

MYSTERY



The Building Keeps Better Records

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

One	Sammy Hall
Two	rpenguin
Three	Dario Selo
Four	Priya Nair
Five	Margot Vail
Six	jmarsh
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Chapter

One

written by Sammy Hall

I never meant to end up in someone else's life, but that's what happens when you're running late, your phone's dead, and the hallway lights in a pre-war building decide to flicker like they're auditioning for a horror movie. The address was 4B. I was sure of it. Terry had texted it three times because he knows I'm terrible with details, and I'd screenshotted it before my battery gave up the ghost. Fourth floor, apartment B. I'd climbed the stairs (the elevator had an OUT OF ORDER sign that looked older than me), counted the floors twice, and stood in front of a door with a tarnished brass B screwed slightly crooked into the wood. I knocked. Nothing. Knocked again, louder this time, because Terry's also partly deaf in one ear from that firecracker incident in college. Still nothing. But I could hear music inside, something instrumental and weird, like a film score for a movie about insects. The knob turned when I tried it. Unlocked. Look, I'm not an idiot. I know you don't just walk into unlocked apartments in New York City. But Terry and I go back fifteen years, and he's exactly the kind of person who'd leave his door open because he was in the middle of something and forgot basic security exists. Also, I'd taken two trains and a bus to get there, my left shoe had a blister situation happening, and I really, really needed to pee. "Terry?" I pushed the door open. "It's me. Your door was open, man. You're gonna get robbed." The apartment was dark except for this pale

blue light coming from somewhere deeper inside, and it smelled wrong. Not bad wrong, just... wrong. Like copper and old paper and something faintly sweet I couldn't place. The music was louder now, and I realized it wasn't coming from speakers. It sounded live, like someone was playing it in real-time, but there was no one in the front room. The furniture was all wrong too. Terry's a minimalist, one of those guys who owns exactly one chair and thinks that's a personality. This place had stuff everywhere: stacks of books, weird sculptures made of what looked like wire and glass, plants I didn't recognize growing in containers that weren't quite pots. And the blue light was coming from them. The plants. They were glowing. "Terry, this better not be one of your art projects." I walked further in because apparently I'd decided tonight was the night I ignored every instinct for self-preservation I'd ever had. The music got more complex, layered, like multiple instruments playing patterns that shouldn't fit together but somehow did. There was a hallway to my left, and the blue light was stronger there, pulsing slightly, and that's when I saw the photographs. They were hung in a line along the wall, maybe a dozen of them, all in identical frames. Black and white photos of people I didn't know in places I didn't recognize. Except. Except in the corner of each one, just barely visible, there was a figure. The same figure. Blurred, like they'd moved right as the shutter clicked, but definitely the same person in every shot. Watching. And in the last photograph, the one closest to where the hallway turned, the figure wasn't blurred at all. It was me. Not someone who looked like me. Me. Same jacket I was wearing right now, same stupid haircut I'd gotten last week, same expression I make when I'm trying to figure out if I'm being pranked. The photo looked old though, printed on that thick paper they don't really use anymore, edges yellowed with age. I should have left. I should have backed right out of there and called someone, anyone, except my phone was dead and my legs had apparently decided to stop taking orders from my brain because I kept walking, following the blue light deeper into the apartment, toward a door at the end of the hall that

was open just enough to see something moving inside. The music stopped. In the silence, I heard breathing that wasn't mine.

Chapter

Two

written by rpenguin

Chapter 2

The breathing had a rhythm to it that didn't match mine, which I knew because I'd stopped breathing entirely somewhere around the second photograph and hadn't started again.

I stood in that hallway for what felt like a geologically significant amount of time. The blue light from the plants threw everything into this underwater quality, like the shadows were liquid, like the walls were slightly further away than they should have been. My left foot throbbed. The blister had opinions about all of this.

The thing about fear, real fear, not movie fear, is that it doesn't make you dramatic. It makes you stupid and very still. I wasn't thinking I must flee this cursed place. I was thinking I can't remember if I locked my own apartment this morning and Terry owes me so much money for the time I helped him move and, with genuine urgency, I still really need to pee.

"Hello."

I didn't say it. It came from behind the door.

