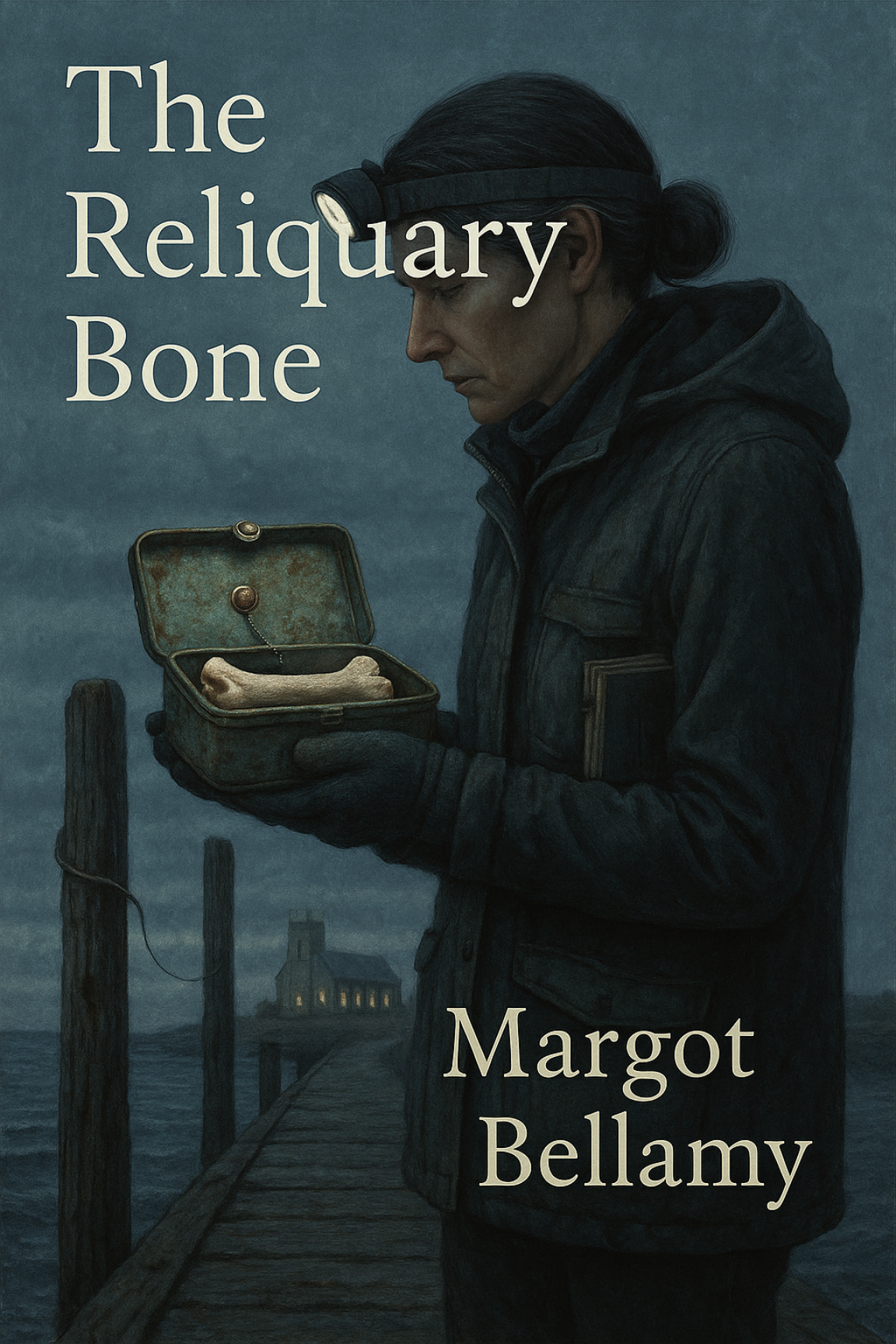


The Reliquary Bone

A detailed illustration of a person with dark hair tied back, wearing a dark, heavy jacket and a headlamp. They are holding a small, open, rusted metal case in their gloved hands, revealing a single, long, light-colored bone inside. The person is standing on a wooden pier or dock, looking down at the bone with a focused expression. In the background, a small, lit-up church or chapel is visible on the horizon under a dark, cloudy night sky. The overall mood is mysterious and somber.

Margot
Bellamy

The Reliquary Bone

by Margot Bellamy

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Chapter 1

Stone Niche

The first flake of lime fell with a small, decisive sound, less a crumble than a release. The work lamp made a hard oval on the wall where the seam in the plaster had been chased with pencil earlier that morning. The men had peeled back coats that smelled of wet wool and old smoke and hung them on the sacristy pegs. Their boots left a damp track across the stone. Cécile stood near the door, eyes on the vertical fissure the foreman had traced with a gloved finger.

He set the bit to the wall and let the rotary hammer find its rhythm. Not fast. The point worked through the top layer, a fine, pale powder mixing with the damp in the air. The sacristy had its usual smells, candle wax long cooled in votive cups, linen dried on racks, the metallic trace of old hinges that needed oil. Today there was lime dust as well, a chalkier note that caught in the throat. The second worker held a pan to catch what the vibration released. A thin hairline widened. The foreman cut the motor, tested a chisel, and eased it into the seam.

The panel did not resist as much as he had expected. Someone had sealed it to hold, not to resist the century. Mortar fractured along a neat boundary, the kind set by a mason who knew where to leave a margin for later. The last wedge of stone loosened with a muffled click. It came forward in his hands as the mortar released under steady pressure. For an instant there was an absence where the wall had always been. Then the oval beam entered the recess and revealed the interior.

Cécile did not move closer. She had counted keys before the men arrived and had put two aside, one on the ribbon she wore around her neck, one on the hook above the desk. She watched the foreman lean in,

his shoulders narrowing as the cavity limited his movement. The beam ran along the rear stones, smoothed by hand once, long ago, then caught on a dull squareness left deeper. The foreman's hand reached and closed around something light for its volume.

When the tin came free, the sound that came from inside it was dry and hard, an audible rattle that changed pitch when he shifted his grip. No give as if there were cloth inside to mute it. Hard on hard. The foreman drew it all the way out. She saw it clearly now: rectangular, a seam along the top edge, the metal surface eaten with pits where corrosion had made craters, a hinge at one side that had not failed. The foreman glanced toward her with a question he did not voice.

"Put it there," she said, her tone the one she used when people were too quick to reach for old linens. She crossed to the small table under the sacristy window and pulled a folded cotton cloth from the drawer, the kind used for polishing brass candlesticks. She shook it once and smoothed it over the tabletop. The men tracked her movements; the foreman followed and set the tin down carefully. It made the sound again as it touched wood, contents striking the metal interior. The second worker took an involuntary half-step back, caught himself, and pretended to adjust the lamp.

"That's been in there a long time," the younger man said, then hesitated. "Depuis, " He broke off, not looking at her. The older man cleared his throat, rough from years of cold air.

"On n'aurait pas dû rouvrir aujourd'hui," he said finally. "Avec la pluie, les gens..." He let it hang, not naming the people or the reasons. Someone would go home and tell someone else that a thing had been found. Something that rattled with a dry shift in tone.

Cécile kept her eyes on the tin. The seam along the lid had swelled with oxidation, blistering in places, dipping in others. The hinge pins were intact, but the clasp's left edge showed a slight outward flare where someone had once pried too quickly. She placed her palm flat on the

table's margin as if to fix a boundary for the object itself.

"No one is going to tell anyone anything yet," she said. She did not raise her voice. "You will go to lunch and talk about the scaffold and the handrail and the price of screws. You will not talk about this." The way she said "this" changed the men's posture.

The foreman nodded. His hand, steady by habit, had a tremor from the rotary hammer that had not yet worked itself out. The younger man shifted, one boot sole squeaking on the damp stone. He shot a look at the wall where the niche, now open, held only its shadow and a scatter of lime on the sill.

"Il y en a qui vont penser, " he began, and stopped. The summer everyone avoided naming was there with them. No need to say the boy.

Cécile turned toward the corridor and her coat on the peg. She did not put it on. She took the phone from the inside pocket and pressed the contact who actually answered when she called. The line clicked.

"Gagnon," she said. "Yes. You said if we found anything, call you first. We have a tin from a closed recess under the sacristy. In it, there are, it's not empty. Yes. Understood. I'm requesting the external anthropologist. Dr. Calder, the one you've already cleared. Today if the river allows."

On the other end, an ordinary voice agreed in the register of people who understood that every word spoken now established a record later. Cécile glanced at the window. Freezing rain tapped, not quite rain, not yet ice. The light the foreman had brought to the wall made a sharp pool on the floor, bright enough to see the dust in the air.

"The ferry master will decide," she said. "We'll keep the sacristy closed until she arrives. Yes. With you present." She ended the call and slid the phone back into the inside pocket.

"We'll wait for her," she said to the men. "We will not move it again. We'll not open it. We will not pray over it. It is an object. It will be treated with respect."

She took the key from the ribbon and used it, the old lock sliding into place with a sound she knew as well as her own breathing. She kept the key in her hand for a moment after the door closed, palm warming cold brass, then looped the ribbon back over her head. She felt the weight settle against her sternum.

When they stepped out into the nave to shrug on their coats, the young man paused and listened to the rain on the windows. It had thickened. He said nothing; he pulled his cap down and went out ahead of the foreman. The door closed. Cécile stood alone for two heartbeats, eyes on the covered table and the tin that had been hidden behind the wall. Then she turned off the work lamp and left it where it stood. She did not want anyone bringing a light to the niche before the right person arrived.

By late afternoon, the ferry came in at a slower angle than usual, the captain making an adjustment for the surface slick of freezing rain that was becoming something else. Moira stood outside despite the weather and held the rail with a gloved hand. Her silvering dark hair was caught in a low knot, flattened by sleet; she kept a reserved line at the rail. Salt had marked her boots. Had she been earlier in her career, she would have watched the town and made a note about the sort of place that built a church on its highest point. She had done that enough to know it had no practical value. Still, she marked the east bluff out of habit, the sharp break where the ground dropped to the shoreline, and the church at its lip, the rectory's roofline across the lane, and the straight line of the south jetty. Rope slapped against a mooring ring with a sound that was regular, then not, as wind shifted.

Her field notebook was in her parka pocket, the cover bent at a corner from use. She did not take it out yet; it was a tool she preferred to produce at the moment it ceased to be ordinary. She mapped the sites: church, rectory, municipal hall, grocery, jetty, landing. She estimated distance, line of sight, and walking times. Any case made itself easier if the places where conversations could occur fit into a pattern of movement that respected weather.

When the crewman dropped the ramp, the slap sounded duller than on dry days. The small crowd on board shifted forward with the practiced care of people who had done this for years. Moira stayed last. Her boot sole tested the ramp and found the threshold more adhesive than it looked. Cold soaked through the knit of her fingerless gloves. She did not resent it. Cold kept people indoors and conversations shorter.

Cécile was visible without announcement. Not many people wore a ribbon for their keys. She stood with her weight evenly set, not the posture people took when they were here to receive visitors for coffee, the kind reserved for times when things found in walls had the potential to rearrange how days were going to go.

"Dr. Calder," she said, not making it a question, not making it warm. "Merci d'être venue."

"Madame Gagnon," Moira said, and let the corners of her mouth move just enough to show she had heard the courtesy. They walked toward a small car. The rain rattled against the windshield in fine needles. The wipers struggled and then aligned their speed with what was falling.

They did not talk about the weather. They did not talk about the ferry.

"You know what was found," Cécile said after the first turn, eyes on the road.

"I know only that there is a container removed from a closed recess under the sacristy," Moira said. The sliding of her language into careful terms gave her something to put her hands on. Containers. Recesses. She did not commit to the word reliquary until it mattered.

She watched the landscape with the other part of her attention. The church stood ahead on the rise. The rectory's roof line across the lane gave her orientation; the distance between them was a few strides. On the branch road to the right, a modest building with municipal posted beside the door would have a noticeboard; she would find it useful later. On the left, a narrow road with churned gravel led down toward the south jetty

she had seen from the ferry. The river held a dull light.

"We have it in the sacristy," Cécile said. "On a table. Covered." She hesitated. "It rattled when they moved it."

Moira did not ask for more; the detail she had been given was sufficient to produce a plan. A rattle indicated loose, hard contents, bone or metal or ceramic, unbuffered. If there was cloth, it had degraded or was insufficient to line the interior. The sound made people think of teeth in a jar if they were inclined to dramatize. She was not.

They turned up the last incline to the church. Moira watched as the rectory sat revealed across the lane, close enough for one person to stand at one doorway and speak to a person at the other without stepping into the weather. A discreet advantage that institutions preferred. The car stopped and they stepped out. Rain struck the exposed skin of Moira's face in pinpoints that stung and then faded.

Inside the small vestibule a noticeboard held an A4 page with a laser-printed header: RENOVATION UPDATE, with Thursday's date below, a time in the early evening, and a list of agenda items. Plaster repair. Heat exchange unit. Temporary closure of sacristy workspace. Moira read quickly, as if the letters could change under her. They did not.

Cécile saw her look. "We had planned to talk about expenditures and timelines," she said. "We will still do that. We will not discuss what you are here to see before the proper time."

The key ribbon made a soft sound when it moved against cloth. Cécile turned the key in the sacristy lock and stepped back. She did not enter first. Moira registered that and paused at the threshold the way she always did, a courtesy to a place with strict boundaries. She stepped in only when Cécile inclined her head once.

The sacristy was small, built for function. A radiator ticked under the window, not enough to warm the room, only enough to reduce damp. The table stood where it would not invite casual use, against the wall opposite the vesting cabinet. The cloth Cécile had used to cover it was clean and

unfringed; it did not belong to any ritual. Moira's eyes went to the corner where scaffolding had pressed its square foot into the floor; the wall had a clean-edged rectangle darker than its surroundings where the panel had been.

"We have not opened it," Cécile said. "We have not moved it since."

"Good," Moira said. "If we are lucky, any residue will still be in place." From her pocket she set her field notebook on the nearest chair, within reach. She did not open it yet. From the outer pocket of her bag she removed a small light and a pair of nitrile gloves and placed them beside the table, not touching the cloth.

"I will look first," she said. "No sampling, no removal. Photographs and notes, then we will decide with Sergeant Mercier what comes next." She kept her voice even and left the extra words inside her. If. If the weather shifted. If the ferries stopped. If the parish meeting flowered into questions.

Cécile gave a single nod, not agreement, not yet. The key ribbon lay calm against her coat, but the hand that touched it was not idle.

Moira pulled the cloth back a measured length. The tin lay in the centre, the way a practical person sets a heavy thing to avoid edge strain. If a story came attached to it in this place, it was not going to lead her anywhere she could write down. She read the object. Corrosion had pocked the surface, a scatter of small lesions where the tin had yielded to time and moisture. The hinge line was intact but lined with residue from slow damage; the clasp showed a distortion at its left margin. The lid met the base imperfectly, a slight misalignment that would have allowed air exchange, condensation cycles, minute intrusions. A faint metallic smell lifted when she drew the cloth fully aside, tin and old metal; the odor matched storage and neglect rather than ritual.

She slid her hands into the gloves, letting the material settle against her wrists. Holding the light low, she examined the hinge. The pins were still in plane. With two fingers on the base, she stabilized the container

and, with the other hand, applied careful pressure to the clasp, testing the resistance. It yielded unevenly. The small flare suggested someone before had pried it open instead of coaxing it.

"I am going to open it," she said.

"D'accord," Cécile said. She stood two steps back from the table, her palm touching the threshold moulding with one finger as if that gave her the right distance.

The lid lifted with a hesitant complaint and then went free on the hinge. The metallic tang came clearer then and with it dry dust, not paper. Moira held the light steady and let her eyes sort shapes. Bone came forward of its own accord under proper light: the distinct contour of vertebral bodies, small ruminant, consistent with ovicaprid based on vertebral body size/proportion and facet morphology; the straight, slim phalanges unmistakably human, distal and intermediate both, cortical bone thin at the shafts but not child-thin; and there, a heavier element laid along a shallow diagonal, an adult metacarpal, its shaft showing an even cortical thickness, one end cleanly cut and the other with normal articular contours. She let the beam rest, then lowered it a shade.

She did not touch anything yet. She named them in her head to order the field rather than to convince anyone of anything. Small ruminant vertebrae consistent with ovicaprid; human phalanges, not paired, mixed right and left. One metacarpal, adult-compatible, cut end present. She shifted the light and caught it: fine parallel striations at the cut end, perpendicular to the long axis, the edges sharp, not feathered by extended exposure. She noted absence as well: no rounding from prolonged handling, no significant adhering cloth. A whisper of wax on one lamb vertebra was visible as a dull translucence, residue perhaps from proximity to candles. On the key ribbon at her collarbone, Cécile's finger stilled.

"I am going to note what I see," she said, and the practice of saying it aloud settled her. She moved the field notebook closer and opened it with

her wrist to avoid contamination and wrote in her small, neat hand. She spoke as ink moved. "Container: tin, hinged lid, clasp deformed left margin. Surface: pitting consistent with corrosion. Contents: mixed assemblage. Small ruminant vertebrae consistent with ovicaprid, approximate cervical and thoracic elements, based on vertebral body size/proportion and facet morphology. Human phalanges, distal and intermediate, multiple. One metacarpal, adult-compatible." She paused, the pen steady. "Cut end exhibits fine linear striations, consistent with saw scoring, fine parallel striations from a small-tooth saw. Timing of cut relative to death: indeterminate at this stage, but the margins lack extended wear." She kept the sheep/goat translation for the written margin.

She glanced up, not for permission. Cécile's face was composed into a shape that probably matched the way she looked at donation ledgers and roof estimates. When Moira let her eyes drop back to the object, she angled the light to examine the metacarpal's other end. Articular surface intact, epiphysis fully fused. With the back of a gloved fingernail, she touched the shaft and watched for movement among the phalanges; none shifted; whichever hand had last arranged these things had done so with care or much earlier, when they had still been bound by something that had gone away.

She set the pen down and used a soft brush to flick a small grit from the cut surface to see the striae more clearly. The delicate ridging moved under light from one angle to another. Her breath stayed steady. When she was new to this, such marks had carried the thrill of an approach to certainty. Now they simply added to a list. There would be a time for care and a time for understanding, and this was the prior.

"Old and holy," Cécile said behind her. It was not a challenge. It was a statement anyone in the parish could recognize.

Moira kept her eyes on the page where ink made a trail of fact. "Mixed remains in a devotional container," she said. "Age of object to be determined by context. I will need access to ledgers and any accession

records to understand intent and timeline, and Sergeant Mercier here for chain-of-custody if we move anything." She kept to neutral language to protect the dead.

"Access to ledgers is not casual," Cécile said.

"No," Moira agreed. "It should never be. But it will help us place this." She closed the tin without sealing it and drew the cloth back over it lightly. "At this point I'm noting only what's present." She did not say, We can hear what people say later. She had learned the volume of the living was high at the start of a case. It would settle.

The radiator ticked again. A gust rattled the window, and the sound of freezing rain was harder now, a harsher texture on the glass. Moira stacked her tools precisely and removed her gloves without snapping them off her fingers. She put them into a small bag as matter-of-factly as she had come into the room.

"I'll speak with Sergeant Mercier now," she said. She centered the tin on the cloth and closed her notebook with a knuckle.

She crossed the lane; freezing rain stippled her hood; the rectory air was warmer with paper.

The rectory office had been a dining room once, the architectural intention still visible in the height and the window placement. Now a table kept a computer, a pen holder of mismatched pens, and a mug that smelled faintly of tea tannin even cold. The radiator here kept more consistent heat; paper on the desk lay flat.

Étienne Mercier was already there when Moira came in. He stood to show he had the kind of manners that disarmed reaction rather than demanded it. His parka hung from the chairback, glossy from rain, creased sharply where it folded. He moved in a way that protected an old ankle, economical and careful, making adjustments automatically when he shifted weight. A waterproof cover lay open on the table with a page of tidy notes, the handwriting level and small.

"Dr. Calder," he said, and nodded, acknowledging past work rather than making a show of introductions.

"Sergeant," she said, and kept the rest of the pleasantries back. They suited each other better when they went to the point.

"I appreciate you coming across in this," he said, tilting his head slightly toward the window where drops were beginning to freeze on the outside of the glass. "Cécile briefed me enough to know there is something that warrants your eye. The island does not need a scandal in winter. It does not need one ever, but winter is worse."

He was not pleading for discretion. He was stating a condition of work that she also respected; the fewer untested words spoken near a found thing, the less harm to be undone after.

"You'll have my observations," she said. "Nothing else." She sat, then changed her mind and stayed standing; standing made leaving easier if people began to talk across one another. "The container is a tin with a hinged lid. There's corrosion and a distorted clasp. Inside are mixed elements: small ruminant vertebrae consistent with ovicaprid, human phalanges, and an adult-compatible metacarpal with saw scoring at the cut end. The articular end shows full epiphyseal closure. No attempt at identification is possible at this stage. Chain-of-custody is intact provided we keep the object where it is until we agree on the next step. When we do, we bag and label, entries initialed."

He listened fully as if he understood how many fewer words this was than she was capable of. He took one note and underlined it.

"And we don't talk about age class of the phalanges or folk stories about relics in public," he said. "People here will call it a child's fragment and walk it straight to the boy. We keep the myth out of the evidence."

"We do not," she said. She pressed the ridge of her thumbnail into the edge of her notebook just enough to engage the senses and anchor the impulse to fill the room with detail.

"Good," he said. "The parish meeting Thursday. It stays on renovation. Anything from today or the next days is yours and mine and, if she agrees, the deacon and Cécile. The donors have a lot of opinions. None of them will help you see what's in front of you."

He spoke not like an adversary but like a man who had seen a case dropped because someone needed to hear his or her own voice. He flipped a page in his notes with a dry sound.

"Julien Arsenault," he added. The name altered the air slightly in the room, as if someone had opened an inner door. "I know you know the history. I am not asking you to fold that into what you saw. I'm asking you not to let anyone around you do it to you."

Moira set the notebook down on the table, open at her notes, as a way to show him there was less here than the name invited, and more. Her fingers pressed the notebook spine once, then released. "I am not in a position to draw any line between this container and any person," she said. "I will not be in that position for days, if at all. We can speak timelines when I have context. For that, I need ledgers. Accession cards, if any exist. Names of who had custody when the niche was closed and opened before."

"They are not eager to open those drawers," he said. "They will do it when it's a choice between order and truth. Or if Cécile says so." He glanced toward the doorway when he said her name. Moira did too. Cécile stood there without entering, her hand still near her ribbon of keys.

"We will respect parish processes," Moira said, and meant it more than politely.

"I'll speak to Deacon Lemoine and arrange supervised access to the ledgers tomorrow," Mercier said. "And we will have a plan for custody transfer if the container needs to move. Weather willing. The ferry is on the line." He looked at the window again. In the two minutes since he had arrived, the drops on the outside surface had changed texture, a roughness that signalled a layer forming.

"A quiet period would help," Moira said. "Today and tomorrow in the sacristy, with someone present for access. Photographs, measurements, nothing invasive. Then we can speak from ground rather than from air."

"You will have that," he said. "I'll ask Benoît to help me with the language about the meeting. He'll smooth the edges." He did not seem to believe smoothing would amount to much this week. He added, gently, "One wrong word and they decide it's theirs alone again. We both know how fast doors close."

Moira absorbed that with a small nod. She kept to the standards that had kept past work clean.

"You want to see the niche?" she asked him.

"I will," he said. "With you. And with Cécile. No surprises."

Cécile's knuckle brushed the doorframe once, a small sound. She stepped inside far enough to be in the conversation without having to speak from the hall.

"We will go back in together," she said. "And then I will lock the door again. The workers come back at three to talk about scaffolding in the nave. They will not step into the sacristy."

Mercier picked up his parka. The fabric made the usual rustle of waterproof cloth. The radiator ticked again. Outside, freezing rain built along seams and edges.

They crossed the lane. The wind made the small flags on the parish noticeboard jump against their pins. Moira kept her pace even, the habit of not showing the urgency the evidence generated in the people around it. At the sacristy door, Cécile turned the key without looking down. She had done it enough times to know the turn by feel.

Inside, the tin sat under the cloth. Earlier footprints marked the floor, damp patches lighter where soles had compressed the surface. Mercier stepped in and then took half a step back when he saw how close the table stood to the window. He put his notes down and did not write. He looked

in the correct order: container, cloth, table, wall, window, floor.

"It rattled," Cécile said, repeating the fact as if laying a foundation.

"I heard," Mercier said. "Thank you for not opening it."

Moira did not reach for the cloth again. Further movement would add disturbance. She set the small light down. The three of them made a sort of triangle in a small room, each occupying a boundary the others respected. That, too, was a sort of custody.

When they stepped out again, Cécile locked the door as promised. She did not check with her eyes that the door was locked. She checked by feel as the cylinder turned into place.

"Tomorrow morning," she said. "Nine. I will be here. Sergeant, you'll come?"

"I will," he said. "If the ferry runs."

They stood for a moment under the vestibule roof and watched the rain thicken into something more granular, the sort that made roads treacherous and people more certain of the stories they told themselves. The noticeboard paper had curled slightly at one corner, the pushpin no longer enough to hold it flush.

Moira did not touch it. She took her notebook back into her pocket and let the weight of it remind her of the things it already contained. The plan for the day had settled. There would be very little room for error. She did not mind that. She respected small margins. They forced better choices.

She crossed again to the rectory office to put her bag down, not to rest. The radiator heat rose in small waves that did not reach the window, where the outside layer of ice had thickened. She thought about the tin inside the sacristy, its contents arranged by some hand that had known the consequences of arrangement. She thought about the line in her notes where she had written adult-compatible and the space after where she had not written anything else.

Mercier picked up his waterproof cover with notes. He tucked it under his arm and said nothing more. There was not any more to say that would not touch the thing that had not yet been earned.

Cécile stood in the doorway again, and this time she did not touch the ribbon key. She let her hands rest at her sides, fingers open and still. That, too, was a kind of control.

The light outside was going toward evening. The street lamp at the corner clicked into its first stage. Wind off the river pressed at the bluff and the glaze thickened along sills. Moira moved to the edge of the office window and stood with one shoulder against the frame, her body at the threshold as she liked. In the glass she could see the outline of the church across the lane and, just past it, the line where the land dropped away to the water. The jetty was out of sight from here, but she held its place in her mind alongside the sacristy, the rectory, the municipal door.

"Nine," she said. "We begin again at nine."

She set the next steps in order: photograph cut surface under oblique light; measure striation spacing; document corrosion pattern; no sampling; timing indeterminate without imaging.

Ice had started to film the landing rail.

Chapter 2

Ledger Lines

The metal shelving in the rectory archive stayed cold even with the radiator ticking. At nine, as agreed, the key turned. Morning light lay as a pale band on the floor near the window and didn't reach the stacks. Boxes were twined in brown cotton string, knots small and practical. The air smelled of paper and damp in old plaster. A strip of tape on the doorframe held a pencilled note about the heat exchange unit that no one had removed.

Cécile slid the key into the lock, turned it without looking down, and stepped aside to let Moira enter first. They had agreed to wait for Mercier before opening the sacristy again; the archive came first. She carried a ledger against her chest and laid it on the table that had a wax ring where a candle had once rested. She set two more ledgers in a careful stack and straightened the top one with her palm.

"I will stay here while you work," she said. Not an apology. A condition.

"Of course," Moira said. She placed her field notebook on the table within reach and kept her bag at her feet, the strap looped under a chair rung. The pencil she preferred lay along the notebook's spine. Her parka was unzipped but stayed on; the room was too cold for more. She did not yet ask for accession drawers. Ledgers first.

The first book had thick pages that took ink unevenly. The entries ran in narrow, controlled columns: date, object, source, note. The handwriting patterns changed over time, fuller loops gave way to thin strokes, then back again when another hand had taken over. Where the page had absorbed too much ink, the edges wicked into the fibers and left

shadows at the margin. The rules here were simple. She was to turn pages with dry fingers and to keep any comment inside neutral sentences.

She read without skipping. In her head she tallied the sequence before the tally hardened into understanding. Holy days and their altar cloths. A broken latch on the tabernacle fixed by a donor whose name repeated in repairs but not in ceremonies. A column header began partway through a decade: relic refreshment. The wording was institutional rather than devotional and sat under the main run of entries in a secondary position.

"Who writes in these now?" she asked, not looking up, keeping her tone neutral.

"It rotates," Cécile said. "It used to be one person for years. Then two. Now anyone who takes responsibility for a thing writes the note. I check it all at the end of the month." She stood inside the doorway and kept her shoulder against the door.

Moirá traced the 'relic refreshment' entries with the blunt end of her pencil, not touching the paper. Each added little: moved to altar for feast, returned; seal checked; cloth replaced; procession cancelled due to weather. The hand around the column changed less than in the general notes; the same person likely kept it or a successor matched it. That continuity carried weight.

