About the book and project

PERSONALISED FICTION

This edition contains Book 1, *The Man Who Died Twice* of *The Long Night Files*, the Benjamin the Vampire Detective series. A vampire detective in Munich is the starting point for linked mysteries about hunger, trust and the stories that records can conceal.

These are complete novella-length reader-trial drafts. They demonstrate a creative process in development; they are not presented as publication-approved finished novels. Books 4-9 currently exist as plans and have not been written.

Book 1: The Man Who Died Twice - 11 chapters; approximately 23,011 words.

Read the books in order: *The Man Who Died Twice*, *The Empty Seats*, then *Olympiapark*. Earlier investigations and relationships carry forward. The full nine-book synopsis is available separately on the example page and contains spoilers.

Personalised Fiction starts with your protagonist, place, genre and preferred length. Historical material can come from your own sources or research, with facts separated from invention. The planned service offers three substantially different story plans, then lets you choose or edit one before creating the book. Characters, conflicts, structure and style should grow from the brief rather than from a stock template.

For this inquiry-first launch, the website collects interest and story ideas; no book payment is taken. The planned price is €9.99 per book, paid before personalised planning, including three plan choices and creation of the selected book. This example series was developed through a human-directed trial and is not proof that automated paid ordering is already available.

Human creative direction and editorial choices: Ben Hoyle. AI drafting and bounded revision: GPT-6 Luna through CWH. AI review and improvement: GPT-6.1 Sol. The prose is AI generated, including wording contributed during Sol improvement. Each current chapter set received a sequential reader pass,

followed by a whole-book review. Editorial issues remain; the website explains the process without promising that AI review guarantees literary quality.

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BOOK 1

The Man Who Died Twice

CHAPTER 1

The Ladder

I had been avoiding the Isar for nearly three months. I took the longer streets to work, crossed bridges only when I had to, and told myself the river was simply inconvenient. That evening I came down to the footpath anyway, because the light was fading and I had let my attention wander.

The river ran high against its banks, brown water shouldering at the stones. A dog barked ahead of me. Its owner stood near the embankment, one hand wrapped around the lead, the other raised as if to keep someone back.

“Don’t come down here,” he called.

I saw the shape below him then: a dark coat caught at the foot of the maintenance ladder, one shoulder dipping toward the water. For a second I thought it was a bundle of clothes. The dog barked again, straining against its lead, and the shape moved—not by itself, I told myself, but with the water.

“Have you called the police?” I asked.

“Already called. They said to stay back.” He glanced down the path, toward the sound of approaching sirens. “You should stay back too.”

I stepped past him.

The ladder was bolted into the embankment, its iron rungs slick and cold under my palms. I climbed down before I had decided to. The dog walker said something behind me; the words broke apart in the noise of the river. I was close enough now to see the coat sleeve snagged on a rung and a pale hand under the surface.

I stopped with one foot on the lowest rung. The body’s face was turned toward the bank, partly hidden by wet hair. I leaned out,

braced against the ladder, and the current rolled him just far enough for the remaining daylight to catch his cheek.

Emil Sander.

I knew the face. I had seen it three months earlier, when Emil had folded to the floor and I had knelt beside him, calling for help. I remembered the cold of his hand, the startled look in his eyes before they closed. I remembered the ambulance taking him away. I had never heard what happened after that. I had asked once, then let the silence stand because there were other things I could pretend not to notice.

There was another part of that night I had kept at the edge of memory. I had been reaching for Emil when something hit me hard enough to leave me badly wounded. Pain burst through me so violently that the room seemed to go white. For a few seconds, I thought I was dying. Then there was warmth running over my skin, slick beneath my fingers. I could not remember whose blood I had touched, or even exactly when the ambulance crew had pulled me away from him. I remembered the pain more clearly than the moments around it.

The river lifted Emil's head against the lowest rung. A fresh-looking wound opened at his temple, dark at the edges. I could not tell what had made it, or when. I could not tell how long he had been in the water.

The smell reached me before I understood I was breathing through my mouth. Blood, diluted by river water but still unmistakable. My stomach clenched. The hunger that had shadowed me since winter rose so sharply it seemed to pull my weight toward him. I gripped the ladder until the iron bit my palms.

I wanted to reach for him. I wanted, with a clarity that frightened me, to get closer.

Instead I climbed back up.

The dog walker caught my sleeve as I came over the bank. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” My voice sounded thin. “Don’t let anyone touch him.”

The first police car arrived with its lights flashing blue against the wet stones. An officer took the dog walker aside. Another asked me to sit on the path while a rescue team made its way down. I told them I had recognized the man. I gave his name, then explained that I had met him once, in January, when he collapsed in the city. I said an ambulance had taken him. I did not say that I had never found out where it took him, or what had happened when it got there.

“Did you see the wound before?” the officer asked.

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure I don’t remember one.” I looked down toward the ladder. The rescue workers were preparing a line; one of them held a lamp above the water. “I only saw his face. I didn’t touch him.”

The officer wrote it down without offering an opinion. They moved me farther from the bank and asked for my address and telephone number. I answered. I watched them secure the scene, watched the ladder disappear behind reflective jackets and bright portable lights. The body was no longer visible, but the smell seemed to have followed me up the path.

I walked away when they told me I could. I did not take the river route home.

At Nora’s, the kitchen light was on. She opened the door in her socks, took one look at my face, and stepped aside without asking me to come in.

“You’ve been outside,” she said.

“I was walking.”

“That’s not a denial.”

I kept my coat on while she filled a glass from the tap. My hands shook enough that the water shivered against the sides. I put the glass down before she could see me struggle with it.

She saw anyway. “Sit.”

“I’m fine.”

“Benjamin.”

I sat at the kitchen table. She came around behind me and touched my wrist, where my cuff had slipped back. The skin was red and tender, a narrow crescent of rawness following the edge of the sleeve.

“How long have you been hiding that?”

“It’s not much.”

“That wasn’t my question.” She went to a drawer for the first-aid kit. “When did it happen?”

“Today. A little earlier.”

“Sun?”

I nodded.

She pulled a chair beside mine and set out gauze and ointment. “You keep saying you’re exhausted. Exhaustion doesn’t account for this.”

“It’s a burn.”

“It’s an injury. I’m treating the injury.” Her fingers were cool and steady as she cleaned the tender patch. “You can decide what to call it after someone examines you properly.”

I watched her work. I had come intending to tell her that I was tired, that I had been sleeping badly, that a walk by the river had made an old memory unpleasant. I had rehearsed these explanations

on the way over. They seemed small and manageable in the kitchen, which was why I had thought they might work.

Nora taped the dressing in place and reached for my other hand. I pulled it back.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“Then let me see.”

A thin pale line crossed the heel of my palm. I had cut it on a tin a week before and shown her the split when it was still open. Now only a faint seam remained.

She turned my hand toward the light. “This was not closed when you showed it to me on Tuesday.”

“It closed.”

“Very quickly.”

“I suppose.”

She looked at me, not the cut. I had always liked that Nora could be direct without making a performance of it. At that moment I wanted her to stop.

“Have you been sleeping?” she asked.

“Some.”

“Eating?”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“Enough.”

“That sounds like a number you don’t want to give me.”

I lifted the glass. My hand trembled again, though I managed to drink. Water tasted like nothing. My mouth still held the iron tang of the riverbank.

Nora leaned back. “You came here because you wanted me to say this is ordinary.”

“I wanted you to look at it.”

“I have. The burn needs care. The cut healed faster than I expected. Your hands are shaking. That is what I can say from looking at you in my kitchen.” She folded the used gauze into the wrapper. “I can’t turn that into a diagnosis because we’re friends.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“You were hoping I would.”

The answer came too quickly. “Maybe.”

She let the silence sit, then asked, “What happened at the river?”

I saw Emil’s face tilt against the rung again. The wound at his temple, the black water in his hair. “There was a body.”

Nora’s expression changed. “You found someone?”

“Someone was already there. Caught on a ladder. I recognized him.”

“Do the police know?”

“I gave them my statement.” I pressed my thumb against the edge of the glass. “It was Emil Sander. The man who collapsed when I was with him in January.”

“Is he—” She stopped. “Did they tell you anything?”

“No. They were still recovering him when I left.”

“And in January?”

“They took him away in an ambulance. I never heard what happened after that.”

Nora's eyes stayed on mine. "You thought he died?"

"I thought there was nothing I could do." I looked down at the table. "I don't know what I thought. I didn't get an answer."

She didn't correct me. She reached for the glass, saw my hand tighten around it, and left it where it was.

The smell of blood had not been strong by the time I reached her flat. I had convinced myself it was river water, mud, something caught in my coat. Then Nora lifted a small knife from the board where she had been cutting an apple. A bright nick crossed the side of her finger.

She noticed me looking and set the knife down. "It's nothing."

I stood so quickly the chair legs scraped the floor. The glass tipped. Nora caught it before it fell, but water sloshed over her hand.

"Ben?"

"I'm sorry."

She wrapped a clean cloth around her finger. I had not moved toward her, but the effort of staying still had made my knees feel loose. The cut was tiny. The smell was not.

"Is that what happened by the river?" she asked.

I could have said no. I could have made another small explanation and watched her accept it because she cared about me. Instead I gripped the back of the chair and tried to breathe through my mouth.

"Ordinary food isn't enough," I said.

Nora kept the cloth pressed to her finger. "Enough for what?"

"I don't know how to explain it."

"Try."

"It's hunger. Not the kind that goes away when I eat." I swallowed. "Blood. I want blood."

She didn’t move toward me or away. Her gaze flicked once to the dressing on my wrist, then back to my face.

“Have you taken anything?”

“No.” The word came out too fast. I made myself start again. “I haven’t taken it from anyone without their permission.”

Nora took that in. “Are you in danger right now?”

“I don’t think so.”

“That is not the same as no.”

“I can control it.”

“You nearly dropped a glass because I cut my finger.”

“I didn’t touch you.”

“No. You didn’t.” Her voice remained level. “That matters. It doesn’t mean we can ignore what happened.”

I sat again, carefully this time. The hunger ebbed by degrees, leaving a hollow ache under my ribs. Nora washed her finger and put a plaster over the nick. She did not hide it from me, but she turned her hand palm down when she came back to the table.

“I can help with the burn,” she said. “I can make sure you’re not in immediate danger tonight. I can help you arrange a proper medical assessment. I cannot be your doctor here, and I won’t pretend I know what this is.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.” I looked at the neat white dressing on my wrist. “You’ll help me get an appointment. I’ll go.”

“And you’ll tell them what you just told me.”

I hesitated. She waited, giving me no softer version to accept.

“Yes,” I said.

“Good.” She pulled her phone closer. “Tomorrow, then. Not an emergency department unless something changes tonight. If you feel you might hurt someone, you call me or emergency services and you get away from people. Can you agree to that?”

“Yes.”

She made a note, then put the phone down. “I’m not asking you to explain the whole thing now.”

I was grateful enough to resent her for saying it.

On the table, my wet coat cuff left a dark mark beside the first-aid kit. I thought of the officers at the river, writing Emil’s name in a notebook because I had given it to them. In January I had watched an ambulance carry him away and accepted that the story had continued without me. Now there was a body, a wound I had never seen before, and no answer about the first time he had fallen.

Nora’s kitchen seemed too bright. The light did not hurt; the sun had. I knew the difference, though I had not wanted to say it aloud.

“I should go,” I said.

“You don’t have to leave because I asked questions.”

“I know.” I stood, slower than before. “I need to be alone for a while.”

She didn’t try to stop me. “Tomorrow,” she said. “You’ll answer my call, and we’ll arrange the assessment.”

“I will.”

At the door I nearly told her about Eva’s contact, the careful arrangements that had kept the worst of the hunger at a distance. The words came close, then stalled. Nora had asked what I needed and what I had done. She had not asked who else knew. I could tell her

tomorrow. I could tell her when I had decided how much of it I could bear to hear repeated back to me.

I left without saying it.

Outside, dusk had settled over the street. I kept to the pavement and away from the river. Behind me, in Nora's kitchen, Emil's name had become a question neither of us could set aside: what had happened after the ambulance took him, and why had no one ever told me?

CHAPTER 2

A Face in the Window

The photograph had been in my phone for three months, filed between a receipt for a new kettle and a picture of a menu I had meant to translate. I had taken it outside Emil Sander's shop while waiting for him to finish an order. At the time, I had wanted to remember the lettering in the window. Now the man who had stood behind it was dead, and I had no reliable lead beyond the fact that I remembered him collapsing.

Klara Reiter studied the photograph on my screen without taking the phone from me.

"Is this the original?" she asked.

"The original photograph, yes. I enlarged it, but I haven't altered the image."

"You enlarged it."

"For clarity."

"That is an alteration." She glanced up at me, not unkindly. "It may be a useful one. It is still an alteration."

I lowered the phone. "Fair."

We were in her restoration room, a narrow space at the back of the private collection where she worked. A task lamp made a bright island on the table. Around it, boxes and folders sat in orderly stacks, each with a paper label in Klara's compact handwriting. She had set one open folder aside from the others and kept her hand on its edge while she looked at the image.

"Show me the whole window," she said.

