



MAGIC

BORROWED DAYS

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	rpenguin
THREE	Cora Lindgren
FOUR	Olive Kassen
FIVE	typewriter_tom
SIX	Priya Nair
SEVEN	Colin McAteer
EIGHT	wordsbylena

Chapter

ONE

written by Lior Tannen

The milk had gone off again, though Sarah had only bought it yesterday. She poured it down the sink and watched the curdles spiral into the drain, trying not to think about how this was the third time this week. The refrigerator hummed its innocent hum. Her daughter Mira sat at the kitchen table, seven years old and solemn, drawing circles inside circles with a green crayon. She didn't look up when Sarah asked if she wanted cereal dry or toast instead. The circles got smaller as they spiraled inward, tighter and tighter until they met in a point that Mira colored solid black. "Toast," Mira said. Sarah put bread in the toaster. She had learned not to ask about the drawings anymore. The child psychologist they'd seen after David left had said it was normal, processing, adjustment. The psychologist had not seen the drawing Mira made the night before David's car went off the bridge: a car, a river, a moon with a disappointed face. Sarah had found it weeks later, folded in Mira's sock drawer. She'd burned it in the bathroom sink and told no one. The toast popped up. Sarah spread butter to the edges the way Mira liked, cut it diagonal, brought it to the table. Mira had started a new drawing. This one showed their house, except the door was in the wrong place. Or maybe it was a different door, one that had always been there but Sarah had somehow failed to notice. "We need to go to the library today," Mira said. She took a bite of toast, chewed carefully, swallowed. "Miss

Winters said." Sarah didn't remember Miss Winters, though she'd met all of Mira's teachers at back-to-school night. "Miss Winters from school?" "From the library." Mira drew a window next to the wrong door. "She said you'd forget, so I should remind you. We have to return a book." They didn't have any library books out. Sarah kept meticulous track since the time she'd racked up forty dollars in late fees. But she nodded anyway, because Mira had eaten three whole bites of toast without being reminded, and that felt like progress worth preserving. "Okay. After breakfast." Mira drew a figure in the window of the house. It might have been herself. It might have been Sarah. It was hard to tell with the way she drew people now, all circles and spirals, faces that looked inward instead of out. The library was a ten-minute walk through streets that still felt new though they'd lived here eight months. Sarah had chosen this town because it was small, because no one knew them, because she'd thought a fresh start might smooth the sharp edges of their grief. Instead the grief had just come along, packed neatly in boxes, unpacked into new rooms with different light. Mira walked slightly ahead, her backpack bouncing against her shoulders. Sarah had checked it before they left. No library books inside, just a juice box, a sweater, and three smooth stones Mira had collected from the garden. The library was housed in a brick building that had once been something else: a bank, maybe, or a courthouse. It had that kind of weight to it, that sense of prior purpose. Inside it smelled like old paper and floor polish and something else Sarah couldn't quite name. Something like rain about to happen, or metal warming in the sun. Mira walked straight to the circulation desk. A woman stood there sorting returns, her back to them. She wore a cardigan the color of moss and her hair was pinned up with what looked like actual twigs. "Miss Winters," Mira said. The woman turned. She had a kind face, the sort that made you want to confess small failures: forgotten birthdays, white lies, fears you couldn't name. Her eyes found Sarah, held her gaze for a moment that stretched longer than moments should. "You came," Miss Winters said. "Good. We have a problem with one of your books.

Chapter

TWO

written by rpenguin

Then there was this.

Chapter

THREE

written by Cora Lindgren

The book Miss Winters held smelled wrong. Not the clean-vanilla of old pages, but something organic. Fungal. Sarah's throat closed around the scent before she could name what it reminded her of: the crawlspace under their old house where a possum had died in July. "I didn't take that out," Sarah said. The words came automatic. Miss Winters' fingers rested on the cover, not quite touching, like you'd hold your hand above a stove burner to test the heat. "No. Mira did." Miss Winters slid the book across the desk's worn wood. The spine crackled. Sarah didn't want to touch it. She touched it anyway because that's what you did when someone handed you something, you took it, you didn't make a scene in a library with your daughter watching. The cover was cloth, forest green gone gray with handling. No title on front or spine. She opened it to the first page. The text swam, letters rearranging themselves like ants after you've kicked their hill. She blinked. The words settled: Property of the Night Collection. If found after sunset, return to sender. "I don't understand," Sarah said. Mira had moved to the window. She pressed both palms against the glass, breath fogging it in quick bursts. Outside, the morning looked ordinary. Bright. A man walked a rust-colored dog past the front steps. "You checked this out," Miss Winters said, nodding at Mira. "Three days ago, just before closing." "I was here with her three days ago." Sarah tried to remember.

