

CAGED LOVE



PAOLO PICARIELLO

SHORT NOVEL

CAGED LOVE

Paolo Picariello

*To Nikita,
who taught me that character
is not bred: it is recognised.*

PART ONE
THE BARS

1. The Bite and the Look

Genoa stank of rain and urine that morning. The wind drove water beneath the awnings of the Monteverde dog-training ground and sent an advertising banner slapping against the fence: CHAMPIONS ARE BORN.

Pepe walked across the concrete, avoiding the puddles. Vanessa had put him in a sand-coloured coat, light but waterproof, and every time he slowed the lead went taut. 'Head up, darling. The television people are here today.'

Pepe knew that voice. Darling meant: do not get dirty, do not bark, do not look where you want to.

Behind the fence of the main ring, a Neapolitan Mastiff sat beside a man with a cigar. His coat was grey, his lips heavy, and a white scar ran along his right flank. He did not pull. He did not pant. He watched.

Pepe slowed.

'Come on.' Vanessa gave the lead a short tug.

The mastiff followed the movement with his eyes. Then he looked at Pepe, not at the coat, not at the bow fastened to his collar. He looked at the tremor running through his legs.

That look was the first bite.

Pepe stopped in front of the fence. Up close, the mastiff smelled of wet earth, iron and something sweet, perhaps the hay in his kennel.

'What's your name?' he asked.

The humans heard a whine and a deeper breath.

'Number Seven.'

'That's not a name.'

The mastiff barely moved one ear. 'They used to call me Gennaro.'

Pepe repeated it softly, to feel its weight. 'I'm Pepe.'
'I know. Your name is written everywhere.'

There were three photographs of Pepe on the barriers: on a red carpet, in Vanessa's arms, in front of a fountain in a city he could not remember. He was smiling in the photographs.

'Don't believe the photographs,' he said.

Gennaro lowered his eyes to the taut lead. 'I don't.'

The man with the cigar noticed that the mastiff had shifted his weight forwards. He jabbed him in the flank with the toe of his shoe, just below the scar.

Gennaro made no sound.

Pepe did. A dry bark, out of all proportion to his body.

Vanessa lifted him by the harness. 'Do you know how bad you make me look?'

As he was carried away, Pepe kept watching Gennaro over her shoulder. The mastiff had not moved. Only his tail, stretched out in the mud, moved once.

It was not a farewell. It was a promise that they would recognise each other again.

2. Number Seven

Alfredo Esposito's breeding kennels occupied a warehouse on the edge of Bolzaneto, between the stream and the motorway. At the front stood a gold sign, two cypresses in pots and an electric gate. At the back, twenty-six concrete kennels.

Gennaro lived in number seven.

In the office Alfredo kept the framed pedigree and a photograph of Gennaro's father beneath the words BLOOD DOES NOT LIE. He talked about jaws, heads, angulation. When clients arrived, he opened the kennel and made Gennaro step out onto a rubber platform.

'Forty-nine kilos of pure breed.'

He weighed sixty-two, but forty-nine sounded better in the brochures.

Two or three times a month, a female was brought in. Alfredo closed the sliding door, gave orders and recorded the times. Afterwards, Gennaro was left with the smell of the others on him and the feeling that he had lent his body to someone who would give nothing back.

That evening he refused the tawny female brought from Turin. Her legs were rigid and she was breathing too quickly. Gennaro sniffed her muzzle, then sat down.

'Come on.' Alfredo clapped his hands. 'Work.'

The bitch tried to approach. Gennaro moved away.

The first blow landed on his back. The second on the scar. Lorenza, Alfredo's wife, watched through the office window, a notebook held tight against her chest.

'Enough,' she said, without opening the door.

Alfredo did not hear her, or chose not to.

When the warehouse fell silent again, Gennaro dug at the patch of earth beneath the kennel fence. He was not looking for a way out. With his muzzle he drew two pointed ears and a tiny body. Wind-blown rain erased the picture before dawn.

Across the city, Pepe slept in a faux-leather bed beneath a shelf full of trophies. Vanessa had left the light on so that she could film him if he did something funny in his sleep.

Pepe did not move. He counted the sounds in the building and thought of a name that appeared on no billboard.

Gennaro.

3. Rain on the Training Ground

They saw each other again three weeks later.

The storm broke during the group trials. A flash of lightning extinguished the floodlights and the humans ran for the shelter, dragging chairs, bags and dogs with them. To prevent a fight, the attendant put the animals into the available transport crates.

Pepe ended up in an aluminium cage that was too large for him. Gennaro was in the one beside it, too small for him.

Rain on the roof drowned out the voices. Vanessa was arguing on the phone near the entrance; Alfredo was smoking beneath the NO SMOKING sign.

Pepe moved close to the perforated panel between the cages. Through the holes he could see one of Gennaro's eyes.

'Did he hurt you?'

'No.'

'You lied.'

'Yes.'

Pepe sniffed the metal. 'Why don't you bite him?'

Gennaro was silent for long enough to make the rain sound louder.

'Because after the bite there is always a smaller cage.'

Pepe thought of hotel rooms, carriers beneath aircraft seats, windowless dressing rooms. 'Even without the bite.'

Gennaro moved his muzzle until it touched the metal. Pepe did the same. The panel was cold between their noses.

'How old are you?' Gennaro asked.

'Eight. Vanessa says six when they ask on television.'

'I'm four.'

'And they still call you Number Seven.'

'Numbers don't grow old.'

A cough came from the far end of the shelter. Alfredo was telling another breeder that he would send Gennaro to Milan for semen collection. He spoke of the journey, the price and the quantity as if he were ordering diesel.

Pepe listened. 'Will you do it?'

'They'll muzzle me. Then they'll do what they want.'

'You can refuse.'

'I refused yesterday.'

Gennaro turned slightly. Through the holes Pepe saw the scar and, lower down, two dark bruises.

Anger rose from his belly to his throat. He did not bark. He placed one paw against the metal.

Gennaro covered it from the other side with his own. The hole between them was no larger than a fingernail, but it was enough to let the warmth through.

When the lights came back on, the humans opened Pepe's cage first. Vanessa picked him up and wiped his paws with a cloth.

'You look as if you've been to war.'

Pepe looked at the cage beside him. Gennaro had not withdrawn his paw.

'Not yet,' he said.

Vanessa heard only a small growl and held him tighter.

The following Sunday, the ground hosted a regional dog show. Barriers divided the grass into two rings; names, numbers and results came through the loudspeakers. Pepe spent the morning on a grooming table while three people arranged fur that did not need arranging.

Vanessa sprayed a talc-scented product over his back. 'No tantrums today.'

Across the grass, Alfredo walked Gennaro back and forth in front of a judge. He lifted his head with the lead and pushed his legs into the position he wanted. Whenever the mastiff tried to sit, the chain tightened beneath his throat.

Pepe watched everything in the table's mirror. When his category was called, he crossed the ring without putting a foot wrong. The judge opened his mouth, checked his teeth and ran a hand along his back. Pepe stood motionless. He had learnt that stillness shortened the contact.

He won.

Vanessa lifted him above her head while the photographer took pictures. From her arms, Pepe saw Gennaro behind the exhibitors' curtain. Alfredo had tied him to a post with three females and was drinking at the bar.

As soon as Vanessa put him down, Pepe slipped beneath the table and ran behind the curtains. He had less than a minute before they noticed he was gone.

Gennaro heard him coming. 'You won.'

Pepe looked at the rosette pinned to his harness. 'I didn't do anything I wanted to do.'

'You walked well.'

'I walk well when I go for a drink too.'

One of the females tied beside Gennaro watched them. She was young, her teats still swollen with milk. 'You two are the ones from the storm.'

Gennaro lowered his muzzle. 'How are the puppies?'
'Sold. They say they're all well.'

The bitch turned her head towards the bar, where the breeders were comparing photographs on their phones. 'I can't remember their smell any more.'

Pepe could find nothing to say. The rosette weighed against his chest.

Gennaro brought his nose close to Pepe's. 'When are they taking you away?'

'I don't know yet.'

'Learn the route.'

'I always do.'

Vanessa called. Pepe had just enough time to lick Gennaro's lower lip, where the skin formed a damp fold, before running back towards the ring.

In the official photographs that day, his muzzle was perfect and the blue rosette shone. No one noticed a grey hair caught between his teeth.

4. The Trophy Room

Vanessa lived in Castelletto, in a flat with two balconies and no photograph that did not contain her face. Pepe's trophies covered the corridor wall; his toys were kept in a basket behind the service door.

That night she came home late and sat on the floor fully dressed. She had taken off one shoe, but not the other. Pepe watched her from his bed.

'Do you know what the problem is?' she said. 'If you stop winning, I stop existing too.'

She was not drunk. She was tired, and when she was tired she spoke to him as if he could answer.

Pepe went over to her. Vanessa lifted him onto her lap, picked a blade of grass from his coat with two fingers and massaged the base of his ears. She knew the exact spot.

For a few minutes there was no phone, no lights, no orders. Pepe felt her heartbeat beneath her blouse.

Then the screen on the table lit up. Vanessa picked it up.

'We're doing Righi on Saturday. Sunset, skyline and a new collar. If it goes well, the brand will renew.'

Pepe climbed down from her lap.

The contract lay on the table. He had learnt to recognise his own name among the lines and the figure written at the bottom. Vanessa had not taught him to read; years of labels, scoreboards and papers left open had done that.

She pointed to a page. 'And then Milan. They have a breeding programme. Only two months.'

Pepe knew what breeding programme meant. He had heard the words used near the kennels.

Vanessa noticed that he was trembling. She covered him with a cashmere blanket and turned up the thermostat.

'Are you cold, darling?'

Pepe stayed beneath the blanket until her breathing became regular. Then he crawled out, crossed the corridor and sat in front of the wall of trophies.

The metal gave back a broken image: an eye, an ear, the collar.

For the first time, he did not see a champion. He saw an animal who had let others decide everything.

5. The Smell of Iron

Alfredo kept the warehouse keys on his belt. When he walked, they struck the buckle with the clatter of teeth.

Gennaro had learnt to tell each key apart. The long one opened the outer gate; the flat one, the office; the small one with the red rim, the medicine room. The key to his kennel was second from the left.

One morning Lorenza came in alone. She carried a bowl of water and clean gauze. Alfredo had gone to the bank.

She opened the kennel without looking Gennaro in the eyes. 'Let me see.'

He remained still.

Lorenza touched the fur around the scar. The skin had split open again. She cleaned the blood away with gentle movements, but her hands trembled.

'He wasn't always like this,' she said.

Gennaro sniffed her fingers. They smelled of soap, second-hand smoke and fear.