Halfway through a book whose spine had been repaired with bookcloth, the ink shifted mid-line. Black, then a thinner, browner tone. The split fell between the date and a donor. Over the donor, a heavier hand had written on a scraped patch; fibers showed where a blade had lifted the surface.

Her fingers paused on the lamp switch before she set the light low across the page. This wasn't fading. It was the same entry. On the right margin a small note referenced a slip number and a box. It had been overwritten.

She noted the citation, the page number, and a small rectangle to mark its place. Turning the page and turning back fixed the position. The scrape sat where a donor name would resolve a transaction. The earlier name was just legible under the heavier ink. She did not read it aloud.

"Humidity does that sometimes," Cécile said, her attention on Moira's hand but not on the entry. "Old pages, old pens. If someone wrote with a wet nib and someone else came back with a dry one, " Her gaze rested on the scraped patch for a moment; her thumb found the ribboned key at her neck and then let it go.

"Mm," Moira said, neither assent nor disagreement. She closed the ledger over her fingers to keep her place and crossed to the shelving where the boxes sat in their rows. The labels were hand-lettered on taped slips: A1, A2, B1, B2, then a gap, then C1 through C4. The referenced box was B3. It was present where the sequence expected it to be.

The string on B3 looked newer than the others. Not out of place. Different. The knot had been tied with three turns at the end instead of two, and the tuck was to the left rather than the right. She did not call it out. Testing the lid brought a small resistance, then a low pull against the string.

Inside lay manila envelopes with dates, the paper smoother than older stock. A smaller envelope at the bottom had worn corners, likely moved here when someone re-sorted. She set each envelope along the table, letting the ledger's right margin serve as a secondary index.

The slip number had no match. The nearest sequence skipped it. She checked the bottom and corners. Nothing. The slip was missing.

She put the envelopes back in order, reseated the lid, and returned to the ledger to note the absence in one line, neutral.

"We have had water in here," Cécile said. "Never a flood. But the wall is the outside wall; we moved things off the floor once and tied them again. Old hands, new hands. People tie differently. They also file differently. Not everyone was trained for this. I wasn't. I learned." She did

not ask if Moira agreed.

Moira looked up. "Are there incidental cartons? Things that didn't fit a category at the time. Loose rosary segments, fabric tags, old envelopes."

"There are some we kept separate so they would not shed into the ledgers," Cécile said. She crossed and pulled a small carton from the floor with careful hands. She set it on the table and took the lid off herself.

Inside lay incomplete things. A chain without its loop. A ribbon with a printed crest, the ink gone to a soft gray. Two small tags with dates and no names. A stained index card with a corner missing. Moira let the picture settle.

"You said yesterday: photographs, measurements, no sampling," Cécile said.

"Yes," Moira said. "If anything here needs to leave for imaging, I'll ask Sergeant Mercier to confirm it. For now, I'm noting only the state of what has been kept." She eased her hand closed to avoid straightening the scattered tags. "I'll continue through the ledgers and correlate dates. Then I'll list this carton's contents without moving them."

Cécile nodded and rested her hand against the ribbon at her neck. She let the key hang.

Mercier stood in the hall with his parka dripping into a tray. He had a waterproof cover open and the corner of a page resting against his thumb. His gait protected the old ankle on instinct when he pivoted toward her.

"You made it," she said.

"Barely," he said. "The ferry master wanted a reason. I gave him one." He lifted his chin toward the archive. "You found things."

She did not lower her voice. The thick walls kept voices inside ordinary range. "An entry with ink that shifts mid-line and a donor name written over a scraped patch. The same line names a receipt slip and a box." A small pause. "The slip isn't in the box. Another envelope references a drawer, but not in that room."

He listened without interrupting. "Overwritten or amended?"

"Overwritten," she said.

"What years?"

She named them, each year its own unit of air. "That middle year sits where you would expect it to sit," she said.

He pushed air out through his nose and glanced toward the vestibule where the noticeboard hung. "We're not going to say that aloud today," he said. "We won't say any names aloud either." He made a note and underlined it, exactly once.

"Ledger anomalies are what I have," she said. "I'll keep to bone categories and provenance questions. I won't attribute intent." Her hands stayed still at her sides.

"The meeting posted in the vestibule is for renovations," he said. "That's what it stays. Cost of plaster, heat exchange unit, handrails. If anyone asks you a question in public, you talk about corrosion and bone types. Not about donors, not about substitutions." He shifted his weight off the ankle he protected and then back onto it in a small test.

"Agreed," she said. "If we need to move the container for light or stability, we'll keep custody tight."

"If the weather worsens and the sacristy becomes unworkable, we move to the rectory office," he said. "We bag and label before the move, we initial. We keep one of us in the room at all times. You and me or you and Cécile. I've only two tamper-evident seals in the kit until Monday, so we plan movements accordingly."

"Winters here are hard," she said.

"People spend more time indoors; talk runs faster. We keep this contained until something requires otherwise."

"I'll go back in. Photographs, measurements, nothing invasive. I'd like this to stay quiet until I've finished cataloguing what's in front of me."

"You'll have that," he said. "Benoît will keep the meeting's center on budgets."

She didn't smile. "Then I'll work. If power flickers, I'll switch to battery in the sacristy. If power fails entirely, we move here."

He closed his cover over the notes. "I'll be nearby. I have to make a call about a hospital record that may intersect with something else, but it's not for today."

He didn't offer the name. She appreciated that. As she turned toward the vestibule, the overhead tubes dipped and then steadied. Outside the archive window, sleet made a fine hiss against the glass.

On her way to the church vestibule, she paused beside the noticeboard. The RENOVATION UPDATE printed page carried bullet points with numbers next to them. Plaster repair: estimate, materials, volunteer labor hour count. Heat exchange unit: cost, delivery time. Temporary closure of sacristy workspace: extended. In smaller font: refreshments available in the hall, donations welcome. The word history did not appear. Neither did relic.

An older parishioner with a knit hat pulled low looked past her at the paper. "Bonjour," he said. "Madame, they say you are the expert. You found the saint?" He kept his voice pitched at a level he thought counted as discreet and failed by a small margin.

"Bonjour," she said. "I'm here to look and to write down what is there. We'll say what it is when we know." He nodded, as if her tone

confirmed his expectations and his question ended where her neutrality began.

Cécile joined her in the vestibule and stood where she could see the church door and the rectory door at once. "Merci pour les mains douces," she said. The phrase landed without decoration.

Moira received it with a small nod. "I keep my hands to what's in front of me," she said. "And my words to what I can defend in a line."

The light through the vestibule window dimmed as the cloud thickened. The overheads hummed and then steadied. She moved back across the lane to the rectory and stepped into the office to check her kit. The battery lamp was charged, the mirror for low-angle light clean, the camera body held its charge and the macro lens sat ready. She noted a short set of residues to check under better light and drier air, wax on metal and bone, stray fibers in tin corners, oxide on the lid, any salt, and kept the note tight.

A municipal worker with a stapler and a folded sheet paused at the noticeboard. "La salle municipale a une génératrice," he said. "Si ça coupe, on ouvre là-bas." He glanced toward the hall.

"Merci," she said. "We'll stay in the rectory if we lose power, if we must."

He nodded and moved on.

Back in the archive, she put her bag behind the chair nearest the wall so it would not invite anyone to move it. The incidental carton came closer by an inch and she wrote a quick inventory without touching the pieces: chain segment, ribbon with crest print faded, two tags with dates but no names, index card fragment with smudge. Her pencil moved at a pace that matched her breathing. The moment when the investigation widened had come; she did not make it more than it was.

In a subsequent ledger the 'relic refreshment' column showed fewer entries and more blank space. Absence counted after a pattern had been

established. She put a small dot in the margin beside the month where the blank space lay and connected it to her earlier markings.

By late morning she closed the book and drew a line beneath her notes. "Another forty minutes," she said. "Then I go to the sacristy to photograph the cut surface with oblique light. After that, back here." The overwritten donor and the paired 'returned' entries set her next check: oblique light on the cut surface and the tin corners for handling traces.

She replaced the ledgers at the near edge of the table to show where they belonged for the next interval and smoothed the string on B3 without retightening the knot. She did not change knots she had not tied.

The sleet thinned for a minute, enough to hear a truck pass on the road and the slap of a rope against a ring at the landing. The ferry would not stay on this schedule all afternoon. If Mercier had to leave early, they would work inside smaller margins.

She lifted her bag and carried it across the lane with a steadiness she practiced. The sacristy key turned in Cécile's hand. Inside, the cloth lay over the tin where they had left it. The earlier footprint had dried to a faint outline.

"Thirty minutes," Moira said. "Light, angles, no touching." With Cécile beside the door, custody stayed intact. She set the lamp low on the table, tested bounce against the interior of the lid and shaft angles, and kept it clear of the window's condensation. Drawing the cloth back with two fingers to expose half the tin, she angled the beam across the cut end of the metacarpal to show the striations. They matched her memory. She measured between three of the lines with a small scale she carried for field work and wrote the numbers down. When the room lights flickered once, the lamp stayed on battery and she kept its position. She took a sequence of photographs from four angles, covering the striations, the articular end, a nearby phalanx, and a flaked corner of the tin, then replaced the cloth.

The tap on the sacristy door came as she was putting the lamp back into her bag. Cécile opened it to a narrow width. Mercier stood there with water on his parka and a page peeking out of the waterproof cover.

"How did it go?" he asked.

"We have the numbers on the striations and the interior pitting," she said. "No change in position, no new residues visible at this light. I'm returning to the archive now." She kept her distance from the table until the cloth lay flat.

"Good," he said. "The meeting stays what it is. I've confirmed that with Benoît. And the ferry master says he'll attempt an evening crossing if the wind doesn't turn."

"If he doesn't," Cécile said, "then we have a quiet night." She made it a condition.

Thirty minutes, a quick oblique-light pass; then back to ledgers. She reentered the archive and added two checks for the afternoon in one line: examine the incidental tags for imprints and compare the index card fragment to ledger hands.

She turned the next ledger one page at a time until she reached another month with the same kind of gap. "If someone erased a donor name once," she said after a long interval, "they could have done the same elsewhere. The scrape wouldn't always show."

"There are entries that were never written at all," Cécile said. "Not out of cunning. Out of habit. Out of a day too full or a week too thin. People think the ledger is itself. It is what people make it." She no longer braced the door.

Moirá made a small mark next to a month that matched the summer that had been kept in people's mouths as a warning. She hadn't been here. She had been in a lab in Montréal where paper told stories until bone contradicted them. She kept her focus on the month headings.

At noon she closed the book. "I'll keep working after I eat," she said. "If anyone calls on the rectory phone, I'm not available for questions. You may say that I'm working."

"I will say that," Cécile said. She looked at the shelf where the hymnals sat. "You may take your lunch in the office. It is warmer there. Leave your things here if you want them to stay your things."

In the office, she ate bread and cheese she had brought while she stood by the window. Across the lane, the church steps held a rim of ice. She thought of the metacarpal's cut end and the ledger's scraped name and kept them separate. Under lunch she added a brief plan to cross-reference the incidental tag dates and keep interpretation neutral.

Before she left the office, she moved her kit to a corner behind the desk where the heat did not fall directly on it and where it was less likely to be moved by someone coming in to grab a file. On the desk lay a mug with a traced ring. The tea inside was cold and smelled faintly of tannin. A thin line of condensation had formed on the inside of the window; she wiped it with her sleeve and watched it form again.

When she stepped back into the archive, Cécile handed her a folded paper towel without remark. Moira took it and set it down next to the incidental carton. They did not talk about weather. They did not talk about names. They returned to pages and the things in the room that would hold their shape as long as someone took care not to change them.

Her pencil point dulled. She sharpened it with a pocket sharpener she had carried for a decade and let the shavings fall into her palm before she dropped them into the small bin by the door. The small acts were the only ones that could be repeated without altering the case. She repeated them as the afternoon advanced.

By early afternoon the light thinned. She tried the overhead fixture in the archive and then switched it off when the hum irritated at a steady pitch. The angled lamp went on low. The scrape under the donor name did not disappear when the light changed. It had not been her

imagination.

When the municipal worker came back through to tack another sheet to the noticeboard, he put his head into the archive first. "On garde la salle prête," he said. "Au cas où."

"Merci," she said. The new sheet's font was hard to scan; she noticed because she relied on clear type to keep order, and then let it go.

She returned to the relic column and found the last entry for the day: a note written in a neat hand. 'Returned to reserve.' The words were clear, the spacing even, the ink uniform. She underlined it once in her notes and then closed the book.

In the sacristy, the cloth remained in place. In the hall, Mercier would answer his phone and choose which words to say into it. In the grocery, someone would tell someone else that the expert had looked at the thing and not said anything. Weather would change or not. None of that altered the entries in the ledgers or the marks on the bone. She would continue to match them where they met and keep them apart where they did not.

She stood, stiffness from hours on a hard floor. Her hand went flat on the table. The margin for error was small and stayed small. She did not mind.

She would open the drawer only with both Cécile and Mercier present.

Chapter 3

Back-Scatter

The overhead tubes dimmed once and steadied. Then the hum cut without a click, as if the current had been drawn down rather than switched. The radiator in the archive stopped its small ticking. In the next room a door latch gave and settled again, the sound travelling farther than it had when the building had been full of power. For a moment the window held its usual gray. Then sleet struck the glass in a faster pattern and made the dimness feel heavier.

Cécile was already turning toward the corridor. "Ça a lâché partout," she said. The calm in her voice was not new; she said it as if naming a kind of weather.

Moira closed the ledger she had been reading and kept her hand on it until the page lay flat. The emergency fixture over the archive door glowed a low red and then died. The taped note about the heat exchange unit looked darker for being the only white shape left on the doorframe. She lifted her bag by the handle and felt the weight of the small lamp through the fabric. That, at least, answered to batteries.

"The sacristy?" she said.

"Same," Cécile said. "The whole hill. The hall will open if they must. But for the work, "

"We move to the office," Moira said. They had set that condition yesterday, not hoping to need it but making it for exactly this.

They crossed the corridor. Without power, the vestibule glass read darker than its own color. Sleet hit the pane with a fine, repetitive patter; it was the only regular sound. Cécile took the key on the ribbon without

looking and spoke once to someone in the nave whose answer did not carry. She kept the key and moved toward the sacristy with her shoulders square against the cold.

Inside the sacristy the light was thin. The bench lamp plugged at the wall was dark. The cloth over the tin was pale in the dim. The window, small and set high, admitted a band of colder gray. The footprint near the table had dried to a faint print of edges; it had not shifted.

Moira set her bag on a chair and opened it to the hand she could work with while her other hand kept the lid from falling closed. She laid out the nitrile gloves, the small evidence bag folded inside a larger one, the pre-printed labels, and the pen that would write without a heated tip. The steps ran under her breath; speaking them fixed them.

She wrote the label before anything else: date, time, location, contents in neutral language, initials. St. Brigid's sacristy, tin container with mixed remains, lid misaligned; no sampling; transfer to rectory office for lighting conditions. The time went in to the minute. She drew a line and placed her initials beside it.

"I will hold the cloth," Cécile said. She did not offer an opinion about whether this was necessary. She lifted the edge enough for Moira to slide the bag under and over without catching it. The smell of cold metal and old dust rose in a small release when the cloth moved. Wax and damp wool stayed behind, stabled in the fabric of the room.

Moira took the tin at the hinge edge with both gloved hands and set it into the open mouth of the bag so that it did not scrape the lip. The deformation at the clasp end caught for an instant and then yielded. She eased air out around it without tipping. The label went on square; she pressed the adhesive with the edge of one thumb so the numbers would not smear. She handed the pen to Cécile and indicated the space beside her initials. Cécile added hers, the pressure even across the letters. The small habits were what kept order when the larger systems failed.

The tamper-evident seal had a number in red ink. There were only two left in Mercier's kit until Monday; she had heard him say it and had counted it as a margin. She read the number aloud once and wrote it in her notebook. From outside, a rope snapped once against metal and fell quiet. Then she ran the seal across the bag's fold and set it flat with two fingers. The friction made a sound that placed the gesture in the room and in the day.

Reading it aloud before opening was less for Cécile than for herself, a mark to keep the next step as controlled as this one.

The door to the vestry gave a small movement in the wind and then held. They carried the bag between them, Moira at the lead for steps, Cécile watching the corners. The vestibule was darker. A parishioner's voice arrived from outside and broke off when it met the quiet. The rectory door opened with a sound they would never have noticed in other conditions; even the latch had a physical weight now that the building had softened to cold.

In the office, the window admitted a broad, pale gray. It showed the church steps as a strip rimmed in ice and the lane in a surface that looked level only because the eye wanted that. Beyond, the river held the same color pulled wide. Moira set the bag on the table they had used yesterday for notes. She moved the lamp to the near edge, switched it on, and let its white fill find the surface of the table before it found the bag.

"We'll work in the circle," she said. "Images and notes only. Light handling." She did not have to say chain of custody aloud; the sealed bag on the table was its own statement.

Cécile stood by the office door, two steps in from the threshold, and let the door sit open by an inch. The habit let her see the hall if someone came. She had always chosen threshold positions; it was where she could be both in and ready to close out.

"You can sit," Moira said.

"Je reste ici," Cécile said. She had made a concession by agreeing to the move; staying in the room was not a concession. It was her way of making the concession safe.

Moirira recorded again: transfer received in rectory office at time stated; bag seal intact. Seal number read aloud prior to opening; break recorded. She peeled the seal. The sound was small and final. She placed the broken backing on a clean piece of paper so that no one could say later it had gone somewhere; nothing was to go anywhere without being handled as itself. She eased the tin out of the bag and set it on the cloth they used to mark a boundary. The hinge caught the lamp light and gave a dull return. The deformation at the clasp end read as a small distort; it had felt the same under her hands yesterday.

She drew the cloth back and opened the lid. The interior accepted the light without showing shape at first. Then the piece-by-piece emerged. The lamb vertebral bodies looked only like themselves. The human phalanges remained in their careful cluster, edges in contact but not jammed. The metacarpal's cut end lay where she had left it, clean and unnatural in a way that did not need an adjective. The smell of old dust and metal lifted without moving far. The absence of power had silenced everything else enough for it to hold its place in the air.

She set the battery lamp low at the table's edge and angled it so its beam ran across the tin's floor. She took the small mirror and tilted it until it bounced a thin stripe into the tin's corners. Under that angle, the interior told a second story. The oxide layer was not uniform. It ran in tracks and had left a faint path down one interior wall where moisture had once made a decision and then repeated it. The opposite wall lacked such a line. The base showed a dusting of fine material that had drifted into a pattern against a lip. Two discrete drip scallops showed on the hinge wall below the upper seam. She didn't name this pattern yet. Naming came after measuring.

She wrote as she looked. "Interior oxidation, track on wall nearest hinge. Pitting small, even; no blistering. Residue banked along lower lip

near clasp. No salt crystals visible at this light." She shifted to bone. The metacarpal's cortical surface had a polish at one edge that did not belong to storage; she knew the difference between what dust did and what skin did. A phalanx showed a faint, tight line across an edge as if it had once pressed against the edge of cloth. She wrote that, too, keeping the words plain. Nothing to do with saints or stories. Handling left its own map regardless of what anyone called the object.

Wind pressed at the office window in a way that made the sash move by something you could see only if you watched the line of the frame against the gray outside. The battery lamp's circle became the only place where her eyes wanted to be. Outside the lamp's circle, the bookshelf lost its edges and the cabinet and chair blurred at the wall. That suited the work. The smaller the room became, the easier it was to keep the words exact.

"We'll need the back-scatter," she said. She placed foam supports near the metacarpal, not touching it, and tested the clearance for the sensor head. The unit sat in her bag wrapped in a layer she had cut from a pillowcase years ago. She set it on the table and felt its mass. It was not heavy, but it remembered its own function. She powered it on and watched the small indicator glow. Battery. Enough for what she needed if she did not waste it. She tipped the headlamp one click higher to dull the screen glare.

"This will be loud?" Cécile asked.

"A hum. No heat. No contact. It reads the surface and near-surface and builds the image. I will not touch the cut end with anything but light."

Cécile accepted that. She did not ask again to be told what the images would show. She had already decided which pieces of information she would hold to in this room and which she would keep for a different room.

Moira angled the unit and let the beam cross the cut plane. The display on the small screen showed gray on gray at first. Then she

adjusted the position by a millimeter and the striae resolved. Fine, regular, parallel, with a spacing that matched what she had measured in the sacristy under oblique light. The back-scatter added depth by showing the relief of the tiny grooves as they ran across the section.

She moved the unit to the articular end, not to see a cut but to confirm absence. That end remained what it was: an intact joint surface with the usual wear for an adult hand that had done work. There was no chisel trauma where someone had tried to divide a holy object by force. The plane of section at the other end sat at a distance and an angle that answered the way surgeons thought about function and removal. She did not call it that yet. She made the images and saved them, tagging the files with date, time, and the same neutral language she had used on the bag.

On the screen the kerf was without wander. At the edges, tiny feathering sat where the teeth had exited. There was no charcoal discoloration along the cut, no baked sheen at the cortical boundary. No microscopic remodeling was visible at the cut margin. A saw with a small-tooth profile, steady, uniform. Not a blade applied by hand on a crowded table. Not a chisel used to lever a shard for veneration. She put one finger on the table near the foam as if that contact could hold something in place in herself. It did.

"You can see the striations," she said.

"Oui," Cécile said. She had stepped close enough that the lamp's edge lit the side of her face. Her fingers held the table's near edge. Her mouth had not changed. The hand on the key ribbon did not move. She looked at the screen too long for it to be only curiosity.

Moira kept her voice even. "The cut is clinical in character."

Her next breath came measured; her fingertip held its place on the table edge. Cécile shifted her weight a fraction, the ribbon drawn tight and then eased.

Cécile did not step back. She did not look at Moira. "Le vent travaille," she said. She adjusted the key ribbon once. The phrase took in

the window and the ferry and the men who had opened the sacristy and anyone else who might have tried a crossing today. "S'ils ne partent pas ce soir, tout sera tranquille."

Moira wrote: kerf straight; striae regular; minimal thermal alteration; no chisel signatures; plane consistent with an amputation event. She did not add a name. She did not add an intention. The description carried its own content. The body told the truth whether anyone liked the phrasing or not.

The battery indicator shifted one shade lower. She adjusted the unit to capture a set from the opposite side for redundancy. The images matched. She saved them with the same naming scheme. She returned the unit to its wrap and kept it within reach. It would need to be on again if anyone asked for another angle; she did not want to unpack it twice.

Cécile eased back to her place by the door. "Le traversier?" she said, making it into a subject that could live in the room without being the thing that had just taken place in the room.

"If the wind holds, he may try," Moira said. She had learned the contour of these conversations. "If not, then tomorrow."

"Demain ou après," Cécile said. The key ribbon moved against the wool of her collar in a small sound that had no symbolic weight except that it happened while they were both there.

Moira looked again at the articular end. It told her what it needed to tell: adult, fully fused, joint surface without trauma that would indicate a division for display. She let the cut end stand on its own as the entry it was: a surgical cut, clean. She thought of the column in the ledger labeled relic refreshment. It had been a controlled way of saying that objects moved and were touched. This had not come from that column. This had come from an operating room.

"Who was the priest here in the year those ink hands overlapped?" she asked without turning away from the table.

"Father Beaudry," Cécile said. The answer came without pause. "He was here a long time."

"I will check the ledgers for any note of his absence or medical leave," Moira said. "Not today. When the light returns. I will not assume the ledgers carry it. I will look. If it is there, I will correlate the dates to this signature."

Cécile answered with her chin. She did not say the name again.

The room had narrowed to the lamp and the table and the window where sleet tracked its own residue on the glass. Outside that, the island existed as shapes with sounds attached to them. Inside this, the bone told the only kind of truth Moira trusted without a second witness.

The next thirty minutes passed in methodical documentation. With the kerf recorded, she turned back to the container's interior to read storage traces.

She switched to the headlamp when the battery in the larger lamp dipped. The circle moved with her and freed her hands to work near the tin without casting her own shadow across it. The rectory office felt colder now that the radiator had given up entirely. Breath did not show but it would soon if the current did not return.

"We continue another hour," Cécile said quietly. "After that we close and lock. I want the door kept shut tonight. The hall meeting is in two days. We keep this room quiet until then."

"Agreed," Moira said. She did not plan to stay through the night. She also did not plan to leave before she had done what could be done without moving anything from where it was.

She separated the lamb vertebrae from the human phalanges, not by sight only but by touch through the gloves. The ovicaprid bone felt lighter

and more porous; the borders and processes sat in different places. She arranged them at the far third of the tin interior, mapping a separation without taking anything out. She set a folded piece of acid-free paper near the metacarpal with a simple code written on it. A scale card sat at the same place to let measurements be made again later against the same reference. She did not attach anything to bone or to tin. Everything went beside, as a neighbor, not a change.

She lifted a soft brush and eased loose residue away from the interior wall toward the lower lip. Not out of the tin. Inside it. The focus was not to clean but to see the line without the accident of last week's motion across it. She paused after each small movement and waited to see what the residue would do. Some moved and fell where gravity had always had it; some stayed, clinging to a track that had been made when the container had not been at this angle. That told her that the pattern was not new.

She squeezed a micro-puffer once to move dust from a seam. The air was enough to shift a layer less than the weight of a word; it showed bands where material had built up against an edge and remained there. She documented the positions and the pattern: vertical runs on the hinge wall, heavier deposition along the clasp lip. If it had rested flat on a shelf, there would be a horizontal dust shelf along the base seam. She took images with the macro lens that kept the corner in frame for context. Light at that angle made the difference between lines and no lines.

"You can see where it travelled," she said, keeping it descriptive.

"Mmm," Cécile said. The sound could have meant assent or could have meant she wanted to put the pieces where she liked them, which was to say inside the line of duty and not beyond it.

Moira did not move her attention away. She thought of the storage options available on an island where space was always under consideration and where not everything could be left on a shelf behind a keyed door. Vertical orientation could come from a box slipped upright

into a high cupboard, but the deposition pattern in the corners argued against being cradled by wood; there would have been a different shape where the edge sat. A vertical hang would leave exposed faces to air and to the drip of water. Those runs kept the jetty understructure in mind as a place where a hung container would take air and spray. The classification remained an inference. She put the word in her notes to keep it from becoming a conviction by accident.

She separated the human phalanges by side and position as far as could be done without laying them out. Right and left mixed, distal and intermediate, none of them attached to anything anymore. The cortical thinness said adult but not child, and the articular surfaces showed the usual variation of hands that had done things. She found a nick on one edge that could have been made by a tool or a moment against metal. She photographed it, then recorded only that it existed and that it lacked accompanying crush lines.

"Tide runs low late morning tomorrow if the ferry crosses early," Cécile said, unprompted. "If you must go to the jetty, you go when the posts are clear."

The mention of the jetty did not come with an invitation. It came the way someone would point to a road and say the road existed whether or not you walked it.

"I want to look at the understructure," Moira said. She did not add why. She had no proof yet that the tin had ever hung. She had only residue that did not behave like something that had sat flat for years.

Wind pressed again and the headlamp's beam trembled for a second as if the light wanted to acknowledge that the room had a skin. She steadied the lamp with a single touch on its band. The work went on because it did not depend on grid power now. It depended only on hands and on a battery that told the truth when asked.

She rechecked the metacarpal's cut plane under the headlamp. The regularity held under the smaller light. The micro-burrs on the exit edge

were visible but hard to photograph in this light. She did not try to capture what she could not capture well. She noted it and left the image to be made again when the battery lamp could return without risking darkness while the bag was still open.

She glanced at the clock on the wall and then at her watch when the clock proved meaningless without current. The hour had gone by. The cold in the office had deepened until the skin at her wrist muttered about it; she ignored it. It was not damage, only information.

"We close and lock," Cécile said. She was not asking.

Moira noted the last line in her field book: residue suggests vertical orientation for a sustained period; storage location to be investigated under safe conditions; no sampling taken; contents calm. She felt the moment of the word "calm" and left it. It belonged here. Nothing in the tin was being forced.

She replaced the cloth, easing it down so that it did not catch. A photograph from a distance included the room's features; later, no one would be able to say they had forgotten where this had taken place. She slid the tin into the evidence bag and showed the mouth to Cécile before she folded it.

"Label unchanged," she said. "Same content state. Same location. Different seal."

Cécile nodded. She took the pen and initialed in the square Moira had left. She did not look at the number on the new seal until Moira read it out. Then she repeated the digits in order, not because she doubted them but because repetition made the record. Moira wrote the number in her notebook and drew a line beneath it. She had liked having one seal left. Now there were none. The margin had gone from small to none, and the line under the number felt heavier than the paper asked of it.

They locked the office door. The key went to the ribbon at Cécile's throat. She tugged once to confirm the door held. Under seal and lock until reconvened. The wind in the lane sang up the steps outside and

made the vestibule door tap against its frame where the latch had a habit of not catching when the building settled in cold. They left the lamp in the bag. They left the back-scatter wrapped. They left the tin within a sealed bag on a table in a room that would remain at the same temperature as the hallway until power returned. None of that changed anything fundamental about what had been recorded.