Mira had wanted books about rocks. They'd gotten three. Sarah had checked them herself, scanned the barcodes while Mira stacked them in size order. "This wasn't one of them." Miss Winters pulled a card from the wooden file box beside her elbow. The kind of checkout card Sarah hadn't seen since childhood, before everything went digital. Mira's name in careful print. A date. A time: 5:47 PM. "Sunset was 5:52," Miss Winters said. The fog pattern on the window had started to look like something. A spiral. Sarah recognized the shape from Mira's drawings. "What happens?" Sarah kept her voice low. "You said there was a problem." Miss Winters reached under the desk. When her hand came back up, she wore a glove. Leather, cracked at the knuckles, stained dark in the creases. She opened the book to the middle. The pages there had gone soft. Pulpy. While Sarah watched, one page curled at the corner, brown spreading from the edge inward like a lit match eating paper. "The book is trying to go back," Miss Winters said. "Everything in the Night Collection belongs to someone who wants it returned. The longer it stays out past dark, the harder it pulls. If you still have it come next sunset..." She didn't finish. The browning page crumbled. Flakes dusted the desk like dead skin. "So I return it now." Sarah reached for the book. Miss Winters caught her wrist, the leather glove cool against Sarah's pulse point. "Not you. The person who took it out." She looked past Sarah to where Mira stood. The fog on the window had spread. The whole lower pane was white now, and Mira's hands had left prints, ten fingers splayed wide. "Before sundown. That's seven hours." Sarah pulled her wrist free. "She's seven years old. She didn't know." "Knowing doesn't change the rule." The door behind them opened. Cold air pushed in, smelling like car exhaust and the creek behind the grocery store. A teenager slouched to the desk, dropped a stack of DVDs on the return slot. Miss Winters didn't look at him. She kept her eyes on Sarah. "There's a door," Miss Winters said quietly. "In the basement level. Storage room at the end of the hall. That's where the Night Collection lives. The door only opens for the person who took the book out. And it only opens before dark." The teenager left. His footsteps echoed wrong,

like the building was bigger inside than the brick shell suggested. Mira turned from the window. Her palms left damp prints on her jeans. "Can we go home now?" The book's pages rustled though no one touched it and the air was still. Another page crumbled. The smell got worse.

Chapter

FOUR

written by Olive Kassen

The creek smell hadn't come from outside. Sarah realized it now, watching the decay spread through the book's center. The smell came from the pages themselves, each one collapsing into the mineral reek of water that hadn't moved in too long. She'd grown up near water. She knew the difference between a living creek and a dead one. Mira crossed the floor. Her sneakers made no sound on the old wood. "I'll take it back," Mira said. She lifted the book before Sarah could stop her. The pages stilled in her hands. No crumbling. No rustling. Whatever lived inside the book recognized her touch. "Mira, put it down." "It's mine until I return it." Mira looked at Miss Winters. "That's the rule, right?" Miss Winters folded the leather glove, tucked it back beneath the desk. "Yes." "Then I should carry it." Sarah wanted to argue. She opened her mouth, found no words that would mean anything against a rule she didn't understand. This was how it had been with the drawings too. Mira explaining things Sarah should have known, couldn't have known, as though the world had handed her daughter a different instruction manual. "I'm coming with you," Sarah said. "The door won't open for you." Mira's voice was patient. Too patient. That was a mother's voice coming from a child's mouth. "Only for me." "Then I'll wait outside it." Something crossed Mira's face. Relief, maybe. Or recognition that Sarah wouldn't bend on this, that some walls still held. "Basement level," Miss

