About the book and project

PERSONALISED FICTION

This edition contains Book 2, *The Empty Seats* 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 2: The Empty Seats - 10 chapters; approximately 19,090 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 2

The Empty Seats

CHAPTER 1

Three Places

The arrangement had taken more messages than the evening out. I had eaten before we left; the next contribution was only a possibility, not a date anyone had promised me. Nora had made me say that aloud, then put her phone away and asked whether I still wanted to go to the Wiesn.

“I do,” I’d said.

“Good. I’m not spending my evening negotiating with a calendar.”

We agreed to meet at the bright outer lanes, away from the packed tents. It was the sort of plan that could pass for ordinary if neither of us mentioned the work involved in keeping it that way.

By the time we reached the fairground, the lights had turned the lanes white and gold. They picked out spilled beer, wet patches on the paving, the shine of brass buttons. They did not hurt me. The crowd did enough on its own: music from three directions, a ride grinding overhead, people calling across one another, each voice arriving sharp and then breaking apart. I could usually choose what to listen to. That evening the sounds chose me.

Nora bought two pretzels from a stand and handed me one. “This is the part where we eat something and don’t discuss your body.”

“I thought we were discussing the pretzel.”

“We can. It has a limited and frankly uninteresting medical history.”

I took a bite. Salt, warm dough, a little scorched at the fold. Ordinary food was still good. It simply left my hunger for blood untouched. I kept chewing, because it was pleasant and because Nora was watching with the patient expression she used when she wanted me to notice that I had stopped doing something.

A woman at the next table had a paper sleeve of souvenir pins beside her drink. She was alone, or at least no one sat close enough to claim the chair opposite. A little red mark showed through the napkin pressed to one finger. When she lowered her hand, the sharp smell of blood reached me through beer, frying onions, damp wool and the sweet, overripe fog of the crowd.

I stopped chewing.

The woman's pulse came clear in the noise. Not words, not a thought—only the quick, steady beat of a living heart, as if someone had turned a small instrument toward me. I looked down at my pretzel. The smell stayed. My mouth had gone dry.

Nora followed my gaze. "Benjamin."

"I'm all right."

"That wasn't my question."

I tried to answer, but a burst of brass music shoved everything else aside. I turned toward the band for half a second. When I looked back, the woman's chair was empty. Her drink and the paper sleeve of pins remained on the table. A folded napkin, spotted red, lay beside them.

I got to my feet before I knew I was doing it. Nora caught the cuff of my jacket.

"Wait."

The crowd pressed past us. A couple brushed the table; someone laughed too loudly behind my shoulder. I couldn't pick out the woman's footsteps, or tell whether I had heard them at all. The pins on the table flashed under the lights. There was no sign of where she had gone.

"I heard her pulse," I said.

Nora's hand stayed on my sleeve. "And then you noticed she was gone?"

“I think so.”

“You’re not allowed to call that normal.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“You were halfway there.” She let go, but didn’t look away from me. “Do you want to ask someone if they saw her leave?”

The question was practical, and that made it harder. I looked around. There were too many faces, too many people moving between tables. My attention kept snagging on the blood-stained napkin. I could feel the answer I wanted assembling itself: the timing, the empty chair, the pulse still vivid in my head. It was a pattern with one point and no line between them.

“I don’t know what I’d say,” I told her.

“Then start there.”

We asked the nearest server whether the woman had gone to the toilets or left the table. He glanced at the pins and shrugged. He had been carrying two trays through the lane and had noticed neither the woman nor her departure. The answer didn’t help, but it stopped me from turning my guess into a fact.

Nora nudged the pretzel toward me. “Eat while it’s still edible.”

I sat down. The food had cooled. I finished it anyway, with the noise crowding in and the smell of blood refusing to fade as quickly as it should have. Nora talked about a colleague who had tried to trade a weekend shift for a concert ticket and ended up with both the shift and the ticket. I laughed at the right point. For a few minutes, I could almost keep my attention where I chose.

We stayed until the crowd thickened around the lanes. Nothing happened at the next table. The drink was taken away; the pins remained until a server collected them with the rest of the abandoned things. I went home with Nora’s voice in my head, insisting that an event could be real without being an explanation.

The next morning, we met outside the Wiesn police information point before Nora's shift. She had sent me the time and place after we woke, and arrived with her work bag over one shoulder and her hair still damp from a hurried shower. The sun had not yet burned through the thin clouds. Around the information point, festival staff were stacking barriers and sweeping paper cups from the paths.

"I have twenty minutes," Nora said. "Then I'm gone."

"I know."

She studied my face. "Did you sleep?"

"Some."

"That is not a number."

"It's the one I have."

A uniformed officer was taking reports at a desk just inside the public entrance. People waited in a loose line; some spoke to the officer, some sat on a bench with their phones in their hands. Nora and I stayed where we could hear the public questions without crowding the desk. A notice on a stand explained where to report a missing person. The officer gave each companion the same calm attention, then wrote down what they had come to say.

The first report came from a young man in a checked shirt. He kept turning his phone over in his hands. His companion, he said, was a translator visiting with friends. They had been at a table in one of the eastern lanes the night before. She had stepped away, and the group expected her back. Her scarf and a folded programme were still at her place. He had called her several times; the calls went unanswered.

The officer asked for her name and a description. I couldn't hear all the answers. A burst of a leaf blower started outside, rattling against the information point's open frontage. I stayed where I was rather than move closer and make my presence part of their conversation.

The second person waiting was a woman in a work jacket, with a strip of reflective tape across one sleeve. She spoke in clipped phrases to someone who looked like a colleague. A maintenance worker hadn't returned from a break, she said. Their group had been near a service lane on the opposite side of the grounds. His work gloves and thermos were still on the bench beside their table. The colleague had checked the nearby facilities and asked staff, but no one had seen him come back.

The third report came from an older man carrying a canvas bag. He spoke more slowly, stopping to search for a word and starting again. The person missing was a pin seller who had shared a table with him near the outer lanes. She had left a paper sleeve of pins and her purse behind. The man had thought she was speaking to someone a few tables away. When he looked again, her chair was empty.

I felt the noise thin around that last detail. Not vanish; just recede enough for the memory of the night before to rise—the napkin, the red mark, the empty chair. The same kind of table. The same sort of sleeve. But a paper sleeve of pins was not a name, and I had not seen the woman's face clearly enough to recognize it now.

Nora glanced at me. She had heard the report too.

I could have told the officer about the woman I'd seen. Instead, I waited until the older man had finished and stepped away from the desk. Then I approached and gave my name. I said I had been at the outer lanes the previous evening and had noticed a woman at a table with a sleeve of souvenir pins and a small cut on her finger. When the officer asked whether I had seen her leave, I said no. I had looked away; when I looked back, her chair was empty.

He wrote down what I could describe and asked me to contact the information point if I remembered anything else. There was no dramatic answer in the questions, no sudden recognition. Just the officer's pen moving across the page, and the short pause while I tried to decide whether the pulse I'd heard belonged to the same woman.

Nora and I stepped back outside. She checked the time on her phone.

“Three people,” I said. “Different places. Different groups.”

“And no confirmed connection.”

“No.”

The temptation was immediate: put the reports into a table, align the times, search for an overlap. My mind had already started sorting them—translator, maintenance worker, pin seller; east lane, service lane, outer lane. It was a clean arrangement, too clean to trust. I took out my phone, opened a blank note, and stopped before I began filling it with guesses.

“Only what was public,” I said. “Their roles, where they were, what they left behind.”

Nora nodded once. “That’s a place to start.”

She had to go. At the corner she lifted a hand in farewell and headed toward the tram stop, already checking a message from work. I watched her go, then looked back at the information point. The officer had resumed taking reports. The people on the bench held their phones and waited.

Three visitors had failed to return to three separate tables. Each had left something behind. I still couldn’t say whether those absences belonged to the same story. But the routine I had spent the evening trying to preserve now had somewhere urgent to point.

CHAPTER 2

The Photograph

Klara asked me to come to her workroom alone, then amended the invitation when I said Nora might join us later.

“Later is fine,” she wrote. “You can look at the photograph here. You cannot take it with you, photograph it, or use the rest of the collection as a shortcut.”

“I understand.”

She didn’t answer that. She sent the address.

The workroom was at the back of a quiet building, where the afternoon light stopped at the high windows. Klara had put a photograph on the table beside a narrow sheet of paper covered in measurements and pencil lines. She stood on the far side of both, one hand resting near the edge of the sketch, not on the photograph.

“This is the one,” she said. “Dated 1927 in the collection file. The concessions sketch survives separately. They were filed together later, not necessarily made together.”

I pulled out the chair she indicated and sat without leaning over the papers. The old photograph showed a festival seating area: a plank table, three vacant places, and a pale square of cloth laid over the back of one chair. A lamp hung above it. The people in the frame had turned toward the photographer, except for a man half cut off at the edge, whose face was mostly shadow.

The sketch was spare. A row of stalls. An entrance marked for the public. Another gap between buildings, labeled as a service approach. Klara set a clear ruler across the sketch to keep the paper flat.

“You’ve put the lamp here?” I asked, pointing to a small circle beside the table’s position.

“I have put the lamp where the sketch places it. The photograph gives us the table and the cloth. The sketch gives us a possible layout.”

I looked back at the image. The lamp’s glow fell across the pale cloth, making it conspicuous against the dark chair. On the sketch, the service approach ran toward the table at an angle. From there, the cloth would catch the lamp’s light. From the public entrance, the stalls and a partition would interrupt the view.

“Someone coming in that way could see it,” I said.

“Could,” Klara replied. “The drawing is not a survey. And the photograph doesn’t tell us why anyone put the cloth there.”

“Three empty places suggest they expected people.”

“Or that the photographer asked them to move.”

She said it without irritation, but the correction stopped me from making the image do more than it could. I shifted back in my chair. The surface of the table was cool beneath my palms; the split in my hand tugged when I opened it. My shoulder objected to the movement, a dull reminder that the body kept its own records whether I wanted them or not.

Klara moved the sketch a few centimetres, then aligned its table mark with the photograph’s table. She didn’t touch the image itself. The cloth seemed brighter when the pages sat together, though nothing had changed except my angle.

“The empty places in the reports,” I said. “And this.”

“A resemblance,” she said. “Not proof that today’s empty seats repeat the same signal.”

“I know.”

She tapped the sketch beside the service approach. I nodded and kept my hands in my lap while I studied the photograph again: three open places, a marker, a lamp, and an angle that mattered.

Klara returned the photograph to its sleeve. I wrote a short note on my phone: three vacant places; cloth marker; lamp; visible from service approach on the surviving sketch, uncertain reconstruction. I showed her before saving it.

She read it, then nodded. “That’s yours.”

