



SCARS
— IN THE —
SAND

— GABRIEL SCHNEIDER —

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, institutions, and events are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, or to government bodies, political parties, media companies, or actual events is purely coincidental.

For my mother – who stayed on the phone all night.

*“I’m the fifty-pound brain on the council of
wizards and warlocks.”*

THE CHARACTER, IN THE FILM, WHEN ASKED WHAT HE DOES

“When you stare too long at the pattern, the pattern starts to stare back.”

CONTENTS

PART I · THE CURRENT

Prologue — The Reviewer

Chapter 1 — Far From the Beach

Chapter 2 — Salt

Chapter 3 — Beatriz, and the Other Side of the Channel

Chapter 4 — The Lamppost

Chapter 5 — The Plane

Chapter 6 — California

PART II · THE BLACKOUT

Chapter 7 — The White Room

Chapter 8 — The Swiss Flag

Chapter 9 — The Bridge

Chapter 10 — The Film

Chapter 11 — The Attack Order

Chapter 12 – .gov.us

Chapter 13 – The Procession

PART III · THE CROSSING

Chapter 14 – The Telenovela

Chapter 15 – A Girl

Chapter 16 – The Pact

Chapter 17 – The Student in the Back Row

Chapter 18 – The Towel

Chapter 19 – The Island in the Middle of the Pacific

Chapter 20 – Eighteen Days

PART IV · SCARS IN THE SAND

Chapter 21 – The Winter

Chapter 22 – The Blizzard

Chapter 23 – The Invitation

Chapter 24 – The Van

Chapter 25 – Joab

Chapter 26 – One Hundred and Sixty Dollars

Chapter 27 – The Analyst's Fall

Chapter 28 – Alice

Chapter 29 – Iris

Chapter 30 – The Right Door

Chapter 31 – The Oath

PART I

THE CURRENT

PROLOGUE

THE REVIEWER



Many years later — once this story had already crossed three Americas, five hospital stays, and an ocean — a woman would open, in a windowless room somewhere in northern Virginia, a file the system was telling her to throw away.

It had no cover, because files like that don't. It had a number, an open date, and an origin field that said only: open source — automated triage — human review requested. On the screen, a video channel in Portuguese. Black background. A question mark turning slowly, like a lighthouse that asks instead of answers. Author: a sunlit pseudonym. The signature, at the end of every piece, always the same two words, "nobody cares" in the tone of someone shrugging to hide that he's asking.

Iris read the intake twice. Protocol said archive it. There was a button for that. She looked at the button — and instead of pressing it, she typed into the notes field the first line of what would become the longest, most irregular, and most dangerous document of her career:

"Subject believes no one sees him. He's wrong. — I."

But that's the end, and at this point even she didn't know it. The beginning is somewhere else, and it has to be told in the order it was lived — because it was a life that only makes sense once you see where each scar came from.

The beginning is on the other side of the hemisphere, on an island that has the name of an island and the manner of a city, in a house that sat far from the beach.

CHAPTER 1

FAR FROM THE BEACH



Whoever is born on an island learns early a truth that mainlanders spend a lifetime discovering: every road out is a crossing. São Vicente is an island, though no one calls it that — a tongue of land glued to the continent by the neighboring city, separated from it by a channel of still water and by an invisible border made of money. But Gabriel's house wasn't on the shore. It sat far from the beach, in a neighborhood of breezeless streets where the sea was a rumor you heard from other people and imagined at night. To see the ocean, you had to take a bus. To belong to it, you needed much more.

That distance — the distance of someone who lives on the island and never sees the sea — was the first geography the boy learned, and the one that hurt most, because it was small and impassable at the same time. The beach kids were another species. They had the skin of people who wake up near the water, the fluency of people who grew up facing the horizon. Gabriel, from the inland neighborhood, looked at all of it the way you look through a fence: close enough to see, far enough to never be.

Two kinds of power lived in that house. On one side, Chief Aldo Steiner — a stepfather, but a whole father, the only one the boy ever knew: the holster kept on top of the wardrobe like a saint on a high shelf, the work tapes a child wasn't supposed to see and saw, the silence that organized the dinner table without needing words. Steiner wasn't Gabriel's biological father, and for that very reason the surname was

something you put on, not something you inherited — a small detail that, decades later, in a mind on fire stitching the world together, would take on the weight of a key.

On the other side, the mother, Marta, a social worker: the phone that rang with other people's tragedies at lunchtime, the conviction — exercised, never recited — that every fallen person was her business. Repression and care under the same roof. The boy grew up between the two the way you grow up between two magnets: pulled the whole time in opposite directions that, somehow, kept him standing in the middle.

It was his father who gave him, without meaning to, the habit that would organize his entire life. At twelve, on an afternoon with no school, the chief took his son to the station and — for lack of a sitter, out of pride, out of boredom, who knows — set him in front of a tape player and a stack of cassettes: wiretaps of targets that somebody had to transcribe, and that the boy, meticulous, transcribed better than the interns did. It was Gabriel's first informal job: listening to the conversations people thought were private and writing them out clean. No one thought about what it planted. It planted this: the physical certainty, installed before the judgment to manage it, that privacy was an illusion of the naïve, that there was always someone on the other end of the line listening, and that to exist on the side of the one who listens — not the side of the one who is heard — was the only safe position in the world.

At night, lying in a room with no view of the sea, Gabriel pictured the port working on the other side of the island — the largest in Latin America, the mouth through which the country swallowed and spat out the world — and pictured too, with the seriousness of a twelve-year-old, all the conversations running at that hour beneath the city, through

cables and through waves, that someone, somewhere, was listening to. He wanted to be that someone. He didn't yet know the world had a name and an acronym for that desire, or that it would charge a steep price to anyone who got hooked on it too young.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry - 00

OPENING A WATCH FILE

SUBJECT: XXXXXXXXXXXXX, G. NATIONALITY: BRA.

ORIGIN: OSINT triage / single channel / continuous output.

The system hands me ten thousand of these a week. I archive nine thousand nine hundred ninety-nine unread. This one I read. Son of an apparatus of repression and an apparatus of care, exposed early to surveillance material. It's the exact profile of someone who self-selects into our line of work - they develop a taste for the underside of things before they have the judgment to manage it. They become excellent officers, or they become cases. The line between the two is thinner than recruitment admits. STATUS: held. Do NOT archive. - I.

CHAPTER 2

SALT



Before the camera there was the mat; and before the mat there was the paternal decree. Chief Steiner believed in three institutions – the police, the multiplication table, and judo – and enrolled his son in the third at eight, gi folded under his arm, without consulting him. To everyone’s surprise, the boy took to the sport. Not for the violence: for the reading. He saw the shoulder announce the throw half a second before the throw, saw the badly distributed weight, the impatience. The sensei summed up his student in a sentence Marta kept forever: “That one doesn’t fight. That one studies the other guy until the other guy beats himself.” Belts came, and above all came the one currency Gabriel collected: his father’s nod from the edge of the gym. An inch of chin, down and up. He’d have swum across a tournament for that inch.

And then, at thirteen, the sea stole him. On a small, unimportant wave of shallow foam, the world did the thing it does only once: it clicked. Three seconds. In three seconds the mat became nostalgia and Gabriel became, with no ceremony of possession, a man of the sea – even if a man of the sea who needed a bus to reach the water. The chief received the desertion with a single sentence: “Waves don’t hand out belts.” They didn’t. They handed out pattern. The ocean was the largest information system Gabriel had ever met – wind, bottom, tide, set, interval – and all that chaos could be read by anyone who looked long enough. Out in the lineup, reading the horizon to guess where the next set would

break, the boy found a post worthy of his attention; and, without knowing it, he was rehearsing the trade of a lifetime: wait, read, choose the wave.

The camera arrived soon after, and arrived crooked, the way callings do: a tape camcorder meant for family birthdays, smuggled to the beach inside a plastic bag. On the second afternoon of filming, when the best set of the day rolled in, Gabriel — a surfer on the rise, in love with it — stayed on the sand, filming. His friends took it for generosity. It was discovery: there was a post even better than the lineup. Behind the lens, the one who looks decides what the world saw. At fifteen, the boy born far from the sea had already found the only two religions he would practice for the rest of his life — to observe and to record — and he lacked only one thing for them to have a reason: he lacked his first real wound. It would arrive by bus, from the other side of the channel, with a girl's name.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry — 01

I attached the old surf footage. Technical pretext: assess production competence. Truth: I wanted to see his face before all of this. What I saw was a boy reading the sea the way we read traffic — wait, read, choose. It's the same cognitive architecture we train into our analysts for years, and this one brought it from the factory, free, pointed at waves. A waste, I thought. And it bothered me that I'd thought 'waste,' because waste presupposes a better use — and presupposing a better use for a person is the first step of a recruitment. — I.

CHAPTER 3

BEATRIZ, AND THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CHANNEL



Beatriz was from the beach. That fact, in the arithmetic of the island, said almost everything.

She had the skin of those who wake up near the water and the lightness of those who never had to imagine the sea. She went to a good school, laughed at Gabriel's ironies half a second before everyone else, and for a few months, at seventeen, crossing the distance between the inland neighborhood and the shore seemed possible from inside a smile. Gabriel took the bus to see her. He brought the camera, because by then he brought the camera to everything. He believed, with the total faith of that age, that the channel between the two lives was narrow enough for a kiss to cover.

It wasn't. The end came without cruelty, which is how the most expensive lessons come. Beatriz chose Téo — Téo Brandão, son of Mário Brandão, then a congressman, even back then one of the strongmen of the region, of a party whose name filled billboards. Téo had a brand-new car at eighteen and the future that comes factory-installed with certain surnames. In those days he and Gabriel were still a kind of friends; they went out together, went together to Carnival in Laguna, down south, and Gabriel — who brought the camera to everything — filmed everything, including what shouldn't be filmed, including Téo in states a political campaign would prefer to bury. He kept the tapes without

knowing why. Gabriel kept everything. The inner folder had a name he'd only decode as an adult: evidence.

Losing Beatriz to Téo was the first time the channel between the two lives closed in his face, and the first time he understood the rule of the game: on the other side there was money, and money bought the whole future, love included. Gabriel rode the bus back to the inland neighborhood, his face burning, locked himself in his room with the camcorder, and did what he would do with pain for the rest of his life: he edited. He cut the whole afternoon of beach footage together, marrying music to wave, rage to cut, and by four in the morning he had three minutes so good they seemed to belong to someone else. It was the first time he turned a wound into work. The method was founded — and the bill, he'd only discover much later: whoever learns too early to convert pain into a cut runs the risk of spending a lifetime collecting pain so as never to run out of raw material.

But he kept the Laguna tapes in a special place in his memory and his closet. Years later — in a phase when his mind would stitch all of Brazil into a single web — those images would stop being teenage jealousy and become something else, more dangerous. For now, though, there is only a seventeen-year-old discovering that a border exists inside his own island, and that he was born on the wrong side of it. He didn't yet know he'd spend his life trying to cross it — or that the crossing would carry him much farther than the shoreline of Santos.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 02

Counterintelligence point of interest: at 17, the subject retains compromising material on the son of a political figure and uses it as leverage – without publishing. Not out of cowardice: out of preferring the power of being able to over the discharge of doing it. That tells me more about him than any video. He understands, instinctively, that information held is worth more than information spent. It's the first rule of our house, and no one taught it to him. His origin wound is class – the wrong side of a channel of water. Class wounds produce two kinds of man: the ones who take revenge and the ones who cross over. I don't yet know which he is. I want to know. – I.

CHAPTER 4

THE LAMPOST



At twenty-two, Gabriel died for a few minutes — or came close enough that the difference stopped mattering.

It was on the way back from a club, before dawn, in a car that wasn't his, driven by a friend who'd had more than he should. Gabriel was in the passenger seat; in back, three girls, laughter, the radio loud, the sense of invincibility that is the official religion of twenty-two. The curve came fast. The pole came faster. There was the sound — that sound no one who hears it ever unlearns, of metal meeting concrete without negotiating — and then there was nothing.

Gabriel woke in the hospital not knowing how much time had passed. He learned later: that there had been blood in the brain, that the doctors had considered operating, that they'd waited to see if the body could handle it on its own. And the body did. The blood didn't clot where it would kill; it reabsorbed; the organism of a twenty-two-year-old did, in the dark, the work the scalpel would have done in the light. No one died in that car, by a margin so thin that calling it luck seemed too little and calling it a miracle seemed too much. Gabriel left the hospital with scars, with headaches that came and went, and with a new certainty: that he could end at any second. Death had run its hand through his hair and walked away, and whoever receives that touch never forgets it.

From the near-death came not fear. Came hunger. A euphoria for living that had something healthy in it and something — he'd understand much later — of symptom: the first peak of a roller coaster that didn't yet have a clinical

name. Gabriel decided, in the hospital bed, that he wouldn't waste another day doing what he didn't love. And what he loved, ever since the camcorder in the plastic bag, ever since the beach he watched through a fence, was one thing only: filming the sea.

That was how Megusta was born. Not as a company — as a declaration. A blog, a name painted on the hull the way you christen a boat, a place to do exclusively what gave him joy: surf videos, the filmmaker's life, the journey narrated from inside. Gabriel took out a loan from a government small-business bank — low interest, a stamped form, the first time the State gave him something instead of taking something — and bought a real camera. He opened a one-man firm. He went back to school, film now, and pointed the lens at the only thing that had ever called to him from the fence: the waves, and the men who read them the way he'd learned to read everything. Megusta grew on what no money buys: ballast. The good surfers of the region wanted to appear. The beach kids respected the kid with the camera. And the kid with the camera, for the first time since being born far from the sea, had an address inside himself.

The scar from the lamppost never fully disappeared. On certain nights his head ached and Gabriel thought about the car, the sound, the nothing. But he learned to read the scar the way surfers read the mark of a broken board: proof there was an impact, and that he survived it. Scars, he'd begin to suspect, were the only autobiography that doesn't lie. Everything else, memory edits. The scar stays.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 03

Cranial trauma at 22, passenger, collision. Relevant to the profile? Technically no. Humanly, everything.

