

MYSTERY



What Repeats in the Spaces Between

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

One	Cora Lindgren
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Two	Dario Selo
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Three	Dan Okafor
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Four	wordsbylena
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Five	Olive Kassen
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Six	Sasha Loomis
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Seven	Priya Nair
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Eight	Colin McAteer
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Chapter

One

written by Cora Lindgren

The smell hit me first: wet dog and something sweeter underneath, like fruit left too long in the sun. I stood in the doorway of what should have been my new studio, key still warm in my palm, and stared at the couch that wasn't supposed to be there. Brown corduroy, one cushion darker than the others from use or spillage. The fabric looked soft in a way that made my fingertips itch. I'd signed the lease three days ago. The landlord had shown me an empty room with clean white walls and hardwood that squeaked under our shoes. Now there was furniture. Now there were things. A coffee table made from what looked like a door laid across cinder blocks. On top: a mug with dregs dried to black crust at the bottom, a TV remote, three batteries that had leaked their acid guts onto the wood grain, and a pair of reading glasses, one lens spiderwebbed with cracks. I picked up the glasses without thinking. The frames were still warm. My skin went cold. I set them down fast, wiped my fingers on my jeans even though I knew the warmth was probably just from the afternoon light coming through the window. Probably. The glass felt greasy anyway, like someone had touched it recently with unwashed hands. The apartment was supposed to be 4B. I checked the number on the door again: 4B. Checked my lease paperwork: 4B, 312 Ashland Avenue. This building, this floor, this door. In the corner, a space heater sat unplugged, its coils faintly orange as if they were

cooling down rather than cold. I crouched next to it, held my hand near the metal grille. Warmth rose against my palm like breath. The outlet was empty. The cord lay coiled beside it like a sleeping snake, and when I touched the plug, it was cool. I stood up too fast. My head went swimmy. There was a kitchenette along the back wall, and something was cooking. Not now, but recently. The air held onto the ghost of it: onions, maybe garlic, and something else I couldn't name. Animal fat, perhaps. The stovetop was clean, all four burners cold when I tested them with the back of my hand. Inside the oven: nothing but old crumbs and a warped baking sheet. But the smell. I could taste it in my mouth, heavy and salted. A door I hadn't noticed stood ajar next to the kitchenette. Bathroom, probably, or a closet. It was dark inside, the kind of dark that seemed thicker than regular shadow. I thought I heard something from in there, a small sound. Fabric moving, or breathing, or the building settling. I should have left. I knew I should have left. Instead I walked toward it. My shoes made no sound on the floor. When had I taken them off? I looked down: they were still on my feet, laces tied, but the floor seemed to swallow the sound of my steps. The door's edge was sticky under my fingers when I pushed it wider. Old paint, humidity, something. Inside: not a bathroom. A bedroom. Single mattress on the floor, no frame, sheets tangled like someone had just gotten up. An indentation in the pillow, head-shaped and deep. On the nightstand, if you could call it that (just a cardboard box turned on its side), there was a glass of water. Still water, but when I looked closely, the surface trembled. Tiny concentric circles spreading out from the center, as if someone had just set it down. Or as if footsteps were approaching. I didn't hear footsteps. I didn't hear anything except my own blood moving through my ears. The water kept rippling. I backed out of the room and the apartment, pulled the door shut, stood in the hallway breathing through my mouth. The key was slick with sweat in my hand. The number on the door said 4B. I looked at the door across the hall: 4A. Next to mine: 4C.