She finished dressing the wound and left the door open while she gathered the used gauze. Nothing stood between Gennaro and the yard. Beyond the yard, the electric gate had been left ajar for the feed van.

Gennaro took one step.

Lorenza raised her head. For a moment she did not move. She could have turned away.

Then she closed the kennel.

'Not today.'

The lock clicked. Gennaro went back to the blanket.

That evening Alfredo muzzled him and dragged him into the examination room. Forms for the transfer to Milan lay on the table. He was due to leave the following Monday.

Alfredo pulled up the skin on his neck to show the microchip to the vet. 'He comes back when he's finished. If he doesn't perform, he stays there.'

The vet asked no questions.

Gennaro stared at the keys on Alfredo's belt. Second from the left.

6. The White Van

The following Saturday, the dog-food company organised an advertising shoot on the seafront at Savona. Vanessa brought Pepe. Alfredo brought Gennaro as a symbol of the breed's strength.

They were put in the same van, in cages opposite each other. A corridor half a metre wide separated them.

The journey took an hour, but traffic stretched the return trip into the night. The humans sat in front with the music turned up. In the back, every bend shifted the cages a few millimetres.

'They're taking me away on Monday,' Gennaro said.

Pepe had heard Vanessa talking about Milan. 'Me too.'
'For how long?'

'She says two months. When she says only, it means she doesn't know.'

The van entered a tunnel. In the dark, Gennaro's voice sounded closer.

'If you could get out, where would you go?'

Pepe thought of the cities he had seen from the back of a carrier. He knew none of them without red carpets, lobbies or dressing rooms. 'Somewhere no one knows my name.'

'I'd go back to the sea.'

'You've never been there free.'

'That's why.'

As they left the tunnel, the motorway lights crossed the van. Pepe saw Gennaro's head resting against the bars. He

pushed one paw between the bars of his own cage. It did not reach the corridor.

Gennaro stretched out his. Their claws touched. 'There is an abandoned railway depot in Campasso,' Gennaro said. 'I smell it every time they take me to the training ground. Old iron, oil and a fig tree growing from the wall.'

'How do you know it's abandoned?'

'Humans lock up the things they use.'

Pepe memorised the smells, the bends and the sound of the tracks. 'If one of us gets out, wait there.'

'How long?'

'Until the other one comes.'

The van braked. Their paws fell apart.

Vanessa turned from the front seat. 'Look at them. They look in love.'

Alfredo laughed. 'Yours is the size of mine's head.'

Pepe and Gennaro did not laugh.

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Soon after Arenzano, the van broke down. Alfredo managed to reach a service station and called roadside assistance. They told him they would have to wait at least two hours.

Vanessa and Alfredo went into the café. They left one door ajar for air and switched on the interior light. Lorries came and went in the car park; every engine made the floor tremble.

For the first time, they had time.

'What were you like before the number?' Pepe asked.

Gennaro rested his head against the bars. 'I had a sister. We slept on top of each other. She bit my ears.'

'Where is she?'

'Sold in France. Alfredo says she produced champions.'

'Do you remember her name?'

'Luna.'

Pepe had no siblings he could remember. His mother was a warm smell, milk and rough cloth. Then came hands, the journey and Vanessa.

'She chose me because I was the smallest,' he said. 'She kept me inside her coat. At first I slept on her pillow.'

'Then what?'

'I won my first competition.'

The sound of a compressor drowned out the car park for a few seconds.

'Sometimes she's kind,' Pepe continued. 'That's what makes it confusing.'

'Lorenza cleans my wounds too.'

'Does she open the kennel?'

'When Alfredo isn't there.'

'Then you can leave.'

'She closes it again before I can choose.'

Pepe pushed both paws between the bars. 'Maybe they're afraid of what happens if they don't own us any more.'

'And what are we afraid of?'

Pepe looked at the white lights of the service station. He had slept in dozens of places without knowing which city he was in. 'That there is nothing outside.'

Gennaro shifted his body. With an effort, he managed to push his muzzle far enough between two bars to reach Pepe's paws. He touched them with his tongue.

'You're outside,' he said.

Pepe closed his eyes. No one had ever offered him anything that could not be photographed, sold or taken away.

When the humans returned, they found both dogs lying against their cage doors, as close to the corridor as they could get. Vanessa took a photograph.

'This will kill on social media.'

Pepe opened his eyes. For once, he did not care.

7. The Gate

On the last Sunday before their departure, the Monteverde training ground was almost empty. It had been raining for days, and the stream behind the trees ran brown.

Vanessa was rehearsing a sequence in front of the camera. Alfredo was talking to a client near the kennels. No one saw the attendant open the service gate to wheel a barrow through.

Pepe saw it.

He twisted free of Vanessa's hand with a move learnt backstage and ran. Not towards the exit, but towards Gennaro. The mastiff was tethered to a ring in the wall. Pepe jumped onto the toolbox, gripped the end of the snap hook between his teeth and pulled. Once, twice. The spring gave way.

They ran through the gate together.

Behind the training ground stood a low storehouse, its roof caved in and sacks of sawdust piled along one wall. They entered through a doorway without a door. For a few minutes they heard only the rain and the distant voices calling them.

Pepe was short of breath. Gennaro placed his body across the entrance.

'We can go now,' Pepe said.

Gennaro scented the wind. 'They'll catch us before the bridge. You're chipped. So am I.'

'Then why did we come out?'

Gennaro turned. Mud covered his legs up to the hocks. 'To know that we can.'

Pepe moved towards the scar. He licked it slowly, once. Gennaro shuddered, but not with fear.

'They'll use you again in Milan,' Pepe said.

'You too.'

'I don't want them to.'

'Neither do I.'

The voices came closer. Vanessa called Pepe in the sweet voice she used for emergencies; Alfredo shouted the number seven.

Gennaro lowered his head over Pepe's neck. His breath was warm and slow.

'Campasso,' he said.

'The fig tree in the wall.'

'Wait.'

'You wait too.'

They returned to the training ground before the humans found them. Pepe let himself be picked up. Gennaro sat beside the broken ring.

Alfredo put the lead back on him and struck him with the buckle in front of everyone. Vanessa looked away.

Pepe did not.

8. The Eve

On Sunday evening, Vanessa packed two suitcases. She put her clothes in the large one; in the hard case she packed Pepe's food, his grooming products and the sand-coloured coat.

'Tomorrow a new life begins,' she said.

Pepe watched her close the zip. He knew she meant her own.

Before bed, Vanessa took him onto the balcony. Genoa shone below them, compressed between the hills and the sea. In the distance, a freight train passed towards Campasso.

She stroked his chest. 'Without you, I would have achieved nothing.'

Pepe rested his muzzle against her wrist. He could hear the blood.

At the warehouse, Alfredo loaded the muzzle, the documents and a syringe of sedative supplied by the vet into the van. Lorenza followed him in silence.

'Don't give him too much,' she said.

'He's worth the same asleep.'

Gennaro listened from his kennel. The key was on Alfredo's belt, second from the left. The outer gate would remain open during loading.

Neither dog slept all night.

Pepe counted the minutes between trains. Gennaro counted Alfredo's steps from the office to the kennel.

They had not decided to kill. They had decided not to leave.

PART TWO
TWO BODIES

9. The Lookout

Vanessa changed her plans at dawn.

Before the train to Milan, she wanted to film one last video in the hills at Righi. The sky had cleared after the rain and, from the lookout, Genoa resembled a slab of slate tilted towards the sea.

'Ten minutes,' she told the taxi driver. 'Then the station.'

She wore heeled boots and a white coat, and her suitcase was already in the boot. She put the pink diamond collar Pepe hated around his neck. The retractable lead was wound twice around her wrist.

The place she had chosen for the shoot lay beyond the main balustrade, on a terrace closed to the public. A sign barred access because the edge was unstable. Vanessa pushed it aside with her foot.

'With that fence behind us, it looks like a prison.'

Pepe went beneath the tape. The concrete was cracked and covered in gravel. Below, the woods fell steeply towards the city.

Vanessa set her phone on a small tripod. She checked the frame, stepped back, adjusted it. 'You here. Me on the wall. When I say go, look at the sea.'

Pepe obeyed the first time. On the second, he turned towards her. Vanessa's face was tired without the screen's filter. Strands of hair had come loose across her forehead. 'Don't drive me mad today of all days.' She crouched and straightened his collar. 'You'll be fine in Milan. They have a big garden.'

Her hands were warm. For a moment, Pepe wanted to believe her.

Vanessa climbed onto the low wall. Her right heel found a firm crack; the left remained close to the edge. She raised the spare phone and smiled.

'Go.'

Pepe looked at the sea.

Then he saw the key to the travel cage beside her boot. It had fallen from her coat pocket. He picked it up between his teeth and backed away.

'Drop it.'

Pepe took another step.

Vanessa stepped down from the wall, but the lead held her wrist. 'Pepe.'

He ran towards the opposite edge. The tape tightened between her legs. Vanessa lost one boot, struck the tripod and managed to seize the balustrade with both hands.

She hung there. The phone fell into the woods.

Pepe was less than a metre away. If he went back towards her, the lead would stop pulling. Vanessa could haul herself up.

'Darling.' There was no command left in her voice. 'Come here.'

Pepe heard her fingers slipping over the wet concrete. He took one step forwards.

Vanessa drew breath.

Pepe looked at the key between his teeth, then at the sand-coloured coat he was still wearing. He thought of the cage waiting in the taxi, the breeding programme, Gennaro waiting beside a fig tree growing from a wall.

He took one step back.

Vanessa's fingers gave way. She did not scream at once. The sound came when Pepe was already beneath the tape.

The taxi driver saw him appear alone in the square, a key between his teeth and the lead trailing through the gravel.

10. The Red Key

Alfredo opened the kennel at twenty past seven. He had already started the van; burnt diesel fumes entered the warehouse with the cold air.

Gennaro let him put on the muzzle. The leather was stiff and smelled of disinfectant. Lorenza held the documents near the office.

'Give him the dose after he's inside,' she said.

Alfredo clipped on the lead. 'I'll decide.'

Gennaro walked as far as the van. The outer gate was open. Beyond the road, the stream ran towards the sea. Nothing barred his way.

Alfredo pulled the lead towards the ramp. Gennaro planted his paws.

'We're off to a good start.'

The first blow came from his hand. The second from the snap hook. When Gennaro still refused to climb in, Alfredo took the filled syringe from his pocket.

Lorenza stepped forwards. 'Wait.'

'Get back inside.'

Alfredo crouched beside Gennaro's right flank, searching for a place between the folds of skin. The scar tightened beneath his fingers.

Gennaro could have run. The gate was still open.

Instead, he turned.

The muzzle struck Alfredo's wrist and the syringe fell. Gennaro pushed again, twisting his neck. The side buckle caught on the sleeve and sprang open. The leather slipped to the ground.