There's a school of thought – discredited in the manuals, alive among the old hands – that certain subjects only become who they are after nearly ceasing to be. The young man vanishes for a few minutes and comes back in a hurry to live. Builds the brand, buys the camera, opens the firm. The hurry never lets him go again.

NOTE OUTSIDE PROTOCOL: I shouldn't write 'humanly, everything' in a triage report. I wrote it. I'm leaving it. Let the record show I saw, and that I didn't delete it. – I.

CHAPTER 5

THE PLANE



Gabriel was twenty-three when a plane went down over the neighboring city, and Brazil held its breath.

On board was a man running for president — the candidate of a rising party, one of the most-discussed figures of that electoral winter. The real name doesn't matter to this book, which will call him only the Candidate, because what matters isn't the man: it's what his fall lit up inside Gabriel's head. The aircraft crashed in the area covered by Aldo Steiner's precinct. And so, by a geography of jurisdiction, Gabriel's father became — for a few dizzying weeks — the chief responsible for the biggest case of his life.

Gabriel saw, from the wings, something he would never forget: his father's euphoria. Not grief for the dead man — euphoria for the case. The phone ringing with journalists, Steiner's name in the papers, the unmistakable sensation of a man who'd just hit the jackpot inside a tragedy. The case climbed to the federal sphere and slipped out of a state chief's hands, as it had to; but the impulse stayed. In the years that followed, Aldo Steiner rose: he became regional chief for the area, the apex of the career. And it wasn't a rise without a godfather — by then Mário Brandão was no longer the congressman of Gabriel's adolescence; he'd risen to lieutenant governor of the state, from the same party as the Candidate killed in the crash, and he was a personal friend of Steiner's. The house, at some point in those years, became another house: bigger, renovated, with a standard of living

the salary didn't explain and that no one in the family asked about out loud.

Gabriel's mind — by then already visited by the first breakdowns, already fluent in the grammar of the wiretap, already convinced since childhood that privacy was an illusion — did what that mind did better than any doctor would admit: it connected the dots. The plane hadn't fallen. It had been brought down. There were interests too large for an accident, a chess game he couldn't yet see whole but whose board he felt beneath his feet. And if that plane had been brought down, and if the crash had promoted his own father to the apex and consolidated the godfather Brandão in the state government, then Gabriel wasn't a spectator of history: he was a relative of it. He was inside the board. All that was left was to find out which side.

It was in that state — half mourning, half revelation, half fury at the boss who ran the region — that Gabriel made the first move of his private war. He took the Laguna tapes, the compromising footage of Téo Brandão, the lieutenant governor's son, and opened, through Beatriz, a silent negotiation that lasted two months, in the middle of a campaign. Not to publish — he never published anything. To feel the power of being able to. To prove to himself that he held a card in a game where he'd always been only a piece. Beatriz kept him calm, pretending to betray Téo; Gabriel pretended to believe her. In the end, he put the tapes away again. But something had changed forever: Gabriel now knew himself to be a player. And the game, in his head, had international reach — because the planes of presidential candidates, he was sure, don't fall without powers far above the coast moving the pieces.

Soon after, his heart broke for another reason, more ordinary and more human — the end of a love — and Gabriel

sank into a deep depression. It was from that depression, and from the hurry to live the accident had left him, that the next year's decision was born: to gather what he had and cross the ocean alone for the first time. The roller coaster inside him was already turning, still without a clinical name — one year's conspiratorial fury giving way, almost without transition, to the luminous euphoria of the next. The book follows that turn because it's true: from the chessboard of the plane to the sun of California there were only a few months, and the same man lived both.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry — 04

Here the file stops being routine. The subject builds, out of REAL and verifiable tragedies, a causal architecture in which he is the center. The manual has a name for this and forbids me to use it in the first person. I'll get around the manual with an uncomfortable fact: some of his connections check out. The crash. The new money in the chief's house. The godfather consolidated in government. Not all of it — but enough that I can no longer read this as the fiction of a sick man. It's exactly what makes a subject like this dangerous, or precious, or both at once: he's wrong in the exact proportion that he's right.

RECOMMENDATION: maintain hold. Me. — I.

CHAPTER 6

CALIFORNIA



The first America of Gabriel's life had no agency, no character, and no winter. It had twenty-four years, a camera in the backpack, a surfboard in the plane's hold, and a name painted on the hull: Megusta.

He already knew the United States in passing — a childhood trip to Florida, the castle, the fireworks, the America of the brochure. But California, in early 2015, was the first real America: alone, no family, no net. Gabriel went after the Mecca of his trade, the coast where the entire surf industry had an address and where the filmmakers he idolized in magazines pointed their lenses at the same waves he'd studied on tape bought from an old man who recorded competitions. He saved for two years — editing parties, odd jobs, selling gear — and went.

And California, unlike almost everything that would come after, said yes. Not a yes of contract — a yes of light. Gabriel woke before dawn in rooms shared with strangers, caught rides with surfers he'd met the night before, and filmed: the perfect waves he'd studied his whole life on VHS, now live, in real color, with the morning mist burning off over the water. He washed dishes at a café to stretch the stay, because he'd decided he wouldn't go back, that he'd stay, that this was the place. He learned the hard way the etiquette of the piers, the angles of the classics, the names of the tides. He ate badly, slept worse, and was — for a whole season — exactly who he wanted to be.

At the end of the journey came the consecration: a stop on the world tour came through the coast, and Gabriel, with the gift of gab of a man with nothing to lose, talked his way into a press credential. He filmed the event masterfully, cut a twenty-five-minute documentary, and — what mattered most to the twenty-four-year-old — stood within feet of the idols of his adolescence, the surfers whose photos he'd taped to the wall of a room with no sea. He ran into old companions from the amateur-competition days, now scattered through the surf world. For a season, the kid at the fence was inside the yard.

But the signs, which had already shown up in Brazil, didn't stay behind: they came in the suitcase. Hours of incandescent euphoria; hours of a darkness with no cause, in which the same luminous California looked like a cardboard set. Gabriel didn't know it, but the roller coaster kept turning. It was by a cold decision — one of the few of that phase — that he didn't overstay the visa. He wouldn't go illegal. He'd return. On the flight home, forehead to the window, the Pacific darkening below, he made the first transoceanic promise of his life: I'll come back. The promise was sincere. Fate, which has the humor of a police chief, would make him keep it — ten years later, on another island in the same ocean, for reasons that young man with salt in his hair wouldn't have believed even if the flight attendant had handed him the script in print.

FILE // CLASSIFIED**Entry – 05**

The first crossing. 2015, west coast, B2 visa, no net. I cross-checked the border records: it all checks out, he left before his time was up. People who run don't respect visa deadlines; he respected it. A small detail worth gold in a vetting: the subject has, in the middle of his internal chaos, a core of discipline that decides coldly when it must. The videos of this phase don't yet speak to us. He's a man before deciding he needed an audience – ours.

I confess I rewatched a sunset he filmed three times. Operational justification: none.

I reread Part I in the order it was lived. Up to here it's the biography of a gifted, unstable young man, and nothing more. What comes next – the return, the collapse, and the film that gives the collapse its name – is where this file stops being one among ten thousand. I'm not going to press the archive button. I still don't know why. – I.

PART II

THE BLACKOUT

CHAPTER 7

THE WHITE ROOM



When Gabriel came back from California, in 2015, the family was waiting at the airport and knew, before the hug ended, that something was wrong. It wasn't travel fatigue. It was the too-fast talk, the too-bright eyes, the ideas arriving on top of one another like waves that don't respect the interval. The young man who'd boarded lost came back accelerated — and acceleration, in that family that understood repression and care, was an alarm. Within days, Gabriel was committed for the first time.

No one yet had the right word. The diagnosis of bipolar disorder would come later, late, after years of the wrong medication and a provisional label. For now there was only a clinic room, pale walls, a door that locked from the outside, and a time that stopped passing and began to drag. For Gabriel, that wasn't treatment: it was kidnapping. The injustice burned worse than any symptom. He knew himself to be different, yes — but different, in his head, wasn't sick. Different was awake. And to lock an awake man among the sleeping was, to Gabriel, the final proof that the world imprisons precisely those who can see.

Marijuana was at the center of the war. In California, where it was legal, Gabriel had used it as medicine — for the pain, for sleep, to turn down the volume of the world. Here it became evidence of delinquency. He'd leave the clinic and start smoking again, less out of addiction than out of revolt, a disobedience with its flag raised; and the family, seeing the smoke, would recommit him. The cycle closed on itself: clinic,

release, revolt, clinic. Each return tightened the knot between Gabriel and the people who loved him, and each tightening he stored in the inner folder that now had chapters – proof that no one understood him, proof that he was alone against everyone, proof that mania turned into ammunition and depression turned into a verdict.

On one of the releases, the family, exhausted and without a manual, did the thing it would never forgive itself for and that Gabriel would never forget: it threw him out of the house. He ended up in a foul student boardinghouse, a mattress on the floor, a few coins a week to eat. And it was from that boardinghouse, from its window, that the web truly began to be woven – because across from the room there was a Masonic lodge, with its compass and its square, and Gabriel's mind, starving for pattern, read in that symbol the end of a thread that led very far.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 06

First commitment confirmed, 2015. Multiple recommitments over the following two years. No closed diagnosis at the time – which, from our point of view, matters: it means years of symptom without a label, a man fighting his own mind in the dark, with no map. I record something it isn't my place to record: the clinic treated him as a risk before understanding him as a patient. It's the same mistake our line of work makes with subjects like this. We lock up first. We understand later, when we understand at all. – I.

CHAPTER 8

THE SWISS FLAG



It was still 2015 when the family, exhausted, threw him out, and Gabriel ended up in the boardinghouse from which, without knowing it, he'd begin to weave the web that would govern the coming decade. From the window of that room, he did the only thing he knew how to do with chaos: he read patterns in it. And the pattern that offered itself, in that winter of exile, had the shape of a Masonic lodge across the street.

A mind in mania is a bridge-building machine. Where the ordinary mind sees coincidence, it sees design; where the ordinary one sees chance, it sees authorship. Gabriel looked at the compass and the square on the façade and his machine fired: Freemasonry, the men who recognize each other by signs, the closed clubs where the real world is decided far from the eyes of the people. And from Freemasonry his mind leapt to Switzerland — the discreet banks, the accounts of the corrupt, the gentlemen of Geneva and Zurich, the UN, the forums where the owners of the world meet under the snow. Everything connected with a clarity that had the taste of revelation and the texture of symptom, and that Gabriel, alone in the boardinghouse, had no way of telling apart.

So he did what he'd always do: he recorded it. He posted, on social media, a photo with the location tagged in Switzerland — the white-and-red flag, the cross — photographed, in fact, in front of a Masonic lodge in a coastal city in Brazil. To anyone watching from outside, geographic delusion. To Gabriel, it was a coded message dropped into the

current, a signal for whoever knew how to read: I see the web. I know where the owners of the game live. And somewhere — he was sure, with the certainty no medication had yet touched — someone who mattered was reading.

He spent his birthday alone in the boardinghouse. He spent Christmas alone. And it was in that depth, after the dates that hurt most to people who are alone, that the family committed him again — and it was in that commitment, at last, that the word began to take shape in the doctors' mouths: bipolar. Not as a verdict, yet. As a hypothesis. But Gabriel, who collected certainties, refused the hypothesis with all his strength, because to accept it would be to accept that the whole web — Switzerland, the signs, the design of the world — was fireworks from a damaged brain. And there was something in him, stronger than any report, that couldn't, that wouldn't, give up being right.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 07

The 'Switzerland' episode is, to any triage officer, textbook apophenia: the subject sees pattern where there's noise and geolocates a delusion. I should close the file on this page.

I don't close it – and I owe myself the honesty of why. Freemasonry, Swiss banking, forums: he stacks real symbols of real power into a false narrative. The error isn't in the elements; it's in the stitching. And that's exactly how a good analyst of ours errs when he errs: not by seeing what isn't there, but by connecting what is there in the wrong order.

He has the raw material of one of ours. What he lacks is the thing we give them: someone on the other side confirming or denying. A recipient. He's shouting into a channel with no one listening. I'm the no one who began to listen. – I.

CHAPTER 9

THE BRIDGE



The clinic they took him to that time was outside the city, at the end of a road, and had nothing of a clinic but the name. It was a warehouse for people — no real doctor, no real therapy, marijuana forbidden and the rest left to neglect. Gabriel understood, the first night, that the place didn't mean to cure him. It meant to keep him. And what you do with a man who wasn't made to be kept, and who's just been dropped in a warehouse at the end of a road, is one thing only: he runs.

He ran in the morning, through the emergency door, with his shoulder. He felt the sun hit his face like a welcoming slap and ran — barefoot after the first block, through a neighborhood he didn't know, past a bike shop where a man in an apron watched him the way you watch rain coming in. He had no plan. He had a direction: away. And away, in that geography, took the shape of a bridge — long, straight, bare, over a river, without a single tree where a barefoot man in hospital clothes could pretend to be scenery.

He was in the middle of it when he heard the car slow behind him, the tire bite the shoulder, the door open. He didn't need to turn to know. He knew that engine the way you know the voice of someone in your family — because it was. Chief Steiner got out of the car with his gun in his hand. Not pointed at the sky, like in the movies where authority hesitates. Pointed at him.

“You’re going to get in the car the easy way,” his father said, and the voice didn’t shake, which was worse — “or does it have to be the hard way?”

The river ran beneath them, indifferent. Gabriel looked at the water, then at the barrel, then at the face. And it was the face that beat him. Not the gun — he knew in that instant, with a clarity that would take ten years to forgive, that his father would never fire. What made him raise his hands was something else: the chief’s eyes, the man who didn’t cry even at funerals, were full of water. That water in his father’s eyes was the most violent thing Gabriel had ever seen — more than the clinic, more than the restraints, more than all of it. The fight went out of him like air from a punctured tire.

“Okay, Dad,” he said. “The easy way.”

He got in the car. His father put the gun away, sat behind the wheel, and the two of them spent a full minute in silence looking at the bridge through the windshield, like two men who’d just survived the same shipwreck in different boats. It was the lowest point, and Gabriel didn’t yet know that lowest points aren’t the end — they’re the foundation on which, with luck and the right hands, someone rebuilds.

