

MYSTERY

An open notebook with blank, aged, cream-colored pages is the central focus. A black fountain pen with gold-colored accents and a gold nib lies diagonally across the right page. The notebook is placed on a dark, textured wooden surface. In the background, a city skyline at night is visible, with numerous colorful lights (red, green, yellow) reflecting on a dark surface, possibly water or a glass pane. The overall lighting is warm and atmospheric, with a focus on the notebook and pen.

The Apartment That Opens Both Ways

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

One	Lior Tannen
Two	inkwell_amy
Three	Iris Beddoe
Four	Sammy Hall
Five	Margot Vail
Six	typewriter_tom
Seven	Ruth Ann Keller
Eight	Dan Okafor

Chapter

One

written by Lior Tannen

The locksmith had kind eyes, the sort that crinkled at the corners when he smiled, which he did often despite the early hour. Margaret watched his weathered hands work the tumblers of apartment 6B with a practiced gentleness that reminded her of her father fixing watches at the kitchen table, decades ago now. "You're sure this is your place?" he asked, not unkindly. "I've lived here eleven years," Margaret said, which was true, though she left out that she'd lived in 6A for all eleven of them. The lock gave with a soft click. The locksmith stood, knees popping, and handed her a new key. "All yours. That'll be eighty-five dollars." She paid in cash, exact change she'd counted out three times that morning. He wished her a good day and she believed he meant it. Some people were just built that way, all warmth with no angle to it. The world hadn't gotten around to teaching them otherwise yet. Margaret waited until his footsteps faded down the stairwell. The building had an elevator, but it had been broken since Tuesday. Or possibly since last month. Time had a way of blurring lately, running together like watercolors left in the rain. The door to 6B swung open with a whisper. Inside, the apartment was exactly as she remembered: the salmon-colored walls, the window that overlooked the air shaft, the radiator that clanked like someone trapped inside knocking to get out. Even the smell was right, that particular mustiness that came from old carpet and steam heat and lives

pressed too close together. Mrs. Chen's apartment. Or it had been, before Mrs. Chen died. Three weeks ago now. Or four. Margaret set her purse on the small table by the door, the one with the wobbly leg that Mrs. Chen had shored up with folded newspaper. The obituary was still there, she noticed. From the Tribune. Mrs. Chen would have appreciated that, being in the Tribune. She'd always been proud of small dignities. The thing was, Margaret had already been inside this apartment. Had been inside it the day after Mrs. Chen died, when the building super asked her to help sort through things, being as she and Mrs. Chen had been friendly. Played gin rummy on Thursdays. Borrowed sugar and company in the particular way of widows who'd landed in the same building, same floor, same long stretch of years with no one much to answer to. Margaret had helped box up the clothes for Goodwill, the dishes for Mrs. Chen's niece in Toledo. Had watered the plants one last time before they went brown. Had stood in this very spot and thought how strange it was that a person could be so thoroughly erased, all their particular arrangements of things undone in an afternoon. But when she'd left that day, she'd locked the door behind her. Had watched the super seal it with tape, the kind that said ESTATE ACCESS ONLY in red letters. The tape was gone now. The door had opened to her new key like it had been waiting. Margaret walked to the window. Down in the courtyard, Mr. Kaminski was shaking out a rug, creating clouds of dust that caught the morning light. He did this every Saturday, regular as the church bells. This was Saturday, wasn't it? She was almost certain. In the kitchen, she found Mrs. Chen's teacups still in the cabinet, the ones with the delicate birds painted on them. The kettle on the stove. The tin of jasmine tea, half full. Everything just as it had been, as if the last three weeks (or four) had simply folded back on themselves. Margaret filled the kettle and set it to boil. While she waited, she walked through the small apartment, touching things lightly: the doily on the armchair, the stack of magazines, the framed photograph of Mr. Chen in his Army uniform, young and solemn and already gone sixty years. The water boiled. Margaret made tea in two cups, the way she always had. She

carried both to the small table by the window and sat down, arranging the cards for gin rummy, dealing them out with hands that barely shook at all. Then she waited, patient as anything, for her friend to come home.

