About the book and project

PERSONALISED FICTION

This edition contains Book 3, *Olympiapark* 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 3: Olympiapark - 12 chapters; approximately 21,702 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 3

Olympiapark

CHAPTER 1

The Open Trench

By the time Klara and I reached the Olympiapark construction site, the police had secured the trench and stopped the machinery. A yellow excavator stood beyond the barrier with its bucket hanging over a cut in the ground. From where the officer directed us to wait, I could see a strip of pale bone and, several feet away, the dull edge of a metal case in the mud.

The site supervisor came toward us with his hard hat tucked under one arm. He had the taut, polite expression of a man who had already explained the same delay to someone more powerful than himself.

“The operator caught sight of the bone when he pulled back,” he said. “He stopped. We cleared the immediate area, then called it in.” He nodded toward the machine. “That’s where it was when the police arrived.”

A uniformed officer standing at the barrier confirmed the sequence with a brief nod. The account was not a record of what I had seen, but it was enough to explain the suspended bucket and the line of workers held behind the site fencing.

“What happens to the schedule?” the supervisor asked him. “We’re not asking to dig through it. Just to clear the site around it.”

“You can ask,” the officer said. “You can’t clear this trench.”

“I understand what you’re saying. The discovery hasn’t even been classified.” The supervisor looked at the exposed patch of ground, then back at the officer. “The rest of the project doesn’t stop being a project.”

“No,” the officer said. “But this does.”

Klara stood beside me, hands in the pockets of her coat. She had not tried to edge past the barrier. I was grateful for that, and a little ashamed to notice how quickly I had wanted a closer look.

The call had come to her that morning. An investigator had sent a photograph of a mark visible on the case and asked whether it meant anything to the private collection she worked with. Klara had asked if I could come too. She had not said she knew what we would find, only that a second pair of eyes might help.

The investigator, a woman named Seidel, came out from a temporary site office and checked our names against a note on her phone.

“You can look at the photograph,” she said. “Nothing at the trench. We’re still documenting the position.”

She showed us the image on a tablet. It was taken from above, close enough to show a stamped mark on the case’s lid: a broken circle around two short parallel lines, with a few scratched letters beneath. Mud blurred one corner. The metal around the mark was worn, not freshly cut.

Klara leaned in without touching the screen. “That’s the old field-service mark,” she said. “The collection catalogue uses it for survey equipment. I’d need to check the entry before I could tell you more.”

“Is it on the current plan?” Seidel asked.

“Not on the version I’ve seen.” Klara straightened. “I can give you the catalogue reference and the plan revision I compared it against.”

“Please do. Keep it to the reference and the comparison for now. We’ll take the rest through the proper channel.”

Klara nodded. She did not ask for the original image or enlarge the mark herself. Seidel saved the screen and led us inside.

The site office smelled of wet jackets, instant coffee, and the dusty heat of a portable radiator. Through its narrow window I could see the excavator's bucket still poised above the trench. Someone had put a paper notice on the door: ACCESS RESTRICTED. The letters had begun to curl where the damp reached them.

Two workers sat at the end of a folding table, each with a plan in front of him. One had a fluorescent jacket folded over the back of his chair; the other kept his hard hat on his knees and turned it by the brim. A second officer sat between them with a notebook open. The supervisor remained standing.

Seidel introduced us, then explained that the workers were giving their accounts separately. She had asked us to wait while she finished with them. The hard-hat worker glanced at the tablet in her hand.

"That the case?" he asked.

"It is," Seidel said. "Tell me where you thought it was when the bucket stopped."

"Low in the fill," he said. He tapped his plan. "Around here. The upper layer's been shifted at least once. We brought spoil across from the east side two days ago."

The other worker shook his head. "You said it was higher when you called me over."

"I said I could see the corner of the case."

"You said it was near the old cut."

"Because I could see it from the old cut." The first worker's finger moved a short distance on his plan. "That doesn't mean it was in the old cut."

Seidel waited. The worker with the folded jacket looked down at his own drawing, then at the other man's. Their marks did not meet.

"What depth did you record?" she asked.

“Two metres, maybe,” said the man with the hard hat. “I didn’t measure it. I was keeping the machine back.”

“And you?”

“Closer to one and a half,” the other said. “But I was looking from the side. There’s been fill moved. I’m not going to pretend I had a clean line to the original ground.”

The officer wrote that down. A drill started somewhere beyond the office wall, whirring up into a harsh, continuous note. My shoulders tightened before I could stop them. The noise swelled over the next question. I caught only the last few words and leaned toward Seidel.

“Sorry. Could you repeat that?”

She did, without making a thing of it. The drill cut off. In the sudden quiet I heard the radiator tick and the restless shift of the supervisor’s boots.

“I’m not challenging the police hold,” he said. “I need to know whether the crew can continue on the adjoining section.”

Seidel closed the notebook halfway. “Not until the scene team says what can be moved.”

“Then I need that in writing.”

“You’ll get it.”

He looked at the two plans. “We’ve got different depths, two different positions, and fill that’s been moved. That’s not a reason to stop the whole site.”

“It’s a reason not to call this spot clear,” Seidel said.

The supervisor pressed his mouth shut. He had no argument that could put the ground back where it had been. He took out his phone and stepped toward the door to make a call.

Seidel turned to the case photograph again. A technician had taken a closer image, the stamped mark sharp enough now to read the

surviving line below it: *Dienstaufnahme 1974*. The rest was abraded or hidden by dirt.

The man with the hard hat leaned across the table. “If it’s from ’74, that gives us a date.”

“For the marking, perhaps,” Klara said. “Not for the remains.”

She spoke without rebuke, and without taking her eyes from the photograph. The worker sat back. The officer entered the visible wording in the notes.

Klara drew a small card from her bag and wrote the catalogue reference in her compact hand. She added the number of the plan revision she had checked, then passed the card to Seidel. The investigator read it, asked Klara to confirm one digit, and copied it into the file.

“Could you send the catalogue entry once you’ve checked it?” Seidel asked.

“I can send the relevant entry and its source details,” Klara said. “I’ll confirm what the collection actually holds before I describe it.”

“Good.” Seidel slipped the card into a clear sleeve. “That’s all I need from you today.”

The supervisor returned from his call. “They’ve asked me for an estimate.”

“Give them the estimate for the rest of the site,” Seidel said. “This trench stays closed.”

He looked as if he wanted to contest the wording, then turned his phone so he could see the time. “I’ll make the call.”

Outside, the rain had thinned to a cold mist. A crew member stood behind the tape with his hands tucked under his arms, watching the trench. The excavator’s bucket held a shallow pool of water. When a gust moved it, the metal caught a brief, pale flash of winter light.

Seidel came out after us and spoke to the supervisor. He listened, then nodded once. No one restarted the machine. The officer at the barrier lifted the notice as it peeled away at one corner and fixed it back to the fence.

Klara and I walked toward the gate. She kept her hands in her pockets, the damp darkening the shoulders of her coat.

“I’ll check the catalogue,” she said. “That doesn’t mean I’ll know what the mark proves.”

“Understood.”

She looked sideways at me. “You’re allowed to say more than that.”

“I was going to say I’m glad you came.”

“Better.”

I took my notebook out beneath the shelter of the gatehouse. My fingers were stiff from the cold, and the old pull in my shoulder sharpened when I bent over the page. I wrote down the wording on the case, the reference Klara had given Seidel, and the two workers’ different depth estimates. Their plans had stayed separate on the table. I left a line beneath the notes for the catalogue check.

There was room to write a depth.

I left it blank.

CHAPTER 2

The Match

The next afternoon, Sepp asked to meet at the police office rather than the café where we had first spoken about his brother’s survey work. He gave no reason over the phone. When I arrived, he was already in a small interview room with Klara and Inspector Seidel. A paper cup sat untouched by his elbow.

The room was too warm for my damp coat. I hung it over the back of a chair and tried not to notice the smell of coffee left too long on a hot plate. My stomach had been reminding me since noon that the sandwich I’d eaten was not an answer. I kept my hands flat on the table, the split in my palm tugging beneath its dressing when I flexed my fingers.

Seidel shut the door. “The case from the trench carries a Hartmann connection in the survey mark,” she said. “That is not an identification. We’re still treating the remains as unknown.”

“I understand,” Sepp said.

He had brought no envelope this time. Instead, he placed his phone on the table and kept one hand resting beside it. His face looked composed, but he had set his jaw in the way I had seen when he was deciding how much of an answer to accept.

Seidel glanced at him. “You asked about providing a reference sample.”

“I did.”

“The comparison would be limited to the question we discussed. Your consent would be recorded, and the result would go through the case file. You can ask questions before you decide.”

Sepp’s eyes moved to Klara, then to me. “I’ve decided.”

Seidel nodded and opened the folder in front of her. A forensic specialist named Dr. Auer came in a moment later, carrying a thin document wallet. She introduced herself to Sepp and explained, in plain language, what the comparison could and could not address. Sepp listened without interrupting. When she finished, he signed the consent form Seidel set before him.

The process was brief. I looked at the window while Seidel and Dr. Auer handled the sample and its paperwork. Outside, rain streaked the glass and turned the buildings across the street into soft grey blocks. My attention snagged on the small sounds in the room: the scratch of a pen, the click of a folder clasp, the radiator ticking as it cooled. They arrived too clearly, layered over one another. I pressed my thumb against the edge of my bandage until the pressure gave me something simple to attend to.

When the paperwork was complete, Seidel told Sepp the office would contact him when the comparison was ready. He stood, tucked his phone into his coat, and looked at the empty cup.

“Not even bad enough to drink,” he said.

“Those are the dangerous ones,” Klara replied. “They persuade you they might improve.”

Sepp’s mouth shifted, almost a smile. He turned to Seidel. “Please let me know as soon as you have something. I would rather hear it in person.”

“I can arrange that.”

He asked for a meeting with Seidel, Dr. Auer, Klara, and me. Seidel checked the specialist’s availability before settling on a time two days later. Sepp wrote it in the small notebook he carried and closed the cover.

On the way out, I fell into step beside him. “Do you want us to wait for that meeting before looking at the family records?”

“I want to know what the comparison says,” he answered. “Then we can decide what else to look for.”

It was not an invitation to start searching on his behalf. I nodded and let the question end there.

Two days later, we met again in a consultation room at the forensic institute. Sepp had requested the meeting and arrived early. He sat with his back to the wall, his hands folded on the table. Klara had brought a notebook and one sheet of paper bearing the catalogue reference from the field case. She kept it face down until Seidel joined us.

Dr. Auer came in last. She had no dramatic folder, no photograph to turn toward us. She sat, set down her notes, and spoke to Sepp first.

“The routine nuclear profiles from your reference sample and the remains are indistinguishable within the limits of this comparison,” she said. “That is the result.”

Sepp did not move. “What does it support?”

“Given the family connection and what we know about the case, identical twinship is a reasonable hypothesis. The comparison itself does not establish that the remains are your brother.”

The sentence settled into the room without resolving it. I watched Sepp’s clasped hands. His left thumb had begun to rub across the knuckle of his right index finger, back and forth, slowly.

“So it cannot tell you which of us the remains belong to,” he said.

“No,” Dr. Auer replied.

Sepp nodded once. “That’s what I asked for.”

I followed the exchange, though the warm air was making my head feel thick. When the radiator clicked again, the sound seemed to strike the side of my skull. I shifted in my chair and felt the familiar

pull in my shoulder. It still had not recovered its ordinary range of movement; it only hurt less when I remembered to move carefully.

I had already opened my own notes on my phone. Under the date, I had typed a heading while Dr. Auer was speaking: **DEAD MAN'S EXACT MATCH**. It looked sharp and useful, a phrase that could make a baffling result seem like an answer. I had not shown it to anyone. Still, the words sat on the screen between my hands as if I had been waiting for the room to approve them.

Sepp's gaze moved from the report to my phone. He said nothing.

I looked at the heading again. If I kept it, every sentence beneath it would have to spend its time undoing the first one. I selected the words and deleted them. Then I wrote: *Routine nuclear profiles indistinguishable within test limits. Twinship supported; remains not identified.*

I put the phone away.

Sepp's fingers had stopped moving. I could not tell whether he had been watching the screen or only the report. He turned back to Dr. Auer and asked whether he could request a copy of the signed consent. Seidel said she would arrange it. Seidel gathered her notes, and the meeting ended without anyone offering a name for the remains.

