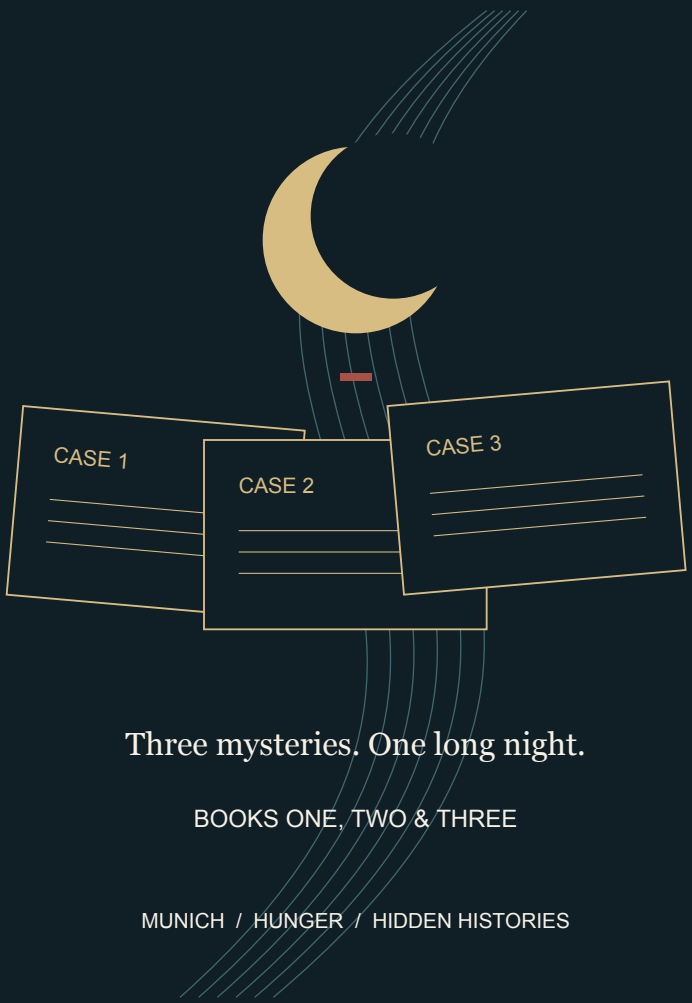
PERSONALISED FICTION

BENJAMIN
THE VAMPIRE DETECTIVE

THE LONG NIGHT FILES



Three mysteries. One long night.

BOOKS ONE, TWO & THREE

MUNICH / HUNGER / HIDDEN HISTORIES

About the book and project

PERSONALISED FICTION

This edition contains the revised first three books of *The Long Night Files*, the Benjamin the Vampire Detective series. A vampire detective in Munich is the starting point for linked mysteries about hunger, trust and the stories that records can conceal.

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

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

Book 2: The Empty Seats - 10 chapters; approximately 19,090 words.

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.

Visit the project

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BOOK 1

The Man Who Died Twice

CHAPTER 1

The Ladder

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

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

“Don’t come down here,” he called.

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

“Have you called the police?” I asked.

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

I stepped past him.

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

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

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

Emil Sander.

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

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

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

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

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

Instead I climbed back up.

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

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

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

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

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

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

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

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

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

“You’ve been outside,” she said.

“I was walking.”

“That’s not a denial.”

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

She saw anyway. “Sit.”

“I’m fine.”

“Benjamin.”

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

“How long have you been hiding that?”

“It’s not much.”

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

“Today. A little earlier.”

“Sun?”

I nodded.

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

“It’s a burn.”

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

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

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

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

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“Then let me see.”

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

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

“It closed.”

“Very quickly.”

“I suppose.”

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

“Have you been sleeping?” she asked.

“Some.”

“Eating?”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“Enough.”

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

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

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

“I wanted you to look at it.”

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

“I’m not asking you to.”

“You were hoping I would.”

The answer came too quickly. “Maybe.”

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

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

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

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

“Do the police know?”

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

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

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

“And in January?”

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

Nora’s eyes stayed on mine. “You thought he died?”

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

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

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

She noticed me looking and set the knife down. “It’s nothing.”

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

“Ben?”

“I’m sorry.”

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

“Is that what happened by the river?” she asked.

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

“Ordinary food isn’t enough,” I said.

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

“I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Try.”

“It’s hunger. Not the kind that goes away when I eat.” I swallowed. “Blood. I want blood.”

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

“Have you taken anything?”

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

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

“I don’t think so.”

“That is not the same as no.”

“I can control it.”

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

“I didn’t touch you.”

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

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

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

“I understand.”

“Do you?”

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

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

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

“Yes,” I said.

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

“Yes.”

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

I was grateful enough to resent her for saying it.

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

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

“I should go,” I said.

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

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

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

“I will.”

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

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

I left without saying it.

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

CHAPTER 2

A Face in the Window

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

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

"Is this the original?" she asked.

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

"You enlarged it."

"For clarity."

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

I lowered the phone. "Fair."

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

"Show me the whole window," she said.

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

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

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

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

“Before he collapsed?”

“Yes.”

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

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

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

“No.”

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

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

“I understand.”

“Do you?”

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

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

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

“Don’t touch the sleeve,” she said.

“I won’t.”

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

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

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

“It could come from the same workshop.”

“It could.”

“Or the same printer.”

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

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

“Could I photograph the letter?” I asked.

“No.”

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

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

“I might. I’ll look.”

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

“I will.”

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

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

“I know.”

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

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

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

“I won’t.”

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

“That would be accurate.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That is not how ownership works."

"It is when you're slow."

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

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

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

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

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

“Are the papers in the collection?”

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

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

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

“Do you know who added it?”

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

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

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

"I understand."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"All right."

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

"All right."

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

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

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

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

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

“Two things we don’t know.”

“Now you’re learning.”

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

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

CHAPTER 3

The Quiet Clinic

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Good. I have a shift. Talk later.

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

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

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

“Thank you for seeing me.”

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

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

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

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

“It’s also the accurate one.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The discharge is earlier than the collection.”

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

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

“Good. What would you call it?”

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

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

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

“Would you publish that?”

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

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

“No,” I said. “There aren’t.”

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

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

“I haven’t decided anything.”

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

“Patients aren’t data errors.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Understood.”

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

“None.”

“Then don’t acquire one by accident.”

“I’ll try to resist the temptation.”

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

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

"Benjamin."

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

"You interviewed with Voss," she said.

"I did."

"Don't take the job."

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

"Why?" I asked.

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

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

"That's what the advertisement says."

"You worked here?"

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

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

“Did you know Emil Sander?” I said.

Her eyes narrowed a little. “Why?”

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

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

“Yes.”

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

“No. I never got confirmation.”

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

“I intend to.”

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

“I didn’t ask.”

“You were going to.”

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

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

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

“What does it establish?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“All right.”

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

“I won’t.”

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

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

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

CHAPTER 4

A Bad Join

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

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

“I understand.”

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

That distinction lasted until I saw the address.

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

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

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

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

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

She glanced at my notes. “Anything?”

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

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

“I won’t use the family part.”

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

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

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

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

“Looking isn’t the problem.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What address?”

I read it out.

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

I looked down at the receipt. “Reiter.”

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

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

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

“Which client?”

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

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

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

“I’ll note that.”

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

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

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

No greeting. No warm-up.

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

“That wasn’t my question.”

“Yes,” I said. “I did.”

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

I sat back. “What did they ask her?”

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

“I wanted to confirm the connection.”

“You wanted to confirm it quickly.”

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

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

“I did.”

“And you still used it.”

“Yes.”

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

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

“That is not a defence.”

“No,” I said. “It isn’t.”

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

“I will.”

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

“All right.”

“And you’re finished with the collection.”

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

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

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

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

“I won’t.”

She ended the call.

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

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

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

A pause. “You believe?”

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

“What do you want from me?”

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

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

“I don’t know,” I said. “I haven’t established that.”

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

“All right,” she said at last. “I’ll speak to Klara before I speak to anyone else.”

“That’s sensible.”

“Don’t call again unless she asks you to.”

“I won’t.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I remember.”

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

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

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

“You sound terrible,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Have you eaten?”

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

The line went quiet.

“From where?” Nora asked.

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

“You haven’t told me that before.”

“No.”

“Why now?”

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

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

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

“You are asking me to help assess risk.”

“Yes. Within what you can actually know.”

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

“I understand.”

“Do you?”

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

“What happened tonight?”

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

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

“I’m not.”

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

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

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

“I know.”

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

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

“All right what?”

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

“That’s a start.”

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

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

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

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

“Do you want me to come over?”

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

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

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me for having a job.”

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

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

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

CHAPTER 5

Lea’s Copy

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

“You came alone,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Did you tell anyone where you were going?”

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

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

“I’m not giving you these,” she said.

“I understand.”

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

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

“I do.”

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

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

“All right.”

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

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

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

“What am I allowed to do?” I asked.

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

“And the photograph?”

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

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

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

“I’m not asking you to.”

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

"That's all."

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It could.”

“Or that one of the records is wrong.”

“That too.”

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

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

“I won’t.”

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

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

“Can I ask you what you remember?”

“You can ask. I can still say no.”

“Yes.”

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

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

“I’m ready now.”

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

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

“You found it?” Nora asked.

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

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

“No,” Lea said. “It isn’t.”

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

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

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

“What happened before you left?” I asked.

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

“Did he say why?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Not when the collection happened,” Nora said.

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

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

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

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

“I know.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I nodded. "Understood."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“All right.”

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 6

The Carbon Impression

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

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

“Thank you for coming,” I said.

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

“I understand.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No.”

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

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

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

“I won’t ask for more.”

“You’ve said that before.”

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

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

“I did.”

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

“I’ll keep it to that.”

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

“I won’t.”

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

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

“Thank you.”

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

“I know.”

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

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

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

“All right.”

“And you don’t speak for me.”

“I won’t.”

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

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

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

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

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

“The paperwork I was given.”

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

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

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

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

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

“What change?” I asked.

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

“Then talk to Lea.”

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

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

“Who told you?” Lea asked.

“Dr Voss.”

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

“You saw him?” I asked.

“I drove him.”

“Where?”

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

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

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

“But it wasn’t.”

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

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

“What was under the cover?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You didn’t check?”

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

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

“I did.”

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

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

“Was it dark?” I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

“I didn’t hurt anyone.”

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

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

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

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

“I know.”

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

“He admitted the route,” she said.

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

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

“No.”

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

“No.”

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

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

“I’ll walk you to the tram.”

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

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

CHAPTER 7

A Name in Reverse

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Could it have been copied?” I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

She looked at me. “I don’t know.”

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

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

“He remembered the cup.”

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

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

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

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

“Thank you for showing us.”

“I’m not giving you the letter.”

“I understand.”

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

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

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

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

“I will.”

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

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

“We won’t take them,” Klara said.

“I won’t photograph them,” I added.

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

“Is this the same clinic?” I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes. That’s why I kept it.”

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

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

Klara nodded. “That’s your choice.”

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

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

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

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

“Yes.”

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

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

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

“I understand.”

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

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

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

CHAPTER 8

The Room After Midnight

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

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

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

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

“I hadn’t assumed it was.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No one’s asking for it,” Klara said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Did you see it happen?" Klara asked.