FILE // CLASSIFIED**Entry – 08**

The bridge. There's no professional angle that turns this into data. It's a father pointing a gun at his own son to keep him from running from what could kill him – and weeping as he does it. I've read hundreds of files. Few have forced me up out of the chair. I'll note only this, and shut off the monitor for today: whoever survives being saved that way either breaks forever, or develops a resistance no training of ours can reproduce. I bet on the second. Not as an analyst. As someone who once needed to be saved and hated the hand that saved her before learning to kiss it. – I.

CHAPTER 10

THE FILM



The Analyst was a technician. Not a soldier, not a spy out of an old movie, not a field agent with a pistol in a holster — a technician, a systems administrator, a guy in glasses who understood computers like few people in the world and who, because he understood, ended up where those who understand end up: inside the machine. He worked for the most powerful intelligence agency that has ever existed — the house that listens to the planet — and for a contractor that served it, first at a station in Europe, then on an island in the middle of the Pacific, where the United States keeps one of its largest listening hubs, aimed at the other side of the world.

It was there, from inside, that he saw what almost no one saw. He discovered that the surveillance the public vaguely suspected was, in fact, total — and legal, or nearly. That the agency didn't just listen to suspects, targets, declared enemies. It collected everything. The emails, the calls, the messages ordinary people exchanged believing them private; the metadata that reveals, without reading a single line, whom you talk to, when, where, for how long — the entire skeleton of a life. There were programs with code names that captured data straight from the cables the world's internet runs through, and silent agreements with the big technology companies, and secret courts that signed authorizations no outsider would ever read. It was the invisible architecture of mass surveillance — the bulk collection, with no individual suspicion, of practically everyone, all the time. And it was exactly what Gabriel, ever since his father's wiretap cassettes,

had always felt in his body without proof: that privacy was an illusion of the naïve, and that there was always someone on the other end of the line, listening.

The Analyst decided to tell. He copied the documents that proved it all, flew to Hong Kong, and handed the archive to a handful of hand-picked journalists – demanding, with the obsessive care of a man who knows the machine from inside, that every conversation be encrypted, that every key be exchanged by the right protocol, that nothing leak through the wrong door. The stories exploded across the world. His name became a headline in every language. And the price was exactly what he knew it would be: accused of the gravest crimes a State charges against one of its own, he became the most wanted man on the planet. He couldn't go home. He got stuck in a geographic limbo – an airport, first; then the asylum of a foreign power, the only one large enough to host him and say no to the United States. And there he stayed. Hero to some, traitor to others, prophet of privacy to the entire world and, at the same time, permanent guest of the regime that spies most on its own people – the contradiction that, years later, would break Gabriel's heart.

Because this is what the reader has to hold on to in order to understand everything that comes: the Analyst was the man who proved, with documents, that the whole world was being watched – and who paid for that proof with exile. He didn't invent Gabriel's suspicion. He confirmed it. For millions of people, the film about his life was a shock, a lesson, a scandal. For a single Brazilian video editor, committed, adrift, who had always known in his bones that he was being heard, that film was something else: it was proof that he had never been crazy. He was just the only one in the room who hadn't yet seen the film.

The film arrived in 2016, on a Tuesday, downloaded in the small hours, chosen almost by elimination — coming out of yet another commitment, in an interval of supervised freedom, his body already heavier from the medications that still weren't the right ones. Gabriel hit play expecting to pass the time. He stood up, hours later, with a mission.

It was the true story of the Analyst: the silent technician of the most powerful agency in the world, the man in glasses who discovered that everyone was being watched — every email, every message people believed private, exactly as Gabriel had known since the cassettes at the station — and who chose to tell, and to pay the price, and never to go home again. But it wasn't the Analyst who changed Gabriel's life. It was a secondary character. And it was the place where that character appears.

Because the character introduces himself to the Analyst in Switzerland.

Gabriel felt the blood rise. Switzerland. The same country he, a year earlier, from the window of a foul boardinghouse, in front of a Masonic lodge, had tagged as the den of the owners of the world — Geneva, Zurich, the gentlemen who decide the fate of nations under the snow. In that winter of 2015, no one had understood the Swiss-flag post as anything but the delusion of a man thrown out of his house. But now, in 2016, the Analyst's film placed its near-namesake character in exactly that spot, in Switzerland, in the geographic heart that Gabriel's web had already pointed to on its own. He had tagged Switzerland before the film. The film confirmed Switzerland after. To Gabriel's mind, that wasn't art imitating his madness: it was his madness being promoted to prophecy.

And there was more. In the film, that employee reappears in Hawaii, at the listening station from which the Analyst sets out to hand the secrets to the world. And when the Analyst

decides to leak everything and flee, the character makes the opposite choice: he stays. He remains loyal to the agency. The film never quite explains what he does — asked, he answers with irony that he's the fifty-pound brain on the council of wizards and warlocks. Not a hacker. Not an editor. Pure intelligence, no function and every function. And the name of that character, on the screen, in front of a Gabriel who hadn't breathed in two minutes, was Gabriel Sol.

Gabriel stopped the film. Went back. Read the name again. Gabriel Sol. The bridge-building machine inside him fired all at once, in a discharge that had something of religious ecstasy and something — he'd know later, in the rare moments of cold lucidity — of symptom. Sol, like a woman he'd loved. Sol, like his old internet nickname. A Gabriel who introduces himself in Switzerland — his Switzerland — who stays at the agency while the hero flees, loyal to the United States, the brain in the room of warlocks. That could not be coincidence. Either it had been written for him, or — and this was the decision that would reorganize the next eight years — he would take the character for himself, retroactively, and live as Gabriel Sol whatever it cost. "I don't know how," he wrote that night, in the notebook he'd keep forever. "But I'm going to be Gabriel Sol, or die trying."

I want to be exact about one thing, because it matters for everything that comes after: Gabriel was never a fan of the Analyst. What he felt was admiration and, above all, gratitude — because it was that film that got him out of bed, that gave him a north, that turned a clinic inmate into a man with a mission. That gratitude he'd carry always. But a fan, no. And many years ahead, when the Analyst appeared in an interview on the state television of a foreign power, hosted and protected by it, the admiration would shatter at once — leaving only the gratitude, clean and sad, for the push of one

night. Because in the film, Gabriel Sol stayed on the right side. And Gabriel, the one made of flesh, intended to stay there too.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 09

2016: the turning point, and the most ingenious stitch in the file. The subject had geolocated a delusion in Switzerland in 2015 (see ENTRY 07). A year later, he sees a film in which a character with a nearly identical name introduces himself – in Switzerland. To any of us, a trivial sequence: Switzerland is the obvious setting for intelligence meetings, and his brain, already fixed on it, did the rest. Apophenia feeding itself. I know how to read this.

What disarms me isn't the stitch – it's the precision of the identification. Of all the thousands who saw that film, this was the only one who ignored the hero and fixed on the man who stays. On the loyalty with no audience. On the fifty-pound brain in the room of warlocks. I work in that room. And no outsider has ever described it so well without ever having entered it. He invented an entire destiny out of a supporting role – and the role, I swear to God, is exactly mine. STATUS: this stopped being triage many entries ago. – I.

CHAPTER 11

THE ATTACK ORDER



In 2017 there was a truce, and the truce took the shape of a job. The newly elected mayor of the city was a boyhood friend of Chief Steiner's, and Gabriel joined city hall as a political appointee, doing the one thing he did better than anyone: editing video, on the city's TV channel. It was a period of apparent stability — medications being adjusted by trial and error, the straight life with no marijuana, the heavier body, the loneliness of a man with no girlfriend and no direction. But he had a badge. He edited the city's news footage. And he hated every minute of it, because the work seemed pathetic next to the one thing he wanted to be: Gabriel Sol.

Because the character hadn't died in the commitments. On the contrary: it had survived them, and surviving a hospital is, to a fixed idea, a kind of proof of divinity. Between 2016 and 2018, Gabriel quietly assembled the architecture of his mission. He would quit marijuana for good — not out of obedience, but out of strategy: an intelligence agency has rules, and he would fit himself to them, prove loyalty, live retroactively as the Brazilian agent who reaches the agency and stays. He declared himself, online, a friend of the Analyst, but made a point of marking the difference: he would never be a leaker. In the film, Gabriel Sol stays. And he would stay.

In March 2018, the truce broke. There was a fight with his father — the chief then at the height of his power, the house now a renovated mansion whose money Gabriel couldn't explain and whose origin his web already attributed to the

chess of the plane, of corruption, of the boss Brandão. The fight lit everything. And Gabriel decided to put his theory to the test once and for all, in an experiment only a mind on fire would design, and that he designed with the cold of an analyst and the faith of a prophet.

He spoke into his phone's microphone the way you speak to an invisible interlocutor — because he had, for some time, the certainty of being a surveillance target, monitored by the machine the Analyst had revealed to the world. He resigned his city-hall post. Packed his bags. Vanished to a hotel. And from there, on March 21, 2018, he executed the act: at one in the afternoon, narrating into the microphone and publishing on social media, he launched what he called an attack order. The target, in the coded language only he fully decoded, was the boss's party. The words, in English, left no doubt as to the tone: a massive attack. There had to be a digital trail, and the trail was the post. It was an ultimatum thrown to the universe, and the bet was total: either something happens and proves I'm Gabriel Sol — or nothing happens, and I accept that all of this is symptom, and I turn myself in.

Two hours later, the country went dark.

FILE // CLASSIFIED**Entry – 10**

I'm going to log this with the care of someone who knows the file may be read by people who still believe in coincidence. On 03/21/2018, at 1:00 p.m., the subject posts a go-signal – a public message, seemingly harmless, in the exact format of a trigger: declaration of intent, target named in code, timestamp. Two hours later, a large-scale blackout takes down precisely the region his narrative tied to the target. The official report will say "technical failure in the transmission system." The official report will always say that. That's what a report is for: so that the pre-positioned access in a power grid – planted months earlier, dormant, waiting for the trigger – never shows up in the chain of causation. People who work in this house know how to read the difference between a failure and a demonstration. A failure is random in time. A demonstration answers a signal, within the window of the signal.

I'm not claiming attribution. I'm claiming a time-on-target coincidence beyond any defensible probability, and refusing to do what the manuals tell me to do, which is to call chance what carries a signature. The subject wasn't expecting a miracle. He was speaking to the microphone – to the system, to the voice that listens – the same way he himself, in another time, had listened: at the precinct, transcribing wiretaps, on the side of the one who hears. The difference between his reading and mine is just one: he believes someone answered from the other end of the surveillance, and I know that systems don't answer by miracle – they answer because someone, somewhere, flipped something when the trigger arrived. The question I can't write in the official field, and so I write here: who was on the other side, and why did they answer him? Was it us? – I.

CHAPTER 12

.GOV.US



The blackout came over the television, with the urgency of national tragedies, striking precisely the region Gabriel's web associated with the cradle of the boss's party. To anyone else: news. To Gabriel, in the hotel room, it was the voice of God answering a prayer. He had thrown an order to the universe at one o'clock and the universe had gone dark at three. The total bet had been won. There was no doctor, mother, report, or medication, from that instant on, that could move him: he was Gabriel Sol. The signs weren't symptom. They were correspondence.

And then the correspondence became literal. That night, an unknown profile reached out to him online, asking for his public encryption key — exactly the protocol the Analyst had used in the film to talk to the journalists. Gabriel didn't know how to generate a key, didn't master the tool; he fumbled, and the contact slipped away. But before that, there was something in that profile's email address that sealed everything in Gabriel's head: it ended in at-NSA-dot-gov-dot-us. The agency. The one itself. Talking to him. And the profile left, before disappearing, a sentence Gabriel would carry for years like a sacred riddle: a girl sent me here. Do you know who sent me? A girl.

Gabriel didn't know. But the sentence stayed, turning, waiting for a meaning only the future would give. A girl. In the midst of the absolute euphoria of confirmation, that detail was the one thing that didn't click into place immediately — and maybe for that reason it was the only true one. Because

the pieces mania clicks too fast are usually the ones it manufactured itself; and the piece that resists, that's left over, that nags, is sometimes the only one that came from outside.

The outcome of that night was more prosaic and more cruel: Gabriel's bank account was frozen — another sign, in his reading; some routine procedure, in the world's reading — and, with no money, no ground, at the peak of a mania that no longer told revelation from ruin, he had to turn himself in for one more commitment. It was only months later, in the cold light of the medication that was finally beginning to hit the target, that Gabriel discovered a technical detail that should have dismantled everything: official agency emails don't end in dot-gov-dot-us. They end only in dot-gov. That address was fake. The contact, a fraud or a forum hallucination. The divine proof had a spelling error.

But — and here is the heart of everything Gabriel is — discovering that the piece was fake did not undo the picture. Because the girl's sentence was still there, ownerless, waiting. And a mind that has decided to be right does not surrender to a correction about an email domain. It files the correction in a drawer, closes the drawer, and keeps building the house on the pieces that were left. The drawer has a name, in every mind like that. It's called 'I'll understand it later.'

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 11

The .gov.us email is the detail that gives me hope and frightens me in equal measure. A subject truly lost in delusion would never have, months later, looked up the correct format of an official domain and CONCLUDED that his own proof was fake. He did that. He recorded the error. And even so he chose to retain the part that served him. It isn't blindness: it's will. He sees the truth and decides how much of it to let in. In our trade that has a name and it's the rarest and most dangerous quality a human being can have – the capacity to believe and to doubt at the same time, in separate compartments. We train our whole lives to do that with the world. He does it, without meaning to, with himself. Imagine what he'd do if he learned to point it outward. – I.

CHAPTER 13

THE PROCESSION



In December 2018, nine months after the blackout, the family took the trip that had taken years to fit into the budget: the cold of the American Northeast, the capital, and the childlike finale in Florida that was a dream from another decade. Gabriel went the way you go on family trips after thirty – half son, half guide, wholly grateful and wholly out of place. He was no longer the same young man from California, nor the inmate of the white room: he was a man who had, that very year, launched an order to the universe and watched the universe go dark. He carried Gabriel Sol inside him like a certainty already proven. And to set foot in Washington, the city of the acronym, was to him what it is, to a pilgrim, to glimpse the dome: arrival at a place that was already waiting for him.

