

A SHADOW OVER THE RIVER DOURO



PAOLO PICARIELLO

A SHADOW OVER THE RIVER DOURO

by Paolo Picariello

Porto, August–December 1992

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This novel is set in Greater Porto in 1992, in a neighbourhood of fishermen, prostitutes, thieves and decent people called Afurada. The events, characters and criminal organisations depicted are works of fiction. Any resemblance to real people is entirely coincidental.

Ten really existed.

PROLOGUE

GENOA. A SUNDAY IN NOVEMBER 1988.

The tarmac was warm against his cheek.

That was his first thought — not the pain, not the sound, not the understanding of what had happened. Only the warmth of the tarmac beneath his cheek, in November, as though the square had trapped October's sun inside the stone and refused to surrender it.

Then the sky. Seen flat on his back, Piazza De Ferrari was another square — the fountain at its centre like a circle of metal that never stopped, the buildings looming on four sides like the walls of a well too wide, a grey November sky turning slowly to the right; or perhaps he was the one turning. It was hard to tell which of them was moving.

The sound came afterwards. First the warmth and the sky, then the sound: a continuous, piercing whistle, like something inside his ear trying to drown out everything else.

Then the voices.

Someone calling his name from under water.

Then the pain.

He tried to get up. His legs did not respond as they should. It was not paralysis — he could feel them, which was already something. The signal set off, but something interrupted it along the way.

‘Ricci. Ricci, keep still. Don't move.’

Marchetti's voice. His deputy. A voice he had known for years — how many? Seven, eight? — and which now seemed to come from very far away, even though Marchetti was half a metre from him, kneeling on the tarmac, his hands doing something behind Paolo's back.

‘Dux.’

He said the name without thinking. It was his first whole word: not Marchetti's name, not a plea for help. The dog's name.

‘Is Dux all right?’

Marchetti did not answer at once. That two-second pause held everything.

‘Keep still, Paolo. Keep still.’

He said nothing more. There was no need.

Dux was not all right.

He closed his eyes. The tarmac was still warm against his cheek. The fountain made its circular, ceaseless sound, which never stopped, not even now, not even with the square full of sirens and voices and everything that happens when something serious goes wrong in a public place.

He thought about what had just happened. Not the pain, not his legs — how it had happened.

A planned operation. Route changed at the last moment — a decision made that morning, shared with no more than three people. A window of only a few minutes between the change and the execution. Yet someone had known. Someone had known the exact route, the exact moment.

Someone on the inside.

It was not yet a name. It was a shape — the outline of someone he knew well enough, someone close enough,

someone who had found enough reasons to sell what he knew.

Rex had died two years earlier, in the other compromised operation Paolo had put down to bad luck. The collar had remained in a drawer, because some objects become difficult to throw away after they have touched something we loved.

Now, with the Genoa sky above him and the sirens drawing nearer, he understood that perhaps it had not been bad luck.

Now he was beginning to understand that the two things might be connected.

There was still no name. Only the shape of someone — close, trusted, bought — moving at the edges of what he was able to think.

The ambulance arrived. Hands turning him over, a stretcher, the sky becoming vertical again instead of horizontal. Someone talked to him without stopping. Paolo answered in monosyllables, his attention somewhere else.

Somewhere the shape of a dog that no longer existed still remained.

And a man was not where he should have been.

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PART ONE

A SHADOW OVER THE RIVER DOURO

Greater Porto — August / September 1992

AFURADA — 14 AUGUST 1992

Miguel came in at twenty past ten.

Paolo recognised him by his posture before he even saw his face: the rigid shoulders, the gait of someone who keeps moving only because stopping would be worse.

He rose from the counter.

‘Miguel.’

The other man stopped halfway across the bar. He was clutching a preserving jar between his hands.

‘Fourth day,’ he said. ‘The police say they still have nothing else.’

Paolo had known Sofia since she used to run along the quay with her laces undone. He also knew the face of a father who could no longer call what he was doing waiting.

He pointed at the jar.

‘Is that the pillowcase?’

Miguel nodded. ‘Sonia took it off the pillow as you told me. She put a clean bag over her hand, without touching the fabric, then sealed it in here.’

Paolo checked the lid. Glass retained a cleaner scent than the T-shirt Miguel had taken to the police, which had already passed through too many hands. It did not make the dog infallible; it merely reduced one of the many reasons he might get it wrong.

‘Who saw her last?’

‘Fernanda. At Fonte dos Leões, the night of the festival. She says it was twenty to one. Sofia stayed there to wait for someone.’

‘Do the police know?’

‘Since yesterday.’

Paolo picked up the telephone and called Fernando Vieira. He told him about the place, the time and the jar. He did not ask for an authorisation Fernando could not give him; he asked for an officer to keep the starting point clear and record every movement.

When he hung up, Ten had already risen from his bed. He came over to the table, sniffed the air and looked at Paolo.

‘Not here,’ Paolo told him. ‘We begin at the last place we know she was.’

He took the harness, the long line and a bottle of water. Maria came out from behind the counter and straightened his collar with a quick gesture.

‘Don't promise Miguel what you don't know.’

‘I don't.’

Miguel followed them to the door.

‘Will you find her?’

Paolo looked at the jar, then at the dog. Four days of heat, wind, traffic and thousands of footsteps separated Sofia from that square.

‘We're looking for a direction,’ he said. ‘If Ten can't find it, he'll tell us. That is useful too.’

They went out into the white glare of August. The Douro shone at the end of the street, the nets were rolled on the quays and a gull cried above the rooftops.

Ten jumped into the car without being called.

II

THE TRAIL

They reached Fonte dos Leões shortly after midday.

Fernando had kept the onlookers back with two barriers and a plain-clothes officer. Fernanda indicated the exact spot: the rim of the fountain facing Rua das Carmelitas. That was where she had left Sofia four nights earlier, sitting with her bag on her knees.

‘Was she waiting for François?’ Paolo asked.

‘She didn’t say. She only said she was meeting someone.’

Paolo did not question her further. He looked at the paving stones, the short shadows, the continuous flow of people. It was a terrible starting point: open, heavily crossed, washed every morning. But it was a known point, not a hypothesis.

He buckled Ten into his tracking harness and attached an eight-metre long line. He opened the jar without removing the pillowcase and held it out to the dog. Ten inhaled twice, turned his muzzle away, then returned to the scent. Paolo closed the container at once.

‘Find.’

He did not indicate a direction. He stepped back and let Ten build his own picture.

The dog traced a semicircle around the fountain. On his first exit he took Rua do Carmo for a few metres, slowed, then came back. On the second he checked the edge of a

flower bed and returned with the line slack. On the third his body changed: head lower, shoulders forward, steady tension on the line.

Paolo followed without shortening it. That did not prove Sofia had gone that way; it was behaviour consistent with the scent being sought. The distinction would be enormous in a report. It had to remain so in his own mind as well.

Ten went down towards Rua de Ceuta. At times he worked along the kerb and at others two or three metres off line, where currents between the buildings had moved the scent. At each crossing he widened his search, tested an exit, discarded it and continued. Paolo read the tension in the long line, not the nose. The nose might be high or low; the decision lay in the whole body.

After twenty minutes they stopped in the shade. Paolo gave him a little water and waited for his breathing to settle. The heat mattered more than the handler's pride.

They set off again.

The trail led them to the ramp of a private car park. The attendant wanted to talk, but Fernando made him wait. Ten went down to the lower level, crossed two rows of cars and slowed in front of a bay beside a pillar. He made two small circles, checked the pedestrian passage, then returned to the bay. Then the tension vanished.

Paolo gave him the full length of the line. Ten tried the vehicle exit, came back, searched along the wall and returned once more to the pillar. No clear continuation.

‘Outside,’ Paolo said.

He let him rest for five minutes, then repeated the check from the opposite corridor. The result was the same: arrival

at the bay, a brief, scattered search, no pedestrian trail leading out.

Paolo took off his cap and looked at Fernando.

‘He loses the trail here. She may have got into a vehicle. There may also be too much contamination for him to continue. I can't tell you which.’

The attendant remembered a dark-green van entering after midnight and leaving less than ten minutes later. He remembered two men and a girl on the front seat; not the whole registration, only the final letters. Fernando had the bay isolated. There was a recent oil stain and a tyre mark, things the laboratory could compare and the dog could not.

Ten lay down on the cool concrete, tongue out.

‘Good boy,’ Paolo said.

Not because he had found Sofia. He had marked out part of her last known route and had known when to stop where the information ended. It was the least spectacular part of the work and the part Paolo most trusted himself to bring to Fernando.



There had been six puppies in André's enclosure three years earlier. One bit at shoelaces, one barked at everything, one tried to climb the fence. Ten watched.

He had sat two metres from Paolo and studied him with the disproportionate seriousness he would retain as an adult. Then he rose, crossed the distance and placed himself at Paolo's side.

‘What's his name?’ Paolo had asked.

‘He hasn't got one yet.’

‘Ten.’

There had been no reason. Only the right sound.

Now, in the car park, Ten raised his head when Paolo picked up the long line. The work was over. They went up towards the light.

III

PAOLO'S YOUTH

Genoa, 1959–1988

Genoa, 1959. Third child. His father at the docks. His mother sewing for ladies from the upper quarter.

At sixteen he left with a gym bag. Amsterdam. Trouble his grandfather dealt with in silence. Then Viterbo — the non-commissioned officers' course, six months, something that changed the shape of things without changing their substance.

The Genoa dog unit. Dux — German shepherd, imposing, patient. The bosses had put a price on their heads.

Then that Sunday in Piazza De Ferrari.

His legs recovered enough. Not enough. He left.

A bar by the docks. A Portuguese woman with a book and a glass of iced tea she never finished.

Maria. Porto. O Farol.

Ten.

IV

SOFIA'S FRIENDS

Fernanda was seventeen and her eyes were swollen. She sat at a table in the bar with her hands clasped around the coffee cup as though she were cold, in August, with the temperature at thirty-one degrees.

Paolo took no notes. He did not open a notebook. He sat opposite her as one sits opposite someone who still has to decide whether to speak.

‘You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to.’

Fernanda looked at him. Assessed him.

‘There was a man,’ she said. ‘French. Sofia called him François. She hadn't introduced him to me — she'd kept him separate. And Sofia never kept things separate, you understand? We told each other everything. When she began keeping him separate, I knew he was different.’

‘Different how?’

‘Like when someone makes you feel older than you are. Not because he truly cares about you — because he needs you for something. But she couldn't see it. Or she could and didn't want to know.’

‘The last time, I left her at Fonte dos Leões at twenty to one. She was different. She had the face of someone who has already decided. Not nervous: resolved. Like someone leaving.’

Paolo remained silent for a moment.

‘Did she say where she was going?’

‘No. She only said—’ Fernanda lowered her eyes. ‘She said that at last she was the one choosing.’

Outside the bar window, the Douro shone motionless in the heat.

Ten sat beside Paolo's chair, still, doing nothing — only his presence, which at certain moments was the most useful thing he could offer.

THE MEETING WITH FERNANDO

Fernando Vieira arrived at the bar late in the afternoon. Paolo knew him well enough to read the news in the way he came through the door — the faint tightening around his eyes, the adjustment of a tie that did not need adjusting.

He sat down. Maria brought port without being asked. Fernando accepted it with a small but genuine gesture of gratitude.

‘Tell me.’

‘The young man found dead at Entre os Rios had links to an organisation we’ve been watching for some time. François Guimarães, French of Portuguese descent, born in Marseille, twenty-six. Connected to trafficking between France and Portugal. He had been seen with Sofia in the days before she disappeared.’

‘Cause of death?’

Fernando lowered his voice still further.

‘Incaprettamento.’

The silence that followed needed no comment.

