

A FEW NIGHTS IN SAN DESVELO

STORIES UNDER THE GARÚA



For the few special people on this plane of existence.

A Few Nights in San Desvelo

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Chapter 1: 2:17 a.m.

The clock reads 2:17.

The day's heat still lingers inside the colectivo. It is trapped in the seat cushions, the metal rails, and the thin floor above the old diesel engine. On every climb, the heat has risen through the soles of the night driver's shoes. Now, on the level road to San Desvelo, the engine is slowly releasing it back into the cabin.

The windows are open. A light, salty breeze blows in from the Pacific, not cool enough to change anything. It only stirs the curtains over the rear windows and carries the smell of diesel outside. Sometimes the dry smell of the cerros comes in. Dust, stone, and something burned, though there is no fire anywhere along the road.

A rosary hangs above the rearview mirror. At one point, the beads have been tied together with thin copper wire. On the larger bumps, the little wooden cross taps against the windshield. Beside it is a faded picture of the Señor de los Milagros. The violet color has turned almost gray around the edges. One corner of the picture has come loose from the glass and flutters in the passing air without falling off completely.

On the inside of the windshield, SAN DESVELO is written in white, hand-painted letters. Beneath it are the names of the towns along the route. The paint is thicker where the painter went over it a second time. Some letters have faded in the sun. At night, the headlights of oncoming trucks make others legible again for a moment.

The road leading south to San Desvelo lies almost entirely in darkness. The headlights reveal the asphalt, the shoulder on the right, and the occasional low kilometer marker. Beyond them begins nothing that can be made out at night. Orange streetlights stand at scattered intervals along the roadside. Some are on. Some are not. For a few seconds, their light passes through the windows and over the faces of the last five passengers before they become silhouettes again.

A woman is asleep with her forehead against the glass. Beside her, a young man holds a plastic bag between his feet. Across the aisle, an older man sits with a jacket on his knees, even though it is warm inside. The other two passengers are seated farther back. In the rearview mirror, the night driver sees only hands, knees, and now and then an eye as they pass beneath a streetlight. Tinny cumbia plays through the old speakers. The left speaker above the door cuts out on the low notes. The right one, in return, carries every scratch on the cassette. The night driver does not know the song by name, but he knows the moment when the singer comes into the chorus too early. It has already happened twice. The cassette has been looping since the bus left the last town.

In the rearview mirror, the night driver sees that the man by the window is looking at him. For a moment, he returns the man's gaze in the mirror. When he turns his eyes back to the road, he realizes he does not know when the man turned his head.

The red aviation warning lights on Cerro Dormido appear first on the dark horizon. Three points that do not blink at the same time. A little later, farther south, the lights of the weather station appear. They stand higher and seem closer, though the road still has several kilometers to go before San Desvelo.

He knows the order. First the cerro. Then the weather station. Then the first low houses on the edge of Las Palmeras. In daylight, the pale slopes, old walls, and the turnoff to an abandoned storage yard appear before them. At night, none of that remains. Only the red lights show that the town is where it is supposed to be.

When the first houses become visible in the distance, one of the passengers knocks twice on the metal rail beside the driver.

"Here."

He takes his foot off the gas. The colectivo does not slow down at once. The old diesel keeps pulling for a while longer, as if it has to be persuaded.

"Las Palmeras?"

"A little before."

He searches the roadside. A low berm of earth. Dark ground beyond it. No house. No lit entrance. No turnoff he can see.

"There's nothing here."

The man gets up and puts on his jacket. He is the man who has been holding it on his knees. Under the jacket, he is wearing a light-colored shirt with the top buttons undone. He takes no bag with him.

"I know."

The driver continues to slow down. Gravel strikes the metal beneath the vehicle. A narrow strip of hard-packed earth begins on the right. Beyond it stand several posts with no wire left between them.

The man looks outside through the open door, though the door is still closed.

The driver brings the colectivo to a stop at the roadside. The engine idles unevenly. The door opens with a metallic jerk and catches halfway. The man pushes it the rest of the way with his shoulder.

Nothing moves outside. The cumbia suddenly sounds too loud. The driver turns it down a little.

"Here again tomorrow?"

The man steps out. His shoes land on the gravel. He stays close to the colectivo, as if he first has to wait for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

"If everything goes well."

"And if it doesn't?"

The man glances back. In the light above the door, his face looks neither worried nor surprised, only tired.

"Then I won't."

He steps away from the light. After two steps, only his pale shirt is visible. Then not even that.

The door slams shut.

The old diesel sputters as the bus starts moving again. The driver gives it more gas than necessary. The wooden cross taps the windshield twice. Tinny cumbia keeps playing through the speakers.

No one asks where the man went. The young man with the plastic bag looks out the rear window for a while longer. The woman against the glass keeps sleeping. The night driver looks into the rearview mirror and then back at the road.

The clock reads 2:17.

The first houses of Las Palmeras stand far apart. Some are built of unplastered brick, others of concrete block with dark formwork stains still marking the edges. Rebar protrudes from the roofs for stories meant to be built someday. Between the houses lie empty lots with low walls, corrugated metal, and piles of sand that are lighter than the road in daylight.

The road through the barrio is dusty. The bus jolts through potholes washed out by the last rain. The Municipalidad has had gravel poured into two of them. The roadbed is now higher there than everywhere else, and the water has cut new channels alongside it. At the wheel, he keeps his speed down, not for the passengers but for the front axle.

A poster from the last municipal election still hangs on a wall. The candidate's face has been bleached almost white by sun and dust. Only his dark hair and part of his name remain. One corner of the poster has come loose and slaps against the bricks with every gust of wind.

MÁS FUTURO PARA—

The rest has been torn away.

Beneath the poster, a black water hose runs across the ground and disappears through an opening in the wall. A plastic bottle has been fitted over a joint for protection. The colectivo drives over it. The hose gives way and rises again behind the vehicle.

In some houses, the glow of old tube televisions flickers behind the windows. For a moment the rooms look blue, then green, then dark again. Three plastic chairs stand side by side in front of one house. No one is sitting in them. In front of another, a mototaxi without a front wheel rests on a block of wood. The tarp over the seat moves in the wind.

A news broadcast blares from one of the houses, so loud in the street that for a moment it drowns out even the bus's old diesel engine. A man's voice reports on a closed section of the Panamericana. Trucks have been waiting there since the afternoon. A representative of the Policía de Carreteras asks drivers to take the detour. The picture in the window changes to a map that cannot be made out from the driver's seat. Then the house is behind the bus.

A window stands open. Dark brown curtains billow outside. No one is sitting in the room beyond, though the television keeps playing.

He drives on.

At a right-hand curve, a street vendor's cart stands close against the wall of a house. JUGOS Y NARANJADA can still be read in faded red letters. Nets of limes and mandarins hang beneath the crooked awning; on the work surface sits a heavy citrus press, dried pulp clinging to its cone. The vendor is gone, and so is his stool. Beneath the cart stand two empty Inca Kola crates and a bucket of cloudy water. In the rearview mirror, the press remains for a moment in the glow of the taillights before disappearing around the curve.

The houses draw closer together. The road widens. At an intersection stands a utility pole carrying three different bundles of cable. One hangs so low that trucks have to move into the opposite lane. A new sticker from the electric company has been pasted on the concrete pole over two older warning notices. Beneath the pole, someone has painted a number on the wall in black. He does not know the number. It has been there for years.

A little later, the bus stops in front of the Municipal Archive.

The building is lit from the outside. Two white lamps above the main entrance work. The third flickers at regular intervals. Above the middle door are the words MUNICIPALIDAD DISTRITAL DE SAN DESVELO. The letters are made of dark metal and cast narrow shadows on the façade. Beneath the sign hangs a smaller plaque listing opening hours that cannot be read at night.

A narrower door on the left leads to the Municipal Archive. An inventory sticker is affixed to the glass, its number too small to read from the street. The community hall is on the right. In front of its door stands a movable metal gate secured with a chain.

Three entrances. One building.

He pulls the parking brake. The lever catches only on the second try. Then he turns toward the remaining passengers.

"Last stop."

No one moves.

The woman at the rear window has opened her eyes but has not yet raised her head. The young man still holds the plastic bag between his feet. One of the two passengers on the back bench looks toward the community hall window as if expecting someone there.

"San Desvelo," the night driver says a little louder. "I'm not going any farther tonight."

A woman on the back bench raises her head.

"Not as far as the Mercado?"

"Tomorrow."

"It is tomorrow already."

For a moment, he looks at her.

"Then later."

The young man beside her laughs softly. Not at the night driver. Maybe at the answer. Maybe because he is tired. The woman picks up her bag and stands.

"Vamos," she says to the others. "The man wants to sleep."

They get out one by one. The woman first. Then the young man with the plastic bag. Then the two from the back bench. At the wheel, he does not count them. He only hears the steps beneath their shoes and the brief rattle of the door whenever someone pushes it open too far.

The last passenger pauses in the doorway.

"What time do you head back?"

"Six."

The man looks toward the road. There is no light in the direction of the Mercado. In the other direction, the illuminated façade of the Municipalidad stands behind him.

"Soon, then."

"If you say so."

The door drops into the latch with a metallic bang.

He is left alone in the colectivo.

It is 2:17 a.m.

He shuts off the engine. The diesel gives two more uneven beats and dies. The cumbia breaks off in the middle of a song. The singer begins a word that never ends.

For a moment, he hears only the ticking of the engine beneath the floor. Metal contracting. A line still vibrating. Then he hears the town.

A dog.

A motorcycle in the distance.

Somewhere, a metal door slams.

For a few seconds, the hum of a fluorescent tube comes from a window above the Archive. Then it falls silent. The exterior lights stay on.

He gets out. The asphalt in front of the Municipalidad has sunk in one place. Rainwater has left a dark rim there, though the hollow is dry. Beside the entrance stands a trash can bearing the town's seal. The upper half was once painted green. The old blue shows through underneath.

The park lies beside the Municipal Archive. None of the lamps are on. Their posts stand along the paths, but the glass globes at the top are dark. One of them is missing. The trees form black shapes between the low walls and the concrete benches. Some roots have lifted the paving stones. During the day, people walk around them. At night, the raised places become visible only when someone trips over them.

As he walks past the park, he feels his hunger. He thinks of coffee. Of a pan francés with butter. Nothing much. Something warm that does not smell like diesel.

Maybe someone is still at the east side of the Mercado. Sometimes the first vendors open early. Sometimes the last ones close late. At the Mercado, it is not always clear which of the two is happening.

Every morning, he takes the same route. Past the Archive. Through the narrow street behind the ferretería. Then left.

The ferretería is closed. Sacks of sand stand in front of the metal shutter, covered by a tarp. No water has collected beneath it. A sign with cement prices hangs on the wall. Three prices have

been written over one another. The oldest is barely legible. The newest one is barely legible too, because someone tried to wipe it away again.

Behind the ferretería, he turns left.

The Mercado Municipal lies dark before him. The large metal gates are closed. A padlock hangs on the middle entrance. Above it, a sign in green letters reads MERCADO MUNICIPAL DE SAN DESVELO. The M in MUNICIPAL is loose on one side and moves slightly in the wind. It lifts a finger's width from the wall and falls back. Again and again.

He stops in front of the locked gates.

Closed. Like yesterday.

Behind the gates stand empty wooden tables, plastic tarps, and stacked crates. One marked PUESTO 28 stands in front of Stall 17. Fish scales and trampled cardboard cling to the concrete; a damp channel leads to a drain held open by a piece of wire.

It smells of fishy water and old oil. Beneath that, faint but distinct, lies the smell of fresh coffee. On the north side of the Mercado, a narrow coffee counter is set into the outside wall, an opening with a metal hatch and a ledge. It is closed now.

Diesel still clings to his clothes, and salt rests on his lips. Even so, he thinks of the paper cup the man at the coffee counter sometimes fills too high.

The smell is not coming through the gates. It leads him toward the south side of the Mercado.

The narrow alley runs along the south side of the Mercado. He knows it. He passes it every night. During the day, delivery vans, handcarts, and crates stand there, none of them belonging to anyone in particular. At night, the way through is clear.

And every night, he hears the market.

A woman calls out the price of limes. Someone answers with the price of jurel. Metal strikes metal. A knife chops against a wooden board in quick, even strokes. Plastic crates scrape across the floor. A man's voice calls:

“¡Bonito! ¡Bonito fresco!”

He stops in front of the alley.

The Mercado is closed.

The padlock still hangs on the middle gate, and nothing moves behind it. Yet the quick, even blows of a knife on wood come from inside.

Someone calls for a crate, a woman laughs, and a voice once again names the price of limes.

Then he enters the alley.

After three steps, the voices are gone.

So is the knife.

He stops. The street lies behind him. Ahead, the alley reaches the back of the building. It is narrower than it looks from outside. On the left is the rear wall of the Mercado, rough concrete marked by dark traces of damp. On the right is a row of locked storerooms. Pipes run above the doors, fastened with wire in several places.

The metal doors are marked with numbers.

14.

15.

16.

The next door has no number.

Where the number should be, a lighter rectangle shows in the paint. The screw holes from an old plaque are still visible. He tries to remember whether the door was also missing its number yesterday. He remembers the doors. Not the missing number.

A single yellow bulb burns above a rear entrance. Beneath it stand a bucket from the Municipalidad that has been painted over and a broom without a handle. At the end of the alley, a closed trash container and two empty fish crates wait.

There is no coffee here. No bread, either, and no open stall.

He turns around.

His footsteps sound louder between the metal doors than they did in the street. When he passes the door without a number, he does not look at it. Only at the entrance to the alley does he stop again.

As he leaves the alley, he hears the market behind him once more.

The sounds begin again behind him: the price of limes, metal on metal, the knife on the board.

The man's voice is gone. In its place, hot oil hisses, and for an instant he smells coffee again.

He keeps walking.

Tomorrow, he thinks. Tomorrow he will buy something.

He thinks that every night.

On the way back to the colectivo, the Municipalidad remains visible behind the dark park. The two white lamps above the main entrance are still on. The third flickers. No one moves in the street. The motorcycle he heard earlier has gone silent.

Between the white stars, the red lights of Cerro Dormido and the weather station blink. For a few seconds, they form a sequence: cerro, star, weather station, star.

Then the rhythm shifts again.

For a moment, he stands still. The stars seem far away. The red lights do not. He does not know why.

Then he walks on.

The garúa drifts into town from the Pacific, a fine coastal mist that turns the air gray without falling as rain.

At first, it lies only between the houses at the end of the street, a low gray layer gliding over the ground without wind. It gathers on metal, windows, and cables until everything is damp without a single drop falling.

He knows it as a film on tools and clothing, as rippled edges on files in the Archive and slick concrete in the Mercado. Today it has come early.

Soon it fills the gutters, the entrances, and every hollow in the street. The tires of a parked mototaxi disappear first; above them, the tarp and handgrips seem to remain without a vehicle beneath them.

Soon he can barely see his own shoes. He feels the ground through his worn soles. Dust. Small stones. A rise in the path. In front of the park, a paving stone has been lifted. Beyond it begins the smoother asphalt in front of the Municipalidad.

He knows the street. He does not need to see it.

In front of the Municipal Archive, the colectivo emerges from the mist. First the upper windows. Then the white lettering on the windshield. SAN DESVELO floats above a gray surface in which the lower part of the vehicle is missing. As he comes closer, the dark body appears. The tires last of all.

The third lamp at the Municipalidad is still flickering.

He opens the door. The wooden cross above the rearview mirror moves slightly, though there is no wind inside the bus. He climbs in and closes the door behind him.

It is still warm inside the colectivo. The engine is off, but heat remains beneath the seats. The passengers' smell lingers: cloth, dust, a little soap, the mandarins from the young man's plastic bag. Diesel underneath it all.

He walks to the back. A narrow strip of paper lies on one seat, perhaps the remnant of a ticket. He does not pick it up. He stretches out on the back bench and folds the jacket beneath his head. Through the front windshield, he can see the exterior lamps of the Municipalidad. Their light does not reach the park. The garúa has gathered at the steps of the colectivo by now.

The clock on the dashboard reads 2:17.

Four more hours of sleep, he thinks.

He turns his face toward the seatback.

Then he falls asleep.

Chapter 2: The Hum

The red Toyota took the last curve before the old quarry in second gear.

The pale dust of the road crunched beneath the tires. To the left, the slope dropped into darkness; to the right, the rock face ran close alongside the car. Dry branches from low shrubs brushed across the doors. Something in the glove compartment knocked against plastic. Then the door popped open. Rafael pushed it shut again.

Rafael knew the Toyota's sounds: the dashboard creaking on inclines, the knocking in the glove compartment on this road. What Inés knew best was the point when a sound became a problem. Until then, she kept driving.

"The red tape is in the glove compartment," she said.

Rafael opened the door. "Not anymore."

"Then in the back."

The road passed the old quarry. In the headlights, the pale, cut faces of the slope appeared for a few seconds. Wide terraces climbed upward and ended in darkness. A rusted conveyor stood at the edge, its framework collapsed on one side.

Trucks had once loaded gravel for the Panamericana here. Since the quarry closed, the access road had led nowhere.

Once a month, it was graded.

Two concrete blocks barred the entrance. A narrow path ran between them onto the grounds. A bent metal sign still hung from one of the blocks. Only a few words of its lettering remained.

PELIGRO

Below it, in smaller letters:

QUEBRADA

The rest had disappeared beneath rust and a gray-brown crust.

"There was a light there yesterday," Rafael said.

"Where?"

"Up there."

Inés glanced at the quarry.

"Not tonight."

She drove on.

Beyond the quarry, the road grew steeper. The air turned cooler with every meter of elevation. Wind from the Pacific came through the open side window into the car. Rafael pulled his jacket zipper higher.

"Window?" Inés asked.

"Won't move."

"It's open."

"Exactly."

Inés closed her own.

Rafael picked up the thermos from between his feet. The emoliente was only lukewarm now and smelled of barley and cinnamon.

"Want some?"

Inés shook her head without looking away from the road.

"I'll ask again tomorrow," Rafael said.

The Toyota slowly worked its way up the mountain toward the weather station.

Rafael held the thermos steady with both feet so it would not tip over in the curves. Inés shifted into the lower gear early. She did not look at the city while the car was climbing. Rafael did almost every time. From up here, distances were easier to judge than down below among walls, rooftops, and the dark, nameless streets.

San Desvelo lay below.

Orange streetlights marked the main roads and a few larger intersections. Between them, blocks of houses, courtyards, and unpaved alleys lay in darkness. To the north, Las Palmeras stretched along the access road. The houses stood farther apart there, with long dark stretches between the few streetlights.

Farther south lay Centro. More lights burned around the Mercado Municipal and the Municipalidad, though hardly anyone was still out. El Alto stretched along the lower slope of the mountain. From up here, the houses looked as if they had been pushed one on top of another. Isolated lamps burned on rooftops and in courtyards.

Only a few cars moved through the city. Their headlights traveled slowly along the streets and disappeared behind blocks of houses. No neighborhood was brighter than the others. There was no strip of bars or nightclubs.

The Municipalidad was lit from the outside. The Municipal Archive on the left, the community hall on the right. Three entrances for a building that had used the same printer for years. The park lay beside the Municipalidad. From above, it was almost entirely dark. The paths between the trees could not be made out.

Rafael leaned closer to the windshield.

"There's still someone driving down there."

"Where?"

"By the archive."

A pair of headlights moved slowly past the illuminated facade.

"Late," Rafael said.

"We're out too."

"We're working."

"Maybe they are too."

The Toyota reached the gate of the weather station.

Rafael got out. The air up here was noticeably cooler than in San Desvelo. The wind swept unobstructed across the slope. The gate's metal bolt was stuck.

"Rock," Inés said through the open window.

Rafael looked down. A flat rock lay in front of the frame. He kicked it aside.

"Wasn't there yesterday."

"It is today."

He opened the gate.

The weather station consisted of a low white building, two containers, a mast with measuring instruments, and several antennas that stood like thin black lines against the sky at night.

The wind had carried salt up here from the sea. Whitish rims clung to the bolts of the exterior brackets. Some metal surfaces had blistered beneath the paint even though there was no water to be seen anywhere around them. Where dust had collected along the edges, the garúa had turned it into a thin, hard crust.

The rear container was older than the rest of the station. A faded sign hung on its side. The sun had bleached the lettering almost completely out of the plastic. Only the year was still clearly legible.

1998

Above it, the outline of a blue logo remained. Below it, parts of two lines could still be made out.

SERVICIO NACIONAL DE METEOROLOGÍA

PROGRAMA COSTERO DE VIGILANCIA

The rest had faded away. Inés had explained to him that the container had been part of an El Niño monitoring program. Beneath the sign, the mount for a rain sensor stood empty.

“A rain sensor up here?” Rafael had asked.

“That’s precisely why,” Inés had said.

Beside the mount was a second, smaller sign. It was torn at one corner and fastened with two different screws. It showed a map of the slopes east of San Desvelo. Thin blue lines marked the quebradas. Several red arrows pointed toward the lower-lying neighborhoods.

Part of the heading was still legible:

SISTEMA DE ALERTA TEMPRANA – LLUVIAS Y HUAICOS

The mount was still empty. A single lamp burned above the station door. Small pale insects clustered around the glass. Inés parked the Toyota beside the generator shed. Farther down, fog lay over the first streets of San Desvelo. Rafael took the tool bag from the back seat and set the thermos on the Toyota’s roof.

“If it’s software again, I’m writing only one word in the report this time,” Rafael said.

“Last time it was only three.”

“And you turned them into twelve.”

Inés unlocked the station. “Sensor three. Wind. Inspect first, name it afterward.”

Inside, it smelled of cold coffee, dust, and warm plastic. Two monitors illuminated the main room. The electrical cabinet hung on the wall beside the door. Several inventory stickers overlapped on its gray metal door. At the bottom, the edge of an old Ministerio del Ambiente logo was still visible. Above it was an inventory label from the Municipalidad de San Desvelo. The newest barcode ran diagonally across both. Beside the cabinet, a cable duct led to the ceiling. Its final section was sealed with black electrical tape. Rafael looked at it.

“There it is.”

Inés set down her bag.

“What?”

“The red tape.”

She looked at the cable duct.

“That’s black.”

“Which is why it wasn’t in the glove compartment.”

On a shelf lay replacement fuses, two packaged filters, and the housing of an old measuring instrument. Beside them stood a cardboard box with writing in marker on its lid:

ANEMÓMETRO – REPUESTO SOLICITADO

Three dates were written below it. The oldest was eight months ago.

“The replacement part from Lima still hasn’t arrived?” Rafael asked.

“Eight months, four calls, and one transfer.”

“Then it’s administratively in transit.”

Inés did not answer.

Inés hung her jacket over the chair. Sensor three had been reporting the same reading for an hour. The wind direction remained constant. The speed did not change either. Inés opened the diagnostic program.

"I'm going up," Rafael said.

He took the flashlight and went outside. Inés sat down at the computer. Sensor three was connected. Signal strength and power supply were normal. No packet loss. Outside, the ladder creaked.

"Housing is dry," Rafael called.

"Cable?"

"Good."

"Contact?"

"Clean."

"Rotor?"

A short pause.

"Turning."

Inés opened the process manager.

"You can come down."

"I'm not done yet."

"I found the problem."

Rafael returned a little later. Pale dust covered his pants, and dark traces of metal marked his hands. On one sleeve, the damp crust of dust had been smeared into a light streak. Inés pointed at the monitor.

"The process is still running."

Rafael leaned forward.

"That's from last week."

"Yes."

"Why is it still running?"

"Because no one stopped it."

Inés ended the process. The wind direction shifted. The speed fell, rose again, and fell once more.

"So, software."

"Yes."

"Are you writing software error?"

"I'm writing software error."

Rafael set the flashlight on the table. Inés began the report.

Before entering the cause, she let the readings cycle through once more. Sensor three now changed with the gusts. Sensor two showed a similar speed, only with the usual delay. The timestamps matched. Inés opened the event log, looked for a restart, and found none.

Rafael wiped his hands on a cloth and put the screwdriver, pliers, and tester back in the bag. Then he looked at the two displays, though he could barely read the numbers from where he stood.

"Stable?" he asked.

"Stable."

"Then we came all the way up here for nothing."

"We checked the sensor."

"And ended a process."

Inés placed the cursor in the Cause field. For several seconds, the only sounds were the computer fan, the clicking of the keyboard, and the wind against the outside wall.

Then they heard the hum. It was quiet. Rafael raised his head. The hum continued. A low metallic tone, steady and scarcely louder than the wind against the station walls.

“Generator?”

Inés listened.

“No.”

They went outside.

The thermos was still on the Toyota’s roof. Small droplets had collected on the red paint. The dust beneath them had darkened, forming narrow rings around each drop.

Below, San Desvelo lay between the cerro and the darkness of the Pacific. The fog had reached more streets. The orange lights looked blurred within it. The Municipalidad was still illuminated. The park beside it remained dark. The hum came from the antennas. The metal masts stood almost motionless in the weak wind. No cable struck a mast. No cover moved. Rafael went closer. Rafael went first to the generator shed. He placed his hand on the door and then on the side wall. The sheet metal vibrated faintly, but at a faster rhythm than the tone. Inés opened the small outdoor distribution box beside the building. The indicator lights glowed steadily. She held the tester to two contacts and waited until the reading stopped changing.

“Normal,” she said.

Rafael checked the lower guy wires of the next two masts. He pulled each one separately, placed his fingers on the fasteners, and waited. One wire gave off a short, high note. The hum beneath it did not change. At the base of the western mast, the grounding cable was secure. Its insulation was brittle but not cracked.

Inés switched off the station’s exterior lighting. For a moment, the building, the Toyota, and the lower sections of the antennas disappeared. The hum remained. She switched the light back on.

“Was that there earlier?”

“No.”

He stopped in front of the first antenna. The hum was not appreciably louder here. Even so, Rafael felt the tone in his teeth.

“Unpleasant.”

They walked between the antennas. The tone vanished between two masts and returned in his breastbone three meters farther on. Rafael stopped in front of the eastern mast.

“Here. Two slow pulses, then a longer gap.”

Inés waited through a complete cycle. “Not the wind. Tension is possible, but not on all the masts at once.”

Inés did not answer. At the foot of the eastern mast, the paint had chipped away. A narrow rust-red streak ran beneath the lower bolt. Beside it was an old sticker, half covered with dust and salt.

ESTACIÓN 04

VIGILANCIA EL NIÑO

Rafael ran his fingers over the old sticker. Muffled cumbia came from the Toyota. When he opened the driver’s door, the hum disappeared beneath the music; as soon as he turned it down, the hum was there underneath it again.

“It isn’t gone,” Inés said. “You’re only covering it up.”

Rafael closed the door. The tone returned in two low pulses, followed by the same long gap. Low.

Pause.

Rafael took the thermos from the roof. The emoliente was cold by now.

“For the sensor, you’re writing software error,” he said. Then he looked at the antennas. “And for that?”

“For that, we have neither a reading nor a cause.”

“So no form for it either.”

They went back into the station. The readings continued to scroll across the monitor. Wind direction, temperature, humidity. The numbers changed. Inés opened the report. In the Cause field, she wrote:

Software error.

In the Action Taken field, she wrote:

Process ended, sensor checked, readings stable.

In the Notes field, she left the cursor blinking.

“Are you putting the hum in there?” Rafael asked.

Inés looked toward the window. “Not without a reading or a cause.”

“Then it stays outside.”

She left the field blank and saved the report. Outside, the antennas continued to hum.

Chapter 3: The First Serving

Maritza Huamán slides back the bolt on the side of her cart and folds down the work surface.

The hinge gives a short crack. Quiet, dry, in the same place as every morning. Maritza presses the surface down with both hands until the two metal braces lock into place. Then she checks the left one first and the right one afterward. The left holds at once. The right one she has to lift and push back down a second time.

The garúa hangs low over the coast. It does not hover above the parking lot but inside it. Between the concrete wall, the closed food carts, and the low buildings on the other side of the coastal road, there is only a gray space that smells of salt, damp dust, and old oil.

From the concrete wall at the edge of the parking lot, on clear mornings Maritza can see as far as the boats lying farther north above the waterline. Some rest on wooden blocks, others directly on the dark gravel. Today she sees only the blue bow of an old boat. The rest disappears into the gray.

A white letter is still visible on the side of the bow. Maritza does not know which one. She has never stood close enough to it. Some days it looks like a P, others like an R. Today it looks like nothing at all.

She puts the large blue cooler beneath the cart. The plastic has faded at the corners. A half-peeled label from the fish vendor at the Mercado Municipal clings to the lid. Only the last digit of the phone number is still legible. Maritza pushes the cooler far enough back that no one will kick it, but not so far that she will have to bend down later.

The limes go beside it. A net of red onions. A plastic dish of ají limo. The choclo and camote are already cooked and waiting in two containers with white lids. She sets the sack of cancha beside the left wheel, where the concrete is slightly higher and water does not collect.

She arranges everything in the same order.

Fish on the left.

Limes in front.

Onions to the right of the knife.

Ají behind them.

The bowls beneath the work surface, beside the tin of change.

Maritza does not need a list. She would only have to hang it where the cloth is now, and she needs the cloth more often.

Maritza takes a lime from the dish.

Her hand stops above the board. She already did this just now.

No. The lime is whole.

Maritza puts it back.

Moisture has collected overnight along the metal edge of the cart. Maritza wipes it away with her apron. The apron was once white. Pale stains from lime and fish water remain on the front, no longer disappearing even after washing.

She runs two fingers along the edge. No rust flake. Good.

The parking lot officially belongs to the coastal promenade of La Playa. It says so on a faded sign beside the entrance, beneath the Municipalidad's coat of arms. All that remains of the promenade is the concrete wall, three streetlights, and a row of square planters in which nothing has grown for years. An empty plastic bottle sticks out of one. Two pale stones lie in the next, neatly placed side by side by someone.

The streetlight behind Maritza's cart is still on. Its orange light ends a few meters before the wall. The other two are off. Maritza does not know whether they are broken or only supposed to come on later. It varies.

She opens the cooler, tests the top fillet with two fingers, and smells it. Firm, cold, salty. That is all it needs to be.

The fillet goes on the light side of the cutting board. Maritza turns the board over on Mondays; today is Thursday.

She picks up the knife. The Pacific cannot be seen beyond the wall. It can be heard. The water runs back over the gravel and pulls small stones with it. The sound comes in long surges, never equally loud but regular enough that Maritza does not have to pay attention to it.

Farther down, a plastic crate strikes concrete twice. Gulls answer one another, and a mototaxi hums through the garúa toward Centro. After that, there is only the sea again.

Maritza sets the tip of the knife against the fillet. The first cut is always the slowest. After that, her hand knows how firm the flesh is and how wide the pieces need to be. Too large, and the lime will not reach the center in time. Too small, and the fish will be lost among the onions and choclo.

Then footsteps.

Four even steps.

A scrape.

Another four steps.

Maritza begins cutting the fish.

Efraín coughs in the fog. She recognizes him by it every morning. By the footsteps and the dry cough that usually starts just before the concrete wall and does not stop until he has gone farther south.

Efraín walks along the beach just beyond her sight. On clear days, his hat appears first and the cane he does not call a cane appears last. Today only his measured pace moves along behind the wall.

Maritza slides the first pieces of fish into a metal bowl with the flat of the knife. She does not count them. She knows by the weight when it holds enough for the first servings.

The footsteps come closer.

Four steps.

A scrape.

"Too cold," a voice calls from the other end of the parking lot.

Maritza does not look up. Down below, the footsteps stop briefly.

"For you," Efraín calls from the fog.

Óscar appears between the streetlight and the cart. The garúa has left tiny droplets in his hair. He carries a folded jacket under one arm. The soles of his shoes are dark with damp dust.

"For everyone," Óscar says.

Efraín coughs. Then the footsteps continue.

Óscar lays his jacket on the concrete wall. He always puts it in the same place, between a crack and a pale patch left by an old coat of paint. Maritza has never asked him why.

"Coffee?"

"No."

"You don't have any?"

"I sell ceviche."

"You had coffee yesterday."

"Yesterday I had coffee."

Óscar nods as if that settles something.

Maritza keeps cutting. The knife strikes the board evenly; speed interests her less than rhythm. Óscar waits until the fillet has been cut up. He knows she does not answer while she is doing it, because otherwise he would repeat his question.

“Am I the first?” he asks.

Maritza stops the knife.

Óscar does not usually ask that. Usually he arrives, sees the first missing bowl, sees the coins in the tin, and says something about the other man having been faster again. Sometimes he claims he will come earlier the next morning. He never does.

Maritza looks at the plastic bowls beside the cooler. The bowls are nested together. Clear, thin, with a white rim. She counted the stack herself the evening before, before closing the cart.

Nineteen.

One for the first customer.

One for Óscar.

The rest for the morning.

Maritza picks up the stack and counts.

Eighteen.

She counts again.

Eighteen.

Óscar watches her. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

“What?”

Maritza puts the bowls back. She opens the small tin beneath the work surface. The lid catches briefly at the right corner. She lifts it with her thumb.

Empty.

The inside of the tin is dry. No money. No damp rim. Only two scratches on the bottom and a dark stain that no longer comes off.

“Yes,” she says.

Óscar furrows his brow.

“Yes what?”

“You’re the first.”

He looks at the cart. Then at the concrete wall. Then behind him toward the coastal road, as if someone might be standing there to confirm his place.

“No.”

Maritza takes a red onion from the net. She checks the outer skin. Dry enough. She places the onion on the board.

“Today you are.”

“I’m never the first.”

“Now you are.”

“Maybe no one was hungry.”

Maritza cuts the onion in half. The dry skin comes loose and sticks to her hand. She brushes it off against the edge of the board.

“Someone is hungry every day.”

Óscar looks toward the beach. The garúa lies even thicker over the water. Even the blue bow of the boat has disappeared. Beyond the wall there is only gray, with the sea sounding through it.

“Maybe he’ll come later.”

Maritza begins slicing the onion into thin strips.

“Then he’ll be second.”

Óscar considers this. He does not look as if he likes the result.

"That won't work."

"Why?"

"Because I'm the second."

Maritza pushes the onions aside.

"Sin mucho ají?"

"Less than the day before yesterday. Yesterday was too much."

"The day before yesterday too."

Maritza cuts off a small piece of ají. Óscar sits down on the damp concrete wall.

Maritza squeezes the first lime. Beforehand, she rolls it once across the board beneath her palm. Then the second. The sharp scent of the peels hangs in the damp air. For a moment it covers the salt, diesel, and the water in the bucket beneath the cart.

She adds salt to the fish, the ají, and some of the onions. With a large metal spoon, she turns everything in the bowl. Three times from bottom to top. Then once around the edge. No more.

Óscar looks at the empty tin.

"Since when?"

"What?"

"The first."

Maritza keeps working. She lifts the lid from the choclo, checks the surface, and closes it again.

"Always."

"No."

"Then since before you were the second."

Óscar rubs his thumb over a damp spot on the wall.

"Have you ever seen him?"

"Who?"

"The first."

"No."

"Never?"

"No."

"And the money?"

"It's there."

"Always?"

"When the bowl is missing."

Maritza says it without looking at the tin. That is how it is every morning. One bowl is missing. The exact amount of money is in the tin. Sometimes in coins. Once as a folded bill with a single coin beneath it. Never too much. Never too little.

She has never heard the first customer arrive. No cough. No footsteps. No engine. No work surface folding down before she slides the bolt back herself. The missing bowl belongs to the order of the morning, like Efraín's cough and Óscar's question about coffee.

Today the bowl is missing.

The money is not.

Óscar looks toward the beach again. Below, Efraín is heading back north. Maritza hears the scrape of his right foot first.

Then the footsteps.

Four steps.

A scrape.

Four steps.

"Coming back already?" Óscar calls.

"Tengo hambre," comes the answer from the fog.

Óscar looks at Maritza.

"He's hungry."

"Then he should come up here."

"¡Hay ceviche!" Óscar calls.

"¡Ya sé!"

Maritza takes the container of camote. The lid comes free with a quiet suction. The pieces are still firm and dark yellow along the cut surfaces.

"He knows."

"He passes here every morning."

"But he never buys anything."

"He says fish in the morning is bad for the stomach."

Óscar looks at the bowl.

"Is that true?"

"No."

"Good."

Maritza places two pieces of camote in a plastic bowl. Beside them she adds choclo and a handful of cancha. Then she takes the metal spoon and fills the bowl with ceviche. She makes sure the onions do not lie only on top. Finally, she spoons some Leche de Tigre from the mixing bowl over it.

She sets the bowl in front of Óscar.

He looks inside.

"That's not much."

"That's the usual amount."

"There was more yesterday."

"You were hungry yesterday."

"Today too."

Maritza holds out her hand. Óscar reaches into his pants pocket. The coins clink. He takes out two, looks at them, and puts one back.

At that moment, Maritza hears something behind her.

A brief scrape.

Plastic on concrete.

The scrape is too close to come from the beach and too short to be a wheel or a crate.

She turns around.

A bowl stands on the wall.

Óscar still has the money in his hand.

Maritza looks at the bowl. It stands exactly where Óscar's jacket does not, just to the left of the crack. A little Leche de Tigre remains on the bottom. Several thin strips of red onion cling to the rim. Between them are two kernels of corn and a small piece of cilantro.

A wooden spoon lies across it. Beside it is a completely squeezed lime half. The bowl has not been set down neatly. One side rests on a damp rise in the concrete, tipping it slightly forward.

Óscar stands up. His jacket remains on the wall.

"Was that there?"

Maritza does not answer.

She looks first toward the coastal road. No one. The closed carts stand motionless in the garúa. The orange streetlight is still on. Then she looks over the wall.

Gray.

The sea drags stones across the gravel.

Efraín's footsteps are farther north. Four steps. A scrape. Too far away.

Maritza goes to the wall and picks up the bowl. The bottom is still wet. Not from the garúa. The liquid is cloudy and smells of lime, fish, and ají.

She sets the bowl on the work surface.

The underside of the bowl is cold. Maritza counts the stack: seventeen. There are now coins in the tin, the exact amount, with a single drop of water on one of them.

Óscar looks back and forth between the money and the bowl. This time he does not argue.

"Then I'm the second."

Maritza puts the coins back.

"Yes."

Óscar sits on the wall again. He moves his jacket a little to the side so it does not touch the used spot.

"Good."

He takes his serving.

Maritza reaches for the knife. She wipes the blade once with the cloth, though there is nothing on it. Then she sets the next lime on the board.

Down on the beach, Efraín coughs.

"¡Maritza!"

She looks into the fog.

"¿Qué?"

"¡Mañana compro!"

Maritza cuts the lime into two halves.

"Eso dices siempre."

Efraín laughs.

His footsteps recede toward the north.

Four steps.

A scrape.

Four steps.

Óscar eats. First the cancha, then the fish. He always does it that way, though every time he says the cancha will grow soft if it sits in the bowl too long.

Maritza empties and rinses the used bowl. She puts it beneath the cart, separate from the clean stack, and takes out the next serving.

There had been seventeen. Now there are sixteen.

The order is right again.

Fish on the left.

Limes in front.

Onions to the right of the knife.

Ají behind them.

Money in the tin.

The second on the wall.

The garúa still lies over the coast. The Pacific cannot be seen.

It can be heard.

Chapter 4: The Sample Book

Pinturas y Decoraciones Vílchez opened at nine. Ernesto Vílchez opened at eight fifty-seven. He lifted the metal grille in front of the display window, pushed it above his head, and waited for the springs to take the weight. He had to push the last section up with both hands. The grille caught. He pushed again. It snapped into the bracket. Ernesto unlocked the glass door and entered the store.

The air smelled of paint, solvent, and dust from the street. Moisture had collected overnight on the inside of the display window. Through the milky glass, the houses across the street could be seen only as pale shapes. Ernesto switched on the light. Two fluorescent tubes flickered. The front one remained dark. He switched the light off. On again. Now all three were lit.

Pinturas y Decoraciones Vílchez was orderly. The paint cans stood sorted by size on the metal shelves. One-liter cans at the top, four-liter cans in the middle, the large buckets at the bottom. The labels faced forward.

Almost all of them.

On the second shelf, the rearmost can in one row stood at an angle. Ernesto had taken it out three days earlier to check the manufacturing date and had not pushed it all the way back afterward.

Interior paints stood on the upper shelves. Beneath them were exterior paint and primer for concrete and unplastered brick. The lower rows held buckets of coatings against moisture and salitre—salt deposits in masonry that loosened plaster on damp walls. Beside them stood smaller cans of enamel for metal grilles, corrugated-steel gates, and the black water tanks on the rooftops.

Some labels had faded around the edges. Direct sunlight entered the store only in the late afternoon, but for years it had always fallen on the same spot.

Beside the register, brushes were arranged by width in shallow cardboard boxes. One lay crosswise over the others. Ernesto had shown it to a customer on Monday.

Paint cards hung from small metal hooks on the wall.

Marfil.

Hueso.

Perla.

Arena.

Niebla.

The cards for the exterior paints were paler than the others. Some customers took them outside, held them against the wall of the house, and brought them back days later. By then they smelled of dust and had bent corners.

The card for Blanco Humo hung on the hook for Blanco Tiza.

Ernesto knew that.

Since February.

Six boxes of painter's tape stood beneath the counter. Five had been pushed flush against the wall. The sixth stood three finger-widths in front of them. It was easy to walk past. That was why it stood there. On the lower wall behind the counter, the salitre had lifted the paint into small flakes. Ernesto had painted over the spot the previous winter. Since then it had grown larger.

He went behind the counter and set his bag on the chair. A thin layer of dust lay on the register. He ran two fingers through it. Then he wiped his fingers on his pants. Above the register hung a calendar from a building-supply dealer in Chimbote. The picture showed a multistory house with a fully stuccoed facade, white window frames, and a garden. The calendar was six years old. Ernesto still used it to write phone numbers on the backs of the pages. Outside, a mototaxi drove past. Its engine grew louder at the intersection and disappeared toward the Mercado. Ernesto took the small radio from beneath the counter and set it beside the register. He turned the dial. A man's voice spoke about the weather in Lima. He kept turning. Cumbia. He left it there.

At nine twelve, the first customer bought painter's tape and primer for an unplastered front wall.

"One coat of primer, two coats of paint," Ernesto said.

The man looked at the price. "One coat is enough."

"Then one coat will be enough." After the man left, Ernesto pushed the sixth box flush against the wall. He studied the straight row, then pulled the box three finger-widths forward again.

At ten thirty-seven, Lucía Salazar arrived. Ernesto knew her by sight. She lived in El Alto, in one of the houses above the old staircase. Her mother had sometimes bought enamel and small brushes from him years ago. Lucía came in and closed the door behind her.

"Buenos días."

"Buenos días. What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for wallpaper for a bedroom."

"Of course."

Ernesto came out from behind the counter.

"Do you have a general idea of what you want?"

"I'm looking for a particular pattern. My mother used to have the wallpaper in her bedroom."

"Then we'll look through the sample books first. Do you remember the colors?"

Lucía set her bag on the counter.

"The background was a pale yellow. Small green leaves, white flowers."

Ernesto placed the dark-blue sample book in front of her. "From what period?"

Lucía remembered her mother putting up the wallpaper. Late eighties, perhaps early nineties.

"That gives us something to search by," Ernesto said.

He flipped past yellow stripes, circles, sunflowers, and little sailboats. Lucía rejected one yellow as too light and the next as too orange.

"Ocre," Ernesto said.

"Then not Ocre."

He kept turning pages.

Lucía ran a finger along the edge of one page.

"My mother liked flowers," Lucía said.

Ernesto remembered the small brushes she had bought and the green paint for a bathroom mirror.

"The mirror was awful," Lucía said.

"I only sold the paint." She laughed.

Ernesto kept turning pages.

After several pages, he closed the book.

"The pattern isn't in here."

"Do you have any other books?"

"Yes. And older stock."

He pointed to the open door behind the salesroom.

"If you have some time, we can look in the back."

Lucía took her bag from the counter.

“I have time.”

Ernesto took the ring of keys from its hook.

“Then let’s try.”

The first wallpaper room was directly behind the store. A long fluorescent tube glowed on the ceiling. Its light was colder than the light in the salesroom and gave the white tiles a faint green tint. The rolls of wallpaper stood upright in wooden racks. Ernesto had attached small labels to the upper edges.

FLORES.

GEOMÉTRICO.

INFANTIL.

RAYAS.

A roll with red flowers stood backward in the rack. The pattern faced the wall. Ernesto walked past it. Lucía stopped in front of one of the racks.

“I had no idea you had so much wallpaper.”

“Most customers don’t.”

“You don’t sell much of it?”

“Not anymore. Because of the salitre, people mostly choose paint now.”

“Does paint help?”

“No.”

Lucía looked at him.

“Then why do they choose paint?”

“Because it comes off again more easily.”

Lucía waited.

“Than wallpaper,” Ernesto added.

“Ah.”

“And the walls are rarely straight.”

“Mine is straight.”

Ernesto looked at her.

“Of course.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“I haven’t seen your wall.”

“Then you can’t know it isn’t straight.”

“That’s true.”

“So?”

“I don’t trust any wall in San Desvelo.”

Lucía smiled.

“And why do you keep all these rolls?”

Ernesto pulled a sample book from a shelf.

“Some of them still belong to my father.”

“The business?”

“The wallpaper.”

“Is your father still alive?”

“No.”

Lucía looked toward the racks.

"Then they belong to you."

Ernesto leafed through the sample book.

"Yes. By now they do."

He held out a page to her. Yellow flowers on a green background.

Lucía shook her head.

"Exactly the other way around."

"Yellow with green."

"Yes."

"And white."

"Exactly."

Ernesto slid the book back onto the shelf.

"Then onward."

In the second room, the patterns were older: brown flowers, green geometry, broad orange stripes. Lucía recognized the cheap semicircle wallpaper from her aunt's living room, which had been very expensive in family memory.

"Then we'll let it stay expensive," Ernesto said.

"She's coming to visit in August."

"Then it was imported."

Lucía laughed, and they continued.

The door to the third room was locked. Ernesto did not know why; his father had always kept it locked, and he had adopted the habit.

The fluorescent tube beyond it was already lit. Its light fell brightly on the two doors but barely reached the racks between them.

"Is the light all right?" Lucía asked.

Ernesto looked up. "It's on."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Then I should ask an electrician."

They continued. In the third room, the top ends of the rolls were visible in the racks, but farther down the colors blended together. A roll leaned against one of the racks. Two lay on the floor. Ernesto stopped at the second rack and pulled the wallpaper out a few inches.

Yellow background.

Green flowers.

He held it so Lucía could see it.

"Similar?"

Lucía stepped closer.

"No. The flowers were white."

"And smaller."

"Yes."

Ernesto pushed the roll back.

Lucía looked at the rolls on the floor.

"It isn't quite as orderly back here."

"No."

"You should set aside an afternoon."

"Yes."

"Will you?"

Ernesto looked toward the next room.

"Maybe."

In the fourth room, the air felt different. Lucía rubbed her thumb and forefinger together.

"It's dry in here."

Ernesto kept walking.

"Yes."

"Much drier than up front."

"Yes."

"Do you have ventilation in here?"

"No."

Lucía looked at the walls.

"Air conditioning?"

"No."

"Then that's unusual."

Ernesto stopped and looked at the racks.

"It's better for the wallpaper."

"That doesn't explain it."

"No."

At the back of the room, one rack stood at an angle. It had tipped forward and was propped against another one. The rolls between them lay in shadow.

"Did something happen in here?"

Ernesto looked into the darkness.

"Not that I know of."

"That rack over there."

"Yes."

"Did it fall over?"

Ernesto studied the dark shape.

"Looks like it."

"When?"

"Before."

Lucía looked at him.

"Before what?"

Ernesto stepped over a roll.

"Before today."

Lucía followed him.

"You really should clean up in here."

"Tomorrow."

"You probably say that often."

Ernesto did not look back.

"Yes."

In the fifth room, the fluorescent tube hung lower than in the others. One end had come loose from its bracket. The light was dimmer. Several dead insects lay in the plastic cover. The racks stood in the dark.

"Wait here."

"Here?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I need to see."

Lucía looked into the room.

"I can't see anything."

"Neither can I."

Ernesto went in. Lucía could see his back for a few seconds, then only his shoulders, then a movement in the darkness.

"Señor Vílchez?"

"Yes."

"Where are you?"

"Here."

Lucía looked into the darkness.

"Where is here?"

Paper scraped across the tile.

"In the back."

"That doesn't help me."

"It helps me."

She heard rolls being moved.

"Did you find something?"

"Wallpaper."

"Mine?"

A pause.

"No."

Ernesto returned empty-handed.

"Do you even know where we are anymore?"

"In the storeroom."

"I mean which room."

Ernesto stopped.

"This one."

Lucía looked at him.

"You know what I mean."

"Yes."

"And?"

Ernesto walked past her to the next door.

"The wallpaper is farther back."

Lucía turned around.

"How do you know that?"

Ernesto put the key in the lock.

"Because it isn't here."

In the next room, the entryway was brighter. The fluorescent tube was mounted directly above the door. The next door was clearly visible at the far end. Between them, a length of wallpaper lay unrolled on the floor. It showed orange streetlights and dark rectangles that looked like houses in San Desvelo.

A roll leaned against the wall beside it. Tiny buses ran across the paper. Each bus had a clock on its front. The numbers were too small to read.

"Do you recognize these patterns?" Lucía asked.

"No."

"Where did they come from?"

Ernesto looked at the paper. "Not from the salesroom."

Before the next door, Lucía asked how many rooms were left. Ernesto said he did not know. To him, there was the store in front and the storeroom in back.

"That one looks like San Desvelo."

"Maybe."

"Did you sell it?"

"No."

"Where did it come from?"

Ernesto looked at the wallpaper.

"From here."

Lucía raised her head.

"I mean before that."

"Before that, it wasn't here."

"Where was it?"

Ernesto thought.

"Before."

Lucía looked at him. Ernesto continued. She followed. To her right, a roll stood at an angle between two racks. In the dim light, she could make out tiny buses on it. Dark buses on a beige-gray background. At the front of each bus was a small white rectangle. A clock. The numbers were too small.

"The buses," Lucía said.

Ernesto did not stop.

"Yes."

"What time do the clocks show?"

"The same time."

"What time?"

"The time on the clocks."

Lucía stopped.

"Why do you talk like that?"

Ernesto turned to her.

"Like what?"

Lucía opened her mouth. She said nothing. Ernesto waited.

"Never mind," she said.

"All right."

They continued. Ernesto stopped at the next door. Lucía looked past him. A bright rectangle.

"How many more rooms are there?"

Ernesto held the key in his hand.

"I don't know."

