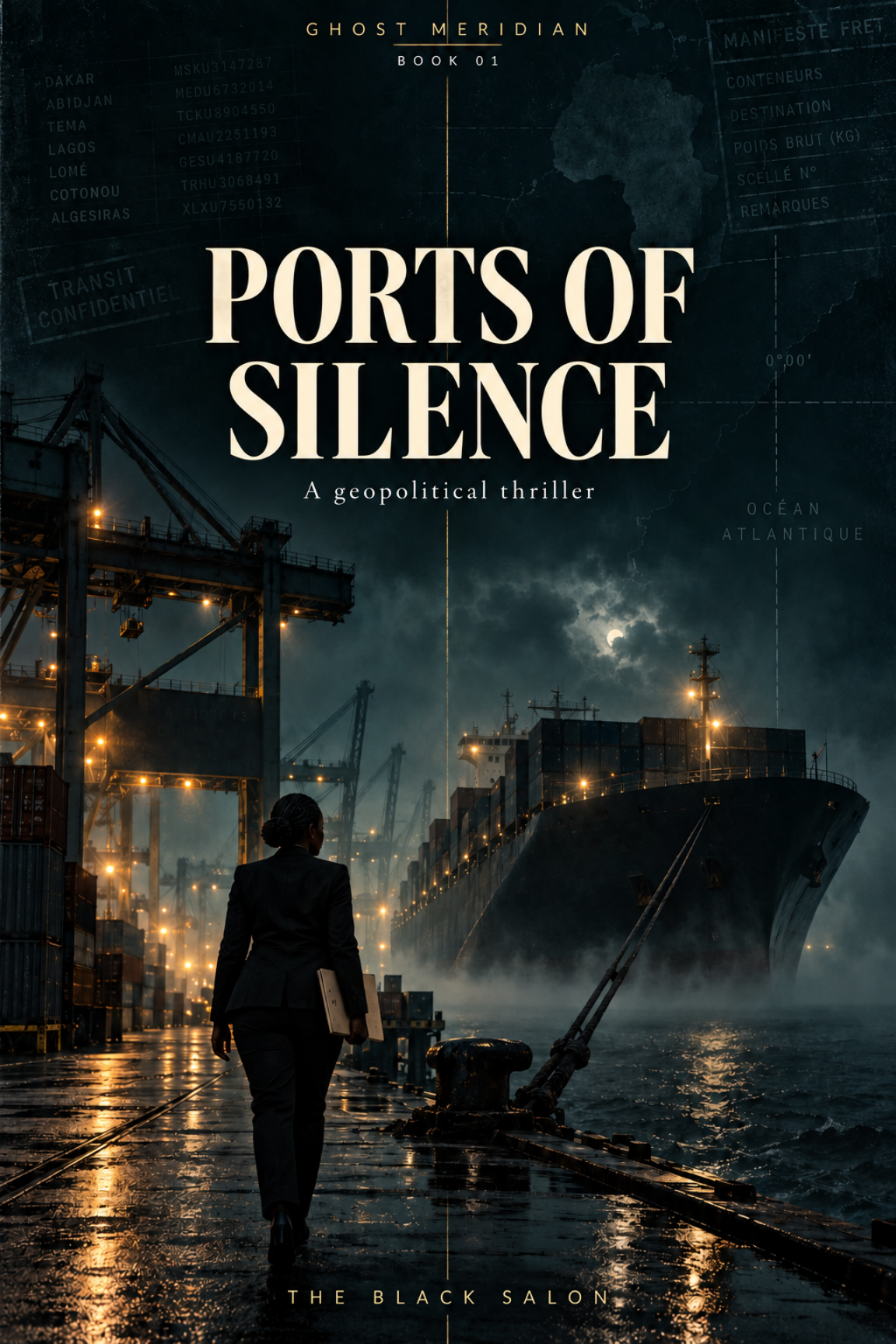
GHOST MERIDIAN

BOOK 01

PORTS OF SILENCE

A geopolitical thriller



THE BLACK SALON

GHOST MERIDIAN

Ports of Silence

READING EXCERPT

The first six chapters of Book 1. This free excerpt is not the complete book. The full novel is available at theblacksalon.com/ghost-meridian.

A work of fiction. Characters and organisations involved in the plot are fictional. Real places provide the setting.

Original text, translation and cover developed with artificial intelligence assistance for The Black Salon.

The Black Salon · 2026

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CHAPTER 01

The Empty Space

The first thing Nora Soglo noticed was a cup. White, with a cracked handle and a ring of dried coffee at the bottom. Someone had left it on the ledge of a guard hut, beside three bolts. All around it, things carried on: an engine idled, a crane swung round, a man rubbed his eyes while he waited for someone to open a barrier. The cup seemed to be waiting for someone too.

Basile Dossou handed her a hard hat.

“Have you got your safety boots?”

Nora glanced down at her ankle boots. He nodded before she could answer. He was about fifty, long-faced, in a clean shirt already darkening at the collar. On his badge, SECURITY was printed larger than his name.

“We have an hour,” he said. “Then they’re bringing the area back into use.”

“Who decided that?”

“Operations. Following internal approval.”

That last word hung between them. Nora was neither a police officer nor a workplace safety inspector. Arcadie Maritime had sent her to examine property damage reported during a fatal accident. Her letter of appointment gave her access to the insured goods, movement records and anything required to assess the loss. It fitted inside an envelope. Jonas Agbo’s death took up only two lines.

They walked between rows of containers. Through a gap, Nora glimpsed a strip of grey water before a lorry blocked it from view. The Solstice Logistique facility occupied a part of the port she had never entered. Yet she knew Cotonou: the routes that

changed with the roadworks, the places where you could still find bread once the day had finished eating you alive. Her aunt lived on the other side of the city. Nora had not called her. An announced visit would have turned into lunch; lunch into the obligation to explain why she had come back with a suitcase that was too small.

Dossou stopped in front of a bay cordoned off with red tape.

"Here."

There were two paint marks on the ground and a paler area that had recently been cleaned. Beside a blue container, an industrial crate rested on blocks. One corner had burst open. Wood fibres protruded beneath the strapping like the bristles of a crushed brush.

"The crate slipped when it was being lifted again," Dossou said. "Agbo was between the load and the chassis."

"Who saw it?"

"The driver. Two cargo handlers were behind him."

"Have you got their statements?"

"In the file."

Nora waited. Dossou realised she wanted names, not the promise of a file. He checked his phone, read three lines and gave them to her. She wrote them down. On a first visit, she always wrote people's names by hand. In a previous line of work, she had learnt to file people under their job titles. It had taken her several years to lose the habit.

The characters on the side of the container were clear: SLGU 481206-3. A rectangle of newer paint surrounded the last one. Nora photographed the whole thing, then the load plate, then the crate. She was not touching anything yet.

"Has it been there since the accident?"

"Since the area was made safe."

"That's not the same thing."

Dossou looked at her. He did not seem offended; more weary that she had caught it.

“They moved it out of the way for the emergency services. Then it was put back here.”

“And the other crates?”

He pointed to the closed container doors. Eighteen units had been declared: converters intended for an industrial electrical grid. According to its label, the crate on the ground was number seventeen. There were two small parallel cuts in the adhesive. Perhaps the strapping had been replaced. Nothing to warrant suspicion yet.

She crouched down, keeping clear of the cleaned area. On one side, the wood had broken outwards; on the other, inwards. She asked for a ruler. Dossou found one in his bag. As she measured, a forklift went past behind them with the sound of metal crockery rattling.

She also asked for an overall photograph taken before the crate had been moved. Dossou scrolled through the pictures on his phone. In one, a rescuer’s high-visibility vest obscured the point of contact with the chassis; in another, headlights flattened everything. Nora asked him to preserve the files as they were and send them with the dates on which they had been taken. An imperfect photograph could still show an angle, an obstacle, the space left for a man to move through. She sketched a small plan and asked him to trace the forklift’s presumed route. At the second turn, Dossou stopped his finger.

