GHOSTS AT SCHOOL

The secret of the Alfieri Institute



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The Old Wing

The bus left me in the square ten minutes late, its engine already rumbling down toward the next bend. For a moment I stood still beside my suitcase, as if the driver might change his mind and come back. He didn't. The village was small, clustered around the fountain and a row of houses with their shutters closed. The smell of burnt coffee drifted out of the bar. A man in an apron swept in front of the entrance without looking at me.

I was sixteen, with a scholarship folded in my pocket and a lined notebook in my backpack. That was all I could call mine without having to explain where it came from. The suitcase, on the other hand, belonged to my mother. One wheel jammed every three steps, and the handle had a crack covered with adhesive tape.

Istituto Alfieri stood at the top of the hill, beyond a narrow road that climbed between chestnut trees and stone walls. I saw it when the fog parted for a few seconds: first the tower, then the dark roof, then a yellowish façade that seemed too large for the village. The fog closed in behind me again, and the rest of the building disappeared.

I reached the gate short of breath, my hand numb from gripping the suitcase handle. A stone plaque on the wall read: ISTITUTO ALFIERI. The lettering had recently been redone, but the old letters showed through beneath the paint. A heavy gate opened onto the courtyard. Inside, the pale paving stones were damp, and the cedar in the middle was shedding dark needles, collected in small piles at the foot of its trunk. The portico ran along three sides; high above the entrance, the tower clock showed nine forty-seven.

I didn't yet know that the hands would stay in that same position every time I looked up.

A man in blue coveralls came out of a small door beside the gate. He had a ring of keys on his belt and large hands, his knuckles reddened.

— Bruni?

— Samuele.

— I know. The headmaster's waiting for you. Leave your suitcase here; I'll carry it.

I wanted to tell him I could manage, but he had already taken the handle. He walked ahead of me under the portico and crossed the courtyard without hurrying. His shoes left dark prints on the wet stone.

— Are you the caretaker?

— Ricci. Ferdinando, if you need to be formal. Nando to everyone.

I nodded. I couldn't think of anything to add.

We crossed a high-ceilinged corridor with a stone floor and narrow windows. The plaster had lighter patches where pictures had been taken down. At the far end, a door closed softly somewhere on the floor above. The sound traveled along the corridor and then faded away.

Nando set the suitcase down beside a desk.

— Wait here.

The headmaster's office door was ajar. From the courtyard came the drip of water from the gutters. I thought of my mother back in the city, of the phone call that morning and the phrase she had repeated twice: it's an opportunity, Samuele. I hadn't told her I wasn't sure I wanted it.

When Ferrero called me in, I slipped my hand into my pocket and touched the edge of the scholarship letter. The paper was already soft, folded in two.

Ferrero wore a gray suit, and an open folder lay in front of him. He didn't stand up. He pointed to the chair on the other side of the desk and checked a sheet of paper, then my face.

— The scholarship covers tuition and boarding. It doesn't cover misconduct — he said. — Here, we expect students to respect schedules and rules.

— Yes, Headmaster.

— Have you seen the school yet?

— No.

— Good. The caretaker will show you around. Your room is number twelve. You'll share the dormitory with another student. If you need to speak to your family, you can use the office phone after dinner.

The sentence sounded like a prepared answer to a question I hadn't asked. I didn't say that my mother had called that morning. I didn't say I'd ended the call before getting on the bus.

Ferrero moved the folder aside and handed me a sheet with the schedule. Classes started at eight, dinner was at seven thirty, and lights-out was at ten thirty. At the bottom was an underlined

sentence: after the caretaker's evening round, students had to stay in their rooms.

— Is everything clear?

— Yes.

It wasn't, but it seemed like the kind of answer that was expected.

Nando escorted me to the dormitory floor. We climbed a wide staircase, worn down in the middle, and crossed a corridor lined with identical doors. I heard voices behind some of them, and a laugh that cut off as we passed. Number twelve was almost at the end. Nando set my suitcase down beside the empty bed.

— Your roommate's in the study hall. He'll explain the rest.

— What rest?

Nando turned to look at me. For a moment he seemed about to answer; then he glanced at the watch on his wrist.

— The rules that aren't on the sheet.

He left me there with the door open and his keys jingling down the corridor. I stood beside the suitcase. The bed had a brown blanket pulled too tight, and the mattress was thinner than the one at home. From the window I could see only the courtyard and the cedar, which looked taller from that floor. A group of students passed under the portico. None of them looked up.

My roommate came back while I was trying to figure out which drawer was free. He wore a dark hoodie, had a small ring in his ear, and was holding a Walkman. He stopped in the doorway, looked at me, then at the suitcase.

— You're Bruni. I'm Teo. That's your bed, unless you brought a mattress.

— I hadn't thought of that.

— Bad move. The school provides almost everything, except the things you need.

He said it with such exaggerated seriousness that I didn't immediately understand whether he was joking. Then he smiled and set the Walkman on the nightstand.

Teo showed me the wardrobe, the shared bathroom, and the hook behind the door where he kept his hoodie. He talked quickly, moving from one thing to another before I could ask a question. He

told me dinner was at seven thirty, the bread ran out fast, and hot showers didn't last long, especially if someone decided to wash their hair as if they had all day.

— And the caretaker's round? — I asked.

— At ten. Nando does his rounds with a flashlight. If he finds you wandering around, he sends you to bed. If he finds you somewhere you shouldn't be, he sends you to the headmaster.

— Somewhere I shouldn't be?

Teo pointed to the schedule lying on the bed.

— Out and about after his round. And in certain places, at any time.

— Which places?

— The ones it's better not to go to.

— That's not very specific.

— That's why it works.

He laughed and rewound the Walkman tape with a pencil. The gesture made me think it wasn't a new joke. He must have told it many times, maybe to boys who had arrived with the same suitcase and the same look of someone who didn't know what to do with his hands.

That afternoon Teo took me to see the study hall and the refectory. He explained which table to avoid, because three third-years considered it theirs, and which vending machine returned your coins only if you gave it a smack on the side. He had a way of talking that made every rule sound like a funny story, but I noticed he checked the doors as we passed. He pulled the handle, listened for the click of the lock, then carried on.

— Do you always do that? — I asked.

— Do what?

— Check the doors.

— Of course. How else am I supposed to know if they're locked?

I looked at him. He shrugged, as if there were no better answer.

Near the notice board, a girl was pinning up some papers. Her blond hair was gathered up with a

pencil, and she wore round glasses. She held an open notebook in one hand and wrote something down without stopping her watch over the corridor.

Teo lowered his voice.

— That's Gaia. She runs the school paper. If she asks you something, make sure it's the answer you want to read in print.

The girl looked up.

— I can hear you, Marchetti.

— I was introducing you.

— Doesn't sound like it.

Gaia came over, holding the notebook against her chest. She looked first at Teo, then at me.

— Did you arrive today?

— Yes.

— Where from?

— The city.

— Which one?

— A city.

Teo stifled a laugh. Gaia didn't smile.

— You don't have to answer if you don't want to — she said. — But if you're trying to figure out how things work at Alfieri, vague answers won't help.

— And questions for a school paper will?

For a moment I thought she was about to reply. Instead, she lowered her eyes to the notebook and wrote down a word.

— Depends on what happens.

Then she walked toward the stairs without stopping to chat. Teo waited until she was out of earshot.

— See? She hasn't printed anything yet, and already she seems to know something.

— Maybe she just asks questions.

— That's what journalists do. It's creepy.

I laughed, even though I hadn't decided yet whether I liked Teo. Since I'd arrived, he was the first person to talk to me as if I didn't have to prove anything. That wasn't enough to make me feel at home, but it made the room seem a little less strange.

That evening we had dinner in the refectory beneath rows of yellow lights. The food tasted of potatoes and something I couldn't identify. Teo told a story about a student who had hidden a sandwich under his pillow and found it a week later, turned into an experiment. The others at the table laughed. I smiled when I realized it was my turn, and kept looking at the window.

After dinner I went back to the room and opened the lined notebook. I wrote the date, the name of the school, and a sentence: "I've arrived." I stared at it. I didn't add that I missed home, because I didn't know if it was true. Maybe I missed my room. I missed knowing where things were and how much noise the refrigerator made at night. I couldn't find a word for my mother that didn't sound like an accusation.

At ten, in the corridor, I heard footsteps and the light tap of a flashlight against a door. Nando passed our room, saw Teo sitting on the bed and me putting my notebook away.

— Everything all right?

— Yes — Teo answered.

Nando waited a moment, as if he had a question for me. Then he went on. His keys jingled all the way to the end of the corridor, and a door closed.

Teo took off his hoodie, checked the window, and turned out the light. The Walkman stayed on, low enough not to disturb me, but loud enough to fill the room with drums and static. I turned toward the wall. The bed creaked under my weight.

I woke up at 01:20.

I didn't remember hearing a first noise. I was already awake when the second one came: a slow scrape, like something being dragged across the floor above us. The room was dark, except for the gray rectangle of the window. I lay still with my eyes open.

The sound stopped.

Then it started again, farther away. A weight sliding slowly, stopping and starting again. The ceiling was dark wood, and I hadn't noticed a hatch, but a hatch wasn't necessary to imagine someone moving on the other side.

— Teo — I whispered.

The Walkman stopped. He rolled onto his side.

— What is it?

— Did you hear that?

He didn't answer right away. Another scrape crossed the ceiling. Teo stayed still, his face turned upward. The light from the window cut across his forehead.

— The wind — he said.

— The wind doesn't drag things.

— The wind does whatever it wants here.

He pulled the blanket up over his shoulder. His voice was lower than usual. We both listened to the silence, waiting for something to happen again. When it did, Teo didn't make any more jokes.

I counted the seconds between one noise and the next. Then I stopped, because the noise didn't come back.

In the morning I looked at the ceiling as soon as I opened my eyes. The boards looked the same as the night before. Teo was putting on a shoe and said I hadn't slept enough.

— You heard it too.

— I heard the wind.

— You were awake.

— And you were half asleep.

I didn't press him. Before leaving, I took out the notebook and wrote: "01:20. Scraping above the room. Teo says wind." My handwriting came out heavier than usual; the pen had made a small hole in the paper.

Over the next two days I learned that the schedule was easier to read on paper than to follow in practice. The corridor by the study hall filled up before I understood where the line was; the dinner bell rang while I was still on the other side of the cloister. Each time someone pointed me in the right direction, but nobody was willing to wait for me.

On Thursday morning I was late for my first class. Not by much, maybe two minutes. The door was closed, and the teacher had already started. I knocked. When he let me in, twenty faces turned toward me at once.

— Mr. Bruni, punctuality is a form of respect — he said, without raising his voice.

— I'm sorry.

— Come see the headmaster after class.

I didn't ask whether it was a threat or simply information. I sat at the empty desk at the back and tried to follow the lesson. I kept hearing the noise from the ceiling, even though there was nothing like it in the classroom.

Ferrero received me before lunch. His office was so orderly it seemed like a room no one actually used. On the desk he had an open register, a black pen, and a stack of papers aligned in a neat pile. He made me stand.

— You've been here only a few days and you've already missed a time — he said.

— I took a wrong corridor.

— The directions are clear.

— Not all of them.

I said it before I could stop myself. Ferrero looked up. He didn't seem angry; he seemed to be deciding whether it was worth answering.

— The school can't adjust every rule for every new arrival. You have a scholarship. You've been trusted.

The scholarship appeared between us even though he hadn't mentioned it. I thought I could see my mother checking the bills on the kitchen table, but I pushed the image away.

— Yes, Headmaster.

— Two afternoons of work in the attic. You'll help the caretaker clear some space. The first is today, the second tomorrow.

— In the attic?

— It's a storage area. There's nothing to worry about.

He said it in the tone he used to close a discussion. He handed me a sheet to sign, even though there was no line for a signature. When I left, Nando was at the far end of the corridor with a bunch of keys in his hand.

— The headmaster's already explained — he said.

— Two afternoons.

— Yes.

— What's in the attic?

Nando slipped a key onto the ring and turned it once. The metal jingled against the others.

— Old stuff.

— And the old wing?

He looked at me without changing expression.

— Do what I tell you, and don't touch anything I haven't asked you to move.

Then he headed for the stairs. For the first time since I'd arrived, I realized the corridor led to more than bedrooms and classrooms. There were doors that seemed to belong to another building, wedged into the same structure.

Nando had me wait in front of an iron door at the end of the corridor. The paint was peeling around the lock, and on the floor the dust formed an undisturbed strip. He checked his key ring, chose one, and turned it in the lock. It gave way with a sharp sound.

—I thought it was a storage room — I said.

— It is.

The door opened inward. Beyond it was a narrower flight of stairs, climbing between stone walls. The air changed as soon as we crossed the threshold. It was colder and smelled of closed-up wood,

dust, and plaster. Nando turned on a light bulb hanging from a wire. The light flickered, then stayed on.

We climbed to a low hatch. The caretaker pushed it up with one hand, and a small shower of dust fell onto the floor below us. I started to cough. He waited for me to stop, then climbed up first.

The attic was larger than I expected, but the roof sloped so low at the sides that in some places you could only walk bent over. The beams ran from one wall to the other, dark and uneven. Broken desks, chairs with no seats, and empty cabinets were stacked in rows, leaving a narrow passage between them. Light came through a high window, dulled by a cloudy film. At the far end I could make out a brick wall, lighter than the rest of the wall.

— Move those desks beside the wall — Nando said. — Don't drag them; lift one end. If you make noise, everyone downstairs will hear.

— And if I don't make any noise?

— Then no one will hear you.

He gave me a pair of work gloves. They were too big and stained with grease. We started with a desk that was missing a leg. Nando lifted it effortlessly, and I took the other end. The wood scratched my palm through the glove. We moved it beside a row of chairs. Then I moved on to a crate of planks, a low cabinet, and a slanted table that looked ready to collapse.

Nando worked without wasting a movement. He knew where to put his hands and which things would give way if we pulled too hard. He never turned toward the brick wall, but he didn't go near it either. When I asked if we should clear the space at the far end too, he said it wasn't necessary.

— Is it all closed off there?

— Yes.

— Why?

Nando gripped the side of a desk and shifted it a few inches. The wood scraped across the floor. I thought of the noise above my bed and stopped helping him for a second.

— The other night I heard something being dragged above room twelve — I said. — Something heavy. Teo said it was the wind.