By the time Nora joined us, the afternoon had turned grey at the windows. She came in with her work bag and the slightly rumpled look of someone who had finished a shift but not yet left it behind.

“Did I miss the part where the photograph explains everything?” she asked.

“No,” Klara said. “Benjamin has behaved.”

“I’m relieved.” Nora set her bag down but kept her coat on. “I have an hour. Then I’m going home and not discussing anyone’s medical history.”

“I wasn’t planning to.”

“Your plans are not always a reliable source.”

Klara gave her a brief smile. I looked once more at the sleeve, then turned away from it. We had spent the morning with three reports and no connection between them. The photograph offered a shape, not a bridge. We needed people who had known the missing visitors, and a place where they could speak without a crowd pressing in around every word.

The beer garden Nora suggested was tucked behind a row of chestnut trees, away from the busiest festival lanes. At that hour, a few tables were occupied by workers in jackets and older couples sharing late lunches. The noise came in muted layers: cutlery, distant music, a tram bell beyond the wall. I could separate most of it if I tried. I was tired of trying.

At the information point that morning, I had left my number with the officer and asked him to pass it to the three companions only if

they were willing to speak with us. They had agreed to meet there. I knew their faces from the reports, but not their names, and I had no reason to pretend we were anything more than people brought together by an absence.

The young man who had reported the translator sat with his phone face down beside his glass. The maintenance worker's colleague had arrived in her reflective work jacket, now folded over the back of her chair. The older man who had reported the pin seller held a paper cup of coffee in both hands. Each had chosen a seat with a clear view of the path in and out.

Nora introduced herself as Benjamin's friend, not as a doctor. I followed her lead and gave my name. Klara sat a little apart, her notebook closed on the table.

The young man spoke first. "She's Leonie. She was translating for the replacement-route briefing. She told me she'd be there after she met us. We were supposed to get food, then she'd go over the wording with them. She always saves the last bite of cake."

"Who were 'them'?" I asked.

"I don't know. She didn't say. It wasn't secret. Just work, I thought." He rubbed the rim of his glass with one thumb. "She said the delivery window had changed and they needed someone to explain it clearly."

The colleague in the work jacket leaned forward. "The maintenance worker was covering the access side. He knew which service gates would be open. He'd been asked to attend the same briefing."

"Did he tell you that himself?"

"He showed me the shift change on his phone. He said he'd be late for our break because he had to be there first." She looked down at her hands. "I thought he meant a routine meeting."

The older man waited until she had finished. “She’s Rike. She carried messages between tables. Not private messages. Notices. She said she had to take a time to the briefing because the delivery was being moved.” He shook his head. “She didn’t tell me what was being delivered.” He looked at his cup. “She knows how I take my tea, even when I forget to ask.”

There it was: three accounts, each limited to what the speaker had heard. The translator had been asked to clarify; the maintenance worker was needed for access; the pin seller carried a time. Their companions had not known one another. Their reports did not establish why those three people had been selected, or what would happen at the briefing. They did put all three expected arrivals at the same meeting.

“When was it?” Nora asked.

The young man checked his phone. “Tomorrow evening. The window was half past six to seven, I think. She said they wanted everyone there before the delivery.”

The colleague nodded. “That’s what I was told too. Six-thirty to seven.”

The older man frowned, counting under his breath. “Yes. The pin seller said the delivery window. Same time.”

My phone was in my jacket pocket. I could feel its edge against my ribs. On the screen, the stop list I had forwarded to the festival logistics desk remained in the same message thread as Eva’s recommendation. I took it out and opened the attachment.

Nora leaned across the table to see. “That window.”

“You recognize it?”

“I’ve seen the list. This is the replacement window we discussed.” She touched the time range on the screen, careful not to scroll. “Six-thirty to seven.”

The number of coincidences had changed. The three visitors' movements were no longer merely scattered across different parts of the grounds. They had all been due at a replacement-route briefing in a shared delivery window—and that window was on a list I had sent outside the group.

I had forwarded it because Eva recommended the logistics desk. Festival operations needed service access coordinated; the desk could pass along gate timings and avoid sending a cart into a closed lane. That had seemed sensible. I had attached the stop list as I used it, rather than make a clean version for the people who needed the times.

Nora read over my shoulder. "Why does the desk have the care notes?"

The list included the operational stops, but also my additions: wait for confirmation; quiet transfer if delayed; check before leaving anyone alone. Useful reminders to people helping with care. Nothing the logistics desk needed to route a delivery.

"I sent the whole sheet," I said.

"Then ask for it back."

I pressed the desk's number. The first ring seemed to hang in the air between us. I could hear the beer garden around it—the scrape of a chair, a glass set down, a child calling somewhere beyond the wall. The second ring came. My mouth had gone dry, the old pull beneath my ribs waking as the lunch hour slipped farther behind us. I kept my attention on the call.

A woman answered with the name of the logistics desk. I gave mine, explained that I had sent a stop list earlier, and asked her to withdraw it and replace it with a version containing only the access times.

"Can you tell me which file?" she asked.

I gave her the subject line and the time I'd sent it.

There was a pause, then the faint tapping of keys. “I can remove it from the desk copy.”

“Has it gone anywhere else?”

“It was included in the operations packet for the subcontractors.”

The beer garden noise seemed to sharpen around that sentence. I looked at the others. The young man had lifted his eyes from his phone. Nora’s hand had stopped beside her glass.

“Can you recall those copies?” I asked.

“I can send a correction and ask them to discard the previous version. I can’t confirm they’ve all opened it, and I can’t retrieve paper copies already printed.”

“Please send the correction. And make a note that the care annotations should not be circulated.”

“I’ll do that.”

I thanked her, ended the call, and set the phone on the table. For a moment, nobody spoke. I wanted to say I’d thought the desk was the safe option, that Eva had recommended it, that I had meant to make the route easier rather than expose anyone. Each sentence was true. None changed where the list had gone.

Nora broke the silence. “The times brought them together. The notes didn’t need to go with them.”

“No,” I said. “They didn’t.”

She didn’t soften it for me. I was grateful, though I didn’t tell her.

The companions remained where they were, each with their own reason for waiting. The older man folded the paper cup between his fingers, then stopped and set it down. The colleague asked whether we needed anything else from her. Nora said only what she chose to share; the woman nodded and stayed long enough to confirm that the shift notice was still on her phone. The young man agreed to send the

exact wording of the message he had received, if he could find it. No one promised more than that.

Klara had listened without opening her notebook. “The photograph gives you an arrangement,” she said as we stood. “These accounts give you a meeting time. They may be related.”

Outside, the chestnut branches stirred above the beer garden wall. I checked the time again: the shared window began at six-thirty. In my mind, the old photograph and the three reports sat side by side—not identical, not explained, but aligned at one edge. A repeated arrangement. A common delivery window. And a list of mine already in other hands.

CHAPTER 3

The Lamp Test

The photograph might have been a code. It might also have been three empty places arranged for a camera and a cloth that happened to catch the light.

By the time Klara let me into the private reading room the next morning, I had been trying to make the two possibilities cancel each other out. They did not.

She had cleared a space on the long table. The photograph remained in its sleeve, beside the old concessions sketch she had shown me the day before. A desk lamp stood at one end; between it and a small paper marker, Klara had set a folded piece of grey card upright.

“You’ve built a tent,” I said.

“I’ve built a partition.” She nudged the card until it covered the marker from where I stood. “A tent would imply rather more confidence in the drawing.”

The sketch was no blueprint. Lines showed tables, stalls, and an approach marked in a hand that had faded unevenly. Klara set a ruler beside it but didn’t use the ruler to make the marks seem more exact than they were.

“Where was the table?” I asked.

“Here, if I’ve matched the photograph correctly.” She indicated a small rectangle on the sketch. “The lamp is marked there. The service approach comes in from this side. The public entrance is here.”

“And the marker?”

“On the back of the chair, according to the photograph. The sketch doesn’t identify it.”

I bent closer. My shoulder tightened at the movement. I straightened, then shifted around the table instead of leaning on it.

From the main entrance side, the folded card blocked the paper marker completely. I moved to the service approach. The lamp threw its light across the marker, which showed pale against the darker table.

“Someone coming from this direction could see it.”

“Someone looking toward the table.” Klara moved the lamp a few centimetres. The marker dulled. “The sketch leaves us room to be wrong about the angle.”

I stepped back to the public entrance. Nothing. From there, the partition hid the table and marker as neatly as a closed door.

“So a person at the service approach could see whether the place was occupied, while someone entering from the public side wouldn’t know to look.”

“Could,” she said.

I glanced at the photograph in its sleeve. “And if it wasn’t meant to be seen?”

“Then the photographer had a very particular sense of composition.” Her mouth turned faintly at one corner. “I’m not prepared to rule it out.”

I went back to the service side. The marker appeared again. It was possible to imagine someone standing there, waiting for a signal that would be invisible to the larger room. More than that, it was possible to meet under observation from one side only: one person able to watch the approach, another screened from everyone else.

The thought made the arrangement feel less like a symbol and more like a tool. It still didn’t tell me who had used it, or why.

Klara watched as I reached for my phone. I stopped before taking a picture.

“Would you like me to write down the result?” I asked.

“I’d like you to note what you saw. Not photograph the collection.”

I opened the note I’d made the day before and added: With lamp and partition in approximate positions, marker visible from service approach, hidden from main entrance. Reconstruction only. Then I put my phone away. The distinction seemed minor, the sort of thing I once would have called careful wording. It felt different now to keep the limit beside the useful conclusion.

Klara drew the concessions sketch toward herself and squared its edges with the table. “The original tent is gone. Even if it survived, the grounds have changed. A resemblance doesn’t give you a modern address.”

“Then we use the public plan.”

“If there’s a public plan.”

“There usually is.”

“Your confidence in maps is touching.”

“Maps tend to be more cooperative than witnesses.”

“That may be because they don’t get to correct you.”

I smiled, though the joke found its mark. On the table, the tiny paper marker sat under the desk lamp, visible only when I stood in the right place. It had given us a principle, not a destination.

We left the reading room with Klara carrying the sketch back to its cabinet. She locked it away herself. I waited by the door, then followed her out with only my updated note and the image of that narrow sightline.

The public concession plan was posted near one of the grounds’ main paths. By late morning, the festival had gathered its usual density: voices layered over music, wheels rattling over temporary track, the sweet smell of fried dough folding into beer and damp

canvas. I could pick out too much at once. A child's sharp call cut across a brass tune; somewhere behind us a cart wheel clicked at every turn. I stopped trying to separate the sounds and looked at the plan instead.

Klara stood beside me, one hand holding down the map's curled corner. The plan showed stalls, service lanes, entrances, and several temporary partitions. No single place matched the old sketch. There were at least four points where a lamp near a service approach might leave a marker visible from one side and screened from another.

