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THE BONEBREAKER

The Hammer of Vengeance

Lower Piedmont, 1978. Three doctors dead. One instrument.

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A noir novel

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1

The Silence Beneath the Operating Table

The blood, in the sterile half-light of the operating theatre, had a metallic smell. The smell of the end.

The body of Dr Arturo Teixeira lay on its back, the gown open like an emptied straitjacket, the eyes fixed on the neon flickering above table number twelve. He still had his surgical mask on, but the face was ruined. The brow ridge split, the skull caved in by something heavy. Beside the table, half hidden under a white sheet, was an orthopaedic hammer. Stained. The stains never lied.

Inspector Ugo De Salvo went in first. Tall, broad-shouldered, the face of a repentant boxer and an overcoat that seemed to carry the weight of the whole station on its own. He was fifty-two and wore every year of it, except in the early morning, when the dark was still thick enough to hide the lines.

Behind him, Officer Andrea Marino took notes without looking up. Thirty-one, precise to the point of stubbornness, too well dressed for the trade. De Salvo respected him: faced with a scene like this, Marino could still observe before he judged.

'Teixeira. Portuguese. Specialist in reconstructive orthopaedics. He'd worked here five years,' Marino said, leafing through the medical file. 'No sign of forced entry. No alarm. The door was locked from the inside.'

'So the killer knew how to get in. And how not to be noticed,' De Salvo muttered.

He bent over the hammer without touching it. On the handle, among the stains, a milky trace remained: surgical-glove talc, perhaps. De Salvo pointed it out to the forensics photographer, then straightened up.

The scene was surgical. Nothing was out of place, except the death.

'Who found him?' the inspector asked.

'A nurse on the night shift. She was expecting him for the six o'clock operation. She says he was always punctual. Precise.'

De Salvo nodded. Then he turned towards the flickering neon. 'Have that switched off. It gets on my nerves.'

They went out into the corridor. A smell of disinfectant and burnt coffee. Outside, the Novi fog wrapped the dawn like gauze. De Salvo lit a cigarette without a word. The first of the day, always the most necessary.

'What do you think, chief?'

'I think whoever did this knew the theatre and knew where to strike. The rest comes later.'

Marino looked at him. 'You think they wanted to leave a message?'

The inspector blew the smoke out through his nose. He studied the empty corridor, the neon lights stuttering, the sign on the wall: ORTHOPAEDICS DEPARTMENT - NO UNAUTHORISED ACCESS.

'I don't know yet. First we find out who Teixeira was when nobody was watching.'

Marino opened his mouth to answer, but De Salvo was already moving towards the exit. The overcoat vanished into the shadow of the corridor like an animal returning to its den.

2

The Morning After

Novi Ligure at six in the morning smelt of baked bread and diesel. The bakeries opened while it was still dark: a yellow light seeped under the shutters, and the smell of flour mixed with the fog made something ambiguous, as if the world had not yet decided whether it was day or night.

De Salvo walked along the avenue that ran beside the hospital. He hadn't gone home. He had slept two hours in the only armchair in the men's changing room at the station, overcoat on, shoes still on his feet. Sissi would not forgive him, but Sissi understood.

The Teixeira case had him pinned to something he couldn't yet name. Brutality he had seen before. What troubled him was the order of the theatre: no struggle, nothing knocked over, a weapon taken from the ward and left beside the body. Whoever had killed had moved without haste.

He stopped in front of a closed news kiosk. In the window, the morning papers were on display behind the glass: the front page of the *Corriere di Alessandria* gave the discovery of Teixeira's body four lines at the bottom left. No photo, no headline. The case of a doctor dead in a hospital seemed, at six in the morning, less urgent than the council elections in Casale Monferrato.

'Nobody knows yet,' he said under his breath.

For the moment it was just a doctor murdered in an operating theatre. De Salvo distrusted cases that seemed to tell themselves.

De Salvo bought a coffee at the corner bar and drank it standing at the counter. The barman - a man in his fifties with grey hair and the hands of someone who has poured a hundred thousand coffees - said nothing. In certain Piedmont bars, silence is a service included in the price.

On his way back to the station, De Salvo passed the hospital's orthopaedics department. The red-and-white

tape was still there. A passing nurse looked at him, then lowered her eyes.

Perhaps she knew something. She had lowered her eyes too quickly.

He stopped. 'Excuse me.'

She turned. Forty, short hair, a folder pressed to her chest.

'Did you work with Teixeira?'

'Sometimes.'

'Is there something you wanted to tell me yesterday and didn't?'

A silence. Then: 'I don't want to lose my job.'

'That's not a promise I can make,' De Salvo said. 'But I can promise you that if you don't tell me, you'll tell someone else. And that someone else might not understand.'

She lowered her eyes again. Then, quietly: 'Three months ago, Teixeira found a discrepancy in the materials registers. Batches were missing. He filed an internal complaint. The medical director called him in and... after that meeting, Teixeira never mentioned it again.'

'Was he afraid?'

'He didn't seem it. He seemed... resolved. As if he'd decided something.'

'Thank you,' De Salvo said.

She walked away quickly, head down. De Salvo watched her disappear along the corridor. Then he took out his notebook and wrote: Medical director - Santa Caterina. And underneath: Teixeira knew. He had decided not to stop.

The sun was still low and pale, filtered through the fog as through a sheet of greaseproof paper. De Salvo slipped the notebook into his pocket and set off for the station. There was still a great deal to do before he could go home to Sissi.

3

Room 4

Room 4 stood at the end of the hospital's east corridor, between the plaster room and the radiology lab. A no-man's corner, where the yellowed walls and the smell of ammonia seemed to hold on to secrets. Inside, the bed was empty. The mattress, stained, still held the imprint of the body that had occupied it until three hours before. That was where Teixeira slept when he wasn't on shift.

The nurse who had found him, Carla Bassi, forty-three, hollow-eyed, a smoker's hands, had been staring at a point on the floor for ten minutes. She didn't speak, but she trembled slightly, as if someone had left her out in the cold too long.

'Did you realise straight away that something was wrong?' De Salvo asked.

She nodded, without looking up.

'Teixeira always arrived at five forty-five. Never late. Macchiato, two sugars, clean gown. This morning, nothing. I knocked. Nothing. I searched the ward, and I found him there... with...'

She stopped. Marino offered her a glass of water, which she refused with the smallest movement of her hand.

'Who did he have problems with?' Marino asked.

'Everyone,' she answered, without thinking. 'He was good, but sour. And he knew too much. He said strange things were going round - expired materials, phantom suppliers. But he didn't trust anyone.'

De Salvo turned towards the window. The rain was falling fine and stubborn, as if it were washing Piedmont away piece by piece.

'Who handles purchasing in this department?' he asked.

'Dr Antonelli. But he's on leave. They said he was in Rome for a conference.'

Marino raised an eyebrow. De Salvo noted the name: Sandro Antonelli. Another line began there.

Before leaving, the inspector cast a last glance around the room: an overflowing ashtray, a gown hanging crooked, and an X-ray forgotten on the desk. A reconstructed knee, with a screw too long. Almost like a warning.

In the corridor, Marino closed his notebook. 'There's something here that doesn't add up.'

'It all adds up for me,' De Salvo replied, lighting another cigarette. 'Teixeira had started digging. And somebody decided to cover him with earth. With a hammer.'

4

Predosa, Home, Night

He walked home, though his car was parked beneath the hospital. He needed road. He needed fog.

Predosa at night is a village that seems to withdraw into itself. The bar lights off, the front doors shut, the sound of your own footsteps ringing on the cobbles like a question without an answer. De Salvo had known that sound for years.

Sissi was waiting for him on the windowsill, as always. The Siamese cat had the habit of sitting exactly in the centre, upright and motionless, like an Egyptian statue passing judgement on her master's return. De Salvo opened the door, and she came down unhurried, without a miaow, and went straight to the empty bowl.

'You too,' De Salvo said.

He opened her a tin of sardines - the only thing left. Sissi sniffed it, ignored it with Olympian elegance, and returned to the armchair. De Salvo opened the bottle of Dolcetto d'Acqui he kept on the kitchen windowsill. It had been half full for three days. He put on a record: Howlin' Wolf, Smokestack Lightning. The turntable crackled through the first seconds, then the rasping voice filled the room like smoke.

He sat down at the table. In front of him, the Teixeira file. A few pages. A life reduced to paper.

Arturo Teixeira, fifty-six, arrived from Portugal in 1954, specialised in orthopaedics in Turin in 1960. Widower. No children. A rented flat in Novi. Nothing out of place.

De Salvo thought that lives reduced to a file always had this in common: they looked normal. His own, probably, looked normal too. Inspector. Divorced. No children. A flat too big for him in Predosa.

It hadn't always been like that.

Turin, four years earlier. A case that was not to be touched - a health-service contract with the wrong names, the wrong friendships, politicians telephoning in the middle of the night. De Salvo had touched it anyway.

His superior had called him into the corridor: 'Bang your head against the wall, De Salvo. You're banging the wrong wall.'

He had left Turin with a 'voluntary' transfer and a buried file. The case died. The suspects went free. The woman he lived with - Marta, a magistrate, three years together - stopped answering his calls two weeks later. Not out of fear. Out of disappointment.

'You didn't lose the case,' she had told him the last time. 'You lost yourself.'

De Salvo hadn't answered. Four years on, he still hadn't found the right reply.

* * *

Sissi jumped onto the table. She sat down on the Teixeira file, with the precision of one who knows exactly where she is not wanted.

'Good girl,' De Salvo said.

He moved her gently aside. Underneath, a note copied from Teixeira's notebook: Three implants - G series. Batches missing. No inventory register.

Someone had made those prostheses disappear. Someone with access to the archives, with the trust of colleagues, with clean hands and a still heart. Teixeira had known it. And now he was dead.

De Salvo stayed up until three. The record had ended hours before. Sissi slept on the armchair. The bottle was empty.

Before turning off the light, he wrote a single word on a sheet of paper: Orengo.

He didn't yet know why that name had returned just then.

Three Implants

The file was marked confidential, but there was no official seal. Just a rusty paperclip, badly bent. Marino had found it in Teixeira's locker, behind a pile of technical manuals and old reports. Inside were loose sheets, handwritten notes, photocopies of purchase documents. On one of the sheets was a note in blue pen:

"Three implants - G series"

and underneath, circled twice:

"batches missing 14-18 - no traceability."

De Salvo leafed through it slowly, sitting at the wooden table in his sitting room. Outside, Predosa stood still under a low sky. Sissi, his Siamese, slept curled on the armchair beside him. It had taken them months to understand each other, but now they were silent accomplices. She didn't speak, and he didn't need her to.

Next to the ashtray, a half-empty bottle of Dolcetto d'Acqui. The cork left at an angle, like an invitation not to stop. On the turntable, Howlin' Wolf's blues scraped the air.

Marino knocked, then came in.

'The G-series implants don't appear in the hospital's inventory registers. But they arrived: I found an estimate made out to a private clinic in Tortona. Same supplier.'

De Salvo didn't answer. He kept looking at a photocopy: a delivery note for three orthopaedic components delivered but never registered. Never used. Never returned.

'Teixeira knew. And he wrote everything down.'

'Right. But he didn't get the chance to talk.'

'Chief.' Marino hesitated. 'I found something else. A name at the bottom of one of the estimates. Written in pencil, almost rubbed out.'

'Tell me.'

'Orengo. Carlo Orengo.'

De Salvo sat motionless for three seconds. Then he raised his eyes from Sissi to the ceiling, as if calculating something.

'You know him?' Marino asked.

'A name I've heard before. A long time ago. In Turin.'

He added nothing. The telephone rang. A flat, clerical voice announced the news:

'We've found another body.'

Marino went white. 'Where?'

'San Lorenzo Clinic. Tortona.'

De Salvo stood up. He stubbed out his cigarette in the wine glass. 'Let's go. Death is starting to make noise.'

6

The Director

Dr Giancarlo Ferrero had been medical director of the Santa Caterina for eleven years. A precise man, desk always clear, papers in colour-coded folders by subject, fountain pen refilled every morning. He had the kind of order that comes not from habit but from fear: disorder made him feel exposed.

De Salvo found him behind that clear desk, hands joined over a blank sheet of paper and the expression of a man who has prepared his answers before hearing the questions.

'Inspector. Do sit down.'

'Thank you.' De Salvo sat without taking off his overcoat. It was a deliberate gesture: he did not intend to stay long, and he wanted Ferrero to know it.

'Dr Teixeira's death has been a blow to the whole institution,' the director began, in the calibrated voice of a man who has delivered the sentence three times already that morning.

'I'm sure it has,' De Salvo said. 'Three months ago, Teixeira submitted an internal complaint to you concerning irregularities in orthopaedic procurement.'

Ferrero didn't blink. He was good. 'I don't recall the specific episode.'

'You called him in after that complaint. The same day. The meeting lasted twenty-two minutes.'

'Possibly. I hold a great many meetings.'

'And after that meeting, Teixeira never raised the matter again.'

'As I told you, I don't recall-'

'Dr Ferrero.' De Salvo rested his hands on his knees. His tone was flat, almost friendly. 'I'm not accusing anyone. I'm gathering information about two murders. Teixeira was killed here; Antonelli was found dead this morning in

Tortona. Both handled orthopaedic materials. Both dealt with the same supplier.'

Ferrero stayed motionless. But something had shifted slightly behind the eyes.

'If you have something to tell me,' De Salvo went on, 'this is the moment. Because in a few days I'll be asking you the same questions with a magistrate beside me, and by then the answers will carry a different weight.'

Silence. The ticking of the wall clock seemed to fill the whole room.

Ferrero opened the drawer, closed it again without taking anything out. 'Teixeira's complaint was detailed. I should have forwarded it to head office. I didn't.'

'Why not?'

'Because I was told not to.' A pause. 'By someone outside the institution.'

'A name?'

