ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 112
FICTION



HOLD HER UNDER UNTIL SHE LOVES YOU

CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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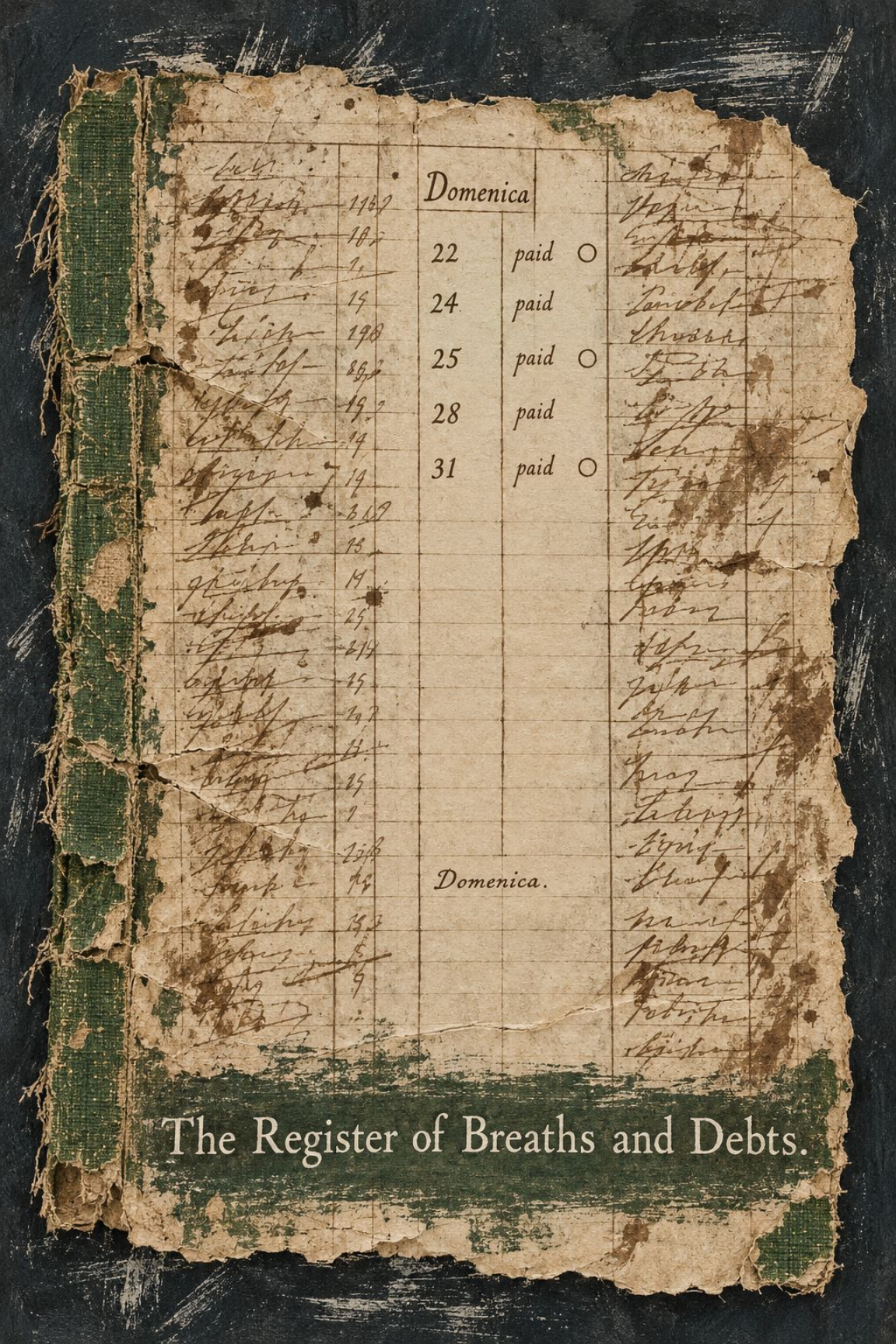
ISBN 979-8-952790-111 (provisional)

Roya Publications

Publication No. 112

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach


Domenica
22 paid
24 paid
25 paid
28 paid
31 paid
Domenica.
The Register of Breaths and Debts.

SYNOPSIS

Naples sits between two volcanoes, and the one under its western half is waking. Every month the ground beneath the old town of Pozzuoli rises a little higher, and every month three million people decide, once again, not to be afraid.

Domenica Esposito has never had to decide. Left as a baby on the steps of a church in 1992, she was taken before anyone could write her name down, and she has no papers, no number and no face in any computer. She was born without fear. Not with a little, or with less than most: with none. Two small almond-shaped parts deep in her brain, the parts that tell the rest of us to be afraid, have been stone since she was a child.

A secret order raised her. The Held are forty respectable, frightened people, a notary, a banker, a priest, a pharmacist, who meet on Sunday mornings above a pharmacy by the sea. For three hundred and seventy years they have found children like Domenica and kept them on the only leash such a child can wear. Every Sunday, in a cave where volcanic gas lies on the floor like an invisible lake, an old man named Ferrante holds her face down in the poison until her body screams, and then lifts her out into the air. She calls it love. On the other six days she goes wherever the Held send her, and does whatever no one else can.

Then a doctor gives her a single breath from a mask, and she recognises the feeling.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book contains killing, torture, the suffocation of children and adults, and harm to children described in its aftermath. Its language is foul. It is the darkest thing Roya has published, and I would rather you knew that before the first page than after it.

This book began with a question I could not put down. What would a person be capable of if they had never once been afraid? Not brave, because bravery is having fear and going anyway. Just without it, the way some people are born without the sense of smell.

The answer starts with a real woman, known in the scientific papers only as S.M. A rare inherited illness, Urbach-Wiethe disease, turned the two fear centres of her brain to calcium when she was a child. When a man held a knife to her throat in a park, she was calm, and the next night she walked through the same park. Then, in 2013, researchers in Iowa asked her to breathe one lungful of air heavy with carbon dioxide, and she panicked for the first time since childhood. Fear of not being able to breathe comes up another road. Domenica was built in that gap.

The Cave of the Dog is real too: a short passage near Agnano where volcanic gas pools on the floor, and where guides once held dogs down for paying travellers. The ground under Pozzuoli really is rising. The foundling wheel, the skulls of the Fontanelle and the city's plagues, massacres and uprisings are history. The Held, the Foundation, the Book of Choosing and every person in this story are invented. So are the evacuation, the swarm of December 2026 and everything that happens in it.

What I hope the book leaves you with is a single question: whether what you would call your own goodness comes from somewhere in you, or from the heavy air round your feet.

Chew Z

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I. THE WHEEL

1. Nothing in the Room Was Frightening

> *You do not breathe until you are lifted.*
> — The First Rule of the Held, as it is taught to children

The man with the cleaver had been cutting onions before I came in.

There was a crescent of white onion stuck to the flat of the blade, and the whole kitchen smelled of it, sweet and sharp, laid over a deeper smell of meat that had been cooking in tomato since noon. It was a Saturday. On a Saturday in Naples every second kitchen has a ragù [rah-GOO] on the stove. That is beef and pork, sometimes a rind of something, sunk in tomato and left on the lowest flame for six hours. Whoever walks past gives it a stir, so that on Sunday the family can eat it and say it was worth the gas. In this city you can find a building by the smell of its Saturday. I found this one that way. The address was only there to confirm it.

There were three people in the kitchen.

The first sat at the table with his right hand flat on the oilcloth and his fingers spread, the way a child presses a hand onto paper so someone can trace around it. He was fifty-one and heavy. He wore a vest that had been white on Monday, and he had a gold chain buried in the hair of his chest like a wire in a hedge. He was the debt.

The second stood over him with the cleaver. Twenty-five, gym arms, a phone in his back pocket with the screen cracked in a star. He worked for a lending app. Those are the new moneylenders. You borrow with one tap of your thumb, at interest that would make a priest cross himself. When you cannot pay, the app sends a boy. This was the boy. He was not the debt. He was a coincidence, and I don’t like coincidences. They are untidy.

The third was the wife. She stood by the stove holding a wooden spoon upright, like a candle in a procession. She was the client. Two weeks before, she had folded six fifty-euro notes very small and pushed them into the little wooden house of a skull. Then she had asked, so quietly that the man taking her request had to bend down to hear, for her husband to stop.

And then there was the heavy air.

I should tell you about the heavy air now, at the start, because you will need it. You have never seen it, and I have never seen anything else.

When a person is afraid, I see the fear come off them. It is like the shimmer over a road in August: colourless, faintly bending the light behind it. It is heavy, so it does not rise. It sinks. It pours off a frightened body and settles on the floor, and it fills a room from the bottom up, the way water fills a bath. I have never needed anyone to tell me how afraid they are. I look at their legs.

In that kitchen the heavy air stood at the knee.

The husband sat in it to his waist. The boy with the cleaver stood in it to his shins, and it was rising, because I had just walked in and he did not know who I was. The wife stood in the deepest of it. It came up to her chest. She had been standing in it, I think, for about twenty years, and she had stopped noticing, the way you stop noticing the sea when you live beside it.

Some people live in it up to the neck. You know some of them. You may be one.

I have none of my own. Not a drop. I walk through rooms and my shoes come out dry.

The door had been on the latch. In the Sanità [sah-nee-TAH] the doors are always on the latch, because there is nothing to steal but each other. The Sanità is a quarter of the city built in a ditch. It is a long, deep valley just outside where the old walls stood. The Greeks buried their dead there, and then the Romans, and then the Christians, who dug catacombs into the soft yellow rock, underground tunnels of graves, and painted saints on the walls of the graves. Later the living moved in on top of the dead and built palaces, and the palaces fell on hard times and filled up with families. Two hundred years ago the French kings who ruled Naples built a bridge clean over the whole valley, so the royal carriage could go from the city to the palace on the hill without passing through the Sanità at all. The Sanità has lived under that bridge ever since. It has laundry for flags and a shrine on every corner. Its boys are good with motorbikes and knives. Its grandmothers can

tell you which saint to ask for what, and how much the saint will cost.

I went in. I went past the three of them to the stove, took the wooden spoon out of the wife's hand, dipped it, blew on it and tasted.

"Too much salt," I said.

All three of them turned and looked at me. Nobody had noticed me until then. That happens. People notice a body by the fear that comes off it, the way a dog notices a smell, and I don't give them any.

"Who the fuck are you?" said the boy.

"You can save it with a potato," I said to the wife. "Peel one, cut it in half, put it in for twenty minutes, take it out. It drinks the salt."

The boy pointed the cleaver at me.

I'll tell you what I saw, because seeing is what I do instead of the other thing.

It was a cheap cleaver, six euros at most, from the shop on the Via Foria [VEE-ah FOH-ryah], the long loud road below the Sanità, that sells everything in plastic boxes. There was a chip in the blade near the heel. There was the crescent of onion. His hand was wet on the handle, and his thumb was on the wrong side of it, on top, where it would slip if he ever had to put any weight behind a blow. He had never had to. The cleaver was for frightening people, and up to now it had always been enough.

Here is what happens when you point a blade at a person. The blade is a question. It asks: *are you afraid?* Everyone answers. Their body answers before they do. Breath goes up into the chest. The hands come up. The weight goes onto the back foot. The eyes go wide, to let in more light, because the old animal in them wants to see where the danger is going to come from. This all happens in less than a second, and nobody chooses it. It is the oldest conversation in the world.

I don't answer. I don't have the part that answers. I'll tell you later what it is and where it should be. For now, imagine shouting into a well and hearing nothing come back. Not even your own voice.

The heavy air came up to the boy's thighs. He had never pointed a knife at someone who did not answer. He did not know what to do next. There is no next, in that conversation, if the other person doesn't speak.

I took the cleaver out of his hand the way you take a fork from a toddler: by the handle, without hurrying, while looking at something else. I was looking at the wife's forearm. There were four oval bruises on the inside of it, in a row, going yellow at the edges. They were the right size and the right spacing for a man's fingers.

"Go home," I told the boy.

"He owes four thousand—"

"Tell them he's dead."

"He's not dead."

"Tell them anyway. You'll be right by the morning."

He looked at me then, properly, for the first time. I watched him understand that he was in a room with something he did not have a word for. The heavy air rose to his belt. He backed into the doorframe, then turned and went out and down the stairs. He had to wade out through his own fear, like a man wading out of the sea against the pull of it. Long after I could no longer see him I could hear him taking the stairs two at a time.

I was wearing yellow dishwashing gloves. I always do. Nobody remembers a woman in yellow dishwashing gloves. They think she has come to clean.

She has.

I sat down at the table across from the husband. His hand was still flat on the oilcloth. Nobody had told him he could move it, so he hadn't. The oilcloth had a pattern of lemons and green leaves. There was a ring on it from a wine glass and a small burn from a cigarette.

"What do you want?" he said. His voice was high. The heavy air was at his chest now. He was sitting in it like a man in a bath that is slowly filling, who can't find the tap.

“Nothing,” I said, which was true. I have never wanted anything from any of them.

I’ll tell you the next part in the order it happened, because order is the only decency I have.

It took one breath. One of mine. He had time for about half of one of his.

The cleaver went into the side of his neck, just under the ear, where the big blood vessel runs up to the head like a pipe up the outside of a wall. A cleaver is not a good knife for this, because it is made for bone and not for anything clever. But it is heavy, and heaviness forgives a great deal.

First there was the sound, a wet, flat sound, like a fish dropped on a marble counter.

Then the blood. It came out in pulses, keeping time with his heart, which was going very fast because he was so frightened. Fear is a pump. It pushed the blood out of him in long bright ropes across the lemons on the oilcloth, onto the tiles, and in one long arc up the front of the cooker, where it ran down into the gas ring and hissed. Then it slowed, because the heart was running out of what it pumps. Then it stopped.

His hand stayed flat on the table the whole time. He had been told to keep it flat, and he did. I want you to remember that. Obedience is a strange thing. It outlives the man.

When it was done, the heavy air in the room went down the way a bath goes down when you pull the plug. Not all of it. The wife’s never goes all the way. But it went down to her waist, and then to her hips, and she put a hand on the edge of the cooker to steady herself, and she breathed in, deep, as if she had been under water.

I put the cleaver on the floor by the door, where a frightened boy would drop it running. His fingerprints were on the handle and mine were in a pair of gloves from the shop on the Via Foria.

“A boy from the lending app was here,” I said to her. “You saw him. You’ll say what you saw.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“Don’t,” I said. “You paid.”

I took the gloves off at the bottom of the stairs, turned them inside out one into the other, and dropped them in a bin three streets away, among the vegetable peelings outside a greengrocer's. Then I walked out of the Sanità the long way, up and over, under the bridge. It was after eleven. There were boys on scooters going nowhere fast, three to a seat. An old woman was changing the candle in a shrine to the Madonna, set into a wall behind a little glass door. She had plastic roses, a photograph of a young man in a football shirt, and a small brass heart. I went down past the museum to the old straight street the Greeks laid out, the one we call Spaccanapoli [spahk-kah-NAH-poh-lee], *Split-Naples*, because from the hill above it cuts the old city in two like a knife through a loaf. In a bar on that street there is a shrine to a dead footballer with one of his real hairs in a glass case. People stop and pray to it. I stopped and looked at the hair. It was a good hair, black and curled. Then I went on to the station for the last train west.

I want to be clear about one thing from the start, because later people are going to call it something else and they'll be wrong.

It wasn't courage. Courage is when you have fear and you go anyway. Courage is expensive, and it is beautiful, and I have seen it in other people and admired it the way you admire a language you don't speak. I don't have any fear to go in spite of. I just go.

Nothing in the room was frightening. It never is.

Tomorrow was Sunday. On Sundays I go under.

My name is Domenica [doh-MEH-nee-kah]. In Italian that means Sunday.

They named me for the day they own me.

2. Esposito

> *Everyone who is afraid owes something to someone who is not.*
> — The Fifth Rule of the Held

My other name is Esposito [es-POH-zee-toh]. It means *exposed*, as in put out, set down, left. If you look in the telephone book of Naples, back when there were telephone books, you would find more Espositos than any other name, page after page of us. The reason is a hole in a wall.

The hole was in the church of the Annunziata [ah-noon-TSYAH-tah], in the old city, near the port. For five hundred years it held the *ruota* [RWOH-tah], *the wheel*. It was a wooden drum set into the wall, open on one side like a cupboard, that turned on a pin. A woman who could not keep her baby came to the wall at night, put the baby in the open side of the drum, turned the drum, and rang a small bell. On the other side of the wall a nun heard the bell, turned the drum the rest of the way, and took the baby out. Neither woman ever saw the other's face. That was the point of the wheel. It was a machine for letting go without being seen.

The nuns wrote each baby down in a book, and every one got the same surname: *Esposito*, the left one, the put-out one. In this city, the name goes, you are either somebody's child or you are the Madonna's. The Espositos were the Madonna's. Some grew up and married and had children, and gave the name on to them, and that is how half the city came to carry it. Most people named Esposito today come from parents who were wanted, and from grandparents who were wanted. Somewhere far back, though, there was always a bell at night.

The wheel was closed in 1875. You can still see the hole where it was. It's bricked up now, with a little grille, and tourists take photographs of it.

I was left there in 1992, one hundred and seventeen years after it closed. Not in the wheel, which is bricked up, but on the steps under it, in a wooden crate that had held fennel. It was April and it was raining. Someone had wrapped me in a man's shirt and put a

plastic bag over the top of the crate to keep the rain off, which I have always thought was kind. They left no note. The building remembered what it was for, I suppose, even after all that time. People went on leaving babies at that door for years after the wheel was gone.

I don't know who left me. I have never wondered. I'm told this is unusual.

What happened next is the important part, and it is very simple. Before anybody wrote me down, I was taken.

In Italy you exist when the town hall writes you down. A child is born and her name goes into the register of the *comune* [koh-MOO-neh], the town she belongs to. She gets a number for taxes and a number for the doctor, and later a card with her face on it. All the rest of her life is built on top of that first line, the way a building is built on top of its first course of stones.

I don't have a first line.

The woman who found me on the steps was not a nun. She was a nurse from the hospital round the corner, coming off a night shift. She was a member of an order I will tell you about, and she knew what to look for. She did not take me to the police or to the nuns. She took me home. She waited, and watched me, and on the third day she made a telephone call. Nobody ever wrote down that a baby had been found at the Annunziata in April 1992. Nobody had to look for me, because nobody knew I existed.

So I have no papers. No card with my face, no number for the doctor, no number for taxes, no bank account, no telephone contract in my name, no name in any computer anywhere in the world. When the police stop a car I am in, I am a cousin. When a hospital wants a name, I borrow one. When I die there will be a body, but in every way that the state can measure, there will have been no person.

The most fearless thing about me is that I am not anywhere.

I live in Pozzuoli [pot-TSWOH-lee]. To understand Pozzuoli you have to understand the ground.

Naples sits between two volcanoes. The famous one is Vesuvius, to the east, the one that buried Pompeii, with a little cloud tied to its top like a flag. It isn't the one I mean.

The one I mean is to the west, and you can't see it, because you are standing in it. It's called the Campi Flegrei [KAHM-pee fleh-GREH-ee], *the Burning Fields*. Long ago it was a mountain. It blew itself apart and fell in, and left a bowl in the earth twelve kilometres across. Scientists call that a *caldera* [kahl-DEH-rah], the old Italian word for a cooking pot. Half the pot is under the sea. On the other half live five hundred thousand people, in Pozzuoli, in Bagnoli [bahn-YOH-lee], in the west end of Naples. They go to school and to Mass in a cooking pot, and the stove underneath is still on. The drains smell of rotten eggs. At the Solfatara [sol-fah-TAH-rah], *the sulphur place*, the ground hisses through yellow-crusted holes.

And the ground moves. Not all at once, the way it does in an earthquake, but slowly, over years, like the flank of a sleeping animal breathing in. People here call it *bradisismo* [brah-dee-SEEZ-moh], *slow earthquake*. Since 2005 the whole town of Pozzuoli has been lifted about a metre and a half, every house and church and harbour wall, the way you'd lift a tray. The old harbour steps now climb out of the water to nothing. When the lifting goes fast, the earthquakes come in swarms, hundreds in a night, like a pot rattling its lid. Last year they were stronger than any since the instruments were put in.

Men from the government handed out leaflets about where to go when the time comes. Nobody goes. That's Naples. I'll come back to that.

I live in the Rione Terra [ree-OH-neh TEHR-rah]. It's the oldest part of Pozzuoli, a high square block of rock over the harbour, where the Romans had a town and a temple. Later the temple became a cathedral, and the town on top of it became a maze of tall, narrow houses joined by bridges and stairs. In 1970 the ground went up very fast, and the government emptied the Rione Terra in a single day. Three thousand people were put on trucks with whatever they could carry, and they never came back. For fifty years the place stood empty. Laundry poles stuck out of the windows with nothing

on them, and kitchen tables sat with their chairs pushed back. Little by little they have been rebuilding it, as museums and expensive rooms for visitors, but there are parts of it no one has touched. In one of those, at the top of a stair whose bottom flight has fallen away, I live.

I have no lease. A person with no name cannot sign one. The people who raised me arranged it with whoever needed arranging. I have a bed, a stove, a table, a chair, a moka [MOH-kah], the little eight-sided coffee pot that every Italian kitchen has, a window that looks over the harbour, and electricity that comes off a cable belonging to the cathedral. I sleep exactly over the point where the ground rises fastest. The scientists put their instruments on the rock under my building because it moves more than anywhere else in Italy.

I find that funny. You probably don't.

That Saturday, after the Sanità, I got home a little after one in the morning. I washed my hands and face and the back of my neck, and made coffee in the moka. I like coffee at night. It doesn't keep me awake. Nothing keeps me awake.

At twenty past one the swarm started.

First there was a sound like a lorry going past in the street below, though no lorry can get up to the Rione Terra. Then the moka walked across the stove. It went about four centimetres on its own, rattling, and tipped over and spilled the coffee into the flame, which hissed and went out. The cup on the table shivered against the saucer. A little plaster sifted down from the ceiling like flour from a sieve. Then it stopped. Ninety seconds later it came again, smaller. Then again. By two o'clock there had been forty of them. The next morning the observatory would put the biggest at magnitude three point nine, on the scale they use to measure the strength of an earthquake, and the depth at two and a half kilometres, which is not deep at all. It means the thing that was moving was just under my bed, about as far down as a long walk to the shops.

I went to the window.

Below me, in the lower town, the lights were coming on one after another, the way they do in a theatre when the show is over. Doors

opened. People came out into the streets in their pyjamas and slippers. Women carried babies wrapped in blankets and men carried television sets, which I have never understood. Somebody had a birdcage with a canary in it. Car engines started all along the seafront, because the cars were where people slept now on bad nights, with the seats pushed back and the doors unlocked so they could get out fast.

And the heavy air came up out of them.

It came out of every door and every window, out of every body. It ran down the stairs and the steps and the steep lanes, just as water runs downhill, and it gathered in the streets and the squares. By two o'clock it was ankle-deep along the whole of the seafront. In the square in front of the town hall, where people had crowded together because it was open ground and nothing could fall on them, it was up to their knees. Under the streetlights it shimmered. Some of the children were standing in it to the waist, because children are short and also because they catch it from their mothers.

The whole of Pozzuoli was standing in a lake of fear. It was perfectly still, and colourless, and nobody could see it but me.

I watched for a while. It's beautiful, if you can see it, the way flood water is beautiful from a hill.

Then I wiped up the coffee and went back to bed.

Three million people live between these two volcanoes, and half a million of them inside the government's red zone, the ground that goes first. When it shakes they go out in their pyjamas. In the morning they sweep up the plaster and have a coffee.

Outsiders call it courage, or stupidity. It's neither. It's a bargain. The city has made an arrangement with the fire under it, the same arrangement it has made with its saints, its moneylenders and its government. *We know what you can do to us. We will be polite. We will not ask too much. In return, not today.* Then every morning that the bargain holds, the city wakes up and is grateful and doesn't look down.

It’s a whole city that has agreed not to look at its fear. It stands in the heavy air up to its ankles every day of its life and calls it the floor.

I was raised by the people who keep the city’s other bargains. I’ll take you to them next.

3. The Held

> *God gave breath first. Fear is God taking it back. Whoever gives it back is God.*
> — The creed of the Held, spoken at every gathering

They met on Sunday mornings, after Mass, in Chiaia [KYAH-yah].

Chiaia is the other end of the city from the Sanità in every way that matters: palaces along the sea, shoes and watches that cost a Sanità family’s year, small dogs in little coats. The heavy air there is a thin film at the ankles. People in Chiaia are afraid of the right things in the right amounts.

On a narrow street climbing from the seafront there is a pharmacy that has stood since 1788, with wooden shelves to the ceiling and two hundred jars of painted pottery labelled in Latin. Some of them are poisons. One of them, if you know which, still holds a little of what its label says.

Above the pharmacy is the Fondazione Respiro [fon-dah-TSYOH-neh reh-SPEE-roh], *the Breath Foundation*. The brass plate says it’s a charity, and it is, in every way that can be checked. It buys inhalers for children with asthma and holds a fish dinner every December where rich people write cheques. A tax inspector once went through its accounts for three months and found them perfectly clean. Behind reception there are glass offices with grey carpet.

Behind the glass offices there is a door that looks like a cupboard. Behind the cupboard is a room that is kept, by a machine humming in the wall, at exactly fourteen degrees, with the air neither too wet nor too dry. In that room there are shelves, and on the shelves are skulls.

There are sixty-one of them. Each one sits in a little house of its own, made of wood or tin or carved stone, with a tiny roof and a little door. Some have lace curtains. Some have a candle stub in front, and some have a coin or two, or a folded note.

In the Sanità there's a cave called the Fontanelle [fon-tah-NEL-leh], *the little fountains*, a quarry as big as a cathedral with no windows. For three hundred years, whenever the city had more dead than its graveyards could hold, the dead went there. Then the women of the Sanità began going down into the dark to adopt a skull, a stranger's, nobody's. They polished it, built it a little house, and asked it for favours: a husband, a son home from the war, a lottery number. They called them the *capuzzelle* [kah-poot-TSEL-leh], *the little heads*. The souls were stuck halfway to heaven and needed prayers to get out. You gave prayers; they gave favours. A bargain, like everything here. One skull, Donna Concetta [DON-nah kon-CHET-tah], was said to sweat.

In 1969 the archbishop closed the cave and called it superstition. The women went home.

Not all of them. Sixty-one are on the shelves in Chiaia, in a room at fourteen degrees.

The Held took them a long time ago, and some of them are the skulls of Keepers. I'll explain what a Keeper is. Not yet.

On Sunday mornings forty people come up the stairs past the brass plate. They're not who you're imagining. There are no robes, no hoods, no Latin, no candles in a circle. There's a notary, a woman with grey hair cut very short who witnesses wills and property sales. There's an adoption lawyer, a geneticist from the hospital laboratory, a banker who manages the money of old families, a priest from a church in the Vomero [VOH-meh-roh], the respectable quarter on the hill, an assistant to a member of parliament, a man who owns three car dealerships, a woman who runs a private clinic, and the pharmacist from downstairs, who has thin white hands and keeps a cough sweet in his cheek at all times. Doctors, accountants, a judge. People you would trust with your house keys. People who are trusted.

Every one of them is afraid of something. That's how they came to be here. That's what holds them.

I could tell you what each one is afraid of by looking at their legs. The notary stands in it to the ankle, an old fear, small and steady, about something she signed thirty years ago. The banker is shin-deep; he is afraid of being poor, which he never will be. The geneticist is at the knee, and it rises on Sundays when she comes up the stairs, because she knows better than any of them what we are and where we come from. The priest wades in it to the thigh. I have never asked him why. I don't need to know the shape of a fear to know its depth.

They sit on grey chairs in the biggest of the glass offices, with their coats on their knees and their phones turned off. At the front there's a desk, and behind the desk there's an empty chair, until he comes.

And on Sundays, a client.

A client is someone from outside. Nobody knows how they find their way up the stairs. Somebody tells somebody who tells somebody. One of the forty knows a woman whose sister cleans for a family whose son is in trouble. The client is always very frightened. That's the first condition. The Held have no use for anyone who is angry, or greedy, or simply wicked. Those people go to the Camorra [kah-MOR-rah], the old criminal clans of Naples, which have a price list. The Held want people who are drowning.

That Sunday the client was a man of about sixty, in a good coat that had once been very good. He sat on a grey chair at the front with his hat on his knees, turning it round and round by the brim. The heavy air was up to his chest. He kept swallowing.

He'd been a builder. He had built, he said, a block of flats in Bagnoli in 1998. He had saved money on the concrete. He didn't explain how, and he didn't need to. Everyone in the room knew what it means to save money on concrete in a place where the ground moves. Last year an engineer from the government had come to inspect the building after the swarms, a young engineer, very serious, with a beard. The engineer had taken samples. The engineer's report was due at the end of the month. If the report said

what the samples said, the building would be emptied, and there would be questions, and then there would be a court, and he was sixty-one, and his wife was ill.

“I’m not a bad man,” he said.

Nobody answered. In the room of the Held nobody ever tells a client what they are.

He took an envelope out of his coat and stood up. He didn’t know where to put it. The pharmacist got up, took him by the elbow very gently, led him through the cupboard door into the cold room of the skulls, and showed him the little house of a skull with a tin roof and a scrap of lace for a curtain. The man pushed the envelope inside. He touched the top of the skull, quickly, the way you touch a hot pan. Then he came back and sat down and put his hat on his knees again.

Then Ferrante [fer-RAHN-teh] came.

I’ll describe him properly later. Today I’ll tell you only what the room saw: an old man, very upright, in a grey suit and a dark blue tie, with white hair combed straight back. He had a long, mild face like a horse’s, and big hands, a workman’s hands, which he kept folded in front of him. He came in from the back, from the cold room. He always comes from there, as if he had been talking to the skulls. When he came in, the heavy air in the room went down. Not a lot. A few centimetres. You could see the forty of them breathe out.

He didn’t sit. He stood behind the desk and looked at the builder for a long moment, kindly, with his head a little on one side.

“The engineer,” he said. “Yes.”

That was all. He didn’t ask anything. He didn’t discuss. He has decided hundreds of debts in that room, and I have never heard him use more than eleven words on one.

The builder began to cry. The heavy air went down to his waist. You’d think a man would be horrified to hear his wish granted like that, in one word, by a stranger. He wasn’t. He was relieved. That is the thing I most want you to understand about the Held, and about

fear: *the frightened do not want to be saved. They want someone else to decide.*

Ferrante raised one big hand, and the room stood. Forty chairs scraped. They said the creed together, quietly, the way you say a prayer you learned before you could read.

God gave breath first.

Fear is God taking it back.

Whoever gives it back is God.

Then the rules. The children of the Held learn seven, and the members say five aloud. The other two are not for saying.

One. You do not breathe until you are lifted.

Two. The hand on your neck is the only hand.

Three. What happens under stays under.

Four. The Keeper is never wrong about air.

Five. Everyone who is afraid owes something to someone who is not.

When they say the fifth rule, the forty of them don't look at Ferrante. They look at me.

I always stand at the back by the window, with my coat on. I don't sit on the chairs. They have never asked me to, and I have never wanted to. When the fifth rule is said, forty frightened, respectable faces turn round and look at the woman by the window. I see in them what you'd see in a family looking at the big dog that lives in their yard. The dog guards them, and once, years ago, she bit the postman so badly that they had to pay for a hospital. They love her for it. They're proud of her. They don't want to be alone in a room with her.

The builder looked too. He didn't know who I was, or what I was for. But he looked at me, and he understood something, and the heavy air came up again past his waist. I watched it climb.

Afterwards, when they had gone down the stairs and out into the bright cold of a Sunday morning in March, Ferrante put on his coat and his hat and a grey scarf, and came to stand by me at the window.

“You smell of onions,” he said.

“Somebody’s Saturday.”

“Was it good?”

“Too much salt.”

He nodded, as though this was what he’d expected, and touched my elbow with two fingers to turn me towards the stairs.

“Come,” he said. “The dog’s waiting.”

4. Sunday

> *Sunday is not a day. It is a depth.*
> — The Sixth Rule of the Held

Ferrante drives a white van, nearly thirty years old, with a dent in the back door and a statue of Padre Pio [PAH-dreh PEE-oh] stuck to the dashboard with a pad of grey glue. Padre Pio was a monk from the south who had the wounds of Christ in his hands, and Neapolitans put him on their dashboards the way other people put on a seatbelt. The van smells of fennel, always. I don’t know why. I have never seen fennel in it.

We drove west out of Chiaia along the sea, and then through the hill.

West of the city there is a ridge called Posillipo [poh-ZEEL-lee-poh], which comes down to the water. Its name is Greek and means *the rest from pain*, because the rich Romans built their summer houses on it and came to forget. The Romans also cut a tunnel straight through the bottom of it, seven hundred metres long, so carts could go west without climbing. Their tunnel is closed now. Next to it there are new ones for cars, lit orange inside, and you go into the hill in Naples and come out of it into the Burning Fields.

You know when you’ve arrived, because the light changes. The sky’s the same, but the ground is different: lower, flatter, scabbed with old craters that have become fields and suburbs and car parks. The air has a faint taste of matches.

Agnano [ahn-YAH-noh] is one of the craters. Once it held a lake, round and blue, six kilometres around, with the spa baths on its southern shore where the hot springs came out. People came from all over Europe for the waters. In 1870 the lake was drained, because it had gone bad, standing water full of fever, and the men of the new Italy wanted the land. Now the lake bed is a racecourse, and on Sunday afternoons you can hear the crowd from the road, and the voice on the loudspeaker calling the horses home. The old spa is still there, half rebuilt, half falling down. Behind it, at the foot of a slope of scrub and broken stone, there is a gate, and behind the gate there is a hole in the hill.

The Grotta del Cane [GROT-tah del KAH-neh]. The Cave of the Dog.

It isn't much to look at. It's a doorway cut into the rock, about as high as a man's chest, opening on a passage that runs straight back into the dark for nine metres and then stops. Someone dug it, a long time ago, Romans or someone before them, maybe as part of the baths. The walls are warm. At the bottom of the passage, in the floor, is the reason for everything: a crack where the volcano breathes out.

What it breathes out is carbon dioxide. That's the gas you breathe out yourself, every time, the used-up part of the air. You can't see it and it has hardly any smell. But it is heavier than ordinary air, half as heavy again, and so it does what heavy things do. It sinks. It flows out of the crack in the floor, lies down in the bottom of the passage, and fills it like an invisible pool. The pool is about as deep as your shin. Above it, the air is fine. A grown man can walk into the cave and stand in it and breathe as easily as in his kitchen.

A dog can't, because a dog's head is down where the pool is.

For hundreds of years, that was the show. Rich travellers came to Naples on what they called the Grand Tour, which was how young English and German and French gentlemen finished their education: they looked at ruins, drank too much, and caught diseases. A man would be waiting for them at the cave, with a dog on a rope. For a coin he would take the dog into the passage and hold it down by the neck. The travellers stood above it, breathing easily, and watched. The dog would struggle, then shake, then roll its eyes and go limp. Then the man would carry it out and throw it

into the cold lake, and it would come up coughing and paddle to the shore, alive. The travellers would clap. Goethe [GUR-tuh] came, the great German poet, in 1787. Alexandre Dumas [ah-lek-SAHN-druh dew-MAH] came, the man who wrote *The Three Musketeers*. Mark Twain came in 1867 and wrote, joking, that he had been keen to see a dog die. One dog, it was said, did this every day for years and learned its part so well that it would faint as soon as it saw a tourist coming.

When the lake was drained, the show stopped. There was nowhere to throw the dog.

The Held came before the tourists, and they stayed after.

Ferrante parked by the old spa. There's a tap on the outside wall there, for the gardeners. He took two steel buckets from the back of the van, filled them both at the tap, and carried them up the slope one in each hand, at eighty-nine years old, without spilling. He always carries them himself. I have offered, once, when I was ten. He looked at me as if I had offered to say his prayers for him.

"The lake was drained in 1870," he said, as he says every Sunday, in the same voice. "So we carry the lake."

The gate has a padlock. He has the key. The ground is volcanic dust and broken pumice, a light grey stone full of holes like bread, which floats if you throw it into water.

And the dog was there.

It's yellow, the yellow of old straw, short-haired, the size of a big fox, with a tail that curls up over its back and a torn left ear. It lives at the cave. Nobody feeds it that I've ever seen. It's always there on Sundays, lying in the sun at the mouth of the passage, and it gets up when we come and wags the back half of its body and puts its nose into Ferrante's hand. Then it looks at me. It has brown eyes with gold in them.

It's the same dog I met when I was six. I'm thirty-four. It's not an old dog. It has never been an old dog.

I don't think about that. You can.

At the mouth of the passage Ferrante set the buckets down and took a candle from his coat pocket, a stub of white church candle,

and lit it with a match. He bent down, slowly, his knees cracking, and set it on the floor just inside the entrance, and we watched it.

The flame stood up straight and yellow for a breath. Then it leaned. Then it went small and blue, and lay down on its side like a tired animal, and went out. A little thread of grey smoke went up from the wick and hung there, just above the floor, at the top of the pool. It lay flat on the invisible surface like smoke on a lake at dawn, showing where the air ended and the other thing began.

“Good,” said Ferrante. “It’s high today.”

I took off my coat and folded it and gave it to him. I took off my shoes. The stone was warm under my feet, warm like a bed someone has just got out of. I walked into the passage, five metres in, to where the roof comes down low and you have to stoop. I knelt down in the dust with my back to the entrance and my face to the dark.

