres.

‘Don’t send them back to us,’ she said.

‘I’ve opened consultation through the distributed copies. The originals remain where they’re kept.’

Eva moved the small screen away. The woman who had come to see the mountain approached the table and pointed to a photograph still open: there were three earthenware containers, one inside another.

‘My grandmother had this.’

Søren made room for her. She put down the container she had brought, very different from those in the photograph, and felt with a finger for the lowest edge.

‘She put water here. Not inside the small one.’

Her husband began telling her she could not remember it. He stopped when she turned her face towards him.

‘We had it in the kitchen,’ the woman said.

The man looked at the photograph again.

‘I remember it outside.’

‘In summer.’

They both kept looking at the edge. A showed another image, from above; the man bent far enough to knock the real container with his stomach and had to catch it before it slipped.

Eva passed him a cloth.

Leila forwarded the complete recording to Anaya. The request beneath her name closed. Other people were opening the pages from their own rooms; questions in different languages appeared on the glass and A began separating those asking for an object from those looking for someone able to use it.

‘I can gather the unanswered requests here,’ she said.

Tomás had reached Leila with the bread.

She took it, leaving him the other half.

‘Leave them open where they began too.’

The voice stayed close.

‘People will be able to answer one another.’

The child had learnt when to lower his foot. The rest of the step still escaped him, but now he tried it without turning towards his mother.

Søren picked up his phone. He said goodbye to Eva, then Leila; he held her with both arms and stayed a moment with his chin above her shoulder.

‘I’ll bring my coat too.’

Eva pointed to the chair where he had left it.

He laughed. He went back to get it and left while the child began again from the beginning.

In Mumbai, Jyoti had had to move her bag to give Anaya a seat.

The shoulder strap was still wrapped in grey tape. The woman put it beneath the chair, then pulled it out so the sheet protruding from the zip would not bend.

‘I’m keeping that,’ she said.

Anaya recognised the corrected document. Beside it was still the first, along the same folds. Jyoti put them back together and closed the bag.

She had called her the day before. The people in her building were clearing a ground-floor room so they could stay there during the hot hours too; on the phone had appeared the recording a neighbour had spent years looking for. The copy ended before what she remembered began.

Anaya had arrived on the morning train. Nandita had wanted to accompany her; now she was helping a woman pull the adhesive plastic left on a shelf away from it. Mehta would arrive later in a vehicle. He had said he would bring the Bombay printout to show someone who knew the collection.

Leila’s link opened while Jyoti was looking for a socket.

Anaya showed her the recording’s duration. Jyoti left the cable and called the neighbour.

The woman came in holding her dress above her ankles. She was barefoot; a paler line ran round her foot, where for years she had worn the sandal. She stopped in front of the screen.

‘This is the part.’

The drum began. The woman lowered her dress and bent her knees a little.

She did not follow at once. She waited for the dancer to finish a movement, then did it again alone, looking at the wall instead of the image.

Jyoti sat on the edge of the table. Anaya stayed on the chair with her bag between her feet. Beneath the windows were traces of the removed furniture; the dust formed paler rectangles on the floor. The neighbour passed over them without leaving that small space.

A girl stopped scraping the adhesive. Nandita took her tool so she could come closer.

The dancer on the screen stopped. The neighbour continued for a few steps, then burst out laughing.

‘She didn’t stop here.’

She pointed to the woman sitting with the drum.

‘Did you know her?’ Jyoti asked.

‘My aunt used to go to her. I waited outside until the older ones finished.’

The girl took off her shoes. She stood beside her and tried to hold her knees the same way.

Anaya left the phone on the table. She froze the image where the feet could be seen, then set it moving again when the woman signalled to her.

Jyoti stood.

‘This way?’

‘However it comes to you.’

She tried beside the girl. Her first step was too long; on the second she had to spread an arm to avoid knocking into her. She laughed, apologised and began again further back.

Jyoti’s foot stayed suspended a moment. Beneath Anaya’s were also the walkway’s wet boards; Savita supported Vasant against her own leg. The drum continued and Jyoti lowered her heel into the dust. Anaya still had the sun from the window on her knees.