In the corridor, Sepp stopped beside a window looking onto a narrow courtyard. A bicycle leaned against the opposite wall, its front wheel turned into a puddle.

"I have the family-register reference," he said. "It records two births."

He brought out his phone and opened a note, not an image of the register. There was a reference number and the name of the office where the entry could be located. He turned the screen toward Klara and me.

"Matthias and me," he said. "Born together."

Klara studied the reference. “Do you have a copy of the entry?”

“No. I can request one. I wanted you to have the reference first.”

She nodded. “That’s enough to begin looking for the record. It doesn’t tell us what happened to either of you afterward.”

“No,” Sepp said. His eyes stayed on the phone. “It doesn’t.”

I could hear a door close farther down the corridor, then the quick squeak of someone’s shoes on the polished floor. Hunger made the sounds intrusive, but I kept my attention on Sepp’s screen. The names were typed in a plain font, without any family photograph or other mark to make them feel less like entries in a list.

“What do you want us to look for?” Klara asked.

“His own work records. He had jobs separate from mine.” Sepp locked the phone and put it away. “And his dental history, if it survives. I don’t want the comparison to become his whole life.”

Klara closed her notebook. “Then we start with the employment records and find out what survives of the medical side. We won’t assume either is there until we locate them.”

Sepp considered that, then nodded. “Yes.”

I felt the old reflex gather itself: ask which offices, what dates, who else remembered him, whether there were letters, photographs, wages, addresses. The questions formed a queue in my head. I could have made a project plan before we reached the lift.

Instead I asked, “Would you like us to search for those records, or would you rather request the register first?”

“Look for the employment records,” he said. “Klara can tell me what she needs from the register reference. I’ll decide how to proceed with the dental history.”

“All right,” I said.

He took out his notebook again and wrote something beside the meeting time. The pen snagged once on the paper. He changed his grip and finished the line.

Klara asked whether she could keep the reference number in her working notes. Sepp agreed, then specified that she should not send it elsewhere without checking with him. She wrote the number and the limitation beside it, leaving no copy in my hands.

Outside, the rain had stopped. The pavement in the courtyard held a thin grey sheen, and the air smelled of wet stone. Sepp paused before the exit.

“Thank you for coming,” he said. “I wanted to hear the result with the people who will help me look, not read a sentence passed around without its edges.”

“I’m glad you asked,” I said.

He gave a small nod and walked ahead of us toward the street. Klara waited until he had gone through the door before she opened her notebook again.

“Employment records first,” she said. “The register reference is enough to request the entry. Nothing else yet.”

I took out my phone, opened a fresh note, and wrote the two tasks exactly as he had set them: *Matthias Hartmann — separate employment record. Dental history to be pursued by Sepp.* I did not add a question mark after the name or turn the comparison into a conclusion.

The remains still had no established identity. But the search now had a person’s name, two distinct lines of inquiry, and someone who had chosen what each of us could do next.

CHAPTER 3

The Crew List

The next Tuesday, Klara had the records laid out in the reading room before Sepp arrived. Each sheet rested on its own support, with a pencil and a stack of loose paper kept well away from the originals.

“I found the roster in the post-Games service files,” she said when I came in. “The archive has certified this copy against the retained personnel record.”

Grey winter light pressed at the high windows. I took off my coat and felt the old stiffness in my shoulder answer the movement. My palm had nearly stopped pulling at the dressing, though the skin beneath it still felt tender when I flexed my fingers. I put my phone beside my notebook, not over either document.

The page was dated 1974. The top corner had been repaired with a strip of yellowing tape; beneath it, rows of names and assignments ran in a hand that changed from one section to the next. Klara turned the page so the line faced Sepp.

“Matthias Hartmann,” he read.

His voice did not catch. He kept one finger beside the name, not touching the paper.

The entry placed Matthias on a survey assignment in the south service boundary section. A personnel reference in the margin led to a dental provider’s name and an old office address. The next sheet was the assignment record itself. Its signature had been authenticated independently against the retained personnel file.

I copied the wording into my notes. It gave the assignment, not the route or the work’s extent. I left the cursor at the end of the line and moved on.

Sepp leaned over the table. “He had his own jobs. That’s what I wanted to find.”

Klara nodded. “This is a dated record of one of them.”

She drew a separate folder toward us. Seidel had used the provider reference to locate a surviving treatment record, now held with the investigation’s materials. The pages before me were an approved extract: dates and the provider’s identifying details, no examination notes or unrelated medical history. I checked the dates against the work record, then returned the extract to its sleeve.

“The dental examiner has the comparison material,” Seidel said. “You don’t need the full chart to follow the employment chronology.”

“Understood.” I closed my notebook over the dates I’d been permitted to copy.

Sepp watched me do it. “And the case?”

Klara set down photographs Seidel had brought from the police file. The field case itself remained under police control. In the clearest image, its latch showed a brass tongue set slightly off centre, fixed with two rivets of unequal size. A dark line marked the handle where years of hands had worn the finish away.

Klara laid a repair invoice beside the photograph. Sepp had authorized us to examine this paper from Matthias’s effects. It named a field case and described a replacement latch, noting the offset tongue and unequal rivets. The date fell within the period of the service roster.

Sepp stared at the worn handle. “He carried it like that. The leather had gone smooth where his hand closed around it.”

The invoice’s details matched the photograph. I wrote that down, then watched Sepp’s eyes remain on the handle.

Klara returned the papers to their supports. “There’s a name, an assignment, and a repair record. We have enough to ask someone who worked beside him.”

Sepp took his finger from the roster. “I remember one of the crew. Rudolf Eberl. If he’s still in Munich, he may remember the work.”

Seidel already had the contact request in progress. Eberl had agreed to speak with us that afternoon, at his flat.

I closed my notebook. The roster had given Matthias a place in a work crew. The rest would have to come from someone who had stood there with him.

* * *

That afternoon, Eberl’s ground-floor flat faced a narrow courtyard where rainwater gathered along the paving stones. Seidel knocked, and an older man opened the door after a pause long enough for us to hear a lock turn. He wore a cardigan buttoned high and held the door with one hand, keeping the other on its edge.

Seidel introduced us. Eberl looked at the three of us in turn, then stepped aside. “Come in, then. I’m not making tea for a delegation.”

“Good,” Klara said. “I’ve already had some.”

“That’s one fewer cup to wash.”

He led us into a sitting room with two chairs and a narrow sofa. A framed photograph of a lakeside picnic hung above a cabinet. Eberl sat in one chair, leaving the other to Seidel, and pointed Klara and me toward the sofa. Sepp chose its far end. From where I sat, I could see Eberl’s hands on the arms of his chair and the door behind him, still open a few inches to the hall.

Seidel explained that we were asking about a survey crew working at the Olympiapark site in 1974. She showed Eberl the roster copy and kept hold of it while he read the relevant lines.

He adjusted his glasses. “Hartmann. Matthias, not Sepp.”

“Yes,” Sepp said. “My brother.”

Eberl looked up at him. “You’re the one I met afterward, at the workshop.”

“I was there once.”

“That’ll be it, then.” Eberl passed the page back to Seidel. “Matthias was quiet until he had something to object to. Then you knew where you stood.”

“What do you remember him objecting to?” Seidel asked.

Eberl shifted in his chair. The fabric creaked beneath him. “There was a partition in one of the service corridors. We were told to survey up to it, not through it. Somebody wanted the plan certified as complete.”

“Did Matthias refuse?”

“He wouldn’t put his name under a line that said the section was finished when it wasn’t.” Eberl rubbed at a pale mark on his thumb. “He said the partition was on the ground, so it belonged on the survey. That was the argument, as I remember it.”

Sepp kept his gaze on Eberl. “Did he say who had told the crew to stop?”

“No.” Eberl shook his head once. “Or I don’t remember him saying. I remember the refusal. I don’t remember the exact week.”

Seidel set the roster on her folder. “Would a date help you place it?”

“It might.” Eberl glanced toward the hall. “I used to keep a pocket calendar. It’ll be in a box somewhere. I’m not going to give you a week because you’ve got a form with a year on it.”

“No one’s asking you to guess,” Seidel said.

“Good.” He settled back. “I’ll look when I feel like looking.”

Sepp had leaned forward as Eberl spoke about the partition, but now he sat back. His hands were loosely closed between his knees. “What did Matthias want for himself?” he asked.

Eberl’s expression changed, the concentration easing around his mouth. “To work for himself. Independent surveying. He talked about getting his own equipment, then doing boundary jobs and site work without waiting for a foreman to tell him where to stand.”

“Did he have a plan?”

“He was saving. He’d worked out what the basic kit would cost. He used to complain that everybody wanted a survey done yesterday and paid for it next month.” Eberl gave a short laugh. “That part hasn’t changed.”

Sepp looked down at his hands. “No. It hasn’t.”

I opened my notebook, but did not interrupt. The room smelled faintly of furniture polish and damp wool. My stomach tightened with its familiar unsatisfied pull. I pressed my thumb against the edge of the bandage on my palm until the pressure steadied my attention.

Seidel asked whether Eberl remembered the field case. He leaned toward the photographs and studied the latch without taking them from her.

“That sort of case, yes. The handle was worn smooth. He carried it everywhere.”

Klara placed the invoice beside the photograph. “This repair description matches the visible latch.”

Eberl bent closer. “I remember that brass tongue being crooked. It never sat straight after the repair.” He looked from the invoice to the picture. “Could be the same case.”

“It is the case recovered at the site,” Seidel said. “The photograph is from the police file.”

Eberl nodded. “Then it’s the one I remember.”

Sepp’s jaw moved once. He did not ask Eberl to say more.

Seidel gathered the photograph and invoice. “If you find the calendar, contact me directly. You don’t need to send anything through the family.”

“I won’t.” Eberl looked at Sepp. “If I find a date, I’ll decide what I want to do with it.”

“Thank you,” Sepp said. “That’s all I wanted to ask.”

We left the calendar in its box, wherever it was. At the door, Eberl stood back to let us pass. Sepp paused on the threshold.

“He wanted his own work,” he said. It sounded less like a question now.

“That’s what I remember,” Eberl replied. “He didn’t want to spend his life carrying someone else’s line.”

Sepp gave him a small nod and went out into the courtyard. Seidel followed. Klara waited until they had moved a few paces before she stepped through. Eberl began to close the door behind us.

Outside, the rain had stopped. Sepp stood beneath the overhang, looking at the darkened paving rather than at us. I opened my notebook. Under the roster entry, I added Eberl’s recollection: Matthias had worked on the crew, objected to certifying a survey that stopped at a partition, and intended to become an independent surveyor. I marked the calendar date as unconfirmed.

The line for Matthias no longer ended at a family register. He had been assigned survey work in 1974; a colleague remembered him doing it, and remembered what he hoped to do next. I closed the notebook and joined Sepp beneath the overhang.

He looked toward the street. “We know what he was trying to build for himself,” he said.

The notes did not identify the remains. But Matthias had a working life beyond the name, and an ambition that belonged to him alone.

CHAPTER 4

A Line Through the Map

Klara's workroom was warm enough to make my coat feel like a mistake. I hung it over the back of a chair and kept my sore shoulder angled away from the table while she set out the survey copy.

It was in a clear sleeve, the paper creased through the middle and frayed at one corner. The line we had come to examine crossed the crease and faded where the sheet had torn. Beside it, Klara placed two public redevelopment plans, each in its own support.

"Those are the successive versions?" I asked.

"Public copies," she said. "The first is a revision, not a clean replacement. The second uses a different datum."

I uncapped my pencil. "I could align the surviving control points and—"

"No." Klara slid the older plan a few centimetres back from the survey copy. "You could align some of them. The control points don't belong to the same revision, and the vertical reference changes here." She tapped the margin, not the map. "A neat overlay would make a persuasive picture. It wouldn't make it reliable."

I put the pencil down.

My first instinct was still to make the papers agree: give the lines a common grid, choose a best fit, let the computer tell me which discrepancies mattered. The wish was more urgent because Klara had stopped me. It had nothing to do with whether she was right.

She opened her notebook to a page of references. "We can compare what each document actually carries. No composite."