"This is your store."

"In front."

"And this?"

Ernesto looked back into the dark room.

"In back."

"That isn't an answer."

"Yes, it is."

"Not a good one."

Ernesto unlocked the door.

"No."

They went in. The fluorescent light fell across the entryway. Farther back, it fell across the next door. The racks stood between them. Lucía could make out their outlines. Wallpaper lay on the floor. Some lengths were rolled up. Others were not. Ernesto walked slowly. Lucía stayed close behind him.

"If we don't find it, we're going back."

"Yes."

"Now?"

"If we don't find it."

"And if we do?"

"Then too."

Lucía looked at his back.

"Good."

"Yes."

A narrow strip of paper protruded from a pile of rolls into the cone of light from the next doorway.

Yellow.

A green leaf.

The edge of a white blossom.

Ernesto stopped. He pulled the roll out. Several others shifted. One fell to the floor. Then another. Ernesto waited. Nothing else fell. He picked up the roll and carried it to Lucía.

"This one?"

He unrolled a section.

Yellow background.

Small green leaves.

White blossoms.

Lucía ran her hand over the paper.

"This is it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Ernesto turned the roll. A yellowed label was stuck near the bottom edge. He wiped the dust away with his thumb.

1974

Beside the year was an oval distributor's stamp. The blue ink had almost disappeared. Only two words were still legible.

DISTRIBUIDORA ALCÁZAR.

LIMA.

Lucía looked at the number.

"That can't be my wallpaper."

"You said it was."

"But the date is wrong."

"Then the date is wrong."

"Or I'm mistaken."

"Then you need different wallpaper."

Lucía looked at the white blossoms.

"No."

He wound the paper around the roll again.

"Good."

He tucked the roll under his arm.

"Are we going back now?" Lucía asked.

"To the front."

"What's in front?"

"Going back."

Lucía looked at him.

"That doesn't make any sense."

Ernesto walked toward the door.

"No."

She followed him.

In the sixth room, the lengths of paper still lay on the floor. Ernesto stepped over two rolls. Lucía stopped behind him.

"Those were lying differently before."

"Which ones?"

"The rolls."

Ernesto looked at the floor.

"This is how they're lying now."

"I can see that."

"Then we know."

Lucía said nothing. They continued. In the fifth room, Ernesto's shoe scraped over paper. Lucía looked to the side.

"There was a roll in front of the door before."

Ernesto stopped.

"Not now."

"No."

"Maybe you moved it."

"Maybe."

"Did you?"

Ernesto looked back into the room.

"I was here."

Lucía waited.

"I know that."

"Good."

He continued. In the fourth room, Lucía stopped for a moment. She rubbed her thumb and forefinger together again.

"Is it more humid in here again?"

Ernesto ran his thumb along the wooden edge of a rack.

"A little."

"I didn't notice that before."

"Before, we were going the other way."

Lucía looked at him.

"What does that have to do with it?"

Ernesto thought for a moment.

"Probably nothing."

Lucía nodded slowly.

“Good.”

“Yes.”

They continued. In the third room, Lucía could make out the top ends of the wallpaper rolls more clearly again. She looked at the fluorescent tube.

“You really should have the lighting checked.”

Ernesto followed her gaze.

“Yes. You’re probably right.”

“Do you know an electrician?”

“My brother-in-law.”

Lucía looked at him.

“Is he an electrician?”

“No.”

Ernesto stopped. He frowned.

“Then I don’t know one.”

Lucía gave a short laugh.

Ernesto looked at her. Then he smiled too.

“I’ll ask around at the Mercado.”

“That would probably be better.”

“Yes.”

In the second room, Lucía reminded Ernesto about her aunt once more. He insisted that the wallpaper had been imported and expensive. In the first room, she pointed to the red roll that stood backward in the rack.

“Should I turn it around?”

“Leave it. Otherwise I won’t find it again.”

Then they were back in the store. The radio was playing cumbia. A mototaxi drove past the display window. For a moment, its blue roof was visible through the fogged glass. Ernesto placed the roll on the counter.

“How many yards do you need?”

“Thirteen. The wall is just under thirteen feet wide and about eight feet high.”

“Just one wall?”

“Yes. Behind the bed.”

Ernesto pulled out the tape measure.

“With this pattern, we need to allow some extra. The strips have to line up.”

“Is that difficult?”

“Not especially. You just can’t cut each strip separately without matching the pattern first.”

“I’ve never hung wallpaper before.”

Ernesto looked at her.

“Then that is exactly what you shouldn’t do.”

Lucía laughed.

“All right. What should I do instead?”

Ernesto unrolled part of the wallpaper across the counter.

“Cut the first strip. Lay the second beside it. Line up the pattern. Then cut.”

“And if I cut it wrong?”

“Then you have the extra.”

He measured the roll. Then measured it again.

“Ten yards.”

Lucía looked at the wallpaper.

“Only ten?”

“Ten yards and a little more.”

“That isn’t enough.”

“No.”

“Is there another roll?”

Ernesto looked toward the open door behind the salesroom.

“Maybe.”

Lucía followed his gaze.

“You want to go back there again?”

“You need thirteen yards.”

“I could choose different wallpaper.”

Ernesto looked at the yellow pattern.

“Do you want a different one?”

Lucía ran her fingers over one of the white blossoms.

“No.”

“Then I’ll look.”

“The wallpaper is from 1974.”

“That’s what the label says.”

“They can’t still be making it.”

“No.”

“Then it’s pretty unlikely that you have a second roll.”

Ernesto picked up the key ring.

“That’s true.”

“And you’re going to look anyway?”

“I just found one.”

Lucía looked toward the door.

“That’s true too.”

“Wait here.”

Ernesto went back through the rooms. In the fourth, the unrolled length of paper had somehow rolled itself up beneath a rack. Farther back, between two dark rolls, he found another yellow background, a green leaf, and a white blossom. This roll also bore the label from 1974.

When he returned, Lucía was holding the Blanco Humo paint card. She had hung it on the correct hook.

“You knew about that?”

“Since February.”

“And you haven’t done anything?”

“Not yet.”

Lucía nodded. “I know how that is.”

Lucía examined the second roll and looked toward the open storeroom door. Ernesto did not know where either roll had come from. He measured off thirteen yards, wrapped the wallpaper in brown paper, and tied string around it.

He recommended all-purpose wallpaper paste and a primer. The wallpaper was at least fifty years old, the wall showed signs of salitre, and Ernesto still did not trust any wall in San Desvelo.

“The house has been standing for forty years,” Lucía said.

“The salitre has probably been there longer.”

Lucía asked how long the primer would help.

"Longer than without it."

She took the paste and primer. If the wallpaper did not hold, she would come back, though not the very next day.

"Good," Ernesto said. "I was going to clean up in back tomorrow."

Lucía looked toward the door. Ernesto corrected himself. "I was going to plan on it."

They said goodbye, and she left. The glass door fell shut behind her. Ernesto looked at the paint cards. Blanco Humo now hung on the correct hook. He took the card down. Hung it back with Blanco Tiza. Then he picked up the partly used roll of wallpaper and went into the back.

First room.

Second.

Third.

Fourth.

Fifth.

Sixth.

In the next room, he stopped. The fluorescent tube was shining brightly. Its light fell on the two doors. Between them, the racks stood in darkness. Ernesto went to the shelf from which he had taken the second roll. It was empty. A small yellowed label hung from the wooden edge. Ernesto leaned closer.

VÍLCHEZ—BEDROOM.

He read it again. Then he looked at the wallpaper in his hand.

Yellow background.

Small green leaves.

White blossoms.

He placed the partly used roll in the empty compartment. It fit exactly. Ernesto went back.

Sixth room.

Fifth.

Fourth.

Third.

Second.

First.

In the salesroom, the radio was still playing cumbia. Beside the light switch, one corner of the wallpaper had peeled away from the wall. Beneath it, the plaster was white and grainy. Ernesto pressed the corner back with his thumb. It stayed against the wall for a moment. Then it came loose again. Ernesto looked at it. On the second shelf, the rearmost paint can still stood at an angle.

Tomorrow.

Chapter 5: Two Chairs

Above El Alto, the houses grew fewer.

The paved streets ended first. Then the paths narrowed too. Concrete walls gave way to unplastered brick, brick to corrugated metal, and corrugated metal at last to open stretches of pale earth and dark rock. The power lines followed the houses a little farther up the slope. Then they ended too.

Aurelio Quispe's house stood above the last utility poles. It was low and built of adobe, brick, and patches where it was no longer possible to tell which material had been there first. The flat corrugated-metal roof was weighted down with fist-sized stones. On the west side, Aurelio had stretched a tarp between two wooden posts. Bundles of dried plants hung beneath it on strings.

Ruda.

Romero.

Muña.

Eucalyptus leaves.

Some bundles were tied with thin cotton thread. Others with the white plastic strips Aurelio cut from old rice sacks. Jars stood on a narrow wooden shelf against the wall of the house. Most were labeled.

MANZANILLA.

ANÍS.

MUÑA.

HIERBA LUISA.

Three jars had nothing written on them. Aurelio knew what was in them. At least two of them. In front of the house was a small yard of hard-packed earth. A low wall of stacked stones bordered it along the slope. Beyond it lay San Desvelo.

Every evening, Aurelio set two chairs in front of his house. The first was wooden. Years ago, he had repaired the seat with braided plastic cord. Some of the strips that had originally been blue were now almost white. The second was a green plastic chair. A crack ran down its back from the top edge to the middle. Aurelio placed the wooden chair on the left. The plastic chair on the right. Then he went inside.

An aluminum pot sat on a small gas stove in the kitchen. The water inside was already steaming. Aurelio took a handful of Hierba Luisa, rubbed the leaves briefly between his fingers, and added them to the pot. He waited. Then he poured the infusion into two cups. A white cup with a chipped rim. A blue one bearing the logo of a pharmacy in Chimbote. Aurelio carried both outside. He set the white one beside the wooden chair. The blue one beside the plastic chair. Then he sat down.

Below him lay El Alto.

The unplastered houses stretched down the slope. Black water tanks stood on the flat roofs. Some were connected to thin pipes that ran down the outside walls. Laundry hung between two iron rods on one roof. The shirts barely moved now. A mototaxi slowly worked its way up one of the steep streets. The engine grew louder. Then softer. Then louder again. Aurelio watched the blue roof disappear between the houses.

Farther down, Centro began.

The streets grew straighter. The houses stood closer together. The pale facade of the Municipalidad was visible between the rooftops. Beside it, the park lay like a dark rectangle. The

roof of the Mercado occupied nearly an entire city block. From up here, Aurelio could see the streets around the market, but not the narrow alley on its south side. North of Centro, Las Palmeras spread out. Low houses. Dusty streets. Scattered trees between walls. On the road far to the north, a car was moving toward San Desvelo. Aurelio watched it for a while. It was still far outside the city.

Los Pinos lay to the south.

The neighborhood was newer than the rest of the city. The streets were wider, and there were still vacant lots between the houses. Unfinished gray-concrete buildings stood beside houses that had already been plastered. Rebar projected from some roofs into the sky. Lights were still on at three construction sites. Beneath a bare bulb, two men moved among sacks of cement. Farther back, a concrete mixer was running. Its steady grinding could be heard all the way to the slope. Sometimes metal struck metal. Then it was quiet again. Los Pinos did most of its growing in the evening. Aurelio did not know why.

The Pacific lay before him.

The garúa had opened over the water. At the horizon, a narrow clear band ran between the gray sky and the sea. The sun stood within it. Low. Orange. Aurelio picked up the white cup and drank. Behind him, something moved among the dry plants. He did not look back. The wind made a bundle of ruda strike the wall of the house. Then Aurelio heard footsteps on the path. Slow. Uneven. Someone was climbing the slope. Aurelio drank again. After a few minutes, a woman appeared between the last houses of El Alto. She stopped, braced her hands on her knees, and breathed. Then she continued. By the time she reached the yard, her face was flushed.

"Don Aurelio?"

Aurelio set the cup beside his chair.

"Buenas tardes."

"Buenas tardes. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"No. Catch your breath first. The last part of the climb is worse than it looks from below."

The woman smiled wearily.

"My mother said it was only ten minutes."

"From her house, perhaps."

"She lives in Las Palmeras."

Aurelio looked down at the city.

"Then your mother has an unusual sense of distance."

The woman brushed a few strands of hair from her forehead.

"I've been telling her that for years."

Aurelio pointed to the green plastic chair.

"Sit down."

The woman sat. The chair creaked beneath her weight.

"I'm Daniela Rojas."

Aurelio thought for a moment.

"Teresa Rojas is your mother."

"Yes."

"The one with the yellow window frames."

"They used to be yellow. My brother painted them white two years ago."

"Then I didn't see that."

Daniela looked at the two cups.

"My mother was here a few weeks ago, wasn't she?"

"Yes."

"She told me."

"She didn't mention that she would send her daughter."

Daniela picked up the blue cup from the ground.

"Because I didn't want to come."

Aurelio nodded.

"And now you're here."

Daniela held the cup in both hands.

"For the past three nights, I've barely slept at all."

"Then start by telling me why."

"I thought my mother had already told you."

"Your mother told me many things."

Daniela smiled briefly.

"That sounds like her."

"You should decide which of them you want to tell me yourself."

Daniela looked at him for a moment.

Then she took a sip.

"What is this?"

"Hierba Luisa."

"Just Hierba Luisa?"

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know."

Aurelio looked at her cup.

"Then Hierba Luisa is probably fine."

Daniela nodded.

"Good."

She looked down at San Desvelo.

The first lights were coming on across the rooftops of El Alto.

"I wake up very early," she said. "Before it gets light."

"For the past three nights?"

"No. It's been going on longer. Maybe three weeks. But at first I could fall asleep again afterward."

"And now you can't."

"No."

"Do you know what time it is when you wake up?"

Daniela shook her head.

"I don't look at the clock. My phone is in the kitchen."

"Do you wake up every night?"

"Almost every night."

"And always because of the same sound?"

Daniela looked into her cup.

"Yes."

Aurelio waited.

"Someone is sweeping my yard."

Aurelio set down his cup.

"For three weeks?"

"About that."

"Every night?"

"Almost."

"Always before it gets light?"

"Yes."

"Have you looked?"

Daniela gave a short laugh.

"Of course I've looked."

"And?"

"No one."

"Did you look outside?"

"My yard isn't large. From the door, I can see all the way to the wall."

"Tracks?"

"From a broom."

Aurelio looked at her.

"That's not what I mean."

Daniela understood.

"No. No footprints."

"Not even your own?"

"Mine, yes."

Aurelio nodded slowly.

"Good."

Daniela frowned.

"What's good about that?"

"The ground doesn't forget everything."

Daniela looked down at her shoes.

Dust clung to the soles.

"And what does it mean if there are no other footprints?"

"That no one wearing shoes walked through your yard."

"I could have figured that out myself."

"You did figure it out."

Daniela raised her eyes.

Aurelio kept looking toward the city.

"My mother says you know about things like this."

"What kind of things?"

"That's exactly why I didn't want to come."

Aurelio picked up his cup again.

"Then try another way."

Daniela thought.

"Things you can hear even though no one is there."

"That's better."

"And?"

"Sometimes."

Daniela waited.

"Sometimes what?"

"Sometimes I know about them."

"And my yard?"

"Not yet."

Daniela sighed. Her mother would be disappointed.

"That rarely lasts long with her," Aurelio said. Daniela had to smile.

Below them, a mototaxi honked. A metal saw gave a brief screech in Los Pinos. Afterward, there was only the steady grinding of the concrete mixer again. Daniela looked south.

"They're building quickly over there."

Aurelio followed her gaze.

"Los Pinos."

"My cousin lives there. Near the little store with the green awning."

"I know it."

"I visited her last week."

Aurelio drank.

Daniela leaned forward a little.

"That house wasn't there."

"Which one?"

She pointed south. Aurelio followed her arm. Between two illuminated construction sites stood a narrow three-story house. It was taller than most of the houses in Los Pinos. The facade was unplastered. Dark gray. No glass was visible in the window openings. No rebar projected from the concrete roof.

"That one," Daniela said.

Aurelio studied the house.

"It's been there a while."

Daniela looked at him.

"No."

"I think it has."

"Last week there was an empty lot there."

Aurelio tried to remember. He knew the three construction lights. The concrete mixer. The wider street that led south between the houses. He knew the house too. At least it seemed familiar to him.

"How long has it been there?" Daniela asked.

Aurelio said nothing. Below, metal struck metal.

"I don't know," he said.

Daniela looked at the house again.

"Then you don't know whether it's been there a while."

"No."

"But you thought it had."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Aurelio studied the dark facade.

"Because I know it."

Daniela looked at him.

"From where?"

Aurelio drank.

"From there."

Daniela waited. Then she shook her head slightly.

"Good."

She looked back toward the Pacific. The sun was touching the horizon now. Its lower edge disappeared into the water.

Daniela asked why Aurelio sat above the city every evening.

"Because I can see a great deal from up here."

She looked at the new house. "But not enough to know when something was built."

Aurelio did not argue.

"No."

The sun sank lower. The orange deepened. Below them, the houses of El Alto already lay partly in shadow. More lights came on in Centro. The Municipalidad was illuminated from the outside. The park beside it grew darker. On Cerro Vigía, the weather station stood as a small black shape against the sky. Its red lights were still off. Daniela set her cup on the ground.

Daniela described the path of the sweeping: along the wall, around the old water tank, and up to the door. If she stayed in bed, it continued. In the morning, the yard was clean.

Her mother considered that an advantage. Aurelio could understand that; Daniela still wanted to know who entered her yard at night.

"I understand that too," he said.

"You can't always understand both sides."

"I don't have to choose as long as both are right."

Daniela started to answer, but then sat upright. A yellow circle of light had suddenly appeared on the roof of the three-story house. Neither a lamp nor a person was visible.

"Was that there a moment ago?"

Aurelio stared longer than an answer required. "I didn't see it before."

They watched the house for another moment. The circle of light remained. The concrete mixer kept running. Half the sun had disappeared by now. Daniela looked toward the Pacific again.

The sweeping now came all the way to the door, but it did not knock and left nothing on the threshold.

"Then it stays outside," Aurelio said.

"You say that as if it's reassuring."

"At least it's a boundary."

After the sun had disappeared, Aurelio lifted his cup.

"And now?" Daniela asked.

"Now we wait."

"For what?"

"To see whether the evening does anything else."

The wall of the house grew warm. Aurelio felt it first on the back of his neck, a dry warmth like a low sun. His shadow and Daniela's fell westward toward the Pacific.

Behind them were only the blue-gray sky, the slope, and the path to the Cerro. Yet the light came from there and traced every leaf of the dried plants on the adobe.

Daniela stood. "What's behind the house?"

"Stones, earth, and old foundations."

"From houses?"

"From before." Aurelio could not say how long before.

After perhaps thirty seconds, the light disappeared. The warmth was gone, and the shadows dissolved. The first red points of the weather station blinked on atop the Cerro.

"Was that normal?" Daniela asked.

Aurelio said no. There were many stories about the Cerro, but if one searched long enough, any occurrence could be forced into one of them.

"That doesn't sound very shamanic."

"Then it's probably useful."

For the first time since the light appeared, Daniela smiled. Below, in Los Pinos, the concrete mixer kept running. Metal struck metal. The light on the roof of the three-story house had

disappeared. Aurelio stood. He went to the tarp beside the house and took a bundle of ruda from the string. He smelled it. Then he set it on the small wooden table beside Daniela.

"Take this with you."

Daniela looked at the plant.

"For sleep?"

"No. Your mother ordered ruda last week."

Daniela picked up the bundle.

"You could have told me that right away."

"I forgot."

"And what about the sleep?"

Aurelio sat down again.

"When you hear the sweeping, stay in bed."

Daniela looked at him.

"I already do that sometimes."

"Then keep doing it."

"And if it comes all the way to the door?"

"Stay in bed."

"Why?"

Aurelio looked down at San Desvelo. The streetlights in Centro were coming on. Orange points between the houses.

"You want to sleep."

"Yes."

"Then try to sleep."

Daniela said nothing.

"That's your advice?"

"For today."

"And tomorrow?"

Aurelio looked toward the slope behind his house.

"If it's still sweeping tomorrow, it's still sweeping tomorrow."

Daniela frowned. Aurelio noticed.

"Come back in three days."

"Why three?"

"Because one night could be chance."

"And two?"

"So could two."

"But not three?"

Aurelio shrugged.

"You have to start somewhere."

Daniela looked at him for a moment. Then she nodded.

"All right. Three days."

She stood.

"My mother will ask what you said."

"Tell her you're supposed to sleep."

"I climbed this entire slope for that."

"And you got Hierba Luisa."

Daniela raised the bundle of ruda.

"Ruda."

"That's for your mother."

"Even better."

Aurelio smiled.

Daniela set the blue cup beside the chair.

"Thank you."

"Buenas noches."

"Buenas noches, Don Aurelio."

At the edge of the yard, she stopped. She looked south.

"The house is still there."

Aurelio followed her gaze. The three-story house stood dark between the construction sites.

"Yes."

"If it's gone tomorrow, I'll come back sooner."

Aurelio looked at her. Daniela smiled. Then she went down the slope. Aurelio watched her disappear between the last houses of El Alto. The car from the north had reached San Desvelo by now. Its headlights moved through Las Palmeras.

The three construction lights were still burning in Los Pinos. Aurelio picked up the blue cup from the ground. He carried both cups inside. Then he came back. He picked up the wooden chair. Carried it inside. Afterward, he picked up the green plastic chair. He lifted it. Stopped. Every evening, Aurelio set two chairs in front of his house. Every evening, he carried one back inside. Aurelio looked at the empty spot beside the wall of the house. Then he set the green chair back down. Its front legs sank slightly into the hard-packed earth.

Aurelio looked toward the slope. He could have climbed it. It was perhaps forty minutes to the old foundations. Longer to the path below the Cerro. He had a flashlight. Inside the house were two fresh batteries.

Aurelio looked toward the Pacific. Tomorrow the sun would set there again. If the light returned, he would see it. He went inside. More lights came on across San Desvelo.

On Cerro Dormido, the red points of the weather station blinked. Down in Los Pinos, the concrete mixer fell silent. For a few seconds, it was quiet. Then metal struck metal. Far out over the Pacific lay a narrow orange band. Where the sun had already set.

Chapter 6: Ten Minutes

The bus came from the north.

For almost two hours, the road had run through the same landscape. Pale earth. Dark hills. Between them, stretches where nothing grew and where, despite that, a house stood every few miles. Javier had tried to sleep. He had not succeeded.

The air conditioner above his seat blew cold air onto his forehead even though he had already turned the small vent shut twice. Somewhere farther up front, a video was playing on a phone. A woman laughed at the same moments every time. Behind Javier, someone rustled a plastic bag. Across the aisle, a woman slept beneath a brown wool blanket. At her feet stood a large plaid bag whose zipper had been tied shut with a piece of string. She held a sealed plastic container in her lap.

Javier pulled the curtain aside.

The Pacific lay to the left.

Sometimes it was visible directly beside the road. Then it disappeared again behind low hills or squat buildings. The garúa had erased the horizon. Sea and sky were the same gray.

Javier looked at his phone.

18:14.

Almost three hours left. He slipped it back into his pants pocket. The bus slowed. The first houses appeared ahead. Unplastered walls. Small repair shops with corrugated-metal doors. A man stood beside a mototaxi holding its seat up while another shone a flashlight into the engine compartment.

The bus passed a gas station. Then came more houses. Streetlights. A pollería. A closed auto-parts store. At an intersection, three dogs waited until the bus had passed. Then they crossed the street together.

Javier looked at his phone again.

18:19.

The bus turned right. The speaker crackled.

“San Desvelo.”

The driver spoke so quietly that several passengers raised their heads at once. A small image of the Señor de los Milagros hung above the rearview mirror. With every bump, it swung against the windshield.

“San Desvelo. We’ll be here for ten minutes. Passengers continuing south, please leave your luggage on the bus.”

The bus attendant came down the aisle.

“San Desvelo. Connections to Puerto Esperanza and Valle Chico outside at the second platform. Passengers continuing to Chimbote, stay on the bus.”

An older woman two rows ahead of Javier stood immediately.

“Señora, please wait another moment. We’re still moving.”

“I know. I’m just getting up now.”

“If the driver brakes, you’ll fall on the man in front of you.”

The woman looked at the sleeping man in the seat ahead.

“He won’t notice.”

The bus attendant had to smile.

“Then at least stand here and don’t start walking yet.”

"I'm seventy-two. I don't go running off anywhere anymore."

The bus attendant continued. The woman remained standing. The bus traveled another hundred yards or so and turned into a small lot. The terminal consisted of a roofed concrete area, a low building, and two bus platforms. A sign with departure times hung above one of the ticket windows.

CHIMBOTE
SAN DESVELO
PUERTO ESPERANZA
ICA
LIMA

Several times had been painted over in white and written in again with a ballpoint pen. The same departure time appeared twice beside the route to Ica. One had been crossed out. The bus stopped. The doors opened. Warm, humid air came in. Before Javier could get off, a man appeared in the bus doorway holding a shallow cardboard box in front of him.

"Water, cookies, candy."

The bus attendant raised a hand.

"Only two minutes."

"I need one."

The man moved through the first rows of seats. Several passengers bought water. The older woman took two packages of cookies and bargained over the price even though the bus attendant was already waiting behind her. Javier got off. He needed something to drink.

Inca Kola, Coca-Cola, and water stood behind the kiosk's glass window; a soccer match was playing above the refrigerator. Javier bought a small cold Inca Kola. The vendor warned him it might upset his stomach; Javier took the risk.

Beside the bus, the driver smoked near the open luggage compartment. The attendant rearranged boxes, sacks, and plaid bags. A woman checked the tag on a sack for Puerto Esperanza and reminded him that the last time, it had gone all the way to Ica.

Javier drank. Across the street, a wide road led north between low houses. The city lay beyond. Not much could be made out from here. Rooftops. Power lines. A few streetlights. Farther east, the ground rose. Houses climbed the lower slopes.

Javier was about to return to the bus when he saw the man. He stood across the street. Blue jacket. Dark pants. Hands in his pockets. Javier lowered the bottle from his mouth. The man was not looking at him. He simply stood there, gazing down the street. Javier knew that posture. He did not immediately know from where. Then the man turned his head slightly. Javier took two steps forward.

"Mauricio?"

At that moment, traffic consisted of a motorcycle and an old station wagon. Both passed between them. When the street was clear again, the man was already walking away.

"Mauricio!"

No response. Javier looked back at the bus. The driver was still smoking. Ten minutes. He crossed the street. The man in the blue jacket was perhaps fifty yards away. He turned at the next corner. Javier followed him.

"Mauricio! Wait!"

He reached the corner. The street beyond sloped gently downward. Small houses stood on the left. On the right was a wall with several palm trees visible behind it. The man was farther ahead. Javier quickened his pace. It could be Mauricio. That was absurd. Mauricio lived in Trujillo. At least, he had lived there three years ago. Javier had not spoken to him since. But the jacket. Mauricio had worn the same blue jacket for years. A simple windbreaker with a pale stripe across the shoulders.

The man turned again. Javier followed. Now he could smell the sea. He stopped briefly. The street ahead ended at a coastal road. Javier turned around. The terminal was no longer visible.

"Damn it."

He took his phone from his pocket.

18:22.

Three minutes. He continued.

The coastal road was damp. The garúa lay like a fine film over the parked cars and walls. Across the street was a parking lot. Beyond it, the Pacific. Javier looked left. The man in the blue jacket was walking along the edge of the lot.

"Mauricio!"

The man did not stop. Farther ahead stood a ceviche cart. A woman was arranging plastic bowls on a shelf. Beside the cart, a man sat on the low wall above the beach. Another person stood with their back to the street. Javier walked faster.

When he reached the parking lot, the man in the blue jacket had disappeared. Javier stopped. He looked between the cars. Nothing. The woman at the ceviche cart placed a metal spoon in a bowl. Javier went over to her.

"Excuse me."

Maritza looked up.

"Yes?"

"Did a man just pass by here? Blue jacket, about my height."

Maritza thought for a moment.

"Old or young?"

"Forty. Maybe a little older."

"Thin?"

"Average."

"That isn't especially helpful."

Javier looked toward the other end of the parking lot.

"He must have been here just now. I followed him from the terminal all the way here."

"From the terminal?"

"Yes."

Maritza glanced up the street.

"Then you're fast."

"That's why I'm asking. Did you see him?"

"I saw two men. One is down on the beach. The other was standing with Óscar."

The man on the wall raised his plastic bowl.

"I'm Óscar."

"Good," Javier said. "And the man who was with you?"

Óscar finished chewing.

"What kind of jacket?"

"Blue."

"No."

"You didn't see him?"

"The man with me wasn't wearing a jacket."

Maritza took a lime from the bowl.

"Besides, that was half an hour ago."

Javier looked at her.

"I mean just now."

"Then no. Just now I was cutting fish."

"He walked right past the cart."

Maritza gave a slight shrug.

"Then I didn't see him. When I'm cutting, I watch my hands."

"Of course."

Javier took a step back. Maritza cut the lime in half.

"Does he owe you money?"

"What? No."

"Then that's better."

Óscar nodded.

"Depends how much."

Despite his impatience, Javier had to laugh briefly.

"I think I know him."

"Then call him," Maritza said.

Javier looked across the parking lot again.

"We haven't spoken in three years."

Maritza paused.

"Ah."

"What does 'ah' mean?"

"That calling him might be harder."

"A little."

"Ceviche?"

"No, thank you. My bus is leaving soon."

Maritza looked toward the street.

"Then I wouldn't be standing here."

Javier took out his phone.

18:27.

He froze.

"Shit."

"The terminal is up that way," Óscar said, pointing toward the street with his spoon.

"I know."

"Good. Some people head toward Centro first."

Javier put away his phone.

"Thank you."

Maritza reached for the knife again.

"If you find the man, tell him to walk more slowly."

Javier gave her a quick look.

"Why?"

"So you don't miss your bus."

Javier started running and took what he thought was the same turn. After a hundred yards, he passed a bodega he did not remember.

The woman behind the security bars explained the way: straight ahead, then right at the green pharmacy. Seven or eight minutes on foot.

"It took three minutes from the terminal to the sea."

"Then you were fast or you took a different street." She did not know a shorter one. San Desvelo had four pharmacies; Javier should watch for the green one. He set out.

After twenty yards, he began to run. He was still holding the bottle of Inca Kola. He ran past a green pharmacy, noticed, doubled back, and turned right. A taxi honked. Javier raised a hand without turning around. The street rose gently. His shoes struck the pavement hard. He passed a repair shop. A small restaurant. A wall with a faded campaign poster. Then he saw the terminal. The bus was gone.

Javier slowed. He walked onto the lot. The bus platform was empty. A dark stain marked the concrete where the coach had stood. The man in the kiosk was still watching soccer. Javier went to the window.

"My bus is gone."

The man glanced at him.

"The one heading south?"

"Yes."

"It left."

"When?"

The man looked toward the television.

"Ten minutes ago. Maybe a little more."

"That can't be."

"It can. I sold two more bottles, and then it left."

Javier set his Inca Kola on the ledge.

"The driver said we were stopping for ten minutes."

"He always says that."

"I wasn't gone for ten minutes."

The man pointed the remote at the clock on the wall.

18:41.

Javier took out his phone.

18:41.

"I got off at twenty past."

"Then you were gone twenty minutes."

"No. I was at the coast at twenty-two past."

"How do you know that so precisely?"

"I looked at my phone."

The man nodded slowly.

"Good. Then you were at the coast at twenty-two past."

"And still there at twenty-seven past."

"That's five minutes."

"Exactly."

"And now it's forty-one past."

Javier said nothing. The man picked up the bottle of Inca Kola from the ledge and looked inside.

"Almost full."

"What?"

"You barely drank any."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"Nothing. I just noticed."

He set the bottle back down. Javier ran a hand through his hair.

"Did the driver ask about me?"

"Yes. He even came over here."

"And what did you tell him?"

"That you bought an Inca Kola."

"Nothing else?"

"I didn't know anything else."

"And then he just left."

"He waited longer."

"How long?"

The man thought.

"Three or four minutes."

"After the ten minutes?"

"I think so."

Javier looked at the empty platform.

"Wonderful."

"He wasn't happy."

"Neither am I."

"Then at least you agree."

Javier looked at him. The kiosk owner smiled slightly.

"Sorry."

"It's all right."

A goal was scored on the television. The announcer shouted. The kiosk owner turned around briefly.

"That was offside."

Javier did not look.

"When does the next one leave?"

"South? Tomorrow morning. You'd better ask at the ticket window. The señora is closing now."

Javier picked up his bottle.

"Thank you."

"If you have another ten minutes tomorrow, stay by the bus."

Javier left.

"I understand that now."

Across the lot, a woman was pulling the metal grille down over the ticket window. Javier quickened his pace.

"Excuse me! Just a moment."

The woman held the grille.

"If you want to buy a ticket, you'll have to come back tomorrow."

"That's exactly what this is about. When does the next bus south leave?"

"Seven ten."

"To Ica?"

"It passes through."

"And there really isn't anything else today?"

"Not today."

Javier looked at the empty platform.

"I missed my bus."

"I gathered that."

"Why?"

"Because you're asking about the next one."

Javier had to laugh.

"Yes. Sorry. I've had a long day."

"And now you have a longer one."

"Can I at least buy a ticket for tomorrow now?"

The woman raised the half-closed grille slightly and pointed to the darkened ticket window behind her.

"The computer is off. The register is closed. And I got off work five minutes ago."

"Understood."

"Someone will be here at six."

"You?"

"Unfortunately."

"Then I'll see you tomorrow."

"Unless you miss the bus before then."

Javier looked at her. The woman smiled.

"The man at the kiosk told me."

"That was fast."

"San Desvelo isn't Lima."

She pulled the grille down. Javier remained there another moment.

"Is there a hotel here?"

The woman looked through the grille.

"Not a hotel. Two hospedajes and one hostel. For one night, the hostel will do."

"Where do I find it?"

"Up the Avenida to the Archivo. The large illuminated building. Turn left there. Then you'll see the sign."

Javier nodded.

"How long?"

The woman looked at him. Javier raised a hand.

"I know. Stupid question."

"No. Fifteen minutes."

"Approximately?"

"In your case, I'd allow twenty."

Javier looked at her for a moment. Then the woman laughed.

"That was a joke."

"Yes."

"You don't look as though you found it funny."

"Maybe tomorrow."

"Tomorrow you'll be leaving."

"Right."

Javier picked up his backpack. He walked toward Centro. The hostel had three stories. Its sign hung vertically on the facade. Four of the six letters were lit. Two plastic chairs stood in the entryway. Behind the counter, an older man sat reading a newspaper.

"Good evening. Do you have a room for one night?"

The man folded the newspaper.

"Just you?"

"Yes."

"Private bathroom?"

"If you have one."

"I do. Hot water costs extra."

"How much extra?"

The man named the price. Javier thought for a moment.

"Does the hot water work?"

The man placed both hands on the newspaper.

"It worked this morning."

"And this evening?"

"I can tell you after you've taken a shower."

Javier smiled wearily.

"All right. I'll take the room with the theoretical hot-water supply."

The man pulled out a form.

"ID."

Javier gave him his DNI. The man copied the number.

"Reason for travel?"

"Work."

"You work in San Desvelo?"

"No. I'm traveling south."

The man looked up from his form.

"Then you're traveling."

"For work."

"Ah."

He put pen to paper again.

"Business trip."

"If that fits the line better."

"Everything fits the line. I write small."

Javier leaned forward slightly. The form read:

MOTIVO DEL VIAJE

"Do I even have to provide that?"

"No."

"Then why are you asking?"

The man looked at the form.

"Because otherwise the line stays blank."

"And that would be bad?"

"No."

"Good."

The man waited. Javier waited too. Finally, the man wrote something.

"Room twelve."

He gave Javier a key with a heavy wooden fob.

"Second floor. At the end of the hall on the right."

"Is there Wi-Fi?"

"Yes."

"The password?"

"desvelo1987. All lowercase."

"Why 1987?"

The man picked up his newspaper again.

"Because everyone forgot 1986."

Javier stood there for a moment.

"What?"

The man looked up.

"The password. It used to be desvelo1986. People always entered 1987."

"Why?"

"No idea. So we changed it."

Javier nodded slowly.

"Of course."

"The Wi-Fi is still bad."

"That almost reassures me."

The room was clean enough: a bed, a small table, two plastic hangers, a television with uneven brightness, and a dripping faucet. The mattress sank beneath Javier and stayed that way.

At 18:58, he opened the map app. His position jumped from the coastal road to Centro and two blocks farther before settling on the hostel.

The map showed more than half a mile between the terminal and the parking lot. Javier wrote down his times: got off at 18:20, coast at about 18:22, ceviche cart at 18:27, started back at 18:29, terminal at 18:41.

Twelve minutes back, even though the woman at the bodega had estimated seven and he had run. From the window, Javier saw a handcart, two women outside a pharmacy, and a mototaxi at the intersection. Behind the houses, the city rose into the garúa.

The next morning, he left the hostel at 6:12. The hot water had worked.

"Room twelve is usually lucky," the man behind the counter said. Javier told him he would be back in about an hour.

The man slid the key beneath the counter. "Then you should be back before seven."

"I thought you might want to know how the experiment turned out."

Now the man smiled.

"Room twelve is usually lucky."

Javier placed the key on the counter.

"I'm coming back one more time."

"No problem. I'll leave it here."

"I need about an hour."

"Then you'll be back before seven."

Javier looked at him.

"Yes."

The man slid the key beneath the counter.

"Good."

Outside, garúa lay over the streets. Centro was already awake. Crates were being unloaded in front of the Mercado. A woman swept water out of an entrance. A man carried two sacks on his shoulders and cursed at someone Javier could not see.

Javier walked south. He stopped at the terminal. The schedule above the ticket window was easier to read in the morning light. Beside the route to Chimbote, someone had written a new departure time on a piece of paper and taped it over the old one with clear tape. One corner had already come loose.

Javier took out his phone.
Opened the stopwatch.

00:00.00

He pressed Start.
The display shows 00:01.
For a moment, Javier thinks he saw the one before his thumb touched the screen.
He looks again. The time keeps running.

Then he walked.
Not fast.
Not slow.
Right at the green pharmacy.
Straight ahead.
Past the bodega.
The woman from the night before was not there.
Onward.

When he reached the coastal road, his phone vibrated in his hand.
Javier looked at it.

06:04.31

He walked to the parking lot.
The ceviche cart was closed. A tarp hung over the work surface.
Footsteps came from the beach. Javier looked down. A man walked along the water. Farther back, a second.

Javier pressed Stop.

06:12.08

He saved the time.
Then he turned around.

At the terminal:

05:48.72

Javier stood in front of the bus platform. People were waiting for the bus south. A woman held a sleeping child in her arms. Two men drank coffee from plastic cups. Beside them stood three plaid bags and a box tied with string. The kiosk owner stocked bottles in the refrigerator.

Javier set out again.
The same route.

06:09.44

Back.

05:51.03

Once more.

06:11.87

Javier stopped in the parking lot. The tarp over the ceviche cart moved slightly in the wind. He looked at the spot where the man in the blue jacket had stood. Then at his phone.

Six minutes eleven.

He opened his notes and wrote:

Terminal – Parking lot: 6:12

Parking lot – Terminal: 5:48

Terminal – Parking lot: 6:09

Parking lot – Terminal: 5:51

Terminal – Parking lot: 6:11

Beneath that he wrote:

Yesterday: approx. 20 minutes

Javier looked at the sentence.

He deleted approx.

Yesterday: 20 minutes

He put away his phone. The garúa drifted in from the sea across the parking lot. For a moment, the ceviche cart was nothing more than a dark shape. Javier waited. Nothing happened. After a while, he went back to the terminal.

This time, he did not time it.

Chapter 7: The Form

The first call came at 6:48. Teresa Valdivia had been at the Archivo Municipal for three minutes. She had opened the side door, turned off the alarm, and set her key ring beside the copier. For four years, the machine had displayed PAPER JAM TRAY 2 every morning, even though there was no Tray 2. The technician from Chimbote had advised her to ignore the message. That morning, the display remained blank until Teresa pressed the power button.

READY

"Finally," she said.

Then the gray telephone rang in the front office. The coiled cord had twisted around itself so many times that Teresa could pull the receiver only as far as the edge of the desk.

"Municipalidad de San Desvelo, buenos días."

A man spoke quickly and only got louder when she asked him to slow down. Teresa had him start over, wrote down his name and address: Felipe Rojas, Los Pinos, Mz. H, Lote 14.

"That block doesn't exist," she said.

Felipe disagreed.

"I'm not saying you aren't there. I'm saying the block doesn't exist."

The clock read 6:49. Teresa asked him to come to the Municipalidad. When he claimed he was already there, she looked through the window at the empty street.

"If you were here, I would see you."

Teresa hung up. She looked at her note.

The telephone rang again.

Teresa picked up the receiver.

"Archivo Municipal."

No one said anything at the other end.

Teresa waited.

Then she heard paper. Not rustling. Someone turned a page.

Teresa looked at the form in front of her.

She turned a page.

The other end was silent.

Teresa hung up.

Felipe Rojas. Los Pinos. Mz. H. Lote 14.

Below it, she had written:

Tuesday.

Teresa crossed out the word.

Then the telephone rang again.

She answered.

"Municipalidad de San Desvelo, buenos días."

A woman.

Teresa listened.

"No."

She kept listening.

"No, Señora, today is Wednesday."

The woman answered.

Teresa looked at the calendar beside the telephone.

Wednesday.

"Yes. I'm sure."

A pause.

"Because yesterday was Tuesday."

Teresa closed her eyes.

"No, I don't want to speak to your husband."

The woman handed him the receiver anyway.

A man spoke.

Teresa let him finish.

"Don Ricardo, please listen to me. I can't explain why your workers came to the construction site today. That isn't my responsibility."

He kept talking.

"No. I'm not responsible for the workers either."

Something else.

"For time?"

Teresa looked toward the window.

"No. Not for that either."

She hung up.

The telephone rang a third time.

Teresa did not answer.

It rang.

She stood and went to the copier.

The display read:

PAPER JAM TRAY 2

Teresa looked at it.

"Good."

The telephone kept ringing.

"Now everything is normal."

At 7:12, the first three people were standing outside the main entrance of the Municipalidad. By 7:20, there were eight. Teresa opened the door at 7:30. The Municipalidad normally opened at eight. People came early anyway. Some because the bus from El Alto ran at a convenient time. Others because they believed whoever stood at the door first had to be helped first. That was not true. Teresa opened the door.

"We're not open yet."

No one left.

"At eight."

An older man raised a folder.

"I just need to ask something."

"Then ask at eight."

"It'll take one minute."

"Then at eight, you can ask for one minute."

The man looked at the others. A woman behind him said:

"I was here before him."

"You're both here before eight," Teresa said.

She went back inside. The door remained open. After a few seconds, they all followed her. Teresa stopped.

"No."

The people stopped as well.

"No what?" the older man asked.

"Out."

"But the door is open."

"To let air in."

The man looked at the door.

"Now we're inside."

Teresa pointed outside.

"Then go back outside."

No one moved. Teresa looked at the woman in the second row.

"Señora Milagros."

"Yes."

"Help me."

Milagros turned to the others.

"She said we should go outside."

"Thank you."

"But I'm staying."

Teresa drew a breath. A door opened at the back of the building. Alberto Salinas, who was responsible for building files, lot numbers, and three other things no one could ever list in full, came into the hall with a cup of coffee. He stopped.

"What happened?"

Teresa pointed at the people.

"Los Pinos."

Alberto drank.

"What about Los Pinos?"

Several people began speaking at once. Alberto raised his free hand.

"No."

The voices fell silent.

"One."

Three started again immediately.

"That's more than one."

Teresa picked up her note from the desk.

"They say it's Tuesday in Los Pinos."

Alberto looked at her.

"Today?"

"Yes."

"Today is Wednesday."

"That's what I told them."

The older man with the folder stepped forward.

"For you."

Alberto looked at him.

"Excuse me?"

"For you, it's Wednesday."

"And for you?"

"Tuesday."

Alberto set his cup on Teresa's desk.

"Where do you live?"

"Los Pinos."

"I understood that part."

"Then why did you ask?"

Alberto picked up his cup again.

"Because I was hoping you'd say El Alto."

The man opened the folder.

"Yesterday, I applied for the final inspection."

He pulled out a form.

"Here."

Alberto took it.

The received stamp said Tuesday.

"Good."

"No."

"What isn't good about it?"

"I submitted this today."

Alberto looked at the form.

Then at the man.

"To whom?"

"To you."

"I wasn't here yesterday."

"I know."

"Then you didn't submit it to me."

"Today."

Alberto looked at Teresa.

Teresa picked up her bag from the chair.

"I'm making coffee."

"You have coffee."

"That's yours."

She left.

Alberto looked back at the form.

"Come with me."

"I was first," Milagros said.

"You come too."

"What about me?" someone asked.

Alberto looked into the hall.

"What do you have?"

"My daughter was at school yesterday."

"That sounds good so far."

"She's at school today too."

"Even better."

"But she says she had the same lesson."

Alberto was silent. The man added:

"The teacher too."

Alberto picked up his cup.

"Good."

"Good?"

"No."

He pointed to the chairs in the hall.

"Sit down."

By 8:40, the Municipalidad had taken twelve complaints from Los Pinos. By nine, there were twenty-one. Teresa had taped a sheet of paper to the front door.

LOS PINOS INQUIRIES — ROOM 3

Below it, she wrote:

LOS PINOS ONLY

A woman from Centro stopped in front of it.

"I have a problem with my water bill."

"Room 2," Teresa said.

"But I used to live in Los Pinos."

"Now?"

"Centro."

"Room 2."

"My sister still lives there."

Teresa looked at her.

"Does your sister have a problem?"

"I'm sure she does."

"Then she should come in."

The first reports contradicted one another in different ways. A wall completed overnight, two receipts for a single cement delivery, eighty sacks instead of forty, and a school lesson some children remembered twice. Beside the teacher's statement, Teresa wrote: Check calendar. She did not know which one.

The man whose dog had come back that morning also got a sheet. Teresa tentatively sorted the reports into construction, school, deliveries, and private matters.

Then she took a blank sheet and wrote LOS PINOS — INCIDENTS. She crossed out INCIDENTS, replaced it with DISCREPANCIES, and crossed that out too.

Alberto came out of Room 3. "We need a form."

"This is one."

"It's blank."

"Every form was blank once."

They settled on REPORT OF AN IRREGULARITY. It sounded like sewage or electricity, and therefore like something an administration could be responsible for.

Below Name and Address, Teresa first wrote Date of incident. Then she added two separate fields:

Date according to your own recollection:

Date according to the Municipalidad:

Alberto read on to the last line.

Property damage: YES / NO / UNCLEAR

"Unclear isn't an answer."

"It is today."

Alberto laughed briefly. Then the telephone rang again.

At 10:23, the weather station's red Toyota pulled up outside the Municipalidad. Rafael got out on the passenger side. Inés remained behind the wheel and looked at the crowd by the entrance.

"That's a lot of people."

Rafael took a black bag from the back seat.

"Maybe they're paying taxes."

Inés looked at him.

"All at once?"

"Maybe someone ran a good campaign."

She turned off the engine. Rafael waited.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You look like..."

"Like what?"

"Like you want to say something."

"I was going to say that you're carrying the bag."

Rafael looked at the bag.

"I'm carrying it."

"Good."

Inés got out. The air was damp. Garúa still hung over Centro, even though the sun behind the gray layer had to be high enough by now to warm the rooftops. On the drive down from Cerro Vigía, they had been able to see the city almost the entire way.

At first, they had not noticed Los Pinos.

Why would they? It lay where it always did. Wide streets. Pale lots. Unfinished buildings. Black water tanks on the completed houses. Inés had not turned on the radio until the first intersection in Centro. The local news did not report on Los Pinos.

There was no local news.

The station from Chimbote talked about a traffic accident, the price of fish, and a demonstration outside a regional government building. Then Rafael had looked at his phone. Seven missed calls. Four from the Municipalidad. Two from an unknown number. One from his mother. He had called his mother back first. She did not need anything. Then Teresa. Now they walked through the main entrance.

Teresa sat behind her desk stamping forms. A stack lay beside her. Rafael set down the bag.

"You called."

Teresa stamped.

"Four times."

"We were up there."

"I know."

Stamp.

"That's why I called the weather station."

Stamp.

"We were outside."

Teresa looked up.

"Rafael."

"Yes."

"I'm going to explain something, and afterward you are not going to say software error."

Rafael pulled the chair opposite her closer.

"That depends on what you explain."

Inés remained standing. Teresa looked at her.

"You tell him not to say it."

"He'll say it anyway."

"Good."

Teresa picked up the top form.

"A man built a wall yesterday."

Rafael waited.

"Is that all?"

"No. Today the wall is finished."

"Then he worked hard."

Teresa put down the form. Inés sat.

"He doesn't remember doing it?"

Teresa looked at her.

"Exactly."

Rafael looked from one to the other.

"Maybe he was drunk."

Teresa picked up the next sheet.

"Forty sacks of cement."

"Drunk too?"

"Eighty arrived."

"That's a delivery problem."

Next sheet.

"Same lesson twice."

"Class schedule."

Next.

"Double shift."

"Staff scheduling."

Next.

"A woman cooked rice Tuesday evening and found the same pot uncooked in her kitchen Wednesday morning."

Rafael opened his mouth.

Teresa raised a finger.

"Don't say it."

He closed his mouth. Inés took the form.

"Only Los Pinos?"

"So far."

"Since when?"

Teresa looked at her. Then she slid the newly designed form across. Inés read the two date fields.

"Ah."

"Yes."

Rafael took the sheet from her hand.

"Date according to your own recollection."

"Yes."

"Date according to the Municipalidad."

"Yes."

"This isn't a good form."

Teresa leaned back.

"Then make a better one."

Rafael put it down.

"No."

"Good."

Inés leafed through the reports.

"What are people saying?"

"Different things."

"Is there a common point in time?"

"Tuesday evening. Maybe night. Some say they went to sleep and now it's Tuesday. Others say Wednesday. Some remember both days."

"And the clocks?"

"Normal."

"Phones?"

"Normal."

"Calendars?"

"Normal."

"Computers?"

"Normal."

"Electricity?"

"Normal."

Rafael picked up the bag again.

"Then it isn't a sensor error."

Teresa looked at him.

"Thank you."

"We haven't measured anything yet."

"That's never stopped you before."

Inés stood.

"We're going there."

Teresa nodded.

"Good."