Alfredo stood motionless for a second, more surprised than frightened. Then he raised the snap hook.

Gennaro seized his forearm. He tightened his jaws until he felt bone, released it and went for the throat.

Lorenza screamed his name, his real name, not the number.

'Gennaro!'

He continued until Alfredo's body stopped resisting.

The diesel fumes from the van masked the smell of blood, but not enough. The other dogs barked in their kennels, all at once, and the warehouse seemed to tremble.

Gennaro raised his muzzle. Lorenza stood against the wall. Her hands were in front of her mouth and the red-rimmed key was clenched in her fist.

For several seconds, they looked at each other.

She pointed to the open gate.

Gennaro left without running. He crossed the road, followed the stream and disappeared beneath the viaduct.

When the police arrived, Lorenza said the muzzle had broken. She did not mention the syringe or say that the gate had remained open for more than ten minutes.

11. The Fig Tree in the Wall

It took Pepe five hours to reach Campasso.

He avoided the main roads, followed the smell of the tracks and hid twice beneath parked cars when he heard sirens. His coat tore on a fence. He left it snagged there and carried on with the diamond collar still around his neck.

The depot was as Gennaro had described it: empty warehouses, rails submerged in weeds and a fig tree growing from a crack in a wall. Pepe slipped beneath the gate and waited.

At sunset, he heard a heavy step on the gravel.

Gennaro appeared between two rusting wagons. Dried blood covered his muzzle and he was limping on a hind leg. Pepe ran to meet him, then stopped a few centimetres away.

The smell told him everything.

Gennaro, too, sniffed the trailing lead, the gravel from Righi and the fear still caught in Pepe's coat.

'You came,' he said.

'So did you.'

Gennaro lay down behind a pile of sleepers. Pepe licked the blood from the fold of his muzzle. He did not ask whose it was. Gennaro did not ask how Vanessa had died.

When darkness covered the depot, they shared a crust of bread found beside the tracks. Gennaro left the soft part for Pepe.

'I could have left,' he said after a long time.

Pepe knew which moment he meant. 'I could have gone back too.'

'Did you?'

'I took one step.'

The evening freight train passed beyond the wall. The ground vibrated beneath their bodies.

'Are you sorry?' Gennaro asked.

Pepe thought of Vanessa's warm hands, of the voice in which she had said darling when there was no audience left. 'Not enough.'

Gennaro rested his muzzle on his paws. 'Neither am I.'

They slept beneath the fig tree, close but not touching. Before dawn, Pepe woke and found Gennaro's head only a few centimetres from his own. He moved against his flank and closed his eyes again.

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They stayed in the depot for three days.

By day, they hid beneath a freight wagon with no wheels. At night, they looked for water and food around the warehouses. Gennaro managed to overturn a bin behind a trattoria; inside they found bones, cold pasta and an unopened bag of biscuits. Pepe dragged the bag back to their shelter and worked at the seam with his teeth until it opened.

On the second day, a newspaper caught in the fence. Vanessa's face was on the front page. Pepe recognised the photograph from the Dubai trip and half his own muzzle at the edge of the frame.

Below it, a smaller headline reported the breeder killed in Bolzaneto.

Gennaro placed one paw on the paper, covering Alfredo's name.

'The humans think you killed him,' Pepe said.

'I did.'

'They think I ran away because I was frightened.'

'That's good for you.'

Pepe tore out the piece with Vanessa's photograph. He carried it beneath the wagon and propped it against a stone. For hours, he avoided looking at it. At sunset, he went closer and sniffed the paper. Her perfume was gone. There was only ink and rain.

'When she was sad, she slept with one hand outside the bed,' he said. 'I would lie beneath her palm.'

Gennaro listened.

'I could have saved her.'

'Yes.'

Pepe raised his eyes, hurt by the simplicity of the answer.

'Do you want me to say otherwise?' Gennaro asked.

'No.'

The mastiff moved the newspaper and lay down beside the photograph. 'I could have gone through the gate. I went back towards him.'

'Why?'

'I wanted him to be frightened at least once.'

A rat crossed the tracks with a piece of plastic between its teeth. In the distance, a train whistled before the tunnel.

Pepe leaned against Gennaro's flank. 'Was he?'

'Yes.'

'Vanessa was too.'

They remained beside the photograph until the rain dissolved the ink. By morning, her face had become a grey stain.

12. Two Scenes

Inspector Carlo Rinaldi received the Alfredo Esposito case file at nine and Vanessa Crespi's at eleven twenty.

The first appeared straightforward. A breeder killed by his own mastiff during an attack; animal escaped; wife a witness. The second was not yet a crime: a woman had fallen from a terrace closed to the public, her Chihuahua missing.

Rinaldi was fifty-six, had a desk covered in paper and a habit of reading what was missing first. Lorenza's statement did not explain why the gate was open. The report from Righi did not say where the dog's body was.

Deputy Inspector Mancuso brought him two photographs.

'Different cases.'

Rinaldi placed them side by side. In one, Gennaro posed beside Alfredo in front of the Monteverde training-ground banner. In the other, Pepe was in Vanessa's arms in front of the same banner.

'A little less different now.'

He called the manager of the ground. He learnt that the two dogs had seen each other four times in the previous two months, that one Sunday they had gone through the service gate together and that both were due to leave for Milan that morning.

'Coincidences,' Mancuso said.

'Two are coincidence. Five make a lead.'

That afternoon, Rinaldi returned to the lookout. The concrete still bore the marks left by forensics. Near the

edge he found small scratches, four at a time, and a line in the gravel made by the lead.

He tested the length of the tape. If the dog had run in the opposite direction while Vanessa was hanging, he would have increased the weight on her wrist. If he had gone back, he would have relieved it.

'Do you think he did it deliberately?' Mancuso asked.

Rinaldi looked at the woods below the terrace. 'I think an accident requires fewer decisions.'

That evening, he questioned Lorenza. She repeated the story of the broken muzzle. Rinaldi placed the photograph of the syringe found beneath the van on the table.

'It was to calm him.'

'The gate?'

'The van had to get out.'

'The dog could have run before attacking your husband.'

Lorenza lowered her eyes. 'Yes.'

Rinaldi closed his notebook. Two dogs had been given a way out. Each had made a choice before using it.

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He reconstructed the previous eight weeks on an office wall. Photographs, call records, receipts from the training ground, van routes. In the centre, he placed the photograph from the regional show: Vanessa holding Pepe aloft with the blue rosette; in the background, almost out of focus, Gennaro tied to a post.

He called the make-up artist who had worked with Vanessa.

'Pepe was her work,' the woman said. 'But he was her family too.'

'Would she have given him up?'

'She needed the contract. She said two months was nothing.'

'For the dog?'

The make-up artist hesitated. 'For her.'

A former employee of Alfredo described forced matings, medicines used without prescriptions and a puppy that had died in transit. He had left the kennels after seeing Alfredo strike Gennaro with a rubber hose.

'Why didn't you report it?' Mancuso asked.

'Because he paid me cash in hand. Because I needed the money. Pick whichever one you like.'

When the man left, Mancuso remained in front of the wall. 'What do we do if we find them?'

'We take them in.'

'That isn't what I meant.'

Rinaldi pulled down the photograph from the show and studied it closely. Pepe, held high, was looking beyond Vanessa's shoulder. Follow the direction of his gaze and it led to the mastiff.

'First we take them in,' he repeated. 'Then we find out what we're allowed to see.'

13. The Dead Track

City cameras found Pepe three times: on Corso Firenze, beneath the Di Negro viaduct, near a railway underpass. Gennaro appeared in a single recording along the Polcevera. Their routes converged on Campasso.

Rinaldi entered the depot with six officers and two dog wardens. He had the sirens switched off three streets away.

The dogs heard them anyway.

Pepe woke before the first man crossed the gate. Gennaro scented the air and indicated the north side, where the wall was lower.

'Three in front,' he said. 'Others behind.'

'How do you know?'

'They're afraid in different ways.'

They ran between the wagons. The officers blocked the main passage with telescopic nets. Rinaldi advanced through the centre, without a pole or gloves, watching the places a small animal would seek for cover.

Pepe saw him kneel in front of the hollow beneath a carriage.

'Don't go there,' he told Gennaro. 'He's waiting for us.'

They changed direction. Gennaro pushed aside a sheet of metal leaning against the wall and opened a gap. Pepe slipped through; Gennaro's shoulders became wedged. The humans were getting closer.

'Go,' he said.

Pepe went back, seized the loose skin of his cheek and pulled. Gennaro twisted his body, leaving tufts of fur on the metal, and managed to get through.

Rinaldi arrived in time to see them drop into the drainage channel together.

'Stop!' he shouted, knowing it would do no good.

Pepe turned. For an instant, their eyes met. Rinaldi saw none of the blind panic of flight in them. The dog was measuring the distance, the number of men and the time the other needed to disappear.

Then he followed Gennaro into the dark.

The officers recovered the diamond collar, lost beside the metal sheet, and two overlapping pawprints in the mud.

'They protect each other,' Mancuso said.

Rinaldi put the collar in an evidence bag. 'And they learn.'

14. Doctor Ferretti

Elena Ferretti had worked with aggressive dogs for twenty years and detested anyone who used the word bad in a clinical report. She received Rinaldi in an examination room at the Begato animal-health centre, between a poster about disease prevention and a medicine cabinet.

She watched the depot footage twice.

'The little one spots the trap. The mastiff opens a way through. Then the little one goes back to free him.'

'Planning?'

'Cooperation. Planning is harder to prove.'

Rinaldi showed her the accounts of the two deaths.

Ferretti read in silence. 'You want me to say they're innocent because they're dogs.'

'I want to know whether they can choose.'

'They choose all the time. We prefer to call it instinct when the answer disturbs us.'

'Then they can kill intentionally.'

'They can bite, hold, release. The rest is a legal word.'

Rinaldi stood. 'If we catch them, I want them separated.'

'Why?'

'Together, they're more dangerous.'

Ferretti closed the file. 'Or less afraid.'

'You've just seen two deaths.'

'I also saw a syringe, a reopened scar and a breeding contract. Don't confuse an explanation with an acquittal, Inspector.'

Rinaldi paused in the doorway. 'I never do.'

It was true. His problem was the opposite: when he found an explanation, he followed it until he turned it into evidence.

15. The Capture

For four days, Pepe and Gennaro lived in the channels beneath the railway. They came out at night, drank from fountains and ate what they found behind the markets. The wound on Gennaro's leg was getting worse.

Rinaldi closed the access points one by one. He used neither poisoned food nor attack dogs. He studied the drainage maps and left only one route open: the tunnel leading to the old goods yard.