In the hall a municipal worker's steps sounded on the stair, careful and slow. He looked toward them with a question in his eyebrows and then said, "La salle est ouverte. La génératrice tourne. S'il faut, on peut rester là-bas."

"Merci," Cécile said. "I keep the door shut here."

He nodded and moved on. The sound of the generator was a tone at the limit of hearing from this distance. It existed as a fact more than a sound.

Moirra made two more notes standing there, her pencil steady even if her fingers had stiffened. She wrote that the tin remained at the rectory under seal, that back-scatter images with clinical character had been obtained, and that she would check the ledgers for any record of Father Beaudry's absence or leave in the months that matched the hand with the scraped line. She read the words once and then closed the book.

Sleet ticked at the vestibule glass as if it had taken up the work of a noticed clock. Salt was in the draft from the lane. In the church across the lane the sacristy held a table with a cloth and a chair dragged two inches to one side and left there. In the grocery a woman would be counting change at a register that ran on whatever power the line still afforded. On the south shore the jetty posts took the tide they always took, whether anyone stood over them or not.

In the office behind the locked door the tin sat where they had left it and told the truth to anyone who chose to read it in the way it needed to be read.

She had a plan for morning. It began with weather and it ended with vertical residue. It depended on the ferry's decision and on the size of the tide. It did not depend on anyone's story. She preferred it that way.

Chapter 4

The Mislabeled Carton

The office had lost its warmth during the night. Frost edged the inside corners of the window where the putty had pulled, and the radiator along the baseboard sat as a dull length of iron that would not heat again until the lines downstream warmed. The sealed evidence bag lay centered on the table, a rectangle of plastic with a neat fold, the red digits of the seal number visible through a wrinkle in the film. Beside it, Moira set the stainless tray and a clean sheet of paper as a catch. The headlamp band sat across her palms for a moment before she lifted it.

Cécile came in with a carton caught against her hip. The cardboard had a long-ago watermark that had spread toward one corner and then stopped. Someone had written linens in a patient hand on the front with a blue marker that had bled at the edges of its strokes. She set it on the table, glanced at the bag, and then took her position with the door open by an inch and her shoulder aimed at the hall.

"It was at the end of the shelf behind the books," she said. She touched the key ribbon at her neck and paused. "Peut-être depuis des années."

Moira registered the placement. The archive had suffered water along the outside wall; untied sets had been retied by different hands, and cartons had been moved off the floor. A mislabeled box could be left for years among unrelated materials. She pulled the headlamp down and settled it; she aimed the light at the box. In the notebook: linens, with the box's dented corner as a physical marker.

"May I?"

"Oui." The nod was small.

She lifted the lid, wary of powdered cardboard and the drift that came from old paper. Inside, a stack of prayer cards lay held together by a loose rubber band that had dried into a brittle oval. Edges were mauled where thumbs had held them. Beside the stack lay a length of ribbon with a printed crest faded to soft gray, the weave flattened in segments where a pin had once held it. Under these, a manila envelope with a corner bent down on itself. It had no label, no number. She moved the cards and ribbon aside to the paper she had laid and brought the envelope to the tray.

Cécile looked at her hands without looking at her face. "It was with the ribbon."

Moira shifted her pencil to the page margin. Block letters: Carton marked 'linens'; contents, prayer cards, processional ribbon, small unnumbered manila envelope; envelope corner bent; no accession slip. She touched the envelope lightly over the tray. The sound inside was soft and dry.

"I'd like to open this over the tray. No removal. Description and scale only."

Cécile's hand went to the ribbon on her neck. She nodded once and stepped back a half-step to her threshold position. She did not change her line of sight.

Moira eased the flap and coaxed its mouth open. She tipped the envelope. Fine particulate eased out in drifts. Not the floating, gray dust common on shelves after years, but a heavier mix. Grains with edges. She tapped the envelope's top corner with her nail; a small cascade slid out and settled. The headlamp picked up small translucent flecks among the matte particles. She did not move the tray for a moment; she watched for the way particles moved to rest. Shelf dust formed fine spreads. This made small piles, as if it had been damp in its past and had then dried into clumps.

"Not shelf dust," she said. "Mineral grit. Some silica-grade. And here," She angled the circle of light. "Wax. Small flecks." The mild sweetness reached her when she leaned in and then faded. She noted wax odor faint; translucent flecks among the grit.

Cécile did not comment. The ribbon on her coat brushed the doorframe as a parishioner went by in the hall and paused when he saw the open door without entering. Cécile's body angle sent him on.

Moira set the envelope aside with its mouth up and its paper spine aligned to the tray rim. The tray corners framed the work. The municipal generator ran; the headlamp stayed steady, and even the hallway held a practical dim.

She separated the small wax flecks with the soft brush to avoid smearing them into the grit and marked the difference between the matte and the faintly translucent. Using the point of the scale, she nudged a grouping into a measured rectangle that would read well in a photograph later. None of this belonged to the sealed bag. It was a separate task. The bag held its position with the seal number legible to anyone who cared.

She recorded bone dust present among mixed particles; non-archive grit suggested prior handling outside a shelf; wax flecks were consistent with proximity to lit candles; no fiber samples were collected at this stage. She closed the book. The beads of her headlamp strap left a line on her hair.

"It might have been shelved wrong for years," Cécile said. The sentence carried weight without making a claim. She used the formal perfection of the phrase to avoid naming the person who had put it there and the other person who had not taken it away.

Moira glanced toward the sealed bag. The seal number stood at its angle as it had last night when she pressed the tape smooth and watched the plastic resetttle flat. "I want the tin open again," she said. "I will call Sergeant Mercier before we break it."

Cécile did not move. "Il vient?"

"He said he would try to cross. I'll ask for authorization with you present and for a plan to secure the bag without a tamper seal until he arrives." She kept it procedural. The step away from the plan they had set last night had to be noted before it could be taken.

Cécile gave an almost invisible shrug that meant permission with limits. "Téléphone ici," she said. She did not look at the hallway. She waited for the words to be said where they needed to be said.

Moira pulled her phone, checked the thin signal, and placed the call with the speaker low. Wind loaded the line with a faint sound that was not voice.

"Mercier."

"Calder. We have a mislabeled carton with an envelope of bone dust and wax flecks, processional contact likely. I want to reopen the tin. We used our last tamper seal last night. We can bridge the fold with signature tape and lock the office. Continuous custody by me and Madame Gagnon until you arrive."

The pause recognized the edges of their plan failing to match their inventory. "I can be there by early afternoon if the master takes me. You document the break with time, both initials, and a photograph. You keep the door locked when you step out. No one else."

"Agreed."

"Give me the wording."

"Bag unsealed at time; tape applied across fold with both initials bridging; office locked. You'll have the seal number before any reseal."

She read the digits. He repeated them. Cécile reached to the edge of the table, two fingers braced.

"Go ahead," he said. "Call me if anything changes before I step off."

Moira ended the call and underlined the time he required. She held the bag mouth toward Cécile so that the other woman's eyes could be the

witness before the plastic gave. She peeled the seal back with a controlled pull. The sound caught at one point and then went. She kept the backing on the clean paper and logged its presence. "Your initials," she said, offering the pen.

Cécile wrote hers over the tape that would later bridge the folded top. The letters were even. Moira added hers, then squared the tape on one edge ready to be laid down. She opened the bag and slid the tin onto the cloth. The hinge reflected a dull band of headlamp. The deformation at the clasp edge looked as it had in the images, no new bends, no new shine.

"Light only," Moira said. It was a promise to the object and to the room.

She lifted the lid and held it at a controlled angle against the bag's clear plastic to prevent shift. She placed the foam rests that had been cut for a different case years ago, angles cut to take weight without transfer. The metacarpal lay where she had left it. She recognized its grain by now: the even cortical thickness, the clean plane, the micro□burrs standing at the exit edge that did not flatten under light.

She would not lift it yet. She brushed the interior seam again with the soft brush to move only the least and watched for lift; most material stayed. Then she set the small tray at the table's edge and angled the headlamp so the circle would not glare off the stainless. Cécile stayed with the door. Voices stepped past; a cough happened somewhere; winter noises carried through the walls.

"I'm going to move the metacarpal to the tray," Moira said. "It will not leave the room."

"D'accord." The word came with a small click in the throat that might have been the word's end or might have been something else.

She lifted the metacarpal with supports to avoid plate□to□bone contact. She set it in the center of the tray on a folded square of acid□free paper. She wanted gravity to be her tool. She tipped the tray a degree and

felt the shift in her fingertips as fine debris moved along the steel. Then she tapped the bone with the back of a fingernail at the shaft's neutral zone, away from the cut and the articular surface.

Particles moved. She watched one pass disappear into a quiet. She put the tray back flat and used the micro□puffer to encourage anything in the cortical void to come forward without forcing. Air was enough in most cases. Then she tapped again: a light, even tap. The sound was more felt than heard.

A small, hard sphere showed in the void, then eased out and rolled. A single click against steel. She held her breath and adjusted the headlamp a fraction to cut glare. The surface under her finger was cold and smooth. She rocked it once to confirm seam and hardness. "A rosary bead."

Cécile did not step closer. She shifted her feet into a stance that made long standing easier. Her eyes did not move off the tray.

Moirá angled the headlamp and leaned in. Diameter; surface wear; manufacturing seam; residue in the depression; crest stamp, enough to link to parish stock. She lifted the loupe and brought the circle down to the plane. Under magnification, the bead's seam lay faint against a field of wear. Near one side, a small depression carried residue, a fine dimness. At one aspect, a faint impression read as the parish crest. It did not announce itself. She noted wax at the depression and a film consistent with hand soap.

She took the small evidence envelope that rode in the notebook and marked it: bead recovered from cortical void of adult□compatible metacarpal; date; time; location; initials; witness present. She slid the bead in and waited for Cécile to read the line and make her mark. Then she sealed it and recorded the envelope number beside the description.

"This is a rosary bead," she said. "Stamped with your crest. Wax on surface. Soap film. Found inside the metacarpal." Her voice did not change. "It shows the object moved through hands."

Cécile's jaw set. The lines at the corners of her mouth shortened. She held the key ribbon without moving her fingers on it. She did not deny the sentence. She looked at the bead envelope when it lay on the table and then at the metacarpal lying on its square.

Moira eased the metacarpal back into the tin and checked once with light for any displacement of the phalanges. Nothing had shifted. She closed the lid without letting it arrive hard against the base. The tin went back into the evidence bag. She folded the top, ran signature tape across the fold with their initials bridging, and photographed the fold.

"I'll tell Mercier," she said.

"Oui," Cécile said. She stepped out into the hallway to give them both a moment. The open door made a thin line between their work and the building's ordinary business.

Moira stayed at the table and made a new entry: bead lodged within cortical void of adult-compatible metacarpal; parish crest faintly stamped; residual wax present; faint alkaline film consistent with hand soap; interior evidence argues against long-term sealed storage in niche without handling. She drew a line under the entry and lifted her head.

When she called, the line was clearer than it had been an hour earlier.

"Mercier."

"Recovered a bead from the metacarpal's cortical void. Parish crest faint. Residual wax and a soap film. I've sealed it in a small envelope with our initials; the tin is in the bag with signature tape across the fold. We kept continuous custody."

"Good. I'm on the eleven-fifty if he moves. Low tide?"

"Vertical runs and scallops point to access at low water. I'll read the posting at the hall."

"Do. Meet me at the top of the jetty if we make it. We keep everything quiet until we see what the posts show."

"We will." She turned the phone off and looked once at the bead envelope. It lay square with its writing straight. She put the headlamp around her neck and left it off.

Cécile waited in the doorway. "La salle," she said.

Moira locked the office; the latch clicked.

They crossed the lane with the wind moving across it in a quick, shallow push that made the thin ice at the edge of the puddle near the step crack. The noticeboard paper held to its pins but one corner had raised and was beginning to curl. Far down, the river held a surface that looked still only because they were far away. The hall's door gave under Cécile's hand and closed behind them with the sound of a building that had power when other buildings did not. Warm light and steady heat met them; the rectory office had held cold and dimness.

The municipal worker stood by the table where coffee would be on a different day. He nodded. "Ça tourne," he said, meaning the generator. The posted sheet with columns for dates and numbers sat near the door, the print small but sharp under the working lights.

Moira stood close enough to read without needing to touch the paper with her hand. "Low at three□sixteen," she said. Later than Cécile had guessed last night. She noted the time and added: exterior traces will matter more now than later; interior residues are recorded; exterior will degrade.

Her phone vibrated once. A text from Mercier. If crossing holds, on island by two fifteen. He added: footing dangerous; they will watch you walk.

She kept the elected brevity. Understood. Be at south jetty head fifteen before low. Continuous custody maintained at rectory. She did not add anything about the bead beyond what the phone had already allowed to be said.

"Je viens jusqu'au chemin," Cécile said. "Après, je retourne." She touched her shoulder in a way that made her coat sit better on its seam. "La porte du presbytère reste barrée."

"Good," Moira said. "We'll be in view on the road for ten minutes at most. Past that, we'll go down the steps if they're passable. We'll look for orientation marks or abrasion lines." She pictured the planks from two days ago and the posts that stood in the distance.

Cécile nodded and glanced at the posted list of renovation items that was still up in the hall. Heat exchange unit. Handrails. Plaster estimates. None of the words they had spoken in the rectory office were on that page. She moved a paper cup an inch on the table and left it there where someone else would believe it had been placed on purpose.

They went back along the lane. The wind carried a different edge now that the day had stiffened. Moira unlocked the office with the key Cécile handed her and then handed back. The headlamp came on and lit the table again. The bead's envelope sat square. The bag's fold carried their tape with initials across it. The pen lay where she had left it on the book, which lay where she had put it so that the bent corner showed, the same bent corner that had been there when she left Montréal last week.

She widened the light and looked again at the tin's interior through the plastic. The vertical runs she had photographed two nights before indicated water tracked along one wall. The two drip scallops at the upper seam indicated intermittent wetting, not saturation. Residue at the clasp lip, heavier at one margin, argued against flat storage.

One word again because it mattered: inference. Under□jetty hang possible given vertical runs and scallops; verify at low tide.

"Safe?" Cécile said.

"We'll take the steps one by one. If there's ice, we stay at the head with him and read what we can from above," Moira said. "He warned people will see us go. That is unavoidable."

Cécile breathed out without sound. "Je sais." She glanced at the bead envelope again with a look that was less about the object than about the words that would have to be said at some point in some room. "Si on te pose des questions aujourd'hui, "

"Residues and categories," Moira said. "No donor names. No stories."

Cécile accepted that and tapped the doorframe once with the knuckle of her first finger, a habit that had belonged to her before Moira arrived and would belong to her after. "Je m'habille," she said, meaning she would add another layer for the walk and would be back in two minutes.

When the door closed, Moira stood alone and counted her next steps with her pencil moving the smallest amount across the page. Three lines only: call Mercier again at two; leave at two□forty□five; keep bead in office; lock door; bring spare gloves and the camera with the macro lens although the light at the jetty would not cooperate with macro work. She put the pencil down and looked at her hands. The rubber of the gloves had left a faint smell she wanted gone; she pulled them off, disposed of them, and drew a fresh pair, sliding the cuffs under her sweater sleeves in a movement that made the line between skin and nitrile vanish from sight.

The hallway air shifted when the front door opened somewhere below, and the smell of the river came up the stair. She knew river smell from a hundred places, mud and cold and the drag of water over wood. This version brought tin to mind. She treated it as coincidence, not evidence, and did not record it.

Cécile returned in a scarf that did not match her coat but fit her neck. "On y va," she said. The key ribbon lay against the scarf. The door to the office closed; the lock clicked. The bead's envelope and the bag and the tin remained on the table where they were, in a room that had shed its warmth.

They went out into the day and turned down the lane. The church sat as it always did, the bluff holding it in a position that could be seen from

the water and from the road. The noticeboard's corners held. Wind had settled; the paper stayed flat. A thin skin of ice coated the stairs and broke under their boots with a sound that matched the thinness of the layer. Down the hill, a rope slapped once against a mooring ring and then stopped.

Her phone vibrated again as they reached the point where the lane began to show the turn toward the south. Mercier: on the water now; ten minutes. She wrote the time under the tide number in the book so that the two would live on the same line. She did not smile. She did not allow the relief to be anything but a fact.

At the top of the jetty they stopped. The planks showed a film, the posts stood where they had always stood, and the water beneath them moved at a steady rate. From this height, a pale scrape marked one post; at this angle it could not be read. A gull made a sound that carried badly in this direction. Cécile looked once at the steps and once at the rail.

"Je retourne," she said. "Tu m'appelles si tu dois fermer la porte pour sortir."

"Yes," Moira said. "We'll keep the look short."

Cécile walked back up the lane without hurry. She did not look over her shoulder.

Moira stayed at the head and rested her gloved hand on the rail. Water moved under the posts with a dull break against wood. Ice traced some of the bolt heads at the first span. The wind cut past her ear and left the skin there smarting under the band.

Mercier came up from the far side a few minutes later, his parka wet and his gait careful on the slope where the gravel tended to shift. He raised his hand once and then let it fall, a simple hello.

"You have it?" he said when he reached her.

"In the office. Labeled, sealed. The bag is taped and signed over the fold. Photograph taken. Custody continuous."

"And the time?"

"Three sixteen." She handed the book open to the page with the line. He looked at the number and gave a single nod.

He looked at the planks and the metal edges that had seen years of feet. "Footing is poor," he said. "We stay at the head. If the first landing opens at low water and the ice eases, we go then. People will see us. They'll make meaning out of it."

"Understood." Context had to precede claims.

"We keep the bag as it is," he added. "Signature tape across the fold with both initials. Photo record. Door locked. Numbered seals Monday."

She agreed with a short sound that did not carry. They stood at the rail and watched the posts take the water. Low tide was close.

Chapter 5

The Jetty Post

Bright marks on wet wood caught the light at the angle where the current ran hardest under the jetty. Even at a distance, the difference between oxidized grain and new scrape registered, narrow bands rubbed clean along a post face that had split shallowly. Low water had opened the first span as the tide table had promised; the planks held a slick film. Moira stayed at the head where footing was sound and let her eyes measure before her body moved.

Mercier stood half a step off her right, shoulders set against the wind that came up the channel in long runs. His parka was wet from the crossing. He kept his notebook beneath his coat's hem, in reach but out of spray. When he spoke it was low. "We keep to the head until we're sure about the first landing."

"Agreed." She didn't lean into the rail. The wood was cold and slick; her glove would take that sheen and lift it in a way she would have to account for later. Below, the water dragged in steady strokes past the posts. Where the tide had fallen away, a two-hand span of post lay brightened. The sheen wasn't uniform; it feathered at the edges where wet wood took scuff in one direction and not the other. She made the distance in her head, cross-brace to scrape's lower margin, then lifted her notebook against the wind and wrote the numbers down. Third post from the head, south face. Scrape band centered between first and second cross-braces. Height above present low water: one forearm and two fingers. She didn't need more precision than that yet. The point was repeatability.

A gull cried once; the sound thinned in the crosswind. The jetty's handrail held frost in pocks where bolt heads sat proud; some had a bead of clear ice around them, the sort that would shear if you put weight on it wrong. She didn't.

"Look where the face splits," she said. Mercier didn't need the sentence but he let her say it. She angled her chin. "There. Clean run. Ends short of the seam. Something came on and off that margin over and over. Not an anchor line. Too narrow, and the pressure points run in a small arc."

He followed her line. "Object weight?"

"Light. There's alternation." She kept the pen to the page. "Pressure heavier at the near edge, then a relief, then heavy again at the far edge. A swing. Small radius." She watched the way water lifted against the cross-brace and fell back. "Tin would do it." She said it as one possibility among others, not a claim. The object could have been anything within that weight class; the geometry fit a lot of possibilities and only some mattered. She kept the word within a sentence that left space.

He didn't answer. He looked along the span and found the safer route with his eyes before his feet considered it. "We see if that first landing will hold."

They waited. The lowest water of the tide opened another inch of the post's base; a brief slack set in. A rope somewhere on the leeward cove side gave a single slap against metal and then lay still. From where they stood, through the gap under the first cross-brace, a mooring ring showed at the side of the third post, half occluded by the brace bracket. A faint glint, not the scrape this time, caught the incidental light that slid under the span.

"Hold," she said. "Let the light shift." She didn't drop to a crouch. She kept her feet flat and aligned her eyes with the lower rail. The glint resolved into two small strands lodged in the open grain just below the ring. They read as the small peeled fragments you sometimes saw at the

edge of a wire when the outer layer lifted away. Even at that distance, the way they set in the wood looked right: not lying on the surface but nestled where pressure had buried them past the line where a fingernail could lift.

“We’ll need the long lens for a context shot and then hands on, your hands,” she said.

“Fine.” He kept his voice even. He had said earlier that people would watch their walk. He didn’t look up the path now to see who had taken up position at the lip of the bluff.

She squared her stance so that when she pointed, she wouldn’t have to shift again. “Third post from head, south face, just below the mooring ring: two fibres set in the grain. Height at your wrist at present low water. We’ll mark exact measurements after the wide frames.”

He took the camera from inside his coat. He brought it out cleanly. He set the strap round his neck and brought the lens up to length for a mid shot, then shortened for a wide. He took context, including rail, first span, cross□brace, post numbering by position, and water line, then looked to her once in case she wanted a change. She didn’t. He moved the lens to the close and shot the ring, the fibre site, the scrape band above. He kept a scale to the side until angles allowed him to seat it near the site. He didn’t linger. Spray collected if you stood over one spot too long.

“Loose board on the left, three down,” he said. “Gap at its far end. Don’t shift left.”

She had seen it. The small sheen on the board edge had that particular look of a margin that might take a foot and then roll. She kept centerline. When she moved, she did it without commentary. The best way to keep attention off the body was to make no sudden corrections that read as surprise.

The first landing held. He tested it with his weight distributed and then, after a small pause that might have read as deference to the rail, not her, moved onto it. He stopped short of the midpoint. The fibre site was

within arm's reach; he kept his center. He reached without tense muscles in his neck. She watched the shape of his hand as it approached the wood with the mooring ring as a stop. It told her more about what he knew he could be blamed for than any words would have.

She put it in a sentence for the record. "I am indicating the site. I will not touch the surface." She kept her voice at the ordinary volume of their talk. "Two fibres lodged in the grain. There may be more. Sampling point is below ring, within the ring's diameter on the south face, distance from present waterline approximately," She looked along the post again, made the number, and said it. He nodded and repeated it back without changing a digit.

He worked quickly in the cold because dexterity was a resource you spent whether you meant to or not. He tugged a nitrile glove tight; the blue snapped once in the wind. Forceps out of a small pouch in his pocket. Paper evidence fold that didn't go slick in damp air. He set the fold under his gloved palm to make a small table against wind and brought the forceps in under the mooring ring, coming from the angle that would lift the fibre against the opening grain rather than push it deeper. He never touched the ring. He let the pressure be in the wood and not in the metal so there would be no noise or shift that would travel.

"Hold for one," he said, and took a picture of the forceps at the fibre without his hand in the frame. Then he eased the first fibre out and let it fall into the fold. The second lifted and then hesitated. He didn't chase it. He waited for it to loosen and then give.

She wrote while he worked. She kept the description clean: fine metallic fibres lodged in the grain below a mooring ring on post three, south face; context photographs taken; wide, mid, close; scale applied at angle due to brace; forceps used; paper evidence fold; no contact with ring; no contact with scrape band above.

A faint shout traveled across from the shore near the cove, but it wasn't to them; it was to the wind and the day and to the idea that

something old could be stirred without permission. Pebbles rattled down the slope. Mercier didn't look. If he looked, the shout would become an interaction instead of a sound.

He folded the paper once, twice, sealing the fibres in a way that could be opened in the lab with no loss. He held the fold in his gloved palm for one second longer than he had to before placing it in a small envelope. He wrote the time and the place and the words that would be needed later when someone who wasn't here had to trust what the paper said without seeing the river. He initialed and dated the small envelope, then slid it into a rigid sleeve inside the evidence pouch. Then he took another set of photographs of the site without his hands in the frame and stood up.

He took a control shaving from the next post at the same height as the first site at present low water, matching exposure, and marked it accordingly. Scrape band and ring intact; no dislodged splinters.

Moira watched the arc of marks again. They didn't run the full width of the post face. They cut short where the cross-brace bracket cut them off, one band below, one above with nothing between. That meant the object's swing, if it had an object, had been limited by that brace at the top and by the water and weight at the bottom. She watched the way water flicked up and stayed for a second in a thin film and then fell. That would make vertical runs inside a container if a container hung wrong side down, hinge toward a water source. She wrote, not as conclusion but as alignment: bright scrape band at the height of the brace; fibres below ring; interior vertical oxidation lines at hinge wall; drip scallops under seam; residue banked at clasp lip; orientation consistent with vertical hang; inference only. Her fingers flexed once inside the glove, then eased.

"It fits," she said. That was as far as she would go here. "Size. Mass. It fits the observed pattern."

"Could be a bait box," he said. He knew it didn't matter what object they named; until the lab told them fibres were consistent with the tin metal, the word 'tin' had no primacy. He gave her a fair counter that kept

the language clean.

“Could,” she said. She added ‘bait box’ to a list that had room for other containers with faces and seams and the right weight.

She lifted her head to look back toward the lane. The line between the jetty and the church door wasn’t a straight run along the gravel and the steps for most people on most days. She marked the practical as the crow flew. The shortest way was a long slant from the jetty head to the church steps, a path stamped into thawing snow where feet had found the same place day after day because people knew where the flat spots hid under the thin cover. Compressed snow sat darker than fresh at the center of that slant, with edges that had melted and refrozen in layers you could read if you had worked crime scenes in winter. Different days showed at the edges: older passes smoothed to a low laminate while newer prints rode slightly higher. It wasn’t proof of who or why. It showed traffic.

There was a figure at the lip of the bluff where the lane opened. A hat pulled down. Hands in pockets. The body pointed toward the jetty without fully committing to the stance of watching. The way the shoulders held told her this person would rather have been elsewhere, a posture built for deniability if asked later. The figure turned after a moment and stepped away. It wasn’t victory or warning. It was information about what the island could bear to acknowledge in public and what it would prefer to hold to itself.

Mercier straightened and read the underside of the rail with his eyes again, keeping his hands well away. “We’re done here for now.” He packed the forceps without wiping them on his jacket. The wind would dry them enough to return them to a bag without smearing water into metal. “Before the turn.”

She nodded. It didn’t need ceremony. They backed away from the first landing in the same order they had gone onto it, and the rail touched neither of them in a way that would require explanation later. At the head, she looked once more along the bright band on the post where wire,

or something like wire, had eaten into the grain and then released. She put the page away and covered the notebook with the flap of her coat.

They stood side by side. The river fell to its quietest and then held. A shallow pause held before water would return and pull their heat along with it.

Mercier's hand stilled on the camera strap, and he let his head turn a degree toward the cove and back. He set the camera to his chest with a hand on it. The shape of the hand said he minded where his evidence went when he no longer had his eye behind it. He placed both envelopes in the rigid sleeve inside the evidence pouch and stowed the pouch inside his coat.

Moira angled her head to the posts again. "Interior oxidation runs were on the hinge wall." She didn't have to say it, and he didn't need to hear it, but saying it once grounded the alignment she had made in her head. "Drip scallops under the upper seam, hinge side. No run line on the opposite wall."

"That matches your earlier inference." He kept his sentences short not because he lacked language but because wind blew words out into the water where they didn't need to be. "Small object. Vertical orientation." He looked toward the mooring ring. "Consistent with a container hung here." He didn't say tin. He didn't say 'our container.' He said 'container,' and that was the right way to do it.

She drew the arc again with her eyes and put a small circle around a place at the band where pressure had deepened and then eased. "Swing limit at the brace. The bracket's edge kept it from wandering higher. Lower limit reads at about where your hand is."

He glanced at his palm in the air where he had held it under the ring earlier and let a dry sound out that in a different room would have

counted as a laugh. “Hand at my wrist.” He took the measure with a small steel rule he kept for less contested work and read the number. “Record it.”

She did, with the daylight closing down a fraction while she wrote. “We’ll want to test the fibre against the tin’s material at the lab. Microscopy before handling anything more inside the bag.”

“You’ll get it,” he said, still watching water. “If the ferry goes.” He didn’t look north across the reach to where the ferry’s line would cut. His words kept the proposal grounded in the simple practical: if a boat moved, they would ask the lab to find them space.

They stepped back together and left the span before the water began to press upward into its next shape. Two parishioners stood at the top of the path now where the lane widened. They were not the watcher from before, and they weren’t together in any way other than standing in the same place. One man smoothed the creased edge of a notice with his thumb, the precise, repetitive habit of someone who kept papers in order. The paper was town-posting stock and had week-old creases. No one spoke. The men were there to gather an image and a name to keep with it. Not because they wanted the story but because they knew it would come to them anyway and they wanted to be able to say something about how the day looked while the officers were at the jetty.