Ferrero looked at the drawer. 'I can't.' Then, after a moment: 'Not yet.'

Ferrero opened the drawer again. This time he took out an envelope and pushed it across the desktop, without letting go of it.

'A photocopy. A single page. The rest stays here.'

De Salvo took it. He didn't open it. He stood up.

'When you're ready, call me. Before somebody else dies.'

He went out. In the corridor, Marino was waiting. 'How did it go?'

'He knows everything. And he's afraid. But he also has a conscience - that's what sets him apart from the others.'

'Will he talk?'

'Sooner or later, yes.' De Salvo put the envelope in the inside pocket of his overcoat. 'Teixeira had documented something. Ferrero is keeping the papers and someone ordered him to bury them. What remains to be understood is why Teixeira waited seventeen years.'

'Orengo.'

'Orengo.'

They stepped out into the cold Novi air. The sky had gained a few metres, the kind of improvement that

changes nothing: it just lifts the grey a little higher. De Salvo lit a cigarette and smoked it in silence, walking towards the car.

He was thinking about Teixeira. A man who had seen the rot and decided to do the right thing. He had been silenced. And then he had been killed by someone who had seen the same rot and decided to do the different thing. He didn't yet know which of them had been right. Perhaps both.

The Mother's Name

The body of Dr Sandro Antonelli had been found in the changing room of the San Lorenzo Clinic, stretched out beside the wooden bench like an emptied sack. He still wore the green theatre trousers, but the tunic was stained. On the chest, a black print, perfect, left by a rubber sole. On the floor, inches from the shattered head, another orthopaedic hammer. Identical to the one found with Teixeira. The killer's signature.

'Same hand. Same fury. But the same calm, too,' De Salvo said, kneeling beside the corpse.

Marino photographed and took notes. On the bench near the lockers sat a woman's handbag. Inside: a French perfume, a packet of cigarettes with lipstick on the filter, and a health card in the name of Luciana Albinoli.

'Known to us?' De Salvo asked.

Marino shook his head. 'I'll check in Novi.'

The handbag might belong to a colleague, to a lover, or it might have been left on purpose. De Salvo chose none of the three.

'Two doctors, same method. Both involved in managing orthopaedic prostheses. Both dead in closed rooms, no witnesses, no struggle. The woman must have walked in calmly. Perhaps he was expecting her.'

Marino nodded. 'Teixeira was sour, but Antonelli... had a different reputation. Gallant, obliging. A man who loved his liaisons, let's say.'

'And somebody loved him with a hammer,' De Salvo cut in.

They left the clinic in silence. The sky had opened onto a low, wintry light. In the car, De Salvo sat for a moment with his hands on the wheel without starting the engine.

'Luciana Albinoli,' he said. 'Born in Acqui in 1919. A nurse at the Santa Caterina until 1974. Died the same year.'

'So the card is forged?'

'Or stolen. Tomorrow I want to know who could have had it and why it ended up beside Antonelli.'

Marino waited. De Salvo seemed to be chasing a thought, but he didn't say it aloud. He started the engine.

'I want the full file on Luciana Albinoli. Where she worked, where she lived, who registered the death and whether she had family.'

'You think there's a link to the prostheses?'

De Salvo looked at the road ahead. 'I don't know yet. But somebody chose that name for a reason. And the reason is in the past.'

The Substance

The toxicology report on Antonelli's body showed scopolamine at a concentration consistent with heavy sedation. It didn't explain every detail of the scene, but it made the absence of any defence credible, along with the blank hours before the death.

Marino read the report in silence, sitting in the incident room at the station. 'He was dazed. Reduced reflexes, next to no reaction.'

De Salvo nodded, an unlit cigarette between his lips. 'That's why nobody heard a struggle.'

A brief silence. The drip from the tap in the washbasin sounded like torture.

'Does the card take us anywhere?'

'To an agency nurse who appeared for a week at the Acqui hospital two months ago. She presented herself as Luciana Albinoli, but the management kept no photograph and the attached document is an illegible photocopy.' Marino held out a sheet. 'No verifiable address.'

De Salvo stood up. He took his overcoat. 'Let's go and talk to the management. But first we stop at my place. I have to feed the cat.'

Sissi was waiting on the windowsill, motionless as an Egyptian figurine. She never miaowed. She never purred. But when De Salvo opened the door she walked in with decision and took her place on the armchair, as if she were the master of the house. The inspector filled her bowl with what little he had. Stale bread and an egg. He poured himself a finger of Dolcetto d'Acqui and put on a John Lee Hooker record. The blues crackled low, as if it were chewing the silence.

Marino watched the scene. 'You live like this every day?'
'Better than average.'

When they went out, the sky was low. Novi was withdrawing into itself, the way certain towns of the plain

do when the sky comes down too far. 'What exactly are we looking for?' Marino asked as they walked to the car.

De Salvo pushed his hands into his pockets. 'We're looking for a woman with no name who knows the wards and chose the identity of a dead woman. For now, that's enough.'

Becoming Someone Else

Genoa, 1963. Two years after her father's death.

The first thing Giovanna learnt was the voice. Not the pitch - the pitch was easy, you only had to drop it half a register and slow the vowels. It was the cadence. Every Italian region has its own cadence, that underground rhythm that betrays your origin even when the words are perfect. Luciana Albinoli had been born in Acqui Terme and had kept the slowness of the Monferrato even after years in Genoa. Giovanna had known that cadence since childhood; for two months she went back to the market in Acqui to listen to women her mother's age, until the voice stopped sounding like an imitation.

The second thing was the walk. Her mother's shoulders were slightly rounded, the mark of twenty years spent bending over ward beds. Giovanna was used to walking straight, head high, with the quick step of someone who always has somewhere to go. She had to take it all apart and put it back together differently.

The walk alone took a month.

She lived in a rented flat in Genoa, in a narrow street behind Brignole station. She had found work as a counter assistant in a chemist's - nothing medical, nothing that required official papers. The chemist was a man in his sixties who asked no questions, which was exactly what she needed.

In the evenings she studied. Not official nursing - she couldn't enrol on any course under Luciana's name without a genuine document. She had bought the manuals second-hand at the harbour market: Clinical Anatomy, Nursing Procedures, Basic Pharmacology. She read them with the same attention she had given adventure novels as a girl. Only now the adventure was real, and she was the one writing the ending.

She learnt orthopaedic surgery from the outside, slowly. First the terminology: intramedullary nails, plates, screws, hip prostheses. Then the procedures: sterilisation, stock registers, batch numbers. Then, above all, the flaws: where the system trusted too much, where nobody checked, where a handwritten document could pass for an official one.

After three years, she knew more than many working nurses.

* * *

The moment she understood she was ready came one November morning in 1966. She was walking along Via XX Settembre in her mother's coat - she had kept it, the only thing she had wanted - when she saw herself reflected in a shop window.

She didn't recognise herself at once.

There was a moment - three, four seconds - in which she saw a middle-aged woman, hair pinned up, slow step, dark coat. One of those figures you see and don't remember.

Then she understood it was her.

She stopped. She looked at herself for a long time. Then she smiled. Not at others - at herself, at that reflection that was no longer Giovanna but not yet entirely Luciana. It was something in between, something built, something that worked.

'Good,' she said under her breath.

She started walking again. She still had eleven years of work ahead of her before she would be ready for the first real step. But it was the first time since April 1961 that she felt she was going in the right direction.

Martini, No Olive

The bar was called the Blu Notte, but there was nothing nocturnal about it. The sign was half burnt out, and the blue neon looked more like a hazard warning. Inside, a smell of gin, badly washed glass and cheap aftershave. A jukebox had been silent for years, but people still fed it coins like a lapsed rite.

That was where she had last been seen. The woman. Plainly dressed, but with expensive shoes. She ordered martinis, no olive. Never twice in the same glass. She spoke little. She barely smiled.

The barman was a man with broad hands and a scar above his lip. His name was Gino, but nobody ever used it.

'Luciana?' he repeated, searching his memory like a jumbled drawer. 'Yes... maybe. Not one of those who make a scene. More... magnetic. A look that empties your head.'

'Was she alone?' De Salvo asked.

'Always. Or rather, never with the same ones.'

'What did she drink?'

'Dry martini. No olive. Once a day. Always at the same hour. Like a medicine.'

Marino took notes. De Salvo was looking at the frosted glass behind the counter. 'Was there anything strange about her?'

Gino scratched his temple. 'Everything about her was strange. But she seemed normal. That's the whole point.'

They left without another word. Outside, the fog had turned to light rain. A rain that cleaned nothing. It only moved the dirt around.

'This woman is playing with the void,' Marino said.

'No. She knows it well,' De Salvo replied. 'That's why she's always a step ahead. Because she has nothing to lose. And people with nothing to lose are dangerous.'

In the inside pocket of his overcoat, De Salvo had the copy of a delivery note found in Teixeira's locker. At the

bottom appeared a name: Paolo Montanaro. Beside it, the code G-4217-RX and Antonelli's signature. He didn't yet know whether it was a patient, a supplier or a transcription error.

11

The Method

Three weeks before her arrival at the San Lorenzo Clinic.

Giovanna had learnt that seduction is not a matter of beauty. It is a matter of attention. Men like Antonelli - pleased with themselves, used to the deference of the wards, convinced they held a certain authority over other people's bodies - melted before a woman who really listened to them. Or at least pretended to.

She had watched him for two weeks before approaching. She had followed him to conferences, to the Thursday-evening sessions at the Medical Association, to the hospital bar where he took his eleven o'clock coffee with the same colleagues every day. She had catalogued his habits with an entomologist's precision: the hour of his meal, the brand of his cigarettes, the way he looked at the women who came into a room.

She had seen him. Antonelli was one of those men who never stop appraising. He looked at every woman who entered a room as if he were deciding something.

Giovanna had chosen carefully what to wear. Nothing showy - Antonelli would not have trusted anything showy. Something precise, controlled, with one detail that betrayed attention: an earring a little too long for a hospital, a barely perceptible perfume. Something that said: I know where I am, but I choose to be slightly out of place.

She had approached him at the bar, pretending to look for a document. She had asked: 'Excuse me, do you work in orthopaedics?' In that voice - Luciana's voice, her mother's, which by now she had all but internalised - calm, slightly low, with a northern cadence that gave away no particular region.

Antonelli had lit up. 'Yes, why?'

'I was looking for someone who could help me with some paperwork. I'm new here.'

That word - new - was a key. It always worked. Doctors of that kind loved new arrivals: someone who didn't yet know the hierarchies, who needed to be guided.

* * *

It took three weeks.

Three weeks of coffees, of hurried lunches in the refectory, of conversations Giovanna steered with the delicacy of someone who knows where she wants to arrive. Antonelli talked about himself with a generosity she found at times pathetic: his years of study, his publications, the international conferences. He asked almost nothing about her. Which made things simpler.

One evening - it was a Wednesday, the hospital nearly empty - Antonelli had said: 'There's a drinks thing tonight with some colleagues. Would you like to come?'

Giovanna had smiled. 'I'd be glad to.'

At the aperitivo she had ordered mineral water while he drank two Negronis. She had waited for the moment when the other colleagues got up to go and smoke. Then she had said, quietly, in a neutral tone: 'I've heard talk of certain problems with the orthopaedic materials. Unregistered prostheses.'

Antonelli had stiffened for a second. Only a second. Then he had picked up his glass again. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Of course,' she had said. 'Forgive me.' And she had changed the subject.

That answer had been enough for her. The way he had stiffened. The speed with which he had picked up the glass. The choice of saying 'I don't know' instead of 'that's not true'.

He knew. And he had lied as easily as he breathed.

* * *

The night before the last meeting, Giovanna sat in the two-room flat in Novi with the notebook open in front of her.

She wrote Antonelli's name. She looked at it for a long moment. Then she wrote beside it:

"He signed. He knows he signed. He has no intention of talking."

She closed the notebook. She opened the drawer. She took out the bottle of scopolamine, removed months earlier from a pharmaceutical cabinet during a temporary posting. She checked the level. It was enough.

She took the orthopaedic hammer from the bottom of the bag. She set it on the table. She looked at it for a moment.

She felt no hatred. She checked the hammer, wrapped the handle in gauze and put it back in the bag.

She put everything away. She stood up. She went to the window.

Outside, Novi was silent. The streetlamps made yellow circles in the fog.

'I'm sorry, Papà,' she said under her breath. Not for Antonelli. For having to become this thing in order to do what had to be done.

She turned. She went to bed. She was asleep before midnight.

The Missing Medical File

The paper archive of the Santa Caterina hospital was a maze of metal shelving, yellowed sheets and binders with handwritten labels. A place outside time, where the dust had the same thickness as the silence. Marino coughed the moment he crossed the threshold. De Salvo ignored him.

They were looking for the medical file of Paolo Montanaro, dead seventeen years earlier of 'post-operative complications'. A formula as vague as it was useful to anyone with something to cover.

The filing was arranged by year and month. April 1961. Fracture of the left femur. Fixation device implanted: G series.

But the complete file wasn't there. Only a copy of the admission sheet and a loose page with a serial number: G-4217-RX. No operating report. No signature from the attending physician.

Marino was checking the folders one by one. 'Where the hell can it have got to?'

'It hasn't got anywhere. It was made to disappear,' De Salvo said. 'Somebody didn't want it known which prosthesis they operated with.'

'And why?'

De Salvo slowly raised his eyes. 'Because that prosthesis shouldn't even have been there.'

At the bottom of the admission sheet was a short signature: G. Montanaro. The handwriting was tiny, too faded to read the name in full. De Salvo had it photographed.

'A relative?' Marino asked.

'Perhaps. First we find the registry file.'

Sissi, that evening, ate in silence under the kitchen table. De Salvo wasn't hungry. Just another glass of Dolcetto and an old Muddy Waters record that scratched the notes like a knife.