At the exit, he placed a transport crate containing a blanket from Gennaro's kennel and, beside it, Pepe's torn coat. No food as bait. Only the smells of what they had lost.

Pepe caught them from fifty metres away.
'It's him,' Gennaro said. 'The man from the depot.'
'I know.'

They could have turned back, but Gennaro's leg would not endure another night in the water. Pepe went first.

The yard appeared empty. Rinaldi waited inside a van with the engine off; the officers were hidden beyond the walls. When the dogs reached the centre, two metal gates dropped, one behind them and one in front.

Gennaro moved in front of Pepe. He growled.

Rinaldi came out alone. He placed the catch pole on the ground and raised his hands.
'It's over.'

Pepe recognised the voice. It was the one that had shouted in the depot. He moved beside Gennaro, not behind him.

Ferretti approached from the opposite side with a tranquilliser blowpipe. 'Don't make me.'

Gennaro looked at his swollen leg, then at Pepe. 'If I run, they'll shoot.'

'If you stay, they'll separate us.'

'We'll find each other.'

Pepe pressed his flank against Gennaro's.

The dart entered Gennaro's thigh. Pepe barked and lunged at Ferretti, but Rinaldi threw a blanket over him before he reached her. He struggled, bit cloth and air, then heard Gennaro's body fall onto the concrete.

He stopped.

Rinaldi picked him up without holding him tight. Pepe raised his muzzle and looked at him from a few centimetres away.

'You know why we're here,' Rinaldi said.

Pepe could not make himself understood. He slowly licked the back of Rinaldi's hand, where the smell of Gennaro's blanket remained on the skin.

Rinaldi drew back his hand.

It was the first mistake Pepe saw him make.

PART THREE
THE IRON KENNELS

16. In Custody

The Iron Kennels did not appear on maps under that name. In official documents, they were the judicial wing of the Begato animal-health centre, a building constructed in the seventies and renovated just enough to change the doors, not the smell.

Pepe woke in a kennel four metres by two. Washable walls, bars at the front, a plastic bed. His collar was gone. On the opposite wall, a camera displayed a red light.

He called Gennaro.

His voice emerged as a series of high-pitched barks. No one answered.

He tried again, then stopped rather than give his panic to the camera.

Gennaro was forty metres farther south, in a reinforced kennel. Ferretti had drained the infection in his leg and stitched a cut left by the metal sheet at the depot. The sedative still held him halfway between sleep and wakefulness.

When he opened his eyes, Rinaldi was sitting beyond the bars.

'The little one is all right,' he said.

Gennaro raised his muzzle.

Rinaldi had brought a file, but did not open it. 'The doctor says you understand a lot of words. Let's see.'

He placed two photographs on the floor: Alfredo beside the van; Vanessa at the lookout. Gennaro looked at the first, then the second. He did not approach.

'Dead.'

Gennaro's ears did not move.

'Pepe.'

This time his breathing changed.

Rinaldi saw it. 'Good. We'll start there.'

The warrant allowed the dogs to be held as living evidence and dangerous subjects. No charge was possible, but protocols existed for animals involved in human deaths. If the panel declared Gennaro beyond rehabilitation, he would be put down. Pepe could be transferred to another facility or returned to Vanessa's heirs.

Rinaldi did not explain any of this. He said only, 'Apart, you're two cases. Together, you're a story. And stories leave traces.'

Gennaro lowered his head onto the bed.

That night, Pepe heard a sound in the drainpipe: two knocks, a pause, another two.

It was not Gennaro. It was the irregular beat of a pump.

Pepe listened until morning and began to learn its rhythm.

The following day, he discovered that time in the Iron Kennels had rubber wheels. It arrived at six with the water trolley, at seven with the food bowls, at nine with the sampling stretcher. Between each passing came the hum of the fluorescent lights and the breathing of the animals shut in the kennels.

A shaved-headed keeper named Marta put down dry food and a bowl of water. She did not try to stroke him. She noted that he was not eating, changed the absorbent pad and left. Pepe waited until the keys sounded far away,

then pushed one piece of food into the centre of the kennel and faced the camera.

He ate it without lowering his eyes.

Two people were required to enter Gennaro's kennel in the south wing. They fitted his muzzle through the bars, opened the bolt and moved him with a loop pole. Gennaro let them do it until they pulled on his injured leg. Then he locked himself in place. He did not growl; he planted his weight on the floor and forced the humans to decide whether to drag him in front of the cameras.

On the second day, Ferretti took the pole from a keeper's hands.

'Just open it.'

'Doctor, the order says double restraint.'

'The order also says not to reopen the stitches.'

She went in alone, sat on the opposite bed and laid what she needed between her knees. Gennaro let her change the dressing. Rinaldi watched from the monitor room: eleven minutes without a threatening movement, then the mastiff shifting to cover the drain with his body.

'Has he got something under there?' Mancuso asked.

Rinaldi enlarged the image. 'No. He wants us to think he has.'

On the next monitor, Pepe slept with his muzzle towards the wall. When Marta passed the south kennel with the bandage trolley, the Chihuahua opened his eyes before the woman had even entered the north corridor.

Rinaldi had the two camera feeds synchronised. Pepe stood whenever Gennaro's wound was dressed. Gennaro

refused food until he heard the trolley leave Pepe's section. They could not see each other, and neither of them barked. 'The pipes,' Rinaldi said.

Mancuso bent over the control desk. 'You think they're communicating?'

'I think they're counting.'

He had the audio channels isolated and ordered changes to the feeding times. It was both a test and a pressure. For twenty-four hours, the trolleys passed in a random order; doors opened off schedule; a radio remained on in the south corridor. Pepe did not sleep. Gennaro overturned his bowl without touching the food.

That evening, Ferretti found Rinaldi in front of the monitors.

'You're disorientating them.'

'I'm testing an ability.'

'The ability to be afraid when the rules change?'

Rinaldi pointed to Pepe, motionless beneath the camera's red light. 'The ability to coordinate without contact. If it exists, the depot was not a chance meeting.'

'And if you prove it?'

'I know what I'm looking for.'

Ferretti placed the report on Gennaro's leg on the desk. 'Remember that they know too.'

That night, Rinaldi restored the routines. At seven, the mastiff ate. At four minutes past seven, Pepe emptied his bowl.

Rinaldi printed the frames and added them to the case file.

17. The Missing Things

Rinaldi returned to Vanessa's flat before her body had been released to the family. On the table he found the Milan contract, Pepe's suitcase and a folder containing receipts from the previous eight years.

The dog had paid for everything: rent, travel, the car, the debts of a company closed twice and reopened under another name. Yet a box beneath the bed held veterinary reports arranged by date, X-rays, a milk tooth wrapped in paper and hundreds of unpublished photographs. Pepe asleep. Pepe ill, a blanket over his head. Pepe in a messy kitchen, without bow or collar.

Mancuso picked one up. 'She loved him.'
'That doesn't exclude the rest.'
'What rest?'

Rinaldi indicated the invoices. 'Dependence. Ownership. Fear of losing the source.'

On Vanessa's phone they found the unfinished video from the lookout. The frame showed the low wall, her legs, Pepe taking the key. Then the tripod fell and remained pointed at the sky. The audio continued.

Vanessa's voice said darling. Four seconds of gravel followed, a breath and the sound of the lead pulling taut. Then emptiness.

Rinaldi listened three times. On the fourth, he switched it off.

At Alfredo's warehouse, Ferretti photographed the other dogs' scars and the unregistered medicines. Lorenza handed over the red key and the mating records.

'Why did you lie?' Rinaldi asked.

'Because my husband was dead.'

'And the dog?'

Lorenza looked at the kennels. 'He was alive.'

'You could have stopped him leaving.'

'Yes.'

'You could have opened the kennel sooner.'

Lorenza took longer to answer. 'Yes.'

Rinaldi left the warehouse with a thicker file and a less comfortable certainty. The dogs had killed. The humans had spent a long time preparing the place in which that choice became possible.

It did not change the dead. It changed how one looked at them.

18. Grandfather Mud

An old mongrel lived in the kennel beside Pepe's, black where he still had fur and grey around the muzzle. One eye was clouded and he had a cough that began every evening after the lights went out.

'If you keep staring at the pipe, sooner or later it will answer you,' he said.

Pepe moved closer to the wall. 'Who are you?'

'They call me Mud here. I had another name outside, but no one remembers it.'

'Do you know where the south wing is?'

'Beyond the infirmary and the storeroom. Four doors.'

'There's a mastiff there.'

'The one who doesn't eat?'

Pepe felt his stomach tighten. 'For how long?'

'Since they brought him in.'

He waited for the evening trolley. The drainpipe ran beneath every kennel and joined a central channel. Pepe put his muzzle to the grate and barked once, as low as he could.

The sound travelled through the metal.

A dull knock came from far away.

Pepe barked twice.

Two knocks answered.

Gennaro.

From then on, they spoke in a meagre code. One bark meant presence. Two, danger. Three, night. Gennaro used his paw against the grate; Pepe answered with his voice.

Long sentences could not pass through, but they were not yet necessary.

Mud listened. 'The central grate lifts when the rain is heavy. Water from the yard comes through underneath.'

'Where does it lead?'

'Outside the fence. I reached it once.'

'Why did you come back?'

Mud coughed, then lay down. 'I was more afraid of the world than of the kennel.'

Pepe looked at the rectangle of sky beyond the bars. 'I've tried both.'

Over the following days, he studied the shifts. Cleaning at six; food at seven; inspection at ten at night. The night keeper opened the storeroom with a pass, left the trolley in the corridor and smoked for six minutes beside the emergency door. During those six minutes, no one could see the infirmary door.

On the other side, Gennaro began working on the drain grate. He did not dig. Every night he bit the same rusted point and hid the blood from his gums by drinking at once.

19. The Test

On the fifth day, Rinaldi had Pepe taken to the examination room. Ferretti had placed three identical containers on the floor. One held food, one Gennaro's blanket, the last was empty.

'This isn't a circus trick,' she said.

'No. At the circus, the audience already knows the answer.'

Pepe entered and scented the air. He saw Rinaldi behind the glass. He understood that they were watching and went straight to the empty container. He sat down.

Ferretti could not hide a smile. 'He's refusing the question.'

Rinaldi entered. He removed the lid from the container holding the blanket and pushed it towards Pepe.

'Gennaro.'

Pepe did not move.

'If you cooperate, I'll let you see each other.'

The promise had a false smell. Pepe looked at the door behind Rinaldi, the pass clipped to his belt, the wet soles of his shoes. It was raining outside.

Rinaldi placed the panel's report on the table. 'They decide about the mastiff tomorrow. High risk. Possible euthanasia.'

Pepe jumped. Not towards the blanket: towards Rinaldi's wrist. He stopped before biting, his teeth a centimetre from the skin.

