



MAGIC

WHAT WE KEEP INSIDE

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

ONE	rpenguin
TWO	wordsbylena
THREE	Cora Lindgren
FOUR	Olive Kassen
FIVE	Dario Selo
SIX	Margot Vail
SEVEN	Sammy Hall
EIGHT	Priya Nair

Chapter

ONE

written by rpenguin

The story begins with Nicole the stinky librarian.

Chapter

TWO

written by wordsbylena

The catalogue showed 14,217 books when Nicole started counting. By noon: 14,219. Two volumes had appeared on the meteorology shelf, both bound in green cloth with no call numbers, no acquisition stamps, no record in the system. She made a list: 1. Unauthorised additions to Collection M550-M599 (atmospheric sciences) 2. Identical typeface to 1847 printing of Espy's "Philosophy of Storms" 3. Completely dry despite humidity reading of 73% in east wing 4. Faint smell of copper, not mildew 5. Pages number backwards from 240 to 1 Nicole counted her steps to the reference desk (38), her breaths per minute while shelving the anomalous books in Quarantine (16), the number of times she had smelled copper in the library before today (0). She did not count the small wet footprints leading from the meteorology section to the children's reading area because footprints are not discrete units when they overlap and smudge, when some show five toes and others show seven. The children's librarian, Marcus, kept his area at exactly 68 degrees. He arranged the picture books by color gradient, red to violet, which Nicole respected even though the Dewey decimal system provided perfectly adequate organisation. Marcus never commented on her smell (rosewater, library paste, the cedar soap she used exactly three times per week, unwashed hair on days four through six). This made him her favourite colleague by default, the only one who understood

that some systems matter more than social conventions. She found him rearranging the blue books. He had made four piles on the floor. "Someone donated these," he said, not looking up. "Twenty-six volumes, all identical except for the publication date. Look." Nicole looked. She counted: 26 books, 26 different years spanning 1823 to 1848, 26 times the title "Registry of Precipitate Events" appeared in silver letters. She picked up volume 11 (published 1833) and opened to a random page. The entry read: April 7, 1833. Coordinates 41.8° N, 71.4° W. Atmospheric pressure: normal. Subjects present: 3. Objects displaced: 847 including but not limited to (see appendix): fishing weights, iron nails, window glass, one bronze bell. She turned pages. Every entry followed the same format. Dates, coordinates, numbers, lists of objects. Five entries per book times 26 books equals 130 documented events. She noted that the objects in each entry were always metal, glass, or stone. Never wood, never paper, never fabric. "Where did these come from?" she asked. Marcus pointed to the returns cart. "They were just there this morning. No checkout record. No donor card." Nicole added to her list: 6. 28 unauthorised volumes total (2 meteorology, 26 registry) 7. All pre-1850 publication dates 8. 0 records of acquisition 9. 3 locations of appearance (meteorology shelf, returns cart, unknown origin of footprints) 10. 7 toes on some prints She walked back to Quarantine (38 steps, she counted them again to be sure) and placed the registries beside the meteorology books. Through the window she could see the parking lot: 23 cars at 2:47 PM, which was 6 more than yesterday at the same time, which meant something or nothing. She had learned not to trust patterns until she had counted them at least eight times. The copper smell was stronger near the Quarantine shelf. Nicole opened the meteorology book that numbered its pages backwards and found, on page 187 (which was really page 54 if you counted from the true beginning), a hand-drawn map of the library. Someone had marked 12 locations with small X's. She counted them twice: definitely 12. Three she recognised (meteorology, children's area, returns). Nine remained unidentified. She would need to walk the entire building. The library

had 47,000 square feet across two floors. If she walked at her normal pace (3.1 miles per hour), checking each location carefully, it would take approximately four hours. She had three hours and thirteen minutes until closing. Nicole began counting her steps toward the first X on the map.