I pinched the screen to reduce the enlargement. Emil's shopfront appeared in the photograph, its glass catching a pale reflection of the

street. Behind the glass, a display card stood at an angle. Most of the lettering dissolved into blur. One small flourish remained: a looping stroke beside a line of type, turned the wrong way by the reflection.

Klara leaned closer. “When did you take this?”

“January. I was ordering a print. Emil was inside.”

“Before he collapsed?”

“Yes.”

She looked at the flourish again. “You remember the day?”

“I remember the shop. I remember talking to him. The date is in the photograph’s metadata.” I heard the defensive precision in my own answer. “I don’t remember the exact conversation.”

“That isn’t the same as remembering the day.”

“No.”

She turned the phone slightly toward the lamp, though the image was on the screen and the light did nothing to improve it. Then she reached for the folder she had kept beneath her hand.

“I have a letter with a printer’s device in the margin,” she said. “It came with a small group of correspondence. The collection was deposited here, but that doesn’t make every item available for every purpose.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?”

It was a reasonable question. I had asked her to look at a photograph of a dead man’s shop and was waiting for her to turn it into a lead. “I’m asking you to compare the mark. If you’d rather not show me the letter, you can tell me that.”

Klara regarded me for a moment, then withdrew a sheet from the folder. It was already sleeved in transparent film. The paper had

browned along its edges, but the ink was still dark. She placed it on the table and angled the lamp away from the surface.

“Don’t touch the sleeve,” she said.

“I won’t.”

She stood beside me, leaving enough room between us that I had to lean forward to see the margin. A printed line of text ran beneath a small device: a curved stroke looping back under itself, crossed by a short, almost blunt flourish. The image on my phone was reversed in the glass of Emil’s shop window, but the shapes occupied the same cramped space beside the lettering.

I looked from one to the other. “That’s it.”

“Possibly.” Klara did not mirror my certainty. She bent over the photograph, then the letter. “The curl is similar. The short stroke, too. But a flourish is not a fingerprint.”

“It could come from the same workshop.”

“It could.”

“Or the same printer.”

“It could also be a copied mark, or a common ornament.” She slid the sleeve a few centimetres away from the edge of the table. “We have a workshop connection worth checking. We do not have a name.”

The distinction was small enough to irritate me and important enough that I knew she was right. I had enlarged the photograph because I wanted the blur to resolve into an answer. Klara had examined the original because she knew what the enlargement could not give us.

“Could I photograph the letter?” I asked.

“No.”

I nodded and put my phone away. The movement felt more conspicuous than it should have.

Klara closed the folder but did not return it to the shelf. “You said you ordered a print. Do you still have it?”

“I might. I’ll look.”

“Good. The shop may have used a mark on the finished work that isn’t visible in the window.” She tapped the closed folder once, lightly. “If you find it, bring the print, not another enlargement.”

“I will.”

She had not solved anything. Still, the photograph had given the case a direction that did not depend on my memory of an ambulance pulling away, or on the body I had seen in the river. I felt the old, quick lift of satisfaction—the moment a loose observation acquired a place in a structure.

Klara saw something in my face. “A direction,” she said. “Not a conclusion.”

“I know.”

“Good. People have a habit of treating the first pattern as permission to stop looking.”

I put my hands in my coat pockets. “I’ll try not to.”

“You can start by not telling anyone the letter proves Emil used the same printer.”

“I won’t.”

She looked at me until I added, “I’ll say it suggests a possible connection.”

“That would be accurate.”

When I left, she had returned the letter to its folder. The task lamp remained pointed at the empty patch of table where it had been. I noticed myself wanting to ask for one more look, one more

comparison, one more image I could keep. Instead I thanked her and went out with only my own photograph.

At the door I checked my phone. Nora had sent a message: *I can help arrange the appointment. I can't assess you by text, and I'm not going to act as your doctor because you know where I keep the first-aid kit.*

I typed, *Understood. I'll tell the clinician what I told you.*

Her reply came a minute later. *Good. That's what I can help with.*

I put the phone away. I had wanted her to take more responsibility for what was happening to me, then resented her for naming the limit. There was nothing unfair in it. I had agreed to the appointment. I would go.

By the time Klara and I reached the bakery, the late shift had pulled most of the trays from the counter. The remaining pastries sat under glass, and the coffee machine hissed while a worker rinsed its metal jug. We took a small table by the window. The chairs were too close together; every time someone passed, a coat brushed my shoulder.

Klara had ordered tea. I had coffee and a warm pastry that left flakes on the paper plate. I was halfway through it when she reached across the table and took the last one.

"You've got your own," I said.

"I did." She broke the pastry in two and kept the larger piece. "Now I have this one."

"That is not how ownership works."

"It is when you're slow."

I laughed, and she smiled as if she had only meant to win the pastry. For a while we spoke about the collection: the peculiar difficulties of preserving pencil notes, the ways old glue could stain

paper, and whether a box labelled “miscellaneous” represented laziness or despair. Klara was funny when she chose to be, though she did not soften the facts to make them easier to hear.

Then she rubbed a flake of pastry from her thumb and said, “My grandmother’s guardianship papers have names struck through.”

The change in her voice brought my attention back to her. “How many?”

“Enough that I stopped counting them as a child.” She broke off another piece. “I thought the lines meant the people had been removed from the family. Later I learned that might not be what they meant. A name can be crossed out because someone left, because a clerk corrected a mistake, because a copy was made and the original was changed. The paper doesn’t tell me which.”

“Are the papers in the collection?”

“Some are. Some belong to my family. The ones I work with are here under an arrangement that lets me examine them. It doesn’t make them public.”

The answer carried a boundary inside it. I let it stand. “You said there was an annotation.”

She looked toward the bakery window. Beyond it, a tram slid through the wet street, its interior lights moving across the glass. “One transfer is marked with a separate date in 1919. Later than the main entry. The handwriting is different.”

“Do you know who added it?”

“No. I know it was added later. I don’t know why.” She turned her cup by its handle. “It may explain a transfer. It may only tell me that someone reviewed the papers after the upheavals. I haven’t found enough to say more.”

I thought of the printer's mark: a resemblance that could be a connection, a copied ornament, or coincidence. "And you want to find out."

"I want to know what can be known without pretending the records answer every question." Her gaze returned to mine. "That distinction matters more when the names are my family's."

"I understand."

"Do you?" she asked again, but this time there was no challenge in it. Only a tiredness I had not noticed while we were looking at the photograph.

"I think so," I said. "I don't have to see the papers to be useful."

"No. But you may need to see them if the print lead goes anywhere."

She finished her tea. The bakery worker had begun stacking chairs at the far end of the room, though there was no sign that he meant to close immediately. Klara took a folded napkin and wiped the crumbs from her fingers.

"I can arrange a supervised visit to the relevant papers," she said. "Not tonight. I'll choose what we look at. You don't photograph or copy anything, and you don't contact anyone named in the papers without asking me first."

The terms were plain. They were also more than I had expected her to offer.

"All right."

"If something seems important, we discuss it before you use it."

"All right."

"And if I say we stop, we stop."

I hesitated only long enough to notice that I wanted an exception. "Yes."

Klara watched me, checking the answer rather than its polish. Then she nodded. “I’ll message you when I’ve set a time.”

The warmth of the pastry had faded from my fingers. I folded the paper plate in half and put it beside my cup. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. We have a printer’s ornament and an annotation we can’t explain.”

“Two things we don’t know.”

“Now you’re learning.”

We left together and separated at the corner. I walked home with the photograph still in my phone and no copy of Klara’s letter. The mark in Emil’s window had led somewhere, but not to an identity, and not to an answer about the man in the river.

Klara had agreed to help. She had also told me exactly how. For once, I did not mistake access for permission to take the next step alone.

CHAPTER 3

The Quiet Clinic

The clinic occupied two floors of a pale stone building on a street where the shopfronts had been renovated without changing the upper windows. Its brass plaque was small enough to miss unless you were looking for it. I had been looking for it for three days.

The interview had been arranged before Emil's body was found. I reminded myself of that as I waited in reception, the clinic's name printed on the folder across my knees. I had applied for the short data-cleaning contract after seeing the advertisement online. At the time, it had seemed like an ordinary job: a few weeks of reconciling inconsistent records and preparing a dataset for review. Now the name on the appointment confirmation was Leonhard Voss, and the clinic was no longer an ordinary place to visit.

It was still only a lead. I had no evidence that Emil had been here. I had a memory of his collapse, a body from the river, and the uncomfortable gap where an answer should have been.

A receptionist in a navy jacket offered me water. The waiting room smelled faintly of lemon cleaner. A plant stood beneath a framed certificate; its leaves were glossy and dust-free. Beside the reception desk, a door opened and a nurse guided an older man into the corridor. The man walked under his own power, one hand resting on the nurse's elbow. I watched them turn out of sight, then looked down at my folder.

My phone vibrated. Nora's name appeared on the screen.

You said this was an interview, not a medical appointment. Keep it that way. Don't send me clinic data or ask me to interpret someone else's record.

I typed, *Understood. I'm only there for the contract.*

Her reply came quickly. *And if they ask you for medical advice, you can say no. You are allowed to be a data scientist without becoming a doctor.*

I smiled despite myself. *I can manage one of those things.*

Good. I have a shift. Talk later.

I put the phone away before the receptionist could see the message and mistake the smile for confidence.

Voss came out to meet me. He was lean, silver-haired, and dressed in a charcoal suit that fitted without looking new. He shook my hand and held my gaze for a beat longer than courtesy required.

“Mr. Hale,” he said. “Thank you for coming.”

“Thank you for seeing me.”

He led me into an office with a glass wall facing the corridor. A blind had been drawn over the lower half, leaving a strip of movement visible at the top. On the desk, a laptop stood beside a neat stack of papers. Voss gestured to the chair opposite him.

“I’ll be direct,” he said as he sat. “Your application is stronger on statistical work than on clinical data. Why should I hire you?”

It was a fair question. “Because the work you advertised is cleaning and reconciliation, not clinical interpretation. I can identify inconsistencies, document decisions, and leave the conclusions to people qualified to make them.”

His expression shifted by a fraction. “That is a careful answer.”

“It’s also the accurate one.”

“Carefulness is useful. It can also be an excuse for avoiding difficult choices.” He opened the laptop. “I’m looking for someone who can distinguish a meaningful discrepancy from a clerical one. We have a funding review approaching. I can’t present a dataset that falls apart under scrutiny.”

The sentence carried more weight than the contract advertisement had. I glanced at the stack of papers and back to him. “What kind of review?”

“An external assessment of the programme. They’ll want to know whether the records support the work we say we’re doing.” He spoke as if this were an administrative inconvenience, but one finger had settled on the edge of the desk. “Which is why I need reliable analysis, not an impressive report built on assumptions.”

I thought of Klara’s letter in its sleeve, the printer’s mark that might have been a connection and might have been an ornament. I thought of her saying that a direction wasn’t a conclusion. I had promised not to make the first pattern do more work than it could.

Voss turned the laptop slightly toward me. “I can show you a small, controlled extract from our administrative records. It has been de-identified; there are no names or clinical details. Tell me what you would check first.”

The screen showed a grid of rows and columns. A line of text above it read CONTROLLED ADMINISTRATIVE EXTRACT—IDENTIFIERS REMOVED. The table contained short codes, dates, status fields, and administrative notes. Voss kept one hand near the trackpad.

I scanned the column headers, then the rows. The export was sparse enough that the oddity appeared quickly: one patient code had a discharge date, and beneath it a separate contractor pickup entry dated later. The dates were separated by several days. The extract did not say what was to be picked up, whether the pickup involved the patient represented by the code, or how it related to the discharge.

“Those two entries are under the same code,” I said.

Voss’s hand stilled on the trackpad. “Yes.”

“The discharge is earlier than the collection.”

“Routine correction.” He moved the cursor to another part of the screen, then clicked. The grid disappeared beneath a blank document window. “The extract isn’t the source record. You’d have to inspect the audit trail before calling it an error.”

“I wouldn’t call it an error from this alone.”

“Good. What would you call it?”

“A discrepancy that needs an explanation. I’d check whether the code had been reused, whether the dates referred to different events, and whether an amendment had been entered late. I’d want the change history before I decided the rows belonged together.”

Voss watched me rather than the screen. “And if the audit trail gave you no explanation?”

“Then I’d document that the extract doesn’t support a single clean chronology.”

“Would you publish that?”

“I’d report it to whoever was responsible for the review. I wouldn’t publish a patient record.”

“There are no patient records in front of you.”

“No,” I said. “There aren’t.”

For a moment, his face was unreadable. Then he shut the laptop. The movement was gentle, almost apologetic.

“You are right to distinguish what you saw from what you don’t know,” he said. “Many people aren’t. They see two dates and decide they have a scandal.”

“I haven’t decided anything.”

“Not yet.” He leaned back. “The programme is under pressure to demonstrate that its methods are reproducible. Funding bodies like a clean result. Patients do not always behave cleanly.”

“Patients aren’t data errors.”

“No,” he said, and the answer came without hesitation. “They are people. Which is precisely why sloppy analysis can do harm.”