"What are we supposed to measure?" Rafael asked.

Inés looked at him.

"Everything we have a device for."

"Temperature?"

"Yes."

"Humidity?"

"Yes."

"Wind?"

"Yes."

"And if someone cooked rice twice?"

Teresa picked up the stamp.

"We have a form for that now."

She stamped the next sheet.

The avenida to Los Pinos was not blocked. Two barricades stood by the roadside. The first was red and white. The second was yellow. There was enough room for two cars between them. A Municipalidad employee sat beside them on a plastic chair, drinking from a bottle of water. Inés stopped. The man stood.

"Where are you going?"

Rafael pointed at the weather station logo on the door.

The man looked at it.

"Weather?"

"Yes."

"It's dry today."

"Thank you."

Inés drove on.

Rafael turned around.

"What is he doing there?"

"Checking."

"What?"

"Us."

"He let us through."

"Then everything was in order."

The road widened. Los Pinos did not begin at a sign. It began where the houses stood farther apart. Where sidewalks suddenly existed and ended again after three lots. Where streets had names already entered on the Municipalidad's maps, even though some of them did not yet have a single finished house.

The garúa was thinner here. Pale dust lay between the unfinished buildings. A concrete mixer was running on one lot. A man pushed a wheelbarrow. Two workers stood in front of a wall arguing. Inés drove slowly.

"Looks normal," Rafael said.

"Yes."

"Maybe that's good."

"Maybe."

They stopped at the school. Parents stood outside the entrance. A teacher spoke with a woman. Children ran across the courtyard. Rafael took the portable meter from the bag.

Temperature.

18.4 degrees.

Humidity.

86 percent.

Inés wrote it down.

"Wind."

Rafael raised the device.

"Hardly any."

"Number."

"Zero point eight."

They continued. At the next intersection:

18.5 degrees.

85 percent.

Wind zero point seven.

At the edge of an unfinished building:

18.4

86%

Zero point nine.

Rafael looked at the display.

"This is boring."

"Good."

"You always say good when you mean boring."

"No."

"When was the last time you said good and meant good?"

Inés thought about it.

"The coffee yesterday."

"You said it was strong."

"That was good."

They continued. A woman sat on a plastic chair in front of a small house. A pot stood beside her. The woman looked at them.

"Are you from the Municipalidad?"

"Weather station," Inés said.
 "Then you're too late."
 Rafael stopped.
 "For the weather?"
 "For yesterday."
 Inés went over to her.
 "What happened yesterday?"
 The woman pointed at the pot.
 "Arroz con pollo."
 Rafael looked inside. The pot was empty.
 "Was it good?"
 The woman looked at him.
 "Very."
 "Then I don't understand the problem."
 Inés lightly kicked his shoe. The woman noticed.
 "I cooked it twice."
 "Why?" Inés asked.
 "Because it was gone the first time."
 "The rice?"
 "Tuesday."
 Rafael said nothing else. The woman smoothed her apron.
 "I cooked. My husband came home at seven. We ate. Afterward he watched the game. I went to bed at ten."
 "And then?"
 "Then I got up."
 "Wednesday?"
 "No."
 "Tuesday?"
 "Yes."
 "How did you know?"
 The woman pointed toward the street.
 "The gas truck came."
 Inés waited.
 "It comes on Tuesdays," the woman explained.
 "Maybe it came a day late."
 "He called out Tuesday."
 Rafael looked at Inés. The woman stood.
 "Wait."
 She went into the house. Rafael leaned toward Inés.
 "Maybe he calls out Tuesday every day."
 "Why would he?"
 "Advertising."
 "Tuesday isn't advertising."
 "Depends."
 The woman returned holding two small slips of paper. Gas receipts. She handed them to Inés. Both had the same number. Both had the same time. Tuesday, 8:13.
 "I paid twice," the woman said.
 "Did you get gas twice?" Rafael asked.

"No."

"Then you should talk to the dealer."

"I did."

"And?"

"He says I only paid once."

"Maybe—"

The woman raised her hand.

"I didn't ask you."

Rafael nodded.

"Good."

Inés handed back the receipts.

"May we speak with you again later?"

"If it isn't Tuesday."

"Today is Wednesday."

The woman sat down again.

"That's what you say."

She picked up the pot.

"I'm not cooking anything anyway."

By noon, Inés and Rafael had recorded twenty-seven unremarkable measurement points. Temperature, humidity, air pressure, radio signals, GPS, and the clocks on their phones behaved as they did in Centro.

In the shade of an unfinished wall, they heard three hammer blows from a construction site, two more, then another three.

"We're measuring the wrong thing," Rafael said.

Inés set her notepad on the dashboard. "What are we missing?"

"Memory. Or construction progress."

They photographed the unfinished building across the street twice and wrote down 12:17. They planned to return in an hour. Behind them, the hammer began the same sequence again.

At 1:27, they returned. The unfinished building was still there. Rafael stopped the Toyota. Inés got out. She stood in the street.

"Phone."

Rafael took it out. He opened the photo. Ground floor. Columns. Rebar. He looked at the house. Ground floor. Columns. A masonry wall on the second floor. Rafael went closer.

"Was that there?"

Inés took the phone from him. She held the image up against the building.

"No."

No one was working at the site. A bucket stood beside a stack of bricks. A shovel leaned against the wall. Rafael went to the entrance.

"Hello?"

No answer. He did not step inside. Inés walked around the lot. The masonry was higher in back. She looked at the photo.

"That isn't one hour."

"Maybe a lot of people were here."

"How many?"

"A lot."

"How many is a lot?"

Rafael looked at the wall.

"More than two."

Inés went back to the Toyota. She picked up the notepad.

12:17 — photo

13:27 — second-floor wall partially closed

Rafael stood beside her.

“Don’t write closed.”

“Why?”

“Built.”

“Partially built.”

“Yes.”

Inés changed the word.

“Better?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Rafael looked at the building.

“Because closed sounds as if someone shut something.”

Inés stopped writing. Across the street, a man approached with a sack of cement on his shoulder.

Rafael went over to him.

“Do you work here?”

The man stopped.

“Next door.”

“Do you know who works on that house?”

“Los Hermanos Peña.”

“Were they here today?”

“Today?”

Rafael and Inés looked at each other.

“Yes,” Rafael said.

The man set down the sack.

“This morning.”

“And at noon?”

“No.”

“How many workers?”

“Three.”

“Did they build the wall upstairs?”

The man looked at the unfinished building.

“Looks like it.”

“Did you see them do it?”

“No.”

“Did you hear them working?”

“I was working.”

Rafael nodded.

“Of course.”

The man lifted the sack again.

“If you’re looking for the Peñas, they eat at their mother’s.”

“Where?”

“Los Pinos.”

“Where exactly?”

The man pointed south.

“There.”

Rafael followed his finger.

"Thank you."

The man continued on. Rafael looked at Inés.

"Helpful."

"Very."

They photographed the house again. Then they drove on.

In the afternoon, Los Pinos began to catch up. No one called it that. Not yet. The first reports came in at two. An electric meter showed consumption that, according to the owner, could not have occurred until the following day.

A truck driver delivered sand to a construction site where the sand was already lying.

A construction manager found inspections in his notebook that he had not signed off on. The signature was his. He compared it with the one on his DNI. Then with an old contract. Then he signed his name five times on a blank sheet. He could see no difference.

At 3:12, Teresa called the weather station. Inés answered.

"Yes."

Teresa spoke. Inés looked at Rafael.

"How many?"

Teresa answered.

"Since when?"

Another answer.

"Good. We're coming."

She hung up.

"What?" Rafael asked.

"The time difference is getting smaller."

"What time difference?"

"Theirs."

"How does Teresa measure memory?"

"With the form."

Rafael was silent.

"Of course."

They drove back to the Municipalidad. Fewer people now stood outside the building. Instead, three stacks of forms lay in Room 3. Teresa had created categories.

DUPLICATE

MISSING

AHEAD

The fourth stack had no label. Rafael pointed at it.

"What's that?"

"I don't know."

"Then it fits."

Teresa ignored him. Inés sat.

"Explain."

Teresa took a sheet from the DUPLICATE stack.

"This morning, most were twelve to fourteen hours apart."

"How did you arrive at that number?"

"Bedtimes. Work start times. Receipts. Phones."

"That's imprecise."

"Yes."

"Good."

Teresa looked at Rafael.

"You may leave."

"I'm here on official business."

"That's the problem."

Inés picked up several forms. The times were indeed different.

Twelve hours.

Nine.

Seven.

At one o'clock, a man had reported that his wife remembered a conversation that, according to his own recollection, was not supposed to take place until four.

"How did he know it was supposed to take place?" Rafael asked.

Teresa picked up the form.

"Doctor's appointment."

"Ah."

"The doctor remembers the conversation."

"And the man?"

"By now, he does too."

Inés looked up.

"By now?"

"He came back twenty minutes ago."

Teresa picked up a second sheet.

"He remembers both now."

"The conversation that hasn't happened yet?"

"It happened."

"When?"

Teresa looked at the clock.

15:38.

"In twenty-two minutes."

No one spoke. A table was moved in the community room next door. Wood scraped across tile. Rafael sat.

"We have to call someone."

"Who?" Teresa asked.

He did not answer immediately. Regional government. Police. Civil defense. Health department. Rafael knew numbers for all of them. He did not know which one to dial.

"The police were here," Teresa said.

"And?"

"No crime."

"Health department?"

"What do I tell them?"

"Confusion."

"In an entire neighborhood?"

"Yes."

Teresa pushed the form toward him.

"Call."

Rafael looked at the two date fields. Then at Inés.

"What would you say?"

"That we are observing an unexplained temporal inconsistency in Los Pinos."

"That sounds worse."

"Is it better?"

"No."

"Then it fits."

Rafael picked up his phone. He did not dial. A bus passed outside. Inés continued leafing through the forms. Then she stopped.

"Teresa."

"Yes."

"Where is Mz. H?"

"Los Pinos."

"I know that."

"Southern section."

"Lote 14."

Teresa thought.

"Felipe."

"The first call."

"Yes."

Inés held out the form.

"This says house number 198."

Teresa took it.

"Yes."

"Is there a house there?"

"Of course. Alberto?"

Teresa called. No answer. She called louder.

"Alberto!"

His voice came from the back hall.

"What?"

"Mz. H, Lote 14."

A pause.

Then Alberto appeared in the doorway.

"What about it?"

"House number 198."

Alberto looked at the form.

"Could be."

"Could be?"

"I don't know every house number."

"You manage the lots."

"Lots. Not doors."

Teresa handed him the sheet. Alberto read it. His expression did not change. He read it again.

"What?" Rafael asked.

Alberto went to the filing cabinet.

"Nothing."

He opened a drawer. Searched. Closed it. Opened the next one.

"Alberto."

"Wait."

He pulled out a binder.

LOS PINOS — MANZANAS F-J

He set it on the table. Turned the pages.

F.

G.

H.

His finger moved down the lines.

Lote 10.

11.

12.

13.

15.

Alberto went back.

13.

15.

"Fourteen is missing," Inés said.

"Yes."

"From the registry?"

"Yes."

"But the man lives there."

"Apparently."

Teresa looked at Alberto.

"This morning, you said the block doesn't exist."

"The block exists."

"You said—"

"I was hoping he'd say El Alto."

Teresa was silent.

Alberto took the form.

"We're going there."

Rafael stood.

"So are we."

"Why?"

Rafael raised his bag.

"Weather."

Alberto looked at Teresa.

"Is he always like this?"

"He's good today."

Mz. H lay at the southeastern edge of Los Pinos. The streets here were only partly paved. Some curbs were already in place even though only pale earth lay behind them. Utility poles followed the road. A cable hung so low from one that a delivery van had to move into the opposite lane. Lote 14 lay between two houses. The lot was empty. Felipe Rojas stood in front of it. He wore gray pants and a shirt missing its bottom button.

"There," he said.

Alberto got out.

"What's there?"

"My house."

They looked at the lot. Pale earth. A few stones. A dry shrub grew against the rear wall.

"You live here?" Rafael asked.

Felipe looked at him.

"No."

"But you said—"

"This morning."

Felipe walked onto the lot.

"My house was here this morning."

Alberto followed him.

"Don Felipe."

"I know how it sounds."

"Good."

"I got up at six. My wife made coffee. I turned on the radio."

"Which station?" Inés asked.

Felipe looked at her.

"What?"

"Which station?"

"No idea. Music."

"Go on."

"Then I looked out the window."

He pointed toward the street.

"The gas truck was there."

"Tuesday," Rafael said.

Felipe nodded.

"Tuesday."

He took a few steps. Stopped.

"The kitchen was here."

Dust lay beneath his shoes.

"The door there."

He pointed.

"And our bedroom over there."

Teresa had come in her own car. She stood by the roadside writing. Alberto looked at her.

"You don't have to write down everything."

"Yes, I do."

Felipe continued.

"I called Teresa."

"At 6:48," she said.

"Yes."

"From where?" Inés asked.

Felipe took out his phone.

"From here."

He opened the call log.

Teresa.

6:48.

"GPS?" Rafael asked.

"What?"

"Location history."

Felipe handed him the phone. Rafael opened the map. The blue dot lay on Lote 14.

"Now," Inés said.

"Yes."

"Yesterday?"

Rafael searched. No data.

"Off."

He handed back the phone. Alberto stood at the edge of the lot.

"Where is your wife?"

Felipe looked at the empty place where the kitchen was supposed to have been.

"At her sister's."

"Why?"

"Because our house is gone."

No one said anything. Felipe put away his phone.

"It was still here this morning."

"And when did it disappear?" Teresa asked.

"I don't know."

"You were here."

"Yes."

"The entire time?"

"No. I went to the Municipalidad."

Teresa looked at her note.

"You didn't come."

"Yes, I did."

"I would have seen you."

Felipe looked at her.

"We spoke on the phone."

"Yes."

"Then I came."

"No."

Felipe rubbed his face.

"Good."

"What's good?"

"Write that I didn't come."

Teresa wrote. Felipe watched.

"You're really writing that."

"You said it."

"I said to write it because you don't believe me."

Teresa held the pen above the paper.

"Should I cross it out?"

Felipe looked at the lot.

"No."

Inés walked to the rear wall. A water pipe ran along it. New. A blue plastic connection protruded from the ground. She knelt.

"Rafael."

He came over.

"Water."

"Yes."

"For an empty lot."

"Maybe it was prepared."

Alberto heard.

"No."

He came closer.

"Connections are installed after the building permit is issued."

"Was there one?"

Alberto looked at the empty lot.

"Lote 14 doesn't exist in the registry."

Teresa stopped writing. Construction noise came from the northern part of Los Pinos. A hammer. Metal. A concrete mixer. Then a low sound. Rafael raised his head.

"What was that?"

Felipe looked toward the street.

"Truck."

The sound was gone. Inés remained still.

"Did you hear it?"

"Yes."

"The hum?"

Rafael waited.

Nothing.

"Maybe."

Teresa looked from one to the other.

"What hum?"

Rafael raised the bag.

"Weather."

Teresa wrote something.

"Don't write that," he said.

"Too late."

Shortly before sunset, Inés and Rafael stood at the unfinished building again. The second floor was almost closed in. Not finished. But the wall that had been only partially built at one o'clock now reached to just below the concrete columns.

The photo on the phone showed something else. Rafael held it beside the building.

"That's at least two days."

"Maybe one."

"With three people?"

"No."

No one was at the construction site. The shovel still leaned in the same place. The bucket stood beside the bricks. Only the stack was smaller. Inés went to the wall. She laid a hand on a brick.

"Dry."

"On the outside."

She scraped a mortar joint with her fingernail. The mortar was hard.

"This isn't from today."

Rafael stood behind her.

"The photo is."

The sun could not be seen behind the garúa. Even so, the light grew dimmer. The first construction lights came on across Los Pinos.

One.

Then a second.

Farther south, three at once. Inés looked at the time.

17:46.

Her phone rang. Teresa.

"Yes."

Inés listened.

“How much?”

Rafael watched her face.

“Are you sure?”

Pause.

“We’re coming.”

She hung up.

“What?”

“Two hours.”

“What’s two hours?”

“The difference.”

Rafael looked out over Los Pinos.

“How does she know?”

“The forms.”

“Of course.”

Inés went to the Toyota.

“Rafael.”

He stopped. The low sound was there again. Not loud. It lay beneath the construction noise. Beneath the engines. Beneath the voices.

The hum returned in two low pulses separated by a short pause.

Rafael looked toward the construction site.

“Concrete mixer.”

The concrete mixer was not running. They walked a few yards. The sound remained.

“Generator,” Rafael said.

“Where?”

He did not answer. The hum came again.

The hum returned in two low pulses separated by a short pause.

Inés looked northwest. Garúa hung over Centro. Beyond it, the coast could be seen only as a gray brightness.

“Do you know that sound?” she asked.

Rafael listened.

“Yes.”

“The antennas.”

“Yes.”

They stood among the unfinished houses of Los Pinos. No weather-station antenna was nearby. The hum fell silent. A worker called something from a construction site. Someone answered. A dog crossed the street. Rafael opened the black bag.

“The device is for tomorrow.”

“Which one?”

“Field strength.”

“Do you have it with you?”

“No.”

Inés looked at him.

“Then why do you say the device?”

“Because we have one.”

“Up there.”

“Yes.”

“On the cerro.”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Rafael closed the bag.

“Now you’re saying good again.”

Inés got in.

At 7:53 p.m., the power went out in San Desvelo. At the hostel, Javier first noticed it in the fan. He lay on the bed reading his notes. The fan slowed. Its blades became individually visible. Then they stopped. The light went out. The television fell silent.

Javier sat in the dark.

A collective sound came from the street. Not a shout. More like the brief exhale of many people realizing at the same moment that something was not working.

Javier went to the window.

Centro was dark. The streetlights were out. The Archivo Municipal had disappeared. The park beside it had been dark already. Now the illuminated facade was gone as well. Farther north, El Faro lay black along the coast. Javier could not see the transmission tower of Radio Desvelo. He only knew roughly where it stood. To the east, the houses of El Alto disappeared on the slope. Cerro Dormido rose above them.

Dark.

Javier looked south.

Los Pinos glowed.

Not brightly. Not unusually brightly. The construction lights burned. Windows. Streetlights. Individual bare bulbs on unfinished buildings. But because everything else was dark, the neighborhood looked like a city of its own. Javier placed his hand against the windowpane.

He counted.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

Eight.

The power returned. The fan behind him began turning. The television did not come back on. Javier kept looking south. Los Pinos was now only part of San Desvelo again. He picked up his phone.

19:53.

In his notes, he wrote:

Power outage. Approx. 8 seconds.

Then:

Los Pinos had power.

He looked at the sentence. For the first time in days, he did not add a time.

On Cerro Vigía, the generator started after three seconds. The weather station monitors went black. Then bright again. Inés sat at the main computer. Rafael stood in the doorway.

“Three seconds,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Generator.”

“Yes.”

The measurement program restarted on the monitor.

Wind direction.

Temperature.

Humidity.

The gap in the data was visible.

Three seconds.

Inés opened the external power supply log.

Grid failure.

19:53:11.

Restoration.

19:53:19.

“Eight seconds,” she said.

Rafael came closer.

“Generator after three.”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Inés looked at him.

“Los Pinos.”

Rafael went to the window. From up here, San Desvelo lay below them. Centro. El Alto. Las Palmeras farther north. La Playa on the coast. Los Pinos to the south.

“What?”

“It was on.”

“Emergency power.”

“For an entire neighborhood?”

Rafael was silent. Inés opened the stored weather data. The measurements continued.

19:53:10.

19:53:11.

Then two data sets. Inés moved the mouse.

“Rafael.”

He came back. Two lines with the same timestamp appeared on the screen.

19:53:12

Temperature 17.9.

Humidity 88.

Wind 1.2.

Below that:

19:53:12

Temperature 18.3.

Humidity 84.

Wind 0.7.

Next timestamp. Two again. Then again. Rafael pulled over a chair.

“Two sensors?”

“No.”

“Backup?”

“No.”

“Software error.”

Inés looked at him. He raised his hands.

"I had to."

The duplicate data sets continued.

19:53:13.

19:53:14.

19:53:15.

Then the values drew closer.

17.9 and 18.3.

18.0 and 18.2.

18.1 and 18.2.

19:53:18.

Both data sets showed the same values.

19:53:19.

Only one line remained. Rafael leaned closer to the monitor.

"Save it."

"It saves automatically."

"Extra."

Inés exported the data. Twice. Then to a USB drive. Rafael watched.

"You don't trust the computer?"

"Not today."

"Good."

Inés said nothing. Outside, the hum began.

The hum returned in two low pulses separated by a short pause.

Both looked toward the window.

The next morning, it was Wednesday again in Los Pinos. At least, that was what people said. The school opened. The gas truck did not come. The woman with the pot made coffee. The construction manager found no new signatures in his notebook. The eighty sacks of cement were forty. No one knew when the others had disappeared. Teresa put the forms in a cardboard box. On the side, she wrote:

LOS PINOS

Below it:

TEMPORAL

She looked at the word. Alberto stood beside her.

"Temporary?"

"Temporal."

"That's spelled differently."

"I know."

"Then spell it differently."

Teresa closed the box.

"Later."

Alberto picked up a stack of building files.

"Mz. H?"

Teresa looked up.

"What about it?"

"Lote 14."

They went into the archive. The binder still lay on the table.

LOS PINOS — MANZANAS F-J

Alberto opened it.

F.

G.

H.

Lote 10.

11.

12.

13.

14.

15.

He stopped. Teresa stepped closer.

“It was missing yesterday.”

“Yes.”

Alberto removed the sheet.

LOTE 14

Owners:

ROJAS, FELIPE / MENDOZA, CARMEN

Use:

RESIDENCE

House number:

198

Teresa took the sheet.

“That wasn’t there.”

“No.”

“You saw it.”

“Yes.”

“So did I.”

“Yes.”

They looked at each other.

Alberto took the binder.

“We’re going there.”

A house stood on Lote 14. Two stories. The front was covered in pale stucco. The bricks were exposed along the side wall. Metal bars covered the windows. A black water tank stood on the flat roof. Beside the front door, a small Virgen hung behind glass. Felipe Rojas stood in the street. His wife Carmen beside him. Neither said anything. Teresa parked. Alberto got out.

“Don Felipe.”

Felipe looked at him.

“Yes.”

“Is that your house?”

Felipe looked at the building.

“Yes.”

“Was it there yesterday?”

Carmen answered.

“Of course.”

Felipe looked at her.

“No.”

Carmen turned to him.

"No what?"

"It was gone yesterday."

"Felipe."

"You were at your sister's."

"Because you called me."

"Because the house was gone."

Carmen looked at Teresa.

"He hasn't slept since yesterday."

Felipe went to the door. He took out a key. Unlocked it.

"Look."

Alberto remained outside.

"At what?"

"Everything."

A small kitchen was visible through the open door. A table. Four chairs. A refrigerator. A calendar on the wall. Teresa went closer. The calendar showed Wednesday. Felipe stood in the doorway.

"This is my house."

"Yes," Alberto said.

"It wasn't here yesterday."

"Yes."

Carmen looked at him.

"Stop agreeing with him."

Alberto looked at her.

"Sorry."

Felipe laughed. Once. Then he went inside. Teresa stopped in front of the small Virgen. Moisture had collected behind the glass.

"Building permit," Alberto said.

"What?"

"If it's in the registry, there's a file."

They drove back.

The file was in the Archivo. Not in the Los Pinos binder. In the old records. Alberto found it at 11:06. A thin brown folder. On the front, it read:

ROJAS / MENDOZA

Below that:

RESIDENCE — LOTE 14

Teresa took it.

"Why the old records?"

Alberto opened the folder. Building plan. Water connection. Electricity. Permit. Stamp. Signature.

Teresa leaned closer.

"No."

Alberto looked at the date.

17 JUN 1987

They stood silently in the archive. The copier could be heard in the front office. One sheet. Another. Then a beep. Teresa picked up the permit.

"Los Pinos didn't exist."

"No."

"Not in 1987."

"No."

"Felipe was—"

She calculated. Alberto did not help her.

"Four?"

"Five."

"And Carmen?"

"No idea."

Teresa looked at the signature.

F. ROJAS

"That's his."

"How do you know?"

"I had six forms from him yesterday."

They went to the front. The box stood beside her desk. Teresa opened it. Took out Felipe's report. Placed the two signatures side by side. Alberto leaned forward.

"Similar."

"They're the same."

"I'm not an expert."

"Neither am I."

"Then don't write the same."

Teresa picked up a pen. On a new note, she wrote:

Check signatures.

Below that:

Check 1987.

Alberto looked at it.

"What exactly?"

Teresa set down the pen.

"Everything."

Nothing happened for three days. That was not unusual for San Desvelo. Maritza sold ceviche. Ernesto Vilchez opened his store at 8:57. The night driver came to San Desvelo. Limes were sold at the Mercado. Los Pinos kept building. At normal speed. Javier did not go south. He bought a ticket twice. He let the first one expire. He returned the second. The woman at the counter recognized him.

"Again?"

"Yes."

"Should I just not sell you one tomorrow?"

"Maybe."

"That saves paper."

Javier smiled.

"I'll let you know."

He still lived at the hostel. Room twelve. The hot water worked two days out of three. He no longer measured routes. At least, not every one. By now, his notes contained other things.

Power outage 19:53.

Los Pinos remained lit.

Wednesday twice?

Mauricio?

He had deleted the last word three times. Written it again three times. On the fourth morning, Javier went north. He did not start the stopwatch. He walked through Centro. Past the Mercado. On toward El Faro. The houses stood closer to the road. Workshops opened. A man washed the sidewalk in front of his house with a hose even though the garúa kept everything damp. Javier continued. Beyond El Faro, the buildings thinned out. The coastal road ran between the Pacific and gently rising ground. A red Toyota stood farther ahead. Javier did not know the car. By now, he knew almost every car that regularly parked between the terminal and Centro. The Toyota was not one of them.

A woman walked slowly along the roadside holding a device. A man stood beside the Toyota looking at a second one. Javier slowed. The woman took five steps. Stopped. Turned. Walked back. The man raised his head.

"Stronger?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Three."

"Three what?"

"More than over there."

"That isn't a unit."

"Then come here and read it yourself."

Javier stopped several yards away. The man noticed him.

"Tomorrow."

Javier looked behind him. No one.

"Excuse me?"

"If you want to ask what we're doing, maybe we'll know more tomorrow."

Javier came closer.

"I wanted to ask what you're measuring."

The man looked at the woman.

"Close."

The woman returned.

"Radio interference."

Javier looked at the device.

"What kind?"

"That's what we're trying to find out."

"From a transmitter?"

"Maybe."

Javier looked north along the coastal road. The old transmission tower could be seen in the garúa. Only the lower part. The top disappeared into the gray.

"Radio Desvelo?"

Rafael looked at him.

"You're not from here."

"No."

"How do you know the name?"

"The hostel."

"The hostel tells people about the radio station?"

"The Wi-Fi has a similar name."

Inés looked at Javier.

"What is the Wi-Fi called?"

"Hostal Desvelo."

"That isn't similar."

"The password."

Rafael waited. Javier said:

"desvelo1987."

Inés held the meter still.

"1987?"

"Yes."

Rafael looked at her.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Javier noticed.

"You know the year."

"A lot of people know 1987," Rafael said.

"It was pretty successful internationally."

Inés looked at him.

"What?"

"The year."

"Stop."

Rafael raised the device again. Javier remained where he was.

"Are you measuring time?"

Inés turned toward him. Rafael looked up as well.

"No," he said.

Javier nodded.

"Good."

He walked on. After five steps, Inés called:

"Why did you say time?"

Javier stopped. He turned around.

"Because I measured time."

Rafael looked toward the road. Then back at Javier.

"For work?"

"No."

"Then why?"

Javier came back.

"I missed my bus."

Rafael waited.

"That happens."

"I know."

"It happened to me three times."

"Rafael," Inés said.

"Once in Chiclayo. The next one didn't come until the afternoon."

Javier took out his phone.

"I was gone for twenty minutes."

"Then you missed the bus."

"For me, it was about ten."

"You can miss a bus even then."

"The driver had announced a ten-minute break."

Rafael thought for a moment.

"Close."

Inés held out her hand.

“Show me.”

Javier opened his notes. He handed her the phone. Inés read.

Terminal — parking lot: 6:12

Parking lot — terminal: 5:48

Terminal — parking lot: 6:09

Parking lot — terminal: 5:51

Terminal — parking lot: 6:11

Below that:

First trip: 20 minutes

She gave Rafael the phone. He read.

“You walked the route five times?”

“Yes.”

“The same morning?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Javier looked at him.

“Because it took twenty minutes the first time.”

“Maybe you went the wrong way.”

“My wife said that too.”

Rafael nodded.

“Sounds reasonable.”

“I’m not married.”

Rafael looked up from the phone. Javier took it from him.

“I wanted to know if you were listening.”

Inés laughed. Rafael did not.

“I was listening.”

“You agreed with my imaginary wife.”

“Maybe she’d still be right.”

Javier put away his phone.

“What are you measuring?”

Inés raised her device.

“A signal.”

“What kind?”

“Broadband. Weak. Intermittent.”

“And?”

“And we don’t know where it’s coming from.”

Rafael pointed south.

“We first heard it at the weather station.”

“Heard it?”

“A hum.”

Javier looked at him.

“What does it sound like?”

Rafael thought.

“Low.”

Inés said:

“Pause.”

Rafael nodded.

“Low.”

“Pause.”

Javier waited.

“That’s all?”

“Yes.”

“And that’s why you’re walking around here with devices?”

Rafael looked at Javier’s pants pocket.

“You walked the same route five times.”

Javier nodded.

“Good.”

“Good.”

Inés walked a few steps north. The meter in her hand responded. She stopped.

“Rafael.”

He came over. Javier followed. A bar moved on the display. Inés turned slowly. Toward the city. The bar fell. Toward the coast. Rose. Farther north. A little higher. Rafael looked at the transmission tower. The garúa lay thick over the low rise. The old studio was only faintly visible.

“There,” Javier said.

“We see it,” Rafael said.

“I meant the hum.”

Inés raised her head. Now she heard it.

Low.

Pause.

Low.

Pause.

Not loud. It lay beneath the Pacific. Beneath the wind. Beneath a truck traveling through El Faro farther south. Rafael turned off his device. The hum remained. Javier looked at him.

“Why are you turning it off?”

“Because now I know it isn’t the device.”

Inés continued. The bar rose. One step. Another. Then she stopped. Ahead of them, the coastal road continued north. Radio Desvelo stood on the low rise. The building was low. Its stucco mottled. The top of the transmission tower disappeared into the garúa. The gate was closed. Rafael looked at his meter.

“That’s enough for me.”

“Enough for what?” Javier asked.

“To come back tomorrow.”

Inés looked at the old studio.

“Why tomorrow?”

“Because I want to get the better device.”

Javier looked at the radio station.

“I’m coming with you.”

Rafael shook his head.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t work for the weather station.”

“I can measure.”

“You measure sidewalks.”

“So far.”

Inés looked from one to the other.

“Tomorrow. Eight o’clock.”

Rafael looked at her.

“Inés.”

“What?”

“He doesn’t work for us.”

“Then he can’t write a report either.”

Rafael considered that. Javier waited.

“Good,” Rafael said.

Inés turned off the meter. The hum remained.

Chapter 8: The Park

Aurelio had known the park for years: a small square between the Municipalidad and Centro, with trees, low walls, too many pigeons, and paths used during the day by children and men with plastic cups.

From Cerro Dormido, he read San Desvelo by its lights. Las Palmeras, Centro, El Faro, Los Pinos. Only the park remained a dark patch night after night. Aurelio had noticed it for four years and done nothing about it.

"New ones are coming tomorrow."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

"In the morning?"

The man had looked at Aurelio.

"If the supplier comes in the morning."

Aurelio had bought three batteries. Then he had gone to the Mercado and bought rue. The woman at the stall had given him two bunches.

"It's not pretty."

Aurelio had looked at the leaves.

"It doesn't have to be pretty."

"People want pretty ones."

"I don't."

"That's why I'm giving it to you."

She had put one more small sprig in the bag.

"That one's free."

"Why?"

"Because it's even uglier."

Aurelio had paid. Now he sat on a bench across from the park. The bench did not belong to the park. It stood on the sidewalk in front of a closed school-uniform store. Aurelio had set the bag of rue beside him. The batteries were inside it.

It was eight twenty-three p.m. He knew because the pharmacy on the corner had a digital clock above the entrance. The display alternated between the time and the temperature.

20:23

Then:

19°C

Then again:

20:23

Aurelio looked at the park. The streetlights along the road were on. There were lights in front of the Municipalidad. The Archivo on the other side of the park was lit as well. A fluorescent tube was still burning in one of the upper windows.

The park was dark. Aurelio saw the first lamppost. It stood perhaps twenty meters beyond the entrance. A slender pole. A round fixture on top. Off. Farther back, Aurelio knew there was a second one. He could not see it. The trees stood in the way. He waited. His eyes would adjust to the darkness. Aurelio waited longer. After a few minutes, he could make out the wall at the entrance more clearly.

The trunk of the first tree.
A trash can.
Nothing beyond it.

From the cerro, the darkness of the park had looked small. A patch between the streets. From here it was larger. Aurelio looked between the trees. He waited for his eyes to adjust. They did not.

A man walked down the street. He carried a plastic bag in each hand. Shortly before reaching the park, he crossed to the other side of the street. Aurelio watched him. The man passed the Municipalidad and crossed back at the next intersection.

Aurelio looked at the park. A girl came from the direction of the Mercado. Maybe sixteen. She was looking at her phone. The shortest route would have taken her through the park. She went around it. Aurelio picked up the bag of rue from the ground and set it on the other side of the bench. Then he waited.

Teresa left the Archivo at eight thirty-seven p.m. She had put the box of forms from Los Pinos on Shelf 7. Not in the main archive. Not in the room with the building files, either. Shelf 7 stood in the small space behind the copier. It held things no one had yet decided where to put. A broken time clock. Three old street maps. A box of keys. A printer without a cable. And now Los Pinos. Teresa had labeled the box.

LOS PINOS

Below that, it still said:

TEMPORAL

She had not changed the word. She would think about it on Monday. Maybe. Teresa locked the door of the Archivo. She pulled the handle twice. Then she took three steps. Stopped. The park lay before her. Teresa looked into it. She knew there were six lampposts inside. Four were listed in the Municipalidad's inventory. Two were not. She knew because there had been a complaint the previous year. A man had fallen on one of the paths. He had claimed the path was poorly lit. The Municipalidad had then ordered an inspection of the lighting. Four lampposts. That was what the inventory said. The electrician had found six.

Teresa had read the form again. Then the invoice. Three bulbs had been replaced. So had a fuse. Teresa had filed the invoice herself. She looked into the park. Not one of the six lamps was on.

"Of course," she said.

She took her phone out of her pocket. Not to call anyone. She opened her notes.

Check park lighting.

Teresa looked at the sentence. Then at the park. She added:

6 lampposts.

She did not know why. When the electrician came, he would count them himself. Teresa put away her phone. Across the street, a man sat on a bench. Long hair. A bag beside him. Teresa recognized his face. Not his name. She had seen him at the Municipalidad sometime. Or at the Mercado. Maybe both. The man looked into the park. Teresa followed his gaze.

The first lamp was out. She could not see the second. The third had to be near the fountain. The fountain could not be seen, either. Teresa knew there was a fountain there. She had filed the invoice for the pump repair. Twice. The fountain was there. Teresa could not see it. She remained where she was.

Javier came out of the Hostal at eight forty-one p.m. He wanted to go to the kiosk at the terminal. Not for Inca Kola. The man sold empanadas, too. Javier had eaten nothing that afternoon. He walked down the street. Past the Archivo. Then he saw the park. Javier knew the park. He had passed it several times over the past few days. During the day. Once in the morning. Twice in the afternoon. He had not measured it. There had been no reason to.

Now he stopped at the intersection. The route to the terminal went around the park. Javier looked at the map on his phone. The blue dot stood at the intersection. He zoomed in. A path ran diagonally through the park. Javier looked at the entrance. He could see it. On the other side, he could see the street between two buildings. A hundred fifty meters. Maybe less. Through the park would take two minutes. Around it, four. Javier put away his phone. Then he took it out again. He opened the stopwatch.

00:00.00

His thumb hovered over Start. Javier looked into the park. The entrance was visible. So was the exit. Between them, he saw nothing. He waited. A car drove past behind him. For a moment, its headlights swept across the entrance. The first tree appeared. A stretch of path. The low wall. Then the car was gone. The darkness returned. Not slowly. At once. Javier looked at the stopwatch.

00:00.00

He did not press it. After a few seconds, he closed the app. He put the phone in his pants pocket. He remained at the intersection.

Maritza had forgotten the last container at the Mercado. She had not noticed until she reached the parking lot. The cart had been almost empty. Fish gone. Choclo gone. Cancha almost gone. She had taken three pieces of camote with her. Óscar had eaten two. The third lay in a plastic dish in her bag. Maritza had gone back to the Mercado. The man at the side entrance had seen her.

"Closed."

"I know."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I forgot something."

"Then you're out of luck."

Maritza had looked at him. The man had opened the door.

"Five minutes."

"I need two."

"Then you have three left."

She had retrieved the container. Now she was going home. The park was on her way. Not directly. But close enough. Maritza saw Teresa first. She stood in front of the Archivo. Then she saw the man on the bench. Aurelio. Maritza knew his name. He had eaten ceviche at her stall twice. Once, he had wanted only camote and choclo.

"Without fish?" Maritza had asked.

"Yes."

"Then it isn't ceviche."

"That's all right."

Maritza had given him camote and choclo. He had paid full price anyway. Now Aurelio sat on a bench and looked into the park. Maritza slowed down. She looked as well. At noon, the park was different. At noon, men with plastic cups sat there. Children rode bicycles along the paths. An old man sometimes sold gelatina roja at the entrance. There were pigeons. Too many. Maritza

knew the park. She looked between the trees. Tried to remember where the benches stood. One by the fountain. Two along the wide path. One under the large tree. Or were there two? Maritza walked more slowly. Where was the fountain? In the middle. Of course. She tried to picture the path to it. Entrance. Straight ahead. Then left. No. Right. Maritza stopped. She knew the park. She had passed it a hundred times. Maybe more. She looked into the darkness. The paths were gone. Not really. Maritza knew they were there. She simply could not remember how they ran.

A man stood at the intersection across the street. The man from the terminal. Javier. Maritza recognized him. He was looking into the park as well. "Ah," Maritza said softly. No one heard her. She set the bag with the container on the ground. Then she kept looking.

Inés and Rafael had eaten at a small chifa near the Mercado. Rafael had ordered lomo saltado. Inés, arroz chaufa. By the end, each had eaten from the other's plate.

"Yours is better," Rafael had said.

"Then order it next time."

"No."

"Why?"

"Then I'll probably want yours."

"That's the same thing."

"No."

"Yes, it is."

Rafael had taken a piece of meat from her plate. Inés had rapped his fingers with her fork. Not hard. The owner had seen it and laughed. Now they were driving back toward El Alto. Inés lived there. Rafael planned to continue on to Cerro Vigía afterward.

"You can sleep at my place," Inés said.

"I have the early shift tomorrow."

"You'll be up there tomorrow anyway."

"Exactly."

"Then drive up in the morning."

"Then I have to get up earlier."

"Ten minutes."

"Twelve."

"How do you know?"

Rafael looked at her.

"We measure routes now."

Inés said nothing. Rafael noticed.

"That was bad."

"Yes."

"Sorry."

"Good."

"You don't mean good this time."

"No."

They drove past the Municipalidad. Rafael slowed down.

"There's a broken lamp."

Inés looked out the window.

"Which one?"

Rafael pointed toward the park.

"There."

Inés looked.

“Which one?”

The Toyota slowed. Rafael looked again.

“All of them.”

“Then several are broken.”

“That’s not normally how electricity works.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Not all at once.”

“Yes.”

“Inés.”

“Power outage.”

“The street has power.”

“Different circuit.”

“Six lampposts?”

“How do you know there are six?”

Rafael said nothing. The Toyota rolled on. Inés turned her head.

“Pull over for a minute.”

Rafael pulled over. The engine kept running.

“What?”

Inés opened the window. She listened. A mototaxi. Music from a house. Dishes. A dog farther away. The Toyota’s engine.

“Turn it off.”

Rafael shut off the engine.

“Now?”

Inés listened.

“Nothing.”

“Good.”

“No.”

Rafael looked at her. Inés gazed at the park.

“Exactly.”

Since Cerro Vigía, Inés had carried the hum in her head. That afternoon, she might have heard it in Los Pinos, later on the Avenida, and once when a refrigerator shut off. In front of the park, it had vanished completely.

Teresa stood in front of the Archivo, Javier at the intersection, Maritza on the sidewalk, Inés and Rafael in the red Toyota, Aurelio on the bench. Six people looked into the darkness.

The park did nothing. No light, no branch, no footstep. Aurelio saw something that reflected no light. Teresa counted lampposts, Javier a distance, Maritza paths, Rafael possible circuits. Inés heard nothing.

Then they noticed one another without communicating.

A woman came from the direction of the Mercado. She carried a grocery bag in each hand. She passed Javier. Then Maritza. She crossed the street. Walked alongside the park. She did not look in. At the next intersection, she turned.

The moment was over.

Rafael started the Toyota. The engine came to life. Inés closed the window. Teresa took her phone from her pocket. She read her note.

Check park lighting.

Below that:

6 lampposts.

She left. Javier looked at the park entrance once more. Then he walked around it toward the terminal. Maritza picked up her bag. She went home. The red Toyota turned toward El Alto. Aurelio remained seated. The pharmacy displayed:

20:49

Then:

19°C

Then again:

20:49

Aurelio waited. The street became normal again. A mototaxi drove past. Two men argued about soccer in front of a bodega. A woman called to her son from a window. The smell of grease and charcoal drifted from the pollería. Aurelio picked up the bag of rue. He stood. He crossed the street. At the park entrance, he stopped. From here, he could see the first path.

Three meters.

Maybe four.

Then nothing.

Aurelio stepped inside. Behind him, the streetlight burned. Before him, the park was dark.

He kept walking.

Chapter 9: Low Tide

Efraín went to the beach at night when he could not sleep. That happened often. Not every night. But often enough that the dogs in El Faro knew him. The black one in front of the Córdova family's house still lifted its head sometimes when Efraín passed. The yellow one at the corner by the coastal road had not done so in months. Efraín did not know the dog's name. He called him Amarillo.

"Buenas," Efraín said.

Amarillo kept sleeping. It was two fourteen a.m. Efraín wore an old track jacket, gray pants, and sandals. In his right hand he carried a small plastic bag. The bag was empty.

After a few steps, Efraín heard a soft scrape behind him.

Amarillo had raised his head.

The dog was not looking at Efraín.

He was looking at the spot directly beside him.

Efraín kept walking.

Amarillo's gaze followed the empty spot.

Most of the time, the bag was no longer empty on the way back. The sea brought things. Not good things. But things. Rope. Canisters. Bottles. Once, an orange life jacket that had been almost new. Efraín had kept it in his house for three months. Then his nephew had taken it.

"What for?" Efraín had asked.

"For the boat."

"You don't have a boat."

"Not yet."

Efraín had given him the life jacket. His nephew still did not have a boat. The streets of El Faro were empty. The neighborhood lay closer to the sea than Centro and smelled different at night. Damper. Of salt, old concrete, and sometimes fish, even though the small boats had long since moved farther south. Many houses in El Faro were low. One story. Some two. On several facades, the air had darkened the plaster. The metal grilles over the windows were rusty along their lower edges. Black water tanks stood on several roofs.

Efraín knew almost every house. Not the people. The houses. He knew which one had once been green. Which one had had a balcony before the owner walled it in. Which one had been for sale for twelve years. At one corner stood a small Virgen behind glass. Someone had put fresh flowers inside that afternoon.

White ones.

Efraín stopped. He looked at the flowers. Then he continued.

Four steps.

A scrape.

Four steps.

His left foot made the scraping sound. It had done so for years. A doctor had once told him he needed to do exercises. Efraín had asked which ones. The doctor had shown him. Efraín had done them for three days. Then no more. The foot worked. It was just louder.

The seawall stood at the end of the street. Efraín climbed over a low section. He could have taken the stairs. They were twenty meters farther on. Efraín took them on the way back. Sometimes. The sand was cold. He removed his sandals and put them in the plastic bag. Then he walked toward the water. After about thirty meters, he stopped. The water was not there.

Efraín looked left. Then right. He could hear the surf. Farther out. He walked a few more steps. The sand beneath his feet grew damp. The water usually reached this spot. Not at every high tide. Not every day. But often enough. Efraín looked out at the Pacific.

The night and the garúa turned the sea into a surface with no visible end. The surf was there. Just too far away.

“Ya,” Efraín said.

He did not know why. He kept walking. After twenty meters, he could have turned back. After thirty, too. After fifty, he stopped again. The sea had receded. Not far enough to be frightening. Just far enough that Efraín had taken off his shoes. He looked back at El Faro. The houses stood behind the seawall. Several windows were lit. Farther north, Radio Desvelo’s transmission tower rose above the flat coast. Its top was lost in the garúa. A red light glowed lower down on the tower.

On.

Off.

On.

Off.

Efraín looked toward the water again. Then he noticed the first wall.

It barely protruded from the sand. Perhaps twenty centimeters. At first, Efraín had thought it was a long stone. Then he stepped closer. Bricks. Old bricks. Dark with water. The garúa had thinned. Above the Pacific, the moon appeared as a dull patch; a pale shimmer rested on the wet bricks. Shells clung to them in places. Efraín followed the wall. It ran straight north. Then it turned. A right angle.

“Casa,” Efraín said.

A house. Or something that had once been one. He knew the stories. Everyone in El Faro knew stories. The sea had once been farther out. Or farther in. Depending on whom you asked. The old people talked about houses on the beach. About a street the water had taken. About a small chapel. About a storehouse for nets. About three houses. About twenty. Efraín’s father had said it was nonsense.

“The sea doesn’t take houses.”

“Why not?”

“Because houses don’t belong in the sea.”

Efraín had been perhaps nine then. He had not understood the answer. He did not understand it today, either. He kept walking. Beyond the first wall lay a second. Then a third. The sand was flatter here. Water stood in shallow depressions. Efraín saw a row of dark stones. He followed it. It ran parallel to the first wall.

A path. Maybe. Efraín stopped. A narrow alley lay before him. Not all of it. Low remnants of walls on the left. Foundations on the right. Firm sand between them. He turned around. El Faro lay beyond the seawall. The present-day street leading inland from the coast ran in roughly the same direction. Efraín looked at the alley again.

“No.”

He entered it. The old El Faro was lower. That was Efraín’s first thought. He did not know why he called it El Faro. Maybe because it lay beneath El Faro. Maybe because he had nothing else to call it. The houses had been smaller. Tighter. The walls stood closer together. Some rooms were scarcely wider than Efraín’s outstretched arms. In one foundation, he made out three areas. A front room. A small courtyard. Behind it, something that might have been a kitchen. Black marks covered the wall. Efraín knelt. Soot. Or algae. He rubbed a finger over them. Black. He smelled it. Nothing. Efraín wiped his finger on his pants.

Farther south, he found a masonry step. There was nothing above it. He placed one foot on it. The step held. A piece of blue ceramic lay beside it. Efraín picked it up. A tile. Not large. A white pattern marked its surface. A flower. Or a star. He turned the tile over. Cement clung to it. Efraín put it back. He knew tiles like these. His grandmother had had similar ones in her kitchen. Not the same. Similar. Farther out stood the remains of a wall. Something pale occupied a small niche. Efraín went over.

A shell. Beneath it, a piece of wax. He leaned closer. The niche was scarcely larger than his hand. A patch of blue paint clung to the back wall. Efraín looked toward present-day El Faro. He could not see the small Virgen at the street corner from here. He looked into the niche again.

“Ya,” he said.

More softly this time. He kept walking. Only a fragment of the old neighborhood was visible. Sand covered most of it and exposed only isolated walls, rooms, and alleys. A wall emerged and disappeared again. A room began and ended beneath a sandbank. An alley ran straight for ten meters and vanished into black water.

Efraín found a brick pedestal with a hole in the middle. Perhaps for a post. Perhaps for something else. A broken Inca Kola bottle lay beside it. That made him less nervous. He picked it up. Old. But not very old. He put it in the plastic bag. Then he stopped. A small plaza lay before him. Efraín needed a few seconds to recognize it. Four foundations stood around an open space. In the center was a round masonry rim. A well. Efraín went closer. The well was filled with sand. A thin piece of metal lay on the rim. He picked it up. A spoon. Aluminum. The handle was bent. Efraín examined it. Then he did not put it in the bag. He set it back down.

Present-day El Faro had no plaza. Not really. There was a wider intersection in front of the bodega. Mototaxis sometimes stood there. A man sold salchipapas in the afternoon. On Sundays, a woman set up a table of used clothes. Efraín looked back. From here, the intersection lay roughly above the small plaza. Not directly. Maybe. He took three steps to the left. Looked again.

“Más o menos.”

More or less. That reassured him. More or less was good. More or less meant things were allowed to resemble one another. He continued.

The farther north Efraín went, the clearer the foundations became. The sea had carried away more sand here. He found the remains of a house with a narrow courtyard. A channel ran through the floor. At its end was a small hole in the wall. A drain. Efraín smiled.

“Of course.”

He did not know what he had expected. That old houses did not use water. A stone basin lay in the next alley. Beside it were three broken clay pots. Efraín knew pots like these, too. Not from museums. From kitchens. His aunt had kept chicha in a similar vessel. Another pot was shallower. Maybe for food. Maybe for water. Traces of red paint remained on one wall. Not brick red. Paint. A vivid red. Yellow beside it. Efraín ran his finger over the surface. It was rough.

He looked toward present-day El Faro. Gray. Beige. Unplastered brick. Dark facades. Black water tanks. The El Faro in the sand had been different. Not prettier. Efraín did not like that word. But more colorful. One house wall must once have been blue. A vivid blue, of which only small patches remained between the salt and algae. Green tiles clung to another foundation.

Efraín found a wall with a painted white line. Above it were the remains of letters.

...ERÍA

He stepped closer.

“Panadería?”

Maybe. Or dulcería. Or something else. Efraín could not tell. Beside the lettering was a faded image. Two yellow stalks of wheat.

"Panadería," Efraín decided.