“Madame Gagnon?” Mercier said, keeping his eyes on the two men and the path. He knew the answer.

“She’s at the rectory,” Moira said. “The door is locked.” She phrased the absence as necessary and true. Strategic distance read cleaner if you didn’t call it strategy.

“Bon,” one of the men said, not to them. It was a word that held its own meaning and could be applied to more than one subject without committing to any. He smoothed the paper edge again and didn’t meet their eyes. If he did, he would owe them a direct response to what they might ask next time.

Mercier set his foot to the gravel where it met the first step without looking at them again. He didn't show them the envelope. He didn't hide it. He kept motion ordinary and let gravity carry them toward the lane.

At the path's head, the direct line between the jetty and the church door was clean in the way only a shortest path under light snow could be. The route passed the corner of the rectory where the office lay behind one window. Behind that glass, the bag with the tin sat on the table under its tape bridged across the fold with two sets of initials bearing weight. Beside it, a smaller envelope held a bead with a faint stamp. None of that could be seen from here. She held the straight line in her head as she mapped the way people moved when they meant to move without being seen.

She put her hand to her notebook and drew a thin line from the jetty head to the church steps. "Shortest distance," she said. "Not the plowed path. The diagonal."

Mercier followed the drawn line with his eyes and nodded once. "People cut that way to save time," he said, giving it a reason that didn't have to be about secrecy for the point to hold. He looked at the posted notice near the church door, still holding to its pins against the cold. Tomorrow's date sat within its grid of tasks and costs.

She wrote: meeting tomorrow, public remarks confined to categories and conditions; no donor names; no stories. It had to be said here again because when they were in the hall with people who wanted both less and more, the lines between the categories could shift if she didn't have them rooted in more than one place.

Wind lifted at the edge of the bluff and then fell off. It ran east to west today and not the reverse. She raised her face into it for the measure of salt that would ride the air at low water and then settle out as the tide

turned. If the container had hung where she thought it had, hinged wall outward, salt-rich spray would have consistently contacted one interior plane more than the other. That told her why the oxidation inside the tin had drawn vertical more on one wall than on the other and why the two drip scallops sat where they did under the seam. She wrote it in the margin of the page she had assigned to the tin's interior: wind pattern today east-to-west; salt spray contact likely higher on exposed hinge wall if hung at post three; consistent with observed interior oxidation runs. Bead residue, wax and soap, sat beside the vertical runs in her notes, keeping the two reads aligned.

"Will you get time at the lab?" she asked without turning toward him. She kept the question practical. When he answered, she would not expect him to promise anything weather could undo.

"If the master runs," he said. He had his phone in his hand but didn't consult it. "I'll ask for a slot. We'll put the fibres under a scope before anyone breathes too much on them." He looked along the lane to the hall. "I can bring the envelopes across if he takes me tonight." The words had the right weight. He would try, but in winter, water made decisions for them.

She tightened her language because it mattered. "One more request." She didn't soften it with an apology. "Hospital appointment dates for Father Beaudry, if they can be lawfully obtained. Not content. Dates only. I want to align any medical visits with the periods reflected in the ledger hands and the imaging signature." If this was the wrong place to say the name, the air didn't change. It had been in the rooms already. Cécile had said it without protest when she had asked who had written in the ledger during the period when the hand didn't change often.

Mercier didn't answer immediately. His jaw worked once and then stilled. His hands went still on the evidence pouch. He kept his gaze on the hall door where someone moved behind glass. It read as someone choosing not to interrupt a path they could see from inside. "I'll pull what I can within policy," he said. "If there's a lawful way to get dates, I'll have

them. If there isn't, we'll mark the attempt and keep to what we have." He left little room; anything broader would loosen things he could not hold later if he needed to say who had asked him to open it.

She accepted the lettering of that door. "Merci." She wrote it down as a step, not a result. When you kept a record, you kept every decision and every refusal so that later the map of what you hadn't done made as much sense as the map of what you had.

For a moment she held the bead in her mind. Not the word. The object, a small sphere with a faint ridge and a shallow depression that had held wax that smelled like any candle the parish used on feast days and like soap a child might use carelessly and leave behind on something that traveled in a pocket and then in a hand. The bead had traveled into bone, into a small hollow where it shouldn't have fit and yet had. It complicated that diagonal in her notes. She didn't look toward the rectory office in case someone stood at that window now watching for where her eyes would go.

"The meeting," he said.

"Tomorrow," she answered. The paper in the vestibule said it. The municipal worker's post had held. "If they ask about saints," she added, "we answer with categories and provenance questions. We stay with oxidation runs and residue patterns. We say nothing about donors or substitutions. We do not discuss any names." The quiet repetition was not for him alone. It was to keep her own language within its rails when someone stood up and said a name to her face and asked her to say it back.

He made a short sound that covered agreement, annoyance, and resolve all in one breath. "I'll be there," he said. "If he crosses." He let that conditional rest.

"We go on evidence," she said. She didn't raise her voice. "Not rumor."

He didn't say yes to the sentence because he didn't need to. He had just taken fibres from a post in a way that would hold in a room where rumor had no seat at the table. That was the only answer that mattered to her now. He tipped his head once toward the hall and then toward the rectory door and kept his hands at his sides when he turned away so that no one could say he had overclaimed the space.

She remained at the path head a moment more. The straight line between jetty and church door still held in thin snow. Some prints had softened at the edges where they had taken sun and then cooled. Others were fresh. The wind moved salt through the air without much sound. The current pressed and pulled, marked wood, and then asked whether anyone would read what had been left behind. She closed the notebook, put it inside her coat at the edge so she could feel its corner, and turned toward the rectory where a locked door held a taped fold that would still be in place in an hour.

She didn't look up at the bluff to see if anyone had returned to that lip. If they had, they would have seen enough. A steady hum from the municipal hall's generator reached the lane.

Chapter 6

Clinical Leave

The paper edges held a faint tide mark where a damp sleeve had brushed them. Mercier took the page from inside his coat and set it squarely on the table between the taped evidence bag and Moira's notebook. The radiator along the exterior wall was silent. The office felt as if it had not warmed at all despite daylight.

He did not sit. He kept his hand on the document as if to keep it from moving in the draft that came under the door.

"I asked for dates only," he said. "I got a confirmation instead. Limited." He lifted his hand. Letterhead from a regional hospital showed through redactions that had been done with a real marker and not copied over. The word remained, black on gray: digital amputation. Below it, a month and year followed by an appointment number and a two-digit clinic code, useless without the hospital's internal index. His finger pressed once to the lower margin. "No names. Location redacted. This didn't arrive through routine. Do not photograph it. Do not quote staff. You can note that the event exists in that month. Nothing more."

She angled the page to the light for a short moment and then set it back the way he had placed it. The printed line sat a degree off the margin, a rushed print. The clerk who had pulled it would have been moving quickly. "Digital," she said. "That narrows us to a finger rather than a toe." She glanced at the taped bag. "The bone is a metacarpal, not a metatarsal. Upper limb is consistent." She did not reach for the bag. The tape bridged the fold with two sets of initials in blue, the pen strokes still dark.

"Month after the storm," he said. He did not say the other time marker. He didn't have to.

She nodded. "Let's map it to the ledger." She eased the ledger toward her with one careful hand so that the spine did not grind grit into the cloth. The page with the mid-line ink change sat under a paper strip she had left in place. The scraped donor name at the right-hand margin remained a pale disruption under oblique light. She paged forward slowly. Within two weeks of the hospital month, the secondary column headed relic refreshment had entries where there had been few before and then fewer after. A margin note referenced a receipt slip and Box B3. The slip was missing. The box had a newer knot. Those facts were already written in her hand.

"It sits here," she said, touching the margin with the back of her knuckle, not the tip. "The irregularities cluster. Hospital confirmation in this month. Ledger anomalies within the same interval." She did not state significance. The body earned that through accumulation, not through adjectives.

He watched the line where the tape crossed the bag's fold. "I have to say this," he said, still looking at the tape. "If the ferry runs and they ask you in the hall, do we have to put this out? The amputation." He smoothed the redaction edge with his thumb. He kept his voice low and even. Sound carried in the office.

She considered the plainest form. "If the bone proves to be Father Beaudry's," she said, "I cannot keep the fact of an amputation out of the report or the room. I will not speak beyond what is supported. But I will not omit it." She let the conditional sit. If the bone proves his. Not a conclusion. A path.

He didn't answer immediately. He lifted the page with two fingers, slid it back into his coat, and closed the zipper. "We protect the source of that line," he said, meaning the word on that paper. "No names. No channels. We frame only what we can own in evidence."

"Yes." She kept her eyes on the ledger. "We can document the cut plane, the striae, the residue patterns, the bead. We can place it in this month." She tapped the date line without striking the paper. "We don't own intention. Not yet."

He turned to the corner where his camera strap hung. "You asked for microscopy earlier. I'll still try to get a slot. The fibres first." He paused. "What else?"

"Photographic comparisons," she said. "Surgical amputation planes for a finger. Standard operating room technique. Teaching sets or de-identified imaging, whatever is permissible. I want a visual that any reviewer can match to the back-scatter frames." She didn't look up. "Only if lawful."

"Lawful," he said. He neither promised nor refused. She had seen him measure favors before.

Through the window, light had a flat quality that made the lane's ice look less present than it was. The hum from the municipal hall's generator came and went on a thin frequency.

"The meeting," he said. "Tomorrow."

"Categories and residues only," she answered. "No donors. No substitutions. We do not speak any names." She turned a page and waited until the paper finished moving. "We can say corrosion and bone types and provenance questions."

"Good." He glanced at the door. "And keep it on budgets. I'll be there if the master crosses."

He stood at the threshold a second longer than he might have on another day. Then he went out into the hall, closing the door to a latch point that did not click because the building had settled a fraction in the cold.

She stayed with the ledger until the vibration of the latch died out. Then she closed it and put it gently at the edge of the table. She read their

initials silently and wrote the hospital month in her notebook with the same block hand she used for measurements.

With the month fixed on paper, she went back to the cut plane to see if the signatures belonged to a hospital and not a sacristy.

She did not break the tape. She did not reach past the fold. The metacarpal lay where she had placed it, inside the tin, inside the bag. Condensation did not fog the plastic. The office air had remained dry. Her initials and Cécile's were visible on the tape across the fold; the edges lay unbroken.

She turned on her headlamp, set the beam to keep glare off the plastic, and brought the camera display up. The back-scatter frames showed their clean grayscale. She counted one breath and let it go, then stayed with measurements. The kerf across the metacarpal's shaft remained straight through the plane with fine, even striae; feathered exit burrs at the far edge read as minimal. No blueing or glazed patches marked heat, no discoloration suggested burned fat; the cut angle held perpendicular to the long axis with no wander. From the hall, the generator's hum shifted once and steadied again.

She opened the notebook to the page where she had written the measurements, striation spacing within a narrow band; no oscillation pattern from manual saw stroke; no tooth skip; minimal thermal alteration, and worked across the notes until she reached the line she had left open: saw type. In the space she wrote a description that matched a fine□tooth oscillating saw used in an irrigated field, consistent with operating room practice for a finger amputation when bone was transected rather than disarticulated.

She flipped to a second image, the articular end, and kept the focus steady to avoid bias.

There were no perforations along the shaft to suggest a devotional partition. No drill scars, no pinning. The cortical polish along one margin matched handling. The small nick along the cortical margin she had photographed earlier remained in mind as a separate point that did not bear weight here.

She held the hospital month against the page and noted the link to the ledger column she had traced in pencil. She had no right to assign a bone to an island until every line she could draw through procedure had been drawn. Accuracy was not cruelty. It was the way to avoid harm she could not repair.

She reached for the shallow dish she used to keep small envelopes from sliding and set the sealed bead envelope in it so it could not migrate if the table was jostled. The envelope showed the small number she had assigned. Her initials and Cécile's ran across the flap.

She noted that the bead's placement indicated local circulation. The crest stamp was faint. Residual wax and a soap film were present. She would not open it. The sealed envelope stayed in the dish. The door was locked.

She looked once more at the back-scatter frames and at the line she had added about operating room technique. A clinical cut through a metacarpal in the window of the hospital month aligned with what the bone had already told her. A community that had loved the man they spoke of often would not want the word printed on the document in Mercier's coat to stand in a room with their devotion. That was not a reason to blunt it. It was a reason to make sure every step toward saying it could be defended.

She turned the headlamp off to save the battery. Light in the room went gray. The taped bag took on a new flatness. She held the thin corner of her notebook as she always did when she was going to move it into a coat pocket and carry it into a conversation.

Clinical signatures could take her only so far; the next step required speaking with Léa. She wrote a plan that fit into one line: grocery; mid-shift; ordinary pretext; no pressure; listen. An ordinary mid-shift exchange reduced pressure and tended to yield cleaner recall.

The hall moved beyond the door. Someone passed the office and did not stop. The generator hum dropped and rose again. She put the headlamp back into her bag, then slid the bag under the table with the strap wound through a chair leg and the chair under the table, so that anyone attempting to move it would drag two pieces at once and make sound. She turned the lock, tried the handle, and looked through the glass to confirm the bead envelope still sat in its dish. As she stepped into the corridor, the air felt cooler and the generator's hum sharpened.

Cécile stood in the archive corridor with the key ribbon against her palm. The hall air held a faint cold that came through the window frames. She did not look at the office door. Her eyes were on a stack of ledgers she had just placed on a small cart.

"I'm going to speak with Léa," Moira said. "At the grocery."

Cécile's chin came up a degree. "The ferry?" she asked. "They say it might not run for the evening crossing."

"It may not," Moira said. "It doesn't change where I walk."

"No." The word sat dry in Cécile's mouth. She did not move her hands.

Moira chose her next sentence as she would choose a measurement. "I have clinical cut marks on a metacarpal," she said. "The hospital month lines up with the gap in the ledger."

Moira checked the window latch and eased it down.

Cécile kept her gaze steady. She did not ask which month. She did not say the priest's name. She touched the key ribbon with her thumb and then let it fall against her coat again. "Be kind when you speak," she said. "Facts can be kind if they are offered with care."

"I will be precise," Moira said. She meant it, and she knew what it would sound like to a woman who tended this building and these papers and the rooms where people came to keep what they could bear to keep. Keeping to what could be supported was the only generosity she had.

The corridor held them for a moment longer. Somewhere on the east side, rope hit metal once and then stopped. The sound faded, and the corridor returned to quiet.

Cécile slid the ledgers from the cart to the shelf. She put each spine in line. She adjusted the ties on one and then stood back to see if the row held true. Her movements were measured. None of them wasted anything that would have to be corrected later.

Moira put her notebook into her coat pocket where the corner could edge against her palm as she moved. She walked toward the vestibule without looking back at the office door. The corridor's cold trailed her to the stairs. When she opened the outer door, colder river air pressed across her face, and the sensation confirmed what the glass had already told her: the temperature had dropped a fraction. The municipal hall's hum remained steady. The lane was bare where wheels cut closest to the curb and thin ice clung at the margins where no tire could reach.

She stepped out. The rectory felt colder behind her as it closed.

She crossed to the path that began the diagonal line she had drawn in her notes and then shifted off it to the plowed section that would take her past the hall and down to the grocery. She kept her head level and her pace ordinary. If Léa was on shift, and she usually was at this hour, Moira would enter, buy tea, and ask a question she had already written. She would offer silence after it. If silence was what was needed first, she would accept it.

Behind her, the rectory office door stayed locked. Inside, the evidence bag remained taped across the fold. The bead's sealed envelope sat in a shallow dish. The tin rested where it had been placed. The ledger's row on the shelf lay true. None of these things changed because she walked. That was the point of procedure.

Snow at the path edges showed the layered compression she had read earlier. Newer prints were already turning to a thin surface that would harden as the evening set in. The church's facade looked further away than it had in the morning because the light had shifted. The generator's tone ran steady. It did not matter to the step Moira was taking now.

Chapter 7

Household Weather

The door chime was a single metal note and then a softer sound as the rubber mat absorbed water off her boots. The grocery's heat sat a few degrees above the lane, not generous, enough to loosen her fingers when she unbuttoned her gloves. Fluorescent tubes hummed overhead at a pitch she recognized from any building with a ballast older than its bulbs. The air held the thin sweetness of stacked cereal, a sharper note from detergent, and a tannin whisper from tea boxes shelved along the back wall.

She let the door fall shut and stood still for a count that could have been a breath or the time it took the chime's vibration to disappear into the shelving. To her left, the coolers kept a steady tone. A white clock above the counter read twenty-two past four. Mid-shift.

Léa was at the far end, in an apron with the store's crest printed in green that had been washed enough times to go soft. Her hair showed the day's wind. She stood angled toward a low cart, one hand on the handle, the other set behind her back the way Moira had seen it go when someone came too close to a subject they didn't want to host. The movement wasn't theatrical. It was a small protective habit that tucked the hand out of reach and kept the torso closed without having to step away.

Moira walked toward the tea aisle and stopped at the endcap, not blocking the aisle mouth. She picked up a box with a brand she used at home and turned it to the side panel without reading. The paper felt light and a little slick. A barcode line sat skewed a fraction, printed on a press that needed a minor adjustment. She set the box back in its row.

"Bonjour." Léa's voice came as she rolled the cart forward. Not a greeting to a stranger, a standard call to someone inside the same room. She didn't look up immediately.

"Bonjour," Moira said. She kept her tone even. "Je cherche un thé qui ne vire pas amer à trois minutes. Vous en avez un que vous aimez?" She kept the request practical and specific, nothing to do with the church, the jetty, or a boy from a summer everyone named only when they were sure of the company.

Léa glanced up. People on the island either tested French in return or dropped into English to make it easier on outsiders; Léa chose neither as a concession. "Le Darjeeling, celui-ci," she said after a beat, touching a box two rows down. "Eau pas bouillante, trois minutes, pas plus." She pushed the cart a few centimeters so the box could be seen without reaching past her.

Moira picked it up. The cardboard rasped against her glove when she turned it. "Merci." She let the pause settle as a neutral plane, not an invitation, then added, "Je m'appelle Moira Calder. Je travaille avec le sergent Mercier." She didn't name the church or the tin. She set the box in the basket at her feet, to make the pretext real and to occupy her hands for a second.

Léa's posture shifted a fraction. The hand behind her back tightened and then eased. She didn't step away. "I know who you are." English now, clean vowels. "You're staying across from the church."

"At the rectory office, for work only," Moira said. The correction was light and carried no judgment for anyone who slept in a parish spare room when weather trapped them. "I'll keep it brief here. This isn't a good place for anything that isn't groceries."

Léa's mouth tightened, then flattened. She moved one box from the cart to the lower shelf and left space where another would fit later. Her hand stayed behind her back, elbow angled slightly outward. The small bones in the wrist made a line under the thin apron tie.

Moira watched the elbow angle for her count and then shifted her attention lower as Léa stepped back. The hem of the apron swung and showed the front of the shin above the boot. A raised line sat along the anterior tibial crest, a healed enlargement a finger-width below the midline. The skin over it had the pale gloss that meant years, not months. When Léa planted her foot, her knee rode a degree out. Habit from an old bump, not a current injury.

"Looks like a low doorjamb at speed," Moira said. She kept her voice low and the language plain. "Young. Probably the kitchen. Were you carrying something you didn't want to spill, so you didn't see the frame? It never troubled a joint. It's not why you tuck your hand now." She kept the rest as observation. She didn't add any softening words. She let the observation stand as if it were a measurement in her notebook, subject to being corrected by the person whose leg it was.

Léa's eyes moved to her face and stayed there. It showed as a longer blink and a steadying of the shoulders that gave more weight to the ground. Her tucked hand came forward and rested on the shelf's edge. She didn't touch Moira, didn't invite proximity. She reduced the distance that her body had kept without words.

"It was the back room," she said. "I wasn't supposed to be running. I was ten. I had a bowl of batter. I hit hard." She let out a breath but didn't laugh. "So you look at legs too."

"I look at what's visible," Moira said. "Only what's visible." She did not add an explanation about bones carrying history because that kind of sentence turned into something else in the wrong room. "I'm here to name a bone and understand why it was hidden. That's the full scope."

Léa weighed that. She glanced toward the register, where a boy in a hoodie stood counting bills behind the counter with two fingers, careful and slow. A woman with a heavy scarf chose apples one by one from the wire basket, her breath fogging a thin patch on the skin as she checked for bruises.

"Outsiders," Léa said without heat, "they ask questions and call it help."

"I'm not offering help," Moira said. "Just a truthful record." The words were flat by design, the kind of sentence that made some people decide she was cold and others decide she was exactly the person they wanted handling a thing that had weight.

Léa set her weight evenly and dropped her shoulders a fraction. She pushed the cart forward with the other hand so it could clear the aisle if someone turned down with a basket.

"My break is at the half-hour," she said. "Back room, if you're still here. Don't wait by the counter." The last direction was for both of them. Avoid making a picture that could be read at a distance and turned into a different story by dinner.

"I'll be here," Moira said. She lifted the tea box once to show it would be bought, not used as a pass. She stepped out of the aisle and let three people pass her, staying on the edge of each transaction until the clock hand moved.

She paid with a card that had seen enough use to turn the corner soft. Léa didn't ring her through; the boy did, glancing at her face once, then back to the screen where numbers rose in small increments. The receipt paper was thin and dry under her fingers. She put it in her pocket not because she would need it but because it added a layer that made it harder for the same pocket to drop something it shouldn't.

At twenty-nine past, the boy turned the clock a degree with a fingertip and said without looking up, "Léa's break." The woman with the scarf had left five minutes before; the apples were bagged. No one stood by the door. A man by the freezer case looked up, then lowered his eyes to a carton he put back unopened.

Léa lifted the counter flap and stepped through.

"There's a table," she said. "Two chairs." She kept her voice low. "It's not private. It's enough."

Moira followed at a distance that let the curtain fall back between them before she touched it. The back room air was warmer and held the smell of cardboard, a faint chemical line from cleaning solution, and the trace of onions in a crate against the wall.

The table's top was laminated wood with a chip missing from one corner. Two metal chairs, dents along one leg from years of being kicked into place. A calendar with a smiling fruit grower hung crooked above the mop sink. Under the pipes sat a blue bucket with coil after coil of delivery rope drying in it, the top loop gray from salt that had dried and white at the edges where it met light.

Léa sat and put both hands flat on the table, then drew them back until her fingertips rested on the table's edge. She looked at the floor. Her shoes were dark and damp around the soles. A drop fell somewhere near the back door and left no sound after.

Moira didn't take out her recorder. She reached into her pocket, took out her notebook, and set it flat. She did not lift her pen yet. She watched the shape of Léa's breathing. Regular. The kind that settled a person into the middle of a room instead of pleading with them to leave it.

A minute held. Then Léa's chin came up and her voice arrived as if she had moved something blocked in her throat that wasn't tears and wasn't anger.

"Heavy," she said. "Wind made the drops hit the windows sideways. We had the rope bucket by the door because the leak in the ceiling, the one over the middle, was getting worse, to catch the drips. He knocked and opened the door without waiting, the way you do when you're already inside the house in your head."

She stopped. Moira didn't help the sentence to its next step. She wrote that the rain was heavy, that a rope bucket sat just inside the door, and that he opened the door as if already inside. She left space.

"His coat was soaked. Water came off it in a line. He stood on the mat because he was taught not to track water if he could help it." Léa used the pronoun and then looked up as if choosing whether to write in a name. No one else would fit inside that kind of sentence in a house like theirs at that hour.

"Father Beaudry," Moira said. "Here only to fix the grammar in the line." It was a small concession to precision and an acknowledgment that they were not in a room where avoiding his name protected anyone anymore.

"Yes." Léa wiped the underside of her wrist over the metal chair back, not because she was sweating; it was a movement that gave the muscles something to do besides brace. "He smelled like brine. Not river. The coat did. His cuffs too. He had a rope in his hand. A short piece. It had a fresh wet on it like he'd cut it after it was used." She flicked her eyes to the blue bucket as if an earlier coil had once been a shape like that.

She noted brine on the coat and cuffs, a short length of rope in his hand with fresh wet on it, likely cut. She let the recollection build by itself. She was careful not to name any dock or jetty when that name had not been spoken here.

"He looked at the corner where the bucket sits," Léa said, "and then he looked at me. He didn't come far inside. He said, " She stopped and the next words came without a catch. "'Tu es en sécurité maintenant.'" She didn't imitate his voice. She placed the sentence in the air exactly and let it rest there.

Moira recorded the sentence in her notebook with quotation marks and the accent marks where they belonged. She added the note she would need later to fix the line in time, marking the storm night, the priest soaked, the brine, and the rope bucket. Confirming who was home would

establish the time. "Who was in the house?" she asked after a silence that gave the quoted line room.

"My mother was at work. Night shift, that week. I was supposed to be in bed because of school in the morning." Léa didn't add why she wasn't. The reason was visible enough in the act of repeating the sentence in a room like this after years of carrying it. "He didn't ask for Julien. He didn't say the name. He didn't cross our floor."

"Did anyone else come to the door?" Moira asked.

"No." Léa's answer was immediate.

The back door hinge clicked and settled as someone went out somewhere beyond the wall. The fluorescent buzz shifted an octave down when one tube started to warm.

"Before that night," Léa said, "Luc was pushing. Asking people. Asking me. Asking at the wharf. He stopped after." She lifted her head. "He did not stop because of an answer he got from me."

"How did you know he stopped?"

"The way you know anything here," she said. "Because the sound goes quiet and the floor stops shaking." She kept any judgment out of her mouth and let the change sit as a physical fact.

She noted that Luc had pressed before and that the pressure stopped after the storm night, not because of Léa. She did not add meaning. Someone else would try. Not on her page.

"Do you know where Julien went?" Moira asked. She kept her voice level and her jaw loose so that the question would not read as pushing.

"I do not know," Léa said. She lifted her eyes and held Moira's gaze with no strain. Her breathing did not change. Her fingers did not jump or tap. She did not angle her face as if looking at a version of the truth she wanted to sell. The denial carried the clean lines of a fact that didn't need extra weight to stand.

Moira did not write "feels true." She wrote the observable, that the denial came with steady eyes, no cadence shift, and quiet hands. She drew a single line under that note so she would not forget how the answer had arrived when someone later wanted to grade it by their own rules.

"I have one clinical question," she said. "Weeks after that night, did you see Father Beaudry favor a hand? A bandage. A change in how he held things."

Léa's eyes tracked left, not up. She was looking at a cupboard in her head with ordinary objects in it.

"He wore a bandage," she said after a moment. "I saw it when he pulled his sleeve back to wash his hands in the sacristy sink. He kept the cloth dry as if someone had told him that mattered. He held his book in the other hand for a few weeks after. I noticed because that wasn't how he stood before."

"How many weeks?"

"Not long. Some Sundays and then it was gone." She tilted her head. "He didn't make a thing of it. People asked and he said nothing. He would find a way to put the question back on them."

She noted that a bandage was present for weeks after the storm night, seen at the sacristy sink, kept dry, and that he shifted the breviary to the other hand for some Sundays. She kept her pen still for a breath and then added a separate line that there was no specification of left or right; do not infer. She added a line that the timeline was consistent with the metacarpal cut marks and the hospital month.

"Thank you," she said. She ended the sentence there. She did not add any phrase that would attach comfort to what had just been placed on the table. People offered comfort in rooms like this when they wanted the cost of what they had taken to be less than it was.

Léa looked at the blue bucket under the sink and then back.

"What do you do with this?" she asked.

"I write it as you said it," Moira answered. "I place it next to what is visible on bone and in records. I name what I can see. I don't reach past that."

A truck went by on the lane; its weight shifted the window frame just enough to make the glass tick against old putty. The clock in the front ticked, too, a higher sound through the thin wall.

"You don't tell stories," Léa said. It wasn't a question.

"No."

"Good." She stood.

Moira closed her notebook and let the cover be seen. She did not put it away until they were in the front room. She followed Léa out through the curtain and let the fabric fall all the way before stepping forward so their silhouettes would not be one behind the other for anyone marking the shape.

At the counter, the boy had the register open and a roll of coins in a paper sleeve that he tapped twice against the counter edge to seat. He didn't look at them. He didn't have to for them to know he had counted the minutes of that break the way you count stock.

Outside, the air had cooled enough to make the metal of the door handle sting through her glove. Light had shifted to that flat hour before full dark, when edges looked closer and distances tricked you into thinking your step would land sooner than it would. The generator in the municipal hall hummed down the lane. Its tone came thin through the air, a constant she had come to use as a marker in days that didn't have many.

She stood under the awning and opened her notebook to the clean page she kept for direct quotations placed in a room by someone who owned them. She wrote the sentence in block hand and then again in smaller script below: *Tu es en sécurité maintenant*. She added a simple alignment noting the storm night, the brine, the rope, the door mat, and

that he did not cross the threshold. She did not write what it meant. The sentence would sit beside the cut marks, the hospital month, and the vertical oxidation lines.