13

What the Blues Plays

He got home at eleven. Sissi was on the armchair, curled on herself like an amphora. She didn't open her eyes when he came in - only moved her ears, that millimetric rotation which was her way of saying: I know it's you, there's no need for all this theatre.

De Salvo took off his overcoat. He hung it crooked, as always. He poured himself a glass of Dolcetto. He opened the record player.

There was a moment, leafing through the records, when he stopped at one he hadn't played in a long time: Bessie Smith, *The Empress*. He drew it from its sleeve with care. The vinyl was scratched on one side, but the sound held.

Marta used to call it sad music. De Salvo had answered that it wasn't sadness, it was knowledge. She had rolled her eyes. Four years on, that grimace still came back to him.

He put the record on. Bessie Smith opened with *Down Hearted Blues*: a voice that asked for nothing, complained of nothing. It recorded. Like a witness.

De Salvo sat down at the table with the glass and the file. But he didn't open the file. He sat listening.

The blues had that about it: it didn't tell you how you were. It told you how things were. There was an enormous difference. Your feelings were irrelevant before the voice of Bessie Smith - what counted was the fact: someone had lost something, someone had suffered, someone had carried on all the same. Not out of strength. Because there was nothing else to do.

He thought of Giovanna.

It wasn't the first time he had thought of her outside the case, outside the logic of the investigation. He thought of her as a person, not a suspect. A girl who had lost her father at seventeen and had taken seventeen years to

answer. The same quantity of time - as if grief needed a mirror.

Sissi came down from the armchair. She walked to the table with that queenly slowness she had always had. She sat down beside the wine glass and looked at him.

'No,' De Salvo said.

She dipped a paw in anyway, then withdrew it and licked herself with the expression of one who has made a technical assessment, not a prank.

De Salvo laughed. It was the first time he had laughed in a week.

Then he opened the file.

* * *

On the table he left the photocopy of Luciana Albinoli's health card. A dead woman whose name went on walking the corridors. Why her, of all people? And who had had access to her papers?

De Salvo held the photocopy in his hand. Bessie Smith was still singing. Outside, the wind knocked at the second-floor shutter - a shutter that had needed mending for years and that he kept putting off.

It wasn't an explanation. It was a door left ajar. He set the sheet down. He finished the glass. He went to bed.

Sissi followed him. She settled at the foot of the bed with the efficiency of one who has an assigned place and occupies it without discussion.

De Salvo switched off the light.

In the dark room, for a few minutes more, he could still hear the echo of Bessie Smith's voice - not the words, only the cadence. The thing he knew every time he put on the blues: the music solves nothing. But it says that the things weighing on you are real. And that you are not the only one carrying them.

The Days of the Bone

The next morning, the air tasted of wet earth and dead tobacco. De Salvo drove slowly towards Tortona, radio off, head heavy. He hadn't slept. Not because of the investigation, but because of the weight of the silences. Sissi's silences, as she curled up ever closer. The silences of the dead, who could no longer say where it hurt.

He had reread Marino's notes at least five times. Always the same words:

*"G series - unregistered entries at three hospitals.
Antonelli appears on two delivery notes."*

And always the same void: no checks, no complaint, no responsibility.

At the Tortona hospital administration, the director received them with the usual prefabricated phrases: 'profound sorrow', 'an excellent professional', 'our fullest cooperation'. But when they asked for the complete list of prosthesis suppliers to the orthopaedics department, things turned opaque.

'Dr Antonelli managed purchasing autonomously, at least for specialist materials,' the executive said, never once meeting De Salvo's eyes.

'By what criteria?'

'We are aware of no irregularities. But we can look into it.'

'We'll do that ourselves. With a warrant.'

In the corridor of the procurement office, Marino found an old notepad wedged behind a filing cabinet. On the cover was the print of a shoe. Inside, patients' names and implant codes. Some crossed out. Others circled.

Montanaro was circled in red. Beside it, a date: 11 April 1961. And underneath, three letters:

"C. O."

Marino stared at the initials. 'Carlo Orengo?'

De Salvo didn't answer. But his jaw set.

The name had been coming back for years. A former health-service executive, with political friendships and hands everywhere. Never investigated, never touched. An invisible man, but present like dust in the lungs. A name that made files disappear. And unregistered materials appear in public operating theatres.

'If C. O. really is him, we're in up to our necks,' Marino whispered.

'No. For now we have a set of initials and a forgotten dead man. That's already enough.'

The station had a meeting room they used twice a year: for meetings with the Prefecture and for cases that needed physical space. De Salvo requisitioned it for a week.

On the long wall, stuck up with tape, were eleven sheets of paper. Photos, names, dates, arrows in pen. It was the kind of work that looked much tidier in films: in reality it was crumpled paper, crossings-out, arrows redrawn three times.

Marino arrived with two coffees and sat down. He looked at the wall. 'It looks like a charity auction gone wrong.'

'It works all the same,' De Salvo said.

The structure was this: at the centre, the supplier. A company called Ortholab Sistemi, registered office in Lugano, operations nowhere in particular. It sold prostheses of uncertified origin - materials from Eastern Europe, probably Romania or Czechoslovakia, repackaged with falsified paperwork.

Below Ortholab, three lines: Teixeira, Antonelli, Cattaneo. Each had signed, in different years, the entry of G-series batches into the stores of their respective hospitals. None had ever checked the provenance.

Above Ortholab, a single name, written in red because there was still no direct proof: Carlo Orengo.

'Orengo never signed anything himself,' Marino said. 'But we have a former storeman who says he saw him collect the packages in person. And we have the notepad with his initials next to Montanaro.'

'Enough for a warrant?'

'With what we have now, maybe. But a lawyer takes it apart in half an hour.'

De Salvo stood up and added an arrow. He drew it from Orengo down to a name he had written at the bottom, almost off the sheet: Senator Luigi Brega. A politician of

long standing, in his third term, with interests in Acqui and Asti.

'That's the problem,' he said. 'Orengo isn't alone. He has a political network protecting the health network. If we press too hard at the bottom, the pressure rises and everything locks up at the top.'

Marino drummed his fingers on the table. 'So what do we do?'

De Salvo looked at the names and the arrows. He thought of the Turin case, come to nothing four years earlier.

'We build the paper trail: who bought, who received, who signed. No shortcuts.'

'And the woman?'

'We hunt her for two murders. Understanding the motive doesn't mean absolving her.'

Marino nodded. He opened his notebook. They went back to work.

The next morning, De Salvo found an envelope with no sender on his desk. Inside, a photocopy of the contract between Ortholab Sistemi and the Santa Caterina, signed by Antonelli. In the margin: the initials C. O. and a date.

It wasn't enough to identify Orengo, but it showed where to look. De Salvo handed it to forensics for handwriting comparison.

Andrea and the Vet's Daughter

Andrea Marino had his hair cut every fortnight, always at the same barber's in Via Roma. He was an orderly man, precise, with ironed shirts and ties that looked as if they had stepped out of a '73 advertisement. Even his way of being in love was meticulous: Valentina Maresca, twenty-nine, a primary-school teacher and the daughter of the municipal vet. A sweet girl, but with the temper of someone raised among animals and authoritarian fathers.

Her father did not approve of the relationship. 'A policeman isn't a trade, it's a fate. And I don't want a fate for my daughter,' he had said once, fixing Marino with the eyes of a Maremma sheepdog.

That evening, Andrea was at her place. They ate in silence. Polenta and stew. The radio crackled through a news bulletin. The Teixeira case was still classified as 'an internal hospital matter'.

'Are you all right?' Valentina asked.

Andrea looked at her. His eyes were tired, his collar dirty with tobacco, his hands unable to keep still.

'I don't know,' he said. 'It's all so... rotten. And still nobody says a word.'

He told her only part of it: the two dead doctors, the materials brought in unregistered, the woman using the name of Luciana Albinoli.

Valentina listened in silence. Then she said: 'Do you think you'll catch her?'

'I don't know. Maybe she doesn't want to be caught. Maybe she just wants it known.'

'And what do you do with someone who just wants it known?'

Marino didn't answer. He sat with his fork in mid-air, eyes on his plate.

Valentina lowered her voice: 'You're hurting yourself, Andrea. Not physically. I mean... are you starting to understand her reasons?'

'It's not understanding her reasons,' he said slowly. 'It's that I can't manage not to.'

That night, while she slept, Marino stayed awake on the sitting-room sofa. Outside, Predosa was silent. Inside, he had the notebook on his knees, but he wasn't writing. He was thinking.

Forty kilometres away, a woman was filling in an employment form at the Alessandria hospital. Name given: Luciana Albinoli. Department requested: orthopaedics.

In the mirror of the ladies' room, she tidied her hair, put on a muted red lipstick and smiled. But not at others. Only at the void she carried inside. It was the smile of someone with a list. And few names left to cross off.

The Man in the Leather Gloves

The next day, De Salvo went to see an old informant. His name was Renzo Maffei, he was seventy-three, and he lived on the second floor of a grey building in Via Cavour, in Novi. He had been a bookkeeper for a pharmaceutical firm for thirty years, then he had begun to talk to the police. Now he drank grappa and waited for death with the patience of a man in no more hurry.

De Salvo brought half a kilo of minced meat and a bottle of Barbera. Renzo opened the door in his pyjamas.

'I knew you'd come,' he said. 'Sit down.'

The kitchen was small, tidy, with an orange cat asleep on the fridge. De Salvo noticed it had the same look as Sissi: indifferent and at the same time attentive to everything.

'Do you know the name Carlo Orengo?' De Salvo asked.

Renzo opened the bottle without answering. He poured two glasses. He pushed them across the table.

'Orengo.' He repeated the name as if weighing it. 'Clinical coordinator. External consultant. In reality: the centre of a network. Supplier, selector, middleman. He never signed anything directly. He passed everything through the doctors.'

'The dead doctors.'

'Right. Teixeira, Antonelli, Cattaneo. I knew all three. Good professionals. But certain names arrive with pressure behind them. Orengo knew how to apply pressure.'

'What sort of man is he?'

Renzo drank. 'One who never raises his voice. He doesn't need to. Well dressed, grey hair, leather gloves even in summer. He has that thing certain men have, who never dirty their hands - because they always know whom to delegate to.'

'Where is he now?'

'He has a villa outside Acqui. And a second house in Turin. He hasn't gone near a hospital in years. But the network is still there. It changes shape, it doesn't disappear.'

De Salvo stood up. He finished the glass. 'Thank you, Renzo.'

'Don't thank me. Tell me that this time you'll go all the way.'

'Depends where the way ends.'

'The end,' the old man said, 'is when you have the proof in your hands and you have to choose what to do with it.'

De Salvo didn't answer. Outside, the sky was low and yellow, that dirty yellow that comes before hail.

The Third Blow

The body was found in the sterilisation store of the Alessandria hospital. No witnesses. No porter in the corridor. No noise. Only a ferrous smell, and the silence.

Dr Renato Cattaneo. Last shift: 8 p.m. Last patient: discharged as normal. Last signature: missing.

He lay on a laundry trolley, wedged between two sacks of surgical drapes. Skull open, one dry, precise blow to the back of the head. The hammer was there beside him, identical to the other two. Same model. Same gesture.

But this time there was something more. A folded note, tucked under the dead man's belt. Handwritten:

"Three men. One protocol. No mercy."

De Salvo studied the scene with an irritation older than anger. He had given up smoking that morning. By choice. He already regretted it.

'Cattaneo?' Marino asked.

'Third man responsible for orthopaedic procurement. His signature appears on two G-series deliveries. One record card points to Montanaro.'

Marino was looking at him. 'He knew too. And he kept quiet.'

De Salvo nodded. 'He knew those batches weren't registered. We still have to prove what he knew about Montanaro.'

Marino picked up the note with tweezers. He slid it into an envelope. 'Three dead. You think it's over?'

De Salvo turned towards the door. 'No. The next name is already on the side of my car.'

They went out into the rain. On the side of the inspector's car, scored with something sharp, a single name could be read: Orengo.

The Weight of the Notebook

Marino got home at ten in the evening. Valentina wasn't there: she had left a note on the kitchen table - 'At Mum's, back tomorrow' - in a tone that was not explanation but statement of fact. The kind of message you leave when you have stopped expecting the other person to be present.

He sat on the sofa without taking off his overcoat. He stayed like that for five minutes.

On the table, beside Valentina's note, he had set down the notebook. The one with the case notes. Black cover, white pages, the regular handwriting he kept for work. He opened the last page.

Three names. Three dead. A fourth name scored into the side of a car.

He read his own words and realised they were growing drier and drier. Fewer adjectives, fewer technical details. As if his language were learning not to say everything he thought.

What he thought was this: Giovanna Albinoli had a reason.

He hadn't written it anywhere. He hadn't said it to De Salvo. But it was there, inside, like a foreign body he couldn't expel. Teixeira, Antonelli and Cattaneo had opened the door to unregistered materials. Perhaps they had used public patients as guinea pigs; perhaps they had merely asked no questions. Either way, nobody had ever touched them.

And now they were dead.

The deaths troubled him less than the logic behind them. And the fact that Marino could not refute it.

He got up. He went to the kitchen. He opened the fridge: half a leftover sandwich, a beer, a container of three-day-old polenta. He took the beer. He went back to the sofa.

He drank slowly, looking at the ceiling.

The G-series prostheses had passed through the rules undisturbed. Public hospitals, the bodies of public patients, the signatures of public doctors. And not one rule had worked.

Only the murders had forced everyone to look. That was what Marino could not forgive the system.

Marino finished the beer. He set the bottle on the floor. He opened the notebook at the last clean page and wrote a single sentence:

"What do I do with what I know?"

He stared at it for a long moment. Then he struck it out with three horizontal lines, so hard the pen nearly went through the paper.

He closed the notebook. He went to bed. He didn't sleep.

* * *

The next morning, he arrived at the station half an hour before De Salvo. He sat at his desk and opened the G-series file. He had already read it seven times. He read it again.