His agreement should have reassured me. Instead, I remembered the two entries on the screen and the speed with which he had closed them. It could have been a routine correction. It could have been an example chosen to test whether I would overstate what I knew. It could have been something else. I had seen a discrepancy in a de-identified administrative extract, not a patient file, and I had not earned the right to turn it into a finding.

Voss asked about my previous work. I described two data-cleaning projects, one for a logistics firm and one for a university research group. I explained how I tracked decisions and preserved the original values when correcting a field. He challenged one of my examples, and I corrected myself when I realized I had described a quality check as if it were a validation result.

“You’re willing to revise an answer,” he said.

“I’d rather do it in the room than in the report.”

“That may be the best thing you’ve said.” He made a note on a pad. “I’ll speak to the administrator about the next stage. If we proceed, you’d work from a controlled copy. No independent access to the clinical system.”

“Understood.”

He stood, and I stood with him. At the door he asked, “You have no clinical background?”

“None.”

“Then don’t acquire one by accident.”

“I’ll try to resist the temptation.”

He gave a small, dry smile. “It is more common than you’d think.”

The receptionist returned my coat from a hook behind the desk. I tucked the interview folder under my arm and stepped out into the cool air. The building's glass door shut softly behind me.

"Benjamin."

A woman stood beside the low stone wall near the entrance. She had been waiting with her back to the building, a canvas bag held close against her hip. Now she faced me, and I recognized her from the photograph clipped to the clinic's old volunteer newsletter I had seen online: Lea Winter. The image had been small, but the dark fringe and watchful eyes were the same. Her gaze moved from my face to the folder under my arm.

"You interviewed with Voss," she said.

"I did."

"Don't take the job."

She did not raise her voice. A delivery van rattled over the street behind us, and someone in the doorway of the next building laughed into a phone. Lea kept her attention on me.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I know what that folder means." She nodded at it. "And because you're going to tell yourself the contract is separate from the clinic."

I had been about to say exactly that. "It is a data-cleaning contract."

"That's what the advertisement says."

"You worked here?"

"I volunteered. I withdrew." She shifted the bag higher on her shoulder. "I kept the packet they gave me when I left."

There was no invitation in the statement. I did not ask what was in it.

“Did you know Emil Sander?” I said.

Her eyes narrowed a little. “Why?”

“I’m trying to establish whether he had a connection to the clinic. I saw him collapse three months ago. Then I saw his body at the river.”

Lea’s attention flicked to the door behind me, then returned to my face. “You saw him collapse?”

“Yes.”

“And you don’t know what happened to him afterward?”

“No. I never got confirmation.”

She looked as if she were measuring the difference between an answer and a claim. “Then ask his partner before you decide what the clinic had to do with him.”

“I intend to.”

“Good.” She pressed her lips together, as if there were more she might say but had chosen not to. “I won’t give you names of other volunteers.”

“I didn’t ask.”

“You were going to.”

I could not deny it. “I was wondering whether anyone else might have seen the same thing.”

“That’s how names start moving from one person to another.” She opened the bag and took out a folded sheet of paper, still inside a clear sleeve. The page had creases at the corners and the faint yellow cast of something kept for years. She held it where I could see the clinic’s letterhead, but did not offer it to me.

“This is from the packet they issued when I withdrew,” she said. “I kept my copy.”

“What does it establish?”

“Only what it says. The inventory lists a copy of my withdrawal form among the enclosures. There wasn’t one in the packet.” She slid the sleeve back into her bag. “Paperwork can be perfectly correct and still leave out what matters.”

The phrase landed between us. I thought of the entries on Voss’s screen: a discharge, then a collection under the same code. A discrepancy, not a conclusion. “Is that what happened here?”

“I’m telling you not to trust a complete-looking record just because it has all its fields filled in.”

It was useful. It was also plainly hers to choose whether to tell me. I had no right to press her for more about her own paperwork, or to treat her warning as permission to recruit her into my investigation.

“Where can I reach you?” I asked. “If you decide you want to speak again.”

She studied me. “There’s a café on Lindwurmstraße, across from the tram stop. Thursday, five o’clock. I’ll be there for half an hour. Don’t bring anyone.”

“All right.”

“And don’t call the clinic asking about me.”

“I won’t.”

She gave a short nod and walked away, her bag tucked under her arm. I stayed by the wall until she had crossed the street. The clinic door opened behind me, and I heard the receptionist say someone’s name, but I did not turn around.

I had come looking for a way to connect the man from the river to Voss’s clinic. I had left with a discrepancy in a de-identified administrative extract, a former volunteer’s warning, and an appointment she had chosen herself. None of it proved Emil had been there. But Lea had shown me one specific gap in paperwork she had kept: an item listed in its inventory that was missing from the

packet. The clinic’s records, however polished, could not yet be taken as the whole account.

CHAPTER 4

A Bad Join

Klara had put the address in a folder with a red paper tab and a note that said *restricted family material*. The note was in German, but she had translated it for me before she unlocked the cabinet.

“Read what you need,” she said. “No photographs. Don’t copy names or addresses. If there’s something you think matters, ask me.”

“I understand.”

I did understand. I also thought the restriction was meant to prevent careless circulation, not to stop a careful person from checking a lead.

That distinction lasted until I saw the address.

We were at a long table in the private collection’s reading room. Klara sat opposite me, close enough to see the page I had open but turned aside to consult a card catalogue. The room smelled of dust and the lemony polish used on the tables. A lamp made a bright circle over the papers; beyond it, the shelves and filing cabinets blurred into orderly shadow.

The address appeared beside an old trading name I recognized from the clinic’s contractor paperwork. Not the company’s current name, which I had seen on a public form, but the predecessor. I checked the spelling twice. The entry was in a later hand than the family note around it, the ink faded to brown. It could be a shared address, a forwarding address, or an association no more meaningful than a landlord’s record. But the same old name had appeared in the clinic material, and the dates were close enough to make my pulse quicken.

A match wasn’t proof. I knew that. A match was a reason to ask the next question.

I copied the address onto the back of a receipt in my notebook.

The movement was small. My hand covered the words as I wrote. I had told myself I was not taking a photograph, not removing a page, not publishing anything. I was only preserving a lead long enough to verify it. I folded the receipt into the notebook before Klara turned back.

She glanced at my notes. “Anything?”

“An old business name. It might be relevant to the clinic contractor, but I don’t know that yet.”

“Then don’t make it more relevant by saying it aloud.” She tapped the open file with one finger. “This is family material, Benjamin. Not a directory.”

“I won’t use the family part.”

She watched me for a moment, then moved the folder a few centimetres away from my elbow. “Good.”

I should have taken that as the end of the discussion. Instead, I spent the next half hour reading the rest of the page while the address sat folded in my notebook like a private permission I had granted myself.

When Klara closed the cabinet, she checked the file against her catalogue card and returned it to its sleeve. I helped her carry the day’s papers back to the desk. She was careful with each sheet, aligning its edges before she lowered it into place.

“Thank you for letting me look,” I said.

“Looking isn’t the problem.”

I thought she meant the records. “I know.”

Outside, I opened my notebook beneath the awning and took out the receipt. The rain had stopped, leaving the pavement dark and reflective. I found the contractor’s public number on my phone and

called before I could give myself time to improve the idea into something less foolish.

A woman answered. I gave her the current name of the firm and asked whether it had traded under the older name. She said she would check. While I waited, I could hear keys tapping and the faint murmur of another call in the background.

“Yes,” she said. “That was an earlier trading name. What’s your enquiry about?”

“An old address is recorded beside it in a family collection. I’m trying to establish whether the connection is genuine.”

“What address?”

I read it out.

There was a pause. “I can confirm that the predecessor business used that address,” she said. “And the family name?”

I looked down at the receipt. “Reiter.”

“Are you asking about the clinic’s records?”

“I’m asking whether the business used that address. I’m not asking for any patient information.”

“I understand. We don’t hold the old records ourselves. I can pass the enquiry to our client liaison team.”

“Which client?”

“I’m not able to discuss that over the phone.” Her voice remained polite, but the keys had stopped. “Would you like me to pass it on?”

I should have said no. The address had done what I needed it to do: it had confirmed that the historical link was real. I could have thanked her and hung up.

“Yes,” I said. “But please make clear I’m only checking the business address.”

“I’ll note that.”

The call ended. I stared at the dark screen, annoyed with myself for feeling pleased. The address wasn’t an accidental scribble in a family file. The contractor had used it. I had not proved why, or what it had to do with Emil, but I had found a clean join between two records.

By the time Klara called that evening, I had already started searching the old business name against company notices and archived directories. I was at my flat with the laptop open and a mug of untouched tea beside it. The screen was bright enough to make my eyes ache.

“Did you give the address to the contractor?” she asked.

No greeting. No warm-up.

I closed the directory tab. “I called to verify the trading name.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

“Yes,” I said. “I did.”

A breath, sharply drawn in. “My aunt has just had a call from the clinic.”

I sat back. “What did they ask her?”

“They asked whether she would be willing to discuss papers connected with the old address. They said they were following up a contractor’s enquiry. She doesn’t know them. She thought it might be about a medical record and called me.” Klara’s voice had gone tight and quiet. “Why did you give them the address?”

“I wanted to confirm the connection.”

“You wanted to confirm it quickly.”

I had no answer that made the distinction sound better. “I didn’t know they would contact her.”

“You knew it was family material. You knew I’d told you not to copy addresses.”

“I did.”

“And you still used it.”

“Yes.”

She let the silence hold for a beat. I heard a door close on her end, then the small click of a lock. “You’ve taken access to my collection and used it to bring a stranger to my aunt’s door.”

“They called her. I didn’t give them her number.”

“That is not a defence.”

“No,” I said. “It isn’t.”

Her anger had a clean edge; I had given her no reason to spend time sorting through excuses. “You’re going to tell her what happened,” she said. “Not just apologise to me.”

“I will.”

“You’ll say you used the address without my permission, and that your call is why the clinic contacted her. Don’t tell her what you think it means. Don’t ask her for anything.”

“All right.”

“And you’re finished with the collection.”

I looked at the notebook beside my laptop. “I understand.”

“No, Benjamin. You understood the rule before you broke it. I’m telling you what happens now. Your access is withdrawn.”

The words landed harder because they were precise. “Yes.”

“I’ll send you a message when I’ve spoken to my aunt. Don’t contact her until I do.”

“I won’t.”

She ended the call.

For a while I kept my hand around the phone as if I could still hold the conversation open. On the laptop, the search results waited without context. The business link was genuine. It was also now attached to a person who had never agreed to be part of my inquiry.

Klara messaged twenty minutes later. Her aunt was willing to take a call, provided Klara stayed on the line. I called the number she sent and heard Klara answer first, then a woman's cautious voice.

"This is Benjamin," I said. "I'm sorry to contact you. I used a family address from Klara's collection to check an old business name. I gave it to the contractor, and the contractor passed my enquiry on. I believe that's why the clinic called you."

A pause. "You believe?"

"I can't know exactly what happened inside their office. But I gave them the address, and they said they'd pass the enquiry to their client liaison team. I should not have used it."

"What do you want from me?"

"Nothing. Please don't give them any papers or agree to meet because of my enquiry. If they call again, you can decide what to do, but you don't owe me an answer or help."

Klara remained silent on the line. Her aunt asked, "Is this about Emil?"

"I don't know," I said. "I haven't established that."

It was the only honest answer I had. The name seemed to settle heavily between us, but I did not try to lift it with a theory.

"All right," she said at last. "I'll speak to Klara before I speak to anyone else."

"That's sensible."

"Don't call again unless she asks you to."

"I won't."

After the call, I deleted the address from my notebook and emptied the deleted note from my phone as well. The paper copy remained folded beside the keyboard. I tore it once, then again, and dropped the pieces into the wastebasket. None of that put the information back where I had found it.

I tried to return to the contractor search. The words on the screen would not stay in order. I opened a company filing, read the first paragraph three times, and could not have said what it contained. My stomach had tightened into a hard, empty knot.

The donor meeting I had arranged for that afternoon had been postponed while I pursued the address. I had told myself I would make it up later, as if the hour could be moved without consequence. By the time I reached for the phone to reschedule, my hands were unsteady enough that I set it down again.

I cut my thumb opening a packet of bread. The blade caught the pad, not deeply, but enough to leave a bright line of blood. I pressed a clean cloth to it and watched the stain widen. In the past, the small cuts I had made since the incident seemed to close before I had time to be concerned. This one stayed open under the pressure of the cloth, then began to bead again when I lifted it.

Hunger made it difficult to keep my attention on anything. It was not the pleasant emptiness before dinner. It crowded out the company search, then the clinic, then the address. I read the same sentence without taking it in. I tried to write down the time of the cut and forgot what I meant to compare it with.

I sent the volunteer a message. I told her I had been wrong to postpone our meeting without working out another time, and asked whether the contribution we had already agreed on could still happen tonight. She replied that she could come by at eight, but she had to leave at eight fifteen.

At eight, she arrived with a small sealed container in an insulated sleeve. She asked how I was feeling before she handed it over, and I

told her the truth as far as I could: tired, distracted, and hungry. She set the container on the counter and waited while I checked the seal.

“You don’t have to stay,” I said, though I wanted her to.

“I know.” She put on her coat. “And I have to leave at quarter past.”