"Four," I said.

"Possibly more, if we count the places where the plan is simplified."

We walked the public paths and checked them against the arrangement in miniature. At the first point, the lamp was set too far inside the stall. At the second, a partition blocked the service lane as well as the public approach. The third was close enough to make me stop, but there was no clear line from the service side to the place where a person might wait. We moved on.

At the fourth, a lamp hung over a narrow turn between two concession fronts. A waist-high barrier screened the space beyond it from the main path. From the service lane, the lamp and the gap behind the barrier were both visible. It wasn't the same layout as the old drawing. The useful part was the one-sided view.

Klara studied the barrier, then the plan folded against her palm. "This would work."

"For the same kind of contact."

She looked at me, then at the lamp. I nodded. We had a place to ask about, not an answer.

My attention had fixed on the electric bulb, burning steadily beneath the awning in daylight. I stood under it, letting the light fall

on my bare wrist. There was no sting, no fresh pull under the skin. Only the usual ache in my shoulder when I shifted my weight.

A strip of cloud moved off the sun. Warmth touched the back of my hand, then gathered into a sharper discomfort along the exposed wrist. I tugged my sleeve down and stepped into the shade of the stall front.

Klara glanced at my hand. She didn't ask me to explain it. "Do you want to stop?"

"No. Just shade." I looked back at the electric lamp, still bright above us. "We should ask someone who works here."

A man behind the nearest counter was stacking paper trays into a crate. He had a dark apron tied over a checked shirt and kept pausing to look up whenever a cart passed along the service lane. I waited until he had set the crate down before approaching. Klara stayed beside the public path, where she could see us without crowding the counter.

"Excuse me," I said. "We're comparing the public layout with an old concessions sketch. Could I ask whether carts ever stop at this turn?"

He looked from me to the lamp and then toward the lane. "They stop all over the place. Depends who's blocking the way."

"Did one wait here during the disappearances?"

His eyebrows drew together. "What sort of cart?"

"I don't know. I'm asking whether you remember one pausing here."

He wiped his hands on his apron. "I remember a cart waiting while the lane cleared. That doesn't make this a special spot. It's a bottleneck."

"Of course." I kept my voice level. "Was it two evenings ago?"

“Two evenings ago, yes. Around the time the service traffic was changing over.” He glanced past me at Klara, then back. “I see a lot of carts. If you want me to say I know what was on it, I don’t.”

“I’m not asking that.”

He studied my face for a moment, deciding whether I meant it. “It waited under that lamp. A man came along from the service side, looked down the lane, and gave the driver a hand signal. Then the cart moved on.”

“Did you recognize the driver?”

“No.” His answer came without hesitation. “I’d seen the cart before. That’s all.”

The lane was in view from where he stood; the barrier hid the space behind it from the public path. The lamp picked out the narrow turn. The old image hadn’t selected this spot for us. His memory had.

“Would you be willing to tell that to someone again, if we need to check the timing?” I asked.

He set one hand on the counter. “Maybe. If you tell me who you are and what you’re looking into.”

I gave him my name and said we were trying to understand the disappearances reported two evenings earlier. I didn’t claim more than that. His expression changed—not to surprise, exactly, but to the guarded attention of someone weighing what his own ordinary observation might mean.

“I’m Hannes,” he said. “I’m here most days. If you want to ask again, come when the rush is over. I’ll tell you what I remember. I won’t guess beyond it.”

“That’s all we need.”

Klara joined us only after he’d returned to his trays.

“He saw a cart wait under this lamp,” I said. “And a man signal it forward.”

She nodded once. “Then we’ll come back when the rush is over.”

The lamp buzzed faintly overhead. Sunlight had reached the edge of my sleeve again, and I pulled it down over my wrist before we turned toward the service lane.

CHAPTER 4

Eva’s Invitation

The photograph had not become less uncertain by the time I reached Eva’s office. It had only acquired a more useful question: who would have needed three empty places to mean something?

Eva had sent for me that afternoon. I had brought no photograph, only the notes Klara had allowed me to make: the lamp, the partition, the pale marker visible from the service approach and hidden from the public entrance. I set my phone on Eva’s desk with the screen dark. My shoulder objected to the chair when I sat down, so I stayed standing.

“Three empty places,” Eva said. “A cloth marker. A sightline from the service side.”

“That’s what we could establish.”

She looked at me across the desk. “Then Sepp helped maintain it.”

The office was quiet enough that I heard the radiator tick behind her. The photograph in my mind was still the one Klara had shown me: three places set out beneath a lamp, a small piece of cloth catching the light. “You recognize it?”

“I recognize the arrangement. Not that particular photograph.” Eva leaned back. “It was a contact method. A way to let two people know whether a place was occupied without announcing the meeting to everyone who came through the public entrance.”

“So the image is evidence of a method, not a map.”

“Good. You’ve saved me a correction.”

Her smile was brief. She reached for the water glass at her elbow and moved it away from a stack of papers. “Sepp helped keep the arrangement usable. He knew who could carry a message, who could

check access, who could be seen doing either without attracting attention.”

I thought of the three reports laid beside one another: different tables, different groups, three personal items left behind. “The translator, the maintenance worker, and the pin seller.”

“The translator handled correspondence between people who couldn’t safely rely on a shared language. The maintenance worker knew which service doors were actually open, not merely marked open on a plan. And the pin seller could pass route notices in the middle of a crowd without looking like someone carrying a notice.”

The roles were ordinary enough to be overlooked. That was what made them useful. I glanced at my phone. “And all three are missing.”

Eva’s fingers tightened once around the glass. “Yes.”

“Could the contact arrangement have brought them together?”

“It could have.” She set the glass down. “It doesn’t tell us where they went.”

Eva opened the bottom drawer of her desk. She moved aside a packet of envelopes and took out a folded sheet. She did not slide it across to me.

“Sepp holds the signed mandate,” she said. “It records the limits of Brandt’s authority over the route.”

“What sort of limits?”

“The sort the signatories can enforce if they can meet and act together.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the answer I’m prepared to give you without the document in front of us.” She tapped the folded sheet with one finger. “The

complete terms are not mine to recite from memory, and they are not what you need to locate three missing people.”

The refusal was clean, almost kindly delivered. I felt the familiar urge to turn the gap into a list of questions and keep going until someone gave me enough to make a model. Instead I moved my phone a few centimetres away from the edge of the desk.

“Why does Brandt want it?”

“Because the mandate is revocable.” Eva unfolded the sheet just far enough to look at a line, then folded it again. “If the signatories agree, they can withdraw his authority. He knows that.”

“And Sepp has the original.”

“Yes.”

The paper disappeared back into the drawer. The lock caught with a small metallic click.

I looked at the blank patch of desk where it had been. “Then the missing people can’t just be coincidences.”

“Benjamin.”

Her tone stopped me before I could finish. She did not raise her voice. She only held my gaze until I looked back at her.

“I said Brandt wants the document,” she said. “I did not say I know why these three people disappeared.”

“Right.” I rubbed the heel of my hand against my trouser seam. “I’m treating the overlap as more than an overlap.”

“You’re allowed to notice it. You’re not allowed to make it true by repeating it.”

The line landed because it was one I had used on other people, usually after I’d decided what I wanted them to admit. I nodded once. “Then tell me what you know about the route.”

Eva's attention went to the window. The blind was half down; a slice of the street showed between its slats, bright with late-afternoon traffic. "Brandt has been asking where Sepp can be found."

"When?"

"Recently. More than once."

"Did he ask you directly?"

"Yes."

"And what did you tell him?"

"That I didn't know."

"Do you?"

"No." She turned back from the window. "I don't know where Sepp is now."

Her answer carried no hesitation, but not enough certainty to tell me how much she wished it were different. I thought of asking when she had last seen him. The question would have been fair. So would asking whether Sepp had chosen to stay away or been forced to. Neither would make him appear in the room.

"What did Brandt ask for?"

"A handoff from Sepp. Before the festival service block is cleared."

"Of the mandate?"

"Of what Sepp holds." Eva's mouth tightened. "Brandt did not put his request in the form of a polite inquiry."

The service block mattered because, once cleared, the workers, routes, and temporary access would all change. That did not mean Brandt's demand had anything to do with the disappearances. It meant the timing was no longer abstract.

"Why didn't you tell me this when you recommended the desk?" I asked.

Eva's expression shifted. The humor had gone from it.

"I recommended the festival logistics desk," she said. "I knew Sailer had access to it."

The name was new to me. "Sailer?"

"He is a legitimate logistics intermediary. Brandt brought him into the route." Eva looked down at her hands. "I failed to exclude him."

"You knew he was there and sent me to the desk anyway."

"I thought the desk was a public point of contact. I thought the work itself would keep him at a distance." She drew a slow breath. "I was wrong to treat that as enough."

A cart could wait under a lamp for any number of reasons. A man could signal it onward without being part of a scheme. But a person with access to the logistics desk, brought into the route by Brandt, was no longer an incidental detail I could leave out of the reports.

"Did Sailer speak to you about the missing visitors?"

"No."

"Have you seen him with any of them?"

"No."

"Do you know he took them?"

"No." She met my eyes. "I know his access role. I know Brandt brought him in. I know I should have asked harder questions before I sent you there."

Her fingers pressed flat on the desk. There was anger in the gesture, though I couldn't tell whether it was aimed at Brandt, herself, or the fact that both could be true.

"Then I need to give his name to the investigators," I said.

"Yes."

"I'll say what you've told me, and who told me."

“Please do.”

She pushed her phone toward herself and unlocked it. “I’ll call the other signatories. They need to hear that the old arrangement may no longer be safe to use.”

“May no longer?”

“I have no proof anyone watched that particular contact.” She opened a contact list, scanned it, and stopped at a number. “But three people who maintain the route are gone, and Brandt is demanding Sepp. I won’t ask anyone to wait at a familiar place until we understand more.”

That was enough. I picked up my phone and called the missing-persons desk. After two transfers, an investigator came on the line. I gave my name, the reference numbers from the three reports, and Eva’s account of the logistics desk. I spelled Sailer slowly. The investigator asked me to repeat his role.

“Logistics intermediary,” I said. “Legitimate access to the festival desk. Eva Dorn says Otto Brandt brought him into the route. She also says she recommended the desk to me and knew Sailer had access there.”

A pause followed. I could hear a keyboard at the other end.

“Does Ms. Dorn believe Sailer was involved in the disappearances?”

“She doesn’t know that. Neither do I.”

“Has she agreed to speak with us?”

I looked at her. Eva had already put her first call through and was listening, one finger held against the other ear. She nodded when she saw me watching.

“Yes,” I said. “She’ll speak with you.”