Chapter

Two

written by Dario Selo

It occurs to me now, though it didn't then (or perhaps it did, in that subterranean way thoughts occur when you're trying very hard not to think them), that there are really only two possibilities when you find yourself in a place that is simultaneously yours and not yours. Either the place is wrong, which suggests an error in the fabric of things, a clerical mistake made by reality itself, or you are wrong, which is worse because it suggests the error is interior, that the machinery of perception has come loose from its housing. I stood in the hallway testing these possibilities against each other the way you might test a sore tooth with your tongue, pressing to see where the pain lived. The thing about keys is that they shouldn't work in the wrong locks. This is foundational, almost philosophical. The whole architecture of security, of private space, of ownership, rests on the premise that a key is specific, that it corresponds to one lock and no other, that this correspondence is something you can rely on when you can't rely on anything else. But my key had worked. I'd felt the pins align, the cylinder turn. The mechanism had recognized something in the teeth of my key that it was willing to accept. So either the lock was promiscuous, undiscerning, willing to open for anyone (which seemed unlikely, though I've known people like that), or my key was in fact the right key, which meant the apartment was in fact my apartment, which meant the furniture, the warm glasses,

the rippling water, all of it was mine in some way I hadn't agreed to yet. I thought about the landlord, Mr. Petrakis, who had shown me the empty room three days ago. I tried to remember if he'd seemed nervous, if his hands had shaken when he gave me the key, if he'd rushed me through the viewing. But memory is a story you tell yourself, and I realized I was already revising, already adding details that might not have been there. Had the floor really squeaked, or was I just assuming it had because floors in old buildings are supposed to squeak? Had the walls been white, or had I just needed them to be white, clean, blank, a space where nothing had happened yet? The door to 4C was different from mine (from 4B, from the apartment that was or wasn't mine). Same wood, same paint, but where mine had a small scratch near the handle, 4C was smooth. I put my ear to it, feeling ridiculous and invasive and desperate. Silence, but not empty silence. The kind of silence that has presence, that suggests people holding very still, or rooms that don't want to be listened to. I knocked, three times, soft enough that anyone inside could pretend not to hear if they wanted plausible deniability. Nothing. I knocked again, harder, and this time I heard something. Not footsteps. Not a voice. Something being dragged across a floor, heavy and reluctant. The dragging stopped. I waited, my knuckles still raised, ready to knock again or to run, I wasn't sure which. The peephole in 4C's door was covered from the inside, a circle of darkness where there should have been a lens, a way of seeing out. Someone had blocked it. Someone didn't want to be seen, which meant someone was in there, which meant I wasn't alone in this hallway (though I already knew I wasn't alone, didn't I, because someone had been in my apartment, someone whose warmth still clung to the reading glasses, whose shape still pressed into the pillow). My phone was in my pocket. I could call the landlord, or the police, or my sister who always knew what to do. But I didn't move. Because another thought was occurring to me, rising up through the layers of panic and confusion: what if the apartment wasn't wrong at all? What if it was simply occupied, and I was the intruder?

Chapter

Three

written by Dan Okafor

The thing about being the intruder is that you know it immediately. It's a physical sensation, like stepping onto ice that hasn't quite frozen solid. I pulled my hand back from 4C's door and looked at my key again, the ordinary brass thing with its number tag dangling from a split ring. The tag said 4B. I unscrewed it, checked the back. Still 4B, stamped into the metal by whatever machine makes these determinations official. I could leave. Walk down the four flights, get in my car, drive to my sister's place in Rosewood and tell her the whole thing was a mistake, that I'd changed my mind about living alone in the city. She'd be smug about it for maybe a week, then she'd help me break the lease. Mr. Petrakis would keep the deposit, which was five hundred dollars I couldn't really afford to lose, but losing money was better than standing in this hallway with my heart doing this thing it was doing. But there was the couch. Brown corduroy, one cushion darker. I'd noticed which cushion because I always notice these things. People have patterns. They sit in the same spot, wear down the same fabric, leave the shape of themselves behind. I put my hand on the knob of 4B again. Turned it. Pushed. The apartment was darker than before, though the window was in the same place and the afternoon sun hadn't moved that much. The smell had changed too. Less onions, more something metallic, like pennies left in a dish of water. The couch sat exactly where I'd seen it. The door-table with its