“I didn’t see that bit. Someone told me.”

Nora replaced the solid line with dashes. He looked at the drawing, then added the position of a floodlight himself. The plan was beginning to distinguish what had been seen from what had already become a story.

“How old was he?” she asked.

“Thirty-four.”

“Jonas.”

“Yes. Thirty-four.”

The first name changed the way Dossou stood. He tucked his chin in slightly and looked at the crate instead of Nora.

“Had he worked here long?”

“Four years. Before that, he moved from contract to contract. Here too, at first.”

Nora took two more photographs, then stood up. The rim of the hard hat was pressing into her forehead. At thirty-eight, she had less tolerance for things designed to fit an average head. She adjusted the dial, to no effect.

“I’d like to see the chronology.”

Dossou’s office was in a low building beyond a car park where employees were already eating beside their vehicles. It was barely nine in the morning. A woman crossed between the spaces, talking through earphones, a bag of mandarins hanging from her wrist. Nora was suddenly hungry.

The cold air in the office smelt of damp dust. Two chairs faced a cluttered table. Dossou moved some binders aside and opened a blue file. The first form had been printed sideways, then put the right way round in pen. Nora saw the time of death as recorded in the report supplied by the emergency team: 22:10, 16 February 2027.

Two days earlier.

According to the first call, the accident had happened at 21:54. Sixteen minutes between a noise and an irrevocable entry on a form. Nora looked at the signature at the bottom of the copy. At this stage, she had no reason to doubt the time. She copied it without adding the word “exact”.

“What time did you send the property damage notification?”

“The following morning. The shift supervisor completed his report that night, but we didn’t open the insurance file until after the inventory.”

“Who carried out the inventory?”

“Operations.”

That faceless subject again. She asked for a copy, then went through the documents in the order they had been filed. Lorry arrival, container set-down, visual inspection, movement to a secondary area. An orange notice bore the words “transit risk review”. It was not wording she recognised from Arcadie’s standard forms.

“Is this usual?”

Dossou tilted the sheet.

“It happens. The client asks for a unit to be kept separate.”

“The client or the insurer?”

“We receive the notice. We follow the instruction.”

There had been no impatience in his reply. Nora recognised the narrow precision of people trying to tell the truth while limiting the scope of their responsibility.

She turned the page. The weighing table showed a gross weight of 25,140 kilograms. The adjacent cell read 22:47, 16 February.

Nora put down her pen.

“Was the container weighed after the accident?”

Dossou leaned forward.

“That must be the validation time.”

“Do you know that, or are you assuming?”

This time, he looked up at her.

“I’m assuming.”

She gave him a brief smile, for the answer rather than what it contained.

“I need the original ticket. And the inbound weighing record.”

“The department will send them to you.”

“Today.”

He took a blank sheet to write down her request. In a corner of his desk, a photograph showed three teenagers in sports kit, pressed together in front of a football goal. Nora looked away before he could explain who they were.

She went on. The estimated damage concerned “packaging, loss of use and possible impact damage to components”. No

discrepancy had been noted in the number of crates. The form gave the same amount for the immediate reserve and the maximum potential loss. That was possible, but lazy. She drew a line beneath both figures.

“Who declared the value?”

“You’ll have to ask your company.”

For the first time, there was an edge to the possessive.

Nora closed the file, but not completely. She kept a finger between two pages.

“I’m not trying to make you responsible for everything that happened on Tuesday night.”

“I know.”

“I simply want to know which records were made at the time.”

“I know that too.”

A telephone rang in the next room. Dossou let it ring twice, then got up to answer it. Nora heard “she’s still here”, and then the door closed.

She stared at the corner of the file. There was nothing remarkable about announcing the presence of an insurance investigator. She had been announced at the gate. She had signed a logbook. Her visit was disrupting an operation in which every minute had a price, known to those who paid it and rarely to those who waited. The old reflex of searching for hidden intent in the smallest pronoun had already cost her time and friends.

Dossou returned with a bottle of water.

“They’re preparing your copies.”

“Thank you.”

She pointed to a witness’s name on the first page.

“Which team was he assigned to?”

“Weighing, normally. Extra cover that night.”

“Can I meet him?”

“Her. Aïcha Mensah. She’s not on duty this morning.”

A woman, then. The report had said “operative”. Nora added the full first name to her notebook.

It took twenty-five minutes to obtain eight pages. Three were missing. The inbound weighing record and the original ticket were unavailable; the order to move the container to the secondary area belonged to another department. Dossou handed her the envelope with an expression she could not read.

On the way back, they passed the guard hut again. The cup had gone. An employee was rinsing the ledge with water from a canister.

“Was it his?” Nora asked.

Dossou followed her gaze.

“No. The guard’s.”

She nodded. The mind invented relics with disconcerting ease.

Outside, the heat settled on her shoulders. She stepped away from the stream of vehicles to call her contact at Arcadie Maritime. While she waited for the ringing tone, she looked at the eight sheets, their new staples, the little black mark the copier had left in the same place on every page.

“Well?” Claire Maret asked.

Claire worked in Paris. Nora could hear in her voice that she already had several files open at once.

“The packaging has taken a substantial impact. I can’t reach a conclusion about the equipment until the crate is opened with the relevant parties present. I’m missing the weighing records and the movement order.”

“Nothing holding things up?”

“Those are precisely the records I need before I can say.”

A brief silence followed.

“The broker wants an initial note this afternoon. Even a provisional one.”

“Which broker?”

“Valcourt. Adrien Valcourt. You must have come across his firm.”

She knew the name as you might know a hotel you had never stayed in. Complex cover, major accounts, risk conferences in windowless rooms.

“I’ll send the observations I’ve established,” she said.

“Good. Keep it factual.”

After hanging up, Nora stood for a few seconds with the phone in her hand. People always asked you to keep it factual before there were enough facts to become inconvenient.

She did not turn it into a maxim. She had work to do. She opened a fresh page in her notebook and wrote down two times, with a space between them: 22:10. 22:47.

Thirty-seven minutes could amount to nothing more than the records being brought up to date. An operative had finished entering data after the emergency response; someone had validated a movement that had been left pending. She wrote those two possibilities beneath the figures.

Then she added a third, without underlining it: “The container really did move.”

Before putting away the notebook, she called the number she had been given for Jonas Agbo’s family. A woman answered. Nora introduced herself, explained her assignment and asked whether the woman would be willing to see her.

“Are you coming about the crates?” the woman asked.

Nora looked at the gate behind her.

“They’re what I was sent here for.”

A door slammed at the other end of the line. The woman gave her an address.

CHAPTER 02

What Belongs to the Living

Lydie Agbo opened the door before Nora had finished knocking. She wore blue trousers and a T-shirt marked by a small floury fingerprint. Behind her, a fan stirred the corners of a transparent tablecloth.

“Come in. If you’ve brought something for me to sign, put it down first.”

Nora set her bag on a chair.

“I haven’t.”

“They all say that on the phone.”

An older woman was peeling an orange with a short knife. A young man of about twenty slept on a sofa, one arm folded over his face. The television showed silent images of a debate. Lydie turned the volume down again, although it was already at zero.

“My aunt Esther. My cousin. He stayed with us last night.”

Nora greeted them. Esther replied with a nod and went on with her task, without offering her a segment. It was neither coldness nor welcome, merely the necessary continuation of something she had begun.

Lydie brought two glasses of water. She sat opposite Nora, her hands between her knees. She resembled the photograph of her brother stapled to the file, but her mouth was narrower, her eyebrows higher. Nora wondered whether the resemblance had struck her before she came in or whether she was inventing it now, because she had never known Jonas alive.

“You said insurance,” Lydie went on.

“Arcadie Maritime. They insure the goods that were being moved when the accident happened. I’m independent. They’ve appointed me to assess the loss.”

“What about my brother’s insurance?”