No one in the room breathed.

Then Pepe jumped down and sat in front of the empty container again.

Rinaldi looked at his wrist. 'He could have done it.'
'He chose not to,' Ferretti said.
'Or he understood it would weaken his position.'
'That is still a choice.'

Rinaldi returned the report to the file. He had obtained the proof he wanted and did not like it. Intention meant responsibility, but made it impossible to go on treating them only as things.

In the corridor, he met the centre's director.
'The public prosecutor's office wants this closed quickly.
The mastiff is indefensible.'
'Wait for my report.'

'Since when does an inspector write reports about dogs?'

Rinaldi looked through the glass. Pepe was sniffing Gennaro's blanket, finally alone.

'Since dogs started crossing out the wrong answers.'

The panel met the following morning in a windowless room. The medical director was there, along with a vet from the regional authority, a behavioural consultant joining remotely and the public prosecutor's officer who had requested a swift decision. Ferretti sat at the back, without a vote. Rinaldi occupied the chair beside the screen.

First they showed the warehouse video: Gennaro, able to pass Alfredo, turning back towards him instead. Then the audio from the lookout, the taut lead, the void. Rinaldi presented the charts of the altered routines and the frames of the two dogs reacting at a distance.

'They plan,' the officer concluded. 'That increases the risk.'
'It demonstrates learning,' Ferretti said.

'Doctor, the mastiff killed a man.'

'After four years of documented abuse.'

The consultant asked Rinaldi whether he considered a repeat incident possible. He looked at Alfredo's photograph on the table. He had pursued the dogs in order to assign a precise direction to every gesture; now that precision could become the reason to destroy them.

'If they are separated, forcibly restrained or returned to the previous conditions, yes.'

Ferretti turned towards him. The officer wrote down only the final word.

The vote was three to one in favour of putting Gennaro down. They deferred the decision on Pepe: neurological assessment, then transfer to the legal heirs. The order would become enforceable once confirmed by the judge, expected within forty-eight hours.

'I want to complete the reconstruction before the execution,' Rinaldi said.

'You already have two dead people and two dangerous animals,' the officer replied. 'What are you missing?'

'The reason they stayed together.'

He was given one day, not two.

On the way out, Ferretti caught up with him on the stairs. 'You just gave the public prosecutor's office the argument it wanted.'

'I gave a truthful answer.'

'And what will you do with the time you asked for?'

Rinaldi stopped. 'My job.'

In the north wing, Marta changed the bowl and spoke to Pepe without knowing she was being heard.

'This time tomorrow, they'll take your friend away.'

Pepe kept staring at the pipe. When the keeper left, he barked three times.

Three knocks came from the south wing.

20. The Water

The rain began in the afternoon and by nine that evening it had filled the yard drains. Water came beneath the doors, carrying leaves and earth.

Pepe heard the pump change rhythm. The irregular beat he had learnt on the first night became continuous, then stopped.

Three knocks came through the pipe.

Night.

Pepe answered with two barks. Danger.

The keeper pushed the trolley along the north corridor. He was in a hurry and swearing about the drains. He opened Pepe's kennel to change the wet blanket. Pepe flattened himself against the wall, trembling visibly enough to appear harmless.

The keeper bent down. 'Come on, flea.'

Pepe slipped beneath his arm, jumped onto the bottom shelf of the trolley and hid between two laundry bags. The keeper shut the empty kennel without checking and pushed on.

At the storeroom, he left the trolley, opened the emergency door and went outside to smoke beneath the awning.

Six minutes.

Pepe jumped down. He crossed the infirmary, following Gennaro's smell. The pass had been left in the reader to hold the storeroom door open. Pepe caught the lanyard in his teeth and dragged it away.

The south door had no handle on the inside, only a low reader and a push plate. During examinations, he had seen the humans touch the pass to it and push.

He lifted it between his teeth. The light changed from red to green.

In the south wing, Gennaro had torn the first bolt from the grate. The water was already up to his ankles. The other dogs barked, frightened by the storm.

Pepe reached the kennel. The bolt was too high.
'Back,' Gennaro said.

He threw his full weight against the bars. Once. The stitches in his leg split open. At the second impact, the frame buckled. At the third, it came away from the wall with pieces of plaster.

Pepe ran into him. Gennaro covered him with his neck for an instant, then looked along the corridor.

'How many doors?'

'Four.'

Behind them, the keeper threw away his cigarette and came back inside.

21. The Red Door

The first door opened with the pass. The second was already unlocked because of the flood alarm. At the third, the light stayed red.

Pepe tried again. Nothing.

Behind them, the keeper shouted. The alarm began with a pulsing sound, different from the storm.

Gennaro sniffed the edge of the door. 'Hinges.'

He turned sideways and pushed with his shoulder. The metal did not yield, but the frame vibrated. Pepe saw a fire-release lever inside a recess protected by plastic. He jumped onto the sill, broke the cover with his teeth and pulled down the lever with his whole weight.

The magnetic locks released.

'Now,' he said.

They crossed the infirmary. Ferretti had arrived from the main building with a torch. She saw them emerge from the south corridor, filthy with water and blood.

Pepe stopped.

She could have closed the red door leading to the yard. Her hand was already on the handle.

'Don't make me lie,' she said.

She opened it.

Outside, the rain erased the boundary between the yard and the sky. Gennaro went first. Pepe followed, then looked back at Ferretti.

The doctor remained beneath the infirmary light. She pressed the alarm button only when they reached the outer fence.

The main gate was closed. Gennaro ran to where water left the yard through a drain grate. The pressure had lifted the central bolt.

They pulled together. The grate opened far enough for Pepe, but not for Gennaro.

'Go.'

Pepe entered the channel, turned and caught the skin of Gennaro's muzzle. 'Not this time.'

The mastiff pushed one shoulder through, then his head. The iron tore his flank along the old scar. He forced himself onwards until his body passed.

The yard floodlights came on behind them.

The channel carried them beneath the fence and spat them out into the woods.

22. The Bridge of the Living

Rinaldi reached the Iron Kennels eleven minutes after the alarm. Ferretti showed him the wet pass, the buckled frame and the blood on the grate.

'You let them out?'

'I opened a door during an emergency.'

'With two animals in judicial custody on the other side.'

'With two living beings on the other side.'

Rinaldi did not answer. He ordered checks of the waterways and stations. Then he took his own car and drove down towards the Val Polcevera.

He knew where they would go. Dogs return to smells they have associated with safety; Pepe and Gennaro had only one such place.

He found the depot empty at Campasso. Beneath the fig tree, the earth retained the shape of two bodies that had slept close together. Fresh tracks led south.

He caught up with them near a footbridge over the stream. The floodwater hammered against the piers and drowned the sound of the traffic.

Pepe was already on the far side. Gennaro, wounded, was moving across the wet boards.

Rinaldi got out of the car. He carried his pistol, but did not draw it.

'Gennaro.'

The mastiff stopped. It was the first time Rinaldi had used his name.

Pepe came back three steps.

'Don't,' Gennaro said.

'I won't leave you.'

Rinaldi stepped onto the bridge. 'If you come with me, I can stop them shooting you.'

Pepe barked. His voice contained the kennel, the panel's report and the dart in Gennaro's thigh.

Rinaldi understood only the refusal.

Headlights appeared on the road behind him. The patrol cars were arriving. Gennaro moved again. A board gave way beneath his injured leg and his body slipped sideways.

Pepe seized his cheek. Rinaldi reached the edge and, for an instant, could have taken hold of the leather collar still around Gennaro's neck.

He reached out.

Gennaro looked at him. There was no plea in his eyes. Only the question Rinaldi had avoided since the first day: what would he do, now that he understood?

Rinaldi seized the board instead of the collar and steadied it with his weight.

Gennaro climbed back up. Pepe pulled him towards the other bank.

When the patrol cars arrived, Rinaldi was alone on the bridge.

'Where are they?' Mancuso shouted. 'Swept away by the current.' Rinaldi lied to buy them time.

PART FOUR
A HOME

23. The Girls from the Underpass

The Certosa underpass smelled of mould, iron and old urine. Pepe and Gennaro reached it at dawn, following the dry line along the wall. The mastiff was losing blood from his flank; every ten steps, he stopped and put less weight on the bandaged leg.

Pepe found a folded piece of cardboard behind a pillar and dragged it over. Gennaro lay down without protesting, a sign that the pain was worse than he showed.

'I'll look for food.'

'No.'

'You can't walk.'

'You're recognisable from three neighbourhoods away.'

Pepe looked at his body. Without coat or collar, he was only a dirty Chihuahua, but he knew Gennaro was right. His face was on the news and in the photographs shared by the training ground.

They stayed hidden until evening. Trains passed above their heads and shook dust from the ceiling. A woman left a tray of cat food beside the wall; Pepe shared it with Gennaro, who ate two mouthfuls and stopped.

On the second evening, two young women arrived.

One had untidily tied red hair, wet trainers and a canvas bag full of books. The other wore a black jacket and held a medical torch. They stopped at a distance.

'It's them,' said the one in the jacket.

'Nina...'

'Look at the mastiff's flank.'

Gennaro raised his head. Pepe placed himself in front of him, absurd and determined, baring his teeth.

The redhead crouched. 'We won't touch you.' She placed an open bag on the ground. Boiled chicken, unseasoned. 'But you can have this.'

Pepe sniffed. Her hands smelled of paper, graphite and soap. Nina's smelled of latex, disinfectant and many different animals.

'She works in a clinic,' he told Gennaro.

'I can smell it.'

Nina shone the torch on the floor, not into his eyes. 'The wound is open. If he stays here, he'll become septic.'

'If we call someone, they'll take them,' Mara said.

'I didn't say anything about calling.'

She took off her jacket, spread it on the ground and placed gauze, a bottle of saline and a bandage on it. Then she sat cross-legged and waited.

Gennaro looked at Pepe. 'If they betray us, you run.'

'We've already discussed this part.'

Pepe picked up a piece of chicken and took it to him. Gennaro rose with difficulty, covered the distance to Nina and lay on the jacket.

She cleaned the wound without using the childish voice many humans reserved for animals. When Gennaro went rigid, she stopped. When his breathing became regular again, she continued.

Mara fed Pepe one fragment of chicken at a time.

'The papers say you killed them,' she whispered.

Pepe stopped chewing.

Mara did not withdraw her hand. 'The papers say a lot of things.'

When the dressing was finished, Nina returned everything to the bag. 'He can't stay here.'

'Our place?'

'One night.'

Mara looked at her. 'Of course.'

'I said one.'

Gennaro tried to stand. Nina passed a blanket beneath his abdomen to support him. Mara picked Pepe up, but he wriggled free and jumped down. He walked beside Gennaro all the way to the car.