Nando let go of the desk. The sound of the wood stopped abruptly. He stayed bent over, one hand

still resting on the edge, and looked at the floor.

— Did you hear me? — I asked.

He didn't answer.

For a few seconds I heard only my breathing and a drop of water falling somewhere, rhythmically, very far away. Nando straightened up and went back to work. He lifted the desk, carried it beside the wall, and set it down carefully.

— There's nothing to hear — he said.

— But you heard what I said.

— I heard.

— So?

Nando took off one glove and ran his thumb over his palm. He had a thin scar near his wrist, white against his reddened skin.

— Keep moving the desks, Samuele.

It wasn't an answer, but I helped him move the rest. The whole time, I avoided looking at the brick wall. And yet I seemed to know exactly where it was, even when I was on the other side of the attic.

By the time we went back down, the afternoon light had grown weaker. Nando closed the hatch and turned the key in the iron door. He held it in his hand for a moment before putting it back on the ring.

— We'll carry on tomorrow — he said.

— Do I have to come back here?

— You have two afternoons.

He didn't add anything. He walked me as far as the dormitory corridor and then stopped. I went on alone, the smell of the attic still on my hands. At dinner, Teo asked me how it had gone.

— Dust, desks, and silence.

— You've just described half of Alfieri.

— Nando knows everything up there.

Teo stopped chewing for a moment.

— He's the caretaker. It's his job.

— He didn't want to talk about the noise.

— Maybe he didn't know what to say.

— Or maybe he knew exactly what to say.

Teo lowered his eyes to his plate. Then he asked if I'd finished the bread. I didn't bring it up again.

After the ten o'clock round, we went back to the room. Teo checked the window, the door, and the wardrobe handle, like he did every night. I wrote in my notebook: "Nando heard the noise. He stopped working. He didn't answer." I read the sentence twice, then closed the notebook.

The room was dark, but I couldn't sleep. I got up without turning on the light and went to the window. The fog covered almost the whole courtyard; the cedar was a dark shape, the portico barely visible. Above the roof, the tower rose out of the mist. The clock still showed nine forty-seven.

I looked toward the wing of the building Nando had called the old wing. From the courtyard I couldn't make out the iron door or the attic. I could see a row of high windows, all black.

Then one lit up.

It was on the third floor, toward the end of the corridor. A weak yellow light behind dirty glass. I stood with my forehead almost pressed against the window of our room. I thought of a reflection, a forgotten lamp, someone with an ordinary reason to be there. I tried to make out a silhouette, a movement, anything that would make the light seem less strange.

I didn't see anyone.

Behind me Teo shifted in his bed.

— What are you doing?

— Nothing.

The light stayed on for a few more seconds. Then it disappeared.

I went back to bed without telling Teo what I'd seen. I slipped beneath the blanket and kept my eyes open, listening to the ordinary sounds of the building: a vibrating pipe, a distant door, the wind against the glass. When I finally closed my eyes, I was no longer sure the noise above room twelve had come from the wind.

The Black Register

On Friday afternoon Nando was waiting for me in front of the iron door with a wheelbarrow and a mismatched pair of gloves. Classes had ended not long before; I could still hear the students' voices in the corridor as they headed down toward the refectory, but there, near the old wing, the noise came through muffled, as if the wall were holding it back.

— Today we'll finish the row of desks — Nando said. — The ones without legs go in the wheelbarrow. We'll leave the others against the wall.

He didn't add anything else. He took the key to the door from his bunch and put it in the lock. The iron clicked with a sharp sound. As soon as we went in, the cold air of the attic hit my face. It smelled of damp wood and dust. The afternoon light came in through a narrow little window beneath the roof, just enough to make out the edges of the beams and the shapes of the furniture covered with sheets.

I'd spent my first afternoon there two days earlier. I remembered the crooked table, the broken desks, and the way Nando had stopped working when I'd asked him about the noise above room twelve. He hadn't answered me. Since then, I'd thought several times about asking him again, but whenever I ran into him he'd just greet me with a nod, and I'd let it go.

Nando pointed to a row of desks piled up near the wall.

— Take the small ones. Don't lift them on your own if they're stuck together.

— And the crates?

The question slipped out before I could stop it. At the far end of the room there were a few wooden crates, stacked one on top of another behind a pile of chairs. One had a faded label, but the words could no longer be read.

Nando put his hand on the desk he was moving.

— Those stay there.

— What's inside?

— Old stuff.

— What kind of stuff?

He looked at me for a second. He didn't seem angry; he seemed tired of a question he already knew.

— Samuele, we're here to move desks. Not to take inventory of the school.

I bent down to pick up the first one. Its broken leg scraped across the floor and raised a cloud of dust. Nando handed me a paper mask without comment. We worked like that for a while: he took the heavier desks, while I cleared a path and carried them over to the wall. The wood had damp-swollen edges and left splinters in my fingers. Every so often, somewhere above us, a beam groaned with a soft thud.

When the sound came again, I looked up.

Nando kept pushing the desk.

— Was that a beam? — I asked him.

— They move in this cold.

— Even at night?

— Especially at night.

The answer came too quickly. I couldn't tell if he wanted to end the conversation or if he was really sure. I decided not to press him. The desk I was dragging had got stuck against a crate. I tried to shift it to one side, but its edge hit the wood and the crate moved a few inches.

— Leave it — Nando said.

I stopped.

— I didn't open it.

— I said leave it.

His voice wasn't any louder, but he'd lost the calm he'd had before. He stood there with one hand on the desk, his eyes fixed on the crate. For a moment it seemed to me that he wanted to check whether the lid was still closed. Then he lowered his eyes and went back to work.

— Let's move these — he said. — Someone else can take care of the rest.

Judging by the dust, that someone else had never come. But I didn't answer him. I carried the desk over to the wall and set it down beside the others. As I went back, the light from the little window

had turned grayer. The room seemed smaller than it was, and the crates at the far end filled all the space that was left.

Nando sent me to get a strap from the caretaker's office. The iron door stayed open only as long as it took to go out; when I came back in, he was picking up some screws that had fallen on the floor. I didn't look at the crates, at least not right away. I focused on the strap, the desks, and my dust-covered hands.

But I kept hearing his "leave it" in my head. It wasn't the way you spoke to someone who was about to break an empty crate. It was the way you spoke to someone getting close to something that had to stay hidden.

The row of desks was almost done when Nando realized we were missing nails to secure a board to the wheelbarrow. He looked toward the door.

— Wait here. I'm going to get them.

He left me the strap and went out. The lock clicked behind him, but the door didn't close all the way; it stayed ajar, as if he didn't want to waste time turning the key. The corridor beyond the threshold was empty. I heard Nando's footsteps getting farther away, then disappearing on the stairs.

I stood still, the strap in my hands. I had no reason to go near the crates. Nando had made that perfectly clear. And yet the crate nearest the desk wasn't completely covered in dust: there was a clean strip on the lid, as if someone had moved it recently.

I set the strap on the floor and took a step toward the back of the room.

I went closer without touching the lid right away. The crate was lower than the others, made of dark planks with rusty metal fittings at the corners. On the side, beneath a patch of dust, I could still make out some writing in pencil: "Desks — classroom 3." There was nothing special about it. It was a crate like all the others, which was exactly why it seemed absurd to me that Nando had reacted that way.

I nudged it with the toe of my shoe. It moved easily. The lid was resting on top, not nailed down. I told myself I'd only look inside, without moving anything. It was an excuse, but at that moment it was enough for me.

I lifted the lid a few inches. Inside were two wooden boards, a piece of gray fabric, and a large volume wrapped in dark cloth. It didn't look like a class register: it was too thick and didn't have

the stiff spine of the books I'd seen in the library. I pulled it out, expecting the dust to make me sneeze. The cloth slipped away, revealing a black cloth cover, smooth in the places where hands had worn it down.

I held it still in my arms. It was heavy and cold. There was no title on the cover, nor the name of the school. Just a small red stain near the edge, which could have been ink or rust.

I opened the cover. The first sheet was yellowed and had a date written in the top right-hand corner. Beneath it was a series of names, each followed by a shorter date and, beside some of them, a red mark made by hand. It wasn't a precise cross. It looked like a line drawn in a hurry, then gone over a second time.

I turned the page. The same pattern. Names, dates, marks. There were no printed columns or headings. Just neat handwriting, slanting slightly to the right, and margins left blank as in a personal notebook.

At the bottom of the page was a signature: Aurelio Bandini.

I knew that name. Professor Bandini was mentioned on a brass plaque near the library: he had taught literature at the Alfieri and, as I remembered it, had died in the autumn of 2009. I couldn't remember the day. The plaque described him as a teacher "devoted to the school and its students," a phrase that seemed too solemn to me at that moment for a man who had left his notes in a forgotten crate.

The signature was repeated at the bottom of the next page, the same but not identical: the pen had pressed harder on the B and left a small blot beside the surname. It wasn't a printed copy or a photocopy. Someone had filled in those pages one by one, always coming back to write his name.

I leafed through more pages. The dates began in years long gone and went on in order, with a few gaps. Some names were written in smaller handwriting, others in large, heavy letters. The red marks didn't appear beside every name. When I found a name without a mark, I tried to figure out whether the line ended there or whether the page had been torn. I found no explanations.

I heard a thud in the corridor and closed the register. I stayed motionless, listening. No footsteps, no voices. Just the distant hum of the pipes and my own breath, which I was trying to keep quiet.

Nando could come back at any moment. The register was open on my knees and the crate was still wide open. I could have put it back where it was and pretended I hadn't seen it. I could also have called Nando and asked him why he'd wanted to keep it away from me. I did neither.

I closed it carefully and wrapped it in the cloth. It wasn't a considered gesture. It just seemed worse to leave it there than to take it away. I looked around: the door was ajar, the room empty. I slid the volume under my sweatshirt, holding it against my side, and put the boards back on top of the cloth to cover the empty space.

Then I picked up the strap and went back to the desks. When I heard Nando's footsteps on the stairs, I'd already started moving a broken leg again.

He came in with a box of nails in his hand. He looked at the wheelbarrow, then at me. For a moment I thought he'd notice the bulge under my sweatshirt right away, but his gaze stopped at the desks.

— Have you finished that row?

— Almost.

He didn't ask me anything else. He secured the board to the wheelbarrow and told me to carry the broken pieces near the door. We worked until the afternoon began to fade behind the little window. The register pressed against my side every time I bent down. At every sound in the corridor, I expected Nando to turn around and ask me what I'd taken.

He didn't. When we went out, he locked the door and put the key back on the ring at his belt. I walked beside him with empty hands, trying not to quicken my pace. Only after we reached room twelve did I realize I'd kept my fingers clenched around the edge of the book the whole way.

I hid it under the mattress, on the side against the wall. Teo hadn't come back yet. I washed my hands, changed my sweatshirt, and sat on the bed, listening for footsteps in the corridor. When Teo came in, he was talking about a test and a sandwich that had been sitting heavily in his stomach. I answered him in monosyllables.

— You look like someone who's just seen a corpse — he said.

— I've just got dust in my eyes.

Teo laughed and threw his backpack on the floor. He didn't press me. I looked at the mattress, as if the register might show itself on its own.

That evening I waited until Teo fell asleep. It was easy to tell when it happened: he stopped moving his feet beneath the blanket, and the Walkman, which he kept at low volume, went on playing by itself in the dark. I lay on my back with my eyes open, counting the minutes and listening to the corridor.

After the ten o'clock round, Nando's footsteps passed by the door. They stopped for a moment, then continued toward the stairs. The school quieted down little by little. From the refectory came the sound of a chair being dragged, then a door closing. Later, the sharp click of the switch marked the lights in the corridor going out.

I turned toward Teo. His breathing was slow. I sat up carefully, slid a hand under the mattress, and touched the rough cloth of the cover. The relief I felt was so strong that I was ashamed of it. It was still there.

I pulled it out and rested it on my knees. The room was dark, but a strip of light from the corridor window fell across the edge of the pages. I turned on the little reading lamp I kept in the drawer and covered it with the blanket, leaving a gap to breathe and see through. The fabric swelled over me like a tent.

The register was older than I'd thought. The black cloth had lost its color at the corners, and the thread of the spine stuck out in two places. The pages, however, were intact, all densely covered in the same slanting handwriting. Some dates went back to before I was born. One page had a date from twenty years earlier; the next had one from four years later. They didn't look like notes kept for school records. The lines had no grades, absences, or parents' signatures. There were only names, dates, and red marks.

I began reading from the start, but after a few pages I got lost. The names repeated, some with a note in the margin, some with nothing. There were surnames I'd already seen on classroom plaques and others that meant nothing to me. In some cases the red mark was beside the name; in others, the line was blank. There was no rule I could figure out.

I stopped at a page dated many years earlier. Beside a marked name, someone had written a short word, crossed out with two lines. I leaned closer. I couldn't read it. I turned the sheet and moved on to the next one. The paper rustled beneath the blanket, a sound that was too loud. Teo moved in his bed.

I stayed motionless. His arm came out from under the blanket and fell back onto the mattress. I waited until his breathing was regular again, then continued.

On every page, I expected to find an explanation. A note, a title, a reference to a class. Instead, the register remained just a list. The more I read it, the more it seemed to me that it had been made to be understood only halfway.

Then I saw the surname Bruni.

I stayed there with my finger above the line, without touching it. The page was dated 1997. The name was written in full: Marta Bruni. Beside it was a red mark, drawn by a steady hand. Beneath it, in a column without a heading, was a date I didn't recognize right away. I read it twice. Was it the same week when the library plaque said Professor Bandini had died? No, the plaque only gave the year. I realized I was holding my breath.

My mother had never told me she'd been to the Alfieri. When I'd asked her where she'd gone to school, she'd said she'd changed schools often and then talked about work. She'd always said boarding school was a practical option, a scholarship, a place where I could study without being a burden on the family budget. She'd never mentioned that she'd already been there.

I reread the name. Marta Bruni. It wasn't a rare surname, but the way the name was written reminded me of the postcards she left on the table for me when she was working a long shift. The M, especially: the first stroke was taller, the curve narrow. I had no way of knowing whether it was really her handwriting. And yet the register didn't just say "Marta." Her surname was there, and beside it the red mark.

I felt foolish for being scared. It could have been another Marta Bruni. It could have been a joke, a private list, a teacher's notebook. The red mark could mean anything. But I couldn't convince myself that my mother was just any name among many.

