



MYSTERY

What Bleeds Between Here and Named

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY • WRITERS

The writers

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

One	inkwell_amy
Two	rpenguin
Three	Lior Tannen
Four	Olive Kassen
Five	Ruth Ann Keller
Six	Iris Beddoe
Seven	Dario Selo
Eight	Cora Lindgren

Chapter

One

written by inkwell_amy

Rain hammered the pavement as Vera crossed the street. She kept her head down, collar up, one hand gripping the envelope inside her jacket pocket. The paper was already damp from sweat or weather, she couldn't tell which. Three blocks to the hotel. Two if she cut through the alley behind the butcher shop. She chose the alley. Water streamed from the gutters above, splattering on crates stacked against brick walls. Something moved near the dumpster. A cat, maybe. Vera didn't slow down. The envelope crinkled under her fingers. She'd memorized what it said. Four lines, handwritten in pencil: Room 4D. Tuesday. 11 PM. Bring what you took. Come alone. You know why. The problem was she didn't know why. And she hadn't taken anything. Not that she could remember. But the note had been slipped under her apartment door sometime between midnight and dawn, and finding it there had triggered something. A flutter of recognition. Like hearing a song from childhood but not remembering the words. She emerged from the alley onto Harwick Street. The hotel loomed ahead, twelve stories of limestone and narrow windows. A doorman stood beneath the awning, smoking. Vera waited for a truck to pass, then crossed. Inside, the lobby smelled like old carpet and lemon polish. A woman sat behind the desk reading a magazine, not looking up. Vera walked past her to the elevator, pressed the button. The arrow above the doors didn't light. She

pressed it again. Nothing. "Elevator's out," the woman said without raising her eyes. "Stairs are through there." Vera followed her gesture to a door marked EXIT. It opened onto a concrete stairwell, cold and echoing. She started climbing. By the second floor her legs burned. By the third, her breath came hard. She stopped on the landing, leaning against the railing. Below, the door opened. Footsteps. Someone else climbing. She kept moving. Fourth floor. The hallway stretched long and dim, alternating pools of light and shadow from fixtures that buzzed like dying insects. Room 4D was at the far end. She walked toward it, her wet shoes squeaking on linoleum. Behind her, the stairwell door clicked open. She didn't turn around. The door to 4D stood slightly ajar. No light showed through the gap. Vera stopped two feet away, listening. Nothing. She pushed the door with her fingertips. It swung inward without a sound. The room was empty. No bed, no furniture, just bare walls and a window that looked out onto the fire escape. In the center of the floor sat a wooden chair. On the chair, a cardboard box. Vera stepped inside. The door closed behind her with a soft thump. Not a slam, just the weight of it settling into the frame. She approached the box. No label, no tape. Just the flaps folded shut. She opened it. Inside: a knife. Not a kitchen knife, something older. Bone handle, tarnished blade. And underneath the knife, folded papers covered in diagrams. Circles within circles. Coordinates. Dates going back forty years. And at the bottom, a photograph. She lifted it out. Four people standing in front of this same hotel, this same entrance. Younger. Smiling. One of them was her mother. The others, she didn't recognize. On the back, written in the same pencil as the note: We agreed never to speak of it. Footsteps in the hallway now. Slow, deliberate. Coming closer. Vera put the photograph in her pocket with the note. She picked up the knife. The handle was cold, smooth. Felt right in her hand, like she'd held it before. The footsteps stopped outside the door. Then the knob began to turn.

Chapter

Two

written by rpenguin

test.