He looked through the missing wall. There might have been a salesroom there. An oven behind it. Or no oven. Efraín was not a baker. He kept walking. A low masonry base stood at one corner. Blue and white tiles lay on top. There was a recess in the middle. Efraín stopped. He knew what this was. He had seen such things in Trujillo. In smaller places, too. An image had stood inside it. A saint. A Virgen. Maybe a cross. The niche was empty. Wax clung to its lower edge. A lot of wax. Efraín sat on the low wall opposite.

He thought of his grandmother. Of the kitchen with the blue tiles. Of the smell of chicha. Of the small figure of the Señor de los Milagros that his aunt took out of a cabinet every year. Of plastic flowers. Of candles. Of bread in thin paper bags. Of walls that had once been painted turquoise and later green, without anyone completely removing the old paint.

Present-day El Faro had concrete. Grilles. Garage doors. Cables. Water tanks. The houses stood farther apart. The streets were wider. The old neighborhood beneath the sand had been tighter. People had lived closer together. Maybe too close. Efraín looked at the empty niche.

"Everyone here would have heard everything," he said.

The sea answered. Farther out.

The bottle stood on a wall. Efraín did not see it until he had almost passed. Brown glass. An old label. Pilsen Callao. Efraín stopped.

"Ah."

He took the bottle. Empty. He held it up to the light from the city. The label was dry. Efraín rubbed his thumb over it. Paper. Not waterlogged. No algae. No shells. He looked at the wall. Then at the sea. The bottle was cold. Efraín held it in his hand. Very cold. Not like a bottle that had stood on the beach at night. Like a bottle from a refrigerator. He put it back. In exactly the same place. Then he adjusted it. The label now faced the sea again. Efraín continued.

After six steps, he stopped. He looked back. The bottle stood on the wall. Efraín did not go back.

"It's empty," he said. Then he continued.

The red beacon on the old transmission tower came on. Its patch appeared in the wet sand and lingered for a heartbeat after the light went out.

Efraín watched several cycles. The reflection always came late. He placed his foot in the fading red: cold water, nothing more.

When he turned around, his own tracks began only at the wall with the bottle. Between the seawall and the object he had found lay smooth, untouched sand.

Cold.

Water.

Nothing else.

The red patch disappeared. Efraín withdrew his foot.

"Ya."

He turned around. Now he wanted to go back. His footprints led through the sand. Efraín looked at them. The left print was deeper along its outer edge. That came from the scrape. He followed the tracks. Past the empty niche. The red wall. The green tiles. The small plaza. The tracks led to the well. From there to the alley. Then to the wall with the bottle. Efraín stopped. The bottle was still there. Its label faced the sea.

Efraín looked at his footprints. They led away from the wall. Toward him. He went to the other side. No tracks. Efraín stood still. He looked back toward the seawall. The sand was smooth. Damp. Untouched. His footprints began at the wall with the bottle.

Efraín took two steps back. Then forward again. Now there were tracks. Of course. He turned around. Farther back, the first trail still began at the bottle. Efraín looked toward the water. The surf was closer.

“Ya,” he said.

He did not know to whom. This time, he took the stairs.

When Efraín reached the seawall, it was five oh seven a.m. He had been on the beach for almost three hours without noticing. The first waves were already running through the exposed alleys again. Don Lucho sat in front of his house smoking.

“The water was far out,” Efraín said.

“Low tide.”

Efraín told him about the niche and the houses. Don Lucho said his mother had known of a church or chapel down there. Maybe only houses, too. More of them than stood in the water today.

“There aren’t any houses standing in the water today.”

Don Lucho ground out his cigarette. “Then fewer.”

When he offered coffee, Efraín declined. Below the wall, the old neighborhood disappeared beneath the water again.

Efraín did not go home but headed south. The coast grew brighter without the sun appearing. Beyond El Faro, it smelled first of damp concrete, then of fish.

In the garúa, he heard Maritza opening her cart. Óscar complained about the cold. Efraín replied that it affected only normal people.

Maritza offered him ceviche.

“Mañana compro.”

“You say that every morning.”

“Then one of these mornings, I’ll really buy a serving.”

He kept walking. Maritza put two pieces of camote in a dish, and the morning began.

Chapter 10: The Measurement Points

The sun had been over San Desvelo since shortly after seven. Not behind the garúa. Not a bright spot in a field of gray. It was simply there. The sky above Centro was pale blue and empty. Sunlight lay across the unplastered brick walls of the upper floors and the flat roofs where rebar jutted out. On one azotea, two bedsheets fluttered between a black water tank and a structure made of bamboo mats. A man in an undershirt poured water from a bucket over the concrete in front of his house. The concrete darkened at once. Then slowly grew light again.

San Desvelo was built for sunshine and still looked surprised whenever it came. At 8:12, the green cross outside the pharmacy on Avenida Grau showed seventy-five degrees. Rafael had seen the number on his way to the café. He had remembered it. There was no reason to. Rafael was at the café at 8:12. Inés arrived at 8:27.

Rafael came to the weather station with two cups of coffee. Inés was already at the computer, comparing the readings from Los Pinos with those from Centro.

“You’re late.”

“I brought coffee.”

“That doesn’t change the time.”

Rafael set the cup without sugar in front of her and kept the sweet one. To Inés, numbers were explanations only if they could also be checked on-site; to Rafael, they were a direction to start in.

The café was two streets from the Mercado. Above the entrance, faded red letters read JUGOS – MENÚ – CALDO DE GALLINA, although they had not served caldo de gallina in years.

The room was narrow.

The lower walls were covered with white tile. Above that, the paint had once been pale green. Every table held a plastic container of napkins and toothpicks. Beside it were two small bottles of ají, one red and one green.

América Televisión played silently above the counter.

A man in a suit was talking about something summarized in a red banner at the bottom of the screen.

No one was watching.

Rafael had a notebook lying on the table. Beside it was a small gray meter. Inés picked it up.

“This is new.”

“No.”

“I’ve never seen it before.”

“Then it’s new to you.”

Inés turned the meter over.

“What does it measure?”

“Electromagnetic fields.”

“Why do we have this?”

“We already had it.”

“Why?”

“For the station.”

“Since when?”

“Inés.”

“I’m just asking.”

“Since 2019.”

“And how often have you used it?”

Rafael thought.

"Three times."

"Good thing we have it."

The woman brought the coffee. Inés thanked her. She took sugar. Two packets. Rafael watched her.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You're looking."

"I'm always looking."

"That sounds unpleasant."

The café door opened. Javier came in. He stopped briefly in the doorway and squinted. Behind him, the street lay in the white morning light. A mototaxi drove past. Blue roof, yellow sides. White adhesive letters on the back read DIOS ES AMOR. Javier closed the door.

"What's going on outside?" Inés asked.

Javier looked back.

"Sun."

"I know."

"Then why did you ask?"

"You look like you saw something."

"I did."

"What?"

"Sun."

Rafael pulled out the empty chair.

"Sit down."

Javier sat.

He looked at Rafael first.

Then at Inés.

Then at the clock on the wall.

"Am I late?"

"No," Inés said.

"Yes," Rafael said.

Javier nodded.

"Good."

Inés drank her coffee.

"He's doing that today."

"Doing what?" Javier asked.

"Times."

Javier looked at Rafael.

"That's all right."

Inés set down her cup.

"Of course."

Rafael slid the notebook to the center of the table. On the page was a rough map of San Desvelo. Not the entire city. Just lines. Centro. La Playa. El Alto. Cerro Vigía. El Faro. North of there, Rafael had drawn a circle.

RADIO

Javier looked at the map.

"Where's Los Pinos?"

"Not relevant."

"Why?"

"Because today we're measuring the hum."

Javier looked at him.

"The hum was in Los Pinos too."

Rafael said nothing. Then he picked up the pen. He drew another circle south of Centro.

LP

Inés looked at Javier.

"Good."

"What?"

"I've been telling him for years that his maps are bad."

"They're not bad."

"An entire neighborhood was missing."

"Not anymore."

Javier turned the notebook slightly toward himself. He traced one of the lines with his finger.

"This is the road to La Playa?"

"Yes."

Javier pointed to a blank spot.

"Then the huaca is here."

Rafael looked at his finger.

"More or less."

"Why didn't you put it on the map?"

"Why would I?"

Javier looked at him.

"You put the park on it."

"We observed something in the park yesterday."

"And not at the huaca?"

Rafael took back the notebook.

"Not today."

Inés drank her coffee.

"Leave the Huaca Bajo la Arena alone."

Javier looked at her.

"Why?"

"Because otherwise we won't get back to the hum before noon."

Rafael nodded.

"Thank you."

"I wasn't supporting you."

"I'll take it anyway."

Javier kept looking at the blank spot on the map for another moment. Then Rafael pointed to Los Pinos.

"Where did you first hear it?"

Javier looked at him.

"What?"

"The hum."

"On the bus."

"Where?"

"On the bus."

Rafael waited.

"Where was the bus?"

"On the road."

Inés picked up her cup.

"This is going to be a long day."

Javier looked at the map.

"I don't know exactly."

"Approximately."

"South."

"Los Pinos?"

"Maybe."

"Outside the city?"

"Maybe."

"On the coastal road?"

"Rafael," Inés said.

"What?"

"He doesn't know."

"I understand that."

"No."

Rafael looked at her. Inés pointed at the notebook.

"You've asked five times."

Rafael closed his eyes for a moment. Then he looked at Javier.

"All right. Different question."

He crossed out a line.

"When did you first determine that a measured duration did not match the duration you expected?"

Javier looked at Inés.

"Didn't he tell you what this was about?"

"He did."

"Then why does he ask questions like that?"

"He always asks questions like that."

Rafael looked from one to the other.

"I'm trying to be precise."

"You asked where I noticed the time."

"All right. Then another way."

He crossed out something else. Javier looked at the notebook.

"That's worse."

Inés laughed. Rafael did not. Then Rafael laughed too. Briefly.

"Good," he said. "You're both very helpful."

"Thank you," Inés said.

Javier looked at the map again.

"On the bus."

Rafael picked up the pen.

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"And the hum?"

"That too."

"At the same time?"

Javier thought.

“No.”

Rafael wrote.

“Which came first?”

“The hum.”

“How much earlier?”

Javier looked at him. Rafael raised the pen.

“I know. You don’t know.”

“No.”

“Good.”

“Why is that good?”

“Because then I don’t have to wait.”

Inés pushed her coffee aside.

“What exactly are we doing today?”

Rafael turned the notebook around. Five points were marked.

“We measure.”

“I can see that.”

“Sound. Electromagnetic fields. I have a data logger for temperature, air pressure, and humidity.”

“Why temperature?”

“Because I have it.”

Inés nodded.

“That I understand.”

Rafael pointed to her bag.

“You record.”

“For how long?”

“Ten minutes per point.”

“Why ten?”

Rafael looked at her. Inés raised both hands.

“I’m just asking.”

“Because five is too short and twenty is too long.”

“Very scientific.”

“It’s a start.”

Javier placed his phone on the table. His wristwatch beside it. Rafael looked at both.

“Why two?”

“To compare them.”

“The watch synchronizes with the phone.”

“Not since this morning.”

Rafael picked up the watch.

“Why?”

“I turned off synchronization.”

“Then eventually they’ll drift apart.”

“That’s the point.”

Rafael looked at him. Then he put the watch back.

“No.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Inés looked from one to the other.

"I take it all back."

"What?" Rafael asked.

"You two aren't finding each other."

The first measurement point was the park. In daylight it was smaller. Javier had thought so that morning when he walked past, and now he thought it again. The municipal building stood on the north side of the park. Its façade had once been painted white. Above the entrance hung the San Desvelo coat of arms between two small Peruvian flags, their red brighter than usual in the sun. The municipal archive occupied the older part of the building. There was no sign of it from outside. Six lampposts stood between the paths. Four along the outer loop. One by the fountain. One near the southern entrance. All were off. That was normal. It was daytime.

Two boys played with a half-deflated soccer ball among the trees. One wore a faded Universitario jersey. The other played in sandals.

At the edge of the park, a man slept on a concrete bench. A Tottus shopping bag stood between his feet.

In front of the municipal building, a woman had set up a small table. Charging cables, batteries, phone cases, and three remote controls lay on a plastic cloth.

Pigeons sat around the dry fountain.

Too many.

The sun stood above the trees. The leaves cast small, hard shadows on the paths. Where there were no trees, the ground was almost white. Inés stopped at the entrance.

"Was it like this yesterday too?"

Javier looked into the park.

"No."

"What was different?"

"Dark."

"Yes."

"That was different."

Inés looked at him.

"You're very talkative today."

Rafael set the data logger on the low wall.

"Don't move it."

"I haven't touched it."

"I'm saying it in advance."

"Very efficient."

Rafael switched on the gray meter. Inés took the recorder from her bag. She plugged in headphones. Javier looked at his watch.

"Ready?" Rafael asked.

Inés gave a thumbs-up. Javier started the stopwatch. Ten minutes. The park made noises. Children. Pigeons. A bus two streets away. From the direction of the Mercado, a man called out the prices of mandarins. The ball hit a tree.

"Perdón," one of the boys called.

The tree did not answer. Rafael looked at the data logger.

"Twenty-six point eight."

Inés took off one earphone.

"What?"

"Temperature."

"Yes."

"It's nine fourteen."

"That too."

Rafael wrote down the reading. Inés looked up at the sky.

"No garúa."

Javier followed her gaze.

"Is that unusual?"

Rafael did not answer immediately.

"Not unusual."

"But?" Javier asked.

"Nothing."

Inés put the earphone back on.

"You have a but."

"No."

"I can hear it."

Rafael closed the notebook.

"We're measuring the hum."

After three minutes, Javier went over to the diagonal path.

"What are you doing?" Rafael asked.

"Measuring."

"What?"

"The path."

"Why?"

Javier looked at him.

"Because I didn't take it yesterday."

Rafael looked at Inés. Inés was wearing headphones. She lifted one shoulder. Javier stood at the start of the path. He started the stopwatch. Then he walked. Not fast. Not slow. At the other end, he stopped it.

One minute forty-three.

He walked back.

One minute forty-four.

One more time.

One minute forty-two.

Inés took off one earphone.

"Satisfied?"

"Yes."

"You don't sound satisfied."

"I am satisfied."

"Good."

"Those are normal times."

"I know."

"That's good."

Inés looked at Rafael. Rafael was writing something in his notebook. He said nothing. After ten minutes, they stopped the recording. Rafael read the values.

"Nothing."

"That was fast," Inés said.

"What?"

"The scientific analysis."

"I mean nothing unusual."
"Then say that."
Rafael wrote.

MEASUREMENT POINT 1

Centro / Parque Municipal

09:14-09:24

Sound level: 47-64 dB
EMF: no anomaly
Temperature: 26.8 °C
Humidity: 71%
Hum: not perceptible
Note I.: six lampposts
Note R.: irrelevant
Inés took the pen. She crossed out irrelevant.
Rafael watched her.
"What are you doing?"
"Correcting it."
"That's my notebook."
"Now it's our measurement log."

Beneath the crossed-out line, she wrote:

Note I.: six lampposts
Javier looked at the page.
"It already said that."
"Now it says it twice."
Rafael took the pen away from her.
"We're leaving."

The Toyota was warmer than it was outside. Rafael opened the driver's door and stopped.
"No."
Inés stood behind him.
"What?"
"Nothing."
"You say nothing a lot today."
Rafael got in. Inés opened the rear door.
"I'm not riding in back."
Javier stood on the other side of the car.
"I can sit in back."
"No," Rafael said.
They both looked at him. Rafael placed both hands on the steering wheel.
"I don't care."
Inés sat in front. Javier in back. Rafael started the engine. The air conditioner blew warm air.
Then less-warm air. After two minutes, it was cool.
"Good," Inés said.
Rafael drove off.
"What?"
"Problems can be solved."

Rafael looked straight ahead.

"Some."

Inés smiled. Red plastic chairs stood on the sidewalk in front of a pollería. The restaurant was still closed. A Gloria delivery truck blocked one lane. Two men unloaded crates and set them directly behind the vehicle. Rafael drove halfway into the oncoming lane. A mototaxi came toward them. Rafael backed up. The mototaxi squeezed past. The driver raised his hand.

"That settles it," Inés said.

"What?"

"He raised his hand."

"He saw me."

"Then it's very well settled."

Rafael honked once. The driver raised his hand again.

"See?" Inés said.

Rafael said nothing. They drove toward El Alto. The sun was higher now. San Desvelo looked different. Not better. Just clearer. The garúa normally hid distances. It broke streets into short sections. Rows of houses became surfaces. The cerros appeared and disappeared.

Today everything was there at once. Cerro Dormido stood east of the city. The houses of El Alto climbed its slope. To the south, the pale shells of unfinished buildings in Los Pinos were visible. On some roofs, bricks lay beneath blue plastic tarps. Farther west lay the Pacific. It was not blue. But it was visible. Javier looked out the window.

"The city is bigger."

Inés turned toward him.

"No."

"It looks bigger."

"That's the garúa."

"Because it's gone?"

"Yes."

Javier looked outside again.

"Then it makes the city smaller."

"No."

"It looks that way."

Inés turned around.

"Now I understand Rafael."

"Thank you," Rafael said.

"That wasn't a compliment."

"I'll take it."

San Desvelo knew heat. Just not this kind of clarity.

It was windy on Cerro Vigía. The wind did not help. It was warm. The red Toyota stood below the weather station on the gravel road. Sunlight lay across the hood. Rafael briefly placed his hand on it and immediately pulled it away.

"Very scientific," Inés said.

"I wanted to know if it was hot."

"And?"

"Yes."

San Desvelo lay below them. Without the garúa, the city was visible all the way to the coast. Centro spread around the Mercado and the park. Beyond it lay the flatter houses of La Playa. El

Faro stretched north along the coast. Black water tanks stood on several roofs. Corrugated metal and unplastered brick flashed between the houses. The Pacific lay beyond. From up here, it looked calm. Rafael carried the equipment to a concrete block beside the fence. Inés followed him. Javier stayed by the Toyota. He looked toward the city.

"Are you coming?" Inés asked.

"Yes."

Javier came over. Rafael set down the data logger.

"Same procedure."

"Ten minutes," Inés said.

"Yes."

"Don't move."

"Yes."

"Five is too short. Twenty is too long."

Rafael looked at her.

"Are you finished?"

"For now."

They started. For the first two minutes, Inés heard wind. Then a vehicle on the road. Then wind again. Rafael watched the sound-level meter. He waited. The display changed.

"There."

Inés raised her head.

"What?"

"Thirty-eight."

"Thirty-eight what?"

"Hertz."

Inés pressed the headphones tighter against her ears. She listened. Wind. A brief crackle. Then something beneath it. Low. Not loud. She took off one earphone. The hum was gone. She put it back on.

There.

"I've got it."

Rafael wrote. Javier looked at his watch.

"When?"

"What?" Rafael asked.

"When did it start?"

"I don't know."

"You're measuring."

"Frequency."

"Not time?"

Rafael looked at him.

"You're in charge of time."

Javier held up his watch.

"I didn't hear it."

"Then you can hardly time it."

"Exactly."

Inés took off the headphones.

"Thirty-seven point eight."

Rafael looked at his meter.

"Thirty-eight point two."

"Which one is right?" Javier asked.

"Calibration," Rafael said.

"We checked the devices this morning."

"Temperature."

Inés looked at the data logger.

"Twenty-nine point one."

Rafael took the logger from her.

"Yesterday it was eighteen here at this time."

Inés sat in the narrow strip of shade cast by the station wall.

"Please tell me temperatures only when they go down from now on."

Rafael scrolled through the stored readings.

"An eleven-degree difference."

Javier was standing beside him now.

"And the hum was here yesterday."

Rafael stopped scrolling. Inés opened one eye.

"No."

Javier looked at her.

"What?"

"Don't do that."

"What?"

"You're doing something right now."

Rafael looked back at the logger.

"We're comparing data."

"No. You have two things."

"Which things?"

"Hum. Warm."

"Very warm," Javier said.

Inés looked at him.

"Not you too."

Javier fell silent. Rafael kept scrolling.

"The garúa is gone."

Inés leaned her head against the wall.

"Three things. Very good."

"I'm not saying they're connected."

"Not yet."

Rafael looked toward the city. Without the garúa, the slight rise north of El Faro was clearly visible. The Radio Desvelo tower stood above it. Thin. Red and white.

"A powerful electromagnetic source could theoretically—"

"No," Inés said.

Rafael looked at her.

"I hadn't finished the sentence."

"That makes it easier."

Javier followed Rafael's gaze.

"The radio station?"

Rafael said nothing.

Inés closed her eyes.

"Four things."

"No one said the radio station is changing the weather."

"Good."

"That would be nonsense."

"Very good."

Rafael looked at the meter again.

"I only said that an electromagnetic source could theoretically affect measurements."

Inés opened her eyes.

"Which measurements?"

Rafael said nothing.

"Temperature?"

"No."

"Humidity?"

"No."

"Sun?"

"Of course not."

"Good."

Rafael wrote something down.

Inés stood. She looked out over the city. Javier stepped beside her. His gaze traveled across the rooftops and down to the coast.

"Where is the huaca?"

Inés did not point.

"Down there."

"Where?"

"Under sand."

Javier looked at her. Inés kept looking toward the coast.

"That's why it's called that."

"I know."

"Then why did you ask?"

"Because you didn't show me where."

"Correct."

Javier waited.

"What is the Huaca Bajo la Arena?"

Inés looked at Rafael. Rafael was writing.

"Ask him."

Javier looked at Rafael.

"What is the Huaca Bajo la Arena?"

"Not today."

Inés nodded.

"See?"

"Why not?" Javier asked.

Rafael closed the notebook.

"Because we're measuring the hum."

"Does the huaca have something to do with it?"

"No."

"How do you know?"

Rafael opened his mouth. Then he closed it. Inés smiled.

"Now you've got him."

Rafael picked up the data logger.

"We're done."

MEASUREMENT POINT 2

Cerro Vigía / Weather Station

10:02–10:12

Sound level: 39–71 dB
Low-frequency signal: approx. 38 Hz
Recorder: 37.8 Hz
Meter: 38.2 Hz
EMF: slight fluctuations
Temperature: 29.1 °C
Humidity: 54%
Hum: perceptible / confirmed on recording
Note J.: onset unknown
Note I.: garúa absent

Rafael had put a question mark after the last line. Inés crossed it out.

In El Alto, they found no shade. That was not entirely true. There was shade. But it was always where they did not want to measure. The houses stood closer together on the lower slope. Many of the lower stories were plastered and painted. Pale blue. Yellow. Green. Above them, the brick began.

Rebar jutted from almost every other concrete roof. Some pieces were rusty. Some capped with empty plastic bottles. They were waiting for another story. Perhaps they had been for a year. Perhaps ten.

A woman hung laundry on an azotea. The line ran between two pieces of rebar. A pink towel barely moved in the warm wind. A dog lay in the shade beneath a blue-and-yellow mototaxi. A small image of the Señor de los Milagros was stuck to the windshield.

Two men were trying to carry a green metal door through a narrow gate. The street's concrete ended three houses farther on. After that came hard-packed sand. A mototaxi drove over it, trailing a thin plume of dust. Rafael set the equipment beside a low wall. Inés sat on the wall. Javier stood beneath a corrugated-metal awning.

"You have to be here," Rafael said.

"Why?"

"Because of the time."

"I can measure the time from here."

Rafael judged the distance. Thirteen feet.

"Fine."

Inés looked at Javier.

"You're learning."

"What?"

"To say no."

Javier looked at her.

"I didn't say no."

"Almost."

Rafael started the measurement. The street was quiet. The woman hung up a blue shirt. The dog slept. The men turned the door. It did not fit through the gate. They turned it back. It still did not fit. Inés watched them.

"Left," she said.

The men did not hear her.

"Left."

Rafael looked at his meter.

"They can't hear you."

"I know."

The men turned the door to the right. Inés shook her head. Then the hum came. This time Rafael heard it first. Not with his ears. On the meter.

"Thirty-seven point six."

Inés put on the headphones. She waited.

"Nothing."

"It's there."

"I don't hear anything."

"On the meter."

"Not on the recording."

Rafael went over to her. Inés handed him the headphones. He listened. Nothing. Just the street. The men with the door. A dog. Cumbia played through an open window. Softly. Too softly to recognize the song.

"Maybe it's too faint," Rafael said.

"It was at the cerro too."

"Different ambient noise."

"It's quieter here."

Rafael took off the headphones. Javier came out of the shade.

"Is it there or not?"

"Yes," Rafael said.

"No," Inés said.

Javier stopped.

"Good."

Rafael looked at him.

"What's good about that?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to say something."

Inés laughed. Rafael gave her back the headphones.

"We'll write down both results."

"Which one is right?" Javier asked.

"Both were measured."

"And which one is right?"

Rafael picked up the pen.

"That's the question right now."

Javier nodded. He looked pleased. Rafael noticed.

"Why do you like that?"

"I don't."

"You do."

"No."

Inés took off the headphones.

"You two are exhausting."

By now the two men had gotten the door through the gate. Inés watched them go.

"Left," she said.

The air conditioner in the Toyota was running at level three. At level three, it was loud. Inés had the recorder on her lap.

"When we measure, that has to be off."

"I know," Rafael said.

"I'm saying it in advance."

Rafael looked at her. Inés smiled. The road led down the slope.

Crates of Inca Kola and Cristal stood beneath a faded patio umbrella in front of a bodega. A woman sat on a plastic stool in the doorway, fanning herself with a copy of *La República*. Javier had taken off his wristwatch. The metal band had grown warm. The watch lay on the dashboard.

"That's not a good idea," Rafael said.

"What?"

"The watch."

"Why?"

"Sun."

Javier picked it up.

"Does that affect the time?"

Rafael did not answer. Inés turned toward Javier.

"Don't do that."

"What?"

"You're doing something again."

"I only asked."

"Yes."

Javier put the watch in the shade. No one said anything for a while. The heat slowed conversations. Even with air conditioning. Rafael drove. Inés had her head against the window. Javier watched the houses.

"If it's a low-frequency source," Rafael said, "it could theoretically—"

"No," Inés said.

"I'm talking to Javier."

"Then no to both of you."

Javier leaned forward slightly.

"Electromagnetic?"

Rafael glanced at him.

"Not necessarily."

"But possible."

"Theoretically."

Inés opened her eyes.

"What are you heating up now?"

Rafael said nothing.

"The city?" Inés asked.

"I didn't say that."

"Not yet."

"I said theoretically."

"Rafael."

"What?"

"The sun."

Rafael looked through the windshield. The sun stood above the road.

"I know."

"Good."

Inés closed her eyes again. Javier looked outside.

"But the garúa is gone."

Inés opened her eyes again.

"Javier."

"What?"

"Sleep."

"I'm not tired."

"Then pretend."

Javier leaned back. After a minute, he said:

"What is the Huaca Bajo la Arena?"

Inés did not open her eyes.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because then Rafael will stop."

Rafael glanced at her.

"Why would I stop?"

"See?"

Javier waited.

"Is it old?"

"Yes," Inés said.

"How old?"

"Old."

"That's imprecise."

Rafael looked in the rearview mirror.

"Now you understand me."

Inés raised one hand.

"No one talks anymore."

For almost three minutes, no one spoke.

At the next measurement point, the data logger read thirty-one point four degrees. They stood at the western edge of La Playa, a few streets from the coast. Sunlight reflected in the windows of the mototaxis. In front of a cevichería, the plastic side curtains had been tied up. A hand-painted sign promised CEVICHE – CHICHARRÓN DE PESCADO – JALEA.

The restaurant was full. Under the roof, men sat before large plates and drank chicha morada from plastic cups. Across the street, an ice-cream vendor stood in the shade of a wall. He had sold nothing since they arrived. Rafael repositioned the data logger twice. The reading held.

"It works," Inés said.

"I didn't say anything."

"You moved it twice."

"The ground is warm."

"So is the air."

Rafael wrote. Javier stood in the Toyota's narrow strip of shade. The Pacific was visible between two rows of houses. Without the garúa, it seemed closer. Rafael started the measurement. The hum was there. Faint. On the recorder. Not on the gray meter. Inés listened to it three times.

"Thirty-seven something."

"Something?" Rafael asked.

"Yes."

"That isn't a reading."

"Then measure it yourself."

Rafael took the recorder. Javier stepped beside him.

"Where was it strongest?"

"The hum?"

"Yes."

Rafael flipped back through the pages.

"Cerro Vigía."

"And where was it warmest?"

Rafael looked at his readings.

"Here."

Javier nodded. No one said anything. Inés took the water bottle from the roof of the Toyota. She drank.

"There's your theory."

Rafael looked at her.

"Which one?"

"Broken."

Javier looked toward the ocean.

"We didn't have a theory."

"Of course not."

"We only—"

"Tested correlations."

Rafael and Javier fell silent. Inés handed Javier the bottle.

"You two are very dangerous together."

Javier drank.

"Why?"

"Because Rafael has a measurement for everything, and you have a question for everything."

"Is that bad?"

"Today it is."

She got into the Toyota. Rafael stayed outside. He looked at his readings. Cerro Vigía. El Alto. Centro. La Playa. No clear relationship to temperature. No clear relationship to humidity. The frequency varied. The devices contradicted each other. Rafael knew that. He flipped back through the pages once more anyway.

"Rafael," Inés called from the car.

"What?"

"Sun."

Rafael looked at the sky. Then at the notebook. He closed it.

In the Toyota, they dismantled the obvious explanations: heat, power lines, radio signals, the radio station, the car body. Each fit one part of the observation and failed at the next measurement point.

Inés did not write "unknown cause." She wrote: not reproducible under the conditions tested.

Back at the station, they placed a second map beside the first. Rafael connected the measurement points in pencil. The line touched the weather station, Los Pinos, the park, and the coast without forming a geographically sensible route.

Inés rotated the map. From another angle, the line ran near the old quarry and an unnamed depression southeast of the city.

"It's still just a line," she said.

Rafael put down the pencil. "But now we know where we haven't measured yet."

They drove through El Faro. In the sun, the neighborhood looked newer than it was. The houses stood farther apart than in Centro. Wide metal gates. Barred windows. Unplastered second stories. A black water tank on almost every other roof. Yellow Cristal crates were stacked in front of a bodega. A man sat beside them on a white plastic stool and read *Depor*. He had pushed his shirt up over his stomach. A radio played inside the bodega. Cumbia. Then an ad for a mobile carrier. On the corner, the Virgen stood behind glass. The white flowers inside were wilted. Javier saw her as they drove past. Then the broad intersection. He turned his head.

"What?" Inés asked.

"Nothing."

Rafael drove on. North of El Faro, the houses thinned out. The coastal road ran some distance from the ocean. Sand lay along its edges. Between the road and the beach stood scattered low walls and small buildings with corrugated-metal roofs.

A mototaxi came toward them. Then nothing for a long time. The slight rise was clearly visible now. The tower stood on it. Radio Desvelo. The closer they came, the smaller the station looked. A low building. Yellowish plaster. A fence. A gate. The tower. Rafael parked the Toyota at the side of the road. The tires rested half on hard-packed sand. No one got out right away. The air conditioner was running.

"Good," Inés said.

Rafael looked at her.

"What?"

"Nothing."

She opened the door. The heat came in.

"Ah."

Javier got out of the back. Rafael shut off the engine. The air conditioner fell silent. Suddenly there was only wind. They took the equipment. The radio station's fence was metal. Rusty in places. The gate was closed. A faded sign hung on it.

PROHIBIDO EL INGRESO

Something else had once been written beneath it. The letters were no longer legible. Rafael set the data logger on the hood. Inés started the recorder. Javier placed his watch beside his phone.

"Ready?" Rafael asked.

"Yes."

"Yes."

They repeated the measurement twice, ten minutes each time. During the first run, the reading remained steady; during the second, the same spike appeared in the same minute even though no device had switched on and no vehicle had passed on the road.

"Nothing."

"Yes," Inés said.

Rafael picked up his notebook. He opened the map. The pencil line ended at the circle.

RADIO

Javier stepped beside him. He looked at the map. Then at the station.

"Maybe," he said, "we have two things again."

Rafael looked at him.

"What?"

Javier pointed at the map.

“The hum.”

Then at Radio Desvelo.

“And that.”

No one answered. Inés sat on the hood. She picked up the water bottle. Empty. She set it beside her. Rafael looked at his readings once more. Then he did not cross out the pencil line. He only closed the notebook. Nothing moved behind the fence. The tower stood above them. Its red lights were off. It was daytime. The sun burned down on San Desvelo.

By now, at least, they had an explanation for that.

Chapter 11: The Night Shift

The old quarry lay between the road to Cerro Vigía and a quebrada that was dry almost year-round. Two concrete blocks set at angles barred the entrance; the bent sign hung from the one on the right:

**PELIGRO
QUEBRADA**

Garúa lay over San Desvelo while the cut benches of the quarry still held the last daylight. At the top stood a dusty solar-powered work light and an open battery box. Below them were the scale house, the rusty truck scale, and the sagging conveyor.

ARENA GRUESA, PIEDRA $\frac{1}{2}$, and PIEDRA $\frac{3}{4}$ were still legible on the loading chute. The AFIRMADO sign lay in the dust.

An old loudspeaker hung on the scale house. Its cable ended in a ragged tear against the outside wall. Beside it clung part of an inventory label from the Municipalidad.

Inside the scale house stood twelve lockers. Four were open; three no longer had doors. One held a rotting sack on which the name of a cement manufacturer could still be made out. Another held an enamel cup with a chipped rim. Pale dust covered the entire floor. A strip of white tape was stuck to the sixth locker door. The ink had bled, but the name was still legible.

E. VÍLCHEZ

A second, thinner line ran beneath the name. Only two letters remained.

TU

A single work glove hung inside the locker. The leather had hardened, and dark grease clung to the fingers. An aluminum tin with two bent latches stood on the floor. Its lid was closed.

There was no dust on the tin.

An old shift roster hung on the back wall of the room beneath a cracked sheet of plastic.

TURNO NOCHE

Below it were names, times, and truck numbers. Most of the entries had faded. Some had been added in blue ballpoint, one in red.

VÍLCHEZ, ERNESTO

Beside the name it read:

22:00-06:00

Beneath it was a date with its final digit missing.

A calendar hung on the opposite wall. The picture showed a road along the coast. The Pacific lay to the left; a bus traveled on the right. Above the road, large white letters read:

PANAMERICANA NORTE

The calendar had stopped at August. The year could no longer be made out. Outside, it grew darker. The pale surfaces of the rock walls lost their color first, then the drill holes disappeared. Finally, all that remained of the conveyor was a black line against the slope.

Muffled noise rose from San Desvelo. One engine, later a second, then a dog. The garúa lay between the city and the quarry, taking the edge off the sounds.

A vehicle passed on the road to Cerro Vigía. Two white beams slid across the rock wall and for a few seconds brought out the broad benches, the sagging conveyor, the loading chutes, and the pole with the work light.

Then the headlights vanished behind the next bend. The quarry lay in darkness again. Something clicked in the battery box. The sound was small and dry, metal against metal, barely more than a relay switching.

The work light came on.

At first it was faint. A yellowish strip lay across the upper quarry bench. Then the light brightened and reached the row of drill holes, the pole, and part of the conveyor. The lower part of the quarry remained dark.

A faded maintenance sticker clung to the inside of the open battery box.

REVISADO

Beneath it:

2019

The lamp flickered once and then burned steadily. A small stone came loose from the rock wall. It fell onto the quarry bench, bounced twice across the hard ground, and came to rest. Nothing moved after that. The light hummed softly. Static came from the old loudspeaker on the scale house. It was only a dry, tinny sound that disappeared again after a few seconds.

Then music began.

Three beats on a drum, a güiro, two measures of cumbia. A man's voice began a word that was lost in the static. The loudspeaker crackled, and the music cut out.

For a few seconds, only the hum of the work light remained.

Then the cumbia returned, this time farther into the song. An accordion, drums, and a thin, overdriven voice came from the gray horn. The sound barely carried beyond the area in front of the scale. At the conveyor only the rhythm remained; at the rock wall, merely a distant tinny sound.

The severed cable hung motionless against the outside wall.

Inside the scale house, the plastic sheet in front of the shift roster moved. Once, then once more. No wind came through the open window.

The cumbia kept playing.

A green digit appeared on the old display for the truck scale. Its yellowed housing hung on the wall beside the lockers. The display had been dark for years.

Now it showed:

0

Then:

280

Then:

8400

The number held. Outside, the metal plates lay empty. No vehicle stood on the scale. The music grew quieter. First the voice disappeared, then the accordion. Finally, only the rhythm remained. Three beats.

Pause.

Two.

Pause.

Three.

Then the loudspeaker fell silent too.

The display still showed 8400.

Dust came loose from a brace beneath the conveyor and fell to the ground in a thin line. Then the first roller moved.

Only a few inches.

The rubber belt drew taut, lifted from the ground at the sagging support, and a stone that had lain on the belt for years slowly slid downward. After half a turn, the roller stopped. The stone stopped as well. The number on the scale went out. The work light flickered. The relay clicked inside the battery box, but the lamp steadied and remained lit.

Then the hum began.

It did not come from the loudspeaker. The gray horn on the scale house stayed silent. At first the sound could be perceived only at the truck scale. The sunken corner of the right metal plate vibrated faintly, and grains of sand shifted at the edge until they fell into the gap.

Low.

Pause.

Low.

Pause.

The vibration traveled across the area. The switch box on the wall hummed even though no cable still connected it to the equipment. The loose door of one locker moved in the same rhythm. A chain began to swing on the loading chute. It hung from the lever that had once opened the gate to the PIEDRA $\frac{3}{4}$ bin. The links moved almost imperceptibly. The lowest one struck the metal.

Once.

Pause.

Once more.

The hum came from the ground. Narrow channels formed between the piles of stone, and loose dust slowly sank into them. The plant with two gray-green leaves leaned to one side. On the upper quarry bench, a second stone came loose, then a third. Neither fell; they rolled slowly across the ground as if the bench were slightly inclined. After several yards, they came to rest directly beneath the work light.

The hum grew stronger without growing louder. It lay deeper in the metal and in the rock walls. The drill holes began to react one after another. Dust trickled from the first, then from the second, the third, and the fourth. A thin stream of pale rock flour ran from each hole and collected at the foot of the wall.

The sequence repeated.

From left to right.

Then a pause.

The work light cast the shadows of the stones onto the wall. With each new tone, they grew a little longer. Not much, only a few inches. At the next hum, their tips reached farther down.

The pole did not move. The light still came from the same place.

When the hum ended, the dust stopped trickling too. The shadows lay where they had before. A shallow pale line remained at the foot of the rock wall, running parallel to the quarry bench. Inside the scale house, the loudspeaker crackled. A man's voice said something. Only two syllables were intelligible.

"...Desvelo..."

Then the cumbia began again. It was the same song, but not the same place in it. This time the singer's voice was clearer. He sang of a road, a farewell, and a woman who would not wait.

During the chorus, the loudspeaker distorted on the high notes. The plastic sheet in front of the shift roster moved again.

In the sixth locker, one latch on the aluminum tin sprang open. The other remained closed. The lid lifted at one corner. Beneath it lay a folded piece of paper. It had yellowed and grown dark around the edges. On its face, written in blue ballpoint, was:

PAN

Beneath it:

QUESO

Beside them was a number.

1.20

The lid remained half open. The cumbia kept playing. Outside, the conveyor began moving again. The first roller turned, then the second. A piece of metal was missing from the third. The rubber belt jumped across it and struck the frame.

The stone on the belt began sliding again. It reached the sagging section, caught there briefly, then moved uphill. The belt ran downward. The stone traveled in the opposite direction. Slowly, without raising dust, it passed the first roller, then the second. It disappeared into the darkness at the upper loading chute.

The conveyor stopped. The cumbia ended in the middle of the chorus. Only static remained in the loudspeaker, then nothing. The lid of the aluminum tin fell back. The open latch remained bent upward.

The hum began again.

This time it came from the rock wall.

The row of drill holes vibrated, and fine dust fell from all of them at once. The pale line at the foot of the wall grew wider. A piece of rock broke away. It was about the size of a brick and fell onto the quarry bench with a dull impact. No pale stone showed beneath the fresh break. There was concrete. Smooth. Gray.

A vertical edge ran through the rock wall. Beside it, a short piece of blue plastic was visible.

The hum stopped.

Dust slid across the gray surface and caught in a narrow seam. The work light flickered. For a moment the spot disappeared in darkness. When the light returned, there was rock again. No concrete surface. No plastic. Only the row of drill holes. Beneath the conveyor, the gate to the AFIRMADO bin opened. The sign still lay on the ground, the lever did not move, and the chain hung at an angle. Even so, material fell from the chute.

First pale gravel, small irregular stones that struck the ground and bounced against the masonry bin. Then came sand. Then gray pieces. Mortar. A broken brick. A short length of rebar. The iron landed crosswise on the pile. Concrete clung to one end. The concrete was dark and damp. Last came a piece of blue plastic pipe from the chute. Then nothing else fell. The gate was closed.

The material lay beneath it, and the damp concrete gleamed in the work light. The hum traveled back through the loading chute toward the conveyor. The metal rollers reacted one after another, the lower ones first, then those farther up. Each vibrated once. A flake of rust came loose from the third roller and fell to the ground.

The hum reached the upper quarry bench. The shadows of the drill holes lengthened again. A pale line appeared on the rock wall. First a vertical line, then a second one, horizontal. Together they formed a right angle. The lines were too straight to be a natural crack.

When the hum stopped, they remained.

The work light dimmed. The relay clicked twice inside the battery box. The cone of light contracted. First the lower quarry bench disappeared, then the conveyor. At last, only the rock

wall remained lit. The two pale lines were still visible. Vertical. Horizontal. Part of a rectangular shape. Then the light went out. The quarry lay in darkness.

A figure seemed to be standing on the upper edge of the cut.

Only a dark silhouette against the slightly lighter gray of the sky, motionless and facing the quarry. Then the work light flickered once more. When the weak light swept across the edge, there was nothing there but rock and garúa.

The garúa rose from below. It reached the entrance first, then the concrete blocks and the bent warning sign. After that it moved slowly across the quarry floor and collected in the depressions of the truck scale. The metal plates grew damp. The hum remained. Without the work light, its direction could no longer be determined. It lay in the ground, in the conveyor, and in the rock walls.

Music came from the loudspeaker again, softer than before. The song did not begin at the start but entered at a point where the singer's voice could barely be understood. Only the rhythm remained distinct.

The garúa came through the open window into the scale house and settled as a thin film on the locker doors. Small droplets gathered on the tape bearing the name E. VÍLCHEZ. The aluminum tin remained dry. Moisture appeared beneath the cracked plastic sheet. It began at the lower edge and slowly moved between the lines of the shift roster. The ink bled. Beside VÍLCHEZ, ERNESTO, the time dissolved first. The first zero disappeared, then the colon. The name remained legible.

Outside, the chain on the loading chute moved. One link struck metal. The cumbia ended. At the same moment, the hum fell silent too. For several seconds, nothing could be heard. Then came the sound of the Pacific. Not directly, but muffled, far beyond the garúa. The ocean was several miles away and could not be seen from here. The sound remained. No vehicle traveled along the road to Cerro Vigía. In San Desvelo, some lights went out while others came on. Construction lights burned above Los Pinos, but their glow was barely visible through the garúa.

The quarry remained dark.

Beneath the loading chute, the new material grew damp. The gravel gleamed in places. The dust on the brick darkened. A droplet formed on the piece of rebar. It gathered on the damp concrete, grew larger, and finally fell to the ground. The concrete beneath it remained wet.

Later, a wind rose. It swept across the upper quarry bench and through the frame of the conveyor. The damaged warning sign at the entrance began to move, and its lower edge struck the concrete block twice. Inside the scale house, the sixth locker door opened a few inches. The work glove still hung inside it. The aluminum tin stood on the floor.

The name E. VÍLCHEZ remained legible.

The door stayed open. Around five o'clock, the sky above the coast began to brighten. By then the garúa had reached the entire quarry. The lower benches disappeared into it while the upper ones already lay above the fog layer. The conveyor seemed to emerge from the gray and end in it again.

The work light remained off. The solar panel was gray with dust, and no further clicking came from the battery box. Slowly, the rock wall on the third bench became visible again. First the upper edges appeared, then the rows of drill holes, and finally the place where the piece of rock had broken away. There was only rock. No concrete surface. The pale lines had vanished. Beneath the loading chute lay the new pile of pale gravel, gray mortar, a brick, a piece of rebar, and the short length of blue plastic pipe.

One side of the brick bore a thin layer of white plaster. A remnant of paint clung to it. A pale yellow stripe. Beside it, a green line. Nothing more remained. The concrete on the rebar had grown lighter by then, but it was still not dry.

At 5:48, the first heavy traffic began on the Panamericana. The sound of the trucks reached the quarry only faintly. First an engine could be heard, then tires on asphalt, later a horn. The loudspeaker on the scale house remained silent. No number appeared on the old scale, and the conveyor stood as motionless as before.

A droplet gathered along the lower edge of the solar panel. It ran across the glass and drew a dark track through the dust. Inside the scale house, the shift roster still hung behind its cracked sheet. The heading **TURNO NOCHE** was still legible. So was the name **VÍLCHEZ**. The time beside it had dissolved completely. The sixth locker door stood open. Inside hung the single work glove, while the aluminum tin stood on the floor with both latches closed. Outside, it slowly grew lighter without the sun becoming visible. The garúa remained over the quarry. At the entrance, the warning sign could be made out again.

PELIGRO
Beneath it:
QUEBRADA

The bent corner moved in the wind and struck the concrete once. Then it was still.

Chapter 12: The Last Frequency

The night driver left Puerto Esperanza with five passengers and a cassette whose left channel cut out on low notes. The colectivo smelled of diesel, warm fabric, and tangerines.

Beyond the last gas station, the road became a pale strip between the dark coast and the cerros. The red lights of San Desvelo were not yet visible. The road turned black.

For many miles it ran between the Pacific to the west and the dry slopes to the east. By day, you could see far across the flat coastal plain, pale earth, scree, scattered concrete walls, and the cerros beyond. At night, only the asphalt remained in the headlights. The center line had vanished along long stretches. In some places, a row of bright reflectors still showed where the road had once been properly surveyed.

The night driver knew every curve. He knew where the asphalt had sunk along the right shoulder, where trucks carried sand onto the roadway, and where water from a quebrada crossed the road after heavy rains. He also knew the spot where the first red lights of Cerro Dormido had to come into view. Not right away. But long before San Desvelo itself appeared.

That night, the garúa was not hanging over the road. It lay on either side.

On the right, it began beyond the narrow strip of sand and scree. On the left, it started at the foot of the slopes. Two low gray walls, their upper edges clearly visible in the starlight. The asphalt between them remained clear. The sky above was open. The stars stretched from one wall of garúa to the other, as though the road lay in an open corridor.

The night driver eased off the gas a little. Not because he could see less clearly. The opposite. The road was sharper than usual. The headlights struck no fog, and no light came back. Ahead of him lay a long black strip, dry and empty. Only the gray at the edges moved. Slowly. Without crossing onto the asphalt.

Static came from the speakers. The radio had been on since Puerto Esperanza. There it had picked up a station from Chimbote, a news report about fish prices and a strike in Lima. Past the edge of town, the voice had disappeared. The night driver turned the dial a little to the right. Static. Farther. A brief, high tone. Static again.

Then music began.

At first, only drums. Then a guitar, a thin electric organ, and a bass that rattled more than it resonated in the old speakers. The night driver kept his hand on the dial. He knew the song. Not its name. Its opening. Three measures, then a woman's voice. Back then, the song had played everywhere. On buses. In the bars by the Mercado. Through open windows. On cassettes taped over so many times that by the end of each song, you could already hear the beginning of the next.

The night driver took his hand off the radio. The woman sang of a return no one expected anymore. At the chorus, he remembered another vehicle. A white colectivo with a brown door and an engine that overheated on every incline. He had not been a night driver then. He had collected fares, hoisted bags onto the roof, and told inspectors that all the passengers were relatives. The driver had always played the song too loud.

"That's old," someone said behind him.

The night driver looked in the mirror. The passengers remained dark shapes.

"Yes."

"From when?"

The voice might have come from the middle. Or from the back. He could not tell whether it was male or female.

"A long time ago."

"It was new then."

The night driver looked back at the road.

"Everything was new once."

No one answered. The song continued. On the left, the garúa opened for a few seconds. Beyond it lay a yard, dimly lit by a single yellow bulb. A low wall, a corrugated metal roof, and two blue barrels. A boat stood on wooden blocks in front of the wall. Its bow pointed toward the road, though the ocean lay on the other side. Nets hung over a pole. The night driver did not know the yard. Perhaps by day it lay hidden behind a rise in the ground. Perhaps he had never looked.

Then the garúa closed again. The yellow light turned gray, grew smaller, and disappeared.

The song ended. A man laughed on the radio. Not loudly. A short, familiar laugh, followed by two knocks on a table.

"Radio Desvelo," the voice said. "La voz de la costa."

The night driver raised his head.

Someone moved in the rearview mirror. "What?"

The night driver did not answer. The voice on the radio continued. It announced three songs for the night shift, greeted the drivers on the Panamericana, and reminded listeners of the dance night at the Salón Mar Azul. The Salón Mar Azul had been closed for many years. The building still stood in El Faro, behind a wall that now advertised mototaxi parts. The blue lettering had disappeared beneath several coats of paint.

The host's name was Beto Saldaña. The night driver had never known him personally. Even so, he knew his pauses, the quick breath he took before station identifications, and the way he held every other word a little too long. Beto had broadcast at night on Radio Desvelo when the mast north of El Faro still bore red lights all the way to its tip. Later, the station had grown smaller. Then it broadcast only during the day. Finally, not at all.

The building was still there. So was the mast. Nothing had been broadcast from there in years.

The night driver turned the dial. The voice grew quieter, then disappeared into static. He turned it back. Beto Saldaña returned, talking about a listener contest with two cases of beer and a fan as prizes.

"Leave it," someone said.

The night driver let go of the dial.

"What?"

"The radio."

He looked in the mirror.

"Who said that?"

No one answered. The colectivo continued on. The engine ran evenly. The cross above the rearview mirror barely moved.

On the left, the garúa thinned. Beyond it appeared a fisherman's shack made of wood panels and corrugated metal, though it should not have stood on this side of the road. No light burned outside. Even so, the night driver could make out a door, a chair, and several buoys hanging from a cord beneath the roof. A pale figure stood beside the wall. When the colectivo's beam drew nearer, it was only a sack stretched open.

The shack slipped past. Then gray again.

Beto Saldaña announced the next song. The night driver knew what it would be before the first notes sounded. He also knew that an ad for Pinturas Alcázar had to follow. Not Ernesto Vilchez's

store. An older shop on the Avenida, where a pharmacy had opened later. The ad always began with the sound of a brush on a wall, though a brush made no such sound.