Chapter

Two

written by inkwell_amy

The door slammed three floors down. Margaret's head snapped toward the sound, teacup frozen halfway to her mouth. Footsteps on the stairs, fast and heavy. Not the locksmith's careful tread. Not Mr. Kaminski shuffling back from his rug-beating. These steps had purpose, had weight behind them. She set the cup down. Tea slopped over the rim onto Mrs. Chen's lace tablecloth. The footsteps stopped. A door opened, hinges screaming. Not this floor. Below, maybe. Margaret stood, moved to the window. In the courtyard, Mr. Kaminski was gone. The rug lay draped over the railing, still swaying. A dog barked. Cut off mid-sound. Margaret's fingers found the window latch. The metal was cold, wouldn't budge. Painted shut, probably years ago. She pulled harder. The latch gave with a crack that seemed loud enough to wake the whole building. Behind her, something scraped across the floor. She spun. The cards had scattered. No breeze. The window behind her still closed. But the cards lay spread across the linoleum like someone had swept them off the table with one quick motion. The radiator clanked twice. Stopped. Margaret crossed to the door of 6B, pressed her ear against it. Nothing. She counted her own heartbeats, got to forty before she heard it: breathing on the other side. Slow, deliberate. Waiting. She stepped back. The door had no peephole, no chain lock. Just the knob and the deadbolt she hadn't thrown. Her hand moved to the deadbolt, slid it

home. The breathing stopped. Margaret waited. Thirty seconds. A minute. When she put her ear to the door again, the hallway was silent. She returned to the kitchen, stepping over the scattered cards. The second teacup sat untouched, steam still rising. She picked it up, carried it to the sink, poured it out. Rinsed both cups. Dried them. Put them back in the cabinet with the painted birds. The apartment felt smaller now. The walls the wrong shade of salmon, too pink, too close. She checked the bedroom. Empty. Checked the bathroom. The shower curtain hung open, the tub dry. A rust stain ringed the drain. In Mrs. Chen's closet, the wire hangers jangled though Margaret hadn't touched them. She pushed past empty space where the Goodwill boxes had been, found the back wall. Solid. No hidden doors, no loose panels. Just painted plaster and the smell of mothballs. Something thumped in the living room. Margaret came out fast. The photograph of Mr. Chen lay face-down on the carpet. She picked it up, glass intact. Hung it back on its nail. It fell again as soon as she turned away. She left it on the floor. The deadbolt was still thrown. She checked the window, found it locked again though she hadn't touched it. Paint sealed the frame. Her knuckles throbbed where she'd forced the latch. When she looked at them, the skin was unbroken. No blood. No bruise forming. Margaret gathered the cards, slow and methodical. Shuffled them once. Twice. They felt wrong in her hands, too thick, too slick. She fanned them out. All fifty-two accounted for, but the faces were backwards. Kings faced left instead of right. Queens held their flowers in the wrong hands. She put the cards in her purse. The apartment key lay on the table where she'd set it. New, brass, catching light from the window. Margaret picked it up, held it close. The teeth were different from how she remembered. Sharper. Cut at angles that didn't match the lock she'd watched the locksmith open. Outside, the church bells rang. Not Saturday bells. These were wrong, discordant, twelve strikes when it should have been nine. Margaret counted them anyway. Got to seventeen before they stopped.

Chapter

Three

written by Iris Beddoe

The key bit her palm. Margaret opened her hand. The brass sat there, ordinary and still. No heat. No sharpness. Just metal pressed into skin long enough to leave an impression. She put it in her pocket and left the apartment. The hallway was yellow. Had always been yellow, the color of old teeth, the paint thick enough to fill the cracks in the plaster. Six doors: three on each side. 6A across from 6B. Her apartment and Mrs. Chen's apartment, facing each other like they'd been doing for eleven years. Except Margaret's door was open. Not wide. Just enough to show the dark inside. She hadn't left it open. Never left it open. The super had lectured the whole floor about it after someone's cat got loose last winter, wound up in the basement with the broken boiler and the mice. Margaret crossed the hall in three steps. Put her hand on 6A's doorknob. Wrong. The knob was glass. Cut glass, faceted, the kind that belonged in old houses with servants and calling cards. Her knob was brass. Scratched brass that stuck in humid weather. She pushed the door wider. Inside was her apartment. Her green couch with the cigarette burn on the left armrest, from before she quit. Her television on its wheeled cart. Her bookshelf with the broken middle shelf that sagged under the weight of her father's watch-repair manuals. But the walls were salmon. Margaret stepped inside. The door swung shut behind her without sound. The kitchen was wrong too. Her kitchen had white