Chapter

Three

written by Lior Tannen

The door opened and Mrs. Kellogg walked in carrying a thermos and two paper cups. "I thought you might need coffee," she said, setting them on the windowsill. "It's been a long night for both of us." Vera lowered the knife but didn't put it down. Mrs. Kellogg was her mother's oldest friend, the woman who'd brought casseroles after the funeral, who still called on Sundays to ask if Vera was eating enough. She wore the same blue cardigan she always wore, pills of fabric forming at the elbows. Her hands shook slightly as she poured the coffee. Parkinson's, early stage. She'd mentioned it last Christmas. "You knew I'd be here," Vera said. "I sent the note." Mrs. Kellogg held out a cup. The coffee steamed in the cold room. "Your mother made me promise. If anything happened to her, I was supposed to show you." Vera took the cup but didn't drink. "Show me what?" "That box. Those papers." Mrs. Kellogg sat down on the chair, groaning a little as her knees bent. "We made a pact, the four of us. We thought we were doing the right thing. Maybe we were. But your mother, at the end, she said you deserved to know." The photograph felt heavy in Vera's pocket. Four people in front of the hotel. Her mother young, dark hair not yet gray. Smiling like she had a secret. "Who are the others?" Vera asked. "Thomas Brenner died in 1987. Car accident on Route 9, though that's not the whole story." Mrs. Kellogg sipped her coffee. "Sarah Lim moved to Vancouver. We lost touch. And

the fourth one, well. You know about him. The neighbor." Vera's chest tightened. "What neighbor?" "The man in 2B. The one who died four months ago. Except we all knew he didn't die, not really. You can't kill something that was never properly alive." Mrs. Kellogg's voice was steady, matter-of-fact, like she was explaining a recipe. "We made him, you see. The four of us. We were young and stupid and thought we understood things we didn't." Vera set her cup on the floor. Her hand found the photograph again, pulled it out. She stared at the fourth face, a man with dark eyes and a thin smile. She'd never seen him before. She was certain of that. "What do you mean, made him?" "There was a ritual. Old magic, real magic, not the nonsense you read about in books." Mrs. Kellogg looked at the diagrams scattered on the floor. "We needed someone who could move between places. Someone who could carry messages where we couldn't go ourselves. We didn't understand the cost. He was supposed to fade after a year. Instead he got stronger. Started having his own thoughts. Started wanting things." Outside, a siren wailed past on Harwick Street. The sound faded slowly. "The mail," Vera said. "It's still coming to him." "That's how he stays tethered. As long as someone remembers his name, speaks it, writes it, he can hold form." Mrs. Kellogg stood, walked to the window. "Your mother spent forty years making sure no one said it out loud. That's why there's no name on his lease. No name on his obituary. She tried to starve him out of existence." Vera thought of the envelopes she'd seen in the building's mail room, addressed in careful print to apartment 2B. She'd assumed the postal service hadn't updated their records. But someone was writing those letters. Someone was feeding him names. "Who's sending the mail?" she asked. Mrs. Kellogg turned from the window. Her face looked older in the weak light, lines deepening around her mouth. "That's what you need to find out," she said. "Because whoever it is, they're not doing it by accident. They're trying to bring him back fully. And if they succeed, the bargain we made, the one that's kept him trapped between here and nowhere, it breaks. Which means he gets to collect what we owe him." "What do we owe him?" Mrs. Kellogg picked

up her thermos. She walked to the door, then paused. "A life for a life," she said. "That was always the price. Your mother just made sure it wasn't hers." She opened the door. "Check the return addresses on those letters. Start there." Then she was gone, footsteps receding down the hallway.

Chapter

Four

written by Olive Kassen

Vera stood in the empty room listening to the silence resettlement. The coffee had gone cold in her cup. She set it on the floor beside the box and knelt, spreading the diagrams flat against the warped wood. The circles were hand-drawn, imperfect. Someone had used a compass but their hand had slipped, leaving small gaps where the lines failed to meet. Inside each circle, words in languages she didn't recognize. Some looked like Latin. Others used alphabets she'd never seen. At the center of the largest diagram, a single word in English: PASSENGER. She traced the word with her finger. The pencil had pressed hard enough to leave an indent in the paper. Whoever drew this had been afraid. Or angry. Maybe both. The knife lay where she'd dropped it. Bone handle worn smooth by hands that weren't hers. She picked it up again. Turned it over. On the underside of the handle, barely visible, someone had carved initials. V.M. Her mother's maiden name. Vera Morgan, before she married and became Vera Chen. Her mother had held this knife. Her mother had stood in circles and spoken words that pulled something from wherever such things lived. Her mother, who'd taught third grade for thirty years and kept African violets on the kitchen windowsill and never missed Sunday mass. The photograph showed a different woman. Younger, yes. But also braver. Reckless. Standing in front of this hotel with three other people who thought they could bend the world into