I moved my chair so I could read without leaning over the sleeve. The stretch in my shoulder eased a little. My stomach did not. The

faint pull there had followed me through breakfast and the tram ride, steady enough to make the warm room smell suddenly crowded: paper, wet wool, coffee from somewhere down the corridor. I took a slow breath and fixed on the ink.

The survey copy's line ran parallel to a marked service route, then turned toward a gap in the later public plan. It was not a complete drawing. A fold hid part of the turn; the damaged edge took the line with it before it reached the map's border.

Klara laid a narrow strip of transparent paper beside the surviving portion, not over it. She copied the line's angle and the two readable marks at either end. Then she set the strip against the older public plan, using the printed grid as a reference rather than forcing the map to fit.

The alignment was not exact. The marks fell within the same general stretch, but one sat closer to the edge than I expected.

"Revision shift?" I asked.

"Possibly." She turned to the next plan and checked its marginal note. "Or a change in how this section was recorded. We can't choose between them from these sheets."

The later plan showed the route ending before the corridor. No corridor appeared on it at all. The earlier revision carried a narrow line in the corresponding area, but its label had been lost with the damaged section.

I looked again at the repeated stroke on the survey copy. "Eberl's partition. The corridor may be where the crew stopped."

Klara followed the line with her eyes. "It fits what he remembered."

The workroom clock ticked past the hour. Klara checked the plan references again, then wrote down the revision numbers she wanted to carry forward. She did not write a coordinate. I copied only the references she had listed and left a space beneath them.

“Can we take the strip with us?” I asked.

“It’s my working copy.” She put it between two sheets of plain paper. “You can refer to it here. At the site, we use the approved plan copies.”

“All right.”

She closed the survey sleeve before I could reach for it. The old crease disappeared beneath the clear plastic. I put my notebook away.

* * *

We met Sepp at the park edge later that afternoon. The clouds had lowered and the air had the damp, metallic chill that settled into my fingers through the notebook cover. Beyond the path, temporary barriers screened the ground where the construction crews had worked. A bus passed on the road behind us, windows grey with reflected sky.

Sepp waited beside a low wall with his hands in the pockets of his coat. He nodded to Klara, then to me.

“You brought the public plans?” he asked.

Klara held up the folder. “The copies we discussed.”

“Good. No originals walking about in the weather.”

He set off along the path at an easy pace. We followed, keeping to the public side of the barriers. He had spent years as a technician; he didn’t need to stop at every change in the paving to look at it. When he did pause, it was to match a bend in the path against the plan, or to study where one stretch of fencing met another.

The first opening we reached was a broad metal grille set into the low retaining wall. I had noticed it on the plan: an appealing point where a line might have met the surface. Sepp stopped several paces away and looked at it without approaching.

“That belongs to the later transit work,” he said. “They cut through here when they added the lower service run. The grille came with it.”

He pointed along the wall to a patched seam and a change in the concrete. The grille sat in a newer rectangle, its bolts cleaner than the stained surface around it. I had mistaken its prominence for age. The plans had made it seem useful; the wall made it a poor candidate.

Klara opened the folder but kept the pages inside. “The later plan shows the addition, but not the earlier route.”

“Because they drew what they needed for that job,” Sepp said. “Not every line that was there before.”

He continued farther along the path, to a less obvious break in the wall where the ground sloped away behind scrub and a maintenance fence. Nothing there announced an entrance. The fence and the angle of the embankment blocked any view below the path.

Sepp stood with his back to the road. “This stretch is older. There was an approach somewhere along here before the transit work. I remember the access being dealt with as part of the earlier site services.”

I took out my notebook. The urge to draw a dot arrived before the pencil reached the page. A dot would look decisive. I let the pencil hover, then wrote *possible older approach, location approximate* and left the space beneath it empty.

Klara turned to the plan’s revision note. “The corridor shown in the earlier material would meet this stretch, if we’ve placed the line correctly.”

Sepp looked toward the fenced ground. “That’s the route I remember.”

We stood there while a cyclist rattled past behind us. The sound faded toward the road. I could hear the cyclist’s freewheel longer than I wanted to; hunger sharpened small noises until they seemed to

press close. I closed my hand around the notebook and waited for the distraction to pass.

Klara traced the line on her copy without touching the page. “The apparent entrance on the later plan is out. This older approach remains plausible.”

“And the trench?” I asked.

She folded the plan back into its support. “The moved fill and the later work leave the burial layer unsettled.”

Sepp walked a few steps back toward the grille. From there, the newer opening looked almost like the obvious answer again. Its straight edges and visible bolts caught the weak light, while the older stretch disappeared behind the fence.

“Easy to see why someone would choose that one,” he said.

“It’s the one the newer work made visible,” Klara replied.

Sepp gave a brief, dry smile. “The newer work was good at that.”

At the park gate, Klara checked that the folder was closed and tucked it under her arm. Sepp turned toward the road, where his tram stop lay, and gave us a small nod.

“Thank you for walking it with us,” Klara said.

“You had the line. You needed the ground.” He glanced once toward the screened construction site. “That’s as far as I’d take it today.”

We watched him go before turning back toward the city. I opened my notebook to the references from Klara’s workroom and added one question beneath them: which site-service revision recorded the corridor? The older approach had a place in the investigation now, but the map still left the burial layer unresolved.

CHAPTER 5

The Brother’s Version

At six on the second Tuesday in December, Sepp opened his kitchen door before I could knock a second time.

“You’re punctual,” he said.

“I was afraid you’d make me wait in the cold as a test.”

“I’d have chosen a better test.” He stepped aside. “Come in.”

Klara followed me into the warm, narrow kitchen. Sepp had set three cups on the table, though only one held coffee. A plate of sliced bread sat beside a dish of butter. The window above the sink had gone black with evening, reflecting the lamp and the backs of our coats.

The table was already occupied by a folder and a stack of papers squared carefully against its edge. Sepp moved the bread to make room for us, then left the folder where it was.

“Those are the records you said you’d show us?” Klara asked.

“Some of them.” Sepp pulled out a chair. “I said we’d start with what I could show you. I didn’t say I’d brought everything.”

Klara hung her scarf on the chair beside her. “That’s fair.”

I sat with my sore shoulder turned slightly away from the table. The ache had become familiar enough that I could ignore it for stretches, which was not the same as its having gone. My stomach gave a small, persistent tug. I took a piece of bread, spread butter over it, and ate. It tasted good. The hunger stayed put.

Sepp noticed me glance at the cups. He pushed the full one closer. “Coffee?”

“Please.”

He poured. The coffee's bitter smell rose above the warmth of the room, and beneath it I caught the dry-paper scent from the folder. Not old in the romantic sense; just paper kept closed for a long time. I took a sip and set the cup down before the heat could become another thing to concentrate on.

Sepp opened the folder. Inside were photocopies of site-service documents, a small photograph of a field case, and a folded sheet in a clear sleeve. He did not take the sleeved page out.

"Is that the survey copy?" I asked.

"A piece of one. The part I kept." He tapped the sleeve once. "You've already seen the version Klara has."

"Not this one," Klara said. "I've seen the damaged copy from the collection."

"Then this is a different copy." Sepp let that distinction sit between us. "It was among my things."

I opened my notebook, then paused with the pen above the page. Sepp had said he would show us records. He had not asked me to take notes. I looked at him.

"Write down what you need to remember," he said. "Just don't make it sound more certain than it is."

"I'll try."

"You don't have to try. You can write what I say, and label it as what I say."

I put the pen to the paper. "All right."

He slid one photocopy toward Klara. "This is a work assignment. Matthias's name is there. You've seen the roster, but not the original layout."

Klara studied the page without lifting it. "The line breaks are different from the copy we had."

“Different reproduction,” Sepp said. “Same entry.”

She followed the type with her eyes, then nodded. “It supports the assignment. It doesn’t tell us what he thought of it.”

“No,” Sepp said. “That’s my part.”

The coffee had cooled enough to drink quickly. I swallowed a mouthful and waited. Sepp’s thumb rested on the edge of the next page, but he did not turn it.

“When was the last time you saw him?” I asked.

“Before he disappeared.”

I let the answer sit a moment. “What do you remember about that last time? The season, the circumstances?”

“Autumn, I think. I can tell you the season, not the day. We’d been arguing for weeks about the room.”

“The concealed room?” Klara asked.

“Yes.” His fingertip flattened a curling corner of the photocopy. “Matthias wanted the place reported. He said people ought to know it existed, and that the work we were doing there couldn’t continue behind a locked door and a private promise.”

“And you disagreed,” I said.

“I was afraid.” He said it without looking at me. “There were people who came to us in bad shape. Some of them didn’t wake for a while. They needed somewhere quiet, somewhere they wouldn’t be taken straight into a system that had no idea what to do with them.”

His hand closed around the edge of the table. The knuckles paled, then eased.

“I thought if we reported the room, it would be shut,” he continued. “Or inspected until nobody could use it. I told myself that keeping it hidden was the same as keeping people safe.”

The kettle ticked as it cooled on the counter. Outside, a car passed through the wet street with a soft hiss.

“What did Matthias say?” Klara asked.

“He said hiding it had made us answerable to ourselves alone.” Sepp rubbed one finger along the seam in the table. “He wanted the room reported. He wanted a record of what happened there, and who had decided what.”

“Did he want to sign a report?” I asked.

“He wanted me to sign with him.”

The sentence seemed to take up more space than its words. I wrote it down, marking it as Sepp’s account. He watched the pen move, but did not stop me.

“Did you sign?” Klara asked.

“No.”

“Did he?”

“I don’t know.” Sepp looked down at the papers. “He left after that. I don’t know what he did next.”

The answer was small and exact. There was no theatrical pause after it, no look inviting us to fill the silence with a theory. I put down the pen.

“How long before you understood he wasn’t coming back?” I asked.

Sepp’s mouth tightened. “That isn’t a date you can put in a file.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“I know what you meant.” He lifted the cup, found it empty, and set it down. “At first I expected him to come home angry. Then I expected him to write. Then I stopped expecting a particular thing and called that waiting.”

Klara shifted in her chair. The legs made a brief scrape against the floor. “Was there a search?”

“Not one I can call a search. People asked after him. I asked where I could, then stopped asking in places where the questions would have put the room in danger.” Sepp’s gaze moved to the window, where the lamp’s reflection lay over the dark glass. “I let his absence remain unexplained. I didn’t arrange a funeral. There was no body established as his, no grave to visit, no proof that he was dead.”

The word *proof* stirred something in me—not a conclusion, just the familiar itch to sort an absence into possible states. I felt the pen between my fingers and set it on the notebook instead.

“You could have gone on looking,” I said.

“Yes.”

He didn’t defend himself. That left my sentence hanging where it belonged: not a finding, not a question that could be answered with a document.

Klara folded her hands on the table. “Do you regret not continuing?”

“Every version of the answer is true.” Sepp looked at her. “I was afraid of what might happen if I pursued him. I was also afraid of finding out that he’d been right, and that I had helped make it possible for him to vanish.”

“Did you help make him vanish?” I asked.

Sepp turned toward me. His expression stayed composed, but his fingers had tightened against the table again.

“I’m telling you what I remember. I’m not giving you a verdict on myself.”

I nodded once. I had asked for a confession because it would have simplified the shape of the room and the years between then and

now. He had refused to give me one. The refusal did not answer the question, and it did change what I could ask next.

“Then what can you tell us about the last argument?” I said.

“That he wanted the room reported. That I didn’t want it exposed. That he walked out while we were still angry.” Sepp released the table. “The rest is what I did afterward.”

He moved the papers aside, clearing a square of bare wood. The table had a pale ring where a hot cup had once stood. He ran his thumb around the edge of it once, then got up and went to the narrow cabinet by the refrigerator.

The cupboard door stuck. He lifted it slightly as he pulled, and it opened with a wooden knock. From the bottom shelf he took a flat paper packet tied with cotton tape. He returned to his chair but kept the packet in front of him without untying it.

“Those are the field papers that were returned to me,” he said. “Long after Matthias disappeared.”

“Returned by whom?” Klara asked.

“Someone who had kept them. I know the name.” Sepp’s hand covered the knot. “I’m not giving it to you tonight.”

Klara glanced once at me, then back to him. “All right.”

He unfastened the tape. Inside were a few folded sheets, a brittle envelope, and two carbon copies with their edges worn pale. Sepp lifted the envelope out last. It was sealed, the flap darkened along its edge, the paper creased at the corners. A date had been written across the front in a hand I could not identify from where I sat.