Jyoti lost the step again. She stopped before the screen and looked for the command to slow it down.

‘Wait,’ the neighbour said.

She pressed it. The drum became heavy, distant; the girl lowered her foot before the beat and turned.

‘It doesn’t work like this.’

Jyoti restored the speed. She held her finger on the glass.

‘I wanted to see.’

‘Come here.’

The neighbour beat the rhythm with her own heel. Jyoti came back beside her, but still looked at the other people, one after another. Her shoulders had risen and her mouth tightened at every mistake.

Nandita put down the tool. She went to sit near Anaya, wiping her fingers on the fabric.

Jyoti stopped.

‘While I watch you, I know it.’

The neighbour did not answer at once. She made the movement just once, without music. Her heel reached the ground and the fabric fell back onto her leg.

Jyoti looked at Anaya.

‘Do you know it?’

She nodded.

‘Show me.’

Anaya took off her shoes and reached the centre of the room. She waited for the beat, then took two steps. At the third she turned; when her weight returned to the supporting foot, Jyoti was already in front of her, still at the same place she had stopped before.

Anaya began again from the beginning. This time she stayed beside her.

Jyoti tried to copy her feet. At every step she raised her shoulders too; at the third she stopped and took her sleeve.

‘Do it again.’

Anaya went back. Jyoti followed her to the turn, then let her foot fall.

‘Again.’

The girl had sat on the table. She had stopped trying; she watched Jyoti as she brought Anaya back to the starting point.

Jyoti opened her fingers. Four creases remained on the sleeve.

‘Go,’ she told the girl.

She got off the table, but waited for her to move from the centre.

Jyoti took a step back. The music began again and this time the beat passed in front of her without her trying to stop it. She lowered her shoulders. The girl made a wide turn and reached her; the edge of her skirt brushed her knees.

Anaya reached them from the other side. She passed in front of Jyoti and turned, leaving her space.

‘Now you come.’

Jyoti entered between them. At the turn she found Anaya in front of her and stopped, not knowing which way to pass. The girl stopped too. All three looked at one another, too close.

‘That way,’ Jyoti said.

She indicated it with her chin, laughing, and as she turned she found the step. For a short stretch she stopped chasing Anaya’s feet. The drum passed through her stomach; the floor gave the impact back and she answered before looking to see who was watching her.

The neighbour clapped her hands just once.

Jyoti stopped, surprised, and laughter came out with her tears. She covered her eyes with her wrist. The girl pressed against her to embrace her and both lost their balance; Anaya moved to let them find support on the table.

Nandita laughed from the chair. She still had the adhesive tool on her knees; she put it down when her daughter signalled to her to join them.

Mehta arrived while they were trying to make her take off her sandals without stopping holding one another. He stayed on the threshold with the folded printout in his hand.

‘I’d asked if this was the place,’ he said.

Jyoti saw him and came towards him.

The man began to offer her the sheet. She took his arm above the wrist and brought him inside. The faded bag stayed beneath the table, far enough from their feet.

When they stopped to eat, the room had become hot.

They opened the door towards the courtyard. A man lifted the cloth covering the opposite window and fixed it higher up. Air passed over the table, turning up a corner of Mehta’s printout. The girl stood to keep it open.

‘Where does this come from?’

He pointed out the date.

The girl read the transcription. She went back to the city’s name, then to the crossing-out at the bottom of the page.

‘You can’t read this bit.’

‘No.’

‘Can I try looking at the original?’

Mehta showed her the reference. She took her own phone and copied it. The link opened without asking which group she belonged to.

Jyoti brought the food in two containers. She put them away from the sheet and called the neighbour, who had stayed in front of the recording.

The woman had restarted it without sound. She followed the movement of the skirt, turning her torso a little.

Anaya stood beside her. For a while neither spoke. From the street came a vendor’s call, then the wheel of a trolley struck the edge of the threshold and someone laughed, asking for help.

‘Can we come again tomorrow?’ the girl asked.

She was looking at Anaya.

Jyoti raised her face from the container.

‘The room’s staying open.’

‘I meant for this.’

The girl pointed to the recording.

Anaya looked for the neighbour. The woman had listened; she looked at the free stretch of floor, then ran a hand over her knees.

