

A FISTFUL OF LEAD



Chapter one

For three hours Jimmy had been splitting stones to get the black powder, and in the dim dawn light he was beginning to glimpse at the end of the passage the little dark patches he had previously distinguished only by light touch. He turned to his companion, asking him to pass him the bottle, even though he knew he still had nine hours of scorching heat in the summer sun ahead of him. After his mother had died two years earlier, he and his sister Leila had been orphaned and the only way to survive was to join illegal miners in the north of the country. Now, however, the effects of exposure to the toxic material on the child were starting to worry him, and he was trying to work harder to buy the medicines for diarrhea and fever, which had turned her into a shred of a human being. He returned to pickaxe, hitting the rock with greater force: for two measly pieces of stale bread and some money he was forced to crawl into that filthy tunnel. But he tried not to think about it to focus on the rhythm instead: hit, touch, collect in the bucket, turn to empty it when full and start over. After another two hours his companion, right his age, took over, and Jimmy was able to go out for a breath of fresh air, which slightly smelled of rotten eggs due to the sulfur of the nearby quarry. The sky had changed and now swift black clouds were approaching the mine. No sooner had he taken shelter than it started to rain, which was unusual in that season, and an enormous quantity of water poured into the tunnel, conveyed by the drains at the base of the excavation; in a matter of seconds the roar of a waterfall echoed mixed with a scream of terror: the floor must have collapsed where his companion, whose name he realized only now that he did not know, was working, until the sea closed above him. It was not the first time that some stone slabs had given way, because, to save money, the tunnels were dug one directly under the previous one, in order to exploit the enormous metal vein present. Now that any point in which to crush the rock to work was inaccessible, the group of miners were ordered to return home. Jimmy lived a hundred yards from there, in a tin shed with two rooms and a hollow in the rock, where he had placed his little sister to keep her cool and safe from harm.

By chance, a truck had stopped just nearby, doubtlessly blocked by the torrential rain that prevented the passage: according to the yellow writing on the side it was a truck transporting electronic waste that had come from afar to a storage point to "improve the country's economy ". Stirred by curiosity, he snuck up into the unattended cabin - who knows where the driver was - and grabbed the papers and the few coins he could find; then, seeing someone coming, he ran away and holed up with his sister. To kill time during the storm that was now raging, Jimmy decided to take a look at what he had stolen, although he did not remember everything perfectly of what his grandmother had taught him about how to read those squiggles, and discovered that the truck was heading fifty kilometers from there, where there was an illegal landfill where the metals and the components of certain luminous contraptions were recycled. To his astonishment, the workers were paid ten times as much as the miners. He didn't think twice: he would change jobs the next day. And that's how he started working in the landfill.

Chapter two

In the distance Jimmy heard the clanging of the last train of the day, the one that was supposed to take the workers home at the end of the shift. It was late, as usual, but no wonder: considering how old that bizarre vehicle was, it was a miracle that it could still move. Similar to the train was the stop, if it could be defined as such: a clumpy pile of sheets, with garbage on each side and a pole stuck in the ground, to remember, as if it were needed, what the purpose of that open dump was. There was not even a schedule, but nobody noticed: everyone was always on the same route, and in the end it didn't really matter to get back to your hovel as soon as possible.

Jimmy got on the train, soaking wet, and slumped over a soft, faded green seat, with the frame in plain sight beneath the crumbling lining. The glass, almost all cracked or scribbled, barely allowed him to look outside, although Jimmy knew the route well and had no interest in seeing it each and every time.

That day, however, maybe for the rain, maybe out of boredom, he began to observe the little glimpse of the outside that he could catch. Not a fascinating sight: a gutter that flowed directly into the river, black for the pollution and overflowing for the rain; of course there was no fish. Once the train left, the landscape certainly did not improve: dozens of piles of waste, muddy roads leading to the quarries, some small withered trees, surrounded by grayish grass.