The investigator asked me to send the spelling and the desk details in writing. I did, making the source explicit and keeping the sentence about involvement out of the report's factual field. When I hung up, Eva was still on her call.

"I'm not asking you to come anywhere," she said to the person on the other end. "I'm telling you not to use the old contact today. No, I don't have Sepp's location. I wouldn't give it over this line if I did."

She listened, then said, "I'll call again when I know more," and ended the call.

I didn't ask who had answered. Eva opened the next contact and began dialing.

The investigator's number remained on my screen beside Sailer's name. Across the room, Eva began her second call, warning another signatory away from the old contact. I had given the investigators a name, a role, and the person who could account for how he got there; Eva was already changing what the others would do with the information.

CHAPTER 5

The Wrong Delivery

Nora met us after her shift with the strap of her bag cutting a red line across one shoulder and the expression she wore when somebody had said “quick question” in a corridor.

“Before either of you ask,” she said, sitting down, “I’ve washed my hands, I’ve eaten half a sandwich, and I am not taking another shift.”

“I wasn’t going to ask you to take a shift,” I said.

“Good. You can start by not asking me to solve the entire route.” She put her phone on the table between us. “What we can do is cancel the handoff that may have been exposed.”

We were in a café near the hospital, at a table against the window. The investigator sat opposite me, a paper cup cooling by her elbow. Outside, people crossed the pavement in festival clothes, most of them carrying nothing more troubling than paper bags and plastic horns.

I had my phone open to the forwarding receipt. It was a plain dispatch acknowledgement, generated when I sent the annotated list to the festival logistics desk. The address named the subcontract that handled the desk’s deliveries. The receipt showed that the file had reached its queue. Sailer’s subcontract.

The list had started as a way to avoid missed handoffs. I had added the times, the marker, and which side of the partition could see it. I had put the useful details in one place so that anyone taking over could follow them.

“I thought the notes made the route safer,” I said.

The investigator looked at the screen, not at me. “The receipt tells us the subcontract received the list. It doesn’t tell us who opened it.”

“No,” I said. “But the details were there.”

Nora glanced from the phone to my face. “And now we change what we can. We don’t wait to find out who read it.”

She picked up her phone and called one of Eva’s volunteers. I heard only Nora’s half of the conversation: the affected handoff, the need to cancel it, the question of who could be helped tonight. She didn’t say anyone’s name. When the volunteer agreed to cover two recipients through a separate arrangement, Nora thanked them and ended the call.

“Two,” she said. “Not everyone. Not you.”

The word landed more heavily than it should have. My stomach tightened beneath the coffee I hadn’t wanted. I had eaten before coming; the food had done its ordinary work and nothing for the particular hollow that had begun to make itself heard again.

“I understand.”

“Do you?”

I looked at the blank message field on my phone. “I’m not asking you to put me first.”

Nora’s face softened, though not quite into a smile. “Then help me tell the others the handoff is cancelled. The notices need to go out before anyone sets off.”

“I can deliver them.”

She held my gaze for a moment. “Only to the people I give you. No extra stops because you think you’ve worked out who should know.”

“I’ll take the notices as written.”

“Good.” She began typing. “And you won’t have access to the separate arrangement. The two people being helped tonight have agreed to that between themselves and the volunteer.”

I nodded. It was not a punishment. It was a boundary that left the people involved with a choice.

The investigator leaned forward, tapping one finger against the receipt on my screen. “Can I have a copy of this? The original email too, if you still have it.”

“Yes.” I forwarded both to her, then watched the sent notification appear. I had spent days treating details as harmless when they sat in separate columns. I had made the columns meet.

Nora pulled a small stack of folded notes from her bag. Each was sealed. “These are the cancellation notices. You can deliver the ones marked for the public drop points. The rest I’ll handle by phone.”

I took the stack. The paper was warm from her bag. “I can do that.”

“I know.” She stood and adjusted the strap on her shoulder. “I have plans that don’t involve this table or any of you.”

“That sounds healthy,” the investigator said.

“It’s dinner,” Nora replied. “Let’s not make it aspirational.”

She paused beside me. For a second I thought she might say something about the route, or the fact that I had made it legible. Instead she touched the back of my chair, a brief, steady pressure.

“Eat something if it helps,” she said.

“It won’t help that part.”

“I know. Eat something anyway.”

Then she left, moving briskly into the crowd. I watched until the people outside folded around her, and then I put the notices in my coat pocket.

The investigator waited while I delivered them. I used only the points Nora had marked, leaving each sealed note where its recipient had agreed to collect it. No names on the outside. No messages added in my own hand. The last stop was a public bench near the old

handoff, where I left the envelope beneath the agreed edge and stepped away.

By the time I returned to the investigator, the evening had thickened around the festival grounds. We took up separate public positions near the old contact point. She stood beside a drinks stall with a clear view across the walkway. I sat on a bench opposite the lamp, far enough from the handoff not to become part of it. A low partition cut off the view from the public entrance; from where I sat, I could see the service approach and the patch of paving where the marker was usually placed.

We had agreed to wait through the original window, not to intervene unless somebody was in immediate danger. The investigator had shown me the subcontract driver's roster photograph beforehand. It was a straight-on image, clean enough to be useful. I kept my eyes on the approach and tried not to turn the people passing into a series of guesses.

The crowd pressed sound against the edges of everything. A brass band broke into a tune several streets away; the nearby stall's extractor fan rattled in uneven bursts. My hearing kept snagging on scraps—a laugh, a chair dragged across stone, a bicycle bell—and losing the line I was trying to follow.

I had not eaten since the café. The hunger was not dramatic. It was a steady insistence that made the smell of roasted onions feel like a personal insult. I pressed my hands together between my knees and focused on the square of paving.

A runner appeared from the service approach. I knew him only as the runner assigned to the contact; I had never learned his name. He slowed at the lamp and looked toward the public entrance before crossing to the marker place.

The usual pale cloth was not there. He took a narrow strip of green paper from his pocket and set it beneath the edge of the bench. Then he stood, empty-handed, and waited a moment.

The investigator’s voice reached me from the drinks stall. “That’s not the usual marker.”

“No.”

The runner left by the way he had come. He carried no bag, no parcel, nothing that might have held a blood delivery. I couldn’t tell from his face whether he was frightened or merely tired; he was too far away, and the lamplight turned his features into pale planes.

I checked the time. “The handoff wasn’t due yet.”

“Not for another twelve minutes,” the investigator said.

The driver came in from the service lane before the agreed time. I recognised him from the roster image as he crossed into the lamp’s spill. He didn’t approach the bench. He stopped at the edge of the open paving and looked first toward the green strip, then along the service approach.

My pulse rose. The driver turned his head toward the public entrance. His gaze travelled past the partition without finding me. He took out his phone and made a call.

The investigator didn’t move from the stall. I stayed on the bench, hands locked together, while the call lasted less than a minute. The driver listened, said nothing I could hear, and put the phone away. He walked back into the service lane without touching the marker.

“That was early,” I said.

“Yes.”

“He saw the change.”

“He looked at it.” The investigator came no closer. “That’s what we can say.”

The words were careful, but her attention had sharpened. She took out her own phone and noted the time. I made myself do the same: the driver had arrived before the agreed handoff, the runner had

changed the marker, and the driver had called before leaving. We still had no location for the missing visitors.

The investigator sent the observations to her team. She did not follow the driver into the lane. There was no safe reason to turn a watched contact into a chase, and no evidence that he would lead us anywhere useful.

A gust pushed festival noise through the gap in the partition. I caught a burst of music, then lost the investigator's next words beneath the clatter of bottles at the stall.

"Sorry?"

"I said you should go home when we're done here." She lowered her voice. "You look exhausted."

"I can stay."

"You can. That isn't the same as being useful."

My first answer was that I could hear things she could not. The noise swallowed it before I spoke. I knew the limits of that argument: fatigue and hunger had already made the crowd a wall of unconnected sounds. I let the sentence go.

"I'll stay until the window closes," I said. "Then I'll leave."

She gave one short nod and returned to her post.

The old handoff remained empty. The strip of green paper lifted once in the breeze and settled back beneath the bench. I could smell food, wet wool, beer, and the faint iron trace of the marker's damp underside, none of it what my body wanted. I kept my attention on the service approach, but the driver had gone and there was nothing else to see.

When the window ended, the investigator crossed only as far as the edge of the public path. She looked at the marker without touching it, then took a photograph from where she stood.

“Surveillance of the contact point,” she said. “That’s the conclusion for tonight.”

I looked at the receipt still open on my phone. My annotations filled the screen in neat rows: time, marker, approach. Details intended to help the next person take over. The subcontract had received them. A driver had come early to the place they described.

“I gave them the route,” I said.

The investigator lowered her phone. I put mine away, and my stomach clenched hard enough to make me brace a hand against the bench.

She headed toward the festival office to report the observation. I remained under the public lamp until she was out of sight, hungry, the sealed cancellation notices gone from my pocket, and the old handoff watched by someone I could not see.

CHAPTER 6

A Seat Kept Empty

By morning, the pickup had become a fact with no destination.

The investigator had a time, a driver's photograph, and my account of the early arrival. Klara had the old photograph and the sense to keep it folded in its sleeve. I had the delivery notes I had helped make legible to the wrong people. None of us knew where the three visitors had gone.

We met beside the pin stalls, where the morning crowd moved around ropes and stacked crates. The stands were open, but the neighboring seller's chair was empty. A tray of enamel pins lay under a plastic cover, each little pretzel and beer stein catching the grey light.

The stallholder watched us approach. He was a broad man with a knit cap pulled down over his ears, and he kept one hand on the corner of the plastic cover as if we might try to lift it.

"I've already spoken to the festival office," he said.

"We're not here to ask you to repeat anything you told them," the investigator replied. She stopped on the public side of the stall. "We're looking for a vehicle you may have seen collecting your neighbor."

His hand tightened on the cover. "I didn't see anything worth reporting."

Klara took a half-step forward, then stopped before she crossed the line of stacked crates. "You don't have to tell us who else uses the route," she said. "Or who was expected where. If you saw a vehicle, you can describe the vehicle. If you didn't, we'll leave it there."

The stallholder looked from her to the investigator. "And my name?"

“That’s your decision,” the investigator said. “I can note that you prefer not to be identified in our working account. I can’t promise what a formal statement might require later.”

He let the cover go. “You people are very good at making a simple question sound expensive.”

“It can be,” Klara said. “That’s why you get to choose what you answer.”

The man studied her for a moment, then turned to straighten a row of pins that was already straight. “There was a little logistics cart. Not one of the big trucks. Electric, I think. It came down the lane from the east, just before the stalls shut.”

The investigator took out her notebook but did not open it. “Did you see it stop?”