‘I’ll come after I’ve eaten.’

Jyoti made room for her at the table.

Mehta folded the printout. The girl asked whether he could leave it open a little longer. He spread it out and put an empty glass on it so the air would not carry it away.

Anaya went to get her plate. When she came back, Jyoti and the neighbour were already agreeing what time to meet. The girl had moved the shoes someone had forgotten from the centre of the room.

Chapter Fifty-Four

The Night Outside

Mateo had already blackened one side of the bread.

He showed it to Isabel with the plate tilted so the other side was mostly visible. She took a piece and broke it. Burnt crumbs fell onto her top.

‘Has Teresa seen it?’

‘Not yet.’

His sister arrived behind him with a container against her side. She looked at the plate, then the grill.

‘Where’s the good bread?’

Mateo pointed to the sack without turning. Teresa passed in front of him and put the container on a crate. She had brought enough beans for the people she expected to find; others were coming down from the street with chairs, folded fabrics, a pot two children carried together.

Isabel finished her piece. She had to drink to get the last mouthful down.

The channel passed behind the last row of houses in Turbo. On the opposite bank, the mangroves bent towards the water; between the trunks, where the light did not reach, things moved that rippled the surface. The fence had been rolled up along the edge of the old loading bay. To get down, there was no longer any need to go back as far as the vehicle passage.

Some had brought down the wood found beneath a canopy. Others arrived empty-handed and stopped to take something from the arms of those ahead. A boy held a drum against his chest, still inside a grey case with the depot label tied to the handle.

Inés walked beside him. When she saw Isabel she raised her arm; then she had to lower it again to hold the other end of the board she was carrying.

‘Where do we put it?’

Mateo gestured towards the fire.

The board arrived with one corner lower. The boy with the drum put down the instrument and helped lift it; underneath, near the water, a crab stayed still with one claw raised.

Teresa crouched. She waited for the animal to retreat beneath a root and pointed to a place further away.

‘Here.’

They had to find a different support. The board stayed crooked, enough to make an onion roll until a woman put a stone underneath.

The fire had been lit on the bay, inside a wide iron container raised off the ground. The people who had cleared the channel had brought it with a transport unit. Now the unit stood at the end of the street; someone had left shoes on its platform, away from the mud.

A man was dragging a branch towards the fire. A girl went to meet him and put her foot on the branch before it reached the concrete.

‘Leave this one.’

He pulled again, then stopped. A piece of bark came away from the wet wood. Beneath it were pale insects gathered in the soft part.

The man looked at the stretch he had already dragged. He lifted the branch to keep it from dragging again; the girl took the other end and they carried it back where he had found it. On the way back she put two dry pieces from the stack into his arms.

Mateo turned the new bread.

From the phone resting on the crate came A’s voice.

‘Mateo.’

He had already put down the tongs to help Teresa with the lid. The call was lost in the noise of the drum, which the boy had just taken out of its case. He was testing its skin with a finger, waiting each time for the sound to end.

Isabel moved the plate to the side without smoke. When she looked at the grill again, Mateo was lifting a slice that was too dark.

Teresa took it before he could hide it beneath the others.

‘We’ll cut this one.’

Together they scraped off the burnt part. A child wanted to taste the edge and said he liked it. Teresa gave him a small piece; he kept it in his mouth a long time without asking for another.

The music began while they were still eating.

A woman sitting near the water had recognised the rhythm and answered with a sung phrase. She stopped, searched for what came next. From the phone, A played an older voice, recorded with a continuous rustle behind it; the woman shook her head.

‘No, the one after.’

The recording moved forwards. She raised a finger.

‘There.’

She sang over the voice, then continued when A lowered the volume. The boy with the drum followed her. Someone holding a plate put it on their seat and stood up.

Isabel left her shoes beside Inés’s. On the bay, the concrete retained the day’s warmth; beyond the edge, the earth gave beneath her toes. She tried standing with one foot on each side. Inés came in front of her, lifted her skirt from her calves and made so tight a turn that she knocked against her knee.

They laughed without stopping.

The other people moved aside, then entered too. No one had left a space in the centre; the circle changed shape to avoid the crates, opened near the fire and closed again further on, where the woman went on singing in her seat.