The song began. A cumbia with horns. The night driver remembered a night when he had heard the song five times. Twice on the radio, once in a bar, once from a parked car, and one last time in the morning, when a woman outside the Mercado sang the same chorus while stacking wooden crates. Back then he had thought the song would never disappear. Later, years passed without his thinking of it.

The road remained straight. The night driver looked at the clock in the dashboard.

1:46.

Puerto Esperanza was about twenty-five minutes behind them. The first lights of Cerro Dormido had to appear soon. He looked ahead. Only stars. The slopes on the left lay as a dark mass behind the garúa. On the right, he could not hear the Pacific. It did not strike him as strange until he paid attention. Along some stretches, the road ran close enough to the water that even in a calm sea you could hear a deep, steady roar. Now he heard only the engine and the music.

"Did we miss the turnoff?"

The question came from inside the bus. The night driver looked in the mirror. A shoulder moved. Farther back, someone raised their head.

"What turnoff?"

"To San Desvelo."

"There is no turnoff."

"Then shouldn't we be there already?"

The night driver kept his eyes on the road. "Not yet."

"How much longer?"

"Not long."

Again he did not know who had asked. The first voice and this one might have been the same. Or not. The night driver did not know most of the passengers. Some regularly boarded in Puerto Esperanza, others only once. In the light, he might have recognized a face. In the dark, they were only people who needed to get somewhere.

The walls of garúa grew higher. Not by much. Their upper edges were now almost level with the windows. The starry sky remained open. In one place, the left wall was so smooth it looked like concrete. The night driver saw no movement in it, no swirls, no thin tendrils. Only gray keeping pace with the colectivo.

Then a narrow opening appeared on the right. Three boats lay on the sand. One was blue, one white, one unpainted. Beside them stood an old car with its hood open. A lamp hung from a post. Beneath it, two people sat at a table. The night driver saw plates, a thermos, and the backs of their chairs. Neither looked toward the road. The light was too weak to show their faces.

The cumbia ended on the radio. The sound of a brush on a wall followed.

The night driver tightened both hands around the steering wheel.

"Pinturas Alcázar," a bright female voice said. "Color para su casa, protección para su familia." Then she gave an address on Avenida Grau and a five-digit telephone number. The night driver no longer knew the number. He remembered only that his mother had once bought blue paint there. The paint had been meant for the kitchen and in the end had covered one wall, two chairs, and half a door. Later, the wall was painted green. For a long time, blue still showed through wherever the green had chipped away.

"That station is closed, isn't it?" someone said.

This time the night driver did not answer right away. "Yes."

"Since when?"

"A long time."

"Then it's a recording."

"Maybe."

"From where?"

The night driver looked at the radio. The green scale was barely illuminated. The needle stood where Radio Desvelo had actually once been. "From before."

Behind him, someone said softly, "That isn't a place."

The night driver heard the sentence but was not sure whether it had come from the bus or the radio.

The ad ended. Beto Saldaña announced the time.

"It is one forty-three in San Desvelo."

The night driver looked at the dashboard clock.

1:46.

Three minutes. The radio could be an old recording. A cassette. A program someone was replaying. The difference meant nothing. Still, the night driver reached for the small button beside the clock and pressed it. The digits did not flicker. He let go.

The road curved slightly to the left. This was where the first view of the cerro should be possible. The night driver knew the spot by a damaged roadside marker whose upper half was missing. The post appeared in the headlights. Only the white base and a black stripe remained. Beyond it, the view normally opened to the southeast.

The night driver looked.

No red lights.

Only stars above a dark expanse. Cerro Dormido was there. It had to be. But neither its outline nor the weather station lights could be seen.

"Shouldn't we be able to see the cerro by now?"

The night driver waited a moment before answering. "The garúa."

"There isn't any above us."

"Farther ahead."

"There are stars."

"I see them."

"Then where is the cerro?"

The night driver looked in the mirror.

"Who's asking?"

This time an answer came at once.

"I am."

"Who's 'I'?"

Silence. Then someone else said:

"Just drive."

The night driver drove.

The road now ran closer to the coast. Dark streaks sometimes appeared between the left wall of garúa and the asphalt, where sand had blown across the roadway. Once, a long length of rope lay on the shoulder. Another time, a fishing net, neatly folded and weighted down with stones. The night driver saw no people nearby.

Beto Saldaña played a slow song. Not a cumbia. A ballad with a saxophone, the kind once played at weddings and farewells. The night driver remembered a woman named Elena. Not her face. Her hand resting on the open window of a bus. Red fingernails. A ring on her middle finger. She had often ridden as far as Las Palmeras and sometimes beyond when she wanted to talk to him.

Later she had gone to Lima. Then to Spain, someone had said. The night driver did not know whether that was true.

He had listened to the song with her. Once. Perhaps more than once. In his memory it was a single long ride in the afternoon, though it must have been made of different days. Elena had told him he should not always drive the same route. He had asked what other route there was. She had laughed. Back then, he had not understood whether she was talking about the road.

The saxophone sounded thin and scratchy through the speakers. The night driver turned the radio down a little.

"Don't," someone said.

He kept his hand on the dial.

"Don't what?"

"Don't turn it down."

The night driver restored the music to its previous volume. In the mirror, the light-colored jacket on someone's lap moved. A hand adjusted the fabric. Nothing else.

"Did you know the music?" a voice asked.

"Yes."

"Was it good?"

The night driver thought.

"Back then."

"And now?"

"Now it's old."

"That wasn't the question."

The night driver looked at the asphalt.

"No."

"No what?"

"Nothing."

On the radio, the man continued singing about a woman waiting at a bus stop. The night driver no longer remembered the last verse. When it came, he remembered it a second before.

The clock read 2:03.

They should have reached San Desvelo long ago. Even at a slow pace. Even if the night driver had been mistaken about the time in Puerto Esperanza. He looked at the odometer. The little number drum sat crooked behind the glass. Thirty-two kilometers had passed since the gas station. That was too far. Or perhaps not. The night driver did not know the exact distance, only the duration. Roads were measured in minutes, not kilometers.

A light appeared ahead. White. Low. The night driver took his foot off the gas. The light did not move. Not an oncoming vehicle. Not a lamp on a pole. As they drew nearer, he recognized a yard between the walls of garúa. A wall of unplastered brick. A small house behind it. A fluorescent tube hung above a door in front of the house.

A vending machine stood beside the door.

The night driver had never seen a vending machine along this road. The machine was old, red, and dented on one side. Across its front, the name of a soda whose logo had changed years ago remained unfaded in white letters. A man sat on a plastic chair in front of the machine. He wore a light-colored shirt. His face stayed in shadow.

As the colectivo passed, the man raised his hand.

Not in greeting. More as though he wanted the night driver to slow down.

The night driver did not.

"Someone wanted to get on there," a voice said.

"There's no stop here."

"There wasn't one before, either."

"What do you mean, before?"

No one answered.

The yard disappeared. The garúa closed. The night driver looked in the rearview mirror. The road behind the colectivo remained empty. The white light was no longer visible.

The ballad ended on the radio. Beto Saldaña read out greetings. To workers at the fishmeal plant. To a driver named Mauro on his way to Casma. To a woman in the hospital in Chimbote. Then he said the night driver's name.

Not the name most people used. His second given name, which only his mother and two teachers had known.

The night driver took one hand off the wheel and switched off the radio.

The music cut out. Inside the colectivo, only the engine remained. Tires on asphalt. A loose window rattling at every bump.

No one spoke.

The night driver continued on. Stars above him. Garúa to the left and right. He waited for someone to demand that he turn the radio back on. No one did.

After a minute, he reached for the knob himself.

The radio came on. Beto Saldaña was still speaking. The sentence did not resume where it had broken off. It began with the final words of the greeting.

"...and to our friend on the night route. You know who you are."

"Four hours to go," Beto said.

The night driver took his hand off the dial.

That was not how people said it.

That was how he said it.

Then Beto laughed briefly and knocked twice on the table.

The night driver did not turn the radio off again.

"Do we have to turn around?" someone asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because San Desvelo is ahead of us."

"Are you sure?"

The night driver looked at the road. "Yes."

It was an answer. Not a certainty.

The walls of garúa slowly sank. At first, only by a few inches. Then parts of the landscape became visible behind them again. To the right, a flat dark expanse where several boats lay above the waterline. To the left, scree and the lowest outlines of the slopes. The sky remained clear.

Beto Saldaña forecast coastal cold, dense garúa, and good visibility on the Panamericana. Then he named the day: Wednesday.

The clock in the colectivo read 2:17 and stopped. When a passenger asked, the night driver gave the time.

"Already?"

"Yes."

"Still?"

In the mirror, no one's mouth moved.

A red light blinked ahead.

The night driver sat straighter. The light vanished. Returned. Farther to the right, a second appeared. The aviation warning lights on Cerro Dormido. Below them, a little farther south, the lights of the weather station on Cerro Vigía.

Red.

White.

Red.

White.

They had not slowly emerged from the distance. A moment before, the sky above the road had been empty. Now they stood there, clear and close, as though someone had removed a dark cover.

Several people moved at once inside the bus. Fabric rustled. A bag was lifted from the floor.

"There," someone said.

The night driver nodded, though no one could see it. "San Desvelo."

The walls of garúa broke apart. Not like something solid. They simply lost their straight edges. Gray streaks drifted across the shoulder and soon settled once more where garúa normally lay: in hollows, over vacant lots, and between the first houses. The road widened. A rusted sign appeared. Then a wall with a campaign ad, of which only one eye and part of a name remained. The first gas station was closed. A single lamp burned above the pumps. A dog lay beneath the canopy and raised its head as the colectivo passed. Then came the repair shops on the northern edge of town. Corrugated metal doors. Stacks of old tires. A mototaxi without a front wheel propped on two concrete blocks.

The night driver exhaled. Only then did he notice that his shoulders had been raised.

A commercial break was playing on the radio. A voice offered lots in Las Palmeras. Water hookup prepared. Electricity planned. Installment payments available. The night driver knew the streets that had been advertised back then. Houses, repair shops, and a small school stood there now. Some lots were still empty.

He turned toward Las Palmeras. Under the first orange streetlights, the passengers became visible. An older woman by the window. A man with a black bag. Two young workers in dusty jackets. A mother with a sleeping child. No one sat on the last bench.

The night driver looked in the mirror once more. Five people. Perhaps there had been five all along.

"Who gets off first?" he asked.

The older woman raised her hand. "At the bodega."

He did not know her voice. The man with the black bag said, "Mercado." One of the workers named El Alto. The mother remained silent.

None of the voices sounded unmistakably like the voices on the road.

The night driver continued. The clock read 2:17.

He stopped in front of the bodega. The older woman got out, pulling a cloth bag behind her. She thanked him. The night driver watched until she opened a door in a low wall. Then he closed the bus door.

"Shouldn't we be able to see the lights of the cerro by now?" someone asked behind him.

The night driver immediately looked in the mirror.

The man with the black bag was looking out the window. The workers sat side by side. The mother held the child. No one's mouth moved.

"We're here," the night driver said.

No one answered.

He drove on to Centro. The Mercado was closed. A light burned in front of the Municipalidad. The park beside it was dark. The man with the black bag got out. Then the two workers. The mother remained seated.

"Where do you need to go?" the night driver asked.

She raised her head. In the streetlight, her face looked young and tired. "I've already gone past it."

"Where?"

She looked out the window. "Before the city."

The night driver placed one hand on the gearshift. "There's nothing there."

"I know."

The child slept against her shoulder. The woman stood. "I'll get out here."

She walked to the door. The night driver opened it. Before getting out, she looked at the radio.

"My mother listened to that station," she said.

"A lot of people did."

"I didn't."

She got out. The night driver closed the door. The woman walked toward the Mercado with the child and disappeared around the next corner.

The colectivo was empty.

The commercial ended on the radio. Beto Saldaña said it was two seventeen. Then the same song as at the beginning started. Three measures. The woman's voice. A return no one expected anymore.

The night driver remained parked in front of the Municipalidad. He switched off the engine. The music continued.

Without the diesel, the radio sounded thinner. Almost far away. The night driver sat in the warm interior and looked through the windshield. The red lights blinked on Cerro Dormido. Beside them, the weather station. Over Centro, the garúa lay low between the houses. The sky above was still clear.

He slowly turned the dial to the left. The music faded. Just before it reached the stop, the music disappeared. No static. Only silence.

The night driver turned it back.

The frequency was empty.

He searched to either side. A station from Chimbote. An ad. Then a sermon. After that, static. Radio Desvelo did not return.

The night driver switched off the radio. The rosary above the rearview mirror hung still. He looked at the clock.

2:17.

Then the display changed.

2:18.

The night driver got out. From the west, the garúa settled against houses, metal, and glass. Somewhere, another cumbia was playing.

Far to the north, a single red light blinked for a moment. It was not on the cerro but lower, almost level with the road.

Then it was gone.

Chapter 13: The Broadcasting License

The night driver arrived at the Municipalidad at nine eighteen. By then Teresa had already looked for two birth certificates, taken a complaint about a clogged drain, and explained to the copier three times that there was no tray 2. The copier continued to display PAPER JAM TRAY 2. Teresa had decided to ignore it until ten.

The night driver stopped in front of her desk. He wore the same dark jacket he wore at night, though outside the sun lay across the facade of the Municipalidad. In one hand he held his keys. In the other, a small piece of paper folded twice. Teresa knew him by sight. At night he parked the colectivo in front of the Archivo and sometimes slept on the back bench until the first morning run began. She did not know his name.

"Buenos días."

"Buenos días. What do you need?"

"Some information."

Teresa looked at the three people behind him. A woman with a folder, a man with a plastic sack full of bills, and Señora Milagros, who had nothing in her hands that morning and would therefore probably stay the longest.

"What information?"

"Radio Desvelo."

Teresa picked up the pen she had just put down. The name meant something to her. Not like the name of a station. More like something she had seen on an old invoice. Or an inventory tag. San Desvelo had many things whose names people knew without knowing whether they still existed.

"What about it?"

"I'd like to know when the station closed."

Teresa looked at the clock. Nine nineteen.

"Why?"

The night driver turned the folded paper between his fingers.

"Because I picked it up last night."

Someone moved behind him. Just enough for Teresa to notice that the people waiting were listening.

"Which station?"

"Radio Desvelo."

"It's closed."

"That's why I'm asking."

Teresa put down her pen. The copier display showed READY. She looked at it. The machine hummed once, though no one was copying anything, then displayed PAPER JAM TRAY 2 again.

"When did you pick it up?"

"Between Puerto Esperanza and here."

"What time?"

"After midnight."

"More precisely?"

The night driver looked at his keys.

"Not precisely."

Teresa pulled a blank sheet toward her. She wrote RADIO DESVELO. Beneath it: Reception at night. Puerto Esperanza-San Desvelo road. Then she paused.

"What did they broadcast?"

"Music."

"What kind?"

"Cumbia."

Teresa looked at him.

"That doesn't narrow it down."

"Old."

"Old cumbia?"

"It was new then."

Teresa waited. The night driver unfolded the piece of paper. A frequency was written on it. 103.7. Below it, he had written a name: Radio Desvelo. The numbers were in blue ballpoint from a pen that had skipped in places.

"And all you want to know is when it closed?"

"Yes."

"No complaint?"

"No."

"No interference?"

"Not for me."

Teresa took the paper. She studied the frequency. Then the people waiting.

"Have a seat."

The night driver looked at the chairs in the hallway.

"How long?"

"I don't know yet."

"Then I'll come back later."

"By the time I find it, it will be later."

He considered this. Then he sat beside Señora Milagros. She moved a little to the side, though there had been plenty of room between them.

Teresa helped the woman with the folder first. Then the man with the bills. Señora Milagros wanted to know why the clock by the park had shown the same temperature for three days. Teresa explained that the clock belonged to the pharmacy. Milagros said the pharmacy had sent her to the Municipalidad. Teresa asked who exactly. Milagros did not know. Teresa wrote PHARMACY – CLOCK on a slip of paper and placed it beside the one marked RADIO DESVELO. Then it was the night driver's turn again.

"Come with me."

She led him down the hallway, past the copier and shelf 7. The box marked LOS PINOS – TEMPORAL sat on the shelf. Beside it were three old road maps, a printer without a cable, and a crate of keys that belonged to no known building. The night driver did not look at the box. He followed Teresa into the small room containing the administrative files.

Teresa and Alberto searched the Archivo for broadcasting licenses. The binders were organized by year, operator, and frequency; no system reliably led to the same records.

Eventually they found a thin file labeled RADIO DESVELO. Several pages were missing. The last remaining page listed a frequency now assigned to a station in Chimbote.

Teresa placed the folder on the table. The night driver stepped closer. The first sheet was a provisional operating permit dated March 14, 1987. Operator: Comunicaciones Costeras San Desvelo S.A. Frequency: 103.7 MHz. Location: Sector El Faro, Parcela 6. Transmitting power: 500 watts. The mayor's signature consisted of a large initial and several lines that trailed away at the end.

"1987,"

Teresa said.

"Yes."

"The password at the hostel."

The night driver looked at her.

"What?"

"Nothing."

She turned the page. Construction drawing. Mast foundation. Permit for a generator. Invoice for two hundred meters of coaxial cable. A letter from the Ministerio de Transportes y Comunicaciones. A list of technical inspections. One sheet bore the station's logo: a black circle containing a white coastline and three narrow waves. Beneath it were the words: RADIO DESVELO – LA VOZ DE LA COSTA.

The night driver placed two fingers against the edge of the sheet without touching it.

"That's what they said."

"Last night?"

"Back then, too."

Teresa took a pencil and wrote on her slip: Station identification confirmed. She crossed out confirmed. Instead, she wrote: Station identification according to file.

Behind the technical documents were program schedules. Morning news. Market prices. Music blocks. Greetings and paid announcements. A program for fishermen that had begun at four thirty. An hour of boleros on Sundays. A daily overnight program from ten p.m. to four a.m. Its title had been stamped in red on every sheet: RUTA NOCTURNA.

"Do you know this?"

The night driver read the name.

"Yes."

"Was that the program?"

"Maybe."

Teresa turned the page toward him. Beneath the title were the program's elements: CUMBIA / MENSAJES / ESTADO DE CARRETERA / DEDICATORIAS / HORA EXACTA. Below them was a handwritten addition: CAMIONES NORTE-SUR.

"Did they mention the road?"

"They said it was clear."

Teresa looked at him.

"Who?"

"The announcer."

"Which announcer?"

The night driver looked at the program schedules. Teresa continued turning pages. At the end of the month were staff rosters. Technicians. Salespeople. Administration. Hosts. Two names appeared beside RUTA NOCTURNA. One had been crossed out. The other read: BETO SALDAÑA.

The night driver said nothing. Teresa noticed anyway.

"Did you know him?"

"Everyone knew him."

"Personally?"

"No."

Teresa waited. The night driver kept looking at the name.

"He had a deep voice," he finally said. "Not a particularly good one. But you recognized it."

"Was it him?"

"Last night?"

"Yes."

The night driver set his keys on the table. The metal clinked briefly.

"I think so."

"Do you think so, or do you know?"

"Back then, I knew."

Teresa looked at the name once more. Beside it was an employee number and an address in El Faro. No phone number. The next page held a contract. Start date: 1988. Term: six months. Then an extension. Another. The last ended in 1994. Teresa flipped back, then forward again.

"When did you hear the station?"

"Before?"

"Last night."

"After Puerto Esperanza."

"Before which kilometer marker?"

"I don't know."

"Before the old fisherman's shack?"

The night driver looked at her.

"Which one?"

"I don't know. You mentioned fishermen's shacks."

"I didn't mention any."

Teresa stopped. She looked at her notes. There was nothing about fishermen's shacks. She did not remember him talking about them. Perhaps she had assumed it. The road followed the coast. There were shacks there. That was not information.

"Good," she said.

"What's good?"

"Nothing."

She set the personnel records aside and looked for the closure. It could not be in the 1984–1992 binder. Teresa took the second binder. RADIO DESVELO appeared there several times. Broadcasting license renewal, 1993. Permit to rebuild the mast, 1995. Complaint about nighttime noise, 1996, though radio stations were not normally loud from the outside. An inspection report from 1998. A request for generator replacement parts in 1999. Then two years were missing.

Between 1999 and 2002 there was only one thin sheet. It stated that the files had been moved because of water damage. The room where Teresa stood showed no visible traces of water damage. The old archivist had once claimed that a pipe burst in 2000. Alberto said there had been no water line in that part of the building at the time. Teresa had filed both statements.

In 2002 she found a warning from the ministry. In 2003, a provisional extension. In 2004, a letter with the subject CESE DE OPERACIONES. Cessation of broadcast operations. Teresa pulled out the sheet.

"Here."

The night driver leaned forward. The letter was dated September 28, 2004. It stated that Comunicaciones Costeras San Desvelo had ceased operations for financial reasons. The frequency had to be vacated within thirty days, the transmitter taken out of service, and the license returned.

"2004," Teresa said.

The night driver kept reading.

"That fits."

"What does?"

"More or less."

Teresa took the next sheet. It was a receipt acknowledgment from the Municipalidad. Then came an inventory list. Two mixing consoles. Three microphones. One turntable. Two CD players. A

cassette deck. Generator. Emergency battery. Transmission mast. Antenna. Under remarks, it read: PARTIALLY TAKEN OVER BY THE MUNICIPALIDAD.

"Why?"

"Debts, maybe."

"Where is everything?"

Teresa turned to the end of the list. No location. Only an inventory number.

"It should be in the inventory records."

"Is it?"

"I'll look."

The night driver picked up his keys again.

"Then it was 2004."

"Probably."

"That's all I need."

Teresa looked at the file. About twenty pages followed the closure notice.

"No."

"No what?"

"That's not all I need."

She continued turning pages. A maintenance order from 2005. Replacement of a fuse in the transmitter room. A 2006 form recording diesel fuel consumption at the El Faro site. A 2007 invoice for replacing a lightning rod. In each case, the client was the Municipalidad de San Desvelo.

The night driver remained standing.

"Maybe it was for the mast."

"The mast belonged to the facility."

"It's still standing."

"Yes."

Teresa took the next page. 2008. Maintenance of the antenna lights. 2009. Repair of a door. 2010. Inspection of the generator. 2011. Replacement of a cable section. Then the binder ended.

"Maybe the building was still in use."

"For what?"

"Storage."

"You don't repair a generator for storage."

"Maybe you do."

Teresa looked at him.

"You don't believe that."

"No."

She placed the sheets side by side. Closure in 2004. Maintenance through 2011. The night driver was no longer looking at the records. He was looking at the map on the wall. North of El Faro, Parcela 6 was not marked. There was only a pale gray area between the coastal road and the Pacific.

"When were you last there?"

"At the station?"

"Yes."

"Never."

Teresa looked at him.

"You listened to it for years."

"On the radio."

"And you never went there?"

"Why would I?"

That was also true.

The inventory trail led to a building called Depósito Norte. A note declared the facility operational in 2011; a later stamp dated the same status to 2018. There was no reactivation between them.

On one map, a line ran from the Depósito to the weather station and a second to the coast. At the southern edge, it did not end but ran off the paper.

They returned to the records room. The folder lay open on the table at RUTA NOCTURNA. Teresa sat. The night driver remained standing. A mototaxi passed outside. Through the closed window, its engine sounded muted. For a few seconds, music came in from the street. Cumbia. Modern. Teresa waited until the vehicle had passed.

"What exactly did you hear?"

The night driver looked at the program schedule.

"A song."

"Which one?"

"I don't remember the title."

"But you knew it."

"Everyone knew it back then."

"What else?"

He sat down after all. He placed his keys on the table in front of him.

"An ad for Alcázar."

Teresa looked toward the drawer marked D for Desvelo. It contained the file for Distribuidora Alcázar.

"The wallpaper company?"

"Building supplies. Paint. Maybe wallpaper."

"Go on."

"The announcer read the news. Nothing important. A road was closed. There was supposed to be a festival on Sunday. Then greetings for drivers."

"Names?"

The night driver was silent for a moment.

"Mauro. On his way to Casma."

Teresa wrote down the name.

"Did you know Mauro?"

"No."

"And the time announcement?"

The night driver looked up.

"How do you know about that?"

Teresa pointed to the program schedule. HORA EXACTA.

"Was there one?"

"Yes."

"What time?"

The night driver took his keys. Moved them an inch to the left. Then back.

"Two seventeen."

Nothing could be heard in the room except the fan of the computer in the next office. Teresa looked at the wall clock. Ten forty-six.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"And your clock?"

"The same."

Teresa wrote 2:17. She did not cross it out.

At the end of the folder, she found an envelope. It was not sealed. On it were the words RUTA NOCTURNA – MATERIAL. Inside were index cards containing ad copy, notices, and short announcements. Teresa took out the stack. The cards had gone soft around the edges. Some bore coffee stains. One was for Distribuidora Alcázar. One for the Puerto Esperanza gas station. One for a hostel in Centro. One reminded drivers to slow down in the garúa. Another contained the station identification.

Teresa did not read aloud. RADIO DESVELO, LA VOZ DE LA COSTA. MUSIC, NEWS, AND COMPANY FOR EVERYONE STILL ON THE ROAD.

The night driver did not take the card. He only looked at it.

"That was it."

"What was?"

"Company for everyone still on the road."

Teresa turned the card over. On the back, in pencil, was written: 02:17 – PASO NORTE. Beneath it was a second line: VERIFICAR LUCES CERRO.

She showed the back to the night driver.

"What does Paso Norte mean?"

"Maybe the northern section."

"Which one?"

"The road."

"Why did they have to check the lights on the cerro?"

The night driver looked at the card. Then at the map on the wall. Cerro Dormido was marked there only as a brown contour line. The weather station on Cerro Vigía had a small black square.

"So the drivers knew they were going the right way."

Teresa waited.

"On the road, you see the red lights first," he said. "Then you know San Desvelo is coming."

"And last night?"

The night driver picked up his keys from the table.

"They came late."

Teresa returned the card to the envelope. She did not close the folder.

"I'm making a copy."

"Of what?"

"The closure notice. The maintenance records. The program schedule."

"For me?"

"No."

The night driver stood.

"Then it was 2004."

"Officially."

"And unofficially?"

Teresa looked at the binders. 2005. 2006. 2007. 2011. 2018.

"There's no field for that."

The night driver nodded as though he had received a complete answer. He stopped at the door.

"Will you write down my name?"

"I don't know your name."

He told her. Teresa wrote it on the slip beneath 2:17. Then he left. In the hallway, Señora Milagros asked him something. He did not answer. A short while later, Teresa heard the side door of the Municipalidad.

She carried the folder to the copier. The display read PAPER JAM TRAY 2. Teresa opened the front panel. No paper. She opened the rear one. No paper. She pulled out tray 1 and pushed it back in. The display changed to READY.

Teresa placed the closure letter on the glass and pressed Start. The copier drew in a sheet. The light traveled beneath the glass. The first copy came out clean. So did the second. On the program schedule, the machine stopped. The display read: CHECK ORIGINAL.

Teresa raised the lid. The sheet lay straight on the glass. RUTA NOCTURNA. CUMBIA. MENSAJES. ESTADO DE CARRETERA. DEDICATORIAS. HORA EXACTA. She lowered the lid again and pressed Start.

The copier hummed. For a moment, a low tone came from inside it, steady and barely louder than the fan. Then the light moved. The copy came out.

Teresa took it. At the top were the words RUTA NOCTURNA. The lines beneath were faint but legible. At the bottom of the page was an additional line that did not appear on the original.

EMISIÓN ACTIVA

Teresa raised the lid again. The line was not on the original. She placed the copy beside the sheet. Compared the margins. The type. The spacing.

She copied the page again.

The second copy did not contain the additional line.

Teresa looked at the first copy. EMISIÓN ACTIVA. Active broadcast. The letters were no darker than the rest of the text. They looked as though they had always been there.

Alberto came into the room.

"The pharmacy says their clock is working."

Teresa pointed to the copies.

"Do you see a difference?"

Alberto took both sheets. He read them. Then held them up to the light.

"There's an extra line here."

"Not on the original."

Alberto looked at the copier.

"Software error."

Teresa looked at him.

"You're not Rafael."

"Good."

He handed the sheets back to her.

"What are you going to do with them?"

Teresa took a new brown folder from the cabinet. On the front she wrote RADIO DESVELO. Beneath it: LICENSE / CLOSURE / INVENTORY. She placed the copies inside. The one with the additional line first, the other behind it. Then she took the slip with the frequency, the night driver's name, and the time 2:17. She placed that inside as well.

"Where does the folder go?" Alberto asked.

Teresa looked toward the shelves. Business records. Telecommunications. Inventory. Shelf 7.

"For now," she said.

She carried the folder into the room behind the copier. The box marked LOS PINOS – TEMPORAL sat on shelf 7. Teresa placed RADIO DESVELO beside it. The folder was thin and would not stand on its own. She wedged it between the box and the printer without a cable.

As she walked back, the copier once again displayed PAPER JAM TRAY 2.

Teresa ignored it until noon.

Chapter 14: Not Quite Straight

Lucía came back on a Thursday shortly before five. Under her arm she carried the yellow wallpaper with green leaves and white blossoms.

"It won't stay up," Ernesto said.

"It stays up. The pattern doesn't line up."

On the counter, Lucía laid two strips side by side. Half a blossom ended at the edge; on the next strip, a leaf began several inches lower. Turning, shifting, and overlapping fixed one place each time and ruined another.

Of the four strips she had cut, only the first matched.

"How many strips have you cut already?"

he asked.

"Four."

"And they're all like this?"

"Three are. The first one is right."

"Then use the first one."

"For a whole wall?"

Ernesto looked toward the open door behind the salesroom.

"No."

Lucía followed his gaze.

"You want to go into the back again."

"Maybe the roll is wrong."

"You found it back there."

"Exactly."

Outside, a delivery van made the display window vibrate, but beneath the music and street noise, a low tone remained. Ernesto switched off the radio and the lights. The hum remained.

On the second shelf, the paint can at the very back stood flush with the others. Lucía remembered straightening it on her last visit.

Ernesto pulled it forward three finger-widths and turned the label out of line. Then he set the last box of painter's tape beneath the counter off-center again.

The hum grew duller.

"What are you doing?"

"Making it quieter."

"With the spacing."

"What spacing?"

Ernesto straightened.

"The right spacing."

Lucía looked at the paint cards. She took Blanco Humo off its hook and rehung it with Blanco Tiza.

The hum lost some of its depth.

For a few seconds, Lucía heard only the fluorescent tubes.

Then the tone returned. Farther back.

"That's not possible," she said.

Ernesto looked toward the storeroom door.

"It is."

"How long have you known?"

"Not everything."

"How long have you known enough to set paint cans crooked?"

Ernesto went to the box of brushes. The single brush that had lain crosswise over the others on her first visit had been put away neatly. Ernesto took it out and laid it crosswise again.

"Since I straightened them."

"Who?"

"The cans."

"When?"

"After my father's funeral."

Lucía looked at him.

"You cleaned up the store."

"Yes."

"And then it started humming."

"Not right away."

"How long afterward?"

Ernesto thought.

"When I was finished."

The hum came from the back rooms more strongly again. A faint clinking traveled through the second shelf. Two metal handles on the paint cans touched.

Ernesto looked toward the open door.

"You turned the red roll."

Lucía followed his gaze.

"Which red roll?"

"In the first room."

"The one with the flowers?"

"Yes."

"It was facing the wrong way."

"No."

Lucía placed both hands on the counter.

"You expressly told me not to turn it."

"Yes."

"Because otherwise you wouldn't find it again."

"That too."

"And the other reason?"

Ernesto took the ring of keys from the hook.

"That's in the back."

Lucía looked into the storeroom.

The hum began again.

Low.

Pause.

Low.

This time the pause was not silent. It held a second, very low tone, almost more pressure than sound.

"I'm not going all the way to the last room again," Lucía said.

"You don't have to."

"Good."

"Maybe only as far as the one before it."

Lucía looked at him.

"That's almost the same thing."

Ernesto took the roll of wallpaper from the counter.

"No."

"How many rooms are there?"

"Today?"

Lucía said nothing.

Ernesto walked to the door.

"You're already talking like that out here."

"Like what?"

"Like you do in the back."

He stopped.

"Not yet."

The first storeroom was brighter than it had been last time. The fluorescent tube was on, and sunlight from the salesroom fell through the open door as far as the first racks. The wallpapers stood in their labeled rows. FLORES. GEOMÉTRICO. INFANTIL. RAYAS.

The red floral wallpaper faced into the room. Lucía had turned it on her last visit. Ernesto set the yellow roll on the floor and walked to the rack.

"Help me."

"With what?"

"Turning it."

"It isn't heavy."

"Not the roll. The rack."

Lucía stepped closer. The wooden rack stood almost parallel to the wall. Ernesto took the left side, Lucía the right.

"Which way?"

"Not far."

"What does not far mean?"

"Until it isn't straight anymore."

"It's already not quite straight."

"Not quite straight in a different way."

They lifted the rack a fraction of an inch and turned it. The lower wooden edges scraped across the tiles. Ernesto listened to the hum.

"More."

Lucía pushed.

"More?"

"Less."

"Less pushing or less humming?"

"Yes."

Lucía let go.

Ernesto remained standing. The tone was weaker. He turned the red floral wallpaper so that the pattern faced the wall. Then he pulled a geometric roll out of the rack until its upper edge projected about a hand's width.

"Why that one?"

Lucía asked.

"Because the red one isn't enough by itself."

"What does the geometric one do?"

"It sticks out."

"I can see that."

"Good."

"That wasn't an explanation."

"No."

The hum was farther back now. A faint vibration of paper came from the second room. Ernesto picked up the yellow roll again.

"Keep going."

Lucía stopped.

"You said only as far as the one before it."

"We aren't at the one before it yet."

"Before what?"

Ernesto looked into the second room.

"Before it."

Lucía followed him.

The patterns in the second room were older. Brown flowers. Orange stripes. The wallpaper with the beige semicircles was no longer in its place. Lucía recognized it on the floor, neatly rolled and parallel to the rack.

"It was lying differently last time," she said.

"Yes."

"Did you move it?"

"No."

"Then who did?"

"Someone who likes order."

Lucía looked at him.

"You mean me."

"Maybe."

"I haven't been here since then."

"Then someone else."

"Who comes into your back rooms?"

"No one."

"Then you can't mean someone else."

Ernesto set the yellow roll against the wall.

"That's why it's lying wrong."

The hum grew clearer. A deep tone ran through the racks. Lucía felt it in the soles of her feet.

Ernesto took the wallpaper with the semicircles and laid it diagonally across the passage between two shelves.

"No one can get past now."

"Yes, they can."

"Only by stepping over it."

"Yes."

"Why is that better?"

Ernesto stood a sample book upright against the roll. It fell over. He stood it up again, this time so that it touched at two points.

"Because you can't walk straight."

Lucía listened.

The hum weakened again.

"It finds straight lines more easily," Ernesto said.

Lucía looked toward the rack.

"What finds them more easily?"

"The hum."

"A sound doesn't find anything."

Ernesto stepped over the roll.

"Then it isn't a sound."

Lucía remained on her side.

"What is it?"

Ernesto thought.

"Loud."

"That's not an answer either."

"It is here."

Lucía stepped over the wallpaper.

In the third room, exposed paper edges trembled in time with the hum. The next door stood completely open. Ernesto moved it slowly until only a hand's width remained and the tone weakened.

In the fourth room, several rolls lay too neatly side by side. Together they redistributed them: one diagonally, one between two racks, one positioned so that anyone passing had to lift a foot.

Lucía kept asking left or right. Finally, Ernesto pointed to the spot in front of her.

"There. But more crooked."

Lucía turned it.

"More."

"Like this?"

"Too much."

"Then less."

"Now it's before."

Lucía straightened.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Ernesto listened to the hum.

"Not quieter yet."

Lucía turned the roll back a little. The hum suddenly dropped. Not completely, but noticeably. The fluorescent tube remained as a higher tone.

Ernesto nodded.

"Like that."

Lucía looked at the wallpaper.

"That was almost the same position."

"No."

"The difference was maybe an inch."

"Yes."

"And an inch makes that much difference?"

"Today."

Lucía picked up the next roll. One with small brown leaves.

"Where does this one go?"

"Don't ask."

"Why?"

"Then we'd have to know where it comes from."

"Where what comes from?"

"The answer."

Lucía held on to the roll.

"You know you're talking strangely again."

Ernesto looked toward the next door.

"Farther back."

"We're here."

"Yes."

"Then why do you say farther back?"

"Because that's where it happens."

"What happens?"

Ernesto did not answer. He took the roll from her and laid it crosswise over the first. Together they formed a low, irregular cross.

The hum moved. Lucía could describe it no other way. It was no longer in the floor but higher up, about level with the racks. The wooden slats began to vibrate faintly.

Ernesto set an open sample book on the floor. The pages showed a sequence of green squares. He turned the pages until one with irregular lines appeared. Then he left the book lying open.

"Patterns?" Lucía asked.

"Those too."

"Which ones help?"

"The ones that aren't finished."

"The pattern is finished."

"Not if the book stays open."

Lucía looked at him.

"Naturally."

"No."

"No what?"

"Naturally is too orderly."

Lucía exhaled.

"Good."

Ernesto raised his head.

"That helps."

"What does?"

"Good."

"All I said was good."

"Yes."

The hum weakened for a moment.

Lucía said nothing more.

The fifth room was darker. The fluorescent tube was on, but its light fell almost entirely on the two doors. The racks between them were black shapes. Rolls of wallpaper lay on the floor. Some parallel, others crooked. A strip of paper extended to the next door.

Ernesto stopped at the entrance.

"It was quiet here once," he said.

Lucía stood behind him.

"When?"

"Before."

"Before what?"

"Before it wasn't quiet anymore."

Lucía looked into the room.

"Does it help when I correct you?"

"With what?"

"The way you talk."

"Out front."

"We aren't out front."

"Exactly."

He went inside. Lucía followed. The hum grew stronger. The dark racks absorbed the tone and returned it somewhere else. It came from the left wall. Then from the floor. Then from the room behind them.

Ernesto lifted one roll. Beneath it lay a second, its pattern showing small orange streetlights. Dark rectangles ran between the lights.

Lucía recognized it.

"San Desvelo."

"No."

"The wallpaper looks like the city."

"The city looks like the wallpaper."

"You didn't say that last time."

"Last time it was underneath."

"It's still underneath."

Ernesto studied it.

"Then above was different."

Lucía knelt. One of the printed streetlights was slightly displaced. Its circle of light lay beside the pole instead of beneath it. She ran a hand over the paper.

The hum grew stronger.

Ernesto pulled her hand away.

"Don't."

Lucía sat back on her heels.

"Why?"

"You're aligning it."

"I only touched it."

"Sometimes that's enough."

"What should I do?"

Ernesto pointed to the broad strip of paper that led to the next door.

"Fold it."

"Where?"

"Not along the line."

"Which line?"

"The straight one."

Lucía took the strip. The pattern consisted of small houses, buses, and streetlights. She lifted the paper.

"There's a line everywhere."

"Then not everywhere."

Lucía folded the strip roughly in the middle. Ernesto shook his head.

"Too even."

She opened it again and folded one corner in diagonally.

The hum grew deeper.

"Worse?" she asked.

"Closer."

"What does closer mean?"

"It hears us."

Lucía let go of the paper.

"Ernesto."

"Yes."

"We're going back."

"Not yet."

"Yes, we are."

"Then it stays here."

"That's what you want."

"No."

"You said it should stay in the back."

"Not this far back."

Lucía looked toward the next door.

"How far back?"

Ernesto listened.

"Farther than we are."

The fluorescent tube flickered. For a moment, Lucía saw more racks in the depths of the room. A door behind them. Light behind that. When the tube burned steadily again, the door stood closer. Or perhaps she had not seen it properly before.

Ernesto lifted the folded section of paper.

"Like this."

He placed a roll of wallpaper on it. The paper remained folded at an angle. The hum grew somewhat weaker.

"Come on," he said.

There were fewer racks in the sixth room. But more rolls lay on the floor. Some were still wrapped in plastic. Others were open, trailing strips of paper across the tiles. One rack lay overturned against the right wall.

Lucía stopped.

"We are not standing that up."

"No."

"Good."

"Yes."

"Now good doesn't help anymore?"

Ernesto listened.

"Later."

They went to the overturned rack. It did not lie flat on the floor. One corner was supported by three rolls of wallpaper. The wood was under tension.

Ernesto placed the yellow roll with the white blossoms beside it.

"It belongs here?"

Lucía asked.

"One of them does."

"What does one of them mean?"

"The one that isn't on the wall."

"My wallpaper is on my wall."

"Then this one."

Lucía looked at the roll.

"You want to leave the second roll here."

"Only until it's quieter."

"And afterward?"

"Afterward is later."

Lucía briefly closed her eyes.

“What do we have to do?”

Ernesto pointed to the rack.

“Move it.”

“In which direction?”

“Out of the direction.”

“Which one is the direction?”

“The one it’s pointing in.”

Lucía looked at the overturned rack. Its upper edge pointed diagonally toward the next door.

“To the left?”

“Not left. Away.”

“Away from the door?”

“Away from where the door is the same.”

Lucía said nothing.

Ernesto knelt. He placed both hands against the wooden edge.

“Help me.”

Lucía knelt on the other side. The hum was in the wood now. It traveled through her fingers and into her arms.

“On three,” she said.

“Which three?”

“One, two, three.”

“Good.”

“One.”

Ernesto was already pulling.

“Wait.”

“You started.”

“I said one.”

“That’s a start.”

Lucía held the rack steady.

“Again. One. Two. Three.”

They pushed. The wood moved a few inches. One of the supporting rolls rolled away. The rack sagged and struck the tiles. The sound was short and hard.

The hum cut out.

Both remained kneeling.

Silence.

Not complete silence. The fluorescent tube buzzed. Paper rustled somewhere in the room. A vehicle horn sounded faintly from the store far out front.

Lucía exhaled.

“Is it gone?”

Ernesto raised a hand.

They waited.

The hum returned.

Farther back.

Low.

Pause.

Low.

Ernesto nodded.

“Better.”

Lucía sat back on her heels.

"That's better?"

"Yes."

"It's still there."

"Yes."

"You can't turn it off."

Ernesto looked toward the next door.

"No."

"You can only move it."

"Not always."

"Then what can you do?"

"Make sure it isn't out front."

Lucía stood. Dust clung to her knees.

"And if someone cleans up?"

"Then it comes."

"How far?"

"Until someone stops."

"Your father knew this?"

Ernesto positioned the yellow roll so that it was not parallel to the rack.

"He never cleaned up."

"Maybe he knew."

"Maybe."

"He never told you anything?"

"He said the red roll stays facing the wrong way."

"And you thought he was messy."

"He was messy."

"But deliberately."

Ernesto thought.

"Not always."

Lucía looked toward the next door. The beam of light there was narrow. Another room began beyond it.

"Do we have to keep going?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"For today."

Lucía nodded slowly.

"And tomorrow?"

Ernesto picked up the yellow roll again.

"Tomorrow isn't here."

Lucía looked at him.

"You're talking like that again."

"I know."

"Do you notice it?"

"Out front."

Lucía said nothing. Then she walked back toward the door.

In the fifth room, the folded paper was still beneath the roll. The hum was barely audible there.

Lucía stopped in front of the wallpaper with the streetlights.

"Are we leaving it like this?"

"Yes."

"The fold too?"

"Especially the fold."

"The pattern is ruined now."

"Yes."

"And that's why it's quieter."

Ernesto listened.

"Maybe."

"You don't know."

"Not completely."

"But you act as though you have a system."

"I do have a system."

"What's the difference?"

Ernesto stepped over a roll.

"It works."

In the fourth room, the dryness diminished. Lucía rubbed her thumb and forefinger together. The hum was far behind them.

She pointed to the open sample book.

"That stays on the floor?"

"Yes."

"Someone will trip over it."

"No one comes here."

"I'm here."

"Not for much longer now."

"That sounds rude."

"I say it better out front."

Lucía looked at him.

"Good."

The hum grew weaker.

Ernesto stopped.

"Again."

"What?"

"Good."

Lucía waited.

"Good."

The tone lost some of its depth again.

They both listened.

Lucía looked at the open sample book.

"That could be a coincidence."

"Yes."

"Good."

Nothing changed.

Ernesto nodded.

"Not now."

In the third room, the door was still open a hand's width. Ernesto did not move it. The green strip of paper was no longer trembling.

Lucía stopped in front of it.

"What if I close this door?"

"Don't."

"What happens?"

"It comes closer."

"How fast?"

Ernesto looked toward the door.

"Faster than we are."

Lucía took her hand off the handle.

In the second room, they stepped over the wallpaper with the semicircles. Lucía paused and looked at the irregular barrier.

"This is dangerous."

"Yes."

"Why don't you mark it?"

"Then it would be a marker."

"And that would be too orderly."

"Yes."

"You could at least put up a sign."

Ernesto thought.

"What should it say?"

Lucía looked at him.

"Caution."

"Caution about what?"

She opened her mouth. Then closed it again.

"Good," Ernesto said.

This time nothing changed.

In the first room, light from the salesroom again fell clearly across the tiles. The red floral wallpaper faced the wall. The rack stood slightly twisted. The geometric roll projected a hand's width.

Lucía stopped.

"It's more normal here."

"Yes."

"You are too."

"Yes."

"You knew we talked differently back there."

Ernesto tucked the yellow roll of wallpaper under his arm.

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me the first time?"

"You wouldn't have understood what I meant."

"I still don't understand."

"But you helped."

Lucía looked back through the rooms. From here, only two doors were visible. Darkness lay beyond them.

"Why did you bring me along this time?"

"I couldn't have moved the rack alone."

They went into the salesroom.

The light had grown weaker by then. The sun was lower. The first shadows on the street were growing longer. The mototaxi at the intersection was gone. The man across the street had painted the lower half of his wall and left. The paint still shone wet.

Inside the store, the hum was barely audible. Only when Lucía stood still and paid no attention to the fluorescent tubes did a deep remnant lie beneath them.

Ernesto placed the yellow roll on the counter.

“Your wallpaper.”

Lucía looked at it.

“Is that the same roll?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

Ernesto turned the label toward her.

1974.

DISTRIBUIDORA ALCÁZAR. LIMA.

“The second roll is in the back.”

“Yes.”

“And this one matches now?”

“Maybe.”

Lucía closed her eyes.

“Out front.”

Ernesto looked at her.

“What?”

“You said you speak better out front.”

“Yes.”

“Then please tell me whether the wallpaper matches now.”

Ernesto unrolled a section. He laid the strip she had brought beside it. The white blossoms joined. The green leaves flowed into one another.

Lucía leaned closer.

“It wasn’t like that before.”

“No.”

“What did you do?”

“Put the other roll in the back.”

“That doesn’t change this one.”

“Apparently it does.”

Lucía took the strip and lined it up again. The pattern matched.

She tried it at a second place.

It matched there too.

“I’m not taking it with me,” she said.

Ernesto began rolling up the wallpaper.

“Good.”

“You’re simply agreeing with me?”

“You don’t want it.”

“I do want it. But I don’t want it on my wall.”

“That’s more difficult.”

Lucía looked toward the door behind the salesroom.

“What happens if I’ve already put it up?”

“How many strips?”

“One.”

“The one that matches?”

“Yes.”

Ernesto thought.

"Leave it."

"And the others?"

"Don't."

"Then I'll have a single strip behind my bed."

"Yes."

"That will look terrible."

"Maybe put the bed in front of it."

Lucía looked at him.

"The bed is already in front of it."

"Good."

She had to laugh. Only briefly. Then she heard the deep hum again. Very far back.

"You won't tell anyone about this," she said.

Ernesto took the cord and tied it around the roll.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Who would I tell?"

"The Municipalidad."

"What are they supposed to do?"

"I don't know."

"Neither do I."

"The weather station. Rafael or Inés."

Ernesto looked at her.

"Why the weather station?"

Lucía hesitated.

"Because they measure things."

"Wallpaper?"

"Humming."

Ernesto paused with the cord in his hands.

"How do you know that?"

"People talk."

"Who?"

"People."

"Which people?"

"Out front."

Ernesto looked toward the open store door. A bus passed outside. Across its windshield, in white letters, were the words SAN DESVELO – PUERTO ESPERANZA.

"The hum isn't only here," Lucía said.

Ernesto pulled the cord tight.

"No."

"You knew that."

"I've heard it."

"Where?"

"Sometimes above."

"Above where?"

Ernesto looked toward the ceiling.

"Not here."

Lucía waited. Ernesto placed the roll beneath the counter.

"You're not giving it back to me."

"No."

"And my money?"

"I'll give it back."

"For the whole roll?"

"For the wallpaper."

"And the paste?"

"You used that."

"Only a little."

"Then a little."

Lucía smiled.

"You're a difficult salesman."

"Yes."

The door opened. A man came in. He wore dusty work pants and held a broken paintbrush in one hand.

"Do you have one like this?" he asked.

Ernesto looked at the brush.

"What width?"

The man held it up.

"This wide."

Ernesto went to the box beside the register. The brush lying crosswise rested over the others. The man reached for it.

Ernesto placed his hand on it.

"Not that one."

The man withdrew his hand.

"Why?"

Ernesto took a brush from the row beneath it. Same width. Same handle.

"This one."

The man compared them.

"They're the same."

"No."

"What's different?"

Ernesto glanced toward the open storeroom door.

The hum was far in the back.

"That one is lying right," he said.

The man shrugged and took the other brush. Ernesto went to the register. Lucía was still standing at the counter.

"I'll come back tomorrow for the money," she said.

"Good."

"And what if it's louder again tomorrow?"

Ernesto looked at the paint can standing crooked. At the box three finger-widths from the wall. At Blanco Humo on the wrong hook. At the brush lying crosswise over the others.

"Then something was standing too straight."

Lucía picked up her bag.

"Buenas tardes."

"Buenas tardes."

She left. The door clicked shut behind her.

Ernesto rang up the brush. The man paid with a crumpled bill and left the store. Outside, the street had turned gray. The sun no longer lay across the display window. The fluorescent tubes were reflected in the glass.

Ernesto was left alone.

He listened.

Out front, the lights buzzed. Beneath the counter, the radio crackled though it was switched off. Farther back lay the hum. Faint. Deep. Not gone.

Ernesto went to the second shelf. The paint can stood a little too crooked. He turned it back one finger-width.

The hum grew quieter.

He went to the boxes of painter's tape. The sixth stood three finger-widths from the wall. Ernesto pulled it a little farther out. Then pushed it back again.