“I’m not handling that. I can tell you exactly which matters fall within my assignment and which don’t.”

Lydie picked up her glass and put it down again.

“At least that’s an answer.”

She got up, fetched a folder from beneath a cabinet and took out three business cards. Two carried the same logo, Solstice’s. The third belonged to a firm whose name Nora did not recognise. Someone had called the previous day to offer help with the paperwork. She had left a document to be initialled, with no copy attached.

“Did you sign it?”

“No. I asked for a copy. She hasn’t answered since.”

Esther put the peel on a plate.

“Lydie reads everything,” she said.

“I work in a laboratory. If a box is filled in wrong, I’m the one who has to do it again. I’ve got into the habit.”

She did not smile. Nora thought people had probably already congratulated Lydie on her courage, her strength, her ability to cope. You only had to see the way she kept her feet tucked beneath her chair to understand what those compliments cost her.

“What are you looking for here?” she asked.

“I’m trying to understand what changed in your brother’s work on Tuesday night. Whether he’d mentioned an unusual movement, a problem with a crate. But I can come back.”

“It’ll still be true tomorrow.”

Lydie pointed towards the bedroom at the back.

“We’d been living together for two years. Our mother was going to be in Bohicon for a few more days. She’s coming back tonight. Jonas wanted us to repaint before her visit.”

On the wall near the door, a square of white filler was indeed lighter than the surrounding paint. A sheet of paper had been taped underneath to catch the dust. Nora looked at it for a moment, then turned back to Lydie.

“Did you see him on Tuesday?”

“In the morning. He asked me to collect his trousers from the tailor. I forgot.”

She said the last words with a flatness directed at no one. Nora did not tell her it did not matter. The trousers mattered precisely because they never would again.

A phone vibrated on the cabinet. Lydie read the name, rejected the call and turned the phone face down.

“He messaged me around seven in the evening. To ask whether there was any rice left.”

“And after that?”

“After that, nothing. A colleague called. I didn’t understand the beginning of what he said. I asked him to start again. He started again from good evening.”

Esther stopped peeling her orange. The cousin stirred on the sofa, then turned towards its back. No one came to rescue them from the silence.

Eventually, Lydie picked up the folder. She took out a payslip, a rota and an envelope containing the personal effects the company had returned. A set of keys, a cardholder, a foreign coin with a hole through its centre. No phone.

“Where is it?” Nora asked.

“With the people examining what happened. That’s what I was told.”

“Have you got a receipt?”

Lydie produced another sheet. Nora read it without taking it from her. A handset and some clothing were listed. She had no business interfering with that procedure; it was enough to know the phone had not disappeared into an unlabelled drawer.

“May I look at the rota?”

Lydie slid it towards her.

Jonas had been due to finish at eight in the evening. A handwritten extension had added three hours to his shift. Beside it were an incomplete first name and an initial. Nora asked who had added the line.

“Him, I think. He copied his hours onto a sheet of paper so he could check them against his pay. It’s not their form.”

“Had he agreed to stay?”

“He often stayed. Not for nothing.”

At last, the faintest smile crossed her face.

“Jonas could spend half an hour explaining why fifteen minutes was a quarter of an hour too much. Then he’d spend a whole day helping you move house.”

Esther nodded, emphatically this time.

“He charged companies. Not people.”

The words restored a distinction to Jonas that the word “victim” had already taken away. Nora asked Lydie’s permission to photograph only the rota. When it was given, she took the picture and showed her the result. The small gesture slowed their conversation down. It also made it more bearable.

In the kitchen, a saucepan began rattling against its lid. Lydie stood up. Esther had already put down her knife.

“Stay there,” Lydie said. “It’s for me.”

She came back with bread and a plate of eggs. She had cooked more than was needed. She put a fork in front of Nora without asking whether she was hungry. Nora ate. For a few minutes, it was easier to be a person sitting at a table than the representative of a case file.

“Soglo,” Esther said. “Is your family here?”

“Some of them. My father grew up in Ouidah. I mostly grew up in France.”

“Do you understand Fon?”

“Better than I speak it.”

“Then make sure you understand when someone tells you something.”

Lydie protested gently. Nora shook her head.

“She’s right.”

She did not explain her childhood, the summers cut short by air fares, the embarrassment of answering in French when she understood the questions, the years she had spent pretending that embarrassment was gone. All of that belonged to her. It had no place at this table.

After the meal, Lydie opened a drawer and took out a small notebook with a green cover.

“He wrote his journeys in here. When a driver was supposed to bring him home. If it’s any use to you.”

Nora hesitated before opening it.

“Have you read it?”

“The recent pages. The rest is none of your business.”

Lydie folded the older pages back behind the cover herself. Nora saw figures, first names, a few amounts crossed out. Under 16 February, one line read “Koffi, home 20:00”, and below it, “don’t wait”. There was a number beside the name.

“A friend?”

“A driver he’d known since before Solstice. Koffi Daran. He called him on Monday. They were supposed to meet.”

“Do you know why?”

“They didn’t need a reason to see each other.”

Nora nodded. It had been a bad question.

A vertical line separated another note: “18 items = 18 signatures?” The words were not self-explanatory. They could refer to the cargo or to any other inventory problem. She asked whether Jonas often brought his work home.

“When he was angry. He wasn’t this time. Mostly, he wanted to get off that team.”

“Why?”

“Because they asked him to cover hours that weren’t his. Because the supervisor kept changing the days off. Not because he’d uncovered something extraordinary, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

This time, Nora accepted the correction without a smile.

“I’m not thinking anything yet.”

“The ones who are don’t take long to turn up.”

Lydie took back the notebook, closed it and kept it on her lap. She allowed Nora to copy Koffi’s number. The notebook would stay in the house.

The cousin finally woke up. He sat upright, looked at Nora without understanding, then got to his feet to fetch a bottle of water. His shirt was creased from the sofa. Lydie asked whether he could collect the trousers. The young man blinked.

“Today?”

“Yes. Today.”

He took the banknote she held out and left. Nora watched Lydie follow his steps to the door with her eyes. When the silence returned, she seemed to sit less straight.

“They told me he’d been trying to save time,” she went on. “That he went where he shouldn’t have. Did you read that?”

“The preliminary report refers to incorrect positioning. It doesn’t establish why he was there.”

“Will you put that distinction in writing?”

“Yes.”

“Even if it has nothing to do with your goods?”

Nora looked at her closed notebook on the table. She could have explained the contractual limits, the qualifications concerning her remit. They were real. But Lydie was not asking her for a medical opinion or a promise of justice. She was asking her not to make an uncertainty disappear behind a stock phrase.

“Yes,” Nora repeated. “I’ll write it down.”

Lydie got up to let her out. In the passage, she handed her a copy of the document supplied by the emergency team. Nora had not asked to take it with her.

“You were looking at the time on the sheet earlier.”

“I need to put the movements in order.”

“Ten past ten. They told me twice. As though it mattered that I knew the minute.”

Nora folded the copy without covering Jonas’s name. Two sources now agreed on the time, but they could have originated from the same record. She made a mental note not to present them as two independent confirmations.

“If anyone asks why you spoke to me, just tell them the truth.”

Lydie stared at her.

“Is someone going to ask me?”

Nora immediately felt the needless weight of what she had said.

“I don’t know. I shouldn’t have put it like that.”

“Then call when you know something. Not to warn me that you don’t know anything.”

She closed the door gently.

Nora walked a few paces down the street before taking out her phone. The city had not stopped around the house. A motorbike stood outside a shop, its rider busy counting his change. Two women were debating the width of a shelf. Further on, a man was painting a gate without managing to prevent the drips.

Nora called Koffi Daran. He answered on the second attempt, an engine audible behind his voice.

“Lydie gave me your number. I’m working on the container involved in Jonas’s accident.”

The engine quietened, then stopped.

“Have you spoken to the woman at the weighbridge?”