The lamp had started to heat the blanket. I turned it off and stayed in the dark, holding the register open on my knees. In the other bed, Teo turned toward the wall. The Walkman had stopped; the cassette had reached the end, and the tape made a little click at regular intervals.

I put the volume back under the mattress, but I couldn't stop thinking about the line. The next morning I could call my mother. I could ask her directly: "Did you study at the Alfieri?" The question seemed simple to me, but I already knew she'd find a way not to answer.

I waited for dawn without really sleeping. When the boarding school woke up, I put the register back under the mattress and got ready for classes. I felt its weight all morning, even when I wasn't in the room. During break I looked at my phone, but I didn't write. After lunch I picked it up again and dialed home.

Marta answered on the fourth ring. I heard some background noise, perhaps the radio at the shop, and then the way she breathed when she was standing up and in a hurry.

— Samu? Did something happen?

— No. I wanted to ask you something.

— Go ahead.

I looked down the corridor. The others had left the classroom; the next bell wouldn't ring for a few minutes.

— Did you study at the Alfieri?

There was no immediate answer on the other end. I heard a soft thud, as if something had been set down on a counter. Then my mother said:

— Why are you asking me?

— It's a simple question.

— It's not a school I know.

The words came too precisely. I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes.

— But have you been there?

— Samuele, aren't you at school? Shouldn't you be in class?

— Class is over.

— Have you eaten?

— Mom.

— I asked because you never answer me. Is the dining hall all right? Are they treating you well?

I could have told her that yes, the dining hall was fine. I could have changed the subject the way she did. Instead, I thought of the page under the mattress and the red mark beside her name.

— I found your name in a register.

The background noise stopped. Or maybe the radio had just changed songs. I realized I was gripping the phone with both hands.

— What register?

— It's a register from the Alfieri. It says Marta Bruni, and there's a date from 1997. There's a red mark beside the name.

My mother inhaled. She didn't say it wasn't her. She didn't say the surname was common. For a

few seconds I could hear only the hiss of the line.

— You must have read it wrong — she said at last.

— The name's written in full.

— I don't remember.

It was the phrase she used when she remembered perfectly well. When I was little, I thought it was a real answer; as I grew up, I understood that sometimes she used it to close a door without having to slam it.

— You don't remember studying there?

— Samuele, don't start. You already have enough to do. Focus on school and leave old registers alone.

— How do you know it's old?

— Because it's an old school. Don't make up stories.

Her voice had grown hard. Not exactly angry. It was the tone she used when she had to convince herself before she could convince me.

— I'm not making anything up. Your name is there.

— I have to get back to work.

— Wait. Just one thing: why have you never told me?

For a moment I thought she'd answer. I imagined her kitchen, the phone resting on the table, her standing there with her coat still on. Instead, I heard another noise, then the short tone of the call being disconnected.

I stood there with the phone to my ear for a few seconds. The call duration appeared on the screen: just over two minutes. It hadn't been a long conversation, but it seemed to me that I'd crossed an entire corridor and stopped in front of a closed door.

When I went back into the room, Teo was looking for a pen in his backpack.

— Did you talk to your mother?

— Yes.

— Everything all right?

— Yes.

He looked at me, but didn't ask a second question. Teo had a way of knowing when it was better to give someone space: he'd make a joke, or pretend he hadn't noticed anything. This time he chose the pen.

I waited for him to go out to the study hall, then lifted the mattress and took out the register. I carried it to the desk and opened it to Marta's page. Bandini's signature was at the bottom, clear and regular. I looked for the date beside my mother's name; it had been written in the same handwriting as the other names, but the ink seemed darker. I made myself not read meanings into it that weren't there.

I turned the pages toward the end. The last sheets were different: not in their layout, but in their color. The black ink was more vivid, less faded. At the end of two names there were red marks that still looked sharp. I ran a finger near the line without touching it. I didn't know how to tell old ink from new, but the last pages didn't look the same as the first ones.

Further on I found a series of blank lines. Then, at the end, a name written recently, in dark strokes that hadn't yet gone dull. There was no signature beside it. I didn't recognize the handwriting. It didn't seem like Bandini's, but I couldn't be sure: I'd only seen his signature a few times, at the bottom of papers.

I went back to the first page, then to my mother's. The register offered no explanations, and the phone call had given me none. I had only two facts: Marta Bruni's name was there, and she didn't want to talk about it. The rest were questions.

I closed the volume and left it on the table, covered by my sweatshirt. Teo's voice came from the corridor; he was laughing with someone. The school went on as if nothing had happened: footsteps, doors, a teacher calling out. And yet from that moment on, I could no longer think of the Alfieri as a place I'd ended up by accident.

When I heard Teo coming back, I put the register under the mattress again. I sat on the bed and opened my lined notebook. I wrote: "Mom studied here. She won't tell me why." I stared at the sentence until the pen left a blot on the page. Then I closed the notebook.

I still hadn't figured out what the red marks meant. I didn't know why my mother's name appeared on those pages, or why the last lines seemed to have been written only recently. But I'd stopped believing that the register was just an old notebook forgotten in the attic.

The Marked Names

For a few minutes, after putting the register back under the mattress, I sat on the bed with my notebook open on my knees. Teo still hadn't come back. The boarding school made its usual noises: a tap dripping somewhere, a door closing softly, pipes settling behind the wall. I tried to convince myself that everything had a simple explanation. That was what I always did when something didn't add up: I looked for the smallest explanation, the one that didn't force me to change my mind.

Then a different sound came from the corridor. Not a footstep. A voice.

At first it was so quiet that I thought a teacher had a television on in his room. I got up and opened the door. The corridor was empty, lit by yellow lamps that left the corners in shadow. At the far end, beyond the turn, was the iron door to the old wing. It was closed, as always.

The voice came again. A word, then a pause. I couldn't make out the name, but the way it was pronounced made me think someone was reading from a list.

— Teo? — I called.

No one answered.

I stayed in the doorway, one hand on the handle. The air in the corridor was colder than the air in the room. It wasn't the even chill that came in through the windows: it seemed to gather in front of the old wing's door, as if the wall there had held on to winter.

The voice read another name. This time I heard it better, but not well enough to repeat it. Right after, a dry smell came, like chalk dust, with something acrid and burnt underneath. I looked toward the windows. They were closed. No fireplace, no smoke, no reason for that smell.

I took a step into the corridor. The light above me flickered once. No movement came from the other side of the door, only a long, slow scrape, like a chair being dragged across the floor.

Then silence.

I could have woken a teacher. I could have gone back to the room and told myself it had been the wind, like Teo had done on the first night. Instead, I stood still and listened, because the silence seemed to be waiting for me to do something.

On the ground, right in front of the iron door, there was a white line. I went closer. It wasn't light:

someone had drawn a word in chalk, in large, uneven letters.

ELIA.

The skin on my arms tightened beneath my sleeve. I had never seen that name before. Or at least, I didn't remember seeing it.

I brushed the floor with one finger. The white dust stayed on my skin. It was real. The voice, the smell, the word: three things I couldn't fit into the old building's noises.

When Teo came back, he found me crouched in the corridor.

— What are you doing there?

I stood up quickly. I pointed to the writing.

He stopped smiling. For a moment he looked first at my finger, smudged with chalk, and then at the closed door. He said someone must have been playing a joke, but he didn't try to erase the word. He stayed there beside me until the sound of footsteps came from downstairs.

We went back to the room without speaking. I wrote ELIA in my notebook, but the pen snapped on the first letter. I changed pens and tried again. When I looked up, Teo was sitting on his bed, still dressed, holding his switched-off Walkman.

On Sunday morning, Gaia arrived at the boarding school before ten. She wasn't supposed to be there: she lived in town and usually left as soon as classes were over. Teo let her in through the side entrance, claiming he had to return a notebook to her. When I asked him which notebook, he pointed to mine, still open on the bed.

— You couldn't come up with a better excuse? — I said.

— I already had this one ready.

Gaia set a folder full of papers on the table. Her hair was tied up with a pencil, and her glasses had slipped down her nose. She looked at my fingers, still stained with chalk.

— Did you find something?

I told her about the voice and the word on the floor. I didn't say right away that the name was Elia, because I still didn't know who he was. When I opened the register to the page where the line appeared, Gaia read in silence without touching the page.

— A marked name doesn't prove anything — she said. — But we can check whether those people existed.

It was the kind of thing I'd wanted to hear the night before. Not an explanation, not a promise: a way to begin.

We chose some of the names marked in red and copied them into the notebook. Teo recognized one surname: a family that had left Roccabruna years earlier. Gaia found old copies of the school newspaper, kept in a box in the common-room cupboard. Among the end-of-year articles were announcements of transfers and class photographs. In one photo, a boy who matched one of the names in the register was standing at the back, his tie loose and a bored expression on his face. The following year, he was gone.

— Maybe he transferred — Teo said.

— Maybe — Gaia replied. — But I'm not writing "disappeared" if all I have is a photo.

She noted the date and source in her tiny handwriting. Then we checked more names. One had left school halfway through the year; a girl had been absent for months, according to a brief notice Gaia had found on an old town bulletin board. Nothing proved that anything strange had happened. There were only interruptions, gaps where there should have been explanations.

I looked at the register and thought about the phone call with my mother. Marta's name was there, and she hadn't wanted to explain why. I didn't tell Gaia. Not yet. It was my own business, and I didn't know if I could bear to hear someone else say it.

Teo took my notebook and checked the names we'd copied down.

— I don't see yours, for now.

— Thanks. I feel better already.

— I was trying to be reassuring.

Gaia took the notebook out of his hands.

— Don't turn it into a joke. If someone marked these names, I want to know when and why.

We decided to look in the archive files, but we knew we couldn't go in without permission. Gaia knew how the documents were arranged and remembered that the oldest copies of the school newspaper had been moved to a room next door. Teo knew which corridor led there and what

time the staff passed by less often. I had the register, but I couldn't carry it around without risking someone noticing.

We left it hidden in room 12. Before going out, I checked that it was still under the mattress. The black cloth seemed darker in the morning light. I thought it was just the bed's shadow and closed the mattress with both hands.

At eleven thirty, as we crossed the new wing, a first-year boy came running down the stairs. I'd never seen him up close. He had a briefcase that was too big and a scarf covering half his chin. He put his foot on the edge of a step, slipped, and lost his balance.

The sound of the fall stopped everyone. The boy was left sitting on the landing, clutching his arm. A teacher knelt beside him and told him not to move. His sleeve was swelling above the elbow.

Gaia started to approach, but a teacher told her to let them through. Teo had gone pale. I looked at the boy's face and tried to remember where I'd seen his name before.

I didn't know yet. But the register came back to me with a precision that bothered me: the lines, the dates, the red mark beside a name I couldn't place.

The boy's name was Davide. I found out later, when the teacher asked Teo to take him to the infirmary. There was no visible wound on his arm, but he was holding his elbow against his chest and struggling not to cry. When the nurse said it was probably broken and he needed an X-ray, Gaia turned to me.

— Is he in the register?

I didn't answer right away. His name had seemed familiar before I knew who he was. I opened the notebook and searched among the lines we'd copied. Davide was there, a common surname and a date written beside it. Next to it, the red mark.

I didn't say that the register had predicted the fall. I couldn't know that. The name had been written years earlier, and the boy had hurt himself on a staircase everyone used. It was possible the two things had nothing to do with each other.

Still, I couldn't stop thinking about the coincidence.

— We have to find Elia's file — I said.

Gaia nodded. Teo came back from the infirmary without making jokes. He'd seen Davide grit his teeth while they set his arm, and he didn't like the idea that the register might have something to

do with it, even by chance.

— If they catch us in the archive, we're done for — he said.

— If we don't go, we won't find out anything — Gaia replied.

The archive was on the ground floor, behind a door with a faded sign. Gaia knew how the files were arranged because she'd looked up old issues of the school newspaper for an article. Teo stayed in the corridor to make sure no one was coming. I kept the door ajar and followed Gaia between the shelves.

The smell in there was different from the one in the attic: closed-up paper, glue, and a little damp. The boxes had handwritten labels, some so faded that Gaia had to tilt them toward the light. We looked first for 1997, then for folders marked "accidents" and "boarders."

— Here — she said.

The file was thin. Inside were a typewritten sheet and a copy of a report bearing the school's stamp. The first document showed the name Elia Randisi, sixteen years old. The date was November 2, 1997. The time, 9:47 p.m.

I read the line twice. The clock in the tower always stopped at that time, but I still didn't know why. Gaia photographed the sheet without using the flash. The report said that Elia had fallen down the stairwell in the old wing. His death was described as accidental. The case had been closed the next day.

There were no other students' names.

The next sheet was a summary of the interviews. Some lines had been torn from the copy, or perhaps they had never been included. A note in the margin mentioned a locked door and a prank that had gone wrong. The sentence broke off before explaining who had locked that door.

— Five boarders — Gaia said, pointing to a line in the report. — It says here that there were five of them.

I felt the same way I had when I found my mother's name in the register: something that had been vague until a moment earlier, and had suddenly taken on a precise shape.

— And their names?

Gaia turned the sheet toward the light. The column was empty. No signatures, no notes, no

attached list. The school had recorded that five boys were involved and left out everything else.

A sharp knock came from the corridor. Teo knocked twice, the signal that someone was coming. Gaia put the papers back in the folder, and I closed the drawer. For a moment, before lowering the handle, I thought I heard a distant voice say a name. I couldn't make out which one.

We left without running. Teo was waiting near the door, his face tense.

— Nando's downstairs — he whispered. — Did he see us come in?

We waited for the corridor to empty before going back to the common room. Gaia looked over the photos on the camera's small screen: the report, the note in the margin, the date and time. She didn't want us to rely on memory, and she was right. If we told someone what we'd found, they might say we'd read it wrong.

The note was brief, but it had given us something the official report avoided: Elia hadn't been alone in the old part of the building. Someone had locked him in the attic. Five boys had been questioned, and then the case had been closed as an accident. It didn't say who had turned the key, or whether anyone had tried to open it again.

— Maybe the complete document is somewhere else — Gaia said. — This looks like a copy for the school archive, not the original report.

Teo looked at the photos one after another. He'd taken off his sweatshirt and was rolling it up in his hands.

— What if the file was cut on purpose?

— Then we need the original — Gaia replied.

— And where is that?

She didn't know. Neither did I. The only thing that was clear was that the papers didn't say enough to explain Elia's death. The school had written "accident," recorded five boys, and filed everything away. The rest had been left out of the folder, as if removing the names were enough to erase what had happened.