Not flush.

Not straight.

Right.

A single low tone came from the back rooms.

Pause.

Then nothing more that could be heard in the salesroom.

Ernesto switched on the radio. The cumbia resumed in the middle of the chorus. The woman's voice was still singing about the man who wanted to return.

Ernesto sat behind the counter.

Beside the light switch, a corner of the wallpaper peeled away from the wall. He looked at it. Then stood and pressed it firmly into place.

It held.

Ernesto took away his thumb.

The corner stayed on the wall.

He waited.

Then he peeled it back a little.

Chapter 15: The New Map

The mayor called at seven fifty-two. Teresa knew it was him before she picked up because the telephone in the Archivo Municipal sounded different when the call came from his car. Not louder. Not longer. Just with half a second of empty street between the first two rings. She had told no one. Alberto would have asked how a telephone was supposed to distinguish between an office and a car. Teresa would have replied that Alberto could also distinguish between coffee from the Cafetería and coffee from the community hall, even though both were served in the same plastic cups. Then Alberto would have said that was different. Teresa would have asked why. By then the morning would have been over.

She picked up.

“Municipalidad de San Desvelo, buenos días.”

In the background she heard an engine. Then a turn signal. Three bright clicks, pause, three bright clicks. A window was probably half open, because behind the mayor’s voice lay the damp air of a street where a truck was passing just then.

“Teresa,”

Alcalde Cárdenas said, as though she had called him.

“We need an overview.”

Teresa pulled a sheet of paper toward her.

“What kind of overview?” “A spatial one.” “Of what?”

The mayor was silent for a moment. The turn signal stopped.

“Of what hasn’t stayed where it belongs over the last few days.”

Teresa held the ballpoint pen over the paper.

“That isn’t a category.”

“Then make it one.”

The mayor seldom governed from his office. He called from cars, construction sites, or rooms whose acoustics he did not explain. To him, responsibility meant that a sheet of paper existed with someone else’s signature on it.

“Don’t make it too neat,” he said this time.

Teresa did not ask whether he meant the representation or the city.

“By when?”

“Before noon would be good.”

“That’s too early.”

“Then before the afternoon.”

“That isn’t a time.”

“Then two o’clock.”

“That’s before the afternoon.”

“Good.”

The connection crackled. The engine grew louder.

“Don’t explain,”

Cárdenas said.

“Locate.”

Then he hung up.

Teresa and Alberto spread a large base map across the table. They marked the known places: Cerro Vigía, Los Pinos, the park, the coast, the quarry, Depósito Norte, and Bajo La Arena.

Alberto wanted a legend, a scale, and unambiguous symbols. Teresa initially allowed several colors and two kinds of dashed lines. The points did not describe the same kind of event everywhere; a uniform category would only have pretended they did.

They went into the community hall. The room lay to the right of the Municipalidad's main entrance and was used for meetings, vaccination drives, tax filings, tutoring programs, memorial services, election-worker training, and, once, a dance class during which the sound system had burned out. The walls were painted light blue. In several places, moisture had raised the paint in bubbles. Above the small stage hung a banner from the most recent disaster-preparedness seminar:

PREVENCIÓN ES RESPONSABILIDAD DE TODOS.

Below it stood a lectern bearing the seal of San Desvelo. Plastic chairs were stacked on the right. On the left stood three long tables whose metal legs were different heights. If you leaned on the wrong corner, the table tipped, but only a little.

Alberto opened the cabinet beside the stage. Inside were rolled-up city maps, old election posters, a box of broken microphones, and two extension cords that no one wanted to use because one of them had smelled like warm plastic the last time. Teresa pulled out the largest map. It was laminated and wavy along the edges. San Desvelo lay on it in pale colors between the Pacific and the cerros. To the west, the sea was a blue expanse, although it was gray on most days. To the east, the slopes appeared as brown hatching. Centro was yellow, El Faro light blue, Las Palmeras green, La Playa beige, El Alto orange, and Los Pinos a very clean pink that looked better on the map than it did on the streets.

"This one is old,"

Alberto said.

"How old?"

Teresa searched for the date. In the lower right corner it said 2018.

"Only half of Los Pinos is on it."

"Back then, only half of it was there."

"Same today."

Alberto took tape from a drawer.

"The newer one isn't laminated."

"Where is it?"

"In the mayor's office."

Teresa looked at him.

"Locked?"

"Of course."

"Did he leave a key here?"

"His driver has one."

"Where is the driver?"

Alberto gestured outside, as though a driver could be anywhere as long as he was not here.

Teresa looked at the laminated map.

"Then we'll use the old one."

They taped it to the wall beside the lectern. The tape would not hold at the upper left. Alberto pressed it down. It came loose again. Teresa handed him a thumbtack.

"Not through the map."

"Then it'll fall."

"Not through the map."

Alberto pushed the thumbtack in just beside the edge. The map hung crooked. Teresa looked at it.

“Straighter.”

Alberto pulled the upper left corner higher. At that moment, the fluorescent tube above the stage hummed. Only briefly. They both looked up.

“Electricity,”

Alberto said.

“Of course.”

He let the corner sag a little again. The humming stopped.

Teresa placed the first red pin not exactly on the Municipalidad but a little to one side. On the map, the building was a rectangle. In reality, it consisted of three entrances, two old wings, an in-between space behind the copier, and a community hall that was officially called a community hall although it was used more often as a waiting room. Centro was too clean on the map. Straight streets, uniform blocks, the Mercado as a gray square, the park as a green patch. Teresa knew that the gutter along the south side of the Mercado was almost always damp, that the vendors did not arrange their crates according to the lines on the map, and that the alley behind the market had voices at night even when the metal gates were closed. She placed a yellow pin at the park.

“Lighting,”

Alberto said.

“Six streetlights.”

“Four in the inventory.”

“Six in the park.”

“Then we’ll write six.”

“And in the inventory?”

“Later.”

Teresa wrote PARK – 6 STREETLIGHTS? on a small slip of paper. Then she did not cross out the question mark.

Las Palmeras lay to the north. On the map, it was a long, somewhat loose area along the access road, with streets that sometimes had names and sometimes only numbers. Alberto put no pin there because there had been no formal report from Las Palmeras so far. Teresa looked at it anyway. She thought of the route by which the night driver entered the city, of the election posters fading on the walls, of houses with flat roofs and windows behind which old televisions still flickered blue after midnight. Las Palmeras had more space between its houses than Centro, but less open ground than the map claimed. The gaps were rarely empty. There stood motorcycles without license plates, stacks of old bricks, half-shuttered vendor carts, water barrels, small workshops, dogs that belonged to no one and yet knew exactly which doors they were allowed to sleep in front of.

“There’s nothing there,”

Alberto said because Teresa had been looking too long.

“Exactly,”

she said.

“Sometimes that’s a category.”

Alberto took a green pin and stuck it into the edge of Las Palmeras.

“For what?”

“Provisional.”

El Faro lay farther west along the coast. The map showed the neighborhood as an orderly row of blocks between the coastal road and the sea. Alberto placed a blue pin north of it at Radio Desvelo.

"Not in El Faro,"

Teresa said.

"North of it."

"On the map, there's only coast there."

"Then we'll put it in the coast."

He did. The pin held poorly in the laminated blue. Teresa thought of El Faro: low houses, facades darkened by salt, metal grilles that rusted first at the bottom, black water tanks on roofs that saw the sea on clear days and only garúa on most days. In old files, property lines there had been drawn as if the sea were a neighboring parcel that followed the registry.

"In El Faro, the lines never quite match,"

Alberto said as he pressed the pin in again. Teresa looked at him.

"What?"

"The old plans. Sometimes the wall begins here, sometimes there. The seawall has been repaired three times but approved only twice."

"Why?"

Alberto shrugged.

"The sea never signed off."

Teresa did not write the sentence down. She would have had to explain it.

La Playa was almost empty on the map. A pale strip between the road and the Pacific, a parking lot, a few utility symbols, then sand. Teresa took no pin. Her hand hovered over the area anyway. Maritza had never filed a report. Neither had Óscar. Efraín certainly had not. La Playa began where Centro had not quite ended and ended not at the water but at the point where the work grew too wet to call it a street. In the mornings, there were carts with coolers, plastic buckets, fish crates, nets, pails of cloudy water, lime halves, choclo, camote, cancha, men with jackets over their shoulders, and women sharpening knives before seven. None of it appeared on the map.

"No file,"

Alberto said.

"Not yet."

Teresa placed a small yellow pin at the parking lot.

"What happened there?"

"Maybe nothing."

"Then why?"

"Because nothing there is rarely nothing."

Alberto looked at her.

"The mayor wanted points. Not proverbs."

Teresa wrote LA PLAYA – NO REPORT on a slip of paper and taped it beneath the pin.

El Alto was the map's problem. Not because of the cases. Because of the paper. The map showed streets winding up the slope, but not the stairs, not the walls, not the places where one roof was the yard of the house above and one yard was the passage to another house. It showed properties, but not that some could be reached only from above, others only from below, and some not at all depending on the rain. On paper, El Alto looked like a neighborhood. In reality, it was a hillside. Houses of unplastered brick, concrete edges, corrugated metal, water tanks, thin pipes running along exterior walls, cables strung from pole to pole and then ending at one house

although three more stood above it. Teresa placed an orange pin roughly where Daniela Rojas lived, although Daniela's yard had not officially appeared in any of the reports so far.

"That isn't exact,"

Alberto said.

"Nothing in El Alto is exact on this map."

Alberto pointed to the streets above the orange pin.

"A street is missing there."

Teresa looked.

"Which one?"

Alberto opened his mouth. He stared at the map for a while.

"I don't know."

"Then none is missing."

"No."

Alberto sat down.

"Probably not."

"Then we'll leave it."

"No. Then we'll write approximate."

Teresa wrote EL ALTO – APROX. and pinned the note on at a slight angle. The fluorescent tube remained quiet.

Los Pinos occupied the southern part of the map. Pink, straight, new. The neighborhood was the easiest to understand on paper. Manzanas, lotes, broad streets, future green spaces that still consisted of pale earth, sidewalks that ended after three properties, unfinished buildings that had house numbers before anyone lived there. Los Pinos looked as though it had first been created inside the Municipalidad and then reconstructed outside. That was precisely where the thickest box of forms was. Teresa put red pins on Mz. H, on the school, on two construction sites, on the section with the power outage, on the street where Rafael and Inés had photographed the unfinished building. Alberto counted along.

"Five."

"Six."

"The school is on there twice."

"So are the classes."

Alberto fell silent. Teresa placed the sixth pin. At that spot, the map suddenly seemed heavier, as though the pink were pulling the wall downward. The tape at the upper left came loose again. Alberto pressed it down. The fluorescent tube hummed.

"Not too straight,"

said a voice behind them. Teresa turned. Rafael stood in the doorway of the community hall. Inés was beside him, a black bag over her shoulder. Rafael held a stack of printouts.

"What?"

Alberto asked.

"The map."

Rafael came closer.

"It's hanging crooked."

"We can see that."

"I said not too straight."

Inés looked at the pins.

"Why?"

Rafael pointed toward the fluorescent tube.

"Because it was straight when it hummed."

Teresa took the stack of printouts from him.

"Since when do you listen to walls?"

"Since the day before yesterday."

"Good."

Rafael looked at Inés.

"She says it now too."

"I said it first,"

Teresa said.

"Not in this context."

Inés set her bag on a table.

"We have measurement points."

Alberto looked at the bag.

"Weather?"

"Not only that today."

Rafael laid the printouts on the table: copies of maps, tables, handwritten times, two printouts of GPS points, a page with duplicate timestamps from the weather station. Teresa looked at the table.

"That isn't suitable for a wall."

Rafael nodded.

"That's why I printed it."

They began transferring the measurement points. Rafael wanted colors according to type of measurement. Inés wanted colors according to place. Teresa wanted colors according to jurisdiction. Alberto wanted fewer colors. After ten minutes, red, yellow, blue, and green adhesive dots lay on the table, along with two kinds of pins, three pens, and a piece of string Alberto had taken from the cabinet with the election posters.

"What is the string for?"

Teresa asked.

"For connecting."

"We aren't connecting anything."

"Not yet."

Rafael took the string.

"Radio, weather station, quarry."

He held it over the map.

"Those are hum points."

"And the wallpaper store,"

Inés said. Teresa looked at her.

"Wallpaper store?"

"Rafael spoke with Lucía yesterday."

Rafael raised his hands.

"We didn't speak. She asked whether we measure noises."

"Where?"

"In front of the Botica."

"And why isn't that on a form?"

"Because I don't carry forms."

Teresa wrote PINTURAS VÍLCHEZ on a slip of paper. Then she looked at the map. The wallpaper store was in Centro, but not exactly where the map showed a store. She placed the pin a little to one side.

The humming began when Rafael stretched the string between Radio Desvelo and Cerro Vigía. Not loudly. At first, it was only the table vibrating on one of its uneven metal legs. Then a stack of pins rattled in the little plastic dish. Teresa looked at the fluorescent tube. It glowed steadily. The humming did not come from above. It lay in the community hall, in the wall behind the map, in the stacks of chairs, in the lectern, perhaps in the floor as well. Rafael was still holding the string.

"Do you hear that?"

"Yes,"

Inés said. Alberto said nothing. He looked at the map. The string ran from the coastal edge north of El Faro across Centro to Cerro Vigía. In doing so, it passed just beside the place where Teresa had set the pin for the wallpaper store.

"That isn't exact,"

Rafael said.

"Good,"

Teresa said. The humming weakened for a moment.

Rafael looked at her.

"Say that again."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it doesn't work when you do it on purpose."

Inés took the string from his hand and let it hang loosely. The humming subsided. Not completely. Teresa went to the map and removed the pin at PINTURAS VÍLCHEZ. She pushed it back in half a centimeter lower.

"That's wrong,"

Alberto said.

"Yes."

"The store is farther up."

"I know."

The humming grew duller. Rafael stepped closer.

"You're deliberately moving the place to the wrong spot."

"Provisionally wrong."

"That isn't a term."

"It is today."

Alberto looked at her. Teresa ignored him. She took a small slip of paper and wrote: NOT EXACT. Then she reconsidered, crossed it out, and wrote: EN REVISIÓN.

Javier arrived at ten forty-four. He stopped at the entrance as though he had only meant to look into the community hall and had accidentally become part of the meeting. He held his notebook in one hand.

"I was supposed to come at eleven,"

he said.

"Who said that?"

Teresa asked.

"Rafael."

Teresa looked at Rafael. He shrugged.

"He has travel times."

"Of course he has travel times."

Javier came closer and looked at the map.

"The road to Puerto Esperanza is too short."

“On the map?”

Alberto asked.

“No.”

“Then where?”

Javier pointed to the northern access road.

“There.”

Teresa picked up a pen.

“If I mark this, I don’t want to hear an explanation.”

“I don’t have one.”

“Good.”

She placed a green pin north of Las Palmeras, where the map showed the road leading out of San Desvelo. Javier looked at the pin.

“A little farther.”

Teresa moved it.

“More.”

She moved it again.

“Maybe.”

“Maybe is bad.”

“Then approximate.”

Teresa wrote PUERTO ESPERANZA – APROX. and taped the note to the edge of the map. Las Palmeras suddenly no longer looked like an outlying neighborhood but like the last recognizable structure before a route that ran too quietly on paper.

Javier studied the map for a long time. Then he pointed to La Playa.

“Something is missing there.”

Alberto exhaled audibly.

“What?”

“The huaca.”

Teresa looked at the pale strip southeast of the city.

“Huaca Bajo La Arena is outside.”

“On the map, outside is still map.”

Rafael laughed briefly. Teresa did not. Javier pointed to an almost empty area between Los Pinos and the dry canal.

“About here.”

Alberto shook his head.

“Farther east.”

“No, the path curves.”

“The old path or the new one?”

Javier looked at him.

“There are two?”

Alberto took a pen, placed its tip at Los Pinos, and drew no line but merely held it over the map.

“The new one follows the properties. The old one follows the ground.”

“That’s the first good sentence today,”

Inés said. Alberto looked at her.

“I’ve said other sentences today.”

“Not like that.”

Teresa placed a yellow pin in the empty area. The humming stayed quiet. Too quiet. She wrote HUACA BAJO LA ARENA – OUTSIDE and deliberately did not slide the note all the way beneath the pin.

When they had placed all the points, the map looked less like an overview than like a wall to which someone had attached different kinds of concerns. Centro was dense but not fully marked. Los Pinos was red and orderly. El Faro had a blue pin that did not want to stay in the sea. La Playa had a pin without a report. El Alto hung beneath a crooked note. The weather station and quarry lay on the right side of the map in the hills, but the map could not show how high up they really were. On paper, Cerro Vigía and Cerro Dormido were areas. In the city, they were direction, shadow, coolness, red lights, and sometimes a sound that traveled over metal. Teresa stepped back.

"This isn't a map for the mayor."

"It's a map,"

Alberto said.

"For the mayor?"

"Depends on what he wants to see."

"He wants points, places, dates, jurisdiction."

"Then he'll see too much."

Teresa looked at him.

"I'm not writing that in the report."

"Write provisional."

They tried anyway. Teresa made a table. Place. Report. Date. Source. Jurisdiction. Status. She wrote LOS PINOS and filled several rows. Under status she wrote: PROVISIONAL. Under jurisdiction she first wrote MUNICIPALIDAD, then crossed it out and wrote URBANISMO / PROV. Alberto looked over her shoulder.

"That's messy."

"Yes."

"On purpose?"

Teresa did not answer. She wrote

RADIO DESVELO. Source: NIGHT DRIVER / ARCHIVO / WEATHER STATION. Jurisdiction: UNCLEAR. Status: EN REVISIÓN.

Park lighting: MUNICIPALIDAD / ELECTRIC. Status: OPEN. Quarry: PROPIEDAD? / MUNICIPALIDAD? / PRIVATE?

She added three question marks. The humming returned quietly. She erased one. The humming remained. She erased a second. The humming grew stronger. She wrote the second question mark back in. The tone subsided.

"That could be coincidence,"

Rafael said.

"Yes,"

Inés said.

"But it isn't."

Rafael looked at her.

"You aren't even waiting for a measurement."

"I hear it."

"That isn't a measurement."

"It is today,"

Teresa said without looking up. Alberto took the printout with the GPS points and placed it beside the table.

"If we sort the points by date, it doesn't begin in Los Pinos."

"Where, then?"

Javier asked. Alberto went through the list.

"Depends on which date is right."

No one spoke. Voices could be heard from the hallway. A woman asked whether Room 3 handled water bills. Another said no. Someone said Teresa would know. Below the table, Teresa wrote: DATE BY SOURCE / DATE BY FILE / DATE BY MEMORY. Then she looked at the three columns.

"That's a bad form."

Alberto said:

"It's a good map."

At eleven thirty-seven, Teresa's telephone rang. Not the telephone in the community hall. Her telephone in the office. They heard it through the open door. Teresa did not go at once. It kept ringing.

"Mayor,"

Alberto said.

"How do you know?"

"It sounds like it doesn't want to wait."

Teresa went into the office and picked up.

"Yes."

In the background she heard the engine again. This time, windshield wipers as well, although there was no garúa outside. The morning was bright and dry.

"How far along are we?"

Cárdenas asked.

"Provisional."

"Good."

Teresa was silent.

"What is good?"

"Provisional is better than empty."

"You wanted an overview."

"An overview, Teresa. Not the truth."

She looked through the window. There was no black car on the street.

"Where are you?"

"On the way."

"Where to?"

"To the meeting."

"It's here?"

"Not yet."

Teresa closed her eyes.

"Alcalde, who is attending this meeting?"

"That depends on the map."

"On our map?"

"What other one?"

There was static in the background. Another vehicle passed very close by.

"Not too clean,"

he said.

"Otherwise someone will think we know."

The connection dropped.

Teresa returned to the community hall. Everyone was looking at the map. Not because it was doing something. Precisely because it was doing nothing. The pins stood still. The notes hung.

The string lay on the table. The fluorescent tube glowed. The room was quiet, but in a way Teresa did not like.

“He says not too clean,”
she said. Rafael folded his arms.

“Who?”

“The mayor.”

“Why does he say that?”

“Because he’s the mayor.”

“That doesn’t explain anything.”

“It does,”

Alberto said.

“In this city, it explains at least thirty percent.”

Javier stood closer to the map than before.

“The huaca pin is wrong.”

Teresa looked at him.

“Wrong how?”

“Not geographically.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then it stays.”

“Good.”

The yellow pin for Huaca Bajo La Arena sat not where it should have on a current map, but not at any other recognizable place either. It sat in an empty area made somewhat paler by the laminate.

Lucía arrived shortly before noon. Teresa first saw her through the open door of the community hall as she stopped in the hallway, looked toward the office, and then back toward the community hall. She held a small receipt in one hand.

“I’m looking for Teresa Valdivia.”

Teresa raised her hand.

“Here.”

Lucía entered. Her gaze went immediately to the map. Then to the pins. Then to the table with the printouts.

“Is this a bad time?”

“Yes,”

Alberto said. Teresa said:

“What do you need?”

Lucía held up the receipt.

“A refund. Actually.”

“I’m not responsible for that.”

“I know. But I passed the Municipalidad on my way home.”

She looked at the map again.

“And Ernesto said that if anyone asks why the color cards are hanging wrong, I should say they aren’t hanging wrong.”

Rafael looked at Inés. Teresa did not take the receipt.

“Has anyone asked?”

“Not yet.”

“Then why are you saying it?”

Lucía thought.

"So no one asks after putting them right."

The wallpaper store got its own note. Teresa wrote PINTURAS VÍLCHEZ – ORDER? Then she crossed out ORDER and wrote ARRANGEMENT. Lucía looked at the word.

"That's better."

"Why?"

"Order isn't the goal there."

The community hall grew quiet for a moment. Alberto took a green pin and pushed it in beside the existing marker for the wallpaper store. Two pins for the same place. Teresa wanted to pull one out but stopped herself. The humming did not return. She left them both in.

"What's going on with the store?"

Javier asked. Lucía looked at the map.

"When everything is positioned correctly, it gets louder."

"What gets louder?"

"What the others call the hum."

Rafael opened his mouth. Inés said:

"Not now."

Rafael closed his mouth. Under status, Teresa wrote: DO NOT FINALIZE. Then she read the sentence.

"I can't write that."

Alberto looked at the map.

"Yes, you can."

"In a report?"

"No. On the map."

Teresa took a new slip of paper and wrote: DO NOT FINALIZE. She did not hang it beneath the wallpaper store but along the bottom edge of the map.

When Alberto wrote DO NOT FINALIZE in the corner, the humming in the room grew weaker. In the photo on his phone, the map nevertheless appeared straight, although it lay visibly crooked on the table.

Teresa replaced the heading with WORK IN PROGRESS. A string between two pins remained loose enough to change its course with every movement.

From above, the map did not look like an explanation. It showed a city in which water, radio, time, terrain, and memory diverged from one another in different places. The lines connected those places without claiming they belonged together.

Teresa took one last slip of paper and wrote: NO FINAL VERSION. Then she looked at the sentence and replaced it with: VERSIÓN DE TRABAJO. She taped the note not straight beneath EN REVISIÓN but offset a little to the left. Alberto said nothing. Rafael said nothing. Inés listened. Javier looked toward the northern road. Lucía was still holding the receipt.

The telephone in the office rang. Teresa did not go at once. It rang twice. On the third ring she picked up.

"Yes."

This time, the mayor was barely intelligible. The reception was poor. In the background, Teresa heard the engine again, but something else as well. Music. Very faint. Cumbia, old, distorted, as though from a radio that was no longer tuned correctly.

"Is the map finished?"

Cárdenas asked. Teresa looked through the open office door toward the wall in the community hall.

"No."

A pause.

“Good.”

“It’s under review.”

“Even better.”

“Do you want to see it?”

In the background, a turn signal began. Three clicks. Pause. Three clicks.

“I’ve seen it.”

Teresa looked toward the window. The black car drove slowly past the Municipalidad. This time, the front side window was half open. Teresa saw the driver. No one was sitting in the back seat. On the telephone, the mayor said:

“Not too orderly, Teresa.”

Then the connection was gone.

Teresa remained at the window until the car disappeared around the corner by the Mercado. The receiver was still at her ear. Only static came through the line. She hung up and returned to the community hall. The map hung crooked. The pins were not exact. Some notes overlapped. The string lay unused in a loop on the lectern. Beneath the map stood EN REVISIÓN. Below that: NO REORDENAR SIN CONSULTA. Teresa picked up the pen and added one word.

NO REORDENAR SIN CONSULTA PREVIA.

Alberto read it.

“Better.”

“No,”

Teresa said.

“Just more complete.”

The fluorescent tube above the stage hummed once. Briefly. Then it remained quiet.

Chapter 16: The Courtyard

Daniela had not checked for three nights.

The first night, she had heard the sweeping by the wall. Where the courtyard sloped down toward the hillside and the stones no longer sat firmly atop one another. It had started around one. Slowly at first. Then in short, even strokes. Straw over dirt. Straw over concrete. A pause in between, as though someone were lifting the broom to adjust their grip.

Daniela had lain in bed, staring at the ceiling. A narrow groove in the plaster from the previous winter ran across the room above her. By day, it was barely visible. At night, when the streetlight fell through the curtains, it looked like a border on a bad map. Daniela had kept her hands on top of the blanket. She had not gotten up.

The second night, the sweeping had started later. It had not been by the wall, but closer to the water tank. The tank stood on a low metal frame in the back corner of the courtyard. Black, round, with a lid that never closed properly. When the wind came down from the cerro, the lid rattled. When the garúa hung low, drops collected along the rim and ran down the wall in one spot. Beneath it, a dark streak had formed in the concrete and remained even on dry days.

Daniela had counted.

Four strokes.

Pause.

Three strokes.

Pause.

Then four again.

She did not know why she counted. Maybe because numbers were something that stayed in bed when you stayed in bed yourself. After a while, she had stopped. The sweeping continued. At some point she fell asleep. In the morning, she found a clean patch at the base of the water tank. Barely wider than a hand. The dust had vanished there, even though the tank had leaked water during the night.

The third night, nothing happened.

That was worse.

Daniela had lain awake until shortly before sunrise, waiting for the first scrape. Outside, a dog had barked twice. Farther down in El Alto, a mototaxi had driven up the hill, turned around, and gone back down. In Los Pinos, one of the construction lights had been on even though no one worked on Sundays. The courtyard had remained silent. When Daniela opened the door in the morning, the dust lay exactly where it had lain the night before.

She should have been relieved.

Instead, she picked up the broom.

The courtyard behind her mother's house was smaller than Aurelio's. Out front, facing the street, there was only a narrow strip of concrete, two steps, and an iron gate rusting along the bottom. The actual courtyard lay behind the house, between the kitchen, the washbasin, and the low wall bordering the neighboring property. Shards of glass had been set along the top of the wall. Some were green, others clear, one brown like an old beer bottle. Shards were missing in three places. Her mother had put small pieces of wire there to keep the cats from crossing over. The cats crossed over anyway.

The ground was rough concrete. Along the edges, you could still see the impressions of the boards someone had used for the forms years ago. The concrete was slightly higher in the middle

so water was supposed to drain in two directions. Most of the time, it did not. It pooled beneath the washbasin, collecting dust, soap, and tiny fibers from the cloths her mother washed there. Beside the washbasin stood a blue plastic bucket. Its handle had been repaired with wire on one side. Inside were clothespins, a length of hose, and an old toothbrush Daniela used on the joints when she was especially annoyed with the courtyard. A palm-fiber broom hung on the wall. Its bristles were worn unevenly at the bottom. When you stood it upright, it tipped to the left.

Daniela stood it upright.

It tipped.

She wedged it into the corner between the wall and the washbasin.

"You're making noise," her mother called from the kitchen.

"I'm sweeping."

"I can hear that."

"Then don't ask."

Her mother appeared in the doorway. She wore an apron whose pattern must once have been flowers. Now it was pale blotches on dark fabric. In one hand, she held a knife and half an onion.

"Did Don Aurelio give you something?"

"Ruda."

Daniela swept the courtyard more thoroughly than necessary: beneath the washbasin, around the drain, between the bucket and the stool. Her mother commented on every movement from the kitchen doorway without acknowledging that Daniela was not responsible for the nighttime sweeping.

Once everything was in its place, the courtyard looked reassuringly ordinary for a moment.

The floor was not clean. It never was. But the corners were clearer, the drain visible, the broom wedged securely into the corner. The plastic stool stood beneath the washbasin. The bucket beside it. The clothespins lay in a small bowl. Daniela surveyed it all and, for the first time in three days, felt a weariness that did not come solely from waiting.

"There," she said.

Her mother looked out from the kitchen.

"Finally."

Daniela would have liked to argue. She simply did not know with which part.

That night, the sweeping started earlier.

Daniela had turned off the light before her mother went to bed. No moon shone through the window. Only the dull orange glow of a streetlamp two houses away, which usually flickered whenever someone on the street turned on an iron. The lamp did not flicker. The street was silent. Daniela lay on her side and listened as her mother coughed in the front room. Once. Then once more. After that, only the refrigerator starting up in the kitchen and stopping again at once. The sweeping began behind the door.

Not by the wall.

Not by the water tank.

Behind the door.

Daniela opened her eyes. She did not move. The broom moved slowly across the concrete. She heard each bristle individually, as though they were being drawn across dry skin. One short stroke. Pause. Two short strokes. Pause. Then a longer one that ended directly at the threshold.

Daniela held her breath.

A thin, pale line lay beneath the door. Not light. The courtyard was dark. Even so, Daniela could see the line. Dust resting against the edge of the door, pushed inside through the narrow gap. It had not been there that evening. Daniela knew because she had swept her foot across that exact spot before going to bed.

The sweeping started again.

This time, something scraped along the bottom edge of the door. Not hard. Not like fingernails. More like a broom trying to draw dust out of a crack.

Daniela thought of Aurelio.

When you hear the sweeping, stay in bed.

She stayed in bed.

The scraping continued. Once. Twice. Then it stopped. Outside, all remained still. Daniela waited for the refrigerator to start again. It did not. She waited for her mother's cough. That did not come either. Instead, she heard a truck far below on the avenida. The engine labored up the grade, growing louder, holding at the same volume for a moment, then disappearing toward Los Pinos.

Only then did Daniela fall asleep.

In the morning, the courtyard was clean.

Not tidy.

Clean.

The concrete beneath the washbasin was pale, as if someone had scrubbed it with water. There was no dust in the corners. The drain was clear. The dark streak below the water tank was now only a faint shadow. The broom was no longer in the corner. It leaned against the wall, exactly where it used to lean. Upright. As though it had not tipped to the left.

Daniela stood in the kitchen doorway.

Her mother stepped up behind her.

"See?"

Daniela looked out at the courtyard.

"What?"

"When you sweep properly, it stays clean."

Daniela did not answer. She went outside and stood beside the water tank. Yesterday, the paint chip had been lying there. Of course it was gone. She had thrown it away herself. But beside it, a small rusty nail had always been embedded in the concrete, so deep in a joint that it could not be pulled out. Daniela had torn the sole of her shoe on it twice. The nail was gone.

She knelt down.

The joint was smooth.

Not repaired. Not filled. Just smooth.

"What are you looking for?"

"Nothing."

"Then don't stand there like that."

Daniela stood. Beside the drain, the piece of wire that held the cover open was gone too. Yet the cover did not lie flat. It stood a finger's width high, as though the wire were still underneath it.

Daniela nudged it with her foot.

The cover rattled.

Her mother pushed past her and set a bowl in the washbasin.

"At least it's tidy now."

Daniela looked at the empty strip beneath the wall. Yesterday, dust, leaves, an old clothespin, and a thread had lain there. Now there was nothing. The courtyard seemed larger. Not by much. Just as if someone had pushed the edges outward a little.

Later that morning, Daniela left the house. She wanted to walk until the image of the clean courtyard grew quieter in her mind. Instead of heading toward Centro, she turned onto the upper road, where fewer people were out.

Beyond the last utility poles, she passed Aurelio's house. She had not intended to visit him. But he was sitting outside beneath the tarp, sorting a bundle of rosemary. A small pair of scissors and the cup with the chipped rim lay before him. The second chair stood empty.

Aurelio had not seen her yet. Daniela could have kept walking.

She stopped at the edge of his courtyard.

"I only wanted to see if you were all right."

Aurelio turned his head. Then he looked back at the bundle.

"Well enough."

"That isn't an answer."

"Today it is."

Daniela did not sit down. Aurelio did not gesture toward the chair either.

"The courtyard was clean this morning."

"That doesn't sound dangerous."

"Too clean."

Daniela told him about the sweeping. About the first night by the wall, the second by the tank, the third with no sound. Then about tidying up. She did not say at once that she had been afraid. She said the courtyard had been clean. Too clean. She said the nail was missing—the nail that could not have gone missing. She said the drain cover stood open even though the wire was gone. Aurelio listened without nodding.

When she finished, he asked:

"What did you change?"

Daniela looked at him.

"I just told you what changed."

"No. Before that."

"I tidied up."

Aurelio nodded once.

"Then it had less to do."

Daniela folded her arms.

"That isn't funny."

"No."

"I tidied up so it would have nothing to sweep."

"Yes."

"And then it came closer."

"Yes."

"Why do you keep saying yes when it doesn't help?"

Aurelio picked up a small pair of scissors from the table and cut a dry leaf from a bundle of rosemary. It fell to the ground. He did not pick it up.

"Clean is good," he said. "Empty isn't."

Daniela waited.

Aurelio pointed to the courtyard in front of his house.

"When everything is gone, the path is easier to see."

"What path?"

"The one that isn't meant to be seen."

Daniela looked across the courtyard. Hard-packed earth. Two stones by the wall. A leaf. The wooden chair. A cup of cold tea. The empty place beside it.

"And what am I supposed to do?"

"Leave something lying around."

"What?"

"Something that doesn't belong where it is."

"Is that all?"

"No."

Daniela waited.

Aurelio cut off a second leaf. This one fell onto the table.

"Leave it there without arranging it."

"That sounds like a trick."

"Then don't do it like a trick."

Daniela gave a short laugh. It sounded harsher than she intended.

"How do you deliberately do something without doing it deliberately?"

Aurelio looked at her.

"Badly."

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Below them, San Desvelo lay in the gray morning. Centro was visible only as a pale expanse. The park beside it remained dark even though it was daytime. To the south stood the unfinished buildings of Los Pinos. Iron rods protruded from some of the roofs. Farther beyond lay the pale stretches leading to the huaca, but from up here all one could see was sand and paths that lost themselves before arriving anywhere.

Daniela looked back at Aurelio.

"And if it comes inside anyway?"

"Then you'll know more than you do today."

"That's no comfort either."

"I sell herbs. Not comfort."

She accepted the remark. Aurelio stood, went into the house, and returned with a small cloth pouch. He handed it to Daniela.

"For your mother."

Daniela opened it. Ruda.

"She still has some."

"Then she'll have more."

"And for me?"

Aurelio bent down, picked up the leaf he had just left on the ground, examined it, and set it down in a different place. Not on the table. Not back with the bundle. On the ground, but closer to the wall.

"Not so tidy."

Daniela looked at the leaf.

"That's supposed to help me?"

"No. It helps the courtyard."

That evening, Daniela left things lying around.

Too many at first.

She placed the bucket at an angle beneath the water tank. She laid the broom crosswise in front of the wall. She brought the empty bottle back from the kitchen and stood it beside the drain. She set a dry leaf on the threshold. Then she noticed that she had arranged everything with too much space between each item. Like a display. She swore under her breath, picked the leaf up again, and tossed it toward the washbasin. It landed half beneath the plastic stool.

Better.

She pulled the broom back a little so the bristles touched the wall and the handle lay on the ground. She did not turn the bucket any farther. She left the bottle where it stood. Then she took an old rag and draped it over the wall, but not in the center. One corner touched the ground.

Her mother came to the door.

"What are you doing now?"

"Nothing."

"That doesn't look like nothing."

"Then don't look."

Her mother looked anyway.

"The broom is lying wrong."

"Yes."

"Pick it up."

"No."

"Daniela."

Daniela turned toward her.

"Not today."

Her mother was about to say something. Then she looked at the courtyard, at the broom, the bucket, the bottle, the rag. Her face barely changed. Only the furrows between her eyebrows deepened.

"Don Aurelio?"

"Yes."

Her mother snorted.

"Then he can come sweep tomorrow."

She went back into the kitchen. Daniela remained in the courtyard for another moment. The garúa moved in from the west. It was thinner in El Alto than down by the Mercado, but it still settled on the concrete, on the rim of the water tank, on the broom's bristles. The courtyard grew darker even though night had not yet fallen.

Daniela went inside and left the courtyard door open until her mother complained.

During the night, the sweeping began again.

This time, it came from the edge of the wall.

Daniela lay on her back. She had not turned off the light, but had covered the small lamp beside her bed with a cloth. That did not make the room bright. Only less dark. She could no longer see a line beneath the closed door. But she immediately heard where the sweeping began.

By the wall.

One stroke.

Pause.

Another.

Then it stopped.

Daniela pictured the broom outside, lying in front of the broom set crosswise. Two brooms in the courtyard. One visible. One only a sound. She knew it made no sense. Still, she imagined it.

The sweeping started again. It did not move in a straight line. The sound wandered a little to the left, then back. Straw on concrete. Then a dull noise, as if the broom handle had struck the bucket.

Daniela exhaled.

The sweeping paused.

So did she.

Afterward, it continued, but more slowly. It moved along the wall, reached the rag, and lingered there as though something had caught. Then Daniela heard a soft dragging sound. Fabric over concrete. The rag was being moved.

She wanted to get up.

She stayed where she was.

The sound did not approach the door. It went back to the water tank. There, it swept in short strokes. Once. Twice. Then not at all. Daniela waited. She did not count. She was afraid counting would impose order on the thing.

Shortly before three, she fell asleep.

She woke because something was sweeping inside the house.

Not in the courtyard.

Inside the house.

It lasted only a moment.

Straw over tile.

One short, dry stroke beneath the kitchen table.

Daniela was sitting upright in bed before she realized she had moved. The cloth had slipped off the lamp. The room was brighter. Outside, it was quiet. Her mother's steady breathing came from the front room.

Daniela got up.

The floor was cold beneath her feet. She went to the door, placed her hand on the handle, and waited. Nothing. She opened it.

The kitchen lay in darkness. Two cups from the evening stood on the table. One upside down, one upright. Her mother's chair was pushed beneath the table. Daniela's chair stood at an angle. That was how she had left it. She turned on the light.

The fluorescent tube above the sink flickered twice and then stayed on.

Beneath the table was a clean line in the dust.

Not wide. No longer than her forearm. Straight from one table leg to the other. To its left and right lay the fine gray dust that was always in the kitchen because the windows did not close properly and the street in front of the house never entirely stopped being dust. Only the line was clear.

Daniela crouched down.

She did not touch it.

No sound came from the courtyard.

She stood back up and went to the rear door. Through the narrow gap beneath it, she saw darkness. No light. No shadow. She did not open it. Instead, she took the upright cup from the table, set it directly on the clean line, and went back to her room.

In the morning, the cup was empty.

That was not unusual. It had been empty the night before. Still, Daniela knew it was empty in a different way. It stood beneath the table, no longer on the line but beside it. The handle pointed toward the door.

Outside in the courtyard, the broom still lay crosswise.

The bucket still stood at an angle.

The bottle lay on its side, and the two little stones inside had slid against its neck. The rag no longer hung over the wall. It lay half beneath the water tank, damp at one corner. The courtyard was not clean. Dust and two leaves lay by the wall. A small patch in front of the door had been swept clear, but not all the way to the threshold. The drain cover sat lower again. The wire lay beside it.

Daniela stood in the doorway.

Her mother came up behind her, yawned, and looked over her shoulder.

"Now it looks the way it did before."

Daniela looked beneath the kitchen table.

The line had grown longer.

Only a few centimeters.

It did not lead to the door.
Not yet.

Chapter 17: Depósito Norte

The key to Depósito Norte lay in an envelope that, according to its label, was supposed to be empty. Teresa found it between two inventory lists. Its bit was marked with blue string.

The building stood north of Centro, behind a decommissioned utility site. On old plans, it had belonged by turns to the water authority, coastal radio, and weather observation.

Alberto shrugged. "Neat little theft."

Teresa searched through the old maps. Not the large wall map, but the shallow drawer beneath the table that held plans too bulky for binders and too creased for frames. There, paper did not smell like paper, but like dust, salt, and the hands of people who had folded it years ago in poor light. She pulled out a map from 1998, then one from 2004, then an undated one on which San Desvelo did not yet have sectors, only names someone had penciled along the edges.

On the 1998 map, El Faro was drawn larger than it was on the current map. Las Palmeras was only a row of planned lots. Los Pinos did not exist. Where the first streets of the new development now cut into the dry ground, lines marked an expansion that had never been built. Between the old coastal road, the lower slope of Cerro Dormido, and a road that later led toward the quarry lay a small rectangle.

It was barely larger than a fingernail.

Beside it were the words: D. NORTE.

Teresa placed the key on the map. The plastic tag covered the point almost exactly.

Alberto leaned forward. "It isn't on the newer maps anymore."

"I can see that."

"Maybe it was demolished."

"Then there should be a demolition record."

"Maybe it was forgotten."

Teresa looked at him.

"Yes," Alberto said. "I know."

She did not call Inés because she needed a meter. She called Inés because she did not want to drive alone with Alberto to a building that officially did not exist and whose key had been lying in a box of event supplies. Inés answered on the third ring. In the background, Teresa heard a metallic noise, then Rafael asking whether anyone had seen the small level.

"We found a key," Teresa said.

"To what?"

"To a Depósito Norte."

Inés was silent for a moment. "Where is that?"

"That's the question."

"Is Rafael coming?"

"No."

"Good. Then it won't take as long."

Half an hour later, Inés stood outside the Municipalidad. She carried a cloth bag with a meter, a notebook, and a coiled cable protruding from it. Alberto had taken the old pickup the Municipalidad used for inspection rounds, even though the paperwork still called it a "unidad de apoyo logístico." The passenger door had to be opened from the inside. The ventilation knob was missing on the driver's side. Someone had left a small screwdriver in the ashtray instead.

They drove through Centro, past the Mercado Municipal, whose metal gates were still half closed. A man was stacking empty beverage crates in front of one stall. Water lay along the curb even though the street was dry. Teresa did not look. She held the 1998 map on her knees and folded it where it was not meant to be folded. Alberto drove slowly because every bump made the pickup

sound as though someone in the back were setting down a tool that was not there.

Beyond Las Palmeras, the road narrowed. The houses stood farther apart. Unplastered brick walls ended in iron rods intended for a second story that might still come someday. Black water tanks stood on flat roofs. Some were covered with blue plastic tarps, some were not. A Municipalidad sign hung at one corner: NO ARROJAR DESMONTE. Construction debris lay directly beneath it. No one had tried to hide the contradiction.

The garúa hung low. It took away the upper outline of Cerro Dormido, but not its mass. To the left, the terrain rose dark and dry. To the right, far beyond the houses and low walls, the Pacific could not be seen, only inferred as brightness behind the gray air. The road still labeled camino de servicio on the 1998 map now existed only as a strip of packed dust, old tire tracks, and chunks of concrete someone had set down like curbstones in two places.

"It's supposed to be here?" Inés asked.

"According to the map," Teresa said.

Alberto steered between two low walls. At the end of the road stood a corrugated-metal gate. It was not large. Behind it was a low concrete-block building set halfway into the slope, as though someone had put it there long ago and forgotten to finish it. Stones lay on the roof to keep the corrugated panels from rattling. A gray PVC cable conduit ran along the left exterior wall and ended after ten feet. Beneath it clung a faded inventory sticker.

MUNICIPALIDAD DE SAN DESVELO.

PATRIMONIO.

The number had been added by hand. SD-MUN-07.

Teresa held up the key. "Not demolished."

"Less good news," Alberto said.

There was no modern padlock on the gate. The lock was old, heavy, and corroded by salt along one side, even though the ocean could not be seen from here. Teresa inserted the key. It fit immediately. Too immediately. She had expected to have to jiggle it, for rust to resist, for Alberto to make a comment. Instead, the key turned smoothly, as though it had been oiled that morning. The gate opened with a brief metallic scream.

Inside, it did not smell like an abandoned building. It smelled of dry dust, cardboard, cold concrete, and something electrical that was not hot. The room was larger than the building had appeared from outside, but not so much larger that anyone could have proved it. There was a front storeroom with metal shelves, a narrow door to a side room, and several electrical cabinets along the rear wall. Old cables ran in orderly bundles above the cabinets. Each bundle was marked with small plastic strips. Some of the labels were legible.

FARO.

VIGÍA.

CANTERA.

RADIO.

A fifth strip was blank.

Inés stopped just inside the door. She said nothing. She took the meter from her bag, switched it on, waited, switched it off again, and tapped the casing twice with her fingernail.

"Broken?" Alberto asked.

"No."

"Then what?"

"It registered something too quickly."

Teresa stepped up to the electrical cabinets. The labels had been made with a care that did not fit

the general neglect. Someone had routed the lines at right angles, placed new stickers beside old ones instead of covering them, and even left small empty brackets where cables were missing. A strip of paper, yellowed beneath clear tape, was affixed to one cabinet.

SISTEMA AUXILIAR DE ENLACE COSTERO.

FUERA DE SERVICIO.

A date appeared beneath it: 12.08.2006.

Alberto found a green-spined binder on one of the shelves. Its label read MANTENIMIENTO. He opened it on an empty metal table. The pages were dry. No ripples, no stains, no mold. The fasteners were not rusting. For a building that supposedly had not been used in years, the records were too orderly.

"Last maintenance in 2011," Alberto said.

Teresa turned around. "The system was taken out of service in 2006."

"Maybe they were finishing up."

"For five years?"

"They took their time."

Inés set her meter on the floor, directly between the door and the electrical cabinets. A faint hum filled the room. It was not loud. You could miss it while moving papers or stepping on the concrete. But when everyone was still, it stood there like an object. Low. Then a pause. Then low again.

It was not like the weather station. There, the hum had been in the equipment, the antennas, the old connections. Here it came from the walls, but not from any one wall. It was distributed evenly, as though the room had learned not to bind it to a place anymore.

"Power?" Teresa asked.

Alberto went to the breaker box. "Shut off."

"Are you sure?"

He pointed to the main breaker. The lever was down. Beside it hung a note: NO ACTIVAR SIN AUTORIZACIÓN. The signature beneath it was illegible. The ink had split into two thin lines.

Inés knelt and looked at the display. "It's weaker when we talk."

Alberto said at once, "Then let's talk."

"Not like that."

"How, then?"

Inés looked around the room. "Normally."

No one said anything.

The hum grew more distinct.

Teresa picked up the binder. The first pages contained inventory lists: two amplifiers, a relay cabinet, an emergency power unit, four cable reels, a measuring mast, three signal transmitters, a map cabinet. The status of several entries had been changed. RETIRADO was written there, then ACTIVO beside it. In one place, RETIRADO had been crossed out, ACTIVO as well, and in the margin was written EN OBSERVACIÓN.

"I don't know that one," Teresa said.

"What?" Alberto asked.

"That category."

"Maybe it's technical."

Inés did not look up. "Technicians don't write that way when they mean something."

The map hung in the side room.

It had been glued to a thin wooden panel and fastened to four hooks. Two hooks sat straight. Two did not. Maybe that was why the map hung at a slight angle. Maybe someone had deliberately left

it that way. Teresa resisted the first impulse to straighten it.

The map showed San Desvelo not as a city, but as a network. Lines ran from Radio Desvelo to a point at El Faro, onward to a marker at Cerro Vigía, then down to the Cantera and back to Depósito Norte. Other lines were thinner, dashed, added in pencil. One led toward Centro. One ended to the south where Los Pinos began today, but which at the time was shown only as a sandy expanse. Another line ran farther southeast.

It continued beyond the edge of the map.

At the edge were the letters: B.L.A.

Alberto leaned forward. "Bajo La Arena?"

Teresa did not answer at once. The huaca was not marked on this map. That was not unusual; the map was technical, not archaeological. But the abbreviation was there as though it were self-evident that a technical line would lead to an archaeological site.

Inés stepped closer. The meter in her hand gave a brief crackle even though it had no speaker. She turned it over, looked at the back, then at the map again.

"What is it?" Teresa asked.

"Nothing."

"Inés."

"The display went out."

"Battery?"

"No."

She held up the device. The display was black. When she took one step back, it flickered on again. Alberto took out his phone and photographed the map. The first photo was blurry. The second showed the map clearly, but the line to B.L.A. was missing. He looked at the wall. The line was there.

"Again," Teresa said.

Alberto took a third photo. This time the line was visible, but the abbreviation at the edge had been cut off even though he had captured the entire map.

"Your phone is old," Inés said.

"It's two years old."

"In San Desvelo, that's old."

Teresa did not smile. She approached the map without touching it. The lines were not all alike. The printed lines were thin, black, and clean. The pencil lines lay over them. The line to B.L.A. was neither. It was lighter than the paper, as though a thread had lain there for a long time, protecting the surface from dust. But there were no pinholes, no adhesive residue, no trace of a removed thread. The line was an absence.

Teresa thought of the map in the Archivo, of the pins, of the empty fields. Of Cárdenas's voice on the phone: Don't explain. Locate. She could have located this line. She could have added it to her map, with a date, source, and note of uncertainty.

She did not.

"We're taking the binder," Alberto said.

"No," Teresa said.

He turned toward her. "Why not?"

"Because it belongs here."

"It's a municipal binder."

"Then it especially belongs here."

Alberto looked at the table, the binder, the map. "We can copy it."

"Not today."

"That isn't a reason."

"Today it is."

He recognized the phrase. He said nothing more.

Something had changed in the front room. Not enough to be immediately visible. Only when Teresa went back did she notice that the shelves seemed less empty. Not fuller. Just less definitively empty. A length of gray cable lay in one compartment that she had not seen on the way in. In another stood a small metal box with its lid open. Inside were fuses, two screws, and a label bearing the word CANAL. The handwriting matched the writing on the cable strips.

Inés stood before the blank cable strip on the electrical cabinet. "This one was empty earlier."

Teresa stepped beside her.

Nothing was written on the strip now. But the surface was lighter in one spot, as though a word had been removed. It could not be read. For that very reason, Teresa looked at it longer than she should have.

"Maybe dust," Alberto said.

"Maybe," Inés said.

The hum grew weaker.

Alberto looked at her. "That helps?"

"What?"

"Saying maybe."

Inés closed the bag. "Sometimes."