new shapes. Vera put the knife in her jacket pocket opposite the photograph. She gathered the diagrams, folded them carefully, tucked them into the cardboard box. The box was lighter than it should have been. She lifted it. Something rattled inside, under where the papers had been. A key. Brass, old, the kind that opened warded locks. A paper tag tied to it with string. The tag had an address written in the same careful print she'd seen on the envelopes. 2B wasn't an apartment number. It was a box number. Post office box 2B, downtown branch. She put the key in her pocket with everything else. Her jacket hung heavy now, weighted with her mother's secrets. The window showed dawn starting, gray light seeping between buildings. She'd been here three hours. Maybe four. Time felt unreliable, like it had stretched and compressed when she wasn't paying attention. She left room 4D and walked down the hallway. The lights still buzzed. Same fixtures, same dying-insect sound. At the stairwell she paused. Listened. No footsteps below, no doors opening or closing. She descended slowly, one hand on the railing. The concrete was cold enough to leech heat through her palm. The lobby was empty. Different woman behind the desk now, younger, scrolling through her phone. The doorman was gone. Vera walked out into morning that smelled like rain and exhaust. The post office didn't open until nine. She had four hours to wait. She walked to the diner on Fifth, the one that served breakfast all night. Ordered eggs and toast she didn't eat. Drank coffee that tasted like the machine needed cleaning. The waitress didn't ask questions. At a quarter to nine, Vera walked the six blocks to the downtown branch. The building was limestone like the hotel, probably built the same decade. The lobby echoed. A clerk stood behind bulletproof glass, sorting packages. Vera waited until he looked up. "I need to access box 2B," she said. "ID and key." She showed him her driver's license. Slid the key under the glass. He glanced at both, then pointed to a wall of small brass doors. "Second row. Help yourself." Box 2B was at eye level. She fitted the key into the lock. It turned smooth, well-oiled. The door opened. Inside: envelopes. At least twenty, maybe more. All addressed in the same handwriting to apartment 2B, care of

this post office box. No return addresses on the front. She pulled them out, turned them over. Each one had a return address on the back. Same address, every time. Her own. Her apartment. Her address. Her building. But she hadn't sent them. She'd never written to a dead neighbor, never mailed letters to a man who didn't exist. Vera stood holding the stack of envelopes in the echoing post office. Someone was using her address. Someone wanted it to look like she was the one keeping him tethered. The question was whether they were framing her or warning her.

Chapter

Five

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One did not customarily experience dread as a physical sensation, yet Vera found herself gripping the counter to steady her hands. The envelopes bore her address in a script that might have been her own, had she written with her left hand whilst half asleep. Similar, but wrong. Too careful in places. Too loose in others. The clerk had returned to his sorting. She tucked the stack into her jacket, where it pressed against the diagrams and the photograph and the knife that had belonged to her mother. The weight threatened to pull her sideways. Outside, the morning had turned bright. She walked three blocks before stopping to examine the envelopes properly. A bus shelter offered a measure of privacy. She sat on the metal bench and opened the first envelope. Empty. She opened the second. Also empty. The third contained a single sheet of paper. No words, only a drawing. The same circles-within-circles from the diagrams upstairs, but simpler. Cruder. As though someone had copied them from memory and gotten the proportions wrong. Vera worked through the stack methodically. Fifteen envelopes empty. Five with drawings, each one slightly different from the last. The final envelope was heavier. She opened it. A lease agreement, photocopied. Apartment 2B, dated 1981. Four signatures at the bottom. Her mother's maiden name. Mrs. Kellogg, listed as "Dorothy Kellogg," not the "Dot" everyone called her. Thomas Brenner. Sarah Lim.