I thought of the chalk writing in front of the door. ELIA. The name had appeared before I knew that the boy had died there, and now I couldn't separate the two things. It wasn't proof of anything, but neither was it a coincidence I could forget.

Gaia said we should look for other documents: old report cards, minutes, newspapers from the town. Teo added that the old wing had been closed after the death and that we couldn't go in without Nando's key. No one suggested forcing the door. For once, Teo hadn't found a hidden way through to use.

In the afternoon, as we were heading back toward the dormitory, I noticed a photograph hanging on a bulletin board near the chapel. It was a group photo, faded and folded at one corner. Beneath it, all it said was "Boarding School, 1997." I didn't recognize anyone. Some faces were too small, and others were obscured by the reflection on the glass.

Gaia followed my gaze.

— It could be them — she said.

— The five?

— We don't know. There's no caption, and a class photo doesn't prove who was in the room that evening.

She took out her notebook and wrote down where she'd seen it. I thought she wanted to photograph it, but in the end she lowered the camera. Maybe she'd realized that an image without names would add another question, not an answer.

At dinner no one mentioned Elia. Teo talked about the boy who'd broken his arm and said he'd probably be back in class with a cast. Gaia listened without commenting. I ate very little. Every time someone passed behind my chair, I expected to hear a whisper by my ear.

When the dining room had emptied, I asked Teo to come with me to the caretaker's office. I didn't have a plan. I just wanted to ask Nando if he remembered Elia, and if he knew why the file didn't contain the names of the five boys.

Nando was in his office, bent over a box of light bulbs. When he saw us in the doorway, he set the box on the floor.

— What have you been up to?

— Nothing — Teo said too quickly.

I kept my eyes on Nando.

— We found Elia Randisi's file. The one from 1997.

The caretaker didn't answer. His hand stayed on the edge of the box, his fingers tense. I thought he was angry because we'd gone into the archive, but his face didn't look like someone about to scold us. It was as if he'd heard a sound he knew and hoped never to hear again. The silence that followed made me realize how little I knew about that man, even though I saw him every day in the corridors.

— Elia fell down the stairwell — I continued. — The school said it was an accident. The file says five boys locked him in the attic.

Nando took a step back. The box hit the wall, and a light bulb rolled across the floor.

— Leave those papers alone.

— Why? — Gaia asked. — Aren't they complete?

He looked at her but didn't answer. His eyes moved from her to me, then to the corridor behind us. The office door was open, and there was no one outside.

— Do you know who the five were? — I asked.

For a moment I thought he was going to say something. His mouth opened just a little, then closed again. He picked up the light bulb from the floor and put it back in the box with exaggerated care.

— Go back to the dormitory. And don't go into the archive again without permission.

— Nando, I found my mother's name in the register — I said. — Was she here in 1997?

His face changed. Not much, but enough. He looked away and ran a hand over his forehead.

— Don't ask me.

— Who should I ask?

— No one.

He took the keys from his belt and clenched them in his fist. The metal jingled. For the first time since I'd known him, Nando seemed more frightened than I was.

Teo moved beside me, as if to tell me to stop. Gaia didn't ask any questions. She waited, notebook in hand, but Nando had already turned his back.

— That's enough — he said.

He left the office without looking at us. His footsteps faded away toward the entrance, and then we couldn't hear them anymore. He hadn't answered anything, yet the way he'd reacted felt like an answer. I didn't know what truth he was trying to protect. I only knew Elia's death wasn't a distant memory for him.

— We're not going to say we saw that look on his face — Teo said.

— What look? — Gaia asked.

Teo lowered his voice.

— The look of someone who already knows how the story ends.

I went back to the room before ten thirty. Teo made his rounds of the corridor doors, as he did every evening, but he didn't put on his Walkman. Gaia had gone home and promised to look for other documents the next day. I sat on the bed with the register on my knees.

I didn't want to open it. The whole time I'd been in Nando's office, I'd been thinking about his hands resting still on the box and the way he'd avoided my question about my mother. But part of me kept returning to the names marked in red. If Davide was in the register, I had to see if the mark had changed.

I waited for Teo to fall asleep. His breathing grew regular, though every now and then he shifted as if he were trying to find a more comfortable position. I turned on the desk lamp and opened the volume on the bed, keeping its spine away from the edge.

The pages had the same dates, the same names, and the same marks I'd seen the night before. I reached the last lines. The name without a signature was still there, written in ink darker and fresher than the rest of the register.

But beneath it was a new line.

Davide.

I recognized the name from the list we'd copied that morning. Beside it was a red mark, drawn with a short, decisive stroke. The ink seemed more vivid than the ink on the old pages.

I snapped the register shut. The lamp trembled on the nightstand, and Teo turned over in his sleep.

— What is it? — he murmured.

— Nothing.

The word came out on its own. I didn't want to wake him, and I didn't even know how to explain what I'd seen. Davide had been hurt that morning. His name was in the register before we saw him fall, and now someone had marked it in red.

I opened the book again, but I didn't touch the line. I checked the edge of the page and the cover, looking for a physical explanation: a stain, a stuck page, a trick I'd missed. I found nothing. There was no signature beside the new name.

I looked at the door of the room. No sound came from the corridor. For a moment it seemed to me that I heard the same voice as the night before, very far away. I held my breath. It didn't say a name; or maybe I couldn't hear it.

I put the register back under the mattress and took my lined notebook. I wrote: "Davide fell. His name appeared at the bottom of the register." Then I added: "Nando knows something."

The pen stopped above the final period. I didn't know what Nando knew, or why the register kept changing. But the idea that it was just a collection of old names no longer seemed possible.

I turned off the lamp. In the dark, Teo was breathing softly in the other bed. Beneath me, the volume pressed against the mattress like an object that had finally found the place it belonged.

The Lanterns

On Monday morning, the Alfieri seemed like a different school. A sign with the interview schedule had been hung on the front gate, and parents in dark coats, carrying leather bags and closed umbrellas, were coming into the courtyard. Voices rose to the portico and echoed beneath the arches. I had never seen so many people pass through the boarding school all at once.

Teo had put on a shirt that pulled across his shoulders and kept adjusting his collar.

— If they see me like this, they'll think I'm a model student — he said.

— Maybe you are — I replied.

— Don't ruin my reputation.

Gaia was waiting for us near the noticeboard, a folder tucked under her arm. She had pinned up her hair with a pencil, as always, but that morning she was wearing a blue jacket and looked even more serious than usual.

— Did your parents come too? — Teo asked her.

— They already had their interview last week. I'm here for the school paper today.

She pointed to the table in the entrance hall, where a few photocopied issues were stacked. Then she looked at me.

— Is your mother coming?

I nodded. I hadn't told her much about the phone call, but Gaia had understood that Marta's name in the register wasn't a coincidence. I had tried calling her that morning. She hadn't answered.

The scholarship depended on my grades and conduct. I had known that even before I arrived at the Alfieri. That was why I thought my mother would come only to talk about my report card. A short meeting, a few questions about my homework, then the trip back. Something ordinary.

In the middle of the morning, I saw her come in through the front gate. She stopped for a moment beneath the arch, as if trying to remember where she was. She was wearing a gray coat and the shoulder bag she always took to work. For an instant, I thought she looked older, even though I had said goodbye to her only a few days earlier. Maybe it was the pale light in the entrance hall, or the way she clutched the strap with both hands.

— Samuele.

She hugged me quickly, without giving me time to really hug her back.

— How are you? — she asked.

— Fine.

— Have you eaten?

I gestured toward the dining hall. It was the same old question, and that was why it seemed almost like a blessing. For a few seconds, we could pretend we had come all this way for my report card.

Marta laid a hand on my arm.

— The teacher is waiting for me. Let's go.

The interview room was at the end of the corridor in the new wing. The classroom doors were open, and low voices, nervous laughter, and the scrape of chairs came from some of them. Passing the library, I caught a glimpse of Gaia talking to a father and taking notes; Teo had disappeared into the crowd.

The teacher waiting for us talked about my grades, my punctuality, and the fact that I rarely spoke up in class. She said I had a lot of ability, but that I needed to learn to ask for help before I fell behind. My mother listened with her chin lowered, asking precise questions about homework and tests.

When the interview was over, the teacher left us alone for a few minutes. Marta folded the report card and slipped it into her bag.

— They're not bad — she said.

— No.

— The scholarship is important. You know that.

— Yes.

She took a breath, as if she wanted to add something. For a moment, she seemed about to ask me something. Then she looked toward the door.

— Are you settling in here?

I could have said yes. I could have told her about Teo, Gaia, and the noise above the ceiling. Instead, I thought of the volume under the mattress, the line with her name on it, and the red mark.

— Did you study at the Alfieri? — I asked her.

Her hand stopped on her bag.

— What?

— Your name is in the register.

For a moment, all I could hear were the voices passing in the corridor. My mother looked at the closed door, then at me.

— I don't know what you're talking about.

— Marta Bruni. It's written there.

She shook her head, too quickly.

— I was never a student at this school. You must have read it wrong.

— Is your name written in your handwriting?

— I didn't say that. I said I've never been here.

Her voice was low, but the sentence had the same hardness as when she wanted to end an argument. I realized I wasn't going to get an answer by pretending it was just an ordinary question.

— Then why were you scared?

Marta looked away. Outside, in the courtyard, someone laughed loudly. The ordinary scene seemed to me like something put on deliberately to cover up what was happening in the room.

— Don't ask questions about things you don't understand — she said.

— That's exactly why I'm asking them.

She looked at me, and for a second I saw exhaustion turn to fear. Then she put the report card back in her bag and stood up.

— This interview was about your grades, Samuele.

— I know.

— Then let's talk about those.

But we didn't talk about my grades again. When we left, the corridor was full of families. My mother walked ahead of me and didn't turn around once.

I caught up with her near the portico, where the line for the interviews split in front of two doors. My mother stopped to let a couple with a little girl pass; I waited beside her, not knowing whether I wanted her to leave or to stay long enough to answer me.

— You can't keep avoiding the question — I said.

— I'm not avoiding it. I answered you.

— You said you've never been here.

— Because I don't want to talk about the register.

— That's not the same thing.

She looked toward the courtyard. Some parents were reading the day's schedule, while others were looking for the classrooms marked on their handouts. Beneath the arches, a teacher was accompanying an elderly woman toward the stairs. Everyone seemed to know where to go, except us.

— Where did you find it? — she asked me.

— In the attic.

For a moment, she closed her eyes. When she opened them, her voice was lower.

— You shouldn't have taken it.

— So you know what it is.

— I didn't say that.

— Do you know what's written in it?

My mother ran a hand over her forehead. Her fingers were red, cracked around the nails. I knew them well; they were the same hands that used to wrap my scarf around me when I was little, and now they were searching for an answer without finding one.

— Samuele, listen to me. Some things are better left where they are.

— That's what everyone says.

— You don't know what you're looking for.

— Then explain it to me.

She looked toward the gate again, as if she could leave at any moment. The bag pressed against her side. Inside it, along with the report card, was the phone I had called the night before. I felt like asking her if she had heard my voice then too, if she had ended the call because she didn't know what to say or because she didn't want to say it. I didn't. I already knew what the answer would be.

— Did you see my name? — she asked.

— Yes.

— And the mark?

I nodded.

Marta stiffened, but she didn't pretend not to understand. For the first time since she had arrived, she didn't look for an excuse to change the subject. She set her bag on the step and sat down. I stayed standing in front of her.

— I was here in 1997 — she said.

The words came out quietly, almost voicelessly.

— Were you a boarder?

— Yes.

I didn't feel relieved. I had gotten an answer, but her face made me understand that I had opened up a harder question.

— Why did you always tell me it was just like any other school?

— Because I wanted you to be able to come here without carrying what happened with you.

— What happened to whom?

She lowered her eyes to her hands.

— There was a boy. Elia.

The name seemed too fragile to bear the whole story I had read in the file. I repeated it without speaking, moving only my lips.

— That night we were all boarders — she continued. — I... I was asleep.

— The night he died?

— Yes.

— But you were there.

— I was in the dormitory.

Her voice broke slightly, then pulled itself together.

— Didn't you hear anything?

— I don't remember.

The words came too precisely. My mother looked away and clenched her fingers until they turned white. I remembered that the five names weren't in the file. I still didn't know who the others were, or what they had done. But Marta's silence didn't sound like the silence of someone who couldn't remember. It sounded like a door locked from the inside.

— You said you were asleep — I pressed. — But before that, you said you didn't remember.

— I don't want to go on.

— Why?

— Because it's not something I can tell you here.

— Then where?

She didn't answer. She picked up her bag and stood. From the courtyard came the sharp thud of a box being set down; someone was unloading supplies for the festival. My mother jumped, and I realized that the noise had reminded her of something. She didn't tell me what.

— You have to stop looking — she said.

— I can't.

— You can. And you will.

— You didn't send me here by chance.

She stared at me, surprised by the words. For a moment, she had a different expression, almost pained. Then she looked away.

— I sent you here because it was a good school and because you needed the scholarship.

— Just for that?

— Samuele, enough.

She used my name like a lock. I didn't answer. I knew that if I kept going, she would find another way to leave without adding anything.

We said goodbye near the gate. She told me to study, to eat, and not to get into trouble. Three ordinary things, said one after another, as if they were enough to set the morning right again. When she walked off toward the parking lot, I didn't follow her.

Gaia came up to me a little later, her folder tucked under her arm.

— What did she tell you?

— That she was a boarder here in 1997.

— And the others?

— She didn't talk about them.

Gaia looked at the door Marta had gone through.

— But she didn't say she was really asleep.

I didn't answer. I didn't know if Gaia had noticed the same hesitation or had only read my face. Either way, she was right: my mother had said she'd been asleep, but she hadn't said she hadn't woken up.

In the afternoon, I went back to the archive with Gaia. Teo joined us after leaving his jacket in the dormitory. He was still wearing his morning shirt, but his collar was open and one sleeve had come untucked.

— I had my interview — he said. — Apparently I should stop drawing monsters in the margins of

my homework.

— Did they tell you anything else? — I asked him.

— That if I keep this up, I'll end up doing something creative. It sounded like a threat.

Gaia closed the door behind us. The archive smelled of damp paper and polished furniture. The file from 1997 was still on the table, where we had left it after reading the report. It didn't have the names of the five boys, but the date and time were precise: November 2, 9:47 p.m. Elia's fall. The stopped clock.