I leaned forward by a fraction. Sepp’s palm came down over the writing.

“May I see it?” I asked.

“Not yet.”

He turned the envelope over. The seal was intact, or appeared intact to me. Sepp held it with both hands, careful not to press the paper flat.

“You knew it was there?” Klara asked.

“Yes.”

“And you haven’t opened it?”

“No.”

His eyes stayed on the envelope. The lamp cast a warm strip along his cheek, leaving the other side of his face in softer shadow. I could hear the faint rasp of paper beneath his thumb. My own attention snagged on the small sounds, as if the quiet had made them important. I gripped the coffee cup and let the ceramic’s warmth steady my fingers.

“Why keep it sealed?” I asked.

“Because it might say what I didn’t want to know.” He lowered the envelope to the table. “Because if it confirms what I chose not to pursue, then I can’t tell myself I had no way to find out.”

No one spoke. The coffee smell had thinned, overtaken by the stale sweetness of the paper packet. Sepp pressed the side of his thumb against the envelope’s crease, then withdrew it.

Klara said, “You don’t have to open it because we’re here.”

“I know.”

“And if you do, you can decide what we hear.”

Sepp looked at her, then at the envelope. “Stay.”

Klara’s hands remained folded. “I will.”

He took a small knife from the drawer beside the sink. When he returned, he did not pass the envelope to either of us. He sat down, set the blade against the seal, and paused.

I thought of asking whether he wanted me to record the date, or describe the envelope, or witness the opening. Every question turned a private decision into a piece of evidence. I closed my notebook.

Sepp glanced at the movement. “You can keep it closed,” he said.

“I can remember without writing.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“No.” I placed the notebook on the empty chair beside me. “It isn’t.”

His shoulders lowered slightly. He drew the knife through the seal. The paper gave with a soft, dry tear.

He slid two fingers inside and eased out a folded sheet. The envelope stayed in his other hand. He opened the page once, then again, angling it toward the lamp. His eyes moved across the lines. I watched them stop, travel back, and continue.

Klara waited. I tried to do the same.

When Sepp reached the bottom, he turned the page over and checked the reverse. Then he folded it along its old creases, carefully, without returning it to the envelope.

“What does it say?” I asked.

“I’m not ready to tell you.”

The answer came without anger, and there was no opening in it to press against.

“Does it change what you remember?” Klara asked.

“I don’t know yet.” He placed the letter beside the open packet. “There are practical things in it I can check against records Matthias didn’t write. I’ll read it again alone. Then I’ll decide what can be shared and whether I can make a statement.”

I kept my hand away from the notebook. Sepp folded the letter along its old creases and left it beside his cup.

Klara rose first. “Thank you for letting me stay.”

“You didn’t ask to read it.”

“I didn’t need to.”

Sepp walked us to the door. I took my coat and the closed notebook from the chair. The letter remained on the table, beside the cup, in the lamplight.

In the stairwell, the door closed softly behind us. I had arrived expecting a record we could examine. We left with a letter Sepp had opened, a question he had not answered, and the understanding that he would decide what could be checked before he spoke for his brother.

CHAPTER 6

The Sealed Room

The qualified map comparison—using named structures and Sepp's recollection to orient the different plans—gave us a place to inspect, not a corridor we could point to. On the morning the safety inspection was authorized, I stood beside the site gate with Sepp's survey copy folded in my coat and watched the site officer check the approximate reference against a surviving service structure beyond the temporary fencing.

The building was low and plain, its concrete walls darkened where rain had run down them. A contractor's access door stood open. Beyond it, the service room smelled of wet dust and old insulation. A fluorescent strip lit a workbench and a stack of tagged materials. Nothing about it suggested a passage running beneath the park. The comparison had brought us to this service structure; it did not identify a corridor beyond it.

The site safety officer checked the inspection notice once more, then turned to the man waiting beside the door. Brandt's representative held a folder against his chest, one thumb pressed into its edge.

"You have access to the service structure," he said. "Not to any other part of the site."

"That is the area named in the authorization," the officer replied. "We'll stay within it."

"And the partition is not part of your inspection."

"It is inside the structure." The officer tapped the plan. "The investigators have requested access to check a possible concealed space. The safety conditions have been approved."

The representative opened his folder. “The Trust disputes the description and the basis for disturbing the wall.”

“Your objection is recorded,” one of the investigators said. “The inspection is proceeding under the authorization.”

No one raised a voice. The representative looked from the officer to the investigators, then stepped clear of the doorway. His folder remained in his hands.

The service room was larger than it had looked from outside, but only by a few paces. Pipes ran along one wall. A newer utility cabinet stood in front of a section of masonry whose seams were straighter than the surrounding surface. The officer checked the work area for loose material.

Sepp stood beside me, his hands in the pockets of his coat. He had brought his own copy of the survey, but he did not take it out. Klara was there as the collection’s representative, quiet and watchful. Lea had come separately and was speaking with one of the investigators near the entrance.

A line on a sheet could hold its shape through decades of copying. I had learned that it could also be misplaced, misread, or made to carry more than its source allowed. The room behind this wall was still a question.

The officer set the safety limits. No one was to move equipment without being told; the investigator would photograph each stage; the work crew would remove only the section identified on the approved plan. Brandt’s representative objected again when the crew brought in a small tool case.

“You are changing the structure,” he said.

“We’re removing a non-load-bearing panel under the approved inspection,” the officer answered. “The engineer is present.”

The representative turned to the investigators. “If you find anything, the Trust expects the material to remain secured.”

“It will be handled according to the authorization,” one of them said.

I felt my shoulder tighten as I leaned to see past the utility cabinet. The old injury had never settled into a predictable complaint; it pulled sharply when I held one position too long. I straightened, then pressed my palm briefly against the coat pocket where the survey copy rested. The paper was a comfort of sorts, and the thought embarrassed me. It was not mine to use as a key.

The work crew removed the cabinet and set it aside. Behind it, the panel was fixed with newer screws than the surrounding fittings. The officer checked the engineer’s signal, then nodded to the crew. The panel came away in sections, each piece lifted and set down rather than dropped. Dust rose in a dry veil. My mouth watered with the faint, persistent wrongness of hunger. I swallowed and tasted plaster.

The opening revealed a narrow gap and, beyond it, a door set into the older wall. Its paint had dulled to the same grey as the concrete. One investigator photographed the threshold before anyone crossed it. The safety officer checked the floor with a light and a measuring rod, then allowed the door to be opened.

It turned inward with a short, reluctant scrape.

The room beyond was long enough for a narrow bed and little else. Its walls were close, the ceiling lower than the outer service room’s. A row of metal fittings ran along one side, with short lengths of insulated cable still clipped in place. On the opposite wall, two squared-off marks interrupted the plaster. At the far end, a second doorway had been filled with blocks and mortar. The infill was rougher than the original wall and darker at the edges.

The investigators entered first. Their lights moved over the fittings, the floor, the blocked doorway. The officer remained near the threshold, checking the air and the condition of the ceiling. I stayed outside until he said the room was safe to enter.

There was no hidden passage opening into an underground system. There was one concealed room, behind one partition, inside one service structure.

Sepp came in after me. He stood near the doorway, taking in the space without moving toward the far wall. I saw his gaze stop at the metal fittings. The sketch he had shown us marked their positions in blunt strokes, with measurements written in the margin. The investigators' tape showed the same intervals. The room's proportions and the blocked exit matched the drawing closely enough that no one had to bend the paper into a new shape to make it fit.

Klara looked at Sepp. "That is the arrangement on the copy."

He nodded once.

I looked from the fixing points to the sketch in my mind. The drawing could tell us where those things had been placed. It could not tell us who had lain here, or what any one person had called the room.

The investigators photographed the fittings and recorded their distances from the wall and floor. One of them used a mirror to inspect the mortar at the blocked doorway without disturbing it. Another wrote down the dimensions while the officer checked the measurements against the service structure's interior plan.

Brandt's representative had stopped at the outer door. From where I stood, I could see the side of his face and the open folder tucked beneath his arm. He did not come into the concealed room.

"Can this be opened?" he asked.

"Not during this inspection," the officer said. "We are documenting the structure as found."

The representative's jaw moved as if he were about to continue. Instead, he closed his folder. One of the investigators noted the objection and moved on to the next measurement.

Lea had left the doorway. When I came back into the outer room, she was waiting near the workbench with her phone in her hand.

“I’ve reached the person I told you about,” she said quietly. “They’re willing to come, but only if they can see the place without an audience.”

“Who needs to be there?” I asked.

“Me. You, if they still want you there. No representative. No recording.”

I glanced toward the concealed room. The investigators were still working, but the representative had moved outside with the officer. “You can ask them what they want when they arrive.”

Lea watched me for a moment, then nodded. “I will.”

The inspection team finished its first pass before noon. The inner door was left open, the temporary barrier placed across the outer entrance. The officer told us the barrier would remain until the next authorized step. The room was visible from the outer service space, but not from the site office across the compound; the wall and the angle of the access passage blocked the view.

We left the site while the investigators organized the photographs and measurements. I had brought a sandwich, eaten half of it, and discovered again that food could be pleasant without answering the specific hollow pull beneath my ribs. I wrapped the rest and put it away. The shoulder had begun to ache in earnest, and the cold air outside made the stiffness harder to ignore.

Lea arranged the next visit for later that afternoon. The former resident asked to meet at the service structure, not at the temporary site office. That was where we returned, after the investigators had finished their initial documentation and the safety officer had confirmed that the room could be entered again under the same conditions.

The representative was not there. Lea made sure of that before she brought the visitor through the gate. The site officer stayed at the outer entrance, close enough to enforce the safety rules but out of hearing. Lea asked the visitor whether they were comfortable with me staying. They considered me, then said yes. I stood beside the outer door, behind them and to their left, where I could see the room they were facing without crowding them.

No reconstruction had been shown to them. Lea had described the visit only as an opportunity to see a room found during an inspection. She had not sent the survey, the photographs, or the measured plan. The visitor had not been told what the investigators thought the fittings meant.

They stepped across the threshold. Their eyes moved to the far wall, then to the filled doorway. They stopped.

“That was the way out,” they said.

Lea did not answer for them. She waited.

The visitor moved closer, slowly, and looked at the metal fittings. “Those were for the monitor. They checked whether I was awake yet.”

The line came without a question leading it. I felt my hand tighten against my coat seam. The investigator’s photographs were behind us, in another part of the site. The blocked opening and the fittings were before the visitor, visible from where they stood.

“Do you recognize the room?” Lea asked.

“Yes.” The visitor kept their gaze on the filled doorway. “I remember being here.”

They did not give a name. Lea did not ask for one. The visitor described the way the room narrowed toward the end and how the blocked exit had once been clear. They used no date. When Lea asked if they would speak with investigators later, they said they would decide after they had time to think.

At the threshold, the visitor paused and looked back once. “Don’t put anybody else’s name beside mine.”

Lea said, “I won’t.”

The visitor left with her, and the site officer walked them to the gate. I stayed by the open inner door. The room seemed smaller after they had gone. I could hear a drill start somewhere beyond the structure, then stop as abruptly as it had begun.

Klara arrived later with copies from an independently held maintenance archive. She set the paper sleeves on the workbench but kept one hand on them while she spoke.

“These were retained outside the Trust collection,” she said. “The archive’s catalogue identifies the service structure by the same site designation on the inspection sheet.”

She opened the sleeves and turned one copy so I could read it. An entry dated 1976 listed repairs to the inner room: replacement of wall signal fittings and renewal of their fixing rail. The inspection record had described the metal fittings and their measured positions. Here, the location and repair description corresponded to what we had just seen.

Klara slid the copy back into its sleeve and gathered the others.

Sepp had remained near the service-room entrance. He was holding his own survey copy now, folded open to the sketch. He did not offer it to Klara or to me. He walked into the concealed room and stopped where the wall fittings came into view.

For a few seconds, he held the paper beside the wall without touching either. The drawn marks and the metal positions sat across from one another: a line on paper, a place that had held its shape without our knowing it.

“Matthias drew this,” Sepp said.

He sounded neither triumphant nor relieved. The copy trembled once between his fingers. Then he folded it along its old crease.

I wanted to say that the room was real now, that the survey had led us here. Both sentences seemed too large for the space between us. I said nothing.