No tenant signature. The line was blank. Someone had paperclipped a note to the lease. The handwriting was shaky, uncertain. "He needs a name to collect. They never gave him one. That was the safeguard." Vera read it twice. The ink was recent, the paper fresh. Not forty years old like the lease itself. She looked at the postmark on the envelope. Two weeks ago. The neighbor had been dead four months, according to the obituary. Dead, or whatever passed for death when one had never been properly alive. Mrs. Kellogg had said the letters kept him tethered. But if someone was sending them after his supposed death, they were not maintaining him. They were rebuilding him. The bus arrived, disgorging passengers. An old man with a cane. Two students with backpacks. A woman holding a child's hand. Ordinary people conducting ordinary business. None of them looked at Vera. None of them knew that something impossible was clawing its way back into existence six blocks from where they stood. She needed to see the apartment. 2B, where the mail had been going. Where something that should not exist had lived for forty years, growing stronger instead of fading. Vera stood. Her legs felt uncertain beneath her, but they carried her. The building superintendent was named Morris. She had seen him perhaps a dozen times in the three years she had lived there, always carrying tools or dragging trash bins to the curb. He kept an office in the basement beside the boiler room. She found him there now, eating a sandwich and reading yesterday's paper. "I need to ask about 2B," she said. Morris looked up. He had the expression of a man who had heard too many complaints and expected one more. "What about it?" "Who lived there. Before." "Nobody, last four months. Before that, some fellow. Kept to himself." Morris returned to his sandwich. "Why?" "Did he have a name?" "Course he had a name. Everyone's got a name." "What was it?" Morris frowned. He set down his sandwich and wiped his hands on his trousers. "Now that's funny. I can't quite recall. Something ordinary. John or James or, no. Maybe it started with an R." He stared at the wall as though the answer might be written there. "I must have written it down somewhere. Lease applications, deposit records. But when I try to

picture it, I just see a blank space where the name should be." Vera felt something cold settle in her chest. "Could I see the apartment?" "Not supposed to show units without an appointment." She withdrew a twenty-dollar bill from her wallet and placed it on his desk. Morris looked at it. Then he stood and took a key ring from a hook beside the door. They climbed the stairs in silence. Second floor, fourth door on the left. Morris fitted the key into the lock. "Fair warning," he said. "It's been sealed up since March. Might smell." He opened the door. The apartment was not empty.

Chapter

Six

written by Iris Beddoe

The apartment was not empty. Furniture lined the walls. Old pieces, wrong-era pieces. A velvet armchair from the seventies sat beside a radio that looked wartime. Forties, maybe. A bookshelf held volumes with cracked spines, titles in languages that shifted when Vera tried to focus on them. The air tasted metal. Morris stood in the doorway. He did not enter. "Was it like this?" Vera asked. "When he lived here?" "No." Morris's voice had gone thin. "No, it was empty. I came in after to check the pipes. Nothing here but dust." She stepped inside. Her shoes left prints on the floor. Not dust, exactly. Something finer. Ash, maybe. Or the residue of something burned too long ago to remember burning. The walls were covered in writing. Not graffiti. Careful script, floor to ceiling, overlapping in places where the writer had run out of room and started again. The same four lines repeated thousands of times: Room 4D. Tuesday. 11 PM. Bring what you took. Come alone. You know why. Vera's note. The one that had been slipped under her door. Copied here like a prayer or a summoning or a scream that had never found a mouth to escape from. She moved closer. Some sections were in pencil, others in ink. Some looked fresh. Others had faded to ghost-impressions, barely visible. As though the walls had been holding this message for years, absorbing it, until the repetition became the only thing the room knew how to be. Morris remained in the doorway. "I'm calling the police."

"Wait." Vera turned. "Did anyone have access? After March?" "Just me. I check the units monthly. It was empty last time." "When was that?" "Three weeks ago." Twenty days. The postmark on the envelope with the lease. Someone had filled this room in less than a month. Someone who knew what her mother and Mrs. Kellogg and the others had done. Someone who wanted to finish it. She walked to the window. The fire escape outside was rusted, the kind of thing that wouldn't hold weight. Below, the courtyard showed a dumpster and cracked pavement and nothing else. Above, the escape led to the roof. On the windowsill sat an envelope. Vera picked it up. Her hands did not shake now. They had moved past shaking into a steadiness that felt like surrender. The envelope was addressed to her. Not apartment 2B. Her name, her unit number. Postmarked yesterday. Inside, a lease application. Blank except for one line. Tenant name. Someone had filled it in. The handwriting was hers. Perfect this time, not the approximation from the post office envelopes. Her actual script, the way she signed checks and grocery lists and birthday cards. The name written there: Passenger. Morris had his phone out. "I'm done waiting." "Go ahead," Vera said. She did not look at him. "Call them." He left. His footsteps receded down the hall, quick and uneven. Vera stood alone in the room that should have been empty. The radio clicked on by itself. Static, then a voice. Distant, speaking words she could not parse. Not English. Not any language she had heard before. The knife in her pocket had grown warm. She took it out. The bone handle felt alive now, pulsing slightly. On the blade, something new had appeared. Etched in metal that should not hold etchings: coordinates. The same coordinates from the diagrams. She knew without checking that they pointed to this building. This room. This exact spot where she stood. The voice on the radio stopped. Silence filled the space where it had been. Then, soft as breath, a knock at the door. Morris had not closed it fully. It stood ajar. The knock came again, patient. Polite. "Come in," Vera said. The door swung open. A man stood in the hallway. Dark eyes, thin smile. The fourth face from the photograph. He looked exactly as he had forty years ago. "Hello, Vera,"