A woman's voice. Not threatening, exactly, but not not threatening either. The kind of voice that's very carefully been made to sound calm, the way you talk to something you're not sure is housebroken.

"The door behind you locks from the inside," she said. "In case you were considering leaving. Which you should be."

I turned around. The front door was closed. I hadn't heard it close. There was, as she'd mentioned, a lock. A deadbolt that looked newer than everything else in the apartment by about forty years. Engaged.

"I wasn't going to lock you in," she added, reading something in my silence. "I'm telling you that you should lock it. There's a difference."

"Who's out there?" I asked. Which was, objectively, a strange question to ask about the hallway I'd just come from. But something in the way she'd said it made me feel like the answer mattered.

"I don't know yet. That's the problem."

The door at the end of the hall swung open.

She was maybe sixty, maybe less, in the way that some people carry age unevenly. Her hands looked older than her face, her eyes looked older than everything. She was wearing what I can only describe as a working outfit, the kind of clothes you put on when you're doing something that matters and can't worry about the clothes. Dark, practical, paint-stained or maybe something-else-stained. She was holding a notebook pressed against her chest with one arm, and she was looking at me the way I imagine ornithologists look at a bird that's shown up somewhere it has no business being.

"You're not supposed to be here until Thursday," she said.

"I'm not supposed to be here at all. I'm looking for my friend Terry. 4B. This is 4B."

"This is 4B," she agreed. "It's also not where your friend Terry lives."

"He texted me..."

"He texted you an address. Buildings change." She said it the way you'd say the sky is blue, a fact about the world that predated argument. "This building has been 4B since 1961. Before that it was something else. The numbering doesn't always agree with itself."

I had no idea what that meant. She didn't seem interested in clarifying.

"The photograph," I said, because apparently my mouth had also stopped consulting my brain. "In the hall. That's me."

She glanced at the row of frames without surprise, without really looking at them, the way you glance at furniture you've stopped seeing. "I know."

"That paper's old. That photo is old. I'm twenty-nine. I got this jacket in March."

"Yes."

"That's not a small thing."

"No," she said. "It isn't." She tilted her head, studying me with that ornithologist focus, and then something shifted in her expression. Not softer, exactly, but resigned. The look of someone who's had a plan interrupted by reality and is now recalculating. "What's your name?"

I told her.

She wrote it in the notebook without looking down, which bothered me more than it should have.

"Are the plants supposed to glow?" I asked.

"They glow when something enters the threshold that's been here before." She paused. "Or before it happened. The tense gets slippery."

The blue light pulsed once, slow, like a heartbeat resting between efforts.

"I need to call my friend," I said. "My phone is dead. Can I..."

Chapter

Three

written by Dario Selo

No phone calls," she said, and the finality of it was less like a rule and more like a description of physics. She'd already turned away, moving back into the room she'd emerged from, and I was left standing in the hallway with the decision of whether to follow or remain among the photographs of myself, which felt like choosing between two kinds of being trapped. I followed. The room was smaller than I expected, which is to say it contained more than I would have thought possible in the space available. There were filing cabinets along one wall, the kind with the old pull-drawers that stick, and they were covered in papers held down by objects I couldn't immediately categorize: stones with symbols carved into them, a compass with a cracked face, several photographs pinned beneath a brass paperweight shaped like a key. The desk in the corner held a lamp with a green shade, the sort my grandmother had owned, and under its light lay a map. Not a street map. A building map, I realized as I stepped closer, drawn by hand in careful ink. Multiple versions of 4B, overlaid on top of each other, some marked with dates, some with X's in different locations. "What is this?" I asked, though the question felt inadequate to the situation, like asking what color the sky is while standing inside a hurricane. She didn't answer immediately. She was pulling something from one of the filing cabinets, a folder thick enough to require both hands, and when she set it on the desk the dust