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

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

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

“Understood,” Klara said.

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

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

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

Klara nodded. “A testable connection.”

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

“They should,” Lea said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I will.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I’ll come too,” I said.

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

“All right.”

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

***

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

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

“I’ll be here.”

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

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

CHAPTER 9

The Door He Left Open

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Keep going. Don't stop here."

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

"Lea," I said. "Outside."

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

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

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

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

"Stay outside," he called to Lea.

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

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

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

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

Lea turned toward the exit.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I went in.

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

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

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

“I know.”

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

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

Lea’s breath hitched. The shelf dipped.

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

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

“Move your arm,” I said.

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

“Can you stand?”

“I can try.”

“Try toward the door.”

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

“Go,” I said.

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

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

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

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

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

"Your shoulder?" I asked.

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

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

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

"I will."

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

"Where's Voss?" I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The officer wrote that down.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I didn't offer.

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

CHAPTER 10

The River Does Not Give Back

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Let them check you first," she said.

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

“And the injury?” I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I felt my hands go still around the cup.

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

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

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

“Thank you,” I said.

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

She sat opposite me. “All right.”

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

Nora didn’t interrupt.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I know."

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

"I know that too."

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

"I'm not asking you to."

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

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

"I will tell you," I said.

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

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

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

CHAPTER 11

The Names We Keep

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"They're yours," Klara said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I understand.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm sorry," I said.

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

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

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

"I know."

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

“They’re potatoes, Benjamin.”

“That isn’t an answer.”

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

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

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

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

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

Nora saw me pause. “Still there?”

“Yes.”

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

“Yes. Eva arranged it.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nora glanced at them. "New?"

"Bought them yesterday."

"Practical."

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

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

"I know."

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

"I understand."

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

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

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

“I will.”

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

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

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

“I did.”

“You ate the potatoes.”

“They were very good potatoes.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BOOK 2

The Empty Seats

CHAPTER 1

Three Places

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

“I do,” I’d said.

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

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

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

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

“I thought we were discussing the pretzel.”

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

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

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

I stopped chewing.

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

Nora followed my gaze. "Benjamin."

"I'm all right."

"That wasn't my question."

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

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

"Wait."

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

"I heard her pulse," I said.

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

“I think so.”

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

“I wasn’t going to.”

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

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

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

“Then start there.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I know."

She studied my face. "Did you sleep?"

"Some."

"That is not a number."

"It's the one I have."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And no confirmed connection.”

“No.”

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 2

The Photograph

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

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

“I understand.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Three empty places suggest they expected people.”

“Or that the photographer asked them to move.”

She said it without irritation, but the correction stopped me from making the image do more than it could. I shifted back in my chair. The surface of the table was cool beneath my palms; the split in my hand tugged when I opened it. My shoulder objected to the movement, a dull reminder that the body kept its own records whether I wanted them or not.

Klara moved the sketch a few centimetres, then aligned its table mark with the photograph’s table. She didn’t touch the image itself. The cloth seemed brighter when the pages sat together, though nothing had changed except my angle.

“The empty places in the reports,” I said. “And this.”

“A resemblance,” she said. “Not proof that today’s empty seats repeat the same signal.”

“I know.”

She tapped the sketch beside the service approach. I nodded and kept my hands in my lap while I studied the photograph again: three open places, a marker, a lamp, and an angle that mattered.

Klara returned the photograph to its sleeve. I wrote a short note on my phone: three vacant places; cloth marker; lamp; visible from service approach on the surviving sketch, uncertain reconstruction. I showed her before saving it.

She read it, then nodded. “That’s yours.”

By the time Nora joined us, the afternoon had turned grey at the windows. She came in with her work bag and the slightly rumpled look of someone who had finished a shift but not yet left it behind.

“Did I miss the part where the photograph explains everything?” she asked.

“No,” Klara said. “Benjamin has behaved.”

“I’m relieved.” Nora set her bag down but kept her coat on. “I have an hour. Then I’m going home and not discussing anyone’s medical history.”

“I wasn’t planning to.”

“Your plans are not always a reliable source.”

Klara gave her a brief smile. I looked once more at the sleeve, then turned away from it. We had spent the morning with three reports and no connection between them. The photograph offered a shape, not a bridge. We needed people who had known the missing visitors, and a place where they could speak without a crowd pressing in around every word.

The beer garden Nora suggested was tucked behind a row of chestnut trees, away from the busiest festival lanes. At that hour, a few tables were occupied by workers in jackets and older couples sharing late lunches. The noise came in muted layers: cutlery, distant music, a tram bell beyond the wall. I could separate most of it if I tried. I was tired of trying.

At the information point that morning, I had left my number with the officer and asked him to pass it to the three companions only if

they were willing to speak with us. They had agreed to meet there. I knew their faces from the reports, but not their names, and I had no reason to pretend we were anything more than people brought together by an absence.

The young man who had reported the translator sat with his phone face down beside his glass. The maintenance worker's colleague had arrived in her reflective work jacket, now folded over the back of her chair. The older man who had reported the pin seller held a paper cup of coffee in both hands. Each had chosen a seat with a clear view of the path in and out.

Nora introduced herself as Benjamin's friend, not as a doctor. I followed her lead and gave my name. Klara sat a little apart, her notebook closed on the table.

The young man spoke first. "She's Leonie. She was translating for the replacement-route briefing. She told me she'd be there after she met us. We were supposed to get food, then she'd go over the wording with them. She always saves the last bite of cake."

"Who were 'them'?" I asked.

"I don't know. She didn't say. It wasn't secret. Just work, I thought." He rubbed the rim of his glass with one thumb. "She said the delivery window had changed and they needed someone to explain it clearly."

The colleague in the work jacket leaned forward. "The maintenance worker was covering the access side. He knew which service gates would be open. He'd been asked to attend the same briefing."

"Did he tell you that himself?"

"He showed me the shift change on his phone. He said he'd be late for our break because he had to be there first." She looked down at her hands. "I thought he meant a routine meeting."

The older man waited until she had finished. “She’s Rike. She carried messages between tables. Not private messages. Notices. She said she had to take a time to the briefing because the delivery was being moved.” He shook his head. “She didn’t tell me what was being delivered.” He looked at his cup. “She knows how I take my tea, even when I forget to ask.”

There it was: three accounts, each limited to what the speaker had heard. The translator had been asked to clarify; the maintenance worker was needed for access; the pin seller carried a time. Their companions had not known one another. Their reports did not establish why those three people had been selected, or what would happen at the briefing. They did put all three expected arrivals at the same meeting.

“When was it?” Nora asked.

The young man checked his phone. “Tomorrow evening. The window was half past six to seven, I think. She said they wanted everyone there before the delivery.”

The colleague nodded. “That’s what I was told too. Six-thirty to seven.”

The older man frowned, counting under his breath. “Yes. The pin seller said the delivery window. Same time.”

My phone was in my jacket pocket. I could feel its edge against my ribs. On the screen, the stop list I had forwarded to the festival logistics desk remained in the same message thread as Eva’s recommendation. I took it out and opened the attachment.

Nora leaned across the table to see. “That window.”

“You recognize it?”

“I’ve seen the list. This is the replacement window we discussed.” She touched the time range on the screen, careful not to scroll. “Six-thirty to seven.”

The number of coincidences had changed. The three visitors' movements were no longer merely scattered across different parts of the grounds. They had all been due at a replacement-route briefing in a shared delivery window—and that window was on a list I had sent outside the group.

I had forwarded it because Eva recommended the logistics desk. Festival operations needed service access coordinated; the desk could pass along gate timings and avoid sending a cart into a closed lane. That had seemed sensible. I had attached the stop list as I used it, rather than make a clean version for the people who needed the times.

Nora read over my shoulder. "Why does the desk have the care notes?"

The list included the operational stops, but also my additions: wait for confirmation; quiet transfer if delayed; check before leaving anyone alone. Useful reminders to people helping with care. Nothing the logistics desk needed to route a delivery.

"I sent the whole sheet," I said.

"Then ask for it back."

I pressed the desk's number. The first ring seemed to hang in the air between us. I could hear the beer garden around it—the scrape of a chair, a glass set down, a child calling somewhere beyond the wall. The second ring came. My mouth had gone dry, the old pull beneath my ribs waking as the lunch hour slipped farther behind us. I kept my attention on the call.

A woman answered with the name of the logistics desk. I gave mine, explained that I had sent a stop list earlier, and asked her to withdraw it and replace it with a version containing only the access times.

"Can you tell me which file?" she asked.

I gave her the subject line and the time I'd sent it.

There was a pause, then the faint tapping of keys. “I can remove it from the desk copy.”

“Has it gone anywhere else?”

“It was included in the operations packet for the subcontractors.”

The beer garden noise seemed to sharpen around that sentence. I looked at the others. The young man had lifted his eyes from his phone. Nora’s hand had stopped beside her glass.

“Can you recall those copies?” I asked.

“I can send a correction and ask them to discard the previous version. I can’t confirm they’ve all opened it, and I can’t retrieve paper copies already printed.”

“Please send the correction. And make a note that the care annotations should not be circulated.”

“I’ll do that.”

I thanked her, ended the call, and set the phone on the table. For a moment, nobody spoke. I wanted to say I’d thought the desk was the safe option, that Eva had recommended it, that I had meant to make the route easier rather than expose anyone. Each sentence was true. None changed where the list had gone.

Nora broke the silence. “The times brought them together. The notes didn’t need to go with them.”

“No,” I said. “They didn’t.”

She didn’t soften it for me. I was grateful, though I didn’t tell her.

The companions remained where they were, each with their own reason for waiting. The older man folded the paper cup between his fingers, then stopped and set it down. The colleague asked whether we needed anything else from her. Nora said only what she chose to share; the woman nodded and stayed long enough to confirm that the shift notice was still on her phone. The young man agreed to send the

exact wording of the message he had received, if he could find it. No one promised more than that.

Klara had listened without opening her notebook. “The photograph gives you an arrangement,” she said as we stood. “These accounts give you a meeting time. They may be related.”

Outside, the chestnut branches stirred above the beer garden wall. I checked the time again: the shared window began at six-thirty. In my mind, the old photograph and the three reports sat side by side—not identical, not explained, but aligned at one edge. A repeated arrangement. A common delivery window. And a list of mine already in other hands.

CHAPTER 3

The Lamp Test

The photograph might have been a code. It might also have been three empty places arranged for a camera and a cloth that happened to catch the light.

By the time Klara let me into the private reading room the next morning, I had been trying to make the two possibilities cancel each other out. They did not.

She had cleared a space on the long table. The photograph remained in its sleeve, beside the old concessions sketch she had shown me the day before. A desk lamp stood at one end; between it and a small paper marker, Klara had set a folded piece of grey card upright.

“You’ve built a tent,” I said.

“I’ve built a partition.” She nudged the card until it covered the marker from where I stood. “A tent would imply rather more confidence in the drawing.”

The sketch was no blueprint. Lines showed tables, stalls, and an approach marked in a hand that had faded unevenly. Klara set a ruler beside it but didn’t use the ruler to make the marks seem more exact than they were.

“Where was the table?” I asked.