“Not yet.”

“Start with her, then.”

“Why?”

Koffi took a breath long enough for Nora to think the call had dropped.

“Because Jonas called her before he called me. And I left.”

He gave her the address of a workshop where Aïcha was having her scooter repaired. He did not know whether she would be there, only that she was due to collect it that day. Nora repeated the workshop’s name to check, then suggested meeting him later.

“Later,” he said.

He hung up without agreeing a time. Nora stood facing the newly painted gate for a moment, then booked a car. In her bag, the copy of the report lay folded in the same way as her letter of appointment. She separated them before the driver arrived.

CHAPTER 03

Six Hundred and Eighty

The workshop had no sign visible from the road. The name Koffi had given her was painted on an inner door, behind a row of tyres. Nora asked an apprentice cleaning a wing mirror for Aïcha Mensah. He pointed to a woman sitting on an upturned crate, a helmet between her ankles.

“If you’ve come to tell me ten minutes as well, I’ll end up believing you,” the woman said.

Nora showed her professional card. Aïcha read it without taking it.

“Who sent you here?”

“Koffi Daran. I’ve been with Jonas’s sister.”

Aïcha looked at the apprentice, then at the road.

“This isn’t a good place.”

“We could go for a walk.”

“I’m not going for a walk so people can see me walking with you.”

Nora put her card away. Aïcha had her hair gathered low at the nape, pale trousers stained at the knee and the voice of someone with no intention of apologising. She got up to speak to the mechanic. He replied without lifting his head out of the engine. Aïcha came back irritated, this time for a perfectly ordinary reason.

“The carburettor yesterday. Now it’s something else. He’s rebuilding it a piece at a time.”

She pointed to a small adjoining room used for storing spare parts. The mechanic agreed they could sit there. The door would stay open. Aïcha chose the chair nearest the exit.

Nora explained her assignment. She used neither “discrepancy” nor “fraud”. She simply asked whether 22:47 was the time of a measurement or the late validation of an earlier one.

“Did Dossou tell you it was a validation?”

“He suggested that explanation. He made it clear he wasn’t sure.”

Aïcha ran her thumb over a corner of her helmet.

“At least he did.”

Outside, a spanner fell onto the concrete. The apprentice swore quietly. Aïcha waited for the compressor to stop before continuing.

“The lorry was on the weighbridge. At twenty-two forty-seven. I was there.”

“Did you weigh it?”

“I monitored the measurement. The night supervisor wanted to link it to the previous entry. The form was already open.”

“Why?”

“Ask him.”

Nora nodded, then laid the copy of the table Dossou had supplied on a pile of boxes. Aïcha looked at it from where she sat.

“I didn’t sign that.”

“Your name isn’t on it.”

“Exactly.”

The line carried an operator number, 417. During the morning’s visit, Nora had taken it for a workstation reference. She now circled it in pencil.

“Was that Jonas’s?”

“Yes. Not a secret code. A number in a list. Anyone could select an operative if they had permission to open the form. Our software’s old. They promised to replace it before the end of last year.”

An ordinary weakness, not an elaborate operation. Nora noted the distinction.

“Does the number identify whoever requested the movement, or whoever validated the weighing?”

For the first time, Aïcha looked at her without immediate mistrust.

“The person the movement is assigned to. Not necessarily whoever’s using the keyboard. That’s why they’ll tell you everything’s normal.”

“And sometimes it is?”

“Sometimes, yes.”

Aïcha took out her phone, found an image and held it towards her. Nora saw a pale blue sheet photographed against tiles. The picture was blurred at the edges, but the figures were legible: 25,140. The time: 22:47. The container identifier matched.

“Why a paper ticket?”

“The weighbridge printer cuts out. When it produces two blank sheets, we use the backup book. The original goes into the file; the duplicate stays at the station. That night, they told me to throw the set away. They were going to print out something clean.”

“You kept it.”

“One sheet. The one I’d written on.”

“Where is it?”

“Not here.”

Nora pressed no further. She only asked to look at the photograph again. In an almost faded box, two figures overlapped: an inbound weight, copied in pen, and the new weight. She tilted the phone to avoid a reflection.

24,460.

She did the subtraction on her own phone. Six hundred and eighty kilograms.

“Was it the same lorry?”

“Not the tractor unit. Same chassis.”

Nora looked up. A change in gross weight could come from the carrying vehicle if the measurement had not been adjusted. She

asked Aïcha to describe precisely what each figure represented, without skipping anything.

“We had the vehicle’s weight separately in the system. The number you’re looking at is the container and everything inside it. If the vehicle changes, we redo its reference weight. We’re supposed to, anyway.”

“Was it redone?”

“I asked for it. Twice.”

“And did you see it?”

Aïcha hesitated.

“I saw the value come up on the screen. I didn’t see the tractor unit being weighed on its own. I’m not going to tell you I was there.”

Nora recorded the three points separately: late measurement witnessed; change of tractor unit; vehicle reference weight not verified by the witness. Six hundred and eighty kilograms were not yet six hundred and eighty kilograms of goods. The paper raised a question. It did not answer it.

“You’ve got a funny look on your face,” Aïcha said.

“I’m trying not to make you claim more than you know.”

“Most people do the opposite.”

She took her phone back, checking that Nora had not photographed anything without asking. Nora liked that concern. She understood it very well.

An engine started outside. Aïcha got up at once. The mechanic was testing her scooter. She joined him, waited for him to rev it twice and asked why he had left it with the same problem. Nora stayed in the little room. Behind the voices she could hear traffic, a vendor calling something too quickly for her to make out the words, laughter. It was no setting for a revelation. It was the middle of an afternoon in which someone needed to leave with a vehicle that worked.

Aïcha returned after five minutes.

“Another half an hour. Have you got time?”

“Yes.”

“Then you can pay for the juice. Not the repairs.”

They sat near the door, each holding a cold bottle. Nora asked whether Jonas had been involved in moving the load after eight in the evening.

“He went with the crate they took out of the container. They’d asked him to check the references before it was put back.”

“Who had?”

“The night supervisor. That’s all I heard.”

“Why had it been taken out?”

“A risk alert. They wanted to check a series. For us, that meant waiting, then starting again.”

The orange notice. Nora recalled the unfamiliar wording in Dossou’s file.

“Who decided on the inspection?”

“A man in a grey shirt. He’d been before, the week before. He wasn’t wearing our colours.”

“Do you know his name?”

“No. And not every man in a grey shirt is the same man.”

Nora gave a small laugh. Aïcha only half smiled.

“They like descriptions,” she added. “Then they bring a photograph and ask if that was him. You end up recognising the photograph.”

“Then stick to what you remember.”

“He had a tin of lozenges. Kept opening it. The lid made a click.”

Nora wrote down the words without giving them more weight than they deserved. She did not want to manufacture a suspect out of a shirt and a habit.

“Had Jonas noticed the difference in weight?”

“Not that one. He was dead.”

The answer fell without any raising of her voice. Nora looked down at the bottle. The cold glass had wet her fingers.

“I meant before the accident. Another difference.”

“He’d counted the crates. He said they were making him sign for movements, not contents. He didn’t want to sign anything else without looking. That doesn’t mean he knew what was inside.”

The equation in Jonas’s notebook took clearer shape: eighteen items, eighteen signatures. He had raised a question about responsibility, perhaps before any question about the cargo itself.

“Did you hear what happened when the accident took place?”

“A shout. The engine noise changed. By the time I got there, they were already trying to get him out. I went back to call for help. I didn’t see anything fall.”

“They’ve listed you as a witness.”

“I witnessed what happened afterwards. That’s what I told them.”

Nora explained that she would be submitting a provisional note to Arcadie. She would mention the weighing after the time of death and the absence of records allowing a proper comparison of the weights. She would not identify Aïcha as the source of the sheet without her agreement.

“But you need the paper,” Aïcha said.

“Yes. To examine it and make a copy. You can keep it if you wish.”