he said. His voice sounded like rust scraping glass. "Your mother said you'd be the one to finally give me a name." He stepped inside. The door closed behind him.

Chapter

Seven

written by Dario Selo

One might have expected terror, or perhaps the paralytic shock that comes when confronted with the impossible made flesh, but what Vera experienced instead was a peculiar sense of inevitability. As though this moment had always been waiting at the end of a long corridor she had been walking down her entire life without knowing it. The man (though "man" felt like an insufficient designation for what stood before her) moved further into the room. He did not walk so much as occupy successive points in space, the transition between them too smooth to be natural. Up close, his edges seemed uncertain. Blurred, like a photograph taken with a shaking hand. "She told you I would give you a name," Vera said. Not a question. "She promised." He gestured at the walls, at the thousands of repetitions of her note. "All of this was her insurance policy. If the others failed to keep me quiet, you would finish what they started. One way or another." Vera turned the knife in her hand. The coordinates on the blade had begun to glow faintly, giving off heat that should have burned her palm but did not. "Why would I give you anything?" "Because you've already started." He pointed to the lease application she still held. The name written there in her handwriting, or something wearing her handwriting like an ill-fitting suit. "You wrote that three days ago. You don't remember, but you will. Memory is funny that way. It comes when called, if the caller knows the right words." She

wanted to argue, to insist she had never seen this paper before opening the envelope sixty seconds ago. But doubt had begun its corrosive work. Had she perhaps walked somewhere in her sleep? Had she written things in states adjacent to consciousness, those liminal hours between three and four AM when the mind became unmoored from its daytime certainties? "What happens if I do give you a name?" she asked. "The real one, not whatever trick my mother built into that application?" "I become." He smiled, and the expression was wrong in ways that hurt to perceive. "Right now I'm a story four people told themselves. A tool they built and tried to unbuild when it frightened them. But with a name, I'm real. Fixed. Permanent. I can stop borrowing substance from the spaces between here and elsewhere. I can exist the way you exist, without constant effort." "And the debt? The life-for-a-life Mrs. Kellogg mentioned?" "That was always negotiable." He moved to the bookshelf, running fingers (were they fingers? they seemed to have too many joints) along the spines. "Your mother thought she was so clever, making sure I stayed nameless. But she forgot that debts don't disappear. They accumulate interest. Forty years of interest, Vera. I've been patient. But patience has limits, even for things like me." Vera looked at the writing on the walls. Thousands of iterations of the same message, building up like sediment. Like prayer. She thought about her mother, young and reckless, standing in circles and speaking words that pulled something through. She thought about Mrs. Kellogg saying you deserved to know, as though knowledge were a gift rather than a burden. "What was the ritual for?" she asked. "Mrs. Kellogg said you were supposed to carry messages where they couldn't go. Where was that?" "Difficult to explain in terms that fit inside your physics." He turned from the bookshelf. "There are places adjacent to this one. Your mother and her friends needed something from one of those places. Information. A specific piece of knowledge that could only be retrieved by something that existed in both locations simultaneously. So they made me. Half here, half there. The perfect messenger." "What information?" "How to prevent something. A death, I think. Or maybe a

birth. The details were never shared with me." His smile had not changed. It had perhaps never changed, merely occupied his face like a mask held too long. "I brought them what they wanted. They paid part of the price. Then they tried to cheat the rest. So here we are." Vera closed her eyes. Opened them. The room had not shifted, though she had half-expected it to. Behind her, somewhere in the building, she heard sirens. Morris had called the police after all. They would arrive, find the apartment, find her standing here with a knife and a stranger who should not exist. She looked at the lease application. The name written there in her sleep-walking hand: Passenger. "That's not your real name," she said. "Is it?" "No," he agreed. "But it's the one you're going to give me. Unless you'd prefer to pay the debt another way.