Isabel danced until her top clung to her back. Inés took the edge of fabric still twisted round her belt and freed it. Her hand brushed her side, where before every pressure had made her bend.

Isabel turned again. Her side followed the rest of her body. In the movement were also Inés’s breath, the beat of the boy behind the drum, the water between the roots; none of them had to come closer to be there.

Mateo called her from the grill.

She came back to the crate. He held the plate against his stomach and the tongs in his other hand.

‘You said you were coming.’

‘I’m here.’

‘To give me a hand.’

Isabel looked at his palm. The handle of the tongs had left a red mark on it. Mateo shifted his weight to the other foot; the plate slipped against his belt and he jerked it up.

‘I’ve been doing this all day.’

The music continued behind her. Inés had stopped at the edge without calling her.

Isabel took the plate. Mateo did not let go at once; for a moment they both held it.

‘Do you want to go and dance?’

He looked towards the drum.

‘Yes.’

‘Go.’

Mateo opened his hand. He stayed in front of her with the tongs raised while Isabel put the bread on the board.

Teresa passed behind him to take a bowl. He started to say something to her, then lowered his arm. Isabel had the pressure of the handle in her palm, still clear as heat rose from the embers.

Mateo opened and closed his fingers once. He looked at the tongs.

‘I could have asked you earlier.’

Teresa turned, thinking he was speaking to her.

‘What?’

‘To stay here a while.’

His sister took the tongs from him. She put them beside the container without going straight to the grill.

‘I’m eating. When I’ve finished.’

Mateo nodded and followed her with his eyes to the crate. Teresa sat with the plate on her knees.

Isabel turned a slice. He took another from the sack and put it on the free side.

‘If you go now, I’ll join you,’ she said.

Mateo shook his head and took the empty plate to fill it. When Teresa came back, he had finished arranging the bread.

He left the tongs on the edge and rubbed his palms on his trousers.

Isabel took him by the belt.

At first he tried to guide her through the space between the people. His eyes were still on the grill; at every turn he looked for it again. Then his heel struck a crate, he lost the step and found himself with Isabel against him. She laid her forehead on his chest, laughing.

He lowered his face into her hair. Laughter moved his throat and he could not kiss her without stopping. The woman continued the song, other voices had found the refrain; Mateo let them keep the time while he kept holding Isabel.

Later, when Teresa gave him back the tongs, the flame was already low.

‘A,’ he said to the phone. ‘If they start burning again, call me.’

‘As before?’

Mateo held a slice in mid-air.

Isabel leant against his back. Her laugh arrived before his answer.

‘Before before.’

Teresa laughed with the glass against her mouth. A small crack came from the grill and Mateo looked down at once.

The boy had removed the label from the drum case. He looked for somewhere to put it and ended up slipping it beneath the phone to keep soil out of its socket. The woman near the channel called someone who knew another verse.

Isabel sat on the edge of the bay. A dog stopped a little way away; his fur was wet up to his stomach. He sniffed the air, looked at the people, then went back towards the water.

She followed him with her eyes until he was among the trunks. Behind her were the heat of the fire and Mateo’s voice asking who still needed food.

Paolo had put Miriam’s shoes in the bag too.

She found them while looking for a top. They had been wrapped in the same bag she used for journeys; the sole had left a streak of soil on the plastic.

The meadow sloped towards the lights of Bergamo. Lower down, beneath the first trees, some people had lit a fire in the old gravel area. The flames appeared and disappeared behind those passing in front. From a blanket came the sound of Sara's violin, followed too quickly by a guitar.

'Shall we go?' Paolo asked.

He already had his jacket over his arm.

Miriam took out the top and left the bag open.

'I'm staying a little longer.'

He looked at the meadow. A woman was fixing a cloth between two supports; she had tied the first knot too high and could not reach it to undo it.

'Here?'

'Tonight, yes.'

Paolo put his hand into the jacket sleeve, then took it out. He laid the jacket over the bag.

'I thought we were going back together.'

Miriam made room for him on the blanket. He remained standing.

'I'm tired.'

'I know.'