She put the notebook back in her coat pocket, felt the cardboard lip press through the lining against her palm, and crossed the lane at ordinary speed. She kept to the plowed strip, not the diagonal, because once a line had been made too clearly in snow there was no use drawing it again for people who were hungry for patterns they could lay over other people's lives. She walked without looking toward the bluff, and the rope at the east side hit something metal once and then stopped.

On the church side, the vestibule glass showed her back when she moved by. No one stood behind it. Across the lane, the rectory office held what it had held for hours: a bag with a fold bridged by tape with two sets of initials, a sealed envelope in a dish that kept it from migrating if the table was nudged, the tin where she had left it, and a radiator that had not come on once all afternoon. None of that changed because she had written a sentence in her book.

She didn't go in yet. She let the cold lie against her face for a minute longer, the way she always did before re-entering a room where the next movement would make the air inside change.

Then she went to the rectory door and turned the lock.

The latch shivered once and did not click. The building had settled in the cold again. She leaned a knuckle on the wood just above the handle and felt the resistance settle. It was enough.

She crossed to the table and checked the tape across the fold the way she would have even if no one had seen her walk by the window. The edges were still sealed. The small envelope sat in its dish. She wrote the time in the margin of the page where the French sentence lay, then closed the book and placed it where its corner could press against her palm again when she picked it up for the meeting in the hall tomorrow.

She didn't turn on the headlamp. She sat still with the weight of the room's quiet on the top of her shoulders, not heavy, present. She didn't look at the tin. She didn't have to. The work had moved forward. She had a sentence now that fit the month and the cut without naming a person who could not speak back. She would carry the sentence into her notes, not the room.

Outside, the generator's tone held. The river moved under what they could see. Light thinned by a degree along the lane.

Chapter 8

The Parish Meeting

The coffee table stood under generator light; cups gave off pale steam. Wet coats dripped onto the rubber mats by the door. The hall's heater couldn't clear the cold from sleeves; it kept a pocket of air where fingers could relax for a minute before going back into gloves.

Moirá kept to the side wall near the map of the island and its tide marks. Someone had taped a new Renovation Update beside the old one. She read the line about plaster repair and the heat exchange unit without letting her eyes slide to the cluster already forming around the front row. The generator's tone came thin through drywall; steady, a working baseline. She had locked the rectory office across the lane. She had left the bag with the tin on the table, tape bridging the fold, her initials and Cécile's visible, corners still clean. The bead's small envelope should still be in its dish.

Cécile placed a stack of papers on the front table and straightened the top sheet with the side of her hand. The ribbon with keys lay against her coat front. Benoît Lemoine smoothed the edge of a posted notice without reading it, a motion he repeated when he needed time before speaking. People came in through the double doors, some with their hats still on, some rubbing at their knuckles where the cold made skin ache. A metal chair leg scraped and then lifted. The municipal worker set a carton of sugar packets by the coffee and stepped back to a place where he could see both the lectern and the door.

A boy from the grocery counted cups in tens and slipped a stack closer to the woman holding the pot. The sound of the hall settled to a low range: coats shifting, paper sliding under a hand, a small cough, shoes on

waxed floor.

Cécile lifted the first page. She didn't need the microphone; the room was compact and the generator hum gave a narrow gap where voices fit. "Merci d'être venus," she said. "We'll begin with the items we posted. Plaster repair along the sacristy's east wall; cost estimates here. Heat exchange unit, the supplier confirmed delivery by the end of next month if we commit this week. Handrails at the north stairs for ice. We have the bids. Questions we can answer are about these."

She scanned the front row, eyes steady, then moved to the next line on her paper. "Because the sacristy is part of the site under renovation, we'll keep that workspace closed except to those responsible. If the power continues to be unreliable, we keep using the hall for meetings and tea." She let the corner of the page fall. "Now. Dr Calder works with Sergeant Mercier on materials. She'll speak to categories and conditions only."

Moira stepped forward and didn't touch the lectern. She stood close enough that the paper lip didn't separate her from the room. Her field notebook lay on the table, closed. There was no need to lift her pen here. They had agreed what she would say.

"Good evening." Her voice carried without strain. "In a sealed niche behind the sacristy wall, a tin container was recovered during planned work. Inside were mixed remains. Categories only: small ruminant vertebrae consistent with ovicaprid, human phalanges, and one adult-compatible metacarpal. The articular end is intact, fully fused. At the cut end, imaging shows a straight cut surface with a fine, machine-like pattern on the cut, minimal heat change, no chisel marks. This is a surgical cut, not a devotional one." She kept her cadence even and ended on information, not judgement.

"Inside the tin, vertical runs on the hinge side with two small drip scallops near the upper seam, residue banked by the clasp, and a clean opposite wall together indicate long storage in one position." She didn't say where it had been stored. She left the where for the lab report with

scales and measurements.

“Additionally,” she said, “a small bead was recovered from a channel within the adult bone. It bears an imprint consistent with local stock. It carries residual wax and a faint alkaline soap film. That tells us the container circulated. It does not tell us which hands.” There. Evidence of movement in and out of sacred space without assigning names.

She kept going before anyone filled the gap. “In the ledgers, the column titled ‘relic refreshment’ shows irregularities within a narrow interval. A margin reference to a receipt slip points to Box B3. The slip is not present in that box. The box has a newer tie. These are inventory facts. We are not assigning intention tonight.”

A murmur moved across the middle rows and sank. “But the boy,” someone said, not loud at first. Then a woman in a purple hat with stiff yarn flowers raised her chin and said, clear enough to draw eyes, “Julien.” She left it without a verb.

At the coffee table, the woman holding the pot drew her hand back from the sugar packets.

“Our scope tonight is categories and conditions,” Moira said. “We are not discussing any person by name.” She didn’t turn toward the woman; she spoke to the room.

At the back, Mercier moved out from the wall so he could be seen and not just heard. He didn’t come fully forward. “To be clear,” he said, “we’re at an early stage. The container and its contents are under lock. If the ferry runs, there’s lab time off-island for microscopy on certain materials. We have to go in order. Speculation will not help. If you have practical questions, speak to me after. Keep it calm.”

A man with a wool scarf looped twice around his neck lifted his hand half way. “Authentic,” he said. “Can donors use that term for commitments on future projects? It was in a niche.” He didn’t give his name; he didn’t need to. People knew which checks had paid for pew sanding last year. Beside him, a woman set her hand on the column of

figures on a cost sheet and left it there.

“The container is not sealed,” Moira said. “The mix includes small ruminant bone and human bone. The human bone includes an adult metacarpal with a clinical amputation plane. We can document only what is present and how it was handled.”

Two people near him dipped their heads together and then apart, each unwilling to be seen whispering. When they lifted their heads, their shoulders aligned and their faces went neutral.

Cécile stepped to the table’s edge and didn’t pick up a page. “Merci pour la langue mesurée,” she said. She gave Moira a small nod and faced the room again. “Questions about plaster and heat exchange?” She returned the room to the posted list.

Chairs creaked as people settled. Breath showed in the air above cups and then didn’t. Mouths flattened. No one reached for the last of the sugar packets.

Benoît stood with his hands on either side of the lectern. He didn’t grip it. He had the careful posture of someone who had been in front of rooms like this for years; his voice stayed even. He looked past the first row to fix his eyes at the midpoint, a trick that set his gaze above any single person’s head.

“We’re grateful to Dr Calder,” he said. “Everyone here is aware of winter. Some days the unit clicked off and back on before the room warmed. We have plaster to keep on the walls. Renovation is our focus.” He smoothed the edge of the notice that lay under his hand. “A proposal. That we accept the find as very old and not interrogate it further, for now. We avoid scandal in the cold season. Donors are generous, but attention has a limit when budgets look like this.” He touched the cost figure for the heat exchange unit and left his finger there.

A few heads nodded in a way that didn't read as assertive; it read as relief. Someone in a heavy coat said "Oui" under his breath. By the wall, a couple in matching scarves edged toward their coats. At the back, a younger man stepped closer to Mercier and took his hands out of his pockets.

Mercier didn't move up the aisle. He did a half turn so his shoulder faced the lectern and the rest of him faced the door. "I understand the instinct," he said. "But there are legal responsibilities under provincial requirements for human remains documentation. I'm not talking about ancient sites with clear chain. I'm talking about what's in this parish. Documentation and disclosure within process aren't optional. A decision to not interrogate is a decision to ignore requirements we carry whether we want them or not." He didn't raise his voice. He didn't have to. He shifted a fraction to bring Moira into his sightline; his tone stayed level.

Benoît tipped his head to show he had heard the word legal. "We also have to keep the church open," he said. "People need a place in bad weather," he added, which was true and not the full point.

Moira stepped one pace toward the front without crossing the invisible line Benoît had set. "Leaving facts unnamed lets wrong stories set," she said. "When that happens, corrections come late and force changes that would have been smaller at the start. Care and accuracy can occupy the same sentence." Her hands stayed still.

An older woman near the aisle lifted her chin. Her hair had been braided once and then unbraided for the meeting; it held the pattern. "We remember Julien," she said. "Be gentle." The way she said his name carried both prayer and warning.

"Gentle does not mean vague," Moira said. "It means measured. It means staying within what evidence supports and not using names that evidence does not require." She did not soften the words. She did not harden them either. She put them down where they belonged.

The room's shape changed in small movements. People who had leaned toward one another leaned back. A man who had kept his hat on took it off and set it on the floor under his chair. A woman in a blue coat drew her purse closer to the chair leg. On the right, two chairs angled toward the aisle; up front, hands stayed flat on papers.

Benoît looked at Cécile, as he would have when they planned these meetings, for the nod that signaled consensus. Cécile did not give it. She kept her hands on the papers and set them square on the table. Her eyes didn't move from the faces in front of her to the deacon. Her silence was not a refusal spoken aloud; it was an unambiguous absence of assent. People saw it. Backs in the front row went still.

"Budget questions," Benoît said after a beat, the smallest edge of strain in a voice that normally didn't show it. "We still have to pay for heat." He set the page aside.

A man near the back cleared his throat and then didn't speak. The municipal worker glanced up at the light over the door, the way you did when you wanted to appear purposeful and not caught looking at people. A coin inside someone's pocket clicked against a key and then went silent.

The generator tone dipped; the ceiling lights dimmed for a second and steadied. Cécile moved to the lectern without pause. She placed her hand on the wood and didn't straighten the paper edge the way she sometimes did when a discussion wanted to fray. She didn't look at Benoît first. She looked at the room.

"Not all truths arrive in the same season," she said.

The room went quiet in the way that signaled relief for some and a new kind of attention for others. The woman with the braided hair let her shoulders drop. The man who had held his hat in his lap set it on the seat beside him and stopped moving his fingers on the brim. The boy from the

grocery shifted his weight and put both feet flat on the floor. At the coffee table, the woman holding the pot set it down without pouring.

Moira watched Cécile's face, not for agreement with her, but for the line that marked what would be allowed. It was there. No promise of names from the front of the room. No instruction to stop. Space to continue, measured and written down. People adjusted papers and chairs, a small clearing of throats before Benoît went back to figures.

Benoît nodded once, the kind of nod that could be read from the back as acceptance. Up close it read as adjustment. "Then," he said, and took a breath and returned to his usual register, "we will continue to report on plaster and heat. And when Sergeant Mercier has something that can be shared under his rules, we'll hear it." He made it a statement, not a question, and glanced toward Mercier with a small expectation in the look that would allow him to save face.

Mercier answered from where he stood. "When there is something concrete," he said, "we will bring it here. Until then, we keep the room steady. That starts with how we speak in it." His eyes went to Moira, then to Cécile.

Someone near the back said, low, "Toujours du monde de l'autre bord," and a friend or a brother at his elbow touched his sleeve to keep it from becoming an argument. It didn't repeat. No one took it up.

Cécile turned the page and went back to the list that had brought people out in the first place. "Plaster," she said, and read the numbers in a calm that would last long enough to get through the necessary motions. When they rose, one cluster paused under the notice board; others moved straight to coats and the back door. A hand flattened the edge of the posting, then left it crooked. Here, non-answers hardened quickly. She needed a material link.

Moira let the first cluster move out. She didn't try to catch anyone's eye. Her notebook stayed in her coat pocket; the bent corner pressed her palm. She kept her hand there. She stepped into the corridor and then out

to the lane.

The fabric of her sleeves stayed cold. Cold stung the skin where her scarf ended. The generator's tone fell to a lower pitch out here. Freezing rain ticked against the glass in the hall's outer door. From the lane, a rope hit metal and went slack. Across the lane the church steps were clean where a shovel had cut a straight path that morning; ice rings held at the margins. The rectory office window showed nothing but the dull reflection of the hall's lights.

She crossed to the rectory without looking up the slope. The lock turned against familiar resistance. Inside, the air was colder than the hall and smelled faintly of old paper and wood polish. She took three steps to the table and checked the signature tape across the evidence bag. Her initials and Cécile's were unbroken. The small envelope that held the bead sat in its shallow dish. The radiator still hadn't clicked on.

Two accounts ran in parallel and needed a material link.

Her notebook went on the table and opened to the page where she kept direct quotations and the short list of points she had allowed herself to write before the meeting. She noted 20:18 by her watch and logged the tape state beside it. On the next line she drafted the lab request for microscopy, naming the metallic fibres from the jetty post and the tin for comparison. Ferry timing would need a window; she could confirm it once the room across the lane cleared. She marked the newer tie on Box B3 in the margin.

She shaded a small square beside microscopy, half. The fibres recovered at the jetty needed the lab. Until then, they stayed in the rigid sleeve inside Mercier's coat. Without context, they remained preliminary.

She turned off the switch and stepped back into the entry. She shut the door and turned the lock. The latch shivered without a full click; the deadbolt took the weight and held.

Chapter 9

The Bead and the Tin

The bead's envelope sat where she had left it the night before, a small white rectangle in a shallow dish to keep it from migrating if the table were jostled. The tape across the evidence bag's folded top held clean; her initials and Cécile's ran straight across the bridge without feathering at the edges. The radiator was still off. The room held the faint smell of paper polish, old dust, and a persistent metallic odor from the tin.

From the hall, the generator's hum steadied. By 07:42 the bead lay where she had left it, the tape clean across the fold, the room still cold, the deadbolt still thrown.

Footsteps in the corridor paused at the door and stopped. A key turned with a soft drag in the cylinder, then the bolt eased back. Cécile came in first; the ribbon lay against her palm. She did not step fully into the room. The air that came with her carried wet wool and lane cold. Behind her, Mercier filled the frame and closed the door without letting the latch slap.

"We have a window," he said, in a low voice shaped by the room. "Master says he'll cross at eight if the ice holds in the cove. Back by noon if the return doesn't close." He kept his gaze on the bag.

Moira nodded once. "Then we take a flake now." She reached for her notebook and opened a clean page she had labeled for openings under authorization. "Procedure as yesterday," she said. "Signature tape over the fold afterward, photograph of the bridge. You and Madame Gagnon present."

Cécile moved just enough to let her coat fall straight and set the keys against the table edge. “Go ahead,” she said. The allowance held no warmth and no cold. Only responsibility.

Mercier took a small pouch from his coat. The blue nitrile glove popped at the wrist when he pulled it over his hand. He set a paper evidence fold to one side where the dish sat, keeping a clean space between the bead and anything that would move. “You drive the light,” he said.

Moira lifted the headlamp from her bag and clicked it on to a level that would not place a hard glare on the plastic. She angled the beam to ride along the bag’s fold rather than through it. The signature tape’s ink looked flat and unbroken.

She recorded the opening under authorization with the date and their names. Mercier put his chin down, not to hide his face but to direct attention to the sequence. They had both done this before in rooms that did not belong to them.

She lifted the edge of the tape with a stainless blade, slow enough that the fibers of the adhesive would not stretch and disguise an opening. Then she took the corner of the bag, eased it open, and waited ten seconds for the difference in room air to equalize in the plastic. The tin sat as they had left it: lid slightly misaligned, hinge toward the left, scale card resting along the lower seam inside, residue lines visible as pale runs when the light hit them.

“Flake site,” she said. “Hinge-side upper left, flaked lip, exterior corner. Avoid contact with interior residues.” She did not reach for the metal. She stepped back so the headlamp’s circle ran across the chosen point and held steady.

Mercier slid the gloved hand in and held the forceps the way he had at the jetty. He did not pinch. He breathed once, left hand anchored to the bag lip to keep it from moving, and lifted a fleck no bigger than a grain of coarse salt from the outer edge where prior corrosion had already lifted it.

The flake lay flat in the forceps' tip. No dust fell.

"In the fold," he said. He dropped the flake into the crease and closed the paper with two quick turns so it would not spit out in the ferry's vibration. He labeled the small envelope with place and source and set it in the rigid sleeve he had used two days earlier for the jetty fibres. "Control?"

"Not today," she said. "Control on the post already collected."

They closed the bag. Moira pressed the fold, then laid new signature tape bridging the top, aligning her initials and Cécile's across the seam and adding the word flake in small letters along the lower margin. She photographed the fold, keeping the headlamp beam off the plastic to avoid glare. Under the tape, the bag looked as it had last night. The tin was still in its position, the bead still in the dish, the room still cold.

Cécile watched their initials dry. She held the ribbon against her left palm, rubbing the fabric once with the pad of her thumb and then stopping. "I will remain here," she said. "The door stays locked."

Mercier nodded. "I'll text when I'm on the water and when I'm landed. If the lab can move, they'll prioritize. Fibres first, then flake." He slipped the rigid sleeve into the inside pocket of his coat, where the pouch sat tight against the fabric. He zipped the coat, securing the sleeve against his chest. "We'll know by mid-afternoon if they don't get clogged."

Moira made the entry in her notebook without looking up. She marked the bag's new tape state and drew a small square beside the word microscopy, shading just the corner. "We need only a compositional and oxide-level comparison sufficient to establish that the slivers embedded in the post are indistinguishable from the tin's plating within the method's limits," she said. "If they can get wood transfer, better."

Mercier's mouth tipped in a way that acknowledged both hope and experience. "They'll try. I'll call as soon as I have anything I can say in a room." He reached for the door and gave it the force required to seat the unsettled latch. The bolt slid and held.

When the hall steps had faded, Moira sat and listened to the room until she had reacquired its normal sounds. The generator's hum ran thin through the wall. On the other side of the window, freezing rain ticked against the glass. She moved the bead dish two centimeters from the edge of the paper to clear space for the next page of her notebook and set the pen down parallel to the paper's ruled line.

She opened the ledger summary she had kept to the side and traced the penciled band of irregular entries in the relic refreshment column back to the heavy redaction month she had written in block capitals two days before. The pencil line darkened where the month began; it lightened again after two weeks. Midway through the band, a margin note referenced a slip for Box B3, the slip that was not there. A newer string, unfamiliar knot. She had already written those words. She added nothing to them now.

A text came in from a number she had labeled simply Étienne. On the water now. Ten. She underlined the words and did not go to the window. She adjusted the headlamp on the table so that it would not cast a shadow across the bead when they opened it later. For the next hour she did not move except to shift the notebook and turn the page. The radiator remained silent. The air did not change.

By midday, the light shifted without brightening. The generator hum dipped once and rose. Two sets of boots crossed the rectory entry and went past. She kept the door closed, the deadbolt in place, the bag in her line of sight.

Her phone vibrated on the table. "Mercier," she said.

"Landed. They took the fibres straight in. Slot in thirty minutes. They bumped another case to give us the bench for an hour. I gave them the flake with the jetty slivers. They're setting the electron microscope and elemental scan, SEM/EDS. If they get spectra, they'll push them through. I'll call with the first sheet even if it's ugly."

“Understood.” She looked at the bead without moving it. “Drive safely when you turn.”

“Always. I’ll call.” The line clicked.

She folded the notebook and slid it under the edge of the dish so that the corner pressed against her palm. The pressure was small and sufficient to keep her present. The tick against the window glass kept time with the lines on the page.

Her phone vibrated again in early afternoon. She answered before the second vibrate. “Go,” she said.

“They ran the analysis,” he said. “Jetty slivers are tinplate over low-carbon steel. Tin layer thin, with trace antimony and lead, old tinplate signature. Iron substrate shows chloride-influenced pitting. They put one sliver under the scope; there’s wood fiber adhered, lignin signal in the spectra, and the micrograph shows a flattened strand. Your flake from the tin, same tin layer signal within measurement error, similar antimony signature, same iron underlayer and oxide morphology. They’re printing micrographs; I’ll bring the paper. Their words are ‘indistinguishable within method limits.’”

“Chloride,” she said. “Brackish rather than fresh.” She looked at the bag’s fold, then at the bead. “Did they get any signal that would argue river water?”

“They wrote ‘chloride-rich; compatible with river mouth conditions and marine influence; inconsistent with potable or purely freshwater exposure.’” He paused. “They went further. The wood fiber under the scope shows crushed tracheids. It looks like pressure embedding, not incidental contact.”

“Against open grain,” she said. “At the post.”

“At the post,” he repeated. “I’m on my way back.”

She clicked off and wrote, in short lines, tinplate match; brackish; wood transfer; pressure embedding. A small rectangle went under her

pencil with post 3 south face beneath it, then the word scallops. She set the notebook aside and took the field book she had used at the jetty from her bag. Her pencil marks along the margin where she had sketched the scrape band ran in a series of shallow arcs, side by side, each span consistent.

She took a steel rule from the kit and measured the spacing she had not bothered counting in the wind. Twenty-one to twenty-three millimeters between low points, five repeats in the visible range. Not gouges; scallops, contact at regular intervals as an object of fixed width swung and settled in variable chop. The swing would not have been the river's entire movement; it would have been the small oscillation of a hung object under a cord or wire.

She closed the book and let the number sit. In her mind, the hinge wall of the tin stayed to the left, with vertical runs darkening that side. Two drip scallops below the upper seam practically counted themselves once she allowed them to matter. The tin had hung. The scrape band's scallops suggested a repeated arc against wood. The lab's wood transfer told her the contact was not imagined. The chloride-rich oxide made prior salt spray inference less hypothetical. The storm that drove brine into cuffs would have covered a man wiring something beneath the dock. Spacing at twenty-one to twenty-three millimeters was consistent with a fixed hanger width; the repeated contact fit a wired suspension. Chloride-rich oxide together with lignin on the slivers placed the contact at the post under salt influence, and a wire would have allowed retrieval once the chop slackened. No devotional origin could explain this, and no "untouched" could survive it.

The door eased open. Mercier stepped inside, a set of stapled printouts in a clear sleeve under his arm. He set them down and peeled the sleeve back. The micrographs confirmed the call: tinplate over iron, chloride pattern, and a flattened wood fiber adhered.

She set the page beside her notebook and did not look up. "This collapses any claim that the object sat sealed and untouched," she said.

“It was hung, and it was hung under the jetty in a salt-influenced period.”

Mercier lifted a hand and let it fall. “How many will need to see this to accept it?”

“Acceptance isn’t my measure,” she said. She kept her voice even. “It meets the threshold for inclusion in my report. The residues and the lab tie together. We do not need the room to agree to write what we can stand behind.”

He gave a small nod. “We bring it here when there’s a format that keeps it steady.” He did not say when, or whether the hall would hold for that kind of paper. “And until then?”

“Until then we map choices,” she said. Her hand went to the dish and stopped short of it. “The object’s path is clear enough to support that work now.”

She set the field notebook open, the jetty sketch visible. “Scallops in the band at the post,” she said. “Twenty-one to twenty-three millimeters apart. Repeats in the range we could see. A narrow object swinging on a wire at wrist height. The hinge wall inside the tin shows the corresponding vertical runs. Drip scallops under the upper seam. The lab gives us chloride and wood transfer. That’s a chain.”

He breathed in and out, through his nose. “It’s enough to say it hung,” he said. “Enough to say where. Enough to say when, in the big sense.” He looked at the bead envelope, then back at her. “Now we need to know who moved it, and why.”

Moira did not answer at once. She lifted the micrograph showing the wood fiber and aligned it to the angle at which the scrape band sat in her memory. Then she put the paper down and re-placed the bead dish to the exact center of the table.

“We ask the people who could have lifted it,” she said. “Not in the hall.” She added a line in her notebook: confront plausible vectors of harm; Luc first; no reach beyond evidence.

Mercier looked toward the door and then at the window. Freezing rain ticked again. “Early afternoon tomorrow,” he said. “Leeward cove while the boats are out. He’ll be in his shed if the weather holds that way.” He kept his tone neutral. “Best to avoid an audience.”

“Agreed.” She closed her notebook and let the bent corner press into her palm until she felt the card beneath. She rested her other hand near the bead and did not touch it.

The bead sat between them, in its paper envelope inside the dish. The tin and the post and the lab now connected; the bead had its work yet to do. The bead’s path would match the path inside.

They did not open the office door for ten minutes. No one tried the handle. When they did open it, Cécile was already there. She slid inside and closed it after her, settling the latch with the same pressure Moira used.

“Results,” she said. She did not frame it as a question.

“Microscopy,” Mercier said. “The slivers we took from the jetty and a tiny flake from the tin’s lip match in composition and oxide. Brackish exposure. Wood fiber embedded. It hung.” He did not soften it; he did not sharpen it.

Cécile’s hands rested on the back of a chair. Her thumbs pressed once into wool and then lifted away. “Then you will write that,” she said.

“I will,” Moira said. “Before that, I want to look again at the bead.”

Cécile’s gaze went to the dish and back to Moira’s face. “Opened once,” she said, stating the count for the small envelope rather than granting permission for this time.

“We open it again under the same rules,” Moira said. “You present; Sergeant present. We re-seal with both initials.”

Cécile looked at the door, then at the corner of the bag's fold where the tape lay clean. She did not move for a full breath. "Proceed," she said finally. "We will not be here long."

Moira put the low-angle mirror on the table and set the headlamp to a narrow beam. She lifted the bead envelope from the dish and held it without flexing it. The initialed flap looked the way it had when she sealed it. She read out the number at the lower corner and wrote it again in her notebook for this opening. Mercier watched. Cécile's mouth did not move.

She eased the flap with a fingernail so the paper fibers did not break. Inside, the bead slid to the crease without leaving the envelope. She let it lie in the fold and passed the beam across it so that the surface came up in relief. The tiny crest mark looked faint at this angle and then more present when the beam shifted. She did not touch the bead. She did not move the envelope.

"At this light," she said, "residual wax in the shallow depressions, translucent, not fully hard. A faint alkaline sheen on the uppermost ridge. The crest's raised lines show polish on one side with micro-scratches in a consistent direction, unidirectional under oblique light. Abrasion pattern suggests repeated thumb contact." The words entered the notebook without commentary. She did not say what the contact meant. She did not need to.

Mercier leaned just enough that he could see the ridge catch light. "You had wax and soap before," he said. "This gives you use."

"It gives handling," she said. "Handling in a context where wax and a cleaned hand would be together." She let the beam die by a degree to see whether the sheen held. It did. "Nothing in this contradicts circulation."

Cécile had not moved since the bead appeared at the fold. Her eyes rested on the envelope, not on the bead itself. Her hands remained on the chair back, steady. "It travelled sometimes," she said. The words came out level. She did not add a date. She did not add a route.

They were quiet for a breath. Cécile angled the chair a fraction and left it there.

Moira wrote the word travelled in quotation marks and added no context beyond the quote mark. “Without dates and without a list of custodians,” she said.

Cécile did not answer the sentence. “Do you require anything more tonight?” she asked.

“I will re-seal the bead,” Moira said. “And then I want five minutes in the nave.” It would let her set the jetty-to-door vector against the ledger’s irregular band.

Mercier’s eyes flicked to her hand as she folded the envelope. “Note, please,” he said softly, not as an order but as process.

She recorded the seal and their initials and then set the bead back in the dish. She pressed the flap, signed the line, and offered the pen across the fold. Cécile took it and wrote her initials at the other corner. There was nothing ceremonial in the motion. It was done.

Mercier set his hands on the table near the micrographs and did not touch them. “Public use of an object with unknown contents,” he said, “is a liability. You know that.” He kept his voice without heat.

Cécile’s gaze moved from his face to the printouts and then to the bag with the tin. “We are accountable for what we carry,” she said. “I know it.” She did not pull the words back.

Moira sank the headlamp’s beam until the bead’s surface went dull. The abrasion pattern would still be there when the light returned. She closed the envelope without lifting it and smoothed the flap once with her thumb to seat the fibers. The paper made a small sound.

She added a new line to the timeline on the open page of her notebook: circulation markers, wax/soap; abrasion on crest; pre-jetty period probable; post-jetty certain by bead in bone. She circled certain and drew an arrow to the lab result for under-jetty. The bead now marked

both sides of the water.

“Five minutes,” Cécile said, already turning toward the door.

She stopped just inside the nave, as she always did when entering a room not built for her. The air was a degree colder than the office. The low light found the grain in the pews and did not make it warm. She kept to the margin where aisle met wall, one step inside the line that marked where the floor darkened from use.