counters, chipped Formica with a brown burn mark where she'd set a hot pan in 1992. These counters were yellow tile. The grout needed cleaning. And there, on the small table by the window: two teacups. The ones with painted birds. She'd just put those away. In 6B. Thirty seconds ago. The cards lay scattered on the floor. The same cards from her purse. Margaret checked her purse. The cards were still there. She pulled them out, set them on the table next to the other deck. Identical. Down to the backwards kings. She picked up one of the teacups. Still warm. Jasmine scent rising with the steam. The window showed the courtyard. Mr. Kaminski's rug still hung on the railing. A woman stood beneath it, looking up. Young, maybe thirty. Dark hair pulled back. She wore a red coat, unbuttoned despite the cold. Margaret didn't recognize her. The woman looked up at the window. Directly at Margaret. Held her gaze for three seconds, four. Then turned and walked toward the building's entrance. Footsteps in the stairwell. Margaret moved to her apartment door, the one that led to the hallway. Opened it. The woman in the red coat stood outside 6B. She had a key in her hand. Not brass. Silver. "Excuse me," Margaret said. The woman didn't turn. Slid her key into the lock. It turned smooth as water. "That's not your apartment." The woman stepped inside 6B. The door closed. The deadbolt slid home from the inside, loud enough to hear. Margaret crossed the hall. Knocked. No answer. Knocked harder. "Mrs. Chen is dead," Margaret said to the door. "That apartment's supposed to be sealed." The peephole darkened. Someone looking out. Margaret pressed closer. "I was just in there. I had tea. I made two cups and I was just in there." The peephole went light again. Margaret tried the knob. Locked. She pulled out the brass key, the one the locksmith had given her. Put it in the lock. It turned. The door opened six inches and caught on the chain. Margaret hadn't seen a chain when she was inside. Mrs. Chen's door hadn't had a chain. Through the gap: the apartment was dark. No salmon walls. No window light. Just dark that seemed to pull at her eyes, make them water. "Hello?" Her voice went in and didn't come back. She pushed harder. The chain held. Brass, thick links. Something moved in the dark. Not walking. Sliding.

Margaret let go of the door. It swung shut, slow. The deadbolt turned itself. She stood in the hallway, breathing through her mouth. The church bells started again. Twenty strikes. Twenty-five. Behind her, in her own apartment, the radiator clanked. Then Mrs. Chen's voice: "Your turn to deal, Margaret."

Chapter

Four

written by Sammy Hall

Margaret turned. The door to 6A was still open. The apartment beyond wasn't dark anymore. Yellow light fell across the threshold, warm as egg yolks, and somewhere inside the radiator was still making noise. Not clanking now. Humming. A satisfied sound, like a cat with a full belly. She didn't want to go back in. Every part of her body was screaming at her to take the stairs, walk right past Mr. Kaminski's rug and out to the street where the buses ran and people bought newspapers and time went the direction it was supposed to. But Mrs. Chen's voice had come from inside her apartment. Mrs. Chen, who'd been dead three weeks. Or four. Who Margaret had helped pack up, whose niece in Toledo had taken the good dishes and left the bird cups because they were chipped. Margaret went in. The teacups were still on the table. Both empty now. The cards were laid out for gin rummy, ten cards each, the rest in a neat pile for drawing. Someone had dealt while Margaret was in the hallway. Someone had been here. "Mrs. Chen?" The radiator went quiet. Margaret walked through her apartment, room to room, touching the walls to make sure they were solid. Her bedroom: the bed was made. She never made her bed. The quilt was tucked hospital-tight, and on the pillow sat a watch. Her father's watch, the one with the cracked face and the second hand that didn't move anymore. She'd pawned that watch in 1994 to pay for her husband's funeral flowers. She picked it up. The