‘An Italian signature.’

‘That’s what we believe. Someone wanted to make an example of him — and did it in the way certain circles make examples.’

‘And Sofia disappeared at the same time.’

‘Yes. We don't know whether she was involved in something or drawn into it against her will. What is certain is that whoever killed François did not stop there.’

Fernando reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and placed a photograph on the table.

Sofia and François. He had an arm around her shoulders; she wore that wide smile she gave when she was truly happy. On the back, handwritten: September 1991.

‘We found it in the dead man's pocket.’

Paolo looked at it for a long time. Then:

‘What are you asking of me?’

Fernando looked him in the eye.

‘To do what you do. Go where we cannot go, talk to people who would not talk to us. Find Sofia before it is too late.’ He stood. ‘And be careful, Paolo. These people are not playing.’

VI

THE CALL TO MARCO MAZZINI

Mazzini was one of those people life rarely gives you. An officer in Genoa's Squadra mobile, he was among the best in his field. Yet he rode around Genoa on an old olive-green Vespa, his helmet perched halfway on his head, wearing an army-surplus parka of the same colour in every season. He lived in a small attic flat in Genoa's old lanes and had a great passion for beautiful women and dogs, two things he declared openly, without hypocrisy or cynicism.

They had met during a joint operation — three days of intense work, nights in the car, radio communications, that tension of shared work which creates bonds stronger than years of ordinary acquaintance. At the end Marco had said, 'If you ever need to know how this world works, call.' It was not a polite formula. It was a promise with real commitment behind it.

'Marco. It's Paolo.'

'Well, well — the Italian in Portugal. Tell me you've found a woman and not the usual trouble.'

'The usual trouble. I need you.'

The voice changed. It did not rise — it tightened, as a Genoese accent does when it stops joking without warning anyone.

'Talk.'

Paolo set out the situation sparsely: Sofia, François, the incaprettamento, the connection with the Italian Mafia, the presence of Eastern European organisations.

Silence. Then:

‘Incaprettamento in Porto. Who works that way in your area — Sicilians or the Marseille branch?’

‘We’re still trying to work out which branch. But that is the method.’

‘Yes, I know the method. And if there are Easterners involved — Ukrainians, Moldovans — then it’s the new post-Wall business. Fast and without a fixed structure.’ A short pause. ‘The girl is sixteen?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then hurry.’ No explanation. None was needed. ‘I’m not leaving Italy — I have an open case I can’t abandon. But I’ll make calls. By tonight I’ll have three names for you.’

‘Marco—’

‘Don’t say thank you. It brings me out in hives. And Paolo — watch yourself among the police too, not only outside.’

He hung up.

He remained on the telephone for another three minutes — Mazzini making concrete promises about contacts to activate, names to check, channels to open. Paolo listened.

He hung up.

Ten watched him from the floor.

‘Everything else is theory,’ he told the dog. ‘We have to find something physical.’

The following day, with Fernando's help, he gained access to François's car — a Peugeot 205 parked in Gaia, seized by the Judiciária after the body was found.

He was not looking for anything specific. He searched in the way one searches when one does not yet know what: open, look, wait for something to answer.

Under the passenger seat he found a spiral notebook, graph-paper pages, dense slanting handwriting. Telephone numbers without names. Initials that might be initials or codes. A date — 3 September 1991 — circled twice in ink.

The third of September 1991.

Paolo looked at the date. The date on the photograph — the one Fernando had shown him, Sofia and François, with September 1991 written on the back.

At the same time François had met Sofia, he was marking dates in a notebook no one was meant to find.

He called Fernando back and pointed out the page without touching it. The notebook was bagged with the rest of the contents of the car.

Ten, on the back seat, followed his every movement.

‘Let's go,’ Paolo said.

VII

PASTELEIRA — 18 AUGUST 1992

Pasteleira had the quality of places forgotten by tourist maps and property guides — not because they did not exist, but because it suited certain people to leave such places as they were. Narrow alleys where heat gathered between the walls, buildings with half-open doors and entrance halls smelling of frying, children playing with whatever they found on streets along which adults walked quickly with their heads down.

The man in the bar at the far end of the little square was waiting for him. He sat opposite Paolo without introducing himself.

‘Your François was a son of a bitch,’ he said without preamble. ‘Trafficked under-age girls. Drugs. But above all he was a rat — he worked as an informer. They killed him because he’d talked to someone he shouldn’t have.’

‘And Sofia?’

‘The men who killed him have nothing to do with her. She wasn’t there when they took him out. If you’re looking for the girl, look among the Ukrainians, the Albanians. People who use human beings as currency.’

The man rose with the money already in his pocket and vanished into the alley.

Paolo remained with his glass of warm beer and a picture beginning to form. François had used Sofia for

something. Or was handing her over to someone. And that someone, or that something, had roots in Eastern Europe.

‘Let's go and see Sergej,’ he said to Ten.

VIII

THE VET IN MAIA

Sergej Volkov had learnt that moral debts are paid differently from financial ones. When he opened the back door of his clinic and saw Paolo with Ten on the lead, he understood at once that the moment had come.

‘There is a man in Vila Nova de Gaia,’ he said, leading Paolo into a secluded part of the clinic, between cat cages and shelves of medicine. ‘Goes by the name of Victor. Ukrainian. Uses the fish trade as a front — you find him at the fish market every morning. He has ears everywhere in these circles.’ He stopped. ‘Be careful, Paolo. These are not like François. These are professionals.’

Paolo made to stand. Sergej stopped him with a gesture.

‘One more thing. Victor answers to someone. I don't know the name — no one here in Porto does. But Sergej hears things. The man above him isn't Julia. It's a man. And when he moves, he moves fast.’

‘I know.’

‘Good. Because if you don't, you won't come back.’

IX

THE MAN AT THE PORT

The afternoon after the meeting in Pasteleira, Paolo decided to widen the search. Not wait for information to come to him — go and look for it where it lived. Leixões was Greater Porto's industrial port, ten kilometres north of the centre, facing the Atlantic Ocean like a place with no time for opinions. Not the picture-postcard port with rabelo boats loaded with barrels of port, but the port of containers, thirty-metre cranes, lorries coming and going from five in the morning, cargo ships unloading all morning without anyone really noticing.

Paolo went alone. Ten stayed at home with Maria — a strategic choice. At a port, a man with a working dog is noticed. A man alone with his hands in his pockets passes unseen among the dozens of workers and lorry drivers filling the area each day.

The side entrance was for suppliers, not the official one. An open gate, a guard smoking against the sentry box, his gaze already elsewhere. Paolo walked in — shoulder bag, purposeful gait, nothing to suggest hesitation. The guard did not even raise his head.

He found his bearings quickly. He had studied the port plan that morning — the layout of the quays, the arrangement of the warehouses, the logic of the parking areas. The C warehouses were what he wanted: buildings from the sixties, corrugated metal already rusting at the

edges, used for the temporary storage of goods awaiting documentation. The least guarded, least monitored area.

The noise was the usual — machinery, voices, the warning signals of forklift trucks — but it had that quality of background noise which makes abnormal sounds invisible. Perfect for anyone wanting to do things that should not be done.

He found his man in the fourth warehouse.

Rui Costa was a docker with fifteen years at the port behind him. Paolo knew him by sight — one of the men who frequented Maria's bar in the low season, when Afurada's fishermen gathered on the quay to do nothing. They were not friends, but they recognised each other.

‘Rui.’

The man looked up without surprise.

‘Paolo. I didn't expect to see you here.’

‘I need two minutes.’

Rui moved away from the work area. He went into a patch of shade between two containers.

‘What do you want to know?’

‘Undocumented arrivals. Loads coming in outside the normal route. Anything involving people, not goods. In recent months.’

Rui took out a cigarette and lit it.

‘That isn't the sort of question with an easy answer.’

‘I know. But I've got a girl who's been missing for nine days. And I have reason to believe certain movements pass through here.’

Silence. Rui smoked.

‘There's a secondary quay, Quay Six. It's used at night for certain unloadings. I don't know for certain — I've only seen it twice, always at night, always with people I didn't know. Vans loading in a hurry.’ After a moment he added, ‘Once I heard voices. They weren't men's voices.’

Paolo stared at him.

‘When was the last time?’

‘Nine days ago. Maybe ten.’

‘The day Sofia disappeared.’

Rui lowered his eyes and drew on the cigarette again.

‘I don't know if it's connected. But that's what I saw.’

‘Is there anyone at the port who handles these things? A name, even only a nickname.’

Rui hesitated for a long time. Paolo waited.

‘There's someone in cargo control who never asks questions about certain night loads. I don't know who. But in a job where questions are part of the protocol, a man who never asks any is an answer in himself.’

Paolo nodded.

‘Thank you, Rui. I won't name you.’

‘I'm not asking you not to. I'm only asking you to find that girl.’

They parted without shaking hands — not because there was hostility, but because they were both men who knew that some agreements are better kept when they are not formalised.

Paolo left the port with one more fact: someone in cargo control was covering the unloadings at Quay Six. A nameless cog. But cogs leave traces in records, and records can be read.

As he walked towards the car, he felt the weight of the information gathered over the last few hours — Pasteleira, the port, Sofia's three friends, Fernando, the body trussed in the incaprettamento. There were still too many pieces to form an image.

He opened the car and sat down.

He called Fernando.

'I have a quay: Six, used for undocumented night unloadings. And someone in cargo control is covering them. I need the duty rosters.'

Silence at the other end.

'Nine days ago. Quay Six.'

'Exactly.'

'I'll check. Paolo — you're building something. Piece by piece, but you're building something.'

'It's not enough yet.'

'No. But it's more than we had yesterday.'

He hung up. Through the windscreen he watched the port continuing its working life, indifferent to everything: forklifts unloading containers, cranes turning, lorries entering and leaving. All that industrial normality in which things with nothing normal about them were hidden.

Sofia was out there. And every thread he found brought him a millimetre closer to her.

He started the engine.

X

VICTOR AT THE FISH MARKET

The fish market in Vila Nova de Gaia at dawn was one of those places Paolo loved for reasons he could not entirely explain. The vendors' voices, the silver of sardines in crates, the sharp, vital smell.

Victor was at the far end, among the boxes of ice. Paolo recognised him from Sergej's description before he even drew near — tall, tattoos rising above his collar and emerging from his sleeves.

He approached. Victor did not look up.

'You were expecting me.'

'I'd heard someone was asking questions,' Victor said quietly, arranging sardines in a crate as though engaged in the most ordinary activity in the world. 'They're moving tomorrow night. Don't ask me where — I don't know, and if I did I wouldn't tell you here.'

'Is she all right?'

Victor waited a second before answering.

'For now. But don't wait.'

Paolo started away. Victor did not look up.

'One thing,' he said to the sardines. 'Julia doesn't decide. There is a man who decides for her. If you find him, be careful — he doesn't run. He waits.'

He returned to his work as though the conversation had never happened.

Paolo walked to the car without hurrying, fitting the pieces together all the way.

Rui had said Quay Six, nine days ago, at night. The tide table he had copied at the harbourmaster's office showed high water that night between two and five — the only window in which a loaded fishing boat could berth there without touching bottom. The final letters of the registration remembered by the car-park attendant matched those of a Ford Transit reported twice in Matosinhos.

And Victor had said: don't wait.

A quay that worked only at high tide. A Ford Transit seen in Rua de Ceuta and reported twice in Matosinhos. A load that could not remain at the main port, where the checks had just changed, and needed a place with a cold warehouse and a direct road north.

Matosinhos. No one had told him. It was the only place where all the pieces fitted.

XI

MATOSINHOS

The building in Matosinhos had the quality of abandoned industrial skeletons — too many broken windows, too many doors yielding to the wind, a structure standing more from inertia than sound construction. But the lights on the third floor and voices filtering down made it unmistakably occupied.