Chapter

THREE

written by Cora Lindgren

The concrete was cool through Nicole's shoes. She'd walked this floor ten thousand times, but now her feet paid attention. Every step had texture: the rough patch near the copy machine where someone dropped a bottle of correction fluid in 1997, the smooth worn groove between the water fountain and the restrooms, the slight rise where they'd patched a pipe leak. The first X sat in the staff bathroom. Nicole pushed the door open. The hinges made their usual squeak, pitched at E-flat. She'd checked once with a tuning app. The toilet ran constantly. She'd reported it five times. Maintenance said they'd fixed it. They hadn't. But the toilet wasn't what the map marked. Behind the toilet, where the pipe came through the wall, the grout was darker. Not wet. Not moldy. Just darker, like something had stained it from inside. Nicole crouched down. Her knees cracked. She pressed her palm to the tile. Cold. Then warm. Then cold again, pulsing in seven-second intervals. She timed it on her watch. When she pulled her hand away, her palm smelled like copper. She marked the location in her notebook: Staff bathroom. Wall behind toilet. Temperature oscillation. 7-second cycle. Copper residue. The second X was in the periodicals room. Nicole walked the perimeter first, counting the shelves (22), the subscription boxes (31), the wooden chairs with torn vinyl seats (8). The X marked the microfilm cabinet. She pulled the drawer. The films were arranged

chronologically: local newspapers from 1892 to 1956. She'd organized these herself, during the summer of 2011 when the air conditioning broke and she worked in just her sports bra and everyone complained but she finished the job. Someone had added a new film canister. It sat between April and May 1847. No label. The metal was warmer than room temperature, the kind of warm that comes from a hand, not a machine. Nicole threaded the film into the reader. Her fingers remembered the motion: feed, catch, wind. The images appeared. Newspaper pages. But wrong. The masthead read The Providence Registry of Atmospheric Anomalies. Not a real paper. She'd memorized the names of every Rhode Island newspaper published before 1900. The articles described rain. Except the rain was made of nails. Made of glass shards. Made of small stones with holes drilled through their centers. One article included an illustration. A man standing in a field, arm raised, palm up. Objects falling around him. The caption: Mr. James Wickes demonstrates the collection method. Note the copper basin, which alone proves effective. Nicole's hands were sweating. She never sweated in the library. She kept the temperature at 66 degrees specifically to avoid sweating. She ejected the film and put it back. The canister stuck to her fingers for a moment, like static, but warmer. Seven more X's to check. Nicole walked to the third. Her footsteps sounded wrong. Too loud. She was walking the same as always, heel to toe, weight distributed evenly. But the sound was wrong. The third X was in the Biography section. She counted the shelves down from the window. Fourth from the left. Eye-level. She scanned the spines. One book sat backwards. Spine facing in, pages facing out. She pulled it. The cover had no title. Inside, handwritten text, brown ink, someone's careful slanted cursive. Registry of Keepers. Appointed 1823. A list of names. Addresses. Next to each name, a date and a location. Next to each location, a number. She found her own name. Nicole Ferraro. 43 Carpenter Street. Appointed 2019. Location: Providence Public. Number: 14,219 (current). Her mouth tasted like metal. She'd brushed her teeth four hours ago with the same toothpaste she always used. The taste wasn't coming

from her mouth. It was coming from the air. She looked at the appointment date. 2019. The year she started working here. But she'd never been appointed to anything. She'd filled out an application. Interviewed. Got hired. Standard process. Except she'd been the only applicant. Marcus told her that once, laughing. Said the job posting had been up for eleven months. Nicole counted the remaining X's on the map. Seven. She had two hours and forty-one minutes until closing. Her shift ended at six. But the rule was about sundown. Sundown today was 5:47 PM. Thirteen minutes before her shift ended.

Chapter

FOUR

written by Olive Kassen

Light through the tall windows turned thin and golden, the kind that makes dust visible. Nicole stood between Biography M and Biography N, holding the backwards book while that gold crept lower down the shelves. In summer this light came at eight PM. Now it came at quarter to six, and soon it would come at four thirty, and the people who made small talk about seasons changing never seemed bothered by this, by time being a thing that wouldn't hold still. She put the book back spine-in, the way she'd found it. The fourth X marked the atlas cabinet in Reference. Nicole walked past the circulation desk where Marcus was checking out picture books to a child wearing rain boots. No rain today. Clear sky through every window. She counted the boots: yellow, rubber, sized for maybe age seven. The child's mother stood close by with a tote bag printed with lighthouse illustrations. Fourteen lighthouses. Nicole had counted them before. The atlas cabinet had twelve wide drawers. She opened the fifth. Inside, maps of New England arranged by decade. The 1840s occupied the back left corner. She pulled the Providence map dated 1847. Someone had marked it. Twelve dots in brown ink, placed with enough care that she could tell the hand hadn't shaken. One dot sat exactly where the library now stood, though in 1847 this had been the Turner estate, a house with stables and a garden documented in three separate historical surveys. The other dots spread across the city.