When De Salvo arrived - overcoat wet with fog, coffee in hand, cigarette already lit - Marino looked at him and said: 'There's something that doesn't add up.'

'Tell me.'

'Orengo is still free. He has cover. Even if we reach him with proof, his lawyers earn more in a month than we do in three years.'

De Salvo sat down. 'I know.'

'And so?'

'So we do our job. And we hope the system works.'

'Do you believe that?'

A pause. De Salvo looked at his coffee cup. 'No. But it's the only thing I know how to do.'

Marino nodded slowly. 'Me too,' he said. Though it wasn't entirely true.

The Turin Patient

In the register she was only patient 21: an initial in place of a surname, no relatives, no complete medical history. She had been operated on as an emergency at a private clinic in Turin, the San Luca, for a multiple fracture of the pelvis. The operation, dating from March 1977, had been performed by a mixed team. None of the three surgeons could be traced any longer: two on leave, one transferred to Calabria. Nobody answered questions. Nobody had signed the implant form.

Marino had cross-checked the record by hand, matching batch numbers against stores dockets. The code belonged to the same series noted in the Montanaro file.

De Salvo stared at the sheet between his fingers, sitting in his car parked in Turin, engine off, rain on the windscreen. Sissi was at home, alone. The record he had left on the turntable had stopped at the third track: Blues Before Sunrise.

'Are you telling me there's a patient walking around alive with a non-compliant prosthesis inside her, and nobody noticed?' De Salvo asked, his tone drier than usual.

'Not just alive. Discharged. Two weeks later. No apparent complications.'

'Name?'

'Clara M. No full surname. Document not photocopied. False address.'

'A cover?'

'Or a test. A guinea pig.'

De Salvo turned the wipers up a speed. 'It could be experimentation without consent. Or an off-the-books implant covered up after the operation.'

Marino didn't answer. But his silence said more than any words.

'Who appears in the Montanaro papers?' the inspector asked.

'Teixeira, Antonelli and Cattaneo. All dead. And a set of initials in the margin of the delivery notes: C. O.'

'Orengo.'

'If the handwriting comparison confirms it.'

De Salvo lowered his head. Outside, Turin seemed to shrink under the rain. The buildings, the streets, the brass plates of the medical practices. A city full of people who knew nothing, or who had decided not to know.

'Then it's time to go and visit our ghost.'

The Ghost of Piazza Statuto

Carlo Orenco lived in a building on Piazza Statuto, fourth floor, windows on the garden side. They had known it for some time, but they still had no legal reason to approach. They had come to watch.

De Salvo parked on the far side of the square. He took out the thermos, opened it, poured coffee into the cap and drank it without taking his eyes off the front door.

'The team has seen him go out twice in a week,' Marino said, leafing through his notebook. 'Shopping and a dinner at the Cambio. Always alone. No meetings logged.'

'He's waiting.'

'For what?'

De Salvo indicated the door with a tilt of his head. 'To find out whether we've reached him. He knows the woman is closing in. He knows we're climbing the chain. He's waiting to see who gets there first.'

'And us?'

'We can't touch him. Not yet. Not without direct proof. He has cover everywhere.'

The door opened. A man in his sixties, beige raincoat, leather briefcase, leather gloves even in the sunshine. He walked upright, with the slowness of a man who knows the pavement belongs to him.

De Salvo followed him with his eyes without moving.

'That's him,' Marino said under his breath, though they were inside the car.

Orenco crossed the square without looking around. He went into a bar, came out with a newspaper, sat for three minutes on a bench. Then he went back inside.

'He didn't look up once,' De Salvo said.

'Why?'

'Because he doesn't expect danger at pavement level. He hasn't expected it for thirty years. He's a man used to being untouchable.'

Marino watched the door close. 'Do we have to wait for her to reach him?'

De Salvo screwed the cap back onto the thermos. 'No. We have to get there first. But build the case so that it holds.'

They drove off in silence. On the radio, the midday news. Nothing about the case. Nothing about Giovanna. As if she didn't exist.

De Salvo switched the radio off.

* * *

He did the wrong thing at four in the afternoon.

They were in the car, stopped at the lights on Via Rattazzi. Marino was reading his notebook. De Salvo had Orengo's home number in his hand - found in the telephone directory, legal, banal. He had thought of passing it to the Alessandria prosecutor's office. Instead he dialled it.

Three rings. Then the voice of the manservant: 'Orengo residence.'

'Inspector De Salvo, Novi Ligure police. Tell Dr Orengo we'll be calling on him tomorrow morning for a few routine questions.'

He hung up.

Marino lowered the notebook. He looked at him. 'Why did you do that?'

De Salvo didn't answer at once. 'To see how he reacts.'

'Now he knows we're climbing towards him.'

'He already knew.'

'Now he knows it officially. Now he can move.'

De Salvo started the engine. 'Or he can make a mistake.'

Marino said nothing more. But he opened his notebook and wrote a line he showed to no one.

He was right, not De Salvo. And De Salvo knew it.

The Missing Name

It was past midnight when De Salvo found what he was looking for.

He had spent three hours leafing through the hospital staff registers of Lower Piedmont, 1960 to 1975: dusty lists, badly photocopied names, faded ink. Marino slept on the sofa in the incident room, overcoat still on. Sissi was at home, waiting.

De Salvo had started from the end - from Luciana Albinoli's death, 1974 - and was working backwards.

Nurse. Orthopaedics. The hospitals of Acqui Terme, then Novi Ligure, then the Santa Caterina. Years of work in the very departments he had been studying for weeks. Present. Discreet. Never once flagged.

Then: 1974. Death by cancer. The end.

De Salvo sat still over the card. Something didn't fit. Not in the document - the document was clean - but in the sequence of events.

He opened another folder. He circled the entry 'next of kin' on Luciana's card. There were two names: the husband, Paolo Montanaro, died 1961; the daughter, Giovanna Montanaro, born in Predosa in 1944. A later note recorded the maternal surname the girl had adopted on coming of age: Albinoli.

De Salvo set his pen down on the table.

He stood up. He went to the window. Outside, Novi was asleep.

Giovanna. G. A.

De Salvo opened Paolo Montanaro's file: a quarryman, admitted on 9 April 1961 with a fractured femur, dead on the 11th of an embolism. Attached to the admission report was the sheet with the faded signature: G. Montanaro.

Giovanna had been seventeen.

De Salvo closed his eyes. He opened them again. He looked at the sheet. He looked at the other sheet. He

looked at the initials G. A. at the foot of the anonymous letter.

'Marino.'

Marino stirred on the sofa. 'Mm.'

'Wake up.'

Marino opened his eyes. He saw De Salvo's face. He sat up sharply. 'What's happening?'

De Salvo turned the two sheets towards him. He laid them on the table, side by side.

Marino read them. Once. Twice. Then he looked up.

'Her father.'

'Yes.'

'Montanaro was her father.'

'Yes. I knew who the dead man was. I didn't know whose father he was. In 1961 the G series appears in his file and in the recent Ortholab deliveries. We don't yet know whether it's the same model or a reused code.'

Marino passed a hand over his face. 'Luciana worked in orthopaedics. She watched her husband die and she kept the papers.'

'Perhaps she tried to speak. We look for complaints, letters, any trace.'

Silence.

'Giovanna was seventeen,' Marino said quietly.

'Seventeen. And she waited seventeen years before she began.' De Salvo looked at the window. 'The same quantity of time. As if the account had to be settled in equal measure.'

Marino sat staring at the sheets on the table. 'And the daughter using the mother's name. That's what she meant with the health card.'

'She chose her mother's name to get into the departments tied to her father's death.'

De Salvo put the sheets back in the folder. He stood up. He put on his overcoat.

'Where are you going?' Marino asked.

'Home. I need to think without the smell of photocopies.'

He went out. In the dark corridor of the station, he paused a moment in front of the noticeboard with the month's shifts. He looked without reading.

He thought: a girl of seventeen who watches her father die in a hospital bed. Then watches her mother die. Then finds a sheet of paper with a serial number. Then waits.

He thought: how long does it take to become what she became.

Then he went out into the cold.

The Hospital, 1961

Giovanna was seventeen the day her father entered the hospital. The story of how he got there begins earlier, at the Predosa quarry, on a Tuesday morning in April.

Paolo Montanaro fell from the second-level scaffolding. There wasn't even a cry: only the dull sound of a body meeting concrete. His workmates gathered him up in a hurry, loaded him into a van, drove him to casualty in Novi.

Giovanna was at school when the telephone call came. They summoned her to the head's office with that air adults put on when they have to tell children bad things: low voice, hands joined on the desk, eyes to one side.

'Your father has had an accident. He's in hospital. It isn't serious.'

It wasn't serious. The secretary repeated it, the Italian teacher who walked her to the entrance repeated it, the duty doctor who met her in the casualty corridor repeated it, in the voice reserved for children and for the old.

It wasn't serious.

* * *

Her father was in bed four of the orthopaedic ward. One leg raised by a system of pulleys, his face pale, his open eyes fixed on the ceiling. When he saw her, he tried to smile.

'You came.'

'Of course I came.' She sat down beside him. She took his hand - that enormous hand, lime-scoured, with calluses hard as stone. 'How are you?'

'I'll manage. A knock to the femur. They say I need an operation.'

'And then you'll be well?'

'Then I'll be well.'

He was sure. He was convinced. In that public hospital, with those doctors in white coats, with that machine that

seemed to work, he had no reason to doubt. It was 1961. He still trusted institutions the way you trust a load-bearing wall.

Giovanna looked at him and trusted with him.

* * *

The operation was scheduled for 10 April. Giovanna waited outside the operating theatre for three hours, on a wooden chair, a magazine on her knees that she didn't read.

At 2.30, the doctor came out. A man in his fifties, green scrubs, mask lowered onto his chin. He looked at her with the expression of one who has said this thing a thousand times and knows it will never be enough.

'His daughter?'

'Yes.'

'The operation went well. We'll keep him under observation tonight. You can see him tomorrow.'

Giovanna went home, ate something, couldn't sleep. The next morning she arrived at six.

Her father had died at three in the night.

* * *

'An embolism,' they told her. 'A complication, unfortunately. Nobody could have foreseen it.'

Giovanna didn't understand. She kept repeating: 'But yesterday he told me he was well. The doctor told me he was well.'

Nobody answered.

The documents were handed to her in a brown paper envelope. There was the death certificate, the discharge sheet, a page with the batch number of the femoral nail implanted: G-4217-RX. Giovanna held it in her hand for a full minute, without understanding what it meant. Then she slipped it into her bag.

For months she didn't think about it. She was grieving, she was working, she was trying to go on.

A year later she found among her mother's papers a carbon copy of a letter that had never been logged. Luciana disputed the provenance of batch G-4217-RX and

asked why it had been used with no stores registration. At the foot, in pencil, someone had written: file away.

Giovanna compared the code with the sheet handed over after the death. It was the same.

* * *

From that moment, Giovanna stopped expecting anyone to do anything. She began to do it herself.

The Latex Gloves

The gloves were there, at the bottom of the grey sack in the medical-waste bin. Nobody would have noticed them if Marino hadn't tipped the container out. A pair of pale latex gloves, size small, folded with care. No visible stain. No strong smell. Only one detail: under the pad of the right ring finger, a red cotton fibre.

De Salvo stared at it without a word.

'It's not blood. It's fabric,' Marino said.

'A woman's fabric. A dress. Evening, perhaps. Incompatible with a hospital.'

The laboratory established only that it was a red textile fibre, not belonging to the department's uniforms. It wasn't much, but it linked the gloves to clothing from outside the hospital.

In the station canteen, De Salvo sat down in front of a cup of stale coffee and a roll with a soft crust. He didn't eat. Sissi was waiting for him. He had left the window ajar, and a bowl of anchovies and bread. She hated anchovies. But that evening she would eat them all the same.

Marino arrived with an envelope: inside, an anonymous letter. Delivered directly to the station.

"Your hands are still clean. Mine no longer are.

*Three guilts, three sentences. But there is a
mastermind. There is always someone behind it. He
signed. I carried it out."*

At the foot of the page, two initials: G. A.

De Salvo read it twice and handed the letter in for handwriting comparison.

'She doesn't run. She doesn't hide. She walks alongside us. She wants us to reach him.'

'Carlo Orengo,' Marino said. 'Yes. And she wants to lead us to him before she gets there alone.'

Her full name was Clara Merli. They found it after six days of cross-checking hospital registers across three provinces.

Forty-two, a primary-school teacher, living in Valenza. Operated on as an emergency at the San Luca Clinic in Turin for a multiple fracture of the pelvis caused by a road accident. Discharged after two weeks. No follow-up on record.

De Salvo and Marino found her in a flat on Via Mazzini, with geraniums on the balcony. She opened it with the wariness of someone who has learnt that bad news always comes in person.

Her walk was slightly asymmetrical. De Salvo noticed at once.

They sat in the living room. There was an orange cat on the sofa and a pile of exercise books to mark on the table. An orderly life, crossed by someone without permission.

'Signora Merli,' De Salvo said, 'we're investigating a series of non-compliant orthopaedic prostheses distributed to Piedmont hospitals between 1975 and 1978. Your operation at the San Luca Clinic, in March 1977, falls within that period.'

Clara Merli said nothing. She looked at her hands.

'Have you ever had problems connected with the implant?'

A pause. 'It depends what you mean by problems.'

'Persistent pain. Asymmetry in walking. The need for further operations.'

'I've been in pain since the day they discharged me.' Her voice was flat, with that particular tone of someone who has said the same words to too many doctors and stopped expecting a different answer. 'They told me it was normal. That recovery took time. That I had to wait.'

'Did you wait?'

'A year and a half. Now I walk like this.' She indicated herself with a precise gesture, without dramatising. 'I don't run. I don't climb stairs easily. I teach primary-school children sitting down more than I should.'

De Salvo waited.