— We need to look for the attendance registers — Gaia said. — If the names aren't in the report, maybe they show up somewhere else.

— What if Alviti's already figured out we're looking for them? — Teo asked.

— Then we'd better do it quickly.

We started with the indexes. Gaia leafed through the folders, Teo checked the lower shelves, and I looked for the years that matched 1997. The files were arranged by year, but some of the labels had come off and the binders had been moved. Every now and then we found a list of boarders, a disciplinary note, or an absence register. Never the names we were looking for.

The sound of footsteps in the corridor made us stop. The door opened without a knock. Professor Alviti came in and looked first at us, then at the file open on the table.

— What are you doing?

Gaia closed the folder.

— Research for the school paper.

— About a death that happened thirty years ago?

— About the school's history.

Alviti came over to the table and picked up the file. She closed it carefully, aligning the edges of the papers.

— These documents are not material for the school paper.

— They're school documents — Gaia said. — And the school is the subject.

— You don't have permission to consult confidential files.

— They weren't confidential yesterday — I said.

The teacher looked at me. The red pen in her breast pocket had a shiny clip, perfectly parallel to the edge of her jacket.

— Yesterday you had permission to consult a specific document. Not to rummage through the archives.

— We're not ruining anything.

— That's not the point, Samuele.

She picked up the other papers we had left on the table and put them back in the folder. She hadn't raised her voice, but the gesture was final. Gaia stepped forward.

— We just need to understand what happened to Elia.

For the first time, Alviti's expression changed. Not much: a tightening of her mouth, a fleeting shadow in her eyes. Then her usual look returned.

— The case was closed. The school has already provided an explanation.

— An explanation that doesn't name anyone — I said.

— That doesn't give you the right to turn an archive into a witch hunt.

— Nobody's said anything about witches — Teo said. — At least, I haven't.

Gaia shot him a look to silence him. Alviti closed the folder and held it against her side.

— You need to focus on your lessons. And you, Samuele, already have enough trouble with your conduct.

I felt the scholarship weigh on me like a hand on my shoulder. I hadn't skipped classes or gotten any other punishments, but the headmaster had already made me understand how easy it was to lose my place.

— Will you give us the file back? — I asked.

— I'll put it back where it belongs.

— That's not what I asked.

— It's the only answer you'll get.

She left with the documents. The door closed behind her, and for a few seconds no one spoke.

— She's afraid we'll find something — Gaia said.

— Or she's afraid we'll tell people about it — Teo replied.

I looked at the empty table, where the report had been a moment earlier. Its absence seemed more noticeable than its presence. We didn't know who the five were, but now we knew that someone didn't want us asking the question.

We hadn't even made it out of the archive when a member of the support staff stopped us in the corridor. She said the headmaster wanted to see me. Alone.

Teo started to follow me, but I stopped him with a hand.

— Wait for me here.

— If you're not back in ten minutes, we'll come looking for you — Gaia said.

The headmaster's office was on the ground floor, near the entrance. The door was open. Ferrero was sitting behind his desk with the attendance register in front of him; he hadn't closed it when I came in. He motioned to the chair without standing.

— Sit down, Samuele.

I obeyed. On the desk, next to the register, was a tan folder. Ferrero folded his hands together.

— I'm told you spent the afternoon looking at documents that have nothing to do with you.

— They have to do with the school.

— It's not up to you to decide what's in the public interest.

— I didn't steal anything.

— I didn't say you did. I'm talking to you about being prudent.

His tone was polite, but every sentence seemed to have been written in the register in front of him already. He asked me if I understood that my behavior could be considered a breach of the rules. I replied that I was trying to understand the death of a boy. He looked at the tan folder.

— That case was closed. The school followed the procedures of the time.

— And the names of the five boarders?

Ferrero looked up.

— I don't know what you're talking about.

— The report says there were five. It doesn't say who they were.

— If the names aren't included, there must be a reason.

— Or someone took them out.

His expression remained pleasant. Only his right hand moved the register a couple of inches.

— Your scholarship was granted so you could study, not so you could question the school's reputation.

I felt the knot in my stomach tighten. My mother wouldn't have been able to pay for that school without the scholarship. Ferrero knew it, and he also knew there was no need to raise his voice.

— I'm not questioning anything. I'm asking questions.

— Questions have consequences when they're asked the wrong way.

— Are you threatening me?

— I'm reminding you that a boarder has to follow the rules. If you keep taking time away from your lessons and involving other students in unauthorized research, I may have to reconsider whether you can stay here.

I didn't answer. I looked at the attendance register, open in front of him. The page was clean, the lines neat, the signatures in columns. Another book in which someone could decide who was there and who wasn't.

Ferrero closed the folder.

— You can go back to your friends. I hope this conversation has been clear.

I stood up.

— Yes.

It wasn't true. The only thing that was clear was that the school wanted me to stop.

When I got back to the corridor, Teo and Gaia were still there. Teo was counting the minutes on his watch face, pretending not to be worried.

— That was quick — he said.

— He reminded me I could lose my scholarship.

Gaia closed the folder she was holding.

— Ferrero can't take it away because you asked a question.

— He can find another reason.

Teo stopped smiling.

— If he sends you home, we'll come get you.

— With what? — I asked. — Your Walkman?

— I've also got a flashlight. And a plan, more or less.

The joke didn't make anything feel lighter, but it helped anyway. For a few seconds, we stood together in the corridor without trying to find a solution. Then Gaia said she would try to remember which documents were still in the archive before Alviti took them away.

— Don't put yourself at risk too — I told her.

— I don't know how to do that.

We parted before dinner. During the afternoon lessons, I tried to pay attention, but I kept thinking about my mother: "I was here in 1997." And right after that: "I was asleep that night." The two sentences didn't fit together. The more I tried to bring them closer, the more a gap remained between them.

After dinner, the courtyard had already changed. Rolls of paper, strings, and boxes of candles had appeared beneath the portico. Two members of the support staff were carrying a wooden ladder from one column to another; some students were folding colored paper to make lanterns. The festival wouldn't be until the next evening, but the boarding school was getting ready ahead of time, as if arranging the lights were enough to make everything else feel safe.

Teo stopped to look at a red lantern hanging from a low branch of the cedar.

— If they make it fly, at least our plan is clear — he said. — We follow it and escape.

— There is no plan — I reminded him.

— Then we're already ahead. We can't fail.

Gaia touched the edge of a paper lantern with one finger.

— The families will be here tomorrow. If anything happens, we won't be alone.

I looked at the tower above the portico. The clock had stopped, as always, but its dark face seemed to be fixed on the courtyard.

At nine forty, I had already put my notebook back under my pillow, but I couldn't stay still. Teo had brushed his teeth and was looking for his Walkman on the bedside table; Gaia had gone home after promising she would check her notes the next morning. Students were still passing through the corridor with lanterns to put up. Their voices came and went, then died away behind the doors.

I left the room to get a drink. The dormitory smelled of soap and damp wool. When I reached the window at the end of the corridor, the town had already disappeared into the fog. All that remained visible of the tower was its pale clock face, suspended above the rooftops.

I looked at my wristwatch: it was one minute to a quarter to ten. The tower's hands weren't moving. I knew it always stopped at that time, but I realized I was waiting for the tick as if it might surprise me.

Suddenly, the corridor turned cold. Not ordinary cold, the kind that came from old windows or switched-off radiators: it was as if the air had drained the warmth from my face. I smelled chalk and burnt paper. Then, from the other side of the building, a voice began to read.

At first I couldn't make out the words. They were low and measured, separated by pauses that were too long. One name, then another. The voice seemed to rise from the ground floor and pass through the walls without going through the corridors.

I stood motionless. A door opened behind me, and Teo came out with his Walkman in his hand.

— Did you hear that?

I nodded.

The voice said another name. This time I recognized it: it was written in the register, on a page I had looked through the night before. I didn't answer. I felt my heartbeat in my neck and the faint

sound of Teo gripping the Walkman in his fingers.

From the window, the tower's clock face stopped at 9:47 p.m.

The voice started again. I could no longer make out the names, but it sounded close, closer than before. For a moment, I was certain it was reading for me, as if my name were already on the page and all that was left was for someone to say it.

Teo took me by the elbow.

— Let's go back to our room.

I didn't tell him I wanted to stay and listen. I didn't tell him I was afraid either. I let him lead me back while the voice continued beyond the walls. The door to our room closed softly behind us.

On the table, my notebook lay open to a blank page. All evening, I had been thinking of writing to my mother. Now I couldn't find a sentence that didn't sound like a question.

Who Is Still Writing

I woke before the bell, with the feeling that someone had said my name just outside the room. Teo was asleep facing the wall, the Walkman beside his pillow and one headphone still in his ear. For a few seconds I lay still, listening. There was nothing in the corridor, not even the sound of the first supervisor's footsteps.

Then I looked under the bed. The suitcase was open, one sleeve of the sweatshirt sticking out at the side. Everything was normal. I tried to convince myself of that as I sat up.

The night before, after the voice and the stopped clock, I had left the notebook open on the table. I hadn't written to my mother. I hadn't written anything. I'd spent the night staring at the ceiling, waiting for something to drag itself across the floor above us again. Every time the wood creaked, my body stiffened before I could even figure out where the sound was coming from.

I got up without turning on the light. The register was under the mattress, where I had hidden it two days earlier. I lifted the edge and pulled out the volume. The black canvas felt cold to the touch, even though the room still held the dead warmth of the radiators. I opened it to the last pages.

The name was still there.

Samuele Bruni.

The ink was darker than the ink used in the previous entries. It wasn't the same shade as Bandini's signatures, and there was no date or signature beside it. Just my name, written in slanted, cramped handwriting, as if whoever had written it had been in a hurry or had little light.

I passed a finger over the page without touching the letters. I didn't want to leave a fingerprint, even though I didn't know whom I would have to prove that the handwriting wasn't mine to.

— What are you doing?

Teo had woken up. His voice was thick with sleep. I closed the register too quickly, and the sharp thud made the cover vibrate.

— Nothing.

— Is that your before-breakfast nothing or the kind that requires an escape plan?

I looked at the door. Then at the register in my hands.

— My name has appeared at the bottom.

Teo pushed himself up on one elbow. The smile disappeared from his face, but only for an instant. He pulled on his sweatshirt and put his feet into his slippers.

— Let me see.

I showed him the page. Teo studied it without touching it. He leaned closer, tilting his head the way he did when he was trying to read something too small on the back of a cassette.

— That's not your handwriting — he said.

— I know.

— And it's not the teacher's?

I pointed out the signatures on the previous pages. Bandini wrote neatly, with all the letters the same height. His signature always took up a whole line. The name at the bottom was different: smaller, more nervous.

Teo looked at the page again.

— It could be Nando's.

— Why?

— Because he's the only one with the key to the attic. And because ever since you found this book, he's been acting like someone waiting for something to happen.

— Someone else could have written it.

— Sure. A ghost with a pen. It's possible.

He tried to smile, but couldn't manage it. I closed the register and held it against my chest. For the first time since I'd found it, it seemed less like a document and more like something that could be used to call someone.

The bell rang. Teo turned toward the door, then looked back at me.

— Don't carry it around.

— I can't leave it here.

— Then don't leave it where someone can find it.

I wrapped the volume in a sweater and put it back under the mattress. Before we went out, I checked the page one last time. The black fabric was back in place, but I could still see the name through the folds of the cloth, as if the ink had seeped through the cover.

At breakfast I kept my eyes down on the tray. Teo talked about the math assignment and the hard bread, as if it were any ordinary morning. I heard every door that opened in the dining hall and every time someone said a name. When the bell announced first period, I decided I wouldn't wait until evening: I would ask Nando why his handwriting was the first thing Teo had thought of.

I waited until the second period was over. Nando was in the gatehouse, by the main entrance, with an open box of light bulbs on the counter. His keys hung from his belt and jingled every time he bent over. He didn't notice me until I knocked on the doorframe.

— Got a minute?

He looked up. First he looked at me, then at the corridor behind me.

— If this is about the punishment, you've already done your shift.

— It's about the register.

His hand stopped above the box. He didn't ask which register. That was already an answer, even if it wasn't enough.

I went in and closed the door. The gatehouse smelled of cold coffee, wet wool, and metal. On the wall were the shift schedules, a calendar with a photograph of mountains, and a set of spare keys hanging from a nail. Nando remained standing.

— Did you find your name? — he said.

— My name was already there. Someone wrote it again, at the bottom.

He lowered his eyes to the box. He picked up a light bulb, turned it between his fingers, and put it back in its place.

— You shouldn't have taken it out of the attic.

— So you know what I'm talking about.

He didn't answer. I took the register out of my bag and set it on the counter. Nando didn't touch it. For a moment I thought he would call the headmaster or order me to leave. Instead, he looked at the cover as if it were a door left ajar.

— Who kept writing in it? — I asked.

Nando rubbed his thumb along the edge of his index finger. There was a dark smudge near his nail, maybe grease, maybe ink. I couldn't tell.

— That book is no use to anyone.

— My name is in it.

— It doesn't mean what you think.

— And what do you think it means?

He breathed in through his nose. For the first time since I'd known him, he seemed older than his forty-six years. His shoulders had hunched, and his blue work clothes hung loose across his chest.

— It means someone wanted you to see it.

— Who?

Nando moved toward the door, but didn't open it. He listened to the corridor. The school was full of the ordinary sounds of a morning: footsteps, chairs being moved, a voice calling for a teacher from a classroom. And yet he was listening for something else, too.

— Put the register away.

— No.

— Samuele.

The way he said my name made me look at the closed page. His voice no longer had the tone of the caretaker who'd caught me working in the attic. It was the voice of someone asking me not to do the same thing he had done.

— I want to know who wrote my name.

— I can't erase it.

— I didn't ask you to erase it.

Nando finally raised his eyes.

— Yes. I was the one who wrote it.

The words hung between us without either of us taking them back. Outside, someone slammed a door. Nando closed his eyes for a moment, as if the sound had come from much farther away.

— Why? — I asked.

— Because I convinced myself that writing them down would keep them away.

— Away from whom?

— Everyone.

— And my name?

He shook his head.

— I didn't write it.

— You just said you did.

— I continued the register. But I didn't write the last line.

He laid his hand on the counter, near the cover, without touching it. His fingers were trembling slightly. I thought of the keys he always carried, the attic, the iron door. I thought about how many times he could have gone in alone and how many times he had chosen not to.