that rose from it caught the lamplight in a way that made me consider whether I was actually seeing it or whether my brain had simply decided that dust motes ascending would be a reasonable metaphor for my confusion. "Before you ask why I can't explain," she said, opening the folder without looking at me, "understand that I've spent the last eleven years learning that some things can't be explained because the language we have for explanation assumes a consistent present. What's happening in 4B doesn't have that luxury." She pulled out a photograph and placed it face-up on the desk. It was in color, recent enough that the deterioration was just beginning, and it showed a man who looked almost exactly like someone I'd seen in one of the hallway frames, except older, except dead. There was no ambiguity about this. "This is David Rothstein. He moved into 4B in 1998. Or he will move into 4B. The tense is the part that gets slippery." "You said that already." "I know. I'm circling the idea because you need to catch it rather than me deliver it." She was watching me now, and I realized she was waiting for something specific, a moment of comprehension or refusal. "David disappeared in 2003. Or he will disappear in 2003. Police found nothing. The apartment was empty except for his furniture and his mail, which had stacked up for six weeks. His family gave up. His friends moved on. But the building kept counting days, and the plants kept responding, and every so often someone would show up at the door with a key that didn't belong to them, trying to reach someone named Terry or Sarah or James, and I would have to make a decision about whether to lock them in." "You lock people in." "I prevent them from leaving before they understand something about their own continuity that they've lost." She paused, and I could see her rewording in real time, dissatisfied with the phrasing even as she spoke it. "I keep them from going back to lives that aren't available anymore. There's an ethical difference, though I admit the distinction probably seems theoretical when you're on the inside of a locked deadbolt." The photograph of David Rothstein stared upward from the desk, his eyes aimed at a moment we'd already passed through. "How many?" I asked. "How many what?" "How many people? How

many have you locked in?" She looked at the filing cabinet, then back at me, and I watched her count something in her head that didn't have numbers attached to it yet. "You're the first one who arrived before Thursday," she said finally. "Which either means the timeline is destabilizing faster than it was, or your friend Terry had a reason to bring you here early." She opened the folder wider, and I could see more photographs, more names, more maps with different versions of the same room overlaid in fading ink. "So here's the question I need answered before we proceed: Who told you the address?"

Chapter

Four

written by Priya Nair

Terry," I said, and then immediately hated myself for how small the word sounded in that room. She was waiting. Not patient exactly, but present in a way that suggested she'd extracted answers from worse situations than this one. The green lamp threw her face into unforgiving detail: the lines around her mouth, the scar tissue on her left temple, eyes that had learned to see things other people couldn't afford to notice. "Terry texted me the address. Three times. I showed you the screenshot already, except my phone's dead so I can't actually show you anything." I was talking too fast now, the way you do when you're aware you're being disbelieved and are trying to outrun the moment it becomes official. "He said to meet him at 4B on Thursday. He said it was important. He said to bring the thing we found." "What thing?" "I don't have it. He was supposed to bring it." She closed the folder without looking away from me, which was somehow worse than if she'd examined it. "Describe it." "I can't. He was weird about it. Said he'd explain when I got there. We were supposed to meet at the apartment, and then he'd tell me what it was and why we needed it." I could feel my voice getting higher, the pitch of someone who's realized they've walked into a conversation already in progress and has no way to catch up. "This is insane. You know that, right? You're talking about time not working and people disappearing and you're asking me about some

thing I've never seen while you keep me locked in a building that might not even be real." "The building is real," she said. "Everything in it is real. The problem is that reality isn't consistent here, and your friend Terry knew that before he sent you." She moved to the filing cabinet and pulled out another folder, older than the first one, the cardboard warped and stained. "David Rothstein wasn't the first person to disappear. He was the third." She opened it. More photographs. More maps. A pattern emerging that I couldn't quite see the shape of yet, like one of those Magic Eye pictures where you have to go unfocused to understand what you're looking at. "1988. 1992. 2003. 2007. 2011. 2015." She was pointing at dates written in the margins, some in the same careful handwriting as the maps, some in different hands entirely, like multiple people had been cataloging this same impossible thing. "Every four years, sometimes five. A resident disappears. Or arrives early. Or both. The apartment stays the same. The building counts down to something." "Counts down to what?" "That's what I need to know." She turned back to me, and I realized she looked tired in a way that had nothing to do with sleep. "Your friend Terry has been trying to figure it out since 2003. He's been sending people here. Testing variables. Seeing if the pattern changes." "Terry disappeared in 2003?" "No," she said. "That was David. Terry was David's neighbor. He's been helping me since then, which means he knows the rules, which means he wouldn't send you early unless something had changed." She was moving now, pulling drawers open, scanning papers with the focus of someone searching for a very specific problem in a very large pile of information. "The thing you're supposed to bring. I need to know what it is. Because if you're the variable he changed, then it's the only reason you're here." A sound came from somewhere below us, muffled through the floorboards. A door slamming, maybe, or something heavier than that. Something deliberate. She stopped moving. Went completely still in the way animals do when they sense something shifting in their territory. "That's not possible," she said quietly. "The lower levels don't open on Tuesdays." "It's Wednesday," I offered, and watched her expression