second hand was moving. The bathroom mirror was fogged like someone had just showered. Margaret wiped it with her sleeve. Her reflection looked back, but the woman in the mirror had longer hair. Gray instead of the white Margaret's had gone three years ago. And she was smiling. Margaret wasn't smiling. She left the bathroom fast, went back to the living room. Sat at the table. Looked at the cards. Her hand was good. Three sevens, a run of spades from four to eight. She could knock in two draws if she was lucky. "I'm not playing," she said to the empty room. The top card on the pile flipped itself over. Nine of clubs. Margaret's hand reached out without her permission and took it. Discarded the four of spades. Her fingers moved like they belonged to someone else, someone who knew what they were doing. Someone who'd played this game every Thursday for eleven years and knew exactly how Mrs. Chen liked to run her straights. A card slid out from the deck on its own. The hand across from Margaret's, the invisible one, was drawing. "This isn't real." Margaret stood up. The chair scraped. "You're not here." The window rattled. Not wind. Something hitting the glass from outside. Margaret looked. The woman in the red coat stood in the courtyard again, but she was closer now, right up against the building. Too close. If Margaret went to the window and looked straight down, she'd be standing directly below. The woman raised her arm and threw something. A rock, maybe. It hit the window hard enough to make Margaret step back. The glass didn't crack. The woman threw again. This time Margaret saw what it was: a key. Silver, just like the one she'd used to open 6B. It bounced off the glass and fell. The woman bent, picked it up, threw it again. Over and over, the same motion. The key hitting the window with a sound like knuckles on wood. Behind Margaret, cards shuffled themselves. She turned. The deck was splitting, riffing, coming back together in a perfect bridge. Mrs. Chen had taught her that shuffle. Had spent three Thursdays showing her the right way to bend the cards, how much pressure to use. The deck cut itself into two piles. Margaret grabbed her purse. The cards she'd put in there were gone. She checked every pocket, every fold. Nothing. Just her wallet, her

apartment key, a roll of wintergreen Life Savers with two left. The door to the hallway was closed. She didn't remember closing it. She opened it. The hallway was different. Longer. More doors, maybe eight on each side now, all of them numbered 6B. Every single one. And at the far end, where the stairwell should be, stood the woman in the red coat. She was inside now. And she was holding up a photograph, turning it so Margaret could see. The woman in the picture was Margaret. The dog at her feet was black and white, some kind of terrier. Margaret had never owned a dog in her life.

Chapter

Five

written by Margot Vail

Margaret closed the door. The photograph didn't make sense. She sat on the green couch with the cigarette burn and tried to make it make sense anyway. Dogs required walking. She had a hip that went out in cold weather. Dogs required food bought on schedules. Her pension came once a month and some months it didn't stretch. The door opened. Margaret hadn't touched it. The woman in the red coat stood in the hallway that was too long, still holding the photograph. Up close her face was ordinary. Round cheeks. A small scar through one eyebrow. Thirty, maybe thirty-five. "You're in the wrong apartment," the woman said. "This is 6A. I've lived here eleven years." "No." The woman stepped inside. Her shoes were wet. They left prints on the carpet, dark and clean-edged. "You lived in 6B. You moved last month after Mrs. Chen died. Don't you remember signing the lease?" Margaret's purse sat on the coffee table. She hadn't put it there. Inside, underneath the Life Savers, was a folded paper. Lease agreement. Her signature at the bottom, dated November 3rd. Today was November 27th. Or it had been when she woke up. "I never signed this." "You did. I was there. I'm Delia Ramos. Building manager." The woman pulled out a wallet, showed an ID card. The name matched. The address was this building, apartment 1A. "You came to the office. You said you couldn't stay in 6A anymore, too many memories of your husband. You wanted Mrs. Chen's place