Fernando coordinated. The operation was swift: seven men and one woman detained, two escaped, the building secured in under twenty minutes. The woman was Julia; Fernando recognised her from the photograph before she gave her name. Paolo waited outside, listening to the radio traffic, Ten still at his side.

When Fernando appeared at the door, his face said everything before he opened his mouth.

‘She isn't here, Paolo.’

Silence.

‘Sofia isn't here.’

Paolo did not lean against the wall. He stood motionless in the dark. Someone had warned them. Not bad luck. The same geometry as Piazza De Ferrari — someone on the inside, with access to the protocols and the timings.

Ten stood still beside him.

‘Who knew about this operation?’

Fernando did not answer at once. One second too long.

‘Six people knew the time. One was Celso Alves.’

The map he was using was wrong. Everything had to be redrawn.

‘How long have you known?’

‘Since last night.’

‘Not before?’

‘I suspected.’

Paolo said nothing. He watched the officers coming out with the detainees in handcuffs. Seven men. A clean operation. Sofia somewhere else.

He was starting again.



Leiria. November 1990.

The rain had stopped half an hour earlier. Mud to the ankles. A trail hours old.

Ten advanced in a zigzag — reading something in the air Paolo could not sense, following something the rain had almost, but not quite, erased, because a trail can survive rain but grants no certainties.

Then the two barks.

Loud. Not repeated.

Paolo pushed the branches aside with his bare hands. The thorns opened his skin without him noticing.

Beneath the fallen trunk: the child. Three years old. Cold, motionless. Eyes open.

Alive.

Paolo knelt in the mud. He wrapped the child in his own jacket. He called the emergency services in the voice one

uses when something violent is happening inside but only clarity must reach the outside.

The child opened his hand. He placed his fingers on Ten's coat before his mother arrived, screaming among the trees.

‘Nice dog.’

Paolo remained kneeling in the mud for a few more seconds.

Not from exhaustion.

To hold that moment where it was.

Now there was Sofia.

Sofia was not beneath any fallen trunk yet. Not yet.

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XII

THE BAG ON THE DOURO

He returned to the Afurada quay because he did not know where else to go.

It was after two. The rain had stopped an hour earlier and the cobbles had the sheen they acquire only at night, when the street lamps work on them without competition. The neighbourhood slept. The nets lay rolled on the quays like sleeping snakes.

Ten walked on his left. He had understood this was not a walk.

Seven men and one woman detained, two escaped, a warehouse emptied in haste. Paolo had done the calculation again on the drive back, and the answer was always the same: someone had talked hours in advance, and in those hours a girl could be moved four hundred kilometres.

Ten stopped.

Not the stopping of a trail. The stopping of a dog who sees something move where nothing should move.

Under the old crooked lamp by the river, within the cone of yellow light that drew a circle on the water, a transparent plastic bag lay against a pillar. Sealed with adhesive tape. Light, almost entirely on the surface.

Paolo found a branch among the boards of the quay. He pulled the bag ashore, bent down and lifted it with his

handkerchief — old habits in his hands: never touch barehanded what might matter.

There were photographs inside.

He took them out one at a time, trying not to damage the wet emulsion. Six.

Sofia leaving school with her satchel over one shoulder. Sofia at the Friday market, half a step behind her mother. Sofia sitting on the low wall outside the church with Fernanda, laughing at something beyond the frame. Sofia on the fishermen's quay in her midnight-blue dress, on the evening of the festival, before.

None had been taken close up. None had been taken by anyone she knew was near her.

Paolo looked at them all beneath the lamp, water running from his cuffs onto the paper.

They were not photographs of a missing girl. They were photographs of a girl selected.

Someone had watched her for weeks. Learnt when she left, whom she walked with, when she was alone. Waited for the festival, because at a festival there are two thousand people and no one looks at anyone.

The sixth photograph was different.

It was not Sofia. It was a view of Porto from above — the Douro, the bridges, Ribeira on the opposite bank. The kind of postcard sold in any tobacconist's in the city.

On the back, in pencil, in a small, precise hand of the sort taught in schools of another generation:

‘V.R.’

Two letters. A full stop.

Paolo stood motionless with the photograph in his hand and the river flowing beneath the boards.

The hair along Ten's back was raised. He did not bark. He stared at the black water beyond the pillar, where there was nothing to see.

‘I know,’ Paolo said.



Fernando examined them the following morning, one by one, without touching them, moving them with the tip of a pencil.

‘I can't use them,’ he said at last. ‘Unknown provenance, no chain of custody, delivered by a river. A lawyer would tear them apart in four minutes.’

‘I'm not asking you to use them. I'm asking you to look at them.’

Fernando looked again.

‘All right. What do I see?’

‘You see it wasn't an accident. You see someone studied her for weeks before taking her. And to study a girl for weeks in Afurada, you need to be able to stay there without anyone turning round.’

Fernando laid down the pencil.

‘Someone local.’

‘Or someone who can come in without having to explain himself.’

For a moment neither said aloud what they were both saying.

‘And the two letters?’

Paolo turned the postcard over and left it on the desk pad.

‘That's the part I don't like.’

‘Why?’

‘Because whoever sends something like this doesn't do it out of kindness. He does it to make me walk in a particular direction.’ Paolo stood. ‘The question isn't whether he's telling the truth. The question is why he's telling it to me.’

Fernando aligned the photographs on the desk with the precision that came over him when he did not yet know what to do with them.

‘I'll circulate the initials. Assuming they are initials.’ He looked up. ‘And in the meantime?’

‘In the meantime I walk in that direction,’ Paolo said. ‘I have nothing better, and she is sixteen.’

XIII

BARBOSA AT THE PORT

Paolo found the name.

He had asked Fernando for one thing only: the duty roster for Quay Six, three months' worth. He spent an entire evening over it at the table at the back of the bar, his coffee going cold and Ten lying across his feet, cross-checking dates. The night of the unloading nine days earlier. The night of the previous month's high tide, which Rui had mentioned in passing. The two nights when, according to the harbourmaster's office, a fishing boat with no name in the register had berthed and repaired 'a fault'.

Four nights. Dozens of men on each shift, always different.

Only one had been there on all four occasions, and on all four he was listed as assigned to a different quay.

Paolo circled the name and took the sheet to Fernando the following morning.

'Paulo Garcia Barbosa,' Fernando read. 'Thirty-six, employed at the port for eleven years.' He looked up. 'How did you find him?'

'Counting.'

Fernando had the checks carried out within forty-eight hours. On the morning of the twenty-third of August, confirmation: beneath the paperwork, two anomalous bank transactions in May and July. Not large sums, but regular, from untraceable sources.

‘It isn't enough for an arrest,’ Fernando had said. ‘But it's enough for a conversation.’

The conversation took place in Fernando's office — not an interview room, not in the tones of a formal interrogation. The inspector had a particular technique for making things seem less official than they were: coffee on the desk, the door ajar.

Barbosa held out for the first twenty minutes. Then he gave way with the usual progression of a secondary cog: not from courage but calculation. He understood that what he knew was worth less than the risk he was taking by keeping it to himself.

Paolo remained outside in the corridor, waiting. He had learnt — late, but he had learnt — that certain interviews gain nothing from extra people in the room. An overcrowded space creates confusion in the subject's mind, and confusion produces defences rather than openings.

Fernando came out after forty minutes.

‘He's talking. But he wants guarantees of immunity before he tells us everything.’

‘Does he have names?’

‘He says he does. He also says he knows where the collection warehouse is, inland.’

Paolo stood.

‘Give him what he wants.’

Fernando looked at him.

‘It isn't that simple.’

‘Fernando. There is a sixteen-year-old girl out there. Any price is worth paying.’

The inspector went back inside. Paolo remained standing in the corridor, shoulders against the wall, eyes

fixed on the closed door, listening to the silence as though it contained the information he was waiting for.

They came out together thirty minutes later.

Fernando handed Paolo a sheet written by hand.

‘A warehouse in Penafiel. About forty kilometres from Porto. He says transfers take place at night, every ten to twelve days. The last was five days ago. The next, according to the pattern he knows, should be in six or seven days.’

Paolo read the sheet once. He folded it and put it in his pocket.

‘Six or seven days. We can't wait six or seven days.’

‘I know. But with this information we can work.’

‘We can move first.’

‘How?’

‘If we go in before the transfer and find the girls, we don't need to wait for them to move.’

Fernando remained silent, chewing over the idea.

‘A recovery operation without warning. Dangerous. If there are armed men—’

‘There are always armed men. But there are eight of them and fifty of us.’

‘I don't have fifty men available without an order from the magistrate.’

‘Then get the order from the magistrate.’

Fernando looked at him — a look containing respect, frustration and the knowledge that Paolo was right, all at once.

‘Give me twenty-four hours.’

‘You have them. No more.’

Paolo returned to Afurada. Ten was waiting for him on the threshold, as always. He went into the bar, sat down and accepted the coffee Maria brought without being asked.

‘How did it go?’

‘We have an address. A warehouse in Penafiel.’

Maria lowered her voice.

‘Do you think Sofia is there?’

‘I don’t know. But it’s the most concrete lead we’ve had so far.’

She sat opposite him, her hands on the table.

‘And if she isn’t?’

Paolo did not answer at once.

‘Then we find the next lead.’

Maria nodded. She did not press. She poured more coffee and sat in silence beside him for a few minutes.

Ten came over and rested his head on Paolo’s knees.

Paolo stroked him.

Tomorrow. The warehouse in Penafiel.

XIV

THE FIRST MEETING

(Sofia's story — how it all began)

It was the night of São João in 1991. Coloured lights hung between the buildings, the smell of sardines over charcoal, the music of folk groups — one of those Portuguese festivals that are identical every year and seem new every year.

Sofia walked among the stalls without looking where she placed her feet. She wore a midnight-blue dress she had chosen herself. Her hair loose down her back. That unconscious beauty parents see as a potential burden and she did not yet understand why.

François was behind her. Or perhaps in front — her memory of that moment was never stable when she returned to it over the following weeks. He was tall, with curly hair. He had a confidence that was not arrogance — or at least that was how it seemed at first. The kind of confidence that comes from having lived in different places, from having learnt how to move in any setting.

‘Porto has its charm. Especially with interesting people like you.’

His voice had a French accent that sounded foreign and alluring in the Portuguese air. Sofia blushed not from embarrassment but from that particular short circuit produced by compliments from someone who seemed to come from a larger world.

They walked towards a small hidden bar without a sign — one of those places that seem to exist only for those who know how to find them. François ordered for them both. He spoke of Paris, of Marseille, of a life that seemed made of freedom and movement. Sofia listened.

The kiss came an hour later. Brief, calculated, full of something Sofia interpreted as emotional intensity and which was instead, though she could not know it, professional skill. The art of making someone feel special when you do not yet know them well enough for them truly to be special to you.

‘You are different from all the others,’ François said. ‘I want you to know that.’

Sofia did not answer. But something within her opened that day towards something unknown.

She did not yet know that the opening was the trap.

—

The following days were a whirl. François sought her out, took her to hidden places, spoke to her in new ways. He told her things about herself no one had ever told her — not the banal things about how beautiful she was, but things about her intelligence, her curiosity, her ability to see the world differently from other people. Things that sounded true because they drew on something real in her — and that made the mechanism impossible to expose from within.

Slowly, the boundaries of her life began to be redrawn. Her friends knew less and less. Her parents knew still less. Each meeting with François was another brick in the wall between the visible Sofia and the secret one. A double life that at first seemed exciting and then seemed necessary.

It continued all summer. And then beyond the summer — François disappearing for weeks, Marseille, the work he said nothing about, and each time returning with new stories and the same undiminished attention. An autumn, a winter, another spring. The double life learnt to last.