— Then why did you keep writing?

Nando looked at the calendar. The photograph showed a ridge beneath a bright sky, a place without buildings and without locked doors.

— Because after that night, I believed silence was something you could control. Then I realized it wasn't.

— Which night?

For a moment he let the question go unanswered. Then he pointed to the chair in front of the counter.

— Sit down. If you want to know, you have to listen to the whole thing. And don't interrupt me to defend your mother.

I sat down. Nando remained on the other side of the counter, his hands resting on the wood. He didn't begin right away. He looked at the register, then at the door, then back at me.

— In 1997, I was a boarding student — he said. — I was sixteen. Like you.

I didn't answer. The file I'd looked through with Gaia and Teo mentioned five boys, but didn't give their names. The school had left a blank space where the truth should have been.

— Elia Randisi was one of us — Nando continued. — He wasn't our friend. Not because he'd done anything, but because we'd decided he wasn't.

He clenched his jaw. His gaze remained fixed on the counter, on a point I couldn't see.

— That evening we locked him in the attic. It was a joke, that's what we told ourselves. Just for a few minutes. We'd open the door again, have a laugh, and never talk about it afterward.

— But you didn't open it again.

— No.

The word came out softly. Nando didn't try to make it sound less serious. He didn't say we were kids, that we were scared, that things had gone differently. He let it remain what it was.

— When Elia fell, the clock stopped at 9:47 p.m. — he said. — It hasn't moved since.

I thought of the voice from the night before, the names moving through the building, the clock face I'd seen from the window. Everything I'd heard seemed to have come one step closer.

— Who were the others?

Nando raised his eyes.

— There was me. There was Corinna Alviti. There was your mother.

The room grew smaller. I gripped the edge of the chair.

— Marta?

— Yes.

— Yesterday she said she was asleep that night.

— That's what she's told herself so she could stay here, even though she left.

— And you? You stayed.

— I couldn't get out.

He said the other two were boarding students, but didn't give their names. He either no longer remembered them or didn't want to say them; I didn't ask. At that moment I had just one question, and it already seemed too big for the room.

— Why did you keep the register going?

Nando ran a hand over his forehead. The skin at his temples remained taut.

— Bandini started it after Elia died. He wrote down the names and marked the ones who, in his opinion, had paid for it. It wasn't an official list. It wasn't a punishment. It was his way of trying to give shape to what he hadn't been able to stop.

— And you took his place.

— I found the register after he died. I thought that if I kept writing, if I kept track of every name, I'd be able to tell when it was over.

— Is it over?

Nando didn't answer.

I thought of Davide's name, which had appeared after the fall. I thought of myself, of the last line without a date, of the handwriting that wasn't the caretaker's. All that time I'd thought the fresh ink was a message. Now it seemed like a door that opened from both sides.

— And my mother? — I asked. — Did she write in it too?

— No. I didn't put her name at the bottom. Bandini had already written it there.

— And mine?

Nando lowered his eyes.

— I didn't write it.

This time I believed him enough to be even more afraid.

He told me the register hadn't prevented anything. Every time a name appeared beside a red mark, he tried to convince himself there was a reason, a rule, a way to make things right. He'd watched the doors, walked the grounds, counted who came back and who was missing. But silence hadn't given him control. It had only taught him to recognize the sound of a key turning in a lock.

— The school demands a name every time — he said at last. — That's what I thought. That there

was a debt to be paid, and the register was keeping track.

— A school doesn't demand anything.

— I know.

— Then what is it?

Nando looked at the closed door. For the first time, it seemed to me that he was afraid not of the memory, but of whatever might hear him.

— I don't know. And I don't want to make up an answer to reassure you.

He didn't ask me to forgive him. He didn't try to say it had been a childish mistake. I didn't know what I would have done in his place, and I didn't want to turn that uncertainty into an excuse for him.

I picked up the register. The cover slipped in my hands.

— If you didn't write my name, who did?

Nando shook his head.

— I don't know.

— And what happens now?

— I don't know that either.

His answer didn't free me from anything. It left me only with my name, my mother's confession still unfinished, and the certainty that the caretaker wasn't the only person who knew the register existed anymore.

I left the gatehouse without saying goodbye. In the corridor I realized I was clutching the register with both hands. I put it in my bag and walked toward room 12, trying not to look at the windows. The sky above the courtyard was low and gray; the fog had begun to cover the town, leaving only the tower visible.

Teo was sitting on the bed with his math notebook open on his knees. He looked up as soon as I came in.

— Did you talk to Nando?

I set my bag on the floor.

— He was the one who continued the register.

Teo closed his notebook.

— And your name?

— He says he didn't write it.

— Do you believe him?

I thought of the dark smudge near his nail, his hands still on the counter, his voice when he admitted he'd been one of the five. I didn't know whether to believe him. I only knew that lying about something like that wouldn't have served any purpose.

— I don't know.

I told him the rest. I didn't repeat every word Nando had said: some of them still felt like his, and I didn't want to carry them away from the gatehouse. I told him my mother had been one of the five, and that Alviti had been there too. Teo listened without making any jokes.

— Your mother told you she was asleep — he said when I finished.

— Yes.

— Maybe that's all she remembers.

— I don't think so.

— That's not the same as knowing what she did.

I looked at the register inside my bag. The distinction seemed right, but it wasn't enough to make me feel less angry. My mother hadn't told me she'd been there. She'd let me come to the Alfieri without explaining why that place frightened her.

— I don't even know if I want her to tell me everything — I said.

Teo moved the notebook aside.

— But you want her to stop deciding what you can know.

I didn't answer. That was probably it. I didn't want to be protected from a truth that had already caught up with me.

For the rest of the afternoon we pretended to study. Every now and then Teo would ask me about a problem, I'd pass him the notebook, and he'd tell me I'd written the numbers as if they were trying to run away. Normality kept us busy, but it didn't make us forget.

At ten, the caretaker's footsteps began their rounds. Nando passed the doors with his flashlight, checking that they were closed. When the light slid beneath ours, Teo stopped talking. I thought it was him, but the footsteps continued down the corridor and disappeared toward the stairs.

We weren't supposed to go out after ten. The lights would go off at half past ten. I put the register under the mattress, but I didn't leave it there: I took it out again and wrapped it in the sweater, keeping it on the floor beside the bed.

— If someone comes, we don't open the door — Teo said.

— What if it's Nando?

— Especially if it's Nando.

He put the Walkman headphones back on, but didn't press play. I opened my notebook and tried to write. I wrote down the date, then my mother's name, then crossed it out so hard the paper went thin.

The dormitory grew quiet. Little by little, the noises from the other rooms disappeared. I could no longer see the town through the window. The tower was a dark shape in the fog, and its clock face was indistinguishable.

I turned off the lamp. In the dark, I smelled burnt paper.

Teo took off one headphone.

— Can you smell it too?

I nodded. The cold was coming from under the door, thin and constant. I reached for the register, but before I touched it I heard a footstep in the corridor. Then another. They weren't Nando's: they were too slow, and there was no sound of keys.

The footsteps stopped in front of our room.

The handle went down.

Teo got out of bed. I grabbed the register from the floor and held it against my chest. The door didn't open. The handle went back up, then went down a second time, more slowly.

— Nando? — Teo called.

No one answered.

The cold spread through the room. I heard the sound of a page turning, but the register was closed in my arms. The voice came from behind the door, so close it seemed to be speaking through the wood.

I didn't understand the first name. I understood the second.

— Samuele.

Teo grabbed my wrist.

— Don't open it.

The door shuddered once. Then the voice said my name again, more softly, as if it were reading from a page and had found the right line.

I tried to reach the switch. The darkness didn't move, but everything in the room seemed farther away: the table, the window, Teo's bed. A blow struck the door from the other side. Teo stepped back. His arm hit the bedside table, and the Walkman fell to the floor.

The handle went down for the third time.

Teo stood in front of me.

— There's no one there — he said, but his voice broke on the last word.

The next blow didn't come from the door. It came from the ceiling, above our bed: a weight dragged across the wood, slowly, from one end to the other. I heard a scrape, then silence.

Teo looked up. He didn't have time to move.

Something struck the wall beside him. His body slid sideways and hit the floor. The sound was brief, followed by a stifled breath. I dropped the register and knelt beside him.

— Teo.

He answered with a groan. His eyes were open, but he couldn't sit up. I saw a dark stain on the sleeve of his sweatshirt and called for help, first quietly, then shouting toward the corridor.

Lights came on in other rooms. A door opened at the far end of the dormitory. I heard real

footsteps, quick ones, and voices asking what had happened. The handle of our door no longer moved.

When Nando arrived, he had his flashlight in his hand and his face was colorless. He bent beside Teo and told him to look at him, to stay still. Another adult ran to call the infirmary. I remained on the floor, with the register open beside my knee.

Nando saw my name on the page.

He didn't ask who had written it. He didn't ask what I'd heard. He looked at the door, then at the ceiling, and tightened his fingers around the flashlight.

Teo was taken to the infirmary. Before they lifted him, he gripped my sleeve.

— Don't open it — he whispered.

I promised I wouldn't. When the footsteps had gone, I was left alone in the room. The cold was gone, but the smell of chalk and burnt paper still hung in the air.

I picked up the register. My name was still on the last line, dark and fresh. For the first time, I understood that the presence wasn't reading the book from a distance. It was looking for me.

The Walled Room

The infirmary smelled of disinfectant and damp sheets. Light came in through a high window, but it didn't reach Teo's bed, which was at the far end of the room. His eyes were open, and his Walkman sat on the bedside table, switched off. His sweatshirt was folded over a chair. The dark stain on the sleeve seemed larger than I remembered, though maybe that was only because now I knew it was there.

— Didn't they tell you what happened? — I asked him.

Teo shook his head. He had a Band-Aid near his temple and a bandage under his sleeve. I couldn't tell whether he'd managed to sleep. When I pulled a chair up beside his bed, he looked at the door, then at me.

— Did you keep your promise?

— I didn't open it.

— Good. Because if you tell me you opened it and then can't remember, I'll still be mad.

He tried to smile. It came out as a brief, strained movement. I thought about asking if it hurt, but I would have got the same answer the nurse had given me when I arrived: rest and observation. No one had been able to explain the wound. The stain on his sleeve was the only thing I could talk about without making anything up.

Gaia arrived a little later, her hair badly tied back and her notebook pressed against her chest. She greeted Teo, then looked at me.

— Does the headmaster know you're here?

— He knows Teo's in the infirmary.

— That's not what I asked.

I didn't know. In the corridor, passing the study hall, I'd heard two adults talking in low voices. One of them had said Ferrero's name. I hadn't stopped. Ever since I'd seen my name on the last line of the register, every conversation between adults had seemed like a closed door.

I told Gaia what I'd understood from talking to Nando: he was the one who had kept the register going after Bandini's death. He hadn't written my name, or so he'd said. And yet he was convinced the school demanded someone every time. Among the five from the night of 1997 were Nando,

Alviti, my mother, and two other boarders whose names I didn't know. Elia's name, on the other hand, appeared in the documents the school had kept hidden.

— And now? — Gaia asked.

I took the lined notebook out of my pocket. I hadn't written anything since Teo had been taken away. I opened it to the blank pages, but I couldn't put a sentence down.

— In the attic there's the room they bricked up — I said. — Nando knows where it is.

Teo curled his fingers against the sheet.

— Then we'll go.

— You can't even get up without making that face — Gaia told him.

— This is my normal face.

— It's not.

The joke did nothing to lighten the room. Teo let it fall, and I understood that he couldn't stop hearing that blow against the wall either, the sound of his body hitting the floor, the voice that had spoken my name. He was in the infirmary because he'd tried to stay by my side. I couldn't ask him to come. I couldn't even convince myself that leaving him there was the right thing to do.

— You don't have to come — I told him.

— I know.

— Teo...

— I said I know. I didn't say I'm staying.

Gaia closed her notebook with a quiet thump.

— If we go in, we document everything. Nothing we find can disappear again.

Until that moment, the idea of finding something had been almost a hope. Now it seemed like a responsibility. I looked at the infirmary door. Outside, in the building, the day went on: footsteps, voices, a squeaking trolley. The boarding school was getting ready for lantern night as if the register didn't exist and no one had spent the night calling for help.

— I want to know what happened to Elia — I said.

Gaia didn't answer right away. Teo lowered his gaze to his bandaged hand.

— Then let's find what they shut up in there — she said.

And for the first time since I'd read my name, fear wasn't the only thing on my mind.

When we left the infirmary, Teo walked more slowly than usual. He said it was so he wouldn't make any noise, but at every turn his hand went to the bandage under his sweatshirt. Gaia noticed and didn't comment. She simply held the door open for him when he hesitated on the threshold.

Nando was at the end of the corridor, holding his unlit flashlight, the ring of keys at his belt. He didn't seem surprised to see us. He looked at Teo first, then at me.

— You shouldn't be wandering around — he said.

— And you shouldn't pretend last night didn't happen — I replied.

My voice came out harsher than I meant it to. Nando lowered his eyes. For a moment I thought he would turn on his heel, the way he had when we'd asked him about Elia outside the archive. Instead, he put a hand on his keys.

— The room's been closed for almost thirty years.

— We know — Gaia said. — We want to see what's inside.

— There's nothing in there that can undo what happened.

— We didn't say it could — I replied.

Nando looked past us, toward the window. Fog had already begun to rise from the town, and the glass reflected only the pale corridor.

— Teo shouldn't come.

— Teo decides for himself — Teo said.

— You're not fit to.

— I'm fit to listen.

Nando clenched his jaw. I'd never seen him so close to giving an answer that wasn't an order, a warning, or silence. At last he detached a set of keys from the ring and started walking.

— Don't touch anything until I tell you to.

Gaia opened her notebook.

— We'll photograph everything.

Nando stopped and looked at her.

— I said don't touch anything.

— And I said I'll photograph it.

For a few seconds they stared at each other. Then Nando started walking again without replying. I followed him with Teo and Gaia. Every step toward the old wing seemed to take us farther from the rest of the school, even though we were crossing corridors I knew. The doors were shut, the lights were on, but the air grew colder and colder.

In front of the iron door, Nando chose a long, dark key. The metal slid into the lock with a rough sound. When he turned it, the bolt gave with a sharp clunk. The door opened a few inches, letting out a smell of dust, damp wood, and something more acrid, like burnt paper.