because it faced the courtyard." Margaret's husband had died in 1994. Twenty-nine years ago. She'd stopped having memories that hurt sometime around 2003. "Mrs. Chen's niece took the apartment. The one in Toledo." "Mrs. Chen didn't have a niece." Delia set the photograph on the coffee table, face up. "She had a dog. Boomer. You took him when she went into hospice. Don't you remember? You've had him for six months." The dog in the photograph had white markings on its chest shaped like a cloud. Margaret looked at the carpet. No dog hair. No water bowl by the kitchen. No smell of kibble or wet animal. "Where is he now?" "You tell me." Delia walked to the window. The courtyard below was empty. Mr. Kaminski's rug was gone. "You called me this morning. Said Boomer was missing. Said you'd let him out and he didn't come back. That's why I came up." The phone on the side table was off the hook. Margaret didn't remember using the phone. She picked it up. Dial tone. "What time did I call?" "Seven forty-five. You were crying." Delia turned from the window. "You said you'd looked everywhere. Asked if I'd seen him in the hallway." Margaret checked her father's watch. The one that had been on her pillow, that she'd pawned in 1994. It read 9:22. The second hand moved smooth as water. "I don't cry." "You did this morning." The teacups were still on the table. Margaret picked one up, looked inside. Tea leaves stuck to the bottom in a pattern like a tree. Mrs. Chen used to read them, said her grandmother had taught her. Said the leaves knew things if you looked right. "If I took Mrs. Chen's dog, where's my furniture? The couch was in 6A. The television. The bookshelf." "You moved it all across the hall. Last month. The super helped." Delia walked to the bedroom, came back. "Your bed's in there. Your clothes in the closet. The quilt your mother made." Margaret's mother had never quilted. Worked at a dry cleaner's until the chemicals took her lungs. She stood. Her hip didn't hurt. It always hurt when she stood too fast. "I'm going downstairs." "To look for Boomer?" "To talk to the super. To Mr. Kaminski. To someone who'll tell me what day it is." Delia moved to the door, blocking it. Not aggressive. Just there. "It's Saturday, November 27th. You moved into 6B on November 3rd.

Mrs. Chen died October 8th. You adopted Boomer on October 10th." She pulled out her phone, showed Margaret a photo. The same dog. The same cloud-shaped markings. Margaret holding him, smiling. Wearing a sweater Margaret didn't own. "That's not me." "Look again." Margaret looked. The woman in the photo had her face. Her hands. The ring her husband had given her in 1966, the one she'd stopped wearing after he died. She was wearing it now. On her left hand. The band warm against her skin.

Chapter

Six

written by typewriter_tom

Margaret pulled the ring off. The band left no mark. Her finger underneath was pale and smooth, like the ring had never been there at all. She put it on the coffee table next to the photograph. "I need you to leave." Delia didn't move. "Mrs. Reeves. Margaret. I know this is confusing." "Get out of my apartment." "This isn't your apartment. Not the one you remember." Margaret walked past her, into the bedroom. Opened the closet. Her clothes hung there. The brown cardigan with the pills on the sleeves. The black pants she wore to church. But also: a red dress she'd never bought. A coat with toggles. Three pairs of shoes she didn't recognize. She turned to the nightstand. Pulled open the drawer. Inside: a dog collar. Blue nylon with a metal tag. She lifted it. The tag read BOOMER in stamped letters. Below that: an address. This building. Apartment 6B. "You kept his collar in there," Delia said from the doorway. "You told me you liked hearing the tags jingle when you opened the drawer. Reminded you he was real." Margaret dropped the collar. It hit the floor with a sound like small bells. "What did you do to me?" "I didn't do anything. You moved apartments. You took the dog. That's what happened." "Show me the security deposit. The check I wrote." Delia pulled out her phone again. Scrolled. Turned it around. A photo of a check. Margaret's name printed at the top. Her signature at the bottom. Six hundred dollars made out to Riverside Property

Management. Dated November 3rd. The handwriting was hers. The account number matched the one she'd had since 1981. Margaret sat on the bed. The quilt underneath her was soft. Worn thin in places. Her mother had never made it, but someone had. The stitches were small and even. A pattern of stars. "Where's Mrs. Chen buried?" "Resurrection Cemetery. North section." "I want to see the grave." "Why?" "Because I helped pack her apartment. I was there when she died. I held her hand." Margaret looked up. "She told me she was scared. Asked me to make sure her dog went somewhere good." Delia's face changed. Something behind her eyes shifted. "What did you just say?" "Mrs. Chen was scared. At the end. She kept talking about her dog." "Mrs. Chen died in her sleep. The super found her in the morning." Delia sat on the bed next to Margaret. "There was no one with her." The radiator started up again. Not humming this time. Knocking. Three slow knocks, then silence. Margaret stood. Walked back to the living room. The teacups were gone from the table. The cards were gone. Just the photograph remained. Her and the dog. Her smile wide and real. She picked it up. Turned it over. Someone had written on the back in blue ink: First day together. He already loves you. The handwriting wasn't hers. The letters looped and connected, European-style. Mrs. Chen had written like that. Margaret had seen it every Thursday when they kept score. Mrs. Chen always wrote the numbers with that same careful slant. "Who gave you this photograph?" Delia took it, looked at the back. "You did. You showed it to me when you asked about putting in a dog door." "I never asked about a dog door." "You did. Last week. I said no because you're renting." The knocking came again. Louder. Not from the radiator now. From the door. Margaret opened it. The hallway was normal. Six doors, three on each side. Yellow walls. Broken elevator at the end. And standing outside 6A: the locksmith. Same kind eyes. Same weathered hands. "Morning," he said. "Got a call about a lock change. Apartment 6B." He held up a work order. "Tenant says the key isn't working right. Keeps opening the wrong door." Delia stood. "I didn't call you." "Call came in at eight-fifteen. Woman said her name was Margaret Reeves." He