“Here, if I’ve matched the photograph correctly.” She indicated a small rectangle on the sketch. “The lamp is marked there. The service approach comes in from this side. The public entrance is here.”

“And the marker?”

“On the back of the chair, according to the photograph. The sketch doesn’t identify it.”

I bent closer. My shoulder tightened at the movement. I straightened, then shifted around the table instead of leaning on it.

From the main entrance side, the folded card blocked the paper marker completely. I moved to the service approach. The lamp threw its light across the marker, which showed pale against the darker table.

“Someone coming from this direction could see it.”

“Someone looking toward the table.” Klara moved the lamp a few centimetres. The marker dulled. “The sketch leaves us room to be wrong about the angle.”

I stepped back to the public entrance. Nothing. From there, the partition hid the table and marker as neatly as a closed door.

“So a person at the service approach could see whether the place was occupied, while someone entering from the public side wouldn’t know to look.”

“Could,” she said.

I glanced at the photograph in its sleeve. “And if it wasn’t meant to be seen?”

“Then the photographer had a very particular sense of composition.” Her mouth turned faintly at one corner. “I’m not prepared to rule it out.”

I went back to the service side. The marker appeared again. It was possible to imagine someone standing there, waiting for a signal that would be invisible to the larger room. More than that, it was possible to meet under observation from one side only: one person able to watch the approach, another screened from everyone else.

The thought made the arrangement feel less like a symbol and more like a tool. It still didn’t tell me who had used it, or why.

Klara watched as I reached for my phone. I stopped before taking a picture.

“Would you like me to write down the result?” I asked.

“I’d like you to note what you saw. Not photograph the collection.”

I opened the note I’d made the day before and added: With lamp and partition in approximate positions, marker visible from service approach, hidden from main entrance. Reconstruction only. Then I put my phone away. The distinction seemed minor, the sort of thing I once would have called careful wording. It felt different now to keep the limit beside the useful conclusion.

Klara drew the concessions sketch toward herself and squared its edges with the table. “The original tent is gone. Even if it survived, the grounds have changed. A resemblance doesn’t give you a modern address.”

“Then we use the public plan.”

“If there’s a public plan.”

“There usually is.”

“Your confidence in maps is touching.”

“Maps tend to be more cooperative than witnesses.”

“That may be because they don’t get to correct you.”

I smiled, though the joke found its mark. On the table, the tiny paper marker sat under the desk lamp, visible only when I stood in the right place. It had given us a principle, not a destination.

We left the reading room with Klara carrying the sketch back to its cabinet. She locked it away herself. I waited by the door, then followed her out with only my updated note and the image of that narrow sightline.

The public concession plan was posted near one of the grounds’ main paths. By late morning, the festival had gathered its usual density: voices layered over music, wheels rattling over temporary track, the sweet smell of fried dough folding into beer and damp

canvas. I could pick out too much at once. A child's sharp call cut across a brass tune; somewhere behind us a cart wheel clicked at every turn. I stopped trying to separate the sounds and looked at the plan instead.

Klara stood beside me, one hand holding down the map's curled corner. The plan showed stalls, service lanes, entrances, and several temporary partitions. No single place matched the old sketch. There were at least four points where a lamp near a service approach might leave a marker visible from one side and screened from another.

"Four," I said.

"Possibly more, if we count the places where the plan is simplified."

We walked the public paths and checked them against the arrangement in miniature. At the first point, the lamp was set too far inside the stall. At the second, a partition blocked the service lane as well as the public approach. The third was close enough to make me stop, but there was no clear line from the service side to the place where a person might wait. We moved on.

At the fourth, a lamp hung over a narrow turn between two concession fronts. A waist-high barrier screened the space beyond it from the main path. From the service lane, the lamp and the gap behind the barrier were both visible. It wasn't the same layout as the old drawing. The useful part was the one-sided view.

Klara studied the barrier, then the plan folded against her palm. "This would work."

"For the same kind of contact."

She looked at me, then at the lamp. I nodded. We had a place to ask about, not an answer.

My attention had fixed on the electric bulb, burning steadily beneath the awning in daylight. I stood under it, letting the light fall

on my bare wrist. There was no sting, no fresh pull under the skin. Only the usual ache in my shoulder when I shifted my weight.

A strip of cloud moved off the sun. Warmth touched the back of my hand, then gathered into a sharper discomfort along the exposed wrist. I tugged my sleeve down and stepped into the shade of the stall front.

Klara glanced at my hand. She didn't ask me to explain it. "Do you want to stop?"

"No. Just shade." I looked back at the electric lamp, still bright above us. "We should ask someone who works here."

A man behind the nearest counter was stacking paper trays into a crate. He had a dark apron tied over a checked shirt and kept pausing to look up whenever a cart passed along the service lane. I waited until he had set the crate down before approaching. Klara stayed beside the public path, where she could see us without crowding the counter.

"Excuse me," I said. "We're comparing the public layout with an old concessions sketch. Could I ask whether carts ever stop at this turn?"

He looked from me to the lamp and then toward the lane. "They stop all over the place. Depends who's blocking the way."

"Did one wait here during the disappearances?"

His eyebrows drew together. "What sort of cart?"

"I don't know. I'm asking whether you remember one pausing here."

He wiped his hands on his apron. "I remember a cart waiting while the lane cleared. That doesn't make this a special spot. It's a bottleneck."

"Of course." I kept my voice level. "Was it two evenings ago?"

“Two evenings ago, yes. Around the time the service traffic was changing over.” He glanced past me at Klara, then back. “I see a lot of carts. If you want me to say I know what was on it, I don’t.”

“I’m not asking that.”

He studied my face for a moment, deciding whether I meant it. “It waited under that lamp. A man came along from the service side, looked down the lane, and gave the driver a hand signal. Then the cart moved on.”

“Did you recognize the driver?”

“No.” His answer came without hesitation. “I’d seen the cart before. That’s all.”

The lane was in view from where he stood; the barrier hid the space behind it from the public path. The lamp picked out the narrow turn. The old image hadn’t selected this spot for us. His memory had.

“Would you be willing to tell that to someone again, if we need to check the timing?” I asked.

He set one hand on the counter. “Maybe. If you tell me who you are and what you’re looking into.”

I gave him my name and said we were trying to understand the disappearances reported two evenings earlier. I didn’t claim more than that. His expression changed—not to surprise, exactly, but to the guarded attention of someone weighing what his own ordinary observation might mean.

“I’m Hannes,” he said. “I’m here most days. If you want to ask again, come when the rush is over. I’ll tell you what I remember. I won’t guess beyond it.”

“That’s all we need.”

Klara joined us only after he’d returned to his trays.

“He saw a cart wait under this lamp,” I said. “And a man signal it forward.”

She nodded once. “Then we’ll come back when the rush is over.”

The lamp buzzed faintly overhead. Sunlight had reached the edge of my sleeve again, and I pulled it down over my wrist before we turned toward the service lane.

CHAPTER 4

Eva’s Invitation

The photograph had not become less uncertain by the time I reached Eva’s office. It had only acquired a more useful question: who would have needed three empty places to mean something?

Eva had sent for me that afternoon. I had brought no photograph, only the notes Klara had allowed me to make: the lamp, the partition, the pale marker visible from the service approach and hidden from the public entrance. I set my phone on Eva’s desk with the screen dark. My shoulder objected to the chair when I sat down, so I stayed standing.

“Three empty places,” Eva said. “A cloth marker. A sightline from the service side.”

“That’s what we could establish.”

She looked at me across the desk. “Then Sepp helped maintain it.”

The office was quiet enough that I heard the radiator tick behind her. The photograph in my mind was still the one Klara had shown me: three places set out beneath a lamp, a small piece of cloth catching the light. “You recognize it?”

“I recognize the arrangement. Not that particular photograph.” Eva leaned back. “It was a contact method. A way to let two people know whether a place was occupied without announcing the meeting to everyone who came through the public entrance.”

“So the image is evidence of a method, not a map.”

“Good. You’ve saved me a correction.”

Her smile was brief. She reached for the water glass at her elbow and moved it away from a stack of papers. “Sepp helped keep the arrangement usable. He knew who could carry a message, who could

check access, who could be seen doing either without attracting attention.”

I thought of the three reports laid beside one another: different tables, different groups, three personal items left behind. “The translator, the maintenance worker, and the pin seller.”

“The translator handled correspondence between people who couldn’t safely rely on a shared language. The maintenance worker knew which service doors were actually open, not merely marked open on a plan. And the pin seller could pass route notices in the middle of a crowd without looking like someone carrying a notice.”

The roles were ordinary enough to be overlooked. That was what made them useful. I glanced at my phone. “And all three are missing.”

Eva’s fingers tightened once around the glass. “Yes.”

“Could the contact arrangement have brought them together?”

“It could have.” She set the glass down. “It doesn’t tell us where they went.”

Eva opened the bottom drawer of her desk. She moved aside a packet of envelopes and took out a folded sheet. She did not slide it across to me.

“Sepp holds the signed mandate,” she said. “It records the limits of Brandt’s authority over the route.”

“What sort of limits?”

“The sort the signatories can enforce if they can meet and act together.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the answer I’m prepared to give you without the document in front of us.” She tapped the folded sheet with one finger. “The

complete terms are not mine to recite from memory, and they are not what you need to locate three missing people.”

The refusal was clean, almost kindly delivered. I felt the familiar urge to turn the gap into a list of questions and keep going until someone gave me enough to make a model. Instead I moved my phone a few centimetres away from the edge of the desk.

“Why does Brandt want it?”

“Because the mandate is revocable.” Eva unfolded the sheet just far enough to look at a line, then folded it again. “If the signatories agree, they can withdraw his authority. He knows that.”

“And Sepp has the original.”

“Yes.”

The paper disappeared back into the drawer. The lock caught with a small metallic click.

I looked at the blank patch of desk where it had been. “Then the missing people can’t just be coincidences.”

“Benjamin.”

Her tone stopped me before I could finish. She did not raise her voice. She only held my gaze until I looked back at her.

“I said Brandt wants the document,” she said. “I did not say I know why these three people disappeared.”

“Right.” I rubbed the heel of my hand against my trouser seam. “I’m treating the overlap as more than an overlap.”

“You’re allowed to notice it. You’re not allowed to make it true by repeating it.”

The line landed because it was one I had used on other people, usually after I’d decided what I wanted them to admit. I nodded once. “Then tell me what you know about the route.”

Eva's attention went to the window. The blind was half down; a slice of the street showed between its slats, bright with late-afternoon traffic. "Brandt has been asking where Sepp can be found."

"When?"

"Recently. More than once."

"Did he ask you directly?"

"Yes."

"And what did you tell him?"

"That I didn't know."

"Do you?"

"No." She turned back from the window. "I don't know where Sepp is now."

Her answer carried no hesitation, but not enough certainty to tell me how much she wished it were different. I thought of asking when she had last seen him. The question would have been fair. So would asking whether Sepp had chosen to stay away or been forced to. Neither would make him appear in the room.

"What did Brandt ask for?"

"A handoff from Sepp. Before the festival service block is cleared."

"Of the mandate?"

"Of what Sepp holds." Eva's mouth tightened. "Brandt did not put his request in the form of a polite inquiry."