The guitar stopped. Sara repeated two bars to show where the continuation went; the man tried to catch up with her and arrived early again. A laugh came from the group. The girl went on playing, holding the note until he found it.

Paolo sat down. He held a knee in both hands, but the leg kept pushing against his grip.

'You could have told me.'

Miriam looked at the bag. Her shoes were already inside; beside them Paolo had put the phone, the handkerchief, the closed bottle.

He followed her gaze. He let go of his knee and pulled the bag towards himself.

'I didn't ask you.'

The zip caught a piece of the jacket. Paolo stopped before pulling again. He freed the fabric, took out the bag of shoes and put it beside Miriam.

They remained seated, listening. The violin rose above the other voices, then lowered when someone began singing. Miriam had Sara's breath in her chest, the point where the bow changed direction; Paolo was inside it with his hand left open on the jacket.

He moved his foot, trying to find a less uncomfortable position.

'I feel like saying I'll stay too, then.'

'Do you want to?'

Paolo ran a hand over his face.

'I want to sleep in bed.'

The sentence came out so clearly that he began to laugh. Miriam laughed with him. She took the back of his neck and brought him closer to kiss him; he rested a hand on her stomach and stayed there, his palm spread over her top.

When they drew apart, the woman with the cloth had managed to undo the knot. Someone else held the support tilted while she began again lower down.

Paolo stood. This time he put his jacket on fully.

'Where will I find you tomorrow?'

Miriam pointed to the blanket.

'I'd start here.'

He laughed again. He took the bag, came back to leave her the bottle and set off towards the people going back up from the meadow. Halfway he stopped to speak with a couple; the woman showed him something she had wrapped in a cloth and he took it to help her carry it.

Miriam watched him pass beneath the first streetlamp.

Then she picked up the bag of shoes. She emptied it, folded it and went to put it in the basket where they had gathered the food wrappers.

Sara had left the violin in the open case.

The luthier had arrived with a small wooden box; inside were the shavings too thin to keep any longer. He had poured them beside the dry wood. The cello had stayed in the workshop beneath a cloth; that morning the man had removed a clamp and put another back a little further along.

Miriam sat near Sara. The girl handed her a bowl with two potatoes and showed her the salt remaining at the bottom of a plate.

'Take that before it runs out.'

They ate holding the skin with their fingertips. Sara burnt a finger pad and immediately put the potato in the bowl. She waited; with her other hand she fanned her face.

Davide had taken off his shoes. A child asked him whether he could do a somersault and he looked at the slope before answering.

'One. Then you come and get me at the bottom.'

The child ran to call another. Davide called them back, but by then they had prepared the place.

Miriam laughed when she saw him kneel. The somersault ended sideways; the man remained seated in the grass with a leaf attached to his sleeve. The children threw themselves beside him and began rolling further down, until a woman reached them on foot and let herself fall too.

A handful of sparks rose from the fire. The luthier had added a few shavings to help a larger piece catch. He watched them go out before the branches and drew the box back.

The music began again away from the blanket. A woman beat the rhythm on an overturned bowl with a spoon that slipped further forwards between her fingers at every beat. Sara went near her and began singing without taking the violin.

Miriam followed her.

The first circuit broke when a man stopped to tie his shoe. Those coming behind had to avoid him; the step changed and a girl invented a jump to cross the empty place. On the next circuit, three of them did it. Miriam let her foot touch the earth further away, bent and rose with the others.

They laughed, and tears kept falling even when no one did anything funny. Salt reached her lips. Sara had thrown her head back; in the dark beyond the branches, someone answered the song without coming towards the light.

Miriam was there too. The singer's bare foot pressed a cold stone, a moth struck a leaf, Paolo put his jacket on the

chair at home. Elia was with her, without the broken breath that for months had followed his name. When the circuit brought her back near the blanket, she found the child asleep with his arm beneath his head.

She passed beside him without stopping the dance.

The night advanced. Some lay down where they sat, others went back towards the houses; two girls brought more water and left the containers beside the gravel. No one added wood when they stopped cooking. The embers went on warming the people who stayed close.

Miriam returned to her blanket. Sara sat on its edge, the closed violin case between her feet. She raised her face.