Everything seemed to be dying, or at least unhealthy, and indeed it was: after all, Jimmy knew the effects of aluminum; a few grams, or drops, if it came from a foundry, were enough to kill plants and animals. The few living beings that survived remained horribly deformed, and it was better not to even touch them: lead poisonings were more than enough.

Chapter three

Although it required a two-hour train journey each and every day, the new job in the electronics dump featured shorter shifts, and the fatigue was constantly relieved by the mere thought of being able to raise enough money to one day put an end to his continued exploitation. Although he had never tasted it, he had an innate perception of the mere motion of freedom, and was therefore firmly convinced that elsewhere he would be able to live fully.

For years Jimmy had lived his work as an endless cycle of purposeless suffering, but now not anymore: now he felt that with every day, every train ride, every single action he took, he was getting close to something, he felt he had a purpose, a mission, that of being able to guarantee his sister and himself a way out.

What used to be a dark and cold leaden labyrinth in which to get lost, now had become a mountain, a mountain to climb, however shady and cold, with a flame burning bright on its summit, which he, slowly but relentlessly, would reach. .

Encouraged by this new vision of the world, every day he worked at a good pace even harder than he should, always bringing home some savings.

In his landfill experience, Jimmy came across electronic gadgets of all shapes and sizes, but there was one that was particularly frequent: it was rectangular in size and barely larger than the palm of your hand. Many featured a display, a term he had learned working there, black and usually fragmented. These objects were called "smartphones".

After a few months, Jimmy realized that an eccentric character residing in the illegal landfill, mainly consisting of a container, occasionally turned up rummaging for smartphones. Although the odd individual had a deep understanding of the place, he didn't seem to belong to the scrap dealers group like the others.

Sometimes he was caught stealing some smartphones or other components gathered by the workers of Jimmy's group, who merely dismissed him in words; but, as no one really

cared about anything other than making ends meet, they began to ignore this illicit procurement of his.

Unexpectedly, the intriguing stranger turned out to be a pleasant variable, as he began conversing with the workers, and his bubbling personality opposed to the gray monotony of the strenuous shifts.

The head of operations repeatedly ordered the foreigner to stay away from the perimeter of collection of the scrappers, but only when he promised an emolument for the capture or the ultimate removal of the stranger, did the guards actually begin to ward him off.

Spurred on by the tempting reward, Jimmy was given permission to intercept the lonely man, and during the search he felt freer than ever in being able to arbitrarily explore the surrounding area. Once he reached the containers, Jimmy stationed nearby armed with courage and patience, and waited there for the night.

Hearing the elusive collector arrive, Jimmy prepared himself by grabbing a metal bar that presumably belonged to a Zoppas washing machine from the 1970s, and rushed to the entrance of the container: here he surprised the target, ordered him to surrender, and so he did, without opposition.

Before handing him over to the boss, Jimmy used the opportunity to ask why he was so worried about recovering damaged components for no payment. The prisoner revealed that he was an inventor: this aroused the boy's curiosity, who asked what he was planning with the parts he collected. The prisoner claimed that it was an amazing device and begged in a feeble voice to be released: in exchange he would give him and teach him to use one of his most successful experiments.

Jimmy was torn: on the one hand, there was a guaranteed reward and on the other hand something of dubious usefulness, but which devoured him with curiosity. It is known that this is the strongest weapon of children, and it is also the one that guides them in their decisions. Unsurprisingly, Jimmy accepted the proposal.

It was a fully operating smartphone, repaired with spare parts recovered over time.

The inventor took several hours to illustrate the countless features of the smartphone, many accessible only with something invisible called signal, which was provided by a sort of cubic box connected to the device.

The manufacturer dwelt on other operations, but Jimmy was only interested in the possibility of making contact with a doctor from the "outside world".

Quite satisfied with the meeting, he hid the newly acquired equipment in his backpack and, with false dejection, reported to the boss the unsuccessful task entrusted to him. He was briefly insulted, but on the other hand it was understandable, since he had missed an entire working day.