battery acid scars. The reading glasses. I went to the glasses first, don't ask me why. Maybe because they'd been warm before and I needed to know if they still were. They weren't. Cold now, and when I picked them up, no greasy residue this time. Just clean plastic frames with that one cracked lens catching the light in a way that made me think of windshields after accidents. The prescription was strong. I held them up, looked through the intact lens, watched the room bend and blur. Whoever owned these was substantially more nearsighted than I was. Substantially older too, probably. The frames were the kind they stopped making in the nineties, thick and square. I set them down, wiped my hands on my jeans again even though there was nothing to wipe off. The bedroom door was closed now. I was sure I'd left it open. Mostly sure. The uncertainty sat in my stomach like something I'd swallowed by mistake. "Hello?" My voice came out smaller than I'd meant it to. "I'm Delia. I think there's been some kind of mix-up with the apartment." No answer. But I heard something, a small sound from behind the bedroom door. A creak, maybe. The specific creak of a particular floorboard being stepped on. "The landlord gave me a key," I said, louder now. "Mr. Petrakis. Do you know him? Did he give you a key too?" The silence had texture, like fabric pulled tight. I thought about the water glass, the ripples spreading from nothing. I thought about the space heater with its warm coils and cold plug. Then I thought about something else, something that should have occurred to me earlier: I'd checked the lease paperwork in the hallway. Had it in my hand, my bag, somewhere. I dug through the canvas tote on my shoulder, found the paper folded in thirds. Pulled it out. Apartment 4B, 312 Ashland Avenue. Lease term begins September 1. Today was September 1. I checked my phone to be sure, because suddenly I wasn't sure of anything. September 1, 4:47 PM. But there, at the bottom of the page, in the section I'd barely glanced at during the signing because who reads that part carefully: Previous tenant: E. Marston. Lease terminated August 15. Unit cleaned and inspected August 29. Three days between inspection and my move-in. And E. Marston's things were still here, which meant either the

cleaning crew had been remarkably incompetent or E. Marston was. The bedroom door opened. Not all the way. Just enough for me to see that the mattress was still on the floor, the sheets still tangled. And next to the cardboard box nightstand, a pair of slippers. Brown sheepskin, worn at the heels. They hadn't been there before.

Chapter

Four

written by wordsbylena

Seven items visible through the partial opening. I counted them while my breath made no sound. One mattress, white fitted sheet half-pulled from the corner. Two pillows, one with the head-shaped indentation, one flat. Three hangers on the floor near what I presumed was a closet, wire hangers in a small pile. Four books stacked beside the cardboard box, spines facing away from the door so I couldn't read the titles. Five shoes total, two slippers now present plus three others: one black sneaker, one brown loafer, one sandal. Six. I needed a sixth thing. The glass of water. Still on the box, still there. The slippers had not been there. I'd looked at that exact spot when I backed out of the room earlier. Looked hard enough to remember the specific way the cardboard box sat, one corner crushed where something heavy had rested. No slippers then. Someone had placed them there in the seventeen minutes I'd been in the hallway, knocking on 4C, unscrewing my key tag, considering departure. Seventeen minutes exactly. I checked my phone: 4:47 now, 4:30 when I'd first stood at the threshold. I track time the way other people track faces. Can't help it. "E. Marston," I said toward the open door. "That's you?" The door moved. Not violently. Just a small swing inward, degree by degree, until I could see the whole room. The closet door was open too. Inside: twelve hangers with clothes still on them. Shirts, mostly. One jacket with a fur collar that looked expensive in a