Winters said. She gestured to the stairwell past the biography section. "The storage room is marked. Don't open any other doors down there." "Why not?" Miss Winters began sorting the returned DVDs, sliding each into its case with small precise clicks. "Because they'll open back." The stairs down were concrete, institutional. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, one of them flickering in a rhythm that made Sarah's back teeth ache. Mira led. She held the book against her chest the way she used to hold her favorite stuffed rabbit before David died, before she'd packed it away and never asked for it again. The basement hallway stretched longer than the building's footprint allowed. Sarah counted her steps. At twenty she should have walked past the library's far wall, come out into the parking lot behind. At thirty they were still walking, still surrounded by cinderblock painted institutional beige. Doors lined both sides. No windows, just numbers in flaking paint. Mira stopped at the end of the hall. The door there had no number. Someone had carved words into the wood at eye level. Not words, exactly. Symbols that became words if you stopped trying to read them, let them mean something at the edge of vision. Storage was what Sarah's mind settled on. But it hadn't been that a second ago. "Do you want me to wait here?" Sarah asked. Mira's hand found the doorknob. Brass, tarnished almost black. "It's better if you do." "How do you know?" "Miss Winters told me. When I checked it out." Sarah pulled Mira back from the door, turned her around. Looked at her daughter's face, this face she'd memorized in the hospital seven years ago, counted fingers and toes and eyelashes and swore to keep safe from everything the world could do. "What else did she tell you?" "That some books choose their readers." Mira's eyes were steady. "That the Night Collection is for people who need to return things. Not library things. Other things." "What did you need to return?" Mira looked down at the book in her hands. A fresh page had started to brown at the edges. "I haven't finished reading it yet. That's why I took it past sunset. I wanted to see the end." "The end of what?" But Mira had already turned back to the door. Her small hand wrapped around the tarnished knob. It turned under her palm with a

click that Sarah felt in her sternum, some lock opening in the architecture of the world. The door swung inward. No light beyond, just thickness. Absence. The smell that rolled out wasn't decay anymore. It was rain that hadn't fallen yet. Metal warming. That same scent from the library's front room, concentrated until Sarah's eyes watered. Mira stepped through. The door closed behind her before Sarah could follow.

Chapter

FIVE

written by typewriter_tom

Sarah's shoulder hit the door three seconds after it closed. Solid wood. No give. She tried the knob. Locked, though no key had turned. Her palm stuck to the tarnished brass, then released with a sound like tape peeling. The metal left a dark smear on her skin. Not tarnish. Ink, maybe. Or something that had been ink once, before it learned to move. She wiped her hand on her jeans. The smear spread instead of rubbing off. "Mira." Her voice came out normal volume. The hallway swallowed it anyway, made it sound like she'd whispered. She knocked. The door didn't echo. It absorbed the impact, drank it down into the wood grain. How long had Miss Winters said? Seven hours until sunset. Sarah checked her phone. No signal, and the time display flickered between 9:47 and 10:23 like it couldn't decide which was true. She pushed the power button. The screen went dark. Fine. She'd wait. She sat with her back against the wall opposite the door. Close enough to see it open. Far enough that she wouldn't be in Mira's way when she came back out. When, not if. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead. The one with the broken rhythm had gotten worse. It clicked now, a pattern that almost sounded like Morse code. Three short. Three long. Three short. Sarah knew Morse code. David had taught her on their second date, tapping messages against her palm under the restaurant table. But the light's pattern didn't translate to anything. Just the shape of meaning without

the content. She closed her eyes. Counted her breaths. At sixty breaths Mira would come back through the door with the book returned, and they'd go home, and Sarah would make grilled cheese the way Mira liked it, burned at the edges. At sixty breaths this would be another strange thing in the catalog of strange things since David died, since Mira started drawing futures instead of flowers. She got to forty-three before the other doors started opening. Not the storage room door. The numbered ones lining the hallway. They opened slowly, one after another, starting from the stairs and working toward where Sarah sat. Each door revealed the same thing: darkness with weight to it. The kind of dark that pressed back when you looked at it. Sarah stood. Put her back against the storage room door. Door Twelve opened. Then Fourteen. Sixteen. The pattern was wrong. They were skipping the odd numbers, opening only the evens on the left side of the hall. Something moved in the doorway of Sixteen. Not walking out. Just existing there, taking up space at the threshold. Sarah couldn't look at it directly. When she tried, her eyes slid off like water off waxed canvas. The thing in Sixteen's doorway made a sound. Wet. Curious. "She's returning it." Sarah said it to the thing, to the hallway, to whatever made the rules down here. "My daughter is following the rule." The thing tilted. At least Sarah thought it tilted. Hard to tell when you couldn't look straight at it. Door Eighteen opened. Twenty. They were going to reach the storage room door. They were going to open every door except the one Mira had gone through, and then what? Then these things that couldn't be looked at would have nowhere else to go but toward Sarah. Her hand found her pocket. She still had her keys. Her wallet. The grocery list she'd written this morning on the back of an envelope: milk, bread, chicken, apples. Ordinary things from an ordinary life she'd lived this morning. The envelope's edge was sharp. She pulled it out. Her own handwriting looked strange down here, the letters too steady, too certain. She turned it over. The other side was a bill. Electric company. Final notice before disconnection. She'd paid it. She was sure she'd paid it. But the date on the notice was from next week. Thursday. Four days away. A bill that