Sepp put the drawing back inside his coat. “I thought I’d spent years keeping a piece of paper safe.” He looked at the blocked exit. “I didn’t know what it was asking me to see.”

A dull pang tightened under my ribs. I shifted my weight, and my shoulder answered with a sharper one. Sepp noticed the movement.

“We should go,” he said.

He did not ask me to prove I could stay. I followed him out through the outer door. Behind us, the investigator set the temporary barrier back into place. The inner door remained open behind it, no longer hidden, but no one could enter without the next authorization.

At the gate, Sepp kept one hand against the pocket that held his drawing. I could not tell whether he was protecting the paper or steadying himself. I let the question remain his.

CHAPTER 7

The Letter

The ward had a door now, and a room behind it, and fittings fixed at measured intervals in the wall. None of that settled who had controlled it, or what happened when someone wanted to leave.

Sepp had asked me to meet him at the same café where we had agreed to begin. He sat with his coat still on, an envelope tucked inside it. The cup in front of him had gone untouched. Outside the window, the winter afternoon pressed its grey light against the glass.

“You said you wanted to know what survived,” he said.

“I do.” I kept my hands on the table. My shoulder was stiff from the trip back to the site, and my palm still pulled when I flexed it. “Only what you want to show me.”

He studied me for a moment, then took out the envelope. Inside was a folded sheet, yellowed at the edges and worn soft along its creases. He opened it carefully, flattening it with two fingers.

“There are two parts,” he said. “One about the ward. One about our family.”

His palm covered the lower section. I could see the change in the handwriting where the practical account ended and the other began, but not a word of the personal passage.

Sepp read from the upper part. His voice was even, but he paused once to find the line again.

“‘A resident asked to leave. Heller said the request would not be accepted. The door was kept shut.’” He looked down. “‘I was told to sign that the arrangement was voluntary. I refused. Heller said I would regret making trouble for him.’”

He stopped there. His hand remained over the private passage.

The room we had entered the day before came back to me: the blocked doorway, the metal fittings, the smallness of the space. I tried to place those details beside the sentence about the door being kept shut. They fitted too neatly. That did not make them the same evidence.

“Did Matthias write when this happened?” I asked.

“Not in that paragraph. There’s a mark on the survey copy, and a date beside it. He didn’t explain it in the letter.” Sepp folded the page along its old crease, then opened it again. “I thought it meant a change in the work crew. I wasn’t sure.”

“Would you like the investigators to see this section?”

His thumb moved along the paper’s edge. “The practical part, yes. Not the rest.”

I took out my notebook, then stopped before opening it. The question I wanted to ask was already lined up behind my teeth: exact wording, date, who had been there, what Matthias meant by voluntary. I watched Sepp’s palm covering the lower lines and put the notebook away.

“Let’s take it to them,” I said.

He folded the letter and returned it to the envelope. His coat closed over it.

At the site office, the investigator had cleared a corner of the table beside the inspection photographs. A strip of fluorescent light shone on the plastic sleeves. Sepp placed the envelope in front of him but kept his hand on it.

The investigator explained that she could photograph the practical section for the case file. Sepp opened the letter to the same crease and held the private passage beneath his palm. She asked before moving the paper; he nodded. She made the image with the family lines still covered, checked the screen, then showed him what had been captured.

He looked at it and nodded once. The original went back into its envelope and then under his coat.

The investigator read the photographed lines without speaking. “We’ll treat this as Matthias’s account of what he experienced,” she said. “We’ll look for something independent that puts the date and the dispute in place.”

Sepp’s fingers closed over the envelope through the cloth. “That’s what I came for.”

The investigator asked about the date on the survey copy. Sepp showed her the mark, keeping the paper in his own hands. She compared it with the notes from the inspection and wrote down the date to check.

Outside the office window, a worker pushed a trolley past the service structure. The wheels rattled over a seam in the concrete, then went quiet. I was hungry enough to notice the smell of coffee in the room, though coffee was no answer to the hollow pull beneath my ribs. I swallowed and tasted the dryness of my mouth.

The retired colleague arrived before the investigator had finished her notes. Sepp had reached him that morning, and the man had gone home to retrieve a pocket calendar he kept from his survey years. He set it on the table with both hands, as if its small size made it easier to lose.

“I didn’t think anyone would care about this,” he said. “It was just where I wrote the changes.”

The cover had cracked at one corner. He opened it to a page crowded with appointments and short entries in dark ink. His fingertip moved down the dates, stopping at the one the investigator had written on her pad.

“Here.” He turned the calendar so she could read it. “Crew redirected. That was the day.”

The entry was brief, in the same cramped hand as the surrounding notes. The investigator asked if she could photograph the page. He agreed, then watched her do it.

I leaned close enough to see the words, not close enough to touch the calendar. The date on the page matched the one beside Matthias's notation. Two separate pieces of paper, two different hands.

"What did the redirection mean?" the investigator asked.

"Not the reason." The retired colleague shut the calendar halfway, then opened it again, as though checking that the answer had not changed. "They sent us somewhere else. I don't remember who decided it. I remember being annoyed. We'd already unloaded."

"Do you remember Matthias there?"

"I remember him arguing about it. I can't give you the words." He looked at Sepp. "I should have written more."

Sepp did not answer for him. He watched the man's thumb rest on the calendar's worn edge.

The investigator made a note and asked the colleague to keep the calendar available for a formal statement. He tucked it back into its cover rather than leaving it on the table. The small movement seemed to cost him more than his admission. He had brought an old workday into the room and found it still had consequences.

Lea came to the site later that afternoon. She had arranged for the former resident to return, but she checked with them at the gate before bringing them inside. The visitor looked toward the service structure, then toward the investigators waiting by its entrance.

"I'll talk," they said. "I don't want a recording."

The investigator put her device away and took out a paper notebook. Lea asked whether I could stay. The visitor glanced at me, then nodded.

We stood in the outer service room, with the concealed room's open doorway ahead of us. The temporary barrier had been moved for the authorized visit. The far wall and the blocked exit were visible beyond the threshold; the workbench partly obstructed the view from where I stood. I kept to the side, leaving the entrance clear.

The visitor did not cross into the smaller room. Their eyes fixed on the metal fittings along the wall.

"I knew Heller," they said. "He was the overseer. Matthias was there that day."

Lea stayed silent. The investigator waited, pen ready but not moving.

"There was an argument about the crew being sent away," the visitor continued. "Matthias wouldn't sign whatever Heller wanted him to sign." They drew a breath. "Heller struck him with a metal tool. I saw it."

The statement landed in the bare room with no echo, only the faint click of the investigator's pen as she began to write. My shoulder tightened. I let my hand fall from the coat pocket where I had been pressing it.

"Do you remember what happened afterward?" the investigator asked.

"I remember a maintenance record being ordered. I was told it would be written up." The visitor's gaze remained on the blocked doorway. "I didn't see the record itself."

The investigator wrote that down. "Would you be willing to help us find it?"

"Ask me again when you know where to look." The visitor turned from the wall. "I'm not giving you my name for a paper that might never exist."

“All right,” the investigator said. She closed the notebook. “We’ll try to locate the record first.”

Lea walked with the visitor toward the gate. They did not offer a name, and no one asked again. I stayed where I was until the two of them were outside. The site officer followed at a distance, leaving the inner doorway unobstructed.

At the table, the investigator set the calendar photograph beside the image of Matthias’s practical passage. I remembered the date beside the mark on Matthias’s survey copy; it matched the calendar entry. The former resident’s account gave the dispute a witness and the investigators a maintenance record to seek.

Sepp stood by the open service-room door, his coat drawn close over the envelope. He looked back once toward the smaller room, then went out through the gate. The latch clicked behind him.

The investigator picked up the phone and asked the site office to identify which maintenance records had been retained for that structure. I followed Sepp into the cold, keeping my sore shoulder tucked against my side. For once, I did not try to make the next answer arrive before anyone had found the paper.

CHAPTER 8

Eva’s Admission

The investigator’s call came the next morning, while I was trying to make toast without leaning on my left arm.

“They’ve found the maintenance file,” she said. “Could you and Sepp come to the site office? Eva too, if she’s willing.”

“What did they find?”

“A record we need to examine in context.”

She gave me no more over the phone. I left the toast on the plate and sent Sepp a message asking whether he wanted me to meet him first. He replied with the site address and a time, nothing else.

By the time we reached the office, the winter afternoon had thinned to a pale strip beyond the high windows. The investigator had set three chairs around the end of a worktable. A fourth stood against the wall, its back partly hidden by a stack of site plans. Sepp chose the chair nearest the door and kept his coat on. I sat beside him, leaving the other two chairs between us and the investigator’s papers.

She had a clear sleeve open on the table. Inside lay a narrow, folded sheet with a municipal maintenance stamp near the top. The paper looked soft at the creases, handled and flattened more than once.

“The archive retained this with the building’s maintenance records,” she said. “We located it after asking for material relating to the service structure. I haven’t removed it from the sleeve.”

She angled the page toward us. I could read the heading and the neat block of type. Near the bottom, beneath a short instruction, sat a signature.

The investigator pointed without touching the plastic. “It directs the crew to seal the room and leave Matthias’s incident out of the outward report. The signature is Brandt’s.”

I leaned forward. My shoulder protested. I kept my hands on my knees.

The words were plain. Seal the room. Omit the incident. The signature did not tell me who had struck Matthias or what had happened afterward. It did tell me Brandt had given an instruction about the room and the report.

Sepp stared at the name. His expression did not change, but his thumb pressed hard against the seam of his coat.

The door opened. Eva entered carrying a flat document case under one arm. She took in the sleeve on the table, then Sepp’s closed hand.

“You found it,” she said.

“We did,” the investigator replied. “You said you had records of the ward arrangement.”

Eva set her case on the table but didn’t open it yet. “I have the appointment terms and my correspondence with Brandt. They belong with the confinement evidence.”

The investigator indicated the chair opposite her. “You can decide which pages you’re prepared to provide. I’ll record what you give me and where it came from.”

“I understand.” Eva glanced at Sepp. “I should have brought them before.”

He did not answer. The silence held, and Eva sat down.

She opened the case. Inside were several papers in sleeves, arranged by date. She removed a short stapled packet and placed it in front of the investigator. “These are copies. I kept the originals.”

The investigator asked before taking out the first page. Eva nodded. The terms described the ward as emergency shelter, named Heller as overseer, and listed the signatories with authority to suspend Brandt's local mandate.

The investigator turned to the correspondence. "You authorized the shelter?"

"Yes. At first, it was meant to give people somewhere to go when they were in collapse and had nowhere safe to recover." Eva rested both palms on the table. "Then I learned that requests to leave were being refused. I knew the restrictions had gone beyond the terms I approved."

"And Brandt remained in operational control."

"I allowed him to keep it." Eva's voice stayed even. "I told myself the shelter would fail if I pulled his authority at once. I wanted time to arrange another way to keep it open."

"Did you suspend his mandate?"

"No." She met the investigator's eyes. "I had the authority to start that process. I did not use it."

Sepp's thumb moved once along his coat seam, then stopped. He still hadn't looked at Eva.

The investigator found a date in the correspondence and asked Eva to confirm it. Eva did. My stomach tightened with the familiar hollow pull. The office smelled of paper, dust, and someone's coffee cooling on a ledge. I swallowed. Coffee was no answer.

"Why bring them now?" the investigator asked.

"Because I can't ask anyone to trust a replacement arrangement while keeping my part of the old one out of view." Eva's gaze shifted to the sleeve containing Brandt's instruction. "And because I've received something else."

She took a second envelope from the case and laid it beside Sepp. It had been opened and resealed. Sepp didn't touch it.

"Brandt sent it to me," Eva said. "I should have told you as soon as it arrived."

Sepp looked at her then. "Yes."

The word was quiet, without softness in it. Eva drew her hands back from the envelope.

"It's a proposal for a commercial transfer," she said. "The annex names the survey originals, the custody document, and the living route contacts."

The investigator paused over her notes. "Did you agree to it?"

"No." Eva looked down at the envelope. "But I kept it. I thought I might need to know what he was willing to ask for."

Sepp picked it up. He turned the envelope over, checked the flap, then opened it himself. The proposal was short. The annex was not. His eyes moved down the listed categories, then returned to the top of the page.