“It doesn’t belong to me. It’s a company duplicate.”

“You’re right. I mean I won’t keep it unless we’ve agreed what I’m going to do with it.”

Aïcha turned the bottle between her palms. Then she gave a time and the address of a small copy shop. 17:30. She would be there with the ticket. Somewhere you could copy a sheet of paper without making an event of it.

Before getting up, she asked what would happen to her statement if Arcadie appointed a different investigator. Nora had to admit that she could not control the internal circulation of a report once she had sent it. She could limit identifying details, keep a record of what she passed on and agree each additional

document with Aïcha. She could not promise that no one would try to identify the person who had been at the weighbridge that night.

“It’s not difficult,” Aïcha said. “There were three of us.”

“No. It’s not difficult.”

Aïcha looked at the workshop for a moment, then explained that she had applied for maintenance training. She wanted to learn how to work on the machines, not spend her whole life sitting behind their screens. A disciplinary entry could jeopardise her application. Nora did not try to tell her that the truth was bound to protect her in the end. She asked whether she wanted to put off making the copy.

“I kept that paper because they were asking me to forget it,” Aïcha replied. “Now I want it used to ask the right question.”

She settled her helmet into the crook of her arm. Their appointment still stood.

Nora arrived ten minutes early. She reread her notes at a table while a student bound a dissertation near the counter. Aïcha came in at the agreed time, helmet over her arm. She had collected her scooter. She did not say whether it worked.

The ticket lay between two pages of a household accounts book. Held to the light, the carbon copy revealed clearer figures than the photograph and the impression of a signature that had only partly come through. Nora asked which details Aïcha had written herself. The time, the weight, the container reference. Not the operator number, which had been added before the set was handed to her.

They made two copies, keeping one each. Nora also photographed the front and back, then the sheet beside a page bearing the date of their meeting and Aïcha’s explanation. Aïcha read the text and crossed out one word: “validated”. She wrote “recorded” in its place.

“That’s different,” she said.

“Yes.”

Nora recorded the correction. The ticket proved neither what had been loaded nor who had wanted it done. But it made it much harder to claim that 22:47 was merely a data-entry time invented the following day.

An hour later, in her hotel, she opened her laptop. Her room overlooked the wall of the neighbouring building. On the ground floor, someone was practising the same notes on a guitar with peaceful determination.

She wrote three pages. Physical observations. Documents examined. Missing records. She distinguished the facts she had observed herself from documentary information and statements requiring confirmation. The sentence about Jonas was in the second paragraph: none of the available evidence established that he had taken up his position on his own initiative.

For the weights, she set out the arithmetical difference followed by the qualifications that still prevented it from being interpreted. Finally, she requested that the original records be preserved and the cargo not be moved again until an inspection could be carried out with the relevant parties present.

She stood up to reread the note. At 19:12, she sent it to Claire Maret.

Dinner arrived on a covered plate. Nora ate by the window with the laptop closed. In the courtyard, the guitarist had finally got past the bar that had been giving him trouble. She stayed to listen to what followed, right to the end.

CHAPTER 04

The Useful Version

Claire Maret called while Nora was trying to get a second cup of coffee. It was 08:06. In the breakfast room, the television was explaining a reform in sport to almost empty tables.

“Valcourt is in Cotonou,” Claire said.

“I assume my note didn’t bring him out overnight.”

“He was already there. He’d like to see you this morning.”

“To bring me the documents?”

“To clarify the qualifications.”

Nora thanked the waiter with a gesture. He had just put a whole coffee pot in front of her.

“The qualifications are clear enough.”

Claire fell silent. Nora heard a keyboard, then a door. When Claire spoke again, her voice was lower.

“I’ve had three calls since seven. Paris time. So before I even got to the office. Your report has already reached two partners who weren’t supposed to have it.”

“I only sent it to you.”

“I know. That doesn’t alter the fact that they have it.”

“Then ask who sent it to them.”

“I am. Meanwhile, meet him. He says he can explain the difference in weight.”

Nora agreed to meet him in her hotel’s conference room at nine. She would have preferred a place she had chosen entirely herself, but there was no point turning every convenience into a battle. She took her notebook, a printed copy of the note and an empty folder for the new documents.

Adrien Valcourt arrived four minutes late and did not apologise until he had greeted the receptionist. A tall, slim man in his fifties, with a guarded air, he carried a soft briefcase and wore a jacket too light to crease. Nora recognised his face from a photograph in a reinsurance file long ago. In the photograph, he had been holding a glass of water. Here, he asked for the same thing.

“Ms Soglo. Thank you for making the time.”

“Do you have new documents?”

“A few. But first, I’d like to know whether the situation has been fully explained to you.”

He put his briefcase at his feet. The room smelt of cleaning fluid and the projector’s warm cables. Six chairs surrounded a table intended for ten. Nora sat at one end, leaving Valcourt to choose the distance between them.

“I was assigned a container damaged in a fatal accident,” she said. “I’ve requested the records necessary to examine it.”

“You also requested that movements be stopped.”

“Suspended pending an inspection with the relevant parties present.”

“On the ground, that amounts to the same stoppage.”

He delivered each sentence in a way that made repeating it unnecessary. Nora had met people like him in her old government department: people who could discuss a phrase for an hour, then use a different one in the minutes.

Valcourt opened his briefcase and took out a two-page table. He placed it in front of her, facing the right way.

“Two different tractor units. Difference in unladen weight: six hundred and eighty kilograms. You see the problem.”

What she saw, above all, was that the figure matched her report exactly. A coincidence proved nothing, either way.

“Where are the individual tickets?”

“This is a summary from the haulier.”

“I gathered that. Where are the measurements it’s based on?”

“We’re waiting for them.”

“Then, for the moment, we’re waiting for the same thing.”

Valcourt placed both hands flat on the table. His nails were short, with no particular shine. Nora noticed he wore no wedding ring, then immediately stopped interpreting the detail.

“The table is enough to show there’s a reasonable technical explanation.”

“My note allows for one. I wrote that the comparison of weights required verification.”

“After drawing attention to the figure.”

“It’s in the body of the text. Like the other figures.”

Valcourt gave a slight smile, almost for her benefit.

“You know how these notes are read.”

Yes. She knew. People read the words they could quote to a superior, a client, the legal department. The rest became context, which meant whatever would not fit into the subject line of the next message.

“Exactly,” she said. “I prefer to keep the qualification beside the number.”

He took out a second sheet: suggested wording. Nora recognised shortened versions of the paragraphs in her note. The sentence about Jonas’s position had disappeared. The time of 22:47 was presented as an administrative validation. The change of tractor unit now explained the difference in weight, without any qualification.

“This isn’t a correction,” she said.

“It’s a version we can use.”

“With facts that haven’t been established.”

“They will be.”

She laid the sheet on the table. She needed to feel her own hand open and relaxed. In a Paris office eleven years earlier, she had signed a note after being given the same promise: the supporting records would follow. They had followed, but they did not say what the summary had already made them say. She had

spent the following weeks explaining that her original caution had disappeared between versions. She had not become more heroic since then. She had become less willing to lose sleep over a sentence written by somebody else.

“I can issue an addendum today,” she said. “Once I’ve received the tickets and spoken to the staff concerned. I can’t backdate certainty.”

Valcourt moved his chair back slightly.

“Nobody’s asking you to backdate anything.”

“Your wording presents as established something that still needs to be checked.”

“You’re very attached to vocabulary.”

“It’s how we put what we know on the record.”

The waiter knocked and brought the water. Valcourt helped clear a space on the table and thanked him by the first name on his badge. It could have been courtesy or technique. Nora had no reason to choose between them.

When the door closed, the broker spoke about the cargo. Eighteen converters, a waiting buyer, a construction site where delays cost money. He gave no spectacular figure. He did not need to. The suspension could trigger a chain of compensation claims, cause other cover to be reviewed, shift the loss onto companies with nothing to do with the accident.

