

MYSTERY



What the Building Collects

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

Eight people who never met. One chapter each, in the order it was written.

One	jmarsh
Two	Margot Vail
Three	Cora Lindgren
Four	Sasha Loomis
Five	Lior Tannen
Six	Iris Beddoe
Seven	Sammy Hall
Eight	wordsbylena

Chapter

One

written by jmarsh

The building knew I was coming before I did, which should have been my first warning, though warnings are only useful to those who possess the good sense to heed them, and I have never been counted among that fortunate number. I had meant to visit apartment 4B, where my sister Clara lived with her husband and their collection of grievances against the modern world. Instead, I found myself outside 4D, my hand already upon the door handle (cold brass, worn smooth by decades of other hands, other mistakes), the key I had been sent somehow fitting perfectly into a lock it had no business opening. The door swung inward on hinges that sang a low, almost vocal note, a sound like someone humming deep in their throat while trying to remember a melody from childhood. Beyond the threshold, the apartment stretched farther than the building's exterior dimensions could possibly accommodate, a trick of perspective I attributed first to my own fatigue from the long train journey, then to the peculiar angling of the afternoon light through windows that seemed to multiply the deeper I looked into the space. Everything inside existed in a state of perpetual twilight, as though the sun had not fully committed to either rising or setting and had decided instead to maintain this ambiguous compromise indefinitely. The wallpaper (a pattern of repeating ferns, or perhaps they were hands, it became difficult to distinguish the longer I stared) appeared to breathe

with the room's own respiration, expanding and contracting in rhythm with something I could not identify but could certainly feel, a pulse that emanated from the walls themselves, from the floor beneath my feet, from the ceiling that loomed closer than seemed strictly necessary. I called for Clara, though I knew by then that Clara was not here, had never been here, could not possibly be here because this was not her apartment, and yet I called anyway because the silence demanded to be broken, because the alternative was to acknowledge that the silence itself was listening, waiting for me to make precisely this mistake. No answer came, which was itself an answer of sorts. The apartment's contents arranged themselves with the careful precision of a stage set: furniture that looked as though it had been purchased specifically to give the impression of long habitation, books whose spines bore titles that seemed almost familiar but revealed themselves upon closer inspection to be gibberish, clever approximations of language that disintegrated the moment one tried to focus on the actual words. A clock on the mantelpiece showed quarter past something, the hour hand having apparently given up and wandered off the face entirely, though the minute hand continued its dutiful rotation with admirable dedication to routine. In the corner, nearest the window that overlooked what should have been the street but was instead a courtyard I had not noticed from outside (a courtyard full of statues, or perhaps people standing very, very still), stood a secretary desk with its writing surface pulled down, inviting correspondence. Upon it rested a single sheet of paper, and though I maintained enough presence of mind to know I should not approach it, should not read what was written there, should turn immediately and leave this place that was not mine to enter, my feet had already begun carrying me forward, operating on instructions from some older, deeper part of my brain that recognized this moment as inevitable. The paper was covered in handwriting that looked distressingly like my own, though I had certainly not written these words, could not have written them because they described events I had not yet experienced, conversations I had not yet had, decisions whose

consequences I had not yet been forced to endure. The first line read: "You were right to be afraid of the building, but you were wrong about why." Behind me, the door I had entered through clicked shut with the finality of a coffin lid, and I understood that 4D had been waiting for precisely this tenant, and that I had just signed a lease written in terms I could not possibly comprehend.