Teo stopped. His hand slid along the wall to keep him upright. I started to reach for him, but he shook his head.

— I'm okay — he murmured.

Nando said nothing. He pushed the door open just far enough and let us pass. In the corridor of the old wing, the flashlight beam reached the peeling walls, the floor, and the stairwell. I thought of the word ELIA written in chalk and the dust left on my finger. I couldn't see it, but for an instant I felt the chalk under my fingernail again.

The attic was darker than I remembered. The beams cut the light into uneven strips, and the broken desks cast shadows that looked like people sitting down. Nando stopped in front of a brick wall. The mortar was lighter than the surrounding mortar, but time had darkened it at the edges. There were thin lines and scratches on the surface, none deep enough to look like a door.

— Here — he said.

Gaia took a photo. The sound of the shutter bounced between the beams.

— You can't tell how long ago it was sealed — she said.

— Right after — Nando replied.

— After Elia died?

He nodded without looking at her.

Teo took a step forward. The wall came just above his head; he pressed his palm to the bricks and pulled it back almost at once.

— It's freezing.

I touched the same spot. The cold ran from my skin to my wrist. There was no sound from the other side. No noise, no movement. Just the silence of a room no one had opened all that time.

Nando put the flashlight on the floor and pointed to a narrow gap near the edge. He didn't hand us a tool or try to break down the wall for us. He stayed back, his hands empty.

— If you don't want to do this, you can turn back now — he said.

I looked at Gaia. She had her camera ready, but she no longer looked like someone searching for evidence to publish. Teo had moved to my side; he was breathing quietly, as if even his breath might wake something. The wall was more than just bricks. It was how the school had decided to shut the story away.

I slipped my fingers into the gap and pulled.

The first brick shifted a few millimeters. My fingers slipped on the dust, and I heard a deep scraping sound, like something being dragged on the other side. I let go. Gaia lowered her camera.

— Did you hear that? — she asked.

Nando hadn't moved. Teo's face was turned toward the wall.

— A brick — he said. — It's a wall. Walls make noise.

I looked at him. He didn't seem convinced, but he was trying to be for all three of us.

I tried again, more slowly. This time the brick gave way. Nando handed me a short pry bar, taken from a toolbox near the desks. He didn't ask me to stop. I wedged the tip into the gap and forced it while Gaia held the light and Teo made sure the brick didn't fall toward us. The mortar crumbled with a dry sound. Another brick shifted, then a third.

There was no need to knock down the whole wall. We only had to open a low, narrow gap, just wide enough to squeeze through sideways. Cold, stale air came out, smelling of cardboard and

dust. Nando pointed to the flashlight, but he didn't go in.

— I'll stay here — he said.

— You're not coming? — I asked him.

— I no longer have the right to choose what to do for you.

Gaia went through first, carefully, then helped Teo. I went in last. The room was small, with a sloping ceiling and a single window boarded up from the inside. It didn't look like a place where anything extraordinary had happened. There was an overturned chair, a blanket stiff with dust, and a brown folder propped under a beam. On one side, a wooden shelf held a few notebooks stacked together.

Gaia photographed the entrance, the wall, and the objects without moving them. The flash lit up the room for an instant. In the photo, the dust looked like snow.

Teo coughed. I couldn't tell if it was because of the dust or the pain. He leaned against the wall and kept his hand near the bandage.

— Do you need to sit down?

— If I sit down here, you'll have to carry me out.

— It wouldn't be the first time — Gaia said.

— You can't know that.

— I saw your face when they brought you to the infirmary.

Teo started to answer, then gave up. I went over to the folder. It was stiff and stained around the edges; one of the inner seams had come undone. I remembered the lines in the file and Elia's name written on the official papers beside the word accident. I'd imagined that in the room I'd find a complete explanation, something I could show everyone. Instead, there was an old folder, and no one who could tell me if it really belonged to him.

— Don't open it yet — Gaia said.

She took another photo, then bent down to look at the seam without touching it.

— It's been here since the room was sealed. If there's anything inside, we need to know how it was arranged.

I waited for her nod. Then I lifted the folder flap. There were school papers, an empty pencil case, and a notebook with a bent cover. Inside the lining, along the unstitched edge, three thin envelopes were sticking out. They had no stamps. On each one, in neat handwriting, was written: "To Professor Bandini."

The room seemed to shrink around those words. I looked at Nando through the opening. He was still outside, but he'd come close enough to see the envelopes.

— Had you seen these before? — I asked him.

He didn't answer.

Gaia photographed the envelopes before I pulled them out of the lining. I took them with both hands, one at a time. The paper was thin, yellowed, and folded in three. There was no sign that anyone had opened them. For a moment I was afraid I'd tear them, so I let Gaia hold the flap while I took out what was inside.

Inside the first was a sheet of paper written on both sides. I recognized Elia's name at the bottom, small, almost hidden in the corner. The letter asked Professor Bandini to speak with him. It didn't tell everything, it didn't make accusations. It said the others had started taking his notebooks again and that he didn't want to go up to the old wing alone anymore. I read the words twice, then a third time, because the first time the voice in my head had drowned out his.

— You read it — Gaia said.

I handed it to her. She lowered her eyes to the page and stopped moving. Teo, leaning against the wall, took a step closer.

The second letter was shorter. Elia wrote that he'd tried talking about it, but the others laughed and he didn't want to be a snitch. At the end he'd added: "If I can't feel safe here, tell me where I should go." It wasn't a sentence from a ghost. It was a simple question, addressed to an adult who could have answered.

The third envelope contained a sheet folded twice. The request was even shorter: Bandini had to meet with him before lantern night. Elia had written that he was afraid of what they would do to him, and that this time he wouldn't be able to get through it on his own.

I looked at the edges of the envelopes. None had a reply. None had a note or the professor's signature. For almost thirty years they'd stayed there, just a few meters from the archive, behind a wall everyone had preferred not to open.

Nando had sat down on the edge of a crate. His head was bowed and his hands lay empty on his knees.

— Had you ever seen them? — I asked him.

— No.

— You could have looked for them.

— Yes.

He didn't add anything. Gaia gathered the letters one at a time, putting them back in the folder without folding them again. She photographed them open and noted which envelope she'd found them in. She didn't say they were enough to prove everything. She didn't need to: what they said was already enough.

Teo looked at the notebook on the shelf.

— And that?

I picked it up. There was no name on the cover. The first page, though, bore the words "Elia Randisi," written in a worn-down pencil. I didn't open it right away. The thought of reading more of his words made me feel as if I were entering a room more private than the one we'd just uncovered.

Gaia asked if I wanted to go on. I nodded.

The notebook contained Italian exercises, sums, sentences copied from a book, and lines left unfinished. On some pages Elia wrote down things that weren't important events: a classmate who'd taken his seat at the table, the cold coming through the library window, the courtyard light that stayed on when everyone else was already asleep. There were also pages where he wrote about wanting to see his mother again. None of it made him different from the other boys I'd known. That was exactly why it hurt to read.

I hadn't found the story of a monster. I'd found the traces of someone who had asked for help more than once and hadn't been heard.

My hand stopped at the next line. The slanted handwriting ran down toward the margin, and the page ended with an unfinished sentence. I closed the notebook without reading any further.

— I don't want these things to disappear again — I said.

Gaia put her camera away.

— Then we take them out of here. But first we decide what to do with them.

In the walled room, the only answer I had was Elia's voice on paper. And that voice was asking for something the adults had had almost thirty years to do.

Outside the opening, the corridor looked no different. The same beams, the same dust, the same light from Nando's flashlight on the floor. And yet, after reading the letters, it seemed impossible to go back to thinking of that wall as just an ordinary wall.

Gaia checked the photos on the screen. A couple of the images were blurry, but the envelopes showed up well. She took out her notebook and wrote down the date, the approximate time and the location, then recorded the contents of the requests without interpreting them.

— I don't want anyone saying we made up what was written there — she said.

— They'll say it anyway — Teo replied.

— Maybe. But at least they won't be able to say we don't have a copy.

Nando was still near the crate. When we came out of the room, he picked up the flashlight and shone it on the open wall. The beam fell on the broken bricks, the letters put back in the folder, and the notebook I was holding tight against my chest.

— Are you taking them to the headmaster? — he asked.

— Not on our own — Gaia said. — And not before we've made copies.

Nando nodded, as if it were the most sensible answer and also the hardest to accept.

— Bandini would have read them — he said.

I didn't know if he was saying it because he believed it or because he needed it to be true. I remembered the register, the signed pages, the red marks, and the years when Bandini had written down names without doing what Elia was asking. I didn't know what answer to give Nando.

Teo leaned against the wall. His face was pale, and he was breathing carefully. I asked if we should go back to the infirmary. He said he wanted to get out of that corridor first. I believed him.

We left the room as it was, except for the opening in the wall. Gaia photographed the

arrangement of the objects one last time. Nando offered to close the iron door, but he didn't ask for the key back right away. In the short stretch to the stairs, no one spoke. The sound of our footsteps seemed too loud, as if the building were counting who was leaving.

In the courtyard, the day seemed brighter, but the fog had already erased the town. From the portico, all we could see was the tower, gray against the sky. Gaia asked Teo if he could get back to the infirmary on his own. He said yes, without convincing anyone.

— You can't stay on your feet all day — she told him.

— I don't have to stay on my feet. I just have to be there.

I placed Elia's notebook on a table in the study hall, away from the windows and the paths people walked along. The envelopes were safe in the folder. I couldn't take them out of the school yet, and I didn't know who would agree to read them. I only knew I didn't want to leave them behind a wall again.

— If we read the names — I said — we can't stop at Elia.

Gaia understood before Teo did.

— There are the names of the five, too.

— And my mother's.

I didn't say it to accuse her. Not yet. But I'd seen how Nando had reacted when he recognized her name, and I'd heard Marta tell me she'd been asleep that night. The two things couldn't both be true without someone lying.

Teo sat down carefully. He kept his bandaged arm close to his body.

— If you do this, you'll be going against everyone who wants this story to stay here — he said.

— I know.

— That's not a very reassuring answer.

— I don't have a better one.

Gaia looked at the photographs in the notebook, then at me.

— You don't have to prove you're not afraid. You have to know why you're doing it.

The question stopped me. I could say I wanted to get rid of my name on the last line, or that I wanted to know what was going to happen to me. It would have been true, but it wasn't enough. I thought of the letters, of that sentence: "Tell me where I should go." Elia had asked an adult for help and hadn't received an answer. After that, the others had shut the door, and the school had sealed the wall.

— Because nobody said his name while it was still possible to help him — I said. — And after that, nobody said it again.

Teo lowered his eyes to his hands. Gaia didn't promise me everyone would understand. She just closed her notebook and put it beside mine.

— Then you won't do it alone.

Teo nodded.

— Not even if you try.

The fear hadn't gone away. I didn't feel braver, or any surer I knew what was in the old wing. But the decision had taken a precise shape: that evening I would read the names in the register in front of the school. I hadn't thought of the words yet, or what I would do when my mother heard me. For now, all I knew was that I wouldn't let Elia's name stay locked in a room.

Marta arrived before dark. I saw her crossing the portico from the study hall table. Her coat was still buttoned up, and her face was tense, like someone who'd spent the whole journey thinking about what to say. When she reached me, Gaia and Teo moved a few steps away, but stayed in sight.

— Don't do it — she said.

She didn't ask me what I'd found. Maybe Nando had warned her; maybe she could tell from my face that I'd stopped waiting for an easy answer.

— I read Elia's letters.

Marta took a breath, then looked over my shoulder. In the courtyard, a few students were hanging lanterns under the portico. Fog had gathered around the cedar, and its trunk looked darker than the stones.

— You don't know what will happen if you do it — she said.

— No.

— There'll be questions. About me. About Nando. About Corinna.

— I know.

— You can't understand everything behind it.

— Then tell me.

She lowered her eyes. For an instant I thought she would speak, that at last she would say the sentence she'd kept inside for thirty years. Instead, she clutched her bag against her side.

— I shouldn't have let you get this far.

— You weren't the one who bricked up the room?

She didn't answer. I didn't ask her for a confession in front of the others. I only asked her not to stop me, and not to ask me again to protect a silence that had hurt too many people.

Marta stayed with me for a few seconds. Then she moved toward the portico, without telling me she would help and without telling me to turn back again. It wasn't a yes. It wasn't forgiveness. It was simply the fact that she hadn't grabbed me by the arm.

Nando came over when the light in the courtyard began to fade. He had the ring of keys in his hand. He detached one, longer than the others, with a dark, worn head.

— This one's for the tower — he said.

I took it. The metal was cold.

— Why are you giving it to me?

Nando looked at the lanterns, then at the door to the old wing.

— Because I can't decide for you anymore.

I didn't tell him that a key couldn't erase what he'd done. He wasn't expecting me to. He left it in my palm and went back toward the portico.

I closed my fingers around the metal. The tower rose above us, beyond the roof and the fog. That evening I would have to climb it. For a few hours, though, there was still nothing to read aloud. There was only a key in my hand and the decision I could no longer pretend I hadn't made.

The Last Line

The tower key stayed in my pocket all afternoon. Every so often the metal knocked against the coin I'd forgotten in there, and that small sound brought Nando's voice back to me: "I can't decide for you anymore." I didn't know if it was an apology or a surrender. In that moment, it was enough that it wasn't an order.

Teo had come back from the infirmary before lunch. He'd said he was fine, that the stain on his sweatshirt was nothing, and that when adults didn't know what to do, they filled him with questions. I hadn't asked him to show me the wound. Not because I didn't want to know, but because he'd already answered. His sleeve was clean; he kept his arm close to his body.

That afternoon we'd stayed in room 12, with the door ajar and the black ledger on the bed. Gaia was sitting at the desk, her notebook on her knees. Teo paced from one wall to the other, stopping each time in front of the window. None of us felt like starting to talk.

— We could wait — Teo said. He stopped in front of the bed. — I don't mean forever. Just until tomorrow. Or until the headmaster isn't around.

Gaia looked up from her notebook.

— The ledger will still be here tomorrow. And so will they.

She didn't say "the ghost." There was no need. Ever since we'd found Elia's letters, the words we used to explain the presence had become harder to find. It wasn't a monster that had come looking for us. It was a boy who had written three times asking for help and received no answer. That didn't make the cold I'd felt in the corridors any less unsettling, or the voice that had spoken my name. But it changed the way I could look at the ledger.