shift into something between calculation and genuine concern. She moved to the desk and pulled open a drawer I hadn't noticed before, reaching past papers and folders until her hand closed around something metallic. A key. Not an ornament. Something that had been used, something with weight. "What's your name again?" she asked, which was a strange question since she'd watched me say it maybe fifteen minutes ago. "Alex," I said. "All right, Alex." She turned the key over in her palm, studying it like it might tell her something about the future. "We have approximately three minutes before whoever's downstairs figures out which door opens first. And I need you to tell me exactly what your friend Terry said about the thing you're supposed to bring. Word for word.

Chapter

Five

written by Margot Vail

I opened my mouth. Closed it. The key in her hand caught the green lamplight and threw it back at me in a thin, sharp line, and I realized I was about to lie to a woman who'd clearly heard every possible variation of deception a human mouth could produce. "He said 'the ledger,'" I told her. "That's the word he used. He said, 'Bring the ledger from the box under my kitchen sink. Don't look at it. Don't read anything in it. Just bring it.'" The sound came again from below. Closer this time. Not a door. Footsteps on stairs. Heavy, deliberate, the kind of footsteps that belong to someone who knows exactly where they're going. She didn't react the way I expected. She didn't panic or move faster. She sat down at the desk, placed the key carefully beside the folder, and looked at me with something that might have been resignation or might have been confirmation of a hypothesis she'd been dreading. "How long have you known Terry?" she asked. "Fifteen years. Since college." "Has he always been the kind of person who keeps careful records?" The footsteps stopped. Not at a door. At the stairs themselves. Whoever it was had paused to listen, and I realized we were all doing the same thing now: listening to each other listen. "Yes," I said, because it was true. Terry kept receipts from 1997. He had a spreadsheet of every book he'd ever owned. "He's meticulous. Obsessive about it." "Then the ledger isn't a ledger at all," she said quietly. "It's a catalog. It's whatever he's been

documenting about this place since 2003." She stood and moved to the filing cabinet, pulled open the bottom drawer, and withdrew a metal box roughly the size of a shoebox. Inside it were papers in Terry's handwriting. I recognized the loops of his letters, the particular slant he made whenever he was annotating rather than composing. Dates. Times. Names. Descriptions of rooms that didn't match the apartment I'd walked through. "He's been here," I said. "Multiple times." "He lives here," she corrected. "Or he will live here. Or he did, depending on when you're asking. He moved into 3B in 2007 after David disappeared. He's been mapping the building's behavior ever since." The footsteps resumed. Up the stairs. Slower now, methodical, like someone counting steps to mark distance. "The ledger he told you to bring," she said, not looking up from the box, "is something you need to know he already has. Which means bringing it here isn't about documentation. It's about something else." She pulled out a single page from the bottom of the box. It was recent, the paper still crisp, the ink dark. At the top, in Terry's handwriting: "If Alex arrives before Thursday, the pattern has inverted. Read the list." Below that was a list of names. Seven of them. The first three I recognized from her filing cabinets: David Rothstein. Marcus Chen. Sarah Voss. The next two I didn't know. But the last two made me stop breathing again. My mother's name. Then mine. "This was written three weeks ago," she said. "Before you ever came here. Before you even knew about the address." The footsteps reached the third floor. I could hear a key in a lock, the sound of a door opening. Not our door. Another one. "What does 'the pattern has inverted' mean?" I asked. "It means that instead of the building selecting people at regular intervals, someone is selecting the building. Using it. Sending people in deliberately, not by accident." She folded the paper carefully and placed it back in the box. "It means your friend Terry has been running an experiment, and you're not a subject of observation. You're part of the mechanism." The other door closed. Footsteps moved along the hallway toward us. Deliberate. Certain. She locked the filing cabinet, locked the desk drawer, picked up the key again and held it out to me. "There's a

service stairwell behind the bookcase in the back room," she said. "It goes down, not up. The person in the hallway is going up. You need to move." "What about you?" "I need to find out what Terry actually sent you here to do." She gestured toward the hallway. "And I can't do that if you're here. So move." The footsteps stopped directly outside the door. A knock. Three taps. Precise. "Open up," a man's voice said. "I'm here about the ledger."