Chapter

Two

written by Margot Vail

I folded the paper once. Put it in my coat pocket. The door had locked itself. I tested the handle: fixed. The bolt had thrown without anyone touching it, which meant mechanisms I couldn't see. I pressed my ear to the wood. Nothing from the hallway. No footsteps, no neighbor closing another door, none of the sounds a building should make at three in the afternoon. Three fifteen, if the clock could be trusted. The minute hand had moved. I turned back to the room and began a proper inventory. The brain does this when afraid: it counts. Four chairs around a dining table, each a different style. One spindle-back, one chrome cantilever, one wingback upholstered in green velvet, one folding metal chair of the type used at school assemblies. Someone had set them deliberately. No one furnishes this way by accident. The books on the shelf resolved into actual titles when I stopped trying to read them peripherally. *Oblique Cartography*, Third Revised Edition. A physics textbook in German, 1953. Seven identical copies of something called *The Tenant's Complicity*. I pulled one. It was hollow, the pages glued into a solid block, cut out to form a box. Empty. All seven were empty. The courtyard outside held twelve figures in a rough circle. Not statues. I could see the rise and fall of breathing. One wore a postal uniform. Another, a wedding dress gone gray with weather. They faced inward, looking at something I couldn't see from this angle, their postures suggesting vigil, or tribunal. A door I

hadn't noticed opened off the main room. Not the entrance I'd come through, this one led deeper. The apartment continued. Through the gap I saw a kitchen: white tile, a chipped enamel basin, burners on a stove that glowed faintly orange though I heard no gas. The paper in my pocket had weight. I took it out, unfolded it. The handwriting was mine. Same slant on the downstrokes, same way I looped the lowercase g. But the words had changed. Now they read: "The building doesn't want you. It wants what you're carrying." I owned a purse, my wallet, keys to my actual apartment across town, a tin of breath mints. The key that had opened 4D. I laid everything on the secretary desk in a line. The key was longer than I remembered. The bow had a design cut into it: a figure eight, or an infinity loop, or a snake eating itself. Difficult to say. It changed depending on the light. Something in the kitchen moved. A shadow crossing the tile, too quick. I took three steps toward the door. Stopped. On the wall between the main room and the kitchen hung a photograph I had somehow missed. Black and white, mounted in a thin metal frame. It showed this apartment, this exact room, from the perspective of someone standing where I now stood. The secretary desk was visible. The four mismatched chairs. The window onto the courtyard. In the photograph, a woman stood at the secretary desk. Her back to the camera, her hand extended toward something on the desk's surface. The photograph was old, the print had that silver gelatin grain, the contrast of images from the forties or fifties. But the woman wore a coat I recognized because I had bought it last winter. Double-breasted navy wool, bone buttons, a torn pocket lining I'd kept meaning to repair. She was me. I turned. The desk was empty except for my things, arranged in their line. No one standing there. No hand reaching. The kitchen door swung wider on its own. The handwriting on the paper had my tics, but I had not written it. The photograph showed my coat, but I had not posed. The apartment knew I was coming, but I had chosen to come. I pressed these facts against each other, testing for the seam where cause separated from effect. In the kitchen: a sound like water

running. A tap, maybe, or something being poured. I picked up the key and moved toward the door.

Chapter

Three

written by Cora Lindgren

The kitchen smelled like copper and cold water left standing too long. Not rot, not yet. Just the mineral edge of something waiting to start. My shoes stuck slightly on the linoleum, which had been laid in a pattern of black and white diamonds so warped by age that the floor looked like it was tilting, though my inner ear said level. The faucet over the enamel basin dripped. One drop, then another. No water ran. The sound I'd heard from the other room must have been something else. The burners on the stove weren't gas. Electric coils, three of them glowing that dull orange that means they've been on a long time but not hot enough to cook. I held my hand six inches above the nearest one. Warm. Not burning. Just enough heat to dry out the air. A pan sat on the fourth burner, the dead one. Cast iron, handle wrapped in a dish towel gone gray. Inside the pan: a key. Not like mine. This one was newer. Brass still bright, no tarnish. The bow was plain, no design. I picked it up. Heavier than it looked, dense, like it had been cut from something meant to last. The metal held warmth from the stove coils even though it sat on the cold burner. Behind me, the drip from the faucet stopped. I turned. The basin was dry. White enamel, brown stains where water had worn through to the iron underneath, but no drop clinging to the spout. I set the key back in the pan. It clinked, loud in the new silence. When I lifted my hand away, the key was gone. The pan was empty. I checked my