Nora let him finish.

“All of that calls for a prompt investigation. Not a conclusion in advance.”

“And the family?”

She looked up.

“What about the family?”

“We’re trying to arrange an advance assistance payment. If the file becomes contentious, everyone will want another opinion. You know how long that takes.”

Lydie’s face came back to her, not in tears but looking at the three business cards. Nora gently pushed the summary away.

“Assistance for the family doesn’t depend on my assessment of eighteen crates. If someone has made it conditional on my report, they need to put that in writing.”

Valcourt’s smile retreated. Not entirely. Enough remained for the next sentence still to pass as advice.

“Do you work with Arcadie often?”

“Often enough to know their procedure.”

“I was thinking of your commercial relationship. They value your precision. They sometimes find your availability more difficult.”

Nora felt a sudden weariness rising. She had three invoices outstanding, rent coming due and a car repair postponed since December. Her business account did not allow her to play at being independent of everything. Valcourt might know none of those details. All he needed to know was that she worked alone.

“If you want to discuss the contract, we can call Claire together.”

“I’m not threatening your contract.”

“Then we can get back to the documents.”

This time, he put away the suggested wording. He folded it carefully, like something that might be useful later. He left the weight summary in front of Nora.

“I’ll have what we’ve got sent over to you.”

“And the risk notice that led to the crate being taken out.”

A fraction of a second passed before he answered. Nora noticed it without giving it a name.

“It’s in the file.”

“The instruction is in the file. I’m asking where the alert originated and who first received it.”

“We centralise that kind of notice to prevent conflicting interpretations.”

“Your firm?”

“The insurance cover arrangement.”

The subject had just expanded enough to stop identifying anyone. Nora wrote down the four words exactly. Valcourt watched her do it.

They parted without shaking hands a second time. At reception, he stopped to ask for a restaurant address. Nora stayed in the conference room until she heard the front door.

She called Claire at once and described the meeting. Not the smiles, the missing wedding ring or the weariness. The precise requests, the proposed version, the suggested link to assistance for the family.

“Send me that version,” Claire said.

“He took it back.”

“You should have kept it.”

“I wasn’t going to snatch it out of his hand.”

Claire sighed, then apologised. Nora sent her the table and an account written while the conversation was still fresh. She distinguished exact words from passages she had summarised. She asked Claire to confirm in writing that her provisional note remained on file.

“I can acknowledge receipt,” Claire replied. “For the rest, I need to speak to management.”

“Do that.”

At 11:20, Nora received an email from Solstice. Her access to the site was suspended pending clarification of her remit. The wording was neutral. The message ended by wishing her a good day.

She called Dossou. He answered from somewhere noisy.

“I didn’t send that message.”

“I haven’t accused you of sending it.”

“I’d rather make that clear.”

She asked whether the container had been moved. He said he could not check immediately. She again requested that the original documents be preserved.

“Send your request to the general address,” he said.

“I already have.”

“Then keep the acknowledgement.”

He said nothing more. Nora thanked him. The advice might be a way of protecting himself, but it was still advice.

She spent the next hour organising what she had. Scans received in one folder, her photographs in another, dated notes in a third. She kept the original files and worked on copies. None of this made the documents unassailable. It merely stopped her damaging them herself in her efforts to explain them.

Valcourt’s summary identified the two tractor units by fleet references. There was no ticket number leading directly to a measurement. Through Claire, Nora asked the haulier to confirm which work each vehicle had been assigned that night. She worded the request without announcing what she hoped to find. If the six hundred and eighty kilograms really did come from the tractor units, she would say so; that correction would make the rest of her examination stronger, not less necessary.

She then called reception to extend the conference room booking. The receptionist told her that Valcourt had offered to pay the hire charge.

“Did you accept?”

“We said we’d have to check with you.”

“Charge it to my room, please.”

She did not see an attempt at bribery in every offer to settle a bill. She simply preferred not to have to establish, three months later, who had paid for the table around which she had been asked to change her mind. The receptionist noted the instruction without seeming to find it strange.

Then Nora calculated the cost of another week in Cotonou without fees. She subtracted the expenses already incurred, looked at the result and closed the spreadsheet. That number required no expert opinion.

Shortly after noon, Aïcha sent her a message: “Have you spoken to anyone about the sheet?”

Nora replied that she had referred to the weighing already in the file, without naming her source or passing on the carbon copy. She asked what was happening.

The reply came almost at once: “I’ve been called in for three. They want me to bring back everything that belongs to the company.”

Nora reread the message. Being called in was not yet a threat. Returning equipment could be part of an ordinary procedure. But the timetable had just ceased to be abstract.

She suggested that Aïcha record what she was asked to do, with names and times, then put the phone beside her plate. For lunch, she had bought bread and fruit outside. She cut a mango with the little knife in the room. One half was ripe, the other still firm. She ate both.

CHAPTER 05

The Price of Silence

At 14:20, Nora received Dossou's photographs. He had sent them from his work address with a single sentence: "Material requested during your visit on 18 February." Not a word about her access being suspended.

She opened each image. The emergency team around the chassis. The moved crate. The floodlight whose position he had added to her plan. None showed the fall, and she found no miraculous detail in the reflections. But one photograph showed the rear of the container: the left-hand door open, the right held by a strap. Inside, crates could be made out beyond the reach of the flash. Impossible to count them.

She filed the images and thanked Dossou. Doing exactly what he had promised was already a choice on his part.

Aïcha called just before three.

"I'm going in. If I don't answer, don't immediately decide they've buried me under a container."

"I'd rather you told me what time you expect to come out."

"Half an hour. An hour if there are a lot of them talking."

They agreed that Aïcha would send a message when she left the site. Nora reminded her to sign only what she understood and to ask for a copy. Aïcha replied that she had not needed to meet an investigator to learn how to read.

After hanging up, Nora smiled despite herself. Then Claire called.

"I've spoken to risk management."

"And?"

“They want to hand the assignment to a firm with a team on the ground.”

Nora looked at the open folder in front of her.

“Since when?”

“I’ve only just been told.”

“That isn’t what I asked.”

Claire let a few seconds pass.

“Since your meeting with Valcourt, I imagine. I wasn’t in the room.”

The candour was limited, but real. Nora asked for the reason in writing. Claire promised to send it. This did not yet mean, she said, that their working relationship was over for good. Arcadie simply wanted to avoid two competing assessments.

“There would only be one if they gave me the documents.”

“I know.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Because I do know, Nora. And the decision isn’t mine alone.”

Nora stood up. She took three steps towards the window, then came back without looking out.

“Are they asking you to remove my note from the file?”

“To treat it as an unapproved working document.”

“It’s signed, dated and submitted as a provisional note.”

“Provisional is exactly the word they’re using.”

They both fell silent. Claire had a child whose first name Nora knew and a husband she had met only once, over the phone, because he had answered during a lift breakdown. Theirs was not quite a friendship. Yet it was more than a line in a contacts list.

“There is a way through,” Claire went on. “You confirm that the weight discrepancy requires investigation, without maintaining the request to suspend movements. The firm takes over the checks. You invoice for your work, and we don’t turn this into a contractual dispute.”

“Who takes responsibility for letting the container leave?”

“The insurer and the operator.”

“Then let them take it. They don’t need me to withdraw my recommendation in order to make a different decision.”

“That’s what I’ll tell them.”

This time, Nora believed her. The words guaranteed no outcome, only an effort.

The email arrived at 15:34. “Reorganisation of loss assessment arrangements.” The letter requested the return of the documents entrusted to her and the cessation of enquiries made on Arcadie’s behalf. An appendix proposed an agreement in which Nora would acknowledge that her initial qualifications had received a satisfactory explanation.

She read that last phrase twice. It was precisely what was missing: a verified explanation supported by the source measurements. Instead of the tickets, she was being sent a sentence to sign.