Chapter

Six

written by jmarsh

The voice came from beyond the door with the authority of someone accustomed to doors opening at his command, and in that suspended instant before the woman moved, I understood that the mechanism Terry had constructed had more than two parts, that I was not merely a variable in someone else's equation but a catalyst for forces already in motion, already descending through the building's vertebrate architecture with purpose I could not yet name. "Get," the woman said, and the word carried no urgency, only instruction, the tone one might use in directing a piece on a chessboard. She was already moving toward the door, her body positioned between me and the sound of knuckles against wood. I clutched the key she'd pressed into my palm. It was warm, which seemed impossible given that it had been lying on a desk moments before, and its weight felt disproportionate to its size, as though it contained density beyond mere metal. The knock came again, sharper this time. "The service stairwell," the woman repeated, not turning around. "Behind the bookcase. Move now or I can't help you, and frankly, I'm not certain I want to anymore." I backed toward the hallway, watching her approach the door with the gait of someone walking toward something inevitable, something she'd calculated and recalculated across a decade of solitude in this apartment that was not quite an apartment. Behind me, the hallway stretched toward that back

room she'd mentioned, toward whatever mechanism of escape she'd preserved in the margins of this place. The plants lining the passage had stopped their pulsing. They were fully luminescent now, a steady blue that cast no shadows, which troubled me in ways I couldn't articulate. The woman reached for the deadbolt. I turned and ran. The back room was smaller than the main office, cluttered in the way spaces become when they serve utility rather than purpose. Metal shelves held boxes labeled in dates and initials. A cot, carefully made. A small desk with a handwritten log bound in cloth. And along the far wall, what appeared to be an ordinary bookcase, pine wood, warped slightly at the base from moisture or age or the weight of whatever architectural impossibility it concealed. Behind me, the door to the office opened. The woman's voice carried down the hallway, steady, cordial even: "Mr. Voss. I wasn't expecting you until next month." The name struck something in me. I'd seen it in the filing cabinet: Sarah Voss. 2007. But Voss was also the name of the man's voice, wasn't it? The inflection suggested they knew each other. The inflection suggested this was not an intrusion but a transaction. I reached the bookcase and pulled. It didn't move. "The ledger," the man named Voss was saying, his voice carrying that peculiar acoustics of someone speaking through a partially opened door, "has become essential to our timeline. Terry indicated it would be here." "Terry," the woman replied, and I heard something in her tone shift, calcify into something harder, "makes promises he doesn't keep." The bookcase had no handle. I felt along its spine, my fingers catching on something that might have been a latch or might have been a seam. The key. Of course. There was a lock I hadn't noticed, small, brass, fitted into the wood at chest height. My hand trembled as I inserted it. The mechanism turned with barely any resistance, as though it had been oiled recently, regularly, by someone who anticipated this exact moment. The bookcase pivoted inward silently. Beyond it lay darkness and the smell of concrete and stagnant water, the smell of spaces beneath spaces, of the building's infrastructure revealed. A stairwell, yes, descending in a spiral that my eyes couldn't quite follow. The steps

were metal, bolted at irregular intervals, and they seemed to go down farther than any basement should reasonably extend beneath a Manhattan apartment building. "I understand your reluctance," Voss was saying now, and I heard the soft sound of footsteps on the office floor, heard the woman saying nothing in response, a silence that contained more negotiation than words could manage, "but the process has accelerated. The inversions are coming faster. Terry needs the ledger because he needs to adjust the calculations. And Alex needs to understand what they are." My name in a stranger's mouth. My name spoken with the certainty of someone who'd known I was here, who'd always known, who'd perhaps arranged the entire descent. I stood at the threshold of that dark stairwell, the key still warm in my grip, and I understood that ascending meant capture, that descending meant abandoning the woman to whatever arrangement Voss represented, that standing still meant becoming complicit in a choice I hadn't authorized. The office door was closing.