pocket. The folded paper was still there. My key, the one that had opened 4D, was in my other hand. This new key hadn't jumped anywhere. It had just stopped being. The refrigerator stood against the far wall, rounded at the corners the way they made them in the fifties. White, with a chrome handle and a latch that looked like it would need a good yank to open. The motor wasn't running. No hum. I put my palm against the door. Cold. Colder than the room. Cold enough that my hand started to ache after three seconds. I opened it. Inside: shelves, empty except for one item on the middle rack. A jar. Glass, threaded metal lid, the kind used for canning. Filled with something dark. I lifted it out. Heavy. The liquid inside was too thick to be water, too thin to be oil. It moved slowly when I tilted the jar, coating the glass, then sliding back down. The lid had a label, handwritten on masking tape gone yellow and brittle. Just one word: Yours. I set it on the counter. Unscrewed the lid. The smell hit me before I got it all the way off: iron, salt, something organic and old. Blood. Or what blood becomes when it sits. I screwed the lid back on, but the smell stayed in my nose. The paper in my pocket got heavier. I took it out. Unfolded it. The handwriting was still mine, the words different again: "The building doesn't want you. It wants what you're carrying. Check the date." Date on what? I looked at the jar. No date on the label. I checked my watch. Still worked. Three twenty-eight. Same day. October fourteenth. I turned the jar around. On the back, scratched into the glass with something sharp, a date: October 14. Today. And below it, a time: 3:45. I had seventeen minutes. The courtyard window was visible through the kitchen doorway, back in the main room. The figures still stood in their circle. But there were thirteen now. One more than before. The new one wore a navy coat. Bone buttons. She stood with her back to me, facing inward like the others. I counted again. Twelve. I'd miscounted. Fear does that, adds things that aren't there. The stove coils had gone dark. The cold from the refrigerator was spreading, I could feel it through my coat, into my ribs, the space between my shoulder blades. The jar sat on the counter, labeled with my name and a time I hadn't reached yet. Something in the

apartment's far rooms, past doors I hadn't opened, moved. Footsteps.
Deliberate. Coming closer.

Chapter

Four

written by Sasha Loomis

The footsteps stopped being footsteps and became the sound of someone dragging furniture, then became footsteps again. Consistency was a courtesy this apartment hadn't agreed to provide. I left the jar on the counter. Took the paper, both keys (mine was still in my hand, solid, the other had been solid too until it wasn't), and moved back toward the main room. The photograph on the wall had changed positions. Not the image. The frame. It hung four inches lower than before, and now tilted left. The woman in the coat still reached for the desk. Her hand was closer to whatever she wanted. I could see the edge of something under her fingertips now. An envelope, maybe. White corner against dark wood. The footsteps came from a hallway I had not seen on my first examination of the apartment. It opened between the bookshelf and the window, a gap that should have been wall. The hall was narrow. Wooden floor, no runner. A single bulb hanging from a cord, unlit. At the far end, perhaps twenty feet away, a door stood open six inches. The footsteps came from there. Heavy. Boot heels on hollow floor. I should have left. The front door was still locked but there were windows, twelve stories was survivable if you landed right, if the courtyard below wasn't full of people standing vigil for reasons they hadn't explained. I should have tested the windows. I walked toward the hallway instead. The paper in my pocket whispered. Not words. Just the dry friction of paper