“I remember.”

At eight fifteen, she left. She did not linger in the hall or let my expression change the time she had set. I stood by the door until I heard her footsteps reach the stairs, then went back inside and drank what she had brought.

The hunger eased enough for the room to become a room again. It did not make my thumb close. The cut had started to narrow, but the edges still met slowly beneath the bandage. I could not tell whether the delay meant anything beyond a bad day and a small wound. I could tell that I had been worse at thinking before I drank. That was an observation, not an explanation.

Nora called while I was washing the glass. I nearly let it go to voicemail. Instead, I dried my hands and answered.

“You sound terrible,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Have you eaten?”

“Yes.” I looked at the clean glass in the sink. “I’ve also had blood.”

The line went quiet.

“From where?” Nora asked.

“An adult volunteer through Eva’s network. It was a small contribution, agreed in advance. She brought it here and left at the time she said she would.”

“You haven’t told me that before.”

“No.”

“Why now?”

I looked at the bandage on my thumb. “Because I don’t know what risks I’m failing to account for. And because pretending it isn’t happening hasn’t made it safer.”

Nora let out a breath. “I can talk through general risks with you. I cannot certify that someone else’s blood is safe, supervise Eva’s arrangements, or diagnose what your body is doing over the phone.”

“I’m not asking you to do any of those things.”

“You are asking me to help assess risk.”

“Yes. Within what you can actually know.”

“That’s different.” Her tone softened a fraction, though not enough to mistake for agreement to more than she had offered. “I don’t know how the contributions are collected or handled. I don’t know what screening has or hasn’t happened. You need to ask Eva about those safeguards, and the answer may still leave uncertainty. I won’t make the uncertainty disappear by calling it care.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?”

The question stung because it was fair. “I’m trying to.”

“What happened tonight?”

I told her about the delayed meeting, the hours at the archive, and the cut from the bread knife. I said I had been unable to concentrate before the contribution and that the wound seemed slower to close than some of the others I had noticed. I did not tell her the cut proved anything. It didn’t.

“Those are two observations,” she said. “They may be connected, or they may not. You need to stop turning one evening into a diagnosis.”

“I’m not.”

“You just gave me a timeline and waited for me to tell you what it means.”

I glanced at my thumb. “I wanted to know if I’d missed an obvious danger.”

“I can help you think about immediate warning signs. I’m not your secret doctor, Benjamin, and I can’t make a private donor network into a clinical service by being your friend.”

“I know.”

“And if you’re injured or unwell, you seek proper care. You don’t test yourself at home and report the result to me afterward.”

The kitchen seemed very still around me. “All right.”

“All right what?”

“I won’t stage another experiment. I’ll ask Eva what checks are in place, and I’ll tell you what I’m told instead of letting you guess.”

“That’s a start.”

She paused. “And the blood tonight came from a volunteer who chose to contribute?”

“Yes. She had agreed to it beforehand. She set the time she could stay and left when she said she would.”

“Good. Her choice and her limits matter. Your need doesn’t cancel either one.”

“I know.” This time I meant that I had heard her, not that I had already earned the right to use the words.

“Do you want me to come over?”

The offer tugged at me. I wanted the company, and I wanted to turn the call into something that would make my admission feel less exposed. “No. Not unless you want to. I’m steady now.”

“I’m finishing a shift report. I’ll call tomorrow.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me for having a job.”

When we hung up, a message from Klara was waiting. *My aunt won’t speak to the clinic without me. Do not contact her again. Your access to the collection is closed. I’ll arrange return of the notes you made.*

I read it twice. Then I placed the phone face down and sat beside the bandaged thumb, with the torn pieces of the address still visible in the wastebasket.

I had found a real connection between the contractor and the old address. I had also made that connection visible to people who had never asked me to look for it. The record could wait. Klara’s aunt could not be turned back into a line in my search results, and my apology could not decide what she did next.

CHAPTER 5

Lea’s Copy

The garden was public enough that neither of us could pretend the meeting was private. A child on a scooter rattled over the path behind me; two men argued mildly over a dog that had found something interesting beneath a bench. Lea stood at the edge of the gravel, facing me, her coat buttoned high against the wind. She kept a brown envelope tucked under one arm.

“You came alone,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Did you tell anyone where you were going?”

I looked at the envelope. “Nora knows I’m meeting you. She doesn’t know what you’re bringing.”

Lea considered that, then sat on the far end of the bench. The envelope stayed in her lap, one hand covering its flap.

“I’m not giving you these,” she said.

“I understand.”

“No, you understand the words. I need to know you understand what they mean.” Her gaze stayed on mine. “You don’t take them away. You don’t send them to someone because you’ve decided they’re useful. You don’t make copies and tell yourself you’ll ask afterward.”

The last phrase landed with the precision of something she had already heard me say in another form. I thought of Klara’s collection, the address I had used, and the call that had followed. “You decide where they go,” I said. “And when.”

“I do.”

“If you want a solicitor to see them, you take them there yourself.”

“I have an appointment.” She tapped the envelope once. “I’m going after this.”

“All right.”

She watched me for a moment longer, as if an answer could be accepted provisionally but not trusted. Then she opened the flap and took out a folded packet, a small calendar and a single sheet with a faint blue line running across its lower half.

“This is from my withdrawal packet,” she said. “The clinic gave it to me when I left. The calendar is mine.”

She placed the page on the bench between us, keeping two fingers on its upper edge. Its paper was thin and slightly buckled. A line of figures had been typed near the top; beneath them, pressure marks from another sheet had left a second, paler line. I leaned closer without touching it.

“What am I allowed to do?” I asked.

“Photograph that page. Only that page. No other part of the packet.”

“And the photograph?”

“You keep it for now. You don’t forward it, publish it, or hand it to anyone without asking me first.”

I took my phone from my pocket but left the camera closed. “You’ll decide whether it goes to the investigators?”

“I’ll decide what I give to my solicitor. Then I’ll decide what I’m willing to do beyond that.” Her fingers tightened on the page. “I’m not promising you a statement.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“You are asking me to help expose the clinic.”

I had been about to tell her that the page could establish a route, that the code might line up with a contractor record. I heard the shape of the argument before I spoke it: the evidence was useful, therefore the request was reasonable. It was the same shortcut that had seemed harmless when I called Klara's family address a verification step.

"I want to know what happened to Emil," I said. "But this is yours. I'll use only what you allow, and I'll ask before I share even the photograph."

"Even if you think waiting will cost you something?"

"Yes."

She looked down at the sheet. "Good. Take the picture."

I framed only the page, not the packet beneath it or the calendar beside it. The camera caught the printed collection code and the faint impression under it. I checked the image before I showed her: no corner of another document, no part of her hand except the two fingertips holding the sheet down.

Lea studied the screen. "That's all?"

"That's all."

She took the paper back and folded it into the packet herself. The envelope went into her bag. The small calendar remained in her hand.

"The clinic's later printout gives this collection an earlier slot," she said. "This copy doesn't."

I enlarged the photograph. The type was plain enough. The carbon impression beneath it was less clear, but the time block differed. Not a name, not an explanation: an entry at a later night slot, preserved faintly beneath the version the clinic had printed afterward.

"Do you know who changed it?" I asked.

“No.” She closed the calendar. “I know the page I was given doesn’t agree with their later version. I don’t know why.”

The distinction was uncomfortable and useful. “It could mean the collection was rescheduled.”

“It could.”

“Or that one of the records is wrong.”

“That too.”

I put the phone away. “I won’t call it proof.”

“Don’t call it my evidence as if that makes it yours.”

“I won’t.”

The child on the scooter came rattling back along the path, chased by a parent with one hand lifted in warning. Lea waited until they had passed before she stood.

“My solicitor will have the originals this afternoon,” she said. “I’m going to tell them what I remember. After that, I’ll decide whether I want to speak to anyone else.”

“Can I ask you what you remember?”

“You can ask. I can still say no.”

“Yes.”

She tucked the calendar into her bag. “Nora said I could use her kitchen. She’ll be there for a little while.”

I nodded. The invitation was not exactly an invitation to me, but I had been included in the arrangement. “I’ll come when you’re ready.”

“I’m ready now.”

She started down the path. I followed a few paces behind, leaving enough space that she did not have to look back to check whether I was keeping up.

Nora’s kitchen smelled of coffee and the onion she had cut for something she had not yet started cooking. She stood at the counter in her work clothes, one sleeve pushed above the wrist, scrolling through a message on her phone. She looked up when Lea came in.

“You found it?” Nora asked.

Lea placed the calendar on the table. “I found the date.”

Nora set her phone down. “That’s not the same as finding the whole answer.”

“No,” Lea said. “It isn’t.”

I remained by the doorway until Nora nodded at a chair. Lea chose the one nearest the table’s end, with her bag on the floor between her feet. She opened the calendar to a page marked with a small pencilled tram symbol and a time. The rest of the day was crowded with appointments, reminders and a note about buying laundry powder.

“This is the evening I withdrew,” she said. “I wrote down the tram I caught because I had to work out when to leave. The date’s clear.”

She turned the calendar so we could see. I didn’t reach for it. The date matched the one on the transport page. That fixed Lea’s account to a day; it did not put Emil’s death on a clock.

“What happened before you left?” I asked.

Lea kept her thumb beside the tram note. “I was finishing up. Emil came to the room where I was putting away supplies. He asked for his chart.”

“Did he say why?”

“He said he wanted to know what they’d written about him. Then he asked how to get out of the program.”

Nora pulled out the chair opposite Lea but did not sit. “Those were the words he used?”

“That’s what I remember him saying. I can’t give you a recording.”

“Of course.” Nora rested a hand on the chair back. “And then?”

“I told him I didn’t know who could authorize the chart. I said he should ask Voss.” Lea’s jaw shifted as she looked at the calendar. “I thought that was the responsible answer.”

“It may have been the only answer you had,” I said.

She glanced at me. “It was the answer that ended the conversation.”

There was no accusation in it, but I felt one anyway. “Did he seem frightened?”

“He seemed determined. Tired. Not confused.” She closed the calendar halfway, then opened it again. “He wanted out. He wanted his own record. That’s what I saw.”

Nora sat down. “And you left on the tram you’ve marked here.”

“Yes. I remember looking at the time because I was going to miss it if I kept talking.” Lea tapped the pencilled note. “This is how I know when I left.”

“Not when the collection happened,” Nora said.

Lea looked up. “No. I didn’t say it was.”

Nora’s correction had been directed at me; I had already started assembling the evening into a neat sequence, her tram, Emil’s request, the transport entry. I put my hands flat on the table to stop myself reaching for the calendar.

“You’re right,” I said. “The tram fixes when Lea left. It doesn’t establish what happened afterward, or when.”

Nora’s shoulders eased a little. “Good. I don’t want one time stamp turned into a medical conclusion or a death time. It isn’t either.”

“I know.”

“Knowing is the part you’re still practising.”

Lea's mouth moved as if she might smile, but she kept her attention on the calendar. "After Emil asked for a way out, I looked at the transport sheet. I wanted to know whether he was listed for that collection. It still showed the earlier slot."

She touched the tram mark, not the transport page on my phone. "When I checked again as I was leaving, the slot had been crossed out and moved later. I didn't see who changed it."

I glanced at the photograph on my phone, but left it there. "So the schedule changed after he asked to leave."

"That's what I saw. The page in my packet has the later slot, and the clinic's printout has the earlier one."

The sequence was clearer now: Emil had asked for his chart and a way out; Lea had then seen the earlier collection slot still listed, and later seen it moved. The record and her memory agreed on the discrepancy. Neither told us who had changed it, whether the collection happened at the scheduled time, or what happened to Emil afterward.

Nora rose and checked the time on her phone. "I have to go in. I can stay another ten minutes, but I can't turn this into an investigation meeting."

"I didn't expect you to," Lea said.

Nora picked up her keys. "I can listen. I can make sure nobody mistakes an appointment time for a death certificate. I can't verify the clinic's records, and I won't put my work aside to manage the evidence."

"I wouldn't ask that," I said.

"You have asked for more than you meant to before." She looked at me without heat. "So I'm making it plain."

I nodded. "Understood."

She looked to Lea. “You’re still taking the originals to your solicitor?”

“Yes. I’ll decide what happens after that.”

“Good.” Nora put on her coat. “Keep the calendar with you.”

Lea slipped it back into her bag. “I will.”

Nora left for her shift. The door shut softly behind her.

For a while, Lea and I listened to the ordinary sounds of the building: a pipe ticking, a cupboard closing somewhere upstairs, the lift starting and stopping. I could feel the photograph on my phone as if it had weight. I had permission to keep it, and no permission to make it mean more than it did.

Lea adjusted the strap of her bag. “I’ll talk to the solicitor first. If I make a statement, I’ll do it through them.”

“All right.”

“Then I’ll help with what I remember,” she said. “Not because you found a connection. Because I heard Emil ask for his chart and a way out, and I don’t want the clinic’s paperwork to be the only account.”

She did not say when she would speak, or to whom. She did not hand me the originals. She took the envelope with her when she left.