dated way. No person stood in the closet. No person stood anywhere I could see. But the slippers were positioned as though someone had just stepped out of them. Toes pointing toward the mattress, heels angled outward. The exact geometry of feet that had been there a moment before. I stepped into the bedroom. Bad idea, probably. Definitely. But the lease had E. Marston's name on it, and that meant E. Marston was real, documented, someone who'd signed papers and paid deposits and lived here for some quantity of time before August 15. Someone who should have moved out sixteen days ago. The books. I crouched beside them, read the spines. *The Daughter of Time* by Josephine Tey. *Presumed Innocent*. *The Name of the Rose*. *Gaudy Night*. All mysteries. I noted this. Kept noting because that's what I do when I'm frightened: catalog, enumerate, build lists as though organization equals control. Under the bottom book, a piece of paper. Corner visible, college-ruled. I pulled it out. A list. Written in blue ballpoint, handwriting that slanted backward, left-handed or deliberate: Things that don't fit: 1. The lease term (check actual dates) 2. The neighbor in 4C (knocked, no answer, but heard someone) 3. Water usage on the bill (I live alone) 4. The smell when I come home (cooking, but I don't cook) 5. My spare key is missing The paper wasn't yellowed. Fresh, recent. The ink hadn't faded. I read it twice. Three times. The neighbor in 4C. E. Marston had knocked too, heard someone too. Water usage suggesting multiple occupants. A missing spare key. My hands were steady as I folded the paper, put it in my pocket. This steadiness surprised me. I should have been running, but instead I was thinking about the things that don't fit, about how E. Marston had noticed them too, had made a list because making lists is what you do when reality starts unspooling. I stood. Looked at the closet again. Counted the hangers a second time to be sure. Twelve with clothes, three on the floor. Fifteen total. The number felt significant though I couldn't say why. The water glass on the cardboard box had stopped rippling. Surface perfectly still now. But when I bent close, I saw something at the bottom. Small, dark. I picked up the glass, tilted it toward the window light. A key. Brass, sitting in maybe two inches of

water. I poured the water into my palm, let it run between my fingers onto the floor. Picked up the key. No tag attached. I held it next to mine. Same make, same cut pattern. Different only in that mine had the 4B tag and this one had nothing. The spare key E. Marston reported missing. In a glass of water, in an apartment that should have been empty, in a bedroom where slippers appeared while I wasn't looking.

Chapter

Five

written by Olive Kassen

The water ran off my fingertips and darkened the floorboards in drops shaped like punctuation marks. I held both keys in one palm: mine with its stamped tag, the other naked and anonymous. The weight was identical. If I closed my eyes I wouldn't be able to tell which was which, and for a moment I wanted to close them, to let the keys blur into each other, to stop knowing anything. But the slippers. They were still there, still positioned like a stopped sentence. I walked to the closet and reached for the jacket with the fur collar. The fur was real. Rabbit, maybe. Soft in a way that made me think of small animals before they became clothing. The pockets were deep. In the left: a receipt from Genovese's Deli, dated July 12, this year. Turkey sandwich, no tomato. Coffee, black. Total: eight dollars and fifty cents. In the right pocket: nothing. I checked the other clothes. Four shirts, all cotton, all clean. Two pairs of pants on hangers even though no one hangs pants that way unless they live in a place too small for drawers. One dress, dark green, hem coming loose at the back. The thread was red where it should have been green, like someone had started to fix it with the wrong color and then stopped caring. Behind the clothes, the closet wall had something written on it. Pencil, small letters, the kind you only see if you lean in close and the light catches right. Numbers: 4B, 4C, 4A. Below them: Same key? My throat closed. I backed out of the closet and stood in the

center of the bedroom. The mattress, the books, the slippers. The door to the main room still open. Beyond it I could see the brown couch, the door-table, the space heater that had been warm when it shouldn't have been. My apartment. E. Marston's apartment. Someone's apartment, and the someone was leaving pieces of themselves scattered like breadcrumbs or warnings. I went back to the main room and stood at the window. Four stories down: the street, two parked cars, a man walking a small white dog. Ordinary September afternoon. The light coming through the glass was thick and golden, the color of honey left in sun. It made everything in the apartment look softer than it was. The phone in my pocket buzzed. I pulled it out. Text from my sister: You there yet? Send a photo so I can see what you've gotten yourself into. I typed: Something's wrong with the apartment. Three dots appeared immediately, bouncing. Then: Wrong how? I looked at the couch, the glasses, the bedroom door standing open. Tried to think of how to explain wrongness when all the pieces looked right but the picture they made was impossible. The last tenant is still here, I typed. Then deleted it. Typed: Their stuff is still here. Sent that. The dots bounced for longer this time. Did you call the landlord? I hadn't. Should have. Would have, if I were a different person with different instincts. But E. Marston had made a list of things that didn't fit, and now I had that list in my pocket along with a key that had been underwater, and calling Mr. Petrakis felt like closing a door I'd only just managed to open. Not yet, I sent back. The dots stopped. Started. Stopped again. Finally: Call him. Or call me. Don't just stand there. But standing there was exactly what I needed to do. Stand and look and let the apartment show me what it was. Because things don't fit for reasons. Water ripples because of movement. Glass stays warm because of hands. Slippers appear because of feet. I walked to the door, pulled it open, stepped into the hallway. 4C was still there across from me, peephole still covered. Next to mine: 4A, not 4C like before. I turned, looked at the number on my door: 4B. Looked at the other doors: 4A to the left, 4C to the right. That was correct. 4A, 4B, 4C in sequence. But when I'd first arrived, when I'd checked, I could have