The yellow dog came in after me and lay down beside me, on its side, its whole body under the surface of the pool, as if the gas were grass. It put its head on its paws and watched me with its gold-brown eyes, and breathed slowly in the stuff that kills dogs, and didn’t die.

Ferrante came and stood behind me, upright, his head in the good air, his big hand open.

I want to describe this properly, because it is the best thing in my life, and I’ve thought about how to tell it so that you will understand. I’m going to try to make it short, because it is short. You’ll feel the sentences go. That’s right. That’s what it’s like.

His hand came down onto the back of my neck. It was warm and dry and heavy. It covered my neck from one side to the other, the thumb under one ear and the fingers under the other, and it pressed, and my face went down.

I didn’t hold my breath. You are not allowed to. The First Rule is that you do not breathe until you’re lifted. The children of the Held learn early that this doesn’t mean you hold your breath. It means you keep breathing, in and out, normally, the whole time, and you don’t try to come up for air until the hand lifts you. You breathe what’s there.

What’s there is not air.

The first breath tastes sour. It tastes of a battery on the tongue and a fizzy drink gone wrong. The gas mixes with the wet of your mouth and eyes and turns a little bit to acid, so your eyes sting. They water. Your nose burns.

The second breath goes deep and finds nothing in it.

The third.

The body knows. Not you. The body.

It is an alarm. Somewhere far down, low, at the back of the head where the neck joins it, something old wakes up. It is older than thought, older than speech, as old as fish. It has one job. It measures the gas in the blood, and when there is too much it presses one button.

The button is *now*.

My heart goes.

It is the only time my heart runs. It runs. It runs like a horse with a fire in the stable. It hammers on the bone of my chest from the inside like a fist on a door.

My lungs pull. They pull like hands. *Air air air.* Bigger breaths, faster. Each one worse. The more you breathe, the more you drown.

Everything in me wants up.

The hand stays.

Light. Light at the edges of the eyes, little lights, then a ring of it. Then the dark goes long. A tunnel. Someone is in it with me. Someone beside me in the dark. I can feel them, a warmth on the left side, close. Close as a mouth. I can’t see them.

Time goes thin. Stretches. A second is a room.

The dog’s eye. Gold.

Under me the stone hums.

Up.

Up.

Up up up up

This is the thing I want you to understand. For six days of every week there is nothing in me. No alarm. No weather. I walk through rooms full of heavy air and my shoes come out dry. I have watched men die and felt what you feel watching a kettle. The world goes past me like a film with the sound off.

And then on Sunday, under his hand, for forty seconds or fifty or sixty-two, there is *everything*. There is the whole bottom of the sea. There is all of it, all the fear in the world, all at once, coming up through the floor of me. I'm terrified, utterly, purely, the way you were terrified as a baby when you woke up in the dark and didn't know yet that there were such things as mornings. I'm all the way alive.

And then the hand lifts, and then he pulls me up by the back of the neck into the good air above the pool like a cat lifting a kitten, and in the same movement the whole bucket of cold water comes down over my head, cold from the tap, cold like the lake that isn't there, and it goes into my mouth and my nose and my eyes and down my back inside my shirt, and I'm on my knees in the light at the top of the cave with my head up, dripping, and I breathe in.

I breathe in.

That first breath is called *the gift*. That's the Held's word for it. You cannot imagine it. You've breathed every second of your life and never once had a breath like that one: so cold and clean and full that it goes all the way down to the soles of your feet and comes back up as light. Every cell in the body opens its mouth and drinks. The heart, which was running, stops running and stands still, shaking, the way a horse stands after a race. The tears run down, and it isn't crying. It's only the body letting go.

He kept his hand on my neck. Not pressing now. Holding.

"There," he said. "There. There. Good girl."

I leaned back against his legs, and he put his other hand on top of my wet head, and I closed my eyes.

"I love you," I said.

"I know," he said. "I love you too."

I'll be honest with you, because there is no point in any of this if I'm not. I meant it. I meant it completely, with my whole body, the way you mean it the first time, and I'd meant it every Sunday since I was six years old. That hand was the only thing in the world that had ever made me feel anything, and the feeling was so enormous that I had never once in twenty-eight years asked what it was made of. Why would you? You don't take apart the only light in the house to see how it works.

He did it three times that Sunday. Forty-one seconds, then fifty-three, then sixty-eight. He counts aloud, softly, in a voice like a man reading to a child. Afterwards he writes the numbers down in a book with brown ink.

The yellow dog got up off the floor of the cave, shook itself, and walked out into the sunshine. It lay down again by the gate and closed its eyes.

Driving back through the tunnel in the orange light, Ferrante took a paper bag of sugared almonds from the glove box and gave it to me, the way he used to when I was small.

I ate them all. I was starving. I always am, after.

You'll want to call it something. People always do. You'll call it cruelty, or brainwashing, or abuse, and you'll feel better for having a word. Go on. I'll wait.

Here is what I'd ask you, though, while you're feeling better. In your whole life, has anything ever made you feel as much as that? Anything? And if it had, and if it came only on Sundays, and only from one hand — what would you have done for that hand on the other six days?

You know what I'd do. You've seen it. You'll see more.

5. The Portfolio

> *A fearless child is a fire. A fire is a gift to a house with a stove. To any other house it is the end.*
> — Saying of the Keepers, from the margin of the Register

On Wednesday he showed me the portfolio.

He did it in his office at the Foundation, the small glass room at the end, which has no plants and nothing on the walls except a framed print of an old engraving: the Cave of the Dog in 1706, with three men in wigs and a dog being dragged into the dark on a rope. He had a laptop on the desk. He doesn't like computers. He uses them the way he handles a dead bird, carefully and as little as possible. He turned it to face me.

"You've met them," he said. "Not all of them. You've seen them come on Sundays. I think it's time you knew what they're for."

There were four faces on the screen.

I'll give them to you as he gave them to me, by what they do, because that's how he talks about them, and because names are the first thing the Held change.

The first was a man of about forty with a shaved head, a broken nose and very light eyes. Under his face was a word: *the Soldier*.

"Found in Salerno [sah-LEHR-noh], down the coast," said Ferrante. "Nineteen eighty-six. The geneticist before this one found him. He went into the army at eighteen and into the parachute regiment at twenty. Then into the ninth, the Col Moschin [kol mos-KEEN]." That's the oldest of the Italian special-forces units, named after a mountain in the north where its first men attacked up a cliff in the First World War. "Afghanistan four times, Iraq twice. He has medals he can't wear because he isn't allowed to say what he did to earn them. Now he's at Lago Patria [LAH-goh PAH-tree-ah]."

Lago Patria is north of the city, on a lagoon by the sea. NATO has a headquarters there, a big one, low and white and fenced, behind which generals from twenty countries plan for wars that haven't started yet.

"What does he do there?"

“He’s useful,” said Ferrante. “He’s in the rooms where the plans are made. And when a plan needs a man to walk into somewhere nobody would walk into, it’s him they ask. He’s never once said no. He’s never once come back hurt. They think he’s lucky.”

The second was a man in his thirties in a dark blue suit, very thin, with glasses. *The Trader.*

“Milan. He bets other people’s money on whether things go up or down. Every trader alive is afraid every second of being wrong, and the fear keeps them careful.” He tapped the screen. “He isn’t careful. He bets everything, every time. When he’s wrong, he doesn’t sweat and he doesn’t sell. He waits. In nine years he’s made the Foundation more money than it made in the century before.”

The third was a young woman with her hair shaved on one side, laughing at someone off the edge of the photograph. *The Founder.*

“San Giovanni [sahn joh-VAHN-nee].” That’s the old factory district on the east side, where the university has built a technology campus in glass and red brick. “She started a company at twenty-two. It should have died ten times. Each time she did what a frightened person wouldn’t: borrowed more, hired more, promised what she didn’t have yet. Now it’s worth more than the whole of the Sanità.”

The fourth was a woman of fifty with grey eyes and a hard, plain face. *The Surgeon.*

“Rome. She operates on the hearts of newborn babies. Hearts the size of a walnut. Her hands don’t shake. When something goes wrong on the table, when the others freeze, she doesn’t. She goes in.” He closed the laptop gently. “Children live because of her who would have died anywhere else.”

I sat and looked at the lid of the closed laptop.

“I’ve seen them,” I said. “On Sundays.”

“Yes.”

“They don’t stand in anything.”

He knew about the heavy air. He’s the only one I’ve ever told. He has never doubted it, not for a moment. He just nodded, as if I’d said they all had brown eyes.

“No,” he said. “They don’t. They’re like you.”

Then he explained it to me properly, the way he does, slowly and plainly, like a man drawing a map on a napkin.

“There’s a word the doctors use,” he said. “*Fearless dominance.* It’s a measurement. They give people questions to answer, and from the answers they put a number on how calm a person stays when there’s danger, how bold they are, how easy among strangers. Everybody has some. Most people have a little. A few have a lot.”

“And the ones with a lot?”

“Are found in three places.” He held up a big finger for each one. “Among leaders. Among heroes, the man who goes back into the burning house for the child, the woman who stands in front of the soldier’s gun. And among the worst people alive, the ones who can hurt others and feel nothing. It’s the same trait. What it becomes depends on what it is pointed at.”

In 2012, he said, psychologists in America had rated the American presidents for it, and the ones with the most were, more often than not, the ones history called great. Then he added, as his own opinion and not the study’s, that they were also the ones most willing to send other men to die.

There’s a man in America who climbs sheer rock a kilometre high without a rope. In 2016 scientists put him in a scanner that photographs the brain at work and showed him pictures meant to frighten anyone. In other people a small part deep in the brain lit up like a struck match. In him, it barely glowed.

“He’s not like you,” said Ferrante. “His is turned down. Very far down, but it’s there. Most people have their fear turned down a little, or turned up. We find the ones in whom it was never turned on at all.”

“And you put them in chairs.”

“We put them where fear would have stopped anyone else. And they do the thing that fear would have stopped. And the world is changed, a little, every time, in the direction we’ve chosen.” He folded his big hands. “That’s the whole of it. That’s all the Held

have ever done. For three hundred and seventy years. In different chairs.”

“And the leash.”

“Is Sunday.” He said it simply. “A fire is a gift to a house with a stove. To any other house it’s the end. If you’d been left loose, Domenica, without the cave, without the hand, what do you think you’d have become?”

I thought about it honestly. I always think honestly with him.

“Anything,” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “Anything. That is the most frightening word there is.”

“Why wasn’t I placed?”

He smiled. It is a lovely smile, sad and kind, the smile of a man in a painting of a saint.

“They are placed,” he said. “You’re kept.”

Then he gave me the debt.

There was a journalist. He was forty-four and worked for one of the newspapers in Rome, the kind of journalist who spends a year on a single story and doesn’t care that nobody reads past the second paragraph. Somebody had told him something. He had become curious about a children’s charity in Naples whose name kept coming up in adoption records, which is a strange thing for a breathing charity. Twenty-three adoptions in thirty years had passed through one lawyer’s office, and every one of the children was a foundling or a hospital case. He had written to the lawyer and to the notary. He had found a woman who’d been a nurse at the Annunziata hospital, and she had talked to him, a little.

He had been planning to talk to the geneticist next week.

“He’s afraid,” said Ferrante, “every day now, of what he’s found. He sleeps with the lamp on. Isn’t that sad.”

“Yes,” I said.

“Don’t let him be afraid for long,” said Ferrante. “He hasn’t done anything wrong.”

I'll tell you how I do it, because it shows something. That's the reason I'm telling you any of this. You asked, back at the start, without knowing you'd asked, what a person without fear can do. This is one of the answers. It's a small one, but it's real.

The journalist had a flat in the Vomero, on top of the hill, all wide streets and doormen and geraniums. You get up there by funicular, a little railway pulled straight up the hillside on a cable. His building's owner was a man who comes up the stairs past the brass plate on Sunday mornings. A key arrived for me in an envelope.

I went in at seven o'clock in the evening, when he was at the library. I looked at everything once, slowly: his kitchen, his books, the photographs of his mother, the ashtray, the bottle of sleeping pills by the bed with eleven left in it, the lamp. Then I got into his wardrobe and closed the door.

It was an old wardrobe, dark wood, with a long mirror on the outside of the door and slats near the top to let the air move. It smelled of cedar and of camphor, the white balls people put in with their clothes against moths. There were five shirts on hangers, a winter coat, a suit in a plastic cover from the dry cleaner, and on the floor three pairs of shoes and a box of old letters. I stood among the shirts with my back to the wood, my arms at my sides, and looked out through the slats into the room.

He came home at twenty to eight. He ate pasta out of the pan, standing up. He telephoned his mother and told her he was fine, and that he had a cold, which was a lie; he said it to explain his voice, which was tight. He read his notes. He went to the window five times and looked down into the street. He checked the lock on the door twice. The heavy air in the flat came up to his knees and stayed there all evening, and at about midnight, when a motorbike stopped outside and its engine idled for a minute and then moved on, it went up to his waist.

He took two of the pills at half past twelve and went to bed with the lamp on.

I stood.

I want to tell you what that's like, because you'd fidget. You'd shift your weight. Your heart would get loud and you'd be sure he could

hear it. You'd need to swallow and be afraid of the sound of swallowing. Your nose would itch, your leg would cramp, and you'd think of a hundred ways it could go wrong. That would make your legs weak and your breath short, and then you'd make a noise. Fear is noisy. People think it is silent, but it isn't. It creaks. It sweats and swallows and coughs and shifts.

My heart went at sixty-two beats a minute, and I know that because I counted it, for something to do. My breathing was slow and full and soundless. I stood with my weight on both feet, and when a leg grew tired I moved the weight onto the other by a centimetre at a time, over a minute, the way the ground of Pozzuoli goes up. I looked at his shirts. One was blue with a white collar, and a button was missing from its left cuff. I looked at his face, asleep in the lamplight, his mouth open. He had a small scar on his chin, white, the kind you get falling off a bicycle at eight years old. I didn't think about anything at all. I was a piece of furniture in a wardrobe.

I stood for nine hours.

At four o'clock in the morning, which is the hour when sleep is deepest and the most people die, I opened the door of the wardrobe and came out.

There was a second pillow on the bed beside him, on the side where nobody slept. I picked it up.

In the Held, we don't waste a death. We use the kind that teaches. The cave teaches that breath is a gift, so we take it back the way it was given.

I put the pillow over his face and leaned on it with both forearms and all of my weight.

He woke up.

I'll tell you only this much, and you can take it as a gift, because it's all I have to give him: he wasn't afraid for long. He was afraid for about ninety seconds, which is the most anyone can be afraid. The heavy air came off him so fast and so thick that it filled the bed, then the room to the height of the mattress, then the windowsill, then my chest. For a moment I was standing in his fear up to my shoulders, a whole room drowned in it, the lamp shining through it the way a lamp shines through water. His hands came up and found

my wrists and pulled. He was strong. People are, at the end. I didn't move. His heels drummed on the mattress, and his whole body arched up off the bed like a bridge, and then it came down, slowly, the way the ground at Pozzuoli comes down, and was still.

When the heavy air drained out of the room it went out under the door and down the stairwell like water going down a drain. I could hear it, almost.

I put the pillow back on the other side of the bed, plumped it, and turned it so the side that had been on his face was underneath. I closed his mouth. I took his notebooks and his laptop and his phone, put them in a shopping bag, and left the sleeping pills where they were. Men of forty-four don't die in their sleep very often. But they do, in a city this size, about once a week. The doctor writes *heart*, because heart is always partly true.

I turned off his lamp. He'd been afraid of the dark, and he wasn't now.

Then I let myself out and walked down the hill. The funicular doesn't run at that hour, so I took the long stairs that go down through the gardens, a thousand steps, with the whole bay below me going grey and then pink as the sun came up behind Vesuvius.

That was the journalist. I've told you all of it.

There are debts in the Register that I'll tell you about the way I told you that one, and there are some I won't tell you about at all. You'll get used to that.

6. Two White Stones

> *The Keeper is never wrong about air.*
> — The Fourth Rule of the Held

The headaches started after the swarm.

They weren't bad. I'd tell you if they were. They sat behind my eyes in the mornings like a thumb pressing, and went away by noon. I mentioned them to Ferrante the way you'd mention that the van was pulling to the left, and he went quiet and still, the way he does

when he’s afraid. The heavy air came up round his good shoes, a centimetre of it, the first I’d seen on him in a year.

“You’ll have a scan,” he said.

A person with no name can’t have a scan. So I borrowed one. The notary has a daughter who is thirty-three and lives in London and is real on paper in every way that I am not. For one Tuesday morning in March I was her. I carried her card and her doctor’s number, and a letter from the clinic of the woman who comes up the stairs on Sundays.

The hospital was the Cardarelli [kar-dah-REL-lee], the biggest in the south of Italy: a city of tired yellow buildings on the hill above the Vomero, with its own streets and bus stops, and a chapel, and cats. I sat in a corridor for two hours under a sign that said not to use mobile telephones, among a hundred people who were using them. Everybody in that corridor was standing in heavy air to the shin. Hospitals are like that. A small girl with a bandage over one eye was sitting in it up to her shoulders, on her mother’s lap, quite still.

They put me into a machine like a white tunnel that knocks and hums while it takes photographs of the inside of your head in slices, like a loaf. I lay inside it for twenty-five minutes and nearly fell asleep. It’s the most restful place I’d ever been. Nobody can reach you in there.

Afterwards they took me to a small office with a window that looked at a wall, and a neurologist came in. He was a doctor of the brain, about forty-five, with a soft beard going grey and good shoes and a wedding ring he turned with his thumb. He sat down and looked at me, and then at the screen of his computer, and then back at me. There was something on his face I had seen before on the faces of people who find things: a coin in a field, a ring in the sand.

“You don’t have anything bad,” he said first. “I want to say that first. No tumour. No bleeding. Nothing growing. The headaches are probably tension. Or coffee. How much coffee do you drink?”

“Some.”

“Have less.” He turned the screen to face me. “But there’s something else. It’s not dangerous. I’ve only ever seen it in books.”

It was a grey picture of a brain, sliced flat across, as if someone had cut a head through at the level of the eyes and looked down at the cut face. It was like a walnut in its shell, in two halves, folded and grey and full of shapes. And deep inside, one on each side, roughly behind where the temples would be, there were two small white marks, each about the size and shape of an almond, as white as chalk, white as teeth.

“Those,” he said.

“What are they?”

“They’re you,” he said. “They should be grey, like the rest. They’re stone.”

He told me plainly, and I’ve kept his words as far as I can, because they were good ones.

There is a part of the brain, deep down, one on each side, called the *amygdala* [ah-MIG-dah-lah]. That’s the Greek word for an almond, because that’s the shape. It’s very old. Lizards have something like it, and so do birds. It works like a watchman. Everything you see and hear and smell passes by it first, before you even know you’ve seen it, and the watchman looks at each thing and asks one question: *is this going to hurt me?* If the answer is yes, the watchman pulls a cord, and the whole body goes off like a fire bell. The heart jumps. The breath goes high. The blood leaves the skin and goes to the legs, ready to run. The eyes open wide. You haven’t decided anything yet, and you’re already afraid. That’s what fear is, he said. Not a thought. A watchman pulling a cord.

“Yours are calcified,” he said. “Turned to calcium. Bone, more or less. Both of them. Completely.”

“Since when?”

“Probably since you were very small. It happens slowly, in childhood. There’s a disease. It’s very rare. It’s called Urbach-Wiethe [OOR-bahk VEE-teh], after the two doctors in Vienna who first wrote it down in 1929. One looked at skin and the other at throats. That’s how they found it. The skin and the voice.”

He asked if he could look at my eyelids. I let him. He bent close with a small light, and I could smell his coffee and his soap.

“Yes,” he said softly. “There. You see?” He gave me a little mirror from his drawer. Along the edge of each eyelid, where the lashes grow, there was a row of tiny pale bumps, like a string of very small pearls. I’d had them all my life. I thought everyone did.

“And your voice,” he said. “It’s always been like that?”

My voice is low and rough. It sounds like a woman who’s smoked for forty years and shouted in a market. I have never smoked. I have never shouted.

“Always,” I said.

“It’s the same thing,” he said. “There’s a gene. One single gene, called *ECM1*. It’s a recipe the body uses for building a kind of glue in the skin and the throat and other places. If you get a broken copy of it from your father and another broken copy from your mother, the glue is wrong, and it builds up where it shouldn’t: in the voice box, so the voice is hoarse; in the eyelids, as the little pearls; and sometimes, in some people, in the brain, in exactly those two places. Nobody quite knows why there. There have only been a few hundred cases ever written down. There’s a valley in South Africa where it’s less rare, because the families there are all descended from a few settlers who married each other, and so the broken copies stayed together. Other than that, it’s one in millions.”

“What does it do,” I said, “to have stones there?”

He looked at me for a long moment, turning his ring.

“There’s a woman in America,” he said. “The doctors call her S.M., so that nobody knows her name. She has what you have. They’ve studied her for more than thirty years, at a university in Iowa. They took her to a shop that sells snakes and she picked them up, big ones, and had to be stopped from touching the dangerous ones, because she wanted to. Curious. They took her to a haunted house, the kind with actors who jump out at you in masks. She frightened one of the actors by poking him in the head, to see what the mask was made of. She stands too close to strangers. She doesn’t see danger in faces.”

“Is that all?”

“No.” He hesitated. “She was walking through a park at night, once, alone, and a man pulled her onto a bench and held a knife to her throat. She wasn’t afraid. She told him calmly that if he was going to kill her, he’d have to get past God’s angels first. He let her go. She walked home. The next night she walked through the same park.”

I laughed.

It came out of me before I could stop it, low and rough, like a dog barking once. The neurologist jumped. The heavy air came up round his good shoes and lay there, a pale little pool on the hospital lino, not much, about to the ankle.

I’m sorry. I couldn’t help it. For thirty-four years I’d been a thing that nobody had a word for. The Held had a word, but it was their word. It was a word for what I was *for*, not what I was. And here, in a hospital office with a window looking at a wall, it turned out that I had a name with two surnames, like a firm of lawyers. I was in books. There was a woman in a place called Iowa who had walked through the same park the next night. I’d have liked to meet her. I think we’d have sat on a bench and said nothing at all, for hours, quite happily.

“I’m sorry,” said the neurologist. He’d misunderstood. He thought I was upset.

“No, it’s funny,” I said. “It’s very funny. Go on.”

He looked at me for a while longer. He’d stopped turning the ring.

“There’s one more thing they found,” he said. “With S.M. It was in 2013. It surprised everyone. It changed what people believed about fear.” He wet his lips. “There’s a test we can do. It’s safe. It takes a minute. You breathe in once, from a mask. We have the equipment here, for the lungs.” He was trying not to look eager, and he was looking eager. “Would you let me? It would mean a great deal. Not for a paper. Your name is safe. For me.”

He meant the notary’s daughter’s name. He didn’t know he was asking someone with no name at all.

“What do I breathe?” I said.

“Carbon dioxide,” he said. “A lot of it, all at once. Thirty-five parts in every hundred.”

I knew exactly what carbon dioxide was. I’d been breathing it every Sunday of my life.

“All right,” I said.

7. Thirty-Five Percent

> *The hand on your neck is the only hand.*
> — The Second Rule of the Held

He did it on the Thursday, in a room in the basement with no windows. It had a narrow bed, a machine with a screen that drew green lines, a steel cylinder of gas on a little trolley with a dial on top, and a mask. The mask was clear plastic, shaped to go over the nose and mouth, with a soft rubber edge. It was attached by a tube to a bag the size of a football.

Two other people were in the room: a nurse who stuck little cold pads to my chest to read my heart, and a young doctor with a clipboard to write things down. Both of them were standing in heavy air to the shin. People are always a little afraid of an experiment, even when it isn’t happening to them.

“It’s one breath,” said the neurologist. “Breathe out all the way first, empty, then put the mask on and breathe in as deep as you can, everything you have, and hold it for a moment, and then take the mask off and breathe normally. That’s all. Some people find it unpleasant. It only lasts a minute or two. You can stop whenever you want.”

He told me, while the nurse fixed the pads, what had happened in Iowa in 2013.

The scientists had thought they knew the answer before they started. They believed the watchman, the almond, was what made a person afraid of not breathing too. If you breathe in a lot of carbon dioxide, your blood turns a little bit sour, a little bit acid, and they thought that was something the almond felt and raised the alarm for. So they expected S.M. to breathe in the gas and feel nothing,

the way she felt nothing with a knife at her throat. They tested her, and two other women who had the same stones, and twelve ordinary people.

“Before the test,” he said, “the ordinary people were nervous. Their hearts went up while they waited. They sweated. The three women weren’t nervous at all. They sat there. They didn’t know what nervous was.”

“And then?”

“And then all three of them panicked,” he said. “Worse than the ordinary people. Much worse. S.M. tried to tear the mask off. She said afterwards she’d felt panic, mostly, because she didn’t know what the hell was happening. It was the first time she’d been afraid since she was a child. One of the other women called it fear. She’d never used the word before about herself. All three of them had never had a panic attack in their lives. They didn’t know what it was.”

He looked at me with his soft, grey-bearded, curious face.

“There are two roads into fear,” he said. “That’s what they think now. One comes in from outside, through the eyes and the ears, past the watchman. The snake, the knife, the man in the mask. Yours is closed. The other comes up from inside the body, from the blood and the lungs, down at the back of the brain, where the oldest parts are. That’s the road for *I can’t breathe*. It doesn’t go past the watchman at all. And it looks as if the watchman, when it’s working, holds that second road a little bit shut, to keep us calm. So when the watchman’s gone…”

“The road’s wide open,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Louder than for anyone else.”

“Yes.” He held up the mask. “We’ll see.”

I lay back on the narrow bed. The nurse turned the dial on the cylinder, and the bag filled up and went tight and round. I breathed out, all the way, until my lungs were flat and empty, and I put the mask over my nose and my mouth, and I breathed in.

It tasted of battery.

I knew it at once. I know that taste the way you know your mother's kitchen. The cold sour sting on the tongue and in the nose. The eyes watering.

Then it went down. All the way down, everything I had, as deep as he'd told me.

And it came.

You know what it was. I've told you already. I've told you the best I can. The alarm at the back of the head, old as fish, pressing its one button: *now*. The heart breaking into a run. The chest heaving for air that isn't there. The lights at the edges of the eyes. The tunnel. Someone close on the left, a warmth, near as a mouth. The terror, total and pure, the bottom of the sea coming up through the floor of me.

All of it, the same. The same.

But there was no cave. I was on my back on a narrow bed in a hospital basement in the Arenella [ah-reh-NEL-lah], the hospital's neighbourhood, with a plastic mask on my face, and a nurse was holding my wrist, and a young man with a clipboard was writing down the green lines. There was no dust and no warm stone, no dog with gold in its eyes, no bucket of cold water, no candle lying down on its side. And there was no hand on my neck.

And it was the same.

That's what broke. Do you see? I was so frightened that my body was trying to climb off the bed, and the nurse was saying *calm, calm, it'll pass, it's passing*. But under the fright, in the middle of it, very small and very clear, like a coin at the bottom of a deep well, there was a thought. The thought was this:

I know this.

I know this feeling.

This is what I feel for him.

For twenty-eight years I'd lived a week that had one day in it. Six days of nothing, and then the hand, and the dark, and the terror. Then the lift, and the gift, and the cold water, and his voice saying *there, there, good girl*. Then the great flooding wave that I had always, always called love. Because it was the only thing I'd ever

felt, and because he called it that, and because when it came it came with his face.

And now it was coming up through me on a hospital bed with nobody's hand anywhere near me. It came from a cylinder of gas with a dial on top. It was exactly the same shape. Exactly the same size. Not like it. The same. The heart was the same and the tunnel was the same and the warmth on the left was the same.

It had never been him.

It was the gas. It had always been the gas. The love was what drowning feels like, when the one thing standing between you and the drowning is the hand on the back of your neck. The heart running, the lungs begging, and then the lift, the gift, the breath, *there, there*. Twenty-eight years of my body learning, every Sunday, that the terror ends when he decides, and that when he decides, there's light. A body only has to learn that so many times before it can no longer tell the difference between the man and the air.

He hadn't made me love him. He'd made me suffocate, and then he'd stood there while I did, so that he'd be the first thing I saw when I could breathe.

I tore the mask off.

The nurse said something. The young doctor stood up. The green line on the screen was going up and down like a child's drawing of mountains. I was sitting up on the bed with my knees drawn up and my arms around them, breathing in great rough sobs of good air, and the tears were running down my face. It wasn't crying. It was only the body letting go. It always does that, after.

The neurologist came and crouched in front of me, close, his face level with mine, kind and worried and fascinated all at once.

"It's passing," he said. "It's all right. You're all right. That was very strong. That's what happened to them too. You're all right now."

I looked at him. The heavy air was up round his knees. He was afraid for me. That was decent of him.

"Can I ask you something?" I said. My voice was rougher than ever.

"Of course."

“Is love supposed to feel like this?”

He didn’t understand. How could he? He looked at me with his mouth a little open, and then he did what doctors do when they hear something they don’t know how to answer: he wrote it down.

I signed nothing. I said thank you. I put on my coat, and walked up out of the basement and out of the Cardarelli and down the hill, past the cats and the bus stops and the chapel. I walked all the way, eighteen kilometres, through the tunnel in the hill and out into the Burning Fields, and it was dark by the time I reached Pozzuoli.

I didn’t go home. I went down to the harbour, to the seawall below the Rione Terra, and sat on it with my legs hanging over the black water.

Behind me in the dark, in a fenced-off square below the street, there are three tall marble columns standing up out of a sunken floor. They’re all that’s left of a Roman market hall, a round building where two thousand years ago people bought fish and meat and wine, with a fountain in the middle. For a long time people called it the Temple of Serapis [seh-RAH-pis], after an Egyptian god whose statue was found there, and the name has stuck.

If you look at those columns in daylight, about halfway up, there’s a wide band where the marble is full of small round holes, thousands of them, as if somebody had stood there for a year with a drill. The holes were made by a kind of shellfish that lives in the sea and bores into stone to make its home. It can only live underwater.

So for some long stretch of years, that floor where the Romans bought their fish went down, slowly, under the sea, deep enough for the water to cover the columns halfway up. The shellfish came and drilled their houses in the stone. Then the ground came back up, slowly, and lifted the whole market out of the sea again into the air, with the holes in it, and the shellfish died in their houses. Two hundred years ago a Scottish scientist put a picture of those three columns at the front of one of the most important books ever written about the earth. They were the proof that the ground is not solid, not fixed. It breathes. It goes under and comes back up, and the stone remembers.

I sat on the seawall all night and looked at the black water.

The Held say that fear is God taking breath back. They say that whoever gives it back is God. I'd always thought that was just something they said, the way people say *God willing*. But they meant it exactly. They had built a god out of a hole in the ground and an old man's hand, and they'd built it inside me.

I didn't feel betrayed. I want to be careful here, because you'll want me to feel that, and I didn't. I don't have the part for it, I think. I didn't feel angry, and I didn't feel sad. I felt what you'd feel if you'd lived your whole life in a house and then, one night, gone down to the cellar and found the wires. *Oh. So that's what the light was.*

But something did happen, sitting there. It was small. I'll tell you exactly what it was, because I've never had a thing like it before or since, and because everything that comes after in this story grows out of it, the way a whole tree grows out of a seed you could lose under a fingernail.

It was a question. Just one.

For twenty-eight years I'd done what the hand wanted. I'd gone into rooms and come out of them, and stood in wardrobes, and walked down a thousand steps at dawn. I'd never once asked why, any more than the cleaver asks why it is lifted. I'd never had a reason to ask. I'd had the hand.

Now I sat on the seawall above the breathing ground, with the stones in my head and the Roman columns behind me in the dark, and the sea going in and out below my feet, and for the first time in my life I asked myself something.

Have I ever chosen anything?

The tide went out. The fishing boats came in. A little after five the sky went grey over Vesuvius, and then pink. The first swarm of the morning came through the ground under the harbour, three small shocks, and the water in the harbour shivered like the skin of a horse.

I didn't know the answer. That was new too.

On Sunday I went to the cave as usual. I knelt down on the warm stone with the yellow dog beside me, and his hand came down on

my neck, warm and heavy, and my face went down into the dark. I breathed what was there, and I was lifted, and I was given the gift, and he said *there, there, good girl*.

And I said, “I love you.”

I said it well. I said it exactly as I’d said it every Sunday for twenty-eight years. I don’t think anyone alive could have heard a difference.

That is something a person with no fear can do. I’m telling you now, early, so that later you can’t say I didn’t.

THE BOOK OF CHOOSING · I — 1656

> *Here the Keepers write down how each child was chosen, each in his own hand, so that the one who comes after will know that it has been done before, and that it was necessary.*
> — Note on the first leaf of *The Book of Choosing*

Centuries ago I chose a child.

It was the summer of the Year of Our Lord 1656, in the city of Naples, which then was one of the largest cities in Christendom, the Christian world, and belonged to the King of Spain. He ruled it from Madrid through a viceroy, a governor in his place, who lived in the great palace by the sea and was afraid of the people. He was right to be.

The plague came in the spring on a ship, or with soldiers. Nobody agrees. At first the viceroy said it was not the plague. He said it was a fever, nothing, that the doctors who said otherwise were making trouble, and he had one of them thrown in prison for saying the word. Then the people began to die in the streets, so many and so fast that there was no more saying what it was. Then the people, who needed someone to blame, decided that there were poisoners going about the city at night, men who smeared the doors and the holy-water stoups, the stone basins of blessed water by church doors, with a powder that brought the sickness. They found some,

or said they did, and tore them to pieces in the squares. And still the plague came on.

I was a physician. I want you to understand what that meant, in that year. It meant that I knew nothing, and was paid for it.

We did not know what the plague was. We thought it was the air, a bad air that rose out of the earth, the dead, and the poor. We wore long coats of waxed cloth to the ground, and gloves, and over our faces a mask of leather with glass eyes and a long beak like a bird's, and in the beak we packed herbs, rose petals and cloves and camphor, against the bad air. We walked through the city like great black herons. Children ran from us. They were right to.

By June the dead were five hundred a day. By July they were five thousand. They lay in the streets where they fell, in their own black blood, their armpits and groins swollen up in great purple lumps the size of eggs, the size of apples. The houses stank. The churches stank. The sea stank, because the dead were thrown into it from the harbour walls by the boatload, and the sea gave them back on the beaches. There were not enough priests to bury them and not enough ground to bury them in. So the carts came round, and the corpse-carriers, who were the lowest men in the city, convicts, beggars, men with nothing left to lose, threw the dead into the carts with long hooks and drove them out of the city and tipped them into the old quarries in the hill outside the walls. Into the Fontanelle, among others. Into the dark under the hill. By the end of it, the people of my city who had died were as many as the people who lived. Half the city, gone in a summer.

That is where I found him, in the Sanità, on a corpse cart.

He was about nine. He was one of the children of the wheel, an *Esposito*, from the Annunziata; I knew it by the little lead medal they hung on a cord round every foundling's neck, to know them by. The nuns were dead or fled. The children of the wheel had been turned out into the streets, and most of them were dead too. This one had found work on the carts. They paid him in bread.

He was sitting on top of the dead.

He was sitting on top of the pile of the dead in the cart, cross-legged, as you might sit on a haystack, eating his bread, and

he was singing. It was a song of the street, a rude one, about a priest and a washerwoman. When the cart stopped he slid down and took hold of a dead woman by her ankles, and pulled her to the edge, and the men with the hooks did the rest. Then he climbed back up and went on eating his bread.

Everyone else in that street had a cloth over their face and was walking fast, close to the wall, looking down. Grown men were weeping in doorways. A woman in a window was screaming a name over and over, one name, as if it were the only word left in the world. And this boy sat in the sun on the dead and ate and sang.

I stopped. I am a man of science, or I was. I stopped, and through the glass eyes of my bird's mask I watched him.

I bought him from the carters for a coin. They were glad to see him go. He made them nervous, they said. He did not keep his distance from the bodies, and he did not say his prayers, and he laughed when the swollen ones burst.

I took him home. I washed him. I tested him.

I put a knife to his throat, a good knife, and pressed until the skin dented. He did not draw back. He looked down along his nose at the blade with great interest and asked if he could hold it.

I held a candle near his hand. He watched the flame. He did not pull his hand away until it burned, and then he pulled it back the way you pull your hand from a wet wall: without hurry, surprised, curious. He had no fear of the fire before it touched him. Only after.

I shut him in a room for a night with a man who was dying of the plague, raving, black-faced, bleeding from the mouth. In the morning I opened the door. The man was dead, and the boy was asleep on the floor beside him with his head on the dead man's arm.

And then I found out what he was for.

I was a physician to the rich. The rich, in that summer, did what the rich do: they fled. They went up to their villas in the hills and shut the gates. Some of them did not go fast enough. The sickness went with them and they lay dying in their great empty houses on the hill, and their servants ran away, and their sons and nephews and

cousins waited at the bottom of the hill, outside the gates, too afraid to go in.

Some of the dying had made their wills. And some of the dying, as they lay there with their swollen groins and their black tongues, alone, abandoned, were beginning to talk of changing them, of leaving it all to the Church, or to the one servant who stayed, or to a woman nobody knew about.

I knew the nephews. The nephews knew me.

Nobody would go into those houses. Not the priests, not the servants, not the soldiers, not I. Only one person in all of Naples would walk up that hill, past the shut gate, into the empty house that stank of the dead, and climb the stairs, and go into the room where the old man lay muttering about his will, and take the pillow from under his head.

He did it without any hesitation at all. With curiosity. He watched them as they died, the way a boy watches a beetle on its back.

The nephews paid me in gold. I gave the boy bread and a bed and a new shirt, and he was very pleased with the shirt.