Chapter

Seven

written by Iris Beddoe

The office door was closing and I descended. Not a choice, really. The absence of better options dressed itself in the language of agency, and I took the stairs two at a time, my shoe catching on the third step down, the blister on my heel sending bright pain up my calf. The key remained clenched in my fist. Behind me, the bookcase swung shut with a soft click that sounded less like a door closing and more like a lock engaging. Permanent. The stairwell's walls were concrete, unpainted, sweating moisture that had nowhere to go. No windows. No electrical outlets. The light that allowed me to see came from nowhere I could identify, a general illumination that suggested the space itself was generating luminescence, the way the plants had. I kept descending. The spiral tightened. My breathing echoed off the walls in a rhythm that wasn't my breathing at all, and I realized I was hearing something else, something that had been waiting in the darkness for someone to arrive. A mechanical sound. Steady. Purposeful. Like a clock mechanism running beneath the city's actual clock, keeping time in a different timezone. The stairs ended at a landing. A door. Not locked. It opened onto a corridor that ran in both directions, disappearing into darkness that the ambient light refused to penetrate. The walls here were different. Older. The concrete was scored with marks that looked deliberate, carved rather than worn. Numbers, I realized as I stepped closer. Dates. 1988. 1992.

2003. 2007. 2011. 2015. And one more, fresh, the numerals still sharp: 2024. This year. This month, maybe. The mechanical sound was louder down here, closer. It came from the left, from deeper into the darkness, and I understood that I could either follow it or stand at this intersection forever, waiting for a choice that had already been made by people who'd mapped this space long before I knew its address. I went left. The corridor widened into something that deserved a different name. A chamber. The walls were lined with filing cabinets identical to the ones in the woman's office, but these stretched from floor to a ceiling I couldn't see. Thousands of them. Maybe tens of thousands. And in the center of the space, surrounded by a circle of tape marked in symbols I didn't recognize, stood a machine. It was nothing like I would have imagined a machine to be. No clear purpose. No obvious mechanics. It was constructed from parts that shouldn't fit together: watch components, brass piping, what looked like the interior of a clock combined with the circuitry of something more modern. It hummed. The humming was the sound I'd been hearing, the thing keeping time beneath the building. A man stood beside it. Not Voss. Not anyone I recognized. He was older, thin, wearing clothes from no particular decade. He was holding a clipboard and writing on it without looking down, as though he could feel the words into existence. "You have the key," he said. Not a question. He said it the way you'd confirm that someone had arrived at an appointment they'd made years ago. "I'm Gregory Reeves. I've been waiting for you to come down here since 2003." "That's not possible. I was twenty-three. I didn't even know Terry." "No," he agreed. "But the building did. The building knows everyone who will ever arrive. It begins tracking them before they know themselves." He gestured toward the machine with his clipboard. "What you're looking at is a registry. Every person who's come through 4B gets written into it. Not by us. By the space itself. The building documents its own inversions." "The woman upstairs said the pattern inverted. She said Terry was selecting people." "Both things are true," Reeves said. "The building inverts. Terry accelerates the inversions. He's trying to

collapse the cycle. Bring it all forward. He thinks if he can get everyone here at once, in the same moment, the building will have to choose. Either open permanently or seal itself." He returned to his clipboard, writing. "The ledger you were supposed to bring isn't documentation. It's a key. Like the one you're holding, except it opens the machine instead of doors." Behind me, the corridor echoed with footsteps. Voss descending. The mechanical sound from the machine changed pitch, shifted into something that sounded almost like speech. Almost like it was trying to say something and had been for twenty years, waiting for enough people to gather in one place to make the message coherent. "Here's what you need to understand," Reeves said, looking up finally, meeting my eyes with the clarity of someone who'd already accepted what was coming. "Terry didn't send you here to retrieve the ledger. He sent you here to write in it.