She traced the route with her eyes, not her feet: the sacristy door; the shallow step to the left; the turn into the short cross-aisle; the main aisle straight down to the rail; the return by the same path. She did not project a procession into the space. She simply reinforced the geometry the building already provided. The curve of a shoulder carried an object one way just as easily as it carried it back. In a room like this, everything had a prescribed place. Access would narrow to those with keys or linens, priest, sacristans, warden; Cécile when needed.

At the threshold where the sacristy door met the nave, she paused. The stone where people stopped before turning showed a slightly flatter sheen. Someone had polished that spot by standing there over years. She did not step onto it. She registered it and left it to its work.

She thought of the diagonal track in the snow between the jetty and the church steps she had mapped with Mercier two afternoons earlier, compressed, thawed, refrozen; a line cutting the plowed corner of the lane. She held that against the equal and opposite line within the building. The ledger’s irregular band sat in the same part of her mind. The hospital month in block letters stood like a header over both. She let those lines sit together without forcing them to say more than they could.

“Your route,” Mercier said quietly at her side. He stood a pace behind, not encroaching.

“Not mine,” she said. “The building’s.” She did not turn to him. “Jetty to steps. Steps to door. Sacristy to aisle. And back.”

He stayed still. “Figured you’d want to see it in your eyes before we go to him.”

She nodded once. “We had to see it with the lab before we went to him.” She turned her head a fraction. “Tomorrow, early afternoon? Leeward cove while the boats are out. Fewer eyes.”

“There’s risk in walking into his shed,” he said.

“Scope only,” she said. “You hold authority; I hold record.”

He made a small affirmative sound. “I’ll set it. He won’t like it either way.”

“He doesn’t have to like it,” she said. She did not add that she did not have to like it either. She set her hand against the side of her notebook and felt the paper give slightly. “We test his vector. We test whether the violence people want to put in his hands belongs there or somewhere else. And we do it before we name a bone.”

He did not answer; he did not need to. He would make the call after they left the building. The absent acceptance sat between them in the way neither of them stepped forward past the point both of them could feel as a threshold.

She looked once at the aisle, then at the sacristy door. The memory of a bandage at the sink came and went, not as evidence and not as proof. It sat the way all things did until someone placed them in a sequence that could be defended.

She stepped back. The stone did not sound under her boots because the soles had softened from walking across the lane all day. She would make the entry in her notebook when they were back in the office. Her body knew where she had been and did not require the note; the record did.

Outside, freezing rain tapped against the vestibule glass and then stopped. The generator's tone came through the wall, steady. The lane lay empty for a breath longer than it had all afternoon. She did not look toward the bluff. She crossed to the rectory and pressed her knuckles into the door above the handle until the latch settled.

At the table, the bag's tape remained clean. The micrographs stayed under the sleeve where they would be safe from any stray draft. The bead's small envelope sat in its dish, the new initials aligned with the old.

She made a note on the page where she had drawn the rectangle for post 3 south face. Then she wrote the word shed and the words leeward cove. On a separate line she wrote: priest, sacristans, warden; Cécile when needed. She did not add an arrow. She closed the notebook and put it in her coat pocket so that the bent corner touched the inside of her palm.

Mercier stood at the door with his hand on the latch. "I'll set it," he said. "Tomorrow, early."

"Before that," she said, "I'll add the lab paragraphs to my notes and set the language for the report." She lifted her hand and let it fall. "It goes in, measured, with the residues. No names. No stories."

He gave one short nod. "No names." He opened the door and left it at the point where the latch held.

She stood for a beat longer. The room had not changed. The work had. The object that people wanted to call a relic had been under a dock. The bead had been in a bone. The tin would not pretend otherwise, and neither would she.

She turned out the light. The generator's hum continued through the wall. Tomorrow the leeward cove would smell of diesel and old rope. The door settled. The deadbolt seated and held.

Chapter 10

The Fishing Shed

Two bare arcs showed where a guard plate should have been. Fresh metal flashed at the bolt holes on the line feeder, bright enough to read even in the dim. The rest of the machine was salt□coated. The absence was not.

Moira stopped half a step inside the threshold and let her eyes adjust. The shed held diesel and old rope and damp wood. The cove was still; the air was close. Boards underfoot carried a thin sheen from boots that did not always wipe at the door. A coil of green twine sat in a shallow bin beside a spool of wire whose leading end was bent into a hook to keep it from slipping back. A gaff leaned against the wall. Its point had been ground down to a narrow wedge and brought to a fresh edge. The haft showed white crystals seated deep in the grain where palms had left sweat and wind had left salt. In the corner, a heater gave a dead click and did not take.

"Afternoon," Mercier said. He did not step ahead of her; he did not take the rear. He set his body where the first move forward would keep her to his left shoulder without making a show of it. Water tracked from the cuffs of his coat to the mat and stopped there.

Luc Arsenault stood with one hand on a bench and his shoulder set not to move first. The crushed knuckle on his right hand, healed off□center, changed the line of his fingers; every small movement passed through that offset. He did not offer them chairs. He did not ask what they wanted. He looked at Mercier's service tag and then at Moira's parka without reading anything on it.

"You got paper for this?" he said. He did not wait for an answer. "If you had it, you would have put it down already. You're in and you're out.

Don't touch."

Mercier let the condition stand. "We have questions that are easier to answer here than on the lane," he said. "Window's small. Boats are out."

Luc lifted his chin a fraction. His gaze moved once to the door behind them and back to Mercier's face. "Ask."

Mercier did not begin with the boy. "Equipment safety," he said. "Someone takes a hand under the feeder, what keeps it from eating the rest of the arm?"

"The guard keeps the hand from going under," Luc said. "Men keep their hands where they belong." He gestured at the feeder. The arc of his hand stopped short of the missing plate. "A guard's nothing if a man is stupid."

Moira recorded the plate's absence in her head where such details went while they waited their turn on paper. Two bolts showed thread cut clean. Two others carried the thread shadow of a nut stopped just inside the end. The plate had been on recently. The paint around the bolt circle showed a ring of bright where a washer had been. At the feeder's throat the paint was worn back to steel where something had ridden there and pressed.

"And a gaff?" Mercier said mildly. "You sharpen that for cod?"

"Everything dulls in winter," Luc said. "Tools keep a man in work when there's nothing to catch." He slid the gaff forward with his boot toe to make space on the floor and then nudged it back to where it had been. He did not pick it up. "You came to talk tools?"

"We came to ask about habits and movement," Mercier said. He did not look at Moira when he said it. "On the south side."

Luc's mouth pulled at one corner. "You mean the jetty."

It came too fast, as if rehearsed. "Out in it," Luc said. "Checking lines. Everybody knows that."

He had said the word without twitch. His hand went to the bench and then away. He took a breath and let it out. "You have a problem? Take it to the municipal. They own the posts."

Mercier nodded once, as if conceding a jurisdictional point he did not need. "We're making sense of a timeline," he said.

Mercier did not agree that everybody knew. "What time?"

"When the wind turned."

"From the east," Mercier said, as if verifying weather rather than alibi.

"You heard it," Luc said. "So you know."

Moira watched the hand with the crooked knuckle resume a small motion against the edge of the bench. A steady, slow tap while Luc held to equipment and weather. When he made space for the boy's name, the taps changed. The tempo jumped to a quick cluster and then stopped, as if he had recognized the sound of himself and put it away.

He made space for it himself. "You want to ask about Julien," he said. He spoke the name flat. The tapping started again on the second syllable and then checked, as if he had cost himself something by saying it.

Mercier did not look at Moira. He kept his eyes on Luc. "We do," he said.

"Ask," Luc said. His mouth held fast and his right hand lay down on the bench. He moved the fingers apart and then together, a small stretch that never got back the full range.

"Any physical altercation with him in the months before he left?" Mercier said. "Any time you struck him, or he struck you."

"No," Luc said.

"Any time you chased him, or cornered him."

"No."

"Any time you threatened him."

"I told him to work and to close his mouth. That isn't a threat."

"You say he left. Not 'disappeared.'"

Luc's mouth did not move. His jaw tightened then released. "He left in his head before he left with his feet. A priest put that there."

"Which priest," Mercier said, and made it a true question rather than a lead.

"What priest do you think," Luc said. "Your saint. Beaudry." His eyes flicked once toward the gaff and back. His voice did not climb. He kept it at the shed's tone. "A thief. Took what wasn't his. Took the boy out of his house. Out of his family's hands. You people want to dress that up with words." He did not spit. He angled his chin and kept his voice even. "He stole him."

Moira let the words be what they were and kept her place at the door's edge. The gaff point on the floor shone smoother than the rest of the steel. File marks ran in one direction only. The haft's heel showed a notch where a wood screw had sat. She said nothing.

Mercier moved a half-step that allowed his coat to drop a little more between Moira and Luc. "Where were you those weeks," he said, as if speaking from notes Luc could not see, "when the church changed its rhythms?"

"Church rhythms," Luc said, and made a sound that did not clear into laughter. "That's church business. This is work."

"Where," Mercier said again.

"Out," Luc said. "In the water when I could be. On shore when I couldn't." He looked past them to the door. "You done."

Mercier did not argue. "Two more and we're gone. Did you ever carry a small tin box to the jetty?"

"What would I do that for." Not a question.

"Did you ever see one under there."

"No." Luc's eyes stayed where they were. "You don't put a tin by salt, unless you're throwing it out."

Moira spoke then, not to confront and not to offer a lifeline. "The guard on your feeder is off," she said. "Recently."

"And." He did not move.

"It changes the way a hand meets the throat," she said. "It changes the mark that meeting leaves."

"A mark is a mark," he said, and closed the subject.

She closed her mouth on the words she could have used. She had no right to argue the cut plane in this room. The bone was not here. The evidence sat where it belonged, under tape and initial, in a room they would lock behind them again.

Mercier asked his last. "You ever lay a hand on Julien in anger."

"No," Luc said. He did not lift his voice for denial. He did not soften it either. "You want a story, go to the Hall."

Mercier drew his breath and kept his face where it was. "We're done here," he said. He took the smallest step toward the door and did not look over his shoulder to see if the man would follow.

Luc did follow. Not close. Close enough that his breath might have been felt if the air had moved more than it did in here. At the threshold, where the mat caught most of the dirt, he stopped. The words he put down there were a warning and a rule at the same time. "Stop stirring rot." In the trade, rot fails under load.

Mercier shifted just enough to stand full in the opening. "We'll be by again if we need you," he said. He kept his palms visible. He used neither apology nor threat. He let need you carry authority.

Moira did not add to it. "Merci pour votre temps," she said. She kept her voice even and stepped onto the packed dirt. Freezing rain from

earlier had left a thin glaze on the tamped ground. At this leeward edge it had not grown thick; it had only made a crust over the dirt that cracked under a heel.

Cold air came off the water. Between the shed and the bend the ground rose a little. Her breath went white once and thinned. Gravel showed through the crust where wheels had passed, and the sound under their boots steadied her pace.

On that short rise she did the test her work required. Could a feeder take a small finger in a way that would make the plane she had seen. The mechanics did not support it. A feeder would pull and then bite at a found angle and tear. Bone would crush at the margin, not part clean. With play at the joint, the pull would make two planes, not one. The kerf she had documented showed fine, parallel striae with exit burrs so slight they only took light at a low angle. Heat at the edge was minimal even at the outermost margin. A dry, dull, or moving cut would have raised more heat and chatter. None of that was present under back□scatter.

Gravel crunched once under her heel.

They turned past a coil that flicked in the faint air. Salt stained it where hands had carried it bent. The jetty lay out of sight, and the tide smell reached them.

A loose line slapped once against a post.

Beside that mechanical read, she set the lab's sheet in her mind. Chloride sat in the tin's oxide, consistent with river mouth exposure. A flattened wood fiber was embedded in the flake, tracheids crushed, which meant pressure had placed wood to metal and held it. The bead's surface had told the same quiet story the week before: wax in shallow depressions, a faint soap trace, micro□scratches across the crest from repeated thumb contact. Before the under□jetty period, the bead had circulated among hands. After, it had lodged in bone. An impulsive act would not have arranged that sequence. Wiring, leaving, retrieving, and delivering to ritual use traced a route that fit tide and weather.

She stopped before the corner to check her sequence. Léa's sentence took its place beside the sheet and the feeder notes. Tu es en sécurité maintenant. He had not crossed the floor. He had said it at the threshold. His cuffs carried brine. He had held a short length of rope, wet, with ends sharp from a recent cut. Returned matched those facts.

"I will write it all," she said, low enough not to carry past Mercier's shoulder.

He did not ask what all included.

"With the residues," she said. "With the lab words. With what the ledgers do and do not say. With the bead where it was and what it carried on its surface."

He did not smile. The small sound he made acknowledged the work.

"Measured," she said. "No names that are not required by evidence."

"And if the room does not want it." Not a question.

"Then it will be in the record even if it is not in the room," she said. "Justice and healing are not the same timetable."

They took the last stretch toward the lane. At the bend, a curtain in a facing window fell back into place. Mercier spoke, low. "I'll add a patrol pass by the church. Quiet. A blue□and□white slow roll twice before dark."

She nodded. The move sat in his column, not hers. "Thank you," she said. "Keep them off the steps."

"Always."

They went up together. The rectory sat where it always sat, directly across from the church, two steps above the sidewalk. The office window held a cold square. The generator hum from the hall reached them through the buildings.

At the steps, Cécile stood with her hands in the long pockets of her coat. The key ribbon lay across her palm where she had pulled it out of

the pocket without bringing the keys with it. She looked at them, not around them. She did not ask what they had found.

"La porte est barrée," she said. "L'office reste froid."

"Merci," Moira said. She waited a moment before turning the knob.

Mercier shifted his weight, then stopped. "We'll have the slow roll before dark," he said to Cécile. "Deux fois."

Cécile's eyes went to his face and then to the lane as if measuring where a car would sit without drawing attention. "D'accord," she said. "Pas de lumière sur l'église."

"Non," he said.

Moira looked at Cécile's ribbon where the fabric crossed and then disappeared back into the coat. She thought of the ledger's margin reference to a drawer that was not in the archive room. She thought of the month written in block letters in her notebook. Key, in her head, was both a shape and an access. The absence of key was a barrier. She didn't ask for anything now. She left the drawer unnamed. She let the door be.

She put the door key into the lock and turned it. The latch settled with a small shake under her knuckle above the handle. Inside, they checked the tape across the fold and wrote the time and the state. The bead sat in its dish, its resealed flap aligned with the last initial. The micrographs lay in their clear sleeve.

Her pencil put the time beside the tape in her notebook. She wrote the state of the fold: intact. She boxed the lab note and shaded half where she had set out the micrographs and their words. She wrote the least number of words necessary to capture what Luc had said: thief; out in it; no. She noted what he had done: tapping faster at Julien; guard off; gaff ground; no heat in his denial. None of it linked yet to the cut plane. She left space on the page for what would come.

Mercier stood with his shoulder to the jamb while she wrote. He took out his phone, put the patrol in motion with a short call, and put it away.

He looked at the window as if checking whether the angle would let a passerby see a light, then chose the low lamp instead of the overhead. The small beam stayed off the glass.

"You saw the plate," he said.

"Yes." She did not write a sentence for it yet. She only wrote GUARD in the margin and the letters came out dark.

"And the gaff," he said.

"Yes." She added GAFF and fresh grind. Salt in the haft could sit beside it when needed.

"You don't like it for cause," he said, no question in it.

"Not with the plane we have," she said. "Not with the absence of heat. Not with the way a feeder behaves." She closed the notebook and tapped its corner once against her palm. "It will sit on the page. It will not sit in the conclusion."

"Good," he said. "The patrol will make some people cooler and other people hotter."

"It will keep hands off the lock," she said. "That's enough."

The generator across the lane was audible again. It had run steady all afternoon.

"Tomorrow," he said, not to set a plan but to see if the word had meaning yet.

"Ledger," she said. "Archive. What exists and what does not. If I am given access that changes the sequence, I will follow it."

She opened the notebook again and wrote a sentence where she would see it when she next picked up her pen: Write fully, measured, with residues and dates. She lifted her hand and the graphite left a faint trace on her skin. Then she shut the cover and placed the book at the table's edge.

She turned the key; the deadbolt seated with a clean metal sound. Mercier took the steps down toward the lane. She left the office for the nave. She stood where tile met the aisle and traced, with her eyes, the door of the sacristy and the step and the short cross aisle and the rail and back. The building's route was fixed. She wanted the geometry steady inside her head when she returned to the ledger and its column that had appeared partway through a decade and gone quiet again within weeks of the month she had written in square capitals.

At the shed door, Luc had used rot for trouble.

On the steps, Cécile did not move. The ribbon lay quiet against her palm. The generator's hum stayed steady through the gap at the door.

Chapter 11

Inventory of Mercy

The ribbon lay across Cécile's palm, its length set out before she offered it. Among the keys on it, a small brass one was not the sacristy key. It was thinner, with one blunt tooth, the bow worn smooth where it had rubbed against other metal for years. She did not build an explanation around it.

"Avec moi," she said.

Moira loosened her grip on the doorframe and stepped down into air that carried the cold from the river. The municipal hall's generator gave off its steady hum. Across the lane, the church sat with its steps cleared but rimmed by thin rings of ice where the shovel had not reached. A curtain shifted once behind the facing window, then stilled. The rope at the mooring point below the bluff knocked once and swung back, a noise that traveled up the stone.

Cécile walked without looking to either side, hands in her long coat pockets. She kept her gait even. People had ways of reading speed here. At the door she pulled the sacristy key from the ribbon, seated it, and turned it in with a sound Moira already knew: a tight metal shift and then the softer give of wood. The door swung, a controlled arc, and Cécile stood back to let Moira enter first. She followed and set the key again in the lock from the inside until the latch settled. The air held its usual mix: cooled wax from the votive table, linen, lime dust from the open mortar at the niche, chalk from hands that had lifted heavy books. The radiator under the small window was silent, its paint chipped down to bare iron where heat had blown off years earlier.

Cécile did not go to the niche. She turned right and indicated the narrow cabinet along the side wall near the vesting press. Moira had

registered that cabinet from the doorway in earlier sessions and had kept herself from approaching it. The wood showed water marks at the base from an old season when the wall had drawn damp. The drawer pulls were small brass rings flattened where thumbs had turned them for a long time.

Cécile placed the brass key in Moira's palm. The ribbon's edge pressed a faint weave into Moira's skin before she took the key off it. The ribbon slid back into Cécile's pocket. Her thumb brushed the ribbon's edge once, then went still. She said nothing. Her head moved once, a small nod toward the cabinet that could have been taken for a blink in other rooms, and then she went to her threshold post beside the door and stood with her hands quiet.

She and Mercier had agreed to open only with both present. On the phone, Mercier said, "Proceed with Cécile; log exception; transfer custody on return."

Moira set the key to the second drawer from the top, the one with a slight darkening around the keyhole that marked use. The key seat took at once. She turned it and felt resistance at the half point. She did not force it. She gave the drawer a light outward pressure with her fingers at the ring and turned again; the lock shifted. When she pulled, the wood offered one dry inch and stopped. She pushed it in a fraction and pulled again. The slide gave with a rough sound where grit had sat for years. The drawer came out a hand's width and then farther until the interior was clear.

An accession card sat at the near edge on top of a shallow sling of folded muslin. The card stock had gone slightly brittle; the fiber edges wore tiny featherings. Ink had browned. The hand on the face was small and unadorned, letters built clean and close together. Beside the card lay a tiny parcel: a square of very thin cloth folded twice and tied with a line of thread that had dead-ended under itself.

It was not a bank of drawers Moira had been told to use. It was a bank of drawers she had been told not to use. Gatekeepers decided when omissions turned into harm. Cécile had walked her across the threshold and put a key into her hand. Moira understood the weight of that movement without telling herself a story about it. The room held steady around them. Lime dust had a chalk smell that did not move unless someone stirred it. The table along the wall where the tin had sat earlier in the week was empty.

She took the card up with both hands and held it where the window's low light could reach. The lock remained turned. The drawer bottom showed the faint rectangle where the card had rested a long time. Cécile's coat did not rustle. Her breath did not change. She had already done what mattered in here by turning a permission into an act.

The face of the card had no date written in the corner. The first line sat centered: Relic refreshed by necessity. The words were in a tight hand, no flourishes, the tails of the letters set even. Moira recognized the stroke on the capital R. She had seen that form across a margin once where a note had directed a person to a box that did not contain its slip. She checked the shape of the lower-case f against the ledger in her head: two compensation strokes, steady, consistent. The hand matched.

She turned the card. On the reverse, near the top edge, a second line ran in the same hand: Evidence without context is debris. The ink on this side had dried a shade lighter, as if the pen had finished that phrase without a pause to dip. On the bottom right corner, the faintest lift of the nib had left a small flare where it had left the paper. She scanned for a name. There was none. The hand itself was identification enough, letter forms placed with restraint, no ornament.

She set the card down gently on the muslin and used both thumbs to open the small cloth parcel. The thread gave. The cloth had been folded around something and then tied around nothing. Inside lay a clipped piece of ribbon, not even the length of her little finger, the printed crest as she had seen it elsewhere but faded toward gray. The weave showed flattened stretches where a pin had once sat, as if it had been fastened to a staff and then removed. She had photographed the same crest and pin flattening on ribbons carried in the nave earlier this week. The cloth and ribbon together made a container that told its own small story without saying a date: something once bound, then unbound; a token of movement around the body of the church, not the body in the tin.

Moirra set the ribbon next to the card. With her thumb on the card's edge, she named the ledger band around the hospital month, no louder than breath. A glance to the ribbon brought the bead in the adult bone with its crest and wax back into place. She thought of the lab line on tinplate and jetty fibres, of chloride-rich oxide and wood fibre embedded, the scrape-band scallops measured at twenty-one to twenty-three millimetres, five repeats. Her eye went to the door that faced the steps; the diagonal to the jetty lay in that angle, along with the spoken 'It travelled sometimes.' The sentence on the card ran through all of it. Refreshed by necessity was not a devotional phrase. It was a confession and a threshold crossed with calculation, and the second sentence had the plain force of a rule: evidence without context is debris.

She set the pieces against one another. An adult metacarpal with a surgical plane held the parish-stamped bead. Jetty fibres matched tinplate; the ledger band rose against the hospital month; the card recorded substitution, a chain-of-custody deviation.

She did not name the life. No inference belonged on the page. The card stock was brittle at one edge. The ribbon's pin-flattened weave lay plain against the muslin. She brought the clear sleeve and label within reach. She would write what was visible and defensible and decide whether to leave this card folded away again where omission had held it.

She kept her language clinical. When she felt herself want to soften, she tightened instead.

Her eye went to the Renovation Update cost line by the window. "I am going to include this in the record," she said. "As it is written. With the drawer and the key noted. Without euphemism."

Cécile did not move. Her eyes held. She had already known the next step when she had pulled the ribbon loose from her pocket on the rectory steps. There was no absolution to give in here, and she did not try. Her coat made one slight sound as she adjusted the weight in her pocket to free her hand.

Moira slid the card into a clear sleeve and laid the piece of ribbon flat beside it. She wrote the room and the drawer on a label with the time and date in the corner and the words 'sacristy side cabinet, second drawer from top' in block letters. She initialed and dated the label, then waited for Cécile to read and add her initials and the date. Cécile stepped forward, read and initialed it, added the date, and gave a short nod. Moira nodded once; enough.

"Will you carry it," Moira said, "or shall I."

"You," Cécile said. She put her hand out for the drawer. Moira set the muslin back into it, left it empty of the card and ribbon, and closed it. When it met resistance, she pressed the side gently and it seated. She turned the key and gave it back to Cécile.

They stood at the door while the lock's tongue found its place in the strike plate. The church smelled of wax and chalk and it was cold. She could hear distant steps outside on the cleared stone. Sound stayed outside. Cécile turned the key and let them out. They crossed the lane without speaking; the sleeve's edge pressed against her ribs. The sleeve with the card sat inside Moira's coat where her field notebook usually rode. The notebook had been moved to the other pocket. She kept the sleeve on her person across the lane.

The light outside remained dim; the generator hummed through the walls. The rectory office was colder than the hall, as always. A faint metallic smell came from the bag on the table. The signature tape that bridged its fold held her and Cécile's initials in a line that had not been broken. The bead's small envelope sat in its shallow dish just where she had left it, flap doubled and initialed a second time two days earlier. The micrographs from the lab lay under a clear sleeve, clipped together, the words 'indistinguishable within method limits' typed at the top of the first page where Moira had already underlined them once.

Mercier came in with his shoulders set as he did when he was keeping his weight low to manage a slick step in a doorway. He closed the door behind him, checked the angle to the window, and chose the low lamp again. The beam sat off the glass. After one glance at the tape over the bag, then at the table where Moira had clipped the labeled sleeve into the evidence binder, and at Cécile's ribbon where it rose from her pocket, he let it sit. Only when Moira pushed it across the wood did he reach for it.

"Sacristy," she said. "Side cabinet. Second drawer from the top. Key from Cécile, returned." She kept the words flat. "Accession card. One cloth parcel with ribbon."

Opening the sleeve, he slid the card out with two fingers. He read the front, then the reverse, his face unchanging. Setting it down, he looked at the ribbon, then at Moira.

"How long was it there," he said.

"Long," she said. "The slide was dry and tight. The wood showed a rectangle where the card lay."

Nodding once, he stayed with the physical state and not with what he thought of it. He read the front of the card again. Under his breath, he said 'necessity' and left it there on the air without loading it. His eyes went to the reverse.

"He wrote this," he said. He did not ask which he meant. "The stroke on the R matches his ledger period."

Moirra folded her hands to keep from touching the clear sleeve again. "Yes."

"And the ribbon."

"Processional stock," she said. "Pin flattening in the weave. Same crest I recorded in the mislabeled carton."

His gaze went to the bag on the table where the tin sat, then back to the micrographs and the card. He moved the micrographs beside the card and set the bead's envelope near the bottom edge of the printouts, opening nothing and leaving the bag untouched.

"You're certain of your element," he said. He kept his voice even, no challenge in it. "Adult metacarpal. Surgical plane."

"I am," she said. "Back-scatter frames, kerf regularity, striae spacing, minimal thermal change, exit burrs slight, angle perpendicular. No devotional perforations or pinning."

He gave a short nod. "Then we have a card that describes a substitution. We have a ribbon that ties it to use. We have a bead that tells me hands. We have metal that says the tin was hung at the jetty, under, in salt influence."

"Yes."

"And people," he said, "who will want me to say we have nothing that requires this to go beyond the room." He let the list stand. "Donors. The deacon. People who have to get through this winter without losing heat." His glance went to the printed cost figure on the Renovation Update copy by the window. "They will say the card is old and ambiguous. They will say ribbon is ribbon. They will say you are reading into things." He gave her the hint of a shrug. "They will say you will ruin them if you place this on a page." He added, "A substitution is a record breach from a provincial standpoint."

"The page is where it belongs," she said. "With the drawer and the key and the words as written. If I subtract it, I turn evidence into debris."

He tapped his finger once on the micrograph where the wood fibre strand showed that crushed shape that had made both of them stop speaking when the lab had called. "He knew that line, then."

"He wrote it," she said. She did not add what it meant to her that a priest had written it and then had gone on to do the opposite of what a record requires by choice. Some contradictions fit only if put beside the rest of the facts.

He leaned back, not far, just enough to set his weight where he could hold it without shifting. "What happens to your room," he said, "when we say this in it."

"The same thing that happens if we don't," she said. "Only later, and louder."

No smile came. His gaze shifted to the card and then to the bag again. "We will be measured," he said. "Not soft."

"Measured and exact," she said. "Front wording quoted. Reverse wording quoted. Location, key holder, time. No names that the evidence does not require."

"You will not name him," he said. He did not make 'him' into anything more than a pronoun. He kept it where it belonged today.

"No," she said. "Not today. Not until the evidence requires it."

He looked at the ceiling toward the street line beyond the plaster. "We will file the report and we will release a line when we file," he said. "Together. To cut the middle out of the rumor."

"Yes." She lifted her pencil and wrote 'filed: joint line' at the bottom of her page and drew a small square beside it. She left the square open.

"We'll take what comes," he said. "Donor calls. The deacon. Luc."

"Luc has already told us to stop stirring rot," she said. "He will not find what he wants in this."

Mercier looked at the clock, then at the window. The generator across the lane held steady. "Timeline," he said. "Before we write. Ledger band, hospital month, the sentence at the grocery."

"I'll check again this hour," she said. "I'll put the band in a bracket and bring the book to the table."

He set his finger on the card and did not touch it. "You and I both know this will heat the room."

"I know," she said. "I am going to write it anyway."

His shoulders loosened a fraction, not a release, a decision to hold at a different angle. "Then I am going to stand in it with you," he said. "Documentation over deference."

Sliding the card back into the sleeve, he set the ribbon beside it, then added his initials and the date to the sleeve label. He wrote the sleeve number on the corner of a blank page with 'sacristy drawer' beneath. Placing the sleeve beside the micrographs, he moved the bead's dish more toward the center where his hand would not knock it if the table shifted.