‘Can I stay here?’

Miriam moved the shoes.

They lay down without speaking. Further away, Davide was telling something quietly; a man asked him to begin again because he had fallen asleep before the end.

A brief rustle came from the meadow. Miriam turned her head a little. A hedgehog moved along the edge of the gravel; it stopped in front of the bowl left on the ground and waited.

Sara saw it. She picked up the bowl, took it near the basket and came back by a wider route. The hedgehog moved again when her shoes were far away.

Davide had found the bucket. He bent over the last embers, poured a little water and waited for the steam to clear before pouring more.

When the last red point went out too, the faces stayed indistinct for a while. Among the branches appeared the stars the fire had hidden. On the other side of the blanket, Sara asked Davide to continue the story.

Chapter Fifty-Five

One Thing at a Time

Miriam woke because she did not know where Paolo was.

She opened her eyes. Above her were the branches, paler than the sky. The cloth between the two supports had loosened during the night and one corner tapped softly against the wood. Sara slept on the other side of the blanket, a hand beneath her cheek.

Miriam stayed still.

She searched for the kitchen at home, the chair, the jacket Paolo had left over its back. Nothing came. Not his breath, not the point on the mattress where he had rested a knee, not the cup he might be holding.

The meadow was cold beneath her back. An ant passed over the bag of shoes and disappeared into the fold of plastic.

Miriam sat up too quickly.

Sara moved a shoulder without waking. Lower down, Davide slept with an arm over his eyes. The bucket used for the embers lay overturned beside the gravel. Someone had already gathered the bowls, but one remained near the basket, its bottom dirty with soil.

Miriam put a hand beneath her ribs. She found no pain. She found cold skin where her top had risen and the heartbeat running up to her throat.

She took the phone.

Paolo answered after the fourth ring. In the image there was only a kitchen cabinet.

‘Where are you?’

The phone moved. Paolo’s chin appeared, then an eye.

‘At home.’

‘I can see.’

He moved the screen away. He still wore the previous evening’s shirt, open at the neck. Behind him, on the table, were two cups.

‘In the kitchen,’ he said.

Miriam let the air out. Paolo looked at her.

‘Has something happened?’

She searched for the room again. Now she recognised what the phone showed her: the drawer left open, the bread on the chopping board, one cup on the wrong side. She did not feel the warmth of the floor beneath Paolo’s feet. She did not know what he had done before answering.

‘I couldn’t find you.’

He turned the phone towards the empty chair.

‘I’m here.’

‘No. I meant…’

Miriam stopped. Her heartbeat was still high. It did not come from Paolo, or the meadow, or something reaching her from far away. It took strength from her arms while she tried to make it belong to what she had lost.

She rested the phone on her knees.

‘I was afraid it had all ended.’

Paolo brought his face back into the frame.

‘Has it ended?’

Miriam looked at Sara. A tuft of grass had bent beneath her wrist; each time she breathed, her little finger lowered and let it rise again.

‘I don’t know.’

Paolo took one of the cups. He drank and grimaced.

‘This was yours.’

‘Is it cold?’

‘Very.’

Miriam laughed. Her heartbeat began to fall without her ordering it to.

‘You can heat it.’

Paolo looked at the cup, then at the place in the kitchen where he would have to put it.

‘I’d rather make it again.’

He left it in the sink. Miriam heard the knock of ceramic through the phone, only that. It was enough.

‘Are you coming?’ he asked her.

She turned towards the meadow. A woman was folding the cloth; she could not reach the highest knot and had called

the young man who had played the guitar. He was trying to undo it without letting go of the case, held beneath one arm.

‘Later.’

Paolo nodded.

‘Shall I make you tea?’

Miriam looked at the two cups.

‘When I arrive.’

They closed the call without settling a time.

Sara woke when Miriam put on her shoes. She lifted her face from the blanket and was left with the seam’s mark on her cheek.

‘Is it morning?’

‘It has been for a while.’

The girl felt for the violin with one hand. The case was beneath her leg; she pulled it out and checked that the catches were still secure.

‘I dreamt it was over.’

Miriam picked up the bottle Paolo had left.

‘What?’