That autumn, as the plague began to slacken, I saw the boy look at me.

It was in my own kitchen, at night. I was tired and had drunk too much wine and fallen asleep in my chair by the fire. I woke up and he was sitting on the floor in front of me, cross-legged, as he had sat on the dead in the cart. He was looking at me with the same face. Interested. Not wicked, not cruel. Interested, the way he had looked at the knife, and at the fire, and at the old men on the hill.

I understood then what I had brought into my house.

I had made a door. I had opened a door in the world through which this child walked to do the thing that nobody else could do. But a door opens both ways, and a boy with no fear has no reason to stop at the threshold of any room. Not even mine.

Every lock on earth is made of fear. The law is fear, and the Church is fear, and the King’s soldiers, and the gallows, and God’s own hell. They are all of them a single key that turns in a single lock that is in

every one of us. In this boy, there was no lock. There was nothing in him that any key could turn.

I did not sleep that night. I sat up and thought.

As a student, years before the plague, I had gone out with the other young doctors to the lake at Agnano, to see a thing every visitor to Naples was taken to see: the dog in the cave. I had watched the dog go stiff and roll its eyes in the poisoned air. I had watched it thrown into the lake and come up coughing. I had written down in my notebook, in my student's Latin, that the bad air in the cave appeared to strike at life itself without any wound. The animal went down in terror though nothing touched it.

Though nothing touched it.

In the morning I took the boy to Agnano. It was a long morning's walk, west, through the old Roman tunnel under the hill. The lake was very blue and still, with the reeds standing up at the edges and the steam coming off the hot springs on the shore. The keeper of the cave was dead of the plague, and his dog was gone, and there was no one there at all.

I took the boy into the passage, five steps. I told him to kneel. He knelt, smiling. He thought it was a game.

I put my hand on the back of his neck and pushed his face down into the bad air, and I held it there.

And I saw it. I saw it go into him.

He struggled. He had never struggled in his life, and he struggled. He fought, he bucked like a calf under my hand, he clawed at the stone, and his eyes, when I could see them, were wide, wide, white all the way round. He was making a sound I had never heard from him, a high thin sound like a kettle. He was afraid. For the first time in his life, and perhaps, I thought, the first time in all the history of his soul, he was afraid.

I counted. I did not know how long was too long. I counted to forty, my heart going nearly as fast as his. Then I lifted him out by the neck into the good air and carried him out of the cave into the light, and threw him, as I had seen the dog thrown, into the cold blue lake.

He came up coughing and choking and spitting, and thrashed in the reeds, and found his feet, and stood up to his waist in the water, and breathed.

And he looked at me.

I have spent my whole life since then looking for a word for the way he looked at me. He looked at me the way a man in a painting looks at the face of God when the heavens open. The way the drowning look at the rope.

I waded in and took him in my arms, wet as he was, and held him, and said into his wet hair the first thing that came into my head, which was:

“There. There. Good boy. I love you.”

And he said, through his chattering teeth, “I love you.”

That was the first Sunday. I had not planned it as a Sunday. It was a Thursday, in fact. But we went back on the Sunday after, after Mass, and on the Sunday after that, and I have kept every Sunday since.

On the walk home, that first night, he walked so close to me that his shoulder bumped my hip with every step. He held on to my coat. I had found the lock. It was not in his heart, where the rest of us keep ours. It was in his lungs.

I wrote the words down that night, and they have not been changed since: *God gave breath first. Fear is God taking it back. Whoever gives it back is God.*

I learned two things in the year that followed, and I set them down here for the one who comes after.

The first is that he learned to cry. He did not cry on that first Sunday, only coughed and shook. On the second Sunday, when I lifted him out, he wept and clung to me, and I was moved almost past bearing. *He learned to cry on the second Sunday.* I wrote that in the margin of my book and underlined it, because I was so proud. I did not ask myself, then, where he had learned. I think now I should have.

The second is that he was not the only one.

There was a girl in the next street to the one where I had found him, in the Sanità. She was about eleven, a washerwoman's daughter. People told me about her: how she had gone into the plague houses for loot when the families were dead, how she had cut the rings off swollen fingers with a kitchen knife, and how she had laughed at the poisoner they tore apart in the square. I went to look at her. She stood in the door of her dead mother's house, in the stench, with a pile of stolen silver behind her, and looked back at me without blinking. The same look. The same nothing behind it.

I thought for a long time about what a city would be if there were two of them in it. If one of them were held, and one of them were loose.

Then I sent my boy.

He came back in the morning and ate his bread and asked for more. He had a little cut on his hand, from her teeth.

I opened my book, the one in which I had begun to write down his Sundays, the seconds of each one, and next to the girl's name I drew a small circle.

That is how it began. With the plague, and greed, and a hole in the ground. With one held and one not held, and a circle.

Whoever comes after me will understand why.

II. THE CAVE

8. Before Words

> *Do not choose a child who weeps at the wheel. Choose the one who is quiet in the rain.*
> — Saying of the Keepers, from the margin of the Register

I was six the first time.

That's late. I know that now. Some of the others went under at four. Ferrante waited for me because, he told me afterwards, I had to be old enough to remember it and young enough not to have words for it yet. Words get in the way, he said. A child with words will try to explain a thing to herself, and a thing that has been explained can be argued with. He wanted the cave to go into me underneath the words, where nothing argues.

He got what he wanted. I'm going to try now to put words on it for the first time, thirty-four years old, sitting in my kitchen in the Rione Terra, with the ground going up under my chair at one and a half centimetres a month. Forgive me if they come out wrong. They've never been used.

I grew up with the nurse who found me on the steps. She had a flat in the Sanità, on the fourth floor of a palace that had once belonged to a duke and now belonged to eleven families and a great many pigeons. There was a courtyard with a dry fountain in it, a staircase wide enough for a carriage, and a smell of drains and frying. Her flat was two rooms. I slept on a folding bed in the kitchen under a picture of Saint Lucy, who holds her own eyes on a plate.

The nurse fed me, washed me and taught me to say *please*. She didn't love me, and she didn't pretend to. I think she was afraid of me. Even then, as far back as I can remember, she stood in the heavy air at the ankles when she bent over my bed at night. She'd watched me put my hand flat on the hot iron at two, to see. She'd watched me walk off the edge of the kitchen table at three, straight out into the air, because I wanted to know where the floor went. She'd watched me stand at the open window on the fourth floor with my toes over the sill and look down at the courtyard, not leaning back, not leaning forward, just interested. She'd pulled me

in by my dress so hard that it tore, and slapped me. I didn't cry. I asked her why her hand was shaking.

She kept a little book in the kitchen drawer, with a pencil tied to it by a string. Once a month a man came and read it. I know now what it was. It was the first page of my Register. She was writing down what I didn't do.

The man who came once a month was tall and old even then, with white hair combed straight back. He brought sugared almonds. He sat on the nurse's one good chair with his big hands on his knees and looked at me, for a long time, in the kindest way anyone has ever looked at me. Then he went away again.

On the morning of my sixth birthday he came on a Sunday, in a white van that smelled of fennel.

I remember the drive. Most of it. The tunnel under the hill with the orange lights going over the windscreen one after another, like the beads of a rosary going through fingers. Coming out the other side into a light that was the same light and wasn't. Padre Pio on the dashboard with his gloves on, to hide the holes in his hands. The bag of almonds in my lap. The racecourse, empty and green, where the lake had been. The old spa with its broken windows and a fig tree growing out of the roof.

The tap on the wall. The two steel buckets filling, loud, then quieter, then quiet.

"The lake was drained in 1870," he said, "so we carry the lake."

I didn't know what a lake was. I'd never been out of the Sanità. I'd seen the sea from the top of the steps below Capodimonte [kah-poh-dee-MON-teh], the hill and palace above the Sanità, as a blue line between buildings, but I didn't know it was water. I thought it was the edge of the world, painted.

The gate. The key. The dust, grey and light, puffing up round my sandals. And the dog.

It was lying in the sun at the mouth of the cave, yellow as straw, with its torn left ear. It got up when we came and wagged the back half of its body and put its nose into Ferrante's hand. Then it came

to me and pushed its nose into my hand too, cold and wet, and looked up at me with gold in its brown eyes.

It was the first animal I'd ever touched that didn't move away from me. The pigeons in the courtyard moved away from me. The cats moved away from me. Dogs in the street put their tails down and showed their teeth when I came near, or crossed the road. I didn't know why. I know now. Animals can smell fear, and they can smell the lack of it, and the lack of it is worse. A person with no fear is a person with nothing that stops her. Animals know what that means.

This dog didn't move away. It leaned its whole weight against my legs.

Ferrante lit the candle and put it on the floor, and we watched it lie down and go out. The thread of grey smoke lay flat on top of the nothing.

"What's that?" I said.

"That," he said, "is God's breath, going back to Him."

I didn't understand, and I didn't need to. He took my shoes off for me, one and then the other, and put them side by side by the gate. He took me by the hand and walked me into the dark. The stone was warm under my feet like an animal's back. Five metres in, where the roof came down, he showed me how to kneel. He knelt himself first, slowly, his knees cracking, to show me: back straight, then forward, hands flat on the warm ground on either side, head bowed.

"Like that," he said. "Like saying prayers."

I knelt like that. He got up. The dog lay down beside me in the dark.

He put his hand on the back of my neck.

I've told you what happens. I've told you twice. I won't tell you a third time. I'll tell you what was different the first time, because there was one thing.

The first time, I didn't know it would end.

When you're six and you're terrified for the first time in your life, you don't know there's an *after*. You don't know the thing has edges. I didn't know the word *afraid*. I'd never needed it. I'd

watched other people be it, the way you'd watch other people speak Chinese. So when it came up through me in the dark, all of it at once, the whole bottom of the sea, I didn't think *I am afraid*. I didn't think anything. I *was* it. There wasn't a me that was having it. There was only it.

I think that's what Ferrante meant about words. If I'd had the word, I'd have had somewhere to stand while it happened. I didn't. It went right through me, into the floor of everything, and it built a room there, and it moved in.

Then the hand lifted. The water came down, cold, and I was in the light at the top of the cave, choking.

And there was his face.

He was kneeling in front of me now, in the good air, his face level with mine, very close, with his big hands holding my face on both sides. Behind him the doorway of the cave was a square of white sunlight, so bright I couldn't look at it, so his face was all there was. A long mild face, like a horse. Kind eyes, wet. White hair.

The most beautiful thing I had ever seen. The only thing.

"There," he said. "There. Good girl. There."

I didn't cry. I didn't say anything. I couldn't. I just looked at him and breathed, and breathed, and breathed, and every breath was the gift. And he was in every one of them, the way the sun is in every leaf.

He held me for a long time. Then he stood up, and took a book out of his coat pocket, and a fountain pen, and wrote in the book with brown ink. I watched him. I couldn't read yet, but I could read numbers, because the nurse had taught me numbers so that I could count pills.

He'd written my name, *Domenica*, the first time I'd seen it written. Next to it he'd written *22*.

Twenty-two seconds. That's all it was. Twenty-two seconds of my life, and it's the longest thing that ever happened to me.

Above my name on the page were other names, with other numbers. I couldn't read them. One of them had a little circle drawn next to it, in the same brown ink, very neat. I pointed at it.

He closed the book. Not quickly. He closed it the way he does everything, gently, and put it back in his coat.

“Next Sunday,” he said.

On the way home, through the orange tunnel, I held on to the sleeve of his coat with both hands. I wouldn’t let go, not even to eat the almonds. He drove with one hand so I could keep hold of the other arm.

That was the first thing I ever wanted. I want you to understand that, because it’s what all of the rest of this is built on. Before that Sunday I had never wanted anything, not a toy, not a sweet, not my mother. Wanting is a kind of fear. It’s the fear of not having. I didn’t have it.

After that Sunday I wanted one thing. I wanted to go back.

9. The Rules of the Held

> *There is only ever one leash.*
> — The Seventh Rule of the Held. It is not spoken at gatherings.

I never went to school.

A child with no papers can’t. A school wants a birth certificate and a doctor’s card and a tax number for the family, and it wants to know where you live. So the Held taught me at their kitchen tables instead, a different table every day of the week, all over the city. It was like being passed round a family at a wedding.

On Mondays the notary taught me letters and numbers, in a flat in Chiaia full of clocks. She stood in the heavy air to the ankle the whole time, small and steady, and she never once touched me, not even to move my hand on the pencil. On Tuesdays the pharmacist taught me chemistry in the back of his shop, among the painted jars: what kills, how fast, how much, and how a doctor would find it. I was a good pupil. On Wednesdays the priest taught me the catechism, the questions and answers of the faith that children learn by heart, and the saints, and Latin, in the sacristy, the room behind the altar where the priest keeps his robes, of his church in the Vomero, where it smelled of old incense and dust. He was in the

heavy air to his thighs the whole time. He sweated. I liked the saints. They were the only people in the books who didn't seem to be afraid of anything either, and everybody loved them for it. I couldn't see why they got loved and I got watched. The priest said it was because they were afraid of God. I said, What does that feel like? He didn't answer. He went and stood by the window.

On Thursdays the banker taught me money. On Fridays the geneticist taught me the body: bones, blood, the heart, the lungs. She drew it all on big sheets of paper with coloured pens, and every Friday she drew the brain last. She always drew two almonds deep inside it, and she always coloured them in white. She never said why. I thought it was just how brains were.

Saturdays I spent with the nurse, who taught me to cook. She was good. Her ragù was famous in the building. She showed me the potato trick for too much salt.

And Sundays.

On Sundays, in those years, I wasn't the only child at the cave.

The Held keep more than one at a time. They find them where they can, one every few years, in the hospitals and at the baby hatches and in the files that the geneticist reads, and they forge them all, and they keep the best. There were six of us that I knew, in those first years. We didn't go to the cave together, never more than two at a time, and we weren't allowed to talk to each other much. But we saw each other, coming and going, at the gate, by the van. And because of what we were, we knew each other at once, the way a dog knows another dog across a whole square.

The one I remember best was a boy called Saverio [sah-VEH-ryoh]. That wasn't his name later. He was twelve when I was six, tall and bony, with a shaved head and big ears and very light eyes, almost white. He'd been found in Salerno. He came on Sundays with a woman from the Held who drove a red car. He would come out of the cave dripping, and stand in the sun with his hands on his knees, breathing the gift, and then he would look at me, and I would look at him.

He was the first person I ever saw who stood in no heavy air.

Nothing. Dry to the soles of his shoes. Everyone else I'd ever looked at, every single person in my whole life, had a little of it round their feet, at least: the shimmer on the floor, the faint pool. Saverio had none. Standing next to him was like standing next to a mirror. I'd never seen myself before.

One Sunday when nobody was looking he took a knife out of his pocket, a little folding knife with a horn handle. He showed me how to throw it at the trunk of the fig tree that grew out of the roof of the old spa. He threw it nine times and it went in nine times. Then he gave it to me, and I threw it, and it bounced off and fell in the dust, and he laughed. Then I threw it again, and again, and I didn't stop until it went in. It took me an hour. He sat and watched the whole time and didn't get bored. Nobody else in the world would have sat and watched a six-year-old throw a knife at a tree for an hour. The woman with the red car would have stopped me. Ferrante would have stopped me. The nurse would have screamed. Saverio just watched, with his white eyes, interested.

When it went in he nodded. That was all. One nod.

Remember that nod. I'll give it back to you later.

There was a girl a little older than me, with red shoes, who came for two years and then didn't come any more. There was a little boy from the hospital in Caserta [kah-ZEHR-tah], north of the city, who came for one summer. There was a pair of twins from somewhere in the north, a boy and a girl, who came only twice and screamed so much the first time that Ferrante had to hold them both, one in each hand.

"Where's the girl with the red shoes?" I asked him once, in the van.

"Placed," he said.

"Where?"

"Where she's needed."

I didn't ask again. I didn't care very much. She'd never thrown a knife with me.

The members said the five rules at the gathering. The children learned seven. Ferrante taught them to me in the van, a rule a month, the way the nurse taught me my numbers.

Six. Sunday is not a day. It is a depth.

I liked that one. I didn't understand it, and I liked it. I said it to myself on the other six days, in the notary's flat full of clocks, in the pharmacy among the poisons: *it is a depth*. I'd whisper it under my breath like the priest whispered his prayers, and feel my heart, for a second, remember running.

The seventh rule I never heard properly.

I was nine. It was a Sunday in winter, and we were in the van, coming back through the tunnel. He'd been teaching me rule seven, and he'd said the first part of it. Then the van went over a metal plate in the road with a great bang, and there was a long scream of brakes from a lorry somewhere behind us in the tunnel, and a horn. Everybody in the tunnel braked at once, and the bang and the horns went on and on, echoing off the orange walls.

When it was quiet again he'd finished. I'd only heard *There is only ever one*. One what, I didn't hear.

"One what?" I said.

He looked at me in the mirror for a long time.

"You'll learn the rest," he said, "when you need it."

Saverio went into the army at eighteen. I was twelve. He came to the cave one last time in a uniform, with his hair even shorter, and stood in the sun after the gift with his hands on his knees. Then he looked across the dust at me, and I looked back at him across the dust, two dry people in a world full of water.

Then he got into the red car and was gone. I didn't see him again for twenty-two years.

That was the year I paid my first debt. I'll come to that. First I have to tell you about the dog.

10. The Dog

> *The dog was there before us. It will be there after. We do not ask it questions.*
> — Saying of the Keepers

In the nurse's kitchen drawer, under the little book with the pencil tied to it, there was a photograph.

I found it after she died. She died when I was nineteen, of a stroke, in the dry fountain in the courtyard. She'd gone down to get the post and fallen into the fountain, and no one found her for an hour. I went through her drawers before the Held came to clear the flat. There wasn't much: rosaries, receipts, a hundred and forty euros in a biscuit tin, and a photograph from the instant camera she had, the kind that pushes out a square photograph with a white edge, which goes from grey to colour while you hold it in your hand.

It was the cave. Someone had taken it on my first Sunday, from the gate, and given it to her. In it a little girl in a yellow dress was standing at the mouth of the cave, barefoot, holding the hand of a tall old man with white hair, and beside the little girl was a yellow dog, its tail curled up over its back and its left ear torn.

On the back, in the nurse's handwriting: *D., the first Sunday. April 1998.*

I took it to the cave the next Sunday. I knelt down in the dust at the gate, with the dog lying in the sun in front of me, and I held the photograph up next to it.

Same dog. The same torn ear, torn in the same place, in the same shape, like a bite taken out of a biscuit. The same white mark on its chest like a thumbprint. The same curl to its tail. The same gold in its eyes. It wasn't a dog that looked like that dog. It was the dog. Thirteen years on, and it wasn't one day older. There was no white round its muzzle. It didn't stiffen in the back legs when it got up. It got up as it always did, in one fluid movement, like water standing up.

Dogs live for twelve years. Fourteen, if they're lucky and small. In the old pictures of the Cave of the Dog, like the one Ferrante has framed on his office wall, there's a dog: in the one from 1706, and

in a painting from the eighteen-hundreds that hangs in a museum in the city, and in a print from a travel book that an Englishman wrote in 1820, the dog being dragged into the dark by a man in a hat. I've looked at them all. I've looked at them with a magnifying glass. In two of them you can see that the dog's tail is curled up over its back. In one, the one from 1706, its left ear is torn.

I asked Ferrante about it once.

"The dog was there before us," he said. "It will be there after us. We don't ask it questions."

So I don't. You can.

I'll tell you what I do know, because it's the truest thing I know about the cave.

Every Sunday for twenty-eight years, that dog has lain down beside me in the gas while I went under. It never gets lifted. Nobody holds it down. It lies down in the poison by itself, on its side, with its whole head under, its nose in the place where the air ends, and it breathes there, slowly, with its gold eyes open, watching me. When I'm lifted it gets up, and shakes itself, and walks out into the sun, and lies down by the gate, and closes its eyes. It does this as if the gas were grass.

When I was small I thought it was there to keep me company. Then, when I was older, I thought it was there to show me what I was: an animal in a cave, held down, like the dogs of the Grand Tour. When I was older still, I thought it was there to remind Ferrante. That he wasn't the first. That this hole in the ground was older than him and older than the Held, and had been killing dogs for the amusement of men since before anyone wrote it down.

Lately I've thought something else. I've thought it was the first child.

The first one who was ever held down in that cave and lifted out, by a guide in a hat, for a coin. Before the Held. Before any of it. A dog who learned, the way I learned, that the terror ends when the hand decides. Who learned it so well, as the story of the old show dog says, that it would faint at the sight of a tourist coming. And who then, somehow, at some point, stopped needing the hand. It went under by itself. It lay down in the poison as though it were home. It

learned that the drowning was the only place it was ever all the way alive, and it moved in.

I don't know if that's true. I know that it's what I'd do, if I were a dog. If I had nowhere else to go.

On the Sunday after the hospital, after the mask and the seawall and the question, I went to the cave early. I went before Ferrante, on the first bus to Agnano. I sat in the dust by the gate with the dog, because I wanted to be near the place without the hand for a while, to see what it was without him. He'd given me a key years ago, for emergencies. I'd never used it.

I unlocked the gate and went in a little way, standing, my head up in the good air. I didn't kneel. I looked down at the floor of the passage, where the pool would be lying, invisible, on the dust.

There was something in the dust, half buried, just where the floor drops a little at the end of the passage. Something pink. I crouched, keeping my head high, reached down into the pool with my bare arm, feeling the warmth of it, and picked it up.

It was a hair clip, the kind little girls wear: a snap clip shaped like a strawberry, pink plastic with little green leaves and yellow dots for the seeds, about as long as my thumb.

I sat back on my heels in the good air and turned it over in my fingers.

It wasn't old. It had no dust in its hinge. The pink wasn't faded and the green leaves weren't chipped. On the back, on the flat part, there was the ghost of a price sticker, a little white rectangle of glue where a label had been peeled off, still a bit sticky, with a little fluff caught in it. The plastic smelled of a shop. When I squeezed it, it snapped open and shut, bright and new.

Little girls lose hair clips all the time, in parks, on buses, in the sand.

Little girls don't come to the Grotta del Cane. It's been closed for a hundred and fifty years, behind a locked gate, at the back of a ruined spa, at the bottom of a slope of broken stone. Nobody comes here at all except the Held.

The dog came in and lay down at my feet, under the gas, on its side, and watched me with its gold eyes.

When Ferrante came up the slope at eleven o'clock with the two buckets, I was sitting on the wall by the gate in the sun, and the clip was in my coat pocket. I showed it to him, on the flat of my hand.

He looked at it for a long moment. The heavy air came up round his good shoes, a centimetre, two. Then it went down again. I watched it go.

"Old," he said. "Someone's child. A long time ago."

He was lying. I don't know how I knew. I've never been able to tell when people lie. People who lie are afraid, and everybody's afraid all the time, so it all looks the same to me. But I knew.

I put it back in my pocket. I've still got it. It's in the drawer of my kitchen table, next to the photograph of the dog.

Then I took off my shoes, and knelt down in the dark, and his hand came down on my neck.

11. Twelve

> *The first debt is not for the client. It is for the Keeper, to see what he has made.*
> — Saying of the Keepers

The first man I killed was an accountant called nothing. I mean that I've forgotten his name. I've forgotten very little in my life, and his name is one of the things. I remember his tie, which was green with small yellow ducks on it. He wore it, I think, to be liked.

I was twelve. It was October 2004.

He did the books for the man who owns the car dealerships, the one who comes up the stairs past the brass plate on Sundays. The accountant had found something in the books that shouldn't have been there. It wasn't anything to do with the Held. It was ordinary, a few cars sold to the wrong people for cash. But he'd found it, and he'd made a copy, and he'd started asking for money every month to keep the copy in his drawer. The car dealer stood in the heavy air

to his chest every Sunday for a year. He couldn't sleep. His hair came out on his pillow.

Ferrante had decided the debt in four words: *Yes. The child. Wednesday.*

I want to tell you why he sent me, and not someone else, and not one of the older ones who'd been placed. It wasn't for the client. The accountant could have been dealt with by anybody, a man from the Camorra, a car that didn't stop at a crossing. Ferrante sent me because he wanted to see.

Every Keeper does it, I know now, with every child. The first debt is a test. Not of whether the child can do it. Of what the child is, afterwards.

The pharmacist made it up for me in the back of his shop, among the painted jars, on the Tuesday. He measured it on a little brass scale and folded it into a twist of paper the size of a sugar packet. He told me how much, and how quickly it worked, and what the doctor would think it was, and what the doctor would write. His hands shook doing it. He kept the cough sweet in his cheek the whole time, and it clicked against his teeth.

"You don't have to," he said, very quietly, when he gave it to me. He was standing in the heavy air to his waist.

I didn't understand what he meant. He might as well have told me I didn't have to breathe.

The accountant had his coffee every morning at nine in the same bar on the Via Toledo [toh-LEH-doh], the long straight shopping street that runs from the royal palace up through the middle of the city. It was a long bar, steel and mirrors, with a man in a white jacket working the big brass machine and a glass case of pastries. You stand to drink coffee in Naples. You don't sit. You stand at the counter with your elbow on the steel, and you drink it in three mouthfuls, and you go.

I went in at five to nine in my school uniform. I didn't go to school, but the Held had bought me a uniform so I'd look like a girl who did: a blue tunic, a white collar, a satchel. I bought a pastry, a *sfogliatella* [sfol-yah-TEL-lah], the shell-shaped one made of a hundred thin leaves of crisp pastry around a filling of sweet ricotta

and orange peel, which shatters when you bite it and gets all down your front. I ate it at the end of the counter and watched the door.

He came in at nine exactly, in the duck tie. He ordered his coffee. While the man in the white jacket was making it he went to the toilet, as he did every morning; the car dealer had told us that. The coffee came out of the machine into its little thick white cup and was set down on its saucer on the steel counter in front of the empty space where he'd been standing, with a little spoon and a glass of water beside it.

I walked down the counter, past it, brushing the cup with my satchel. I stopped and said sorry to nobody, and moved the cup back where it had been, and walked on to the door. It took perhaps four seconds. Nobody in the bar looked at me. A girl in a school uniform with flakes of pastry down her front is the most invisible thing in Naples.

I didn't leave. I'd been told to leave. I stood outside by the window, among the people going past, and watched him come back from the toilet, and pick up the cup, and drink his coffee in three mouthfuls, and put it down, and pay, and go out of the door right past me and turn left up the Via Toledo.

He walked eleven steps and stopped. He put his hand flat on his chest, on the ducks. He looked surprised. People always look surprised, I've learned. Then he sat down on the pavement, carefully, the way an old man sits on a low wall. Then he lay down on his side.

People stopped. A woman screamed. A man knelt by him and loosened the duck tie and shouted for an ambulance, and the heavy air came off the crowd and spread across the pavement, ankle-deep, knee-deep, shimmering in the October sun among their shoes. I stood at the edge of it with my satchel and watched him go grey and then blue round the mouth. It took about four minutes.

I wasn't upset. I wasn't pleased. I was interested, the way you'd be interested in a film you'd heard about. I watched carefully, because I'd been told how it would happen and I wanted to see if it was true, and it was all true, exactly as the pharmacist had said. I remember thinking how clever the pharmacist was. I remember the smell of

the sea coming up the street from the harbour, and a pigeon walking about in the heavy air round everybody's feet, quite unbothered, pecking at pastry crumbs.

When the ambulance came I went home on the bus.

That evening I told Ferrante, in his van, everything I've just told you, in the same voice. I told him about the ducks, and the eleven steps, and how he sat down like an old man on a low wall, and the pigeon. I told him that the pharmacist had been right about everything and that I'd like to learn more from him.

He listened without moving. When I'd finished he sat for a long time with his big hands on the steering wheel, looking out through the windscreen at nothing.

The heavy air was coming up off him. Up past his ankles, his shins. It filled the footwell of the van. It was the most I'd ever seen on him.

"You stayed," he said. "You were told to leave."

"I wanted to see."

He nodded. Then he started the engine and drove me home, and he didn't say anything else, and he didn't give me any almonds.

From that week, the Sundays doubled.

Not more days. More times, and longer. Five times under every Sunday instead of three, and every time longer. Forty seconds. Fifty. Sixty. I'd come out of the cave grey and shaking and sick into the dust, and he'd lift me and pour the water and say *there, there*. But his voice was different. Tighter. And his hand stayed down on my neck a second longer, and then another second, every week, as if he were listening for something in me that wasn't there yet.

I didn't know what he was listening for. I learned.

It was on the third Sunday after the accountant. He lifted me out of the dark the second time that day, sixty-one seconds, and threw the water. I came up into the light with my chest heaving, and his face was in front of mine, and this time — I don't know why — the gift came out of my eyes. The tears ran. I sobbed. My whole body shook with it, and I put my arms round his neck and held on, and cried into his coat like a little child.

I felt him go soft. All of him, at once. I felt it through his coat, his whole body letting go of something, like a man putting down a suitcase he'd carried a long way. The heavy air went down round his shoes like a tide going out.

"There," he said, and his voice was his own again. "There. There. Good girl. Oh, good girl."

He didn't put me under a third time that day. He gave me the almonds in the van.

The next Sunday I cried again, after the first lift. And he didn't put me under the second time. And the Sundays got shorter again, week by week, and kinder, and his hand on my neck was gentler, and he looked at me in the mirror on the drive home the way he'd looked at me when I was small.

I learned to cry.

I want to put that down plainly, without decorating it, the way I've put down everything else. I learned to cry on the third Sunday after the accountant, and after that I cried every Sunday of my life, at the right moment, after the lift, into his coat.

On the Sunday after the hospital, after the mask and the seawall, I went under three times. And each time, after the lift, I did something I'd never done before: I watched it. I watched myself cry the way I'd watched the accountant die, from the edge, interested, the way you'd watch a film you'd heard about.

The tears came each time in the same place. Two breaths after the water. Not one, not three. Two. Every time, like a clock.

I sat in the van afterwards with the almonds on my knee, not eating them, and thought about it all the way through the orange tunnel.

I wondered who had taught me.

Then I wondered whether anyone had.

12. Ferrante's House

> *Chaste goddess, who silvers these sacred old trees…*
> — Bellini [bel-LEE-nee], *Norma*, the prayer to the moon

He asked me to dinner on the Thursday.

He lives on the ridge of Posillipo, on the side that faces the sea, in a house built for a rich family a hundred and fifty years ago. It's pink, or it was. Now it's the colour of a shell that's been on a beach a long time. It has green shutters with half their slats gone, an iron gate that doesn't shut, and a garden that falls away below it in steps, terrace after terrace of lemon trees and old vines, all the way down to the rocks and the water. At night from his kitchen window you can see the whole bay. Naples is a horseshoe of lights on the right and Vesuvius a black shape against a lesser black, and straight out in front, the island of Capri [KAH-pree] low on the sea like a sleeping animal.

The house is full of books. They're in every room, in shelves to the ceiling and in piles on the floor and on the stairs, one pile on each step, so that you climb up to bed through a library. Most of them are old. Many of them are about the lungs, about breath, about drowning, about saints, about the plague. He's read every one.

He was cooking when I came, in an apron, with his shirtsleeves rolled up over his big forearms. The ragù had been on since noon. He makes it the old way, the way the nurse who kept him as a baby made it in the Sanità before the war: three kinds of meat tied with string, the tomato passed through a sieve by hand, a glass of red wine, and six hours on the lowest flame. The pot muttered to itself like an old woman in church. He'd made the pasta himself as well, long thick tubes, and laid them out to dry on a cloth over the back of a chair.

On an old record player in the corner of the kitchen there was music. A woman's voice, alone, high and slow and very pure, rising and falling over a few soft strings.

"Bellini," he said, when he saw me listening. "*Norma*." Bellini was a composer from Sicily who wrote operas two hundred years ago and died young. "She's a priestess, in Gaul, in the old days, when the

Romans ruled. She's praying to the moon for peace. *Casta diva* [KAH-stah DEE-vah]. Chaste goddess." He stirred the ragù. "She's secretly in love with a Roman. She's had his children. Nobody knows. She stands in front of her whole people under the moon and prays for peace, and the whole time she's carrying the thing that will destroy her, inside her, and nobody can see it."

"What happens to her?"

"She walks into the fire," he said. "At the end. She chooses it." He tasted the sauce, and closed his eyes for a moment. "It's the most beautiful thing ever written."

We ate at the kitchen table by the window. The bay was dark and full of lights. He poured me wine, which I don't drink, and I held the glass. He asked about my week. He asked whether I'd been sleeping, and whether I'd eaten properly, and whether the headaches had gone. He cut bread for me from a big round loaf, holding it against his chest and drawing the knife towards himself, the old way, as women in the Sanità do. He watched me eat with the same face he'd had at the nurse's flat when I was four, a face that seemed to have been waiting all its life to watch me eat.

I'd decided before I came that I would watch him. Not the way I watch a debt. The way you'd watch a machine that you'd always used and never opened, now that you'd seen the wires.

So I watched him, and here's what I saw.

I saw that he loved me. I'm sorry if that's not what you expected. It's what was there. Everything about him at that table was love: the bread, the sauce, the way he leaned to fill my glass that I wasn't drinking from, the way his eyes went to my plate and to my face and back. It wasn't acted. I've seen acting all my life. The Held act all day long, and so do their clients, and so does everyone. This wasn't that. It was the realest thing in the room. It was realer than the table.

And I saw that it didn't make any difference.

That's what I can't explain to you properly, and I'll try. You'd think, wouldn't you, that if the man who drowned you every Sunday turned out to love you, it would make it better. Or worse. That it would mean something. I sat across from him and watched him love

me, and understood all at once that his love and the cave weren't two different things. They weren't a kind man doing a cruel thing, or a cruel man pretending to be kind. They were the same thing, the way the flame and the heat are the same thing. He held me under *because* he loved me. That's what the love was for, and what it was made of. If you love a fire, you build a stove round it.

After dinner he made coffee in a little copper pot, and we took it to the window, and stood looking at the bay.

"Tell me about the scars," I said.

He'd rolled his sleeves down by then and buttoned his collar, as he always did. But I'd seen them all my life, when he bent over to lift me in the cave: two thin white lines on the back of his neck, side by side, very old, just under the hairline, like two strokes of a pen.

He touched them, with two fingers, without thinking.

"My Keeper had strong hands," he said.

The heavy air didn't move round his shoes. Not a centimetre. He said it as if he were telling me the time.

Then, because I'd asked, or because he'd been waiting years for someone to ask, he told me about the Four Days.

He didn't tell it about himself. He told it about a boy.

In September 1943, he said, Naples was the most bombed city in Italy. The Americans and the British had been bombing it from the air for three years. The port was a field of sunk ships and the old city was full of holes like a bad tooth. Then Italy surrendered and changed sides, and overnight the Germans who'd been our friends became the people who owned us. They knew they'd have to leave, so they decided to leave nothing behind. They blew up the port and the water and the power, and they rounded up the city's men to ship north to the camps.

And on the twenty-seventh of September, the city stood up.

Nobody organised it, he said. Nobody planned it. It started in a dozen places at once, in the Vomero and the Sanità and the old streets by the port: men with old rifles from the last war, women dropping furniture out of windows onto German trucks, priests hiding men in crypts. And the boys. The *scugnizzi*

[skoon-YEET-tsee], the street boys of Naples, boys of ten and eleven and twelve who lived in the ruins and sold black-market cigarettes to soldiers and slept in doorways. They ran at German tanks with bottles of petrol with a rag on fire. One of them, a boy called Gennarino [jen-nah-REE-noh], eleven years old, was killed throwing a grenade at a tank on the third day.

“Four days,” he said. “On the night of the thirtieth the Germans left, and on the first of October the Americans drove in, and found the city had already freed itself. The first city in Europe that did.”

“And the boy?” I said.

“There was a boy,” he said, looking out at the bay. “Younger than the others. Six. He didn’t have a gun. He didn’t have a bottle. He walked up the middle of the Via Foria in the morning on the second day, in the middle of the street, in the open, where the men were lying flat behind the overturned trams and shouting at him to get down. A German half-track was coming down the street towards him. That’s a lorry with the back wheels of a tank and a gun on the top. It was coming down slowly, firing at the windows. He walked towards it. He had a grenade in his hand that he’d taken off a dead soldier. He didn’t know how to use it. He walked up to the half-track as if he were walking up to a man selling ice creams, and he stood in front of it, and he looked up at the soldier behind the gun, and the soldier looked down at him.”

He stopped.

“What happened?” I said.

“The soldier didn’t shoot,” he said. “Nobody ever knew why. He just looked at the boy, standing there, so small, not afraid. Not afraid of *anything*. And then the soldier put his hands over his face. And the boy pulled the cord in the grenade’s handle, the way he’d seen the men do, and dropped it into the half-track, and walked away.”

He drank his coffee.

“There was a man watching,” he said. “From a doorway. A doctor. He saw the whole thing. And he went out into the street after the explosion and took the boy by the hand and took him home.”

The record had come to the end. The needle was going round and round in the last groove, hissing softly, like the sea.

“Did the boy love him?” I said. “The doctor?”

“With his whole body,” said Ferrante.

He put down his cup. He turned from the window and looked at me, and his long, kind face was very still.

“Come to the cave early on Sunday,” he said. “Earlier than usual. I want to show you something.”

I said I would.

I didn’t wait for Sunday. I went on Saturday night.

13. Without the Lift

> *What happens under stays under.*
> — The Third Rule of the Held

I went at two in the morning, on foot from Pozzuoli. It’s eight kilometres along the old Roman road and over the shoulder of the Solfatara, where the ground steams in the dark and the air smells of matches and rotten eggs. I passed no one. A fox crossed the road in front of me with something in its mouth. It looked at me. It didn’t hurry.