The service block mattered because, once cleared, the workers, routes, and temporary access would all change. That did not mean Brandt's demand had anything to do with the disappearances. It meant the timing was no longer abstract.

"Why didn't you tell me this when you recommended the desk?" I asked.

Eva's expression shifted. The humor had gone from it.

"I recommended the festival logistics desk," she said. "I knew Sailer had access to it."

The name was new to me. "Sailer?"

"He is a legitimate logistics intermediary. Brandt brought him into the route." Eva looked down at her hands. "I failed to exclude him."

"You knew he was there and sent me to the desk anyway."

"I thought the desk was a public point of contact. I thought the work itself would keep him at a distance." She drew a slow breath. "I was wrong to treat that as enough."

A cart could wait under a lamp for any number of reasons. A man could signal it onward without being part of a scheme. But a person with access to the logistics desk, brought into the route by Brandt, was no longer an incidental detail I could leave out of the reports.

"Did Sailer speak to you about the missing visitors?"

"No."

"Have you seen him with any of them?"

"No."

"Do you know he took them?"

"No." She met my eyes. "I know his access role. I know Brandt brought him in. I know I should have asked harder questions before I sent you there."

Her fingers pressed flat on the desk. There was anger in the gesture, though I couldn't tell whether it was aimed at Brandt, herself, or the fact that both could be true.

"Then I need to give his name to the investigators," I said.

"Yes."

"I'll say what you've told me, and who told me."

“Please do.”

She pushed her phone toward herself and unlocked it. “I’ll call the other signatories. They need to hear that the old arrangement may no longer be safe to use.”

“May no longer?”

“I have no proof anyone watched that particular contact.” She opened a contact list, scanned it, and stopped at a number. “But three people who maintain the route are gone, and Brandt is demanding Sepp. I won’t ask anyone to wait at a familiar place until we understand more.”

That was enough. I picked up my phone and called the missing-persons desk. After two transfers, an investigator came on the line. I gave my name, the reference numbers from the three reports, and Eva’s account of the logistics desk. I spelled Sailer slowly. The investigator asked me to repeat his role.

“Logistics intermediary,” I said. “Legitimate access to the festival desk. Eva Dorn says Otto Brandt brought him into the route. She also says she recommended the desk to me and knew Sailer had access there.”

A pause followed. I could hear a keyboard at the other end.

“Does Ms. Dorn believe Sailer was involved in the disappearances?”

“She doesn’t know that. Neither do I.”

“Has she agreed to speak with us?”

I looked at her. Eva had already put her first call through and was listening, one finger held against the other ear. She nodded when she saw me watching.

“Yes,” I said. “She’ll speak with you.”

The investigator asked me to send the spelling and the desk details in writing. I did, making the source explicit and keeping the sentence about involvement out of the report's factual field. When I hung up, Eva was still on her call.

"I'm not asking you to come anywhere," she said to the person on the other end. "I'm telling you not to use the old contact today. No, I don't have Sepp's location. I wouldn't give it over this line if I did."

She listened, then said, "I'll call again when I know more," and ended the call.

I didn't ask who had answered. Eva opened the next contact and began dialing.

The investigator's number remained on my screen beside Sailer's name. Across the room, Eva began her second call, warning another signatory away from the old contact. I had given the investigators a name, a role, and the person who could account for how he got there; Eva was already changing what the others would do with the information.

CHAPTER 5

The Wrong Delivery

Nora met us after her shift with the strap of her bag cutting a red line across one shoulder and the expression she wore when somebody had said “quick question” in a corridor.

“Before either of you ask,” she said, sitting down, “I’ve washed my hands, I’ve eaten half a sandwich, and I am not taking another shift.”

“I wasn’t going to ask you to take a shift,” I said.

“Good. You can start by not asking me to solve the entire route.” She put her phone on the table between us. “What we can do is cancel the handoff that may have been exposed.”

We were in a café near the hospital, at a table against the window. The investigator sat opposite me, a paper cup cooling by her elbow. Outside, people crossed the pavement in festival clothes, most of them carrying nothing more troubling than paper bags and plastic horns.

I had my phone open to the forwarding receipt. It was a plain dispatch acknowledgement, generated when I sent the annotated list to the festival logistics desk. The address named the subcontract that handled the desk’s deliveries. The receipt showed that the file had reached its queue. Sailer’s subcontract.

The list had started as a way to avoid missed handoffs. I had added the times, the marker, and which side of the partition could see it. I had put the useful details in one place so that anyone taking over could follow them.

“I thought the notes made the route safer,” I said.

The investigator looked at the screen, not at me. “The receipt tells us the subcontract received the list. It doesn’t tell us who opened it.”

“No,” I said. “But the details were there.”

Nora glanced from the phone to my face. “And now we change what we can. We don’t wait to find out who read it.”

She picked up her phone and called one of Eva’s volunteers. I heard only Nora’s half of the conversation: the affected handoff, the need to cancel it, the question of who could be helped tonight. She didn’t say anyone’s name. When the volunteer agreed to cover two recipients through a separate arrangement, Nora thanked them and ended the call.

“Two,” she said. “Not everyone. Not you.”

The word landed more heavily than it should have. My stomach tightened beneath the coffee I hadn’t wanted. I had eaten before coming; the food had done its ordinary work and nothing for the particular hollow that had begun to make itself heard again.

“I understand.”

“Do you?”

I looked at the blank message field on my phone. “I’m not asking you to put me first.”

Nora’s face softened, though not quite into a smile. “Then help me tell the others the handoff is cancelled. The notices need to go out before anyone sets off.”

“I can deliver them.”

She held my gaze for a moment. “Only to the people I give you. No extra stops because you think you’ve worked out who should know.”

“I’ll take the notices as written.”

“Good.” She began typing. “And you won’t have access to the separate arrangement. The two people being helped tonight have agreed to that between themselves and the volunteer.”

I nodded. It was not a punishment. It was a boundary that left the people involved with a choice.

The investigator leaned forward, tapping one finger against the receipt on my screen. “Can I have a copy of this? The original email too, if you still have it.”

“Yes.” I forwarded both to her, then watched the sent notification appear. I had spent days treating details as harmless when they sat in separate columns. I had made the columns meet.

Nora pulled a small stack of folded notes from her bag. Each was sealed. “These are the cancellation notices. You can deliver the ones marked for the public drop points. The rest I’ll handle by phone.”

I took the stack. The paper was warm from her bag. “I can do that.”

“I know.” She stood and adjusted the strap on her shoulder. “I have plans that don’t involve this table or any of you.”

“That sounds healthy,” the investigator said.

“It’s dinner,” Nora replied. “Let’s not make it aspirational.”

She paused beside me. For a second I thought she might say something about the route, or the fact that I had made it legible. Instead she touched the back of my chair, a brief, steady pressure.

“Eat something if it helps,” she said.

“It won’t help that part.”

“I know. Eat something anyway.”

Then she left, moving briskly into the crowd. I watched until the people outside folded around her, and then I put the notices in my coat pocket.

The investigator waited while I delivered them. I used only the points Nora had marked, leaving each sealed note where its recipient had agreed to collect it. No names on the outside. No messages added in my own hand. The last stop was a public bench near the old

handoff, where I left the envelope beneath the agreed edge and stepped away.

By the time I returned to the investigator, the evening had thickened around the festival grounds. We took up separate public positions near the old contact point. She stood beside a drinks stall with a clear view across the walkway. I sat on a bench opposite the lamp, far enough from the handoff not to become part of it. A low partition cut off the view from the public entrance; from where I sat, I could see the service approach and the patch of paving where the marker was usually placed.

We had agreed to wait through the original window, not to intervene unless somebody was in immediate danger. The investigator had shown me the subcontract driver's roster photograph beforehand. It was a straight-on image, clean enough to be useful. I kept my eyes on the approach and tried not to turn the people passing into a series of guesses.

The crowd pressed sound against the edges of everything. A brass band broke into a tune several streets away; the nearby stall's extractor fan rattled in uneven bursts. My hearing kept snagging on scraps—a laugh, a chair dragged across stone, a bicycle bell—and losing the line I was trying to follow.

I had not eaten since the café. The hunger was not dramatic. It was a steady insistence that made the smell of roasted onions feel like a personal insult. I pressed my hands together between my knees and focused on the square of paving.

A runner appeared from the service approach. I knew him only as the runner assigned to the contact; I had never learned his name. He slowed at the lamp and looked toward the public entrance before crossing to the marker place.

The usual pale cloth was not there. He took a narrow strip of green paper from his pocket and set it beneath the edge of the bench. Then he stood, empty-handed, and waited a moment.

The investigator's voice reached me from the drinks stall. "That's not the usual marker."

"No."

The runner left by the way he had come. He carried no bag, no parcel, nothing that might have held a blood delivery. I couldn't tell from his face whether he was frightened or merely tired; he was too far away, and the lamplight turned his features into pale planes.

I checked the time. "The handoff wasn't due yet."

"Not for another twelve minutes," the investigator said.

The driver came in from the service lane before the agreed time. I recognised him from the roster image as he crossed into the lamp's spill. He didn't approach the bench. He stopped at the edge of the open paving and looked first toward the green strip, then along the service approach.

My pulse rose. The driver turned his head toward the public entrance. His gaze travelled past the partition without finding me. He took out his phone and made a call.

The investigator didn't move from the stall. I stayed on the bench, hands locked together, while the call lasted less than a minute. The driver listened, said nothing I could hear, and put the phone away. He walked back into the service lane without touching the marker.

"That was early," I said.

"Yes."

"He saw the change."

"He looked at it." The investigator came no closer. "That's what we can say."

The words were careful, but her attention had sharpened. She took out her own phone and noted the time. I made myself do the same: the driver had arrived before the agreed handoff, the runner had

changed the marker, and the driver had called before leaving. We still had no location for the missing visitors.

The investigator sent the observations to her team. She did not follow the driver into the lane. There was no safe reason to turn a watched contact into a chase, and no evidence that he would lead us anywhere useful.

A gust pushed festival noise through the gap in the partition. I caught a burst of music, then lost the investigator's next words beneath the clatter of bottles at the stall.

"Sorry?"

"I said you should go home when we're done here." She lowered her voice. "You look exhausted."

"I can stay."

"You can. That isn't the same as being useful."

My first answer was that I could hear things she could not. The noise swallowed it before I spoke. I knew the limits of that argument: fatigue and hunger had already made the crowd a wall of unconnected sounds. I let the sentence go.

"I'll stay until the window closes," I said. "Then I'll leave."

She gave one short nod and returned to her post.

The old handoff remained empty. The strip of green paper lifted once in the breeze and settled back beneath the bench. I could smell food, wet wool, beer, and the faint iron trace of the marker's damp underside, none of it what my body wanted. I kept my attention on the service approach, but the driver had gone and there was nothing else to see.

When the window ended, the investigator crossed only as far as the edge of the public path. She looked at the marker without touching it, then took a photograph from where she stood.

“Surveillance of the contact point,” she said. “That’s the conclusion for tonight.”

I looked at the receipt still open on my phone. My annotations filled the screen in neat rows: time, marker, approach. Details intended to help the next person take over. The subcontract had received them. A driver had come early to the place they described.

“I gave them the route,” I said.