They went outside. The garúa had settled lower. It did not lie like fog in the courtyard, but as a damp film on the walls, the corrugated metal, the stones on the roof. The number SD-MUN-07 gleamed on the inventory sticker. Teresa pulled the gate shut and inserted the key into the lock. This time, it was hard to turn.

She had to pull it out, set it again, and turn it slowly. The lock closed with a dull click. Alberto held out his hand.

"I'll take it."

Teresa did not give him the key. "It stays with me for now."

"'For now' doesn't establish responsibility."

"It is."

They walked to the pickup. Behind the building, a narrow track continued along the slope. It was not marked on the 1998 map. It was not marked on the current map either. Still, it was there—not fresh, but used. Small, pale stones lay on the ground in a line, as though water had sorted them. It had not rained here in weeks.

Inés stopped.

"What is it?" Alberto asked.

She pointed to the track. "Where does that lead?"

Alberto looked at his phone. No signal. He put it away as though that were an answer. "Maybe to the old Cantera."

Teresa looked southeast. Beyond the low hills lay Los Pinos, beyond that the Canal Seco, and farther out still, Bajo La Arena. None of it was visible from here. All one could see was garúa, dust, concrete, and a track continuing where no line ended.

"We'll add the Depósito to the records," Alberto said once they were back in the pickup.

Teresa placed the key in the side pocket of her folder. "Yes."

"As what?"

She looked through the windshield at the gate. The building was small. Smaller than it had been inside. Maybe that was the garúa. Maybe the perspective. Maybe the fact that Alberto had already started the engine and the pickup was vibrating slightly.

"As present," Teresa said.

Alberto did not write it down. That was good.

They spoke little on the drive back. The road was the same, but it seemed shorter. In Las Palmeras, a mototaxi with no passenger drove slowly along the side of the road. The driver stopped at an empty lot, honked once, and waited. No one came out. After a few seconds, he drove on.

The mayor's car was not in front of the Municipalidad. The office was still locked. The air conditioner was no longer running. Teresa noticed before she opened the door. The air in the Archivo was warmer than it had been that morning. The 1998 map lay on her desk. She had been certain she had left it in the drawer. Maybe Alberto had taken it with them and put it back. Maybe she had done it herself.

She unfolded the map.

The small rectangle was still there.

D. NORTE.

Beside it, a second point had been marked in pencil. Very faint. Almost nothing more than an indentation in the paper.

D. SUR.

Teresa stood still. She did not call Alberto. She did not call Inés. She folded the map again, but not along the old creases. Then she wrote on a blank form:

DEPÓSITO NORTE – PRESENT.

She did not put a date beneath it.

She held the pen over the responsibility field for another moment. Then she wrote:

EN REVISIÓN.

The hum in the room was barely audible.

Or perhaps the copier was merely waiting.

Chapter 18: Bajo La Arena

The drive to Bajo La Arena began with two different sets of directions and a map that omitted the final turn. Teresa, Alberto, Inés, and Rafael drove southeast past Los Pinos until the houses gave way to construction sites and the construction sites to open sand.

At first, the Canal Seco was only a shallow depression. Beyond it, the huaca barely rose above the terrain; wind, trash, and newer tire tracks lay over older contours.

A sign stood before them.

SITIO ARQUEOLÓGICO HUACA BAJO LA ARENA MINISTERIO DE CULTURA NO REMOVER MATERIAL

Beneath it was a smaller sticker with a phone number faded by the sun. Beside the sign, a strip of plastic tape hung from a nail. It had once been white and red. Now it was the color of old meat.

No one said anything.

The reason was not reverence. At first, the place looked almost impoverished. A fenced-off patch of ground at the edge of a growing city. A few posts. Loose strings. Three tarps weighted down with stones. A small sheet-metal container whose door was secured with a chain. Two wheelbarrows with flat tires. A stack of sandbags, one of them split open. A plastic chair without a back. A handwritten note in a clear sleeve that hung from a post and was fogged on the inside.

REGISTRO DE VISITAS TEMPORALES

The list beneath it was blank.

The wind came from the dry land instead of the sea, carrying dust and laying it on their shoes and in the folds of their clothes. The garúa left the dust dry and merely gave it weight. Javier noticed it at once on his lips: more mineral than salty, unlike down by El Faro. As though the air carried fine plaster.

"It's smaller than I thought," he said.

Alberto took the map from its sleeve. "A huaca can be small too."

"I know."

"A lot of people know that."

Inés walked past the sign to the strings. She stopped before the first excavation square without stepping inside it. Wooden stakes driven into the corners marked it off. White string ran between them. The area was perhaps ten feet long and six feet wide. In the center lay an exposed edge of adobe bricks. The bricks differed from modern ones: flatter, softer in form, with uneven edges and surfaces smoothed by sand. Some lay in a row. Others vanished beneath a thin layer of sand whose striking uniformity argued against deposition by the wind.

"Someone worked here," Inés said.

Alberto stepped beside her. "Of course. That's what the strings are for."

"No. Today."

He looked at the ground. "How do you know?"

Inés pointed to the patch of sand beside the wall line. Impressions were visible there. Not footprints. More like rectangular pressure marks, as though someone had set down a small box or a piece of equipment and picked it up again. The edges were sharp. In the garúa, edges like that lasted only a short time.

"Maybe people from the Ministerio were here," Alberto said.

"They're not on the list."

"Maybe no one used the list."

"That would be possible."

The way she said it reassured no one.

Javier walked slowly along the edge of the barrier. At archaeological sites, he always felt as though he were being too loud, even when he was silent. This place muted the feeling. It demanded no silence; it seemed indifferent to their presence.

Beyond the first low rise were more strings. Some marked square fields, others irregular sections. One field was covered with a green tarp. A little water stood on it: a thin gray surface, motionless even as the wind drove dust across the edge. Javier stopped in front of it.

"It hasn't rained," he said.

"The garúa is enough," Alberto said.

"Not for that much."

Alberto needed a moment. He had to walk around a rope stretched at knee height. A laminated sign hung from one post.

NO INGRESAR ÁREA EN EVALUACIÓN

The lower corner had been repaired with tape. The tape was new.

Inés set her meter on a flat stone outside the square and waited. The display showed numbers Javier could not read. A thin tone sounded and fell silent. Inés changed its position, rotated the device a few inches, and looked at the display again.

"Nothing," Alberto said.

"I haven't said anything yet."

"Your face did."

"My face only says I don't like taking measurements near unlabeled utility lines."

"There aren't any utility lines here."

Inés looked at him.

Alberto unfolded the map again.

The gray line from Depósito Norte ran to the edge of the rise. But it ended there only in appearance. It grew so pale that it was impossible to tell whether the line truly ended or the print had lost it. Beside B.L.A., a small cross was marked on the map. Not a cross like the one on a church. More like a survey point. Four short strokes that barely missed one another.

"The point should be over there," Alberto said, indicating an area behind the container.

The three of them walked over. The container stood on four concrete blocks. Dust had collected beneath it, though unevenly. A narrow clear track ran through the middle, as though something regularly moved in or out there. It could not be an animal: the track was too straight. Nor could it be liquid: it was too dry.

Behind the container lay an unmarked area. Two old iron rods stood in the ground with a piece of wire hanging between them. Beyond them ran a low edge of adobe brick, barely visible. It did not form a wall, more the memory of one. In one place, the sand had been brushed back. There, a small corner led down into the ground.

Javier leaned forward.

Something blue lay in the corner.

He said nothing. He crouched without touching the barrier. The blue piece was small, perhaps the size of a fingernail. It lay half in the sand, half pressed against the adobe edge. A white remnant was visible on its surface, a thin curved line. It was not enough to form a recognizable pattern, but it created the expectation of one.

"What is it?" Inés asked.

Javier pointed.

Alberto came closer. "Don't touch it."

"I'm not touching anything."

"Good."

Inés looked at the fragment. At first, she said nothing. Then she looked west, where Los Pinos

stood as a low row of unfinished edges in the garúa. The city lay much farther beyond it. El Faro and the Pacific remained hidden from here. The smell of the beach was absent. Yet that little bit of blue lay there as though someone had taken a piece of a house from the coast and forgotten it in the dry adobe.

"That's modern," Alberto said.

"Maybe," Inés said.

"Tiles are modern."

"Adobe bricks are older than tiles," Javier said.

"I know that."

"Then it's the wrong way around."

Alberto straightened. "A lot of things get into the ground the wrong way around. Trash, later use, looting, fill, children, animals. It would be premature to turn every misplaced piece into San Desvelo."

No one contradicted him.

Their silence lent his statement no additional force.

A little farther on, they found the niche.

It was barely more than an indentation in a low adobe edge that emerged from the sand and vanished again after eight inches. Someone had exposed the edge and worked it with a small brush. The brush marks were still visible. Something dark clung inside the indentation. Not fresh wax. More like a remnant that had accumulated dust several times over. Beside it lay a tiny yellow strip of plaster, so thin the first gust of wind would have broken it apart. A stone held it in place.

Javier thought less of Efraín himself than of his story at the Mercado: walls at low tide, a niche, something blue, old wax. At the time, he had scarcely been able to believe it. San Desvelo taught neither quick belief nor quick doubt. You waited longer with things that evaded both.

"Someone was here before us," Inés said.

"Of course someone was here before us," Alberto said.

"Not archaeologically."

"Then how?"

Inés said nothing. She set the meter on the ground, this time closer to the niche. The display remained steady. She waited. The wind moved the string on one post while the one beside it stayed motionless. A piece of plastic sheeting crackled against a sandbag. In the distance, a mototaxi drove through Los Pinos. Its sound was inaudible at the huaca; only its movement could be seen: a light that briefly disappeared between two unfinished buildings.

The meter emitted a tone.

Once.

Low.

Then nothing.

Inés did not raise her head until several seconds later. She remained bent over the display as though waiting to see whether the device would apologize.

The tone returned.

Low.

Pause.

Low.

Alberto looked at the niche. "That sounds different from the Depósito."

"No," Inés said.

"Is that better?"

"No."

Javier took the map from its sleeve. He laid it on the flat side of a sandbag so the wind would not

carry it away. The gray line ended at B.L.A. The survey point lay behind the container. The niche was absent from the map.

"Maybe the map is wrong," he said.

"Maps are often wrong," Alberto said.

"No. I don't mean wrong. I mean it ends in the wrong place."

The tone did not return.

"Show me," she said.

Javier placed one finger on the line. Then he looked at the terrain. The adobe edge with the niche curved gently instead of running straight west, disappeared beneath the sand, emerged again in another square, and then ran toward the green tarp. Its course led neither to the container nor to the sign, but to an unmarked area where the ground was slightly darker.

"There," Javier said.

Alberto followed his gaze. "There's nothing there."

"Yes."

They walked to the darker area. It was not a hole. Not an opening. Only a flat place between two excavation squares with no string running across it. The ground was firmer there. Javier put one foot on it; the dust stayed packed beneath his sole. He stepped back at once.

"Don't step there," Alberto said.

"I know."

"You just stepped there."

"Only on the edge."

"There is no edge if the area isn't marked."

"That's exactly the problem," Inés said.

Alberto was about to answer, but remained silent.

The shape of the darker ground remained unclear. It was roughly rectangular, but one side ran at an angle. At the southern corner lay a pile of small stones, so uniform that a natural arrangement seemed unlikely. A piece of metal protruded between them: a modern stake of the kind used for tarps. Its string was missing.

Inés crouched and held the meter over the ground.

No tone.

She moved it two inches to the left.

Low.

She moved it back.

Nothing.

To the left again.

Low.

"There's a line," she said.

Alberto looked at the ground. "I don't see one."

"The meter does."

"The meter can't see."

"Then it can hear it."

Javier followed the line as best he could without entering the marked area. He dispensed with the map and oriented himself by the darker patches, the positions of the stones, and the small differences in the sand. After a few yards, he stood at the edge of an excavation square covered with a gray tarp. There was no water on the tarp. Instead, dust lay across it in a thin, straight trail. It crossed the plastic as though someone had drawn a line with a finger hovering just above the surface.

"It continues here," Javier said.

"Where to?" Alberto asked.

Javier looked west.

His gaze passed between Los Pinos and the flat terrain, across a place where the ground sloped gently downward. Beyond it stood a single pole. No lamp. Only a pole with the remnant of a cable hanging from its top. Farther on, the garúa was denser. It reduced the city to a low, pale layer. El Faro remained hidden. Even so, Javier felt that the line wanted to go there.

"Away from the huaca," he said.

"We're at the huaca," Alberto said.

"I mean outward, away from it."

Inés came over to him. The meter's tone had vanished again.

"More like away from it," she said.

Alberto exhaled. "We're standing at a protected archaeological site that appears on a municipal map as the endpoint of an old technical line. If there are any lines in the ground here, they could belong to all kinds of things. An old road, drainage, an excavation grid, later use, cables, a livestock trail."

"Livestock?" Javier asked.

"I'm listing possibilities."

"There aren't any animals here."

At that moment, a dog barked in the distance.

Alberto raised a finger. "Still a possibility."

The only reassuring thing was Alberto's effort to be right.

They went back to the sign. The light had grown weaker. The garúa now came from the west, lying low, moving through the shallow areas and catching on the strings. In some places, the strings turned dark. In others, they remained pale. For several minutes, this made the excavation grid look as though lines of moisture had drawn it onto the ground.

Inés photographed the strings, the tarps, the posts, and the darker patches of ground. She omitted the niche and the blue fragment. Alberto photographed the sign, then the visitors list, then the chain on the container. Javier watched him.

"Why the chain?" he asked.

"Because it's new."

"And?"

"An old container with a new chain makes a statement."

"What does it say?"

"That someone considers the old container more important than before."

Alberto tugged lightly on the chain. It was locked. The padlock showed almost no rust. Its shackle bore a brand Javier recognized because the same brand hung on some of the market stalls. It was older, but well maintained. An inventory sticker from the Ministerio de Cultura was affixed to the container itself. Beneath it was a second, smaller sticker, half torn away.

PROYECTO DE REGISTRO PREVENTIVO ZONA SUR - COSTA CENTRAL

Only the first two digits of the year were legible: 19 or 20. Sand and adhesive residue covered the rest.

"Registro preventivo," Inés said.

"Preventive documentation," Alberto said.

"Against what?" Javier asked.

Alberto read the sticker again as though an answer might be written there. "Construction. Looting. Erosion. Everything archaeological sites are protected from."

"Maps too?"

Alberto looked at him. "That was poetic."

"Sorry."

"Don't do it again."

Inés smiled briefly. Then it was gone.

They continued around the container. At the rear, the ground had been cleared. Old sandbags lay there, their fabric disintegrating. Among them was a broken wooden frame, probably from a sieve. A piece of wire mesh had been torn out. Two buckets were nested in one corner. Dust lay in the upper one; something damp shimmered beneath it.

Inés left the bucket where it was and only looked inside.

"Water?" Javier asked.

"Maybe condensation."

"That much?"

"Maybe not."

Alberto had meanwhile examined the lock on the container. "I'd like to know who has the key."

"The Ministerio," Inés said.

"The Ministerio has many keys without knowing where they are."

"Then it fits right in with us."

He looked at the map from the Depósito again. "The container isn't on the map."

"The map is old."

"So is the container."

"Then maybe it isn't old enough."

Alberto folded the map, unfolded it again, then folded it only halfway. "I hate sentences that are true without being useful."

Javier stood at the edge of the protected area and looked into the shallow depression south of the huaca. A dry channel ran there, barely deeper than a curb. It came from the east, curved around the rise, and disappeared toward Los Pinos. You might have taken it for a track if its edges had not been so conspicuously clean. They looked more like the result of frequent use than recent work.

"Is that the Canal Seco?" he asked.

Alberto came over to him. "No. The Canal Seco lies farther south."

"Are you sure?"

"According to the map."

They both stood still for a moment.

"That means no," Javier said.

"It means yes according to the map."

The channel contained no trash. Javier noticed only because small things lay everywhere around it: scraps of plastic, a cigarette pack, shards, a bent piece of reinforcing wire, an energy-drink wrapper, pale blue sheeting from a cement bag. None of it lay in the channel. Only small stones, sorted lengthwise, with their narrow sides pointing in the same direction.

He followed it for a few steps, outside the barrier. The channel passed beneath a loose wire. In one spot, the ground was darker. Javier knelt and held only his hand above the sand.

Cool.

Not wet.

But cooler than the rest.

Inés came over with the meter.

"I know," Javier said.

"What?"

"That I'm not supposed to touch anything."

"Good."

She held the meter over the channel. It remained silent. Then the low tone came: once and

irregularly, as though the device had detected something and immediately forgotten it again.

"There," Javier said.

"Yes."

"What's there?"

"A reason to come back later."

Alberto heard her. "Later, with permission."

"Of course," Inés said.

"That wasn't a joke."

"My answer was sincere."

They returned to the first excavation square. The green tarp had changed. The water now lay along the edge even though, as far as Javier could tell, the tarp was level. A narrow trail ran across the plastic to the edge and dripped into the sand there. Very slowly: one drop, a long pause, then another.

Beneath the edge, the sand had formed a small dark patch.

"So the garúa is enough after all," Alberto said.

"You already said that earlier," Inés said.

"I stick with explanations as long as they're still alive."

"That's a good quality."

"Thank you."

"Not always."

Alberto accepted that.

Then they heard something.

It differed from the hum in the Depósito: lower, more irregular, far from any metallic vibration and the pressure behind the teeth. Its direction was almost impossible to determine. It lay sideways in the ground, as though someone very far away were dragging a stone across a surface of adobe. One short pull. Pause. Another pull.

Javier looked at Inés.

The meter was switched off—or switched on and showing no reading. Inés held it without looking at it.

"That wasn't the meter," Alberto said.

"No," Inés said.

The sound returned.

Shorter this time.

Then sand moved.

Only a small amount. At the edge of the exposed adobe, where the blue fragment lay, a thin layer slid down. It covered the white line and left only a dot of blue visible.

No one went over.

That may have been the most sensible moment of the day.

Alberto slipped the map into its sleeve. His movements were orderly. Too orderly, Javier thought, and kept the thought to himself. Inés switched off the meter and abandoned her measurement. Javier looked at the niche. The dark remnant of wax was still there. The yellow strip of plaster was gone.

"We're leaving," Alberto said.

"Yes," Inés said.

They walked slowly, as though no one had explicitly forbidden them to run. Alberto stopped at the sign, took out his phone, and snapped one more picture. He looked at the display, rubbed a smudge with his thumb, and froze.

"What?" Javier asked.

Alberto said nothing.

He enlarged the image. Then he looked at the sign. Then back at the display.

"What?" Inés asked.

Alberto turned the phone toward them.

In the photo, another line appeared beneath NO REMOVER MATERIAL. It was pale, almost like a shadow beneath the sign's lettering.

SECTOR EL FARO

Javier looked at the sign.

It was unchanged.

Only the four lines. Sitio arqueológico. Huaca Bajo La Arena. Ministerio de Cultura. No remover material.

Alberto took a second photo.

He looked at it.

The additional line was missing from the second photo.

"We're keeping the first photo," Inés said.

"I never delete evidence on principle," Alberto said.

"Good."

"Though it's too early to call it evidence."

"What do you call it?"

He put the phone away. "A photo that should appear in the report only alongside other material."

They climbed into the pickup. Alberto started the engine and waited a moment before turning around. The headlights struck the sign, the posts, the loose string. Beyond them, the huaca lay low in the gray. A shallow rise instead of a temple, a few edges in the sand, strings that promised more than they explained, and beneath them something that evaded discovery or wanted to be found in some other way.

Javier looked through the rear window as they drove away. The tarps grew smaller. The sign disappeared first. Then the posts. The rise remained visible longer because the sky behind it was brighter. Finally, it too became part of the ground.

For a long time, no one spoke on the drive back.

Los Pinos first appeared as a row of lights: construction lamps, isolated lightbulbs, an open room lit by white LEDs, an empty guard booth. The pickup passed a stack of pipes lying beside the road. Blue plastic pipes, like those from the quarry. Some were new. One contained sand that must have gotten inside before both ends were sealed with plastic.

Javier saw it only as they drove past.

He said nothing.

Where the asphalt began again, a thin line of sand lay across the road. It was barely two fingers wide. It came from the right, ran straight across the shoulder, across the asphalt, and ended in the gravel on the left. Alberto drove over it without slowing down.

In the rearview mirror, Javier saw that the line remained unbroken even after the tire passed over it.

It remained whole.

"Did you see that?" he asked.

"What?" Alberto asked.

"Nothing."

Inés did not turn around. "Then we'll leave it."

The pickup reached Los Pinos. The garúa hung more densely than before between the unfinished buildings. At a half-built house, a ladder ended beneath a wall with no window. A stone weighted down the lid of a water tank. Radio music came from a dark ground floor. The road had been

freshly graded, too straight for the terrain. Javier realized he was searching in vain for the hum. That was no comfort.

Alberto drove on past the Municipalidad. He dropped Inés and Javier at the Mercado because Teresa should have been home long ago. Of course, a light was still on in the Archivo. A bright strip showed in the upper window, narrow and motionless. Alberto looked up and said nothing.

"I'll bring the map tomorrow," Inés said.

"No," Alberto said.

"No?"

"I'll return it tonight."

"But Teresa sleeps at home."

"No one said she did."

Javier got out. Dust from the huaca clung to his shoes. He left it on the soles; for some reason, knocking it off seemed impolite.

Alberto drove on to the Municipalidad. Inés remained beside Javier and watched the pickup go.

"You know he'll wake Teresa," Javier said.

"Yes."

"Is that good?"

"No."

"Then why are you letting him?"

Inés zipped her bag shut. The meter lay inside. It was switched off. Even so, for a moment Javier had the impression that it was warm.

"Because some things in the Archivo are better left awake," she said.

They walked together for a while. The roll-up doors along the edge of the Mercado were down. A poorly secured blue plastic tarp lay over one stall. The garúa had darkened its surface. Everything beneath it remained still. Even so, a small bulge formed in one spot, as though something lay there that was taller than it had been that evening.

Javier stopped.

"Not today," Inés said.

He looked at her.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Then come on."

The next morning, before the sun became visible behind the garúa, Teresa found sand on her desk.

Only a little.

A thin line, barely longer than her hand. It ran from the lower edge of a form to the corner of the map Alberto had returned during the night. The map lay in its sleeve. The sleeve was closed. The line of sand lay on top, as though someone had drawn it with a ruler and decided at the last moment to leave the ruler out.

Teresa stood in the doorway and looked at it.

Alberto, who had fallen asleep in the chair beside the filing cabinet, raised his head.

"I only meant to drop it off," he said.

Teresa went to the table. She kept her fingers away from the sand.

On the map, the gray line was still almost colorless. It ran southeast from Depósito Norte, past Los Pinos, to B.L.A.

Teresa studied it for a long time.

Then she picked up a pencil and set its point beside the mark.

She wrote:

Provisionally present.

Alberto rubbed his eyes. "That isn't a category."

Teresa set down the pencil.

"Not yet," she said.

Chapter 19: The Community Hall

The notice for the meeting went through four versions. "Informational meeting" promised too much, "hearing" sounded like a formal proceeding, and "irregularities" attracted people who only wanted to discuss their water bill.

In the end, it read: JOINT REVIEW OF REPORTS. Below that, Teresa had the date, time, and community hall printed.

They stood in the entrance area, which smelled of damp file folders, cleaning solution, and the warm back of an old copier. Garúa drifted in through the open door to the courtyard, more a thin wetness than fog, settling on glass, metal, and hair. The morning visitors' footprints on the floor had already turned back into dark patches. Someone had posted a note on the wall with a phone number for Defensa Civil, but the second digit had softened in the damp and looked like either an eight or a three.

"Is the mayor coming?" Alberto asked.

Teresa picked up the stamp from the reception desk and turned it in her hand without using it. "He said he's on his way."

Alberto nodded. That was answer enough.

Alberto arranged rows of chairs until Teresa asked him to leave two seats crooked. The stage remained empty except for a table, a microphone, and several boxes of copies.

The room was disorderly but usable. By now they knew the difference.

On the table lay a ballpoint pen, an ink pad, a stack of blank forms, and the Libro de Actas. Teresa opened it to a new page. The paper was heavy and smelled like a cabinet around the edges. At the top she wrote the date, and beneath it the title of the meeting. Then she paused.

She decided against "special cases."

She left out "incidents" as well.

She wrote: Reports.

At a quarter to seven, Inés arrived with Rafael. Rafael carried a folder and a coiled extension cord. Inés had her meter in a black bag over her shoulder. Her shoes were dusty, pale material from the path to the Huaca clinging to the soles even though she had knocked them against the curb before entering.

"Should I take readings?" she asked.

Teresa looked at the chairs. "Not yet."

"That's not an answer."

"Yes, it is. A temporal one."

Rafael set his folder on the table and looked toward the windows. "The lights in the park are still out."

"They were repaired," Alberto said.

"I know."

No one asked anything else.

Javier arrived shortly afterward. He stood in the entrance for a moment as if he needed to determine whether he really belonged at this kind of meeting. He was not wearing a uniform, only his jacket, its sleeves shiny at the edges. On the attendance sheet, he wrote his name on the first blank line, looked at the column marked "Sector," and drew a dash.

"You don't live here?" Alberto asked.

"Today?"

Alberto looked at Teresa. Teresa slid the pen back to him. "The dash is enough."

A little after seven, the others arrived in the rhythm in which people in San Desvelo came to a meeting officially scheduled to begin at seven: in small groups, with apologies, with children,

with jackets over their arms, with incidental questions. A man from Los Pinos brought a rolled-up construction plan. Two women from Las Palmeras sat in the second row and left a chair open for a bag. Maritza came in her white apron, even though her work at the cart had ended long ago, and smelled of lime, salt, and cold water. Efraín came without a cap, which made him look older. Daniela initially sat against the wall at the very back, as though she had come only to hear whether anyone else said the same thing.

Lucía arrived shortly after her. She paused in the entrance, studied the rows of chairs, and sat in one of the seats along the side wall. Teresa noticed but said nothing.

Ernesto was absent.

Teresa had expected that. Even so, she glanced at the door when the hum of the power strip briefly cut out.

A sign bearing the mayor's name stood at the reserved place at the front table. Alberto had printed and folded it. ALCALDE VÍCTOR CÁRDENAS. The chair behind it remained empty.

At 7:08 p.m., Teresa called the meeting to order.

Her first words were lost in the microphone. It picked them up, distorted them, then gave a brief crackle and fell silent. Alberto turned a knob. For less than a second, something that sounded like music came from the speaker. Softly, a fragment of rhythm somewhere among the cables. Then it was gone.

"No microphone," Teresa said.

"It'll be working in a second," Alberto said.

"No microphone."

He turned the knob back. One of the ceiling fans made a quarter turn, although no one had switched it on. Then it stopped again.

Teresa remained standing behind the table. "This is not a complaints meeting," she said. "Nor is it a public determination of causes. Today we are collecting reports related to municipal services, roads, lighting, water, properties, or public spaces. We will not make any final decisions today."

At the word final, she kept her eyes on her list. Alberto looked up anyway.

"We'll begin by sector," she said, immediately realizing the sentence was too neat.

The hum returned.

The sound remained quiet and could easily be mistaken for the light fixture. Inés heard it. Rafael heard it. Javier turned his head slightly toward the window as if it were coming from outside. Teresa looked at the first lines of her list.

"Los Pinos," she said.

The man with the construction plan stood up. His name was Manuel Arce, the site supervisor for a small company responsible for two residential blocks in Sector 6, although neither block was fully serviced. He spread the plan on the front table and spoke about concrete rather than apparitions.

"The formwork for the gutter was right yesterday," he said. "This morning it was still right, only it was in a different place. Maybe four centimeters. But four centimeters is enough for the water, whenever water finally comes, to run the wrong way."

"Who moved it?" Alberto asked.

"No one."

A few people in the room laughed softly, because "no one" always carried many meanings in sentences like that.

Manuel remained matter-of-fact. "There were no drag marks in the dust. It had been set down. As if the entire formwork had stood there and then been poured somewhere else without anyone lifting it."

Teresa wrote: Gutter / Los Pinos / four centimeters.

The speaker crackled.

"Do you have photos?" Rafael asked.

Manuel took out his phone. The first photo showed a construction site, rebar, loose bricks, wooden formwork. The second showed the same thing. To Teresa, the two pictures looked identical. Manuel pointed to a marking.

"Here. The chalk is still there. The formwork isn't."

Alberto leaned forward. "Maybe the marking is wrong."

"Yes," Manuel said. "But yesterday it was right."

That was the first sentence of the evening no one laughed at.

After him, a woman from Los Pinos spoke who really only wanted to know whether her house number was official yet. She had received a notice from the electric company that said Mz. D, Lote 14, but Lote 13 had been spray-painted on her wall, and her neighbor had the same number. Teresa knew the file. At first she left the page blank so she would not have to see the number there one more time. Then she wrote after all: House number / duplicate / check.

The hum deepened for the length of a breath.

"El Faro," Teresa said.

Efraín hesitated before rising. His hands were folded between his knees and his eyes were on the floor. Beside his right shoe lay only a little sand: a pale rim, as if some of it had remained on his soles at the threshold. When he stood, the sand stayed behind.

"At low tide there are walls," he said.

He said it as if he were reporting a delivery.

"Where exactly?" Alberto asked.

"Below the old road. West of Radio Desvelo. They only appear sometimes."

"Are they marked?"

Efraín looked at him. "In the water?"

"I'm asking for the record."

"No."

Teresa wrote: El Faro / wall remains at low tide / do not mark.

She immediately crossed out the last words. Too late. The speaker made a brief sound, like a voice caught halfway through.

An older woman in the second row raised her hand without being called on. Her name was Rosa Benites, and she had come from Las Palmeras, but she said her mother had been from El Faro.

"Not the one there is today," she said.

Alberto picked up the pen. "What do you mean by the one there is today?"

Rosa Benites shrugged. "People used to call the area below El Faro too."

"Below?"

"Below."

With her hand, she made a motion that was not a direction but a slope.

"On the beach?" Teresa asked.

"No. Under the beach."

Rafael looked at Inés. Inés kept her eyes on her bag. The meter was inside, and her hand rested on the zipper.

"That's a memory," Alberto said carefully.

Rosa Benites nodded. "Yes."

"Not a report."

"That too."

Teresa wrote nothing. Then she wrote: Memory / El Faro / below.

This time nothing crackled.

"El Alto," Teresa said.

Daniela remained seated.

A man in a cap first reported a broken light at the stairs between two streets, which were not supposed to be stairs because they were officially registered as a connecting path. Then a woman said the water tank on her roof made noises at night even though the faucet was turned off. Teresa noted both. Then Lucía, from the side wall, raised her hand.

"I'm not from El Alto," she said.

"Then later," Alberto said.

"But it's about the question."

Teresa nodded to her.

Lucía remained seated. "If a place stays quieter as long as something is out of place, does that make it a structural defect?"

Several people turned toward her. No one asked what place she meant.

"Structural?" Alberto said.

"Or commercial. Or a safety issue."

"That would have to be checked."

"Yes," Lucía said. "But if you check it, do you then have to make it right?"

Alberto set down the pen.

Teresa wrote: Inspection changes condition. Then she looked at the sentence as if someone else had written it. She crossed out condition and wrote: situation.

The hum grew quieter.

Daniela stood.

She held no bag, no note, no photo. Her hands hung at her sides. Her gaze rested on the chairs between her and the table as if they had to confirm that the distance was great enough.

"My courtyard gets clean," she said.

A child laughed. His mother placed a hand on his head without looking.

Daniela barely waited for the laughter to end. "By clean, I mean empty. If I tidy up too much, it starts sooner. If I leave something lying around, it stays farther away. Sometimes that fails."

Teresa hesitated before writing.

"Who sweeps?" Rafael asked.

"No one."

"You hear a broom?"

"Yes."

"And in the morning the courtyard is clean?"

"Not the courtyard. The path."

"What path?"

Daniela looked directly at him for the first time. "The one I want to avoid."

Inés opened the zipper of her bag a centimeter, then let it go again.

Teresa wrote: Courtyard / path created by cleaning.

She wanted to cross out "cleaning" but left the word as it was.

The room fell silent. It was a small silence, just long enough to make everyone aware of sharing it. Within it, three chairs in the front row very slowly aligned themselves.

The process escaped any passing glance. Anyone who looked noticed only that afterward their front legs stood on the same grout line.

Javier saw it. Teresa did too.

Alberto missed it. He studied Daniela's name on the list and searched for a field into which he could have placed the courtyard.

"La Playa," Teresa said too quickly.

Maritza stood, wiped her hands on her apron, and said, "My cart is in the wrong place in the morning."

"Wrong how?" Alberto asked, audibly relieved by an object that could be moved.

"Five, maybe six centimeters. Sometimes only two. But the wheels leave their tracks."

"Could someone have pushed it?"

"Yes."

"Did you see anyone?"

"No."

"Then it could have been someone."

"Yes."

She said it without contradiction, but without agreement either.

"Why are you reporting it?" Teresa asked.

Maritza looked toward the door as if her cart were outside. "Because it's always positioned so I have to start differently in the morning."

"Differently?"

"It doesn't get worse, only different. The shade is different. The crate is in a different place.

The first serving goes to a different side."

She realized she had said too much and sat back down.

Teresa wrote: Cart / tracks / beginning shifted.

The ballpoint pen made a dot, although she had not meant to make one. Ink gathered on the paper, round and dark. When she lifted the tip, the dot stayed glossy for a moment, then turned matte.

Music came from the speaker again.

This time it was clearer. A brief chord, a rhythm, a cumbia as if from a small radio rather than a sound system. A few people in the room smiled automatically, because music like that belonged to everyday life in San Desvelo. Then it stopped. The smiles remained too long on two people's faces.

"Centro," Teresa said.

A man from the park committee stood and complained about the lights. They had been repaired. He had seen the invoice. The fuse had been replaced, two lamp heads changed, and a cable run along the north side. Even so, the park remained dark at night.

"Maybe the timer," Alberto said.

"The timer is in the box."

"Then we'll check the box."

"The box is bright," the man said.

No one understood at first what he meant. Then he said, "When you open it, there's light inside. But not outside."

Teresa wrote: Park / box bright / outside dark.

The park beyond the windows grew darker.

Only faintly, but enough for the reflection of the hall in the panes to become clearer. The people saw themselves sitting, the chairs, the flag, the photograph of the mayor. Behind the reflection, the park was barely visible. A child waved at his reflection. The reflection waved back at the same time. Teresa immediately looked down at her paper again.

"We'll take a short break," she said.

"We're right in the middle of it," Alberto said.

"Exactly."

During the break, people rose one by one. Some stayed seated because they wanted to hear everything. Others went to the door, made phone calls, looked for water, or asked Alberto things

meant for a private conversation. Maritza spoke with Daniela. Teresa saw Daniela studying the salt lines on the other woman's apron as if they were a kind of proof that work held a place in the world. Efraín stood at the window and studied the reflection of his own shoulders. Inés went to the speaker and held her meter beside it without turning it on.

Teresa went into the hallway.

Outside the Municipalidad, the mayor's black car stood at the edge of the plaza, half under a streetlight and half beneath the low branches of a tree. The windows were dark. Garúa lay across the windshield in tiny droplets. The engine was off.

Her phone vibrated.

She answered.

"Teresa," Cárdenas said.

His voice was clearer than most calls at the Municipalidad. There was no static, no traffic, no echo. That was precisely why it sounded wrong.

"Señor Alcalde."

"Is everyone there?"

She looked through the open hall door at the people. "Some are missing."

"Good."

She waited.

"Let them speak," he said. "But not in order."

Teresa looked toward the car. "Are you outside?"

"I'm already here."

"Where?"

The connection remained open for a moment. In the receiver was an emptiness that could scarcely be called silence.

Then Cárdenas said, "Don't write anything final."

The call disconnected.

Teresa remained standing in the hallway. The car was still there. Its windows reflected only the streetlight and the tree. A drop of garúa ran down the windshield. It did not take a straight path. It caught briefly on a speck of dust, detoured, continued at an angle, and disappeared at the lower edge.

When Teresa returned to the hall, Alberto had straightened the first two rows of chairs.

"I'm against that," she said.

He straightened up. "Against what?"

"That."

He looked at the chairs. "They were all out of order."

"Then let them stay out of order."

"This is a public meeting."

"Not so much today."

He was about to answer, but a low tone came from the speaker, neither music nor electricity. It began in the wall and ended in the table. Several people turned around. The tone stopped as soon as Alberto pushed the chair back a little.

Alberto left his hand on the backrest. Then he took it away.

After the break, Teresa remained beside the table, the pen in her hand, the Libro de Actas closed.

"We're moving away from the sectors," she said.

Alberto opened his mouth.

"Not today," she said.

No one objected. Perhaps that was because no one knew exactly whether it made the meeting worse or better.

The comments now came without order but calmly. They came the way things came in a city when a forced sequence was abandoned: by way of neighborhood, memory, work, irritation, fatigue.

A man from Centro told of a key that fit a door that had been bricked up for years. A woman from Las Palmeras said that for three nights her dog had refused to urinate at a certain corner, although every dog used to stop there. A boy from Los Pinos said there were small footprints in a construction pit every morning, all headed in the same direction. Rafael asked if they were animal tracks. The boy said, "Wearing sandals?" No one laughed.

An older man Teresa had never seen before said that at the Mercado he had been given a receipt listing his order before he placed it. Maritza looked at him and said, "Which stand?" He said, "None of them." Maritza nodded as if that were a category.

Lucía said nothing about the wallpaper shop. She said only that, in her view, certain things had to remain crooked, though certainly not all of them. "Some mistakes are only mistakes," she said.

Teresa wrote that down.

Some mistakes are only mistakes.

The hum remained quiet.

Inés did not speak until late, and she spoke from her seat. "The readings don't fit together," she said.

"Which ones?" someone asked.

"All of them, when you put them together."

That was not a helpful answer. She continued anyway.

"At Radio Desvelo, at the weather station, at the quarry, in the Depósito, at the Huaca. You can draw lines. But the lines are accurate only as long as you don't draw them too precisely."

Rafael looked at his folder. Inside were tables: readings, times, places, spikes, notes. Teresa knew he would keep it closed.

"What does that mean?" Manuel from Los Pinos asked.

Inés looked at the map on the wall. It was the older laminated overview of the sectors used for community meetings, while the new map with Teresa's pins lay in the archive. Sectors 1 through 6 were marked in color. The east was printed too lightly, as though the printer had wanted to conserve toner there.

"It means I don't know whether the map helps," Inés said.

"That's not very scientific," someone said.

"No."

She said it without shame.

A new sound entered the hall, this time from outside, perhaps from the park, perhaps from a motorcycle on the plaza. A low, steady drone. It lasted too long for an engine passing by and not long enough for a machine that was actually running. While it continued, the drops on the windows ran more directly downward.

Teresa saw it. The garúa had gathered in thin lines, exclusively on the middle pane. The lines were almost parallel.

"Open the window," she said.

Alberto looked at her. "It'll let the draft in."

"Yes."

Javier stood and opened the window on the left. The garúa entered more as a damp film than as wind, settling on the frame, the first row of chairs, the edge of the table. The smell of the park came with it: damp earth, dust, leaves, cold metal. The sound weakened.

The drops on the middle pane lost their lines. One ran sideways.

"Thank you," Teresa said.

Javier remained standing at the window.

The meeting continued. It became less orderly and, as a result, more relaxed. Interjections remained peaceful. People helped one another remember. Efraín let Rosa Benites's statement that El Faro used to be lower stand. Daniela let Maritza's sentence stand: sometimes a cart had to be left where it wanted to stand in the morning. Alberto wanted to suggest a category three times and did so only once.

The third time, Teresa left out his category.

"Why not?" he asked quietly.

"Because it's too good."

His indignation faded quickly. Then he looked at the chair in front of him, which stood slightly out of line, and left it crooked.

By nine thirty, people were still waiting to speak. That was good. Teresa felt it before she could put it into words. A complete ending would have forced the room back into rows. An open ending left the voices where they were: on chairs, on walls, on windows, in bags, on slips of paper, and in the minds of those who had kept some things to themselves.

She raised her hand.

"We'll adjourn for today."

"But there are no results," Manuel said.

"No."

"Then what was it for?"

Teresa looked at the Libro de Actas. "So the reports could come together."

Manuel seemed to think about that. Then he nodded, but only slightly.

The people left more slowly than they had arrived. Some carried their chairs to the wall; others left them where they were. Maritza picked up one of the blue chairs and set it down two rows farther back because it was "more out of the way" there. Daniela helped an older woman to her feet. Efraín's sand remained behind. Lucía lingered for another moment and looked toward the stage as if a space were opening behind it in a pattern.

"Ernesto wasn't here," Teresa said.

Lucía nodded. "He wouldn't have said anything."

"And you?"

"I didn't say everything either."

"Good," Teresa said.

Lucía studied her. Then she left.

After the meeting, they collected forms, cups, and pens. Alberto straightened a chair and, after a brief hesitation, pushed it back out of line.

Inés stood in the empty hall and listened. The drone remained and now had more space between the objects.

Javier closed the window. As he fastened the latch, an engine was briefly audible outside. Teresa looked toward the door.

"The mayor," Alberto said.

They waited for the sound to fade before going out. Then Teresa took the attendance sheet and the Libro de Actas. It was colder in the hallway. The glass door fogged from the inside. Outside, the plaza lay in the gray light of the lamps. The place where the black car had stood was empty.

A dry rectangle remained on the asphalt.

The rectangle was only drier than its surroundings.

"So he was here," Alberto said.

Teresa looked at the spot. "Maybe."

"Should I note that?"

"No."

She returned to the hall and sat at the front table. Alberto remained standing beside her. Inés and Rafael spoke quietly by the window. Javier waited at the door as if there might still be a trip to make.

Teresa opened the Libro de Actas. The page she had begun was half full: names, notes, isolated words. Los Pinos. El Faro. Courtyard. Park. Cart. Below. Four centimeters. Some mistakes are only mistakes.

She put the pen to the paper.

Result of the meeting:

She left the words unwritten and saw them only where they might have stood.

Then she wrote:

Continuation required.

Alberto read over her shoulder. "That's not a result."

Teresa blew lightly on the ink, although it had long since dried.

"Yes, it is."

"I can't file that as a result."

"Then file it as something else."

"As what?"

Teresa studied the heading, the margin, and the missing fields that Alberto always found anyway.

"As a meeting."

He nodded slowly. "That's very little."

"A little is enough today."

One final crackle came from the speaker: soft, dry, and far from any music. It sounded as though someone at the other end of a line had checked whether it was still open. Inés looked up. Rafael did too. Teresa laid the pen across the page.

There was only that single crackle.

They closed the hall. Alberto switched off the lights. This time all the fluorescent tubes went dark at once. For a moment, the room remained visible behind the glass door: the stage, the photograph of the mayor, the flag, the crooked chair in front of the stage.

Then only the reflection of the hallway could be seen.

Teresa pulled out the key.

At the exit, she stopped in front of the notice. The upper corner had come loose again. The strip of packing tape hung down at an angle. The paper rippled in the damp, but it held.

Alberto raised his hand.

"Leave it," Teresa said.

He lowered his hand.

Outside, the garúa had grown denser. It settled on the edges of the plaza, the benches, the trunks of the trees, and the steps of the Municipalidad. The park was dark. Behind one of the lightless windows of the community hall, the crooked chair remained invisible.

Teresa locked the door. The key turned without resistance.

As she pulled it out, she heard a brief, dry sound from inside the hall.

Neither microphone nor speaker.

A chair leg on tile.

Alberto looked at her.

They waited.

Nothing else followed.

"Tomorrow?" he asked.

Teresa put the key in her pocket. "Not tomorrow."

They crossed the plaza. Behind them, the notice hung on the door, half loose, half secured. REUNIÓN INFORMATIVA was still legible. The lower line had absorbed moisture. Salón Comunal had become Salón Comunal because a drop had washed away the n. The next morning, Alberto would want to replace it. Teresa knew that. She also knew she would make sure it hung a little crooked again.

Chapter 20: The Water Tank

The morning after the meeting, the community hall smelled of garúa, sodden dust, and wet paper. Beside the Municipalidad's promise on the notice, someone had written: ¿Y el agua? Teresa stopped in front of it before unlocking the door.

She read the sentence twice. The first time, she wanted to know who might have written it. The second time, it remained unclear whether it had already been there the night before.

Alberto came across the plaza behind her. He carried two plastic folders under his arm and the empty box that had held the stamps the previous evening. A faint dark line marked the collar of his shirt where the night's damp had dried.

"That's new," Teresa said.

Alberto set the box on the concrete ledge beside the door and looked at the glass.

"The water?"

"The sentence."

"The water too."

He pulled out one of the folders. Among the papers were notes fastened together with paper clips. Some had been torn from Municipalidad form pads, others from school notebooks, one from the back of a Mercado receipt. On top of the stack lay a handwritten list of eight addresses.

"These were in the mailbox early this morning," he said. "Two before seven. One person knocked but didn't wait."

Teresa unlocked the door.

Inside, the hallway was brighter than outdoors. Someone had switched on the fluorescent light above the breaker box, although it normally did not come on until after eight. The community hall was on the right, its double doors open a crack. One of the chairs remained crooked beside the last row. Alberto looked at it and passed the hall by.

"Leave it," Teresa said.

"I didn't say anything."

"You looked."

He shrugged and followed her into the archive.

The complaints concerned different events. That was the first thing Teresa noticed. The morning after a meeting, people normally wrote about the topics raised there: lights, noise, property lines, damaged sidewalks, dogs that barked too early. These notes were about water.

In El Alto, a rooftop water tank had filled even though the inlet had been shut. In Los Pinos, water came from a faucet in a house where the fixtures had not yet been installed. In Las Palmeras, a tank remained empty even though the pressure-zone plan showed service scheduled for that week. A woman from La Playa wrote that in the morning her water bucket had contained sand at the bottom, and the sand was wet even though she had emptied the bucket the night before.

The most matter-of-fact complaint came from Daniela.

At first, Teresa did not recognize the handwriting. She recognized the courtyard.

Roof tank filled overnight. Inlet shut. Valve crosswise. Water smells like concrete. Please inspect. Not an emergency.

There was no signature beneath it, only: D. Rojas, El Alto.

"Not an emergency," Alberto said.

"That's polite."

"Or worse."

Teresa kept the note separate from the others and slid it under the edge of her notebook, leaving half of it visible.

Manuel Chacón arrived at 8:06 a.m.

Manuel stood in the doorway without knocking, as though unsure whether the Archivo would receive a visitor that morning. He worked for the Municipalidad, but outside the building. They called him when a pipe lay on the wrong side of the street, a new pump under contract failed, or a tank in El Alto remained empty while water spilled over the rim in Las Palmeras. In the files, his position was called Técnico de Mantenimiento de Redes Menores. In town, people called him the man with the valves.

He was short and broad-shouldered and wore a brown jacket that was darker on the sleeves than on the back. From his belt hung a key ring with two valve keys, a short screwdriver, and a piece of blue cord. He smelled of metal, damp concrete, and the grease that kept the threads of the old closures moving freely.

"You have the notes?" he asked.

Teresa pointed to the table.

Manuel entered, picked up the list, and disregarded the order. His gaze jumped back and forth among the addresses. At some of them, he made a short mark in the air with his thumb.

"This isn't one problem," he said.

"That doesn't reassure me," Alberto said.

"It shouldn't."

Manuel set down the list. "This one is pressure zone two. This one is technically three but is sometimes connected to two. This one is Los Pinos, officially not a zone at all yet. This one is El Alto, old connection. And this one"—he tapped Daniela's note—"is a tank that should still have something in it."

Alberto looked at Teresa.

"What do you mean, should?"

Manuel shrugged. "If a tank in El Alto is completely empty, it draws air. If it draws air, the line knocks. If it knocks, they call me."

"And if it fills even though the inlet is shut?"

"Then we drive out there."

His tone remained matter-of-fact. He spoke like someone who knew the order of things: first read, then take tools, then drive there, then see whether the gauge was lying or the pipe was.

Inés arrived ten minutes later. She carried the bag with the small meter but kept it over her shoulder. After the night in the community hall, she had slept less than planned. The shadows under her eyes did not suit the brightness of the morning.

"Water?" she asked.

"Water," Teresa said.

"Finally, something normal," Alberto said.

No one answered.

They rode in Manuel's white van. The old Municipalidad crest was still on the side, but the sun had bleached its colors. The word SERVICIOS was barely legible. A Defensa Civil sticker was affixed beneath the rear window, and below it a small crack ran through the glass from lower left to upper right, looking for a moment like a drawn pipeline whenever the van crossed a bump.

Manuel drove slowly because of the road surface. He steered around potholes as well as darker patches of asphalt where water might once have escaped. Centro had curbs and painted gutters. Farther uphill toward El Alto, the gutters grew shallower, the stairways longer, the houses set closer against the slope. Black water tanks stood on the roofs, some new and glossy, others with white lime deposits beneath their lids. Reinforcing bars rose above the unplastered brick into the garúa, as though the houses were waiting for another story that might come later or never.

Daniela was waiting in the courtyard.

The front door stood ajar. The courtyard looked deliberately untidy. A bucket stood half beneath the water tank, a broom lay crosswise in front of the rear wall, and a cloth hung over a low ledge. Everything looked intentional and at the same time incompletely arranged.

Manuel saw it and gave an almost imperceptible nod.

"Good," he said.

Daniela heard him and left unanswered the question of what was good about it.

The water tank stood on a simple frame of concrete pillars and rusty angle iron. It was black and round, with a lid weighted down on one side by a stone. An old strip of cloth hung beneath the inlet valve to catch drips and keep them from carving a groove in the ground. The ground beneath it was darker than the rest of the courtyard.

"Valve was shut?" Manuel asked.

Daniela pointed to it. "Crosswise."

Manuel stepped onto a low stool. He placed two fingers against the valve, then tapped the pipe with his fingernail. It gave a dry sound, short and hard.

"Empty sounds different," he said.

"It was almost empty yesterday."

"Almost is better than completely."

Daniela glanced at Teresa. Teresa left the sentence out. In the folder, she thought, it would immediately sound wrong.

Manuel opened the lid a crack. The smell was different from stale water. It smelled of concrete, cold dust, and the inside of a new building before the windows were installed. Inés raised her head.

"That isn't from here," she said.

"Water often smells like the pipe," Manuel said.

"Not like that."

He fell silent. Then he took a small flashlight, shone it inside, and closed the lid again. A fine gray rim lay on the stone weighting down the lid. Manuel wiped it off with his thumb, rubbed his fingers together, and smelled them.

"Sand."

"From the courtyard," Alberto said.