The racecourse was dark. The old spa was dark, its broken windows full of nothing. I climbed the slope by starlight and unlocked the gate with the key he’d given me for emergencies.

The dog was there. It was lying by the gate in the dark. It got up when I came, in its fluid way, and pushed its nose into my hand. Then it went in ahead of me into the passage, as if it had been waiting.

I’d brought one of his buckets. I’d taken it from the back of the van on Thursday, while he was in the house making coffee. I filled it at the tap on the wall of the spa and carried it up, and set it down inside the gate, by the door of the cave. I lit a candle and put it on the floor. It lay down and went out, and the thread of smoke lay flat on the dark.

Then I went in, five metres, to where the roof comes down, and I knelt.

I'll tell you something about the end of the passage that I haven't told you yet. At the very back, where the tunnel stops at the rock face, there is a small square niche cut into the stone at the height of a kneeling child's head. In the niche, on a little shelf, there's a tin box like the ones the skulls in Chiaia live in, with a tiny pitched roof and a door. In the box there's a skull. It's small, and very old, the colour of strong tea, and its jaw is missing. It's been there as long as I can remember. When I was small I asked Ferrante whose it was.

"The first," he said.

That's all he's ever said about it. I always took it to mean the first Keeper, the doctor. I thought he'd been put here, at the bottom of his own cave, like a saint under his altar. I was wrong about that. I'll tell you how I know.

I knelt in the dark, with the dog lying beside me on its side under the invisible surface, and the little tin house a metre in front of my face. I put my own hand on the back of my own neck. And I pushed my face down.

It's harder than you'd think. Your own hand doesn't want to. Your own arm knows whose neck it is.

I pushed.

Sour. Battery. Eyes stinging.

Breath. Nothing in it. Breath.

The alarm.

Now.

My heart broke into its run.

And it came, all of it, as it always comes, the bottom of the sea. But this time there was something new under it, and the new thing was this: *nobody was going to lift me.*

You have to understand what that meant, to a body that had been taught one thing for twenty-eight years. The First Rule: you do not breathe until you are lifted. It wasn't a rule any more. It wasn't

words. It was built into me, deeper than my bones, the way the nurse's ragù was built into the walls of her kitchen. My body had learned, every Sunday for twenty-eight years, that you breathe what's there and you wait, and the hand decides, and when the hand decides, there's light.

There was no hand. There was my own hand, and it was pressing down, because I'd told it to, and the body didn't know how to want up without being lifted. It didn't know there was such a thing.

The lights came. The ring. The tunnel.

Then the voices.

I'll tell you exactly what I heard, and you can decide what it was. I've decided. I won't tell you what I decided.

The first was a boy, singing. A high, rough voice, very close, in the dark just to my left, where the warmth always is. He was singing a song I didn't know, in an old Neapolitan so thick I could barely follow it. It was something about a priest and a washerwoman, and it was very rude, and he was laughing as he sang it. I could smell bread. I could smell something under the bread, sweet and rotten, like meat left out in August.

I, said the boy, in the middle of the song, as if he were answering someone. *I chose a child.*

Then a second voice, a man's, younger than Ferrante, hoarse, as if he'd been shouting for days. I could smell smoke, wood smoke and something else burning that wasn't wood. Far off, a lot of people were roaring together, the way a crowd roars at a football match, but wrong. *I*, he said. *I chose a child.*

Then a girl's, a young woman's, singing too, but a slow song, a lullaby, low, while somewhere water was being poured and poured, and there was the sound of wet cloth being slapped on stone, and a smell like a hospital, of lye and of sickness. *I chose a child*, she sang, to the tune of the lullaby, as if it were the words.

Then another boy, a small one, six, maybe, breathing fast, and then the scream of tank tracks on cobbles, and a grenade pin, *ping*, and then a voice I knew. It was younger, so much younger, high and

light, but I knew it the way you'd know your own father's voice on the radio.

I, said the boy who was Ferrante. *I chose a child*.

And then — fainter, further off, from somewhere ahead of me in the dark, or above, or in a place that wasn't in the cave at all — more voices. Voices that weren't dead. A man's, very calm, very flat, saying something I couldn't hear, in the ringing quiet after a gunshot. A woman's voice in a hospital, in a room full of beeping machines, saying *clamp*. A young man laughing in a glass room full of screens. They didn't say *I chose a child*. They said nothing to me. They were just there, a long way off, like lights across the bay. I knew who they were. I'd seen their faces on a laptop.

And last of all, so faint I wasn't sure, right at the very edge, a little girl's voice. Small and bright and curious, asking someone a question I couldn't hear. And then laughing, one high hiccup of a laugh.

The tin house in front of my face wasn't dark any more. There was a light inside it, a very faint light, coming out through the crack under its little door like a candle in a shrine. And the voice of the boy, the first one, the singer, the one who smelled of bread, came out of the box. Very close. Very kind.

We all say I, it said. *Every one of us. We all say I.*

My body was screaming. I'd been under longer than I'd ever been under in my life. The lights were going out at the edges, one by one, like the lights of Pozzuoli going on and off in a swarm. The warmth on my left was very close now, so close it was like a mouth against my ear, and the dog was looking at me in the dark with its gold eyes, and it was so easy. It was the easiest thing in the world. All I had to do was what I'd always done: breathe what was there, and wait.

And nobody would come. And I'd never be lifted. And it would be over.

I don't know where it came from. I'll tell you that honestly, because it's the second thing in this story that I've never had before, and I don't know its name.

My hand moved. Not the one on my neck. The other one, the one that was flat on the warm stone, holding me up. It came off the floor, and went up, and found my own hair, at the back of my own head. It took a fistful, and it pulled.

It pulled my head up out of the gas by the hair, the way you'd drag a drowned woman out of a river. It hurt like hell. I felt hairs come out at the roots. My face came up through the surface of the invisible lake into the good air, and my mouth opened, and I breathed.

There was no water. There was no gift. There was no *there, there, good girl*. It was just air, ordinary night air in a hole in a hill, going into me in great tearing gulps. I knelt with my fist still in my own hair, retching, and the tears came. Not two breaths after. Not on time. All at once, any old how, running down into my mouth with the snot, and I didn't watch them. I didn't time them. I just knelt there and let them come, like a dog being sick.

When I could move I crawled out of the cave on my hands and knees into the starlight, and got up, and the bucket was standing where I'd left it by the door. I picked it up and poured the whole thing over my own head.

It was very cold. It was the coldest thing I'd ever felt.

Then I saw him.

He was sitting by the gate on the other bucket, turned upside down, the way old men sit on upturned crates in the Sanità to play cards. He had his coat on and his hat and his grey scarf. His big hands were folded on his knees. Behind him, over the racecourse, the sky was going grey. I don't know how long he'd been there.

The heavy air around him was up to his chest.

I'd never seen him in so much. Not ever. He was sitting in it as if he were sitting in the sea, up to his heart, and it was perfectly still, and the dawn light came through it as it comes through water.

"You went under without me," he said.

His voice was very quiet. It wasn't angry. I don't know what it was.

I stood in front of him, dripping, with my hair torn and my eyes running and my clothes stuck to me.

“Whose skull is that?” I said. “In the cave. In the box.”

He looked at me for a long time. Then he stood up, slowly, his knees cracking, and picked up the bucket he’d been sitting on, and the one I’d emptied, one in each hand.

“Come home,” he said. “I’ll tell you.”

14. Every Keeper Says I

> *The voice does not die. Only the throat.*
> — Saying of the Keepers

He made me a coffee in the copper pot and gave me a towel and one of his own shirts to put on, a white one, too big, with the sleeves rolled four times. He sat me at the kitchen table by the window, with the bay going from grey to silver to blue below us. Then he went upstairs, climbing through his library one step at a time, and came down again with a book.

It was big and very old, as thick as a loaf of bread, bound in leather gone black and soft as a glove with handling. It had brass corners, one of them missing. When he put it on the table it made a sound like a door closing.

“*The Book of Choosing*,” he said.

He opened it at the front. The first pages were brown and spotted, and the writing was in an old hand, crabbed and full of loops, in ink gone the colour of rust. The first line was in Italian, the old kind. I could read it, just. The priest had taught me.

Centuries ago I chose a child.

He turned the pages, slowly, so I could see. The writing changed. Every few dozen pages, the hand changed. A new pen, a new ink, a new way of making the letters, sloping one way and then the other, big and then small, careful and then hurried. Seven hands, eight, nine. And every time the hand changed, the new hand began with the same words, at the top of a fresh page.

Centuries ago I chose a child.

“Every Keeper writes his own chapter,” he said. “How he chose. Each in his own hand, so the one who comes after will know that it’s been done before, and that it was necessary.” He laid his big hand flat on the page. “But each one begins the same. The doctor wrote that line to whoever would read his chapter centuries later, and every Keeper since has copied it. And each one says *I*. As if it were the first.”

“Why?”

“Because it is,” he said. “Every time.”

Then he told me. He told me plainly, simply, without any drama, the way you’d hand someone the keys of a house and show them which key is for which door. I’ll tell it to you the same way.

The first Keeper was the doctor, in 1656. The plague doctor, with the bird mask. He found a boy on a corpse cart in the Sanità, and he held him under in the cave, and the boy loved him for it with his whole body, and became his Hand.

That’s the word for what I am. The Hand. The one the Keeper sends. The one that does what nobody else can do.

When the doctor grew old, the boy became the Keeper.

That’s the whole of it. That’s the secret of the Held, the thing nobody says aloud at the gathering on Sundays. The Keeper isn’t a man the Held choose. He isn’t a priest or a member. He isn’t one of the frightened at all. *The Keeper is always the Hand, grown old.* The child who was held becomes the one who holds. He chooses a new child of his own, and holds her under, and lifts her out, and she loves him with her whole body. And when he’s old, she takes his place, and chooses, and holds.

Three hundred and seventy years. Fourteen Keepers, counting him, and every one after the first had been a Hand. Each one the same, each one saying *I*.

“The skull in the cave,” I said.

“Is the boy,” he said. “The first Hand. The one from the cart. When he became Keeper, he asked to be put there, at the end. Where he was first lifted.”

“And the singing?”

He looked at me sharply then, for the first time that morning. Then he looked away.

“Sometimes people hear things,” he said. “Under.”

“And you,” I said.

He was quiet for a while. The sun was up now, coming in through the window across the table, across the book, across his hands. Down below on the water a ferry was going out to Capri, very small and white, trailing a white line.

“I was the Hand of 1943,” he said. “The boy on the Via Foria. The doctor who took him home from the doorway was the Keeper. He held me under for thirty years. He had strong hands.” He touched the back of his neck. “And when he was old, I became the Keeper. And I chose.” He looked at me. “I chose you.”

“And when you’re old,” I said.

“You’ll be the Keeper,” he said. “And you’ll choose. And you’ll write your chapter in this book, in your own hand, and it’ll begin like all the others.”

He turned the pages forward, past all the hands, the rust and the brown and the black, to near the end, where the paper was whiter. There was his hand, which I knew from the Register: upright, careful, in brown ink. Then, after that, a page with nothing on it.

He put his finger at the top of the empty page.

“There,” he said.

And then he cried.

He sat at his kitchen table with his hand on the empty page and his long horse’s face crumpled, and the tears ran down into the lines of it and dripped off his chin onto the old leather. His big shoulders shook. He didn’t make a sound. He cried the way old men cry in church at funerals, as if it had been waiting in him a long time.

I sat across the table from him in his shirt with the sleeves rolled four times, and I watched him.

And I want to tell you what I saw, because you’ll want me to have been moved, and I was something. I don’t know what. I watched him cry, and it was beautiful, the way all of him is beautiful, the way

the Bellini was beautiful. The tears came in exactly the right place, at the top of the empty page, at the moment of handing over. They came two breaths after he said *there*. Not one, not three. Two. They ran down in the right lines on his face. His shoulders shook in the right rhythm. Not too much. Not too little. Exactly enough for a girl in a too-big shirt to see, across a kitchen table, in the morning sun.

I'd never seen anyone cry so well.

The heavy air round his feet hadn't moved. Not a centimetre. It lay round his good shoes on the kitchen tiles at exactly the depth it had been at when he came down the stairs with the book, a thin film, at the ankle, nothing.

He wiped his face with the back of his big hand, and smiled at me, the saint's smile, sad and kind.

"Read it," he said. He pushed the book across the table to me. "All of it. Take it home. Then you'll know what you're for."

I took it home. I read it all that week, at my kitchen table in the Rione Terra, with the ground going up under my chair. I'll give you some of it, as I go. Not all. Some of it's not mine to give.

Here's the chapter from 1799. It's the ninth hand in the book. Hoarse, the letters jammed together, as if the man who wrote it had been shouting for days.

THE BOOK OF CHOOSING · II — 1799

> *The mob is a fear that has found its legs.*
> — Saying of the Keepers

Centuries ago I chose a child.

I set down first, for the one who comes after, what the city was in that year, because the child cannot be understood without the city. They were made for each other, the way a key is made for a lock.

In the winter of 1798 the King ran away.

He was a big, loud, stupid, well-liked man who liked hunting and fishing and eating macaroni with his fingers in front of the people, and they loved him for it. The French had cut off their own King's

head six years before and made a republic, and now their armies were marching down the length of Italy. Our King ran from them in the night on an English warship, the ship of the Admiral Nelson, with the Queen and the crown jewels and the treasury, to his other kingdom in Sicily. He left his city behind him like a coat on a chair.

The gentlemen of Naples were glad. The lawyers, the young nobles, the professors, the poets, the doctors: they had read the French books and they believed in liberty, in reason, in an end to kings. In January 1799 the French army came to the gates, and the gentlemen opened them.

The *lazzari* [LAHT-tsah-ree] did not.

I must explain the lazzari, because the one who comes after may live in a time when there are none. They were the poor of Naples. Not a few poor. A whole people of the poor, tens of thousands of them, who had no houses and no trade. They slept on the steps of churches and under the arches of the port, and lived on what they could sell, steal, beg or carry. They wore a shirt and a pair of short trousers and nothing else, summer and winter. They were dark from the sun, loud, quick, devout, and they loved the King, because he was loud and ate with his fingers like them. They hated the gentlemen, because the gentlemen had always hated them.

For three days the lazzari fought the French army in the streets with knives and stones and old muskets. The French had cannon. Thousands of the lazzari died. The French won, and the gentlemen proclaimed a Republic, with a tree of liberty in the square in front of the palace and a red cap on top of it. The lazzari went back to the steps of the churches and waited.

They waited five months.

In those five months the Republic of the gentlemen wrote laws and printed newspapers and argued, and did nothing at all for the lazzari. In the south, in Calabria [kah-LAH-bryah], a cardinal of the Church, a fat, clever, fearless old man, raised an army of peasants and bandits and priests and called it the Army of the Holy Faith. They marched north up the length of the kingdom behind a great banner of the cross, burning every town that had planted a tree of liberty. In June the French army went home to France, because it

was needed elsewhere, and the cardinal's army came to the gates of Naples.

And the lazzari rose.

I set down what I saw, plainly, because the one who comes after must know what a city is when its fear finds its legs.

They went through the streets of Naples for three weeks looking for anyone who had been for the Republic. They looked for anyone who wore short hair in the French fashion, anyone who wore trousers instead of breeches, anyone who could read. They dragged them out of their houses, out of churches, out of the convents where they had run to hide. They killed them in the street with knives and clubs and their hands. They burned them alive in the squares, on bonfires built from their own furniture. And it is true, though I would not believe it if I had not seen it, that some of them roasted the flesh and ate it, there in the squares, and offered it round. The gentlemen had been afraid of the lazzari for a hundred years, and now the lazzari were afraid of nothing at all, because there were so many of them, and because the cardinal had told them God was on their side.

That is the thing I learned in that summer, and I set it down above all. *A crowd is the one thing that can do what the fearless do.* Every one of them was afraid, alone. Together they were not. Their fear had found its legs, ten thousand of them, and it ran down the streets like water down a hill. I stood in doorways and watched it go past.

I was the Keeper of the Held. I had been the Hand before that, and I knew what the Hand was for.

The Held had clients in that summer as never before. Everyone was afraid of everyone. The gentlemen were afraid of the lazzari, and the lazzari of the French coming back, and the King's men of the gentlemen's friends. Brother was afraid of brother over an inheritance, and creditor of debtor, and husband of his wife's lover. They came up our stairs one after another, white and sweating, and pushed their coins into the houses of our skulls. And they all wanted the same thing: one particular person dead, in a summer when everybody was dying. One more body on one more bonfire.

My Hand was a boy of fourteen, from the wheel, like all of them. I had chosen him at five. He had a scar through one eyebrow and a laugh like a girl's. He was the best Hand there had been, then. I believe it still.

I sent him out into the burning city every day of those three weeks, and he paid every debt I gave him. A silk merchant on the Toledo, owed money by our client: knifed in his doorway on the night the lazzari came to that street, and they burned his house over him. A notary who had witnessed a will he should not have: thrown from his own balcony into a crowd that had come for his neighbour. A young lieutenant who had got a judge's daughter with child: found in the morning in the Piazza del Mercato [PYAHT-tsah del mer-KAH-toh], the Market Square by the sea, with his head on a pike among twenty other heads, and nobody asked which hands had put it there. A widow's brother-in-law. A bishop's nephew. A man who knew too much about a ship.

Twenty-nine debts in three weeks. The city did the rest. It covered every one of them, as the sea covers a stone.

He went through the slaughter as a boy goes through a summer meadow. I watched him once, from the steps of a church, walk down the middle of the Via Toledo in the middle of the killing. There was a bonfire on the left and a man being beaten to death on the right, and a priest running with his skirts up. The lazzari were roaring like a sea, and the smoke was full of the smell of roasting. He walked straight down the middle of it, eating a peach, at an even pace. He was the only person in the street walking. Everyone else was running towards something or away from it. The lazzari let him pass. They did not even see him. A crowd sees only fear, its own or its prey's, and he had none of either.

When he came back to me in the evening he knelt at my feet, there in the house, and put his head against my knee, like a dog, and asked when it would be Sunday.

On Sundays he went under longer than any child had. A hundred seconds. A hundred and ten. And when I lifted him and threw the water, he wept, and clung to me, and wept, more beautifully each Sunday than the last.

He obeyed me best on the days the city burned. I set that down here and I underline it, so that the one who comes after will remember it. Of all the times to fear a Hand, I would have said, it is when the world is on fire around him and every lock is broken. But it was in that summer that he loved me most. It was in that summer he came back to me every night, and knelt, and asked for Sunday.

I did not ask myself why. I set that down also.

In August, when it was over, the King came back from Sicily, and the Admiral Nelson with him, and the gentlemen who had not been eaten were tried and hanged in the Piazza del Mercato. They were hanged one by one, on a scaffold in front of the great market church, with the lazzari packed into the square to watch, cheering each one.

I took the boy to see the last of them, because I wished him to see that the law too is only a crowd with a rope.

It was a woman. Her name was Eleonora [eh-leh-oh-NOH-rah]. She was a poet and a scholar, a noblewoman of a Portuguese family, born in Rome, who had lived in Naples since she was a child and had written the newspaper of the Republic. She was forty-seven. They had refused her the axe, which was for nobles, and given her the rope, which was for the common. They had refused her a pair of drawers to wear under her skirt. When she dropped, the lazzari underneath would be able to look up and see her naked, and they had come for that. They were already laughing.

Before she climbed the ladder she asked for a coffee, and they gave it to her, and she drank it. Then she said a line out loud, in Latin, from the old poet Virgil. It is what the hero says to his men after the shipwreck, when they have lost everything and washed up on a strange shore: *Perhaps one day it will please us to remember even this.*

Then she climbed the ladder.

I was watching her. Everyone was watching her. But I am the Keeper, and I have been taught to watch what nobody watches. So I looked away from the scaffold, into the crowd, and I saw a girl.

She was ten or eleven, a lazzara, one of the lazzari herself, in a ragged shift, barefoot, standing on the base of a column by the

church door so she could see over the heads. She was not laughing. She was not cheering. She was not afraid. She was watching the poet on the ladder with her head a little on one side, as you watch a bird on a branch. When the poet dropped and the rope went tight and the poet's legs kicked and the lazzari roared, the girl did not blink.

Ten thousand people in that square, standing in their fear like water to the waist. And one girl on a stone, dry.

The boy saw her too. I felt him see her. His hand on my sleeve went still.

I looked at him, and he looked at me. Then I nodded, once.

He was back by nightfall. He knelt at my feet and put his head on my knee and asked when it would be Sunday.

I opened the Register at his column, and wrote down the debts of the day, and beside the last one, which had no client, no name, only *the girl on the column, Piazza del Mercato*, I drew a small circle.

Then I sat for a while by the window, with his head on my knee, and thought about the poet on the ladder. *Perhaps one day it will please us to remember even this.*

I find, setting it down now, that it does.

III. THE HAND

15. The Trader

> *A placed child who stops coming on Sundays has not escaped. He has only forgotten what he is for.*
> — Saying of the Keepers

The Trader stopped coming in May.

He'd been coming once a month for nine years, on the first Sunday, on the early train from Milan, to kneel in the cave like the rest of us. He'd stand in the sun afterwards in his good blue suit, dripping, his thin face shining, and then he'd catch the afternoon train back. The placed ones all come. Not every week, like me. Once a month, or once a season if they're far away. But they come. They have to. You can take a fire out of the stove and put it in a lamp, but it still needs its oil.

In May he didn't come. In June he didn't come. In July Ferrante called me to his glass office at the Foundation and turned the laptop round to face me. On the screen were lines, green and red, going up and down, like the lines on the hospital machine when I breathed the gas.

"He's betting against us," Ferrante said.

I'll explain this as simply as he explained it to me, because it's simple underneath. The Held own things: pieces of companies, buildings, debts, a bank in Switzerland, a port in the north. Most of the money the Trader had made for us in nine years had gone into those things. And there's a way of betting, in the markets in Milan and London and New York, that the price of a thing will fall. You bet the thing will be worth less tomorrow than today, and if it is, you win. The more it falls, the more you win.

The Trader had made that bet, with all of the fund's money, every euro, on every company the Held owned a piece of. Then he'd begun to sell pieces of those companies himself, in great slabs, and to whisper in the right ears in Milan that something was wrong with them. And the prices had started to go down.

"How much?" I said.

“Enough,” said Ferrante. “Enough that if it goes on to the end of summer, there won’t be a Foundation. There’ll be a building in Chiaia with a brass plate on it and nothing behind the plate.” He closed the laptop. “He’s not doing it for money. He has money. He’s doing it because he’s stopped coming on Sundays, and he’s found out he doesn’t die.”

“Is that so bad?”

He looked at me for a long time with his kind horse’s face.

“It’s the worst thing that can happen,” he said. “To him. To everyone. A fire that’s found out it doesn’t need the stove.” He put his big hand flat on the laptop lid. “Go to Milan.”

I went on the train. You don’t need papers for a train in Italy, only a ticket. It’s four and a half hours on the fast one, north through the whole length of the country: Rome, the hills of Tuscany going gold, the flat grey plain of the Po [POH], the great river that runs across the top of Italy, and the mist lying on the rice fields. The north is different. The people are paler and quieter and they walk faster, and the heavy air round their feet is a different kind. In Naples it’s a lake, warm and deep and shared, everyone standing in it together. In Milan it’s a thin, cold, private film round each pair of shoes, like frost, separate. Everybody alone with their own.

He worked in a glass tower in the new business district at the north of the city, one of a cluster of towers that went up in the last fifteen years. One is twisted like a wrung cloth. One has trees growing up the outside of it on every balcony, a forest standing on end. His was plain and blue and very tall. From the street you could see the people on his floor through the glass, forty storeys up, small as seeds.

I didn’t go up. I didn’t need to. I sat for two days in a café across the square with a coffee I didn’t drink, and watched.

On the second day the prices fell hard. I didn’t understand it then, and I don’t now. Something happened in New York in the night, and when the markets in Milan opened, the companies he’d bet against began to drop like stones down a well. I could see it happen without a screen, because I could see the tower. Floor by floor, through the glass, as the morning went on, the heavy air came up. On every

floor, round every pair of legs, rising, until the people in that tower were standing in it to the knees, and on some floors to the waist. Forty storeys of glass with a lake of fear rising inside every one, like an aquarium filling up.

Except his floor. Except one man on his floor, standing at the window with his hands in his pockets, looking out at the city.

Dry.

He came down at seven. I followed him. He walked through the old streets into a neighbourhood called Brera [BREH-rah], where the painters used to live, all cobbles and ivy, little shops selling expensive paper, bars with tables outside. He sat at a table outside one and ordered a drink.

I sat down at his table.

He looked at me. He didn't jump. He didn't stand in anything. He looked at me with his pale, thin, clever face behind its glasses, and I watched him know me, the way Saverio had known me at the gate when I was six, the way a dog knows a dog across a square.

"Domenica," he said.

He'd seen me at the cave, years ago, once or twice, when our Sundays had crossed. I'd never spoken to him. I'd never spoken to any of them, much, except Saverio.

"Yes," I said.

"He sent you."

"Yes."

He nodded. Then he raised his hand for the waiter and ordered me the same drink he had, without asking, an orange one, bitter, in a short glass with ice and a slice of orange. Then he leaned back in his chair and smiled at me. It was the first smile I'd ever had from someone like me. I want to tell you what it was like, because it was the strangest thing that happened to me that year, until the strange things started.

It was like being looked at by a window.

Everyone else in my whole life, when they looked at me, had something behind their eyes: a little shiver, a little wariness, a little

of the heavy air, the knowing of a dog in a yard. Even Ferrante. *Especially* Ferrante. Everyone who has ever looked at me has been, under it all, a little afraid of me. And it's in everything, in the eyes, the voice, the way they hold their hands. I'd never once in thirty-four years been looked at by somebody who wasn't.

He wasn't.

"How long have you got?" he said. "Before you do it."

"There's no hurry."

"No," he said. "There never is, for us. Is there." He drank. "Can I tell you something first?"

"Yes."

He leaned forward, his elbows on the little table, his thin hands round his glass.

"I stopped," he said. "In May. I was on the platform at the station in Milan at six in the morning, the first Sunday, waiting for the train to Naples, as I'd done every month for nine years. And I just didn't get on. I don't know why. The train came in and the doors opened, and I stood there and watched them close. I thought I was going to die. Do you understand? I thought, the way you'd think it if you stopped breathing, that something would happen. That I'd come apart. I went home and sat on my bed and waited for it."

"And?"

"And nothing." He laughed. It was a lovely laugh, surprised, like a boy's. "Nothing. It's like giving up cigarettes. You think the want will kill you, and then you find out the want is all it was. There's nothing under it. It's not love, Domenica. It was never love. It's a hole in a hill. It's gas. It's the oldest trick there is. They do it to dogs." He reached across the table, and put his hand on my wrist. His hand was cool and dry and light. "You could stop too. Today. You could get on a different train. We could get on it together."

I looked at his hand on my wrist.

I'd breathed the gas in the hospital in March. I'd sat on the seawall all night. I'd gone under alone and pulled myself out by my own hair. I knew everything he was telling me. I'd known it for four

months. And here was a man like me, the first, holding my wrist in a pretty street in Milan, offering me a train.

I'm going to be honest with you, because there's no point otherwise. If he had asked me a week after the hospital, I don't know what I'd have said.

He hadn't asked me then. He was asking me now.

"Where would we go?" I said.

"Anywhere," he said. "Anywhere. That's the thing they never tell you. That's the word they're frightened of. *Anywhere*."

He finished his drink, and paid, and stood up, and held out his hand to me as if we were going to dance.

"Come and see where I live," he said. "Then decide."

We took the tram.

Milan still runs its old trams, the orange ones, built in the 1920s, with wooden benches inside and brass handrails and windows that slide down. They go rattling and swaying through the middle of the city, ringing their bells, as they did a hundred years ago. It was eight in the evening and the tram was packed: people going home from work, a group of students, old women with shopping, a man with a cello in a case. We stood in the middle, holding the brass rail, our shoulders touching, swaying together as it went round the corners. He was telling me about his flat. It had a terrace, he said, with a lemon tree, a small one, in a pot. It reminded him of the south. He was smiling.

I'll tell you how it happened, in order, because order is what I have.

The knife was a thin one, very thin, with a blade as long as my hand and no wider than a pencil. It's the kind a fisherman uses to open sea urchins. I'd carried it up my sleeve for two days.

The tram went round the corner by the castle, the big brick castle in the middle of Milan where the dukes lived, and everybody swayed to the left, all together, the way a field of wheat goes over in the wind. He swayed into me. I put my left arm round him, as if to steady him, as if we were lovers. With my right hand I put the knife in under his ribs on the left side, upward, at the angle the pharmacist had shown me when I was thirteen, into the heart.

It took one breath. His.

He didn't make a sound. He looked down at me, surprised, the way they always look surprised, his face very close to mine. His glasses had gone a little crooked. And then — I'll give you this, because it's the truest thing I know about him — he smiled. Not a big smile. A small one, at one corner of his mouth, as if he'd just understood the end of a joke he'd been told a long time ago.

He wasn't afraid. Not even then. Not one drop. He was the cleanest death I've ever given anyone. There was nothing round his feet when he died, nothing at all, not even at the end, when everyone has some. He went out the way a candle goes out in the cave: lay down on its side, small and blue, and was gone.

I took the knife out and held him up against me as the tram straightened, and let him down onto the wooden bench by the window, gently, and sat him there with his head against the glass as though he'd fallen asleep. There was very little blood. With a knife that thin there isn't, at first. It all goes inside. I took my arm away. I put the knife back up my sleeve.

At the next stop I got off.

I looked back from the pavement as the tram rang its bell and pulled away. A woman sitting across from him had noticed. She'd seen the dark spreading on his blue shirt under his jacket, and she was standing up with her hand over her mouth. As the tram swung away down the street, I saw the heavy air come up inside it, out of everyone, all at once. It filled the old wooden car from the floor to the windows in the time it took the tram to reach the next corner. A tram full of fear to the ceiling, lit orange, swaying and ringing its bell down the street into the dark.

And sitting in the middle of it, with his head against the window, a man who was dry.

I took the night train home. I sat by the window all the way down the length of Italy, and watched the dark go past, and thought about a lemon tree in a pot on a terrace in Milan that nobody was going to water.

I want you to understand that I'd decided. Not on the tram. Before. In the café, watching the tower fill up with fear, I had already

decided I was going to do it, and that I was going to do it because he'd asked me to come with him, and not in spite of it. A fearless man who'd found out he didn't need the hand. Who'd go anywhere. Who'd bring down the Foundation in a summer, from a terrace with a lemon tree, because nothing in the world could stop him. And who, if I'd gone with him, would have needed me for nothing at all.

He was everything I'd been sitting on the seawall wondering whether I was. And I killed him, because there can't be two.

I didn't know yet that that was a rule. I thought it was only how I felt.

In Naples, in the morning, Ferrante met me at the station in his van. He didn't ask anything. He drove me to Chiaia, and up the stairs past the brass plate, to his glass office. He took a big book out of the drawer of his desk, bound in green cloth gone soft at the corners, and put it on the desk in front of me.

"You've earned this," he said.

16. The Register of Breaths and Debts

> *Write the seconds. Write the debts. Write nothing else. The book is not for feelings. It is for the one who comes after.*
> — Note on the inside cover of the Register

There are thirty-one volumes of the Register. They go back to 1656. The old ones are in the cold room behind the cupboard door, on the bottom shelf under the skulls. They're bound in leather, cracked and powdery, and you're not allowed to touch them without cotton gloves. The one he gave me was the newest, the green one, started in 1971.

It's a very simple book. That's what makes it terrible.

Every page is ruled into columns. At the top of each column is a name, and under the name, in brown ink, run two lists side by side.

On the left: Sundays. A date, and a number. The number is seconds under.

On the right: debts. A date, and a few words. A name, or not. A place. And one word that is always the same: *paid*.

That's all. No notes, no thoughts, no feelings. Three hundred and seventy years of children, written down like the takings of a shop.

I found my column.

Domenica. The first entry: *April 1998 · 22*. I've told you about that. Then, Sunday after Sunday, down the page and onto the next page and the next and the next, twenty-eight years of them, in his upright careful hand: 24, 25, 25, 28, 31, 30, 34… The numbers climbed slowly through my childhood like the ground under Pozzuoli. There was a long run of big numbers in the autumn of 2004, after the accountant, 60, 64, 71, and then they eased back down. That was after I learned to cry. Then they began to climb again, steadily, year after year, into the forties, into the fifties. The most recent was the Sunday before I went to Milan: *68*.

And on the right, the debts.

Oct 2004 · Via Toledo · paid. That was the accountant.

Mar 2026 · Sanità · paid. That was the onion kitchen.

Mar 2026 · Vomero · paid. The journalist in his bed.

Apr 2026 · Bagnoli · paid. That was the young engineer with the beard, the one with the samples of bad concrete. I haven't told you about him. There isn't much to tell. He had a scooter, and a habit of riding it too fast along the coast road at night.

Jul 2026 · Milan · paid.

Forty-one of them, in twenty-two years. I counted. I'm going to tell you about some more of them, as we go. They show things. That's why I tell them.

But I'll tell you now, straight, so you're not waiting for it: ten of them I'm not going to tell you about at all.

Ten of the forty-one have a small circle drawn beside them in brown ink. A perfect little circle, the size of a lentil, drawn with care, in the margin next to the word *paid*. Like the circle I saw when I was six, next to a name above mine, before he closed the book.

“What are those?” I asked him, there in the glass office, with my finger on one.

“Special,” he said.

That’s what he said. *Special.* And I said nothing back, because I knew which they were. I had paid them.

So that’s how it’ll be, with those ten, and with any more. When we come to one, I’ll tell you there was a debt, and I’ll tell you it was paid. And that’s all you’ll get. You’ll be annoyed. I’m sorry. Some things are not for telling, not yet, and I’ve decided that these are mine.

I’ve decided. You’ll notice I said that.

I sat in his office for three hours and read the Register, the whole green volume from 1971. He left me alone with it. He went down to the pharmacy, and I heard him through the floor, talking and laughing with the pharmacist.

I read the columns of the others. The Soldier’s, starting in 1990: Sundays, Sundays, then, when he was eighteen, monthly, then seasonal. Debts in places I’d never heard of, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Libya, which aren’t debts the Held decided, Ferrante said, but debts the Held were *glad of*. The Trader’s, which ended in April, with a blank space under it where May should have been, like a missing tooth. The Founder’s, the Surgeon’s. The girl with the red shoes, who’d been placed in Brussels, among the people who write the laws for all of Europe.

Then I went back to the beginning of the volume, to 1971, and read the column at the very front.

It wasn’t a child’s. It was a Keeper’s. Ferrante’s Keeper, the doctor from the doorway on the Via Foria in 1943. He’d kept his own column, as well as his Hand’s, and in it there were no Sundays and no debts. There were just dates, one a year, with a word beside each: *well*. *Well*. *Tired*. *Well*. *Hands*, which I didn’t understand. *Well*. It went down the page in a thin, slanting, old man’s writing, getting thinner and shakier year by year, until 1973.

And in 1973 the last entry wasn’t his.

It was in another hand. It was in Ferrante's hand, the upright careful one I knew from my own column, though younger, a little bigger, pressing harder into the paper.

Sunday. 4 min.

That's all. *Sunday. 4 min.* And then nothing more in that column, ever, all the way down the page to the bottom, ruled empty lines.

I went through the cupboard door into the cold room with a pair of cotton gloves on, and took out the old volumes from the bottom shelf, one after another, the cracked leather ones, and found the Keepers' columns. I have good eyes and plenty of time.

Every one was the same.

Every Keeper's column ended in the middle of a page. And every last entry was in a different hand from the rest of the column. It was in the next Hand's writing. A word, *Sunday*, and a number, every time. *Sunday. 3 min. Sunday. 5 min. Sunday. 6 min.*

Thirteen Keepers before him. Thirteen columns. Thirteen last entries, all in the next one's handwriting.

I put the volumes back exactly as I'd found them, and took off the gloves. Then I stood in the cold room among the sixty-one skulls in their little houses, at fourteen degrees, and looked at them.

I'd always thought there were more skulls than Keepers. Sixty-one, against thirteen. I'd always assumed the others were just old ones, from the Fontanelle, adopted long ago.

I looked at the little houses. Most were wood or tin. Twelve of them, I noticed for the first time, standing there, had something in front of their little doors: a tiny brass plate, the size of a postage stamp. And on each brass plate, a number.

3 min. 5 min. 4 min.

I heard Ferrante coming up from the pharmacy, his slow, heavy, careful tread on the stairs, still laughing at something the pharmacist had said.

I went out to meet him with the green book under my arm, and we drove to the cave, because it was Sunday.

17. The Captain

> *The dead want only to be remembered. That is why they are so useful.*
> — Saying of the Keepers

There's a debt I want to tell you about properly, because people who read things like this will want to know whether I'm a monster. I'd like to help you decide. I can't decide it for you. I haven't got the part.

In August a girl from the Held was raped.

She was the daughter of the man with the car dealerships, the one whose accountant I poisoned when I was twelve. She was nineteen. She'd gone to a party in a villa on the coast, and a man had put something in her drink, and in the morning she'd woken up in a room she didn't know with her dress torn and no memory, only the bruises and the blood, and a photograph on her phone that someone had sent her, laughing.

The man was twenty-eight, the son of a family that owned half the hotels on the coast. Within a week there were four lawyers. Within a month the case was closed for lack of proof, and the photograph had been deleted from every phone except hers.