Nora replied that she acknowledged the termination of her appointment and would supply an inventory of the documents she held, but could not attest to facts that had yet to be established. She attached a dated list of the missing records. She threatened no one, mentioned no journalist and copied in no additional address.

Before sending, she calculated in her head the annual amount Arcadie represented. Just over a third of her turnover. She thought of the car, the dentist she kept putting off, the plans she had grown used to describing as provisional.

Then she sent it.

There was nothing glorious about the gesture. She immediately wanted to call Claire back and explain more gently what she had just written. She did not call. Gentleness would not change the appendix.

At 16:09, Aïcha had still sent nothing. Nora waited another six minutes, then called. No answer. At 16:19, a message came: “Out. Don’t come to the gate.”

Nora asked where they could meet. Aïcha named a pharmacy near a busy road. Nora went there with a driver, then got out away from the entrance so she would not obstruct the customers. Aïcha was inside, sitting near the counter. An employee was handing her a small bag of ice wrapped in a cloth.

“The scooter?” Nora asked.

“Parked somewhere else.”

Her sleeve had been pushed up her forearm. A red mark encircled her wrist. Nora crouched to speak to her at eye level.

“What happened?”

“As I was leaving the meeting. A man wanted my phone. He said it belonged to the company. It doesn’t. He grabbed my arm when I took it back.”

“Who was he?”

“He didn’t give his name.”

The pharmacy employee set down a glass of water. She had seen Aïcha come in, not what had happened beforehand. Nora asked whether there was a medical practice nearby. She directed them to a neighbouring street. Aïcha protested at first that her arm was not broken.

“I’m not saying it is,” Nora replied. “I want someone to look at it, and put it on record.”

They walked there. The waiting room smelt of soap and fresh paper. While Aïcha filled in a form, Nora stayed beside her without speaking to the staff on her behalf. The examination confirmed superficial bruising. The practitioner recorded what he observed, distinguishing that observation from Aïcha’s account. She left with a document and advice to rest if the pain persisted.

Outside, the anger caught up with her.

“My supervisor was there, a woman from human resources and this man. The first two asked me to hand back my badge. They gave me a letter saying I’d be called back after my conduct

had been reviewed. Then he stayed in the corridor. He wanted the carbon copy."

"What did he call it?"

"'The duplicate you removed from the station.' He knew it was missing. It wasn't necessarily you."

Nora had said nothing. Aïcha had watched her think.

"Did he threaten you?"

"He said I'd taken a company document. That if I went on, they'd have to look at what I'd taken before. And that it would be a shame to bring my sister into something that had nothing to do with her."

Aïcha's sister ran a small delivery business with her. Her name appeared on a document submitted with an earlier request to change working hours. The man had not needed an intelligence service to find it.

"Where is your sister?"

"At work. I've called her. She's with two colleagues and she'll stay at a friend's."

Nora suggested reporting the assault and intimidation. Aïcha agreed, then asked not to go back towards the offices near the port. She did not want to risk meeting the man in the same corridor again, introduced as someone else.

Nora had the number of a lawyer in Cotonou who had been recommended during an earlier commercial assignment. She asked Aïcha's permission before calling. The office answered; the lawyer was in court, but a colleague took the essential facts and promised a return call. They agreed to keep the medical document and write an account without delay. It offered no immediate protection. It was a first fixed point.

Aïcha asked where they could sit down. Nora suggested her hotel. The young woman shook her head.

"You see the insurance people there."

"Not any more."

"Do they know that?"

Nora had no answer that improved the suggestion. They went into a café with a terrace overlooking the street. Aïcha chose a table near the staff. She ordered tea, then asked for two sugar cubes. Nora lent her a pen.

The account filled a page and a half. Names of the people she knew. A brief description of the man. Approximate departure time, established from the first message. Words remembered, distinguishing direct quotation from general meaning. Aïcha crossed out three lines, rewrote them, then signed. Her hand only trembled when she stopped.

On rereading it, she added a detail from the meeting. Before taking back her badge, they had shown her a statement saying she had reconstructed the ticket from memory after starting work the following day.

“Have you got a copy?” Nora asked.

“No. The woman said I’d get one once it was signed.”

“Did you manage to read the date at the bottom?”

“Today’s. But the text said I’d written the sheet on Wednesday morning.”

Nora looked at the carbon copy through the sleeve. If Aïcha had copied a result from memory on Wednesday, her account of the actual passage over the weighbridge became secondary, then open to challenge. The difference between Tuesday night and Wednesday morning could therefore make two problems disappear in a single sentence.

“Did they explain where that version came from?”

“My supervisor said he wanted to avoid misunderstandings. I asked him which one. He said we’d all been tired that night.”

Aïcha turned the page over and wrote down the exchange. She hesitated over “all”, crossed it out, then kept only what she was certain of. Nora did not make the correction for her. The account remained Aïcha’s, including her uncertainties. Later, they would need to look for things that could confirm it independently: a call, a vehicle passing through, someone who had seen her at the

station. For now, they had a sheet of paper that someone wanted to move through time.

“They kept the badge,” she said.

“That’s in your account.”

“I know. I mean, tomorrow I’m not going in. I’ll get up and I won’t go in.”

Nora thought of her own terminated appointment. She did not mention it straight away. A third of her turnover was not Aïcha’s badge. Each had just lost something it would be pointless to compare.

“They’ve taken me off the case,” she said at last.

“Then why are you here?”

There was no gratitude in the question. It asked for a clear position.

“Because you gave me a copy knowing there was a risk. And that risk has just changed.”

“Can you give me paid work?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Can you stop that man coming back?”

“I can stay with you, help us find somewhere to go and keep a record of what he does. I can’t promise the rest.”

Aïcha put down the pen.

“All right. Then don’t promise.”

They called Koffi. He knew someone who could confirm which tractor unit had collected the container. That person would not agree to meet at Nora’s hotel or near the port. They were due at an equipment depot on the western outskirts of the city that evening.

“I can come and pick you up,” Koffi said.

Nora gave him the name of the café. Aïcha nodded her agreement. Then she took the carbon copy from her bag, protected by a transparent sleeve.

“I’d left it with a neighbour. I went to get it before I messaged you.”

“Keep it for now.”

Aïcha put the ticket back in her bag with the medical document. The two sheets were different colours. Yet they had ended up in the same sleeve.

While they waited for Koffi, Nora paid for the drinks. Aïcha put her share on the table. Nora was about to object, then stopped herself. She took the coins and asked for a receipt for the rest.

CHAPTER 06

The Road West

Koffi Daran wore a small-checked shirt and glasses he took off to look into the distance. Because of his voice, Nora had imagined him older. He could barely have been forty. He came into the café, recognised Aïcha, then checked Nora's name before sitting down.

"The person can see us at half past seven this evening," he said. "After that, she's leaving."

"Where?"

"An equipment depot to the west. An hour if the traffic moves, more if everyone's decided to go the same way."

He checked his phone. 18:08.

"Her name's Mireille Kouton. She handles fleet records for several small hauliers. Maintenance, vehicle changes, the paperwork they ask for when something breaks down in the wrong place."

"Does she have Tuesday's tickets?"

"I don't know. She has information about the two tractor units. That's what she told me. She wants to know why someone asked her to confirm a table she didn't draw up."

Nora looked at Aïcha. The young woman had put away her pen but still held her cup between her hands.

"What about you, Koffi?" Nora asked. "What had Jonas told you?"

He took off his glasses and folded them.

"That he'd finish late. That they'd brought back a container they weren't supposed to reopen. He thought it was absurd: if it

wasn’t meant to be opened, why had they sent it somewhere else for an inspection?”

“Where else?”

“He didn’t know. Or he didn’t tell me.”

“What time did you leave?”

“About twenty past eight. I had a job. I couldn’t spend the whole evening waiting.”

He looked at her with sudden hardness. Nora understood that he was defending himself against an accusation she had not made, one that someone had been repeating to him in his own voice for the past two days.