'Nobody ever told me what they had implanted in me,' Clara went on. 'I asked for the documents three times. The first time they told me they were in the archive. The second, that the register had been moved to another archive. The third, that the consultant was on leave.'

'Do you have a lawyer?'

'I can't afford one.' No resentment. It was a fact, not a complaint.

De Salvo opened the folder. 'Signora Merli, what I'm about to tell you is confidential until we make it official. The prosthesis they implanted was the model G-4217 RX. Experimental material, brought in without ministerial authorisation.'

A long silence.

'It was a prototype,' Clara repeated. It wasn't a question. 'Yes.'

The woman looked at the cat on the sofa. Then she said, in a voice that betrayed nothing: 'And who knew?'

'The doctors who operated on you. And the project supervisor.'

'Have they been arrested?'

De Salvo hesitated. 'The doctors are dead. The supervisor is under investigation.'

Clara stayed silent for a long moment. Then she said: 'I won't ask you how. I've learnt not to ask useless questions.' She stood up. 'Come back when you need my testimony. I'll be here.'

They left in silence. In the car, Marino said: 'She's one of the victims. One who still walks.'

'Yes.'

'Did Giovanna know?'

De Salvo looked out of the window. 'Her initial appears on a copy of the record card. She probably wanted us to find her.'

The fog in Novi doesn't fall. It settles. It spreads over the pavements, the parked cars, the signs of the shut bars. It isn't a presence, it's a condition. Like tiredness, like suspicion. Ugo De Salvo knew it well. In those emptied streets his mind moved more clearly, almost cutting. The town went mute and the case grew sharper.

They had received another tip-off. A nurse. Anonymous. It said that a woman, recently taken on as an assistant in orthopaedics, had left the hospital without notice. No official request, no signing out. Name used: Luciana Albinoli.

She had vanished into nothing.

'Do you want to know the most unsettling thing?' Marino said as they walked under the arcades.

'Tell me.'

'Every time a trace of her appears, she's the one who leaves it. She doesn't flee, she doesn't slip away. She lets herself be found. But on her own terms.'

'She walks alongside us.'

'Yes. It's as if she wanted to educate us. She wants us to see what she saw. To feel the same injustice.'

The town was mute. Every step left a trail on the damp road. In a doorway, a man was shivering, huddled against the shutter of an ironmonger's.

'Who is he?' De Salvo asked.

'They call him Spina. Former hospital storeman, sacked eight months ago. He said he'd seen strange things in the prosthesis stores. Nobody ever believed him.'

They went closer. The man's hands were red, his cheeks hollow.

'Who sent you?'

'Nobody. We're the ones looking for answers.'

Spina licked his lips, then pointed to the back of the ironmonger's.

'Back there, there was a secondary entrance. They used it to load boxes with no delivery notes. Packages with false stamps. Once I opened one. Only once.'

'What was inside?'

'Prostheses. All identical. No labels. Just numbers in pen.'

'Who came to collect them?'

Spina smiled. It was a broken smile. 'An elegant one. Always in leather gloves. He spoke little. But he knew everything. His name was... Orengo.'

The Villa at Acqui

Carlo Orengo's villa stood on the hill beyond Acqui Terme, among the Moscato vineyards that in October still held the odd forgotten bunch. A dirt road, five hundred metres between the vine rows, then a wrought-iron gate with a modern intercom, out of tune with the rest.

De Salvo rang.

He waited thirty seconds. Then a voice - male, young, with the inflection of someone who has learnt to play the guard dog: 'Who is it?'

'Inspector De Salvo. I want to speak to Signor Orengo.'

'Dr Orengo doesn't receive visitors without an appointment.'

'I understand. Tell Dr Orengo I'm investigating the deaths of three of his acquaintances. If he'd rather I came back with a warrant, I can do that.'

A silence. Then the gate opened.

The villa was large, orderly, with a garden that seemed always in order - one of those gardens that require a permanent, invisible gardener. On the drive, a blue Lancia Gamma. Turin plates.

A man in his forties opened the front door. Jacket, no tie. Not a servant: something in between, that category of people who stand between the master and the staff without belonging to either.

'Please, come in. Dr Orengo will see you in the library.'

The library was on the first floor: dark wooden shelves, bound books, a desk with nothing on it but a crystal ashtray and a brass paperweight. Orengo stood by the window. Leather gloves on the table, grey jacket, white hair combed back. Sixty years worn as if age were a choice, not a fate.

He didn't offer his hand. 'Inspector.'

'Dr Orengo.'

'Sit down.' He said it the way one says hurry up. A concession, not an invitation.

De Salvo sat. He looked around without trying to hide it. Thousands of volumes, aligned by height. No family photographs. No personal object in sight. A room that said: here there is culture, not life.

'What can I do for you?' Orengo asked.

'We've been investigating the deaths of three of your acquaintances. Arturo Teixeira. Sandro Antonelli. Renato Cattaneo.'

No reaction. 'Acquaintances is a generous word. Colleagues in the sector, at most.'

'You worked with them as supervisor of an experimental project on orthopaedic prostheses. Between 1975 and 1978.'

'I held a great many consultancies in those years.'

'The G-series project. Does that mean anything to you?'

The briefest pause. 'Vaguely.'

'A patient named Paolo Montanaro died following the implant of a G-series prosthesis. The prosthesis did not appear in the ministerial registers.'

'These things happen, unfortunately. The system of controls has its gaps.'

'It has its gaps,' De Salvo repeated. His tone was flat. 'It has its gaps.'

Orengo looked at him. For the first time, something moved behind the eyes - not fear, something subtler. The calculation of a man assessing how much the other one knows.

'I have nothing to add, Inspector. If you have formal questions, I'll ask you to address them to my lawyer.'

De Salvo rose slowly. He buttoned his overcoat. 'You have a lawyer ready?'

'I always have a lawyer ready.'

'I see.' He took a step towards the door, then stopped. 'One thing, Dr Orengo. There's a woman. Her name is Giovanna Albinoli. If you meet her, call me.'

No reaction. Zero. As if the name meant nothing.

De Salvo went down the stairs, crossed the drive, passed through the gate. He waited until he was on the dirt road, beyond the gate and out of sight of the villa, before stopping to light a cigarette.

Orengo knew. He had seen it in the eyes: that quick calculation, that silent appraisal. The man was already deciding how much to concede.

The man already knew Giovanna existed. Perhaps he already knew what she was doing.

And he had no intention whatsoever of asking the police for help.

Paolo Montanaro's file, which had seemed to vanish, resurfaced at the bottom of an uncatalogued cupboard, buried under years of negligence and bureaucracy. Marino found it while looking for another name. Inside was everything. Or almost.

A man of forty-two. A quarryman, one daughter. Operated on for a fracture of the left femur. Admitted on 9 April 1961, dead on the 11th, two days after the operation. Official cause: embolism. On the theatre sheet appeared a femoral nail, batch G-4217-RX, absent from the stores register.

De Salvo sat at the table with the document in front of him. His glass of Dolcetto was full but untouched. Sissi, the cat, watched him from the sideboard. Outside, evening had already fallen, like a grey curtain on a play gone wrong.

'I can't yet say Montanaro was killed by the nail. I can say the material wasn't registered and that the same names reappear in the recent supplies. Antonelli, Teixeira, Cattaneo.'

Marino nodded, standing, overcoat still on.

'And now Orengo. The man in the leather gloves. The only one still alive. The mastermind. The centre of the network.'

'Giovanna wants him. Not for justice. For memory.'

Marino came closer to the table. 'Whose side are you on, chief?'

De Salvo stared at the glass. Then at the cat. Then at the file.

'The side of the evidence. Even when it comes late.'

In the document there was a note in the margin, in pen. A woman's handwriting. A single sentence:

"They let him die knowing what they were doing."

The Predosa Cemetery

The Predosa cemetery lay outside the village, at the top of a climbing road that turned slippery in winter. De Salvo went there one Tuesday morning, alone, telling no one. He had the Montanaro file in the car, but he didn't take it in. He left everything in the boot.

The grave was in the third row to the right of the entrance. A grey granite headstone, with a black-and-white photograph: a man of about forty, broad face, short hair, a smile that seemed surprised to be photographed. Below, the name:

"Paolo Montanaro - 1919 - 1961"

And below that, a line carved in italics:

"A man of work and of silence."

De Salvo stood before the headstone for some minutes thinking of nothing in particular. It was one of those pauses that serve no purpose and serve everything - the kind of silence you can't schedule, that comes on its own when the brain needs to stop constructing and simply be.

Montanaro was forty-two when he entered the hospital. He had spent twenty-five of those years working in the quarry, carrying on his back the weight of a house, a daughter, a life that had never asked to be extraordinary. Just regular. Just decent. Just honest.

They had operated on him with an unregistered device whose risks no one had assessed. Somebody had signed. Somebody had been paid. And he had died on an operating table with the same simplicity with which he had lived: without making noise.

De Salvo realised his hands were in his pockets and his head was bowed, the way one stands in church without quite knowing what to do with the body. He hadn't been to church in thirty years. But the gesture was the same.

He took his hands out. He stood straight.

'We found him,' he said quietly. Not to the grave - to the photograph. To that man surprised at being photographed. 'Not the way it should have gone. But we found him.'

A gust of wind stirred a few dry leaves between the flowerbeds. At the far end of the cemetery, a white cat crossed the path and disappeared behind a chapel.

De Salvo stayed another three minutes. Then he turned and walked towards the exit.

Walking down the road, he stopped a moment at the verge and looked at the village below. Predosa in the morning: low roofs, a bell tower, the fog lifting off the fields slowly, like something in no hurry. A village that had looked the same every day for a hundred years.

He thought: a woman came to this village. She stayed long enough to do what she had to do. Then she left, towards a harbour without fog.

He thought: and now it's for us to do the rest.

He went down to the car. He opened the boot. He took out the Montanaro file. He set it on the passenger seat.

He started the engine. He went back to work.

Giovanna Albinoli was seventeen when she lost her father. Her mother, Luciana, worked in the same hospital and would die thirteen years later. Paolo Montanaro was the centre of their house: calloused hands, a rough voice, laughter that was rare but true. It was he who had taught her to walk without fear, to read the road signs, to know when people were lying.

When they admitted him, Giovanna wasn't alarmed. He had taken a bad fall at work, but the doctors said the operation was simple, routine. Two days later, he was dead.

The girl had screamed. But nobody was listening.

It was Luciana who kept the batch sheet and the copy of the rejected letter. Giovanna found them together a year after her father's death. She started from those two papers.

She used her mother's name, Luciana, to pass unnoticed. She studied nursing without ever officially enrolling. She changed cities, appearance, voice. She became what was needed: an invisible extra among the wards. And in the meantime she gathered evidence, listened, seduced.

Teixeira. Antonelli. Cattaneo.

Intelligent men, pleased with themselves, complicit. Men who had signed false documents and gone on working as if Paolo Montanaro were only an archive number.

She had waited for the right moment. She had watched them, approached them, sedated them. And finally she had struck them with a surgical mallet, turning an instrument of healing into the mark of vengeance.

Now only one remained.

Carlo Orenco. The real mastermind. The man who moved everything from behind the scenes. Supervisor. Consultant. A respected man. Untouchable. But Giovanna

didn't want respect. She wanted him to suffer. She wanted him to live through the panic, the paralysis, the shame. She wanted him to remember every broken bone he had signed for.

And so she had prepared the final act.

* * *

That same night, Giovanna sat at the table of her flat in Novi. A rented two-room flat, taken in the name of Luciana Albinoli, naturally. Nothing personal on the walls. Nothing permanent in the drawers. A life that could be dismantled in twenty minutes and loaded into a suitcase.

Things had changed in the afternoon. Orengo had received a call - Giovanna knew because she had the manservant's number, and the manservant talked to his wife, and his wife was a woman who couldn't keep secrets from her beautician. The chain was long and banal, like all chains that hold.

The police had moved earlier than expected. Someone had telephoned directly. Not officially - too informal, too direct. A mistake. But a mistake that had set Orengo in motion: that morning he had called a lawyer, and in the afternoon he had unpacked a suitcase and then packed it again.

Giovanna had two days, perhaps three. Not a week, as she had calculated.

She changed the date. The theatre: Saturday, not Monday.

On the table, a notebook. She had kept it for years. No emotion, no outpouring. Only names, dates, facts. The precise documentation of every step. The document she would leave for De Salvo, at the end.

She wrote the last page in a clear hand:

"I did what a court would not have done. Not because I liked it. But because you cannot build a memory on a trial that will never come."

She closed the notebook. She turned off the light. She waited.

31

The Stage

Two days before 11 October 1978.

Giovanna had entered the Teatro Civico of Alessandria through the second-floor window, the one at the back with the lock broken for two years and nobody who had troubled to mend it. She had gone in at night, with a torch and a rucksack.

The first time she had gone only to look.

The theatre was large, dark, with that specific smell of abandoned places: damp, old dust, and beneath everything, almost buried, something older - the wood of the seats, the worn velvet, the wax of the stalls floor. The smell of when it had still been a living place.

Giovanna had stopped in the middle of the stalls. She had switched off the torch. In the darkness, she had waited for her eyes to adjust. Slowly, the hall had taken shape. The outlines of the seats. The profile of the stage. The empty balconies. At the far end, the central chandelier - unlit, covered in dust, but still there.

She had thought of her father. Of the only time they had come here together. She didn't remember the show. She remembered the smell of tobacco on her father's jacket. The weight of his hand on her shoulder. The way he had said to her, quietly: 'It's beautiful, isn't it?'

'Yes, Papà.'

'One day we'll come back.'

They hadn't come back.

* * *

On the second night she had brought everything needed: electric cables, an extension lead, six work floodlights. It had taken her three hours to wire them into the theatre's secondary fuse board. She had placed them around the stage, aimed at the centre.

Then she had brought the photographs. Printed at a shop in Turin, not in Alessandria. Four photographs, large format, framed in black: Teixeira, Antonelli, Cattaneo. And Paolo Montanaro.