On the evening of the patronal festival, the tenth of August 1992, Sofia told her mother she was going out with Fernanda and Filipa. She put on the midnight-blue dress. She walked among the stalls for twenty minutes, long enough to be seen, then turned into the alley behind the church where François was waiting with the engine running.

THE GAME OF SEDUCTION

François knew the game by heart — he had learnt it not at a school, not from a teacher, but through years of practice on different girls, in different cities, with variations depending on the setting but always the same structure. Like a musician who plays the same piece every time but knows how to adapt it to the acoustics of the room.

With Sofia, the technique was mirroring. Understand what the girl wants — what she lacks, what she dreams of, what she cannot find in the life she has — and become exactly that. Not clumsily, not in the tones of an improvised flatterer, but with precision: simulated authenticity is more convincing than the real thing, because real authenticity has imperfections, and the version he simulated was calibrated to have none.

That evening, in the second hour of conversation in the little café without a sign, François understood three fundamental things about Sofia.

First: she was intelligent. Not showy intelligence, but the more dangerous kind — the intelligence of someone who feels misunderstood, who knows she is worth more than the people around her can see. This kind of intelligence is the easiest key to exploit, because those who feel misunderstood are disproportionately grateful to the first person who seems truly to understand.

Second: she hungered for the world. Not the simple adolescent desire for adventure, but something more concrete — a painful awareness of her geographical limits. Sofia had spoken about books she could not find in Afurada. Music she listened to in secret — not the Portuguese folk music of the patronal festivals, but recordings passed to her by a cousin in Lisbon, English and French groups that seemed to come from a parallel universe. That hunger was the second key.

The third thing — and this was the most important — was that she was afraid. Not afraid of him, not yet. Afraid of staying. Afraid this was all there was. That the afternoons in Afurada, the fishermen's bar, the Friday market, the sound of the river at night were already, at fifteen, all she could expect. That fear was the root of everything else.

François used the first two hours to build trust. Not the naive trust created by compliments — that is too obvious; anyone with a little critical sense recognises it. He built trust through understanding. He listened. He did not pretend to listen — he truly listened, because understanding the prey was the only technique that truly worked.

‘Have you read Pessoa?’ he asked at one point, with a naturalness that seemed to arise from the conversation rather than being sought.

Sofia's eyes widened.

‘You know Pessoa?’

‘I spend enough time in Portugal to know him. But above all — there's something in the way you talk that reminded me of certain lines. That sense of containing different worlds.’

Sofia was silent for a second. Then she laughed — a real laugh, not the polite one used to answer banal compliments.

‘No one has ever said anything like that to me.’

‘Perhaps you hadn’t yet met someone who knew how to look.’

The stroke was calibrated. It sounded like a compliment — it was — but also carried the aftertaste of a gentle challenge: the people around you do not see you. I do. This kind of implicit message is not processed rationally. It goes straight to the deep place where unspoken needs live.

Sofia did not process it rationally. She could not have done.

The following weeks were constructed with the same precision. Each meeting left something behind — a Pessoa book genuinely bought and brought to the next conversation, music recorded on cassette because she had said she listened in secret, stories of Marseille and Paris told so as to make them seem not unreachable, merely not yet reached. As though they were waiting for her.

After that first kiss, the physical boundary was crossed slowly, without violence, without anything that sounded like pressure. A casual touch of the hand during an intense conversation. A moment of closeness that became natural and then normal. The first time he kissed her, Sofia was not surprised — she had already imagined the moment often enough for it to feel almost like a memory rather than something new.

François knew this mechanism perfectly. Not through academic experience, but from having lived on the other side long enough to know how it worked.

He had never thought of himself as someone who harmed others. The girls he had approached, seduced, delivered — after a certain point they had become an abstract category to him. Not people. Operations. And operations do not generate guilt.

With Sofia, however, there had been something different — a moment, one evening, when she had said something genuinely intelligent about a book they had discussed and for a fraction of a second he had felt something he did not recognise. Something resembling respect. What in another man might have been called conscience.

He ignored it. As always.

Because the game had already begun, and François knew nothing else but to keep playing until the end.

The end had come sooner than he expected. But that was the future — and the future, on that June evening, with Sofia looking at him through eyes still full of naive faith, was still invisible.

That evening he had only the present.

And the present, for once, had seemed almost real.

XVI

WHAT PAOLO KNEW

Thirty-three of the forty-eight pages in François's notebook had been written on.

Paolo had read them twice, then a third time with a pencil in his hand, trying to separate fact from interpretation. It was the kind of reading he had learnt through years of field work — do not seek confirmation, seek anomalies. The things that do not fit are more useful than the things that do.

Thirty-three pages out of forty-eight. Telephone numbers without names. A circled date — 3 September 1991.

The same month he had appeared in Afurada.

It was not an arrival date. It was the date of an agreement. Sofia was already part of the agreement before she knew it existed.

There were also initials — 'F.R.' — beside a number with a French dialling code. Two letters. The kind of abbreviation traffickers use to avoid writing full names.

He called Fernando.

'F.R. Marseille network. Check your files.'

Fernando called the following day. 'I have a Maurice Ferrandez. Small-time trafficker in Marseille, part of François's network. Died in 1990 — overdose, according to

the report. He was already out of the picture before Sofia disappeared.'

Paolo closed the notebook.

'Dead end,' he said. 'It isn't him. He's not involved.'

Ten sat beside the chair, staring at him.

'It still isn't enough,' Paolo said softly. 'But it's a beginning.'

XVII

THE NAMELESS DAYS

Time in captivity does not pass — it accumulates. Sofia learnt this in the first days: days without structure, without natural light, without any of the references normally used to measure time become a uniform substance in which morning cannot be distinguished from evening, yesterday from today.

The room was a cellar. A floor of rough concrete, stone walls sweating moisture in the colder hours, one high, narrow window with a rusted iron grille that admitted only a rectangle of sky changing colour — the only clock she had left. Bright blue meant morning. Darker blue meant afternoon. Orange meant another day was over.

There were four girls in the room when Sofia arrived; with her, there were five. On the third day they brought Alina, a red-haired Ukrainian girl with pale eyes who said almost nothing for the first few days. There were six in all. Marta, the Polish girl, functioned best in conditions of scarcity.

Ana was the youngest after Sofia. Seventeen, Czech, short brown hair, a collection of ironic jokes she brought out at the worst moments with a precision that seemed therapeutic — not to lighten the situation, but to remind herself and the others that there was still someone in there capable of laughter. The ability to laugh, Sofia learnt to

understand, was one of the few concrete acts of resistance available to them.

The rhythm of captivity was made of small events rendered enormous by the scarcity of everything else. The arrival of food — usually once a day, sometimes twice, never at predictable times, as though unpredictability were part of the method — was the moment around which expectations were organised. The sound of footsteps on the stairs became a precise code: heavy steps meant a man, and men were never good news. Light steps meant the woman — Julia or one of hers — bringing food.

For the first five days there was a chain. An iron ring fixed to the wall and a length that reached the bucket but not the window. They removed it on the sixth day without a word, and only much later did Sofia understand it had not been mercy. It had been an assessment. They had watched how she behaved for five days and decided the chain was unnecessary.

The man who removed the chain came down alone, without the guards. He was tall, spoke slow Portuguese learnt as an adult, and before opening the ring he crouched to look at her ankle where the iron had marked it. Then he said a sentence in Russian to someone above, in an ordinary tone, and that evening the woman bringing the food did not enter the room. Sofia would not learn his name for another two weeks.

On the night she had a fever, he was the one who came down with water. He remained on the threshold while she drank. He said nothing kind — almost nothing at all. But he had come down himself. And in a room where nothing ever happened, that had happened.

Sofia learnt to control her reactions. She understood soon enough that showing emotion was a risk, not because punishment followed automatically, but because it made her vulnerable. The guards — mostly silent men who would not look the girls in the eye, as though that protected them from something — reacted differently according to how they were addressed. If they saw fear, some played with it. If they saw open resistance, they reacted. But if they found neutrality — studied neutrality, not the natural kind born of indifference — they seemed to choose not to engage.

Conversations with the other girls took place in emergency English — everyone knew enough to convey the essentials, no one was fluent enough for nuance. This made their conversations direct, at times brutally so, without the filters a mother tongue provides. But there was something useful in it too — communication among them was dense with information and free of ornament.

Marta had explained the structure as she saw it.

‘This is a collection point. Not the final place. They’ll move us — I don’t know when, I don’t know where. I heard talk of a boat.’

‘A boat to where?’

‘I don’t know. Somewhere we don’t speak the language.’

Sofia processed this in silence. Then she asked:

‘Has this happened to you before?’

Marta looked at her in a way that held many things and revealed none.

‘Yes. But that time I managed to escape. This time, no.’

‘How did you fall into it again?’

A long pause.

‘I thought I could trust someone who told me the right things. I was wrong.’ She rose, went to the high window and looked at the rectangle of sky. ‘It isn’t stupidity. I won’t let you think I was stupid. Some people are very good at lying.’

Sofia thought of François. His voice, his words, the certainty with which he had said everything he had said. The moment he had held her face in his hands and kissed her forehead — a gesture she had interpreted as tenderness and which now, with the clarity that comes from being in a room with a concrete floor, she understood was something else. Not tenderness. Control.

‘I understand,’ she said.

And she truly did.

Over the following days Sofia devoted herself to observation. It was an impulse she had not yet recognised as such — as something she could use, already a form of action. She noted the guards — how many, their shifts, the times they seemed more distracted. She noted the door — an ordinary lock, not a security one, the kind that could be forced with a flat object and enough strength. She noted the high window — too high to jump to directly, but not for someone standing on another’s shoulders.

On the night of the fifth day, while the others slept, Sofia sat in the darkest corner of the room and remained awake. Not from anxiety — she had already crossed the anxious nights, and this was not one. She was awake to think, to use the silence and darkness as the space for concentration she could not find by day with the others present.

She thought of her father. Miguel at the table on Sunday morning with his newspaper and coffee, that silent, solid

presence she had always taken for granted. She thought of her mother singing under her breath as she cooked — a song Sofia could have identified but could not have sung, because she had always listened without learning it, with the unconscious certainty there would be plenty of time to do so later.

She thought of Fernanda, Filipa, Rita — her friends, with their faults and qualities, everything about them that made her angry and everything she now missed.

She thought of Paolo Ricci and his wife, who ran the bar — that Italian couple who seemed to have come from a different world and yet had settled into the neighbourhood with a naturalness that still surprised her when she thought about it. She had heard that Paolo had worked in the police. That he had a trained dog. That he was not the type to remain still when something was wrong.

Not the certainty that someone was looking for her. Not the assurance of rescue. Only the possibility that someone knew she had not disappeared by choice.

She lay down on the floor, wrapped the blanket around her shoulders and closed her eyes.

The rectangle of sky above was turning orange. Another day was over.

One fewer to cross.

XVIII

THE ADVANCING FRONT

Victor at the fish market. Sergej with his Eastern contacts. Carmelo's men gathering information without asking questions. Fernando with the channels of the Judiciária. Marco Mazzini in Genoa cross-checking records and making calls between offices.

A week of names that did not fit, trails closing, walls that all wore the same face.

On the third day Paolo had given Fernando a name: Giacomo Brunelli. Former Genoese customs officer, documented Marseille contacts, left the customs service in 1989 without a pension. The kind of figure who might act as an intermediary between an Italian network and a French one.

Fernando checked within forty-eight hours. Brunelli had been in Buenos Aires since 1990 — alive, located, completely outside the story.