The investigator lowered her phone. I put mine away, and my stomach clenched hard enough to make me brace a hand against the bench.

She headed toward the festival office to report the observation. I remained under the public lamp until she was out of sight, hungry, the sealed cancellation notices gone from my pocket, and the old handoff watched by someone I could not see.

CHAPTER 6

A Seat Kept Empty

By morning, the pickup had become a fact with no destination.

The investigator had a time, a driver's photograph, and my account of the early arrival. Klara had the old photograph and the sense to keep it folded in its sleeve. I had the delivery notes I had helped make legible to the wrong people. None of us knew where the three visitors had gone.

We met beside the pin stalls, where the morning crowd moved around ropes and stacked crates. The stands were open, but the neighboring seller's chair was empty. A tray of enamel pins lay under a plastic cover, each little pretzel and beer stein catching the grey light.

The stallholder watched us approach. He was a broad man with a knit cap pulled down over his ears, and he kept one hand on the corner of the plastic cover as if we might try to lift it.

"I've already spoken to the festival office," he said.

"We're not here to ask you to repeat anything you told them," the investigator replied. She stopped on the public side of the stall. "We're looking for a vehicle you may have seen collecting your neighbor."

His hand tightened on the cover. "I didn't see anything worth reporting."

Klara took a half-step forward, then stopped before she crossed the line of stacked crates. "You don't have to tell us who else uses the route," she said. "Or who was expected where. If you saw a vehicle, you can describe the vehicle. If you didn't, we'll leave it there."

The stallholder looked from her to the investigator. "And my name?"

“That’s your decision,” the investigator said. “I can note that you prefer not to be identified in our working account. I can’t promise what a formal statement might require later.”

He let the cover go. “You people are very good at making a simple question sound expensive.”

“It can be,” Klara said. “That’s why you get to choose what you answer.”

The man studied her for a moment, then turned to straighten a row of pins that was already straight. “There was a little logistics cart. Not one of the big trucks. Electric, I think. It came down the lane from the east, just before the stalls shut.”

The investigator took out her notebook but did not open it. “Did you see it stop?”

“It stopped by the neighboring stand. The seller came out. They spoke. Then the seller got in.” He rubbed his thumb over the edge of a pin tray. “I thought it was a late stock run.”

“Did you recognize the driver?”

“No.”

“Could you describe them?”

“Not usefully. Cap, jacket. Festival was closing. Half the people on this lane had a cap and jacket.”

The answer came quick and a little sharper than the question. The investigator left it alone.

Klara’s gaze had settled on the stallholder’s hands, not his face. “Was there anything distinctive about the cart?”

“The side had a logo. Blue square, white lettering. Münchner Festlogistik. They use those carts for moving stock and rubbish.” He leaned on the table. “The left rear wheel was bad. It made a knocking sound every turn.”

The investigator opened her notebook. “Which way did it go?”

“Out through the service lane. West, toward the bakeries.” He paused, as if deciding whether to add something. “It didn’t look like anyone was forcing anybody. The seller climbed in on their own.”

I heard the small clack of a pin dropping against the tray. Or thought I did; a nearby stall was unloading a metal rack, and the sounds arrived overlapped. My shoulder had begun to stiffen beneath my coat. I shifted it, too quickly, and the old pull ran down my arm to the still-tender split in my palm.

“Thank you,” Klara said. “That’s enough to start with.”

The stallholder gave her a wary look. “You won’t put down who else was around?”

“No.” She glanced at the investigator, who gave a single nod. “Not unless you choose to tell us, and not for this account.”

He drew the plastic cover back over the pins. “Then that’s all I saw.”

We moved away without asking him to remember more. The cart, the damaged wheel, the direction. A seller choosing to climb in. It was a witness’s account, not a view into the cart or its destination. Still, it gave the missing person a last known movement that was not a blank patch on a map.

“West,” the investigator said as we reached the end of the row. “Toward the bakery loading bays.”

Klara tucked the photograph sleeve more securely beneath her arm. “And a supplier we can check against the festival roster.”

I looked back at the empty chair beside the pin display. It seemed too ordinary to have become a point on the route: a chair, a covered tray, a place where a person ought to have been selling souvenirs. I had spent the previous evening trying to turn details into control.

This time the detail belonged to the man who had seen it. We would have to ask for the next one.

The bakery sat beyond the service lane, its loading bay opening onto a narrow paved yard. Flour dust marked the black rubber strips around the rear door. Warm air pushed out each time someone went in, carrying yeast, burnt sugar, and the savoury smell of onions from a tray being wheeled toward the front counter.

I had eaten a roll on the walk over. It had softened the ache of an empty stomach and done nothing for the hunger underneath it. The scent of the bakery made my mouth water anyway. I kept my hands in my coat pockets so I would not reach for something I didn't want.

The investigator showed a festival credential at the loading entrance. The baker who came to meet us wore a flour-marked apron and had a pencil tucked behind one ear. He listened to her question while looking over her shoulder toward the yard.

"A small electric cart?" he said. "Yes. It waited here."

"When?"

"At closing that night. I can't give you the minute. I was finishing a delivery and the driver was on the phone." He pointed to a spot beside the wall, a few metres from the loading door. "There. The cart had a wheel making a racket. He left it and went off in a van."

"Did you see who drove the van?" the investigator asked.

"Only the driver. I was inside most of the time." He rubbed flour from his palm onto his apron. "The cart was still here when I came in before dawn. Later, Wegner's collected it."

"Wegner's?"

"Wegner Fahrzeugservice. They do the festival carts. A van came with a flatbed, and they took it away. I signed for the collection because the driver wanted somebody to confirm it had been left on the loading strip."

The investigator made a note. “Do you still have that collection record?”

“In the office. I can look.” He glanced at the open bay, where a worker was manoeuvring a rack of cooling trays. “But I’m not leaving that lot unattended.”

“We can wait,” Klara said.

The baker gave her a quick look, perhaps expecting a hurry from people who had arrived with an investigator and questions. Then he ducked back through the door. We stayed where we were, outside the loading bay. A forklift beeped twice somewhere beyond the next building; the sound cut through the traffic and left a brief ringing pressure in my ears.

I leaned against the wall. The cool brick took the heat from my shoulder. My stomach clenched at the smell of warm bread, then settled into its familiar, unsatisfied pull.

“You’re all right?” Klara asked quietly.

“I’m hungry.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

“My shoulder’s stiff. The crowd noise is worse than the bakery noise.” I rubbed my thumb along the seam of my pocket, avoiding the split palm. “I can follow the conversation.”

She nodded, accepting the answer without treating it as reassurance. The investigator was checking the time of the stallholder’s account against the delivery window on her phone. Neither of them asked me to listen for something they could not hear.

The baker returned with a narrow receipt book and a printed collection slip. He held them out to the investigator, who read the slip without taking it from him.

“Wegner’s collected the cart at 06:12,” she said. “Is that the time you saw it leave?”

“That’s the time on the form. The driver came before then, but I signed when he showed me the job number.” The baker tapped a line near the bottom. “This is mine. The cart had already been left here. I didn’t see it arrive.”

The distinction mattered. The stallholder had seen the cart leave with the seller. The baker had seen it waiting at the bakery and later watched the repair company collect it. His paper connected the vehicle to the shop, but not the cart’s entire journey.

Klara looked down at the pavement near the wall. “You said the wheel was damaged. Was anything left behind?”

The baker followed her gaze. “There was a piece of it in the gutter. I moved it off the drain so it wouldn’t block the water.”

He walked to the edge of the loading strip and pointed without bending. A dark, curved fragment lay among grit and scraps of cardboard, partly lodged against the gutter lip. One edge showed a pale break beneath its coating.

The investigator took a photograph from where she stood. “Would you mind if I looked at it?”

The baker considered the fragment, then stepped aside. “You can. Don’t pull the gutter apart. We need the drain.”

She crouched and examined the piece where it lay. I stayed behind the line of the loading bay. My first impulse was to close the distance and turn it over, to see whether the break matched anything in the roster or the cart’s likely make. I kept my hands in my pockets. There was nothing in the fragment that gave me a right to enter the yard or dismantle the place where it had fallen.

The investigator rose. “I’ll have the photograph and location recorded. We can ask the festival team to compare it with the cart.”

“Good,” the baker said. “I don’t want a crowd in the loading bay. We’ve got deliveries.”

“We won’t bring one.”

He handed her the collection slip long enough for her to photograph it, then took it back and returned it to the receipt book. He did not offer us the original. The paper remained his, with his signature on it.

“Wegner’s workshop is in the service block?” Klara asked.

“On the west side,” the baker said. “The garages behind the old produce hall. You can’t miss the sign.”

The investigator brought up a map on her phone. The bakery sat at the edge of a cluster of loading yards, vehicle depots, and repair units. She traced the westward route from the stalls to the bakery, then farther along the service lanes to the garage row.

“The cart was taken there,” I said.

“The cart was collected by Wegner’s,” the investigator corrected, still looking at the map. “That puts the repair shop on the trail. It doesn’t establish that the people went there.”

“I know.” I made myself look at the lines on the screen rather than fitting the empty spaces between them. “But the seller left in the cart, and the cart stopped here. The driver changed vehicles here. Then the cart went to the shop.”

“The baker saw the cart waiting, not the change itself,” Klara said. “He saw the driver leave in a van. The stallholder gives us the direction; the bakery gives us the stop and the collection.”

She said it without reprimand, setting the separate accounts beside each other as carefully as the slips of paper she handled for work. I felt the shape of a solution tug at me anyway. A cart, a change of vehicle, a westbound lane. Three missing people; one route. It was easy to make each line meet because I wanted them to.

The baker had returned to the loading door. He paused there, one hand on the frame. “If you’re going to ask Wegner’s about a

collection, do it through the public number. Don't turn up through the yard. They'll send you away, and I'll have to explain why you're in my loading bay."

"We'll use the public number," the investigator said.

She saved the map view and put her phone away. "I'll call Wegner's and ask them to confirm the collection against the job number."

The baker went back inside. The door swung shut behind him, and the warm smell of bread thinned in the open air.

I looked west, past the bakery roofs toward the service block. Wegner's garages were close enough to reach, their signs still too distant to read. The cart's broken wheel had left us a current trail through the loading yards; beyond them, the row of closed doors seemed broad enough to hide three absences.

CHAPTER 7

The Laundry Note

The service lane looked different once we had a direction to follow. It had not changed: the same shuttered stalls, the same strip of festival light laid across the paving. But I found myself measuring the gaps between doors as if one of them might open onto the answer.

It did not. The damaged cart wheel had given us a trail as far as the bakery loading bay, and the baker had seen the driver leave in a van. Beyond that, the service block was still a collection of garages and loading entrances on the investigator's phone. We had no reliable account of where the three missing people were, or whether they were hurt.

The neighboring stallholder had pulled the cover over his pins. Klara stood with the investigator beside his table, the old photograph tucked away. I kept my hands in my coat pockets. My shoulder had stiffened during the walk, and the tender split in my palm caught whenever my fingers curled. The lane's overlapping sounds kept breaking apart and recombining: metal shutters, a trolley, a burst of laughter from the public path. I could follow a voice if I looked at the person speaking. I could not make the whole place quiet by wanting it.