She had spent twenty minutes choosing the right position for each. Teixeira at stage left, because he had been the first. Montanaro at the centre, because he was the reason for everything. Antonelli and Cattaneo at the sides, symmetrical.

When she had finished, she had sat down in a front-row seat and looked at the whole. It was what she wanted. Not a revenge - a performance. A visible indictment that no court would ever be able to stage.

Only then had she understood completely why she had chosen that place. Her father had taken her to the theatre to show her that stories could be told in a way people truly understood - not by reading, not by listening, but by seeing.

* * *

On the third night she had done one last thing. She had brought the notebook - the one with all the documentation, the years of evidence, the names and the dates and the signatures. She had left it in the right-hand dressing room, inside an envelope marked:

"For Inspector De Salvo. Novi Ligure police station."

Then she had added, in pencil, smaller:

"He already knows why."

Before leaving, she had stopped one last time in the middle of the stalls. 'It's beautiful,' she said under her breath. As her father would have said.

Then she had climbed out through the second-floor window and walked to her car without looking back.

The Theatre of the Living

The Teatro Civico of Alessandria had been closed for years. A restoration never finished, a contract vanished into the cracks of bureaucracy. From outside it looked abandoned, but Giovanna knew it well. She had gone in as a child with her father, the first and only time.

Now that forgotten place would be her stage. The last one.

Carlo Orengo received the anonymous invitation in his letterbox. A grey card, no sender.

"Come. There is something you must see."

Date: 11 October 1978. Time: 9 p.m. Place: Teatro Civico - side entrance.

He held it between his fingers for a few seconds. Then he burnt it in the ashtray. But he went all the same.

At 9.03, he entered by the back. The service lights were on. The foyer smelt of damp and dust. He advanced with an uncertain step as far as the stalls. A single seat was lit. On it, a box. Small. Black.

Orengo looked around. No one. He opened the box. Inside, a pair of pale latex gloves. And a note:

"Put them on. It is your turn now."

The voice came out of the dark. Calm. Female. Steady.

'Good evening, Dr Orengo.'

He turned. On the stage, standing at the centre of the scene, a woman in a dark suit. Hair pinned up, gaze fixed.

'You... who are you?'

'Someone who has learnt all your false signatures by heart. Someone who had to pretend to be my own mother to get into the departments where you were sending unregistered materials.'

Orengo swallowed. 'Is this a kidnapping?'

'No. It's a trial. And the audience are the dead.'

The central lights came on. Around the stage, four framed photographs: Teixeira, Antonelli, Cattaneo... and Paolo Montanaro.

Orengo took a step back. His breathing had shortened. His voice, that silent weapon he had used for thirty years never to say things clearly, had suddenly jammed.

'I've done nothing illegal,' he said. Then he added: 'Not directly.'

'No,' Giovanna agreed. 'You have never done anything directly. It's your speciality. Every part of the system moves on your behalf. You stand still and watch.'

'If you kill me, nothing changes. The system remains.'

Giovanna didn't smile. 'I don't want to kill you. I want you to stay conscious long enough to hear the names and see the papers you made disappear.'

'You're mad.'

'No. I'm methodical. There's an enormous difference. You're about to understand it.'

'My father died.'

'So did mine.'

A long silence. Orengo looked at the photographs. He stopped on Paolo Montanaro. A man he had never met, a name on a sheet of paper, a signature at the foot of a document that should not have existed.

'I didn't know he would die,' he said, quietly.

'You knew the batch wasn't registered and that my father had consented to no experiment. You approved it anyway.'

From the side of the stage came a trolley. On it, straps. Syringes. A bottle of scopolamine.

Giovanna came closer. 'It is your turn, Dr Orengo. Now listen to what you have done.'

* * *

When it was all done, she stood beside the trolley for a moment.

Orengo was motionless. Eyes open. Conscious. Unable to move his arms.

Giovanna looked at him.

She had imagined this moment for seventeen years. She had imagined it with precision: the certainty, the coldness, the compact satisfaction of closing an account that could be closed no other way. She had imagined she would feel something resembling an ending.

Instead she felt only how tired she was.

Not of him. Of all the time it had taken. Of all the years spent building something that now, done, resembled less what she had built in her head and more something smaller, more fragile, irremediably human.

Orengo was looking at her. His eyes were those of a man beginning to understand something. Perhaps the same thing she was understanding.

Giovanna straightened. She turned. She went to arrange the photographs - Teixeira, Antonelli, Cattaneo, and her father - in the position she had prepared. Her hands were steady. The plan was carried out.

She did not turn to look at him again.

The telephone rang once. Then silence. De Salvo's eyes snapped open, as if he had heard a gunshot. The room lay in the bluish dark that comes before dawn. The turntable had stopped on the run-out hiss. Sissi was crouched on the pillow, alert, as if she knew something was about to happen.

At 4.17, in a Predosa still asleep, the inspector was already dressed. Crumpled jeans, black jumper, pistol in his belt. He drank the coffee cold. No bread, no cigarette. Only that liquid silence that works its way into the bones.

Marino was waiting for him outside. 'Anonymous message. From a phone box on the main road. They've found a man naked and in shock... at the Teatro Civico in Alessandria. Strapped to a trolley.'

De Salvo didn't speak. He got into the car and started the engine. In the boot he had a thin dossier with Carlo Orengo's photograph. And a note received two days earlier, written in a clean, almost childlike hand, which he now knew by heart:

"Sometimes justice is not found in the courts. But in the theatres. Where everyone is forced to play their part, right to the end."

When they reached the theatre, the scene was already sealed off. The trolley was there. Orengo had been taken to hospital in a catatonic state. He wasn't speaking and barely responded to stimuli. Eyes staring. No visible wound. But something in him had broken.

Marino leafed through the report. 'No sign of physical violence. But he was immobilised for hours. Wrists bound with trolley straps. On his body, traces of scopolamine.'

De Salvo crouched to look at the floor. A line had been traced in chalk:

"Now you know what it means not to be able to move."

Beneath it, two initials: G. A.

The inspector stood up. 'It isn't over. Not for her.'

'Will we catch her?' Marino asked.

De Salvo looked at him, then raised his eyes to the grey sky. 'Depends whether she wants to be caught. Or whether she only wants to leave us her traces. Like a director who has already written the ending.'

The Morning of 12 October

They reached the Novi Ligure station at seven. The night had left a metallic residue in the air - that feeling of dry cold that comes before frost. Marino had the shadowed eyes of a man who hadn't slept, and hands gripping the thermos as if it were the only certain thing in the world.

On the board in the operations room, De Salvo updated the diagram. He wrote Teixeira, Antonelli and Cattaneo beneath a single word: DEAD. Then he drew a third column, wrote Orengo, and added the title: SURVIVOR.

'Survivor,' Marino read aloud, in a tone that was neither irony nor approval. Just record-keeping.

'Yes. She didn't want to kill him. She wanted him standing long enough to understand.'

'Did he understand?'

'I don't know yet. The doctors talk of heavy sedation and stress reaction.' De Salvo turned towards the window. 'Giovanna wanted him alive and conscious. The rest is for the doctors to establish.'

Marino set the thermos down. 'Did you sleep?'

'Two hours.'

'Me, zero.'

They stood in silence for a moment. From the corridor came the smell of machine coffee and the sound of someone talking loudly on the telephone.

'What do we do now?' Marino asked.

De Salvo took a marker. Under SURVIVOR he wrote: WITNESS.

'Now we build the case on the documents. The notebook found at the theatre points the way, but it comes from her.'

Marino looked up. 'And so?'

'So it's documentation gathered by the perpetrator. Useful, but every piece has to be verified independently.'

'Then what do we have?'

De Salvo wrote on the board: ORTHOLAB CONTRACTS. TEIXEIRA COMPLAINT. SPINA TESTIMONY. ORENGO VOLUNTARY STATEMENT.

'The contracts and the complaint, if Ferrero hands them over. Spina's testimony. And Orengo's statement, if he repeats it before the magistrate with his counsel present.'

'And the notebook?'

'It tells us where to look. The proof we find ourselves, in a way that holds.'

'It's not enough. A good lawyer-'

'Giovanna knew that,' De Salvo said. 'That's why she left the notebook to me, not to a magistrate. My name was on the envelope.' A pause. 'She was hoping Orengo would talk afterwards, in legal form.'

Marino nodded slowly. 'It's a legal strategy built on top of three murders.'

'Yes.'

'And we're using it.'

De Salvo didn't answer. He set the marker down on the ledge of the board.

At eight, a telegram arrived from the Alessandria prosecutor's office: urgent request for all case materials by six p.m. The prosecutor's office was waking up. It was the right moment.

De Salvo read the telegram, folded it in four, put it in his pocket. 'Marino.'

'Yes.'

'Go home. Sleep on it. Be here at two.'

'And you?'

'I'm going to Sissi.'

Marino looked at him. 'Seriously.'

'Seriously. I left the window open and nothing to eat. If I'm not back by noon, she'll take the sofa apart.'

He left before Marino could answer. In the car park, the inspector's Fiat was the only car covered in frost. He scraped it off with the back of his hand, got in, started the engine.

He drove towards Predosa with the radio off. The countryside was flat and grey, the vine rows bare as

outstretched fingers. Now and then a white bell tower against a white sky.

He thought: somewhere in this landscape there is a woman who is disappearing. Who has already begun to disappear. Who is perhaps looking at the same sky.

He thought: we won't find her. And perhaps that is as it should be.

Then he thought of something else. He thought of Sissi and the sofa.

He accelerated.

Beneath the Skin

At the hospital, Orengo didn't speak. He didn't react. No screaming. No weeping. Only a glassy stare, fixed on the ceiling, as if he were watching a scene no one else could see. The doctors called it 'post-traumatic dissociative state'. Marino called it 'a conscience blown open'.

Meanwhile, in De Salvo's office, the file grew. Every piece fitted. Every death had a motive. Every detail had been foreseen. Teixeira, Antonelli, Cattaneo. And now Orengo. Not dead. But destroyed. Perhaps the worst blow. The most human.

In the pocket of an old gown found in the theatre dressing room, Marino had discovered a torn scrap of paper. A line, written in a thin, elegant hand:

"You cannot heal a fracture without first feeling the pain." - G. A.

De Salvo slipped the scrap into the evidence envelope. Giovanna went on guiding them with sentences built to be remembered.

Back home, the inspector sat on the sofa. Sissi rubbed against his legs. The record played I'd Rather Go Blind by Etta James, low. The Dolcetto d'Acqui was finished. But he had no wish to drink.

On the table was a postcard. No postmark. No address. Only an ink drawing: a human vertebra, cracked down the middle. And beneath it, a sentence:

"Beneath the skin, we are all made of bones."

De Salvo turned the postcard over. No address, no stamp. He set it beside the other messages.

A Thing He Didn't Write

On 14 October, three days after the theatre, Marino found the trace.

He was in a bar in Novi, the Caffè della Stazione, where he went when he didn't want to think and couldn't stop. He ordered a coffee with a shot of grappa. He sat by the window.

At the counter, two women were talking. One was the owner of the bar. The other was a lady in her fifties, green headscarf, a straw bag out of season. Marino wasn't listening. Then he heard: 'The girl from the flat in Via Cavour left last night. She left the key under the mat, left me three weeks' rent counted out on the kitchen table. In cash. Not even a note.'

Marino set down his cup.

'What was she like?' the owner said.

'Tall. Dark hair. Well mannered. Worked at the hospital, she said. Made no noise. Never had visitors.'

Marino opened his notebook. Then he closed it again.

He sat still for a moment. The window gave onto the wet pavement. A cat crossed the road in no hurry.

He thought: Via Cavour. Three weeks' rent. Dark hair. Hospital.

Then he thought of De Salvo, of what he would do with a trace like this. He wasn't sure of the answer.

He opened the notebook again. He wrote the date. He wrote: Caffè della Stazione. Then he stopped.

The owner was stacking cups. The woman with the headscarf was leaving.

Marino tore out the page. Carefully, along the line. He folded it in four. He put it in his coat pocket, not in the notebook. The pocket where he kept private things.

He paid for the coffee. He went out.

In the car, before starting the engine, he sat for a minute with his hands on the wheel. He thought: De Salvo would have reported it. Perhaps.

He thought: I won't.

It wasn't a moral choice. It was simply what he was. He was still deciding which side to stand on - but he had just understood that the answer wasn't a single side. It was more complicated than that. It was living with what he knew and with what he didn't say. It was exactly the kind of thing he had believed himself incapable of doing, and it was the thing he was doing.

He started the engine. He went to the station. He reported that there was no trace of Giovanna Albinoli.

In the afternoon he filled in three routine reports. In the evening he went back to Valentina's and said nothing. Not about Giovanna, not about the trace, not about the torn-out page in his coat pocket.

Valentina asked him if he was all right. He said yes.

It wasn't entirely false. It was only incomplete.

Bed Number Eleven

Carlo Orenco lay in bed eleven of the medical ward at the Alessandria hospital, watched by an officer. The doctors spoke of acute stress reaction and the residual effects of the sedative.

De Salvo obtained permission to see him on the third day.

The room was white. A bed, a chair, a high window onto the courtyard. Orenco sat up in bed with his back against the headboard. He was looking at the opposite wall with eyes that were not empty - they were full of something that could not be seen from outside.

De Salvo came in. He sat down on the chair. He said nothing for a full minute.

It was Orenco who spoke first. The voice had changed: that controlled diction, built syllable by syllable, had crumbled. What remained was the voice of a man who had stopped choosing his words.

'Do you know what it's like,' he said, 'when you can't move your arms?'

De Salvo waited.

'It isn't the pain. Pain can be borne. It's the impossibility of reacting. You're conscious, you feel everything, but you can do nothing. Nothing. Not even close a fist.'

'It's the effect of the sedative,' De Salvo said.