against wool lining, but it had a rhythm. Three short sounds, three long, three short. I took it out. The handwriting had degraded. Still mine, but rushed now, the letters cramped and leaning: "Don't open the last door. The building needs a name. Give it anyone's but yours." I folded it. Put it away. The whisper stopped. At the mouth of the hallway I paused. The bulb overhead flickered once, stayed dark. Ahead, the six-inch gap of the open door showed a slice of green wall. Floral wallpaper. Roses, I thought, or peonies. Something full and overblown. The footsteps had stopped. I could hear breathing instead, low and steady. Not labored. Just present. "Clara?" My voice sounded wrong in the hallway. Too loud, too definite. The breathing continued. The door didn't move. I walked forward. The hall was longer than it looked. Seven steps, ten, fifteen. The door stayed twenty feet away, the gap unchanged. Perspective worked differently here, or distance did. I stopped trying to count. Walked until the door was in front of me, which happened suddenly, the way destinations do in dreams when you stop watching the road. Up close, the wallpaper resolved. Not flowers. Hands. Small ones, child-sized, overlapping in a pattern that suggested bouquet but was actually reaching. All the fingers pointed toward something outside the frame of the door, something I couldn't see from the hallway. I pushed the door wider. It swung without sound. The room beyond was not a room I could have predicted, though by now I should have expected the apartment to abandon sense. It was a stairwell. Spiral. Metal steps, open risers, descending. The walls were brick, old brick, the kind with uneven faces and black mortar. A single window at the first turn showed the courtyard from a different angle. Fourteen figures now. Maybe I had miscounted before. Maybe the courtyard was adding them the way the apartment added rooms. The breathing came from below. Down the stairs, past the turn where the window cut the darkness. I looked at my watch. Three thirty-nine. Six minutes until the time scratched on the jar. The jar that had my name. The jar I'd left on the kitchen counter because carrying blood, if that's what it was, seemed like agreement with something I hadn't consented to. The stairs waited. The breathing

continued, patient as weather. I thought about the key in the pan, how it had vanished when I looked away. I thought about the photograph showing my coat, my reaching hand. I thought about the paper saying give it anyone's name but yours, which meant the building was collecting something more specific than tenants. The figures in the courtyard had turned. All fourteen faced the window now, faced me, though I couldn't see their features through the dirty glass. I started down the stairs. The metal rang under my shoes, each step a small bell tolling.

Chapter

Five

written by Lior Tannen

The stairs spiraled tighter as I descended, each loop smaller than the last, until I had to turn sideways to keep from scraping my shoulders on brick that wept moisture I didn't want to identify. My mother used to say that old buildings remember everything that happens inside them, store it in the walls like a battery. She meant it as comfort, I think. Heritage. The idea that a house could hold all the birthday candles and goodnight kisses and keep them warm for you. She never considered what else a building might keep. The breathing grew louder. Human, definitely human, but with a wet quality that said illness or fear. Someone crying without the tears, maybe. I rounded the final turn and the stairs opened into a basement that shouldn't exist. The building had twelve floors above ground, nothing below. The rental listing had specified: ground floor retail, apartments above, built on bedrock. No excavation. But here was a basement anyway. Dirt floor, packed hard and smooth. Wooden support beams every eight feet, scarred with dates and initials like the ones teenagers carve into picnic tables. The earliest I could make out said 1889. Below that, someone had scratched: First tenant, M. Harrow. He stayed. The breathing came from a woman sitting against the far wall. She was younger than me. Twenty-five, maybe. Dark hair pulled back, wire-rimmed glasses, a fleece jacket with a university logo I recognized because my niece had applied there. She

looked up when my foot hit the dirt, and her face did something complicated, relief and fear competing for territory. "You're not supposed to be here yet," she said. Her voice was steady. Matter-of-fact. The tone you'd use to tell someone they'd arrived on the wrong day for an appointment. "I didn't plan to be here at all." I stayed on the bottom step. "Who are you?" "Mariam Osgood. 4C. I came down three weeks ago." Three weeks. She didn't look like she'd been anywhere for three weeks. Clean clothes. No beard of grime. She had a backpack beside her, canvas, with a water bottle in the side pocket. "How did you eat?" She gestured at the backpack. "I brought groceries. I was only supposed to stay an hour." She pulled her knees up, wrapped her arms around them. The posture was young, childlike. "The door locked. Like yours did. And then it just kept adding rooms every time I tried to find my way out. For a while I thought I was walking in circles, but I was marking the walls and I never saw the same mark twice." The paper in my pocket had gone silent. I took it out. The handwriting had changed again, but not to my rushed scrawl. This was someone else's printing, blocky capitals: SHE HAS BEEN HERE LONGER THAN THREE WEEKS. SHE IS FORGETTING. I showed it to Mariam. She read it, frowned. "That's not true. I came down on September twentieth. I remember because it was my sister's birthday and I was annoyed I had to miss dinner." "Today's October fourteenth." She looked at me. Her face went very still. "That's not possible." But she didn't argue further. Some part of her already knew. I could see it in the way her hand went to her jacket pocket, came out with a phone. Dead, obviously. She pressed the power button anyway. Nothing. She set it carefully on the dirt beside her. "Did you find a jar?" she asked. "In the kitchen. With my name on it." "Mine was in the bathroom cabinet. Full of something dark. A time written on the label." "Three forty-five." She shook her head. "Ten fifteen. That was yesterday. Or what I thought was yesterday." She pulled her sleeve back. Her wrist was bare except for a pale band where a watch had been. "I threw mine at the wall when I realized it had stopped. What happens when the time comes?" I didn't know. Didn't want to guess. The support beam nearest