Back home, he got in touch with a doctor, hoping to be able to save Leila, and inquired about what to do in order to help her: in those months he had saved up enough money to be able to organize a meeting with the doctor and buy the much sought-after medicines, which have now become the symbol of hope; he almost felt like he was about to touch the flame on top of the mountain.

He seemed to touch it for real the next day, when, at the entrance of the landfill, he found a bag with the words "for Jimmy " on it. It didn't take him much to understand that they were the medicines for his sister, but it took him a lot to realize that in his miserly world there were also those who were willing to give without anything in return, as evidently the doctor had done.

The boy went to work with a smile on his face, creating a lively contrast to the surrounding atmosphere, and there was nothing else he thought about except when he returned home that evening.

Chapter four

Since his parents died, Jimmy had never felt so light at the end of the day: he could finally save his sister's life and a glimmer of hope would be rekindled in their lives. Just looking out of the window of his ramshackle carriage, his imagination began to travel faster than the train; the thought of being able to return to play with his sister in the middle of those abandoned fields made the screeching of the rails a sweet soundtrack.

Lost in his dreams, he did not realize that time had flown and it was now time to get off: with the bag of medicines in his hand, as if he were showing off a trophy, he made his way among the passengers and ran home. In the grayness of his village, he was at that moment the only flame to light up the darkness.

But all of this lasted little. Too little.

Jimmy's hand swung open the battered door and a deathly silence overwhelmed him. The ghostly stillness of the house violently opposed the euphoria of the boy, who was used to his sister's daily welcome. He then rushed into Leila's room and found her lying on the bed. "Maybe she's just sleeping", he thought to himself, and walked over to give her the good news. Only then did he realize how cold she was. He shook her in anguish, trying in every way to grasp that thin thread that had been her life, but which had now escaped her.

With tears streaming down his face, he picked up the cold body in his arms and ran out of the house: he stopped motionless in front of that landscape whose lifeblood had been removed, just as the last affection that had been taken away from him and he let out a scream full of anger.

In the following weeks he looked himself up at home, tormented by the unjust fate that had befallen his sister; without her nothing made sense anymore.

He tried to get rid of all the things that reminded him of his beloved Leila and, in doing so, he came across the medicine bag, which had been his last hope. In a mixture of anger and pain, he kicked the bag, from which a black box came out: it was the cell phone that had allowed him to get in touch with the doctor.

Jimmy noticed that it had lighted up, and an image of a beautiful village nestled in the heart of a forest appeared on the screen. He looked closer: something was familiar to him, but what? The houses were so similar to his, almost identical, but what seemed wrong was the surrounding landscape: changes had clearly been made. He had the same feeling as he scrolled through the other photos on the phone.

Was that so then? In the eyes of the world, his country seemed like a paradise. Apparently no one knew the reality, and he felt even more lonely.

However, something had changed. He felt he had found a purpose, which would allow him to vent all the resentment he carried inside: everyone had to be told his story, and especially that of his sister. Despite the fact that he had promised himself not to set foot there again, he decided to return to the landfill to meet the inventor, who surely could teach him how to use technology to inform people.

Apparently it was possible to "open" a "blog", a word then unknown to Jimmy: in that way, everyone would be able to discover the sad reality behind the extraction of critical materials.

It wasn't easy: it took months just to find an Internet connection to communicate with the rest of the world, and the beginning was far from promising. It seemed that no one cared about poverty, the miners' miserable living conditions, pollution: everyone was apparently satisfied with the screens of their phones, nothing more.

He had lost hope by now, when Jimmy realized that his videos, previously viewed by a handful of users, were literally "soaring up" in terms of likes. First a hundred, then a thousand, then ten thousand, finally millions of people got interested in the exploitation in the mines of his country, all thanks to a trivial stroke of luck: a

famous environmental youtuber, by pure chance, had stumbled upon a video of Jimmy's, and had reposted it, sparking popularity.

From there on it would be downhill all the way, Jimmy thought, but this was only a small, albeit important, victory in the area of pollution and human rights, and the little boy would have no peace until everyone could live in the open smokeless air, free from exploitation.

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