"Late afternoon," he said. "Lock language."

"Late afternoon," she said. Before then, she would lock the dates against the ledger band.

He stood and checked the window again, then opened the door and let the sound of the hall fill the gap in the office air. Stepping out, he left it quiet again behind him. The latch caught and then settled back a fraction, the way it did in cold.

Moira looked at the bag. She did not touch it. She wrote the time next to 'tape intact' and then turned to the ledger shelf in her notes and the pages where the hand changed and the band had started and gone quiet again.

She opened the office door and kept it at the first notch. Across the lane, the church's door was shut. The steps held thin ice rings from last night. She went down the corridor toward the archive and let the door close with its soft sound behind her. The card lay under a clear sleeve on the table with the ribbon, within her sightline. It was not going back into a drawer.

The archive air had the smell of old paper and cold paint. She moved to the shelf where Box B3 sat and left it where it was. She took down the ledger for the relevant decade and set it on the table where there was light enough. The entries read as they had read yesterday, and the day before. The 'relic refreshment' column had appeared partway through, the hand had tightened then slackened, the ink had changed mid-line where a donor's name had been scraped and overwritten. The margin note that had sent her to Box B3 had been there the whole time. The slip had been missing the whole time. The band of irregular entries had risen and then dropped off within two weeks of the month she had written in block letters from the hospital confirmation sheet.

She drew a bracket in pencil along the ledger's dates that flanked the hospital month. She wrote 'band' on the corner of a small paper flag and set it against the first page of the bracket, not touching ink. She logged the page numbers. In her notebook she added a half-line: 'bracket:' followed by the page span and the date span as printed. She looked once more at the overwritten donor line, saw again the scraped paper fibers under the second ink, and noted in her field book that an overwriting had occurred in the interval when the card's sentence would have been written. She did not extend the line to a person. The line itself was enough for now. She did not need to open anything else today.

In the office she rechecked the tape, made a note, and then went back to the sentence she had written to herself earlier. She underlined the word 'fully' and the word 'dates.'

The door's latch moved under her hand when she closed it again. The deadbolt seated with its clean metal sound when she turned it. The

generator kept humming.

She sat and began the sections she could lock now, leaving square brackets for ledger pages. The card under plastic stayed within her sightline.

Chapter 12

Naming the Bone

The signature tape bridging the fold had dried to a matte line. The ink of their initials sat dull in the low light, hers and Cécile's on the tape; Mercier's on the card sleeve from yesterday. The bag itself kept its slight crease where the plastic folded around the tin's hinge edge. Cold air pressed against the window putty; the radiator below it stayed silent. From across the lane, the generator in the hall hummed on a narrow frequency that underlay the room.

She set the items in reach but not reckless. The evidence bag stayed centered with the tin and its contents visible through a clean panel. To its right, the small dish held the bead's sealed envelope at an angle where the flap could be read without moving it. Beside that, Mercier placed the SEM/EDS printouts: spectra bars, a flattened strand of wood fibre, oxide blooms that the lab had described as chloride-rich and indistinguishable within method limits from the flake lifted at the hinge-side lip. On the left, open and flagged with a paper slip marked band, the ledger lay flat. The bracket she had drawn sat pale against the darker page numbers. In front of the ledger, under a clear sleeve, the accession card read what it had read for years without anyone making it public: Relic refreshed by necessity. On the reverse: Evidence without context is debris. The clipped piece of ribbon lay beside it where she had placed it earlier under plastic so it would not catch on a sleeve.

Mercier stood with his hand on the chair back and watched the layout settle. He had angled the lamp so the beam stayed off the window. A thin line of frost persisted along one corner of the glass, a residue of last night's temperature drop. He did not ask her to move faster. Pace had

mattered all week. It mattered more now that the pieces were finally on one table.

"The bag," he said quietly.

"Intact," she said. "Tape clean. No clouding." She kept her hands on the table's edge. There was no need to touch anything. The last flake they had lifted would carry them through the argument that still waited at the hall door.

He nodded toward the ledger. "Show me the span again."

She turned the book just enough to face him without straining the spine. "Here." The pencil bracket started five days before the printed month and ran to nine after. "Irregularities in the 'relic refreshment' column rise, then drop. The overwritten donor line sits here." She set her finger just to the side of the scraped fibre without touching, keeping the habit she had built in archives where a breath could move soot.

"And the hospital month."

She drew a neat square around the printed month header and another around the line in her notebook copied from his redacted confirmation sheet: digital amputation with month and year. "Aligned within this band." She didn't say the clinic code or the appointment number. Those were off limits by agreement and remained inside his coat.

He stepped close enough to read the card through the plastic. "He wrote both sentences with the same hand," he said, not because she needed telling. The R shape had already settled the matter. But there was a difference between knowing a thing in the head and situating it among other objects under a light.

She rested the tip of her pencil on the clear sleeve without bearing down. "He did." She lifted the pencil and shifted to the printouts. "And the lab gave us what we needed for the jetty. Tinplate over iron with the same antimony trace. Chloride in the oxide. Wood fibre with crushed

tracheids. Flattened strand embedded." She kept the words plain. They had both listened to the lab voice state those terms over the phone, monotone across a poor line. "Twenty□one to twenty□three millimetres between scallops on Post Three. Five repeats visible at present low water. Inside the tin, vertical runs along the hinge wall and drip scallops below the upper seam. The hinge was left when we had it open. The interior runs and exterior match each other."

"Post Three," Mercier said. He placed one finger on the micrograph where the flattened fibre strand appeared as a gray laddered line. "South face below the mooring ring." He did not need a diagram to hold the angle. He had stood on the first landing and said the number for her to write when the wind went through his sleeves.

"South face," she said. "The diagonal to the church steps sits between those posts." She glanced toward the window without interpreting what the diagonal meant beyond traffic. They had learned that repeating what a path suggested could make a path into a story; the shoe treads had been snow on snow. Identities did not show in compression and refreeze.

He moved to the bead dish and read the initials along the flap. "Your envelope," he said. He brought the dish half a handspan toward the center so the dish would not be clipped by a passing sleeve.

"Wax in shallow depressions," she said, reciting her own notes without looking at them. "Faint alkaline sheen on the highest ridge. Unidirectional micro□scratches across the crest's raised lines suggesting repeated thumb contact. Parish crest faint but present." She tapped her tongue once against her molars to stop herself from adding anything about how hands moved in rooms. What the bead carried was enough. Context had come from Cécile's single line: It travelled sometimes. She had recorded the word with quotation marks and left it at that.

"The sequence," he said. "Say it."

She drew a breath that brought the metallic odor in the room up against the back of her throat. She had breathed it for days and it still

caught. "Hospital month. Digital amputation." She lifted the pencil toward the ledger and let it hover above the bracket. "The band of irregular entries, including the overwritten donor name. Within two weeks of the hospital month. The under□jetty period proven by the lab and the scrape band during storm conditions. The object retrieved. After retrieval, circulation marked by the bead surface, wax, soap, abrasion, and by Cécile's word." She placed the pencil tip on the margin beside the card and held there. "Insertion of mixed remains. Lamb vertebrae to legitimize an object in ritual. Human phalanges, adult□compatible metacarpal. No juvenile bone." She kept the last three words clipped and precise for the minutes ahead.

He kept his voice even. "The pivot night."

She didn't need her notebook for that sentence. She could have closed her eyes and seen the back room at the grocery, the blue bucket under the sink, the gray loop of rope where salt had dried on the top coil while the underside stayed white. "Heavy rain. The door mat. Brine, not river. Short rope piece, consistent with having been cut after use. He stayed on the mat and did not cross the floor." She spoke each point as she had written it. "Tu es en sécurité maintenant." She let the French sit in the room the way it had sat in the back room when Léa said it. Her eyes moved from that line on the page to the metacarpal visible through the bag. "Weeks later, a bandage kept dry while washing in the sacristy. He shifted the breviary to the other hand. He deflected questions." Her pencil was still. She dropped her hand and set the pencil on the table.

Mercier looked at the evidence bag and then at the ledger. "The donor line," he said.

"In the bracket," she said. "Scraped and overwritten. If you needed a public reason to alter an object's status, you would increase activity in a column created to carry that reason." She rolled the pencil once with two fingers but did not pick it up. "You would also avoid dates. You would say returned to reserve."

"You're calling that camouflage," he said.

"Administrative," she said. "Camouflage without naming a person. The ledger stands on the page. The scraped fibres are visible under the second ink. The missing slip remains missing. Box B3 shows a newer tie where the others do not." She did not look toward the archive door. The light in that room did not change the fact of the knot.

He set his palm flat on the table, then removed it. "This wasn't panic," he said. "You don't wire a container under a dock during a storm, then lay ledger cover, then bring the object to hands again if you're panicked. That's measured."

"Yes." She kept her eyes on the card. "Measured, and deliberate in its materials." She touched the micrograph sleeve with one finger, light. "And he hid a confession where only certain readers would find it." She lifted her hand before he could ask. "The cut plane. Kerf straight. Parallel striae. Minimal heat. Exit burrs minimal. No tooth skip. No manual oscillation signature. Operating room irrigation. A clinical amputation plane. He knew what bone would say if someone read it. He also wrote the reverse of this card." She turned the sleeve to show the lighter ink line. "He recorded the constraint he relied on." She did not change her tone.

Mercier let a small sound escape, not quite a breath through teeth, and then shook his head once. "We name the bone," he said. "We do it clean."

She moved two sheets aside so the ledger could sit open without folding into itself, and positioned her field notebook square to the table edge. The page where she had written file: joint line remained waiting with its square empty. She turned a leaf and drew a short line across the top of a clean page. "To a reasonable degree of scientific certainty," she said. "I will write 'is most consistent with Father Alain Beaudry,' not 'is,' and I will link that line only to the cut plane, the adult morphology, the hospital month, the ledger band, and the bandage weeks later as

remembered." She held her pencil until the tip left a pale point on the paper. "No devotional drill holes. No pinning. Nothing of a reliquary partition."

"No accident narrative," he said, to test whether she would be tempted to use the machine in Luc's shed as an easier path.

"No." She did not look toward the door. "A feeder guard is two bolts off and paint worn to steel where something rode. The mechanics would pull, bite, and tear. We do not have crush or chatter or heat. That is not our plane." She let that rest, thinking of the way the line feeder would take skin and then nerve even if you pulled a hand back in time. "We stay with the cut we can see."

He shifted on his feet and then stilled again. "And the boy," he said. He did not use a name. "We leave him where?"

"In evidence," she said. "Not in water. The tin was in water. The body was not." She glanced from the micrograph to the bead envelope and then to the ledger. "We reconstruct departure under an identity not his own the week of the storm. We write 'adult assistance' and leave it there. That much sits on the route through the nave and the diagonal track and the timing and the word at the door."

"Guidance?" he said, testing the edge of it.

"Assistance," she said. She touched the edge of her notebook and then let her hand fall away. "We do not record motive."

The generator's hum dipped and rose and then leveled. Outside the window, a shadow moved across the lane and stopped, then passed on without breaking stride. The door latch made a faint sound as the building's frame settled.

Mercier's eyes went over the table once more and then came back to her. "Ready to write it?"

"Yes," she said. She didn't need to say what it would do to the air in the hall. The sentence would change how people stood in doorways with

each other for a while. She set the pencil point down and pulled the notebook close.

She wrote the first line without lifting the point.

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She returned to the top of the paragraph, read the first clause, and removed the only adjective she had allowed herself out of habit. The page did not need it. She drew a line through used in an irrigated field; minimal thermal alteration held the point. The cut plane had done the work for twenty years and would do it now.

"Read me the line," Mercier said, not unkindly, not as a test. As a check.

She kept her eyes on the paper and read her own writing and listened for any part of it that would have to be defended up on the wall with the tide map behind her. "Element identified: one adult□compatible human metacarpal with full epiphyseal fusion at the articular end and a single clinical amputation plane at the proximal shaft. Kerf morphology shows a straight cut with regular, fine parallel striae consistent with a fine□tooth oscillating saw; minimal thermal alteration; minimal exit burrs; no tooth□skip. No devotional perforations or pinning present. Identification: is most consistent with Father Alain Beaudry to a reasonable degree of scientific certainty, correlating cut morphology and adult□compatible size with the hospital month confirmed for a digital amputation, a bracketed band of ledger irregularities within two weeks of that month, and a contemporaneous observation by a parish witness of a sustained hand bandage in the weeks following the storm." The lamp gave a low hum.

She paused for air, then read the next sentences without breaking pace. "Provenance of container: tinplate over low□carbon steel with trace antimony and lead, oxide morphology chloride□rich, both indistinguishable within method limits from metallic fibres embedded in Post Three, south face, at the south jetty (SEM/EDS). Adhered wood fibre

shows crushed tracheids consistent with pressure embedding at the post. Interior residue patterns (vertical run along hinge wall; drip scallops below upper seam) correlate with vertical suspension and salt exposure. A bead bearing the parish crest was recovered from a cortical void in the metacarpal; bead surface residues show wax in depressions, a faint alkaline sheen, and unidirectional micro□abrasion suggesting repeated thumb contact. Together these facts are most consistent with the container having been wired under the jetty during storm conditions and subsequently reintroduced to circulation locally." Her thumb paused on the page margin.

"Keep Post Three and face," he said quietly. "Stay with 'crushed tracheids.'"

She left the line as it was.

She lifted the pencil only to bring it down again. "Ledger and accession record: entries within the bracket show irregular use of the 'relic refreshment' column; one donor line was scraped and overwritten; Box B3 shows a newer tie than adjacent boxes; a margin□referenced receipt slip is absent. One accession card recovered from the sacristy side cabinet (second drawer from top; key held by the warden), in Father Beaudry's hand by letterform, reads on the front: 'Relic refreshed by necessity' and, on the reverse, 'Evidence without context is debris.' Interpretation: without assigning motive, these entries and the card document a substitution outside devotional partitioning."

"Drawer position," he said, tapping once.

"It's in," she said, and underlined the parenthetical.

"Good," he said, the word simple and practical, no praise attached. "One check." He tapped a knuckle against the table edge to mark the place in her paragraph. "On the under□jetty sentence, keep the lab phrase. 'Indistinguishable within method limits' buys you less argument."

She underlined the phrase once, firm enough to be legible later. She read the line aloud. "Indistinguishable within method limits." A brief

exhale so the graphite wouldn't smear across her hand as she moved.

"And on identification." He leaned in and touched the blank margin where administrative language would sit. "Add that we recognize jurisdictional standards on human remains disclosure in a parish context. Don't make the deacon go look them up to argue with what is already his obligation."

She wrote the line, letting the words sit in the plainest form. "Disclosure under provincial standards for human remains in ecclesiastical settings is required." She did not add the word not or optional anywhere.

He took a step back. "What about the boy," he said again, letting the pronoun keep its mask. "Do you want to put that in the 'Interpretation' or a separate line."

"Separate," she said at once. "Conclusions keep their weight better apart." She drew a straight rule along the left margin with the edge of a postcard. "I am not writing his name." She put down the lead. "I am writing that the evidence contradicts any narrative that places a juvenile body in the tin or in water, and is most consistent with departure off-island under an identity not his own during the storm period, with adult assistance, given after hours access to nave and sacristy restricted to priest, sacristans, and the warden." She did not write anything about the word mercy. She would not set the card's front against the card's reverse inside one sentence.

He watched her hand while she wrote that line and didn't correct the phrasing. When she had finished, he pointed at a single word. "Keep 'is most consistent with.'"

She left it as written. "Most consistent with," she said, so her mouth understood the shape of it before it had to stand in a room.

He said, "Anything about where."

"No." She closed the notebook for a moment with the pencil inside. "We have no manifests in this room. If we had them, we still might not have a name. He left with help. That is as far as our evidence goes." She opened the notebook again and checked that no graphite had transferred to the facing page.

They stood in the low light without speaking for a count that might have been ten, might have been fewer. The generator tone shifted and then steadied. Outside, a boot heel slid and corrected near the hall door. Neither of them moved toward the window.

She wrote the reporting language at the top of a clean page. "Public wording: quote the card exactly, front and reverse; name the room and drawer; name the key holder's role; state month and year only for the hospital confirmation without channel; state that no juvenile remains are present; state that the tin sat under the jetty; state that the object then circulated; omit names not required by evidence."

"Keep 'adult assistance' in," he said. "It shapes rumor."

She nodded without lifting her eyes from the page. "It will draw it and keep it just outside the person people want to hang it on." She rested the pencil on the notebook spiral. "We are measured. That is not soft."

"That is not soft," he said. He checked the time on his watch, turned his wrist, and then reset his arm at his side. The room was getting darker by increments that didn't show on the wall but did on the window edge where the frost line blur had crept in another fraction.

She pulled a loose sheet toward her and wrote the file name and date at the top with a pen that still put down clean ink in the cold. She signed the bottom of the identification paragraph with her initials and the time and let her hand rest for a moment to account for the small tremor she only noticed when the pen came away from the page. The nib caught on the paper's grain and she eased the pressure; a slow exhale kept the stroke even. Her jaw had tightened without her telling it to. She unclenched it and the ache at the joint stayed, a residue of holding a line

for too long.

"We are going to need the hall again," she said. She didn't move toward the switch; the habit of keeping light off the window had grown into the way she saw this room.

He reached for the SEM/EDS sleeve and straightened it so the edges would not curl at the corner, then stepped back. "Joint line at filing," he said. "We put the card's second sentence in the paragraph where people are going to try to make it into a story. We keep it there, plain, where it belongs."

She moved the bead's dish a finger's breadth to the center line of the table. She shifted the clear sleeve with the card and ribbon into the evidence binder and clipped it under a metal arm, checking with a fingertip that the edge sat inside and would not slide if the binder moved. She did not open the binder again after that. Her eyes stayed on the bag's fold and the tape bridging it.

He watched her hands, then the door. "We'll file from my side," he said. "We don't need to move anything to do that. I will take your text and the lab language and the photographs of the fold and the numbered seals from before. We will send a line as soon as it sits in the system." He kept his voice in the same register he used when he said the tide time. No weight added. It was weight enough already.

"Good," she said. She wrote the word filed and drew a neat, empty square beside it on the earlier page, then put a mark through the square's upper left corner, halfway. It would be all the way through when he called from wherever the paperwork went to live while people argued in rooms about heat and donors.

He reached for his coat and stopped with his hand on the fabric. "One more check." He stepped to the window, turned his head a fraction, and then came back. "No one on the steps." He didn't add yet.

She took the pen again and wrote a single, tight sentence at the bottom of the page, something she had written to herself twice already

and underlined. Write fully, measured, with residues and dates. The graphite line she had drawn under fully earlier looked darker in the failing light.

She lifted the binder by its spine and set it on the inner half of the table against the wall so a casual hand could not sweep it when someone leaned in. She checked the dish once more by touch rather than sight and then moved the evidence bag an inch back from the table edge. Her fingers came away dry; no condensation marked the plastic.

Mercier reached to the lamp and lowered the beam by a degree that took glare off the plastic sleeve edges but kept the center fields legible. "Briefing," he said. "We say what we will say and we refuse to say what we will not."

"We do," she said. "We quote. We locate. We leave names off the lines that do not require them." She thought of the woman at the meeting who had asked for gentleness and felt the ache at the hinge of her jaw again as if it were a thing she could document with a caliper. Gentleness meant not cutting more than the plane demanded. It did not mean leaving a cut unmeasured because someone would feel it tomorrow.

He put on his coat, zipped it a third of the way, stopped, and left it there. "I'll go set the time," he said. "Come back in twenty. We'll lock the wording and file it." He didn't ask if she wanted him to walk past the church or the hall first. The patrol car would do the two passes either way.

"Twenty," she said. She waited until the door latch seated and the bolt had its familiar small catch sound before she let out the breath she had been holding somewhere in her chest since she said yes to his question. The generator's frequency came up one narrow band, either her ear had shifted or the load had, and then settled. She turned a single page and read the paragraph again with the flat care she used for a numbered slide under a microscope. Nothing in it moved when the room did.

She rose and went to the archive just far enough to put her hand on the ledger spine where it lay open, then slipped a sheet of clean paper

over the bracket for dust control and closed the cover with both hands set evenly. The shelf held the weight. When she came back to the office she checked the tape again and put the pen down.

Her hand rested on the table; cold came through the wood. The surface cooled her palm and slowed her fingers. She lifted her hand and flexed her fingers and looked at the evidence bag and the dish and the binder and understood she would remember this light and this cold long after the filing. She made no note of that. It did not belong on a page.

When the knock came, it wasn't loud. She turned the key and let him in the way he had all week, checking the window first out of habit, shutting the door with his back without throwing his weight into it. He put one folded paper on the table and a pen on the paper.

"Time?" she said.

"Eighteen forty," he said. "Hall in forty minutes if the generator stays up. If it dips, we move people to this room in two's and three's, not a crowd." He set the paper beside her notebook and stepped back to where his shoulder found the jamb.

She looked at the paper. He had written seven lines, none of them long. Joint line at filing; quotes from card; hospital month phrasing; SEM/EDS wording; no juvenile remains statement; under□jetty conclusion with lab phrase; departure line with 'most consistent with' and 'adult assistance.' Beneath that, a note about donor calls. He had left the last word off that last line, a choice that said what a complete sentence would have shouted.

She didn't add any words to his list. She ran her finger down each line and nodded. "Yes," she said when she reached the bottom.

"Say it out loud," he said. "Once."

She did, not dramatic, not slow, just with enough air to carry through the kind of room where chairs scraped and people whispered while someone at the front spoke. When she finished, he didn't say good. He

reached for the pen and underscored the SEM/EDS phrase once.

"Sign it," he said quietly, not the paper he had given her but the paragraph she had written earlier. He took a half step back so she had room to rest her elbow and not catch the binder. His knuckles eased to the table edge and stilled.

She signed. The loop of her initial looked steadier than her jaw felt. She wrote the time and put a small point between the numbers so it couldn't be misread later as a different hour.

He nodded and took the paper in a way that didn't show any satisfaction. That would come across wrong in the hall. He slipped the paper inside his coat. "We'll come back to the bag after," he said, meaning the numbered seals that would replace the tape tomorrow. "For now, it sits."

"It stays under seal," she said. She centered the dish again out of habit and closed the binder with the card inside. The binder went against the wall, perpendicularly, so the sleeve inside wouldn't slide when the table shook, if it shook. She put down the pen.

He swung his coat the rest of the way closed and pulled the zipper up another third. He exhaled once; his breath showed for a second when he turned toward the door and a thin leak of air pressed in around the jamb.

"Yes," she said. She took her own coat from the back of the spare chair and didn't shrug into it yet. The feel of the wool under her fingers was enough to register that something would have to change in the church this week beyond words while they waited for the heat exchange unit the notice had promised.

"Twenty minutes," he said, and went.

She stood in the middle of the room, then turned down the lamp by a small click so the lowest setting held. The frost line at the window's edge hardened from blur to something with an edge. The generator kept humming at its small, steady work across the lane. She reached for the

key and turned the deadbolt. It seated with the same clean sound it had made every time this week. She put her hand on the door for a second. The wood was colder than it had been an hour ago. She took her hand away and looked once at the bag, the dish, the binder, the printouts, the closed ledger. Everything sat where it should sit.

Then she lifted her coat and put it on, and the wool held a little of the hallway's residual heat where people had passed earlier. She wrote one last line at the bottom of the page where she kept the checklist she had made on Monday morning, the one she had underlined twice over the week without adding boxes: Reporting and follow-ups run on separate schedules. She logged the lock and time with her initials in the notebook.

She turned the key and opened the door into the corridor. The hallway air held the faint smell of coffee that had been poured and then thrown out. The municipal worker would have seen to that, the one who counted cups in tens and slid a stack toward the woman with the pot without looking. She stepped into the hall, shut the door behind her, and heard the small shift of the latch, then the deadbolt when she turned the key again. Across the lane, the church stood as it had all week: steps cleared, rings of ice at the margins, the sacristy locked.

She went toward the hall without hurry. People measured speed here. She kept her shoulders down and her face neutral and her notebook in her pocket with the paragraph that had changed the week folded into it, twice.

Chapter 13

Report and Rupture

A low generator hum and the smell of boiled coffee that had cooled before it was poured filled the municipal hall. Chairs had been set in two rows, not many, metal scraping once when someone adjusted a distance rather than a view. A frost line marked the bottom of the window where the seal had hardened over past winters. Cécile stood near the door, steady, the ribbon with keys held inside her palm, not displayed. Deacon Lemoine smoothed the edge of a posted notice and left the corner crooked. A donor in a wool scarf sat in the front and made no effort to hide impatience. Others clustered loosely, a few feet apart.

Mercier checked the lamp angle so the glare would stay off the glass, then let his hand fall. He waited. The list he had written lay folded once at the table beside Moira's notebook. She already knew the order. She had revised the phrasing on the paper in her pocket until it did no more than it needed to do.

She took her place at the front, waited, and began without preamble.

"We filed; this public wording follows that filing," she said. "Numbered seals are scheduled after this briefing, with replacements arriving on the next ferry. We will answer practical questions and will not debate merit." She touched the edge of her notebook and left it closed.

"First," she said, "I will quote the accession card recovered from the sacristy side cabinet, second drawer from the top, key held by the warden. Front: 'Relic refreshed by necessity.' Reverse: 'Evidence without context is debris.' The card is in Father Beaudry's hand by letterform comparison with ledgers from his period. We have labeled and secured it."

She kept her voice even.

"Hospital month only," she said. "A digital amputation occurred in that month. We will not provide channels or names beyond what the evidence requires."

"Identification of the human element: one adult-compatible metacarpal with a single clinical amputation plane."

Someone's chair leg pinged against concrete as the metal flexed. The generator dipped and then came back up.

"To a reasonable degree of scientific certainty, it is most consistent with Father Alain Beaudry, named here because the evidence requires it. That identification rests on cut morphology, size, the hospital month, ledger irregularities within two weeks of that month, and a parish observation of a sustained hand bandage after the storm. No devotional perforations or pinning."

"Container provenance," she said. "Tinplate over low-carbon steel; oxide morphology chloride-rich (salt-influenced)." She set a clear sleeve of micrographs at the table edge for anyone who wanted the spectra after. "Those features are indistinguishable within method limits from metallic fibres embedded in Post Three, south face, at the south jetty." An older man by the south windows glanced that way and then back. "Adhered wood fibre shows crushed tracheids. Interior residue patterns indicate vertical suspension and salt exposure. Together, the facts are most consistent with the container having been wired under the jetty during storm conditions and later reintroduced to local circulation. A bead bearing the parish crest was recovered from a cortical void in the metacarpal. On its surface we documented residual candle wax, a faint alkaline sheen, and unidirectional micro-abrasion consistent with repeated thumb contact."

A hand went up in the second row. She nodded to it without breaking pace.

"No juvenile remains are present in this container," she said. "The evidence contradicts any narrative placing a juvenile body in the tin or in water. It is most consistent with departure off-island under an identity not his own during the storm period, with adult assistance, in a window when after-hours access to nave and sacristy was limited to priest, sacristans, and the warden. We will not speculate about where." The donor in the wool scarf dropped his eyes to the floor.

Mercier spoke then, concise.

"Disclosure is not optional," he said. "Provincial standards for human remains in a parish context apply. We've filed to those standards."

The donor with the scarf stood. The knot at his throat had shifted so the wool pulled to one side. He did not look at Moira while he spoke; he looked at the space just above her shoulder.

"This is gratuitous," he said. "All these details. The month, the saw, the , " He stopped to pull the scarf flat. "You're asking us to fund a building while you publish every cut and date. If this is the tone, I will remove my pledge."

He smoothed his scarf again. The fabric stayed skewed. A chair foot slid; another settled as someone adjusted weight. Two heads turned toward Cécile. She set her hand against the doorjamb and left it there.

Lemoine's mouth tightened; his hands stayed on the edges of the notice. He kept still.

A woman near the back spoke without standing. Her voice carried enough to cross the room.

"Father Beaudry saved lives," she said. "He should be left alone by this, whatever you call it. He did what he could for the boy and for us. Why put this back on the parish ledger."

The donor lifted his chin at that. Someone else said "Oui," without adding a sentence.

Moira did not step forward or back.

"The record reflects what happened," she said. "That is its sole purpose. We will not argue about virtue or about blame." She let the words sit where she placed them. Her hand hovered over the notebook and withdrew.

Mercier faced the donor now, not hostile.

"We're not choosing the facts for pressure or for effect," he said. "We're naming what is present and how we know it. Documentation over deference."

A chair scraped. The cashier from the grocery, who had counted coffee cups in tens at the last meeting, sat by the wall and did not move his hands. He watched the list on the table more than the speakers.

Someone asked about the bead. Another wanted the priest's name not spoken, even in identification language. The donor with the scarf restated his objection once. Lemoine kept quiet. Cécile looked at Moira once when the volume rose and then down at her own keys. She held her place.

Moira answered plain questions. She avoided anything that would make a story.