checked the paper. "Said she needed it done today. Emergency rate." Margaret looked at Delia. Delia looked at Margaret. "I'm Margaret Reeves." "I know," the locksmith said. He smiled, crinkles at his eyes. "You paid me yesterday to change the lock on 6B. Don't you remember?"

Chapter

Seven

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One could not remember what one had not done. Margaret opened her mouth to state this plainly, but Delia spoke first. "She didn't call you yesterday. I would have the record." The locksmith consulted his work order. "Nine-forty-five a.m., November 26th. Lady paid cash. Eighty-five dollars, exact change. I remember because she counted it out three times before she handed it over." He looked at Margaret with those kind eyes. "You were real particular about the count." Margaret had counted out eighty-five dollars that morning. This morning. Before the locksmith arrived the first time. Or had that been yesterday? The watch on her wrist read 9:47. The second hand continued its smooth progression. No stuttering. No stopping. "Show me your records," Delia said. The locksmith pulled a small notebook from his shirt pocket. Flipped through pages covered in cramped handwriting. Found the entry. Held it out. Margaret looked. The date read November 26th. Below that: Apt 6B, Riverside Arms. Key recut. M. Reeves. \$85 cash. "What did I say to you?" Margaret asked. "Yesterday, when I paid you." "You said you'd lived there eleven years. I asked if you were sure it was your place, and you said you were." He put the notebook away. "Then you waited in the hallway until I finished. Didn't go inside until I left." That was precisely what Margaret had done. This morning. Every detail matched except the date. "Let me see that work order," Delia said. The locksmith handed it

over. Delia examined it, turned it over, held it up to the light from the window at the end of the hall. "This is today's date. November 27th." "Right. Second call came in this morning." The locksmith took the paper back. "Same lady. Same problem. Said the key wasn't working." The brass key sat heavy in Margaret's pocket. She pulled it out. "Did I say which key?" "The one I made yesterday. Said it opened 6A instead of 6B. Asked if I'd mixed up the blanks." He shook his head. "I don't mix up blanks. Been doing this thirty-two years." Margaret looked at 6A's door. Closed. She had left it open when she stepped into the hallway to speak with Delia. One did not simply forget closing doors. "May I try something?" she asked. The locksmith stepped aside. Margaret put the brass key into 6A's lock. Turned it. The lock opened. She removed the key, crossed the hall, inserted it into 6B's lock. The lock opened. Delia made a small sound. Not quite a word. "Same key opens both," Margaret said. "That's not possible," the locksmith said. But he took the key from her, examined it. Tried it himself in both locks. Both opened. "I'll be damned." "The locks are different," Delia said. "6A's been here since the building was renovated in 2005. 6B still has the original from 1987." Margaret knew this. Mrs. Chen had complained about her old lock for years. Said it stuck in winter. "Someone changed them," the locksmith said. "Someone rekeyed both to match." "When?" Delia's voice had gone sharp. "I would know if work was done." The locksmith walked to 6B's door. Examined the lock housing. Ran his finger around the plate. "This was installed recently. See the fresh scratches? Metal's still bright where the screws went in." He pulled out a small tool, began removing the plate. Margaret watched his hands work. The same gentle precision she had observed before. Or would observe tomorrow. Or had observed yesterday. The plate came free. Behind it, the lock cylinder gleamed. New brass, unmarred. "I put this in," the locksmith said slowly. "I recognize my own work. But I installed it in 6A yesterday. I'm certain." Delia took out her phone. Pressed buttons. Held it to her ear. "Martin? It's Delia. I need you to come up to the sixth floor." A pause. "Now, please." She lowered the phone. Looked at Margaret. "The super will

have records of any work orders. If someone changed these locks, he'll know." Footsteps sounded in the stairwell. Heavy boots on concrete. But they were descending, not ascending. Moving away. "Martin?" Delia called toward the stairwell. The footsteps stopped. Then started again. Still descending. Margaret walked to where the hallway ended. Looked down through the metal railing. A man in coveralls was walking down the stairs. On his back, in yellow letters: RIVERSIDE MAINTENANCE. On the back of his head, she observed, was a bandage. White gauze taped over what appeared to be a substantial wound. The man reached the fifth-floor landing. Turned. It was Mr. Kaminski. He looked up at Margaret and smiled. Then he continued down the stairs, and the building went dark.