sworn 4C was on the other side. I pulled out E. Marston's list, read it again under the hallway's fluorescent hum. Same key? I looked at the brass key in my hand, the one from the water glass, then at 4C's door. The knob was brass too. Same age, same wear pattern. I fitted the wet key into the lock. It turned.

Chapter

Six

written by Sasha Loomis

The lock turned but the door didn't open. Something held it, not a deadbolt. Weight pressed from the other side. I could feel it through the door, patient and aware. I took my hand off the knob. The key stayed in the lock, horizontal like an accusation. The hallway had too many ceiling tiles. I counted them while not looking at the door: eighteen tiles from where I stood to the stairwell. Four lights, but only three were working. The dead one was directly above 4C. When had that happened. I'd walked under it twice now and hadn't noticed darkness gathering in that specific spot, though maybe darkness doesn't gather, maybe it's always there and light is the thing that comes and goes. Behind me, my door, 4B, stood open. The apartment inside it looked different from this angle, flatter, like a photograph of a room rather than the room itself. The space heater was visible from here. It wasn't glowing now. I wanted it to glow again so I could understand the rules, but wanting is different from having. I knocked on 4C. Three times, the same rhythm as before. The weight behind the door shifted. Not away, just differently distributed. Lower now. "E. Marston is in 4B," I said. "Or they were. I have their things. I have their list." The peephole stayed covered. "The list says 'same key,'" I continued. "I'm holding the key now. It fits your lock." From the stairwell, the sound of footsteps ascending. Heavy boots, methodical pace. A person climbing one step at a time without urgency.

I counted: twelve steps before the footsteps stopped. The fourth floor landing had sixteen steps. They'd stopped four short of arrival. I pulled E. Marston's key from 4C's lock and tried it in 4A instead. It fit. Turned. The door swung inward onto an apartment identical to mine in layout but emptier. No furniture except a single wooden chair facing the window. On the chair's seat, a folded newspaper. I could see the date from the doorway: August 16. The day after E. Marston's lease terminated. The headline was about water main repairs on Ashland Avenue, estimated completion September 15. I didn't enter. Entering felt like agreement to something I hadn't read the terms of. The chair was positioned so that whoever sat in it would be looking directly at my window across the way. Not at my window. At the window of 4B. At what had been E. Marston's window. I tried to remember if I'd seen someone sitting there when I'd looked out earlier, but memory is selective and I'd been looking down at the street, at the man with the white dog, at the ordinary world below where doors stayed in the same place and keys fit only the locks they were meant for. The newspaper on the chair hadn't yellowed. Two weeks old but the paper was still crisp, edges clean. Someone had left it there recently, or someone had been preserving it, keeping it from the windows and the sun. I closed 4A's door. Tried the key in 4B, my door, the one I'd already opened twice with my own tagged key. E. Marston's key worked there too. One key, three apartments. I stood in the center of the hallway triangle and felt something shift in my understanding, a plate sliding sideways in the skull. The apartments weren't separate. They'd never been separate. Just three angles of the same room, three ways of looking at the same space. But that was impossible because I could see into 4A from the hallway, see the chair and the newspaper, and when I turned my head I could see into 4B, see the brown couch and the space heater, and those were different rooms with different things in them. Except the floorboards. The same stain ran across both thresholds, a water mark shaped like an open hand. The footsteps on the stairs started again. Still ascending. Still four steps away from the landing. 4C's peephole uncovered itself. I

heard the small scrape of whatever had been taped over it falling away. Through the lens, an eye looked out at me. Too close to the glass. The wrong color. Gray like newsprint, like water with something dissolved in it. The eye blinked once, very slowly. Then the door opened from the inside.