“It stopped by the neighboring stand. The seller came out. They spoke. Then the seller got in.” He rubbed his thumb over the edge of a pin tray. “I thought it was a late stock run.”

“Did you recognize the driver?”

“No.”

“Could you describe them?”

“Not usefully. Cap, jacket. Festival was closing. Half the people on this lane had a cap and jacket.”

The answer came quick and a little sharper than the question. The investigator left it alone.

Klara’s gaze had settled on the stallholder’s hands, not his face. “Was there anything distinctive about the cart?”

“The side had a logo. Blue square, white lettering. Münchner Festlogistik. They use those carts for moving stock and rubbish.” He leaned on the table. “The left rear wheel was bad. It made a knocking sound every turn.”

The investigator opened her notebook. “Which way did it go?”

“Out through the service lane. West, toward the bakeries.” He paused, as if deciding whether to add something. “It didn’t look like anyone was forcing anybody. The seller climbed in on their own.”

I heard the small clack of a pin dropping against the tray. Or thought I did; a nearby stall was unloading a metal rack, and the sounds arrived overlapped. My shoulder had begun to stiffen beneath my coat. I shifted it, too quickly, and the old pull ran down my arm to the still-tender split in my palm.

“Thank you,” Klara said. “That’s enough to start with.”

The stallholder gave her a wary look. “You won’t put down who else was around?”

“No.” She glanced at the investigator, who gave a single nod. “Not unless you choose to tell us, and not for this account.”

He drew the plastic cover back over the pins. “Then that’s all I saw.”

We moved away without asking him to remember more. The cart, the damaged wheel, the direction. A seller choosing to climb in. It was a witness’s account, not a view into the cart or its destination. Still, it gave the missing person a last known movement that was not a blank patch on a map.

“West,” the investigator said as we reached the end of the row. “Toward the bakery loading bays.”

Klara tucked the photograph sleeve more securely beneath her arm. “And a supplier we can check against the festival roster.”

I looked back at the empty chair beside the pin display. It seemed too ordinary to have become a point on the route: a chair, a covered tray, a place where a person ought to have been selling souvenirs. I had spent the previous evening trying to turn details into control.

This time the detail belonged to the man who had seen it. We would have to ask for the next one.

The bakery sat beyond the service lane, its loading bay opening onto a narrow paved yard. Flour dust marked the black rubber strips around the rear door. Warm air pushed out each time someone went in, carrying yeast, burnt sugar, and the savoury smell of onions from a tray being wheeled toward the front counter.

I had eaten a roll on the walk over. It had softened the ache of an empty stomach and done nothing for the hunger underneath it. The scent of the bakery made my mouth water anyway. I kept my hands in my coat pockets so I would not reach for something I didn't want.

The investigator showed a festival credential at the loading entrance. The baker who came to meet us wore a flour-marked apron and had a pencil tucked behind one ear. He listened to her question while looking over her shoulder toward the yard.

"A small electric cart?" he said. "Yes. It waited here."

"When?"

"At closing that night. I can't give you the minute. I was finishing a delivery and the driver was on the phone." He pointed to a spot beside the wall, a few metres from the loading door. "There. The cart had a wheel making a racket. He left it and went off in a van."

"Did you see who drove the van?" the investigator asked.

"Only the driver. I was inside most of the time." He rubbed flour from his palm onto his apron. "The cart was still here when I came in before dawn. Later, Wegner's collected it."

"Wegner's?"

"Wegner Fahrzeugservice. They do the festival carts. A van came with a flatbed, and they took it away. I signed for the collection because the driver wanted somebody to confirm it had been left on the loading strip."

The investigator made a note. “Do you still have that collection record?”

“In the office. I can look.” He glanced at the open bay, where a worker was manoeuvring a rack of cooling trays. “But I’m not leaving that lot unattended.”

“We can wait,” Klara said.

The baker gave her a quick look, perhaps expecting a hurry from people who had arrived with an investigator and questions. Then he ducked back through the door. We stayed where we were, outside the loading bay. A forklift beeped twice somewhere beyond the next building; the sound cut through the traffic and left a brief ringing pressure in my ears.

I leaned against the wall. The cool brick took the heat from my shoulder. My stomach clenched at the smell of warm bread, then settled into its familiar, unsatisfied pull.

“You’re all right?” Klara asked quietly.

“I’m hungry.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

“My shoulder’s stiff. The crowd noise is worse than the bakery noise.” I rubbed my thumb along the seam of my pocket, avoiding the split palm. “I can follow the conversation.”

She nodded, accepting the answer without treating it as reassurance. The investigator was checking the time of the stallholder’s account against the delivery window on her phone. Neither of them asked me to listen for something they could not hear.

The baker returned with a narrow receipt book and a printed collection slip. He held them out to the investigator, who read the slip without taking it from him.

“Wegner’s collected the cart at 06:12,” she said. “Is that the time you saw it leave?”

“That’s the time on the form. The driver came before then, but I signed when he showed me the job number.” The baker tapped a line near the bottom. “This is mine. The cart had already been left here. I didn’t see it arrive.”

The distinction mattered. The stallholder had seen the cart leave with the seller. The baker had seen it waiting at the bakery and later watched the repair company collect it. His paper connected the vehicle to the shop, but not the cart’s entire journey.

Klara looked down at the pavement near the wall. “You said the wheel was damaged. Was anything left behind?”

The baker followed her gaze. “There was a piece of it in the gutter. I moved it off the drain so it wouldn’t block the water.”

He walked to the edge of the loading strip and pointed without bending. A dark, curved fragment lay among grit and scraps of cardboard, partly lodged against the gutter lip. One edge showed a pale break beneath its coating.

The investigator took a photograph from where she stood. “Would you mind if I looked at it?”

The baker considered the fragment, then stepped aside. “You can. Don’t pull the gutter apart. We need the drain.”

She crouched and examined the piece where it lay. I stayed behind the line of the loading bay. My first impulse was to close the distance and turn it over, to see whether the break matched anything in the roster or the cart’s likely make. I kept my hands in my pockets. There was nothing in the fragment that gave me a right to enter the yard or dismantle the place where it had fallen.

The investigator rose. “I’ll have the photograph and location recorded. We can ask the festival team to compare it with the cart.”

“Good,” the baker said. “I don’t want a crowd in the loading bay. We’ve got deliveries.”

“We won’t bring one.”

He handed her the collection slip long enough for her to photograph it, then took it back and returned it to the receipt book. He did not offer us the original. The paper remained his, with his signature on it.

“Wegner’s workshop is in the service block?” Klara asked.

“On the west side,” the baker said. “The garages behind the old produce hall. You can’t miss the sign.”

The investigator brought up a map on her phone. The bakery sat at the edge of a cluster of loading yards, vehicle depots, and repair units. She traced the westward route from the stalls to the bakery, then farther along the service lanes to the garage row.

“The cart was taken there,” I said.

“The cart was collected by Wegner’s,” the investigator corrected, still looking at the map. “That puts the repair shop on the trail. It doesn’t establish that the people went there.”

“I know.” I made myself look at the lines on the screen rather than fitting the empty spaces between them. “But the seller left in the cart, and the cart stopped here. The driver changed vehicles here. Then the cart went to the shop.”

“The baker saw the cart waiting, not the change itself,” Klara said. “He saw the driver leave in a van. The stallholder gives us the direction; the bakery gives us the stop and the collection.”

She said it without reprimand, setting the separate accounts beside each other as carefully as the slips of paper she handled for work. I felt the shape of a solution tug at me anyway. A cart, a change of vehicle, a westbound lane. Three missing people; one route. It was easy to make each line meet because I wanted them to.

The baker had returned to the loading door. He paused there, one hand on the frame. “If you’re going to ask Wegner’s about a

collection, do it through the public number. Don't turn up through the yard. They'll send you away, and I'll have to explain why you're in my loading bay."

"We'll use the public number," the investigator said.

She saved the map view and put her phone away. "I'll call Wegner's and ask them to confirm the collection against the job number."

The baker went back inside. The door swung shut behind him, and the warm smell of bread thinned in the open air.

I looked west, past the bakery roofs toward the service block. Wegner's garages were close enough to reach, their signs still too distant to read. The cart's broken wheel had left us a current trail through the loading yards; beyond them, the row of closed doors seemed broad enough to hide three absences.

CHAPTER 7

The Laundry Note

The service lane looked different once we had a direction to follow. It had not changed: the same shuttered stalls, the same strip of festival light laid across the paving. But I found myself measuring the gaps between doors as if one of them might open onto the answer.

It did not. The damaged cart wheel had given us a trail as far as the bakery loading bay, and the baker had seen the driver leave in a van. Beyond that, the service block was still a collection of garages and loading entrances on the investigator's phone. We had no reliable account of where the three missing people were, or whether they were hurt.

The neighboring stallholder had pulled the cover over his pins. Klara stood with the investigator beside his table, the old photograph tucked away. I kept my hands in my coat pockets. My shoulder had stiffened during the walk, and the tender split in my palm caught whenever my fingers curled. The lane's overlapping sounds kept breaking apart and recombining: metal shutters, a trolley, a burst of laughter from the public path. I could follow a voice if I looked at the person speaking. I could not make the whole place quiet by wanting it.

A man in a dark work jacket came down the lane carrying a laundry bundle against his hip. He stopped at the covered pin display and looked from the stallholder to the investigator.

"I was told to bring this here," he said. "To the stall beside the pin seller's."

The stallholder glanced at the bundle. "Who told you?"

"No one. It was in a return bundle from tonight's collection run." The man set it on the edge of the table. "There's a note inside."

The investigator moved a half-step closer, leaving the bundle where it was. “You found it yourself?”

“I was sorting the returns from that same run before I brought the bundle straight here. It was folded between two towels.” He looked at the investigator’s credential, then at me. His thumb worried the frayed hem of his jacket. “I didn’t open it.”

“Where did you collect the laundry?” Klara asked.

“From the service-block laundry building. The collection entrance is off the west lane, past the produce hall.” He pointed back the way he had come. “Not Wegner’s garage. It’s a different building.”

The investigator brought up the map again. The bakery loading bay lay east of the produce hall; the laundry building was farther along the service lane, inside the block we had been tracing. Two stops, not one place blurred into another.

“Tell us what happened there,” she said. “Only what you saw.”

The runner shifted the bundle to his other arm. “Tonight, on that run, a van came into the laundry yard. I was bringing the empty returns inside. A man brought a woman from the van to the washroom by the collection room. He waited outside the door. I didn’t speak to her.”

“You saw her face?”

“Briefly. She came out and crossed to the return bundles. I saw her fold something into one. Then the man took her back.”

“Did you see anyone else from the van?”