I remained at Nora’s table after the room had emptied, with the photograph on my phone and the discrepancy still unresolved. Lea’s calendar fixed the evening she withdrew. Her account placed Emil’s request before the later change to the transport slot. The carbon impression preserved that later slot beneath the clinic’s earlier printed version.

It connected the collection to the days when Emil was still trying to leave. It did not tell me who changed the schedule, whether the collection happened as scheduled, or when Emil died.

CHAPTER 6

The Carbon Impression

Klara had chosen a table beneath the reading room’s high windows, where the light was good enough to inspect paper and too flat to make the room welcoming. I arrived early and spent ten minutes pretending to read the rules posted beside the catalogue terminals.

She came in carrying a thin folder. She saw me, paused, and looked at the empty chair opposite her before sitting down.

“Thank you for coming,” I said.

“I said I would bring you one finding.” She set the folder between us but kept her hand on it. “One.”

“I understand.”

Her eyes stayed on mine a moment, measuring the answer. Then she opened the folder and took out a public reference sheet and a narrow copy of the annotation from her family material. The names on the copy were covered with strips of paper. She aligned the two pieces without giving them to me.

“I checked the date against the municipal reference,” she said. “The transfer it cites belongs to 1919. The handwriting in the margin is later.”

I leaned in, stopping short of the papers. “Later by how much?”

“I can’t date it more precisely from this.” She tapped the public reference with one fingernail. “But it isn’t part of the original entry. And the wording on the private note describes custody afterward. It isn’t a death certificate.”

The distinction landed with the quiet force of a door closing. I had imagined that the annotation might name a final moment, or at least

point toward one. Instead it marked something continuing beyond the transfer: custody, later and unexplained.

“So it doesn’t tell us what happened to anyone,” I said.

“It tells us what it says.” Klara folded her hands over the folder. “That is not the same thing.”

“No.”

For a moment we listened to the room’s subdued noises: a chair moved across the floor, a page turned, a printer woke somewhere behind the desk. I had a dozen questions about the family papers. I could feel them arranging themselves into a sensible order, each one attached to a reason I could defend. The collection might contain another date. A name might resolve the reference. A second document might show whether custody meant protection, property, or something else.

Klara’s thumb rested on the folder’s edge.

“I’m not reopening the index,” she said. “You won’t photograph this copy. You won’t use the names beneath those strips. I’m giving you the finding, not access.”

“I won’t ask for more.”

“You’ve said that before.”

I looked down at my hands. “I used the address from your research. I told myself it was a verification step. The clinic contacted someone who had never agreed to be part of this.”

“Yes.” Her voice was level, which made it harder to hide behind an apology. “You found a useful connection and treated usefulness as permission.”

“I did.”

She slid the covered copy back into the folder. “I don’t want to make your inquiry easier. I want to correct one assumption. The annotation is later than the transfer, and it doesn’t certify a death.”

“I’ll keep it to that.”

“Keep it to what I’ve said. Don’t turn it into a conclusion about the people named there.”

“I won’t.”

She closed the folder. I did not ask her to leave it with me, or to let me read the line beneath the strips. The old papers and the clinic still occupied separate places in my mind. One was a record of custody with an unknown purpose. The other was a present-day collection scheduled, changed, and possibly diverted. I could not make them one story merely because both resisted a clean account.

Klara stood. “That’s all I have for you.”

“Thank you.”

She lifted the folder, then hesitated. “I’m not doing this because I trust you again.”

“I know.”

“Good.” She left without offering me a way to prove I understood.

Lea was waiting outside the reading room, her bag held close against her side. She had kept the withdrawal packet and the original page with the collection code. The photograph on my phone showed only the page she had permitted me to photograph. I had not sent it to anyone.

“I’ve got time to go to the depot,” she said. “After that, I’m done for today.”

“All right.”

“And you don’t speak for me.”

“I won’t.”

She watched me put the phone away. “Then come on.”

The transport contractor’s depot stood behind a row of workshops, with a chain-link gate and a low office attached to the vehicle bay. Inside, the air smelled of diesel, wet concrete, and coffee left too long on a hot plate. Lea showed the page to the clerk at the counter, keeping her fingers over everything except the collection code. He checked it against a screen, asked her to wait, and went through a door at the back.

The man who came out wore work trousers and a grey fleece. He glanced at the page, then at Lea.

“I told the clinic,” he said. “It was a normal transfer. That’s what the paperwork says.”

Lea did not sit down. “The paperwork you have here?”

“The paperwork I was given.”

“Then who signed for the load at the receiving end?”

He looked at the page. “That’s not my department.”

“It’s the receiving signature,” she said. “There isn’t one.”

The man took a breath through his nose and rubbed his thumb along the edge of his fleece pocket. His eyes moved to the clerk’s closed door, then returned to us.

“There was a change,” he said. “An extra instruction.”

“What change?” I asked.

His gaze settled on me. “I’m not talking about the clinic’s records with you.”

“Then talk to Lea.”

He looked at her again. She had not shifted her stance or lowered the page.

“They said it was routine,” he said. “A transfer to a service access by the river. I was told the receiving signature would be handled there.”

“Who told you?” Lea asked.

“Dr Voss.”

He said it quickly, as if naming the doctor might return the conversation to safe ground. Lea’s grip tightened on the page.

“You saw him?” I asked.

“I drove him.”

“Where?”

“At the end. He rode with me for the last part.” The driver rubbed his palm over his mouth. “He paid for the diversion. Cash, not through dispatch. I knew it wasn’t the licensed route.”

Lea lowered the paper a fraction. “You knew there was no receiving signature.”

“I knew it was supposed to be signed at the access.”

“But it wasn’t.”

“No.” His answer came after a pause. “I didn’t get one.”

A forklift beeped somewhere beyond the office wall. The sound came twice, then stopped. The driver glanced toward it, using the interruption to look away.

“What was under the cover?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You didn’t check?”

“No. It was covered. I wasn’t there to examine it.” He turned his face back toward me. “I drove what I was told to drive.”

Lea’s voice stayed calm. “You accompanied the diversion.”

“I did.”

“And Voss came with you for the final leg.”

“Yes.” He looked at her, then added, “I saw him. I’m not guessing.”

“Was it dark?” I asked.

“Not inside the cab. The dome light was on when he climbed in. I knew him from the clinic.” He gave a small, impatient shake of his head. “I’m telling you what I saw. I didn’t look under the cover.”

The words made a narrow path through the questions. A driver had taken a covered load off the ordinary route, without a licensed receiving signature. He said Voss paid for the diversion and accompanied him on the river-side leg. He did not know what the load contained. His account put Voss there; it did not tell us who—or what—had been in the vehicle, or what condition they had been in.

“You’ll have to tell investigators exactly that,” I said. “The route, the payment, the missing signature, and what you didn’t see. They’ll need your part in it too.”

His jaw set. “You’re saying I’m in trouble.”

“I’m saying you were involved. Leaving out your own part won’t make the account more useful.”

“I didn’t hurt anyone.”

“I’m not saying you did.” I kept my voice level. “I’m saying the record has a gap, and you know how it got there.”

He looked at Lea. She had not offered to soften the account for him.

“I’ll speak to them,” he said at last. “I’ll tell them what I did.”

Lea folded the page and put it back in her bag. “You should tell them what you saw, not what you think they want to hear.”

“I know.”

She nodded once, neither forgiving him nor asking him to say more. Outside the office, she waited until the door had shut behind us before she spoke.

“He admitted the route,” she said.

“He admitted what he did and what he saw. That matters.”

“It doesn’t tell us what was under the cover.”

“No.”

She looked toward the road beyond the depot gate. “And it doesn’t tell us when Emil died.”

“No.”

The river-side service access was still only a place in a driver’s account. The 1919 note was still a later custody annotation, not a certificate of death. I had two facts that resisted being made into answers, and for once I did not try to force them together.

Lea adjusted the strap of her bag. “I’m going home.”

“I’ll walk you to the tram.”

“You can walk beside me,” she said. “You don’t have to turn it into anything else.”

So I walked beside her, carrying no papers and asking no further questions.

CHAPTER 7

A Name in Reverse

Emil's partner unlocked the shop and held the door while Klara and I stepped inside. "I'm Irene," she said. The place smelled of paper dust and machine oil. A job had been lifted from the cutting table, leaving a clean rectangle amid the scattered scraps; the press stood silent, its rollers flecked with dried ink.

"He was finishing an order," she said. "I thought the proof might still be here."

She kept her voice practical, as if the work might resume if she described it correctly. I looked at the empty stool beneath the bench and remembered Emil's body by the river. The shop offered no correction to that memory.

Klara carried a thin folder, but didn't open it. The last time I had used information from her family research without asking, I had treated access as a technical matter. She had since made clear what she would share and what she would not. I watched her wait for the partner's permission before she moved toward the bench.

The partner found a narrow sheet caught beneath a board. It was a type test: letters printed in reverse, with a small device at the bottom—a line broken by two short strokes.

"He was checking the spacing," she said, laying it flat.

Klara glanced at her. "May I show you something?"

At the partner's nod, she opened the folder and took out a reproduction from a public catalogue. The entry dated the older print work. Its device matched the one on the fresh test: the break in the line, the two strokes, their position against the edge.

"Same arrangement," Klara said. "And this one has an independent date."

“Could it have been copied?” I asked.

“It could.” She didn’t look up from the pages. “But it gives us a connection.”

The partner turned the type test slightly, bringing it closer to the catalogue reproduction. “He used to draw that mark on proofs when he was impatient.”

A folded letter had been tucked into the shallow drawer beneath the bench. The partner opened it carefully. The signature read Jakob Seidel. Her eyes moved from the name to the printed device beside her hand.

“I know his writing,” she said. “And this is his.”

“Could anyone else have known the mark?” I asked.

She looked at me. “I don’t know.”

I heard the narrowness in my question after I’d asked it, the way I’d tried to make recognition into proof of exclusivity.

She read a few lines and paused. One mentioned the chipped cup she kept behind the counter, the one Emil had repaired and she still used. She touched the paper with one finger.

“He remembered the cup.”

Klara gave her a moment. “The dated work and the letter support the name. They don’t tell us everything about the person who used it.”

“I didn’t invite you here to explain him to me,” the partner said.

“No,” I replied. “You invited us to look for the commission.”

I wanted to ask whether there were more letters, how long she had known the name, whether Jakob Seidel had been someone she had met or only a signature on paper. Each question could have passed for useful. I stepped back from the bench instead.

“Thank you for showing us.”

“I’m not giving you the letter.”

“I understand.”

Klara closed her folder. The partner put the letter away, then returned the test sheets beneath the board. The name remained with me, but the paper stayed where she had chosen to keep it.

Outside, I called Nora. I didn’t ask her to interpret Emil’s collapse.

“I should arrange a proper assessment for myself,” I said. “Not ask you to make sense of it between shifts.”

“Good,” she replied. “Tell the person you see what’s happening. Not just what you think it means.”

“I will.”

At the riverside café, Emil’s partner chose a table beside the window. Klara sat opposite her; I took the chair to one side. The partner set her phone face down, then brought two folded letters from her bag. She kept her palm over them.

“These are the ones I can show you,” she said. “You can read them here. They stay with me.”

“We won’t take them,” Klara said.

“I won’t photograph them,” I added.

She lifted her hand. One letter was signed Jakob Seidel. The other was more recent. In it, Emil wrote that he wanted to leave Voss’s clinic and take his chart with him. The words were plain, almost administrative. He wasn’t asking for an exception. He expected to be allowed to go.

“Is this the same clinic?” I asked.

“Voss’s,” she said. “He told me he’d asked for his chart.”

Klara looked from the signature to the partner. “The name matches the shop letter.”

“Yes.” She touched the edge of the newer page. “He folded the last line under when he wanted to be sure I’d read it.”

It was a detail that belonged to their life together, not a mark anyone could date or compare. Alongside the old print and the letter, it made the alias more persuasive. It did not make the record complete.

The partner returned the pages to her bag. “There’s something else.”

She unlocked her phone, found a recording, and checked the screen before setting it between us. The time beside it was 00:18.

My attention snagged on the small speaker. The café sounds seemed to draw closer: a spoon against a cup, someone’s chair scraping, the soft hiss of tyres on wet pavement beyond the glass. Under them, my hunger tightened, a familiar inward pull that made the ordinary food smells useless. I put both hands on the table and kept them there.

The message played. Emil sounded tired, but clear. He said he was still at Voss’s clinic. He had asked for his chart and expected to leave shortly.

The recording stopped. I could hear the partner breathe in before she picked up her phone.

“He was alive when he sent that,” I said.

“Yes. That’s why I kept it.”

I wanted a copy, a file, a way to check its time and source. The questions were already forming when I saw her thumb resting over the screen. It was her phone. She had chosen what to play and what to keep.

“I’ll give investigators access to the original message through what my provider can retrieve,” she said. “They can ask me directly. The letters stay with me.”

Klara nodded. “That’s your choice.”

The partner’s gaze rested on me. “I’m not handing over everything he ever wrote because he’s dead.”

“I understand.” I let the questions go unanswered.

She contacted the investigators while we sat there and told them she could provide the message through her provider’s available records. She made no promise about the letters. Afterward she put the phone away and looked down at the table.

“The message places him at the clinic at 00:18, asking to leave,” I said.