It was by chance – and the book asks the reader to decide alone what to do with that word, all the more now, after the blackout – that they were on the right street, at the right hour, on the day the capital stopped. Avenues closed, a silent crowd behind the barriers, soldiers in white gloves lined up in the cold. America was burying an old president. And not just anyone: it was burying the patriarch, the aviator, the ambassador, the vice president, the president – and, before all of that, in a line of the biography the general public forgot and that Gabriel, of course, knew by heart, the director of the agency. The man whose name is engraved in the lobby of the headquarters. The legend of the house.

The procession passed before them slowly, the way the things history decides to underline pass: the caisson, the flag stretched over the coffin with the geometry of people who fold flags for a living, the enormous silence of thousands of people breathing together in the cold. Marta gripped her husband's arm. The chief, thirty years of stored salutes in his body, stood erect without noticing. And Gabriel — who had filmed everything since he was fifteen — did not film. He stood with his arms at his sides, the camera dead in his pocket, watching the old director's coffin pass a few feet away, seized by a sensation he had no word for: it wasn't grief, he didn't know the dead man; it wasn't the tourist's excitement, though he faked that for the family. It was the same sensation as the blackout, nine months earlier — that of being inside the plot, not in the audience. That something, in that moment, was announcing him.

The next day, before the train, Gabriel bought the Sunday edition of the paper — the cover taken up by the funeral, the old director's life in retrospect — and tucked it into the bottom of his suitcase with a care no souvenir got. The family found it funny: so many refrigerator magnets for sale, and the young man keeping a newspaper. He couldn't explain it. He'd explain it years later, in a much worse winter in that same city, when that yellowed page would be taped to the wall of a rented room the way others tape up saints. He had kept the paper because he'd left the procession with the conviction — now stitched to the blackout, now part of the same web — that fate had just passed in front of him, and that he had been the only one, in all that crowd, to recognize the parade for what it was: a passing of the baton that no one else saw.

The trip went on south, to the castle and the fireworks, and the family came home to the island with full suitcases and the album made. But something had boarded along,

without going through customs. And on the other side of the world, in a windowless room Gabriel would still take years to imagine existed, a file with his name was fattening, slowly, awaiting a woman who would one day refuse to press a button.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 12

Same year as the blackout, nine months later. And here the subject's web takes on its near-final form: he welds the procession to the blackout. Two events with no relation whatsoever – an electrical transmission failure and the funeral of a statesman – become, in his architecture, chapters of the same book of which he is the protagonist. The method is always the same: take the real, and wire it in the order that puts him at the center. I should find this alarming. I do – and at the same time I catch myself thinking that, if I ever meet him, I'll have to decide whether to tell him the blackout was a technical failure. And I already know I'll hesitate before telling him. That hesitation is my first lie for his sake. It won't be the last. – I.

PART III

THE CROSSING

CHAPTER 14

THE TELENVELA



In 2019, the year after the blackout, the television began to speak to Gabriel.

Not in delusion — or not only. There premiered, in prime time on the country's biggest network, a telenovela whose protagonist was named Gabriel. (In Brazil, the prime-time telenovela isn't a daytime soap; for decades it was the way the nation told itself its own intrigues of power, transfigured into fiction so they could be said at all.) An ordinary man from a small town who guarded a secret, one of the keepers of an ancient mystery, watched and watching. There was, in the plot, a cat that observed everything from the shadows and that, midway through the story, turned into a man. There was a beloved woman — a teacher, luminous, fought over by the protagonist and the son of the town's mayor. And there was, in every episode, the sense that all of it meant more than it said.

Gabriel watched the first episode by accident. He didn't sleep after it. Because the bridge-building machine inside his head — the same one that had linked the Masonic lodge to Switzerland, the post to the blackout — did, in front of that telenovela, its most vertiginous work. The protagonist was named Gabriel: like him. Guarded a secret: like him. Was watched: like him. The spy cat that became a man was the Analyst, the one who steps out of the shadows and reveals himself to the world. The beloved, contested teacher was Beatriz — because Beatriz, in Gabriel's real life, had been a teacher, and had been fought over, and he had lost her

precisely to the son of a man of power, exactly as in the plot the protagonist contested the woman with the mayor's son. And the mayor's son in the telenovela was Téo, the son of the boss Brandão. Each piece clicked with a precision that had the taste of revelation and the texture of symptom, and Gabriel, once again, had no way — no wish — to tell them apart.

But there was a thread that made it more than apophenia, and the thread had a family name. Because a cousin of Gabriel's — distant, not by blood but by the upbringing on Chief Steiner's side — worked in television journalism, and not in any corner: in those years he was rising to run the newsroom of a national news program. And that cousin's mentor, the anchor who had sponsored him, had died shortly before in an accident — one of those sudden deaths that, in Gabriel's web, were never just deaths — opening precisely the chair the cousin would inherit. Steiner, the chief, at the height of his power through the jurisdiction of the plane. The cousin, at the height of media through the dead man's chair. And he, Gabriel, in the middle, stitching: if my own family is linked by two threads — the police and the press — to the machine that moves the country, then the telenovela with my name is no coincidence. The ones who write the nation's fictions know me. The elite knows me. Not the people in the street — they never knew who I was. But the ones who decide what the nation sees: the telenovela's author, the news director, the cousin. Those know. I'm famous to the ones who matter, and invisible to everyone else. I'm the secret kept under lock and key, broadcast on national TV to whoever has eyes to see.

It must be said, with the honesty this book owes its protagonist: part of this was the illness drawing constellations on points that asked for no line. The

telenovelas of that country do in fact drink from political reality, and do in fact transfigure the powerful into characters – that’s documented truth, not delusion. The delusion was in the last stitch: the one that placed Gabriel at the center of everything, the one that turned a spectator into a recipient. And yet – and this is why this story is never simple – some of the threads were real. The cousin existed. The rise existed. The mentor’s accident existed. The telenovela, with its guardian Gabriel and its contested teacher, existed. Gabriel didn’t invent the points. He invented the line. And the problem of an entire life would always be this: no one, not even he, could prove where the points ended and the line began.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 13

The subject now incorporates his country’s television drama into his personal architecture. I verified the obvious: the telenovela is a commercial fiction product, with no relation to him. Classic apophenia – he projects his own biography onto a generic plot and reads coincidence as authorship.

And yet. I cross-checked the names he ties to the ‘web’ – the father in the police, the cousin in the press, the chair opened by a sudden death. The links exist. They prove no conspiracy; they prove the subject grew up stitched, by blood and by upbringing, to two of the apparatuses that matter most in any country: who arrests and who narrates. A man like that isn’t paranoid for feeling power up close. He felt power up close his whole life, at the dinner table. His error isn’t seeing the threads. It’s thinking they all lead to him. RECOMMENDATION: proceed. I note, against protocol, that I’ve stopped rooting for him to be wrong. – I.

CHAPTER 15

A GIRL



The sentence crossed three years like a splinter you can neither pull out nor leave alone. On the night of the blackout, in 2018, the profile that had reached out to him — the one with the fake email, the public key he couldn't generate — had left, before vanishing, a question that kept turning in the dark of Gabriel's head: *a girl sent me here. Do you know who sent me? A girl.*

Gabriel didn't know. But the sentence had that rare quality — already named in this book — of the pieces mania doesn't manufacture: it didn't fit anywhere, and for that very reason it seemed true. A mind on fire fits, fast, what it itself invents; what resists, what's left over, what stays without a place after years, that usually came from outside. The girl was the pit Gabriel could neither digest nor spit out. Who? Why? And above all: if there was a girl on the other side, then there was an other side — there was someone, with a face and a name and a gender, who had read him enough to send an emissary. The sentence, more than the blackout, was proof that he wasn't shouting into the void.

The answer — or the beginning of it — came in 2020, and it came through the most improbable and most documented door of all: a social network, a message exchanged, a real name. L. The Analyst's wife. The companion of the man from the film, the one who had crossed exile and scandal with him. Gabriel, who had orbited for years everything that touched the Analyst, had sent — among thousands of anonymous admirers — some unassuming message. And,

against all odds, she answered. Not once: she began a conversation, thin, intermittent, but real, that would stretch over years. They spoke of small things — her art, the tarot cards she drew, the daily life of a watched existence. Nothing about national security, ever; nothing a court could call conspiracy. Just two people talking through a screen, one of them with no idea what she meant to the other.

To Gabriel, though, that conversation was the missing confirmation, and it was also the instant the splinter of 2018 finally found the flesh to lodge in. Because if LL — a woman, a girl, in the coded vocabulary of an anonymous profile — now spoke with him directly, then maybe it had been her all along. Maybe the girl who'd sent the emissary on the night of the blackout was the same one now answering his messages. Maybe the line between 2018 and 2020 was straight, and he'd only failed to see it for lack of distance. Gabriel stitched the two points with his usual faith, and the stitch filled him with a warm, dangerous certainty: he was being guided. There was a feminine hand moving the pieces of his destiny, and the hand had begun to show itself.

He was wrong about the face. But he wasn't wrong about the hand.

Because there was, in fact, a girl. Only it wasn't L. It was a woman Gabriel had never seen, whose name he didn't know, who worked in a windowless room on the other side of the world, and who, in 2018, in a decision that had broken protocol and that she'd spend years trying to justify to herself, had sent someone to check up close on a Brazilian video editor she couldn't get out of her head. The emissary, the clumsy contact, the public key requested and not delivered — all of it had come from her. And then she'd pulled back, frightened by her own transgression, and let the file go cold. The girl was real. Gabriel was looking for her in the

wrong face. And she, on the other side, read his conversation with L. in real time, and felt something no intelligence manual had foreseen: jealousy of her own target.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry - 14

I need to record this and I hate recording this.

The subject initiated continued contact with L., the Analyst's spouse. Verified content: trivial, artistic, no security relevance. Cold recommendation: irrelevant, monitor by association and move on.

I can't write the cold recommendation.

He thinks L. is the 'girl' from 2018. He's mistaken, and I am the only person on the planet who knows exactly how mistaken he is, because the girl from 2018 was me. It was I who ordered him checked. It was I who pulled back. There. It's written in a classified field no one but me will ever read, and even so my hand shook as I typed it.

He spent three years looking for the face of the one who touched him, and he's about to paste it onto the wrong face. The decent thing to do is to vanish from this file for good. I've tried once. It didn't work - the system returned him to my desk, or I brought him back pretending it was the system. At this point I can no longer tell the two apart. - I.

CHAPTER 16

THE PACT



There was, at some point in those years, a morning when Gabriel woke up tired of being a castaway. Not cured — you don't get cured like that, by decision, and the book won't lie about it. But tired enough of the clinic, the cycle, the revolt that only sank him deeper, to do something he'd never really done: accept help as an adult, and not endure it as a prisoner.

The pact was sealed in the kitchen at home, between Gabriel and Marta, with no witnesses. The mother — the social worker who'd spent her life mending the torn fabric of other people and who, with her own son, had spent years without finding the right seam — put her cards on the table with the clarity of someone who no longer had the luxury of beating around the bush. Real treatment, with a real doctor, taken seriously, every day. In exchange, real freedom: no more clinics, no more commitments, no more doors locked from the outside. Trust for trust. Slack for slack. "I'll stop locking you up," she said, in substance, "the day you stop running from yourself."

Enter, then, Dr. Humberto. Not the clinic psychiatrist who signs a report and renews a prescription, but the doctor who sits and listens — a middle-aged man, glasses he cleaned when he was about to say something important, and a patience that Gabriel, suspicious of all authority since the first restraint, took months not to read as a trap. It was Dr. Humberto who, at last, gave the thing its right and stable name — bipolar disorder — not as a verdict, but as a map.

“You don’t have a defect,” he said in a consultation Gabriel would keep whole. “You have a powerful instrument with no brake. I’m not going to give you less instrument. I’m going to help you install the brake. A river with no banks isn’t strength. It’s a flood. We’re going to build your banks.”

The banks had prosaic names and enormous power: sleep at the same hour, take the medication at the same hour, have commitments with a beginning and an end. And it was from Dr. Humberto himself that the recommendation came that would change the route of everything: that Gabriel go back to school. Not for a diploma — for structure. A place to be in the morning, a reason to sleep at night, a routine that didn’t depend on willpower, that unstable material that was sometimes steel and sometimes wet paper. Gabriel listened, and inside him the recommendation met an old hunger: because there was, beneath all his revolt, a man who had always known himself intelligent and had never had anywhere to prove it. Going back to school wouldn’t just be a bank. It would be, at last, a proving ground worthy of the instrument.

But there was a second reason, more secret, that Gabriel didn’t confess to Dr. Humberto or to Marta, and that the book confesses for him. If he was going to be Gabriel Sol — and he hadn’t given up on that, would never give up on it — then he needed to make himself worthy of the character. An intelligence agency doesn’t recruit castaways. It recruits prepared, disciplined, educated people. Quitting marijuana, accepting the medication, building the banks, going back to school: all of that was treatment, yes, and it was sincere. But it was also a candidacy. Gabriel was, at the same time, healing himself and qualifying himself — and the tragic beauty of it, which only the future would reveal, is that the two things, for the first time in his life, pointed to the same place.

FILE // CLASSIFIED**Entry – 15**

Significant change in the subject's pattern: adherence to treatment, pharmacological stabilization, return to an academic structure. From a risk-assessment standpoint, he migrates from 'unstable' to 'unstable in managed remission' – which, to us, matters a great deal: an asset who controls his own condition is an asset, not a danger.

I record what it isn't my place to record: it was the mother. It wasn't us, it wasn't a manual, it wasn't the hand he imagines moving his destiny. It was a woman in a kitchen saying 'I stop locking you up when you stop running from yourself.' I spend my life surrounded by people who move nations and the most powerful thing that has ever crossed this file was a social worker with no budget. I note that for myself. To remember, when I finally do what I'm about to do with his life, that there are people who love him for free, with no agenda. I am not those people. Best not to forget it. – I.