“No. Not clearly. I was inside by then.” He shook his head, as though the answer bothered him. “I didn’t see the other people. I can’t tell you who was in that vehicle.”

After the runner first said the bundle held a note, the investigator called the young man who had reported the translator missing. We waited briefly while the runner finished describing tonight’s

collection and what he had seen at the service-block laundry. The young man arrived before we asked him to authenticate the handwriting and private phrase, his arms folded tightly enough to press the coat sleeves into his palms. At the investigator’s nod, he stepped into the pool of light at the stall and left the bundle untouched.

“May I see the note?” he asked.

The runner glanced at the investigator. She nodded once. He opened the bundle just enough to lift out a folded sheet. On the outside, in slanted handwriting, was the companion’s name and the instruction *For the stall beside the pin seller*. He held it toward me.

I took the original. The paper was thin and creased twice, its edges softened by the towels. My fingers had become clumsy with the ache in my shoulder; I steadied the fold against the table rather than trying to flatten it in the air. Then I handed it directly to the investigator.

She slid it into a clear evidence sleeve and wrote the time and the runner’s name on the outside. Only after she had done that did she open the sleeve again, carefully lifting the page by its edges. The companion bent over the table. The stall lights caught the ink, not his face; I watched his eyes track the lines.

“That’s her handwriting,” he said. His voice thinned on the last word. “And the phrase is ours. We used it in our travel messages.”

The investigator looked up. “What phrase?”

“‘Leave the orange string loose.’ It means don’t tie down the return plan until we both agree.” The companion drew in a breath and let it out slowly. “She wrote it to me more than once. This is hers.”

The investigator turned the page so we could read it without taking it from her. The writing slanted uphill across the sheet.

*Service-block laundry, tonight. I am writing during a delay. I can see the other two; all three of us are alive here. The maintenance

worker is hurt and cannot move quickly. I heard Sailer say they will move us offsite before the next dawn unless Sepp attends the handoff at the usual pickup. Do not bring him there. Find another exit. The usual point is watched. Leave the orange string loose.*

I read it once, then again. On the second pass, the words *all three of us are alive* held my attention. The companion put one hand on the table, fingers spread, as if the empty space beside the note needed holding in place.

“She was at this building when she wrote it,” I said.

The investigator tapped the sleeve, not the page. “The runner places her at the collection room and saw her put the note in that return bundle. Her companion recognizes the hand and the phrase. The note reports the three of them alive here when it was written. It doesn’t tell us which room they’re in now.”

No one tried to make the distinction sound better than it was. The message gave us a building and a deadline, not a door to break through.

The companion kept looking at the note. “She says the maintenance worker is hurt.”

“Do you know how badly?” the investigator asked.

“No.” He swallowed. “She wouldn’t waste space telling me that unless it mattered. He can’t move quickly. That’s all I can give you.”

The investigator nodded and turned to her radio. “I’m sending the building and the before-dawn move to the team. They’ll need to plan for someone who can’t keep pace.” She gave the location in short, precise phrases, then listened to the reply.

The phrase *usual pickup* sat in my mind beside the photograph’s old arrangement: a place made visible to the right person and ordinary to everyone else. This was no longer a suggestion on paper. Someone had written that the point was watched, and Sailer was using Sepp’s attendance as the condition for delaying the move.

“We’re not asking Sepp to attend,” I said.

The companion looked up. “She asked for another exit.”

“I know.” I kept my eyes on the words, not on his hand braced against the table. “We’ll find one that doesn’t make her warning useless.”

The investigator slid the page back into its sleeve and sealed it. The original disappeared behind the clear plastic, but the message remained legible. She kept it in her hand while she made another call, then turned away from the stall and spoke quietly to the person on the other end.

The runner remained beside the table. He had stopped rubbing his jacket hem. “Is she getting out?”

“We’re working on it,” the investigator said when she ended the call. “You’ve given us what you saw. If you remember anything else, tell the officer whose number I’ll leave with you. Don’t go back to the building.”

He nodded. The stallholder pulled the laundry bundle closer to himself, careful not to disturb what remained inside. The runner looked once toward the west end of the lane, then left by the way he had come.

The investigator stepped away to coordinate with the extraction team, the original still in her custody. The companion stayed beside the stall. I asked if he wanted water. He shook his head, then changed his mind and took the bottle Klara offered. He drank once, slowly, and handed it back.

“I want them to know we’re not going to use the pickup point,” he said.

“They will,” the investigator answered from a few paces away. “We’re preparing the approach now.”

My phone showed a missed message from Eva. I called her. She answered before the second ring.

“Tell me you have something better than another cart,” she said.

“A note from the translator. A runner saw her at the laundry collection building in the service block. Her companion recognizes the handwriting and a private phrase. The note says all three were alive there when she wrote it. One is injured. Sailer plans to move them offsite before dawn unless Sepp comes to a handoff.”

Eva’s reply came without hesitation. “Then the rendezvous is finished. I’m moving the people who use that route away from it now.” I heard paper rustle, then a door close on her end. “The usual point was never a safe place once someone was watching it.”

“The note asks for another exit.”

“Police are preparing the extraction?”

“Yes. They have the building, not the room.”

“Good. I’ll keep the network clear of the pickup and tell no one to improvise a second meeting.” Her tone sharpened at the last sentence, not at me but at the problem. “An unplanned route is still a route. I won’t have people wandering into the same net from a different direction.”

I looked at the companion. He was listening, though he could only hear my side. “And Sepp?”

“He stays out of the handoff,” I said. “I won’t send him in.”

Eva was quiet for a beat. “I’m calling him myself. He can hear the news without becoming the price of it.”

She ended the call before I could thank her. It was a choice made elsewhere, with consequences I could not manage from this stall. I put the phone away.

The investigator came back to us. “The team has the service block and the transfer deadline. We’re checking the premises and preparing a police-supported approach. No one is going to the pickup point.” She looked to the companion. “If you remember any detail about the writing or the travel messages that changes how we read the note, tell me. For now, stay with Klara.”

The companion nodded. His gaze had gone to the empty chair at the pin stall, the one the missing seller should have been sitting in. He did not ask me to promise an outcome. I was grateful for that, and ashamed of how easily I might have offered one.

The investigator left with the original sealed in its sleeve. The stall lights shone through the plastic as she crossed the lane, then the page turned opaque against her coat. The building was no longer an empty shape on a map. Somewhere inside it, according to the note, three people had been alive when it was written. One could not move quickly. Before dawn, Sailer meant to move them again.

The route to the service block was clear enough to follow. The hours left to follow it were not.

CHAPTER 8

The Cart Route

The repair shop was squeezed between a shuttered drinks stall and a row of service doors, its sign nearly hidden by the festival banners. The investigator went in first. Klara followed with the concession plan folded under one arm; I stayed on the pavement with Nora while the crowd moved around us in bright, noisy currents.

My shoulder had gone stiff again. The split in my palm tugged when I flexed it, and the smell of hot onions from a nearby stand settled unpleasantly over the sharper, more insistent hunger beneath it. I had eaten earlier. That fact seemed to matter to everyone except my body.

The investigator came back out with a grey-haired man in a stained work apron. He carried a shallow metal tray. On it lay the broken wheel fragment from the cart.

“You brought the piece?” he asked.

The investigator nodded. “You recognize it?”

The man turned it over, thumb tracing a ridge in the rubber. “This came off the blue delivery cart. The split here is from the bracket, not the road. I repaired the other wheel on the same axle last week.” He looked at the fragment again. “You don’t forget a cart that comes back twice in three days.”

“Was it brought in by Sailer’s company?”

“It was booked under the company name.” He ducked back inside and returned with a receipt, folded lengthwise and softened at the creases. The date was two days earlier. “Late collection. They were supposed to pick it up before closing. Didn’t.”

The investigator read the line beneath the repair charge. “Collection address?”

The owner tapped it with one blunt nail. “That’s where the driver said it was going.”

I leaned close enough to read without taking the paper. The address matched the laundry collection building the runner had named. Same service block; same entrance off the west lane.

The investigator photographed the receipt and asked the owner to keep the original. He pressed it flat beneath the metal tray, as if it might try to leave.

“Is that enough?” he asked.

“It gives us a current link,” the investigator said. “We’ll take a copy and come back if we need a statement.”

The owner glanced at the fragment. “I’d rather you did. I’m not keen on being part of whatever that cart was carrying.”

“You don’t have to guess,” Klara said. Her voice was even. “Just tell them what you saw and what you recorded.”

He looked at her, then nodded once. The investigator made the copy, thanked him, and slid it into a folder. We stepped back into the lane.

Klara opened the concession plan against the side of a closed stall. The wind kept lifting one corner. She pinned it with her palm and followed the printed service lanes with a finger, checking the marked buildings against what we could see around us. I watched her work and felt the old impulse rise: align the photograph, the map, the route, make one clean shape out of them. I kept my hands in my pockets.

“The laundry entrance is here,” she said. “The repair address agrees with it.” She turned the plan a little to catch the light. “The old photograph helps with how a contact could be seen. It doesn’t put this building on the page.”

She didn’t look up to see whether I agreed. I looked at the little blocks printed along the lane and said nothing.

The investigator called the premises manager. He was waiting inside the service block, near a side entrance where the noise from the public walkway thinned to the rumble of carts and distant machinery. When he came out to meet us, he had a key ring in one hand and a flat folder under the other arm.

“I manage the block,” he said. “The laundry is on the west side. What’s happened?”

The investigator showed him her credentials and explained that a message from one of the missing visitors placed three people in the building and warned of a move before dawn. She did not show him the original note. He listened without interruption, then glanced at the service doors.

“There’s a storeroom in the basement,” he said. “Rented to Sailer’s company. It’s not part of the laundry tenancy.”

“Do you have the lease?”

“Here.” He opened the folder on the flat top of a nearby cart. His hands shook once as he sorted through the pages, then steadied when he found the right sheet. The investigator checked the company name against the repair receipt and asked him to confirm the storeroom number.

He did. His finger stayed on the line for a moment.

“There are occupancy conditions,” he said. “The service exit has to stay clear and operable. We had trouble with deliveries blocking it last month, so I put that in writing.”

He led us down the service corridor, stopping short of the basement stairs. The investigator went with him. Nora and I remained by the landing while Klara held the concession plan closed against her coat. From below came the smell of damp stone and cleaning fluid.

The manager returned with the investigator a few minutes later. His face had tightened.

“The exit is barred from inside,” he said. “A crosspiece across the door. It isn’t supposed to be secured that way.”

The investigator asked him to show the officers the access and the floor plan. He looked toward the basement again.

“I can do that.”

The officers had arrived while we were upstairs. The manager handed the plan to one of them and pointed out the service corridor, the basement stairs, and the exit. The officer checked each point against the drawing, then spoke quietly with the investigator. I heard only fragments: access, clear route, occupants, confirmation.