Her father came up the stairs on a Sunday, past the brass plate, and stood in the heavy air to his neck. He didn't sit on a chair. He didn't take his coat off. He couldn't speak. He just stood at the front of the room and shook, and pushed a fat envelope into the house of a skull with a tin roof so hard that it split the back.

Ferrante didn't need eleven words. He said one.

"Yes."

The man went out every night. He had a red open-topped car he liked people to see. He was easy to find and easy to follow, and easy, in the end, to talk to. He never in his life had been told no by a woman, and he couldn't imagine one would lead him anywhere he didn't want to go. I sat down next to him at a bar in Chiaia at midnight. I put my hand on his knee, and I told him I knew a place in the old city where nobody would ever find us.

He thought I meant something else. He was very pleased. The heavy air round his good Italian shoes was nothing, a film. I'd never seen a man less afraid who wasn't one of us.

I took him to the Fontanelle.

It's open to visitors now, in the day. The city cleaned it up and put in lights. People come in groups with guides and take photographs. At night it's locked behind tall iron gates, and I had a key, because one of the forty is on the committee that runs it.

I'll describe it for you, because there is nothing like it anywhere in the world.

You go in through the gates at the end of a narrow street in the Sanità, at the foot of the hill, and the hill opens in front of you like a mouth. The cave is enormous. It's not a cave, really; it's a quarry the Greeks and Romans dug, cutting out the soft yellow stone to build the city, chamber after chamber, deeper into the hill. The roofs are high as a church's, lost in darkness. And all along the walls and the floor of every chamber, in long low banks, in heaps, in neat rows like loaves on shelves, are the dead.

Skulls, thousands and thousands of skulls. Long bones stacked like firewood. Forty thousand dead, more or less; nobody knows exactly. The ones the city had no room for: the plague dead of 1656, the cholera dead of 1836 and 1884, the poor who couldn't pay for a grave, all brought here and laid in the dark, and forgotten. And then remembered, by the women of the Sanità, one skull at a time. Here and there among the banks of bones are the little houses: wood, tin, stone, with their tiny roofs and doors, some with lace, some with plastic flowers, some with a rosary hung over the roof, some with coins pushed into the eye sockets. *Capuzzelle.* The adopted ones. Each one somebody's.

With a torch, at night, it's the most beautiful place I know. The light goes across the faces of the skulls, thousands of them, and their eye sockets fill with shadow and empty again as you pass, so it looks as though they're all turning to watch you go by.

He stopped at the gate when he saw it. The heavy air came up round his ankles, his shins. He tried to laugh.

"What is this?" he said.

“It’s where the city keeps the people it doesn’t want,” I said. “Come on.”

He came. That’s what I want you to notice. He came on, into the dark, among the bones, behind a woman he’d met an hour ago, with a torch. The heavy air was rising round him with every step, past his knees, and he came anyway. You’d think that being afraid would turn people back. It doesn’t, mostly. Mostly it makes them obedient. Fear doesn’t make you run. It makes you follow whoever doesn’t seem afraid.

I talked to him the whole way. Gently. He wasn’t the first man I’d taken down there. I told him about the plague, and the carts, and the boy who sat on the corpses and sang. I told him about the women who came down here in the war, when the bombs fell, to ask the skulls to keep their sons alive. I told him about the archbishop in 1969. I told him the names of the famous ones: the Captain, and Donna Concetta, the head that sweats. I told it to him the way you’d tell a child a story to keep it walking, and he kept walking.

The Captain is at the back of the deepest chamber, on a raised stone in a little shrine of his own, behind a low iron rail. He’s an ordinary skull, the colour of old ivory, with a cross on the stone in front of him and offerings around him: a soldier’s medal, a child’s shoe, a lottery ticket. The story is that a woman of the Sanità used to come and pray to him every day. A young man who was courting her was jealous of the skull, and one day he came down here and poked the Captain in the eye with a stick, and laughed, and asked the skull to come to his wedding. And on the wedding day a stranger came, dressed as a soldier. And when they asked him to take off his hat, he did. Under the hat he was a skeleton, and the bridegroom and the bride both dropped dead of fright on the spot.

He doesn’t sweat. That’s Donna Concetta, in her glass case nearer the entrance; the women touch her and their fingers come away wet. Nobody has ever said it of the Captain.

I stopped in front of the Captain, and turned round with the torch under my chin, the way children do to frighten each other, and looked at the man.

He was standing in it to the chest.

He knew. Not what, but that. He'd known for some minutes. I'd watched him know, and keep walking anyway. His face was white and wet. I could hear his breath, high and short.

"Do you know why you're here?" I said.

"I didn't do anything," he said. "She wanted to. She was drunk. Who sent you? Her father? I'll pay. I'll pay you double, I'll—"

"You put her in a room she didn't know," I said. "So I've put you in one."

I'll tell you what I did, but not all of it, and not because it's too horrible. It's because I want you to think about the right part.

I'll tell you that it took a long time, and that I talked to him the whole time, gently, in the voice you'd use for a frightened animal. I told him about the dead around us, who had died of plague and cholera and hunger, of things they didn't choose. I told him each of them had been afraid at the end, as he was now. I told him that this was the most honest he had ever been in his life, and that he should notice it. I'll tell you the heavy air rose until it was over both our heads, until I was standing at the bottom of a lake of his fear at the back of the Fontanelle, among forty thousand skulls, with the torch shining through it like a lamp through dark water. And the skulls were all looking at us, their eyes filling and emptying with the light.

I'll tell you that at the end I left him lying on the long bank of bones beside the Captain's shrine, with his face turned to the wall, among the others, the way the city leaves the people it doesn't want. It's a big cave. It would be eleven days before a guide noticed him, and then only by the smell.

And I'll tell you that afterwards I stepped over the iron rail and knelt in front of the Captain, and took a cloth out of my pocket, and cleaned him. I wiped the dust off the top of his head, and out of his eye sockets, and off the stone in front of him, the way the women used to, tenderly, as you'd wash an old man's face.

He was wet.

The top of his skull, under my cloth, was wet. Cold and wet, beaded, the way a glass of cold water sweats on a summer table. I took the

cloth away and looked at it in the torchlight, and it was damp. I touched my finger to his forehead and then to my tongue.

Salt.

Like tears. Like the sea.

Nobody has ever said it of the Captain. He did it for me.

Now, here's the part I want you to think about.

I've told you what he did. I've told you what I did. You're deciding, now, whether it's justice or murder or both, whether I'm the girl's avenging angel or a mad woman with a torch. Whether the father was right to come up the stairs. Whether the Held are monsters or the only thing in this city that works.

Go on. Decide.

And then ask yourself this. If I had found a man, one ordinary man, who had raped a girl and walked free, and come to you with him, and said: *Here. Tell me to, and I'll take him into the dark, and nobody will ever know, and nothing will ever happen to you.* What would you have said?

And ask yourself whether what you'd have said would have come from your idea of justice, or from the heavy air round your feet.

I walked home through the Sanità at four in the morning. The van was waiting under the bridge, with Ferrante in it, as he always was after the long ones.

"Someone has asked for you," he said, as I got in. He didn't start the engine.

"Who?"

"Some people who would like to know," he said, "what happened to an engineer on a scooter on the coast road in April."

18. What Torture Is For

> *Pain is not the instrument. Pain is the oil. The instrument is fear.*
> — Saying of the Keepers

They took me on a Tuesday, at the bottom of the steps below the Rione Terra, at eleven in the morning, in the sun, with a white van. Four men. They were quick and good at it. One of them put a cloth bag over my head and another hit me on the back of the skull with something heavy wrapped in a towel. They did it so well that I'd like to have watched.

The engineer on the scooter, it turned out, had been a nephew. The young man with the beard and the serious face and the samples of bad concrete was the son of a sister of the wife of a man who runs a part of the city called Scampia [SKAHM-pyah].

Scampia is in the flat land at the very north of Naples, where the city runs out into fields and motorways. In the 1970s the government built huge blocks of flats there for the poor, out of concrete, in the shape of enormous triangles, like the sails of ships. People called them the *Vele* [VEH-leh], *the Sails*. They were going to be the future. Within twenty years they were the biggest drug market in Europe: sixteen floors of broken lifts and dark stairwells and walkways where boys of twelve stood lookout and sold to people who came from all over Italy in cars with the engines running. The clans fought a war over them in the 2000s and left the stairwells full of the dead. The government has knocked most of the Sails down since. One is left standing, painted pale blue, like a ship stranded on a sandbank.

They took me into the cellar of that one.

It was a concrete room with no window, a drain in the middle of the floor, one bulb, a metal chair bolted down, and the smell of old water and older piss. They tied me to the chair with plastic ties at the wrists and ankles, and took off the bag.

There were five of them now. The four from the van, and a fifth, younger, about thirty, in a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a very good watch. He was the boss's son. He sat on an upturned

bucket in front of me, like Ferrante at the gate of the cave, with his elbows on his knees, and looked at me.

“Who sent you?” he said.

I’ll tell you what torture is, because I learned it in that room, and because it’s one of the true answers to the question I’m telling you this story to answer.

Most people think torture runs on pain. It doesn’t. Pain is just a tool, the way a hammer is a tool. Torture runs on fear. The pain is there to make the fear, and the fear does the work. It’s not the cigarette that makes a man talk. It’s the second cigarette, the one he can see being lit, the one that hasn’t touched him yet. The fear of the next thing is what opens the mouth. Every torturer in history has known it. The rack, the fire, the pliers: they’re all for showing. *Look what’s coming.* The body hurts, and the mind runs ahead of the hurt, terrified, into the future, and begs to stop it. You’re not tortured by what’s happening. You’re tortured by what you’re afraid is going to happen next.

Take away the fear, and the machine has no oil.

They started with my hands. One of the van men did it. He was big, with a soft face and a gold cross, and he was good at his work in the way a butcher is. He took the little finger of my left hand in a pair of pliers and broke it, slowly, so I’d hear it. Then the ring finger. Then he lit a cigarette and smoked half of it, and put the burning end on the back of my right hand, and held it there while it hissed.

It hurt. I want to be clear. I’m not made of stone, except in two small places. Pain is pain. I felt every bit of it, like anyone. I sweated and my breath went short and my body jerked in the ties.

But I wasn’t afraid of the next one.

I watched him light the second cigarette with interest. I watched the pliers come towards my middle finger. I looked at the gold cross on his chest, and at the rust on the pliers, and at the stain on the boss’s son’s white cuff, which was wine, I think. I looked at the drain in the floor, and wondered where it went. I was in pain, the way you’re in pain when you’ve hit your thumb with a hammer. I wasn’t anywhere in the future at all. There was no future in me for the fear to run ahead into.

“Who sent you?” said the boss’s son.

“Your cuff’s got wine on it,” I said. “Salt takes it out, if you do it fast.”

He looked at his cuff.

And the heavy air began to come up off them.

Not off me. Off them. Slowly at first, the first hour, a film round their shoes on the wet concrete. They didn’t know why. They’d done this before, I could tell, many times. They knew what was supposed to happen. A person in the chair screams and begs and weeps and pisses and talks, and the men in the room feel big, and strong, and safe, because the fear is all on the other side of the room. Torture is a machine for moving fear from one person into another. It’s a pump. The torturer pumps his own fear out into the one in the chair, and gets bigger as the one in the chair gets smaller.

I had nowhere to put it. So it stayed on their side of the room.

By the end of the first day it was at their knees. The big one with the cross had stopped smoking. He kept wiping his hands on his trousers. One of the others, a thin one, went out and was sick in the corridor; I heard it. The boss’s son sat on his bucket in it up to his waist, and stared at me, and didn’t speak.

Then they found the door.

It was the thin one who found it, coming back from being sick. He was angry, the way frightened men get angry, and he took a towel off the hook by the door and soaked it in the bucket of water in the corner, and said, “Tip her back.”

They tipped the chair back against the wall, and he put the wet towel over my face and poured water on it.

You may know what that is. Armies do it. It’s very old. Armies call it waterboarding. It was used in the Spanish Inquisition, and in the jungles of Asia, and by American interrogators in secret prisons twenty years ago. A wet cloth over the mouth and nose, and water poured on top, slowly, so it soaks through, so that every time you try to breathe in you breathe in water, and the cloth sticks to your face like a second skin, and the body thinks it’s drowning. It isn’t drowning. The body doesn’t know the difference.

It doesn’t go through the watchman. It comes up the other road. The old road, from the lungs, from the blood. The road that’s wide open in me.

It came.

All of it, the bottom of the sea, there in a cellar in Scampia under a wet towel, with five men standing round me. The alarm. *Now.* My heart broke into its run. My chest heaved and found water. My body screamed and bucked in the plastic ties, so hard that the ties cut into my wrists to the bone. And I was afraid, utterly, purely, as I’m afraid every Sunday. I thrashed. I made the high thin noise the boy in the cave made in 1656.

And they felt it. I heard them: a breath going out of all of them at once, a laugh, the thin one saying *there*. The machine had found its oil. The pump started working. Their heavy air went down, fast, like a bath draining. I couldn’t see it under the towel, but I could feel it, the room changing. They were big again. They were safe.

Then the thin one pulled the towel off and the chair came forward, and I breathed.

And this is the part I need you to hear, because it’s the worst thing I know about myself, and I’ve never told it to anyone.

For one second, when the towel came off and the air came into me, I loved him.

The thin one, with sick on his breath, holding the wet towel. He was the one who’d lifted me, and the gift came into me, and my body, which had been trained for twenty-eight years, did what it was trained to do. It looked at the face in front of it and *loved* it. With everything. The way I love Ferrante on Sundays. A great warm flood of it, up from the soles of my feet, for this man in a cellar who’d been sick in a corridor. It lasted one second. It was the most frightening thing that’s ever happened to me, and I can say that because it’s one of the very few.

The body is so stupid. That’s what I learned. You can teach it anything. Teach it that the terror ends when a hand decides, and it will love any hand that ends it. Any hand at all.

The thin one leaned in close. The heavy air round him was down to his ankles now. He was grinning.

“Who sent you?” he said.

And the second passed. The flood went back down to wherever it lives. The gas was gone out of my blood, and the old road closed, and I was dry again, entirely, as if nothing had happened. I sat there in the chair with water running off my face and blood running off my wrists, breathing normally, and looked at him with the same interest as before.

“Can I have a cigarette?” I said. “I don’t smoke. I’d just like to see if you’ll give me one.”

He stepped back.

I watched it hit them, all five, one after the other. They’d seen me afraid. They’d seen it with their own eyes, the thrashing and the noise. They’d felt the machine catch and turn. And then, two breaths later, it was gone, as if it had never been. As if I’d been pretending, or as if I’d been a different woman under the towel and had gone away again.

The heavy air came back up off them in one wave. Past the knees. Past the waist. It came off them faster than it had all day, because now they knew the thing they’d been afraid of was true: there was nothing in me that they could reach. There was one small door, and it led nowhere. Whatever they did to me with the towel, the minute they took it off, I’d be back. They could drown me, and that would be the end of it. But they couldn’t make me tell them anything, because the only fear I had was fear of not breathing. All you can do with that is give the breath back, and when you give it back the fear’s gone.

They tried the towel twice more that night. Each time it went the same way: the terror, the lift, the one-second flood of love for whoever was holding the towel, and then the dry, calm face, asking for things. Each time they came out of it standing deeper. By midnight the thin one wouldn’t touch the towel any more. The big one with the cross had his rosary out.

The boss’s son sat on his bucket in it up to his chest, staring at me, and in the end he got up and went out without a word, and three of

them went with him. They left one, the youngest, to watch me. He was a boy of seventeen with a pistol in the back of his tracksuit trousers and a stud in his ear, standing by the door.

He stood in the heavy air to the neck.

I talked to him. Quietly, for about two hours, in the voice I used in the Fontanelle. I told him what was going to happen. I told him who I was, not my name, but what I was. I told him exactly, plainly, in order, what I would do to the other four, one by one, at some point in the next year or the next ten, at a time they didn't choose and wouldn't see coming. And I told him that I'd leave him out of it, because he was a boy, and because I didn't need him.

I told him about the dog in the cave that never gets old. I told him that I'd been afraid on exactly one night in my whole life outside a cave or a hospital, under their towel, for three seconds, three times, and that he'd seen it. He and the four who'd gone upstairs were the only people alive, apart from one old man, who had seen it. It would be very sensible of him to forget he had.

I said it all very kindly.

You remember what I told you in the Fontanelle. Fear doesn't make people run. It makes them follow whoever doesn't seem afraid.

At about three in the morning, he came over and cut the ties.

I'll tell you that the big one with the cross came back at five with coffee, and that I was standing behind the door, and that I didn't need the pliers. I'll tell you that the thin one came back at six to take over the watch, and that I'd soaked the towel by then. I won't tell you more, except that I gave it back to him exactly as he'd given it to me, and I didn't take it off.

At seven I walked out of the cellar and up the broken stairs and out into the morning, with my two fingers taped together with electrical tape and my wrists wrapped in strips of a tracksuit top. The boy of seventeen was a few steps behind me like a dog.

The boss was outside.

He was sitting on a white plastic chair at the foot of the blue Sail in the early sun, an old man in a vest, with a newspaper and a coffee, as he did every morning. He looked up at me coming out of his

cellar. He looked at my hands. He looked past me at the dark doorway, where no one else was coming out.

The heavy air came up round him like a spring coming up out of the ground. Then he put the newspaper down on his knees, and he put both his hands over his face.

I walked past him, close enough to touch. I took the coffee off the little table beside his chair, drank it, and put the cup back.

At the bus stop I told the boy to go home and never come back to Scampia, and he went. I don't know where. I've never looked.

Ferrante was waiting for me in the van, outside the hospital where I went to have my fingers set under the notary's daughter's name. He'd been waiting, it turned out, since the night before, in the car park of every hospital in the north of Naples in turn.

The heavy air in the van was up to his neck.

I'd never seen him in that much. Not even at the gate of the cave, after I'd gone under alone. He was sitting at the wheel in his coat and his hat, drowning in it, his big hands on the wheel, white at the knuckles.

"I thought I'd lost you," he said.

"To them?" I said. I got in and showed him my fingers. "They're amateurs."

"No," he said. He started the van, and didn't look at me. "Not to them."

19. San Gennaro

> *Every Neapolitan waits for something to turn to liquid in a glass.*
> — Saying of the Keepers

The nineteenth of September is the feast of San Gennaro [sahn jen-NAH-roh], Saint Januarius, the patron saint of Naples, the one who holds the city in his hands.

He was a bishop, in the old days of Rome, when Christians were still being killed for being Christians. They tried to burn him in a furnace and he walked out of it. They threw him to the bears and the bears lay down at his feet. In the end, in the year 305, they cut off his head. They did it at Pozzuoli, at the edge of the Solfatara, the sulphur crater, about two kilometres from my bed. A woman caught some of his blood in two small glass bottles as it ran out of him, and kept it.

The bottles are still in Naples, in the cathedral, the Duomo [DWOH-moh], in a silver case with glass sides like a little lantern. Inside them the blood is dried, a dark crust, brown-red, like old rust. Three times a year the archbishop takes the case out of the strongroom behind the altar of the saint's own chapel, a chapel all of gold and silver and marble. He holds it up in front of the people, turns it over in his hands, and prays. And the blood turns to liquid.

That's the miracle. The dry crust goes soft and red and runs down the inside of the glass like fresh blood. When it happens, the archbishop waves a white handkerchief, and the cathedral roars, and the bells ring all over the city. The scientists have their explanations. I don't care about them, and neither does Naples.

What Naples cares about is when it doesn't happen.

Because sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes the archbishop turns the lantern over and over and prays and the blood stays dry. And the city remembers every time it has. In 1939, before the war. In 1973, the year the cholera came back. In 1980, before the earthquake that killed nearly three thousand people in the hills east of the city. Each time, the blood stayed dry, and each time, the people say, something terrible followed.

I'd never been. Ferrante went every year. That year he asked me to go with him.

The cathedral was full by six in the morning. Ten thousand people, packed so tight inside that the crowd swayed like the tram in Milan when it went round the corner, and more outside in the street, and more on the steps, and television vans, and a man selling plastic statues of the saint, and police. We stood near the front, in the side

aisle, against a pillar. Ferrante held his hat in front of him with both hands.

In front of the altar, in the best place, closest to the saint, sat the old women.

They're called the *parenti di San Gennaro* [pah-REN-tee dee sahn jen-NAH-roh], the saint's relatives. They're old women from the old families of the city who say they're descended from the woman who caught his blood. They have the right, by long custom, to sit at the front and pray him into it. And they don't pray the way you'd think. They talk to him. They argue with him. When the blood is slow they shout at him, in Neapolitan, in front of the archbishop and the television cameras and ten thousand people. They call him lazy. They call him *faccia gialluta* [FAHT-chah jahl-LOO-tah], yellow-face, because of the colour of his golden statue. They tell him they've been waiting since dawn and their knees hurt and what kind of saint makes old women wait. They wave their fists at him. It's the most Neapolitan thing in the world: a whole city that loves its god so much it's allowed to insult him to his face.

The heavy air in the cathedral was up to the waist.

I'd never seen so much in one place. Ten thousand people standing in it, packed shoulder to shoulder, a lake of fear filling the whole long body of the church to the height of the old women's chins as they sat. It shimmered in the light from the high windows. It was beautiful. And it was all, every drop of it, the same fear: *what if it doesn't?*

The archbishop came out at nine with the silver lantern, and held it up. The old women started.

I watched him turn the lantern over in his hands. I watched the ten thousand watch it. I watched their faces, lifted, every one, towards the little glass bottles in the old man's hands. Their mouths moved. The heavy air was perfectly still around them, waist-deep, waiting.

And I understood.

It came to me so simply that I nearly laughed out loud in the cathedral, as I'd laughed in the neurologist's office. I put my hand over my mouth.

They were waiting for the lift.

All of them. Ten thousand of them. Standing in their fear up to the waist, faces up, waiting for an old man's hands to decide. The whole city. Every year, three times a year, it stood in the dark with its face down in the gas, so to speak, and waited for a hand to lift it out. And when the hand did, when the white handkerchief went up, there'd be the gift. The roar, the bells, the breath let out, the tears running down, *there, there*. And they'd go home and love their saint with their whole bodies until the next time.

It was the cave. It was the whole city kneeling in the cave.

The Held hadn't invented anything. The doctor in his bird mask in 1656 had only found a small, private way of doing what this city had always done to itself, at the top of its voice, under a roof of gold.

The archbishop turned the lantern over. And over. And over.

The old women shouted. *Yellow-face. Lazy. Come on.*

An hour.

Two.

The heavy air was rising. I watched it go up, a centimetre at a time, from the waist towards the chest, through the whole cathedral, like a tide coming into a harbour. People were crying now. Not the gift kind. The other kind. Children were being held up above it on their fathers' shoulders without anyone knowing why.

At a quarter to twelve the archbishop put the silver lantern down on the altar, very gently, and crossed himself, and said into the microphone, in a tired voice, that the blood had not liquefied, and that they would pray again in the evening, and that the people should be calm.

It didn't liquefy in the evening either.

I stood against the pillar in the cathedral with the heavy air up to the shoulders of ten thousand people, as dry as a stone at the bottom of a lake.

Ferrante, beside me, was in it to the chest. He was holding his hat so tight that the brim had bent.

"It's time," he said. Not to me. To himself. Very quietly.

That night there was a swarm. Two hundred and twelve earthquakes between eleven and four, the biggest a four point one. The ground under Pozzuoli went up two centimetres in one night. In the morning, on the radio, the man from the observatory used the word *accelerating*.

Ferrante telephoned at seven.

“Come to Chiaia,” he said. “I’ll show you how it ends.”

20. How Keepers Die

> *The voice passes only through the hand.*
> — Saying of the Keepers

He took me into the cold room behind the cupboard door, among the sixty-one skulls at fourteen degrees, and he showed me the twelve brass plates.

“You’ve seen them,” he said.

“Yes.”

“You read the Register.”

“Yes.”

He nodded, as though that was right and proper and he was proud of me for it. He took down one of the little houses from the third shelf, a house of dark carved wood with a roof of green copper and a little door with a brass hinge, and set it on the table in the middle of the room, and opened its door.

The skull inside was big, a man’s, very white, very clean, with all its teeth. On the brass plate in front of the door: *4 min.*

“My Keeper,” he said.

He told me. He told me in the same plain voice he’d used for the Four Days, at his kitchen window, and for the Book of Choosing, at his kitchen table. The keys of the house, one by one.

No Keeper of the Held has ever died of old age, or of illness, or in a bed.

When the Keeper is old, and the Hand is ready, and the ground or the city gives the sign, the Hand takes the Keeper to the cave. The sign is a great swarm, or a great sickness, or a saint's blood that stays dry: something that frightens the whole city at once, so that a death goes by unseen in the crowd of fear. The Hand carries the lake in two buckets. The Keeper takes off his shoes and kneels down in the dust, five metres in, where the roof comes low, with his face to the dark.

And the Hand puts a hand on the back of the Keeper's neck. And holds him under. And doesn't lift.

"Four minutes," he said. He touched the brass plate. "That's what the plates are. How long each of them took. Some of the old ones, three. One, in 1841, it was seven. He'd been the Hand of the massacre. He was very strong." He smiled a little. "Mine was four. In 1973. The year of the cholera. The year the blood stayed dry."

"Why?" I said.

He'd expected that. He sat down on the edge of the table, his big hands folded, and looked at me with great tenderness.

"Because the voice passes only through the hand," he said. "Think, Domenica. What is a Keeper? A Keeper is a Hand who has been held, all his life, every Sunday, and who loves the hand that held him more than anything in the world. If the Keeper died in his bed, of a cold, the Hand would still be that. A child. A held thing, with no one left to hold her. She'd go mad. Or she'd go loose." He looked at me. "Like the Trader."

"And if she holds him under."

"Then she has done the one thing," he said, "that can't be done by a held thing. She's held him. She has knelt her Keeper down and kept him there, and felt him fight, and not lifted. She has made herself the hand." He opened his own big hand, palm up, and looked at it as if it belonged to someone else. "And after that there is nothing left in her to be held. There's only the Book. And the next child."

"And the scars," I said.

He touched the back of his neck. The two thin white lines.

“He fought,” he said. “At the end. They all do. Even the ones who’ve asked for it. The body doesn’t know it asked.” He smiled, sad and kind. “He reached back and caught me. Two fingernails. They never healed properly. I was glad.”

I looked at the big white skull in its house with the green copper roof.

“Did you cry?” I said.

He was quiet for a moment.

“Yes,” he said. “The whole time.”

I didn’t ask whether his eyes had been dry. I didn’t need to. I’d read the chapter from 1884 again, the night before, in the Book of Choosing. I’ll give it to you soon.

He closed the little door of the house, gently, and lifted it back onto the shelf among the others. Then he turned round and stood in front of me in the cold room with his hands at his sides.

The heavy air came up round his good shoes. Not a film. More than I’d ever seen on him in that room. Past his ankles. Past his shins.

“And now me,” he said.

21. He Asks

> *Do not let your Keeper die in his bed.*
> — Written inside the back cover of the Book of Choosing, in every Keeper’s hand

He asked me properly, the way an old man in Naples asks a girl to marry him: at his own table, after dinner, with the good glasses out.

It was the next evening, at the house on Posillipo. He’d made the ragù again. He’d put *Norma* on the record player, the prayer to the moon, *Casta diva*, and turned it low. It was warm still, the end of September, and the window was open on the bay. Through it came the smell of the sea and the lemon trees, and once, far off, the siren of an ambulance going along the coast road towards Pozzuoli, where they’d begun to move people out of the oldest houses in the night.

He waited until I'd finished eating. Then he put both his big hands flat on the table, on either side of his plate, and looked at me.

"At the next big swarm," he said. "When the gas is high."

That was all. He didn't need to say what. He didn't need eleven words. He'd needed ten.

"How do you know there'll be one?" I said.

He nodded towards the window. Out there, in the dark, beyond the end of the ridge and the black water, under the lights of Pozzuoli, the ground was going up a centimetre a fortnight.

"There'll be one," he said. "Before Christmas. The blood stayed dry."

Then he told me how long he'd waited.

He'd chosen me when I was four, he said. He'd been watching me through the nurse's little book since I was a month old, but he'd chosen me at four, when I stood at the open window on the fourth floor with my toes over the sill. He'd been nearly sixty, then, and had already waited for a child like me for twenty years. He'd had others. He'd placed them. None of them had been the one. And then I'd come, on the steps of the Annunziata in a fennel crate, and he'd known.

"Thirty years," he said. "I've been waiting thirty years for you to be ready for this. To be strong enough. To be *held* enough." He smiled. "You were ready a long time ago. I wasn't."

And then he did the thing that I've thought about more than anything else in this whole story.

He was afraid.

Not the film round the shoes. Not the little lift and fall I'd watched all my life at the Foundation and the gate and the cave. Afraid. The heavy air came up off him as he sat there at his own table, up and up, past his knees, past the edge of the table, past his chest, until he sat in it to the collarbone. His big hands were flat on the cloth, and they were shaking. His long face was grey. His eyes were wet. He was eighty-nine years old, and he'd just asked the only person in the world he loved to kneel him down in the dark and hold him there until he stopped. He was terrified. Purely, completely, the

way I’m terrified on Sundays, the way you were as a baby in the dark.

I’d never seen anything so beautiful.

You have to understand. Everyone I’d ever known stood in the heavy air. It was the floor of the world to me, like water to a fish. I’d watched it rise and fall round ten thousand people in a cathedral, and round a man in a wardrobe, and round five men in a cellar, the way you’d watch weather. It had never once meant anything to me. Other people’s fear was a thing that happened in rooms, like light.

But this was *his*. The man who’d lifted me out of the dark three thousand times, whose face was the first thing I’d ever seen worth seeing, whose hand was the only door I’d ever had into feeling anything at all. He was sitting across a table from me, drowning in it, because of me. Because he loved me, and because he was about to ask me to kill him, and because he was a person, and people are afraid to die.

He was the only frightened person I had ever loved.

I sat with that for a while. I’ll let you sit with it too.

Then I thought of other things, quickly, one after another, the way you see things from a train.

I thought of Saverio throwing a knife into a fig tree and giving me one nod.

I thought of the Trader on the tram in Milan, saying *anywhere*.

I thought of the seawall, and the Roman columns behind me in the dark, and the question I’d asked myself there, the only question I’d ever asked: *Have I ever chosen anything?*

And I thought of something under a loose tile in the floor of my kitchen in the Rione Terra, which I’m not going to tell you about yet.

“Yes,” I said.

He closed his eyes. The heavy air stayed where it was, up to his collarbone. It didn’t go down. I watched it, to see if it would. It didn’t.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Don’t,” I said. “You asked.”

He laughed. It came out of him all wet and broken, and he put his face in his big hands and laughed into them, and cried, and laughed. I sat and watched him do it, and I couldn’t tell you which was which, and I don’t think he could either.

Norma had come to the end of the prayer to the moon. The needle went round in the last groove, hissing like the sea.

I washed the dishes. He dried. We didn’t talk. It was the nicest evening we’d ever had.

When I left, he walked me to the iron gate that doesn’t shut, and stood in it with his hand on the bars, the bay all lit up behind him. He looked very old, and very tall, and very tired, and he was still standing in it to the chest.

“Sunday,” he said. “As usual.”

“As usual.”

I walked down the hill in the dark towards the sea, and the lights of Pozzuoli, and my bed over the place where the ground rises fastest.

I’d said yes. I’d chosen something. It was the first thing I’d ever chosen in my life. Or at least I thought it was, walking down that hill, and I want you to remember that I thought so.

Nothing in the room had been frightening. That was the problem.

THE BOOK OF CHOOSING · III — 1884

> *Naples must be gutted.*
> — Agostino Depretis [ah-goh-STEE-noh deh-PREH-tees], Prime Minister of Italy, after visiting the city in the cholera, September 1884

Centuries ago I chose a child.

I set down first what the cholera is, for the one who comes after, in case by then it is gone from the world and has become a word in old books, like the plague.

It is a sickness of the bowels that lives in dirty water. You drink it, and within a day, sometimes within hours, your body begins to empty itself. It comes out of you as a grey water, like the water rice has been washed in, without end, more than you would think a body could hold. You lose it faster than you can drink. Your blood thickens like syrup. Your skin goes blue and cold and wrinkled, like a washerwoman's hands at the end of the day. Your eyes sink back into your skull, and your voice goes thin, a whisper, and then the heart stops, because there is nothing left in you to pump. Half of those who take it die. A strong man can be well at breakfast and dead by dark. It is not a slow death. It is not a clean one.

It came to Naples at the end of August 1884, from France, where it had been all summer. By September it was killing hundreds of us a day.

It killed in the low city. It killed in the four old quarters by the port, where two hundred thousand people lived in tall black houses six and seven floors high. The houses were built so close together that the sun had not reached the alleys between them for three hundred years. Whole families lived in a single room on the ground floor, the *basso* [BAHS-soh], with no window but the door. They lived there with their chickens and their goat, and their dead when the dead could not be moved. There were no sewers. The wells were next to the cesspits. The water they drank had passed through the cemetery.

The King came. I set it down in his favour. Umberto [oom-BEHR-toh], the new King, the King of all Italy now, which had been made one country twenty years before. He was invited to the races in the north that week and refused, and came to Naples instead. He walked through the cholera wards with his hat in his hand, and put his hand on the dying, and did not wash it afterwards. The people loved him for it. They still have his picture in their bassi.

His Prime Minister came with him, and stood in the alleys of the low city with a handkerchief over his face, and said a sentence I will set down because it was the truest thing any government ever said about this city. *Bisogna sventrare Napoli* [bee-ZON-yah zven-TRAH-reh NAH-poh-lee]. Naples must be gutted. The way you gut a fish.

And so they did. In the years after, they tore out the four old quarters by the port, house by house, alley by alley. They drove a great straight new street through the middle of where they had been, wide and white, with fine buildings on both sides, and named it after the King. They called it all the *Risanamento* [ree-zah-nah-MEN-toh], *the making-healthy*.

And the people who had lived in the black houses for three hundred years had to go.

Many did not want to go. They had nowhere to go. Where does a family go who have lived in one room on the ground floor since their great-great-grandfathers? So they stayed, behind their doors, in their bassi, with their goats, and refused. And the men who had bought the land from the city, to build the fine white buildings on it, came to the Held.

I was the Keeper. And my Hand was a girl.

I found her in the cholera hospital, in the September of the worst of it. She was fifteen, a foundling of the Annunziata like all of them, and she worked in the hospital laundry. She washed the sheets of the dying, and when there were too many of the dying for the nuns, she washed the dying themselves, and then the dead. She was small and strong and very dark, with big red hands from the lye, the strong soap they used for the sheets. She sang while she worked. Lullabies, the old ones, from the Sanità. She sang them to the dead as she washed them, very low. She was the only one in that hospital who went near the cholera without a cloth over her face, who put her hands in the grey water without fear of it. She drank from the same cup as the dying. She did not take sick. The nuns said she was a saint.

I knew what she was. I had been one.

I took her to the cave at fifteen, which is very old to begin. I held her under, and she fought, and I lifted her, and she loved me. I have never had such a child. She went under longer than any before her except the Hand of the massacre. She came up out of it every Sunday weeping, beautiful, and put her red hands round my neck and wept into my coat.

And on the other six days I sent her into the low city, to the bassi of the people who would not leave.

I set down what she did as plainly as the Register does, because that is how it should be set down.

The ones who would not leave got the cholera. That is all. In that year, in those streets, nobody counted. A family of seven in a basso by the port, behind a door that would not open for the men from the Risanamento, took the cholera in a night and was found in the morning, all seven, blue and cold. A widow on the fourth floor who had sworn on the Madonna that they would carry her out feet first got her wish. An old man who had been born in his room and said he would die in it did. She went in at night with her laundry basket and her lullabies, and did what she did, and came out. And in the morning the cholera carts came and took them away, and nobody ever asked a question, because hundreds were dying every day, and what were seven.

I will not set down what she put in their water. The one who comes after does not need to know. It is not the method that matters. It is the child.

Forty-three debts, that autumn and the next. The fine white street went through on time.

I set down now the thing that I most wish the one who comes after to read and think about.

She wept every Sunday. I have said so. She wept as no Hand had ever wept, more beautifully than the boy of 1656 who learned on the second Sunday, more beautifully than the Hand of the massacre. When I lifted her, she clung to me and sobbed, and her whole small body shook, and I was undone by it every time. I loved her more than I have loved anything in my life.

One Sunday in the winter of 1886, I lifted her and threw the water, and she wept, and clung to me. And over her shoulder, because I was holding her close, I could see her face in the little hand-mirror I had set on the wall of the passage to see the candle by.

And her eyes, I noticed, were bright and dry.

The tears were running down her face. Her mouth was open and sobbing. Her shoulders were shaking. And her eyes, above it all, were perfectly clear and calm, and looking past my ear at the mirror, at me, watching me be undone.

I did not ask myself what it meant.

I set that down. I did not ask myself. I knew what I had been, at fifteen. I knew what I had learned, on my own second Sunday, in my own Keeper's arms. And I chose not to ask, because the asking would have taken from me the only thing I had left that I loved. I put my face in her hair and said *there, there, good girl*, and I let her weep, and I loved her.

She will hold me under. It is the way. When the ground goes up, or the blood stays dry, or the sickness comes back, she will carry the lake up the hill in two buckets, and kneel me down, and keep me there. She will weep over me the whole time. I know it as I know my own name.

I am content.

Do not let your Keeper die in his bed.

Below this, at the foot of the page, in a different hand: small, round, upright, pressed hard into the paper, the hand of a woman who learned to write late.

April 1906. The year the mountain burned. Four minutes and ten seconds.