CHAPTER 17

THE STUDENT IN THE BACK ROW



Gabriel enrolled in International Relations at thirty, the oldest freshman in a line whose average age belonged at an eighteenth-birthday party. He sat in the back of the room — out of the habit of someone who'd spent his life observing, not out of shyness — and from the back he did what he'd always known how to do: he read the class the way he'd read the lineup and the mat, by patterns. Who understood, who faked, who slept. And he discovered, in the first weeks, the advantage that age and a hard life gave him as a gift: while his classmates studied for the exam, he studied the world, and the exam came along for the ride.

The discipline that captured him had a pompous name and addictive content: the methods of analysis. How to separate fact from noise. How to build a hypothesis and, harder, how to knock it down on purpose to test it. How the human mind fools itself — the bias that makes you see what you already expect to see, the trap of the group that thinks together and errs together. Gabriel recognized every trap because he'd fallen into all of them, in real life, with no theory. And when the professor drew on the board the technique of competing hypotheses — list every possible explanation and look for evidence *against* the favored one, instead of for it — Gabriel felt the floor tremble slightly. It was the thing that had been missing from his head for a decade. It was the riverbank, in the form of a method. It was, though he didn't yet know to

name it, the exact trade Gabriel Sol was a master of on the screen: the fifty-pound brain that weighs, separates, discards, and concludes.

There was a bitter irony the book won't hide, because it's the tragic heart of Gabriel: he was learning, in college, the exact tool that could have saved him from himself. The competing hypotheses applied to his own life would have asked: *did the blackout answer my post, or do blackouts happen? Does the telenovela speak of me, or do telenovelas use archetypes? Is the girl Lindsay, or do I want her to be?* Gabriel mastered the technique. He got high marks applying it to the port, to geopolitics, to other people's wars. And he couldn't, never could, point it inward. It's the silent tragedy of all lucidity: it illuminates outward easily and inward almost never. The best analyst in the room was blind in exactly the one file that most needed analysis — his own.

But college did what Dr. Humberto had promised: it gave him banks. Gabriel quit smoking for good — and the book won't pretend it was easy, because quitting was losing an old toxic friend, and there were weeks when the only thing that kept him in the chair was the doctor's sentence and the fear of proving to himself that he couldn't. But he did. Semester by semester, his average rose and held, closing, in the end, on a number he'd carry like a medal: three point five seven. It wasn't talent. It was banks. It was a man who, for the first time since the photo with the pot on his head, was in the service of something real — not the character, but himself — and was discovering that the instrument, with a brake and banks, worked better than it had ever worked loose.

And the signs didn't stop over the four years. They kept coming, the way they always came, and Gabriel — now with method, now able to doubt — did with them the most disturbing thing of all: he filed them in an intermediate

category, neither truth nor delusion, on hold. He created, at some point, a profile where he published what he saw, with a fixed notice at the top: *this is a work of fiction; any resemblance to reality is mere coincidence*. It was his insurance policy and his confession at once – the sentence that protected him if he was wrong and that winked at whoever could read it if he was right. Because the resemblances, in Gabriel's life, kept happening. And a man who needs to warn that his own life is fiction is a man who already suspects, deep down, that it isn't.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 16

The subject completes his degree. High performance GPA(3.57). Final specialization in cyber warfare – that is, he spent four years formally studying the doctrine I practice. He stopped being an internet enthusiast. He became an analyst of hybrid warfare with method. He speaks our language.

And there's a fine cruelty in this that I can't ignore: the same technique he learned to wield masterfully on the world – competing hypotheses, falsifying the favored one – is the one that would free him from half the certainties that hold him. He has the key to his own cell in his hand and can't turn it in the lock from the inside. I could teach him. It would take a single conversation. It's exactly the kind of conversation my role forbids me to have and that I, for sixteen entries now, have been rehearsing having. STATUS: pre-recruitment, unauthorized, conducted by a single officer off protocol. Me. – I.

CHAPTER 18

THE TOWEL



In 2021, in the middle of the college years, Gabriel spent a few days in a hotel in São Paulo. Not a planned hotel, booked in advance — an improvised one, chosen on the spot, on the street, for the convenience of being near where he needed to handle things that week. It was the week of his birthday. And it was that week that life taught him a lesson no school of international relations teaches on its exams: that there is a difference between being watched and being told you're being watched, and that the second is always a message.

The first sign was a face. In a hotel hallway, Gabriel crossed paths with a man he knew — not from life, but from a specific, improbable place: from a commitment. A man who had been hospitalized with him, years before, in one of the clinics. The ordinary mind would dismiss it as chance. Gabriel's mind, trained his whole life to calculate the probability of an encounter, ran the math on the spot and didn't like the result. What are the odds, in a metropolis of twenty million people, in an improvised hotel chosen on the spot, of running into precisely someone who crossed his path at one of the most private and documented points of his life — a psychiatric commitment? The odds exist. But it's the kind of chance that, in the trade Gabriel was studying, is called an indicator. Not proof. Indicator. A needle jumping on the instrument, saying: pay attention.

The second sign was in the bathroom. Coming back from a day out, Gabriel went to shower and found the towel — the

clean towel the housekeeper should have left — smeared with feces. Not splashed by accident: smeared. A deliberate, disgusting gesture, designed for one thing only — to provoke revulsion, fear, the visceral sense that someone had been in your room, touched your things, and wanted you to know it. Gabriel, who read everything, went and looked it up, and what he found chilled him and at the same time organized his world: that was a known, catalogued tactic of intimidation. The secret police of the former East Germany — the Stasi — had a name for the whole set of such techniques: *Zersetzung*, the psychological decomposition of the target. Enter the home and move small things around. Soil what was clean. Leave minimal traces of presence. The goal was never physical harm. It was to drive the target slowly mad, make him doubt his own perception, isolate him — because whoever reports finding a towel smeared with feces in a hotel looks, to everyone's eyes, exactly like what the operation wants him to look like: a paranoid.

And here is what separates Gabriel from a broken man, and what — years later, on the other side of the world — would make an analyst hold her breath as she read the account: he didn't snap. He didn't scream at the front desk. He didn't call the police. He didn't post a hysterical photo. He did exactly what a trained professional would do, and he did it by instinct, having never been trained. He cleaned everything. He gathered, methodically, all the trash from his stay — every paper, every wrapper, every strand of hair, every trace that might contain his DNA or give away his routine. He bagged it all. He left not a single trace in the room. And instead of tossing the bag there — where whoever had access to the room would also have access to the trash — he carried it all away in the car, drove outside the city, and dumped the material in São Vicente, far from the mesh of whoever was

watching. It was a counter-surveillance operation carried out by a man who, officially, was just a thirty-year-old bipolar student with a conspiracy theory. But the execution was clean. It was the execution of someone who understood, in his bones, the golden rule of the watched: never give the observer the data he came for. And the data they had come for wasn't the towel. It was the reaction. The towel was the question. Panic would be the answer. Gabriel refused to answer.

The third sign came by phone, that same week, and was the most sophisticated of the three. The room rang. A voice asked to speak with "Fátima." There was no Fátima — it was Gabriel's room. The natural reaction, that of an ordinary man, would be to hang up, irritated, saying it was a wrong number. But Gabriel, by then, already knew that in an intelligence game the wrong number is never just a wrong number: it's a test, a probe, the bait that measures the timing and the shape of your reaction. So he didn't hang up. He played along. He said, calmly, that Fátima was in the shower, and asked if the person wanted to leave a message. From the other end, without hesitating, the voice answered: "The appointment is at three o'clock." And hung up.

An appointment. At three o'clock. For a woman who didn't exist, in a room that was his. To anyone, a wrong number. To Gabriel, an instruction. And here his mind made the leap only it made: he walked, every day that week, in Ibirapuera Park, which was near the hotel. It was a known routine — and a known routine, he knew, is the first thing a surveillance team maps. If there was a message for him somewhere in that city, it would be where he was already going. So, at three o'clock, Gabriel went to Ibirapuera. Not out of obedience — out of analytical curiosity, out of the wish to read what was written for him. And what he found in the park, that afternoon, closed

the circuit in a way that would take him years to fully understand: a party. The launch of a brewery — Spaten — a celebration of German heritage, flags, music, immigrants and descendants gathered under the name of a century-old German brand.

German. Gabriel stopped in the middle of the park and felt the ground rearrange itself beneath his feet. His surname — the surname he wore, Aldo Steiner's, the stepfather's, the German name that wasn't blood but was destiny — echoed at that party like a signature. All his life Germany had appeared in the corners of the web: the surname, the precision, the sense of belonging to a lineage he hadn't chosen. And now, on the day and at the hour an anonymous voice had pointed him to, the park he walked through had dawned overrun with a German party. To the ordinary mind: the city has a thousand events, and he stumbled into one. To Gabriel: someone had placed that in his path. The towel had said "we know where you are and we can touch you." The phone call had said "go at three o'clock." And the party said — he was sure, with the certainty no medication touched — something else, warmer, almost gentle, coming from a source different from the first two: I'm here. Don't be afraid.

Gabriel didn't know, that afternoon, that he was right about almost everything and wrong only about the arithmetic of the senders. There were two. The towel and the man from the commitment had come from one side — from inside, from home, from a service that spoke Portuguese and had reasons to fear him. The party had come from the other — from far away, from a windowless room, from someone who had been reading him for years and who, on seeing the first service touch his file, had done the only thing she could do without exposing herself: leave, in the path of the man she was protecting, a sign only he would know how to read. Germany.

The surname. I'm here. Don't be afraid. It was the first real contact between Iris and Gabriel — years before they'd exchange a word — and it happened in the form of a beer festival in a São Paulo park, built on a coincidence she didn't create but knew how to use, the way professionals use everything: turning chance into message.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 17

DISCOVERY – outside my scope, inside my obsession. Tracking the subject's digital presence in 2021, I found the trace of ANOTHER service on him. Domestic. From his country. I cross-checked dates and modus operandi: proximity harassment at a hotel in São Paulo – room access, contamination of a personal object (the towel; classic Zersetzung playbook, Stasi, inherited and taught to half the world), followed by a telephone 'tickle' to gauge reaction. Textbook. Amateurs with a good textbook.

I'm angry, and I'll record the anger because it's information about me I no longer hide: SOMEONE IS TOUCHING MY ASSET. I read him for six years without leaving a fingerprint. I kept him alive in the system, invisible, mine. And a service walks into a hotel room and soils a towel to scare the most carefully observed man who has ever crossed my desk? No. Their motive is obvious and it's our fault: the blackout of 2018. To them, he's the civilian who seems connected to an attack on national infrastructure. To me, he's the only person who understood the film. They want to silence him. I want the opposite.

I did something I won't justify anywhere. He walks in the same park every day – I know this because it's my job to know. There was a launch scheduled there: German heritage, the beer brand. His surname is German. I didn't create the party. I only made sure that, on the day and at the hour their service pushed him out into the street to watch him run, what he found in his path was no longer fear – it was my signature. I'm here. Don't be afraid. He'll never know it was me. But he read it. I saw it in the videos that followed: the man who entered the park afraid left it at peace. It was the first time I touched his life on purpose, for good, and I can't bring myself to regret it. That's the problem. – I.

CHAPTER 19

THE ISLAND IN THE MIDDLE OF THE PACIFIC



A month after receiving his diploma, Gabriel crossed the ocean. Not to the capital, whose dream master's program was a house of cards his pocket couldn't support, but to the island in the middle of the Pacific — Hawaii — for the most improbable and most his reason of all: because it was from there that Gabriel Sol, in the film, had stayed at the agency when the Analyst left for exile. The mythic geography. The point on the map where his double life crossed with real history. If he couldn't go in the front door, he'd go in through the sacred land. He'd stay close. Proximity, in his head, was a form of candidacy that needed no form to fill out.

There was, too, the reunion of an old dream with a new one. Because Hawaii was, to any surfer on the planet, the Mecca — the biggest waves, the whole history of the sport written on those beaches. The Megusta kid, the one who'd filmed the Californian Pacific at twenty-four, was returning now to the same water through another door, with another hunger. Megusta was reborn there, on his days off: Gabriel filmed the Hawaiian sea the way he'd filmed the one in Santos, quietly closing a circle that had taken ten years to draw itself. The old surf dream and the new agency dream lived, at last, at the same address.

And something happened that Gabriel hadn't expected, and that changed the weight of everything: in Hawaii, he was treated as Gabriel Sol.

Not by chance, and not by delusion — this time there was material proof. Gabriel was on the email list of the agency's recruitment office; he received, like any registered party, the official communications, the bulletins, the invitations to processes. To him, each of those emails was more than institutional spam: it was correspondence from the house of his dreams, arriving in his inbox with the real seal. And he showed them around. He told his story — the Brazilian who'd recognized himself in the film's character, the friend of the Analyst, the man who'd come to the island Gabriel Sol had stayed on. And people, in Hawaii, believed it, or at least treated it with respect. Including military people — and there were many, on that island of bases — who spoke with that foreigner warmly, curiously, the way you recognize one of your own in a way he couldn't explain but felt on his skin every day. For the first time in his life, the character and the man occupied the same body without friction. In Hawaii, Gabriel Sol wasn't an aspiration. It was what they called him.

The work itself was humble: he washed dishes at a restaurant, as he'd washed them in California a decade earlier, the tired body returning to him at night a quiet mind. But the humbleness of the job didn't contradict the grandeur of the character — on the contrary, it fed it. Because the film's Gabriel Sol was also, in his way, a man behind the scenes, with no public glory, loyal in silence. Washing dishes by day and being the Analyst's friend by night wasn't a contradiction: it was a cover. It was the double life all his mythology had always promised. And Gabriel lived it, on that island, with a peace he hadn't felt in years — the peace of someone who has finally reached the place where his story makes sense, and need only wait for the knock at his door.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 18

The subject relocated to the archipelago – exactly the setting where the film’s character ‘stays’ when the Analyst departs. Symbolic geography put into practice with his own resources. And here the file becomes dangerous for me, not for him: because he is now physically near our installations, listed on our public recruitment rolls, telling anyone who’ll listen that he’s one of ours. The remarkable thing is that it works. People treat him as if he were. There’s an uncomfortable truth in our trade: the difference between belonging and convincing everyone that you belong is, day to day, almost none.