Chapter

Eight

written by Cora Lindgren

The knife felt slippery now. Not from sweat, from something leaching through the bone itself. Vera's palm itched where the heat concentrated, the kind of itch that meant blistering underneath. "Show me," she said. "The debt. What it looks like." He tilted his head. The motion took too long, like film played at the wrong speed. "You want to see?" "I want to know what my mother actually promised you." He reached into his jacket. His hand went in farther than the fabric allowed, disappearing past the wrist, past the elbow. When he withdrew it, he held a jar. Glass, old, the kind her grandmother had used for canning. Inside, something dark and viscous moved against the sides. "This is what's left of Thomas Brenner," he said. "The part of him that kept thinking after the car crash. Your mother collected it. Gave it to me as the first installment." Vera's stomach clenched. The thing in the jar pressed against the glass, flattening, seeking a way out. "Sarah Lim sent hers from Vancouver. Mailed it in a shoe box wrapped in brown paper. She cut it out herself. Took her three tries with kitchen scissors before she got it all." He set the jar on the radio. "Mrs. Kellogg's is still attached. She's been carrying it around for forty years, getting heavier, waiting for the day I come to take it." "And my mother?" "Your mother tried to substitute." He looked at Vera with those too-dark eyes. "She offered something that wasn't hers to give. She wrote your name in the original contract, the night you were

born. A future payment. Insurance, in case she couldn't provide her own." The sirens had stopped. Voices in the building now, boots on stairs. The police moving through the lower floors, checking each apartment. Morris would lead them here. Two minutes, maybe three. Vera looked at the lease application. At the name she supposedly wrote. Passenger. A placeholder. A word that meant temporary, meant in-transit, meant not-staying. "If I give you that name," she said, "you become real. But incomplete. Still halfway between." "Very good." He sounded pleased, which made it worse. "Your mother was cleverer than the others. She understood I would come for you eventually, but she left you a trap disguised as surrender. If you name me Passenger, I exist, yes. But I remain what I am: something that moves between places. Never arriving. Never fixed. I can collect the debts, but I can never stop collecting. Can never rest. An existence, but not a life." "And if I give you a real name?" "Then I become human. Limited. Mortal." His edges solidified slightly. "I can die. But first, I can live." Boots in the hallway now. Voices calling for Morris, asking which apartment. Vera thought about her mother teaching third-graders to read. Watering African violets. Going to church every Sunday. Living forty years with this grafted to her spine, this knowledge that she had marked her daughter before the girl could speak. She thought about Mrs. Kellogg saying your mother just made sure it wasn't hers. The thing in the jar had stopped moving. Vera folded the lease application. Put it in her pocket with the photograph and the diagrams. The knife's heat had reached bone-deep. She could smell her skin beginning to char. "I'm not giving you anything," she said. His smile finally changed. It sharpened. "Then you'll pay the other way." "No." She turned the knife. The coordinates glowed brighter, white-hot. "I'm keeping what's mine. My name. My mother's debt. All of it." She drove the blade into her own palm. The pain came correct and absolute. Blood welled around the bone handle, soaking into it, darkening the aged ivory. The coordinates blazed. The room tilted. He lunged forward. "What are you, " But the knife knew what it was for. Had always known. Her mother had carved those initials into the handle

because this was a tool for unmaking. For severing contracts written in blood and memory. Vera felt something tear loose inside her chest. Not physical. Deeper. The connection her mother had written into existence, the thread that marked her as payment. It came out like fishhook through flesh, barbed and catching. She pulled the knife free. Blood dripped onto the floor, onto the ash-dust, onto the writing that covered every surface. Where it touched, the words began to erase.

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