The category meant contact information for living people—people who slept in the shelter, volunteered, or gave rides. Passing it to a commercial liaison could let someone approach them outside the contact arrangements they had chosen.

"Living contacts," he said.

Eva nodded once. "Yes."

He drew the pages together and held them in one hand. The investigator did not reach for them.

"May I make a copy for the file?" she asked.

Sepp looked at the annex, then at the investigator. "A copy of this. I keep the original."

“That’s fine.” She set a document camera beside him and waited until he positioned the pages. He adjusted them himself, one sheet at a time. When he was finished, he returned the original proposal to its envelope and put it inside his coat.

The investigator turned the appointment terms toward Eva. “I need your account of what you authorized and when you understood the limits were being ignored. We can take that separately if you prefer.”

“I’ll give it here.” Eva touched the edge of the page, not the investigator’s pen. “I don’t want to make the record cleaner than it was.”

She began with the emergency shelter, then the continuation of Brandt’s operational authority. She spoke without dramatizing either. When she reached the point at which requests to leave had been refused, she stopped to check the date in her correspondence. The investigator waited while Eva found it herself.

I watched Eva’s finger trace the line. A tremor showed briefly at the nail, then vanished as she turned the page.

“I thought keeping the beds open justified keeping the arrangement intact,” she said. “It didn’t. I made the choice to leave him in place after I knew what that meant.”

Sepp shifted his chair back a few centimetres. The legs rasped over the floor. Eva’s eyes moved toward the sound, but she did not turn to him.

The investigator wrote for a while. When she asked Eva to identify the signatories listed in the terms, Eva pointed to their names. The investigator copied them into her notes, checking each spelling with her.

A gust pushed at the high window. The frame clicked. Hunger pulled again, sharp enough to make the paper edges seem too bright.

I lowered my gaze to the table and pressed my sore palm against my thigh until the moment passed.

Eva closed the document case, then opened it again. From beneath the correspondence she took a single sheet, folded across the middle. Unlike the copies she had given the investigator, this one bore no sleeve or label.

“This is the bank authority,” she said. “The account that pays for the ward’s ordinary costs and transport.”

The investigator looked up. “What do you want to do with it?”

“Give up my unilateral authority as part of a replacement arrangement.” Eva unfolded the paper. The signature field at the bottom was blank. “Not put it in someone else’s hands and call that reform. The people who depend on the shelter have to be able to see who can move the money.”

The investigator studied the form. “This document alone won’t change the account.”

“I know. The new arrangement has to be agreed and the authority changed properly.” Eva set the sheet flat before her. “I want to help build it, if the people who depend on it will have me. I’m not asking you to treat an intention as a completed transfer.”

Sepp had remained still while she spoke. Now he stood, the proposal secured inside his coat. He gave the investigator a brief nod, then looked at Eva.

“If you’re invited,” he said.

Eva’s mouth opened, but she let the words go. After a moment she nodded.

He left without asking either of us to follow. Through the narrow office doorway I saw him pass the bright strip of corridor and disappear around the corner.

Eva kept her eyes on the open doorway for a beat, then lowered them to the bank document. She did not sign it. She folded it once and held it in her own hand.

I wanted to follow Sepp, to ask what he meant by the condition in his voice. I stayed where I was. The investigator waited. Eva's fingers tightened around the folded bank paper.

CHAPTER 9

The Offer

The investigator was still waiting when Eva folded the bank authority and put it away.

No one asked her to sign it. Sepp had gone, and the empty chair he'd left behind seemed to have made the room smaller. I wanted to follow him. I also wanted to ask the investigator what she thought Brandt's proposal meant, and whether the new evidence changed anything we could do about it. Both questions would have been ways of making her choose for us.

Instead I said, "When do we meet again?"

The investigator closed her notebook. "I'll contact you when I've reviewed the material. Separately, please. I don't want anyone's account shaped by hearing someone else's first."

Eva nodded. She kept the folded authority in her hand.

Outside, the afternoon had gone cold and dark early. I found Sepp by the gate, buttoning his coat. He watched me approach but didn't ask why I'd stayed behind.

"Brandt knows what we have," I said.

"He knows what he sent me." Sepp tugged at one cuff. "That is not the same thing."

"No." I stopped an arm's length away. My shoulder gave a low, persistent ache beneath my coat. "Do you want me to come with you?"

Sepp glanced back at the office. "Not now."

I said I understood. It was the kind of answer that left no useful task to hide inside. I let him walk away alone.

The next afternoon, Eva asked us to meet at the shelter. She sent the message to the people who had a reason to be there and made clear that no one had to come. By the time I arrived, the kitchen table had been cleared of cups and covered with a clean cloth. The room beyond it held six narrow beds, each made up in a different way. A blanket had been folded at the foot of one; another had a book tucked under its pillow.

Sepp stood near the door, the custody document and survey originals in a flat case at his feet. Lea sat at the table with her hands wrapped around a mug. Klara had brought a notebook and kept it closed. Eva was by the window, away from the table, looking into the dim courtyard.

Brandt arrived last. He took off his gloves slowly, placing them together on the sill. His face was composed, almost tired. He looked around the room as though checking that the beds were still where he had left them.

“I appreciate everyone coming,” he said. “I know the timing is not ideal.”

“Then get to the point,” Sepp said.

Brandt’s mouth tightened, but he didn’t answer the tone. He set a document folder on the table, careful not to touch Lea’s mug. “The current lease and vehicle arrangement can be renewed. Six beds, and continued maintenance of the volunteer pickup vehicle. I have the funding to make that possible.”

He opened the folder and took out a few pages. The first was a funding agreement, unsigned. A venture’s name appeared at the top. I recognized it from the proposal in the envelope Sepp had shown the investigator. The pages beneath it included an annex.

Brandt pushed the papers toward Sepp, stopping before they reached the edge of the table. “The agreement isn’t executed. I’m not

suggesting otherwise. But the funding is available if we settle the transfer terms.”

“Which are?” Sepp asked.

“The custody document and the survey originals would pass to me for safekeeping and review. The residents would agree to a transfer of their contact information to the venture’s designated liaison.”

Lea put her mug down. Its base clicked against the table.

“Contact information for what purpose?” she asked.

“Continuity of support,” Brandt said. “The people funding it need to know who may be affected and how to maintain the arrangements.”

“Who may be affected,” Lea repeated. “You mean people who sleep here. People who volunteer. People who give rides.”

“I mean the relevant contacts.”

“That isn’t a smaller category.”

Brandt folded his hands. “It is a practical one. The venture is not interested in gossip. They want to ensure that the support continues.”

Sepp rested one hand on the flat case. “You’re asking for the originals and the names of the living people connected to them.”

“I’m asking for a controlled transfer, with safeguards.” Brandt nodded toward the unsigned agreement. “In return, these beds and the vehicle remain available.”

A woman who had been standing near the kitchen doorway stepped into the light. I had seen her there when I came in, but she had kept out of the conversation. She was small, with a blue scarf wound twice around her neck, and she kept one hand on the doorframe.

“When the lease runs out,” she asked, “where am I supposed to sleep?”

No one answered at once. The radiator clicked behind her. The woman looked from Brandt to Eva, not asking for a speech, just an answer she could use.

Brandt turned toward her. “The renewal would prevent that immediate problem.”

“Only if we agree to this?”

“The funding has conditions.”

“So where do I sleep if we don’t?”

Brandt glanced at the papers. “I can’t promise an arrangement that isn’t funded.”

The woman’s hand tightened on the doorframe. She didn’t look at the annex. She looked at the bed nearest her, where a pair of socks had been laid neatly on the folded blanket.

Eva stepped away from the window. “The beds are not a line item to use against people.”

“They are also not kept open by good intentions,” Brandt said. His voice stayed level. “The vehicle needs maintenance. The lease has an end date. You know that better than anyone.”

“I know,” Eva said. “I also know what you’re asking them to trade for it.”

Brandt’s gaze moved to the folded bank authority protruding from the open side of her case. “You have not yet put forward a replacement arrangement.”

“No,” Eva said. “We haven’t.”

She didn’t soften the admission, and Brandt couldn’t turn it into agreement.

Sepp lifted the funding pages by their corners and read the first sheet. He didn’t pass it around. “You will not take the custody document or the survey originals.”

“Then I can’t commit the funding.”

“You can ask for copies of what people choose to provide.”

“The venture requires a usable record, not fragments distributed among people who may change their minds.”

“That sounds like their decision to make.”

Brandt’s eyes settled on him. “Without a coordinated record, there may be no support to preserve.”

Sepp closed the folder and slid it back across the table. “Then the offer is clear.”

Brandt left his hand on the folder. “It is an offer, Sepp. Nothing transfers unless someone agrees.”

“I agree to nothing.”

For a moment Brandt looked at the flat case by Sepp’s feet. Then he withdrew his hand. The pages remained on the table, unsigned and unaccepted.

My stomach had begun to pull inward. The room smelled of coffee, damp wool, and the paper in the folder. The smell of food from some nearby apartment came through the courtyard window, warm and useless. I shifted my sore shoulder, trying not to make the movement visible.

“If the concern is keeping the evidence secure,” I said, “we could assemble it in one place and hold the living-name key separately. I could keep the key until we’ve finished the chronology. No one outside this room would have it.”

Sepp looked at me. Klara’s closed notebook lay between us, her hand resting over its cover.

“Who decides when you’ve finished?” Lea asked.

“I do the chronology. We can review it together.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

I looked at the flat case. I had meant it as a barrier between the residents and the venture. I could already see how easily it became another barrier between them and their own names.

Klara opened her notebook. “Benjamin can assemble the chronology from the material we’ve agreed he may use.”

I turned to her. “Without the key?”

“Without the key.” She spoke without accusation. “You can organize dates, records, and the points where they don’t agree. You don’t need the contact list to do that.”

I heard myself readying an answer about matching sources, cross-checking, avoiding mistakes. It would have sounded sensible. It would also have kept the key in my hand.

Lea had already turned toward the woman in the blue scarf. “We can arrange separate statements. Not in this room, and not with everyone listening. You choose who carries them to the investigator. If you want to make one, we’ll find a private time. If you don’t, no one will ask you to explain why.”

The woman glanced at Sepp. He didn’t prompt her. After a pause, she nodded once.

“Would you be willing to help us arrange that?” Klara asked Lea.

“I’ll ask the residents’ representative what they want. I’m not gathering names myself.” Lea picked up her mug again. “They can decide what leaves this place.”

The woman’s shoulders lowered, not much. She moved away from the doorway and sat on the end of the nearest bed.

Brandt had been watching us. “The venture cannot preserve support if it cannot communicate with the people receiving it.”

“Then it can ask them,” Lea said. “One at a time, through someone they chose.”

“That makes planning difficult.”

“Difficult is not the same as impossible.”

Brandt shut his empty folder. “I can’t hold the funding indefinitely.”

“Then don’t,” Sepp said.

Brandt put on his gloves. He paused by Eva on his way to the door. “The offer stands for now. If the lease is allowed to expire, the consequences won’t be mine alone.”

Eva met his eyes. “I know whose consequences they are.”

He left without taking the unsigned agreement. The door closed behind him, and for several seconds nobody moved. Then Sepp picked up the folder and placed it on the table, separate from his case.

I wanted to tell him that my plan had been an attempt to protect them. I wanted him to say he knew. Neither thing would make the key less mine.

Klara turned her notebook toward me. “Chronology,” she said. “Use the records we have permission to use. Mark what is dated, what is reported, and what remains uncertain. Don’t try to make the gaps look tidy.”

“All right.”

She wrote the word on the first page, then pushed the notebook across. It was not a key, or an invitation to reach for one. It was work I could do without collecting anyone’s name.

I sat. My shoulder complained as I leaned over the table. The pages held dates, document references, and gaps. I began with the earliest record we had already examined, leaving a space where the sequence stopped. Klara watched for a moment, then turned to Lea to discuss how she would contact the residents’ representative.

When I had written the first few entries, the woman in the blue scarf stood and came back to the table.

“I’m Miriam,” she said quietly, looking from Lea to me. “I’ll speak to Lea. Not today.”

Lea nodded. “Not today.”

The woman returned to the bed and picked up the socks she had left there. She held them in both hands, considering them as if the lease might already have an end date printed on the label.

I closed the notebook. “I’ll look for replacement beds.”

Eva took out her phone. “How many?”