'Yes.' A long pause. 'It's what I did, for years. To people who didn't know anything was happening. Patients who put themselves in our hands.'

De Salvo stiffened slightly. He hadn't expected that. 'Are you saying you were wrong?'

Orenco looked at him. For a moment the old Orenco returned: that silent appraisal, the calculation of how much to concede. 'Inspector, you're here for a confession.'

'I'm here to find out whether you intend to talk. If you do, I'll call the magistrate and your counsel.'

'Experimental protocols have a history. Risks are documented, accepted. That is how clinical research works.'

'Montanaro signed nothing. He was told nothing.'

Orengo's fingers moved once on the sheet, then stopped. 'He was a quarryman. Would he have understood a technical form?'

'He was forty-two and he could read. But you gave him no form at all.'

A long silence. The barred window, the white wall, the hum of the corridor outside. Orengo looked at the wall again.

'I'm saying I know what it feels like. Now I know.' Orengo moved his eyes from the wall. He set them on De Salvo for the first time. 'That girl is more intelligent than you.'

'Probably.'

'She didn't want to kill me. She wanted me to understand. There's a difference.'

'There's a difference,' De Salvo agreed. 'But she killed three people.'

'People who killed her father.'

'That doesn't give her the right.'

'No,' Orengo interrupted. 'It gives her no right at all. But it gives her a reason. And I no longer have the energy to pretend that reasons don't exist.'

He was silent for a moment. Then: 'I approved supplies that should never have entered the hospitals. I knew the controls were missing and I decided the risk was acceptable.' His voice was flat. 'Montanaro was the first incident that forced us to change the codes. Not the last.'

De Salvo didn't open his notebook. He called the officer into the corridor. 'Notify the deputy prosecutor and Dr Orengo's counsel. Until they arrive I take down nothing more.'

Orengo nodded. 'I'll wait for them.'

When it was over, Orengo had gone back to staring at the wall. 'Will you find her?' he asked.

'Giovanna?'

'Yes.'

De Salvo put the notebook back in his pocket. 'Depends whether she wants to be found.'

'I hope not,' Orengo said. He had the voice of a man who has already decided to fight no more. 'I hope she goes far away. She did what needed doing. Even if in a way I would not have chosen.'

De Salvo stood up. 'If you should remember anything else-'

'I remember everything,' Orengo said. 'That's the problem. Now I remember everything.'

De Salvo went out. In the corridor, Marino was waiting with two cups of machine coffee.

'How did it go?'

'He wants to make a statement before the magistrate and his lawyer.'

Marino held the cup in both hands. 'Because of what Giovanna did to him?'

'Because of what she showed him. Don't confuse the two.'

Marino went back to Valentina's a week later. He brought two bottles of Barbera and half a kilo of cheese - peace in Piedmont is made like that, with something concrete to put on the table.

She opened the door without surprise. She looked at him. Then she stepped aside to let him in.

They ate almost in silence. The cheese, the bread, the wine. The kitchen had that smell of home Marino had learnt to associate with Valentina: wood, Marseille soap, something faintly sweet he had never managed to identify.

'How is it going?' she asked.

'The case is closing. More or less.'

'More or less.'

'The mastermind has confessed. The killer has vanished. I don't know if we'll catch her.'

Valentina poured more wine. 'And you? How are you?'

Marino paused. He set down his glass. 'I've spent three weeks trying to work out whether what that woman did was wrong.'

'And?'

'It was wrong. She killed three men. But without those crimes nobody would have reopened the papers.'

Valentina looked at him without speaking.

'Her father died because of unregistered material implanted in a public hospital. The people responsible knew. Nobody ever touched them. She waited years, she gathered evidence - and then she decided no court would listen to it. Perhaps she was right about that, not about what she did afterwards.'

'And so?'

'And so I'm afraid of what I think.'

'What do you think?'

Marino took the glass. He looked into it. 'That the system I defend doesn't work well enough to deserve my absolute loyalty.'

Valentina was silent for a moment. Then she said: 'My father says a vet has to tell the difference between what he can cure and what he can only document. Otherwise he lies to the owner and to himself.'

Marino looked at her. 'That's a depressing thing.'

'It's an honest thing.'

He stayed a little longer. Then Valentina said, in the same level voice she used for important things: 'You can stay, if you want.'

It was the first time she had said it like that, without taking it for granted.

Marino stayed.

Before dawn, while she slept, he got up and went to the kitchen. He opened the notebook at the last page.

He crossed out the sentence he had written three weeks earlier - What do I do with what I know? - and in its place he wrote:

"Bear witness. For now, that is enough."

He closed the notebook. He went back to bed.

Outside, Piedmont was slowly beginning to be day.

Ferrero Speaks

Ferrero presented himself at the station on 19 October, without an appointment, without a lawyer. He carried a worn leather bag and the air of a man who has decided something in the middle of the night and hasn't yet repented of it.

De Salvo showed him into the interview room - not the official one with the metal table and the neon lamps, but the meeting room, the one with the worn sofas and the window onto the courtyard. A deliberate choice: he didn't want him to feel accused. He wanted him to talk.

Ferrero opened the bag. He took out a folder. He set it on the table. 'There are twelve documents. Copies of the originals. Three estimates with Orengo's signature as supervisor of the G project. Four internal communications between the supplier and the department. Five materials-entry authorisations bearing the initials C. O. as approval.'

De Salvo touched nothing. 'How long have you had them?'

'From the beginning. I kept them in the safe.'

'Why didn't you hand them over before?'

Ferrero met his gaze. 'Because I was afraid.' He said it without embellishing anything. 'Teixeira had spoken to me about it. In 1961 he had countersigned Montanaro's theatre register; last year he recognised the same code in the new supplies. He had kept silent for years, then he tried to put it right. I told him to wait. I waited too long and he died.' A pause. 'What happened afterwards... the deaths... I didn't understand them at first. Then I understood.'

'What did you understand?'

'That someone was doing what I hadn't the courage to do.'

De Salvo opened the folder. He leafed through the documents without hurry. They were exactly what he had said: signatures, authorisations, the traces of a network built on paper with the same care with which one builds a credible lie.

'Is this a voluntary statement?'

'Yes.'

'You'll have to repeat it before a magistrate.'

'I know.'

'You'll lose your post.'

'I know that too.' Ferrero looked at the window onto the courtyard. 'I've already written my resignation. I hand it in tomorrow.'

De Salvo looked at him. Ferrero had failed out of fear; now he was trying to make amends. Sometimes that was all you could get.

'Anything else?'

'A name.' Ferrero opened the bag again. He took out a sheet of paper. 'Senator Luigi Brega. He telephoned the institution twice during the internal inquiry into the Montanaro case. The second time he spoke to me directly. He told me that certain matters were best left to the competent.'

'Competent in the sense of...'

'In the sense of people who knew how to keep them still.'

De Salvo took the sheet. He looked at it. Brega's name was already on the station board - but as a hypothesis, not a certainty. Now it was a certainty.

'Thank you, Dr Ferrero.'

'Don't thank me. I've done nothing heroic.'

'No,' De Salvo said. 'You've done the only useful thing that remained. For certain cases, that's enough.'

Ferrero stood up. He remained a moment on his feet with the bag in his hand, as if still searching for something to add. Then he left without saying it.

De Salvo stayed seated. Then he returned the twelve documents to the folder, one at a time.

Outside, Novi was turning dark in the low orange light of late afternoon.

He thought: now we have enough to begin. Not for Giovanna - she is already beyond reach. For Orengo. For Brega. For Montanaro.

He went to telephone the magistrate.

The File Under the Cherry Tree

At first light, Sissi woke De Salvo. She stood on the kitchen cupboard, tail bushed, ears strained forward. And growling.

A deep sound he had never heard before.

Ugo rose in silence, took the pistol from the bedside table and went to the window. Outside, the dark was solid, and yet under the cherry tree in the garden something was moving. A shadow. Light. Silent.

He opened the door. He went down the steps barefoot, without switching on the light. His footsteps sank into the wet grass. From the cherry tree's lowest branch hung a folder of documents. Real. Heavy. Bound. On it, in red, the name:

"Giovanna Albinoli."

He went back inside, sat at the kitchen table and opened it.

He read for an hour and a half. Outside, dawn came in.

Inside were carbon copies of three letters sent by Luciana Albinoli between 1961 and 1963: to the hospital administration, the Medical Association and the prosecutor's office. Two bore the received stamp; none had had any follow-up. There were also unsigned replies from the supplier and a handwritten list of batches from the seventies.

At the back, a page from Giovanna's notebook:

"My mother tried with letters. I tried with evidence. When I understood it wasn't enough, I chose the hammer. This does not absolve me. It only prevents you from saying you didn't know."

De Salvo read it twice, closed the file and telephoned the prosecutor's office.

Sissi stared at the door. He shot the bolt, set down the pistol and stroked her. 'Good girl,' he said. 'You found the evidence.'

The Last Fracture

The old farmhouse had been abandoned for decades. Ugo De Salvo knew it. It stood a little beyond Castelferro, wedged between two fields left untilled. Once a deaf farmer had lived there, raising goats and blasphemies. Then, nothing. Only weeds, mould and wind.

When he received the address, handwritten, unsigned, he didn't hesitate.

He went alone. He left Marino in charge. Sissi shut in the house, with a full bowl and the radio tuned to a jazz station. The pistol was in his jacket. But he didn't touch it.

The gate creaked like a confession. The door stood ajar. Inside, a smell of dust and rust. And silence.

At the centre of the room, a chair. And on it, Giovanna Albinoli.

Dressed in black, pale eyes, a face marked by exhaustion. But lucid. More alive than De Salvo had ever seen her.

'Inspector,' she said. 'You're in time.'

'In time for what?'

'To see the ending. To know why.'

On the table beside her, a file. The same dossier on Paolo Montanaro, with the addition of reports, letters, copies of correspondence, documents falsified by Orengo and signed by different hands. Everything.

'These things had to come to the surface. But not in the courts. Not among lawyers and plea bargains. They had to come out in the flesh, in the bone. Where the pain is felt.'

Ugo stared at her in silence.

'Do you think you have done justice?'

'I don't believe in justice. I believe in memory. And pain... is the longest form of memory.'

'You killed three people.'

'Three people who killed my father. Not with their hands - with their signatures. With their silences. With their eyes turned the other way.'

De Salvo took a step forward. 'There's a warrant out in your name.'

'I know.'

'But first...' He stopped. He looked at the file on the table. 'First I want to understand one thing.'

'Ask.'

'How did you know about me? Why did you choose me as your witness?'

Giovanna hesitated. Then she said: 'Because you're the only one who, in Turin, had already tried to do the right thing. And stopped. Not out of fear. Out of loneliness.'

De Salvo didn't answer.

'This time you're not alone,' she said. 'You have everything you need to close the case. And to keep it open in your conscience.'

Giovanna stood up. She was pale, but unbowed. She held out a key.

'In the drawer below. You'll find what's needed to close the case.'

De Salvo opened it. Inside, a recording on magnetic tape. He listened to it all the way through, sitting on the edge of the chair. Orengo's voice: cold, technical, without a trace of remorse. False signatures. Prostheses sold. Institutional complicity. Everything.

He sat still with the tape in his hand.

He already knew what any lawyer would say: a recording obtained by a civilian from a sedated man with no counsel present could not carry a prosecution on its own. It would serve only to show where to look.

Giovanna knew that. She had calculated it.

The tape was not evidence. It was a map. It was telling him: look here, search here - then find the proof yourself, in a way that holds.

Behind him a hinge groaned. De Salvo recognised the sound of the door. He had only to turn round, but he

stayed with the tape in his hands until the end. When he looked back towards the chair, Giovanna was gone.

He went out. Outside, only fog. No sound. No footprints.

On the chair, a single object: an orthopaedic hammer, left with care. And engraved on the handle, with surgical precision, the name:

"Paolo Montanaro"

De Salvo stood motionless for a long moment.

Then he put the hammer in the evidence bag.

He went back to the car. He drove off slowly, along the road that skirted the untilled fields. The radio was off. The sky was white. Somewhere beyond the fog was Predosa. There was Sissi waiting. There was a turntable with a record to put on.

He didn't yet know which.

What Remains

On 3 November 1978 De Salvo forwarded to the prosecutor's office the concluding report of the preliminary investigation. Three murders attributed to Giovanna Albinoli, still at large. Carlo Orengo under investigation for criminal conspiracy, fraud in public supply contracts, forgery and manslaughter in connection with the death of Paolo Montanaro.

De Salvo signed the last page of the report and set it on the desk of the Questore, who read it without a word for a full minute. Then he looked up. 'The perpetrator?'

'At large. No recent sightings.'

'Are we looking for her?'

'The warrant is active.'

The Questore drummed his fingers on the file. 'De Salvo.'

'Sir.'

'Do you think this woman deserves to be found?'

A brief silence. 'That's not a question I can answer on duty, sir.'

'No, of course not.' The Questore leafed through the file. 'The Orengo case will drag on for years. His lawyers will try everything. But the voluntary statement holds - I've shown it to three magistrates.'

'I know.'

'Your doing.'

'Others' too.'

The Questore looked at him. He didn't ask whose. 'You may go, Inspector.'

* * *

That evening, De Salvo got home at six. Sissi was on the windowsill. When he opened the door, she came in unhurried, went to the empty bowl, then came back

towards De Salvo with her tail raised. 'Understood,' he said.

He opened her a tin. She ate. He made himself coffee, sat down at the kitchen table, opened the notebook. He read what he had noted down on the day of the meeting at the farmhouse: Giovanna's words, transcribed in the car before driving off.

"Do you think you have done justice?" "I don't believe in justice. I believe in memory."

He reread that line three times. Then he opened a new page and wrote:

"Paolo Montanaro, quarryman, forty-two, died on 11 April 1961 after the implant of an unregistered femoral nail. His daughter Giovanna forced the system to look, by killing three men. She had a reason; she did not have the right. The system had failed before she did."