Paolo accepted the correction without comment. He stood, took the notebook and struck out the name with a single line. What he did not tell Fernando was that the page with the French dialling code had not been in the notebook for days: it was folded into quarters in the inside pocket of his jacket.

Begin again.

Then, slowly, something began to take shape.

Julia was the name of the head of the group holding the girls. Ukrainian, between thirty and forty-five, with an organisation stretching from northern Portugal to Vigo. Roman Vasiliev was the contact between the organisation and the distribution networks towards northern Europe — an intermediary with enough autonomy to make operational decisions, but with people above him.

And there was Celso Alves. A name Fernando had spoken in that particular voice of professional disillusionment.

‘I’ve known him since he joined. He was a good policeman, many years ago.’

‘But?’

‘But the money came. A little at first, then a lot. The usual path.’

‘He knows where the girls are.’

‘Yes. That is the problem and the solution at the same time.’

XIX

ROMAN VASILIEV

Roman was not a man of visible emotions. He had learnt that as a boy in a Soviet Ukraine where visible emotion was a vulnerability someone would use sooner or later. He had buried them so well that he was no longer sure he had any — or perhaps simply could not distinguish them from operational reflexes.

He sat in the makeshift office, looking at the sea. Julia was in custody after the raid in Matosinhos and could no longer run the depot. She had not been stupid, merely unlucky in the order of events. Roman was not sentimental about it.

‘Boris.’

His deputy entered.

‘The girls?’

‘Still at the warehouse. The farmhouse is ready.’

‘How secure is the warehouse?’

Boris hesitated.

‘There has been movement in the area. Perhaps only hunters. But—’

‘Move them tomorrow. Before dawn.’

‘Yes, boss.’

‘And the corrupt policeman — Celso. Does he confirm the investigation has stalled?’

‘He says the Italian has stopped moving. That all the leads have gone cold.’

Roman nodded. He did not entirely believe it. But it was the information he had.

‘Good. Keep me informed.’

He remained alone.

The sea was still — the grey-silver flatness of northern Portugal that seemed to have no depth, as though it were a painted surface rather than real water.

Roman looked at the sea without thinking about the girls in the farmhouse. He never thought about the girls. He thought about routes, timings, transfer points. The sea does not judge. It carries.

He had made peace with that distinction many years earlier. Not from cynicism — for survival.

He stood. He had work to do.

XX

THE TRANSFER

They came for them before dawn.

Sofia heard the lorry in the others' breathing — Marta woke first, and her breathing changed, and that change woke Alina, and so on through the room, as though fear observed an order of seniority. Then she too heard the engine, the doors and the footsteps on the stairs.

Boris opened the door and switched on the bare light.

‘Five minutes. Only what you're wearing.’

They had nothing that was not on them. It was an order meant to make them move, not prepare.

They were put into a windowless van with two benches welded along the sides and a smell of diesel and rotten fruit. Sofia counted the seconds between turns, as she had once read in a book she could no longer remember — count, memorise, reconstruct the route. She reached two hundred and lost count. The book had not said that fear makes you lose count.

Marta took her hand in the dark. She did not squeeze it. She held it.

The journey lasted hours. When the van stopped and the door opened, the light was the grey before sunrise and the air was different — no longer damp concrete and cellar diesel, but earth, trees, distant manure. Real countryside. Sofia recorded that too: we are even farther from home.

The farmhouse was granite, with a slate roof and the ground-floor windows barred from within. In the yard were two dogs on long chains; they rose without barking. A man she had never seen opened a side door and counted them with his finger as they entered, the way crates are counted.

There was already another girl inside.

She sat against the wall of the new room — larger than the cellar, with a high barred window and a bolt fitted on the corridor side — and looked at the new arrivals without standing. She was blonde and had a split lip healing badly.

No one introduced themselves. Introductions belong to people with a name to spend.

Ana broke the silence, in her crooked English, pointing at the barred window:

‘At least the window is wider here. We’re moving up in the world.’

The blonde girl looked at her. Then made a short sound through her nose which was not a laugh but resembled one closely enough to be worth something.

Sofia sat against the wall and took stock, because that was what she had learnt to do. One high, barred window. One door, the bolt outside. Six girls besides her. Two dogs in the yard. At least three men, perhaps more.

And something new, which the cellar had not had: when the wind turned, the smell of water came from the yard. Not the sea. Fresh water, still and broad.

A river.

Sofia did not know which river or where. But she thought — and thought it with a clarity that surprised her, because it was the first thought in two weeks that contained

no fear — that all rivers go somewhere. That the water passing that farmhouse would, sooner or later, pass her home.

It was not a means of escape. It was nothing.

But when Roman arrived the following day and crossed the yard with the gait of a man in no hurry, Sofia watched him from the high window, holding the sill, and did not lower her eyes first.

Roman noticed.

It was a mistake. She understood it at once, from the way he stopped halfway across the yard and stared at her for three full seconds before walking on.

But one part of her — the part that counted turns, took stock, sensed the river — recorded this too: he looked at me the way one looks at a problem.

Better a problem than a crate.

THE THREATS AT THE BAR

Maria was wiping the tables when two men no one in the neighbourhood had ever seen walked in.

They did not look around like customers. The taller man stayed by the door; the other came to the counter with his right hand inside his jacket.

‘Your husband has to stop looking for the girl.’

Maria put down the cloth. At the corner table, Henrique lowered his newspaper a few centimetres.

‘My husband doesn't take orders from me,’ she said. ‘Let alone from you.’

The man smiled without mirth. His jacket fell open far enough to show the butt of a pistol.

Behind the counter, Ten stood up.

He was not trained to attack, and Maria did not ask him to. The dog advanced to the opening in the counter, stopped between her and the man and barked once. A dry, full sound that made everyone in the bar turn.

‘If you take your hand out,’ Maria said, ‘I don't know what he'll do. And neither do you.’

It was a half-truth, used as half-truths are used when the other person has a pistol.

Henrique folded the newspaper and stood. Then short António stood. Then tall António. No one was holding

anything; they were merely four bodies in a small space, and suddenly the two men no longer controlled the room.

The one by the door said a word in Ukrainian. His companion slowly took his hand out of his jacket.

‘This isn’t over.’

‘I hear that phrase often,’ Maria said. ‘It doesn’t improve with use.’

They left.

Maria waited until she saw the car turn the corner before picking up the telephone. Ten had remained in position. A faint tremor ran along his flanks, not from fear: from restrained energy.

‘Enough,’ she told him.

The dog looked at her, then returned behind the counter.

When Fernando answered, Maria gave him descriptions, the time and the make of the car. Then she called Paolo.

XXII

TEN'S NOSE

The following morning Paolo took Ten back to Matosinhos.

The building had now been emptied and processed. Fernando showed him the service door through which, according to Julia, the girls had been taken a few hours before the raid. For the first time they had a known point within that structure, not a direction suggested by a map.

Paolo put on clean gloves, opened the jar containing the pillowcase and let Ten take the scent. Then he closed it, clipped on the long line and moved behind the dog.

‘Search.’

Ten swept the breadth of the yard. Twice he took passages saturated with the scents of officers and detainees; twice he returned without commitment. On his third choice he followed the wall to the loading ramp. There the line tightened.

The dog reached the road, worked along the pavement for thirty metres and stopped in a lay-by blackened with diesel. He searched in a fan. Tried north, came back; tried towards the port, came back. He returned to the centre of the lay-by and looked at Paolo.

Paolo did not put him back on the trail at once. He walked him around the perimeter a second time, then took him across the road to check. No consistent pedestrian trail.

‘Loaded into another vehicle,’ Fernando said.

‘That's the best hypothesis. It isn't a destination.’

Under a shelter they found a fragment of tail light and a broken plastic cable tie. The fragment came from a Ford Transit of the same series described by the attendant in Rua de Ceuta. The cable tie would go to the laboratory.

Ten drank, then lay down in the shade. He had worked for forty minutes in a yard crossed by dozens of people and had given two useful answers: a route to the lay-by and the absence of any readable continuation on foot.

Paolo recorded the time, temperature, wind, surface and the dog's behaviour. He did not write trail found. He wrote: consistent indication to ramp; loss at lay-by; no confirmed restart.

Paolo looked at the tail-light fragment in the evidence bag.

‘They change vehicles at every stage, and someone knows when we set out. Unless we find the leak, we'll keep reaching the right place at the wrong time.’

XXIII

CARMELO'S SICILIANS

The old black Alfa Romeo arrived two days later, at half past seven in the morning. Maria recognised the sound of the engine before she even saw who got out.

Salvo was first — grey hair, broad shoulders. Two others followed, with the same quiet quality.

Maria embraced them one by one. It took a moment before she could speak.

‘Thank you.’

‘There's no such thing as thank you between us,’ Salvo said. ‘You're family.’

Carmelo's men asked no questions. They took a room near the bar, divided the shifts naturally and learnt the rhythms of the neighbourhood. Among themselves they spoke broad Sicilian — the language that, to Maria, was the language of her grandparents, of something ancient and safe.

Paolo returned to find them already settled in. He greeted them.

‘How is Carmelo?’

‘Carmelo is as he always is. He sends his regards.’

‘Tell him I'll repay the debt on my next visit.’

Salvo smiled. It was not the kind of debt repaid with visits.

MAZZINI AND THE VIGO CONNECTION

‘Do you think Sofia is still in Portugal?’ Mazzini asked.

‘I can't rule out Vigo. But the van seen in Porto reappears in the toll records heading east, not north.’

Mazzini had brought in an Italian liaison officer and a Spanish inspector who monitored shipping companies. These were not Interpol wiretaps, as newspapers called them when they wanted to lend elegance to a telephone call between offices. They were ship schedules, bills of lading, cover names and people willing to compare them.

‘I've got a fishing boat, the Albatros,’ he said. ‘It runs Vigo, Porto, La Rochelle. Leaves in four days. Its name appears alongside a company in Matosinhos already seen in a Marseille file.’

‘Crew?’

‘I'll fax it to Fernando. Don't go after it alone.’

‘I'm not going alone.’

‘Paolo.’

‘I understand.’

He hung up and opened the notebook to a page divided into two columns: CERTAINTIES and HYPOTHESES. Under the first he wrote the name of the boat and its departure time. Under the second, in block capitals: TRANSFER BY LAND BEFORE VIGO.

Ten watched him from the floor.

‘We have to reach the point before that,’ Paolo said. ‘By the time they’re on a boat, it’s already too late.’

PART TWO

THE ESCAPE

Greater Porto and Trás-os-Montes — September 1992

THE WRONG POLICEMAN

Celso Alves was exactly forty years old and had a career that, from the outside, looked perfectly ordinary. An officer in the Polícia de Segurança Pública since 1974, first in the north, then transferred to Porto in 1983 and promoted to senior officer in 1988. A wife, Conceição, a primary-school teacher. A son, Nuno, eleven, who played football on the pitch below their home every Saturday. A flat in the Bonfim neighbourhood, fourth floor without a lift, with blue shutters identical to the neighbours' because the building had had them all painted the same colour a year earlier.

It was the kind of life that produced nothing memorable when recounted.

The debt had begun in 1988 — a loan of five million escudos from a man Celso had met through a colleague, to renovate the flat and buy the new car the family had been waiting for for two years. The interest rates were reasonable; repayment seemed manageable. It seemed so.

In 1989 the colleague who had acted as intermediary died in a car accident on the A1, and the loan changed hands — from a private lender to something far less nameable. The new creditor did not raise the rates, make threats or ask for anything extraordinary. He merely made it clear that the debt was now of a different nature.

Not financial. Operational.

The first favour had been small: a file disappearing from a desk. Then an advance warning — knowing beforehand

about certain checks scheduled in certain neighbourhoods. Then, gradually, something more serious: investigation reports shared before they reached the right desks. Informants' names leaked. The movements of certain suspects reported in advance.