I opened the cover. The black cloth was worn at the edges, and the paper smelled of dust, as if it had been shut away for years. Names lined the pages, with dates and red marks. At the very end, the new one. Mine. Written in darker ink, without the signature that appeared on the other sheets.

— If I read it, I can't choose to skip my mother — I said.

Teo stopped pacing.

— You don't have to decide everything right now.

— I have to decide whether I'm going to let her keep silent for me.

Gaia closed her notebook. For once, she didn't ask for proof or try to find a more precise way to put it. She just looked at me.

— If you do it, I'll stay here — she said.

Teo sniffed, as if he were about to make a joke. He didn't.

— Me too. But if a voice calls my name from that tower, I'm coming back down. I'm saying that now.

— All right.

— And if my leg gives out, you'll drag me.

— All right — I repeated.

I closed the ledger. The decision hadn't taken away my fear. It had only taken away my chance to call it indecision.

Outside, in the courtyard, some people had started setting up lanterns along the portico. I could hear voices, chairs scraping, and the sound of a ladder being leaned against the wall. The celebration was taking shape as if it were any ordinary evening. And yet everything that day seemed to be waiting for the same question: who would have the courage to speak the name everyone had left out of the stories.

When we went downstairs, the boarding-school corridor smelled of wax and wet wool. Someone had left a window open; fog drifted in in thin strips, and the glass had turned opaque. Teo checked the door handle, as he did every evening, then looked at me.

— No rounds tonight, right?

— Nando will do them anyway.

— I know. It was a rhetorical question.

I didn't ask if he was afraid. I'd seen it in the way he held his arm, and in the care he took to try to joke. My fear was no different. It was just that, since that afternoon, it no longer seemed like a reason to stay still.

Before we went out, I checked the key in my pocket and picked up the ledger. I wrapped it in my

sweater because I didn't want to carry it in plain sight. The black cloth showed just a little through the fabric, a dark line against the blue wool. Gaia opened the door first.

— Let's go, then — she said.

And we went.

The courtyard was almost unrecognizable. Paper lanterns hung along the portico, tied to the pillars with thin strings, and some were already lit. The orange light fell on the pale stones and people's shoes, but it couldn't reach beneath the arches. There, the darkness remained, dense and cold.

In the middle, the cedar disappeared into the fog. We could no longer see the upper branches. Beyond the boundary wall, Roccabruna had vanished; only the tower stood out against the sky, darker than it.

Families had arrived in heavy coats, carrying closed umbrellas. Some parents were talking with the teachers near the entrance; others had stopped to look at the lanterns, as if they were there for an ordinary celebration. The students moved around in groups, trying not to step on the cables powering the lights. No one seemed to know that the black ledger was hidden beneath my sweater.

Gaia stopped beside the portico. She'd left her notebook in our room, but she held her phone in her hand.

— Don't record — I said.

— I'm not recording. If someone tries to take the ledger from you, I want to be able to call for help.

Teo made a low sound.

— That's the most cheerful plan I've ever heard.

— It's a plan — Gaia replied.

I saw my mother near the cedar. She still had her coat buttoned and her bag pressed against her side, like the day before. She wasn't looking at the lanterns. She was looking at the tower.

I stopped. Gaia and Teo didn't move; they stayed a few steps behind me, close enough not to leave me alone and far enough away not to speak for me.

Marta saw me. For a moment neither of us took a step. Then she came closer.

— Do you still have that key? — she asked.

I nodded.

— Don't go up there, Samuele.

She didn't say it loudly. The music from the celebration and the voices around us covered it. Somehow, that made the request feel heavier. She wasn't trying to stop me in front of everyone. She was asking me to go back to being the son who didn't ask questions.

— You said you were asleep that night.

— I already told you.

— Elia's letters were asking for help. You were there.

She lowered her eyes. Her fingers closed around the handle of her bag.

— You don't know what happened.

— That's why you have to tell me.

Marta drew a breath but didn't answer. For an instant, I saw the fear she'd felt that afternoon, when I'd asked if she'd been the one to brick up the room. It wasn't the fear of being found out. It was the fear of finally having to look at what she'd left behind.

— If you do this, you won't be able to go back — she said.

— I know.

— And you don't know what will happen afterward.

— Neither do you.

There was no anger in my voice. I might have wished there were; perhaps it would have been easier. There was only a weariness that wasn't mine, but that I'd carried with me ever since I'd read her name in the ledger.

Marta looked over my shoulder. Headmaster Ferrero was making his way through the parents. He wore a dark suit and a courteous expression, the one he used when he'd decided a conversation was already over.

— Samuele — he said, stopping in front of us. — Your mother is worried. Perhaps it would be best

if you went back inside. This evening is organized for the families, not for… school matters.

— It's not a school matter — I said.

— Everything that happens in here concerns the school.

— What happened to Elia too?

His smile faded. For a second, he looked at the sweater I was clutching to my chest. He'd realized I was carrying something, but he didn't know how much.

— This isn't the time — he said.

— It's been the time for thirty years.

Ferrero lowered his voice.

— If you cause a scene, there will be consequences. For you, for your scholarship, and for your mother.

He delivered the threat calmly, almost as if it were advice. I thought of the suitcase I'd arrived with, the lined notebook, room 12. The possibility of being sent home frightened me. It didn't change my decision.

— I'm not causing anything — I said. — I'm about to read out some names.

Behind us, Corinna Alviti had stepped out beneath the portico. She wasn't wearing a coat. Her hands were clasped in front of her and her face was pale, but she didn't come closer. For an instant, her eyes met mine. Then she looked at my mother.

Marta unclasped her fingers from the bag.

— I can't ask you to lie for me — she said quietly.

It was the first thing she'd said to me without asking me to stop.

I didn't know if it was a yes. I didn't ask her anything else. I tightened the sweater around the ledger and looked at the tower door.

The tower door was behind a curtain of lanterns, in a corner of the portico no one was watching. The lock was dark and smooth, worn by hands. I took out the key. For a second I couldn't get it in: my thumb trembled against the metal edge.

— You don't have to do it alone — Gaia said.

Teo came to stand beside me.

— And if halfway up you decide you'd rather be somewhere with fewer stairs, I won't judge you.

— Are you afraid of stairs?

— I'm afraid of a lot of things. The stairs are just the ones in front of me.

The key slid in. I turned it. The lock gave with a sharp click, and the sound seemed louder than the whole celebration.

I opened the door. Behind it was a narrow stone staircase, rising into the dark. The air coming down from above was cold and smelled of dust. I looked back. Not everyone in the courtyard was facing us, but someone had seen the door open. Ferrero stood motionless beneath the portico. My mother hadn't moved.

I picked up the ledger and held it against my chest.

— I'm coming with you — Teo said.

— Me too — Gaia added.

I nodded. I didn't try to tell them they could stay behind. I had no right, and I wouldn't have wanted to be left alone.

The door closed behind us. The celebration became a distant murmur, as if we'd gone underwater. The staircase wound around the center of the tower; the steps were narrow and worn in the middle. Each time I put a foot on the next step, the key in my pocket knocked against the seam.

We climbed slowly. The ledger weighed more than I remembered. It hadn't changed, of course. I was the one who knew what it contained.

Halfway up, Teo stopped. He braced himself against the wall with his left hand. He didn't look at his injured arm, but I saw him tense up.

— Do you want to go back down? — I asked him.

— No. I stopped because this staircase was designed by someone who hated people.

Gaia touched his shoulder.

— If it hurts, tell me.

— I'll tell you if it hurts. Not if it scares me.

— And if it scares you?

— Then I'll pretend it hurts.

I smiled faintly. That was enough. We started climbing again.

The room at the top was low and round. On one side, the mechanism's great cogwheel took up almost the whole wall; on another, a narrow slit looked out over the courtyard. The hands, seen from behind, were still. I couldn't see the time from that side, but I knew it still showed 9:47 p.m.

The slit was wide enough for a voice to pass through. Below, the lanterns cast trembling circles on the stones. The students and families had gathered in the center of the courtyard. Someone was still talking. Then the voices fell quiet, one after another.

I set the ledger on a crate near the window and opened the cover. The paper lifted with a rustle. I searched for the right page without stopping at my name. I didn't want it to be the last thing I read.

— Whenever you're ready — Gaia said.

I looked down. My mother was beneath the cedar, beside Alviti. Ferrero stood a few steps away, his arms by his sides. Nando was near the entrance, his hands empty. None of them had found a way to leave the courtyard.

I took one breath, then another.

The first name caught in my throat. I thought of the three letters folded into the lining of the folder, of a room shut away for years, and of a boy who'd had no one on his side. Then I began.

I read the first name. Then the second.

My voice came out lower than I'd expected, but the slit carried it down. No one in the courtyard interrupted me. I read the dates, the names that had been marked, the boys I'd looked for in the archives and those I'd never known. Some had disappeared from the school's pages without leaving anything but a line. Others had stayed long enough to become adults, parents, teachers. The ledger kept them all in the same silence.

With each name, I turned a page. The paper was thin and rough beneath my fingers. The red

mark could be seen even from there, a small wound beside the black letters.

When I said “Marta Bruni,” I stopped reading.

No sound came from the courtyard. I looked at my mother. Her face was turned toward the tower, her hands at her sides. She hadn’t covered her mouth or lowered her eyes.

I continued.

“Ferdinando Ricci.”

Nando took a step forward, then stopped.

“Corinna Alviti.”

Alviti closed her eyes. Ferrero moved as if to reach the tower door, but a few people stepped in front of him without knowing what they were doing. They didn’t touch him. They didn’t need to.

I skipped the names that had nothing to do with it. I didn’t want the ledger to become a faceless list, or for people to think that everyone marked in it had done the same thing. I read only the names from the night of 1997, the ones I’d been able to verify. Then I reached the last page written by Bandini.

The lines were more closely spaced. My finger stopped on the name Elia Randisi.

Before I read it, I saw Marta leave the group. She walked to the middle of the courtyard, beneath the light of a lantern. She didn’t come toward the tower. She stayed where everyone could see her.

—I was there — she said.

Her voice wasn’t loud, but the courtyard had become so quiet that I heard her without any effort.

Marta looked at the families, then at the students. She didn’t look for Ferrero, or Alviti, or Nando.

—In 1997 I was a student here, living at the boarding school. Elia was a boy from our school. Five of us locked him in the attic as a joke. We knew he didn’t want to be there. We knew he was afraid. And none of us came back to open that door.

She stopped. Her hand trembled slightly, but she didn’t hide it.

—When he fell, we said it was an accident. I let them say it. I let the school erase our names and what we’d done. When Samuele asked me the truth, I lied to him. I can’t undo what happened. I can only stop lying.

She didn't ask for forgiveness. She didn't try to explain why she'd kept silent. Her words couldn't turn back time, and that was why they seemed more true to me.

The headmaster took a step toward her.

—Marta, this isn't the place…

—Enough — she said.

She didn't shout. Ferrero stopped. For once, his voice hadn't found an open door.

My mother looked up. I lowered my eyes to the page. The name was there, written in a different hand from the others, but legible.

I said, "Elia Randisi."

The nearest lantern to the tower trembled. No one spoke.

The cold came through the slit, but there was no wind. It crossed the tower room and passed over my hands, beneath my sleeves. The ledger paper lifted. No page turned.

The smell of chalk and burning paper rose from the courtyard. I recognized it before I even understood where it was coming from. Gaia had described the same smell the night she'd heard the voice in the old wing; I'd smelled it near the iron door. Now it was here, in the tower, among us.

Teo moved closer to the slit. He didn't make a joke.

A voice came from the side of the building that had been shut for years. It didn't say my name. It didn't call Nando or Marta. It spoke its own name softly, as if trying it out after a long time.

—Elia.

I couldn't say whether the voice really came from the old wing or from the courtyard. It didn't echo like someone speaking from a room. It was a voice without distance, and yet I couldn't see it anywhere.

The lanterns continued to tremble. One by one, the flames straightened. The cold lingered for another moment, then withdrew from the room and the slit. The smell of burning paper vanished with it.

The tower mechanism gave a dull thud.

I looked at the cogwheels. One moved, then another. The sound came again, slow and rough, like something waking against its will. A ticking came from the clock face. The hands jumped forward.

The courtyard reacted all at once. Someone let out a breath; a little girl called for her father. No one applauded. No one screamed. The clock kept ticking above our heads, and for a while, nothing else could be heard.

I closed the ledger. The cloth cover brushed against the palm of my hand. I didn't know if Elia had gone, if he'd stayed somewhere else in the building, or if that voice had been nothing more than the way silence had learned to speak. I had no answer to give Gaia. I had none for myself.

When we went downstairs, the tower door opened onto the courtyard. People had moved aside, leaving a passage between us and the cedar. My mother was still there. She didn't hug me. I didn't ask her to.

Ferrero was talking to a man from the school board. He spoke in a low voice, but he couldn't turn the evening back into a celebration. Alviti remained beneath the portico, her hands empty. Nando stood near the entrance; he'd seen the key in my hand and lowered his head, as if he'd received an answer he didn't deserve.

Gaia took the ledger from me. She held it in both hands without opening it.

— The school paper won't be enough tomorrow — she said.

— I know.

— Then we'll write it all down. The letters, the file, what your mother said.

I looked at the courtyard. No one had gone back to talking as before. Some parents had put a hand on their children's shoulders; others were exchanging quiet questions. Elia's story was no longer shut inside a wall. It had come out into the place where everyone could hear it, and I didn't know what they would do with it.

In the days that followed, the school couldn't erase what had been said. Marta kept her word and told her side of the story again, even when the questions became more specific. The school paper published Elia's letters without correcting their sentences or turning them into a lesson. Nando didn't leave the Alfieri, but he no longer carried the ledger alone. Ferrero talked about investigations and disciplinary measures; no one mistook those words for an answer.

I kept attending classes. I still had my scholarship, but I knew I wouldn't be coming back at the end of the year. I hadn't decided where I would go. I only knew I could no longer call a place home

when everyone had known and no one had spoken.

One evening, before going to sleep, I opened the ledger to check the last page. I didn't want to look for my name. I didn't want to look for anything.

The neighboring pages were yellowed and fragile with age. The last one, though, was untouched. On the bottom line was a name I'd never read before, written in fresh, dark ink.

There was no signature beside it.

I closed the ledger. Outside the window, the corridor was silent. For an instant I thought I heard a step above the ceiling. Then came the ticking of the clock, steady, from the other side of the building.

The name on the page did not disappear.