Chapter

Seven

written by Priya Nair

The woman standing in 4C's doorway was exactly my height, which I noticed first because noticing height is a reflex when you're five-foot-three and spend most conversations addressing sternums. She wore E. Marston's dress. The green one with the red thread dangling from the hem. "You should probably come in," she said. Her voice was mine. Not similar. Mine. The exact pitch and cadence I heard when I listened to voicemails I'd left myself. "No," I said. "Fair." She leaned against the doorframe. "I wouldn't either." The hallway felt narrower than it had thirty seconds ago, like the walls were polite about encroaching. I could still hear those footsteps on the stairs, perpetually four steps away, the sonic equivalent of a loading screen that never resolves. "Are you E. Marston?" I asked. "Sometimes." She scratched her ankle with her other foot, a gesture I recognized because I did it constantly, had done it twice already today. "Are you?" "I'm Delia Marsh." "I know. I read your lease application. You lied about having a car." I had lied about the car. Told Mr. Petrakis I'd sold it to simplify city parking when actually I'd never owned one, just borrowed my sister's when the rental agency asked for a driver's license as secondary ID. "The lease said E. Marston moved out August 15," I said. "It did say that." She stepped backwards into 4C, leaving the door open. Not an invitation, more like she'd stopped caring whether I followed. I followed. Obviously

I followed. The apartment was a mirror of mine. Same layout, same window placement, same water stain on the floor. But where 4B had the corduroy couch, 4C had a futon with a sleeping bag wadded on top. Where 4B had the door-table, 4C had an actual coffee table, IKEA, one leg slightly shorter than the others. A folded matchbook shoved under it as a shim. "You're probably wondering about the key," she said. "Among other things, yes." "Mr. Petrakis only has one key. For all three units." She sat on the futon, pulled her knees up. My knees. "He had a locksmith install the same cylinder in 4A, 4B, and 4C six years ago. Cost-saving measure. Easier to rent them out if he doesn't have to track separate keys." "That's illegal," I said. "Extremely." The matchbook under the table leg was from Genovese's Deli. Same place as the receipt in the jacket pocket. I could see the logo from where I stood, green cursive on red cardboard. "So anyone with a key to one apartment can access all three," I said. "Correct." "And you are?" "Delia Marsh," she said. "Moved in September 1. You're E. Marston. Lease terminated August 15. We've been trading apartments every few hours for two weeks, leaving pieces of ourselves in the wrong rooms." My phone buzzed. I pulled it out. Text from my sister: Seriously, call the landlord or I'm driving over there. "Don't call him," the woman said. "He'll just tell you the apartments are separate and you're confused. He'll say the key is specific to 4B. He'll make you doubt the things you've seen." "Because he's lying or because he doesn't know?" "Does it matter?" She picked at the red thread on the dress hem. "The apartments are connected. Not physically. Something else. Time, maybe, or intent. I haven't figured it out yet." "But you're me," I said. "You're wearing my face and my tics and my voice." "Am I?" She looked up. "Or are you me? You're the one with E. Marston's list in your pocket." I pulled out the paper, unfolded it. The handwriting did slant backward. Like mine did when I wrote too quickly and stopped paying attention. "I made that list the day I moved in," she said. "August 1. I thought I'd rented 4B. Found all the same things you found today. Warm glasses, rippling water, furniture that shouldn't exist." "And the slippers?" "Yours. You took them off in 4B's bedroom seventeen minutes

ago while you were reading the list. You don't remember because you weren't you yet." The footsteps on the stairs stopped. All at once, no fade. Just stopped. The silence felt loud. "Someone's coming," I said. "Someone's always coming," she said. "That's the problem with wrong apartments. They're never empty.