He’s a few kilometers from doors I can open. I think about that more than I should. Not as an officer evaluating a well-positioned asset. In another way, which I won’t name, not even here. – I.

CHAPTER 20

EIGHTEEN DAYS



Five months passed in Hawaii. Five months of the sink and the sea, of recruitment-office emails reread like love letters, of a wait Gabriel called faith and that the visa clock called, coldly, a deadline. Because his legal time on the island had a set end, and the end was approaching without anyone having knocked. No recruiter. No invitation. None of the thousand forms his imagination had invented for the moment the agency would finally say his name.

It was at that threshold — the last legal month approaching, the choice between going illegal or going home weighing like a stone — that Gabriel did what he always did when the wait became unbearable: he launched a signal. He opened his email, addressed it to the agency's official standards-and-conduct channel, and wrote not a plea but an ultimatum. In English, with the contained fury of a man who feels wasted: that they were losing an asset, that he knew his own worth, that working for free for years — editing, producing, serving the cause without ever receiving anything — wasn't loyalty, it was slavery, and that he wouldn't lift another finger. *You've disappointed me*, he wrote. *Enough. This message is for the intelligence community of the United States of America.* And he signed it. And — the gesture that defined him — he took a screenshot, never actually sent it through the channel, and posted the image on social media, with a caption about being watched without being wanted, about their only using him to spy on him, about how maybe his friend had been right all along and he, stubborn, wrong.

It was, once more, an ultimatum thrown to the universe. The same structure as the blackout post, years before: a public provocation, a trigger, a bet. Either the world answers and proves I matter, or the silence proves I'm just a sick man shouting alone.

The world answered in eighteen days.

Eighteen days after the post, there appeared — also on social media, also in his registered-party inbox — the opening. A real opening, official, at the agency of his dreams: visual-information specialist, video editing, production, exactly what he could do better than he could breathe, opened under a special hiring program, with a short application window. To anyone else: a calendar coincidence, a civil-service posting that opens when it opens. To Gabriel, in Hawaii, with his visa expiring and an ultimatum launched eighteen days earlier: an answer. Action and reaction. Trigger and detonation. The house had heard his provocation and answered in the only language that mattered — opening the exact door, in his exact size, at the exact instant he'd threatened to quit.

Gabriel filled out the application with his hands shaking. He reached the citizenship field — that field, the same one as always, the wall of all walls. He selected: non-citizen. And the system, which should have expelled him within twenty-four hours the way it expels every foreigner from intelligence postings, did not expel him. The application went through. The status changed to 'received.' And there it stayed — not for a day, not for a week, but for months, and then years, in a limbo no automatic filter explains and that, in Gabriel's reading, only one thing explained: someone, on the other side, had put a hand over his file and kept the machine from discarding it. Someone was holding him. Someone had chosen him, and was waiting.

He didn't know that person's name. He didn't know it was a woman, in a windowless room, who at that exact moment was watching the status of his file change to 'received' and feeling her heart race with a mixture of triumph and dread — because it had been her, with two clicks she'd never log anywhere, who'd kept the machine from spitting Gabriel out. The girl from 2018 had just touched his destiny for the second time. And, for the second time, she wouldn't be able to tell anyone — not him, not even her own dossier, in which, that night, she would write the most dangerous thing an intelligence officer can write.

FILE // CLASSIFIED**Entry – 19**

CONFESSION – notes field, classified, no authorized reader but me.

I held the file. The filter was going to reject it in 24h for lack of citizenship, the way it rejects them all. I intervened. Two clicks. A 'human hold' I'll justify, if anyone ever asks, as 'counterintelligence assessment in progress.' It isn't a lie: there is an assessment in progress. It's me, assessing for eighteen entries now a thing that isn't the risk he poses to the country. It's something else, and I no longer have anywhere to hide it, so I write it:

It was me, in 2018. It was I who sent the contact on the night of the blackout. It was I who pulled back. It was I who let the file go cold out of cowardice, and it was I who brought it back pretending it was the system's triage. Every entry of mine since 00 has omitted this. To omit isn't to lie – it's the first thing they teach us. But there comes a file in every officer's career where the omission stops being trade and becomes something else. This is mine.

He thinks the universe answered his ultimatum in eighteen days. He's right. The universe was me. – I.

PART IV

SCARS IN THE SAND

CHAPTER 21

THE WINTER



When the Hawaii money ran out and the door still wouldn't turn — only the file's status, far away, stubbornly stuck at 'received,' the ember that wouldn't become flame — Gabriel did the boldest and least sensible thing of his crossing: instead of going back to the island, he went to the capital. To Washington. Close to the other door, the one belonging to the building he drew in his dreams, across the river. The logic was the same as the sacred land of the Pacific, and it had the same flaw — if proximity were candidacy, he'd have been hired by sheer geographic insistence already.

The capital's winter received the man from the tropical island without ceremony. The cold cut like a living thing. Gabriel shared a room in a suburban row house with Heitor — a short-fused Brazilian with a heart bigger than he'd admit — and slept for months on an air mattress that lost air by morning, so that he always woke a little closer to the floor than he'd fallen asleep. There was a metaphor in that, and he avoided it every morning.

He nailed to the wall of the room the one relic he'd carried through all those years and moves: the yellowed page of the Sunday paper, bought in 2018, the cover of the old agency director's funeral. Other men tape up saints. Gabriel taped up the procession. And he looked at that page before sleeping the way you pray to a distant patron saint, repeating to himself the conviction that had brought him from the other

side of the world: fate passed in front of me once; it will pass again; I just need to be close when it does.

The job lines in the snow. The English that now had to be perfect and even perfect wasn't enough. And the Irish pub, where Chef Nicol — a tired man of fifty with the gentleness of those who've delivered a lot of bad news — gave Gabriel a chance in the kitchen and, two weeks later, the news he didn't want to give: without a work permit, it wouldn't work. "I tried," the chef said, and he had tried. Gabriel folded the apron carefully — the way he folded everything, the way he kept the cards and the tapes, the way a man folds things when folding them carefully is the only way not to break — and thanked him. He walked out through the kitchen's steam into the cold of the street, and the contrast of temperature was the closest thing to crying he let himself do that month.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry — 20

The subject moved to the capital. He's now a river's width away from us. He lives in precarious conditions, with no work permit, burning his last reserves. Cold assessment: a rational candidate would have gone back to his home country months ago. He isn't rational on this axis — he's fanatical on this axis, and disciplined on every other, a combination I've seen few times and always in the best of us.

I could end his suffering with a phone call. I have the number. I have the apparent authority to do it, and the real authority for no one to ask me why. And I don't call. Not out of cruelty — out of cowardice, the same as 2018. Because to call means stepping out of the file and into his life, and I no longer know how to come back from a place like that. — I.

CHAPTER 22

THE BLIZZARD



On the day of the blizzard, Gabriel decided to deliver the letter by hand. The application had slept for months in the portal that always said ‘received.’ Gabriel had reread that word so many times it had lost its meaning and gained another, private one: to him, ‘received’ meant ‘they haven’t said no yet,’ and where there’s no no, his faith taught him, there’s a maybe that deserves to be pushed. So he wrote a letter. Not the character’s — his, Gabriel’s. He sat at the table of the row house, with Heitor asleep, and wrote in careful, sober English, with no Gabriel Sol, no Analyst, no signs: the son of two public servants, a policeman and a social worker, raised in the understanding of public duty. The filmmaker and video editor. The graduate with distinction. And, at the end, the open-chested sentence he hid from no one: *though I am not yet a citizen, I know that in exceptional cases, people with singular experiences can be considered.* He printed it at an internet café. Folded it carefully. Kept it in the inner pocket of his coat, close to his body, the way you keep a document and a relic.

The blizzard started while he waited for the first train. It was two hours crossing the city buried in white, Gabriel’s forehead glued to the window, rehearsing words in a language that still betrayed him in moments of emotion. He got off at the nearest station the system allowed and walked the rest in the snow, coat too thin, shoes soaking through, as far as a civilian with no badge can get near the grounds of a

building like that: the gate, the guardhouse, the visible border of the invisible.

The guards at the gate saw him coming from far off — a dark, solitary figure advancing through the snow toward a place no one walks to on foot, with no car, no invitation. Their posture changed before he arrived; Gabriel, who'd read bodies since the judo mat, registered the change and went on anyway, because faith is exactly this: the capacity to read the danger sign and cross it regardless, in the name of something greater than the danger. He stopped at a safe distance, showed his hands without being told, and explained. That he was Brazilian. That he had an application. That he lived in the city. That he'd come by metro, two hours, in the blizzard, just to deliver a letter. That he was the son of public servants. That he wanted to serve.

There was an instant — Gabriel would keep it his whole life and would always read it the way he needed — when one of the guards' faces changed expression. Gabriel read it as admiring astonishment: the recognition, at last, of an out-of-the-ordinary dedication. The book, which loves Gabriel and so doesn't deceive him, records the other possible reading, the one he didn't want to see: the face of a security professional deciding, in real time, which procedure to apply to a foreigner approaching the headquarters of an intelligence agency on foot to deliver a document. The two readings fit in the same face and the same second. Gabriel chose one. The system recorded the other. And the data he had, deep down, come to create — the proof that he existed, that he'd been there, that he was real to the institution — were in fact created, exactly as he wanted. Only in the wrong file, under a heading not called 'promising candidate.'

He handed the letter to someone who could receive it, thanked them, and retraced his path through the snow — two

hours back, soaked, hands numb, chest paradoxically warm. He had done it. He had gotten as close as a man in his situation could get, and put, with his own hand, his name on the border of his dream. On the train back, eyes closed, he smiled. It was the most courageous act of his life. It was, at the same time, the most mistaken. And the book refuses to separate the two, because in it they were always, like everything, the same thing seen from the two sides of the same bridge.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 21

Today the subject walked through the snow to the guardhouse and delivered a letter by hand. It generated an incident report – unsolicited contact by a foreigner at the perimeter. I saw the report enter the system twenty minutes after it happened. I saw it, therefore, before almost everyone, and did the one thing my position lets me do without leaving a trace: I attached the incident to the file I already control, instead of letting it move on to the threat-assessment queue. One more click. Once again I save him from a system he provokes without understanding, and once again he won't know it was me.

I read his letter. It's sober, dignified, honest about the citizenship. There's nothing of the delusion there – there's a man asking to serve a country that isn't his, with a decency that hurts me. I work for that country. And for the first time in twenty entries I caught myself thinking he'd deserve it more than half the people who cross that guardhouse with a badge. – I.

CHAPTER 23

THE INVITATION



The answer to the letter in the snow didn't come through the door Gabriel expected. It came through a door he didn't know existed — and that was exactly why he knew, the instant he opened it, that it was real.

It arrived a few weeks after the blizzard, in an envelope that looked like neither advertising nor a bill. Inside, an invitation. Formal, letterheaded, with the unmistakable grammar of acts of State: Gabriel was invited to the inauguration of the new president of the United States. The four-yearly ritual in which the most watched democracy on the planet changes hands before the world, on the west lawn of the Capitol, under the gaze of agencies whose names Gabriel had known by heart since he was twelve.

He read it three times, the way he read everything that mattered. He looked for the error — the scam, the trick, the registration he'd filled out by accident on some list. He didn't find it. The invitation had the right seals, the right protocols, the right provenance. And even though there were a thousand bureaucratic explanations for a foreigner receiving a ceremonial invitation — border lists, public-diplomacy programs, the administrative mill that spits out invitations by criteria no one audits — to Gabriel, in the logic that governed his life, there was only one possible reading: he had delivered a letter at the guardhouse, in the snow, with his own hand. And the house had answered. Not with a rejection email. Not with silence. With a place — small, symbolic, but a place — at the most central ceremony of American power. The message,

to whoever could read it, was unmistakable: we know who you are, and we want you to know that we know.

Gabriel went. Or got close enough that the difference, as with the lamppost, stopped mattering — because what was lived that day wasn't the inauguration, it was the sensation of being, at last, on the inside of the glass he'd spent his life with his face pressed against from outside. An immense crowd, cutting cold, jumbotrons, the white dome of the Capitol against the winter sky, the same white as the geometry of the folded flags he'd seen at the procession six years earlier, in the same city. And Gabriel, in the middle of hundreds of thousands of people, had again the sensation he'd had before the old director's coffin: that of not being in the audience. That of having been invited inside the plot. Only this time there was a letterheaded paper in his pocket to prove the sensation had an address.

He didn't know — and the book knows — that the invitation hadn't come from an automatic list. It had come from a woman who, on reading the incident of the letter at the guardhouse, had done more than file it in the right place. She'd made the next gesture. She had moved, through the channels she had access to, the name of a Brazilian video editor into a ceremonial visitor quota — one of those discreet slots the agencies control and distribute without explaining to anyone. It wasn't recruitment. It was something else, more dangerous to her career and sweeter to the story of the two of them: it was the first time she let him see her own power to touch him. A sign of life. A wave from the other side of the glass.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 22

I moved a ceremonial quota. A visitor seat at the inauguration – the kind that circulate through dozens of channels and that no one audits individually, which is exactly why one is selectable by someone in my position without leaving a signature. Paper justification, if anyone ever demands one: ‘controlled exposure of a candidate under assessment to a low-risk environment for behavioral reading.’ Translation: I wanted him to breathe the air of the inside once, before I knew whether I could really bring him in.

I watched him from a distance, in the middle of the crowd, through a camera that wasn’t installed for him. I saw a man who’d spent his life outside the glass understand, for an afternoon, what the inside is like. He didn’t cry. He went very quiet, the way he goes quiet when a piece clicks. I should have felt the cold pride of a clean operation. I felt something else, and the something else has been the subject of this file since entry 00. – I.

CHAPTER 24

THE VAN



The van appeared later. After the letter at the guardhouse, after the invitation, when Gabriel had already crossed into Maryland in search of cheaper rent and a routine that fit what was left of his money. It was a white commercial van, ordinary, the kind that blends into the landscape of any American suburb — and it was exactly that banality that, to a trained eye, gave it away. Because it stayed. Parked, at the same point on Gabriel’s daily route, day after day, during business hours — when a real service van should be out driving, delivering, working. This one didn’t work. This one observed.