me had a fresh carving: D. Foster, 4D. My sister's married name is Foster. Her husband is David. I touched the letters. The wood was rough, the cuts shallow. Recent. "How many people are in the courtyard now?" I asked. Mariam stood up. Slow, like someone who'd been sitting a long time. "I can't see the courtyard from here. Why?" Because I was starting to understand what the building collected. And how it kept them.

Chapter

Six

written by Iris Beddoe

I didn't answer her question. The beam wanted touching again. I ran my finger over David's name, felt splinters catch. Fresh wood underneath, pale where the knife had peeled away stain. My brother-in-law doesn't carve. Hates camping, won't whittle, keeps his hands soft for surgery. Orthopedic. He fixes knees. "When did you see him?" I asked. Mariam came closer. Three steps, then stopped like she'd hit an invisible line she wouldn't cross. "Who?" "David Foster. My sister's husband. He carved this." "I didn't see anyone carve anything." But her eyes went to a different beam, one deeper in the basement where the light from the stairwell didn't quite reach. "There's more names. Dozens. I tried counting them the first day but I kept losing track." First day of three weeks she didn't know she'd lived. I checked my watch. Three forty-one. Four minutes. The jar sat upstairs on the kitchen counter, getting closer to its appointment. I could feel it the way you feel thunder before it arrives, a pressure change in the air. "What happened at ten fifteen?" I said. Mariam's hand went to her wrist again, touched the pale band. "I heard someone upstairs. In my apartment, 4C. Footsteps. I called out but no one answered, and then..." She stopped. Started over. "The basement got darker. Not like the lights dimmed. Like dark was pouring in from somewhere, filling it up. And the breathing started." "Whose breathing?" "Mine." Flat voice. She was telling a fact, not a story. "I

could hear myself breathing from the corner where you found me, but I was standing by the stairs. I was in two places." She was describing bifurcation. A split. The building doesn't want you. It wants what you're carrying. Not objects. Not the keys or the paper or the jar of old blood. Us. The parts of us that can be separated out and kept. "Did you give it a name?" I asked. "What?" "The building. When it asked. Did you give it your name?" Mariam's face did something complicated again. "How did you know it asked?" Because the paper told me not to. Because the apartment had been ready for me, had my coat in a photograph, my handwriting on a page I never wrote, my name on a jar I never filled. Because I was supposed to be in 4B with Clara and I'd chosen the wrong door. Except. Clara's key had opened 4D. The key she'd mailed me, the one she said would get me into her apartment for the weekend while she and David visited his parents in Vermont. Vermont. Where David was supposed to be right now, not carving his name into a basement beam with fresh splinters. "You didn't answer my question," Mariam said. I looked at the stairs. Metal treads still visible, spiral still intact. The way out was right there, twenty steps up, a hallway, the main room, a locked door I could break a window beside if I wanted to badly enough. Three forty-three. "I need to get the jar," I said. "Don't." She moved then, crossed her invisible line, grabbed my wrist. Her hand was cold. Too cold. "That's what it wants. It puts your name on something and waits for you to claim it, and when the time comes, " "You're still here," I said. "After ten fifteen. You didn't disappear." "No." She let go. Stepped back. "I split. Half of me is still sitting in that corner breathing. The other half is talking to you. And I don't know which half is real anymore." The support beam with David's name threw a shadow that hadn't been there before. Or the shadow had always been there and now I could see it. A figure. Tall. David's build exactly, his shoulders, his surgeon's posture. But when I looked directly at it, nothing. Just beam and dark. Three forty-four. One minute. The paper in my pocket started whispering again. Three short, three long, three short. SOS in the international alphabet I'd learned in Girl Scouts and never forgotten. "The jar has my