Chapter

Eight

written by inkwell_amy

The machine's pitch climbed higher, and I felt it in my teeth, in the base of my skull, a vibration that suggested the whole chamber was tuning itself to some frequency only it understood. Reeves was waiting for me to respond, his clipboard held at his chest like armor or evidence. "I'm not writing anything," I said. "You already are." He moved toward the machine with the careful gait of someone approaching something volatile. "Every choice you've made since you entered the building has been inscribed. Every hesitation. Every moment you decided to follow instead of flee. The machine records intention, not just action." The footsteps behind me stopped. Voss had reached the chamber's mouth. He was breathing hard from the descent, his suit jacket dark with sweat, and he was holding something in his right hand. Not a gun. A folder. Terry's handwriting visible on the spine. "The ledger," Voss said, holding it up. "The woman upstairs chose to relinquish it rather than let me take it from the office. Which suggests she understands something I'm still calculating." He stepped into the chamber's light. He was older than his voice had suggested, with the particular exhaustion of someone who'd spent years making the same decision repeatedly and had stopped believing in its necessity. "What did Reeves tell you?" "That I'm supposed to write in the machine." "Did he mention what happens if you do?" Reeves had resumed his writing, apparently unconcerned with

the conversation occurring ten feet away. The machine's humming changed again, settled into a rhythm that matched the mechanical clock sound from the stairwell, as though they were the same thing, the same impossible instrument running through different chambers of the building's architecture. "He said Terry's trying to collapse the cycle," I told Voss. "Make the building choose." "That's one version." Voss opened the folder. The ledger. I could see Terry's handwriting filling page after page, columns of dates and names and notations I couldn't read from this distance. "Another version is that the building already chose. In 1988. It selected David Rothstein. Selected the woman upstairs. Selected every person whose name appears in these filing cabinets. And it's been building toward a moment when all those selections converge in a single instant." "What moment?" "Now." Voss turned the folder around, showed me a page dated three weeks prior. It was written in Terry's hand, but the words were different from the careful documentation I'd glimpsed in the boxes upstairs. This was something else. A confession, maybe. Or an instruction. "Terry wrote this as a contingency. If the pattern accelerated past his ability to control it, if someone arrived before the designated date, he wanted a final option." He read: "If Alex comes before Thursday, it means the inversions have exceeded calculation. The ledger should be written into the machine. Not read. Not archived. Written directly into the mechanism. This will either close the cycle or infinite it. Either way, the building stops being a question and becomes an answer." The machine hummed louder. The filing cabinets lining the walls began to vibrate, subtle at first, then with increasing violence. Papers shifted inside them, making a sound like wind through a forest of documentation. Reeves looked up from his clipboard with something that might have been satisfaction. "He's been waiting for someone to arrive early," Reeves said. "Someone who wasn't part of the initial selection. Someone the building didn't anticipate. You're the anomaly. You're what breaks the pattern." "By writing in the ledger?" "By choosing to write in it or not to write in it. That choice. That's the thing the machine can't predict. The building has mapped

every decision made by every person it selected. But you were never selected. You arrived by accident, which means your choice isn't mapped. It's new." Voss was moving toward the machine, the folder still open in his hands. The mechanical sound from inside the device was approaching something like speech now, syllables that almost formed words, a voice trying to remember how to speak after decades of silence. "Terry spent twenty years building this moment," Voss said. "He thought if he could create an unpredictable variable, the building would have to reveal its true nature. Instead, what it reveals is that there is no true nature. There's only the machine. And it's hungry." I looked at the key in my hand. Warm. Still impossibly warm. The lock on the machine was brass, identical to the one on the bookcase, and I understood suddenly that they were the same lock, that the building had been constructed with this mechanism in mind, that everything since 1988 had been preparation for a moment when someone would stand in this chamber holding a key and a choice.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Sammy Hall

The thing about keys is they don't care which direction you turn them.

Priya Nair

The machine stopped humming the moment I realized I'd already written myself into it the second I walked through that door.

jmarsh

The building was always waiting to be read, and I was always the only person who could choose what language to write it in.

Iris Beddoe

The building had been waiting so long to be chosen that it forgot how to want anything else.

rpenguin

The key turned, which it shouldn't have

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

[https://relaywriters.com/read/29?t=JqtqZTRVvDIMGjmPoxRJFqhCgsD
0TYTA](https://relaywriters.com/read/29?t=JqtqZTRVvDIMGjmPoxRJFqhCgsD0TYTA)