Manuel pointed to the bucket, the broom, the wall. "The sand in the courtyard is pale. This is darker."

Daniela moved the bucket a little farther beneath the tank. The movement was small, almost apologetic. At that moment, the pipe dripped although the valve had not been touched. A drop clung to the underside for a moment, slid sideways along a barely visible slope, and then fell to the ground.

No one said anything.

Inés took her meter from the bag and held it against the concrete pillar. The needle barely moved. Then she held it against the pipe.

Low.

Pause.

Low.

Faint, but enough to make her look up.

"Like in the Depósito?" Alberto asked.

"No."

"Like at the Huaca?"

Inés lowered her hand. "Not enough to say."

Manuel climbed down from the stool. "We're going to the box."

"Which box?" Teresa asked.

"The one that exists on the plan. Then the one that doesn't."
He said it without emphasis.

The first valve box lay at a corner between El Alto and Las Palmeras. It had a square concrete cover, half buried in dust, marked AGUA SD in blue paint someone had retraced years ago. Beside it stood a wall with an old election poster hanging in tatters. The candidate smiled with half a cheek. Beneath his face, a dry piece of pipe jutted from the wall as a drain.

Manuel fitted the valve key, turned it a little, stopped, and listened while standing upright as if he were listening to the street.

A mototaxi drove past. Two children with school backpacks walked on the other side. A woman set a plastic crate of bread in front of a store. Everything was normal enough to be disruptive.

"There's pressure here," Manuel said.

Alberto looked into the open box. "The gauge reads zero."

"The gauge isn't the line."

Inés knelt. The bottom of the box was dry. In one corner, a thin line of dark sand crossed the pipe like a small dam.

"When was the box last cleaned?" she asked.

Manuel looked at Teresa.

Teresa looked at Alberto.

Alberto leafed through the folder in vain.

"Officially?" Manuel asked.

"Yes."

"Two years ago."

"And actually?"

"Last week."

"Why isn't that in the record?"

Manuel pulled out the key. "Because all I did was remove the sand. No repair."

"That's maintenance."

"Not if you don't change anything."

Teresa wrote: Sand in box, not logged as repair. Then she crossed out the last four words and wrote: without change.

The drone Inés had heard in the pipe was weaker here. It apparently came from beneath the street farther uphill, where the pipes curved around an old wall. Manuel showed them the spot. The wall no longer belonged to any house. It was low, made of concrete and fieldstone, and ended in the middle of the sidewalk. There was no gate on either side.

"Why does the line go around the wall?" Alberto asked.

"Because the wall was there first."

"Who does it belong to?"

"No one."

"Then they could have removed it."

Manuel looked at him as though Alberto had suggested letting the air out of a tire to see whether it would roll better.

"They could have."

"Even so, they left it standing."

"No."

They continued to Los Pinos.

There, the city was still in the process of becoming itself. Some streets had already been named, but the signs lay in a stack beside a construction trailer. At certain corners, the curbs stood too high. Blue plastic pipes, gray PVC pieces, coils of wire, and bags of cement that had hardened at

the edges lay between the houses. Black tanks already stood on several flat roofs, although the stairs to those roofs were still missing. One house had a stuccoed facade, but its windows were sealed with plywood. Another had windows and no floor.

Manuel parked beside an unfinished house with the spray-painted number L-14B. The number was written on the concrete in red paint, with a second, older number in chalk beneath it that someone had only half painted over.

"This one filed a report?" Teresa asked.

"No," Manuel said. "This one doesn't report. This one acts."

He went to the water-meter box. The box was new, its gray plastic still fresh. The closed cover had no seal. Manuel opened it with his fingernail.

A meter stood inside.

"It should be empty," Alberto said.

"It is empty."

"It's counting."

The small red numbers in the display window moved slowly. First they trembled, then the final digit advanced by one.

Inés stepped closer. "Is a line connected here?"

Manuel pointed to the ground. In front of the box, the sand had been broken open and tamped down again. A blue line lay exposed but ended in a ditch two meters farther on. A rag was stuffed into the end.

"The line ends before the network," Manuel said.

"Then the meter should be still."

"It can. Just not because of water."

"Because of what?"

Manuel took the screwdriver from his belt and tapped the box. The meter came to rest. He tapped a second time, now against the open pipe stub. A dark drop emerged from the rag. It fell into the ditch and immediately disappeared into the dust.

Teresa looked at the row of houses. Between two unfinished buildings, a narrow track led south to where the streets ended and the terrain grew flatter. Beyond the last walls lay a dark stripe in the ground. Not a true ditch, more a long depression where the dust was softer than on the surrounding ground.

"Is that Canal Seco?" she asked.

Manuel answered with his back to them. "Part of it."

"On the plan, it's farther south."

"Which plan?"

Alberto took the plan from the folder, unfolded it, and spread it across the hood. The garúa immediately laid a thin film on the paper. The lines of Los Pinos were neat and rectangular, pale blue for water, red for electricity, gray for streets. Canal Seco was marked as a dashed line a safe distance from the first construction phases.

Manuel pointed to the dashed course. Then he pointed to the depression before them.

"That's the plan they approved."

"And the other one?"

"What other one?"

"The real one."

Manuel left the plan lying on the hood. "The real one is in the ground."

Alberto exhaled. "That won't fit into any report."

"Then write it differently."

Inés had walked a few steps farther. She stood at the edge of the depression. The ground there

was drier than beside the houses, but the stones lay in small repeating arcs as though a shallow current had once sorted them. A piece of plastic film was caught between two stones, damp on the underside. She crouched and held the meter just above the ground.

Nothing.

She lowered it.

The needle remained still.

Then she heard water.

Soft and distant, more like a brief tug in a faraway pipe than a river. She looked at Manuel. He was still standing with Teresa and Alberto, but his head had turned slightly as though he had heard it too.

"There's no line here," Inés said.

"Not anymore," Manuel said.

"That's not an answer."

"Yes, it is."

They walked to the small pump house at the edge of Los Pinos. It stood at the end of a lane of hard-packed dust. Two concrete blocks served as a step in front of the door. Above the metal frame hung a sign that must once have been white. In blue stencil, it read: CASETA DE VÁLVULAS – SECTOR SUR. Someone had later added beneath it in black marker: NO CERRAR TODO.

Teresa stopped in front of the sign.

"Who wrote that?"

Manuel unlocked the door. "Someone who wanted less work after I was gone."

Inside, the coolness felt hollow rather than pleasant. The walls were raw concrete with white efflorescence in places. Pipes ran along the wall, blue, gray, one painted green. Some were marked with numbers, others with tape and handwritten arrows. An old cracked bucket stood in the corner. A plan hung on the wall in a plastic sleeve fogged from the inside.

Alberto stepped closer to the plan.

"Why is the sleeve damp on the inside?"

In the pump house, the needle of the old pressure gauge rested just below zero. Manuel marked the position of the valve wheel with chalk and left it slightly open.

Teresa wrote: provisional operating position.

The drone came from a thin gray line that disappeared behind a wooden board and left the largest pipe silent.

Behind the board, which had merely been propped in place, was a half-open pipe channel. Inside lay a smooth bed of dark sand with a groove that ran horizontally into the wall.

Manuel said the course used to run south before the depression had been named Canal Seco. Depending on who was speaking, it had been an outflow, an inflow, a quebrada, or simply the channel.

When the drone stopped, Manuel replaced the board and left a gap two fingers wide.

"Take a picture?" Alberto asked.

"Then someone will ask why it's open."

On the way back to the van, Teresa stopped at the L-14B water-meter box. The last red digit had moved again. Only by one.

She said nothing.

Alberto saw it too. He tucked the plan more firmly beneath his arm to protect it from the damp.

"We have to document this," he said.

"Yes," Teresa said.

"How?"

She looked south across Los Pinos. The depression lay where the plan knew a different line.

Beyond it, the land began to flatten, then grew uneven again before rising toward the Huaca. Nothing of Bajo La Arena was visible. Only the direction.

"As a course, not a defect," she said.

"As what, then?"

"As a course."

"A course needs a beginning and an end."

Manuel, already standing beside the van, turned around.

"A course can remain open."

They drove back through Las Palmeras. Halfway there, Manuel stopped once more without explaining why. He got out, walked to a low concrete edge beside the road, and lifted a small cover. Beneath it was no pipe, only an empty shaft with dust at the bottom. A wet fingerprint clung to the inside wall.

"From today?" Inés asked.

Manuel shook his head. "No one's."

He let the cover fall back into place. The sound was too deep for the size of the shaft.

That afternoon in the Archivo Municipal, Teresa laid three sheets of paper on the table.

On the first she wrote: Water-supply reports.

On the second: Pressure zones / provisional.

On the third, she wrote nothing at all.

Alberto stood by the shelf looking for the old Redes Menores binder. He found three. One was organized by year, one by sector, one by the names of technicians. Two of those technicians now worked elsewhere; for a third, the personnel file contained no indication that he had ever worked for the Municipalidad. The sector binder was missing the South section. The binder organized by year contained a copy of a 1987 plan on which a line ended at the edge of Los Pinos, long before Los Pinos existed as Sector 6.

Teresa laid the plan beside the current one.

The old line reached neither the Huaca nor the area before it. It simply ran off the edge of the plan.

"This is incomplete," Alberto said.

"Yes."

"Should we look for the adjoining plan?"

Teresa looked at the line for a long time. Then at Daniela's note, which still lay beneath the edge of her notebook.

"Not today."

Inés sat by the window. She had rested her head against the frame and was listening to the building. Downstairs in the community hall, someone moved a chair. Just one. Then it was still.

"In the pump house, it was weaker when we left the board open," she said.

Alberto drew his eyebrows together. "Then we have to note that."

"No," Teresa said.

"Why?"

"Because otherwise someone will copy it."

It was the first answer of the day that no one corrected.

Shortly before the end of the workday, Manuel returned to the archive. He had taken off his jacket and wore a gray T-shirt with an old water stain on the chest in the shape of an island. He set a small bag on Teresa's table. It contained sand.

"From the tank?" she asked.

"From the pipe at L-14B."

"Damp?"

"It was damp."

"And now?"

"Not now."

Teresa left the bag where it was. Through the plastic, the sand looked darker than the dust of Los Pinos. A few grains clung to the inside as if moisture remained there, but when the bag was shaken, they fell dry to the bottom.

"Should I label it?"

Manuel looked at the three sheets on the table. "If you label it, you have to say where it came from."

"We know that."

"No. We know where we took it."

Teresa left the pen where it was.

Outside, the light hovered between day and evening. The garúa moved through the streets from the west and settled on the windows of the Municipalidad. Drops collected in small scratches in the glass.

Alberto had unfolded the old plan once more. The line that ran off the edge was drawn as a thin blue stroke. At its end there was no arrow. No cross. No label.

"There's hardly any evidence that the line continues," he said.

"No," Teresa said.

"Or that it ends."

Manuel picked up his key ring from the table. The valve keys struck each other, a brief metallic sound that lingered in the archive longer than it needed to.

"Then don't write that it ends," he said.

Teresa looked at the blank third sheet.

After a while, she pulled it toward her and wrote in the upper corner:

EN REVISIÓN

Then she laid the plan on it at a slight angle.

Chapter 21: The Report

Teresa began the report out of duty, long before she was ready.

She began it because the printer in the outer office woke up on its own.

It was shortly after six in the evening, and in the Archivo Municipal the day had already taken on that second fatigue that settled over furniture instead of people. The desks stood crooked. The fluorescent tube above the hallway flickered in a rhythm too slow to be reported as a malfunction and too regular to ignore. On Teresa's desk lay three open folders, two closed ones, and one half beneath another in a way that made it look like an accident.

Teresa sat at the metal-legged table that had been too small for the stacks of files for years. Beside her lay three folders, two notebooks, and a thin binder with a faded Municipalidad sticker. In block letters, the sticker read: INFORMES VARIOS. Beneath it, someone had later added in ballpoint pen: NO USAR.

Alberto had retrieved the binder anyway.

"It was on the shelf with the closed cases," he had said.

"Then it doesn't belong here."

"Exactly."

Now he stood at the window, trying to loosen an old strip of tape from the frame with his thumbnail. The strip resisted, stretching instead and turning milky.

The printer clicked in the outer office.

Teresa raised her head.

The printer was old. It stood on a table of its own because no one knew anymore whether the machine's vibrations damaged other furniture. Before every print job, it drew in a sheet, rejected it, huffed, displayed ERROR, and started over. Its connection to her computer depended on Alberto pressing the plug beneath the table against the wall in exactly the right way.

The router was off.

The printer drew in a sheet.

Alberto let go of the strip of tape.

"Did you send something?"

"No."

"Maybe from downstairs."

"No one's downstairs."

The printer worked slowly, as though it had to remember the shape of letters. First came one line, then a pause, then several short movements. At last the sheet lay in the output tray, still warm, with a single sentence on it.

INFORME PRELIMINAR SOLICITADO.

There was no name beneath it. No date. No file number.

At first Teresa left the paper where it was. She took off her glasses, wiped the lenses with the bottom edge of her blouse, and put them back on. The sheet remained.

Just enough of it showed against the blue folder.

"The mayor?" Alberto asked.

Teresa picked up the sheet. It smelled of hot toner.

"The mayor is calling," she said.

The phone rang.

It was the old landline on the side table, while her cell phone remained silent. The landline was used almost exclusively by the switchboard now, or by people who had numbers from old directories. Ordinarily, it never rang.

Teresa picked up.

"Archivo Municipal," she said.

A dry, quiet static lay on the line, like a sheet of paper being dragged over concrete.

Then Cárdenas said, "Teresa."

His voice sounded close, as though he were speaking from a room in the same building.

"Señor alcalde."

"We need the report."

"Which one?"

"The one you don't want to write."

Alberto looked at her.

Teresa sat down slowly.

"There are no final findings yet."

"That's good."

She waited.

"Don't send it to Lima tomorrow morning," Cárdenas said.

Teresa gripped the receiver more tightly. "You said we need it."

"Of course."

"But we're not sending it?"

"Not yet."

"Then where does it go?"

Cárdenas exhaled. The engine sounded far away, as though it were behind a wall or beneath a street. Then he said, "File it where someone will find it while looking for something else."

"That's not an instruction."

"Yes, it is."

"Who is supposed to find it?"

"You."

The line crackled. Inside the crackle was a single cumbia note, very brief, as though someone in the background had turned on a radio and immediately covered it again.

"Mr. Mayor?"

"And Teresa?"

"Yes."

"Don't write cause."

Then the connection was gone.

The receiver sat crooked in its cradle. Teresa straightened it.

"What did he say?"

"That we need the report."

"Good."

"And that we shouldn't send it."

"Also good?"

Teresa looked at the printed sheet.

"Provisionally."

They chose REPORT ON REPORTED IRREGULARITIES—WORKING DRAFT as the heading. At the words WORKING DRAFT, the fan started even though no one had touched the switch.

Teresa left the heading as it was.

Inés arrived at six thirty.

She had brought her measurement folder, but she looked as though she had opened and closed it three times on the way. Her hair was damp from the garúa. Pale dust clung to her left shoe, probably from Los Pinos or the road to the pump house.

"You're writing?" she asked.

"Unfortunately."

"Don't write cause."

Teresa looked at her.

"That's what he said too."

"Who?"

"Cárdenas."

Inés set the folder on the table a hand's width away from the others.

"Then for once he didn't say anything wrong."

Alberto pulled over a chair. He set it down crooked, noticed, and left it that way.

Inés opened her folder. Inside were printouts of the measurements from Depósito Norte, the courtyard, the water tank, and Bajo La Arena. No two curves looked alike. Teresa had hoped the lack of resemblance would be reassuring. Instead, it felt like a refusal.

They separated observation, measurement, and interpretation. The attachments contained maps, photographs, statements, and logs; none was described as evidence of a common cause.

Alberto wanted a section called "Conclusion." Teresa called it "Next Steps."

Teresa was about to answer, but the printer in the outer office drew in another sheet.

This time Alberto jumped up. He went out before Teresa could stop him. She heard his footsteps on the tile, then the hard click of the printer cover. The printer kept working anyway.

"It isn't connected," Alberto called.

The sheet came out.

Alberto brought it inside, holding it by one corner. A table was printed on the paper. Four columns, six rows. Headings in bold type:

LUGAR / TIPO / ESTADO / RESPONSABLE

The first row read:

PARQUE CENTRAL / ALUMBRADO / PENDIENTE / MUNICIPALIDAD

The second:

RADIO DESVELO / INFRAESTRUCTURA / INACTIVO / MUNICIPALIDAD

The third:

HUACA BAJO LA ARENA / PATRIMONIO / PROTEGIDO / MINISTERIO DE CULTURA

The fourth:

DEPÓSITO NORTE / SERVICIOS / ACTIVO / SIN DEFINIR

The fifth:

CANAL SECO / DRENAJE / SIN AGUA / SIN DEFINIR

The sixth row was blank.

Teresa read it twice. Then she looked at the computer. This table had come from someone else.

"That's exactly what we're not doing," Inés said.

"It's orderly," Alberto said.

"That's the problem."

Teresa took the sheet, laid it on the table, and ran her finger over the fourth row. DEPÓSITO NORTE / SERVICIOS / ACTIVO / SIN DEFINIR.

"Active," she said.

"That was in the old forms," Alberto said.

"Not in my report."

The printer clicked again.

Teresa stood, went into the outer office, and pulled the plug.

The printer fell silent. For one second, all they could hear was the distant traffic from Centro, a mototaxi horn, a dog, a fragment of voices from the Mercado. Then a quiet sound came from the machine, as though a sheet had shifted inside.

Teresa remained where she was.

No paper emerged.

When she went back into the archive, a new line had appeared on her screen.

6. Sector no registrado.

The cursor blinked after it.

"Did you write that?" Alberto asked.

"No."

Inés pushed her folder back a little.

"Don't delete it right away."

"Why?"

"Because it wants to know whether you'll delete it."

"It?"

Inés looked at the wall map. "The report."

Teresa wanted to say that a report could not want anything. But that would have been a statement, and statements were unreliable that evening.

She sat down again. The line was still there. Sector no registrado. No place, no name, only a category presenting itself as a gap.

6. Additional unassigned information will remain unprocessed until review is possible.

The screen remained still.

"Too long," Alberto said.

"Good."

She continued working.

The report acquired a disorderly structure. Teresa wrote it like a room in which something had to be left behind. She began with the confirmed points, placed the rejected observations beneath them, and listed the Huaca as a "topographic reference" rather than a place. She assigned the water tank to "supply" instead of water. The park appeared as a marginal note on public use instead of in the lighting section. Radio Desvelo remained an object with no current operation; she omitted the definitive word "decommissioned."

With every phrase, she had to decide whether to say what was or what could be entered into the record.

The difference mattered.

Alberto read the sentences she left on the screen. He rarely commented. Inés sat in the visitor's chair and refrained from drawing conclusions.

At 7:12, someone knocked at the door.

No one opened it immediately.

The knock came again. Two short raps. A pause. A third.

Alberto went out. Teresa heard voices. Then Manuel Chacón entered. He was no longer wearing a jacket, only a shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Dark streaks of pipe grease marked his forearms.

"The line at Los Pinos is knocking," he said.

"Now?"

"Since you started writing."

Teresa looked at her hands.

"That's not a good technical explanation."

"I'm not here because of the explanation either."

Manuel placed a small slip of paper on the table. One corner was damp. In pencil, he had sketched a valve box, a line, and an arrow pointing southeast. In the margin he had written: no decir termina.

Leave the end of the line open.

"I already told you that," he said.

"Yes."

"Then write it that way."

"How?"

Manuel looked at the screen. He read slowly. His lips barely moved.

"This line is not without a destination," he said. "We just don't know what it is."

Teresa almost copied the sentence, but stopped.

"That's too pretty."

"Then make it uglier."

She wrote:

No final destination assignment is available for certain line segments.

Manuel looked at her.

"Ugly enough?"

"Almost."

The wall behind the shelves made a quiet cracking sound. Not a loud noise. More like wood, though there was no wood there. Teresa looked at the wall map. The pins were still where they had been: El Faro, the park, the wallpaper store, the weather station, the quarry, Depósito Norte, Bajo La Arena, the water tank, Los Pinos. There was no line between Los Pinos and Bajo La Arena. Even so, a thin shadow lay there on the paper.

Alberto stepped closer.

"Was that there before?"

"No," Inés said.

Teresa stood. The shadow lay across the map like the line of a thread stretched taut from above, though there was nothing above it. It ran south past the Huaca, faded before the edge of the map, and grew so faint that its end remained indeterminate.

"Canal Seco," Manuel said.

"That's farther south," Alberto said.

"On which map?"

Alberto said nothing.

The phone rang again.

Teresa hesitated. Everyone looked at the phone. On the second ring, she picked up.

This time there was no voice on the line. By now, the dry static was clearly distinguishable from a bad connection.

Teresa hung up.

"Cárdenas?" Alberto asked.

"No."

"Then who?"

"The attachment."

Inés and Manuel remained serious.

Teresa sat down and continued writing.

The report grew. The fluorescent tube above the hallway kept flickering. The cup on the windowsill remained dry even though someone had set it there that afternoon. The light in the room hovered between yellow and white and gave every face the same tired color.

The report grew.

In the end, it had five sections.

I. Subject of the preliminary review.

II. Reports from residents and the community hall.

III. Infrastructure and technical information.

IV. Protection and jurisdictional areas.

V. Open assignments.

Teresa stared at the outline. Five sections. Too orderly. She added a sixth:

VI. Individual notes pending final review.

The hum, which until then had existed in the room only as a possibility, became audible.

Its source was neither the floor nor the fan nor the printer, whose plug Alberto had stopped holding by then. It came from the papers. From the folders, from the forms, from the spaces between the sheets. Quiet, but with weight.

Low.

Pause.

Low.

Teresa placed her hands flat on the table. The sand on the blue folder trembled almost imperceptibly.

"What did you just change?" Inés asked.

"I added a section."

"Which one?"

"Individual notes."

"Delete it."

Teresa kept it. She selected it, changed the Roman numeral, and moved it between II and III.

III. Individual notes in no particular order.

The hum remained. But it grew broader, less precise. It lost its rhythm, as though it had to go around the sentence.

Manuel nodded.

"Like that."

"That's not a clean outline," Alberto said.

"I know."

"I mean, it really isn't."

"Good."

Before they saved, Alberto returned with another folder. He had found it in the community hall beneath the table where the lists had lain. Its spine read: AÑO I. No year. Just AÑO I, as though someone had left the beginning of their chronology open.

Teresa hesitated before opening it. The cardboard smelled damp even though the hall had been dry. Inside lay a single form.

"Not another file," Inés said.

"It wasn't there when we locked the hall," Alberto said.

Teresa opened the folder. It held no reports, only blank forms. All bore the same Municipalidad letterhead but had different line spacing, as though they had been copied over the years and stretched a little more each time. In the middle of every form was a field: BREVE DESCRIPCIÓN DEL HECHO. Beneath it: MEDIDA ADOPTADA. Beneath that: RESULTADO.

The last field was blank on every form.

Teresa took the form out of its sleeve. The sheet was old and had remained pale. The lines were blue. The fields lay in almost the same places as the sections of her report.

"We're not using that," she said.

"It would be easier," Alberto said.

"That's why."

Instead of returning the folder to the hall, she placed it half beneath the bottom one, outside any orderly filing system.

Only then did they save the report under a name that was almost wrong:

INF_PREL_SD_REV_21_b.docx

Alberto and Teresa wanted to avoid "final." Inés said even "b" was dangerous because it presupposed an "a" that had to remain excluded.

Page seventeen was missing when they printed it. The printer reported no error; the numbering jumped from sixteen to eighteen.

Alberto printed the page by itself. The sheet came out blank. On the second attempt, only the page number appeared.

Teresa removed the numbering from the document. Afterward, the paragraph that had previously been on page seventeen appeared between two attachments.

They stamped the draft. The right edge of the stamp came out faint. Alberto wanted to press it again, but did not.

They went back into the Archivo. The report lay on the table. The title page still read only INFORME PRELIMINAR. No file number. No recipient. No date except the one the computer had inserted automatically.

Teresa picked up the stack and looked for a folder.

"Where do we file it?" Alberto asked.

"Far from the closed cases, in any event."

"So with the open ones?"

"It hardly fits there either."

"Then where?"

She remembered Cárdenas: Where someone will find it while looking for something else.

On the back shelf was a narrow gap between two binders. The one on the left read: CENSO DE FAROLES 1998-2003. The one on the right read: PROGRAMAS DE LIMPIEZA Y ORNATO, SECTOR CENTRO. The gap was too narrow for a folder and too wide for a single booklet. Teresa had often seen it and never used it because it was not a category.

She slid the report into the gap.

At first the report stuck. The printer took the paper, pulled it in at an angle, and stopped. Teresa tugged carefully. The sheet came back, wrinkled along the edge but legible. On the second attempt, Alberto held the plug. Manuel steadied the printer table. Inés stood beside them and did nothing. Teresa kept the pressure light.

This time the report fit.

Badly, but well enough.

"Page seventeen is missing," Alberto said.

"Yes."

"Which page was that?"

Teresa looked at the blue folder.

"Destination assignment for the line segments."

Manuel gave a quiet, approving laugh without any trace of amusement.

"Good."

Inés closed her measurement folder. "What do we do with the file?"

Teresa went to the computer. She opened the folder containing the report. The filename was there: INF_PREL_SD_REV_21_b.docx. A second file had appeared beneath it.

INF_PREL_SD_REV_21_final.docx

The file had come from someone else.

Alberto stepped beside her.

"Don't open it."

"I know."

She kept the file and renamed it.

INF_PREL_SD_REV_21_no_abrir.docx

The computer accepted the name. For a moment, Teresa thought that had been too easy. Then the file disappeared from the folder.

It appeared neither in the trash nor in any other folder.

It had simply vanished.

Alberto exhaled.

"Is that better?"

"No," Teresa said. "But it's less final."

Outside, it had grown dark. They left the building together. Inés went first, the folder under her arm. Manuel carried the empty coffee cup as though it were a piece of evidence. Alberto locked the door twice. Teresa remained on the steps for a moment. Music came from a side street, unfamiliar and, for an instant, like Radio Desvelo.

The mayor's reserved parking space was empty.

A rectangular dry patch lay in his reserved space.

Teresa stopped in front of it.

The patch was larger than a car and smaller than a room. Around its edge, the garúa had darkened the dust. The concrete in the middle was dry, as though something had stood there for a long time and had only just driven away.

"Was he here?" Alberto asked.

"Maybe."

"When?"

Teresa looked at her watch. It read 2:17.

She shook it once. The second hand continued moving, but the minutes stayed where they were.

"Not today," she said.

Inés looked at her.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Teresa walked a few steps, then looked back. No light remained in the window of the Archivo. Only a pale rectangle lingered where the map hung.

The map lay behind the glass.

From outside, both the line on the map and the report in the gap remained invisible. But both were there.

And the report lay precisely where someone would find it while looking for something else.

The next morning, Teresa would leave it closed.

Outside, the garúa settled against the windows.

Chapter 22: The City Stays Crooked

The next morning, Teresa left the report closed.

She arrived at the Municipalidad earlier than usual because she had slept poorly, and because bad nights in San Desvelo rarely improved by staying in bed. Outside, the garúa hung low over Centro. It clung to things instead of floating in the air: to the metal grilles over the windows, the hoods of the mototaxis, the cables between the houses, the yellow curb in front of the park. The asphalt was dark without being wet. The dogs in the plaza lay beneath the benches as though waiting for rain that never came.

In the Archivo, it smelled of paper, metal, and the faint heat old computers gave off when they had been only half shut down overnight. Teresa stopped in the doorway. The table was as she had left it. The folder of water complaints lay on the left. Beside it were Inés's printouts. Beside those, the old plan with the line that led nowhere. On the shelf beneath the map, the report was wedged into the gap between two folders. Its white edge was visible.

Just as it had been yesterday.

No more and no less.

Teresa pulled over the chair and sat down. She placed her bag on the floor instead of the side table. Then she took a blank slip of paper and wrote in the upper corner: DO NOT OPEN TODAY.

She considered the sentence for a while.

Then she crossed out TODAY and wrote beneath it: PROVISIONALLY.

Alberto arrived ten minutes later with two paper cups of coffee and a partially completed list. He set one cup beside Teresa, the other in front of himself, looked at the note, and nodded.

"Good," he said.

"What's on your list?"

"Nothing that has to be completed today."

"That's not a list."

"Yes, it is."

He placed the sheet on the table. It contained six items: community hall, Mercado, El Alto, water line, El Faro, weather station. None had a time beside it. After community hall, Alberto had made a small asterisk and then half scraped it away with his thumbnail.

"Why the weather station?"

"Inés called."

"What did she want?"

"For us to stay down here."

Teresa took a sip of coffee. It was too sweet, but less so than usual. Alberto had apparently remembered to take the spoon out sooner.

"Then we'll go up later."

"Provisionally," Alberto said.

The community hall remained usable as long as some of the chairs stood crooked. Before events, Alberto marked two positions on the floor in pencil. Afterward, he erased the marks again.

Then they drove to El Alto.

The road climbed in uneven stretches. Some houses had stuccoed facades; others exposed brick, rebar, and pipes jutting from the concrete, as though someone had interrupted the buildings before they could decide what they wanted to become. Black water tanks stood on the roofs. Some were round, some rectangular, some with lids weighted down by stones. The garúa gathered along the rims of the tanks, scarcely dripped down, and remained as a dark border.

Daniela stood in her courtyard holding the broom as though she had just considered using it and decided against it.

The courtyard looked lived in rather than clean. A bucket stood half beneath the water tank. A plastic bottle lay beside the drain without being in the way. The broom leaned against the wall, its straw end angled slightly outward. A thin line of dust lay in front of the door.

"The broom stayed put today," Daniela said.

"You can tell," Alberto said, and regretted it at once.

Daniela merely looked at him.

Aurelio sat on a low stool in the shadow of the wall. He wore his hat low even though there was no sun. Beside him stood a half-full glass of water.

"Last night?" Teresa asked.

Daniela pointed the broom at the ground. "Up to there."

A clean trail was visible in the dust. It ran along the wall, broke briefly at the bucket, and curved around the broom. It ended in front of the door.

"And inside?"

Daniela was silent for a moment. Then she led Teresa into the kitchen. The clean line was still there beneath the table, but it had stopped moving forward. Beside it now lay a small dark plastic button. Teresa did not recognize it.

"It isn't from any of my things," Daniela said. "I'm leaving it there anyway."

"Since when?"

"Since this morning."

"Why?"

Daniela shrugged. "It gets in the way."

Aurelio had remained in the doorway. He said, "Sometimes getting in the way is polite."

Alberto would have liked to write down the sentence. Teresa saw his hand move toward his shirt pocket and drop again.

"Thank you," Daniela said.

"For what?"

"For not asking whether I'm sure."

Teresa nodded. She had doubts too. Everyone did. But in San Desvelo, certainty was a word that promised too much.

In the pump house, the valve remained in its marked intermediate position. Manuel renewed the chalk line whenever moisture erased it and left off the date.

The gap behind the wooden board remained two fingers wide. The sand inside was sometimes dry and sometimes damp even though no water ran through the line.

They continued to La Playa and from there to El Faro because Alberto said that if they were already giving up on documentation, they could at least look. Teresa found the sentence dangerous, but she agreed.

Efraín stood on the beach near the boats. The sea lay farther out than usual, though not as far as it had that night. Small pools of water had remained between the stones of the old seawall, shallow and gray. The garúa blurred the horizon. The boundary between the sky and the Pacific dissolved.

"Are you going down there?" Alberto asked.

Efraín shook his head.

"Why?"

"Because checking every day changes nothing."

He had a bucket beside him containing two old lengths of rope. Sand clung to one of them. Efraín took it out, left the sand where it was, and laid the rope on the edge of a boat.

"Yesterday there was nothing to see down there," he said.

"And today?"

"The same today."

"Then it's gone?"

Efraín looked at the water. "No. Today it remains invisible."

Teresa thought of Mara Pizango, whom she did not yet know, and of a sentence no one in San Desvelo had yet spoken: Dry does not mean empty. Here it would have needed different wording. Wetness makes things invisible. Or: Beneath the water, it remains.

At the edge of the ebb tide lay a small row of seashells. It ran diagonally inland instead of parallel to the water, as though the tide had marked a direction unfamiliar to it. Alberto saw it. Teresa saw that he saw it. Neither said anything.

Efraín picked up a stone, turned it once in his hand, and set it down again a few inches to one side. Just enough.

"Better?" Alberto asked.

Efraín looked at him as though the question were too large for the stone.

"Different."

On the way back, they stopped at Ernesto's store.

Lucía was there. She stood in the first room, in front of the shelf of color cards, holding a roll of wallpaper beneath her arm. Ernesto sat behind the counter, trimming a piece of cardboard with a knife. The blade was dull. He kept cutting anyway.

The store smelled of paper, dust, paste, and the dry sweetness of old paint. Up front, everything was almost orderly, more lived in than arranged. A can of Blanco Humo stood apart from the other shades of white. A catalog lay crooked. A brush stood in a jar with an old ring of paint at the bottom. In back, where the rooms began, the light was dimmer.

"You took your time," Ernesto said.

"Two days."

"That's a long time for the back rooms."

Lucía turned the roll in her arms. "I was just about to put it back."

"Not there," Ernesto said.

"That's where it belongs."

"Exactly."

Lucía set it on the floor, leaned it against a shelf, and let go. The roll slipped a little, came to rest crooked, and stopped. No sound came from the back rooms.

Teresa waited.

"Quiet today?" she asked.

Ernesto lifted one shoulder. "Quiet enough."

"And if someone cleans up?"

"Then we sell less."

"Why?"

"Because I throw them out first."

Lucía remained serious. She looked into the back hallway. "It's different from before."

"What does that mean?"

"It used to be bigger back there. Now it's the same size, but it takes longer."

Alberto frowned. "That's the same thing."

"No," Ernesto and Lucía said at the same time.

Teresa stood in the doorway to the second room. She saw the shelves, the rolls, the boxes, the green pattern she knew, and a section of wall that still looked like the wrong one. A red strip of

paper lay on the floor. It had been placed there deliberately, like a boundary no one had officially drawn.

"Should I mention the report?" she asked.

Ernesto looked at her.

"What report?"

"Good," Teresa said.

As they left, Lucía said quietly, "If you ever put the wallpaper store on a map, draw only the front room."

"And the back?"

"Depends on the time of day."

Teresa nodded. "Provisionally."

Late that afternoon, they drove only as far as the lower bend below the weather station on Cerro Vigía, where the road grew worse and the garúa swept across the slope in bands. Inés came down to meet them, her backpack over one shoulder, her hair pressed to her forehead by wind and damp.

"I asked you to stay down below," she said.

"We did," Alberto said. "This still counts as down below."

Inés looked up the road. Above them, the red warning lights blinked on the low aircraft markers instead of on the antennas. Their rhythm was uneven. One came too late; another missed a beat. After that, the sequence was almost correct again.

"Rafael?"

"Up there. He's copying down numbers I don't need."

"Why do you let him?"

"Because copying something down calms him."

Inés opened her notebook. One page was blank except for the date and location. Beneath them it read: NO MEASUREMENT.

"That's a measurement," Alberto said.

"No. It's a placeholder."

"For what?"

"As a reserve, as long as nothing happens."

Teresa looked at the blank page. The wind moved it slightly. For a moment, it looked as though something were written there in very pale ink. Then it was only paper.

"The hum?"

"Less," Inés said. "Still there."

"Is that good?"

"It's less."

They left it at that. Down below, toward the city, the first lights became visible. Centro lay in the gray. El Alto rose darkly. Los Pinos was a row of isolated construction lamps and water tanks. Beyond it lay the terrain toward Canal Seco and Bajo La Arena, but from here it was only a darker patch in the desert.

"You could almost believe it works," Alberto said.

Inés closed the notebook. "Then hold that belief lightly."

That evening, Teresa and Alberto returned to the Municipalidad. The community hall was empty. The secundaria class had ended. The chairs stood crooked instead of in rows. Someone had left a piece of chalk on the floor. An unfinished arithmetic problem remained on the board.

In the Archivo, the report was still in the gap.

Teresa kept her distance.

Instead, she took the map down from the wall, laid it on the large table, and studied the pins. Some had been pressed deeper into the paper over the past several days. Others sat loose. A red pin at El Faro tilted west. A blue pin at Los Pinos sat beside the line. The marker for Depósito Norte was crooked because Alberto had placed it with his left hand. The Huaca had been marked only in pencil, and the line leading there trailed off unevenly.

Alberto stood beside her.

"We could reset them."

"Yes."

"Should we leave them?"

Teresa shook her head.

She took a new yellow pin from the small box. For a moment, its location remained unclear. Then she pushed it into the edge of the map, where the streets ended and the printing on the paper grew lighter.

"What is that?"

"A gap."

"Then why a pin?"

"So the emptiness has a place."

Alberto studied the map. "That's hard to explain."

"No."

"Good."

They hung the map back on the wall. It hung slightly crooked. Teresa looked at the upper-right corner. Alberto saw it too. Neither touched it.

Outside, the garúa settled against the windows, neither as a wall nor as a corridor. Only as a thin gray skin over glass and concrete. A late shout came from the Mercado, a dog from El Alto, the rhythm of an engine from somewhere. For a moment, Teresa thought she could hear the hum beneath it all.

Then she realized it was the refrigerator in the outer office.

Maybe.

She switched off the light in the Archivo. The room remained dark afterward.

Almost. A narrow strip of light lay beneath the door to the shelving area because a lamp was on in the hall. It ended before the report.

"Tomorrow?" Alberto asked.

"Tomorrow what?"

"Do we open it?"

Teresa locked the door. The key stuck once, then turned.

"Maybe."

They went down the stairs. The air in the plaza was cooler. The city smelled of dust, damp concrete, and night. A driverless mototaxi waited at the corner. A small rosary hung from the rearview mirror. It did not move.

A short horn sounded from the direction of the terminal.

Alberto stopped.

"Is there still a bus tonight?"

Teresa ignored the time.

"There's always one running."

They kept walking. Behind them, the Municipalidad stood slightly crooked in the dark, restless and burdened with tasks that remained open. On the map on the second floor, the yellow pin sat at the edge of the paper.

That evening, the city stood in such a way that one could walk through it. Two chairs remained crooked in the community hall; the chalk line remained beside the valve in the pump house; the button remained beneath the table in Daniela's courtyard.

On the map, the yellow pin sat at the edge of the paper.

Farther east lay a dry line in the sand that no one yet considered a road.

Chapter 23: 2:17 a.m. ... Again.

The clock read 2:17.

The night driver tapped the glass lightly, just to make sure the display was free of dust. The digits remained. Two dots. A one. A seven. The little red light in the dashboard was dimmer than it used to be because the cover had turned cloudy on the inside and because no one in San Desvelo replaced dashboards as long as they still displayed something.

He was at the northern edge of the road, where the last low houses of Puerto Esperanza lay behind him and the coast grew darker again to the south. Puerto Esperanza was only a bright strip in the rearview mirror now: the counter with the cookies, the truck-tire shop, a gas station where one of the lights always flickered, and two dogs sleeping beneath a parked trailer. The man at the counter had said the road was clear. He said it every time. This time the night driver had remained silent, because in this region a clear road rarely meant a clear roadway.

The old heat of the engine lingered inside the colectivo. The windows were open a crack. Air came through them smelling of salt, dust, and cold metal. The rosary hung above the rearview mirror. The wooden cross rested against the windshield as if it were tired of swinging. Beside it, the faded image of Señor de los Milagros was still stuck in place. The purple had receded even further. At one corner, the garúa had loosened the adhesive, but the image still held. The night driver had raised his hand several times and lowered it again each time. It held better as long as it stayed crooked.

On the inside of the windshield, SAN DESVELO was written in white, hand-painted letters. Beneath it, the names of the stops had blurred. Las Palmeras was almost illegible. Centro had a scratch through the O. El Alto was brighter than the others because years ago someone had wiped a cloth over it and then stopped. Beside the sign hung a small scrap of red cloth whose origin the night driver had forgotten. It was too small for a flag and too old for a decoration. It moved at every bump, but never in time with the rosary.

The passengers were quiet. Up front sat a woman with a shopping bag on her knees. Two seats behind her, a man leaned against the window, though it was cold enough that it should have woken him. Farther back were knees beneath a blanket, an arm on a bag, a hat in a lap. Faces remained fragmentary in the dark interior. The night driver had stopped counting. He used to do it. For some time now, it was enough if the number barely changed along the way.

He put the bus in gear. It began to roll, heavy, with a slight metallic resistance beneath the floor. The first yards still belonged to Puerto Esperanza. Concrete walls, a sign for motor oil, a cable hanging across the road, a single house with a blue-painted door. Then the road became what it usually was between towns: asphalt running through the coastal desert without making much effort to please it.

Far below on the right lay the Pacific. It registered more as a dark expanse than as an ocean; in places it grew lighter when the garúa opened. The surf remained distant. Only now and then did a muffled rumble rise, as if someone were moving large stones beneath a blanket. The desert lay to the left. Anything but empty. Never empty. The ground rose slowly, brown and gray, with stones, low ridges of sand, utility poles, and old posts whose wires had vanished. Beyond them stood the cerros, heavier than the sky.

The road dipped and rose in small, indecisive movements. White posts with black caps stood along the edges. Some were straight, some leaned, and one was missing entirely. The night driver used the missing ones as landmarks just as he used those still there. He knew where the road disguised a jolt in daylight. He knew where the right lane was slicker in July than in January. He knew which curve must never be cut, even when it looked clear.

The cumbia from the old speakers was soft. Not Radio Desvelo. An old USB drive a cousin had given him years ago, with the songs in an order no one could change anymore. Sometimes a track skipped back. Sometimes the first second was missing. Today everything played. Almost everything. At every third chorus, the bass dropped out for one beat, and in that small gap another tone could be heard. Low. Brief. More memory than sound.

The night driver left the volume unchanged.

After a while, the woman up front raised her head. She looked straight ahead through the windshield. "Shouldn't we be able to see the lights by now?"

Her voice sounded alert, free of fear.

"Soon," said the night driver.

"On the cerro?"

"Yes."

"By the weather station?"

He looked at her in the mirror. In the darkness, her face was only a pale shape above the bag. "First the cerro. Then the station."

She nodded. As if she had known that order and merely wanted to check whether it still held.

Before San Desvelo, the night driver checked the familiar sequence: first the red dots on Cerro Dormido, then the weather station, then the houses of Las Palmeras. This time everything appeared exactly where it should.

It did little to reassure him.

"Are you stopping early again tonight?" someone asked from the back.

He did not recognize the voice.

"Before Las Palmeras?"

"Yes."

"If someone wants to get off."

"Does anyone?"

He looked in the mirror. The interior was dark. A cross, a scrap of cloth, a hat, a bag. No raised hand.

"Not tonight," he said.

That was enough. No one objected.

Even so, they came to the place where the man had gotten off back then. The night driver recognized it by the missing post and a stone lying too far out on the shoulder. Out of habit, he eased his foot off the gas a little. The door remained closed. Outside lay only the desert, with the ocean far below on the right. Man, jacket, and footsteps in the sand had vanished. The bus rolled past.

The wooden cross struck the windshield once.

Not twice.

His eyes stayed on the road.

The road now descended slowly toward San Desvelo. Cerro Dormido remained in the background on the left, farther inland rather than close to the ocean, dark and heavy. The red lights blinked above it until the garúa swallowed them for a few seconds. When they reappeared, they were in the same place. The night driver realized he was breathing out.

Only then did he see the weather station. Two small red dots on Cerro Vigía, farther south, lower than the Dormido lights. Few and muted. Just enough to tell you that someone up there maintained equipment, wrote reports, kept readings, and perhaps left a window open a crack even though the damp came in. The night driver knew Inés slightly. He had seen her once at the

terminal, a folder tucked under her arm and a look in her eyes as if she had heard something others regarded as nothing but an engine.

"Now it's right," said the woman up front.

He took his time answering.

"Yes," he said at last. "Tonight it is."

The first houses of Las Palmeras appeared as isolated lights; there had never been a chain of them here. A lamp burned behind bars, a lightbulb above a little store, a television in a room with the curtain half drawn. A wall still bore an old campaign poster. The face on it had faded further. Only FUTURO remained of the slogan, and that only because someone had used a knife to peel away half of another poster pasted over it. Beneath it, the old word showed through again, dirty and persistent.

The bus rumbled over the first bad patch. The woman gripped her bag more tightly. From the back of the colectivo came the quiet sound of coins in a tin. The night driver slowed down, out of courtesy to a city that disliked being entered in haste.

Las Palmeras was awake. No neighborhood in San Desvelo ever slept completely. A man stood smoking in a doorway. He watched the bus as if checking whether the number of windows was correct. Two mototaxis stood by the roadside with tarps over their seats. Garúa had collected on one tarp and run into a dark fold. A dog raised its head, remained silent, and laid it back on its paws.

At the turnoff for El Faro, the night driver glanced to the right. The road disappeared into the darkness toward the coast. Down there lay the old lighthouse, Radio Desvelo, and the walls exposed at low tide that everyone in the morning wanted to describe only incompletely. No light came from there. Only the garúa seemed denser on that side, as if it had something to cover—something difficult to keep beneath the sand and yet hardly permitted to lie exposed.

A passenger in the back tapped the rail.

Only once.

"Centro," he said.

"Terminal?"

"A little before."

The night driver nodded. That was a normal answer in San Desvelo. No one got off exactly where the signs said. You got off where you ended up.

The bus drove through Centro. The Mercado Municipal lay dark but awake inside. Beneath the metal shutters, the smell of damp wood, fish, lemon, and cleaning water was trapped. A lone cart stood several handbreadths from its old wheel tracks. The night driver saw a small pale sphere on the ground beside the wheel. Perhaps a lemon. Perhaps only a stone gleaming in the garúa. He drove on without looking more closely.

The park lay to the left. The lamps were switched off and intact. It was a difference you could see at night if you drove through San Desvelo long enough. Broken lamps had a dead edge. Switched-off lamps waited. The trees stood dark, their crowns heavy with moisture caught in the leaves. One bench was brighter than the others. At the edge of the park stood the Municipalidad's community hall. One of its windows was dark, but a bright strip lay across the glass, as if another room were reflected in it.

The black car was not in front of the Municipalidad.

The night driver noticed because he had expected it.

Then he spotted it after all: farther down on the other side of the street, half in a tree's shadow, in a place where parking avoided attention. The windows were dark. The interior looked empty, at least as far as the street could tell.

A white envelope lay on the passenger seat.

The night driver saw it for only a moment. Then the bus was past.

Behind the Municipalidad, the road climbed toward El Alto. From below, the black water tanks on the roofs merged into dark rounded edges against a sky that had not yet taken on any color. One of them leaned slightly. Another had a lid weighted down with two stones. The night driver thought of the brief sound of pumps he sometimes heard when he drove through the city toward morning, even though the water was off at that hour. It never sounded like water. More like something remembering how water had once sounded.

Farther south lay the unfinished edges of Los Pinos. There was not yet night in the proper sense because small security lights burned at some construction sites while others lay completely dark. Half-built walls stood in the darkness, rebar protruding from their tops. Plastic tarps moved without wind. A single water tank already stood on a roof above rooms without windows. The night driver glimpsed it only briefly between two houses. He also saw the road that continued outward toward the dry land. It lay dark and belonged to no schedule.

A child he had not noticed until then suddenly stood behind the seat of the woman with the bag. It held on to the seatback and looked outside. Perhaps it had been there the entire ride. Perhaps it had been asleep.

"What's there?" it asked.

The night driver hardly knew whether it meant Los Pinos, the water tanks, the darkness beyond them, or something visible only from a child's low vantage point.

"Not much yet," he said.

The child nodded. "But later?"

"Probably."

It sat down again without making a sound. In the mirror, the night driver saw only the top of its head, and then that too disappeared.

At the terminal, three people got off. The woman with the bag asked about tomorrow; the man by the window said the lights had been right.

"Not always a good sign," he added, and left.

The night driver waited until the area was empty and turned off the cumbia.

He switched it off.

The silence was incomplete. The engine was still running. From somewhere beneath the dashboard came a slight vibration, alien to the diesel. The night driver placed his hand on the steering wheel. The vibration held its place. It waited.

He looked at the clock.

2:17.

"Of course," he said.

The clock remained at 2:17. In the past, the night driver would have struck the glass. Today he let first the engine and then the vibration beneath the dashboard fall silent on their own.

A thin line of damp sand clung to the right rear tire. It smelled of concrete and cold pipe.

Southeast of Los Pinos, a bright streak appeared on the ground for a moment, as if someone had drawn a wet finger through dust. Then it was gone.

Behind the terminal's scratched plastic, the schedule crackled. Beside the night run, the usefully false time still read 02:15.

The night driver took the key from his pocket to lock the bus. Then he paused. Something lay on a seat in the last row, more like a ticket than luggage or an article of clothing: a folded piece of paper smaller than the palm of his hand.

He got back on. The floor gave beneath his weight as it always did, a small metallic sound he knew better than some voices. He walked to the back. The paper lay on the left-hand window seat. As far as he knew, that seat had remained empty during the ride.

He picked it up.

It was a ticket made of thin, poor-quality paper. The printing had almost run out, as if the ribbon at the counter had failed. SAN DESVELO was printed at the top. Beneath it, crooked and barely legible:

CANAL SECO.

The price and date were missing. There was only a punch hole at the edge, though the night driver's punch had remained unused.

He turned the ticket over. Sand clung to the back. A single damp streak ran diagonally across the paper and ended just short of the edge.

He could have wiped it away.

He did not.

At the front, the wooden cross struck the windshield although nothing in the bus was moving. Once. Then it hung still.

The night driver did not fold the ticket a second time. He set it on the dashboard beside the empty paper cup and the image of Señor de los Milagros. It lay crooked there. One corner lifted because a crack ran through the plastic beneath it.

It was not getting lighter outside. Not yet. But the night was losing weight. Somewhere toward the Mercado, a metal door was raised. A dog barked once. From El Alto came the brief sound of a pump, then it fell silent. The park and the Municipalidad remained dark. The black car was gone, unless the tree was hiding it.

The night driver sat down in his seat again. He left the door open. The garúa came into the bus and settled on the first step. Just enough to darken it.

The clock changed.

2:18.

He watched it until the digits were certain. Then he leaned back.

The night driver slipped the ticket beneath the frame of the holy image, far enough in that it held and remained visible.

Then he closed the bus door without letting it latch completely.

Beyond Los Pinos, the Canal Seco lay invisible in the darkness. It carried no water. That did not mean it was empty.