“Yes.”

She took a folded collection slip from her purse. “I was meant to pick up an order at the paper merchant before all this happened. Would you collect it for me?”

I read the shop name and the pickup details. “Of course.”

“It’s ordinary stock,” she said. “Nothing to do with him.”

“I understand.”

I put the slip in my pocket without taking out my phone to record it. She gathered her things, keeping the letters and the message with her.

The name Jakob Seidel had a signature, an independently dated print mark, and the recognition of someone who knew Emil’s hand and habits. The letter showed that he intended to leave Voss’s clinic with his chart. The 00:18 message placed him there, alive, still expecting to leave. Those things helped establish a life under another name. They could not restore the man who had written them.

At the door, I let her go ahead of us. I didn’t ask to see the letters again.

CHAPTER 8

The Room After Midnight

Nora’s kitchen was too small for five people to stand around the table without negotiating every movement. The radiator clicked as if it objected to the arrangement, and someone upstairs dragged a chair across the floor.

“If they’re moving furniture,” Nora said, shifting the sugar bowl to make room, “they can at least have the decency to do it somewhere else.”

Lea sat nearest the window, her carbon copy laid flat in front of her. Klara was beside her. Emil’s partner had set her phone next to her cup but kept one hand close to it. I stood at the counter, where I could stay out of everyone’s way and pretend I wasn’t listening to the pipes, the upstairs chair, the refrigerator’s low motor, and the rain ticking against the glass.

Nora put a mug in front of me. “Tea. It is not a medical intervention.”

“I hadn’t assumed it was.”

“Good. You’ve been difficult to treat lately, and I haven’t even tried.” She turned to Lea. “Show us what you want us to see.”

Lea’s carbon-backed collection entry came from the clinic paperwork she had kept when she withdrew. She pointed to the date and the line for Emil. The clinic’s record put his discharge at 23:42. A collection had been entered against the same line, though the copy did not say who had taken him or where.

Klara placed the partner’s phone beside the paper, leaving it in its owner’s reach. “And the message?”

The partner unlocked the phone herself. She found the recording and set it down between the entry and her cup. At 00:18, Emil’s voice

came through the small speaker, tired and unmistakable to her. He said he was still at Voss’s clinic. He had asked for his chart and expected to leave.

She stopped the recording. “That’s what he said.” Her thumb stayed on the screen. “I’m not giving you the phone.”

“No one’s asking for it,” Klara said.

The partner put the phone back beside her cup. I looked again at the handwritten discharge line, then at the quiet black screen. If Emil had recorded the message at 00:18, his account conflicted with a physical departure at 23:42. But the displayed time might be transmission rather than recording, and discharge might not mean he had walked out. He could even have left and returned. I wrote down the checks for the investigators: the original recording and its metadata, the provider’s transmission record, and what anyone had actually seen of his departure or return.

Lea slid another sheet from her folder. “The driver brought this to the investigators. He said he’d ask for a copy of the vehicle record and let them check it.”

The page was a printout from the van’s journey system. The driver had agreed that it could be checked against the depot’s own records. I leaned over it, but the figures and lines seemed to separate from one another. A spoon clinked against a mug. I lost my place.

“Could you read the two entries aloud?” I asked Lea.

She glanced up, then followed the row with one finger. “The van left the depot at 23:31. It returned at 00:06 and remained there until 01:11.”

Klara looked at the marks beside the times. “Those are the vehicle’s entries, not proof that he sat in it every minute.”

“No,” Lea said. “The depot supervisor saw him arrive with it at 00:06. He saw him leave again at 01:11. He couldn’t account for the driver in between.”

The record was still awaiting independent verification, but its sequence was plain enough to follow: the van came back before Emil's message and did not leave again until nearly an hour later. The supervisor's two sightings fixed the driver at the depot at the ends of that interval, not throughout it. If the van had carried Emil from the clinic after 00:18, it had not done so on a journey recorded then. That did not tell us where the driver had been otherwise, or when Emil died.

"He was still at the clinic at 00:18," I said.

The partner's expression tightened, but she didn't look away from the phone. "That's what the message says."

Nora took the entry from beside my hand and set it back in front of Lea. "Then there's a discrepancy to check. We don't need to make the paper say more than that."

The upstairs chair scraped again. My attention jumped toward the ceiling before I could stop it. Nora saw me looking.

"Old building," she said. "The walls are thin, not prophetic."

"I know." I sat down. The chair gave a small groan beneath me, an ordinary sound, and I kept my hands around the mug until the room settled into its separate noises again.

Lea had taken a small envelope from her folder. "There's another thing. I remembered a treatment chair being taken out of use after that night."

"Did you see it happen?" Klara asked.

"I saw it in the corridor the next day, with a tag on it. I don't know when the damage was done." Lea opened the envelope and drew out a print of a photograph. "This was attached to my later correspondence about getting my notebook back. I kept the whole exchange."

The photograph showed part of a treatment room. A chair stood against the wall, its detachable steel arm absent. At the side of the seat, the socket that should have held it was visibly damaged. The image was small, but the break in the fitting was clear.

Lea set the photograph down without releasing the envelope. “I want investigators to have the context. The date is when this picture was sent, not necessarily when the damage happened.”

“Understood,” Klara said.

The photograph connected the chair to Lea’s memory of its removal from use, but the date on the correspondence could not tell us when the arm went missing. I looked from the damaged socket to the collection entry. The clinic had recorded Emil as discharged; if 00:18 was the recording time rather than the transmission time, his account put him there afterward, but discharge might not mean physical departure, and he might have left and returned. The chair was in a room he had used, but that alone gave it no part in his death.

Emil’s partner touched the rim of her cup. “The investigators told me the injury was blunt-force trauma to the head. They haven’t told me anything more.”

“Then it’s worth asking them to examine the chair and the arm,” I said. “Not calling either one the weapon.”

Klara nodded. “A testable connection.”

The partner took her phone back into her hand. “I’ll show the investigators the original message and authorize the provider record they asked about. The letters stay with me.”

“They should,” Lea said.

For a moment no one reached for the papers. Rain ticked at the window. The radiator gave another small knock, and Nora lifted her mug in its direction as if toasting a troublesome guest.

“Now that the kitchen has hosted a full inquiry,” she said, “I’d like my table back before the radiator asks a follow-up.”

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The next morning, the investigators’ office smelled of damp coats and overheated paper. Lea had the original collection entry and the complete correspondence that had carried the photograph. She placed them on the table herself and kept one hand on the envelope until the officer had finished listing what he was taking. Then she signed the receipt.

Emil’s partner sat beside her with her phone in her own hands. She played the message for the investigators and confirmed that she would authorize the request for the provider-held record. The letters remained in her bag. Nobody asked her to leave the phone behind.

The officer wrote down the chair and the room Lea had identified. “We’re adding both to the search request,” he said. “We don’t have the result of the examination, because there hasn’t been one.”

Lea gave him the correspondence that held the photograph. “Keep the date with it.”

“I will.”

The driver was not there, but he had agreed to make a formal statement about the diversion, the van, and what he had and hadn’t seen. His admission about the unlicensed route remained in the file; the new journey record did not erase it. The officer said the vehicle data would be checked against the depot’s records before they relied on it.

“Could you also check who could get into that room?” I asked. “Other entrances, where the staff were, whether anyone could see the doorway. And whether there are access records kept outside the clinic.” The officer added the questions to his notes, then turned back to the room and chair he intended to ask a judge to let them examine.

I had no answer to any of them. The photograph gave us something to test, not a way to decide who had been alone with Emil.

Outside, the air was cold enough to clear the office smell from my nose. Lea checked the time on her phone.

“My appointment’s this afternoon,” she said. “I’m going back for the notebook. My solicitor will come with me.”

“I’ll come too,” I said.

“You can wait outside,” she replied. “I don’t need another person in the room.”

“All right.”

She had arranged the return for her own notebook before we knew what the photograph showed. Now she would go with her solicitor, carrying no obligation to turn the appointment into an investigation for us.

***

The clinic’s front windows were bright with the grey afternoon, the rooms beyond them pale and difficult to read from the pavement. Lea and her solicitor arrived together. Before they went in, Lea checked that the notebook’s description was written on the appointment email in her hand, then folded it and put it away.

“I’ll call you when we’re finished,” she said.

“I’ll be here.”

She and the solicitor entered. The door swung shut behind them, leaving me outside with the clinic’s name above me and traffic hissing past on the wet street. Through the glass, I could see only the reception counter and a slice of the corridor. No one came out.

I stayed on the pavement, where Lea had asked me to wait, and watched the door without trying to see through it.

CHAPTER 9

The Door He Left Open

I had been waiting on the pavement long enough to count the clinic's front-door openings twice when Lea's solicitor came back into view behind the glass.

He had gone in with her. Now they stood in reception, facing the corridor beyond the counter. Lea held one hand out, palm up. The solicitor said something I couldn't hear. A moment later the two of them came through the front door together.

Lea didn't look at me until they had crossed the pavement to the service entrance around the side of the building. I followed at the distance she'd asked for, neither invited into the appointment nor willing to leave her alone outside a clinic that had already given us reason to distrust its records.

The service entrance opened into a shallow loading bay. A grey metal door stood ajar at its inner end, showing a strip of corridor and, farther in, a trolley. A black notebook lay on it. Lea stopped just inside the bay; her solicitor remained beside her, one hand resting on the strap of his document case.

"Mine," Lea said, looking at the notebook.

A man in a white coat appeared beyond the inner door. Voss. He looked first at Lea, then at the solicitor, then past them to me. His expression didn't change, but his fingers closed around the door's edge.

"You were told the collection would be witnessed," Lea said.

"It was arranged before the circumstances changed." Voss kept his voice level. "The driver has made a statement. Investigators are preparing a search. I won't have anyone removing material from the clinic."

The solicitor took a small step forward. “We’re here for Ms Winter’s personal notebook. You acknowledged the appointment.”

“I’m withdrawing permission.” Voss’s eyes returned to Lea. “You’ll have to make your request through the proper channel.”

Lea glanced at the notebook on the trolley. It was within sight, but not within reach. “Then call the investigator handling my complaint. Tell them you’re refusing to return my property.”

The solicitor had already taken out his phone. “I’ll call now.”

Voss let the door swing partway toward him. For an instant, he seemed to consider another answer. Then he turned and went down the corridor, away from us. His coat vanished through an open doorway on the left. The door pulled shut behind him.

Lea looked at the solicitor. “Tell them he saw us. Tell them about the notebook.”

“I’m doing that.” He angled the phone away from the clinic’s interior and began speaking to someone. “Yes, I’m at the service entrance. Dr Voss has refused the witnessed return. Ms Winter’s notebook is visible inside.”

A smell reached me: first warm dust, then something sharp and bitter beneath it. I turned toward the corridor. A thin line of smoke was slipping from under the closed door Voss had gone through.

“Is that coming from the records room?” I said.

The solicitor ended his call. He looked at the smoke and then at Lea. “I’m calling emergency services.”

A latch clanged farther down the corridor. The inner door opened, and a clinic assistant appeared with one hand braced against it. Smoke had gathered behind him, not yet thick enough to hide his face. He was breathing hard.

“Everyone out,” he called. “Use the service exit. Now.”

Two people came after him from the corridor, both wearing the clinic's pale volunteer badges. One had a coat over an arm. The other clutched a canvas bag to their chest. They moved quickly but not well; the nearer one stumbled at the threshold.

I stepped out of their way, then caught the door with my shoulder so it wouldn't swing back against them. The assistant pointed them toward the courtyard beyond the loading bay.

"Keep going. Don't stop here."

The solicitor moved with the volunteers, one hand out to steady the person who'd stumbled. Lea stayed near the open inner door, watching the smoke.

"Lea," I said. "Outside."

"I'm coming." She didn't move yet. Her gaze had fixed on the trolley. The notebook was still there, its cover dark against the metal.

A noise came from inside the closed room: a short, hollow crash. Smoke pushed harder under the door.

The assistant turned back toward the corridor. "There are two more in the rooms at the rear. I'm getting them."

He disappeared through the inner doorway. I kept the exit clear, letting the volunteers pass into the courtyard. The one with the canvas bag paused on the other side, coughing. The solicitor guided them farther from the building, then turned back toward the door.

"Stay outside," he called to Lea.

She took a step toward the threshold. "He can't keep my notebook."

"He just refused to give it to you," the solicitor said. "That's now on record. Come out."

She looked from him to the trolley. Then the smoke thickened in a sudden dark push, and the corridor's strip of visible floor

disappeared. I smelled hot plastic. My eyes watered. Somewhere inside, an alarm began to shrill, flattening every other sound into a high, hard insistence.

Lea turned toward the exit.

I was still at the threshold when the assistant came back, coughing into his sleeve. Behind him, the two remaining volunteers were following in a rush. I stepped outside to give them room. The solicitor took one by the elbow and led them across the bay. The other reached the courtyard on their own, head bent against the smoke.

Lea was a pace behind them, trying to get out through the same narrow opening. I saw the metal shelving unit tip from the corridor wall. One end struck the floor; the other swung down across the passage and caught her at the shoulder, driving her against the wall.