“Six.” I glanced toward the beds, then at the unsigned agreement Brandt had left. “And a vehicle arrangement, if I can find one.”

“No one asked you to solve it tonight,” Sepp said.

“I know.” I stood carefully, easing my shoulder. “I can start tonight.”

He didn’t thank me, but he didn’t tell me to stop. I picked up my coat and went to the small table by the kitchen, where the shelter kept its public notices and a working phone charger. My first calls would be inquiries, not promises. Six beds was a number; the people who needed them would have to decide whether any offer was safe enough to take.

Behind me, Lea began arranging a time to speak with the residents’ representative. Klara reopened the chronology. The names stayed with the people whose names they were. I started searching for somewhere they might sleep.

CHAPTER 10

Different Accounts

Two days after Brandt left his unsigned offer on the shelter table, the residents met with Lea and the representative they had chosen to speak for them. They had picked a room with a table large enough for papers and enough space that no one had to sit with their back to the others. I took a chair near the wall. Klara sat beside me with her notebook closed. Sepp kept his flat case at his feet, one hand resting on its edge.

Lea had brought no forms to sign. She set a mug in front of each person who wanted one, then waited until the representative had asked the first resident if they were ready to speak.

“I saw Heller strike the survey worker,” the resident said. Their hands stayed around the mug. “He fell. I didn’t see him get up again.”

No one moved to fill the quiet that followed. I kept my pen on the table. The resident had agreed to tell us what they remembered; nothing in that gave me leave to hurry them toward the next part.

The representative asked whether the account could be written down for the investigator. The resident considered this, then said, “That part. Not anything about where I was sleeping.”

Lea wrote only the limits, in the margin of her own pad. “We’ll keep those separate.”

A second resident spoke without waiting to be asked. They described the ward’s exits being blocked and the rules for leaving: permission had to be sought, and a person who tried to go alone could be stopped. They did not look at Brandt’s empty chair, or at Sepp. Their account was their own, and they gave it directly to the representative.

The third person had brought a small folded copy of a maintenance entry. They kept it in their hand while they spoke.

“I held on to this. It records cleanup after the survey worker was injured.” They unfolded the paper, then looked at Lea. “You can read it here. I’m not handing over the original.”

Lea read it without reaching for the sheet. The resident turned it toward the representative, who checked the lines and handed it back. The copy went into the resident’s pocket again.

Klara opened her notebook only after the three accounts had been heard. She asked each contributor what could be included in a shared account and what should remain with them. No one answered for anyone else. The representative kept track of those choices; Lea noted which pieces each person had approved.

We moved to the papers Klara had prepared. She laid out four separate schedules rather than binding them into one file. The first concerned identity. The family records and work roster set out two brothers with separate lives; the routine nuclear comparison was indistinguishable and supported the twin hypothesis. Dental comparison and marked belongings added a different kind of support for identifying the remains as Matthias. Klara left those pieces in their own columns.

My shoulder tightened when I leaned across the table to see the dental note. I started to pull the page toward me, then stopped as the pain caught. “Would you pass that over?” I asked.

The resident who had brought the maintenance entry looked at the page, then slid the copy within my reach. I read it where it lay instead of taking the whole stack. The numbers held still on the page; it was my shoulder that had made the distance matter.

The second schedule covered the historic death. It put the assault account beside the skull findings and the retained maintenance entry. The three came from different sources and converged on the

survey worker's fatal injury. Klara did not turn that convergence into a claim about details none of us had witnessed.

For the third schedule, she set the work record and Matthias's letter beside the physical room we had seen. The record placed him at the site; the letter carried his fear of the ward's custody practices; the room's layout matched the use described in the testimony. Those separate traces met at the same place.

The last schedule was for the current transfer pressure. Klara listed the unsigned funding offer, its demand for the originals, and the annex seeking living contacts. She recorded what Brandt had proposed, not what the venture might do beyond the terms on the page.

"I can check the order of the records," I said. "Not the residents' names."

The representative looked to the contributors before answering. One nodded. Another said, "Dates and sources. Keep the rest out."

Klara turned her notebook toward me. "That's the work."

I began with the dates already on the schedules, checking one against the next. When the hunger sharpened, the room's smells crowded in—the tea, damp coats, paper, a trace of food from somewhere outside. I lost my place in the transfer schedule. I could have asked the resident to repeat the line. Instead I looked to Klara, who tapped the dated entry without comment, and I resumed from there.

When the schedules were set aside, Eva brought out the arrangements she had been working on with the residents. She had temporary beds confirmed at two addresses in the network, enough for the people who needed to move when Brandt's money stopped. The representative asked who would share each place and whether anyone wanted a different arrangement. A resident accepted a place

with two others; Miriam declined the first address and chose the second. Eva changed the list without asking for a reason.

“For the morning,” Eva said, “there’s a vehicle and a driver. After that, we’ll review what’s still needed.”

One resident did not want to travel with the whole group in a single trip. The representative asked Eva to arrange two runs instead. Eva checked the timing, then agreed. No one was asked to take a ride they had not chosen.

She laid out the papers to replace her sole authority over the shelter account. The residents chose two signatories from among themselves. Eva would be a third, not the only one. The representative read the names back to the group, and each chosen person agreed to the role. Sepp watched from beside his case, saying nothing until Eva asked whether the new arrangement would leave him responsible for decisions he had not made.

“No,” the representative said. “You keep your own papers. This is for the beds and the vehicle.”

Sepp nodded. His hand stayed on the flat case.

The shelter plan took longer than the schedules. One host could take people that evening; the other needed the morning to prepare. Eva wrote down the times, and the residents adjusted who would go first. The vehicle’s first run would carry bedding and the people who had chosen that address. The second would take the remaining bags and those who preferred the other place. By the time they finished, no bed depended on Brandt renewing the offer, and no single person held the practical arrangements alone.

Klara returned to the chronology only once, to mark the point the documents could not settle. The maintenance entry placed cleanup after the survey worker was injured, but it did not establish where that cleanup fell in relation to the assault. She left the sequence open there.

Then she placed the municipal record beside the page. Heller was documented as dead. No one promised the residents a prosecution of a man who could not answer for what he had done.

The first resident looked down at their mug. “Then nobody can ask him why.” Their voice had lost none of its steadiness, but disappointment had entered it. Lea did not try to replace it with comfort.

Klara made no further change to the chronology. The representative asked each contributor to review only the account they had approved. One read their passage in silence and gave it back. Another asked Lea to read theirs aloud. The third checked the maintenance entry copy again, then agreed to let its description accompany the statement without surrendering the original.

The representative gathered the approved accounts and Klara’s schedules into a folder. The contributors kept their own copies and the original papers they had brought. Sepp’s survey case remained at his feet. Lea checked that the shared account contained no detail anyone had withheld. Klara checked the source references. Neither of them changed a contributor’s words.

They agreed that the representative would carry the folder to the investigator in the morning. The account was theirs to approve, and the records stayed with the people who had brought them. At the doorway, the representative lifted the folder once. Lea nodded.

CHAPTER 11

The Last Transfer

By eight, the survey case had been moved from the excavation office to a locked room at the site, and the items relevant to the death and the ward were under the investigator's seal. Brandt's representative arrived in a grey van with a document case and the expectation that the rest of the material would follow.

He stood just inside the site office, facing the folding table where the case had been kept. The door behind him opened onto the van; through the narrow window beside it, I could see the driver waiting with both hands on the wheel. Herr Bauer had taken over Seidel's field assignment to preserve the relevant material and receive the approved accounts; he stood between the representative and the storage-room door.

"I'm here for the survey materials listed in the annex," the representative said. "The contractor has been told to release them as site paperwork."

The contractor's supervisor glanced from him to Bauer. "I can release ordinary paperwork. Not items in an evidence hold."

The representative tapped his document case. "This is an authorized transfer."

"Not by me," the supervisor said. "The relevant items have already been preserved."

Bauer's expression did not change. "You can leave the request with me."

For a moment the representative looked past him, toward the locked door. He could not see what was inside. Neither could I. The door gave no hint of what it held; the narrow window showed only a slice of the corridor, and Bauer standing in the way.

The representative set his case on the table but kept one hand on its handle. “The Trust approved the agreement.”

“Then the Trust can provide the proper authority,” Bauer said. “This contractor cannot release evidence as ordinary site paperwork.”

He slid a certified copy across the table. It set out the custody terms and the signatories authorized to revoke the relevant powers. Sepp’s original remained with the representative he had chosen; the copy let Bauer verify the terms without taking it from its holder.

The commercial annex lay beneath it. The transfer covered historical papers, survey records, and living contacts. The representative read the page, though he had brought it himself.

“I’ll report that collection was refused,” he said.

“You may report what happened,” Bauer replied.

The man signed an attendance-and-refusal line, closed his case, and went back to the van. A minute later it pulled away, its rear windows reflecting the bare trees along the access road.

Bauer handed me a card. “My assignment is to preserve the material relevant to the inquiry and receive the approved accounts. Tell me which records you handled and when. Nothing more than you know.”

I felt the familiar urge to offer him a chronology already polished into a single account, to bridge every gap before someone else could mistake it for an answer. My shoulder tightened as I reached for the chair. I sat instead and gave him the dates I had checked, the pages I had seen, and the point where the sequence stopped.

He wrote without prompting me to fill the space. When he was done, he capped his pen. “That’s enough for today. The folder is ready when the representative brings it in.”

Across the room, the residents’ chosen representative lifted the folder of approved statements. Lea checked the fastening; Klara

checked the source schedule. No names had been added beyond what the contributors had agreed to share.

That afternoon, the authorized signatories met at the Trust offices around a table Eva had cleared of everything but the custody copies, the commercial annex, and the replacement arrangements. The meeting had been properly called, and each signatory had received the papers in advance. Brandt sat at the far end, his coat folded over the back of his chair, one hand resting beside the annex as if the page might otherwise wander away.

Sepp sat beside the representative he had chosen to hold his original. The representative placed the certified custody terms at the center; the original was not there. That custody choice remained Sepp's. The copy named Eva and Sepp among the Trust signatories authorized to revoke Brandt's local mandate.

Brandt looked at Eva. "You asked for a formal meeting. We are here. Let's not pretend the papers answer every question."

"No," Eva said. "They answer this one."

She rested her thumb against the edge of the custody copy. "The mandate is revocable by the signatories listed here. The transfer requires authority you no longer have alone."

"'No longer' is convenient," Brandt said. "The shelter has used my leases, my vehicles, my introductions. It has done so because those things were available."

"And people have depended on them," Eva said. "That dependence is why the replacement arrangements are on the table."

She nodded to the representative, who opened the folder of approved accounts. The first pages concerned the historic ward: a resident's account of seeing Heller strike the survey worker; separate testimony about exits blocked and departures controlled; a retained maintenance entry describing cleanup after the worker was injured. Klara's schedules set those statements beside the skull findings, the

work record, Matthias's letter, and the room the inspectors had found. The sources met at the ward and the death, but they left part of the sequence open.

Brandt turned one page with the tip of his finger. "These are statements collected now about events decades ago."

"They are accounts of the ward," Klara said. "The dates and source of each are marked. The residents chose what could be included."

She kept one hand on the schedule and did not look at me. I had a question ready about a name in the work record. I left it unasked. Klara turned to the concession plan, checking the line where a contributor's statement had been limited. She did not offer me the notebook, and I did not reach for it.

The representative moved the next set of papers forward. This one concerned the current risk. The three visitors from the autumn had given separate accounts of the demand that Sepp be brought to Sailer. A recording preserved Sailer's own words: they could not leave until Sepp came. The receipt connected Sailer's company to the destination address; the tenancy record placed the rented basement storeroom there. Its exit had been secured against the terms of occupancy. When the replacement van arrived, police had led the entry and found the visitors inside.

Brandt leaned back. "And this is meant to prove what about me?"

"It is part of the present risk the signatories must consider," Bauer said. He had come to the meeting as an investigator, not a signatory. "The visitors' separate accounts and the recording are evidence concerning Sailer's demand. They do not identify who directed him."

Brandt's eyes stayed on Eva. "You asked an investigator to sit in judgment on a Trust decision."

"I asked him to describe the evidence he is responsible for preserving," Eva said. "The decision belongs to the signatories."

The annex demanded not only the survey papers but the living contacts connected to them. On the page, the requirement occupied two lines. At the table, it left the room quiet.