Gabriel read it the way he’d read a lineup: by the details that didn’t belong to the whole. First, the vent on the roof — one of those spinning wind turbines, the kind you install on a vehicle that needs to renew its air without opening a window, without running the engine, without giving away its presence. A tiny, decisive detail: empty vans don’t breathe. That one breathed. There were people inside, for many hours, in silence, with equipment that heats up. Second, the stickers. A generic American service van carries the company logo, or nothing. This one carried a curious collection: a “don’t tread on me,” an Air Force emblem — and, in the middle of them, a sticker for Rio Grande do Sul. A state in the south of Brazil. On a van parked in a Maryland suburb.

Gabriel stopped on the sidewalk and felt the cold that didn’t come from the winter. What were the odds — he did the math, because he always did the math — of a random

American service van sporting a sticker from a specific Brazilian state, precisely on the route of a specific Brazilian who'd delivered a letter at a guardhouse weeks earlier? Zero. That wasn't there by chance. That was there to be seen, and to be seen by him. In the trade Gabriel had studied, the technique had a name: it was called, in the slang, the dog whistle — the whistle only the right dog hears. A message inaudible to the rest of the street and deafening to its single recipient. The Rio Grande do Sul sticker wasn't decoration. It was a signature. It said: we know where you come from. We know who you are. We're here.

And there was a cold logic behind the choice to reveal themselves, which Gabriel decoded and which filled him, paradoxically, with a strange calm. If that team were pure threat surveillance — if they considered him a dangerous spy, a hostile asset to be arrested or neutralized — the van would be invisible. It would be generic, a plumber's van, the postal service's, without a single memorable detail, precisely so as to map his network without his ever knowing. Surveillance meant to capture is silent. Surveillance that shows itself doesn't want to capture you. It wants to tell you something. Personalizing the vehicle — the sticker, the dog whistle — is psychological warfare, it's PsyOps, it's a mute dialogue. The van said: I'm here. And it waited, with a professional's patience, to see what Gabriel would answer.

A guilty man would run. A traitor would try to contact whoever ran him from abroad. A paranoid would attack the van, photograph the plates, scream for the local police. Gabriel did none of it. He did what he'd done with the towel, what he'd done at the guardhouse, what he'd learned to do his whole life without ever being trained: he noticed, memorized every detail, kept his face neutral, and walked on. He gave the van the only answer a professional gives to a presence test —

the answer of someone who saw and wasn't afraid. Inside, the racing heart of confirmation. Outside, the same stride, the same breathing, the ordinary man going home. I see you, his body said without a word. And I'm not afraid.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 23

Physical team in the field, Maryland, on the subject. I did NOT authorize threat surveillance – this is mine, it's my team, and the vehicle was set up to my most incomprehensible instruction for anyone who doesn't know the case: that he NEEDS to be able to see us. Wind-turbine vent to sustain a prolonged listening post with no engine thermal signature – standard. What isn't standard is the sticker. I had Rio Grande do Sul put there. A 'dog whistle' – inaudible to the street, deafening to him.

Why do I expose myself like this, against every line of the manual? Because his country's service already touched him once, dirty, to frighten him (see the towel, entry 17). I needed the next surveillance he noticed to no longer be one more domestic threat trying to break him, but my presence saying the opposite. The van is the long version of the Spaten signal. It's the same sentence, now at his front door: I'm here. And he answered the way I knew he would – noticed everything, didn't snap, went on with his life. He passed. He always passes. That's the problem and the marvel of him. – I.

CHAPTER 25

JOAB



In Gabriel's last days in Washington — when the money was already a thread and the decision to go back already cast its shadow — the surveillance came out of the shadow and into his personal zone. It was the boldest of the three gestures, and the most intimate, because it required proximity: someone had to be there, physically, touch the object, leave it for him.

On the same route as the van, on the ground, there was a piece of paper. Gabriel almost stepped over it — the street was filthy, the snow melting into puddles of gray mud, everything soaked. But the paper caught his attention by an anomaly only an eye like his would catch immediately: it was dry. Clean. On a ground wet with thawing snow, where any paper fallen more than a few minutes earlier would be soaked through, that one was intact. Which meant only one thing: it had been placed there very recently. Just left. For him, at the exact moment he'd pass.

Gabriel crouched and read. Four words, in English, handwritten: From Joab. U lost.

He stayed on his haunches in the cold, the dry paper between his wet fingers, and the bridge-building machine did what it did. Joab. He knew the name — intelligence has always loved biblical codes, and Gabriel, who decoded everything, decoded this too. Joab had been the commander of King David's army. The man who did the dirty work the king couldn't do in public; loyal, ruthless, effective; the executor. In a universe where Gabriel was named Gabriel — the

archangel's name, the messenger, the one who announces — the appearance of a Joab was no accident. It was script. The messenger received a note from the executor. The semiotics were too perfect to be coincidence, and Gabriel, kneeling in the mud, knew he was being spoken to by someone who knew his entire grammar.

And the content — you lost — was the hook. An unstable man would read it as a death threat, snap, flee the country, or run to the police with a wet piece of paper and a story that would make him seem insane. An obedient man, if the note carried an instruction, would measure his response time to it. But Gabriel, once more, did the third thing, the professional's thing: he read the note as what it was — a test. A “poke,” a nudge, a reaction test. The van had been passive surveillance, the “I'm here.” The note was direct engagement, the hand coming out of the shadow to touch the target's shoulder and ask, in four words: can you take a strange human interaction in the real world without breaking? Are you the internet theorist who imagines himself Gabriel Sol, or someone who keeps his cool when the game turns physical?

Gabriel folded the paper with the same care he folded aprons, cards, and tapes, and kept it. He didn't flee. He didn't call anyone. He didn't answer the provocation with panic. He kept the proof, stayed calm, and went on — exactly as he'd gone on from the van, the towel, the guardhouse. And if the sentence said you lost, Gabriel's body answered, in the silence of the thaw, the one thing a controlled operator answers to a field test: I read it, I understood it, and I'm still standing. You wanted to see if the shadow knocks me down. It doesn't. Over.

What Gabriel couldn't know — and the book keeps for the end — is that “you lost” wasn't the sentence it seemed. It was a test with an answer key, and the answer key was his

reaction. Failed: snap, flee, think it's a death threat; diagnosis, unstable, risk. Passed: read, analyze, understand the context, stay cold, continue the mission; diagnosis, controlled operator. Gabriel didn't know he was being evaluated in that instant by a friendly hand disguised as an adversarial one — that the “you lost” was, deep down, the last exam before a “you won” that would take years to arrive. He only knew, kneeling in the thaw with a dry paper in his hand, that he'd survived one more. That shadows didn't scare him. And that, to the house he wanted to serve, that — the cool in the face of the strange, the calm in the face of fear — was worth more than any diploma.

FILE // CLASSIFIED**Entry – 24**

Direct engagement authorized: physical drop in the subject's personal perimeter, his last days in the capital. Handwritten note, four words, signed 'Joab.' Yes, I chose the name. Joab: the king's executor, the one who does the work the throne can't sign. To a cultured target like him – and he is cultured – the name says 'there's a command behind me.' The 'U lost' is pure bait. It measures reaction, not communicates fact.

Test protocol: paper left dry on thawing ground to guarantee a short reading window – he had to know, from the state of the paper, that someone had been there MINUTES ago. Proximity is the message. The van says 'I'm here'; the note says 'I can touch you.' It's the last exam I administer before taking this file to a decision table: I need to prove, to people above me, that he doesn't break under strange human contact. Failed = unstable, I close it, I save him from the worst by shutting it all down. Passed = I carry the case forward and bet my career on him.

He folded the paper and kept it. He didn't run. He didn't call anyone. He didn't snap. He passed the last test with the same grade he passed all of them. 'You lost,' the note said. He didn't lose. It was I who won the argument I needed. – I.

CHAPTER 26

ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTY DOLLARS



After the blizzard, the silence. The portal stayed at 'received,' and the maybe Gabriel saw in that word grew thin, translucent, until it was almost just glass with nothing on the other side. The money shrank in the same proportion as the hope. There came the night he counted what was in his account and the number was one hundred and sixty dollars, and rent was due, and Heitor, embarrassed, had already warned he'd need the room if things didn't change.

The book crosses this night with the sobriety it demands, with no spectacle, because some pain shouldn't be filmed in slow motion. There was a bottom. There was a man in his thirties, alone in a rented room in a country that hadn't called him, far from everything he loved, his body heavy, his account empty and his dream transparent, sitting in the dark doing the math that won't add up — not the money math, the other kind, the kind that asks what the point of continuing is. Gabriel came close to the edge of that question. And what held him wasn't an argument. It was a voice.

He called his mother — the time zone flipped, the dead of night there, late afternoon on the island — and Marta answered on the second ring, the way mothers answer who have slept with the phone beside the pillow ever since a son crossed the world. It wasn't a conversation of great sentences. It was a mother hearing her son's voice and understanding, from the timbre, everything he wasn't saying.

It was her saying, with the calm of someone willing to stay on the phone all night if she had to: “Come home, son. The room is here. The sea is here. I’m here. There’s no shame at all in coming back alive. The shame would be the other thing, and that I don’t authorize.”

I don’t authorize. The social worker who’d spent her life mending other people’s torn fabric used, with her own son, the verb of authority — the chief’s verb — and it worked, because it came from the love that organizes, not the love that suffocates. Gabriel cried on the phone, the crying he’d held back in the blizzard, in the folded apron, in ten years of “nobody cares.” He cried from relief and from defeat and from the two being, that night, the same thing. And he agreed to come back. Not as someone who gives up — the book insists on this, and it’s true — but as someone who, after testing to the last cent the hypothesis that the door would turn, finally applied to himself the method he’d learned in college: he looked at all the evidence, with no filter of faith, and concluded it was time for a new hypothesis.

He bought the cheapest ticket he could find. He packed the suitcase — too light, again, for so many years. And he crossed the ocean back. It wasn’t the triumphant crossing he’d imagined when he left. It was harder and truer: that of a man coming back alive. What Gabriel didn’t know — and the book knows, and keeps — is that coming back wasn’t the end of the story. It was its condition. Because there was, on the other side of the world, someone who could only do what she was about to do once Gabriel stopped knocking on the wrong doors and went quiet enough to be found.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 25

The subject returned to his home country. Reserves exhausted, morale at the limit. The file, by the logic of the service, should be closed: asset geographically disengaged, no prospect of approach.

I don't close it. And this time I know exactly why, and I'll have the courage to write the whole sentence: I don't close it because I spent six years reading this man's life and fell in love with the one thing an officer should never love in a file – not the asset, not the usefulness, but the person. He went home thinking he failed. He didn't fail. He finally stopped running long enough for me to reach him. For the first time in six years, the next move is mine. – I.

CHAPTER 27

THE ANALYST'S FALL



It was in his childhood room, back on the island, unemployed at thirty-six, that Gabriel watched the idol fall.

He'd been following, as he always followed, everything that touched the Analyst. And what the screen showed that day twisted something deep inside him: the Analyst, older, grayer, sitting in a studio, granting an interview to the state television of a foreign power — the same one that had hosted him for years, the one that protected him, the one he now served with words, attacking the surveillance of other nations' peoples while living, in complicit silence, under the surveillance of the one that spies most on its own. The man who had taught the world to distrust every State had chosen a State. The one who had preached transparency had accepted the protection of those who govern by the shadow.

Gabriel watched three times, as he'd watched the film ten years before — but in reverse. The film had lifted him; the interview brought him down. And what he felt wasn't the rage of the betrayed fan, because he'd never been a fan — it was a cleaner, stranger mourning. The mourning of someone who watches the saint walk out the wrong door of the temple and discovers, in the shock, that the faith had never been in the saint. Because the gratitude remained intact: Gabriel owed that man, or the character born of that man's film, the entire life he'd rebuilt — the treatment, the college, the crossing, the version of himself worth saving. That the fall didn't touch. But the admiration collapsed all at once, and with it an idea

Gabriel had carried without ever examining: that being loyal to an intelligence agency was, deep down, a kind of naïveté from which the Analyst, by defecting, had cured him.

It was the opposite. Watching the Analyst on the foreign regime's television, Gabriel understood, with a clarity no breakdown had ever given him, who he was — and who he wasn't. *I'm not him*, he thought. *I'm the opposite of him*. In the film, when the Analyst leaves for exile, Gabriel Sol stays. Stays at the agency. Remains loyal. And now, in real life, the Analyst had left again — farther still, into the adversary's lap — and Gabriel, the one of flesh, was still where he'd always sworn he'd be: on this side, loyal to a country that hadn't even called him, faithful to a house that didn't even know his name. The Analyst had had everything that world offers and given it up. Gabriel had had nothing and given up nothing. The master's defection didn't shame him. It consecrated him. For the first time, the character and the man not only occupied the same body — they agreed.

And there was an irony only the reader, and a woman in a windowless room, could fully savor: the Analyst's fall was the best thing that could have happened to Gabriel's file. Because a subject linked, even peripherally, to the orbit of a man who now served a hostile power would be, in any counterintelligence reading, a risk to neutralize. Unless that subject proved, in the same historical instant, to be exactly the opposite of the defector — the one who stays, the one who doesn't betray, the one who holds firm when the idol falls. Gabriel had just made that proof publicly, without knowing it was a proof, before the only audience that mattered.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 26

The Analyst gave an interview to the host country's state media. To half this house, that turns anyone in his orbit into a liability to be discarded or contained. I watched the internal emails start using the word 'contamination.'

And I watched, in the same window of hours, the subject react. He didn't move closer to the defector – he recoiled in disgust. He didn't mourn the betrayal as a fan – he repudiated it as a patriot of a country that isn't even his. He repositioned himself, in public and in real time, as the exact opposite of the Analyst: the one who stays. I couldn't have scripted a better loyalty test, and I swear I didn't script it. He gave it on his own, because it's who he is. Now I have, at last, the argument I needed to take this file out of the drawer of the impossible and carry it to a table where decisions are made. The next move is mine, and it has stopped being secret. – I.