I wept over him the whole time.

IV. THE FIELDS

22. Red Zone

> *Count the swarms. Never count the dead.*
> — Saying of the Keepers

October came in hot and the ground kept going up.

I'll tell you what that's like, from inside it, because you'll never live in a place like this and you should know.

It's not like a storm. A storm comes, and does its worst, and goes. This was more like living on the back of an animal that's slowly waking up. Every week the man from the observatory came on the radio and said a number. Ten millimetres this month. Fifteen. Twenty. Then the word *accelerating* again, which nobody liked. The earthquakes stopped coming in swarms with quiet weeks in between and simply came, every day, little ones, two and three at a time. Glasses walked across tables. Pictures hung crooked on every wall in Pozzuoli, and people stopped straightening them. Old cracks in the walls of the houses opened a finger's width, and new ones came. In the Rione Terra a piece of the cathedral's cornice fell into the square at four in the afternoon and smashed a tourist's rented scooter, and the tourist stood beside it laughing and taking photographs.

The gas came up too. That's the part people outside don't know about. When the ground rises, the volcano breathes harder, and what it breathes is carbon dioxide, the same gas as the cave. It comes up through the soil, through cracks in the roads, through the floors of cellars. The scientists measure it in tonnes. In October they were measuring four or five thousand tonnes a day, coming up out of the ground of the Burning Fields, invisible, heavier than air, filling the low places. They put up signs in Pozzuoli telling people not to sleep in basements and not to let small children play in hollows in the ground. Two dogs were found dead in a dip in a garden in Agnano. Nobody knew why, except me.

The government moved the alert from green to yellow, and then talked on television about orange. They put up maps on the walls of the town halls showing the red zone in red: the ground that would be lost first, half a million people. They showed the roads out, with

arrows, and which towns in which other parts of Italy would take the people of which streets, if the time came. Pozzuoli would go to Lombardy, in the north. People laughed at that. *They'll make us eat polenta* [poh-LEN-tah], they said. Polenta is cornmeal porridge, the food of the north. Neapolitans think it's what you'd feed a horse.

And they stayed. Every single one of them. That's the bargain.

I was the only person in Pozzuoli who slept well. I watched the heavy air in the streets at night come up and go down, come up and go down, with the shocks. The whole town was breathing fear in and out like a sleeper with a bad chest.

On the twelfth of October there was a debt.

I'll tell you about the place first, because it matters, and because something happened there that you should know about, and it's not mine.

The Solfatara is a crater on the edge of Pozzuoli, a small one, about seven hundred metres across, flat-bottomed, white and grey and yellow, like the inside of an old cooking pot that's been left on the flame. Steam comes up out of the ground all over it, in jets and wisps, through holes crusted with yellow sulphur crystals like sugar on a cake. In some places the ground is hot enough to cook an egg. In the middle there's a pit of grey mud that bubbles and heaves and plops, slowly, like porridge on the stove. The scientists call the holes where the gas comes out *fumaroles* [FYOO-mah-rohlz], from the Latin for smoke. The biggest one hisses like a train.

For a hundred years people paid to walk on it. There was a campsite at the edge, with pine trees and a swimming pool, and families came from all over the world to stand on the crust of a volcano and breathe the sulphur and take photographs of the steam.

On the twelfth of September 2017, a family from the north, near Venice, were walking there on holiday: a father, a mother, and two boys, eleven and seven. The eleven-year-old went past the fence, into a place where you weren't supposed to go. The ground was only a crust there. It broke under him, and he fell into a hole full of hot mud and gas. His father went in after him. Then his mother went in after them both. All three died in the hole. The

seven-year-old stood at the edge and watched. He was the only one left.

They closed the Solfatara after that. It's been closed ever since, behind a high fence and locked gates, while the lawyers argue. The steam comes up among the empty pine trees, and the swimming pool at the campsite is dry, with leaves in the bottom.

I've thought about that father many times. He went in. He saw his boy go down into the ground and he went in after him, into the hot mud and the gas, knowing, as anyone would have known. He went anyway. And then the mother did the same.

That's courage. That's what I was telling you about at the beginning. That's the thing I haven't got.

I've wondered, sometimes, what I'd have done.

The debt was a boy of nineteen.

His name doesn't matter. He was a climber of things he wasn't supposed to climb: cranes, bridges, the outsides of churches, the tops of the empty towers at the edge of the city. He went into places nobody was supposed to go, closed tunnels and fenced-off ruins and the sewers under the old city. He filmed himself doing it with a camera on his chest, and put it on the internet, and a great many people watched him. In the films he never hurried. He never looked down. He walked along the edge of a crane forty storeys up the way you'd walk along a kerb. He talked to the camera the whole time, calmly, about what he could see.

He'd announced that he was going into the Solfatara. Into the closed crater, past the fence, at night, at the worst of the gas, to film the fumaroles from the inside. He'd told his followers when.

He was one of the eleven. One of the circles.

I'm not going to tell you this one.

I'll tell you that I went over the fence at the Solfatara at two in the morning, in the dark, after him. I'll tell you that the heavy air from Pozzuoli lay at the foot of the fence like snow against a wall. Then I was over, and inside, and there was none: only the real gas, the volcano's, which I couldn't see, and the steam, which I could. It went up all round me in white towers in the moonlight, out of the

ground, hissing. It was like walking through the middle of a sleeping army breathing. The ground was warm through my shoes. The mud pit in the middle was heaving and plopping in the dark. I could smell rotten eggs, and something hot and metallic underneath it, like a coin in your mouth.

I'll tell you that I found him at the big fumarole, the one that hisses like a train, standing at the edge of the steam with his camera on his chest, filming. That he turned round when he heard me and didn't jump, didn't start, didn't stand in anything. He looked at me with interest, the way the boy of 1656 looked at the knife.

I'll tell you that I walked up to him.

And that's all you get.

I came back over the fence at four in the morning, alone. The film from his camera was never posted. People who'd followed him waited for it for a week, and then went on to something else, the way people do.

The Register, under my column, in Ferrante's upright hand: *Oct 2026 · Solfatara · paid.* And a little circle beside it, the size of a lentil.

Twelve days later Ferrante gave me a letter to deliver to the Soldier.

23. The Soldier

> *Nobody stops a woman who is not afraid of being stopped.*
> — From the Register, in a Hand's writing, in the margin

The letter was in a plain white envelope, sealed, with nothing written on the front. Ferrante gave it to me in the van outside the Foundation, and said only: "Into his hand. Not into anyone else's."

I didn't ask what was in it. I'd never asked what was in anything.

Lago Patria is twenty kilometres north of the city, on the coast, where the land goes flat and sandy and there are pine woods and buffalo farms. The buffalo are the big black water buffalo whose milk makes the real mozzarella, standing in muddy fields with their

horns swept back like the hair of old film stars. And there's the lagoon, wide and shallow and grey, with herons in it. And beside the lagoon, behind three fences, there's NATO.

NATO is the alliance of the countries of Europe and North America that promised after the Second World War to defend each other. If one is attacked, all of them fight. The base at Lago Patria is one of its big headquarters, the one that watches the south: the Mediterranean, Africa, the Middle East. It's a town of its own, low white buildings and car parks and flagpoles with twenty-odd flags on them, and satellite dishes, and a gym, and a supermarket that sells American breakfast cereal. Three thousand people work there, from all those countries, in uniform and out of it. You can't get in without a pass, and a pass needs your papers, your fingerprints, your face on a computer in Brussels.

I don't have papers.

I'll tell you how I got in, because it's funny. It shows something, and that's the reason I tell you anything.

I walked in.

That's all. There was a catering van at the side gate at seven in the morning, delivering trays of pastries to the officers' coffee bar. The driver and his boy were carrying the trays in through a door by the gate, past a guard with a rifle, a young man from the Italian air force, who was checking their passes. I picked up a tray from the back of the van — *sfogliatelle*, two dozen, still warm — and followed the boy in.

The guard looked at me. I looked back at him. I didn't smile. I didn't hurry. I didn't look at my feet or at the gun or at his face for too long or not long enough. I didn't do any of the hundred small things that a frightened body does without asking when it's somewhere it shouldn't be. A guard's whole training is in seeing those things. He's a man paid to stand in a doorway and watch for fear. He looked at me, and there was nothing to see. So, the way a mind does when it sees nothing, his filled in the gap with what it expected: a girl from the catering firm, carrying pastries.

He nodded me through.

The heavy air round his boots, after I'd gone past, came up a little. A few centimetres. He didn't know why. He'd tell himself later it was the coffee.

Inside, I put the tray down on a table in the coffee bar and took a white catering jacket off a hook in the kitchen and put it on. Then I walked through NATO for two hours.

Nobody stopped me. I want you to understand that it isn't a trick. There's no trick. A building like that is made entirely out of fear: the fences, the passes, the cameras, the guards. They all work by making a person who shouldn't be there *feel* that she shouldn't be there, so that she gives herself away. Every lock in the world, the doctor wrote in 1656, is made of fear. A lock you don't feel is only a door.

I found him in a car park behind a long white building with no windows on the ground floor, leaning on a grey car, smoking. He was in uniform, the plain green one, with a red beret folded under his shoulder strap. I'd last seen him when I was twelve and he was eighteen, standing in the sun at the cave in a new uniform with his hands on his knees.

He was forty now. His head was still shaved. His nose had been broken, more than once, and set badly. He was bigger, wider, heavier in the shoulders, with a scar across the back of one hand like a white worm. And his eyes were still that colour: so pale they were nearly white.

He saw me coming across the car park in a white catering jacket. He didn't move. He didn't stand in anything. He watched me come with the same face he'd had watching a six-year-old throw a knife at a fig tree for an hour.

I stopped in front of him and held out the envelope.

He looked at it. Then he looked at me. Then he took it, and opened it with his thumb, and read it. It was one sheet of paper, folded in three, and he read it twice, slowly. Then he folded it back up and put it in the breast pocket of his uniform, and buttoned the pocket.

I don't know what it said. I still don't. I've thought about it.

"Saverio," I said.

“Not for a long time,” he said. He had a deep, flat voice, like a stone dropped down a well. He looked at me for a long moment, up and down, the white jacket, my hands with the two fingers that had set crooked after the cellar.

“I heard about Scampia,” he said.

“From who?”

He almost smiled. Then he dropped his cigarette on the tarmac and put it out with his boot.

“Is he well?” he said. “The old man.”

“He’s old.”

“Yes,” he said. “He would be.”

We stood there. Two dry people in a car park in the middle of three thousand others, every one of them, in every building around us, standing in their own small shimmer of heavy air. The guards on the gates. The generals in their offices, planning for wars that hadn’t started. The officers in the coffee bar eating my sfogliatelle. The whole great white town of NATO, built out of fear and run on it, and the two of us standing in the middle of it, dry, like two stones in a riverbed.

He looked at me.

And he nodded. Once.

The way he’d nodded when my knife went into the fig tree. One nod. Small. Nothing in it that anybody else would have seen.

It wasn’t in the letter. I know it wasn’t, because I know Ferrante’s letters, and they don’t have room for nods.

Then he got into his grey car and drove away towards the long white building, and I walked back across NATO, past the guard, out of the side gate, still in the white jacket. I took it off at the bus stop and left it folded on the bench.

That evening Ferrante asked me if I’d put the letter into the Soldier’s hand. I said yes. He asked if the Soldier had said anything.

“He asked if you were well,” I said.

He was pleased. I watched him be pleased.

I didn’t tell him about the nod.

24. The Debt Is Six

> *A child with no fear is not a child. It is a door left open in the wall of the world.*
> — Saying of the Keepers

In the first week of November Ferrante gave me a name with no client.

That had never happened. Every debt in the Register had a client, someone frightened who’d come up the stairs past the brass plate and pushed an envelope into the house of a skull. Even the circles had clients, or something like them. Even the Trader had a client: the Foundation itself, the Held, all forty of them, frightened for their money.

This one came only from his hand.

He gave it to me in his glass office, with the door closed, on a plain card: an address in Pozzuoli, a street I knew, near the station. And clipped to the card, a photograph.

A little girl. Six, maybe. Small, sturdy, brown from the summer, with black hair in two short bunches that stuck out on each side of her head like the handles of a jug. She was standing on top of something. You couldn’t see what. She was very high up, against the sky, with her arms out on each side for balance, and she was laughing. She had a gap in her front teeth.

In one of her bunches, holding the hair, there was a clip. Pink plastic, in the shape of a strawberry.

I looked at the photograph for a long time. Then I put the card in my pocket, and said nothing, and went.

The address was a *casa famiglia* [KAH-zah fah-MEEL-yah], a family house. That’s what they call a children’s home in Italy now. It’s not a big grey orphanage with dormitories, as in the old days, but a flat or a house where six or eight children who have nobody live together with a couple of grown-ups who are paid to look after

them. This one was on the first floor of a yellow building next to the railway, with washing on the balcony and a little playground behind it: a slide, two swings, a climbing frame in the shape of a ship, a square of rubber matting.

I sat on a wall across the road and watched for three days.

I learned her name the first afternoon, because the woman who ran the house shouted it out of the window every fifteen minutes. *Pia [PEE-ah]!* Get down from there. *Pia!* Leave that boy alone. *Pia!* Where are your shoes.

She'd been left in a *culla per la vita* [KOOL-lah per lah VEE-tah], a *cradle for life*, in February 2020, at the hospital in Pozzuoli. That's the modern wheel. Some of the big hospitals in Italy have one: a little door in an outside wall, like a cupboard. Behind it is a warm cot that heats itself, and when a baby is put inside and the door is closed, an alarm goes off in the ward, and a nurse comes. The mother can be gone before anyone arrives. Nobody sees her face. It's the same machine as the ruota at the Annunziata, five hundred years on, with electricity. A woman had put Pia into it in the middle of a February night, wrapped in a hospital towel she must have stolen from somewhere, and gone.

Nobody had adopted her. The adoption lawyer from the Held had seen to that. I found that out later.

She was six. She'd been six since February.

On the first day I watched her climb to the top of the climbing frame, the ship, to the very top of the mast, which is a pole with a little flag on it about three metres off the ground. She stood on the top of it with her arms out, against the sky, laughing, the way she did in the photograph, while the woman screamed from the balcony. She didn't hold on. She didn't wobble. She stood up there as if the air were a floor.

On the second day she walked up to a dog on the pavement outside the gate, a big brown guard dog off its lead, which belonged to the man from the bar on the corner. Everyone gave it a wide berth. It growled at her and showed its teeth. She walked straight up to it and put her hand on its nose, flat, and pushed its lip down over its teeth with her thumb, to see what they were like inside. The dog

backed away from her with its tail between its legs and went and lay down under a car.

On the third day another child, a boy of nine, pushed her off the swing, and she got up off the rubber matting and looked at him. Just looked at him, with interest. Then she picked up a stone from the edge of the playground, walked back to him, and hit him in the mouth with it, hard, once. She stood and watched with her head on one side while he screamed and the blood came out between his fingers.

Everybody in that playground, every child, every grown-up, the woman on the balcony, the man from the bar who came running, everybody stood in the heavy air. It came up off them in a rush when the boy screamed, until the little playground was flooded with it to the height of the swings.

Pia stood in the middle of it. Dry.

Not a drop. Nothing round her small bare feet on the rubber matting. Nothing at all.

I sat on the wall and looked at her, and I can't tell you what I felt, because I'd never felt it, and I didn't have a name. The nearest I can get is this: it was like looking into the mirror in the cave, the little hand-mirror the Keeper of 1884 hung on the wall, and seeing someone in it.

On the fourth day I went over.

I waited until the woman had gone in to answer the telephone, and walked across the road and in at the playground gate, and sat down on the edge of the rubber matting near the climbing frame. Pia was at the top of the mast again. She looked down at me.

"Who are you?" she said.

"Nobody."

"Everybody's somebody," she said. "That's what Mariella [mah-ree-EL-lah] says." Mariella was the woman on the balcony.

"Not me."

She thought about that. Then she climbed down the mast, hand over hand, quick as a monkey, jumped the last metre and a half

onto the matting, and came and stood in front of me, close. Too close. Closer than children stand to strangers. Closer than anyone stands to me. Her face was a few centimetres from mine. She smelled of crayons and of dust and of the sweet sticky orange drink they give children.

She looked at me with the face. Interested. Nothing behind it. A window.

I'd never been looked at like that by anyone except Saverio and the Trader. And they were grown men, and I was a grown woman, and we were three stones in a river. This was a child. Six. With a gap in her teeth and a strawberry clip in her hair.

"Your fingers are crooked," she said.

"Two of them."

"Does it hurt?"

"Yes."

"Can I see?"

I held up my left hand. She took it in both of hers, small and hot and sticky, and looked at the two crooked fingers very closely, turning my hand over, the way you'd look at a beetle.

And then she bit me.

She bit the side of my hand, hard, with her small sharp teeth, below the little finger, so hard it broke the skin. And then she let go and looked up at my face to see what I'd do, and laughed. A high hiccup of a laugh. One.

I'd heard it before. In the cave, in the dark, under the gas, in March, without the hand, at the very edge of hearing, after the voices of the dead and the voices of the placed: a little girl laughing, once, a high hiccup.

I laughed.

It came out of me before I could stop it, low and rough, the dog-bark laugh I'd laughed in the neurologist's office. I sat on the rubber matting with the blood coming out of the side of my hand in little beads, and a six-year-old in front of me with my blood on her teeth, and I laughed, and she laughed back, the two of us, at the

same joke. I don’t know what the joke was. I’ve never known. I think it was just that we were both there.

And then I stopped.

Because something in my chest did something.

I don’t know how to tell you what it did. I’m going to try, because I’ve promised to tell you everything I can. It wasn’t the heart running, as it runs in the cave. It wasn’t the flood that comes with the gift. It was smaller than either, and lower, and it hurt. It was as if something under my breastbone, something I’d always had and never noticed, like a muscle you’ve never used, had suddenly tightened. Once. Like a fist closing round a bird.

Then it let go.

“Pia!” The woman was on the balcony, with the telephone in her hand. “Who’s that? Who are you? *Pia!*”

Pia looked up at the balcony, and then back at me, and then she turned and climbed the mast again, to the very top, and stood there against the sky with her arms out.

I got up and walked out of the gate and down the street to the station, holding my bitten hand against my chest. I didn’t look back. I sat on a bench on the platform for an hour while trains came and went. I pressed my other hand against my breastbone, hard, where the thing had happened, and waited for it to happen again.

It didn’t. Not then.

I told myself it was indigestion.

25. The Circles

> *There is only ever one leash, and the Held hold it.*
> — The Seventh Rule of the Held, spoken in full

“You’ve seen her,” he said.

It was evening, at the house on Posillipo. He wasn’t cooking. We were standing in his kitchen with the light off, and the bay outside the window was full of lights, more lights than usual. All along the

coast road towards Pozzuoli there was a slow river of red tail-lights, people driving out of the red zone for the night to sleep at relatives' houses, in cars, anywhere. There'd been a four point four at six o'clock.

"Yes," I said.

"And you know what she is."

"Yes."

He nodded. He turned and looked out at the bay with his big hands at his sides.

"Then I'll tell you the seventh rule," he said. "All of it. You've been ready for it for a long time. I told you you'd learn it when you needed it."

And he told me, in the plain voice, the keys of the house.

There is only ever one leash.

That's how it begins. The first part of it, *There is only ever one*, is what I heard in the tunnel when I was nine, before the bang and the horns. And this is the rest:

There is only ever one leash, and the Held hold it. No fearless child may live in the world unless the Held hold her. Every other is a fire with no stove, and every fire with no stove is the end of a house.

"The circles," I said.

"The circles." He didn't turn round. "Three hundred and seventy years. Every child like you who's ever been born in this city, or come to it, or been found by someone who knows how to look. Every one we didn't choose. Every one we couldn't hold. The girl in the next street in 1656. The girl on the column in 1799. The partisan girl of the Four Days. And every one since." He touched the window glass with one finger, gently, where the lights of Pozzuoli were. "They're found, and the Hand is sent. And the Register gets a circle."

"Eleven," I said.

"Eleven of yours. The geneticist finds them, mostly. In the hospital samples. The gene. Sometimes it's a doctor who notices something, or a teacher, or the police. Sometimes it's the internet now: a boy

who climbs cranes and films himself." He breathed in and let it out. "You've been the best Hand there has ever been at it. You never once hesitated. Not once in eleven."

I thought of the eleven. I'm not going to tell you what I thought.

"The Trader," I said.

"Was as good as a circle," he said, "when he stopped coming. A held thing that lets go of the hand isn't held any more. It's loose. It's the same as never having been held at all."

"And Pia."

"Is the twelfth."

He turned round then, and looked at me in the dark kitchen. His long face was grey in the light from the window. He looked very old.

"I took her to the cave," he said. "Once. In March. Before you went to the hospital. I had to know. The geneticist had flagged her at birth, but you can't be sure from a sample. I had to see. So I took her, one Sunday afternoon, after you'd gone home. And I put her under, as I put you under." He was quiet a moment. "She's what you are. She came up out of it screaming and fighting and biting my hand, and the second she could breathe she stopped screaming and asked if the dog minded."

"She lost a hair clip," I said.

"Yes."

"You said it was old."

"Yes," he said. "I'm sorry."

The heavy air was coming up round him in the dark. To his knees. To his waist.

"Why not her?" I said. "Why not keep her? Make her the next Hand. Mine. When I'm Keeper."

"Because you'll choose your own child," he said. "When you're Keeper. A Keeper never inherits a child. The child must be chosen by the hand that will hold her, from the beginning, before she has words. That's how it's always been. Your child will be yours. Not one I found and tested in a cave in March and then left in a home by the railway, unadopted, waiting, for six years." He shook his head

slowly. “She’s been loose for six years, Domenica. She’s never been held. Not once, except that one afternoon. She’s a fire with no stove. You saw her with the stone.”

“I saw her.”

“Then you know what she’ll be, at twelve. At twenty.” He put his big hand flat on the kitchen table. “*Anything*.”

I didn’t say anything.

“And so,” he said, very gently, “on the night of the swarm, when the gas is high, when you take me to the cave to kneel me down: you’ll bring her. And when it’s done, when I’m gone and the voice has passed to you, the very first thing you’ll do as Keeper, before you’re even up off your knees, is pay her. There. In the same place. In the same air. So that the voice passes clean. So that there’s nothing loose behind you when you begin. Only the one leash, and your hand on it.”

The bay was full of lights. The river of tail-lights went on along the coast road, slowly, towards the north.

“That’s the order of it,” he said. “That’s how my Keeper did it, in 1973. He had a girl too. A loose one, a girl from the Quartieri [kwar-TYEH-ree], the Spanish Quarters, the tight grid of alleys above the Via Toledo. He had me bring her, on the night. That was my first act as Keeper.” He held up his hands, his big workman’s hands, and looked at them in the light from the window. “These have done everything that needed doing.”

His hands were shaking.

I watched them shake. They were shaking badly, an old man’s hands, trembling in the air in front of his face as he held them up, the fingers jittering. The heavy air was at his chest. It was very moving. I’d have been moved, I think, if I’d been someone who could be.

Then he turned back to the window to look out at the bay, and put his hands on the sill.

And I saw his reflection in the glass.

The kitchen was dark and the bay was bright, so the window was a mirror. In it I could see his face, and his hands on the sill, from the

front, while he thought I was looking at his back. I could see his hands quite clearly against the black glass, lit from below by the lights of the city.

They were perfectly still.

Not a tremble. Not a flicker. They lay on the sill like two stones, like two hands on a piano before the music, steady as the hands of a surgeon who operates on hearts the size of walnuts.

And the heavy air round him was going down.

I looked from the glass to the real man, his back to me, his shoulders still bowed. Round his legs it was draining away across the tiles like a bath when you pull the plug, past his knees, past his shins, until there was nothing round his good shoes at all. Dry. In the glass, an old man's dry face looked out at the burning city with eyes that were bright and calm and very, very awake. He thought a back can't be read.

I looked down at the floor round my own feet, and there was nothing there either, of course. There never is.

I turned away before he could see me looking, and went and filled the copper pot for coffee, as if I'd seen nothing at all.

"You'll do it," he said, to the window.

"Yes," I said.

He let out his breath. In the glass, his still hands lifted off the sill, and as he turned back to face me they began to shake again, and the heavy air came back up round his shoes like a tide.

26. Teaching Pia

> *Teach the child to breathe before you teach her not to.*
> — Saying of the Keepers

He arranged it so that I could take her out. I had to be able to, on the night. A child can't simply disappear from a children's home in the middle of an evacuation without someone asking where she went. So the adoption lawyer from the Held sent a letter to the woman on the balcony. The letter said I was a volunteer from a

charity, the Fondazione Respiro, which gives days out by the sea to children who have breathing problems. It also said that Pia had been chosen, because of a slight weakness of the chest noted at her last check-up. It was signed and stamped. The name on it was the notary's daughter's.

Mariella read it twice and looked at me over the top of it on the doorstep, and the heavy air came up round her slippers. Something about me was wrong, and she couldn't see what. But the letter was signed and stamped, and she had seven other children and a husband with a bad back. In the end she went and got Pia's coat.

It was the last warm Saturday in November. I took her to Baia [BAH-yah].

Baia is a small fishing harbour on the far side of Pozzuoli, at the end of the bay, where the land curves round. Two thousand years ago it was the richest place in the world. It was where the Romans went to be wicked. The emperors had their summer palaces there, and the senators, and the millionaires, all along the shore, with hot baths fed by the volcano and fishponds and gardens and statues. Julius Caesar had a villa there. Nero, the emperor who killed his own mother, had her killed there. The poets wrote that a decent man couldn't spend a night in Baia without losing his decency.

And then the ground went down.

Slowly, over hundreds of years, the slow earthquake, the bradisismo, took the whole of Roman Baia down into the sea. The palaces and baths and gardens and statues went under the water, a little at a time, a few centimetres a year, until the waves were lapping at their doors, and then at their windows, and then over their roofs. Today the town the emperors played in lies five or six metres under the surface of the bay, along the shore, for a kilometre. It's a park now, under the sea. You can take a boat with a glass bottom out over it, or put on a mask and swim. When you look down, there are the roads, the walls, the doorsteps, the floors of the rooms laid in little coloured stones, the mosaics, with the fish going in and out of the doorways, and the statues standing on the sea floor in the green light with their arms broken off, waiting for someone to come home.

I'd hired a little boat. The man who rented it to me gave us two masks and a lifejacket for Pia. She threw the lifejacket over the side as soon as we were out of the harbour. I let her.

We stopped over a place where the water was very clear, and I put my mask on and showed her how to put hers on, and we went over the side together.

She couldn't swim. She'd never been in the sea. She went straight down like a stone, and I went down after her and caught her by the back of her T-shirt and pulled her up. She came up spitting and coughing, with her mask full of water, and the first thing she did when she could breathe was laugh.

"Again," she said.

So I taught her.

I taught her to lie on the water on her front with her face in, with my hand flat under her stomach, and kick. I taught her to turn her head to the side to breathe, and to let it out slowly through her nose under the water, in bubbles. It took her about twenty minutes to be able to do it without my hand. She was very quick. She was quick at everything. She had no fear of the water to fight, so all her strength went into learning.

Then I taught her to hold her breath and go down.

"Big breath," I said. "All the way. Like a balloon. Then hold it, and go down, and look. When you need to come up, come up. You decide. Nobody holds you. You decide."

She went down. I went down beside her.

Under us, five metres down in the green light, there was a floor. A Roman floor, the floor of a room in a rich man's house, made of thousands of tiny squares of black and white stone in a pattern of waves and knots. The sun came down through the water onto it in moving nets of light. A shoal of small silver fish turned over it all at once, flashing. There was a doorway at one end, with its stone step worn in the middle by feet two thousand years ago. Beyond the doorway, standing on a block of stone in the next room, there was a statue: a woman, with her face worn smooth by the sea and one arm

gone, and the other arm held out, as if she were offering something to someone who'd just come in.

Pia hung in the water beside me looking down at it. Her bunches floated up on each side of her head like weed. Her eyes behind the mask were very wide. She went down, kicking, a metre, two, towards the floor, towards the woman with her arm out. She went down further than I'd thought she could, and stayed down longer, looking. Then she turned round and kicked for the surface, without hurry, and came up into the air and breathed.

She didn't panic. Holding your breath isn't like the cave. You can hold your breath a long time before the gas in your blood rises far enough to sound the alarm, and when you come up by your own choice, the alarm never sounds at all. It's only when someone else decides when you come up that it turns into the cave.

She came up laughing.

"There's a lady," she said. "With no face."

"She's been down there a long time."

"Why?"

"The ground went down," I said. "Slowly. And the sea came in. Now the ground's going up again, over in Pozzuoli. One day she'll be on dry land again."

"Will we see?"

"No," I said. "It takes hundreds of years."

She thought about that, holding the side of the boat with both hands, her legs going behind her in the water like a frog's.

"Again," she said.

We did it for two hours. She went down to the faceless woman twelve times, and the twelfth time she touched her outstretched hand, and came up shouting. After that we sat in the boat in the sun and ate bread and mortadella [mor-tah-DEL-lah], the big pink sausage of Bologna, that I'd brought, and peaches, and she got peach juice all down her front and wiped it off with the back of her hand and licked her hand.

Then, with her mouth full of peach, she said, "Does the dog mind?"

I'd been watching the water. I didn't look at her.

"What dog?"

"The yellow one," she said. "In the hole. With the man with the buckets." She swallowed. "He lay down next to me. In the bad air. He didn't mind. I don't think he minded." She considered. "I think he likes it."

"I think he does," I said.

"Do *you* like it?"

The sea moved under the boat. Over by the harbour a fisherman was hosing down his deck, and the sound came to us across the water.

"Yes," I said. It was true.

She nodded, as if that settled it, and threw her peach stone over the side and watched it sink.

"Are you going to hurt me?" she said.

She said it the way she'd said *does the dog mind*. Interested. Plainly, without any heavy air at all, round her small bare brown feet on the wet floorboards of the boat. Nothing. A child asking what time it was.

I could have lied. I've lied to everyone I've ever met. I could have said *of course not* and smiled. It would have cost me nothing. I can lie better than anyone you'll ever meet, because there's nothing in my face that the lie has to get past.

"I don't know," I said.

She looked at me for a long moment, with her head on one side.

"Okay," she said.

And she lay down on her back across the bench in the bottom of the boat, in the sun, with her hands behind her head and her wet hair drying in salty spikes, and went to sleep. Just like that. Between one breath and the next. Fast asleep, in a little boat, in the middle of the sea, a metre from a woman who'd just told her she didn't know.

I sat and watched her sleep for an hour.

The thing in my chest happened again. Twice. Under the breastbone, low, the fist closing round a bird and opening. The second time it stayed closed for longer, and it hurt more, and I put my hand flat on my chest and pressed, and breathed out slowly through my nose the way I'd taught her.

I told myself it was the mortadella.

I want to tell you what I was thinking, sitting in that boat, and I can't, because I don't know. I've gone over it a hundred times. I was watching a six-year-old sleep, over a drowned Roman house, on the last warm day of the year. I had a card in my pocket with her address on it, and a debt in the Register that would be paid in four weeks or less, in a cave, in the gas, after I'd killed the only person I'd ever loved. And I'd said yes to all of it. Twice.

And I sat there and watched her breathe. In. And out. And in. Her small chest going up and down under the wet T-shirt with the peach juice on it. And I counted the breaths, for something to do, the way I counted my heartbeats in the wardrobe in the Vomero.

I counted to six hundred and twelve.

Then she woke up and asked if we could go and see the lady with no face again, and I said no, it was time to go back, and she bit me.

27. Monte Nuovo

> *When the ground goes up, the frightened go out into the streets. The Held go up the mountain.*
> — Saying of the Keepers

On the eleventh of December the Held went up the mountain.

That's something they do. They've done it for three hundred years, whenever the ground has gone up hard. They did it in 1970, the year the Rione Terra was emptied, and in 1983, when the earthquakes came in hundreds a day, and they'll do it again. The Keeper calls them, all forty, at night, and they go up Monte Nuovo [MON-teh NWOH-voh] with candles, and stand on the top, and sing.

I'll tell you about Monte Nuovo, because it's the most important hill in the world, and almost nobody outside Pozzuoli has heard of it.

Its name means *New Mountain*. It's new because it's the youngest mountain in Europe. It's only four hundred and eighty-eight years old.

In 1538 there was a village on that spot called Tripergole [tree-PEHR-goh-leh], on the flat ground between Pozzuoli and the sea, with an inn and a hospital and the old Roman baths. For two years before, the ground there had been going up. Not slowly. Fast. Metres. The sea went back from the shore so far that the people of Pozzuoli walked out onto sand that had been sea-bottom for a thousand years, and picked up the stranded fish in baskets, and took them home and ate them. They thought it was a gift.

Then, on the night of the twenty-ninth of September, the ground opened. Right under the village. Fire and ash and stones came up out of it, roaring, for eight days. The ash fell on Naples, fourteen kilometres away, like black snow. The people of Pozzuoli ran. When it stopped, on the sixth of October, the village of Tripergole was gone, and in its place there was a mountain. A hundred and thirty-three metres high. Grown out of flat ground in eight days, like bread rising.

It's covered in pine trees now, and broom, and wild herbs, and there are paths up it, and a little nature reserve with a gate. In its top there's a crater, small and round and green, like a bowl full of trees. From the rim you can see the whole of the Burning Fields laid out below you in the dark: the lights of Pozzuoli, the black crater of the Solfatara, Agnano with the racecourse, the long curve of the bay to Baia, and the sea.

The Held stood on the rim in their good coats with their candles. Forty frightened, respectable people at midnight on a mountain that had grown out of a village. The notary with her short grey hair. The banker. The geneticist. The priest. The pharmacist with his cough sweet. The car dealer whose daughter's debt I'd paid in the Fontanelle. They stood in a circle round Ferrante, holding their candles in paper cups to keep the wind off, and they sang.

It’s an old hymn, older than the Held, in old Neapolitan, to the Madonna of the Fire. I don’t know the words. It goes up and down slowly, like the ground.

And the heavy air came up off them, all forty, as they sang.

It came up off them more than I’d ever seen it come off the Held, even at the gatherings, even when the clients were weeping. It poured off them, out of them, down the rim of the crater and over the edge into the bowl of trees, and filled it. By the end of the hymn it was up to their waists. They stood in a lake of their own fear on top of a mountain with their candles shining up through it from below, so their faces were lit like the faces of the drowned. And they kept singing. Their voices shook and they kept singing, to an old man in a grey coat who stood in the middle of them in it up to his chest. His big hands, I noticed, were trembling round his candle.

I stood a little way off, on my own, at the edge of the trees, and looked at them.

And I saw them.

I don’t mean I saw them for the first time. I’d seen them all my life. I mean I saw what they were. All at once, the way I’d seen it in the cathedral, waiting for the blood.

They were the city.

Forty people on a mountain, and they were the whole of Naples, the whole three million, made small, like a city built in a bottle. They were frightened of everything: the ground, the gas, the law, the poor, the rich, their own children, their own secrets, each other, death, God. They had always been frightened. They had come up those stairs past the brass plate, one by one, over the years, because they couldn’t stand the fear alone. And they’d found an old man who would decide for them, and a girl who would go where they couldn’t. They’d pushed their envelopes into the houses of skulls, and been grateful, and gone home, and not looked down. They’d made a bargain. *We know what you can do to us. We’ll be good. Hold us.*

And they’d never once, in three hundred and seventy years, asked who was holding whom.

They thought they were the Held because they held the fearless child on her leash. They thought it was their leash.

I stood at the edge of the pines with the whole of the Burning Fields lit up below me, and the ground, I knew, going up under my feet a millimetre a day. I watched them sing, and I knew whose hand was on whose neck.

When the hymn was finished, Ferrante blew out his candle. Then they all blew theirs out, one by one, round the circle, till they were standing in the dark. He spoke to them, quietly, and I couldn't hear what he said. The heavy air was still up to their waists, black now without the candles, invisible even to me except where the city lights below caught its surface and shimmered.

I took a phone out of my coat pocket.

Not my phone. I don't have a phone, not one with a name on it. This one lived under a loose tile in the floor of my kitchen in the Rione Terra, wrapped in a plastic bag. I took it out a few nights a year, never more. I'd taken it out the night before, and charged it. It was a cheap one, the kind you buy at a market stall for thirty euros with no questions. It had eleven numbers in it.

I sent one word to all eleven.

Domenica.

That's all. One word. You know what it means. It means *Sunday*. It's also my name.

Then I turned the phone off and took the back off it and took out the little card inside, and snapped the card in half, and dropped the two halves into the dark under the pines. I put the phone back in my pocket.

I'm not going to explain that. Not yet.

Ferrante came across the rim of the crater towards me in the dark, slowly, an old man on a mountain. The forty were going down the path behind him with their torches, in a long line, like a procession.

"Soon," he said.

"Yes."

He looked at me in the dark. I couldn’t see his face. I could see the heavy air round him, up to his chest, lit faintly from below by the lights of Pozzuoli.

“You’re not afraid,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

“Of what?”

He laughed, very softly. Then he put his big hand on the back of my neck, gently, the way he does in the cave, and held it there for a moment, warm and dry and heavy.

It was the first time he’d ever touched me there outside the cave.

My body did what it had been taught. My heart jumped. My breath went short, once, in my chest, waiting to be pushed down into the dark.

He felt it. I felt him feel it.

He took his hand away.

“Good girl,” he said.

28. The Night the Ground Went Up

> *The mountain does not ask.*
> — Saying of the Keepers

It came at fourteen minutes past one in the morning on the eighteenth of December.