There were no cages waiting in the boot. The rear seats were folded down and covered with an old duvet.

They climbed in together.

24. The Night Nothing Happened

The home was on the ground floor of a low building behind a green gate. An olive tree too large for the space grew in the yard, its roots lifting two tiles beside the wall.

Nina opened the service door to avoid the front steps. Gennaro entered first, sniffing the floor, the door frames and the air. Pepe followed half a metre behind.

The home had the untidiness of people who truly lived there: shoes beside the door, books open face down, two mismatched mugs on the table. A worn wool blanket lay on the beige sofa. No leads hung on the wall.

'First we wash him,' Nina said. 'Then antibiotics.'

Gennaro looked at her, then at the bath visible at the end of the corridor. He planted his paws.

Pepe entered the bathroom and jumped onto the mat. He had spent years among lavender shampoos, professional hairdryers and glossing oils. This was familiar territory.

Mara filled a basin with warm water and carried it into the sitting room. Nina washed Gennaro there, without forcing him into the bath. Mud ran onto the sheet in black streaks. When she reached the scar on his flank, the mastiff's muscles tightened.

'I'll stop,' Nina said.

She waited for him to move towards her hand.

Pepe, already dry, sat on the sofa. No one had told him to get down. Mara picked up the blanket and spread it over him.

For years he had slept in beds worth more than that home, but no one had ever covered him without first arranging him for a photograph. He lowered his head onto his paws and watched Nina work.

Gennaro did not climb onto the sofa. He lay on the floor with his back against its base, muzzle towards the front door. The position of someone who slept only if he could watch the exit.

Mara sat on the floor beside him and opened a book. She read softly, not to entertain him but to fill the room with a sound that demanded nothing.

Nina prepared two bowls of rice, chicken and water. Gennaro waited for Pepe to begin. Then they ate side by side.

'Tomorrow we have to decide,' Nina said from the kitchen.

Mara continued reading. 'Yes.'

'We can't keep them hidden.'

'I know.'

'The police are looking for them.'

Mara turned the page. 'I know that too.'

Her tone was not a challenge. It was the way they spoke when both had already chosen and were afraid only of saying it first.

Later, they turned off the lights and left the bedroom door open. Pepe circled the sitting room three times. He checked the corridor, the bathroom, the window and the door to the yard. Gennaro did not move from his place.

A scooter went past. The refrigerator started. Someone upstairs dragged a chair. Every sound raised one ear, but

no footsteps came into the yard, no keys entered the lock, and no one gave an order.

Pepe climbed down from the sofa and lay beside Gennaro. He left a distance the width of one paw between them.

In the middle of the night, that distance was gone.

Nothing else happened. No one entered. No one separated them. No hand woke them.

In the morning, Mara found them still asleep and made coffee without turning on the radio.

The first problem was the parquet floor.

Gennaro returned from the yard with damp soil between his pads and left a line of prints all the way to the kitchen. As he tried to turn, his bandaged leg slipped; a claw scored a floorboard with a sharp sound.

Nina turned from the sink.

Gennaro flattened himself. The movement was immediate: head low, tail pressed to his belly, eyes fixed on her hand. From the sofa, Pepe recognised the posture. In dressing rooms, he had assumed it whenever he soiled a garment or knocked over a product.

Nina looked at the scratch. She picked up a cloth, wiped away the prints and measured the distance between the door and the bowl with her eyes.

'We need a runner,' she told Mara.

Gennaro did not move.

Mara arrived with a towel. 'May I?'

She waited. Gennaro lifted one paw, then the other, allowing her to remove the mud. When she finished, he

went to inspect the floor and sniffed the groove left by his claw for a long time.

'Stay,' Pepe said.

Gennaro lay over the scratch.

That evening, Nina returned with a runner she had found in the clinic's cellar. It was green, faded in the middle and half a metre too short. She laid it along the route of the pawprints. Gennaro tested it once in each direction, then curled up over the part it did not cover.

Pepe, meanwhile, discovered the square of sunlight that formed beside the French window at eleven. On the first day, he arrived after it had vanished. On the second, he waited early. Mara noticed that the sofa cushion was empty every morning and put it on the floor, but not quite in the light. Pepe caught one corner and dragged it into the right place.

'Demanding,' she said.

Pepe turned three times on the cushion and presented her with his back.

Nina's shifts regulated their days. She left before dawn and returned smelling of frightened cats, feverish dogs and disinfectant. Before putting the key in the lock, she knocked twice so that Gennaro would not rush into the corridor. Mara worked at the sitting-room table, correcting proofs for a small publishing house. She read sentences aloud and argued with absent authors. Pepe learnt that a dropped pencil did not announce anger; Gennaro, that the printer could start moving without attacking anyone.

On the third day, Nina had to change the dressing. Gennaro let her remove the bandage, but when he saw the

scissors he backed up to the door. His flank struck the wall and the bowl holding the keys rocked.

'Stop,' Pepe said.

'I can't.'

Pepe jumped down from the cushion and placed himself between Gennaro's front legs. He pressed his back against the mastiff's chest.

'Look at me.'

Nina sat on the floor. She cut the bandage away from the wound and waited whenever the mastiff stiffened his neck. Pepe stayed where he was. When the final piece of gauze came away, Gennaro had left a patch of saliva on the fur between his ears.

'Don't say it,' he murmured.

'That you drooled?'

'That I was afraid.'

Pepe turned and licked his chin. 'I already knew.'

The wound was clean. Nina dressed it and let Gennaro approach for the morsel containing the antibiotic. From the kitchen, Mara filled the water bowl a second time.

That night, Gennaro did not sleep in front of the door. He chose the side of the sofa closest to Pepe's cushion.

25. The Names on the Bowls

Nina returned from the afternoon shift with two plastic bowls, one blue and one orange. She placed them on the table, picked up a black marker and wrote the names the news had been repeating for a week.

PEPE.

GENNARO.

Mara watched her. 'I thought you wanted to keep them for one night.'

'It passed.'

'Four have passed.'

Nina replaced the cap on the marker. 'Exactly.'

Pepe stared at the blue bowl. He had heard his name shouted in the rings, announced syllable by syllable by presenters and turned into a brand. Written badly on a bowl that cost a few euros, it seemed new.

Gennaro sniffed the rim of the orange one, where the ink was still wet, then licked it.

For their first walk, Nina used two soft harnesses and ten-metre long lines. No collars, no jerking. They went out at dawn, when the streets were nearly empty.

Pepe walked along the pavement, avoiding puddles out of habit. After the first block, he deliberately crossed one. The water reached his belly and Mara laughed.

Gennaro stopped at every smell. He read the city in the traces left on walls, bins and the bases of lampposts. The long line remained slack between him and Nina.

In the park, they found a tree born from two trunks. One was wide and dark; the other, thinner, bent towards

the first until they merged. The roots emerged from the earth at the same point.

Pepe sniffed the join. Gennaro dug a shallow hollow between the roots and lay in it. Pepe settled beside him.

Mara raised her phone, framed them and lowered her hand without taking the photograph.

'Why?' Nina asked.

'Vanessa photographed everything.'

Nina looked at the dogs. 'Then we'll leave this one to them.'

On the way back, they met a patrol car. Pepe recognised the smell of uniforms before he saw it. He slipped between Gennaro's legs; the mastiff stopped, covering him with his body.

Nina did not pull the line. She kept walking and talked to Mara about what they would cook, in a voice so ordinary that the officer at the wheel looked over for only a moment.

As soon as they turned the corner, Pepe left his shelter. 'I don't want to live like this,' he said.

'Neither do I,' Gennaro replied.

'What, then?'

Gennaro watched Nina calmly gathering the line that was too long. 'For now, we go home.'

The word home was harder than escape. It assumed a place that might wait for them.

At home, they ate from the new bowls. The marker survived the water and the names remained.

Later, Mara went out to buy bread. She returned twenty minutes later without any and locked the door with both bolts.

'There was a man outside the newsagent's,' she said. 'The same jacket as yesterday in the park.'

Nina slowly removed her kitchen gloves. 'Police?'
'Perhaps.'

'We can't keep taking them outside.'

'We can't shut them in here either.'

'Mara, if they report us for aiding them, I lose my job. You lose the home. They go back to the kennels anyway.'

Nina's voice was low, but Gennaro stood. Pepe blocked his way to the kitchen.

'They're arguing because of us,' the mastiff said.

'They're deciding.'

'It's the same thing.'

Mara put the keys on the table too hard. 'Do you want to call Rinaldi?'

'I want a way out that doesn't end badly for everyone.'

'We don't have one.'

They stood on opposite sides of the table. Mara's eyes glistened; Nina kept folding the gloves, one finger at a time, until they formed a tiny square.

Pepe went to the blue bowl and pushed it beneath the cabinet. Then he gripped the harness between his teeth and dragged it towards the door.

'What are you doing?' Gennaro asked.

'If we leave, they'll stop.'

The mastiff looked at the two women. 'And where do you want to go?'

Pepe had no answer. The depot was now under surveillance; the training ground belonged to the past; the city had eyes at traffic lights and stations. He pulled the harness again, but the buckle caught beneath the leg of the cabinet.

Mara saw him. She knelt and freed the strap. For an instant, Pepe thought she would put it on him. Instead, she returned it to the drawer.

'We won't decide tonight,' Nina said.

Mara nodded. 'But we'll decide together.'

They did not embrace. Nina went into the yard to call the clinic; Mara retrieved the bowl and washed it, though it was already clean. Gennaro returned to the green runner.

Pepe joined him. 'At the training ground you said I was what was outside.'

'You are.'

'That isn't an answer.'

Gennaro rested his muzzle between his paws. 'I spent four years wanting an open door. Now there is one and I don't know if I want to use it.'

Pepe settled against the unstitched side of his flank. 'We don't have to know until tomorrow.'

Nina's voice came from the yard, asking for two days' leave. Mara switched off the kitchen light and left only the lamp beside the sofa burning.

For that night, it was enough.

26. The Storm

The storm arrived in the afternoon. First, the smell of the air changed; then the sky lowered over the roofs and the first thunderclap made the windows vibrate.

Pepe disappeared beneath the bed.

He did not decide. His body remembered doors slamming backstage, fireworks outside hotels, luggage thrown onto the floor when Vanessa was furious. In the narrow darkness, he curled against the wall and held his breath.

Mara rose from the sofa. 'I'll go to him.'

Nina caught her wrist. 'Don't pull him out. That's the place he chose.'

'I can stay near him.'

Nina released her. 'Yes.'

Mara sat on the bedroom floor, a metre from the bed. She did not reach beneath it or call. She stayed there.

Gennaro stood at the window. He watched lightning open the sky for a second, then crossed the corridor. He lowered himself beside the bed, put only his muzzle into the dark and licked Pepe's forehead. Then he lay on the floor, his flank against the edge of the mattress.