Celso had never participated directly in any crime. That distinction — the line he drew in his mind between what he did and what he had not done — was the mechanism that had allowed him to keep looking at his wife over dinner, to take his son to the pitch on Saturdays, to go on treating himself as a man merely trying to survive an impossible situation.

He was not a bad man. He was not a brave man. He was a man with the wrong debt at the wrong time who had chosen survival with the same banal logic by which one chooses the lesser evil.

When the Ukrainian contact — a man who introduced himself only as Boris — had called him in August to say there was a matter in Porto requiring his attention, Celso had obeyed as always. The details: a missing girl, a private search conducted by an Italian, certain movements that were not to be passed to higher authorities.

At the time, he did not know the girl had a name: Sofia Neves. He did not know that her parents, an entire neighbourhood and a former Italian Carabinieri with a working dog were looking for her. He had not tried to find out.

He had merely played his part as a cog. As always.

But this time the cog was turning in a machine that involved a sixteen-year-old child. And something —

something he had believed he had extinguished many years before — was beginning to resist.

It was not yet enough to change course. But it was enough to create friction.

THE NUMBER PLATE

A number plate.

The report on the failed raid in Matosinhos mentioned a car parked two hundred metres from the building, routinely recorded.

On the fourth reading, Paolo saw the plate.

The same plate was in the access log at Matosinhos police station. Twenty-four hours earlier, in the officers' car park.

It was registered to Celso Alves.

Paolo worked out the timings. Six people had planned the raid; Celso was one of the four officers.

The trail lost in the garage. The loading bay. The fragment of tail light. The Penafiel warehouse emptied twelve hours earlier.

Four times someone had beaten them there.

It was not bad luck. It was architecture.

He called Fernando.

‘Celso Alves.’

‘Where did you find the plate?’

‘In the Matosinhos report. Matched against the police-station log.’

The silence lasted.

‘Christ.’

‘You knew him.’

‘For twelve years.’ He paused. ‘He has a debt. Not to a bank, and not since yesterday. I thought — I didn’t think enough.’

Paolo said nothing. He knew that silence. He had already lived in it. With Ferri.

‘What do we do now?’

‘We use him.’

The plan was simple in conception and dangerous in execution. Make him believe the investigation had stopped. That Paolo was out of the picture. Celso would tell Roman he was safe. Roman would lower his guard. And at that moment — the farmhouse, the girls, the transfer.

XXVII

TWELVE HOURS

‘And we can't simply arrest him.’

‘Not without concrete evidence. And if we arrest him now, Roman realises the network is compromised and moves everything immediately. Sofia disappears before we can reach her.’

Paolo understood.

‘We have to use him,’ he said.

Fernando nodded slowly.

‘It's risky. If he realises he's being watched—’

‘Then we have to make sure he doesn't.’ Paolo stood. ‘Let me think of something. Give me twenty-four hours.’

The inspector rose and picked up his jacket.

‘We don't have twenty-four hours. The transfer could happen at any moment.’

‘Twelve, then.’

Fernando looked at him.

‘Twelve hours. Then you tell me what you've come up with.’

When the inspector left, Maria appeared from the kitchen, her face making no attempt to conceal her concern.

‘How dangerous is this?’

Paolo hesitated one second too long.

‘Maria.’

‘Don’t tell me “I don’t know”, because I know you.’

She came closer and took his hands in hers. He looked at them. His own hands, thick-fingered and bearing old scars. Hers, small.

‘There are dangers. I won’t hide them from you. But there’s also Carmelo, Fernando, Marco Mazzini — I’m not alone.’

‘That’s not what worries me. What worries me is what I see in your eyes.’

‘What do you see?’

‘That you feel responsible for everything. For Sofia. The girls. Fernando. The men watching the bar. As though it all depended on you.’

‘Part of me knows it doesn’t. The other part—’

‘The other part is the part of you that never stopped. The part that woke up the day you left the Carabinieri and has never slept since.’ Maria held his hands steady. ‘Be careful. Not because you aren’t capable — you’re the most capable man I know. But because I want you to come back.’

‘I’ll come back.’

‘Promise me.’

‘I promise.’

From his corner, Ten made a low sound — not a bark, a sort of murmur. Maria turned towards him.

‘Do you promise to come back too?’

Ten wagged his tail once, with a solemnity that seemed almost deliberate.

‘Good,’ Maria said. ‘Then I believe you both.’

XXVIII

THE PLAN

The meeting took place in a room at the Polícia Judiciária, not in the back of a warehouse.

Fernando had asked Paolo to attend for one reason only: to assess whether and when Ten might be useful. On the table lay a road map of the north-east, three old aerial photographs and Celso Alves's file. No men belonging to Carmelo, no private weapons.

‘Celso uses the code P-seventeen for a transfer point,’ Fernando said. ‘He doesn't know the final address. But we have three properties held by a front company within fifteen kilometres of Picote. An anonymous postcard indicated the same area, and two fuel receipts found in Matosinhos lead to Miranda do Douro.’

Santos drew a circle in pencil.

‘Three farmhouses, forty kilometres of minor roads. If we openly check all of them, we alert them.’

‘Celso's call has to force them to move,’ Fernando said. ‘The teams will follow the vehicles. The GNR will close the routes towards Mogadouro and the border without knowing the target until the last moment.’

He pointed to Paolo.

‘The dog goes in only if we have a last known point and a fresh trail. He won't choose a farmhouse from a map.’

Paolo nodded. 'If you lose the vehicle and we find a point where Sofia got out on foot, I can try. If she stays in the vehicle, I can't. And if Ten gives me a negative, the negative remains a result: I won't push him towards the house we prefer.'

Rodrigo made a note.

'And the guard dogs?'

'They aren't Ten's concern. He's a tracking dog, not a bite dog. The GNR is bringing two men with catch poles and shields; the vet in Miranda will be on call.'

Fernando moved on to the rest of the plan: surveillance, radio, vehicle identification, ambulances, responsibility for entry. Paolo would not cross the perimeter until Santos declared it safe. He would carry no weapon. Ten would remain with him.

'When?' Santos asked.

'The call tomorrow at six. If Roman brings the transfer forward, the window opens at once. If he doesn't move, we keep watching.'

The meeting ended after midnight. Outside, Maria was waiting in the car. She did not ask for details he could not tell her.

'Do you know where your place is?' she said.

'Yes.'

'And will you stay there?'

Paolo looked at Ten on the back seat.

'This time I will.'

XXIX

THE BAIT

Celso Alves arrived at the Polícia Judiciária at six thirty-five in the morning, accompanied by two plain-clothes officers.

He was not under arrest. Not yet. Fernando made him read the number plate, the police-station access records and the timings of the four compromised operations. Then he left the room and let Paolo in.

Ten crouched by the door. Celso looked at him longer than he looked at the man.

‘Five million escudos in 1988,’ Paolo said. ‘For the house and the car. The colleague who introduced you to the lender died on the A1, and the debt changed hands. Since then they haven’t asked for interest. They’ve asked for favours.’

Celso lowered his eyes to the table.

‘You haven’t taken any money since the loan. That’s what you tell yourself to set yourself apart from them.’

‘How do you know?’

‘We know. The question is what you do now.’

Outside, beyond the glass, a typewriter struck in bursts. Celso kept his hands visible, one resting over the other.

‘My wife teaches at a primary school. Nuno is eleven.’

‘I know.’

‘What happens to them?’

Paolo had no formula to offer him. In Portugal in 1992, there was no programme with new identities and ready-made lives waiting on the other side of a door.

‘The magistrate can authorise a confidential transfer and discreet protection. A house outside Porto, surveillance, an escort for your son. The address stays out of the records for as long as the law allows. I can’t promise you another name or tell you how long it will last.’

Celso looked at him. ‘And why are you here?’

‘Because Fernando thinks you’ll talk to me.’

‘No. Why do you care?’

Paolo thought of Rex, Dux, Ferri and all the first steps that become habits before those who take them admit they have chosen a road.

‘Because they caught you when you were tired. You did the first favour believing it would be the last. Then turning back became more costly than carrying on.’

Celso pressed his lips together.

‘You know someone like that.’

‘Yes.’

Ten stood, took two steps and stopped near the table. He did not rest his muzzle against Celso or offer him absolution. He merely remained there.

‘If you cooperate,’ Paolo said, ‘you won’t erase what you’ve done. You can still prevent what they’re about to do.’

Celso began to speak.

First he gave minor names: a number plate, a telephone number, a depot. Then the code P-seventeen and the meaning he had been taught: an emergency point in the east, near an old olive press. Finally, he described the

procedure for informing Roman that the danger had passed.

Fernando returned with the recorder and a blank statement form.

‘From this moment on,’ he said, ‘every promise comes from the magistrate and goes on paper. Paolo decides nothing. I don't decide everything. Is that clear?’

Celso nodded.

‘It's clear.’

XXX

THE FAMILY

Conceição and Nuno left Bonfim before noon.

They received neither new documents nor a prepared story. An unmarked car took them to a police safe house outside Vila Real; two officers took turns at the entrance. Conceição was given only enough time to pack a suitcase and offer her son an incomplete explanation.

Celso signed the statement in another room.

‘Can’t I call her?’

‘When they’ve arrived,’ Fernando said. ‘From a line we control.’

‘And after that?’

‘After that it depends on your cooperation, the magistrate and the risk. I won’t sell you a certainty I don’t have.’

Celso looked at Paolo. Perhaps he was seeking a more reassuring version of the same answer. Paolo did not give him one.

‘The call to Roman at six,’ Fernando said. ‘Until then we rehearse every word.’

Ten slept under the chair. For once no one gave him the task of understanding men in their place.

XXXI

CELSO'S CALL

The communications room contained a table, two reel-to-reel recorders and a grey telephone.

Celso dialled the number at exactly six. Fernando listened through a headset; Santos followed the other line with the surveillance team. Paolo remained behind the glass, outside the conversation.

‘Celso.’

Roman's voice was flat.

‘The Italian has given up. The private search has stopped, and Matosinhos is being treated as a closed operation.’

Seven seconds of silence.

‘Good.’

‘Can we proceed?’

‘Bring it forward. Tonight. Use point seventeen, then burn the vehicle.’

The line went dead.

Celso put down the receiver and closed his eyes.

Santos received the first report eleven minutes later: Boris had left a telephone box in Campanhã, got into a saloon car and reached a depot. Two vans had set out from there, one heading north and one on the Amarante road.

‘The one heading north is a decoy,’ Celso said. ‘Seventeen is east.’

Fernando did not trust his certainty. He had both followed.

The northbound van returned empty to Matosinhos two hours later. The one heading east passed Vila Real and continued towards Bragança.

At twenty past two, in light rain, the team lost it on a minor road between Sendim and Picote.

At thirteen minutes to three, they found it abandoned beside a quarry. The rear doors were open. Several sets of footprints led away through the mud, already distorted by the water.

Fernando looked at Paolo.

‘Now you have a point.’

Paolo picked up the jar containing the pillowcase.

THE LAST KNOWN POINT

The quarry was a pale wound in the hillside. The van stood at an angle near the fence, its engine still warm and the smell of diesel inside.

Before bringing Ten near, Paolo made everyone move back. He asked Santos where the officers had walked, marked their routes on the map and chose a presentation point beside the rear door. The visible path through the mud was not enough: it might have been left by Roman's men or by the surveillance team.

He put Ten's harness on, clipped on the long line and opened the jar. The dog took the scent from the pillowcase; Paolo closed the jar and led him to the edge of the vehicle.

‘Search.’

Ten checked the interior without entering. He moved out towards the road, described a wide arc and returned. He tried the most obvious path for twenty metres, lost tension and came back to the quarry. Paolo did not correct him. It was the route the men expected, not necessarily Sofia's.