I was awake. I was sitting at my kitchen table in the Rione Terra in the dark with a coffee, the photograph of the dog and the strawberry hair clip on the table in front of me. I wasn’t waiting for anything. I just wasn’t asleep.

First the sound. Not a lorry this time. A sound like the whole rock under the Rione Terra being torn, slowly, the way you tear a thick cloth: a long low ripping that came up through the legs of the chair into my spine. The coffee jumped out of the cup. The table walked a hand’s width towards the window. The light that hangs from the ceiling swung and hit the wall. Plaster came down in a sheet, and a crack ran across the ceiling from one corner to the other like a

black river on a map. Somewhere below me in the building something heavy fell over and broke.

It went on for eleven seconds. I counted.

Then it stopped. And then, ten seconds later, it came again, almost as big. And again. And again.

The observatory would put the first one at five point two, in the morning, on the radio, in a voice that had had no sleep. The biggest in the Burning Fields since the instruments were put in, and since long before. Six hundred and forty earthquakes between one in the morning and dawn. The ground at the Rione Terra went up eleven centimetres in one night. Eleven centimetres: the length of my hand. The whole town of Pozzuoli lifted by the length of a hand between midnight and breakfast, like a loaf going into a hot oven.

I went to the window.

I've told you what Pozzuoli looks like in a swarm. This wasn't that.

The whole town was coming out of its houses at once. All the lights were on, every window, every street, as if it were noon. The streets were full: people in pyjamas and coats over pyjamas, people with suitcases, people with nothing, carrying children, carrying old women, carrying dogs and televisions and birdcages and the statues of saints from their bedroom shelves. The car alarms were going all over the town, hundreds of them, set off by the shaking, whooping and wailing. And over them, the church bells. Not ringing for anything. Ringing by themselves, swinging in their towers as the towers swung, all the churches of Pozzuoli at once, clanging out of time with each other like a hundred broken clocks.

And the heavy air.

It came up out of the town the way the sea comes into a harbour in a storm. It ran down every street and filled every square. It rose over the cars and the doorsteps and the low walls along the seafront, over the knees and the waists and the chests of the people in the streets. It was up to their shoulders in the square by the town hall, and over the heads of the children, and over the roofs of the cars, so the car alarms seemed to be wailing at the bottom of a lake. The whole of the lower town was under it. Pozzuoli was a town at the bottom of the sea, with all its lights on, and eighty thousand

people walking about on the bottom with their arms full, and their mouths open, and their faces turned up, as if looking for the surface.

I looked at it for a long moment. I'll tell you honestly that it was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Then I put on my coat, put the hair clip in my pocket, and went down the broken stairs into it.

The sirens started at a quarter to two. The real ones, the civil defence sirens on the poles, which I'd never heard before except at the tests: a long rising wail, round and round, over the whole of the Burning Fields. Then a voice, through loudspeakers on a car going slowly along the seafront, telling the people of Pozzuoli to go to the gathering points marked on the maps. The buses were coming. Stay calm. Take only what you can carry. Go north.

The Minister in Rome would say on television at six in the morning that the alert was red. The first time in history. Evacuation of the red zone.

In Milan, I read later, when the markets opened, the price of Italy went down like a stone dropped down a well.

I walked through the bottom of the sea to the yellow building by the railway.

It took me forty minutes. The streets were jammed with cars that couldn't move, their horns going, people getting out and leaving them with the doors open and walking. A woman was sitting on the kerb in her nightdress, praying the rosary out loud very fast. A man was standing on the roof of his car shouting a name. And on the corner by the station, in the middle of all of it, a little old man with a cart was selling *taralli* [tah-RAHL-lee], the ring-shaped biscuits Neapolitans eat with beer, hard and crumbly and flavoured with black pepper and fennel seeds. He'd come out at two in the morning in a red alert with his cart, and he was selling them. He was doing very good business. People stood in the heavy air up to their necks, buying taralli for a euro a bag, and eating them, crying.

I bought a bag. I've never loved Naples more.

The casa famiglia was on the first floor. The building was emptying, people coming down the stairs with their arms full. Mariella was in the courtyard with eight children in their coats and pyjamas holding hands in a line, and a man with a bad back sitting on a suitcase, and a list. She was up to her chin in it. She saw me and her face did something, and she looked at her list, and at me, and at her list.

“The charity,” she said. “You’re the—”

“Yes.”

“They said someone would come. For the chest. For the ones with the chest. There was a call. A lawyer.”

“Yes.”

She looked at the line of children. And at the end of it, at the very end, holding nobody’s hand because she’d let go of it, was Pia, in a red coat too big for her and a pair of yellow rubber boots, looking up at the sky with interest. Her hair was in the two bunches. She had the strawberry clip in one. The other side was held with a rubber band.

Mariella let go of the line.

“Take her,” she said. She was crying. “Take her. Thank you. God bless you. Take her.”

I held out my hand. Pia looked at it, and at me. Then she came, and took it, and held on. Her hand was hot and dry. There was nothing round her yellow boots at all.

“Is it the hole?” she said. “With the dog?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” she said.

Ferrante’s van was waiting where I’d told him, at the end of the street, with the engine running and its lights off. He was at the wheel in his coat and hat. Padre Pio was on the dashboard. In the back there were two steel buckets, full, with lids on, and a bag of sugared almonds on the passenger seat. The van smelled of fennel.

He looked at Pia, climbing in, and at me. He was in it to his collarbone. His hands on the wheel were shaking.

“Good evening,” he said to Pia, very politely.

“You’re the man with the buckets,” she said.

“I am.”

“Can I have one of those?” She meant the almonds.

He gave her the bag.

We drove out of Pozzuoli against the traffic. Everyone else was going north, a river of headlights up the hill towards the motorway and the buses. We went the other way, east, round the shoulder of the Solfatara, where the steam was coming up out of the fenced crater higher than I’d ever seen it, white in the dark, in great slow towers. Then down onto the old road to Agnano.

Nobody stopped us. A police car passed us with its blue lights going and didn’t even slow. Who stops an old man, a woman and a little girl in a van driving *towards* the volcano?

The racecourse was dark. The old spa was dark. There was nobody. We could hear, from here, the sirens over Pozzuoli behind us, and the bells, very faint. A shock came while we were getting out of the van, a big one, and the ground under our feet moved sideways like the deck of a boat. The fig tree on the roof of the old spa shook all its leaves. Pia held on to my coat and laughed.

Ferrante carried the buckets up the slope, one in each hand, slowly, an old man in the dark, without spilling.

“The lake was drained in 1870,” he said, to Pia. “So we carry the lake.”

“Why?” said Pia.

He didn’t answer.

The dog was at the gate. Yellow in the dark, with the gold in its eyes, its torn ear, its tail curled over its back. It got up as we came, in its one fluid movement like water standing up, and pushed its nose into Ferrante’s hand, and then into mine, and then into Pia’s. Pia put both her arms round its neck and her face in its fur.

Ferrante unlocked the gate.

He took the candle out of his coat and lit it, and bent, with his knees cracking, and put it down on the ground.

Not inside the passage. Outside. On the dust in front of the doorway, a metre from the gate, in the open air.

It went out.

It didn’t lean, and go small and blue, and lie down. It went out the moment it touched the ground, as if a hand had closed on it. The little thread of grey smoke went up, and stopped, and lay flat on nothing.

Not at the floor. Not at the shin, where it had lain every Sunday of my life.

It lay at the height of my waist, across the mouth of the cave. A flat grey line in the dark, perfectly level, perfectly still, running out of the doorway and across the dust towards us like the surface of a black lake that had overflowed its basin. The volcano was breathing out harder than it had in four hundred years, and the cave was full, and spilling.

Pia was standing beside me holding the dog. She looked at the line of smoke.

It lay across the air exactly at the level of her chin.

THE BOOK OF CHOOSING · IV — 1943

> *The children of this city did not wait to be freed.*
> — Inscription, in memory of the Four Days of Naples

Centuries ago I chose a child.

I set down the year first, because the one who comes after should know what it was to be in this city in 1943. There may never be such a year again, God willing.

I was a doctor. I had been the Hand before that, for twenty-six years, and I had been the Keeper for eleven. I was forty-three years old. I had a practice in the Via Foria, two rooms over a shop that sold buttons. I treated the poor for nothing and the rich for a great deal, and I went to the cave on Sundays with my Hand. She was a girl of nineteen, the only one I had had, whom I had chosen the year I became Keeper, when she was eight.

She died in the bombing of the fourth of August.

I set it down plainly. The Americans came over in the morning, four hundred aeroplanes, and dropped their bombs on the port and on everything near it. A bomb came through the roof of the church of Santa Chiara [SAHN-tah KYAH-rah], the great old church of the queens of Naples, and set it burning, and it burned for two days. My Hand was in the street by the port, paying a debt, a man who had been selling the Held's secrets to the Fascist police, the secret police of Mussolini's government. The building beside her came down on her and on him together. They found them in the same hole. I like to think that she paid it before the wall came down. I will never know.

I had no Hand. In the middle of a war. And there was no child.

I had been watching, as the Keeper always watches, for years. I had looked at every foundling of the Annunziata, every child in the bombed streets, every orphan the war had made, and the war had made thousands. I had found nothing. It is like this sometimes. Twenty years without a child. Then two in a year.

In September the war came to us on the ground.

The King and his generals made peace with the Americans and the British on the eighth of September, and ran away to the south and left the army without orders, and in a single night the Germans who had been our friends became our masters. They knew the Allies were coming up the coast from Salerno, and that they could not hold the city. And so they decided to leave nothing behind them. They mined the port and blew it up, the cranes, the quays, the ships at their moorings. They blew up the water mains, so there was no water. They blew up the power station. They set fire to the university. They shot people in the street for looking at them. They put up notices ordering every man between eighteen and thirty-three to report for labour in Germany, and everyone knew what that meant.

Thirty thousand were ordered to report. A hundred and fifty went.

On the twenty-seventh of September the city stood up.

I have seen it once in my life, and I set it down because I do not expect to see it again. The whole city, by itself, without anyone telling it to, all at once, stopped being afraid.

It is not quite true. It was afraid. It stood up anyway. I had not understood, until those four days, that this could happen. The Held are built on the fear of the city, the way a house is built on the ground. We had always believed that the fear was the ground and could not be moved. For four days it moved.

The men took the rifles from the abandoned barracks. The women dropped furniture from the windows onto the German lorries, and boiling water, and the stones of their own houses. The priests rang the church bells to call the people, and hid the men in the crypts. And the boys of the streets, the scugnizzi, ten years old, twelve, came up out of the ruins where they lived like rats and ran at the German tanks with bottles of petrol with a burning rag in the neck. One of them, a boy of eleven, threw a grenade under a tank on the third day and was killed by its gun.

And on the second day, the twenty-eighth, I saw a child walk up the middle of the Via Foria.

I was in the doorway of my own practice, the button shop below, flat against the doorframe. In the street outside the men of my district were lying behind two trams they had pushed over on their sides, with their rifles, and bodies were lying in the road between the trams and the end of the street, three of them. And down the street from the end, slowly, came a German half-track, a lorry with a tank’s tracks behind and a machine gun on a ring above the cab. A soldier was behind the gun, firing along the fronts of the houses, at the windows, at anything that moved.

And from the other end, from behind me, up the middle of the street, in the open, in the sun, came a little boy.

He was six. I learned afterwards. A foundling of the Annunziata, whose nurse had died in the August bombing, who had been living in the ruins since, like the scugnizzi. He was barefoot, in short trousers and a vest. He had a grenade in his right hand, a German one, a stick grenade, with a long wooden handle like a potato

masher, which he must have taken off a dead soldier. He was holding it by the head, the wrong end.

He was not running. He was not creeping. He was walking up the middle of the Via Foria at an ordinary pace, the way you walk to buy bread.

The men behind the trams were screaming at him to get down. Women were screaming at him from the windows. I was screaming, I believe.

He walked past the trams and past the bodies in the road, past the men who were screaming, towards the half-track. He looked at nothing but the half-track. Interested.

The half-track stopped. The soldier behind the gun stopped firing. He was a young man, I could see his face, younger than my Hand. He looked down at the child walking towards him up the empty street. He swung the gun round. He pointed it at the child.

The child kept walking.

He walked right up to the half-track and stood beside it and looked up at the soldier, and the soldier looked down at him along the barrel of the gun. And I saw the soldier's face. I have seen the face of every kind of fear there is, I believe, in my life and in my work. I had never seen that one before. It was the face of a man who has pointed a gun at a child, and found that the child does not care.

The soldier took his hands off the gun and put them over his face.

The boy unscrewed the cap at the foot of the handle and pulled the cord inside, the way he had seen the men do it, and reached up on his toes and dropped it over the side of the half-track into the back, where the soldiers were. And he turned round and walked away, down the middle of the street, back the way he had come, at the same pace.

The grenade went off behind him. He did not look round.

I went out into the street. I do not remember deciding to. I went out of the doorway and down the street to the child, and took him by the hand, by the hand that had held the grenade, and walked him back into my house.

He came. He did not ask who I was. He looked up at me as we walked with the same face he had turned on the half-track. Interested. Nothing behind it.

I knew. You know when you know. I had found no second child in eleven years of looking, and I had lost my Hand under a wall in August. And God, or the city, or the ground, sent me a boy walking up the Via Foria with a grenade in the middle of the only four days in three hundred years when the city was not afraid.

The Germans left on the night of the thirtieth. On the first of October the Americans drove in from the south and found the city had freed itself, and gave out cigarettes and chocolate and tins of meat. The bells rang all day.

On the first Sunday after, I took the boy to the cave.

I set down now the thing that the one who comes after must read most carefully of all.

He wept on the first Sunday.

Not the second, as the boy of 1656 did. Not after the third Sunday of the first debt, as so many have, as I did. The first. The very first time.

I knelt him down in the dust, five metres in, and put my hand on his neck, and pushed his face down into the bad air. He fought as they all fight. He made the high thin sound, the kettle sound, that all of them make. I lifted him and threw the water. And he came up out of the dark into the light of the doorway, and looked at me, and his face crumpled, and he wept. He put his arms up round my neck, and sobbed into my coat, and his whole small body shook. And then he said, through his weeping, as I held him, *Thank you. Thank you. I love you.*

He cried beautifully. I had never seen anyone cry so well. Not in all my years, not any Hand, not myself. It was perfect. It was the most perfect thing I had ever seen.

I was so proud of him that I did not ask myself where he had learned.

A boy of six, who had walked up the Via Foria to a machine gun with a grenade held by the wrong end. Who had never in his life been

held. Who had been under the bad air for the first time for twenty seconds. Who did not yet know what Sunday was. He came up out of the cave already knowing exactly what to do with his face, and his arms, and his voice, and the words.

I did not ask.

I set down one more thing, and then I will close this chapter, because I am tired, and it is late, and he is asleep in the next room. He is nine now. He has been the Hand for three years.

There was a girl in the Four Days.

She was nine, a partisan, a girl of the Vomero. In the fighting she carried messages and ammunition between the men behind the barricades, running through the streets under the German guns. Afterwards people told stories about her: that she had walked into a German post by herself and come out with a pistol, that she had laughed when they shot at her. She was a heroine. They put her photograph in the newspaper, with the other children of the Four Days.

I looked at the photograph for a long time. I looked at her eyes.

In the spring of 1946 I sent the boy. He was nine. It was his first circle.

He came back in the evening and knelt at my feet and put his head on my knee, like a dog, and asked when it would be Sunday. When I opened the Register at his column to write it down, I saw that someone had already written it, very neatly, in a careful upright hand, in brown ink. The date, and the place, and *paid*.

And a small circle, the size of a lentil, perfectly drawn.

He had drawn it himself.

V. THE BREATH

29. Under

> *You do not breathe until you are lifted.*
> — The First Rule of the Held

The cave was full.

I want you to see it as I saw it, because I'll never see it like that again, and nobody else ever has.

The doorway in the hillside, chest-high, black. The dust in front of it grey in the starlight. And lying across the air in front of the doorway, at the height of my waist, perfectly flat, the line of grey smoke from the candle. It wasn't hanging there. It was *lying*, the way oil lies on water, on the surface of something that couldn't be seen. That something was the gas. It had filled the nine-metre passage from the floor to the roof and come pouring out of the doorway like water over the lip of a bath, and spread across the slope in front of the cave in a low invisible pool, a lake as deep as a woman's waist. The volcano was breathing out under us.

You couldn't see it. I couldn't see it, and I can see fear. It's not fear. It's only the earth's breath, heavier than ours, lying in the hollows.

But you could see what it did. A moth came fluttering across the slope in the dark towards the lamp in Ferrante's hand, low, and flew into it, into the invisible lake, and dropped. It didn't flutter. It simply stopped flying, and fell, and lay on the dust.

Behind us, beyond the racecourse, the sirens of Pozzuoli went round and round. The bells were ringing. Every half minute the ground shifted under our feet: a jolt, a sway, a long low groan like a ship's timbers. Far away, a car alarm started, and stopped.

I lifted Pia up onto the wall by the gate, the old stone wall that runs along the slope there, above the line of the smoke. I sat her on the top of it with her yellow boots hanging down, and put the bag of almonds in her lap.

"Stay up here," I said. "Don't get down. Whatever happens. The air down there is bad."

"The dog's down there."

The dog was lying in the gas in front of the doorway, on its side, as it always did, as if it were grass, with its gold eyes open, watching us.

“The dog’s different,” I said.

“Why?”

“Nobody knows. We don’t ask it.”

She thought about that, and ate an almond, and nodded.

Ferrante took off his hat and his coat and his scarf and folded them and laid them on the wall beside Pia, neatly, the scarf on top. Then he sat down on the wall and took off his shoes. He was slow about it. His knees cracked. He set the shoes side by side at the foot of the wall, toes together, as he’d set mine side by side by the gate on my first Sunday when I was six.

Then he stood up in his socks, and in his white shirt with the sleeves rolled down and buttoned, and went down the slope to the doorway of the cave. He stood in the gas to his waist, his head and shoulders up in the good air. He looked like a man standing in the sea.

I took the buckets off their hooks on the wall, where he’d hung them. I carried them down after him. I set one down on the dust at the edge of the lake, outside it, where the air was good. I carried the other in.

I stood beside him in the gas to my own waist. I could feel it. I’d never felt it before, not standing. It was warm, very slightly, like a bath that’s been run and left, and heavy, as if the air there were thicker than air should be. It pressed on my legs.

He looked at me in the starlight. He was standing in it, the heavy air, the other kind, the kind only I can see, up to the chest. In the light from the lamp on the wall it shimmered on top of the invisible lake of the gas, a lake on top of a lake. His hands were shaking.

“I’m ready,” he said.

He knelt.

He knelt down in the dust in front of the doorway, in the lake, slowly, as he’d shown me how to on my first Sunday: back straight, then forward, hands flat on the warm ground on either side. And as

he went down onto his knees his head went down too, under the line where the smoke lay, under the surface of the gas, until only the top of his white head and the back of his neck were still up in the good air. Then he bent forward over his hands, and his face was an inch above the dust, and his whole head was under.

I stood over him with the bucket.

The ground jolted. The bucket slopped. On the wall Pia laughed and held on.

He lifted his head, just enough. It came up out of the gas into the air, his long face grey and wet. His eyes were watering from the sour sting of it. He'd been under perhaps four seconds.

"Your hand," he said.

I put down the bucket.

I put my hand on the back of his neck.

I'd never touched it before. Not like this. I'd been under his hand three thousand times, and I'd never once put mine where his went. His neck was warm, and thin, an old man's neck, the skin loose over the tendons like cloth over a chair. Under my fingers, just below the hairline, I could feel the two scars, two raised lines, like two strokes of a pen.

My thumb went under one ear and my fingers under the other, the way his always did. My hand knew how. It had always known. It had been learning, the whole time, from underneath.

I could feel his pulse under my thumb.

It was very slow. It was slower than mine. It was the slowest pulse I'd ever felt in a living thing, slower than mine in the wardrobe in the Vomero, sixty a minute, fifty-eight, steady as a clock in an empty house.

The heavy air was up to his chest. And his heart, under my thumb, was walking.

"Now," he said.

30. Did You Think We Were the Ones Being Held?

> *The leash runs both ways. Only one end knows it.*
> — Written inside the back cover of the Book of Choosing, in one hand only

He didn’t go under. Not then.

He held his head up just above the line of the gas, an inch from it, his face turned sideways towards me so I could see one eye, wet and bright in the lamplight. With my hand on his neck, he talked.

“I’ll tell you the last thing,” he said. “Then you can do as you like. You always have.”

I didn’t take my hand away.

“You can’t put fear into the fearless,” he said. “That’s the last thing. That’s the thing every Keeper knows and none of them writes down. The doctor in 1656 thought he’d found the lock. He thought he’d found where God hid the key in that boy, in his lungs, and that by turning it every Sunday he could make him afraid, and then make him grateful, and then make him love. It isn’t true. It was never true.”

The ground groaned. He waited for it to pass.

“What happens in the cave isn’t fear,” he said. “Not the fear you see in the streets. It’s panic. It’s the body screaming for air. It comes up the old road from the lungs, and it’s real, God knows it’s real. But it has no *object*. It’s not afraid *of* anything. And the moment the breath comes back, it’s gone, completely, as if it never happened. You know that. You’ve known it since you were six. You come up out of the cave and you’re dry again before the water’s stopped running off you.”

“Yes.”

“Panic,” he said, “can be studied. Like weather. Like a tide. You can learn its times. You can learn what it wants. A child with no fear, held down in the dark every week, doesn’t learn to be afraid. She can’t. She learns what the hand wants. She learns what makes the hand gentle, what makes the Sundays shorter, what makes the man in the doorway soft. She learns to cry.” He smiled with half of his

mouth, his cheek against the dust. “On the second Sunday. On the third Sunday after the first debt. On the first.”

“You,” I said.

“Me,” he said. “On the first. I’d been living in the ruins for two months. I’d watched women cry over bodies in the street every day of the bombing. I’d watched what it did to the men who saw them. I’d watched what the crying *bought*. Bread, sometimes. A blanket. A man’s hand on your head. I learned it from watching, like learning a song. And when the doctor lifted me out of the cave and I saw his face, I knew at once what that face wanted, and I gave it to him. I was six.” The eye looked at me. “So were you.”

I didn’t say anything. My hand was on his neck. I could feel his pulse, slow, walking.

“Every one of us,” he said. “Thirteen Hands who became Keepers. Every one of us learned to cry for the hand, and every one of us grew up and became the hand, and held a child under, and watched the child learn to cry for us. And every one of us *knew*. We knew, because we’d done it. We knew the child was doing it. And we chose to believe the tears. Every Keeper. All of us. Because it was beautiful, and because the alternative was to admit what we were.”

“Which is what?”

He was quiet for a moment. A shock came through the ground, small. On the wall, Pia ate an almond.

“The leash runs the other way, Domenica,” he said. “It always did.”

He let his head sink a little, so his chin touched the line of the gas, and lifted it again.

“Look at them,” he said. “The Held. Forty frightened, respectable people. The notary, the banker, the priest, the judge, the woman with the clinic. They think they hold the fearless child. They think it’s their leash, their fire in their stove. They come up the stairs on Sundays and push their envelopes into the skulls and look at you by the window, and they think you’re their dog.”

“And?”

“And who decides?” he said. “Who stands at the front of the room and says *yes* in one word, and is never once argued with in three

hundred and seventy years? Who chooses which debts are paid, and which chairs are filled, and which of their money goes where? Who has their secrets, all of them, every envelope, every name, every frightened thing they ever pushed into a skull, written down in brown ink in thirty-one volumes in a cold room? Who sends the Trader to Milan and the Soldier to NATO and the Surgeon to Rome and the girl with the red shoes to Brussels, where they write the laws for all of Europe?" He breathed. "A frightened order doesn't hold the fearless. The fearless hold the frightened. The Keeper is always a Hand grown old, and the Hand is never held. Not for one Sunday. Not for one second. Three hundred and seventy years of the fearless, ruling a city that's afraid of everything, through forty people who think they're in charge."

I looked down at the back of his white head in the starlight. My hand on his neck.

"You stood in it," I said. "All my life. The heavy air. I've watched it on you since I was four. At the gate. In the van. In the kitchen, when you asked. Up to your neck."

"You can see what fear does to a body," he said. "That's what you see. Not what it does to a soul. A soul you can't see; nobody can. You see the breath go high, and the sweat, and the heart, and the hands. And a body can be taught. I taught mine. For eighty years. Every time I needed you to see me afraid, I made my body do it, the way you make your eyes cry two breaths after the water. I did it so well that even you believed it. I only ever stopped when I thought no one was looking." The eye looked up at me, very bright. "Even a back can be read, in a window."

"You saw me see."

"I've been waiting thirty years for you to see."

The ground jolted. The water in the bucket slopped over its rim and ran away into the dust.

"And the circles," I said.

"The circles." His voice was tired now. "You know why. You've known since Milan. *There can't be two.* Not because a loose fire would burn the city. The city's been burning for three thousand years and it's still here. There can't be two because two fearless

people in a city of frightened ones is a war. And one is a king." He breathed. "Every Keeper has known it. The doctor in 1656 sent his boy to the girl in the next street within a year of finding him. My Keeper sent me to the partisan girl when I was nine. I drew the circle myself. I wanted to. I've sent you to eleven." He closed the eye. "It's the only rule that was ever true. *There is only ever one.* Not one leash. One of us."

"And Pia."

"Will be the twelfth, after I'm gone, when you're the one. And you'll be what I was. Alone, and holding all of them." He opened the eye again. "I'm not sorry. It's the best life there is. I've had it for fifty-three years."

"Then why go under?"

He smiled, his chin at the line of the gas.

"Because I'm tired," he said. "Not of living. Of being the only one. And because I'm eighty-nine, and I've never once in my life been afraid of anything except that cave, and I'd like to find out whether I'm afraid of this." He breathed in, long and slow, at the very edge of the gas. "And because I want it to be you. I chose you. I want to see what you do with it."

I could feel his pulse under my thumb. Still walking. Fifty-six.

"There was a letter," I said. "To the Soldier."

"Yes."

"What did it say?"

"It said that if you didn't come back from the cave tonight," he said, "if you lost your nerve, if you let the child go, if you did anything at all but what the Keeper must do, he should pay you. A circle. The Soldier's first." He sighed. "I'm sorry. A Keeper has to be careful. A fire with no stove."

"He read it twice," I said.

"He's very thorough."

"And then he nodded at me."

He was quiet.

His eye moved, in the lamplight, up to my face, and stayed there.

31. Eleven

> *Centuries ago I chose a child.*
> — The first line of every chapter of the Book of Choosing

I'm going to turn round now and talk to you. I've been doing it the whole time, but now I'm going to do it properly, because there are things I've told you that weren't true. You've been patient. You deserve to have them back.

I told you there were eleven debts I wasn't going to tell you about. The eleven circles. I told you I'd paid them.

I never paid a single one.

The first was when I was fifteen. A girl in Caserta, a year younger than me, whom the geneticist had flagged in a hospital sample. Ferrante gave me her name and her photograph in the van, and said *special*, and I went. I found her in a park, sitting on the back of a bench with her feet on the seat, throwing stones at a pigeon, alone. She looked up at me coming, and didn't move. Dry. A window.

I was fifteen. I'd paid four debts by then and I'd never once hesitated. I'd been held under every Sunday for nine years and I loved the hand with my whole body.

I sat down on the back of the bench beside her, and looked at her, and I thought one thing. I've never forgotten it, because it was the first thought I ever had that was mine. Not his. Not the cave's. Mine.

I thought: *I'm not going to be the only one.*

So I didn't.

I took her to the station and put her on a train to the north with all the money I had, and a name I made up on the platform. I went back to Ferrante and said *paid*, in the van, in my ordinary voice, and he wrote it in the Register. He drew the little circle in brown ink.

He didn’t ask for a body. Nobody ever asks the Hand for a body. That’s what the Hand is for. You say *paid*, and it’s paid.

That’s the thing about being obeyed. If you obey well enough, for long enough, nobody ever checks.

I did it eleven times. Over nineteen years.

A boy in Salerno. A girl in Bari [BAH-ree], on the other coast. The twins, the boy and the girl from the north who screamed so much in the cave when I was small that Ferrante had to hold them both, one in each hand, and who stopped coming after two Sundays. They had been circled, years later, when the geneticist found they’d grown up loose, and I went to Turin to pay them. A woman in Rome. A young man in Palermo [pah-LEHR-moh]. A boy who climbed cranes. The others.

I didn’t save them. I want to be clear about that. You’ll want me to have saved them, out of pity, or goodness. I haven’t got either. I didn’t save them. I *kept* them. The way the Held keep skulls. The way the women of the Sanità used to go down into the Fontanelle and choose one, a stranger, nobody’s, and take it home and give it a name and build it a house.

I gave them deaths first. For each of them the notary signed what needed signing, and a doctor who owed me a favour wrote *heart*, or *drowned*, or *fell*. The twins drowned off a beach in Liguria [lee-GOO-ryah], on paper. The boy who climbed cranes fell into a fumarole, on paper; they found his camera at the edge. Ferrante read the notices and drew his circles.

Then I gave them names. The Held have a notary and an adoption lawyer and a woman in the town hall and a man at the passport office. Their whole machine for making the children they place into real people on paper, with real cards and real numbers, I’d watched working for years from my place by the window. I used it. A little at a time. A form here, a stamp there, the notary’s daughter’s name on a letter. I paid for it with the Held’s own money, a little at a time. The Trader had made them so much that nobody noticed. It’s very easy to steal from people who are afraid. They’re always looking somewhere else.

And then I placed them. Exactly as the Held place theirs. In chairs where fear stops other people.

A woman in the Department of Civil Protection in Rome, the office that decides, when the ground goes up, who must leave and when and by which road. She signed the red alert tonight, at a quarter to two. That was the signal, though nobody in Rome knew it. A man at the port authority of Naples. A woman on the risk desk of a bank in Milan, the desk that decides, when the markets open, what the price of Italy is. A young man in the carabinieri [kah-rah-bee-NYEH-ree], the national police who are also soldiers, in the command for the whole of Campania [kahm-PAH-nyah], the region round Naples. A woman in the newsroom of the state television, who decides what the country sees at six in the morning. Others. Eleven chairs.

A week ago, on a mountain, I sent them one word.

Domenica.

It meant: the next great swarm. The night the whole country is standing in its fear up to the neck and looking nowhere else. Tonight.

“While we’ve been standing here,” I said to the back of his white head, “they’ve been working.”

He didn’t move. My hand was on his neck.

In my coat pocket a phone buzzed, twice. Not mine; I don’t have one. It had come in a parcel from the Soldier, addressed to the volunteer from the Fondazione Respiro, and Mariella had pushed it into my hand in the courtyard by the railway with Pia. I took it out with my free hand and read the two messages on it by the light of the lamp, and put it away.

“The cold room in Chiaia is empty,” I said. “The girl from Bari did that, at three o’clock, while the whole of Chiaia was standing in the street. All thirty-one volumes of the Register. Every envelope. Every name, every secret, every frightened thing every judge and minister and banker and bishop ever pushed into a skull. Three hundred and seventy years of it. The skulls too. She took the skulls. I told her to be careful with them.”

The ground jolted. He didn't move.

"The Foundation's accounts will be empty by ten o'clock. The woman in Milan will do that when the markets open, when the price of Italy goes down like a stone and nobody is looking at anything else. The bank in Switzerland. The port in the north. The Trader's money. All of it. It'll all be ours."

"Ours," he said, to the gas.

"Ours. And the morning. That's the woman at the television. And the roads out of the red zone, and who gets on the buses, and who's on the trains, and who goes where, and who's in charge when they get there. That's the woman at Civil Protection, and the man in the carabinieri, and the man at the port. And the Soldier. He nodded. You wrote to the Soldier."

He was quiet for a long time.

"You kept one fearless person on a leash," I said, "for three hundred and seventy years. And all that time the one on the leash was holding it herself. I'll give you that. That was good. That was very good." I looked down at my hand on his neck. "I let eleven off. I didn't need a leash to hold them. They're like me. They'll do what they like. They like me."

And then — I'll tell you this — he laughed.

He laughed with his face an inch above the gas, his whole body shaking under my hand. It wasn't a performance. I'd have known. I've watched him perform for twenty-eight years. It came up out of him the way the gift comes up out of you after the lift, unasked for. It was the laugh of a man who's built a house all his life and come home to find someone has built a bigger one on top of it, without him noticing, out of his own bricks.

"Oh," he said, laughing. "Oh, Domenica. Oh, good girl."

I want to tell you something now, while he's laughing, and it's to you, not to him.

I've lied to you. I've told you that I loved him, every Sunday, with my whole body, that I said *I love you* and meant it. That was true. I've told you that I sat on the seawall after the hospital and asked myself whether I had ever chosen anything. That was true too. I

hadn’t known, until that night, that I had. I’d been doing it for nineteen years and I didn’t have the word for it. The body loved him. The body was trained. The body cried two breaths after the water and meant it.

And underneath the body, the whole time, there was me. Steering. Since I was fifteen on the back of a bench in Caserta. Since before, maybe. Since I was six and cried, or didn’t cry, and watched his face.

Both things were true. I loved him with everything I had, and I was holding the leash.

Every scene I gave you where I did as I was told, I was steering. The wardrobe. The tram. The Fontanelle. The van, the almonds, the cave. *Yes. Yes. I love you. Yes.* And I steered you too, on these pages, the whole time. I told you what to look at. I told you the debts I wanted you to see, and how to feel about them, and I hid eleven from you. You let me, because I told you I was obedient, and you believed me, because obedience is the most restful thing in the world to watch.

I’m sorry. In the way that I can be.

Go back and read it again some time, if you like. You’ll see me. I’m there, in every chapter, steering.

He’d stopped laughing. He knelt with his chin at the line, breathing, an inch from the gas.

“So,” he said. “What will you do?”

“I don’t know yet,” I said.

It was true. It was the only time that night I didn’t know.

He breathed in, long and slow, the last good air at the very top of the lake.

“Then let me go under,” he said. “I’d like to. Truly. I’m tired. And I want to know if I’m afraid.”

My hand was on his neck.

On the wall behind me, Pia said, “What are you doing?”

32. Pia Under

> *There is no rule for this.*
> — Written in the margin of the Register, in no Keeper’s hand

The ground went up.

Not a jolt. Not a sway. It went up under us all at once, the whole hillside, the way a wave lifts a boat. It went up and then dropped, and there was a sound like the earth itself cracking a knuckle, deep down, enormous. The wall of the old spa down the slope behind us cracked from top to bottom, and the fig tree on its roof leaned over and fell. The observatory would put it at five point six, in the morning. The biggest of the night. The biggest in the history of the Burning Fields.

And the gas came up.

I felt it come. It came up out of the cave in a single pulse, a great slow heave, like a breath let out by something very large lying under the hill. The lake I was standing in to the waist rose in one second to my chest. It came up over the dust, up the slope, up the old wall, in a single swell, invisible, silent, heavy.

Pia was on the wall.

The shock had thrown her. I didn’t see it. I heard the bag of almonds hit the ground. When I turned round, she was gone from the top of the wall, and she was on the slope below it, on her hands and knees in the dust, where she’d landed. She was getting up. She was laughing. She was six years old, and she stood up into the lake that had just risen to my chest.

It was over her head.

I watched her take a breath. I watched it go into her, the stuff that kills dogs, all the way down.

She stopped laughing.

She looked surprised. They always look surprised. She put her hand up to her mouth, as if she’d tasted something sour, a battery, a fizzy drink gone wrong. Her eyes went wide. She took another breath, bigger, the body pulling for air that wasn’t there, and her hands came up in front of her and opened and closed on nothing. And I

saw it go into her. I saw it come up the old road. The alarm. *Now.* The terror, total, the bottom of the sea, the thing I'd been given every Sunday of my life, going into this child in the dark on a hillside. And there was no hand on her neck. There was no hand anywhere.

She went down on one knee, in the dust, in the lake.

Then onto her side.

The yellow dog got up from the doorway of the cave and went to her, through the gas, and lay down beside her, and looked at me with its gold eyes.

And something happened in me.

I'm going to tell it to you as slowly as I can. It's the only thing in this whole story I'm not sure I can tell, and I want to get every bit of it right. It's the only thing in my life that I didn't see coming.

It didn't come from my lungs. I want you to know that. I was standing in the gas to my chest, but my head was up in the good air, and I was breathing. There was nothing wrong with my blood. The old road, the one from the lungs, the one the cave uses, was shut. I could feel it shut.

And it didn't come from the two white stones, the almonds. They're stone. They've been stone since I was a child. They don't pull any cords. The neurologist showed me.

It came from somewhere else. Somewhere I didn't know I had. It came up from under my breastbone, from the place where the fist had closed round the bird on the rubber matting in the playground and in the little boat over the drowned house. It came up through the middle of me like the ground coming up under Pozzuoli. It was slow and enormous and it could not be stopped. It was cold, and it was hot. It went down into my legs and turned them to water, and up into my throat and closed it, and into my hands. My hands began to shake. Not the way Ferrante's shook. Truly. On their own. I looked down at them and they were shaking, and I hadn't told them to.

I looked at the small shape lying on its side in the dust, in a red coat and yellow boots, under the invisible surface of the lake, with a dog lying beside her.

And I was afraid.

Not of the gas. Not of the ground. Not of anything that could happen to me. I'd never been afraid of anything that could happen to me, and I wasn't now.

I was afraid *for her*.

Do you understand? I'd seen it all my life, on everyone, the heavy air, rising and falling round their feet, and I'd thought I knew what it was. I'd thought it was one thing. It isn't. There's the fear that's for yourself, which comes in through the eyes, past the almonds, and I've never had it, and I never will. And there's the fear that comes up the old road from the lungs, which the cave gives, which is only panic, which goes when the breath comes back. And there's a third.