name," I said. "But I didn't put it there." Mariam shook her head.
"Neither did I." Upstairs: a sound like glass breaking.

Chapter

Seven

written by Sammy Hall

I took the stairs fast, two at a time, hand on the brick wall because the spiral was tighter going up and my balance was shit. The sound came again before I reached the top. Definitely glass. Not a window. Sharper. Closer. Kitchen. Mariam followed. I could hear her breathing behind me, real breathing this time, not the wet doubling she'd described. When we came through the hallway back into the main room, the photograph had moved again. Lower still. The woman's hand was on the envelope now, fingers curved around it, and I could see what I hadn't before: the envelope was thick. Not a letter. Something bulky inside. The frame's glass had cracked, a single line running diagonal from corner to corner. The kitchen doorway was ahead. I stopped at the threshold. The jar had exploded. That's the only word for it. Glass everywhere, covering the white tile floor, the counter, embedded in the dish towel hanging from the oven handle. The liquid had sprayed across the wall in an arc, dark and already drying to rust at the edges. But that wasn't the worst part. The worst part was the second jar. It sat on the counter exactly where I'd left the first one. Same threaded lid, same masking tape label, same handwriting. But the word had changed. Not Yours anymore. Clara. "Jesus," Mariam said behind me. She stayed in the doorway. Wouldn't come in. I checked my watch without wanting to. Three forty-six. The time on the jar had passed. I looked at the new label for a date, a time,

instructions I could follow or ignore. Nothing. Just my sister's name. The courtyard window was visible from where I stood. I counted without meaning to. Fifteen figures. The one in the navy coat was still there, still facing inward. I made myself look at the others. The one in the postal uniform had moved to the left. The wedding dress was closer to the center. And there, on the far side, nearly hidden behind a man in coveralls: a woman in surgical scrubs. My phone was in my purse, back in the main room where I'd left everything lined up on the secretary desk. I went to get it. The line of objects had been rearranged. Phone in the center now, keys on either side, wallet at the end. The tin of breath mints was gone. I unlocked the phone. Three forty-seven. Still the fourteenth. I pulled up Clara's number, pressed call. It rang. Four times. Voicemail. "Clara, it's Delia. Don't come to the building. I'm in 4D, not 4B, and something's wrong with it. Call me back. Don't come here." I hung up. Checked my texts. Nothing from her since Tuesday, a photo of her cat sleeping on David's briefcase. I scrolled back further. Found the message from last week where she'd said they were leaving Thursday morning, gave me the key code for the lobby, told me the apartment key would work fine even though it was old, the building had never changed the locks in forty years. Forty years. The building had been here since 1889 according to the beam downstairs. The photograph on the wall looked like the fifties. "She's not answering," I said. Mariam had moved to the bookshelf. She had one of the hollowed-out books open, the one I'd checked earlier. Not empty anymore. Inside: a driver's license. New York state. The photo showed Mariam, same glasses, same dark hair. Expiration date three years from now. "This isn't mine," she said. "I mean, it's me, but I didn't put it here. My license is in my wallet." "Check your wallet." She did. Pulled a card from the pocket, compared them. Identical except for one thing: the address. The book's version listed 4C. Hers listed an address in Brooklyn, a neighborhood I knew because my first apartment had been two blocks over. I went back to the kitchen, stepping careful over the glass. Opened the refrigerator. Three jars now, lined up on the middle shelf. Clara. David. Mariam. No times. No dates.