The dog started again from the opposite side of the van. He followed a ditch for a few metres, raised his head into the wind and cut towards a goat track descending between the holm oaks. The line tightened.

Paolo signalled Fernando to stay back.

The trail was little more than an hour old, but the rain, the ground and overlapping passages made it uneven. At a fork Ten overshot the turn, reached a dry-stone wall and returned to search in ever tighter circles. The wind pushed the scent into the valley. When he recovered it, he did not follow the centre of the path: he worked five or six metres lower down, through wet grass.

After half an hour Paolo stopped him. Water, a check of his pads, a minute without demands. Ten set off of his own accord when he saw the harness was still on.

At the first candidate farmhouse he showed no interest. He checked the gate and continued along the wall without taking the rise. Paolo mentally recorded the negative and did not make him repeat the point.

At the second property the path divided. Ten went a few metres into the drive, returned to the fork and chose the descent. Behind them, Santos reported over the radio that the house was empty.

The third farmhouse appeared just as the sky began to lighten. It was lower than the others, set against the slope, with a single light on the ground floor. Ten slowed a hundred and fifty metres away. He did not lunge towards the building: he checked the edge of the road, followed a trail to a side gate and there the tension changed again, stronger and confused. Recent scent, many people, dogs behind a fence.

Paolo called him back before he barked. The search ended there.

‘He followed a consistent trail from the van to this entrance,’ he told Fernando. ‘It doesn’t tell you who is

inside or how many people there are. It tells you the person represented by the scent article passed this way.'

Fernando raised the binoculars. In the yard stood a dark-green Ford with a broken rear light. The number plate matched the letters remembered by the attendant in Rua de Ceuta.

That was the second confirmation, independent of the dog.

'That's enough for us to stop and observe,' Fernando said. 'Before we go in, I want to see the girls or the van move.'

Paolo removed Ten's harness and dried him beneath a blanket. The dog lay down without ceremony.

He had found an entrance, not a truth. The rest belonged to men.

XXXIII

BEFORE DAWN

At twelve minutes past five, a girl appeared at the high window on the north side.

She remained visible for three seconds, then a hand pulled her back. Santos took two photographs. At eighteen minutes past five, the magistrate authorised entry.

The briefing took place behind the wall of a vineyard. Fernando assigned the perimeter to the GNR, the entry to Santos's team and the evacuation to two ambulances waiting on the lower road. The men responsible for the guard dogs had rigid shields and catch poles; the vet was waiting a kilometre away.

‘Paolo stays at the medical point with Ten,’ Fernando said. ‘He enters only after the all-clear and only if we need to identify a route.’

No one argued.

Paolo checked Ten's paws a second time. One pad was red but intact; his breathing was normal. He gave him water and put him in the back of the car, secured by his travel harness.

‘You've already done your part,’ he said.

Ten rested his muzzle between his paws.

The night before, Maria had asked him whether he knew his place. Now he knew it precisely: a hundred and forty metres from the house, behind a switched-off engine,

unarmed, waiting for the radio to tell him what he could not see.

At five thirty-one Fernando raised his hand.

The team began to move.

XXXIV

THE FARMHOUSE AT PICOTE

The eastern door gave way on the second blow.

Paolo listened to the operation over the radio. Brief voices, numbers, rooms declared clear. Two shots came from the farmhouse and echoed through the valley. Then Rodrigo's report: a graze to the forearm, conscious, operational.

The guard dogs barked behind the western fence. The GNR men contained them without allowing them to reach the entry line. Ten raised his head in the car, but Paolo did not open the door.

‘Stay.’

Five minutes later the radio said: ground floor secure. Prisoners located, north corridor. Roman was missing.

Then an engine started behind the house.

A Ford Transit emerged through an opening not marked on the map, knocked down a light fence and took the track towards the valley. The western patrol had been moved to help Rodrigo; for twenty seconds the opening remained uncovered.

‘Vehicle fleeing, one person driving, possible hostage!’ Santos shouted.

Fernando ran to the command car. ‘Paolo, with me. The dog stays secured.’

They set off with Santos driving. Paolo climbed into the back, beside Ten. He had no pistol and did not ask for one.

At the farmhouse, meanwhile, six girls were emerging from the locked room. Marta was last. Alina pointed at the van heading down the track.

‘He's taken Sofia.’

The radio carried the sentence into the car.

Fernando ordered the GNR to close the bridge on the Sendim road and leave a stopping route, not a wall of men. Santos kept his distance from the Ford. With a hostage on board, ramming it on the wet road was not an option.

The red lights appeared and disappeared between the bends.

Paolo rested a hand on the transport crate. Ten was awake and still. He had finished his work and did not know the person they were looking for was less than a kilometre away. He was a dog, not an omniscient narrator. His reliability lay in that limitation.

XXXV

SOFIA ALONE

Sofia was sitting on the floor of the van, one wrist fastened to a handhold with a plastic cable tie.

Roman drove with both hands. He had not told her where they were going. He had said only that the men at the farmhouse would kill them both, and that he was the only one who could protect her.

Sofia watched the rain distort the lights outside the window.

She thought of the water Roman had brought her during the fever. She thought of the door Roman had locked. The two images continued to occupy the same mind without erasing each other.

Behind them, headlights appeared at every bend.

‘Have they come for me?’ she asked.

‘They’ve come to take what they need.’

‘What about the others?’

Roman did not answer.

Sofia pulled gently at the cable tie. Its edge cut into her wrist. She stopped before she really hurt herself and looked at the profile of the man behind the wheel.

For the first time she did not seek confirmation in his face. She looked for a contradiction.

She found it in the silence.

XXXVI

THE BRIDGE

The GNR roadblock stood beyond a narrow bridge, where the road widened in front of a closed garage.

The cars occupied only half the carriageway. The other half led to a spike strip and a shallow ditch: a stopping route, not a death trap.

Roman saw the lights too late. He braked, tried the verge, struck the bridge parapet and came to rest sideways against the embankment. The van remained at an angle, engine running, windscreen cracked.

Santos stopped fifty metres away. The officers got out with their weapons aimed. Paolo stayed in the car until Fernando had Roman on the ground, hands visible, and the rear door under control.

‘Now,’ Fernando said.

Paolo got out without Ten.

Sofia was huddled in the cargo compartment. An officer had cut the cable tie, but she would not come out. Roman, handcuffed on the tarmac, turned his head towards the van.

‘Don’t go with them,’ he said in Portuguese. ‘They don’t know what they’ve done to you.’

‘Enough,’ Fernando ordered, and had him taken behind a car.

Sofia gripped the edge of the door. ‘Don’t take him away.’

Paolo stopped three metres from her. Blue lights sliced through the rain; every movement seemed faster than it was.

‘Sofia.’

She recognised him. It was not relief. It was shame.

‘He kept me alive.’

‘I believe you when you say he brought you water.’

‘He stopped Boris from touching me.’

‘I believe that too.’

Sofia looked up, surprised by the absence of a denial.

‘But Boris was there because Roman put him there. You were thirsty because Roman controlled the water. I don’t have to tell you that what you feel is false. I have to tell you who built the room in which you felt it.’

She shook her head. ‘You don’t know anything.’

‘I know Marta, Ana and Alina are alive. The other three too. They’re out of the farmhouse, and they’ve asked for you.’

‘They saw me. They know what I’ve become.’

‘They saw what you did to stay alive.’

Sofia looked towards Roman, now hidden behind the car. His voice no longer reached her. Only the sound of rain on metal remained.

‘I’m not who I was before.’

‘No. No one comes back unchanged from six weeks like those. At home they aren’t waiting for a copy of the girl who left. They’re waiting for you.’

Sofia did not move.

Paolo took a step back. ‘May I bring Ten?’

The name passed through something. Sofia looked towards the car.

‘The dog from the bar?’

‘Yes.’

She nodded.

Paolo returned to Ten, clipped on a short lead and brought him to the edge of the safe area. No tracking harness, no command. The dog saw Sofia in the open doorway, sniffed the air and sat.

Sofia remembered him lying behind Maria's counter, indifferent to football matches and the fishermen's voices. Something from the world before that did not ask her to explain the world after.

She extended one leg out of the van. Then the other.

Ten remained still.

When Sofia was on the ground, the dog came as close as the lead allowed and sniffed her hand. He did not bark or recognise her with a ceremony. He registered that she was there.

Sofia closed her fingers in the fur at his neck.

‘May I come closer?’ Paolo asked.

She nodded.

Paolo did not embrace her. He placed a blanket over her shoulders and remained close while her body began to tremble, gently at first, then uncontrollably.

‘Did you find them all?’ she asked.

‘The police freed six girls. Ten took us from the last vehicle to the gate. Then we saw you being driven away.’

Sofia lowered her eyes to the dog.

‘So he didn't find me by himself.’

‘No. No one finds anyone alone.’

For the first time that night, Sofia breathed all the way in.

XXXVII

MOGADOURO

The GNR station in Mogadouro had cream-coloured walls and a coffee machine that worked only when struck on the side.

Roman arrived in a separate car. As he passed Fernando, he stopped.

‘You did good work,’ he said. ‘But the grey-haired Italian sends his regards.’

Paolo's expression did not change.

‘Name.’

Roman smiled. ‘Sandro Berti.’

The name meant nothing to Paolo. That was precisely what made it useful: an identity without memory, clean enough to have been constructed.

‘We’ll check it,’ Fernando said.

Roman was taken away.



The six girls from the farmhouse were alive. Three consulates had already sent officials; the others would wait until morning. Julia remained in custody for the proceedings arising from the Matosinhos raid.

Celso had begun a full deposition. Conceição and Nuno were in a confidential location under surveillance. No one spoke of new identities or a programme that did not exist.

Sofia sat wrapped in a blanket, one hand on Ten's neck.

'Your parents know you're safe,' Fernando told her.
'They're waiting for you.'

She looked at her reflection in the glass.

'I'm ugly now.'

'You're tired,' Fernando said. 'There's a difference.'

Paolo got into the car that would take them back to Porto. Ten settled at Sofia's feet, secured by the seat belt. This time no one attributed a human choice to him. It was simply the closest place.

XXXVIII

THE RETURN TO AFURADA

Paolo stopped the car outside the Neves home at twenty past seven in the evening.

Sofia wore a Polícia Judiciária sweatshirt three sizes too large and her hair was still damp from the hospital shower. She kept her hand on the door.

‘Shall I come with you?’ Paolo asked.

‘No. I’ll go.’

She got out, walked along the path and stopped at the door. The hall light came on before she rang the bell.

Sonia opened it with a tea towel in her hand. She looked at her daughter and produced a sound that was not yet a word. The tea towel fell. She did not pick it up.

Then she gathered Sofia into her arms.

Miguel came from the kitchen and stopped two metres away. He had walked in circles for six weeks; now that his daughter stood before him, he did not know how to cover the distance.

Sofia did it. She rested her forehead against his chest, as when she was a child and returned defeated by something. Miguel placed his hands on her back and said her name four times, each one softer than the last.

Sofia turned towards the car and raised a hand.

Paolo raised his in reply, then drove away before anyone could invite him in.



He parked a hundred metres from the bar. He needed the cobbles under his soles and the smell of the river before crossing another threshold.

Ten walked tired, not injured. On the third examination the vet had found no cuts, only an irritated pad and weary muscles. Paolo shortened his stride.

The light of O Farol was visible at the end of the street.

Maria came out from behind the counter when she saw them. She knelt in front of Ten and ran her hands over his paws and chest with the speed of someone checking before she believes.

‘Is he in one piece?’

‘He’s in one piece.’

‘And you?’

‘Me too.’

Only then did she stand and embrace Paolo.