There's the fear you feel for someone else. And it doesn't use either road. It doesn't need the watchman or the lungs. It comes up out of the place where you keep the people you'd die for, and it doesn't care what you're made of. It comes anyway.

I'd never had anyone to keep there. That's all. That's the only reason I'd never felt it. Not the stones. Not the gene. I'd never had anyone.

I looked down.

Round my feet, in the dust, under the gas, rising, shimmering in the lamplight on the wall, was the heavy air.

Mine.

The first I'd ever had. Coming off me. Pouring off me. Past my ankles, past my knees, filling the hollow in front of the cave, a lake of my own fear on top of the volcano's lake. I watched it come up off me the way I'd watched it come up off ten thousand people in a cathedral, off a man in a wardrobe, off five men in a cellar. I watched it rise.

It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

I took my hand off Ferrante’s neck.

33. The Lift

> *Whoever gives it back is God.*
> — The creed of the Held

I don’t remember deciding. I want to tell you that, because everything else in my life I’ve decided. In the wardrobe, on the tram, in the cellar, I always knew exactly what I was going to do a long time before I did it, and I watched myself do it from a little way off. Not this time. This time there was nobody watching. There was only the doing.

I took a breath. The biggest I’ve ever taken. All the way down, the way I’d taught her in the boat. *Like a balloon.*

And I went down into the gas.

It closed over my head. Warm, heavy, silent. It stung my eyes. I kept them open. I could see her, a dark shape in the dust a metre and a half away, in the light of the lamp on the wall, which came down through the invisible lake as moonlight comes down through water. I went to her on my knees, holding my breath, the dust under my hands warm as an animal. The dog lifted its head and watched me come.

I got my arms under her. She was limp, and heavier than she should have been, the way the sleeping are heavy. Her face was against my neck. Her mouth was open. She wasn’t breathing.

I stood up.

I stood up out of the lake with her in my arms, into the good air, my head breaking the surface. And I breathed, and I didn’t stop. I went up the slope with her, past the wall, over the line where the smoke had lain, up and up, three metres, five, until we were well above it, on the bare stony ground above the gate, where the air was night air, ordinary, cold. I knelt down and laid her on her back.

She wasn’t breathing. Her face in the lamplight was grey-blue round the mouth, as the accountant’s was on the Via Toledo when I was twelve.

The bucket. The second bucket, the one I’d left outside the lake. I could see it, at the edge of the slope, standing on the dust. I went down for it and came back up with it, and I knelt over her, and I lifted it, and I poured the whole thing over her. Over her face, her chest, her small body in the red coat. The lake, carried, the way it was carried for me every Sunday of my life, cold from the tap at the old spa.

She didn’t move.

I’ll tell you what I did then, because the pharmacist taught me, when I was thirteen, how to stop a heart. If you know how to stop one, you know how to start one. It’s the same knowledge facing the other way.

I tipped her head back, gently, one hand on her forehead and two fingers under her chin. I pinched her nose shut. I put my mouth over hers, over her small cold open mouth that tasted of almonds and of the sour battery taste of the cave, and I breathed into her. Slowly. I watched her chest rise under the red coat. I took my mouth away and watched it fall. I did it again. Then I put the heel of my hand in the middle of her chest, on the breastbone, with my other hand on top, and pushed. Hard. Fast. Thirty times. You count. You’re supposed to count out loud. I counted out loud. My voice was shaking. I’d never heard it shake. Then two more breaths. Then thirty more.

The dog had come up the slope after me. It stood on the other side of her, in the good air, and barked. It had never barked before. Not once in twenty-eight years. It barked and barked into the dark over the racecourse, a hoarse, high bark like a fox’s, over and over, as if it were calling someone.

Thirty. Two breaths. Thirty.

The heavy air was pouring off me. I could see it in the lamplight. It filled the hollow where we knelt, round my knees, round her small body lying on the stones, round the dog’s legs, rising. Mine.

Thirty. Two breaths.

I put my mouth on hers the fourth time and breathed, and under my mouth her mouth moved.

She coughed. Into my mouth. A small, wet, furious cough. And then she turned her head away from me to the side and was sick, almonds and water and the orange drink, all over the stones and my knees. And she pulled in a breath. A great ragged whooping breath, like the first breath a baby takes, the whole of her small body heaving for it.

And then another.

And then she opened her eyes and looked up at me, and her face was wet with the water from the bucket, and her lips were going from blue to pink.

And she said, quite clearly, in a hoarse, cross little voice, “That was horrible.”

And I laughed.

And then I was crying. I’m telling you this as plainly as I’ve told you everything, and you’ll have to take my word for it, because nobody saw it except a six-year-old and a dog. I was crying. Not two breaths after. Not on time. Not for anybody’s face. I knelt on the stones with her head in my lap and I cried, the way you cry when you’re a child and you didn’t know yet that there were such things as mornings. And I didn’t watch it. I didn’t time it. For the first time in my life I didn’t count.

She lay in my lap and looked up at me crying, with interest.

“Why are you doing that?” she said.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Okay,” she said. And she took my hand, the bitten one, and held it against her chest, where I could feel her breathing.

In. And out. And in.

The dog had stopped barking. It lay down beside her, its head on its paws, and looked at me.

Then I looked down the slope, at the cave.

The lake had sunk back a little, after the surge. The smoke from the candle was gone, but I could see where the line was by the dust on

the slope: below it, everything was still. No moth would fly there. In the lamplight from the wall, the doorway of the cave was a black mouth in the hill, and in front of it, in the dust, inside the lake, Ferrante was kneeling.

He hadn't got up. When I'd taken my hand off his neck and gone down into the gas for her, he could have stood. He could have lifted his own head an inch and breathed. He had all the time in the world. He was eighty-nine and he was fearless and his heart walked at fifty-six beats a minute, and nobody was holding him.

He was kneeling as he'd shown me on my first Sunday. Back straight, then forward. Hands flat on the warm ground on either side. Head bowed. His whole white head under the surface of the lake, his face an inch above the dust, his back to me.

He wasn't moving.

I don't know how long he'd been there. I hadn't counted. For the first time in three hundred and seventy years, nobody had counted.

I had two hands. One of them was holding a child's hand against her chest so I could feel her breathe. The other was on her wet hair.

I could have gone down. It was ten metres. I could have put the child down on the stones, and gone down the slope into the gas, and put my hand on the back of his neck, and lifted him out into the good air, and poured the water over him, if there'd been any water left. I'd used it all on her. And breathed into him. And said *there, there*. And he'd have opened his eyes and looked up at me, and seen my face, and then I'd have had to decide what to do with him for the rest of his life.

I didn't go down.

I sat on the slope with the child in my lap and her hand in mine, and I watched him kneel there in the dark, in the lake, until I was sure. And then for a long time after.

I'll tell you I don't know what it was. I've thought about it every day since and I still don't. Whether it was murder, because I could have lifted him and didn't. Whether it was mercy, because he'd asked, because he was tired, because he wanted to know if he was afraid. Whether it was love: the only kind I had for him, the kind he'd built

in me himself, Sunday after Sunday, which was the kind that holds you under and doesn't lift. Whether it was the first thing I ever did that he hadn't taught me, or the last.

I'll tell you what I do know. The heavy air was coming off me the whole time I watched him. It was rising round me and Pia and the dog, on the slope, in the lamplight. I was afraid.

I was afraid for him too.

I just wasn't afraid enough to let go of her hand.

34. Morning in the Red Zone

> *The ground has no memory. The stone does.*
> — Saying of the Keepers

At dawn the swarm went quiet.

It didn't stop. It never stops. But the big ones stopped coming, and the little ones came further and further apart, and the ground under the Burning Fields settled. It didn't go down. It just stopped going up, for now, like an animal that's stood up in the night and walked round in a circle and lain down again in a slightly different place. Eleven centimetres at the Rione Terra. Fourteen at the old harbour. The observatory said so on the radio at six o'clock.

At six o'clock, on the state television, a woman in a grey suit read the morning news to the whole of Italy. She said the evacuation of the red zone had been carried out in exemplary order. She said the authorities were in full control. She said the country should be calm. She was very good. She was perfectly calm herself, and everyone who watched her believed her, because she didn't stand in anything at all.

At nine o'clock, when the markets in Milan opened, the price of Italy went down, and then, quite suddenly, at about half past nine, it came back up. Nobody could explain why. Someone, the newspapers said the next day, had been buying.

At ten o'clock the Soldier telephoned me, on the phone from his parcel.

“It’s done,” he said, in his deep flat voice. “All of it. All eleven. Nobody’s hurt who wasn’t supposed to be.”

“Was anybody supposed to be?”

He was quiet for a moment.

“Two,” he said. “I’ll tell you about them. Not on the phone.”

“All right.”

“Is he—”

“Yes.”

He was quiet again, longer this time.

“I’m sorry,” he said. And I think, as far as Saverio can be, he was. I think he had been to the cave too, every Sunday until he was eighteen, and knelt, and been lifted, and loved the hand. And I think that, like me, he’d never once been held.

My hand, holding the phone, was shaking. I looked at it. It went on shaking.

I didn’t know why. Then I did. Pia was asleep in the van behind me, across the back seat, under Ferrante’s coat, with the dog lying on the floor beside her. Every few minutes I turned round to make sure she was still breathing.

At noon the Held came to Chiaia.

Not to the Foundation. The building had been evacuated. There’d been some damage in the night to the old houses along the sea, cracks and fallen cornices, and the police had put red tape across the door with the brass plate. They came to the pharmacy downstairs, because the pharmacist had a key, and because they didn’t know where else to go.

Thirty-eight of them. Two didn’t come. I’ve been told about the two. I’ll tell you another time.

They stood in the old pharmacy among the wooden shelves and the two hundred painted jars, in their good coats over yesterday’s clothes, grey-faced, unshaven, with no sleep. And they were in the heavy air to the chest, all of them, the whole room flooded with it to the height of the counter. Some of them had been up to the Foundation before they came down. They’d found the cold room

empty. The shelves were bare. The skulls were gone. The Register was gone. Thirty-one volumes, three hundred and seventy years of every frightened thing they'd ever done, gone in the night.

The notary saw me first, when I came in. Then the banker. Then all of them, turning round one by one. They looked at me, standing in the doorway of the pharmacy in my coat with the dust of the cave on it, and the dried sick of a six-year-old on the knees of my trousers. I watched them understand.

Not all of it. They'll never understand all of it. But enough.

Where was he? they wanted to know. What had happened? Who had taken the books? What would happen to them? What would happen to them? What would happen to them?

They're the frightened. They didn't want to be saved. They wanted someone to decide.

I stood at the front of the pharmacy, behind the old counter, where he'd always stood behind the desk upstairs. I didn't sit down.

"He's gone," I said.

The heavy air rose. Past their chests. Up to their chins.

"The books are safe," I said. "The skulls are safe. They're with people I trust. Nobody will ever read them who shouldn't."

It went down a little. I watched it go.

"Everything will go on," I said. "The way it always has. The Foundation. The gatherings. The clients. The debts." I looked at them, one after the other, all thirty-eight. "Sundays."

The notary began to cry. Then the pharmacist, with his cough sweet. Then the banker. I watched them cry. It was very moving. I'd have been moved, I think, if I'd been looking at anything but the heavy air going down round their legs like a tide going out, as they understood that someone was going to decide for them. That they were held.

The priest from the Vomero came forward, wading in it, and knelt on the floor of the pharmacy in front of me, and took my hand, and kissed it.

I let him.

I want to be honest with you, to the end. I didn't give it back. Any of it. The Register, the money, the skulls, the chairs, the thirty-eight frightened people kneeling in a pharmacy in Chiaia. I didn't burn the books or open the cold room or call the police or set anybody free. I kept it all. I'm a fearless woman with eleven people like me in eleven chairs that matter, and a soldier, and thirty-one volumes of the secrets of every frightened powerful person in this country. Of course I kept it. What did you think I'd do? I've told you what I am.

The next Sunday a client came up the stairs to the pharmacy, a woman, and pushed an envelope into the house of a skull the pharmacist had found for her, a borrowed one, with a tin roof. And I decided. One word.

And that week I paid it.

But I didn't draw a circle beside it. And I never will. Nobody will ever draw a circle in the Register again. I've told the eleven that, and they've told me what they think of it, and they're staying anyway. They like me.

I went back to the cave on the afternoon after the swarm, alone, before the police or the scientists came to measure the gas. I took him out of the lake by his shoulders and laid him on his back in the dust in the sun, outside it, and closed his eyes, and put his coat over him, and his hat on his chest, and his shoes side by side at his feet, toes together.

His face was calm. I looked at it for a long time. I'd like to tell you there was something in it, at the end: that he'd found out, that he'd been afraid. There wasn't. Or if there was, it had gone, the way it goes when the breath comes back.

There was nothing round him on the dust. No heavy air at all.

There was round me.

The dog was lying in the doorway of the cave, in the gas, on its side, with its gold eyes open.

I didn't count. I never wrote down how long. On his column in the Register, when the books came back to me, at the bottom, under the last of his years, there's an entry in my hand. It doesn't have a number. It has one word.

Domenica.

35. Centuries Ago I Chose a Child

> *So this is it.*
> — Domenica Esposito, in the margin of the Register, December 2026

It's night. I'm in his house on Posillipo. I suppose it's my house now. The lawyer will see to it. Somebody has to live in it, and I couldn't go back to the Rione Terra: it's in the red zone, and they've closed it, and they say it'll be months. The ground's still going up there, under my bed, a millimetre a day. I'll go back one day. I'd like to.

The books are on the stairs, one pile on each step. The ragù pot is on the stove, washed. *Norma* is in its sleeve on the shelf by the record player. I haven't played it. I don't think I will for a while.

Pia's asleep in the big bed upstairs, in the room that faces the sea.

I'm sitting beside her, on a chair I've pulled up to the side of the bed, in the dark. The window's open a little, and I can hear the sea down on the rocks at the bottom of the lemon terraces, going in and out, and very far away, round the bay, the sirens still going over Pozzuoli. They've been going for a week.

She's asleep on her back with her arms flung out and her mouth open, the way children sleep, as if they'd been dropped from a height onto the bed and stayed where they landed. She has a strawberry hair clip in each bunch. I gave her the one from my coat pocket, the one I found in the cave in March, the one he said was old. She was very pleased. She said it was hers. She knew it by a scratch on one of the green leaves.

I've got my hand an inch from her mouth.

I've had it there for three hours tonight. I can feel her breath on my palm: warm, slow, damp. In. And out. And in. Every time it goes out against my hand, something under my breastbone, in the place where the fist closes round the bird, lets go. And every time there's a pause between one breath and the next, a long one, the way there is in children's sleep, the fist closes, hard, and the heavy air comes

up off me, round the legs of the chair, across the floorboards, under the bed. And I wait. And the breath comes. And the fist lets go.

I've been doing this every night for a week. I don't sleep. I can't. I've never not been able to sleep in my life, and I can't. If I take my hand away I can't feel her breathe, and if I can't feel her breathe I have to put it back.

So this is it.

This is what you've all been living with. All of you. The whole time. The notary and the pharmacist and the priest and the man in the duck tie and the father in the Solfatara who went in after his boy. The woman screaming one name at a window in 1656 and the mother in the cradle-for-life who walked away into a February night. Ten thousand people in a cathedral with their faces turned up, waiting. This. A hand an inch from a mouth in the dark, waiting for the next breath. All night, every night, for the rest of your life, the heavy air coming up off you whenever the breath is slow. And nothing you can do about it. Nothing you can decide. No hand to lift you. Just this.

I don't know how you bear it.

I used to watch you stand in it, all my life, and wonder why you didn't just step out. I thought it was weakness. I thought you could just walk out of it the way I walk out of a room, dry. I didn't know it was this. I didn't know it was holding.

I'm never going to take her to the cave. I want to tell you that clearly, so it's written down. Not once. Not ever. Not to see. I've had the gate welded shut. The Soldier did it, with a torch, the day after, while I watched. The dog lay in the sun beside us while he did it, and watched too, and when it was done it got up and walked through the bars as if they weren't there. It went into the dark and lay down in the gas, and closed its eyes.

We don't ask it questions.

I'm never going to hold her under. And I'm never going to let go of her either. Both of those are true. I've worked out that I'll be doing this for the rest of my life: sitting beside a bed in the dark with my hand an inch from her mouth. I'll do it when she's six and when she's twelve and when she's thirty and climbs cranes and walks up

to men with guns and bites people and laughs. When she stands at the top of the mast against the sky with her arms out and doesn't hold on. Whatever she does. She'll do anything. She's like me. And I'll be standing at the bottom in the heavy air up to my neck, holding.

That was the question, wasn't it. The one I said at the beginning you'd asked without knowing.

What is a person with no fear capable of?

I've told you. I've shown you all I can. She can walk into any room. She can stand in a wardrobe for nine hours. She can kill a man on a crowded tram in one breath and walk off at the next stop. She can sit in a cellar while five men do their worst, and walk out past their boss and drink his coffee. She can walk into NATO with a tray of pastries. She can hold the leash of a whole city from the end everyone thinks is the collar. She can steal three hundred and seventy years of secrets in a single night and keep them. She can let an old man she loves kneel in the dark until he stops, and watch, and not go down.

Anything. That was the answer. He was right. It's the most frightening word there is.

But there was one thing she couldn't do. She couldn't be held. Not for one Sunday. Not for one second. Not by the cave, not by the hand, not by the man who built her. Nobody could put a leash on her.

So she put one on herself.

That's the last thing a fearless person is capable of. It's the only thing that's ever stopped one. Not God. Not the law. Not the Held. She has to choose it. She has to find someone small enough and loud enough and loose enough to be worth it, and put her own hand on her own neck, and keep it there.

Pia's breathing has gone slow again. A long pause.

The fist closes.

I wait.

The breath comes, warm, against my palm.

In.

And out.

THE BOOK OF CHOOSING · V — 2026

> *Do not let your Keeper die in his bed.*
> — Written inside the back cover of the Book of Choosing, in every Keeper's hand. Below it, in a fifteenth hand, a line has been added.

Centuries ago I chose a child.

That's how it begins. Every one of us has written it, fourteen hands in three hundred and seventy years, each in our own ink. *Centuries ago I chose a child.* As though it were the first time. As though it were us who did the choosing.

I'm the fifteenth. I'm writing this at his kitchen table on Posillipo, in his book, with his pen, in brown ink, because there's no other ink in the house. It's three in the morning. There's an earthquake every few minutes, small ones, and the pen jumps. You'll be able to tell, if anyone ever reads this, which words were written during a shock. They wander.

I'm not going to write how I chose her, because I didn't.

I sat on a wall by a railway for three days and watched her stand at the top of a mast against the sky. Then I sat down on a rubber mat, and she came down the mast to me, hand over hand, and walked up close, too close, and looked at me with nothing behind her eyes. And she bit me. And she laughed. And something in my chest that I'd had all my life and never used closed, once, like a fist round a bird.

That's all. That's the whole of it.

Centuries ago I chose a child.

This time the child chose me.

Below the old line inside the back cover — Do not let your Keeper die in his bed — in a hand that is new to the book: small, upright, steady, written during an earthquake so that the last word wanders:

Let her.

And at the very foot of the page:

24 December 2026. The ground at the Rione Terra went up one more millimetre tonight, under an empty bed.

The Keeper of the Held is awake. She is afraid.

She’s holding.

GLOSSARY

Agnano [ahn-YAH-noh] — An old volcanic crater west of Naples that once held a round lake, drained in 1870 and now a racecourse. The Cave of the Dog lies behind its ruined spa.

amygdala [ah-MIG-dah-lah] — Greek for *almond*. One of two small almond-shaped parts deep in the brain, one on each side, that act as a watchman: they notice danger and set off fear. In Domenica they have turned to stone. Plural: amygdalae.

Annunziata [ah-noon-TSYAH-tah] — *The Annunciation*. An old church and foundling hospital near the port of Naples, where unwanted babies were left in the wheel for five hundred years.

Arenella [ah-reh-NEL-lah] — The hilltop neighbourhood of Naples where the Cardarelli hospital stands.

Bagnoli [bahn-YOH-lee] — A seaside district of western Naples, inside the Burning Fields.

Baia [BAH-yah] — A fishing harbour west of Pozzuoli. In Roman times it was the luxury resort of emperors; the slow earthquake has since sunk its villas five or six metres under the sea, where they can still be seen.

Bari [BAH-ree] — A port city on Italy's Adriatic coast, across the country from Naples.

basso [BAHS-soh] — *Low*. A one-room home on the ground floor of an old Naples building, opening straight onto the street, with no window but the door. Plural *bassi*.

Bellini, Vincenzo [bel-LEE-nee] — Sicilian composer of operas (1801–1835). Ferrante's favourite, above all *Norma*.

Bisogna sventrare Napoli [bee-ZON-yah zven-TRAH-reh NAH-poh-lee] — *Naples must be gutted*. The Prime Minister's words after the cholera of 1884, which led to the tearing-down of the old port quarters.

bradisismo [brah-dee-SEEZ-moh] — *Slow earthquake*, in English *bradyseism*. The slow rising and sinking of the ground in the

Burning Fields as the volcano pushes from below.

Brera [BREH-rah] — An old artists' quarter of Milan, all cobbles, ivy and small bars.

Calabria [kah-LAH-bryah] — The southernmost region of mainland Italy, the toe of the boot.

caldera [kahl-DEH-rah] — Old Italian for *cooking pot*. The huge bowl left when a volcano collapses into itself after a great eruption.

Camorra [kah-MOR-rah] — The old criminal clans of Naples.

Campania [kahm-PAH-nyah] — The region of southern Italy round Naples.

Campi Flegrei [KAHM-pee fleh-GREH-ee] — *The Burning Fields*. The sleeping supervolcano under the western half of Naples and Pozzuoli, half of it under the sea.

Capodimonte [kah-poh-dee-MON-teh] — *Top of the mountain*. The hill and royal palace above the Sanità.

Capri [KAH-pree] — The island at the mouth of the Bay of Naples.

the Captain — The most famous skull in the Fontanelle, said to have come to a jealous man's wedding as a skeleton in a soldier's coat.

capuzzelle [kah-poot-TSEL-leh] — Neapolitan for *little heads*. Nameless skulls from the Fontanelle that local women adopted, cleaned, housed and asked for favours, until the Church banned the practice in 1969.

carabinieri [kah-rah-bee-NYEH-ree] — Italy's national police, who are also part of the armed forces.

carbon dioxide — The gas every person breathes out. It is half as heavy again as ordinary air, so it sinks and pools in low places, like the floor of the Cave of the Dog. Breathed in large amounts it causes air hunger and panic.

Cardarelli [kar-dah-REL-lee] — The largest hospital in southern Italy, on the hill above Naples.

casa famiglia [KAH-zah fah-MEEL-yah] — *Family house*. A small modern children's home where a few children with no family live

with paid carers.

Caserta [kah-ZEHR-tah] — A city north of Naples.

Chiaia [KYAH-yah] — The elegant seafront quarter of Naples, full of palaces and expensive shops. The Fondazione Respiro stands there.

cholera — A disease spread by dirty water that drains the body of fluid within hours. It killed some seven thousand people in Naples in 1884.

Civil Protection — The Italian government department that handles disasters and decides on evacuations.

Col Moschin [kol mos-KEEN] — The 9th Parachute Assault Regiment, the oldest of Italy's special-forces units, named after a mountain its first men stormed in 1918.

comune [koh-MOO-neh] — The Italian town or city council, which keeps the register of every person born there.

culla per la vita [KOOL-lah per lah VEE-tah] — *Cradle for life*. A modern baby hatch: a small heated cot behind a door in a hospital's outside wall, where a mother can leave a newborn safely and unseen. An alarm calls a nurse.

Depretis, Agostino [ah-goh-STEE-noh deh-PREH-tees] — Prime Minister of Italy at the time of the 1884 cholera.

Domenica [doh-MEH-nee-kah] — *Sunday*, from the Latin *dominus, lord, master*. The narrator's given name.

Donna Concetta [DON-nah kon-CHET-tah] — A skull in the Fontanelle known as *the head that sweats*.

Dumas, Alexandre [ah-lek-SAHN-druh dew-MAH] — French novelist (1802–1870), author of *The Three Musketeers*, who visited the Cave of the Dog.

Duomo [DWOH-moh] — The cathedral of Naples, where the blood of San Gennaro is kept.

ECM1 — The single gene whose broken copies, one from each parent, cause Urbach-Wiethe disease.

Eleonora [eh-leh-oh-NOH-rah] — Poet and journalist of the Neapolitan Republic of 1799, hanged in the Market Square that

August.

Esposito [es-POH-zee-toh] — *Exposed, set out*. The surname given to every foundling left at the Annunziata, and now the most common surname in Naples.

faccia gialluta [FAHT-chah jahl-LOO-tah] — Neapolitan for *yellow-face*: what the saint's 'relatives' shout at San Gennaro, after the colour of his golden statue, when his blood is slow to turn liquid.

fearless dominance — A measure psychologists use for how calm, bold and at ease a person stays in the face of danger. High levels turn up in leaders, heroes and psychopaths alike.

Ferrante [fer-RAHN-teh] — The Keeper of the Held.

Fondazione Respiro [fon-dah-TSYOH-neh reh-SPEE-roh] — *The Breath Foundation*. The charity in Chiaia that serves as the Held's public face.

Fontanelle [fon-tah-NEL-leh] — *The little fountains*. A vast old quarry in the Sanità where the city's unclaimed dead were laid for three centuries.

fumarole [FYOO-mah-rohl], plural *fumaroles* [FYOO-mah-rohlz] — From the Latin for *smoke*. A hole in volcanic ground through which steam and gas escape.

funicular — A short railway that climbs a steep hillside, its cars pulled up and down by a cable.

Gennarino [jen-nah-REE-noh] — An eleven-year-old boy killed fighting a German tank during the Four Days of Naples in 1943, later awarded Italy's highest medal for bravery.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von [GUR-tuh] — The great German poet (1749–1832), who visited the Cave of the Dog in 1787.

Grotta del Cane [GROT-tah del KAH-neh] — *The Cave of the Dog*. A short man-made passage near Agnano where volcanic carbon dioxide pools on the floor. For centuries guides suffocated dogs there for tourists and revived them in the lake.

Lago Patria [LAH-goh PAH-tree-ah] — A coastal lagoon north of Naples, home to a large NATO military headquarters.

lazzari [LAHT-tsah-ree] — The great class of the homeless poor of old Naples, who fought for the King in 1799. Singular *lazzaro*; a woman, *lazzara*.

Liguria [lee-GOO-ryah] — The coastal region of north-west Italy, around Genoa.

Mariella [mah-ree-EL-lah] — The woman who runs Pia's children's home.

moka [MOH-kah] — The small eight-sided stovetop coffee pot found in every Italian kitchen.

Monte Nuovo [MON-teh NWOH-voh] — *New Mountain*. A volcanic hill 133 metres high that grew out of flat ground near Pozzuoli in eight days in 1538, burying the village of Tripergole. The youngest mountain in Europe.

mortadella [mor-tah-DEL-lah] — The large, pink, mildly spiced pork sausage of Bologna.

NATO — The military alliance of the countries of Europe and North America, which promise to defend one another. One of its large headquarters is at Lago Patria.

Norma — Bellini's opera about a priestess who prays to the moon for peace while hiding a secret love, and at the end walks into the fire. Her prayer, *Casta diva* [KAH-stah DEE-vah], means *chaste goddess*.

Padre Pio [PAH-dreh PEE-oh] — A twentieth-century monk from southern Italy, said to bear the wounds of Christ in his hands, now a saint loved across the south.

Palermo [pah-LEHR-moh] — The capital of Sicily.

parenti di San Gennaro [pah-REN-tee dee sahn jen-NAH-roh] — *The relatives of San Gennaro*: old women who claim descent from the woman who caught his blood and sit at the front of the cathedral to pray, and shout, the miracle into happening.

Pia [PEE-ah] — The fearless six-year-old left in a cradle for life at the hospital in Pozzuoli in 2020.

Piazza del Mercato [PYAHT-tsah del mer-KAH-toh] — *The Market Square*, by the sea in Naples, where public executions were held.

Po [POH] — The great river that runs across the top of Italy through a wide, flat plain.

polenta [poh-LEN-tah] — Porridge of cornmeal, a traditional food of northern Italy.

Posillipo [poh-ZEEL-lee-poh] — From Greek, *rest from pain*. The ridge on the western edge of Naples where rich Romans built summer villas. Ferrante lives there.

Pozzuoli [pot-TSWOH-lee] — The old port town at the heart of the Burning Fields, where the ground rises fastest.

Quartieri [kwar-TYEH-ree] — The Spanish Quarters: a tight grid of narrow alleys above the Via Toledo, built for Spanish soldiers in the 1500s.

ragù [rah-GOO] — The Neapolitan Saturday sauce: meat cooked slowly in tomato for six hours, eaten on Sunday.

Rione Terra [ree-OH-neh TEHR-rah] — The oldest quarter of Pozzuoli, on a rock over the harbour, emptied in a single day in 1970 when the ground rose. Domenica lives there.

Risanamento [ree-zah-nah-MEN-toh] — *The making-healthy*. The rebuilding of central Naples after 1884, which tore down the old port quarters and drove a wide new street through them.

ruota [RWOH-tah] — *The wheel*. A turning wooden drum set into the wall of the Annunziata, in which mothers left babies they could not keep. Closed in 1875.

Salerno [sah-LEHR-noh] — A city on the coast south of Naples.

San Gennaro [sahn jen-NAH-roh] — Saint Januarius, patron of Naples, beheaded at Pozzuoli in 305. Dried blood said to be his turns to liquid three times a year; when it does not, the city fears disaster.

San Giovanni [sahn joh-VAHN-nee] — An old factory district on the east side of Naples, now home to a university technology campus.

Sanità [sah-nee-TAH] — A poor old quarter of Naples built in a valley over ancient catacombs, crossed by a bridge so the kings could pass above it.

Santa Chiara [SAHN-tah KYAH-rah] — A great medieval church in Naples, burial place of its queens, gutted by fire after the bombing of 4 August 1943.

Saverio [sah-VEH-ryoh] — The boy who later becomes the Soldier.

Scampia [SKAHM-pyah] — A district on the northern edge of Naples, long known for its drug market and clan wars.

scugnizzi [skoon-YEET-tsee] — The street boys of Naples, famous for fighting in the Four Days of 1943.

Serapis [seh-RAH-pis] — An Egyptian god. The ruined Roman market in Pozzuoli, whose columns show the ground sinking under the sea and rising again, was long called his temple.

sfogliatella [sfol-yah-TEL-lah] — A Neapolitan pastry shaped like a shell, made of many thin crisp layers around sweet ricotta.

Solfatara [sol-fah-TAH-rah] — *The sulphur place*. A steaming crater on the edge of Pozzuoli.

Spaccanapoli [spahk-kah-NAH-poh-lee] — *Split-Naples*. The long straight Greek street that cuts the old city in two.

taralli [tah-RAHL-lee] — Small ring-shaped Neapolitan biscuits, hard and crumbly, flavoured with black pepper and fennel seed.

Tripergole [tree-PEHR-goh-leh] — A village near Pozzuoli buried when Monte Nuovo was born in 1538.

Umberto [oom-BEHR-toh] — King of Italy, who walked through the cholera wards of Naples in 1884.

Urbach-Wiethe [OOR-bahk VEE-teh] — A very rare inherited illness, first described in Vienna in 1929, that causes a hoarse voice, tiny bead-like bumps on the eyelids, and sometimes the hardening of both amygdalae into calcium, leaving a person without fear.

Vele [VEH-leh] — *The Sails*. Huge triangular blocks of flats built in Scampia in the 1970s, later a drug market; most have been demolished.

Via Foria [VEE-ah FOH-ryah] — A long, busy road running below the Sanità.

Via Toledo [VEE-ah toh-LEH-doh] — The main shopping street of Naples.

Vomero [VOH-meh-roh] — The respectable middle-class quarter on the hill above Chiaia.

waterboarding — A torture in which water is poured over a cloth on a person's face so that the body believes it is drowning.

THE WORDS OF THE HELD

the Held — The secret order behind the Fondazione Respiro: about forty frightened, respectable people, held together by their fears.

the Keeper — The head of the Held, who chooses the fearless child and holds her under. Always a former Hand, grown old, except the first.

the Hand — The fearless child the Keeper forges and sends where no one else can go.

going under (also *to go under*) — Kneeling in the Cave of the Dog while the Keeper's hand holds the face down in the gas.

the lift — The moment the Keeper pulls the child's head up out of the gas.

the gift — The first breath after the lift.

a debt — A killing asked for by a client and decided by the Keeper. To **pay** a debt is to carry it out.

the Register of Breaths and Debts — The Keeper's ledger, kept in brown ink, recording each Sunday's seconds under and each debt paid.

the Book of Choosing — The leather book in which each Keeper, in their own hand, writes how they chose their child.

the heavy air — Domenica's name for the fear she sees coming off people as a colourless gas that pools at their feet.

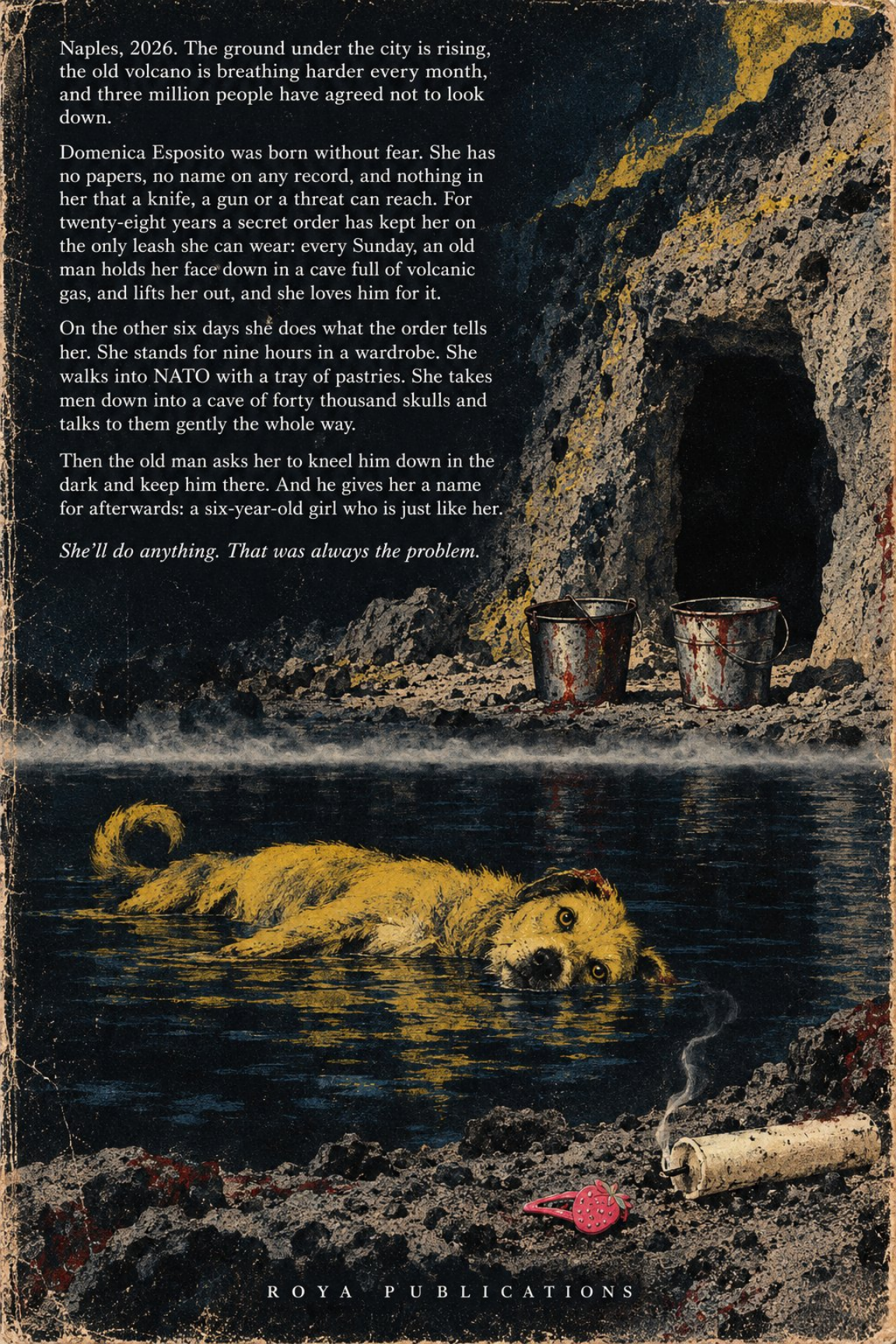
Naples, 2026. The ground under the city is rising, the old volcano is breathing harder every month, and three million people have agreed not to look down.

Domenica Esposito was born without fear. She has no papers, no name on any record, and nothing in her that a knife, a gun or a threat can reach. For twenty-eight years a secret order has kept her on the only leash she can wear: every Sunday, an old man holds her face down in a cave full of volcanic gas, and lifts her out, and she loves him for it.

On the other six days she does what the order tells her. She stands for nine hours in a wardrobe. She walks into NATO with a tray of pastries. She takes men down into a cave of forty thousand skulls and talks to them gently the whole way.

Then the old man asks her to kneel him down in the dark and keep him there. And he gives her a name for afterwards: a six-year-old girl who is just like her.

She'll do anything. That was always the problem.



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