The impact knocked the breath from her. Her arm disappeared beneath the lower shelf. She made a short, involuntary sound, then clenched her jaw against another.

The transport folder had fallen from the trolley. It lay near the threshold, its papers fanned across the dirty floor. I could reach it with one step. Lea was farther in, partly hidden by the shelf and the smoke.

For a fraction of a second, I looked at the folder.

Then Lea tried to pull her arm free and the shelf shifted against her.

I went in.

The air was hot and smoky. The alarm sawed at my ears, too close to separate from the pounding in my chest. My eyes couldn’t keep the corridor sharp. I found Lea by her coughing and the movement of her hand against the floor.

“Don’t pull,” I said. “I’m lifting it.”

She looked up at me through watering eyes. “My shoulder—”

“I know.”

I got both hands under the nearest edge of the shelf. The metal bit into my palms. I tried to raise it, and my arms answered with a weak, sickening tremor. The weight shifted barely enough to make a gap.

The folder lay just behind my heel. A loose page had caught on my shoe. I could have bent, picked it up, and still had both hands free if I were quick. The thought arrived with the kind of calm that wasn’t calm at all: the driver’s statement, the route, the paper that might make the clinic’s account harder to alter.

Lea’s breath hitched. The shelf dipped.

I kicked the page away and put my shoulder beneath the metal.

Pain flared down my arm. The shelf lifted a little, then dragged back against me. My body had been forgiving lately in small, startling ways; now it gave nothing back. The strain stayed where it landed, raw and immediate. My right hand began to shake so badly that I had to brace it against the shelf to keep my grip.

“Move your arm,” I said.

Lea slid it free. She sucked in a breath and pressed it against her ribs.

“Can you stand?”

“I can try.”

“Try toward the door.”

She pushed herself up. I held the shelf, feeling its weight grind through my arms. For a moment she couldn’t get her feet under her. Then she was upright, bent forward, her free hand against the wall.

“Go,” I said.

She took two uneven steps toward the exit. I let the shelf fall behind her. It struck the floor with a bang that I felt in my teeth.

I followed, one hand out against the wall. The smoke blurred the corridor into a few close shapes: doorway, floor, Lea's coat moving ahead of me. The alarm filled my head. Outside, the solicitor was calling her name.

At the threshold Lea stumbled. I caught her around the waist and got her over the lip of the door. The solicitor took her weight from me as soon as they were clear.

"Courtyard," he said. "Keep moving."

We reached the open air. Cold struck my wet face, and I gulped it as if I could rinse the smoke from my lungs. Lea sank onto the low concrete edge beside the loading bay. Her solicitor crouched in front of her, asking whether she could move her fingers, whether she felt faint. She answered each question through clenched teeth.

"Your shoulder?" I asked.

"It hurts." She looked at the open service door. "That's the report."

The solicitor took out his phone again. "I saw Dr Voss refuse the return. I saw him go into that room. I saw smoke under the door after he went in." He looked from Lea to me. "I'm telling the investigator exactly that. I'm not guessing what he did in there."

Lea gave a tight nod. "Tell them the notebook was still on the trolley."

"I will."

The assistant came out last, coughing hard, one hand pressed over his mouth. He looked toward the side of the building rather than the courtyard door.

"Where's Voss?" I asked.

The assistant pointed along the narrow passage beside the clinic. It ran between the building and a high wall, ending at a vehicle gate. "He went out that way. I saw him turn behind the loading annex."

“Did you see him leave the building?” the solicitor asked.

“I saw him in the side passage.” The assistant bent over, hands on his knees, and coughed again. “I opened the rear exit to get the volunteers out. He was already past the corner.”

A siren rose from the street. The two volunteers stood farther across the courtyard, leaning on each other. One had begun to cry without making any sound. The assistant straightened and repeated the direction to a uniformed officer who had arrived at the gate. The officer listened, then called it in and pointed another officer toward the passage.

The first officer asked who had been inside and who had seen what. The solicitor gave his name and described the refusal, Voss’s departure into the corridor, and the smoke that followed. The assistant gave his account separately, including the side passage. Lea corrected the solicitor when he called the notebook a file.

“It was my notebook,” she said. “It was on the trolley. He refused to return it.”

The officer wrote that down.

My hands had started to throb. I lowered them and tried to open my fingers. The right one resisted; the muscles along my forearm quivered with the effort. Smoke clung to my coat. Beneath it, I could still smell the paper and dust inside the clinic, and the faint iron note of my own split palm. I curled my fingers before anyone could ask about it.

A car stopped beyond the gate. Klara got out carrying a flat document case. She came toward us quickly, then slowed when she saw Lea sitting with her arm held close to her body.

“I heard there was a fire,” she said. “Are you hurt?”

“Probably,” Lea said. “Ask me when the sirens stop.”

Klara’s eyes shifted to the officers. “I brought the deposit records.” She opened the case but didn’t take out the contents until the investigator approached. “The copies were lodged offsite before today. This is the receipt and the duplicate set for your file.”

The investigator examined the receipt, then accepted the papers. Klara stayed beside the case while he checked the pages against a list she had attached. Whatever Voss had tried to destroy inside the clinic, these copies had not been there to burn.

Lea watched the open service entrance. The notebook was somewhere inside, beyond smoke and a fallen shelf. She didn’t ask me to go back for it.

I didn’t offer.

Voss had left the door open behind him. The smoke kept coming through it, and the people who had seen him go were still there to say which way he’d gone.

CHAPTER 10

The River Does Not Give Back

The courtyard had filled with people who had nowhere useful to go. The volunteers stood near the wall, the solicitor spoke into his phone, and Lea sat on the concrete edge with her injured arm tucked close. Smoke still drifted from the service entrance.

The assistant pointed towards the side passage again. An officer went that way with another close behind. I heard a sharp clatter beyond the gate, then hurried steps on gravel.

I turned my head, but the high wall and the open service door blocked the view. I didn't see Voss. Lea's breathing had gone shallow, each breath catching as if it stopped at the top of her chest. I put my hand where she could see it, not touching her.

"Stay with me," I said. "You're outside. The air's clear here."

Her eyes found mine. She drew in a breath that shook on the way out.

Nora came through the courtyard entrance with the ambulance crew. She crouched beside Lea while one of the paramedics checked her shoulder and asked her to move her fingers. Nora kept her voice low and practical, giving Lea one question at a time. I stayed close enough to answer when Lea looked towards me, far enough not to crowd the people treating her.

My own shoulder had begun to stiffen. The strain from lifting the shelf sat deep beneath the skin; the small, familiar easing I had come to expect from an injury did not arrive. My split palm throbbed, too. Beyond the smoke and wet coats, the air carried the hot, unmistakable scent of blood from the people who had been hurt or scraped in the evacuation.

Every pulse in the courtyard seemed to sound separately. Mine. Lea's. The paramedic's, steady as he spoke. I fixed my eyes on the buckle of his equipment bag and tried to let his words become the loudest thing in my head.

Klara stood beside the officers, holding the empty document case against her hip. I caught her eye.

"Could you contact Eva's volunteer network?" I asked. "Ask whether someone can come by later."

Her expression changed, just slightly. She didn't ask me to explain. "I'll call."

I looked back at Lea. I would not take anything from someone who was injured and frightened, no matter what my body was asking for. The decision did not quiet it. It only kept it from becoming someone else's problem.

An officer returned from the passage. Behind him, another was escorting Voss across the courtyard. Voss's coat was gone; ash marked one cuff of his shirt. He looked towards the open service door, then at the people gathered around Lea. His eyes passed over me without stopping.

The assistant identified him to the officers. He had seen Voss in the side passage and pointed out the route. That was enough for them to take hold of Voss and lead him towards the gate. I had heard movement beyond it. I had not seen him leave, and I had not seen what he did inside the room.

The solicitor lowered his phone. "They've got him," he said, more to Lea than to me.

Lea tried to sit straighter. Nora put a hand up, a small stop sign.

"Let them check you first," she said.

Lea’s jaw tightened, but she let the paramedic continue. I stayed beside her until the crew had her settled and the courtyard stopped feeling like a room full of unfinished alarms.

* * *

Several days later, Emil’s partner met me at a café near the shop. She had chosen a table by the window and kept her coat on. A narrow envelope lay beside her cup. She rested two fingers on it, as if to keep it from sliding away.

“The investigator told me what they found,” she said. “I thought you should hear it from me.”

I waited. A grinder started behind the counter. The noise cut through the café in a bright, metallic burst, and my attention snagged on it before I could stop myself. When it fell silent, I found her eyes again.

“They recovered the steel arm from the treatment chair,” she said. “There was Emil’s blood inside the joint. They found corresponding traces at the damaged socket where the arm had been.”

She turned the envelope a quarter turn but didn’t open it.

“And the injury?” I asked.

“They say the shape is consistent with the fatal head wound.” She watched my face. “Not proof by itself. But it fits what they’ve learned about the clinic and the transport.”

She opened the envelope and drew out one page. “The investigator let me read this. I made my own copy.” She kept the page in front of her, one hand at its edge. “They checked the van printout against the original journey data and the depot records. Then they checked where the driver himself had gone. The transit operator supplied the fare records and station images before they were overwritten. They identified him in the images, not just his card.”

She glanced down at the page. “His outward journey was before the confrontation at the clinic, and his return was afterward. The checked times and the journey back leave no opportunity for a clinic visit during that confrontation. He was back before the van left at 01:11. They aren’t claiming to know every step he took.”

I looked at the coffee darkening the bottom of my cup. The driver had still taken Emil’s body towards the river. These records narrowed what he could have done before that, not what he had done afterward.

“The assistant who helped get people out during the fire was on that late shift too,” she continued. “Investigators questioned him afterward. He says he’d kept quiet because he was afraid of Voss and of losing his job.”

She followed a line on the page with her finger. “He saw Emil demand his chart after the message. Voss took him into the treatment room and ordered the assistant out. The staff station looks straight at the room’s only usable doorway; investigators checked that. He stayed there until Voss came out. Nobody else went in or left. He heard raised voices, then a metallic crash and a cry. After that he didn’t hear Emil again. He didn’t see a blow.”

She left her hand on the page. “The building operator ran the electronic locks and kept the audit remotely. Its service records let them check the clock. Voss’s credential was used at that room after the message, with no other credential use during the assistant’s watch. That doesn’t tell them who was inside or rule out an unlogged entry by itself. The assistant’s view of the doorway is what supports Voss being alone with Emil.”

His partner said investigators had compared the original recording on her phone with the provider-held message and checked the device’s recording time. The recording was made at 00:18; the provider separately confirmed transmission then. That established the timing and content, not the truth of Emil’s statement that he was

at the clinic. The assistant's account independently placed him there after the discharge Voss had entered. The assistant had seen Voss alone with him during the chart confrontation and heard its sudden disturbance; the independently checked door record supported that account. The driver's verified journey excluded a clinic visit during that confrontation without clearing him of the later river-side diversion. Emil's blood in the chair-arm joint and at the broken socket, together with the compatible fatal wound, supported an assault in that room. Those traces could not identify the hand that struck him, but they no longer stood alone. With the falsified departure and Voss's part in the disposal, they formed the case against him.

"Is Voss still saying Emil left in the ordinary way?" I asked.

"He says Emil chose to leave." Her mouth tightened. "He says a great many things. The officer told me Voss is being held on suspicion of Emil's murder. The fire is a separate investigation."

The investigators had arrested him after the fire. Now there was a case against him for the killing, built from what Emil had said, what the records claimed, what the witnesses saw, and what the chair had kept.

She folded the summary and put it away with her copies. She didn't slide them across the table, and I didn't ask her to. They were hers to keep.

"I'm meant to collect the shop stock this afternoon," she said. "There's a delivery I've put off twice already." Her mouth tightened around the last word. "I keep thinking I should be doing something else."

"You can collect it," I said. "You don't have to earn the right to do an ordinary thing."

She looked down at her cup. "He'd have said the delivery was more urgent than it was."

The shop, the missed delivery, the small duties that had belonged to Emil as well as the great ones. I could imagine him saying it; that was not the same as knowing the exact words.

She looked at me again. “There’s something else. After he collapsed in January, he contacted me. Not the message from the clinic. Earlier. I knew he was alive after the collapse, though neither of us ever worked out what had happened to him then.”

I felt my hands go still around the cup.

The message at 00:18 had been different. It belonged to Emil’s final stay at Voss’s clinic, after the time the clinic later entered as his discharge. In it, he said he was alive and still there. He expected to leave with his chart. That message had helped undo Voss’s version of the final days. It had not told us what happened after the January collapse.

His partner folded one corner of the envelope, then smoothed it again. “I don’t know what treatment he got in January. We didn’t talk about it in a way that made the details clear. I only knew he’d reached me afterwards.”

I wanted to ask what he sounded like, how long the call lasted, whether he’d said where he was. The questions came up in the familiar order, neat as boxes waiting to be filled. I let them pass. She had already given me what she chose to give.

“Thank you,” I said.

She nodded and moved the envelope back beside her cup. “I’m going to collect the stock now.”

At the door she paused to pull her gloves on. Then she went out into the afternoon, carrying no part of the case that she had not chosen to carry.