hadn't been sent yet, warning about a disconnection that hadn't happened. Door Twenty-Two opened. Twenty-Four. The storage room door had no number. That meant they couldn't open it from outside. That meant it could only open from inside. Sarah pressed her ear against the wood. Listened for her daughter's footsteps, her breathing, any sound that meant Mira was still Mira in there, still herself, still coming back. She heard water. The creek smell intensified. And under it, so faint she might have imagined it: a child's voice, reading aloud.

Chapter

SIX

written by Priya Nair

Sarah pressed harder against the door, trying to separate Mira's voice from the water sounds. The words were wrong. Reading backwards, maybe. Or reading something that translated itself as it left her daughter's mouth. The thing from Sixteen stepped into the hallway. Sarah could look at it now. Somehow that was worse. It had the shape of a man folded in half the long way, hinged at the spine, so both halves walked in parallel. Four arms. Two heads, one facing forward, one back. The faces were identical. They smiled at her with teeth that had never been human. "You're not supposed to be here," it said. Both mouths moved in unison. "Tough shit," Sarah said. "Neither are you." Door Twenty-Six opened. A woman crawled out, except she crawled on the ceiling, hands and feet pressed flat to the acoustic tiles. Her dress hung upward around her shoulders. She wore sensible shoes. She had the face of someone's grandmother. She looked at Sarah upside down. "The child is reading the terms," the woman said. Her voice came from somewhere else. From behind Sarah, maybe. "Does the mother accept?" "Accept what?" The folded man tilted his forward head. "The exchange, obviously. We take what she's returning. She takes what we're discarding." "Mira isn't taking anything." "Then she can't return anything." The woman on the ceiling smiled. "Rule of balance. The Night Collection only accepts trades." Sarah's hand was still on the doorknob.

The dark smear had spread to her wrist now. It itched like a healing scab. She resisted the urge to scratch. "What would she be trading?" "That depends on what she's returning." The folded man's backward head spoke this time. "What did she draw? Before her father died?" Sarah's breath caught. "How do you, " "The drawings are prophecy. Prophecy is debt." The ceiling woman had crawled closer. She hung directly above Sarah now. A drop of something fell from her hair and hit Sarah's shoulder. It burned through her shirt. "She borrowed from the future. Now the future wants payment." The storage room door warmed under Sarah's palm. The wood was breathing. She could feel it expand and contract like a lung. Behind it, Mira had stopped reading. The water sound intensified. Something splashed. "She's seven years old." Sarah kept her voice level. "She didn't know what she was doing." "Knowing doesn't change the price." The folded man moved closer. Both his faces maintained eye contact. "She drew the death. The death came. The debt accumulated." "So what? You want her to trade away years? Memories? Her name?" Sarah had read fairy tales. She knew how this worked. The ceiling woman laughed. The sound came from Sarah's pocket. From her phone. "We don't want those. We want what she's been carrying since he died." "Which is?" "The afterwards." The folded man had reached the door. He stood so close Sarah could smell him. He smelled like the library's front room. Rain about to happen. "The part that came after he stopped. She's been holding it for him. Reading it, night after night, in that book. The story of the father who lived. We'll take that. She can keep everything else." Door Twenty-Eight opened. Door Thirty. The storage room door trembled. The breathing rhythm increased. Sarah understood then. The drawings weren't prophecy. They were grief trying to rewrite itself. Mira drawing what could have been, what should have been, then letting it bleed into what was. And somewhere in the space between those things, a library had opened its doors. "If she trades that away, she'll forget him." Sarah's voice cracked. "She'll forget the version where he didn't die." "Yes." The ceiling woman had lowered herself on an invisible rope. She hung face-level with Sarah now, still

upside down. "But she'll stop drawing futures. She'll stop opening doors. She'll be a normal child who had a father who died in a car accident. Sad. Ordinary. Safe." "Or," the folded man's forward head said, "she keeps the book. Keeps the afterwards. Brings it home. And every night it pulls harder. And eventually, " The door behind Sarah flew open. Mira stood in the threshold. Her hands were empty. Her clothes were soaked. She looked at Sarah with eyes that knew too much, had always known too much, would know everything if someone didn't stop it. "Mom," Mira said. "I need you to choose.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by Colin McAteer