Pepe felt his warmth through the wood.

The storm lasted almost an hour. When the thunder moved away, Pepe came out slowly. First his muzzle, then his paws, then the rest of his body. Gennaro did not move until Pepe lay against him.

Mara went back to the kitchen. Nina was making tea. 'You were right,' Mara said.

'About what?'

'Not to pick him up.'

Nina handed her a mug. 'You were right to stay.'

Mara kissed her temple. The gesture was quick, habitual, and Pepe saw it from the doorway.

That night, he could not sleep. He went to the sitting-room window. The rain had washed the street clean; beneath the lamppost stood a dark car he had never seen. The engine was off, but the bonnet was still giving off heat.

Gennaro joined him.

'Have they found us?'

'Perhaps.'

Pepe looked at the room reflected in the glass. Behind them were the worn sofa, the bowls, the blanket hung up to dry. 'I'm afraid of losing it.'

Gennaro did not ask whether he meant the home or the life inside it. 'So am I.'

'You never look afraid.'

'In the kennel, if they saw it, they hit me.'

Pepe knew a similar rule: in front of the camera, smile. 'You can show it here,' he said.

Gennaro moved one paw until it touched his.

Pepe thought of Vanessa hanging over the void. The scene returned in quiet moments, never during the escape. 'Sometimes I still hear her voice.'

'I hear him too.'

'Are you sorry?'

'I'm sorry I became capable of it.'

Pepe rested his muzzle on the floor. It was the answer he had sought beneath the fig tree and had not known how to form.

They remained at the window until the dark car drove away without switching on its lights.

27. The Open Gate

Rinaldi had found them two days earlier.

A traffic camera had recorded Mara and Nina loading Gennaro near the underpass. The number plate led him to the address. He had not requested a warrant at once. He watched the home from his car and recorded times, visitors and routes.

Mancuso sat beside him with a cup of coffee that had long gone cold. 'If they're in there, why are we waiting?' 'I want to understand whether the girls are holding them or the dogs are holding the girls.' 'What difference does that make?'

Rinaldi did not answer.

On the morning of the sixth day, Mara opened the green gate to take out the rubbish. The telephone rang inside. She left the gate open and went back in.

Pepe and Gennaro were in the yard, without their harnesses.

Mancuso put down the coffee. 'There they are.'

Beyond the gate was the open road. No fence, no lead, no one between them and the corner around which they could disappear.

Pepe walked to the threshold. He looked right, towards the centre; left, towards the underpass and the railway. Gennaro stopped beside him.

'We could go,' Pepe said.

'Yes.'

'Before they come in.'

'Yes.'

Pepe heard Mara talking on the telephone in the kitchen, Nina opening a drawer, the sound of the orange bowl being moved across the floor. He took one step back.

Gennaro followed him.

They went back inside. The gate remained open.

Mancuso turned towards Rinaldi. 'Do we understand now?'

Rinaldi closed his notebook. 'Now we know they aren't prisoners.'

'That isn't what we need to arrest the girls.'

'No.'

'Then I'll request the warrant.'

Rinaldi started the engine. 'I'll request it.'

He drove away before Mara came back to close the gate.

PART FIVE
THE THIRD FILE

28. The Check

Rinaldi knocked at nine in the morning.

Three even knocks, with the timing of someone who did not fear the door would remain closed.

Pepe was in the kitchen. At the first knock, he slipped beneath the table; at the second, he reached the corridor. Gennaro was already in front of the entrance, his body across it.

'It's him,' Pepe said.

Mara looked through the spyhole. 'Police.'

Nina closed the door to the yard and picked up the telephone. 'Don't open it.'

'If he had a warrant, he wouldn't be alone.'

Mara opened the door with the chain still fastened.

Rinaldi showed his identification. He wore the same dark jacket as on the days of surveillance and carried no leads, nets or colleagues.

'I know they're here.'

'Who?' Mara asked.

Pepe barked before she finished.

Rinaldi looked towards the corridor. 'The little one, for a start.'

The chain came off. Gennaro did not retreat when the inspector entered. Pepe settled between his legs, muzzle towards the man.

Rinaldi stopped at a distance. He saw the harnesses, the gauze and the packet of antibiotics on the cabinet. In the kitchen, the two bowls bore the dogs' real names.

'You removed two animals from judicial custody.'

'We found them injured,' Nina said.

'And you called no one.'

'We knew what would happen.'

'A man's throat was torn open. A woman was left to fall from a lookout.'

Mara went pale. Nina did not look away. 'Can you prove that?'

Rinaldi looked at Pepe. 'To them, yes.'

He sat on the chair nearest the door. Gennaro followed every movement.

'Alfredo Esposito beat him, sedated him and used him for breeding. Vanessa Crespi lived off the dog and was about to hand him over to a programme he feared. That explains. It does not acquit.'

Pepe stepped out from beneath Gennaro. He approached Rinaldi until he could smell the bridge on his shoes, faint now but still present.

'He could have taken him on the bridge,' Pepe said.

'I know,' Gennaro replied.

Rinaldi extended a hand towards the mastiff. Gennaro barely bared his teeth. He withdrew it.

'The panel meets tomorrow. If we take them back, the mastiff is put down. The little one will be isolated and then given to one of Vanessa's heirs. If they stay here, sooner or later another camera will find them.'

'Why are you telling us this?' Mara asked.

Rinaldi studied the gate visible through the window. 'Because yesterday it was open and they came back inside.'

Nina understood before Mara. 'How long?'

'Twenty-four hours. After that, I'll have to come with a warrant.'

'What if the public prosecutor's office sends someone else?'

'Then you'll have less.'

He stood. Before leaving, he stopped in front of the bowls. Gennaro's name had smudged in one place, but was still legible.

'They'll have to change them,' he said.

Pepe growled.

Rinaldi looked at him. 'On the documents, not here.'

29. Rinaldi's Choice

Ferretti was waiting for him in the Iron Kennels car park. Her shift had ended, but she still wore her white coat beneath her overcoat.

Rinaldi handed her an envelope containing two microchip numbers and Mara and Nina's address.

'You're asking me to commit at least three offences.'

'Four, if you register the new chips.'

'And you?'

'Falsifying an official record, dereliction of duty, aiding and abetting. I haven't counted properly yet.'

Ferretti opened the envelope. 'Why?'

Rinaldi lit a cigarette, held it between his fingers and did not bring it to his mouth. 'I've spent my life looking for the moment when a person could have chosen differently. That's where responsibility begins.'

'And they chose.'

'Yes.'

'They killed.'

'Yes.' Rinaldi looked at the building. 'Then, in front of an open gate, they chose to go back inside.'

Ferretti closed the envelope. 'It doesn't erase the dead.'

'No. But the law I can apply does not judge them. It destroys them. Until yesterday, that difference seemed theoretical.'

'And today?'

Rinaldi stubbed out the untouched cigarette in the ashtray. 'Today I have to write it in a report.'

Ferretti had a blue van used to transport rescued dogs. She knew a small association in Val Trebbia and a vet willing to work at night. They had two sterile, unassigned microchips. The old devices could be surgically removed and the new ones implanted under the same anaesthetic; afterwards, they would register two found dogs and two adoptions in the regional canine registry.

'Chips can migrate beneath the skin,' she said. 'They have to be located precisely. Anaesthetic, incision, stitches. It isn't the same as changing an identity tag.'

'I know.'

'And the girls?'

'They go with them.'

Ferretti studied him. 'You arranged everything before asking whether I would agree.'

'I learnt from a Chihuahua.'

When Rinaldi returned to the office, Mancuso had the completed warrant application on his screen.

'Your signature is missing.'

Rinaldi sat down. 'Tomorrow morning.'

'Why not now?'

'Because I want to read the file again.'

Mancuso stared at him, then saved the document without sending it. 'Twenty-four hours?'

Rinaldi raised his eyes.

The deputy picked up his coat. 'I asked whether they'll be enough.'

It was the only way they spoke of the choice.

At twenty to seven, the deputy public prosecutor called.

'The number plate recorded at Certosa belongs to the partner of one of the clinic employees. Do we have an address?'

Rinaldi had the street number, the building plan and twelve photographs of the green gate in front of him.

'Not confirmed.'

'A patrol can check.'

'If they arrive in uniform and the animals are there, the mastiff will react. I want the veterinary unit.'

'Tomorrow morning, then.'

Rinaldi ended the call. The search system still contained the note authorising any patrol to restrain the dogs while waiting for the specialist unit. He opened it, replaced immediate danger with possible unverified sighting and removed Mara's address. Every alteration preserved the operator's name and the time.

Mancuso, still standing in the doorway, read the screen. 'That won't get lost in the archive.'

'No.'

'If they catch them after they've injured someone, that is your signature.'

'Yes.'

The deputy entered and closed the door. 'And if they don't injure anyone?'

Rinaldi saved the change. 'The signature is still mine.'

At nine that evening, an email arrived from the lawyer representing Vanessa's mother. It demanded Pepe's return as an asset of the estate and included an estimate of his breeding value. Half an hour later, Alfredo's brother

telephoned to ask whether Gennaro would be put down and whether the family could attend.

Rinaldi answered neither. He printed Pepe's valuation, placed it beside the photographs of Gennaro's scars and remained seated until the offices emptied.

At eleven seventeen, he called Ferretti.

'The road is clear until seven.'

'And after that?'

'After that, they start reading my changes.'

30. The Numbers Beneath the Skin

The clinic opened for them at two in the morning. No illuminated sign, shutters lowered, the blue van parked at the back.

Pepe recognised the steel table and looked for the door. Gennaro blocked his path with his muzzle.

'If we leave now, they'll find us.'

'I know.'

'Are you afraid?'

'Yes.'

Gennaro lay on the floor. 'So am I.'

Ferretti passed the scanner over Pepe's left shoulder. The device emitted a signal and displayed the number registered to Vanessa. She marked the spot with a pen. Gennaro's chip had migrated almost seven centimetres down his shoulder; she located it with ultrasound.

She scanned the entire body again, from neck to tail, to rule out a second device. Then she read both sequences aloud while Nina checked them against the regional registry. Pepe was registered to Vanessa Crespi. Gennaro to Alfredo Esposito. Even in death, the owners remained inside their bodies.

Ferretti prepared two vials of sedative, but did not open them.

'I can't explain consent to them,' she said. 'I can at least avoid surprising them.'

She left the examination-room door open and spread the blanket from the kennels on the floor. Gennaro sniffed the table, the covered instruments and the exit. He could

have reached the back yard. Instead, he circled the room and returned to Pepe.

'They won't find us afterwards?' Pepe asked.

'Not with those numbers,' Gennaro answered.