A man in a dark work jacket came down the lane carrying a laundry bundle against his hip. He stopped at the covered pin display and looked from the stallholder to the investigator.

"I was told to bring this here," he said. "To the stall beside the pin seller's."

The stallholder glanced at the bundle. "Who told you?"

"No one. It was in a return bundle from tonight's collection run." The man set it on the edge of the table. "There's a note inside."

The investigator moved a half-step closer, leaving the bundle where it was. “You found it yourself?”

“I was sorting the returns from that same run before I brought the bundle straight here. It was folded between two towels.” He looked at the investigator’s credential, then at me. His thumb worried the frayed hem of his jacket. “I didn’t open it.”

“Where did you collect the laundry?” Klara asked.

“From the service-block laundry building. The collection entrance is off the west lane, past the produce hall.” He pointed back the way he had come. “Not Wegner’s garage. It’s a different building.”

The investigator brought up the map again. The bakery loading bay lay east of the produce hall; the laundry building was farther along the service lane, inside the block we had been tracing. Two stops, not one place blurred into another.

“Tell us what happened there,” she said. “Only what you saw.”

The runner shifted the bundle to his other arm. “Tonight, on that run, a van came into the laundry yard. I was bringing the empty returns inside. A man brought a woman from the van to the washroom by the collection room. He waited outside the door. I didn’t speak to her.”

“You saw her face?”

“Briefly. She came out and crossed to the return bundles. I saw her fold something into one. Then the man took her back.”

“Did you see anyone else from the van?”

“No. Not clearly. I was inside by then.” He shook his head, as though the answer bothered him. “I didn’t see the other people. I can’t tell you who was in that vehicle.”

After the runner first said the bundle held a note, the investigator called the young man who had reported the translator missing. We waited briefly while the runner finished describing tonight’s

collection and what he had seen at the service-block laundry. The young man arrived before we asked him to authenticate the handwriting and private phrase, his arms folded tightly enough to press the coat sleeves into his palms. At the investigator’s nod, he stepped into the pool of light at the stall and left the bundle untouched.

“May I see the note?” he asked.

The runner glanced at the investigator. She nodded once. He opened the bundle just enough to lift out a folded sheet. On the outside, in slanted handwriting, was the companion’s name and the instruction *For the stall beside the pin seller*. He held it toward me.

I took the original. The paper was thin and creased twice, its edges softened by the towels. My fingers had become clumsy with the ache in my shoulder; I steadied the fold against the table rather than trying to flatten it in the air. Then I handed it directly to the investigator.

She slid it into a clear evidence sleeve and wrote the time and the runner’s name on the outside. Only after she had done that did she open the sleeve again, carefully lifting the page by its edges. The companion bent over the table. The stall lights caught the ink, not his face; I watched his eyes track the lines.

“That’s her handwriting,” he said. His voice thinned on the last word. “And the phrase is ours. We used it in our travel messages.”

The investigator looked up. “What phrase?”

“‘Leave the orange string loose.’ It means don’t tie down the return plan until we both agree.” The companion drew in a breath and let it out slowly. “She wrote it to me more than once. This is hers.”

The investigator turned the page so we could read it without taking it from her. The writing slanted uphill across the sheet.

*Service-block laundry, tonight. I am writing during a delay. I can see the other two; all three of us are alive here. The maintenance

worker is hurt and cannot move quickly. I heard Sailer say they will move us offsite before the next dawn unless Sepp attends the handoff at the usual pickup. Do not bring him there. Find another exit. The usual point is watched. Leave the orange string loose.*

I read it once, then again. On the second pass, the words *all three of us are alive* held my attention. The companion put one hand on the table, fingers spread, as if the empty space beside the note needed holding in place.

“She was at this building when she wrote it,” I said.

The investigator tapped the sleeve, not the page. “The runner places her at the collection room and saw her put the note in that return bundle. Her companion recognizes the hand and the phrase. The note reports the three of them alive here when it was written. It doesn’t tell us which room they’re in now.”

No one tried to make the distinction sound better than it was. The message gave us a building and a deadline, not a door to break through.

The companion kept looking at the note. “She says the maintenance worker is hurt.”

“Do you know how badly?” the investigator asked.

“No.” He swallowed. “She wouldn’t waste space telling me that unless it mattered. He can’t move quickly. That’s all I can give you.”

The investigator nodded and turned to her radio. “I’m sending the building and the before-dawn move to the team. They’ll need to plan for someone who can’t keep pace.” She gave the location in short, precise phrases, then listened to the reply.

The phrase *usual pickup* sat in my mind beside the photograph’s old arrangement: a place made visible to the right person and ordinary to everyone else. This was no longer a suggestion on paper. Someone had written that the point was watched, and Sailer was using Sepp’s attendance as the condition for delaying the move.

“We’re not asking Sepp to attend,” I said.

The companion looked up. “She asked for another exit.”

“I know.” I kept my eyes on the words, not on his hand braced against the table. “We’ll find one that doesn’t make her warning useless.”

The investigator slid the page back into its sleeve and sealed it. The original disappeared behind the clear plastic, but the message remained legible. She kept it in her hand while she made another call, then turned away from the stall and spoke quietly to the person on the other end.

The runner remained beside the table. He had stopped rubbing his jacket hem. “Is she getting out?”

“We’re working on it,” the investigator said when she ended the call. “You’ve given us what you saw. If you remember anything else, tell the officer whose number I’ll leave with you. Don’t go back to the building.”

He nodded. The stallholder pulled the laundry bundle closer to himself, careful not to disturb what remained inside. The runner looked once toward the west end of the lane, then left by the way he had come.

The investigator stepped away to coordinate with the extraction team, the original still in her custody. The companion stayed beside the stall. I asked if he wanted water. He shook his head, then changed his mind and took the bottle Klara offered. He drank once, slowly, and handed it back.

“I want them to know we’re not going to use the pickup point,” he said.

“They will,” the investigator answered from a few paces away. “We’re preparing the approach now.”

My phone showed a missed message from Eva. I called her. She answered before the second ring.

“Tell me you have something better than another cart,” she said.

“A note from the translator. A runner saw her at the laundry collection building in the service block. Her companion recognizes the handwriting and a private phrase. The note says all three were alive there when she wrote it. One is injured. Sailer plans to move them offsite before dawn unless Sepp comes to a handoff.”

Eva’s reply came without hesitation. “Then the rendezvous is finished. I’m moving the people who use that route away from it now.” I heard paper rustle, then a door close on her end. “The usual point was never a safe place once someone was watching it.”

“The note asks for another exit.”

“Police are preparing the extraction?”

“Yes. They have the building, not the room.”

“Good. I’ll keep the network clear of the pickup and tell no one to improvise a second meeting.” Her tone sharpened at the last sentence, not at me but at the problem. “An unplanned route is still a route. I won’t have people wandering into the same net from a different direction.”

I looked at the companion. He was listening, though he could only hear my side. “And Sepp?”

“He stays out of the handoff,” I said. “I won’t send him in.”

Eva was quiet for a beat. “I’m calling him myself. He can hear the news without becoming the price of it.”

She ended the call before I could thank her. It was a choice made elsewhere, with consequences I could not manage from this stall. I put the phone away.

The investigator came back to us. “The team has the service block and the transfer deadline. We’re checking the premises and preparing a police-supported approach. No one is going to the pickup point.” She looked to the companion. “If you remember any detail about the writing or the travel messages that changes how we read the note, tell me. For now, stay with Klara.”

The companion nodded. His gaze had gone to the empty chair at the pin stall, the one the missing seller should have been sitting in. He did not ask me to promise an outcome. I was grateful for that, and ashamed of how easily I might have offered one.

The investigator left with the original sealed in its sleeve. The stall lights shone through the plastic as she crossed the lane, then the page turned opaque against her coat. The building was no longer an empty shape on a map. Somewhere inside it, according to the note, three people had been alive when it was written. One could not move quickly. Before dawn, Sailer meant to move them again.

The route to the service block was clear enough to follow. The hours left to follow it were not.

CHAPTER 8

The Cart Route

The repair shop was squeezed between a shuttered drinks stall and a row of service doors, its sign nearly hidden by the festival banners. The investigator went in first. Klara followed with the concession plan folded under one arm; I stayed on the pavement with Nora while the crowd moved around us in bright, noisy currents.

My shoulder had gone stiff again. The split in my palm tugged when I flexed it, and the smell of hot onions from a nearby stand settled unpleasantly over the sharper, more insistent hunger beneath it. I had eaten earlier. That fact seemed to matter to everyone except my body.

The investigator came back out with a grey-haired man in a stained work apron. He carried a shallow metal tray. On it lay the broken wheel fragment from the cart.

“You brought the piece?” he asked.

The investigator nodded. “You recognize it?”

The man turned it over, thumb tracing a ridge in the rubber. “This came off the blue delivery cart. The split here is from the bracket, not the road. I repaired the other wheel on the same axle last week.” He looked at the fragment again. “You don’t forget a cart that comes back twice in three days.”

“Was it brought in by Sailer’s company?”

“It was booked under the company name.” He ducked back inside and returned with a receipt, folded lengthwise and softened at the creases. The date was two days earlier. “Late collection. They were supposed to pick it up before closing. Didn’t.”

The investigator read the line beneath the repair charge. “Collection address?”

The owner tapped it with one blunt nail. “That’s where the driver said it was going.”

I leaned close enough to read without taking the paper. The address matched the laundry collection building the runner had named. Same service block; same entrance off the west lane.

The investigator photographed the receipt and asked the owner to keep the original. He pressed it flat beneath the metal tray, as if it might try to leave.

“Is that enough?” he asked.

“It gives us a current link,” the investigator said. “We’ll take a copy and come back if we need a statement.”

The owner glanced at the fragment. “I’d rather you did. I’m not keen on being part of whatever that cart was carrying.”

“You don’t have to guess,” Klara said. Her voice was even. “Just tell them what you saw and what you recorded.”

He looked at her, then nodded once. The investigator made the copy, thanked him, and slid it into a folder. We stepped back into the lane.

Klara opened the concession plan against the side of a closed stall. The wind kept lifting one corner. She pinned it with her palm and followed the printed service lanes with a finger, checking the marked buildings against what we could see around us. I watched her work and felt the old impulse rise: align the photograph, the map, the route, make one clean shape out of them. I kept my hands in my pockets.

“The laundry entrance is here,” she said. “The repair address agrees with it.” She turned the plan a little to catch the light. “The old photograph helps with how a contact could be seen. It doesn’t put this building on the page.”

She didn’t look up to see whether I agreed. I looked at the little blocks printed along the lane and said nothing.

The investigator called the premises manager. He was waiting inside the service block, near a side entrance where the noise from the public walkway thinned to the rumble of carts and distant machinery. When he came out to meet us, he had a key ring in one hand and a flat folder under the other arm.

“I manage the block,” he said. “The laundry is on the west side. What’s happened?”

The investigator showed him her credentials and explained that a message from one of the missing visitors placed three people in the building and warned of a move before dawn. She did not show him the original note. He listened without interruption, then glanced at the service doors.

“There’s a storeroom in the basement,” he said. “Rented to Sailer’s company. It’s not part of the laundry tenancy.”

“Do you have the lease?”