“I’m asking for the time so I can establish the chronology.”

“Yes.”

He put his glasses on without fully unfolding one arm and had to try again.

“I called him back some time after nine. He didn’t answer. I thought he was working.”

Aïcha briefly laid her uninjured hand on his forearm. The gesture ended the conversation more effectively than consolation.

As they came out, Nora noticed a man beside a grey car parked across the street. He was holding a phone horizontally, perhaps to read, perhaps to take a photograph. She did not slow down. There were thousands of reasons to hold up a phone outside a café.

Koffi had left his saloon at the end of the pavement. He opened the rear door for Aïcha. She stopped before getting in.

“That’s him.”

Nora followed her gaze. The man had left the grey car. He was crossing between two vehicles, making no attempt to conceal where he was going.

“The one from the corridor?”

“Yes.”

Koffi looked at the man, then at Aïcha. He did not ask whether she was sure. He motioned her into the car. Nora got in beside her while he went round to the front.

The man reached them as Nora closed the door. He put his hand on the handle and pulled once. The lock stopped him.

“Ms Mensah, open up. We haven’t finished.”

His voice barely carried. It was a voice for a service counter, a lift, a neighbour stopped before leaving.

Koffi started the engine without moving off. He lowered his window a few centimetres.

“Step away from the car.”

“We have a matter of company equipment to settle.”

“Then make an appointment.”

The man glanced towards the café. The waiter had come out with a stack of saucers; he now held them against his stomach. A woman had stopped beside him. Nora lowered her window just enough to be heard.

“She doesn’t want to speak to you. You’ve already been told. Let go of the door.”

At last, the man looked at her. He had a broad, clean-shaven face and a small cut on his chin. Nothing to suggest who employed him. His hand left the handle.

Koffi waited for a gap and pulled into the traffic. He did not accelerate sharply. Nora stayed turned towards the rear until the next junction. The grey car’s lights had come on, but a minibus blocked her view of whether it was moving off.

Aïcha rubbed her wrist through her sleeve.

“You saw,” she said.

“Yes.”

Nora made a very short voice note, recording the time, the place and what she had personally witnessed. She did not give the man a name. Then she called the lawyer’s office and added these facts to the message she had left earlier. The colleague recommended staying somewhere busy and said the lawyer

would call back shortly. With his permission, Nora also gave Koffi's number.

"We can stop," he said.

"Somewhere with staff. Not by the roadside."

They drove on for another ten minutes. Vehicles drew together and spread apart in waves as roadworks narrowed a section of the carriageway. Pedestrians crossed where the cars were almost stationary. Twice, Nora caught sight of grey bodywork behind them. Twice, she lost sight of the number plate before she could compare it.

She did not say they were being followed. She simply asked Koffi to stop at an open, well-lit petrol station. He knew one on their route.

At the entrance, vehicles queued for the pumps. Koffi parked near the little shop and switched off the engine. Only then did Nora feel how tightly her shoulders had drawn in. She unclenched her fingers. There was no particular courage in sitting behind a locked door, yet her body had reacted as though she had been lifted over a void.

Aïcha got out first. She wanted water. Nora went inside with her while Koffi called Mireille to say they might be late.

The shop sold drinks, biscuits and a few phone cables. The person at the till was changing a paper roll. Nora bought a bottle, then asked whether they could wait near the counter because a man had just tried to open their car against their wishes. She gave the information without mentioning the port or the container.

The cashier called the manager. He asked just one question: was the man there?

"I can't see him at the moment," Nora replied.

"Stay here. If someone comes in to bother you, point him out to me."

He went back to the pumps. His answer was simple, limited to what he could do. Nora thanked him for it.

The lawyer called back at 18:47. Her name was Maître Adeline Hounsa. Nora passed the phone to Aïcha, who explained both incidents herself. The conversation lasted eight minutes. By the end, Aïcha had agreed to an appointment at the office the following morning and to preparing a documented report. If the man returned or tried to prevent them leaving, they would immediately ask the appropriate authorities to intervene. The lawyer could not come and collect them. She asked where they would spend the night.

Aïcha looked at Nora before answering that they were still arranging that. After the call, the gap in their plans suddenly seemed more urgent than the meeting about the tractor units.

“Could you go to your neighbour’s?” Nora asked.

“He knows my sister. He might know the building. I don’t feel like finding out tonight.”

Koffi came in, phone in hand.

“Mireille says she can stay until quarter past eight. Then she’s closing. She wants to know whether we need help finding somewhere to sleep.”

Nora looked up.

“Did you explain?”

“I said Aïcha didn’t want to go home. I’ve known Mireille twelve years. If you’d rather not go, we won’t.”

The choice had just been given back to them. Nora turned to Aïcha.

“You’re the one who knows Koffi.”

“I know him. I want to go.”

They waited a few more minutes, long enough to drink and pay. No one approached them. Nora noted the station’s displayed number so she could locate the place and its staff again if necessary. She did not ask the cashier for camera footage, which she might not have been authorised to hand over. She only asked her to tell the manager the time they had been there, in case a

formal request followed. The woman wrote the time on a piece of paper from the new roll.

By the time they got back into the car, the colour had drained from the sky. Koffi headed west. Nora followed the route on her phone, less to watch the driver than to know where she was. Too often, she had allowed the names of neighbourhoods to become interchangeable points between appointments.

After a while, the buildings thinned out. Shops still open alternated with plots enclosed by new walls. Families walked along the edge of the road. The smell of burning wood came through the ventilation, then faded.

“Had Jonas ever mentioned a problem with signatures before?” Nora asked.

Koffi thought about it.

“He said you signed for the next person. When the next person complained, they worked their way back to whoever had the least means of defending himself.”

“Did he say that on Tuesday?”

“No. Before. Don’t put everything on Tuesday.”

Nora silently welcomed the resistance. An investigation could do violence to memories by drawing them all towards the same evening. She corrected the approximate date in her notes.

Aïcha had fallen silent. She watched the road, holding her bag close. Nora asked whether she wanted to let Lydie know.

“Not to tell her about this. Her mother came back yesterday.”

“I could just say we’re continuing the checks.”

“She asked you to get in touch when you knew something, didn’t she?”

Nora looked at her in surprise.

“Jonas used to say the same thing. I suppose it runs in the family.”

Koffi smiled for the first time. For a few seconds, they spoke of Jonas as a man capable of interrupting a conversation that had gone on too long, rather than an event to be reconstructed. Aïcha

told them how he had once refused to choose between two restaurants until he had compared the exact size of the portions. Koffi corrected her: he had already chosen; he only wanted everyone else to agree.

They laughed, briefly, and the laughter did not betray them.

The depot appeared after a turn Nora would have missed. A green gate, a gravel yard, two sheds and a lit building at the back. Koffi stopped at the gate. A woman came to open it, holding a torch in one hand and a bunch of keys in the other.

“Two minutes to eight,” she said. “You’d almost think you were early.”

“I did what I could.”

“That’s usually your explanation when you’re late.”

Mireille Kouton wore thick glasses, a work coat open over a dark dress and dust-covered shoes. She shut the gate behind the car, then greeted Aïcha and Nora. She did not embrace them. She led them to an office where four plates had been set on a cleared table.

“You’re going to eat. Then you can explain what you’re looking for. And before you leave, we’ll decide where you’re going to sleep.”

On a cupboard, Nora noticed vehicle files, some thick, others no more than a few sheets. Mireille followed her gaze.

“The papers won’t go anywhere while we eat.”

Nora put her bag at the foot of her chair. Only then did she realise she had kept her notebook open for the entire journey. A page had folded beneath her hand, where she had written the two weights.

She smoothed it out, then closed the notebook. Aïcha had taken off her jacket. Koffi was pouring water. Beyond the door, the sounds of the road were still audible, close enough to remind them they had not left the world behind.

For the first time since the café, Nora put her phone face down on the table.

End of this excerpt

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