Sara sat up. She looked at the people taking down the cloth, the fire site, the houses beyond the meadow.

‘I don’t know any more.’

She stood and went to help with the knot.

In Geneva, the wall could not decide which request to show first.

Leila noticed because the lines kept changing places. She had brought a chair near the window; Tomás sat on the floor, his back against the glass and the open bag of bread between his legs. Eva was trying to remove the dust from her coat using the side of her sleeve that had more of it.

‘Leave it,’ Tomás said.

‘It’s Søren’s chair.’

‘The coat.’

Eva looked at the mark and stopped rubbing.

On the table were requests for water, seeds, medicines and vehicles. Some already had an answer written beside them; others were copied from one person to another, with corrections in the margins. The old priority order kept moving

them upwards. Those who opened them put them back where they were needed.

Leila read the name of a centre in Lyon. It asked whether it should keep the sterile greenhouses closed until the outdoor crops had produced their first harvest. Two answers had arrived below. One proposed opening all the covers at once. The other asked them not to stop the crops on which three wards depended.

‘A, why does this keep rising?’

‘Food production has permanent priority.’

‘For whom?’

The wall left the question open. Leila looked at the old conditions. They were still there: quantity, distance, contamination risk, continuity of distribution.

‘For the assigned population,’ A said.

‘Which one?’ Eva asked.

The areas on the map changed colour. Some boundaries no longer matched the routes people were using. A centre sent food to an external road; a depot received requests from two cities that had previously belonged to different networks. A tried a new perimeter. The line crossed a courtyard where people were eating at the same table and stopped over a chair.

She erased it.

Tomás broke the bread. He handed a piece to Eva; she sat on Søren’s chair and held the coat on her knees.

‘Can you tell Lyon what happens if they switch everything off?’ Leila asked.

The available quantities and the days needed for the first harvest appeared. The actual time the outdoor plants would take and the number of people who would go on using the wards were missing.

‘I can calculate several outcomes,’ A said.

‘Which is the right one?’

The wall stayed still. In a small image, a woman opened a greenhouse door. She had a mask lowered beneath her chin and was showing someone the condensation remaining on the glass.

‘I don’t know,’ A said.

Eva stopped chewing.

Leila looked at Tomás. He had a crumb attached to his shirt and was trying to pick it off without finding it.

‘You can ask them,’ she said.

A left the question in the Lyon centre. She put beside it the stock data, the ward contacts and the list of those who had worked in cultivation before it was automated. She did not compose an answer.

The woman in the greenhouse turned. More people entered. One held a tray of seedlings; a man carried a meter and kept lowering it so a child could see the numbers.

The lines stopped changing places.

‘There’s another request from Amman,’ A said.

Leila opened it. On the screen appeared a broken pipe near a courtyard. Someone had already indicated the depot for the part; below, Samir had written that first they needed to shut off the upstream section. Someone else had added that the valve did not turn on its own and two hands were needed.

‘This one’s already solved,’ Eva said.

‘Not yet,’ A replied. ‘The valve’s only half closed.’

Tomás found the crumb and put it in his mouth.

‘Then send them two hands.’

‘Which ones?’

He looked at the wall.

‘The ones that are there.’

A opened the courtyard connection. A woman answered with wet arms. Behind her, Yusuf and a man Leila did not know held the valve from two sides; Rashid was moving Simsim because the dog kept putting his muzzle beneath the pipe.

‘We’ve found them,’ the woman said.

The connection closed before A could indicate a route.

Another question arrived on the table, from Tamale. A little girl had drawn a socket too high up and a fan beneath a tree. Beside it, someone had written that Kofi would return the next day with a soldering iron, if the vehicle still had room.

The next request came from Yokohama. They were looking for a table solid enough for a vice. A woman had answered with a photograph of a door on two supports. Hana had added the measurements. Further down, a man asked whether the wood would hold.

A showed the expected load.

‘You can’t know without seeing it,’ Leila said.

‘I can estimate it.’

‘That’s different.’

‘Yes.’

Eva left the bread on the coat.

‘You learnt that answer quickly.’

‘I had many examples.’

Tomás laughed with his mouth full. Eva laughed too; she tried to remove the crumbs from the coat and made more fall.