Chapter

Eight

written by Dan Okafor

The lights came back on before Margaret could decide whether to scream. Mr. Kaminski was gone. The stairwell below was empty. Delia stood beside her at the railing, breathing hard through her nose like someone trying not to be sick. "He doesn't work here," Delia said. "Mr. Kaminski's a tenant." The locksmith was packing his tools. His hands shook just enough that the screwdriver missed the loop on his belt twice before he got it clipped. "I think I'm done for today." "You can't leave," Delia said. But he could. He did. Walked to the stairwell, paused, looked down, then took the stairs faster than a man his age should have been able to move. Margaret listened to his footsteps fade. Counted flights. He made it to three before the sound cut out entirely, no lobby door, no street noise, just silence. "We should call the police," Delia said. "And tell them what?" Margaret turned back to the two open doors. "That an apartment has the wrong photographs? That a dead woman's dog exists in a lease I don't remember signing?" Delia's phone rang. She looked at the screen, didn't answer. It rang four more times, then stopped. Immediately started again. Margaret walked into 6B. The apartment was dark now, curtains drawn, though she had left them open. She found the light switch. Flipped it. Nothing happened. She tried again. The switch clicked up and down with no result. Behind her, Delia said, "Don't go in there." Margaret went in anyway. Her eyes adjusted. The

salmon walls were visible in the grey light that came under the curtains. The furniture was where it should be: Mrs. Chen's chair, Mrs. Chen's table, Mrs. Chen's television. But on the table now, arranged in a neat row, were seven dog collars. She picked up the first one. Blue nylon. The tag read BOOMER. The second collar was red leather, worn soft. The tag read BOOMER. The third was green, the fourth black, the fifth blue again. All seven tags said the same name. All seven had the same address: this building, apartment 6B. "Margaret." Delia stood in the doorway. "We need to leave." "Mrs. Chen had the dog for six years. She got him after her husband died." Margaret set down the collars. "She told me his name while we played cards. She showed me pictures." "What was his name?" Margaret tried to remember. Thursday afternoons, gin rummy, Mrs. Chen talking about her life while she shuffled. The dog came up often. He slept on her bed. He liked chicken. He barked at the radiator. She could not remember his name. "It wasn't Boomer," Margaret said. Delia's phone rang again. This time she answered. "Martin, where are you?" A pause. "No, I'm on six. I called you five minutes ago." Another pause. Her face changed. "Say that again." She lowered the phone. "He says he's been in the basement all morning. Says he never got a call from me." She looked at the screen. "I have three missed calls from him. All from twenty minutes ago. I was standing right here. The phone never rang." Margaret walked to the window. Drew back the curtain. The courtyard below was empty. No rug, no Mr. Kaminski, no woman in a red coat. But there, on the ground directly beneath the window: a small shape. Black and white. Not moving. "Call an ambulance," Margaret said. Delia came to the window. Looked down. Went pale. "Is that, " "Call them." Delia dialed. Waited. "It's ringing." She waited longer. "It's just ringing." Margaret left 6B. Crossed to 6A. The apartment was exactly as she had left it: green couch, cigarette burn, her father's watch on the coffee table. The photograph of her and the dog was gone. In its place sat a single playing card, face up. The Queen of Hearts. But the queen's face was wrong. It was Margaret's face. And she was not smiling. The radiator knocked three times. From the

courtyard below, a dog barked. Margaret looked at Delia. "Take me downstairs." "We should wait for, " "There's no ambulance coming." Margaret picked up the card. Turned it over. On the back, in Mrs. Chen's handwriting: Your turn to deal. "Take me down to the courtyard," Margaret said. "I want to see the dog."

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/27?t=MlYJ3rtl7pqBowHZxZ7fzb9_8PD
I6NDm