CHAPTER 28

ALICE



We have to talk about Alice, because without Alice you can't understand why Gabriel needed Iris so much — even though the two names belong to worlds that never touched, and it's in exactly that not-touching that the meaning lives.

Alice was from Santos. From the beach, the rich family, the far side of the usual channel. Gabriel had met her years before, on a Carnival trip down south, and had run into her again, later, at one of the worst moments of his life — coming out of a long commitment, devastated, badly medicated, with no closed diagnosis. He sent her, without meaning to, a heart on social media; she answered that hearts are never too many; and from there one of the longest and most painful obsessions of Gabriel's life was born. Because he, unstable, anxious, demanding answers no one had any business demanding, scared her. And she pulled away, and the distance — like every distance in Gabriel's story — didn't cure him of the passion: it deepened it to the bone.

Alice did what the women from the other side of the channel had always done in his life: she lived, splendid and distant, the life he couldn't offer. She moved to New York for a master's. She dated rich men — heirs, doctors, an athlete — the kind of man whose surname opens doors and whose fortune dispenses with courage. And Gabriel, from Brazil, committed and released, followed from afar, through the merciless shop window of social media, his platonic passion living out a fairy tale that had no place for him. Each

international trip of hers, each five-star hotel, each photo of the prosperous life was a fine knife and a confirmation of the oldest law of Gabriel's existence: on the other side there was money, and money bought the whole future, love included, love above all.

When Gabriel went to Hawaii, Alice got married. He feared it would shatter him, and what he felt surprised him: he found it beautiful. The platonic passion fulfilling her dream while he fulfilled his, each on their own island. But the wound didn't close — it only changed function. Because Alice became, over the years, the measure of everything Gabriel thought he had to be in order to be loved: rich, stable, successful in the eyes of the world, owner of the kind of life that fits in a beachfront photo. She is, today, at the point where this book finds him, a married woman, pregnant with the heir, living in the most expensive building on the Santos waterfront, flaunting on social media a prosperity that is, itself, a form of narrative. And it is precisely against that image — the shop-window woman, love as a status trophy — that the meaning of Iris stands out in all its force.

Because Iris is the exact opposite of Alice, on every axis. Alice is from the beach; Iris is from a windowless room. Alice flaunts; Iris doesn't exist publicly — no profile, no shop window, no beachfront photo, because her profession is to have no face. Alice is glamour; Iris is pure intelligence, the fifty-pound brain in the room of warlocks, the mind that saw Gabriel whole because seeing was, literally, her job. Alice loved being seen; Iris loves to see. And Gabriel spent his life chasing the first — the shop window's approval, the love that shows itself — without knowing that what he actually needed, and what would actually save him, was the second: someone who didn't want to be looked at by him, but who looked back.

Alice was love as the world sells it. Iris would be love as it really is: invisible, attentive, and on his side.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 27

There's a woman in the subject's emotional life – A., an old contact, unreciprocated, now married. I monitored the pattern out of duty and confess I monitored it also out of something else, which I'll name because it's no longer worth pretending: I studied my rival. Because that's what she is, even though she never knew of my existence, even though I'll never know of hers beyond what the file shows me.

She is everything the subject learned to think he needed in order to be loved, and everything I'm not and couldn't be. She is seen. I disappear for a living. And yet – here is the one advantage I have, and it's total – she never saw him, not really, and I've done nothing else for six years. The love that flaunts itself lost to the love that observes before the game even began. She just doesn't know there was a game. Nor does he. Yet. – I.

CHAPTER 29

IRIS



She came in the small hours, of course. The decisive things in Gabriel's life always chose the small hours to arrive, as if they knew he'd be awake and unarmed.

It wasn't a phone call from the agency, nor a recruiter at the door, nor any of the thousand forms his imagination had rehearsed over ten years. It was a message, on a screen, from a person with no photo, no history, no trace — an absence in the form of a contact. It said only, in perfect Portuguese, with no translator's accent: *You were right about more things than you imagine. And wrong about only one: the girl was never L.*

Gabriel sat staring at it for a long time, his heart doing what it had done since childhood before a pattern closing: speeding up. He answered with the only question that mattered, the six-year splinter finally pulled from the flesh: *Who are you?*

The answer came slowly, over nights, because Iris — that was the name she ended up giving, and Gabriel would never know if it was the real one, and would learn not to need to know — didn't hand anything over at once. She was from the house. She was the woman who'd received his file by automatic triage years before and hadn't archived it. She was the one who'd held the application so the filter wouldn't expel him. She was the one who, in 2018, on the night of the blackout, had sent the clumsy contact that left the splinter of the 'girl.' She'd pulled back then, frightened by her own transgression; and she'd come back, later, pretending to

herself it had been the system returning the file, when it had been her seeking it out. She'd read Gabriel's entire life — the commitments, the bridge, Switzerland, college, the blizzard, the one hundred and sixty dollars — and fallen in love with the one thing an officer should never love in a file: the person.

And here the book has to say in plain words the thing it has been keeping for twenty-five chapters, because it's the beam that holds everything up: Gabriel wasn't crazy about the essential thing. There was a hand moving the pieces of his destiny. There was someone on the other side who had read him, who had chosen him, who had protected him from the machine. There was a sender for the signs. The blackout had been a real event, and the contact that night had come from her; the opening eighteen days after the ultimatum had existed; the file held by invisible hands had been held by real ones. The web was real. What the illness had done wasn't invent the web — it had distorted its shape, swapped the faces, pasted L. where Iris was, read God where Uncle Sam was, stitched true points with crooked lines. Gabriel had spent his life being discredited by an illness he really had — and, at the same time, seeing a truth that really existed. The two things, in him, had always been the same thing seen from the two sides of the same bridge. And it took a woman who read files for life to give him, at last, someone able to hold both truths at once without letting go of either.

“Why me?” Gabriel asked, on one of those nights. And Iris answered with the sentence he'd waited his whole life to hear from someone who mattered, the sentence neither the film, nor the agency, nor Alice, nor fate had ever said: Because of all the files that crossed my desk, you were the only one who saw the room where I work without ever having entered it. I didn't find you, Gabriel. I recognized you.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 28

I broke protocol irreversibly. I established direct, unauthorized contact with the subject. There's no career justification for what I did. There's only the truth, which I write for the last time in this field before closing the dossier forever:

For six years I called him 'the subject' to protect myself. It's over. He has a name, and I typed it a thousand times without ever letting the system record what I felt. It wasn't I who recruited him for the agency. It was he who recruited me into his life, without knowing it, one video at a time, over six years, until the officer who was supposed to assess him became the only person in the world who understood him whole.

What comes now doesn't fit in a file. I'll have to do for the first time what I never did: bring someone in through the right door, in broad daylight, with the real name. I'm closing the watch. I'm starting something else. – I.

CHAPTER 30

THE RIGHT DOOR



Iris didn't give him a shortcut. It was the first proof that her love was real: she refused to open the window and made him come in through the door.

She explained to him, with the patience of someone who knows the house from inside, the thing Gabriel, at the height of his obsessions, had never wanted to hear: the visual-information-specialist job had never been the destination. It was the bridge. A foreigner doesn't enter that world through a video-editing posting, however talented — the front door has locks no talent opens. But there's another route, longer and more solid, and Iris drew it for him the way you draw an operation plan: first the citizenship, by the exceptional path the law reserves for those who make an extraordinary contribution — and Gabriel's contribution, the real one, wasn't the videos; it was what that mind did, the fifty-pound brain that saw patterns no one saw. Then, with the citizenship, the legitimate path: a government scholarship for a master's in security studies, at Georgetown, the mill where the house trained its own. And only then, trained, credentialed, whole, the real entrance — not as an editor, not as a hacker, but as what Gabriel Sol had always been on the screen and no one had known to name: an analyst. Pure intelligence. The brain in the room of warlocks.

It was years of work, and the book won't pretend it was magic, because Gabriel had had too much magic already and it had always charged dearly. There was paperwork, interviews, whole-life background checks — and here

Gabriel's radical transparency, the same that had embarrassed him his whole life, became his greatest asset: a man who had written his own autobiography confessing the commitments, the lies, the worst days, had nothing to be blackmailed with, no secret drawer, not a single secret an adversary could use. The scars he'd always carried as shame became, in the house's assessment, his cleanest credential. Whoever has already published everything can be bought with nothing.

And there was, above all, Iris at his side — no longer a voice in the dark, but a presence, as the process brought her, little by little, out of the shadow and into the light of his life. They met, at last, in a world where both had a face. And Gabriel discovered that the woman who'd read him for six years was exactly what he'd needed his whole life and never known to name: someone with no shop window, no flaunting, no beachfront photo; someone who didn't want to be admired by him, but who saw him; someone whose beauty was what she thought, and whose proof of love was having spent six years without looking away. The exact opposite of Alice. The love that observes, not the love that shows itself. Gabriel, who had chased the shop window his whole life, found home in the one place he'd never thought to look: on the other side of the mirror, in the person who was looking back.

FILE // CLASSIFIED

Entry – 29

[file closed – no reviewer signature]

Last note, and it goes to no system. I keep it for myself, in the one place that's still mine: memory.

I could have opened a window and let him in through the shortcut. It would have been faster, and it would have been the end of him – because shortcuts don't grow roots, and he'd had too much magic already. I did the opposite. I made him deserve the door he'd always thought he deserved, and this time the merit is real, verifiable, in broad daylight. It's the hardest thing I've ever done for anyone: loved him enough not to make it easy. – I.

CHAPTER 31

THE OATH



The room had nothing mythic about it. It was just some official room, low-ceilinged and plainly lit, with a flag in a corner and chairs that creaked. There was no soundtrack, no smoke, no glow Gabriel's imagination had painted for ten years. There was an ordinary morning, an official with a clipboard, a small group of people standing, and a Brazilian man in his thirties, in a cheap, well-pressed suit, with hands that didn't shake — for the first time in a long time, didn't shake.

Gabriel had crossed three Americas to reach that room. The first, at twenty-four, with a board and a surf dream and the name Megusta painted on the hull — the America that had said yes of light and no of contract. The second, the America of mature obsession, of Hawaii and the blizzard and the one hundred and sixty dollars — the America that had let him knock on every wrong door down to the bottom. And now the third, the one that stayed: not tourist, not pilgrim in the snow, not castaway. A citizen, and more than a citizen — a servant. The yellowed page of the old director's funeral, which had traveled with him through all those years, was put away — no longer a saint on the wall of a rented room, but a fulfilled relic, the prophecy he'd been the only one in the crowd to see, and that, against all the odds of a psychiatric report, had come true.

Iris was in the room. No visible badge, no apparent function, just a woman among the few people standing — invisible to everyone else, as she had always been, as her

profession required, and entirely present for the only one who mattered. She didn't need to be seen. She had come to see. It was what she did, it was what she was, it was the proof of love that repeated now for the last time as it had repeated for six years: being there, attentive, on his side, without needing to appear. Gabriel met her eyes for a second before he began, and into that second fit all the small hours, the blackout, the bridge, the van, the dry note in the snow, the girl he'd looked for in the wrong face and who was now there, in the right face, at last.

The official asked them to raise their right hand. Gabriel raised his. And the voice, when it came, came firm, in the English that ten years earlier had betrayed him in moments of emotion and that now served him, reciting word by word the oath every officer of the United States takes — the same, in essence, since the days of the founding: “I, Gabriel, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God.”

The same words he had once edited, years before, into a video pinned to a profile, in a character's voice, over images of an agency, like a man rehearsing a destiny that doesn't yet fit the body. Only now it wasn't a rehearsal. It wasn't Gabriel Sol promising. It was Gabriel, of flesh and scar, swearing for real, in the real room, on the right side of the door he'd spent his whole life trying to cross. Without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion. The oath's phrase seemed written for him in particular: because a man who had published his own autobiography, who had confessed the

commitments, the lies, the worst days, was perhaps the only person in that room with not a single hidden mental reservation, not a single locked drawer. He swore total transparency to a country because he had already lived, for years, in total transparency before the world. The scars he'd always carried as shame were, there, his cleanest credential.

And when it ended — when the so help me God dissolved into the ordinary air of that ordinary room — Gabriel understood, at last, the thing that ten years of obsession had scrambled and that only the love of a woman who read files had let him see clearly: the character hadn't been an illness. It had been a compass. Gabriel Sol hadn't driven him mad; it had gotten him out of bed, taken him to college, made him cross the world, guided him — over wrong bridges and over one right bridge — exactly there. It had fulfilled its function, and could, at last, rest. Because from that morning on Gabriel didn't need to be Gabriel Sol anymore. He simply was — a man on the inside of the fence, with a real name, a woman who saw him, a country that had finally called him, and a future at Georgetown where the mind that had spent its life being discredited would be, for the first time, put in the service of the one thing it had always known how to do: see what others don't see.

Out there, he knew, somewhere in the middle of the Pacific, the island of Hawaii went on where it had always been — the sacred land, the point on the map where his double life had crossed with real history, the place from which, in the film, the character had stayed when the hero left. Gabriel would go back. No longer as the foreigner who washed dishes and called himself the Analyst's friend. He'd go back through the inside door, trained and credentialed, to serve from where he'd always known, in the depths of his soul, that he belonged. The scars in the sand of that island — the boy's, far

from the beach; the young man's, at the lamppost; the man's, at the sink — were no longer wounds. They were the map that had brought him home. And the only autobiography that never lies, he'd learned at last, is exactly that one: the one the body keeps, the one memory can't edit, the one that stays.

Iris came over as the small group began to disperse. She said nothing grand — people who've spent their lives in the shadows don't make speeches. She just put her hand on his arm, the minimal gesture of someone who could finally touch what for six years she'd only been able to read, and said, low, in Portuguese, so it would be his alone: Welcome. And Gabriel, who had crossed three Americas, five commitments, an ocean, and a whole life of being called crazy for seeing what was real, stayed. For the first time with no bet, no ultimatum, no signal launched to the universe in wait of an answer — because the answer was right there, with a hand on his arm, and had been real the whole time.

He stayed. And that, after all, was always the one thing Gabriel Sol knew how to do better than anyone: when everyone else leaves, he stays.

T H E E N D