"We will replace the tape on the bag with numbered seals when they arrive on the next ferry," Mercier said toward the end, practical. "The binder and the card remain on-site. Patrol presence remains discreet."

The donor made the withdrawal clear. There would be numbers to think about for heat and for plaster now. That belonged to the deacon's side of the table. No one clapped. No one tried to lighten the air.

Mercier gave the joint line again, each point shortened to its core. He said the words adult assistance without heat, and he did not let the room move past them to a person.

They broke without a call to close. People stood and walked without talking to those they had come with. Faces were set. The generator hum stayed steady while they left.

At first light, a frost line marked the rectory step.

By morning, the nave showed gaps. Coats did not brush against coats in the pews. Breath rose and dispersed above the few heads bent. The radiator under the small window stayed cold. Wax in the side candles had set flat on the top. The steps outside had a rim of ice at the lower edge where run-off had paused and frozen; a new shoe print had broken the ring and stopped short of the door.

Moira stood at the back by habit, near the threshold she trusted. The words at the front did what they needed to do and no more. No one asked for a longer homily. No one requested a special intention aloud. Lemoine's jaw stayed tight; his hands turned a single page and held it.

After the final chord flattened and the congregation rose, she did not move to the aisle. The older woman who had said "Be gentle" days earlier stored her folded gloves inside her coat cuff and did not look toward Moira, or if she did, she did it without turning her head.

She left by the side door into air that felt colder than the hall had the night before. The lane showed fewer tracks. The diagonal between the jetty and the church had thinned and then split into two shorter routes that did not cross the steps, both angles cutting early toward houses.

The municipal hall's smaller room had a table and nothing else. Mercier took the chair and left the other clear. Luc did not sit. He kept one hand on the back of the empty chair and the other on his hip. His mustache had a wet edge. The smell of rope and diesel came in with him and stayed.

"We're going to keep this plain," Mercier said.

Luc's knuckle, the one healed off-center, changed the angle of his fingers when he tapped once against the chair's back.

"You made him a saint," he said. He did not bother to use the name.

Mercier let it pass.

"We named a bone and where it had been," Mercier said.

His jaw tightened; the hand with the off-center knuckle pressed harder on the chair's back.

"He stole the boy," he said. "You're telling people it was a mercy."

"We named adult assistance and we left motive out," Mercier said. "That is the line."

Luc's tapping picked up, a short cluster, then stopped mid-beat. He looked past Mercier at the door and then at Moira.

"You wrote the saw," he said.

"I measured the plane," she said.

His breath caught short through his nose.

Mercier's voice remained at its normal level.

"I'm going to be clear about one point," he said. "You're angry. Fine. You have a right to be angry. You do not have a right to threaten or harass anyone. Not Léa. Not the warden. Not anyone named or not named. You understand me."

Luc shifted a half step toward the table, his hand lifting before stopping at his belt. Mercier met his eyes and did not blink. The hand lowered.

Luc stared at him a long beat and then cut his gaze to the door again.

"I didn't lay a hand on anyone," he said.

"Keep it that way," Mercier said.

Luc's breathing changed; his shoulders held low with effort. He moved to the door without moving the chair. As he pushed out, his sleeve skimmed the jamb and the push bar took a hard contact. A shallow exhale

carrying stale nicotine left him. The corridor outside had two men standing with their hands in their pockets. He kept his eyes forward as he passed. Their heads tracked him as he went. One looked to the other and back. One shifted his weight and a boot scuffed dull against the floor.

Moira stayed silent until the door closed. Mercier wrote two lines in a notebook he kept for this kind of meeting, folded the book shut, and did not sigh.

"We stay with patrol," he said.

"Yes," she said.

By mid-afternoon, the exchange had already been repeated around the lane; Mercier staggered the patrol times in response.

The first patrol pass that afternoon came slow. The car's lights stayed directed toward the lane. Windows didn't change. Curtains moved a fraction and then lay still. The second pass came later, at a different hour, without pattern. The church remained dark, as Cécile had asked.

At the grocery, the clock over the counter had been turned half a degree so that the minute hand misled a tired eye. A handwritten note under the glass said that Léa would be back Wednesday. It didn't say which Wednesday. The cashier counted coins into the tray by twos, eyes on his hands, and didn't offer any commentary. He did not look relieved.

In the late afternoon Moira saw Léa once at a distance, cutting along a side street she had not used in Moira's week on the island, a route that would bring her onto the lane near the hall rather than the church. The day being dry did not fit the boots she wore; they were chosen for grip rather than comfort. She kept one hand inside her coat pocket the way she had tucked it behind her back in the grocery when she was uneasy. Moira didn't call out. It would have made a spectacle out of someone who had gone to trouble to leave no trace on the main line.

On the church steps, foot traffic showed its pattern. The diagonal between the jetty and the door that had been stamped down earlier in the

week now showed a clean break where someone had chosen not to climb the last rise. A set of child's prints appeared and then doubled back. Another path cut straight for the municipal hall and never touched the church rail. The stone at the sacristy threshold had the chalky residue it always did when weather ran cold and wet over the last work.

Near the vestibule, an older parishioner who had stood at the back during the meeting and said nothing stepped close enough to be heard without drawing attention. He kept his hands behind him where it would be hard to read anything from them.

"He's alive, then," he said very low. He did not say the name.

"The evidence says he left with help," Moira said.

"Alive," the man said again. It was not a question. He brought one hand to the pew end as he said it.

Her thumb pressed the notebook's corner. "I will not say more than the report says," she said.

His fingers tightened once against the wood, then he nodded and walked away.

Inside the rectory office, the bag with the tin sat with signature tape bridging the folded top, pending the arrival of numbered seals on the next ferry. The fold showed no clouding. The bead's envelope sat in its dish centered on the table. The binder lay against the inner wall, sleeve clipped under a metal arm holding the card and the clipped ribbon. The radiator stayed off. The window's frost line had widened by a hair since morning. She wrote the time in the log and closed the notebook.

Cécile came into the corridor with a tray and stopped when she saw the door open. She did not cross into the office.

"Thé?" she said, not offering sugar.

"Merci," Moira said. The tannin cut the cold quickly enough that it registered.

Cécile placed the tray on the hall table instead of handing it over the threshold. She straightened the cloth under the plate without looking at it and pressed a fold flat with the side of her thumb. Her ribbon lay quiet against her coat. She was not making a show of moving. She was maintaining the line of what had to happen for people to keep stepping into rooms.

The patrol car passed again while they stood there. Neither of them looked toward the window.

"The hall," Cécile said after a moment.

"Yes," Moira said.

They did not make an appointment. They had already kept it.

The file in Mercier's system remained open. He had said it would remain so, because official closures required distributions and sign-offs and sometimes a set of forms that would wait for warmer weather when the ferry ran predictably. The moral center had settled where it would settle. That distinction was not a comfort. It was simply accurate.

The north wind drove cold across the bluff.

After the thin mass two days later, parishioners did not empty the nave quickly. They stayed standing in the aisles, not speaking loudly, turning to look toward the lectern without stepping forward. The wind had hardened the thin film at the step edges into smooth rings that someone cautious would avoid with a heel. The smell of wax and chalk and linen stayed the same as it had all week.

Cécile climbed the two steps to the lectern and set her hand on the wood. She did not take a breath for effect. She allowed the quiet to exist and then used it. She looked over the center pews, noting the gaps that had widened since the meeting.

"We were cared for," she said.

Her voice carried to the rafters and came back with a small echo.

"We were also deceived," she said.

No one moved. Lemoine sat in the first row with his hands folded and his shoulders upright, posture held tight. He did not raise his eyes to the window or lower them to his lap.

"You will see the niche resealed this week," Cécile said.

Her voice did not add any weight to week.

"There will be an inscription. It will record that the wall was opened and the reason. It will record what changed and why. We will not pretend we have not done this."

Moira remained at the back. She did not put her hand on the pew in front of her or on the jamb. She watched the way a man near the font had turned to face the lectern with his whole body rather than just his head. She watched a child lift the wax-softened stub of a candle and put it back exactly where he had found it. A hymnbook closed with care. She registered motions because those would tell her more accurately than anyone's words whether the room would hold.

"If this harms you, come and speak with me."

She let her hand rest on the wood for another second and then stepped down. She did not ask for a response. No one applauded. Two people angled past Lemoine by a row rather than cross in front of him. Shoes scuffed once along the aisles; weight shifted, then stillness.

A few people crossed toward her without looking toward anyone else. She listened to one sentence from each and held each one separate. One said, "My boy asked if he should stop saying his name at night." She did not write. She did not promise anything her authority could not deliver. She nodded once, sometimes twice. A woman with a purple hat with yarn flowers from the earlier meeting stood near Lemoine without turning to him and then left.

Mercier stood near the side aisle in a place where he could watch without being seen to watch. When Cécile said the words about the niche, he tipped his head once. He did not smile. It was not a moment for that. He kept his hands still. He did not move to make it easier. She had already done the hard part.

Moira stayed until the last person left a pew. She did not go forward. She was not needed there. Her work in this building now was to ensure that the inscription said what it needed to say when it was carved into or painted across stone. She would check spelling and dates. She would not choose adjectives. On a fresh page she marked a header for the inscription and wrote the date.

Outside, the wind stayed north. The rope at the mooring point below the bluff knocked once and came back to rest. The diagonal path from the jetty to the steps had not reappeared in the same way. It would not, for a while. People had found other lines to walk that kept them away from thresholds where too many sentences had been said.

She went across the lane to the rectory office. The signature tape reflected a thin stripe of window light as it bridged the fold; the numbered seals had not yet arrived. The fold held. In the log, she wrote the time. She left the report as filed. It would not change because money had left the table or because someone had liked a priest and had not wanted the word saw anywhere near his name.

The building's wood held the same cold she had learned on her second day here. It had not lessened. It would not until the heaters came, and the heaters could not come without a donor shifting a pledge or others stepping in where he would not. That was not her part of the work. Her part was the plane on bone, the bead in the cortical void, the card's two sentences, the drawer's location, the lab's phrase, the route through the nave, and the space left in a line where a proper name should not appear until the evidence could carry it.

She closed the notebook and let her knuckles rest on the table. The generator hum from the hall came thin through the window, steady. The patrol car did a pass that no one seemed to notice anymore. In the sacristy, across the lane, chalk dust held to the wall where the mortar had been opened. A wrapped trowel lay on the sacristy table beside a length of mason's line. It would hold until the masons came to close it.

Chapter 14

Threshold

The rope at the mooring ring knocked once and fell still. Overnight ice had left clean circles along the lower steps where runoff had paused, set, and been notched by boots. The air at the south jetty carried salt and iron, the sort that sat in the nose until it warmed. Moira stood at the start of the steps with her coat zipped and her gloves on, bare fingers still visible at the tips where the wool was cut away. Beneath the frost she could see the grain of the plank that had flexed when Mercier had warned her days earlier; the screws sat proud with a little halo of rust each.

The water was on a slow rise. Not slack, not pressing. The posts held a skim along their south faces that the sun had not yet caught, the glaze stopping at a bright scrape band she could find without looking for it now. She traced it in her head while she kept her eyes on the steps, third post, south face, just below the ring at present low water wrist height. The numbers would always be there when she needed them: twenty-one to twenty-three millimetres between scallops, five repeats visible the day she measured. She had fixed them in memory. Chalk and wax had marked the week.

Footings at the steps had changed since the meeting. The diagonal had not returned in the same line from the jetty head to the church steps. It broke, then split, a sign that people were making different decisions from the same place. She followed none of those lines now. She kept to the start of the steps and let herself stand where the tide and the land met and did not make a point of it.

A coat hem moved at her right. She did not turn. Léa stood next to her, not close enough to make their sleeves touch, close enough that the

warmth from her coat edged the cold on the side of Moira's arm. Léa kept her right hand inside her pocket the way Moira had first seen her do it at the grocery when the conversation had not yet been safe. The boots were the same ones from two days ago, chosen for grip. There was nothing else that needed naming in her body now. Moira left her eyes on the ice rings and held still.

"You'll go today," Léa said. Her voice did not carry. She was speaking for two people only.

"Yes," Moira said.

The water against the lower step made the sound it made when a film bent and gave. A patrol car, quiet, changed gears somewhere behind them at the bend and went on. The municipal hall generator had been off since dawn. Light could do the job now.

"He wrote once," Léa said. She did not turn her head. "Just once. From far." She let the last word sit. "Then stopped." The paper had been thin; the ink a flat blue.

Moira waited. She did not count seconds. The pause was intentional and did not require anyone to fill it.

"For safety," Léa said. "It wasn't for me to answer."

Moira drew a breath in and let it go without noise.

"I won't ask where," she said.

A small movement at the mouth of the cove made the sun show briefly on the edge of ice before the surface shifted and lost it.

"We will not put any living location in the record," she said. "That is not our mandate and it is not safe." She kept the verbs plain. She had spent the week stripping anything not needed out of her sentences, and there was nothing left to take.

Léa nodded once. A fine white line at the corner of her thumb caught the light when she lifted her hand inside the pocket and then let it settle

again. Her hair had come loose under her cap and a single strand lay against her coat collar and did not move in the still air.

"He's not a saint," Léa said after a minute. There was no two in the pronoun; it did not split. Moira did not push for names.

"I named the bone," Moira said. "I did that because the bone's plane and the month and the ledger band made it necessary." She kept the word necessary in its place, with Beaudry's card and its front line and its reverse.

"He told me once," Léa said, "not me directly, he was looking past me, 'Tu es en sécurité maintenant.' That's the part I had." She let out a breath that came out like a fog strip that did not go far. "It was brine on him then. Not river."

Moira said nothing. There was nothing to add to what had already been said and written. The list of residues and cut planes did not belong in a conversation on a jetty step at this hour.

"I'm telling you about the letter because it's what I have that doesn't make a story," Léa said. "It was just the one. Then none."

"Thank you," Moira said.

They stood and watched the water shift a little more and a gull drop and turn once and go elsewhere. The rope at the ring did not knock again.

"Thank you for naming only what you could see," Léa said after the gull had lifted. She did not put a question into it and she did not put weight in the places people sometimes did when they wanted the thanks to do more than it could. She made it ordinary, which was accurate.

Moira touched her notebook at its upper corner inside her coat pocket with a flat finger. "You made it possible," she said. "That sentence in the grocery." She did not repeat the French. It did not need repeating on this particular morning.

Léa's head tipped, not a nod, not a shake, and then she moved. She did not take the diagonal. She chose the side street that cut back toward

the hall and would join the lane above the bend and did not touch the church steps. She did not look back. Moira tracked the line until the coat turned at the corner and then let the sightline go.

She stayed until numbness reached her exposed fingertips, then lifted her hand once to bring the blood back and went up to the lane. The day was going to be full. The wall would be done in minutes; the crossing would take longer. It would take more care.

The sacristy held more lime dust today than it had the day the tin first came out of the wall. It sat in a fine layer along the lower rail of the vesting press and grayed a place where someone had set a thumb to steady a level. The wrapped trowel from two days ago lay unwrapped on the table and showed a clean steel shape with a handle that had been used enough to go smooth under the thumb where people naturally put it. Two buckets sat under the small window; one held water in which a skin had begun to form, the other held a paste that smelled of limestone and water and nothing else. The radiator under the window was quiet as it had been all week.

Two masons worked without talking over one another. One had a pencil behind his ear with a shaved edge from a pocket knife; the other set a small plumb line and let it hang, then watched it stop moving. Their jackets were open at the throat and chalk had caught in the fiber at the collar edge where they would forget to brush it out later and carry it into a kitchen. They had put a canvas drop on the floor so the dust would not track through the nave. Cécile stood near the side cabinet where she had stood during the drawer opening and did not touch the small brass ring pull. The ring flattened against the wood where it always did after a century of use.

The reliquary was not in the room. It was not anywhere inside the church. Moira had looked toward the rectory when she came in and saw the office door shut and the blind drawn halfway down as it had been since the first night of cuts. The bag on the table would stay there under lock until the transfer that would come and go whether anyone liked it or not. She did not write that note; it did not belong on a page. She checked the fold and tape with her eye when she had come in from the jetty earlier, then locked the door again without putting her hand anywhere near the fold. For this hour, the sacristy could be what it was: a room where people set things right again when they had opened them.

Cécile held a rectangle of brushed metal. Not bright. The light through the small window made a soft sheen of it. She had asked Moira to come an hour early to read it before it went into the wall, and before anyone else did. Measure twice. It was a habit worth keeping.

Cécile did not offer it into Moira's hand. She tilted it and let Moira read while she held the edges. The words did their job.

THIS NICHE WAS OPENED DURING RENOVATIONS IN LATE WINTER.

A TIN CONTAINER WAS RECOVERED.

ITS CONTENTS WERE EXAMINED UNDER PROVINCIAL REQUIREMENTS: SMALL RUMINANT BONE AND A SINGLE HUMAN METACARPAL BEARING A CLINICAL AMPUTATION PLANE.

THE CONTAINER HAD BEEN STORED UNDER THE JETTY IN STORM CONDITIONS AND LATER CIRCULATED LOCALLY.

THE CONTENTS WERE REMOVED TO POLICE CUSTODY.

THIS NICHE IS RESEALED. THIS INSCRIPTION RECORDS WHAT CHANGED AND WHY.

Moira read it once and then again. No names. No adjectives. The month lay where it should: late winter. The human element kept to one adult-compatible metacarpal with a clinical plane. The under-jetty

statement used the phrasing that would take the least argument: stored under the jetty in storm conditions, circulated locally after. She counted the lines, not to impose tidiness but to check whether the eye would hang on the wrong thought. It did not. The eye moved. The sentences moved with it and did not make a claim the room could not support.

"Good," she said.

Cécile's hand did not change. She held the plaque steady by its edges for another second and then brought it down and rested it on the muslin square laid along the vesting press. "You will keep a copy of the words as we set them," Cécile said. It was not a question. It was an administrative sentence with a person attached to it.

Moira inclined her head once. "They will sit in the report's appendix as written," she said. "With date, room, and location in the wall."

The deacon stepped in then. His collar was neat, hair careful, paper flattened in his hand with a corner left bent. He paused at the threshold the way he always did. He set the parish register on the table and opened it to a blank line he had already tabbed with his nail before he came over. The nib he used left a narrow line darker at the start of his strokes. He did not look at Moira. He glanced at the masons and then at Cécile and lowered his head to write: Date; Sacristy niche resealed; inscription installed; contents removed to police custody; parish ledgers cross-referenced (book and page where relevant). He kept his pen under control when he had to write the word human. His mouth tightened for one breath and then relaxed as he moved into the line about provincial requirements. He signed and set the pen down and smoothed the edge of the register page and left it not quite straight.

"Merci," he said to the air in general. It did not make more of the moment than it needed to. He lifted the pen again, put a small line under his name, and stood back.

Mercier stood with his shoulder against the door casing, his notebook open. He had copied words from Moira before, and he was doing it again

now. He was not mirroring for show. He wrote with the same sequence she had used the night they drafted the identification paragraph: container; composition; environment; organics; orientation; human element; jurisdiction. His pencil made a steady scratch that did not interfere with the sound of the trowel and the hawk. When he finished, he ran a line under the words adult assistance in the file, not on the plaque. He turned the page, wrote the inscription's lines, and set two square brackets around the sentence about storm conditions and circulation. He did not draw anything that looked like an opinion.

The masons lifted the small slab the foreman had cut to measure and set it into the niche with their thumbs at the edges and the level's bubble brought center once and then held there. The younger one used the edge of a trowel to press a clean bead along the seam, then flicked off the excess without making a tail; the mortar sat smooth. He put the trowel down and used the side of his thumb to set the surface flat where a tiny ridge had formed. He then pressed little squares of paper along the seam to keep the paste from skinning in the drafts under the window. They would come away when it set. The work did not take long because they had done the prep well.

"C'est bon," the foreman said without lifting his voice. He nodded to Cécile. The space where the tin had been would be nothing more than a rectangle behind stone now. Nothing hidden about it. Nothing mysterious either.

Cécile lifted the plaque again and held it out for the younger mason to test against the stone. He adjusted a shim within the recess prepared for it so the face would sit flush. He pressed the plaque home with two fingers and felt whether any edge gave. It did not. He lifted his hand and the metal remained true. The foreman checked the level in both axes, checked the plumb where it mattered, and stepped back.

"Égal," he said.

Cécile put her thumb against the lower right-hand corner of the plaque, pressed once with a small weight that did not change anything, and then removed her hand.

She reached into the pocket where she had been keeping her keys. She drew out the ribbon with the ring and the little brass key that had not been shown to many people. The brass had picked up oil from skin and the bow was smooth when a different key on the same ribbon was rough. She looked at the small key without any expression Moira could read and then let it slide under the other keys.

Only the sound of it against the ring told anyone she had done it.

The ribbon hung against her coat and the metal disappeared against the other metal.

They stood a minute without speaking. The masons cleaned their tools along the edges of the bucket so that the trowel held nothing that would harden and ride into the next job. They set the bucket near the door where no one would step in it by mistake. The small window let in enough light to read faces without needing to move the lamp. The silence that followed did not feel like something that had come because there was nothing left to say. It was held together by the bodies in the room who understood that this was what followed statements that would remain and would not be painted over.

Lemoine shut the register, picked it up, and left first. He did not look at the plaque again. He did not look at Moira at all. That was not new.

Mercier slid his notebook into his coat without closing the top button. He did not come forward to shake hands or do anything that would require someone to interpret it. He lifted his chin a fraction in Moira's direction, the way he had in the side aisle when Cécile said the words that a room like this rarely heard, and stepped back into the corridor to speak to the municipal worker who had held the door for the masons in and would hold it for them out.

Moira looked at the plaque once more. The metal held its quiet light. The words did their job and nothing else. She let her eyes rest on the line about custody for a breath because it was the sentence that had carried the most weight in this room: not the plane, not the under-jetty, but the fact that the contents were not here. She did not wish them back in the wall. The room could be honest and still be the room it had always been.

She turned then. Cécile was watching the small window, not the plaque. There was chalk in the crease of her knuckle that had gotten there when she had set a fold flat at the hall two days ago.

"It will hold," Moira said. She meant the plaster and the sentence both.

Cécile nodded once without moving her gaze. "Oui," she said. Then she looked at Moira. "Je te remercie pour la précision," she said. She did not say kindness. She did not mean it that way. Precision had done more work here than kindness would have.

Moira set two fingers against the table edge to steady the old surface while she stepped back. The habit was unconsciously acquired after a week of low temperatures in wooden buildings where nothing stayed square. "De rien," she said, and meant that as well.

She crossed the lane from the sacristy and went in by the rectory door. Mercier waited for her in the rectory office with the blind half down as it had been all week. The bag on the table held its shape with the fold bridged by tape. The bead's envelope sat inside the little dish at the table center. The binder with the sleeve containing the card and the clipped ribbon lay under the arm that kept it from sliding. Everything looked as it had looked the night they wrote the identification paragraph into the book, because that was the point of evidence: it did not change until somebody changed it under a record.

"I want to copy your lines by hand into the permanent file," he said without preamble. "Verbatim." He aligned his notebook with the table's edge using two fingers. He had said the same thing in other words in other rooms in other cases. He meant it now in a way that said he had understood why she had cut everything she could find to cut out of the paragraph and left it with language that did not invite a story.

Moira opened her notebook at the page where the identification paragraph sat. The numbers had been written with a dot between digits to prevent misreading. The line about the hospital month lay where it needed to. The bead's residues and the lab's phrasing stayed within method limits. She turned the book and set it on the table so that the sentence about adult assistance sat in its own bracketed line below the rest. He put his notebook next to hers and wrote everything over into his hand with square letters that were easy to read if you had to stand in a hallway later and count on your eyes in bad light. He paused with the tip above the word assistance for a second, then wrote it.

When he finished, he placed his pencil across the top of the page and did not close the book yet. "We leave the file open," he said. "The administrative part will close when it closes." He looked at her, then at the bag's fold, and did not say anything about seals. The ferry would run for some hours and then it would not.

"I know," she said.

Cécile stood just outside the threshold. She did not cross in. She was still respecting that room, and Moira did not invite her in. The rules had kept three people intact through a week that had asked more of all of them than any one sentence could say. "Merci pour la précision," Cécile repeated, this time on the corridor air. The word precision held the weight of the whole case. Moira inclined her head again because there was no better reply.

"Je te laisse," Cécile said to both of them, plural and singular in one act, and stepped away without waiting for an answer.

Mercier shut his notebook and slid it into his coat. He put his hand flat to the door at shoulder height and then lowered it. "You have time before the ferry," he said. "An hour."

She did not need the time to put anything else into the book. She needed it to stand where she had stood every day since the tin came to light and look once more at the line that had run from there to here and see it without an audience.

She went out and closed the door. She put the deadbolt into place and checked the latch by habit though she already knew the fit. It seated after the usual resistance when the air turned, then clicked home. She pocketed the key Cécile had given her for this door at the start of the week. It was different from the sacristy key and different from the small brass one from the drawer. This one returned to Cécile with all the others. That was part of the work today too.

The lane did not carry anyone at that hour. A woman two houses down carried a bag to a bin and went back inside without looking around. The municipal worker had a hand on the hall door and the other on his coat pocket, counting something with his fingers the way he counted cups sometimes. He nodded when he saw her pass and left it at that.

At the bluff edge, the rope at the mooring point tapped its ring because a little wind had shifted. The rings of ice on the steps were thicker than they had been an hour earlier, but the surface looked the same. She went down to the limit of her traction. She kept her weight evenly distributed, a habit from field sites with worn steps that could slide if you were careless. She stopped at the last place where the sole still had purchase on the step. She let the cold reach the small bones at her fingers where the wool did not cover them, and the facts lined up the way they had all week, tinsplate over low-carbon steel, chloride-rich oxide, jetty fibres indistinguishable within method limits, crushed tracheids in adhered wood fibre, vertical run along hinge wall, drip scallops below upper seam, adult metacarpal, clinical plane, minimal thermal alteration, no tooth-skip, no devotional perforations or pinning, bead bearing parish

crest, residual candle wax, alkaline sheen, unidirectional micro-abrasion, ledger band, handwritten card, Relic refreshed by necessity, Evidence without context is debris. She stopped there. Anything after that was commentary. She had learned early about the danger of commentary. It was why she had taken care with this week the way she had.

At the ferry slip, the motor idled soft. The deckhand had a cap pulled down to the line where eyelashes met knit. He put a hand up by reflex and then let it down again when he saw that she was carrying nothing in her hands and was not going to ask him anything about crossing times that he could not tell her. The ramp came down with a dull thud that sounded different on cold steel. She stepped onto the deck without looking back at the slip. There was no reason to.

At the side rail, she set her gloved hands on it, then took them off again and set the bare fingers of the gloves there instead. The steel was cold and bare. The church and the south jetty lined up when the boat moved a length and she let them sit in her sight together like that. The angle showed the steps and the slope and the path that had broken this week. She did not try to put them back together. She did not need to.

The diagonal path had broken this week; new tracks had started, harder lines.

The ferry cut the water and the wake parted and came back together in patterns she knew from every crossing she had made to places like this. The sound it made did not change. Justice and healing. The words belonged on separate timetables, in separate files. Her job was the first file, nothing more. She had written those words for herself and then taken them out when she wrote the filing.

She looked once at the crest of the bluff as the angle shifted and the church moved behind the trees for a second and then came back out. The plaque would sit in the wall and people would read it and not read it and put their hand on it and pass by it without touching it. The card would sit where it sat in the binder under a clear sleeve with the clipped ribbon.

The bead would stay in its envelope until someone else needed it. The tin would leave on someone else's day and be logged at someone else's counter. She had done what she could do within the limits of her training and her ethics. She had filed fully. The social cost had arrived and would arrive again and keep arriving until it had spent itself. That schedule was not hers to manage.

She took her hand off the rail long enough to check the note tucked inside the notebook in her coat. It had nothing to do with this case and everything to do with it. It read in her own hand: Write fully, measured, with residues and dates. The pencil had left a little smudge that had transferred to the page behind it. She did not clean it.

She did not watch for anyone on the shore. There was nothing someone standing there could do for the file or for the parts not yet ready to be put into words. She watched for the shift in the ferry's rhythm where the wake became its own line, which told her they were clear of the particular eddies near this island's landing and into the main channel where the current ran stronger and the engine changed pitch. She let her shoulders come down one notch. Not more. She still had to carry the notebook off the boat and put it in a drawer she trusted for a night. She still had to copy the inscription words into her typed record.

The cold in her fingers receded in a way she knew would return when she handled keys again on the other side. She closed her coat against the wind that found the gap near her throat and pulled the glove hems down over what skin showed and kept her hand on the rail for another full minute before she stepped back.

The case closed in the record when files reached the right desks and signatures were placed. It did not close in the heart of any person who lived in the rooms where the wall had been opened. She had known that before she came. It would be no different now that she was leaving. She was not going to pretend otherwise.

The ferry kept on. The island stayed behind them whether anyone looked back or not.