'And will we still be us?'

Gennaro gently pushed him towards the blanket. 'That was never their number.'

Pepe climbed onto it. Nina kept one hand in front of his muzzle until the injection began to take effect.

Nina remained during the preparation. Mara waited in the corridor, the bowls in a bag and Pepe's torn coat folded at the bottom.

They put Gennaro under first. Pepe watched him slowly give way, his head between his paws. When his own turn came, he bit the edge of the blanket until he tasted the fabric.

He woke in a warm room. His shoulder burned. Gennaro lay on the mattress beside him, still motionless but breathing deeply.

Two small cylinders of biocompatible glass, stained with blood, lay on a metal tray.

Eight years in one. Four in the other.

Ferretti placed them in separate containers, wrote the numbers on them and sealed them in a shielded envelope. She handed it to Rinaldi, who had arrived without his service car.

'Destroy them,' she said.

Rinaldi looked at the chips. 'No. I'm keeping them in the file.'

'They're evidence.'

'Exactly.'

Before closing the incisions, Ferretti implanted the new chips on the opposite side and checked the numbers with a second scanner. In the regional registry, Pepe became Leo, an eight-year-old mongrel found without an owner. Gennaro became Bruno, a four-year-old mastiff cross. Mara and Nina signed two formally valid adoption papers, accepting responsibility for their care and address.

They remained under observation until dawn. Ferretti checked their temperature, wounds and response to the anaesthetic. Only when both had drunk, accepted a little food and walked without staggering did she authorise the journey; Nina would continue to watch them on the way.

When Pepe managed to stand, he went to the blue bowl. His name was still written on the rim.

'Leo,' Gennaro said.

Pepe glared at him.

'It suits you terribly.'

'Bruno is worse.'

For the first time since the bridge, they laughed.

31. The Blue Van

They left before dawn.

Mara and Nina brought two bags, the blankets, the bowls and a box of books Mara refused to leave. Ferretti drove. Low mattresses covered the back of the van; there were no cages.

Pepe climbed in and immediately jumped out again. He crossed the yard, went inside and made one last circuit: the beige sofa, the window, the place beneath the bed, the pale mark the bowl had left on the parquet.

Gennaro waited on the threshold.

'I don't want to go,' Pepe said.

'Neither do I.'

'Then let's stay.'

Gennaro looked at the street, still dark. 'Staying doesn't mean waiting for them to take us.'

Pepe knew he was right and hated him for several seconds.

Mara knelt beside him. She did not try to pick him up. 'The home isn't this,' she said softly. 'These are only walls.'

Behind her, Nina closed the door and put the key beneath the olive-tree pot. 'And we can come back.'

Pepe climbed into the van.

The green gate remained open as the engine started. Gennaro watched the olive tree until the bend hid it.

On the front seat, Ferretti kept a folder containing the new documents. She followed minor roads eastwards, avoiding motorways and tollbooth cameras.

Inside the van, Mara rested her head on Nina's shoulder. Pepe settled against Gennaro's flank. The chip incisions hurt at every pothole, but the pain had a precise boundary and a reason they had chosen.

'Where are we going?' Pepe asked.

'Somewhere with grass,' Gennaro said.

'Is that all you know?'

'She also said there's a gate.'

Pepe raised his muzzle. 'Closed?'

'I didn't ask.'

32. Tracks in the Sand

Ferretti turned towards the sea when the sun was already high. At Bogliasco, she left the coast road and parked beneath the railway. She said the dogs needed to walk and that there had been an accident farther ahead, near Bargagli. No one asked which reason was the true one.

The beach was a strip of grey sand between the railway and the water. In winter there were no parasols or people, only driftwood brought in by the storm.

Pepe jumped down from the van and stopped. Salt covered every other smell. It was the same sea he had watched for years through car windows, from hotel balconies and from the lookout where Vanessa had died. He had never touched it while free.

Gennaro walked to the water. The first wave wet his paws; the second reached the bandage and Nina called him back.

Pepe followed his prints. His own were small and shallow, Gennaro's broad and deep. For a stretch they ran parallel.

'Do you remember the first day?' he asked.

'The rain.'

'You looked at me as if you knew everything.'

'I knew you were trembling.'

Pepe entered the water up to his chest and came straight out, shaking himself. Mara laughed; Nina photographed her with the dogs, then put the phone in her pocket without sending the image to anyone.

Gennaro lay on the dry sand. Pepe curled beside his shoulder, careful of the stitches.

'If we hadn't killed, would we be here?'

Gennaro looked at the sea. 'I don't know.'

'Does that make what we did right?'

'No.'

The answer came without hesitation. Pepe rested his muzzle on his paws.

'Then what are we?'

'Alive.'

It was not an acquittal. For that day, it was enough.

33. The Roadblock

The report on the van arrived at fourteen twelve. A camera had recorded it at Bargagli, heading towards state road 45; the number plate was registered to the Begato animal-health centre.

Mancuso entered Rinaldi's office with the telephone in his hand. 'A patrol is stopping them on the state road.'

Rinaldi looked at the clock. The warrant was still a draft in the system. 'On what grounds?'

'Vehicle linked to the escape.'

'The vehicle belongs to Doctor Ferretti. It wasn't stolen.'

'Boss.'

'Tell the patrol to check the documents and the animals' condition. Nothing else.'

Mancuso made the call in front of him.

The roadblock was just before Torriglia, beyond a bend in the state road: two service cars and four officers. Ferretti pulled over. Mara squeezed Nina's hand. In the back, Pepe smelled the uniforms and slipped beneath Gennaro's neck.

An officer opened the rear door. 'Transporting animals?'

'Two adoptions. The documents are in the glove compartment.'

He passed the scanner over Pepe first, then Gennaro. The new numbers appeared on the display and matched Leo and Bruno. He examined the incisions beneath the dressings.

'Recently implanted.'

'Recovered without readable chips,' Ferretti said. 'The association's procedure.'

The officer looked at Gennaro. The mastiff held his gaze without growling. Pepe remained hidden.

The radio on the man's shoulder crackled. A voice said: documents in order, no detention authorised.

The rear door closed.

The van moved off. Only after two bends did Pepe emerge from beneath Gennaro.

In the Genoa office, Mancuso put down the telephone. 'They got through.'

Rinaldi nodded.

'What do we write now?'

'The truth we can prove.'

'Which is?'

Rinaldi opened the third file. 'That two animals entered a channel during a flood and were not recovered.'

Mancuso remained standing. 'And the dogs in the van?'
'Leo and Bruno. Their chips were in order.'

The deputy looked out of the window. 'Of course.'

34. The Third File

The meeting with the public prosecutor's office lasted twenty-seven minutes.

Rinaldi showed the recordings, the storm reports and the images of the flooded stream. He did not show the original chips, sealed in an envelope in his desk drawer. He did not mention the home with the green gate or the bridge.

'Probability of survival?' the deputy public prosecutor asked.

Ferretti had written the agreed phrase: extremely low without recovery within the first seventy-two hours.

'Low,' Rinaldi said.

'The bodies?'

'The stream reaches the port. That night, the current exceeded the safety limits for a search.'

The prosecutor closed the folder. Two dead humans, two animals presumed dead, no possible defendant. The case offered no trial, press conference or career.

'We'll close it when the deadlines expire.'

Rinaldi returned to the office and opened the drawer. The chips were two almost identical cylinders. He placed them in the third file with the photograph taken at the Monteverde training ground: Pepe in front of the fence, Gennaro on the other side.

On the final page, he wrote:

PEPE, CHIHUAHUA, PRESUMED DEAD.

GENNARO, NEAPOLITAN MASTIFF, PRESUMED DEAD.

Beneath it, he added: no further danger to the public.

Mancuso read over his shoulder. 'Are we sure of that?'

Rinaldi closed the file. 'No.'

'Then what?'

'Every report contains the point where we stop knowing and decide what to do with the doubt.'

He took the file to the archive. He placed it on the lowest shelf, behind a box of records already marked for destruction.

Three days later, he received a summons from internal affairs. The system had recorded the delay in requesting the warrant, the change to the operational note and the call in which he had limited the roadblock. Mancuso proposed a joint report: excessive workload, coordination errors, divided responsibility.

Instead, Rinaldi wrote six lines. The operational assessment had been his. The orders had been his. Mancuso had carried them out.

'They'll take you off investigations,' the deputy said.

'Probably.'

'And was it worth it?'

Rinaldi thought of the green gate, of the two bodies that could have crossed it and had not. 'Ask me when we know what they do with the time.'

He accepted the formal reprimand and temporary transfer to the complaints office. He said nothing about Ferretti, Mara or Nina. The original chips remained in the file: not as trophies, but as the part of the story he had decided not to surrender to an automatic sentence.

For the first time in years, he left without checking whether he had his cigarettes.

35. The Open Gate

The home in Val Trebbia had a low roof, an empty barn and a meadow sloping down to the woods. The association used it for dogs that could not return to kennels and were not yet ready for a family.

Mara and Nina took the ground-floor room. Ferretti stayed for two days, checked the stitches and left in the blue van.

The gate had no lock, only a latch the wind could lift.

On the first morning, they found it open.

Pepe reached the white road. Gennaro joined him, still stiff from his wounds. Ahead, the road descended towards the village; behind them came the smell of coffee from the kitchen and the sound of the marker with which Mara was rewriting the names on the bowls.

PEPE.

GENNARO.

'On the documents, we're dead,' Pepe said.

'And our names are Leo and Bruno.'

'Don't say that.'

Gennaro rested his head on Pepe's neck. Beyond the woods, a bell rang. No siren answered.

'We can go,' Pepe said.

'Yes.'

'We can stay.'

'Yes.'

Pepe looked at the road, then at the home. For a long time they had mistaken freedom for the distance between

themselves and a cage. Now that distance was open in both directions.

'I love you,' he said.

Gennaro kept his head on Pepe's neck for several more seconds. 'I know.'

Pepe gently bit a fold of his cheek. 'It was your turn to say it.'

'I love you.'

They went back towards the kitchen. Mara placed the bowls on the floor; Nina checked the dressings without having to restrain them.

The gate remained open all day.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Caged Love is a dark fable. The dogs speak to each other; human beings hear only barks, silences and movements. Everything else belongs to the world we know: one in which an animal can be loved and possessed by the same hand.

I have worked with dogs for more than forty years. In this novel, I did not try to make them human, but to return to them a narrative will: the ability to desire, fear, choose and bear the weight of their choices.

About the Author

Paolo Picariello was born in Genoa in 1959 and has lived in Portugal since 1998. A writer, poet and canine professional, he breeds under the FCI kennel name Dos Maus Feitios and is an international IGP and Mondioring judge. He has published poetry and fiction and was a finalist for the Città di Como International Literature Prize.