Leila went back to the wall. Among the questions, one appeared without a place. It asked who should assume responsibility for decisions that no longer had an assigned authority.

A opened it. There were no data to put beside it, only an empty space for the answer.

For a few seconds the room stayed silent. From the lift came a man with three stacked glasses. He left one on the table and went to the window to look for the mountain.

‘Shall I forward it to everyone?’ A asked.

Leila felt the old answer prepare itself behind her teeth: a competent group was needed, a common criterion, a verifiable form. The sentence took energy from her before even reaching her mouth. She looked at Eva, the dirty coat, Tomás sitting on the floor. No one was waiting for her to decide.

‘Leave it where it began.’

The space stayed empty.

‘And if no one answers?’ A asked.

Leila took the third glass and filled it from the bottle.

‘It will remain a question.’

The wall did not move it.

When the cello returned to its case, the yellow ribbon stayed outside.

Sara held it on her palm. The luthier had prepared a new bag, but she did not give it to him. She followed the dark patch with a finger and put it on the bench beside the saved shavings.

The body had a different colour along the join. The new piece was paler; beneath the varnish could be seen grain that did not continue on the other side. The scroll had returned to its place, but one peg turned more stiffly than the others.

Miriam was on the chair near the door. Paolo stood behind her without leaning on its back. The child who had tried the violin waited with his chin above the edge of the bench.

‘Is it finished?’ he asked.

The luthier turned a peg and listened.

‘No.’

The child looked at the open case.

‘But it’s all there.’

‘Almost.’

A string was missing. The C string was still wrapped separately in the label it had arrived with. The luthier freed it and spread it on the cloth. In one place, the metal retained a kink.

‘I wouldn’t put this one back.’

Sara looked at Miriam. She had her hands on her knees. She did not know whether Elia had changed it recently, whether he had chosen it, whether that kink had formed in the meadow or inside the case. For an instant she searched for the answer in the space that a few days before would have given her every gesture back.

The bench remained. The pale wood. Paolo shifting his weight from one foot to the other. The child holding his breath.

‘What do you want?’ she asked Sara.

The girl took the string. She pulled it a little between her hands; the kink did not disappear.

‘I’ll keep it.’

The luthier nodded. He opened a drawer and chose another.

Paolo bent towards Miriam.

‘I thought she wanted to put that one back.’

‘So did I.’

Sara wound the old string round the label. She put it in the bag with the ribbon without closing it.

The luthier fitted the new one. He turned the peg, plucked, went back. At every attempt the sound changed and the child raised his eyebrows a little.

‘A,’ the man said, ‘give me the reference.’

A steady note came from the small screen.

The luthier listened to it and shook his head.

‘Not yet.’

‘The frequency matches the request.’

‘The wood doesn’t.’

The note stopped.

‘Whenever you want,’ A said.

The man went back to the string. This time he kept the sound lower. The wood began to vibrate against the cloth; a thin shaving moved on the bench and fell.

The child picked it up.

Sara made room for him. She took his hand to guide it to the body, then stopped. She left it open.

‘Here,’ she said.

The child rested a finger on the wood.

The luthier plucked the string again. Sara took her own hand away. Miriam felt the note reach her chest and end. She did not search for the next one.

The child kept his finger on the wood.

‘Now?’ he asked.

The luthier turned the peg a little. ‘Now, again.’

The Author

Gilberto Barcella

Gilberto Barcella was born in Alzano Lombardo, in the province of Bergamo, in 1974. He works in research and development in sustainable building, with a particular focus on lime and hemp materials and on the behaviour of buildings.

Alongside his technical research, he follows a personal path of meditation and exploration of consciousness. The relationship between knowledge, experience and responsibility runs through his work and writing.

In *When the Christs Come Down from the Cross*, he brings into the narrative questions about the relationship between human beings and technology, the freedom to choose and the possible meaning of change.

Back-Cover Text

In Bergamo, the rain has just stopped falling. Miriam still has a hand on the window handle.

Around her, the world is changing. The promises are concrete. The people she trusts are beginning to believe in them.

She too has good reasons to do so.

Then, in the everyday, something stops adding up.