Fernando, Henrique, the two Antónios and Carmelo’s men were in the bar; they had guarded the bar, not taken part in the operation. No one made a speech. Henrique raised his glass. The others did the same.

Ten reached his bed, turned three times and lay on his usual side.

Maria placed a glass of water before Paolo.

‘This first.’

‘It’s a terrible celebration.’

‘It’s my bar.’

Paolo drank. Then someone filled the glass with port, and the room began to breathe again.

XXXIX

THE NIGHT AFTER

The celebration ended after one.

Fernando was the last to leave. At the door he handed Paolo a copy of the name found in Roman's papers: Sandro Berti, born in Cairo Montenotte in 1930.

'Mazzini will check tomorrow.'

'He doesn't exist,' Paolo said.

'Not yet, to us.' Fernando folded the sheet and put it in his hand. 'This time don't put it in your pocket to hide it. Bring it back to me.'

Paolo held his gaze. 'I'll bring it back.'

When the door closed, Maria switched off half the lights. Ten slept behind the counter.

'Are you going to the quay?' she asked.

'No.'

'Good.'

Paolo sat at the back table. He thought of Sofia in her own home, the six girls entrusted to doctors and consulates, Celso having to recount each favour one by one. He thought of Ferri — if Sandro Berti truly was Ferri — and Rex's collar in the drawer.

Sofia's story had reached a point that was not a happy ending, but was an ending: she was alive, she was home, the trial could begin.

The rest had no right to steal her last page.

‘Let's go to bed,’ he said.

Maria closed the till. Paolo switched off the light. Outside, the Douro continued towards the sea without asking what had been resolved and what had not.

PART THREE

WHAT REMAINS

Porto — October / November 1992

XL

SOFIA'S DAYS

In the days that followed, Sofia inhabited her bedroom like a borrowed flat.

The photographs were still on the walls, the blue bedspread was ironed, the books in the same order. Yet she checked the window before going to bed and woke whenever an engine slowed in the alley.

Sonia did not ask her to tell the story. She prepared food, left a light on in the hall and sat nearby when needed. Miguel returned from work before sunset and learnt to knock on the bedroom door, though he had never done so before.

Fernanda brought pastéis de nata and remained silent. Filipa arrived in her denim jacket and without a single joke. Rita placed field daisies on the windowsill.

On Thursday Sofia went to Dr Joaquim Castro, at a practice in Foz overlooking the sea. She returned more tired than when she had left, and went back the following Thursday.

The question she repeated was not why Roman. It was how did I fail to see François.

Castro did not give her an answer that absolved her all at once. He told her that deception did not prove the stupidity of the person deceived; it proved the skill and responsibility of the person who constructed it. He told her that the body can go on protecting itself even after the danger is over.

‘And when does it stop?’ Sofia asked.

‘Not all at once. When it understands, many times over, that now you can choose.’

In January she would try to return to school. For the moment she was learning smaller things: sleeping with the door closed, getting into a car driven by her father, crossing a room without checking who was behind her.

XLI

TEN AND SOFIA

Sofia returned to O Farol one Wednesday morning.

Maria made her sit down and brought her a galão without asking what she wanted. Ten came in through the back, made his usual round and stopped half a metre from the chair.

Sofia held out her hand. The dog sniffed it, then let her touch his ears.

‘He's soft,’ she said.

‘Behind the ears is the best place.’

Ten closed his eyes for a moment.

‘Did he follow my scent?’

‘From a van to the farmhouse,’ Maria said. ‘Paolo had one of your pillowcases, sealed in a jar. Ten found the route you'd taken on foot.’

‘And before that, in the city?’

‘He followed a trail to a garage. He lost it there. Paolo says knowing where it ends is part of the work too.’

Sofia stroked the dog more slowly.

‘I thought he was the one who found me.’

‘A lot of people looked for you. Ten did the part he knew how to do.’

‘It's not as beautiful when you put it like that.’

Maria smiled. ‘It's truer. True things last longer.’

Ten lay down at Sofia's feet.



Paolo found her later on the church steps. He sat some distance away, with Ten between them.

‘May I ask you something?’ Sofia said.

‘Of course.’

‘That night you told me Roman had built what I felt. Dr Castro says it was a survival response. But I really did feel it.’

‘I never thought it was false.’

‘Then how can I trust what I feel?’

Paolo looked at the river at the end of the street.

‘By not basing your whole judgement on a single feeling. Look at what a person does when you say no. How quickly he demands your trust. Whether he cuts you off from other people. Whether he offers relief from a fear he created himself.’

Sofia was silent.

‘François did all those things.’

‘Yes.’

‘And I didn’t see them.’

‘You see them now.’

Ten raised his muzzle into a gust of wind, assessed the scent and lowered it again.

‘How does the dog choose?’ Sofia asked.

‘He doesn’t choose who’s good. He follows a scent because that’s what he’s been trained to do, and he can make mistakes. It’s my job to read him, to know when he’s working and when he isn’t.’

Sofia laughed quietly. ‘You spoil every beautiful story.’

‘Only the ones that do dogs harm.’

This time her laugh was fuller.

Before leaving, Sofia bent down and rested her forehead against Ten's for a second.

‘Thank you for your part,’ she said.

It was the exact phrase.

XLII

THE REPORT

Fernando's report ran to forty-six pages and contained not one triumphant sentence.

Roman Vasiliev was being held on remand. Julia would answer for the offences connected with the Matosinhos depot and the six identified girls. The international proceedings would take months, perhaps years. Three men in the network had fled before the warrants were issued.

Celso had confessed. His cooperation would be taken into account at sentencing; it would not erase the corruption. Conceição and Nuno remained outside Porto under discreet protection, renewed week by week with improvised resources.

‘Don't call it complete justice,’ Fernando said. ‘It isn't.’

Paolo put the report down on the desk.

‘Sofia is home.’

‘That she is.’

At the bottom of the file was the rain-soaked photograph recovered at the quay, with two initials in pencil: V.R. The magistrate had placed it in a separate investigation. A door left closed, not a corridor to be followed at once.

The telephone rang. It was Mazzini.

‘Sandro Berti exists on paper,’ he said. ‘Passport issued in Savona in January eighty-seven. But the child with that name died at eleven months, back in thirty-one. Someone

took the birth certificate from one register and counted on no one opening the register of deaths.'

'Who could do that?'

'Someone who knew the archives. I compared the passport photograph with the service files.'

Mazzini did not say the name at once.

'Ferri.'

Paolo looked at Fernando.

This time he did not take the sheet for himself. He left it on the desk.

'Send us everything,' he said. 'And request the warrant through official channels.'

XLIII

FERRI

Ferri's address was a four-room boarding house in Foz, above a fishing-net shop.

Paolo sat in the car for eleven minutes. It would have been easy to go up alone, knock on the door and look him in the face. He needed neither a warrant nor a badge to make the same mistake he had criticised others for.

He started the engine and went to Fernando.

'Why are you bringing this to me?' the inspector asked.

'Because last time I put a piece of evidence in my pocket.'

Fernando read the address. 'The warrant will arrive tonight. You stay outside.'

'I'll stay outside. Check the back. In Troia he came down a fire escape while everyone was watching the door.'

Fernando studied the plan.

'The courtyard is a public space. You and Ten cover the gate with an officer. The dog stays on the lead. He's not there to stop anyone.'



At ten past six on the twenty-third of November, a fine rain was falling.

The courtyard behind the boarding house was three metres wide. An iron staircase descended from the second

floor to a low wall; beyond it lay an alley and the road by the sea.

Paolo stood against the wall. Officer Barbosa covered the gate. Ten sat beside him on a short lead.

Someone knocked at the door above them. Three blows, a voice, the sound of the door being forced.

The second-floor window opened.

Ferri came down with his jacket in his hand. He was sixty-two and still had the body of a man who had spent his life calculating exits. On the penultimate step he saw the officer. Then he saw Paolo. Finally, he saw the dog.

Ten did not bark. He did not stand. Paolo gave him no command.

Ferri remained with one foot on the step and the other suspended. To reach the alley he would have to pass between the officer and a dog whose training he did not know. He slowly raised his hands.

‘Beautiful dog,’ he said in Italian.

Barbosa handcuffed him.

◆ ◆ ◆

Eleven days later, Paolo entered the prison visiting room in Lisbon. Ten had stayed in the car with Fernando; the prison was not a training ground and had no need of four-legged spectators.

Ferri sat on the other side of the table.

‘What’s his name?’ he asked.

‘I’m not telling you.’

The silence that followed was the first thing that hurt him.

‘Four years,’ Ferri said. ‘I expected you sooner.’

‘I was busy.’

‘I read about the girl. Good work.’

Paolo did not answer.

‘You want to know why.’

‘No. Debts, a woman, someone who already had a hold over you. Telling me would ease your own burden. That's not why I'm here.’

‘Then why are you here?’

Paolo had prepared the answer for four years. Now it was short.

‘Rex's collar. It arrived at my house in January eighty-seven, in a bag with no sender's name. On it were the words *I remember well*. Did you send it?’

Ferri's right hand moved two centimetres.

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

Ferri looked at the table. ‘I trained Rex during his first few months. After the operation, the collar arrived at the depot with the rest. I kept it for a year.’

‘And then you sent it to me as a threat.’

‘No.’ Ferri looked surprised. ‘It was the only thing I could manage to say. I remembered.’

‘In Genoa, you passed on the altered route.’

‘I knew you were there and I knew the dog was there. I calculated the odds. I decided you would make it.’

‘Dux didn't.’

Ferri lowered his eyes. ‘I didn't know his name.’

‘Dux.’

‘Dux.’

Paolo slipped a hand into the inside pocket of his jacket. Rex's collar was in an envelope. He had meant to leave it on the table, to return to Ferri the weight Ferri had handed him.

He did not.

It was his.

He stood.

‘You have twenty years left, if you're lucky. I'm not going to spend them thinking about you.’

Outside, Fernando was waiting by the car. Ten raised his head when Paolo opened the door.

Paolo placed the envelope on the seat. The dog sniffed it, then looked out of the window.

‘Yes,’ Paolo said. ‘Let's go home.’

They set off north.

EPILOGUE

WINTER — DECEMBER 1992

Porto, the twelfth of December 1992.

The Douro was the colour of ageing steel. The first rains had swollen it, and the river ran dark towards the ocean, indifferent to the files being opened and those someone would leave closed.

Paolo walked along the quay with Ten at his side.

Roman and Julia awaited trial. Letters rogatory to Spain, France and Ukraine advanced at the speed of paper. Of the names that had emerged from Celso's deposition, one had led to a suspension; two others, to nothing. Insufficient evidence, the magistrate had written.

The six girls from the farmhouse had been placed with their families, their consulates or in protected accommodation. Not all of them had somewhere they could call home.

Sofia would return to school in January, at first for two mornings a week. On Thursdays she continued to see Dr Castro. Some nights she slept. Others she did not. No one called the mere passing of days a cure.

Ferri was awaiting extradition. Rex's collar had returned to the second drawer of the bedside table, beneath the old Carabinieri identity cards. Paolo had not thrown it away. He no longer asked it to be a door.

Near the monument to the fisherman, Ten stopped to check a scent carried on the wind. After a few seconds he discarded it and walked on.

In the bar, Maria was changing the curtains.

‘You’re late,’ she said when Paolo came in.

‘Three minutes.’

‘Four.’

Sofia was at the table by the window, an open book and a cup between her hands. Ten saw her, approached and waited. She touched his forehead.

‘Hello, colleague,’ she said.

Paolo took off his jacket and climbed the stepladder to fasten the curtain. Maria passed him the rings one by one.

Outside, the river went on with its work. Inside, for that morning, everyone did theirs.

THE END