“Here.” He opened the folder on the flat top of a nearby cart. His hands shook once as he sorted through the pages, then steadied when he found the right sheet. The investigator checked the company name against the repair receipt and asked him to confirm the storeroom number.

He did. His finger stayed on the line for a moment.

“There are occupancy conditions,” he said. “The service exit has to stay clear and operable. We had trouble with deliveries blocking it last month, so I put that in writing.”

He led us down the service corridor, stopping short of the basement stairs. The investigator went with him. Nora and I remained by the landing while Klara held the concession plan closed against her coat. From below came the smell of damp stone and cleaning fluid.

The manager returned with the investigator a few minutes later. His face had tightened.

“The exit is barred from inside,” he said. “A crosspiece across the door. It isn’t supposed to be secured that way.”

The investigator asked him to show the officers the access and the floor plan. He looked toward the basement again.

“I can do that.”

The officers had arrived while we were upstairs. The manager handed the plan to one of them and pointed out the service corridor, the basement stairs, and the exit. The officer checked each point against the drawing, then spoke quietly with the investigator. I heard only fragments: access, clear route, occupants, confirmation.

At the bottom of the stairs, the service door stood beyond a turn in the corridor. The public entrance was on the far side of the block, facing the broad lane where festival visitors drifted past in both directions. A bare lamp over that entrance made the threshold plainly visible from the lane’s open end. From the service side, the same doorway vanished behind a partition.

The note said the usual pickup point was watched. I remembered the old photograph’s one-sided view: visible from one approach, ordinary from another. I did not need the photograph to tell me where a person crossing that bright public entrance could be seen.

“That entrance is exposed from the lane,” I said. “If that’s the point they’re watching, anyone coming through it will be visible before they reach the stairs.”

The investigator followed my gaze, then turned to the officer. They spoke together for a few seconds. The officer studied the floor plan and indicated the service access. He made the decision; I watched his pencil move over the paper.

The manager unlocked the service door. It opened only a few inches before the bar caught against it. The metal gave a small, hard knock.

He let go of the handle. “That’s not how I left it.”

The officer looked at him. “Don’t touch it again.”

“I won’t.” The manager stepped back, keys clenched in his palm.

The sound brought my attention sharply to the door and then scattered it. A trolley clattered overhead; someone laughed in the public lane; from farther along the corridor came a radio squawk. I tried to separate them and got each noise at once. The hunger had made the edges of everything too distinct, not clearer. I pressed my thumb into the tender seam of my palm until the sting gave me one thing to attend to.

Nora had moved a little apart from us, phone to her ear. She listened, gave an address, then waited through a pause.

“Yes, that’s the one,” she said. “He may arrive unable to keep pace. I’ll send the details through the officer, not the open channel.” She ended the call and looked at the investigator. “There’s a staffed receiving place for the injured visitor. They know to expect someone from the extraction. I’m not going to assess him in the corridor.”

The investigator nodded. “I’ll pass it on.”

Nora put her phone away. “If he’s worse than the message suggests, the people bringing him out can make that call.” Her eyes met mine briefly. It wasn’t a rebuke. It was a boundary stated once, and I let it stand.

My own phone vibrated. Eva’s name appeared on the screen. I answered and moved close enough to the wall to hear her over the lane.

“We have the block,” I said. “A basement storeroom rented by Sailer’s company. The exit’s barred contrary to the occupancy conditions. Police are checking the approach.”

“And the handoff?”

“Not happening.”

“Good.” I heard the brisk scrape of paper at her end. “Sepp knows enough to stay away from it. I’m keeping him away from the decoy point and out of anyone’s line of sight.”

I looked toward the public entrance, where the lamp shone over people who had no reason to look twice at it. “He’s not coming here?”

“No.” Eva’s answer was immediate. “He won’t be part of Sailer’s bargain.”

I had no useful reply. I could hear her turning pages, arranging something beyond my reach.

“The officers have the premises plan,” I said. “They’ll choose the route.”

“As they should.” Her voice softened by a fraction. “You stay where they put you, Benjamin.”

The call ended. I pocketed the phone.

The investigator was speaking with the lead officer. The manager had given them the tenancy record and was answering questions about the basement’s ordinary access. Klara stood beside the plan, one hand resting on its fold. She had not taken out the photograph.

A van turned into the west lane.

It was a plain replacement vehicle, clean enough to look recently collected and practical enough to belong among the block’s deliveries. It rolled past the laundry entrance without stopping, then slowed near the service access. The driver looked toward the basement door and continued to the far end of the lane.

Nobody called out. The officer nearest the plan watched the van disappear behind the produce hall. The investigator checked the time against the message, then met the lead officer's eyes.

The predicted window had opened.

The officers gathered close to the floor plan. One asked the manager to point out the internal turn again. Another checked the service access with him. The replacement van remained out of sight, somewhere beyond the block. There was no certainty about who was inside it, or whether it would return. There was enough to stop treating the deadline as distant.

The lead officer looked at me. "You'll stay at the support point with the manager. When the route is cleared, help the evacuation team with the injured visitor. Don't enter the storeroom."

"I'll stay here."

My body had already leaned toward the stairwell. I felt the pull in my shoulder as I shifted, and the hunger narrowed my attention to the dark opening below. I made myself step back from it. The officer turned to Nora and confirmed the receiving destination. She gave him the details without adding more than the team needed.

Across the corridor, the service door waited behind its narrow gap. From the public lane the other entrance was all light and open sightline. Here, the wall broke the view before anyone could see the stairs. The officers chose the service route and took their positions. No one asked me to lead them.

The lead officer lifted a hand, listened to his radio, and gave a short nod.

The room was identified. The route was chosen. We were ready to go in.

CHAPTER 9

The Bright Stall

The manager turned the key while the officers held the basement door against the bar. Metal scraped. The door gave an inch, stopped, then yielded with a bang that rang along the corridor.

“Clear the stairs,” the lead officer said.

The manager stepped back. Two officers went down first, shields forward, their voices clipped by the turn in the passage. I stayed at the support point with the manager, as instructed. My shoulder pulled when I shifted my weight. I kept my hands still.

The minutes narrowed to radio static, shoes on stone, and the occasional clatter from somewhere below. Hunger made every sound stand apart and press at me. I fixed on the service door’s narrow gap and tried not to make the noises mean more than they did.

A voice called that the route was clear. An officer came up first, then the translator, moving stiffly but under her own power. She stopped beside the manager. From there she could see down the service corridor toward the protected exit; the public entrance was hidden behind the fixed partition.

“That’s the van,” she said, pointing past the exit. “The replacement. It’s the one Sailer said would take us after the change.”

The officer beside her looked in the direction she indicated, then spoke into his radio. I heard a reply, not the words. The translator’s gaze shifted along the lane, beyond the turn.

“And Sailer?” the officer asked.

“Near the bright entrance.” The translator raised her voice to carry over the movement below. “The man in the dark coat. I saw him from the exit.”

I couldn't see either man yet. From where I stood, the partition kept the public entrance out of sight. The officer sent someone ahead and told the rest of us to hold.

The evacuation team came up next, bringing the maintenance worker in his wheeled chair. Rike walked close beside him, her bright apron still on, one hand near the chair's handle. I moved to the worker's uninjured side as the team guided him over the threshold.

The officer nearest us glanced at the worker. "Do you want her to come with you?"

The worker looked up at the pin seller. His face had gone grey under the corridor light. He nodded. "Yes. If she wants to."

"I do," she said, and took hold of the handles again.

The officer gave a short nod. No one asked either of them to explain the choice. I supported the worker's uninjured shoulder when the chair jolted over a seam in the floor. My own shoulder pulled hard in answer. I kept my grip steady.

A phone rang somewhere behind me. The officer steering the chair spoke into his radio, giving the receiving team the worker's condition and our route. He kept the chair moving. The pin seller stayed at the worker's side.

We passed the fixed partition together. The corridor opened toward the service exit, and the view along the lane cleared.

Only then did I see Sailer.

He stood at the illuminated public entrance, several dozen metres away, his dark coat sharply outlined beneath the bare lamp. Festival visitors streamed across the lane between us. Beyond him, the plain replacement van waited near the curb. Its engine idled. A security guard had stepped into its path.

Sailer looked toward the service exit. Leonie, now beyond the threshold with an officer, lifted her arm and pointed him out again.

The officer steering the chair gave the receiving team our position over the radio. He kept the chair moving. The pin seller walked beside the worker as they continued toward the receiving point.

Across the lane, Sailer turned away from the guard and set off toward the crowded festival edge.

Eva's voice came from a security radio near the service door. "That's him. I've alerted the nearby team. Keep the lane clear; don't let the van pull out."

The guard at the van shifted to block its driver's view of the exit. Two more security staff came in from the stall row. Sailer changed direction once, angling between a lit pretzel stand and a booth hung with strings of coloured pins. The lamps made him easy to follow, though the crowd kept cutting across my view. Each time he vanished behind a shoulder or a raised beer glass, he reappeared in another bright patch.

He reached the mouth of the lane and put a hand up to a uniformed guard.

"Routine collection," he said. "My company's vehicle is there."

The translator called from the protected exit, loud enough to carry. "That's Sailer. He told us we wouldn't leave until Sepp was delivered."

Sailer's hand dropped. He tried to turn into the crowd.

The guards closed the space before he could. One took his arm; another stepped between him and the van. Sailer twisted once, not enough to break free, and his coat pulled open. A security guard raised a small body camera, keeping it trained on his face and hands.

"You can't detain me," Sailer said. "I'm collecting property."

The guard held his arm. "Then why did you tell them they couldn't leave until Sepp was delivered?"

“The vehicle doesn't leave until Sepp comes,” Sailer said. “That's the collection arrangement. I said nothing about keeping anyone here.”

The camera’s red light stayed on. The guards held him beside the stall entrance, in full view of the lane. I could not hear what the radio operator said next, but the officer beside the chair touched his earpiece and nodded.

“Police are taking custody,” he told us. “Keep moving.”

The worker had watched the exchange without turning his head. When the chair bumped over a seam in the paving, he winced and closed his eyes. The pin seller leaned down to say something I couldn’t hear. He opened them again and nodded.

At the receiving point, a responder took the chair handles and checked that the worker was settled before asking whether he wanted the pin seller to accompany him. He said yes. She answered, “I’m staying for now,” and went with the chair through the open doors.

The translator remained with the investigator and the officers. She had identified the van and Sailer; now she gave her account while the investigator took notes. I stood far enough away not to hear every word. The lane remained busy, its light and movement a poor place to sort voices. My shoulder had begun to stiffen where I’d supported the chair.

A little later, the pin seller made a phone call from the corridor outside the receiving room. She kept the worker’s chair beside her. I heard her say, “I’m with him. He’s out. I’ll call again when I know more.” Then she ended the call and tucked the phone away.

The investigator asked each visitor for an initial account separately. I stayed near the door, where they could see me without having to speak over me.

The translator went first. She identified Sailer from the public entrance and said the van was the replacement vehicle Sailer had

described for the transfer. She repeated the demand that Sepp be brought to them before the visitors could go. Her voice was level, but she kept rubbing one thumb across the other as she spoke.