He sat looking at those words. Then he turned the page, as if he wanted to separate them from the rest.

On the turntable he put a record: Mississippi John Hurt, Avalon Blues. A hoarse, gentle voice, a guitar that seemed to think between one note and the next. The oldest music of the blues, the kind that shouted nothing - it simply stood there, bearing witness.

Sissi jumped onto the table. She sat down beside the notebook. 'Right,' De Salvo said.

Outside, Predosa was silent. The November air already had that specific quality: not yet cold, not yet damp. Only a soft grey that flattened the outlines. De Salvo stayed at the table until late. He didn't drink. He didn't smoke. He listened to the record to the end, then turned it over and listened again. When he went to bed, he left the notebook open on the table.

The Magistrate of Alessandria

Dr Emilio Rastelli was forty-six, with round spectacles and the face of a man who has read too many files and slept too little. He had been a deputy prosecutor in Alessandria for eight years. There was nothing personal in his office: no photograph, no object, only law books and piles of papers arranged in descending order of height, a kind of paper skyline.

De Salvo knew him by sight. They had crossed paths two years earlier over a receiving case that had come to nothing. Rastelli was one of those who preferred doing things well to doing them fast - a rare characteristic, and prized for that reason.

'Inspector.' He received him without rising. He indicated the chair in front of the desk. 'I've read the material. It's a great deal.'

'Yes.'

'Twelve documents from Ferrero. Giovanna Albinoli's notebook. Spina's deposition. Orengo's voluntary statement at bed eleven.' Rastelli opened a drawer and took out the tape in a transparent bag. 'The recording I don't cite. I've listened to it. It tells me where to look. But it doesn't go in the file.'

De Salvo didn't ask why. It wasn't necessary.

'Then what holds?'

'The Ortholab contracts with the initials C. O. are authentic documents with an identifiable signature. Teixeira's complaint is a logged internal act - it's on the record, it can't disappear. Spina is an eyewitness to the transfers. And Orengo confirmed the facts before me and his counsel. That statement goes in the file.'

'It's a case built on top of three murders and evidence a good lawyer can contest.'

'Yes,' Rastelli said. 'That is exactly the case.'

Rastelli looked at him. 'But you want me to proceed all the same.'

'I want you to proceed because Paolo Montanaro died with an experimental prosthesis in his femur and no one has ever answered for it. That is the case. Everything else is frame.'

Silence. Rastelli opened the file. He leafed through it with the practised fingers of a man who knows exactly where to look. He stopped at the copy of the Ortholab-Santa Caterina contract with the initials C. O. in the margin. He held it up to the light.

'Do you know what interests me about these initials?' he said. 'It isn't a signature. It's an approval. One of those annotations an executive puts on a document to say: I have seen, I have understood, proceed. One doesn't sign a crime - one approves it. It's how certain men keep their hands clean.'

'Exactly.'

'And then somebody decided those hands weren't clean enough.' Rastelli closed the file. 'I proceed. Not because the case is perfect - it isn't. But because if we don't do it now, with this material, we never do it.'

He stood. He held out his hand. De Salvo shook it.

'There's one thing I have to ask you,' the magistrate said. 'The woman. Giovanna Albinoli. If she were to come forward voluntarily - and I stress voluntarily - she could cooperate and make a full confession. It will be for the judge to weigh it.'

De Salvo stood motionless for a second. 'I don't know where she is.'

'Of course.' Rastelli replaced his spectacles. 'But if you should come to know, tell me before you tell anyone else.'

De Salvo went out without replying. In the corridor of the courthouse, the sound of footsteps on the marble seemed too loud, as in an emptied church. Outside, the Alessandria sky was solid grey, that grey which promises neither rain nor clearing.

He walked towards the car. He thought of the postcard on the windowsill at home - the harbour, the white boats, the light that was not Piedmont's.

He thought: I won't tell anyone.

He opened the door. He got in. He started the engine. He drove back towards Predosa.

The Man Who Didn't Rise

Senator Luigi Brega received the summons to appear as a witness on 18 December 1978, at eleven in the morning. The court officer delivered it to the front office of his practice in Alessandria. Brega was in, but he kept the man waiting forty minutes before coming out.

He was a man in his sixties, white hair carefully combed, dark grey suit. He was neither bulky nor threatening. He had the face of a man who has learnt to last - not to win, to last. There is a difference.

The officer said: 'Summons in the capacity of witness. Orengo trial, proceedings no. 247/1978. Hearing set for-'

'I've read it,' Brega interrupted. The voice was calm. The voice of a man who has never needed to raise it.

'You must sign for receipt.'

Brega took the pen from his breast pocket. He signed. He handed the pen back without looking at the officer.

'Anything else?' he said.

'No, Senator.'

'Then good day.'

The officer left.

Brega stood still for a moment. Then he returned to his desk. He opened the summons. He read it carefully, the way one reads a contract - looking for the clauses, not the words. When he finished, he laid it on the desktop and turned it face down.

He picked up the telephone. He dialled a number.

'It's me,' he said when the other answered. 'They've set it for January. Yes.' A pause. 'I know. But Orengo has already talked.' Another pause, longer. 'No. We do nothing. We testify. We answer what they ask and only that. Witness, not accused. For now.'

He hung up.

He stayed seated at the desk a few minutes more. He looked at the garden through the window: the bare vine

rows, the wet earth, a sky that promised neither rain nor sun. A landscape he had looked at for forty years and never found beautiful or ugly. Only present.

He opened the right-hand drawer. He took out a thin folder. He opened it. Inside: copies of three contracts, all with the initials C. O. in the margin. He looked at them one by one. Then he put them back in the drawer and turned the key.

It wasn't fear, what he felt. It was the precise sensation of a man who has run long enough to know that sooner or later one slows. The moment had come earlier than expected. But it had come.

He rose. He went to the window. He looked at the bare rows.

He thought: Orengo was manageable. This is not.

He said nothing aloud. There was no one to warn. He was a man who had learnt to do his sums alone, in silence, without witnesses. It was that capacity that had kept him standing so long.

But the name Giovanna Albinoli was not in the folder. It was in no document he possessed. She was a variable he had not foreseen, and men like him do not love the variables they have not foreseen.

He returned to the desk. He took paper and pen. He wrote three lines to his lawyer. He signed them. He sealed them in an envelope.

Then he called his secretary. 'I'll take this myself,' he said. 'This morning I'm going out on foot.'

Outside, the December cold was dry and clean. Brega walked slowly along the arcades of Alessandria. The city knew him. Some greeted him. He answered with a nod of the head, without stopping.

He thought: I still have time.

It was what men like him always told themselves, even when the time was running out.

The Last Snow

December 1978.

The first snow of the year came in the night, silent and precise as certain decisions. De Salvo woke at six and found Predosa covered in white. The fog was still there, but beneath it lay the snow, and the combination of the two made a strange, milky light, as if the world had decided to stop being defined.

Sissi was in the middle of the bed, forepaws tucked under her body in that loaf position she assumed when the cold was truly cold. She didn't move when he got up. She only shifted her ears.

De Salvo made coffee. He sat at the table. On the windowsill, Giovanna's postcard had been there six weeks. The harbour without fog. The white boats. And on the back, three lines he now knew by heart: 'The sea has no fog. It will take me time to get used to it. G.'

He opened the notebook at the last written page. He read: Bear witness. For now, that is enough. It was Marino's line - but in recent days it had become his too.

The Orengo investigation would last years. Rastelli was good, but the system is slow when it is defending itself. Brega had already engaged two lawyers. The newspapers had begun covering the case with that particular caution reserved for names that still have friends in the right places. The Montanaro case had become 'the prostheses case', as if the death of a man could be reduced to a category of merchandise.

De Salvo closed the notebook.

He got up. He went to the record player. He had spent a week looking for the right record for that morning. Not Howlin' Wolf - too angry. Not Etta James - too melancholy. He had found what he was looking for three days earlier in a shop in Acqui: Robert Johnson, King of the Delta Blues Singers. The first blues. The root of everything.

He put the record on. The needle found the groove. The first seconds were pure hiss, then Johnson's voice filled the room like smoke: Cross Road Blues. A voice recorded in 1936 in a Mississippi hotel room, in a quality so poor it seemed to come from another dimension of time. And yet it was there, precise, true, impossible to ignore.

De Salvo sat down to listen.

Sissi came down from the bed. She walked to the kitchen with a regal step, sniffed the empty bowl, came back into the sitting room and sat down near the record player to listen too. It was the first time she had done it.

'Good girl,' De Salvo said.

* * *

Marino arrived at nine. He knocked, came in, poured himself a coffee without asking.

'There's something I have to tell you.'

'Tell me.'

'I spoke to Rastelli last night. Senator Brega will be heard as a witness on 15 January. Not as a defendant - yet. But Rastelli has the documents and he intends to use them.'

De Salvo said nothing. He kept looking at the record player.

'It's good news,' Marino said.

'Yes.'

'You don't seem convinced.'

'I'm convinced. It's just that good news in this job always comes with an edge of something else.'

Marino sat down. 'Is the edge Giovanna?'

De Salvo didn't answer at once. Outside, the Predosa snow was untouched - no passers-by, no tracks yet. A landscape that seemed to be waiting for something.

'The edge,' he said at last, 'is that she did the right thing the wrong way, and we're doing the right thing the right way, and in the end the result might be the same. Or worse.'

'Then what's the right way for?'

De Salvo looked up. 'So you can look at yourself in the mirror.' A pause. 'More or less.'

Marino laughed softly. It was a tired laugh, but it was a laugh.

They stayed there a while, both with coffee in hand, with Robert Johnson's voice filling the space between one word and the next. Sissi had fallen asleep near the record player with her tail wrapped round her paws.

At ten, Marino stood up. 'I have to go. Valentina wants us to put up the Christmas tree.'

'Didn't you say you weren't getting married till January?'

'The tree goes up on the first of December.' He said it in the voice of a man who has learnt a new rule and isn't yet sure he subscribes to it. 'At least, that's what she says.'

De Salvo saw him to the door. Outside, Marino's footprints in the snow were the first of the morning.

'Marino.'

'Yes?'

'You did well. In everything.'

Marino stood still for a second. Then he nodded, without a word, and walked towards the car.

De Salvo stayed on the threshold. The cold came in, but he didn't move at once. He looked at the white snow on the roofs, on the bell tower, on the fields. He looked at the solid grey sky that promised neither rain nor clearing but held everything still, suspended, like a question that has not yet found the right answer.

He thought of Giovanna. Of a harbour without fog. Of a different light.

Then he went back in. He closed the door.

On the turntable, Robert Johnson was still singing.

November 1979

A year later.

The Orenco trial was still under way. The defence had lodged four procedural objections, two requests for psychiatric assessment, one challenge to territorial jurisdiction. The investigating judge had rejected them all. The case moved on.

De Salvo had stopped following it in the papers. Marino followed it, and now and then came by with the cutting from the *Corriere di Alessandria* and laid it on the desk without a word. It was their code.

Clara Merli had found a lawyer willing to take her case without an advance fee. She had joined the proceedings as a civil claimant. She still walked with that very slight asymmetry that would never pass. She still taught primary school.

De Salvo had met her once, by chance, at the Valenza market. 'Any news?'

'The trial goes forward. Slowly, but it goes.'

'And the woman?'

'She hasn't been found.'

Clara had nodded. 'Good.' Then she had picked up her shopping bag and walked away.

* * *

Marino had married Valentina in September. A small ceremony, at the town hall, lunch in a trattoria. De Salvo had arrived with a bottle of Barolo and left before the coffee.

Marino had caught him at the door. 'Thank you for coming.'

'I had nothing better to do.'

Marino had smiled - that smile that could read the inspector's words backwards.

* * *

One November morning - the 7th, a little over a year after the first murder - De Salvo found an envelope in his letterbox. No sender. A5 format, sealed with wax. No name on it.

De Salvo stood motionless at the door for a long moment. Sissi passed between his legs and went in.

He carried the envelope to the kitchen. He set it on the table, beside the windowsill where Giovanna's postcard - the harbour, the white boats, the G - had stood for a year. He put on a record: Skip James, Devil Got My Woman. The strangest voice in the blues, the one that seemed to come from another time.

He made the coffee.

He looked at the envelope while he waited for the coffee to come through. It was well sealed. Heavy. Not a letter: something thicker, folded sheets.

He took the coffee. He sat down. Sissi jumped onto the table and sat down beside the envelope, as if standing guard.

'I know,' De Salvo said.

He opened the envelope.

Inside was a sheet of paper. Written in that hand he now knew. At the top, no heading. Only this:

"There are others. Not all the accounts have been settled. What to do with this is for you to decide. G."

And below, a list. Seven names. Beside each: town, hospital, year, prosthesis model.

De Salvo read the list to the end. Then he read it again. He laid the sheet on the table, slowly, as if it weighed more than it seemed.

Sissi came closer, sniffed the sheet. Then she raised her eyes to him.

Outside, Predosa was silent. The morning light came slanting through the window. Giovanna's postcard on the windowsill - the harbour, the white boats, the G - caught that light and gave it back in a strange way, almost as if it were alive.

De Salvo sat for a long time with that list in front of him.

Then he got up. He opened the drawer. Not the notebook drawer - the bottom one, the one where he kept the things he didn't yet know what to do with.

He paused a moment with the sheet in his hand.

Sissi watched him.

De Salvo left the list on the table and closed the empty drawer. He put on his overcoat. He went out.

The sheet was still on the table.

Author's Note

I wrote *The Bonebreaker* from a single intuition: the most unsettling acts of vengeance are not those in which the guilty are eliminated, but those in which someone is left behind, forced to bear witness. Giovanna Albinoli seeks no absolution. She wants Ugo De Salvo to know, and the papers, at last, to speak.

The novel is set in Lower Piedmont in 1978. Characters, health institutions, companies and events are the author's invention; any resemblance to real persons or facts is unintended.