Chapter

Eight

written by Colin McAteer

The silence lasts four seconds. I count them. Then a door opens downstairs, not closes. Opens. The sound travels up the stairwell like a question someone forgot to finish asking. I step backwards toward the hallway. The woman on the futon doesn't move. Just watches me with my own eyes, which is worse than if she'd stood up or reached for me or done anything that required response. "You can leave," she says. "I did. Walked out September 3, got in the car I don't own, drove to my sister's. Stayed there two days." "Then what?" "Then I came back." She pulls the sleeping bag over her legs even though the apartment isn't cold. "Because the key was still in my pocket. And Mr. Petrakis called saying someone reported water damage in 4B. Asked if I'd left the tap running." I look at the coffee table, the matchbook shim. Genovese's Deli. The receipt was dated July 12. Today is September 1. Almost two months between the sandwich order and now, but the matchbook looks new. No wear on the striker strip. "The water glass," I say. "On the nightstand in 4B. You left the key in it." "I put it somewhere you'd find it." She scratches her ankle again. "Somewhere I'd found it when I was you." The stairwell door opens. Actually opens, hinges creaking in a specific pattern: three squeaks ascending in pitch. A person steps onto the landing. I hear it but don't turn around because turning around feels like agreement to see what's there. "Mr. Petrakis?" I ask. "No." The footsteps

move toward us. Boot heels on linoleum, the same methodical rhythm from the stairs. They stop outside 4C's door. I'm still standing in the doorway, half in the apartment, half in the hall. Blocking the threshold. The person behind me breathes. I can hear it. Steady, controlled, the kind of breathing you do when you're trying not to be heard but your lungs have requirements. "Is that me?" I ask the woman on the futon. "Turn around and check." I don't turn around. Instead I step fully into 4C and push the door closed. It doesn't latch. Something blocks it. A boot. Brown leather, worn at the toe. I know these boots. Bought them three years ago at a consignment shop in Rosewood. Resoled them twice. Wore them yesterday. The door pushes open. The person wearing my boots steps inside. She's not me. Not exactly. Her hair is shorter, cut blunt at the jawline instead of pulled back like mine. She's wearing jeans I don't recognize, a jacket I've never owned. But the face. The height. The way she stands with her weight on her left foot because her right knee hurts when it rains. "September 15," she says. "I'm two weeks ahead." The woman on the futon nods. "Delia, meet Delia." "E. Marston," I say. "That's not a person. It's an anagram." September 15 Delia sits on the IKEA table. The short leg wobbles but holds. "Smarted Later. Master Denial. You can make a lot of phrases out of those letters. None of them helpful." "The apartments aren't connected through space," I say. "They're connected through time." "Congratulations." The woman on the futon pulls the sleeping bag higher. "Took me six days to figure that out." I try my phone. No signal. Four bars a minute ago, now nothing. September 15 Delia watches me check, says nothing. She already knows. "So we're stuck here," I say. "All of us. Different versions in different apartments, moving through the same two weeks." "Not stuck." September 15 Delia stands. "Looping. Every time one of us reaches September 15, another version moves into 4B on September 1. Mr. Petrakis rents it out again because from his perspective, it's been empty since August 15. And the next version finds the glasses, the water, the slippers." "The list," I say. "The list." She reaches into her jacket pocket, pulls out a folded paper. Same college-ruled sheet, same backward slant.

But this one has seven items instead of five. "You'll add to it. Things you notice that we didn't. Then you'll leave it where the next one finds it." "Why?" "Because eventually," she says, "one of us figures out how to stop it." She walks past me into the hallway. The woman on the futon stands too, follows. They're both wearing my face, my body, my particular way of moving through space. I'm the last one out of 4C. The door closes behind me with a sound like a page turning.

Finished on 29 April 2026.

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