* * *

That evening Nora let me into her kitchen and put the kettle on. A week earlier, I might have tried to shape what I needed to tell her into a version that sounded manageable. I had spent too long treating omission as a kind of protection.

She set two mugs on the table. “You’ve been quiet since the clinic.”

“I need to tell you what happened in January. All of it.”

She sat opposite me. “All right.”

“When Emil collapsed, I tried to help him. I remember how still he was. I thought he was dead.” The words sounded blunt in the small kitchen. “I didn’t know what happened after the ambulance took him. I never got confirmation of an outcome.”

Nora didn’t interrupt.

“I was hurt too. Badly. I remember the pain, sudden and violent. I remember the wound opening through my clothes, and blood on my hands.” The memory came in pieces: a flash of motion, the sharpness of the pain, the warmth slick against my skin. “I can’t tell you whose blood it was, or what happened medically after that. I thought I was going to die. Then I didn’t.”

I looked down at my hands. The palm I had split in the clinic courtyard was still tender, the shoulder still stiff. “Afterwards, my body began changing. The hunger. The way small cuts close. Hearing too much. Sunlight leaving me worse than it should. I’ve been trying to make it add up without telling you how much of it there was.”

Nora’s fingers rested against the handle of her mug. “And Emil?”

“His partner told me today he contacted her after the January collapse. She knew he was alive then. She doesn’t know what treatment he received.” I took a breath. “That’s separate from the 00:18 message during his last stay at Voss’s clinic. That came after the discharge entry Voss falsified. Emil said he was still there and intended to leave.”

Nora's gaze stayed on me. "So you saw him profoundly still, and you believed he was dead. But nobody established that he had died irreversibly."

"No." I looked at the steam drifting from my mug. "I mistook what I saw for certainty."

The admission did not undo the image I had carried from the river. It made the image smaller and more human: a man collapsed beside me, and me frightened enough to decide what his stillness meant.

Nora leaned back. "I can't tell you what caused the changes. I'm not going to pretend I can diagnose you from a story about one terrible night."

"I know."

"And I can't be your secret doctor."

"I know that too."

She waited. I had been waiting for her to ask the question I most feared. Instead, she said, "Is there anything else I need to know before we talk about what help you want?"

"You already know about Eva's network," I said. "We talked about the contribution that night, the screening, the risks. What I didn't tell you was how much of my life already depended on it. Since winter, most weeks when someone was willing and available, I've relied on a contribution. Not just that evening."

Nora's expression sharpened with recognition. "I remember. You'd postponed the meeting, and you told me how you felt before and afterward. We talked about handling and screening, and I told you I couldn't supervise the arrangements."

"Yes. I gave you that evening. I kept the extent of it to myself."

"And how much you were relying on it to get through your days."

"Yes."

She sat with that for a moment. Then she pushed her mug away, though she hadn't drunk from it. "That is what you needed to tell me. My boundary hasn't changed. I won't manage Eva's network or tell you it's safe."

"I know. I'm telling you now."

"I can help you arrange proper follow-up and keep track of what you choose to observe. I won't decide what the changes mean, and I won't take over your care."

"I'm not asking you to."

"Good." Her voice softened a fraction. "And you'll tell me if something changes enough that you need help. Not after you've decided on your own that it's nothing."

I almost said I would try. It sounded too much like a way to leave myself an exit.

"I will tell you," I said.

She gave a small nod. It wasn't absolution. It was a boundary with a door left open beside it.

The kettle clicked as it cooled. Outside, traffic moved along the wet street, an ordinary sound I could hear too clearly and still choose not to follow. Emil was dead. Voss's account had failed against the records, the witnesses, and the blood inside the chair joint. What had happened to Emil after the January collapse remained beyond what either of us could reconstruct.

My own body remained beyond my explanation, too. For once, I let that be the fact we had—not an answer I could force out of someone else, and not a secret I could keep from the person sitting across from me.

CHAPTER 11

The Names We Keep

Emil's shop smelled of ink, warm paper and the dust that settled in the grooves of old type. The front window had been propped open, though the afternoon outside was cool. Irene stood at the counter with a parcel tied in string, checking the name on its label before she put it into her bag.

"Menus," she said when she saw me looking. "For the café on the corner. Emil promised them last week."

The parcel was ordinary enough to be almost indecent. A hundred cream cards, perhaps, with a border and a list of soups. The customer's name was written in Emil's hand. She ran a thumb over the knot, then tucked the parcel beneath her arm.

Klara had arranged the remaining tools across the workbench. Not all of them—there were too many, and some were part of the shop rather than anyone's private property. She had made three small groups on squares of brown paper. The partner moved between them slowly, lifting each tool to judge its weight and condition.

"I don't know what I'll use," she said. "I know what he used."

"That's not the same question," Klara said.

"No." She set down a composing stick and picked up a small brass rule instead. "This one. And the wooden gauge. He was always losing it, so I'm keeping it out of spite."

Klara's mouth shifted, almost a smile. "A sound archival principle."

The partner put the rule and gauge beside the parcel. She left the composing stick where it was.

I had stopped just inside the door. The ache in my shoulder had become a steady tug under my coat, and the split in my palm pulled

when I flexed my fingers. I could have crossed the shop more quickly. I didn't. The last few days had taught me the difference between being able to do something and having it cost nothing.

Klara turned from the bench. A slim folder lay beside her elbow, closed with a paper band.

"I've made copies," she said to Emil's partner. "The print samples and the letter you allowed us to compare. You can take them, or I can keep them sealed until you decide."

The partner looked at the folder, then at Klara. "I want them."

Klara removed the band and passed it across. The partner opened the folder and looked at the first page without taking it out. I recognized the shapes of the old print marks, the same distinctive breaks we had followed through the shop work. The letter beneath it was the one she had chosen to share. Together, they supported what the case had established: Emil had used another name. They did not explain every year of his life, and nobody in the room pretended they did.

The partner closed the folder. "I'll put these with my own things."

"They're yours," Klara said.

There was no ceremony to it. The partner placed the copies beside the menus and the tools she had chosen, making a small, untidy pile of what she meant to take with her.

Klara waited until she had finished. Then she looked at me.

"I have one more page you may see," she said. "Only one."

The paper band around the second folder was marked in pencil. Klara took it off herself and laid a single sheet on the workbench, turning it so that the partner could read it too. The annotation was dated 1919, in a hand different from the older entries. I knew the date from our earlier examination; it was a later custody note, not part of

the printing evidence and not connected to the clinic or its transport records.

Klara had covered much of the page with opaque strips. A repeated meeting reference remained visible, together with a brief mention of a festival. The writing was small, the ink faded at the edges.

I leaned forward, then stopped before my hand reached the paper.

“Is that the same phrase in both places?” I asked.

“Yes,” Klara said. “The repeated reference is visible. The rest is not yours to read.”

The restraint in her answer was quiet, but I heard it. I had once treated her family material as a faster route to a result. The living person caught in that shortcut had not become less exposed because I regretted it afterward.

“Could I have a copy of this part?” I asked. “The words you’ve left visible. Nothing else.”

Klara studied me for a moment. “You’re not asking for the index?”

“No.” I kept my hands at my sides. “I’m asking for the part you’ve chosen to show.”

She brought out a copy already marked with the same redactions. “This much,” she said. “You may use it to follow the reference. You may not circulate it or treat the note as proof of what happened.”

“I understand.”

“I’m not sure you do.” Her voice was level, not sharp. “But you’ve stopped asking me to hand over the rest. That is something.”

She slid the copy across the bench. I took it by the unmarked edge. On the visible portion, the meeting reference appeared twice. The festival mention sat beside one of them. The note gave me a direction, not an answer. I folded the copy once along the blank margin and put it away.

Emil's partner had been watching. "Does it tell you anything useful?"

"Something to check," I said. "Not something I can claim to understand yet."

She nodded as if that were the only sensible answer. Then she lifted the parcel and tools. Klara offered to carry the heavier box; the partner let her, but kept the folder herself.

At the door she paused with one hand on the frame. "I thought knowing his other name would make him feel closer," she said. "It doesn't. It makes the space around him larger."

Klara didn't try to fill the silence. Neither did I.

The partner went out with the menus tucked under her arm and the chosen tools in a small box. Klara watched until she had turned the corner, then returned to the bench and began putting away what remained.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She continued sorting the loose paper. "For what part?"

I could have named several. "For deciding I knew what your records were for."

"That is a better apology than 'I was trying to help.'" She squared the papers against the bench. "It doesn't restore access."

"I know."

She put the papers in a drawer. "Good."

I left with the redacted copy in my pocket. It seemed very small against the weight I had once wanted from her collection.

* * *

Nora had chosen a place with early supper and a short menu. She had told me beforehand that she had plans afterward, and I had arrived on time rather than asking her to move them. The restaurant

was busy enough to blur most conversations into one low sound. I could still pick out the scrape of a chair behind me and the quick clink of a spoon against glass, but they stayed at the edges of my attention.

Nora studied the menu. “You can choose something without asking whether it counts as treatment.”

“I was going to ask whether the potatoes are good.”

“They’re potatoes, Benjamin.”

“That isn’t an answer.”

“It’s the answer potatoes deserve.” She ordered them anyway, with a plate of roasted vegetables. I chose bread and fish. The meal was good: warm, crisp at the edges, properly salted. For a while we talked about an irritating meeting she had endured and a book she was trying to finish between shifts. I told her the ending of the one I’d just read had been a betrayal of basic structural principles.

“Perhaps it was a book about betrayal,” she said.

“It wasn’t good enough to be that deliberate.”

She laughed, and for a few minutes my body was not the subject of the conversation. It was a relief so modest I nearly missed it.

The hunger remained. It did not sharpen into an emergency, and the food did nothing to touch it. I noticed it when I set down my fork: a persistent absence beneath the meal, as distinct from appetite as an ache was from fatigue.

Nora saw me pause. “Still there?”

“Yes.”

She didn’t reach for my wrist or start asking questions. “You have your meeting afterward?”

“Yes. Eva arranged it.”

"All right." She returned to her plate. "Then we don't need to turn dinner into a test."

I was grateful she hadn't offered to solve a thing she had already told me she couldn't solve. "How are your plans?" I asked. "You said you were meeting people."

"I am. They've chosen a film that appears to involve a great deal of running through corridors."

"That sounds less like a film than an architectural survey."

"I've been assured there's a plot." She lifted her glass. "I'll reserve judgment until the corridors have had their chance."

We finished before the evening crowd arrived. Outside, she pulled on her coat and checked the time. The sky was clear, with the sun still catching the upper windows across the street. I had bought a close-woven overshirt and a cap earlier that week. They were not elegant, but the cap's brim threw a useful strip of shade across my face, and the shirt covered the skin at my wrists.

Nora glanced at them. "New?"

"Bought them yesterday."

"Practical."

"I'm trying not to take that as an insult."

"It wasn't. I'm pleased you bought them before you needed them." She tugged at one cuff, then let go. "You don't have to walk with me. I'm going the other way."

"I know."

She hesitated, as if considering whether there was another thing she ought to say. "About what we talked through the other night: I can help you find an independent appointment. I can't be the person monitoring you, and I won't make your decisions for you."

"I understand."

“Then you contact them. If you want me to send you the details, I will.”

“Send them, please. I’ll make the call tomorrow.”

“All right.” She looked at me directly. “And if you’re going to tell me something has changed, tell me before you’ve spent a week deciding it doesn’t count.”

“I will.”

She gave a small nod. It was not a promise to take responsibility for me, or a declaration that nothing between us had been damaged. It was a plan with edges. I could accept that without trying to make it larger.

“I hope the corridors are compelling,” I said.

“I’ll report back if the plot survives them.” She stepped away, then raised a hand in farewell. “Eat something with actual vegetables next time.”

“I did.”

“You ate the potatoes.”

“They were very good potatoes.”

“That is not a vegetable defence.” She turned towards her evening and left me with the last of her smile.

The volunteer Eva had arranged to meet me was waiting at the agreed place. We spoke for a few minutes before they decided they were still willing to help that evening. They also told me they could not promise another meeting the following week. I thanked them. I did not ask them to change their mind, and I did not mistake tonight’s willingness for a standing offer.

Afterward I took the longer route home, keeping to the shaded side of the streets where I could. The new shirt trapped a little warmth at my wrists. It was a small inconvenience. The sunlight that reached

my cheek felt different: not like the clinic's steady electric lighting, which had revealed every surface without hurting me, but like a pressure that accumulated while I was exposed. The brim of the cap helped. It did not undo what had already begun to ache.

At the next junction I stopped in the shadow of a building and let the pull in my shoulder settle. My pace had slowed, but the injury had not vanished. It complained when I moved and more quietly when I stood still. I could hear a tram approaching several streets away, its metallic rhythm arriving through the city noise. I waited until it passed before crossing.

At home I set Klara's copy on the table and took off the cap. The paper showed only the words she had permitted me to see: the meeting reference, repeated; the festival mention; the date of the later annotation.

I opened my calendar and marked the next public festival dates to check against the note. Then I stopped.

I put the copy in a folder of my own, separate from the case papers. Tomorrow I could begin with what was public and ask Klara before I needed anything that wasn't. For tonight, the repeated words were enough to follow—and not enough to own.

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