At the bottom of the stairs, the service door stood beyond a turn in the corridor. The public entrance was on the far side of the block, facing the broad lane where festival visitors drifted past in both directions. A bare lamp over that entrance made the threshold plainly visible from the lane’s open end. From the service side, the same doorway vanished behind a partition.

The note said the usual pickup point was watched. I remembered the old photograph’s one-sided view: visible from one approach, ordinary from another. I did not need the photograph to tell me where a person crossing that bright public entrance could be seen.

“That entrance is exposed from the lane,” I said. “If that’s the point they’re watching, anyone coming through it will be visible before they reach the stairs.”

The investigator followed my gaze, then turned to the officer. They spoke together for a few seconds. The officer studied the floor plan and indicated the service access. He made the decision; I watched his pencil move over the paper.

The manager unlocked the service door. It opened only a few inches before the bar caught against it. The metal gave a small, hard knock.

He let go of the handle. “That’s not how I left it.”

The officer looked at him. “Don’t touch it again.”

“I won’t.” The manager stepped back, keys clenched in his palm.

The sound brought my attention sharply to the door and then scattered it. A trolley clattered overhead; someone laughed in the public lane; from farther along the corridor came a radio squawk. I tried to separate them and got each noise at once. The hunger had made the edges of everything too distinct, not clearer. I pressed my thumb into the tender seam of my palm until the sting gave me one thing to attend to.

Nora had moved a little apart from us, phone to her ear. She listened, gave an address, then waited through a pause.

“Yes, that’s the one,” she said. “He may arrive unable to keep pace. I’ll send the details through the officer, not the open channel.” She ended the call and looked at the investigator. “There’s a staffed receiving place for the injured visitor. They know to expect someone from the extraction. I’m not going to assess him in the corridor.”

The investigator nodded. “I’ll pass it on.”

Nora put her phone away. “If he’s worse than the message suggests, the people bringing him out can make that call.” Her eyes met mine briefly. It wasn’t a rebuke. It was a boundary stated once, and I let it stand.

My own phone vibrated. Eva’s name appeared on the screen. I answered and moved close enough to the wall to hear her over the lane.

“We have the block,” I said. “A basement storeroom rented by Sailer’s company. The exit’s barred contrary to the occupancy conditions. Police are checking the approach.”

“And the handoff?”

“Not happening.”

“Good.” I heard the brisk scrape of paper at her end. “Sepp knows enough to stay away from it. I’m keeping him away from the decoy point and out of anyone’s line of sight.”

I looked toward the public entrance, where the lamp shone over people who had no reason to look twice at it. “He’s not coming here?”

“No.” Eva’s answer was immediate. “He won’t be part of Sailer’s bargain.”

I had no useful reply. I could hear her turning pages, arranging something beyond my reach.

“The officers have the premises plan,” I said. “They’ll choose the route.”

“As they should.” Her voice softened by a fraction. “You stay where they put you, Benjamin.”

The call ended. I pocketed the phone.

The investigator was speaking with the lead officer. The manager had given them the tenancy record and was answering questions about the basement’s ordinary access. Klara stood beside the plan, one hand resting on its fold. She had not taken out the photograph.

A van turned into the west lane.

It was a plain replacement vehicle, clean enough to look recently collected and practical enough to belong among the block’s deliveries. It rolled past the laundry entrance without stopping, then slowed near the service access. The driver looked toward the basement door and continued to the far end of the lane.

Nobody called out. The officer nearest the plan watched the van disappear behind the produce hall. The investigator checked the time against the message, then met the lead officer's eyes.

The predicted window had opened.

The officers gathered close to the floor plan. One asked the manager to point out the internal turn again. Another checked the service access with him. The replacement van remained out of sight, somewhere beyond the block. There was no certainty about who was inside it, or whether it would return. There was enough to stop treating the deadline as distant.

The lead officer looked at me. "You'll stay at the support point with the manager. When the route is cleared, help the evacuation team with the injured visitor. Don't enter the storeroom."

"I'll stay here."

My body had already leaned toward the stairwell. I felt the pull in my shoulder as I shifted, and the hunger narrowed my attention to the dark opening below. I made myself step back from it. The officer turned to Nora and confirmed the receiving destination. She gave him the details without adding more than the team needed.

Across the corridor, the service door waited behind its narrow gap. From the public lane the other entrance was all light and open sightline. Here, the wall broke the view before anyone could see the stairs. The officers chose the service route and took their positions. No one asked me to lead them.

The lead officer lifted a hand, listened to his radio, and gave a short nod.

The room was identified. The route was chosen. We were ready to go in.

CHAPTER 9

The Bright Stall

The manager turned the key while the officers held the basement door against the bar. Metal scraped. The door gave an inch, stopped, then yielded with a bang that rang along the corridor.

“Clear the stairs,” the lead officer said.

The manager stepped back. Two officers went down first, shields forward, their voices clipped by the turn in the passage. I stayed at the support point with the manager, as instructed. My shoulder pulled when I shifted my weight. I kept my hands still.

The minutes narrowed to radio static, shoes on stone, and the occasional clatter from somewhere below. Hunger made every sound stand apart and press at me. I fixed on the service door’s narrow gap and tried not to make the noises mean more than they did.

A voice called that the route was clear. An officer came up first, then the translator, moving stiffly but under her own power. She stopped beside the manager. From there she could see down the service corridor toward the protected exit; the public entrance was hidden behind the fixed partition.

“That’s the van,” she said, pointing past the exit. “The replacement. It’s the one Sailer said would take us after the change.”

The officer beside her looked in the direction she indicated, then spoke into his radio. I heard a reply, not the words. The translator’s gaze shifted along the lane, beyond the turn.

“And Sailer?” the officer asked.

“Near the bright entrance.” The translator raised her voice to carry over the movement below. “The man in the dark coat. I saw him from the exit.”

I couldn’t see either man yet. From where I stood, the partition kept the public entrance out of sight. The officer sent someone ahead and told the rest of us to hold.

The evacuation team came up next, bringing the maintenance worker in his wheeled chair. Rike walked close beside him, her bright apron still on, one hand near the chair’s handle. I moved to the worker’s uninjured side as the team guided him over the threshold.

The officer nearest us glanced at the worker. “Do you want her to come with you?”

The worker looked up at the pin seller. His face had gone grey under the corridor light. He nodded. “Yes. If she wants to.”

“I do,” she said, and took hold of the handles again.

The officer gave a short nod. No one asked either of them to explain the choice. I supported the worker’s uninjured shoulder when the chair jolted over a seam in the floor. My own shoulder pulled hard in answer. I kept my grip steady.

A phone rang somewhere behind me. The officer steering the chair spoke into his radio, giving the receiving team the worker’s condition and our route. He kept the chair moving. The pin seller stayed at the worker’s side.

We passed the fixed partition together. The corridor opened toward the service exit, and the view along the lane cleared.

Only then did I see Sailer.

He stood at the illuminated public entrance, several dozen metres away, his dark coat sharply outlined beneath the bare lamp. Festival visitors streamed across the lane between us. Beyond him, the plain replacement van waited near the curb. Its engine idled. A security guard had stepped into its path.

Sailer looked toward the service exit. Leonie, now beyond the threshold with an officer, lifted her arm and pointed him out again.

The officer steering the chair gave the receiving team our position over the radio. He kept the chair moving. The pin seller walked beside the worker as they continued toward the receiving point.

Across the lane, Sailer turned away from the guard and set off toward the crowded festival edge.

Eva's voice came from a security radio near the service door. "That's him. I've alerted the nearby team. Keep the lane clear; don't let the van pull out."

The guard at the van shifted to block its driver's view of the exit. Two more security staff came in from the stall row. Sailer changed direction once, angling between a lit pretzel stand and a booth hung with strings of coloured pins. The lamps made him easy to follow, though the crowd kept cutting across my view. Each time he vanished behind a shoulder or a raised beer glass, he reappeared in another bright patch.

He reached the mouth of the lane and put a hand up to a uniformed guard.

"Routine collection," he said. "My company's vehicle is there."

The translator called from the protected exit, loud enough to carry. "That's Sailer. He told us we wouldn't leave until Sepp was delivered."

Sailer's hand dropped. He tried to turn into the crowd.

The guards closed the space before he could. One took his arm; another stepped between him and the van. Sailer twisted once, not enough to break free, and his coat pulled open. A security guard raised a small body camera, keeping it trained on his face and hands.

"You can't detain me," Sailer said. "I'm collecting property."

The guard held his arm. "Then why did you tell them they couldn't leave until Sepp was delivered?"

“The vehicle doesn't leave until Sepp comes,” Sailer said. “That's the collection arrangement. I said nothing about keeping anyone here.”

The camera’s red light stayed on. The guards held him beside the stall entrance, in full view of the lane. I could not hear what the radio operator said next, but the officer beside the chair touched his earpiece and nodded.

“Police are taking custody,” he told us. “Keep moving.”

The worker had watched the exchange without turning his head. When the chair bumped over a seam in the paving, he winced and closed his eyes. The pin seller leaned down to say something I couldn’t hear. He opened them again and nodded.

At the receiving point, a responder took the chair handles and checked that the worker was settled before asking whether he wanted the pin seller to accompany him. He said yes. She answered, “I’m staying for now,” and went with the chair through the open doors.

The translator remained with the investigator and the officers. She had identified the van and Sailer; now she gave her account while the investigator took notes. I stood far enough away not to hear every word. The lane remained busy, its light and movement a poor place to sort voices. My shoulder had begun to stiffen where I’d supported the chair.

A little later, the pin seller made a phone call from the corridor outside the receiving room. She kept the worker’s chair beside her. I heard her say, “I’m with him. He’s out. I’ll call again when I know more.” Then she ended the call and tucked the phone away.

The investigator asked each visitor for an initial account separately. I stayed near the door, where they could see me without having to speak over me.

The translator went first. She identified Sailer from the public entrance and said the van was the replacement vehicle Sailer had

described for the transfer. She repeated the demand that Sepp be brought to them before the visitors could go. Her voice was level, but she kept rubbing one thumb across the other as she spoke.

The pin seller spoke next, without looking at the translator's notes. "It was before the van came. Not after. I heard the engine while he was still talking." She paused, then added that she had chosen to stay with the worker when the officers came up.

The worker gave his account from the wheeled chair. He had heard the demand through the storeroom door from a different position. His voice thinned with effort, and the responder stopped the interview when his breathing grew uneven. The investigator put down her pen.

"Enough for now," she said. "You can continue later if you choose."

He nodded, and the pin seller moved the chair back a little from the doorway.