The pin seller spoke next, without looking at the translator's notes. "It was before the van came. Not after. I heard the engine while he was still talking." She paused, then added that she had chosen to stay with the worker when the officers came up.

The worker gave his account from the wheeled chair. He had heard the demand through the storeroom door from a different position. His voice thinned with effort, and the responder stopped the interview when his breathing grew uneven. The investigator put down her pen.

"Enough for now," she said. "You can continue later if you choose."

He nodded, and the pin seller moved the chair back a little from the doorway.

The messages gathered during the investigation were brought over after the separate accounts had been taken. The investigator compared the relevant pickup messages with what each visitor had said: the threatened transfer and the demand for Sepp. She marked the correspondence without asking the three of them to combine their memories into a single statement.

The security guard's recording was added to the file. It captured Sailer's attempt to leave, his claim that he was collecting property, and his own words about Sepp. The recording's red light had stayed on as the guards held him in view of the lane.

By then, police had arrested Sailer. Eva told the investigator that Sepp had stayed away from the handoff. His document had not been taken or brought to the block.

The worker's chair rolled toward the receiving room, the pin seller walking beside it because he had asked and she had agreed. I moved out of their way. The rescue could get them clear of that room. It

could not give them back the hours in it, or make the choice to trust anyone simple again.

CHAPTER 10

A Route with an End

By the time the police finished taking statements, the temporary rooms smelled of damp coats, vending-machine coffee, and the sharp disinfectant someone had used on the corridor floor. Dawn had turned the windows the colour of old paper. The maintenance worker slept in a chair with his injured arm supported across his lap. The pin seller sat nearby, her apron folded over one knee. Nobody had asked her to stay. Nobody had asked her to go.

Nora stood at the table with a phone tucked to her ear, writing down a name and an address on the back of a festival programme. She had already spoken with the receiving team about the worker's follow-up. Now she was checking that the appointment would not be made for a time he could not manage.

"He says mornings are worse," she told the person on the phone. "Then don't put him down for eight." She listened, eyes on the worker. "Good. Ask him before you move it again."

When she ended the call, she turned the programme toward him. "They'll contact you this afternoon to set a time. You can tell them what works. This isn't a summons."

He examined the writing, then nodded. "I'll answer."

"Excellent. A revolutionary approach to appointments." Nora capped the pen and left it beside him.

His mouth twitched. The pin seller leaned forward, as if to check that he was all right, then stopped herself. He saw the movement and gave her a small nod. She settled back, hands resting on the folded apron.

Nora put the phone away. "That's as far as I can take it."

"You've done enough," I said.

She gave me a look that made the word enough seem to have several meanings. My split palm throbbed under its dressing. My shoulder had gone rigid from holding it too still, and the hunger had been there all night, low and persistent, turning every trace of coffee into a sour promise.

“I have a shift,” she said. “And I’m going home first to change. I’m not staying here to supervise the building.”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

“No. You only look as if you’re about to ask the walls.”

The maintenance worker let out a quiet breath that might have been a laugh. Nora’s expression softened, but she was already gathering her things.

Nora showed him the agreed follow-up note; he read it and said, “That’s right.”

She put the programme in her bag.

At the door she paused beside me. “You should arrange your own follow-up. Not through me between shifts.”

“I know.”

“And eat something, if you can.”

“I did.”

“Then you know I mean the other thing.” She did not wait for me to pretend I didn’t. “I’ll call when I’m off. If I’m awake.”

“I’ll manage.”

“That wasn’t what I said.” She squeezed my good arm once, brief and warm, and went.

The door shut behind her. The room did not become quieter; the radiator knocked, a trolley rattled down the hall, and somewhere outside a delivery lorry backed up with three sharp beeps. But I

noticed the space Nora had left, and how quickly my mind tried to fill it with another task.

Rike unfolded her apron. “I need to get back to the stall.”

The worker stirred. “You don’t have to—”

“I know.” She stood and checked that he could see her. “I’m going to recover my stock. Then I’m going home. If you want me to come back later, call me. If you don’t, don’t.”

He looked at her for a moment. “I’d like you to call.”

“I can do that.” She tucked the apron under her arm. “I’m not promising to sit here all day.”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

“Good. We’re learning.”

Her smile lasted just long enough to make the words kind. She asked the officer by the door whether she could retrieve the stock with an escort. He checked the time, then said someone could take her as soon as the investigator had finished with the translator.

The translator was still at the other end of the room, speaking with the investigator. I could hear pieces of her statement whenever the corridor noise dipped: the van, the demand, the promise that they would not be released until Sepp came. Her voice stayed level. Her hands did not. She rubbed one thumb across the knuckle of the other, again and again, as if testing a rough edge.

The investigator closed her notebook and looked toward the pin seller, who was waiting by the door with her apron tucked under her arm.

“I’ll sign what you wrote, but I won’t carry messages again,” Leonie said.

The investigator opened the notebook once more. “You mean you won’t work as a courier?”

“I mean I won’t carry messages,” the translator said. She looked down at her hands. “Not for Sepp. Not for anyone who says the route is safe because it used to be.”

The translator turned the notebook so she could read the statement. She took her time and changed one phrase. The investigator entered the correction, then handed the statement back to the translator to check.

The translator signed the corrected version.

The pin seller raised her apron slightly. “They’re ready.”

The translator looked at it, then at the open door. For a second I thought she might offer to go with her. Instead, she gave a small shake of her head.

“You go,” the translator said. “I’ll get my own things.”

The pin seller nodded and left with the officer. The translator watched until the door swung closed, then put her signed statement into the investigator’s folder herself.

By midmorning, the worker had been moved to another room where he could rest without people crossing in front of him every few minutes. He said he wanted to answer the follow-up call alone. Rike returned for her stock and stayed long enough to tell him she had recovered it all except a box of enamel pins nobody could locate. She would not leave her stall open another day, she said, but she would call him that evening.

He asked if she wanted him to keep the box if it turned up.

“Only if you don’t charge me storage,” she said.

“I’ll consider a reasonable rate.”

She laughed, and for the first time since the service-block door opened, the sound seemed to belong to her rather than to the corridor.

Then she took her apron and went. The translator left separately, after giving the investigator a number where she could be reached for any further statement. She did not offer a second number or a future errand. The worker chose to stay until the receiving team called. Their choices did not make what had happened smaller. They made what came next theirs.

I was still hungry when the room emptied around me. A paper cup of broth sat untouched on the table. I had tried it because someone had put it there and because Nora had told me to eat. It had warmed my hands and done nothing for the ache beneath my ribs.

Eva arrived shortly before noon. She stood in the doorway long enough to take in the vacant chairs and the paper cup.

“You look dreadful,” she said.

“I’ve had a restful night.”

“You’ve had a night. There’s a difference.” She set a folded note on the table. “A volunteer has offered to meet you this afternoon. They made the arrangement directly, not through the festival stop.”

“Do they know the route is closed?”

“They know the old arrangement is closed. They chose a different place and a time. You may accept or refuse. They may change their mind.”

I had spent the hours since the rescue trying to turn the route into a problem with a clean fix: remove the exposed detail, move the handoff, warn everyone who might use it. But a warning could become another list. A new list could become another map. I took the note then, careful not to unfold it while Eva was watching.

“Thank you.”

“Thank them if you see them.”

The meeting was in a small room above a café, away from the festival grounds. The volunteer had chosen it and was already there

when I arrived. They were an adult I had met only briefly before, someone who had once offered help without making a promise of permanence. They gave me time to sit down and time to say no. I accepted.

Afterward, the hunger loosened its grip enough for the room to come back into focus. My shoulder still hurt. The split in my palm pulled when I flexed my fingers. I was not restored, and I had not earned the right to be less careful. I thanked the volunteer and left when they said they had somewhere else to be.

By the time I met Eva again, the afternoon had begun to fade. Sepp had chosen the place: a quiet café near a tram stop, with a front window facing the street and a second door opening onto a narrow courtyard. He was seated with his back to the wall. A plain envelope lay on the table in front of him.

Eva took the chair opposite him. I sat to his left, leaving the envelope between us. Sepp's hands stayed on either side of it.

"You brought the original," Eva said.

"I did."

"May I inspect the signed limits?"

He looked from her to me, then opened the envelope. He removed a few pages, kept the rest inside, and turned the top sheet toward Eva. "These. You can read them here."

Eva did not reach for the paper until he nodded. Then she drew it closer and read in silence. The café grinder started behind the counter, drowning out the tram bell outside. I watched the door instead of trying to hear what the machine concealed.

When the grinder stopped, Eva was still reading. She traced a line with one finger, not touching the ink. "This authority is limited to the arrangements named here."

"It says that," Sepp replied.

“And the signatories can challenge its use beyond those arrangements.”

“It says that too.”

She looked up. “Brandt has been treating the beds, transport, and donor access as if they were his to assign.”

“He has been assigning them,” Sepp said. “That’s why I kept this.”

Eva returned to the page. “These limits are enough to begin a formal challenge. They won’t settle every claim he may make.”

“I didn’t bring them to settle everything.” Sepp held out his hand. Eva returned the sheet at once. He placed it back in the envelope and folded the flap over, but did not seal it. “The original stays with me.”

“Yes,” Eva said.

“What happens now?” I asked.

“Now the challenge goes to the people who signed the limits,” Eva said. “They’ll have to decide whether they’re willing to use them.”

“And Brandt?”

“He’ll have the chance to answer.” Her tone made clear that a chance was not the same thing as a reprieve. “We don’t have a conclusion yet.”

Sepp slid the envelope inside his coat. “I’m not staying in the festival district tonight.”

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Somewhere I chose.” He said it without challenge, but the words put a boundary around the answer. “Eva knows how to reach me if there’s a real need.”

Eva inclined her head. She did not ask him to say where.

Sepp looked at me. “I should tell you about my brother before I ask. He worked on surveys.”

“Winter records, boundary work, the sort of jobs that leave marks in offices long after the people are gone,” he said. His thumb rubbed the envelope’s edge beneath his coat. “I want to know what survives of his survey history—not what someone says it means, but what was recorded, when, and by whom.”

I felt the old reflex rise—the wish to make a list, assemble a timeline, ask for every name before the conversation had ended. I let it pass without speaking.

“What would you want me to do?” I asked.

“Start with the records I can show you. If we find another source, we decide together whether to use it.”

Eva watched me over the rim of her cup. I kept my eyes on Sepp.

“All right,” I said. “When?”

“December. The second Tuesday, if that still works for you.”

I checked my phone. “I can be here at six.”

“Here,” he said. “Same table, if it’s free.”

“That’s specific enough.”

“It should be.”

He stood, leaving the envelope under his coat and the untouched coffee on the table. At the courtyard door he looked back once, not to ask us to follow. Eva remained seated. I let him choose the distance to the exit.

“Thank you for reading it,” he told her.

“Thank you for letting me.”

He nodded and went through the door.

The festival was still running somewhere beyond the café, loud enough that its cheer reached us in scattered bursts. On the table between Eva and me, the cup Sepp had left was cooling.

I entered the appointment in my calendar: Tuesday, six o'clock. Beside it I wrote only what Sepp had asked me to bring—nothing yet.

For tonight, the festival case was over. In December, if Sepp still wanted me there, we would begin with what he chose to show.

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.

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