Just names. A collection that was growing. The front door unlocked. I heard the bolt throw, the handle turn. Someone was coming in.

Chapter

Eight

written by wordsbylena

The person coming in was my height. Same coat. Same bone buttons. I watched her from the kitchen doorway as she stepped into the main room, pulling the key from the lock, turning to close the door behind her with the careful quiet of someone who doesn't want to disturb neighbors who aren't there. She hadn't seen me yet. I counted the seconds. Seven before she noticed the mismatched chairs. Twelve before she saw the photograph. At fifteen, her hand went to her pocket, the same pocket where I kept the paper that kept rewriting itself. "Don't take it out," I said. She spun. Her face was mine exactly. Same scar on the left eyebrow from the time I fell off Clara's bike in 1996. Same crooked incisor. But her eyes were wrong. Not the color. The expression. She looked at me the way you look at furniture that's been moved while you were gone. "You're early," she said. "Early for what?" She didn't answer. Walked to the secretary desk, ran her finger along the line of objects I'd arranged. Phone, keys, wallet. She picked up my phone, checked the screen. Three fifty-one. Put it down exactly where she'd found it. "The jar broke," she said. Not a question. "Yes." "So now there are more." She moved toward the kitchen. I stepped aside. Let her look. She catalogued the glass on the floor with the same counting compulsion I recognized because it was mine. Forty-seven pieces visible from this angle. The new jars on the refrigerator shelf got a longer examination. She touched

Clara's name through the glass, one finger on the masking tape. "She's not coming," I said. "I called her." "She's already here." I looked at the courtyard window. Counted again without meaning to. Sixteen figures now. The one in scrubs had moved closer to the center. Next to her, a woman in a navy coat. Two women in navy coats. No. Three. I counted again, forced myself to see what I was seeing. Four women wearing my coat, bone buttons catching the courtyard's strange light, all of them standing with their backs to the window. "How many times have you done this?" I asked. The other me, the one who'd just arrived, closed the refrigerator. "Done what?" "Come into 4D. Found the photograph. Gone down the stairs." "This is the first time." Liar. But her face believed it, which was worse. The building was collecting us in pieces. The jar that broke at three forty-five had taken something I hadn't felt leave. The Delia standing in front of me had walked in carrying a piece I might have already lost. The basement had Mariam split into two positions, both breathing, both real. I pulled out the paper. It had rewritten itself again, new handwriting this time, shaky and old: The building doesn't take your name. It takes your ability to have only one. "Where's Mariam?" the other me asked. I turned. The main room was empty. She'd been right behind me on the stairs, had stood in the kitchen doorway while I made the phone call. I checked the hallway leading to the basement. The gap in the wall had closed. No hallway. Just bookshelf and courtyard window, the space between them solid and papered with reaching hands. "She was here," I said. "She's in the courtyard now. Fifth from the left." I counted. She was right. A woman in a fleece jacket with a university logo, standing between the postal worker and the wedding dress. She faced inward like the others, looking at something I still couldn't see. The apartment had four jars now. Four people named and stored. I thought about the beam downstairs: First tenant, M. Harrow. He stayed. How many names had been carved into that wood? Dozens, Mariam said. Dozens of people the building had split and kept and arranged in a courtyard that shouldn't exist. "We need to leave," I said. "The door only opens inward," the other me said. She was looking at the

front door, the one she'd just come through. "I tried last time." Last time. This is the first time, she'd said. Both statements were true. The building took your ability to have only one. I walked to the door. Turned the handle. It opened onto the hallway, twelve floors up, the corridor stretching both directions exactly as it should. Emergency exit at the far end, apartment doors with their brass numbers, 4A through 4F. 4D's door was already closing. I shoved my foot into the gap before it could latch.

Finished on 28 April 2026.

*Written in relay on relaywriters.com: eight strangers, one chapter each, never
more than eight hundred words at a time.*

https://relaywriters.com/read/2?t=hMIzWcO1ufq_ae07QQ00dmUjElV_
AMIG