The messages gathered during the investigation were brought over after the separate accounts had been taken. The investigator compared the relevant pickup messages with what each visitor had said: the threatened transfer and the demand for Sepp. She marked the correspondence without asking the three of them to combine their memories into a single statement.

The security guard's recording was added to the file. It captured Sailer's attempt to leave, his claim that he was collecting property, and his own words about Sepp. The recording's red light had stayed on as the guards held him in view of the lane.

By then, police had arrested Sailer. Eva told the investigator that Sepp had stayed away from the handoff. His document had not been taken or brought to the block.

The worker's chair rolled toward the receiving room, the pin seller walking beside it because he had asked and she had agreed. I moved out of their way. The rescue could get them clear of that room. It

could not give them back the hours in it, or make the choice to trust anyone simple again.

CHAPTER 10

A Route with an End

By the time the police finished taking statements, the temporary rooms smelled of damp coats, vending-machine coffee, and the sharp disinfectant someone had used on the corridor floor. Dawn had turned the windows the colour of old paper. The maintenance worker slept in a chair with his injured arm supported across his lap. The pin seller sat nearby, her apron folded over one knee. Nobody had asked her to stay. Nobody had asked her to go.

Nora stood at the table with a phone tucked to her ear, writing down a name and an address on the back of a festival programme. She had already spoken with the receiving team about the worker's follow-up. Now she was checking that the appointment would not be made for a time he could not manage.

"He says mornings are worse," she told the person on the phone. "Then don't put him down for eight." She listened, eyes on the worker. "Good. Ask him before you move it again."

When she ended the call, she turned the programme toward him. "They'll contact you this afternoon to set a time. You can tell them what works. This isn't a summons."

He examined the writing, then nodded. "I'll answer."

"Excellent. A revolutionary approach to appointments." Nora capped the pen and left it beside him.

His mouth twitched. The pin seller leaned forward, as if to check that he was all right, then stopped herself. He saw the movement and gave her a small nod. She settled back, hands resting on the folded apron.

Nora put the phone away. "That's as far as I can take it."

"You've done enough," I said.

She gave me a look that made the word enough seem to have several meanings. My split palm throbbed under its dressing. My shoulder had gone rigid from holding it too still, and the hunger had been there all night, low and persistent, turning every trace of coffee into a sour promise.

“I have a shift,” she said. “And I’m going home first to change. I’m not staying here to supervise the building.”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

“No. You only look as if you’re about to ask the walls.”

The maintenance worker let out a quiet breath that might have been a laugh. Nora’s expression softened, but she was already gathering her things.

Nora showed him the agreed follow-up note; he read it and said, “That’s right.”

She put the programme in her bag.

At the door she paused beside me. “You should arrange your own follow-up. Not through me between shifts.”

“I know.”

“And eat something, if you can.”

“I did.”

“Then you know I mean the other thing.” She did not wait for me to pretend I didn’t. “I’ll call when I’m off. If I’m awake.”

“I’ll manage.”

“That wasn’t what I said.” She squeezed my good arm once, brief and warm, and went.

The door shut behind her. The room did not become quieter; the radiator knocked, a trolley rattled down the hall, and somewhere outside a delivery lorry backed up with three sharp beeps. But I

noticed the space Nora had left, and how quickly my mind tried to fill it with another task.

Rike unfolded her apron. “I need to get back to the stall.”

The worker stirred. “You don’t have to—”

“I know.” She stood and checked that he could see her. “I’m going to recover my stock. Then I’m going home. If you want me to come back later, call me. If you don’t, don’t.”

He looked at her for a moment. “I’d like you to call.”

“I can do that.” She tucked the apron under her arm. “I’m not promising to sit here all day.”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

“Good. We’re learning.”

Her smile lasted just long enough to make the words kind. She asked the officer by the door whether she could retrieve the stock with an escort. He checked the time, then said someone could take her as soon as the investigator had finished with the translator.

The translator was still at the other end of the room, speaking with the investigator. I could hear pieces of her statement whenever the corridor noise dipped: the van, the demand, the promise that they would not be released until Sepp came. Her voice stayed level. Her hands did not. She rubbed one thumb across the knuckle of the other, again and again, as if testing a rough edge.

The investigator closed her notebook and looked toward the pin seller, who was waiting by the door with her apron tucked under her arm.

“I’ll sign what you wrote, but I won’t carry messages again,” Leonie said.

The investigator opened the notebook once more. “You mean you won’t work as a courier?”

“I mean I won’t carry messages,” the translator said. She looked down at her hands. “Not for Sepp. Not for anyone who says the route is safe because it used to be.”

The translator turned the notebook so she could read the statement. She took her time and changed one phrase. The investigator entered the correction, then handed the statement back to the translator to check.

The translator signed the corrected version.

The pin seller raised her apron slightly. “They’re ready.”

The translator looked at it, then at the open door. For a second I thought she might offer to go with her. Instead, she gave a small shake of her head.

“You go,” the translator said. “I’ll get my own things.”

The pin seller nodded and left with the officer. The translator watched until the door swung closed, then put her signed statement into the investigator’s folder herself.

By midmorning, the worker had been moved to another room where he could rest without people crossing in front of him every few minutes. He said he wanted to answer the follow-up call alone. Rike returned for her stock and stayed long enough to tell him she had recovered it all except a box of enamel pins nobody could locate. She would not leave her stall open another day, she said, but she would call him that evening.

He asked if she wanted him to keep the box if it turned up.

“Only if you don’t charge me storage,” she said.

“I’ll consider a reasonable rate.”

She laughed, and for the first time since the service-block door opened, the sound seemed to belong to her rather than to the corridor.

Then she took her apron and went. The translator left separately, after giving the investigator a number where she could be reached for any further statement. She did not offer a second number or a future errand. The worker chose to stay until the receiving team called. Their choices did not make what had happened smaller. They made what came next theirs.

I was still hungry when the room emptied around me. A paper cup of broth sat untouched on the table. I had tried it because someone had put it there and because Nora had told me to eat. It had warmed my hands and done nothing for the ache beneath my ribs.

Eva arrived shortly before noon. She stood in the doorway long enough to take in the vacant chairs and the paper cup.

“You look dreadful,” she said.

“I’ve had a restful night.”

“You’ve had a night. There’s a difference.” She set a folded note on the table. “A volunteer has offered to meet you this afternoon. They made the arrangement directly, not through the festival stop.”

“Do they know the route is closed?”

“They know the old arrangement is closed. They chose a different place and a time. You may accept or refuse. They may change their mind.”

I had spent the hours since the rescue trying to turn the route into a problem with a clean fix: remove the exposed detail, move the handoff, warn everyone who might use it. But a warning could become another list. A new list could become another map. I took the note then, careful not to unfold it while Eva was watching.

“Thank you.”

“Thank them if you see them.”

The meeting was in a small room above a café, away from the festival grounds. The volunteer had chosen it and was already there

when I arrived. They were an adult I had met only briefly before, someone who had once offered help without making a promise of permanence. They gave me time to sit down and time to say no. I accepted.

Afterward, the hunger loosened its grip enough for the room to come back into focus. My shoulder still hurt. The split in my palm pulled when I flexed my fingers. I was not restored, and I had not earned the right to be less careful. I thanked the volunteer and left when they said they had somewhere else to be.

By the time I met Eva again, the afternoon had begun to fade. Sepp had chosen the place: a quiet café near a tram stop, with a front window facing the street and a second door opening onto a narrow courtyard. He was seated with his back to the wall. A plain envelope lay on the table in front of him.

Eva took the chair opposite him. I sat to his left, leaving the envelope between us. Sepp's hands stayed on either side of it.

"You brought the original," Eva said.

"I did."

"May I inspect the signed limits?"

He looked from her to me, then opened the envelope. He removed a few pages, kept the rest inside, and turned the top sheet toward Eva. "These. You can read them here."

Eva did not reach for the paper until he nodded. Then she drew it closer and read in silence. The café grinder started behind the counter, drowning out the tram bell outside. I watched the door instead of trying to hear what the machine concealed.

When the grinder stopped, Eva was still reading. She traced a line with one finger, not touching the ink. "This authority is limited to the arrangements named here."

"It says that," Sepp replied.

“And the signatories can challenge its use beyond those arrangements.”

“It says that too.”

She looked up. “Brandt has been treating the beds, transport, and donor access as if they were his to assign.”

“He has been assigning them,” Sepp said. “That’s why I kept this.”

Eva returned to the page. “These limits are enough to begin a formal challenge. They won’t settle every claim he may make.”

“I didn’t bring them to settle everything.” Sepp held out his hand. Eva returned the sheet at once. He placed it back in the envelope and folded the flap over, but did not seal it. “The original stays with me.”

“Yes,” Eva said.

“What happens now?” I asked.

“Now the challenge goes to the people who signed the limits,” Eva said. “They’ll have to decide whether they’re willing to use them.”

“And Brandt?”

“He’ll have the chance to answer.” Her tone made clear that a chance was not the same thing as a reprieve. “We don’t have a conclusion yet.”

Sepp slid the envelope inside his coat. “I’m not staying in the festival district tonight.”

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Somewhere I chose.” He said it without challenge, but the words put a boundary around the answer. “Eva knows how to reach me if there’s a real need.”

Eva inclined her head. She did not ask him to say where.

Sepp looked at me. “I should tell you about my brother before I ask. He worked on surveys.”

“Winter records, boundary work, the sort of jobs that leave marks in offices long after the people are gone,” he said. His thumb rubbed the envelope’s edge beneath his coat. “I want to know what survives of his survey history—not what someone says it means, but what was recorded, when, and by whom.”

I felt the old reflex rise—the wish to make a list, assemble a timeline, ask for every name before the conversation had ended. I let it pass without speaking.

“What would you want me to do?” I asked.

“Start with the records I can show you. If we find another source, we decide together whether to use it.”

Eva watched me over the rim of her cup. I kept my eyes on Sepp.

“All right,” I said. “When?”

“December. The second Tuesday, if that still works for you.”

I checked my phone. “I can be here at six.”

“Here,” he said. “Same table, if it’s free.”

“That’s specific enough.”

“It should be.”

He stood, leaving the envelope under his coat and the untouched coffee on the table. At the courtyard door he looked back once, not to ask us to follow. Eva remained seated. I let him choose the distance to the exit.

“Thank you for reading it,” he told her.

“Thank you for letting me.”

He nodded and went through the door.

The festival was still running somewhere beyond the café, loud enough that its cheer reached us in scattered bursts. On the table between Eva and me, the cup Sepp had left was cooling.

I entered the appointment in my calendar: Tuesday, six o'clock. Beside it I wrote only what Sepp had asked me to bring—nothing yet.

For tonight, the festival case was over. In December, if Sepp still wanted me there, we would begin with what he chose to show.

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