Sarah turns. The folded man blocks her view of Mira, both his faces watching her decide. She sidesteps. His backward head tracks the movement but he doesn't shift his body. Mira stands ankle-deep in water. It's pooling on the concrete floor, spreading outward from the storage room in a slow tide. The overhead lights reflect in it. Two lights. Four. Sarah counts six reflections where there should be one flickering bulb. "What choice?" Sarah asks. Mira's hair is plastered to her skull. Her T-shirt clings, and Sarah can see her daughter shivering. Behind her, the storage room contains rows of shelves. The kind you'd find in a library basement, metal frames painted industrial gray. Books line them, spines facing out. Every spine is blank. "The book I took out isn't a book." Mira's teeth chatter. "It's the days. All the days after Dad died where he didn't. I've been reading them before bed. Miss Winters said I could keep reading as long as I brought it back." The ceiling woman drops to the floor. She lands on her feet now, right-side up. Her dress falls into place. "But she didn't bring it back. She brought it through." She gestures at the storage room. "Big difference." Sarah looks past Mira. The shelves stretch back farther than the building allows. Somewhere in the dark between the stacks, something turns a page. "I read to the end," Mira says. "The last page is tomorrow. Dad picks me up from school. We get ice cream. He tucks me in and tells me about the stars." "Tomorrow is

Thursday." Sarah remembers the electric bill in her pocket. The date that hasn't happened yet. "In the book it is." Mira wipes her face. The water there might be tears. Might be from her soaked hair. "Miss Winters says I can trade the book and go home. Or I can keep it and live there. In the version where he didn't die." The folded man's forward head speaks. "She can't have both. You can't have both. One daughter in one world." Sarah steps toward Mira. The water is cold through her sneakers. It smells like the creek behind their old house, the one David used to take Mira to on Saturday mornings. They'd catch crayfish in a red bucket and name them before putting them back. "If she goes into the book," Sarah says, "what happens to her here?" "She was never here." The ceiling woman walks to the storage room threshold. Doesn't cross it. "The seven-year-old who drew her father's death never existed. You'll have a different daughter. One who drew flowers." "Will I remember?" "No." Sarah reaches Mira. Kneels in the water. Holds her daughter's face in both hands. The dark smear from the doorknob has climbed to Sarah's elbow now. It doesn't itch anymore. It pulls. A gentle insistence toward the storage room, toward the shelves of blank spines, toward the someone turning pages in the dark. "What do you want?" Sarah asks. "Not what you think I want. What do you actually want?" Mira's eyes fill. "I want Dad." "I know." "But I want you too." Sarah pulls Mira against her chest. Her daughter's heart beats fast. Alive. Here. Real in the way that the book's version can never be, no matter how many days it offers, no matter how many ice cream trips and star stories it promises. "The book only has up to tomorrow," Sarah says into Mira's wet hair. "Then what?" Mira's voice is muffled against Sarah's shoulder. "Miss Winters said it keeps writing. As long as I keep reading." "A whole life?" "A different life." Sarah looks at the shelves. Counts the blank spines. Hundreds. Thousands. Every single one waiting for someone to read them, to choose them, to walk into their pages and let this world's version close like a door. The water has stopped spreading. It laps at Sarah's shins, going nowhere. "If you go in there," Sarah says, "does the pulling stop? Do you stop drawing things that come true?" Mira pulls

back. Looks at her. "Miss Winters said the drawings were me trying to read my own book. But I can't. Only the Night Collection has those." "So you'd have to stay. To know how your story ends." "Yes." Sarah stands. Keeps one hand on Mira's shoulder. Faces the folded man and the ceiling woman and whatever else is watching from the numbered doors. "She's not trading," Sarah says. "We're leaving." The folded man's backward head laughs. "With what book? She has to return something." Sarah pulls the electric bill from her pocket. Holds it out. "She's returning this. A piece of the future. Even exchange.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by wordsbylena