Brandt folded his hands. “The venture would pay for proper accommodation. It would keep the transport running. The contacts are part of the work; the arrangement is not a trick.”

“Those are people,” Sepp’s representative said. “They are not a schedule you can attach.”

“I didn’t say they were.”

“You asked for their names and access.”

Brandt’s jaw shifted. He looked down at the annex, then pushed it away from himself by the width of a finger. “I asked for the resources to keep this functioning.”

Eva watched him. “And your contribution?”

“If you suspend my mandate, I will withdraw what is mine. The lease I support. The vehicle. The private funds that have covered the gaps.”

The beds were occupied. The next journey still had to happen. People needed shelter whether or not the signatories found the right words for the arrangement.

Eva took out the replacement lease and the vehicle agreement. “The new lease is signed. The residents chose the addresses and the rooming. The vehicle has a separate contract and a driver who is not yours.”

“Not for long,” Brandt said.

“The papers take effect today.”

He looked toward the two resident signatories. One had a pen in hand; the other had the new lease folded open to the signature page. Neither looked to Eva for permission to speak.

“The first beds are ready,” one said. “We’re moving them this evening.”

Brandt’s gaze shifted back to Eva. “You are surrendering control of the account as well?”

“Yes.”

She set the bank authority form beside the custody terms. “I am giving up sole authority. The replacement signatories are named here.”

“You have managed that account for years.”

“I have.” Eva picked up the pen. Her hand paused above the signature line, not long enough for anyone to call it hesitation. “That was the problem.”

She signed, then passed the form to the first resident signatory, who checked the name before adding theirs. The second followed. The account would no longer move at Eva’s direction alone, and Brandt could not stop the change by withholding his personal contribution.

Bauer asked the authorized signatories to state their decision for the record. They read the motion aloud: Brandt’s local mandate was suspended; his authority over the relevant collection, shelter arrangements, and transport was withdrawn pending the Trust’s review. The two resident signatories retained their authority over the replacement bank account but did not vote on the Trust mandate. Eva voted for suspension, as did Sepp. Brandt stated his opposition.

The representative recorded the vote. No one applauded. Eva put the signed bank form into the replacement folder, and the resident with the lease closed the folder over it.

Brandt stood. He placed his coat over his arm, then stopped beside Eva’s chair. “You’ll have to answer for the gap when the first account falls short.”

“I will answer for what I agreed to,” she said. “So will the others.”

He left without taking the annex.

By evening, the residents were moving bedding from the old shelter into one of the temporary addresses. The new accommodation was a separate place; the old shelter and its ground-floor room remained under Brandt’s control. The residents had chosen who would share rooms and which belongings came first. The vehicle made two runs because one resident did not want to travel with the whole group in a single trip. The driver waited while the last blankets were carried inside.

I stood in the replacement house’s corridor with an empty carton against my hip. Hunger had gathered under the day’s work, not sharp enough to stop me but insistent enough to blur the edge of the conversation around me. I caught the smell of bread from a paper bag on the table and looked away before the thought became a calculation. My shoulder hurt when I lifted the carton. I lowered it and let someone else take the next bundle.

Brandt had come to the replacement address, though nobody had invited him to direct the move. He stood by the open entrance, leaving the corridor clear. The resident who needed a ground-floor room was just inside; the open room behind me held the accessible replacement bed. From where I stood, she could see its bedframe, and the corridor light fell across her face.

“I can keep the ground-floor room at the old shelter for you,” Brandt said. “Private. You wouldn’t need to go through the others.”

It was an offer shaped like the old arrangement: one person asking, one person deciding, an exception no one else could check. He did not sound cruel. He sounded certain that usefulness would still make the choice for her.

The resident looked past him toward the open room. She turned to the representative. “That bed is ground floor?”

“Yes,” the representative said. “Your name is on it. You can change rooms with someone else if you want, but it’s yours tonight.”

She nodded once. “I’ll take that.”

Brandt stayed beside the entrance, not in her path. She went past him and into the room. The bedframe gave a short wooden knock as she set her blanket down.

I set the empty carton aside. My hands were empty, and hunger tugged again. At the other end of the corridor, Brandt stood without the folder or the authority form, with no key to the room she had chosen.

The resident lifted one corner of the mattress and looked back at me. “Could you help?”

I went to her.

CHAPTER 12

A Shared Key

The morning after the move, Sepp called me from the Trust office. The formal identification had arrived.

I found him at the end of the long table, the report open beneath his hands. Eva stood by the window, looking down at the yard. Nobody had brought coffee. The air smelled of damp coats and paper.

The report named Matthias Hartmann. The ordinary profile had not separated him from Sepp; it was the dental comparison, marked belongings, family records, and the accounts of people who had known him at work that made the identification. Sepp read the final page without moving his hands from the table.

“The account of his death is in there,” he said.

The report connected the fatal injury to Heller’s assault. A resident’s account of seeing the blow had been set against Matthias’s notation, the skull findings, and the maintenance entry kept independently of the Trust. Brandt’s signed instruction ordered the room sealed and Matthias’s incident omitted from the outward report. The appointment terms, Eva’s correspondence and admission, and the residents’ testimony supported the separate finding that departures had been controlled. Those sources did not establish that Brandt struck Matthias.

Sepp closed the report.

“I’m not going to tell the family a cleaner story than the evidence gives us,” he said. “Or a worse one.”

Eva turned from the window. “They’re waiting at the cemetery office. We can still get the burial arranged for tomorrow.”

He nodded. His fingers rested on the report’s cover a moment longer, then lifted away.

The following day, at the cemetery, the family chose a small plot and argued gently over the inscription. Sepp let them. He answered questions about Matthias's dates and the work record, and when someone asked whether the report settled everything, he said it settled enough to put his brother's name where it belonged. The rest would stay in the papers.

Before the burial, Sepp took Matthias's letter from its envelope and walked beyond the others, past the bare trees at the edge of the grounds. He read the private part alone. I waited by the path with the family. When he came back, his face had gone quiet in a way I had learned not to interrupt.

Later, as the last of the earth was pressed into place, he stood with his hands folded in front of him. There was no speech. The family stayed until the groundskeeper began gathering his tools, and then we walked back to the gate together.

Sepp fell into step beside me.

"He wanted his own surveying practice," he said. "Not a grand firm. One room, a proper table, his name on the door. He used to measure the kitchen wall at home and tell our mother she'd put the cupboards in the wrong place."

I smiled. "Was she wrong?"

"Not once." His mouth shifted, almost a smile. "He still measured."

For a few steps we walked without speaking. Matthias had been a survey worker in other people's records, a body under moved ground, and a brother with an idea for a door sign. Sepp had given us the last part, not to explain the rest but because it was his to give.

That evening, the temporary shelter began its first full night with a gap in the rota.

The driver who had promised to cover the late run called shortly before the residents were due to move the last of their things. He had a family emergency. He apologized, but there was no replacement

arranged, and the residents' bags, including Miriam's, were already lined up beside the door.

Eva listened to the call, thanked him, and hung up. "I'll take the shift."

"You've already taken the morning," one of the residents said.

"And this is evening." Eva reached for the keys. "The distinction will comfort me."

The replacement arrangements had independent signatories for a reason. One of them checked the written agreement and called the contracted backup driver; the other confirmed the extra cost could be covered. They made the decision between them while Eva waited with her hand on the keys. The backup arrived late, but it arrived. Miriam carried her last bag inside and set it, still closed, beside her bed. "I'll unpack in the morning," she said.

A resident who had been carrying boxes from the van sat down suddenly on the front step. Nora was there to drop off a small case of supplies before going back to her regular shift. She crouched beside them and asked a series of quick questions, listening closely to the answers. She stayed long enough to make an emergency assessment and help them arrange the next step, then checked her watch.

"I have to go," she said, fastening her coat. "You have the number I gave you. Use it if anything changes."

The resident nodded. Nora looked at me. "And you're not lifting with that shoulder."

"I'm carrying a box."

"You're carrying a box badly."

She left before I could argue, headed for her own work. The resident was settled with someone they trusted, and the next steps were theirs to choose.

I moved smaller supplies from the van. The old route stayed closed. That evening Eva asked one volunteer whether they were willing to be contacted about a separate blood-support route; they declined after the move and did not authorize their details to be passed on. No contribution was promised, and no replacement was confirmed. With no contribution arranged that night, hunger sat under my ribs like a hand that would not quite close. The smell of bread from the kitchen made my attention snag; I kept my eyes on the cartons and tried to remember which one held blankets. My shoulder complained when I reached too high. I lowered the box and asked someone else to take it from me.

Eva took the late shift herself. The two signatories recorded the change and left the review date where everyone could see it.

When the last bag was inside, Eva found me by the kitchen doorway. “You look as though you’ve been trying to solve hunger by sorting towels.”

“It was a complicated stack.”

“Of course.” She handed me a glass of water. “The review is still on the calendar. We’ll have more than one night’s experience to discuss by then.”

I drank. The water did not touch the specific pull in my body, but it gave my hands something to do.

Two days later, Klara asked me to meet her at the collection room. She had placed two letters on the table, each inside a protective sleeve. I waited until she nodded before leaning closer.

The first was dated 1912. Its writer asked that a meeting be arranged through a particular address and mentioned a person who could carry a reply. The second, from 1956, referred to another meeting and a change of address. The language was practical, almost brusque. The paper showed use, not ceremony.

The two letters made a line across decades, and I had begun supplying what might connect them. I let the line remain what the pages supported: people reaching one another, arranging meetings, passing on addresses.

Klara took a third item from a folder. It was a current request from New York, with a message attached from Mara, the correspondent Sepp had mentioned. The message said she was alive. It also said that the records she needed to challenge listed her as dead, and that the broker who could help correct them benefited from the discrepancy.

A live call came through while I was still reading. Klara looked at me; I waited for her nod before she accepted it. A woman appeared on the screen, framed closely, the background indistinct. Klara introduced us. Mara looked directly into the camera.

“I’m the person in the message,” she said. “I’m alive. The record says otherwise.”

I set my hands flat on the table. “What would you want me to do?”

“Look at the record trail with me. I have copies that don’t agree. I’m not asking you to decide why yet.” She paused. “The broker has a route to make a correction. He also benefits while the record stays as it is. I won’t approach him before I understand what I’m taking to him.”

I felt the old urge to ask for every date, every name, every missing page. Klara’s hands were still beside the sleeves. I looked at the letters instead of making the questions her problem.

“I could come to New York and examine the copies you choose to share,” I said. “We’d meet first. I wouldn’t contact the broker before that.”

Mara watched me for a moment. “That’s what I’m asking for. I can arrange a meeting when you’re here.”

The image held steady. Her face looked tired, but her voice was level. Klara wrote down the time and the agreed method for making

contact. She did not offer the original letters to take with me. I did not ask.

“I’ll need time away from work,” I said. “And I need to know what happens with my care while I’m gone.”

Mara waited while I spoke with my manager. I could take two weeks in late January, with the dates confirmed by email. Then I called Eva. She checked the Munich rota with me to confirm there was a handoff contact before I left and someone to meet me when I returned. One volunteer was willing to help with those arrangements. Another, whom Eva had asked, declined to be counted on while I was away.

I thanked Eva.

I looked through the glass partition at Klara. She was reading the concession plan beside Mara’s message, checking what could be shared and what could not. The pages remained in her hands. I noticed the question forming in me—whether one date in the request matched a detail on the older letter—and held it back. It could wait until I had permission to examine the relevant records.

I asked Mara whether she could put me in touch with someone in New York willing to talk about local practicalities. She said she would ask first and send nothing without permission. That was enough for the moment.

I opened my calendar and entered the departure and return dates. Beneath them I put the Munich review visit, in person, before the shelter’s next rota was settled. The work approval arrived while I was still on the call; I saved it and closed the message.

Klara turned the concession plan toward herself again. She checked one line, made a small correction, and left the letters where they were.

I looked once more at the 1912 and 1956 dates. They did not make Mara’s present record make sense. They gave me a reason to go and people to ask, not an answer in advance.

“Late January,” I said. “I can be there for the meeting.”

Mara nodded. “I’ll send the details when I have them.”

The call ended. Klara slid the current request back into its folder, keeping the historical letters on the table until I had finished looking at them. The case in New York would have to begin with Mara’s records, on her terms. I left the broker’s name unwritten.

After the story

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