The folded man's forward face considers the envelope. His backward face has stopped smiling. Sarah counts: four seconds of silence, six reflections in the water that should be one, two faces that haven't blinked in the ninety seconds since she's been watching. "That's not hers to return," the ceiling woman says. "It's addressed to me. I'm offering it." "The rule specifies, " "The rule," Sarah interrupts, "says the person who checked out the book has to return it before sundown. Mira checked it out. Mira went through that door. She's returned it. Now we're negotiating what the Night Collection accepts as payment." The folded man's both mouths open. Close. Open again, not in sync this time. When the forward mouth speaks, the backward one shapes different words. Sarah can't hear them, but she can see them in the mirror of his teeth: technically correct. "The future-that-hasn't-happened for the future-that-didn't." The ceiling woman tilts her head. The motion is bird-like. Predatory. "Equivalent weight?" Mira's hand finds Sarah's. Her fingers are wrinkled from the water, pruned the way they used to get after long baths when she was smaller. "Mom, you don't have to, " "How do we measure it?" Sarah asks. She keeps her voice level. Analytical. If this is negotiation, she'll negotiate. She's done it before: payment plans with the hospital, custody arrangements that became moot, the careful trade of who-gets-what

when dividing a life into boxes. "The bill is four days. The book was how many?" "Two hundred and sixty-three," Mira whispers. "I counted." Two hundred and sixty-three days. Sarah does the math: eight months, three weeks, two days. Every day since David died, rewritten. Every morning he didn't leave for work. Every evening he came home. "Four days aren't equivalent to two hundred and sixty-three," the ceiling woman says. "No." Sarah folds the envelope once. Twice. Three times, until it's small enough to fit in her palm. "But this bill is a final notice. It branches. Pay it: we keep electricity. Don't pay it: disconnection, late fees, reconnection charges, deposit for the next place because our credit tanks. Four days that split into months of consequences." The folded man leans closer. Both faces are interested now. "Branch-point futures are worth more than linear ones." "I know." Sarah doesn't know. She's guessing. But the guess feels right the way Mira's drawings probably felt right, that weight of something true before it happens. "The book was linear. One path, clean. This is probability. Heavier." The water at their feet begins to drain. Sarah watches it sink between the concrete seams, counts: twelve seconds until the floor is damp instead of flooded. Eighteen until it's dry. The folded man extends one hand. Not the front-facing pair of arms. The back-facing ones, reaching around his hinged torso. His palm is up. Sarah places the folded envelope in it. The man's fingers close. The paper ignites. Not with fire, with the opposite of fire, a cold burn that pulls light inward instead of releasing it. The envelope blackens, then whitens, then becomes transparent. Sarah can see through it to the bones of his hand, and through those to the hallway beyond, and through that to something else: a kitchen, lights on, a table set for two. Someone who might be Sarah, older, tired, paying a different bill in a different house while a different daughter does homework in the other room. The vision collapses. The envelope is ash. The ash is gone. "Accepted," the ceiling woman says. She sounds disappointed. The storage room door swings shut. The numbered doors along the hallway close in sequence: Thirty, Twenty-Eight, Twenty-Six. The countdown reverses itself, sealing away what had crawled out. Mira's hand tightens

in Sarah's. "Is it done?" "One more thing." The folded man straightens. Both his faces look at Mira. "The drawings stop now. The debt is paid. You can't borrow from the future anymore." "Okay," Mira says. Her voice is small. Seven years old again. Just seven. "And you," the ceiling woman says to Sarah. "Thursday, when the bill doesn't come, don't question it. Don't call the electric company. Let it be gone." Sarah nods. She understands: some payments erase themselves from both sides of the ledger. The fluorescent light overhead stops flickering. The rhythm ends. The hallway looks ordinary now: concrete, institutional beige, a stairs leading up to a library where people check out normal books about rocks and return them on time. Mira tugs Sarah's hand. "Can we go home?" They climb the stairs together. Sarah counts: twenty-three steps to the main floor. Thirty-seven steps through the biography section. Twelve steps to the front door. Miss Winters watches them leave. She doesn't wave. Outside, the afternoon is ordinary. Bright.

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