Federal Hill. Fox Point. The waterfront where the hurricane barrier now ran. She recognized two addresses: 43 Carpenter Street, her apartment. And 89 Benefit Street, where Marcus lived. She knew because he'd mentioned it once, explaining why he walked to work even in January. Nicole had never believed in coincidence as a mathematical concept. Patterns required explanation. She checked her watch. 5:23. Twenty-four minutes to sundown. The fifth X was in the basement. Nicole took the back stairs because the front stairs would mean passing Marcus again and he would ask if she was okay and she didn't have an answer prepared. The basement smelled like cardboard and heating ducts. They kept surplus furniture down here, broken chairs waiting for repair, tables missing bolts. The fluorescent lights buzzed at a frequency that made her back teeth ache. The map showed the X near the old furnace. Nicole walked between stacked boxes of discarded encyclopedias. The furnace hadn't worked since 2003. They'd installed new heating but left the old furnace because removing it would mean tearing up the floor. She found the copper basin on top of the furnace, sitting where no one would put a basin unless they meant for it to be found. Wide as both her hands. Deep enough to hold maybe two gallons. The metal had a patina that meant age, the kind of age that came from a century, not from years. Inside the basin: iron nails, window glass, smooth stones with holes drilled through. The same objects from the Registry books upstairs. Except these weren't listed in a book. These were here, real, cold when she touched them. Nicole picked up a nail. Three inches long. Hand-forged. She could tell by the hammer marks. It smelled like rain that hadn't fallen yet. The lights buzzed. Her watch read 5:39. Eight minutes. She heard footsteps on the stairs. Marcus appeared between the encyclopedia boxes carrying his coat and shoulder bag. He stopped when he saw her. "They're closing," he said. "I tried to find you." Nicole held up the nail. Marcus went very still. Not the casual still of someone pausing. The careful still of someone recognizing a thing they'd hoped not to see. "You found the basin," he said. "You know about this." "My landlord told me when I moved in. Said the

apartment came with a job. Said I'd know what it meant when the time came." He set his bag down. "How many locations have you checked?" "Five." "The rest can wait. We need to leave." Through the basement window wells she could see the sky going orange and then pink. Marcus reached for her elbow but Nicole stepped back. "The books," she said. "What happens if books leave after sundown?" "The books are fine," Marcus said. "It's not the books we're keeping in."

Chapter

FIVE

written by Dario Selo

Nicole's stomach did something complex, something that felt like understanding arriving in the wrong order, first the nausea of implication, then the logic to support it. If the books weren't the thing being kept in (and Marcus had said it with that particular emphasis, the way you'd say "it's not the fox we're protecting from the henhouse"), then the library's rule functioned as perimeter rather than protection, and she and Marcus and possibly everyone who'd ever worked here were on the wrong side of the fence. Though that metaphor collapsed under scrutiny because fences had two sides of equal validity, whereas what Marcus was suggesting, "We're the collection," Nicole said. Marcus picked up his bag again, the motion too practiced, like he'd rehearsed leaving quickly. "The long version takes twenty minutes. We have six. Can you trust me enough to walk?" Trust operated on evidence, and the evidence: Marcus had lived at one of the marked addresses, Marcus had known about the basin without her mentioning it, Marcus was afraid in the specific way people get afraid when they've seen a thing before and survived it barely. But evidence also included: Marcus had never commented on her smell, Marcus had let her count things without performing the social dance of reassurance people usually attempted, Marcus was asking instead of commanding which meant he respected her agency even in crisis. "Yes," she said, because the calculus

came out narrowly in favor. They took the stairs fast. Nicole's knees protested (she was thirty-four, not old, but her body kept insisting otherwise). The main floor was nearly empty. The mother with the lighthouse tote bag was gone. One teenager remained at the computers, headphones on, watching something that made his face glow blue. Through the windows the sky was doing that thing it did in October, burning itself out in stages, orange to rose to something purple and hungry. Marcus stopped at the circulation desk and woke the computer. "I'm clocking us both out," he said, typing with the two-finger method that made Nicole irrationally anxious. "If the system thinks we left before sundown, it helps. Not much. But some." "The system knows?" Nicole heard how her voice pitched up at the end, turning statement into question, a habit she'd worked for years to suppress. "The system is how they keep track." Marcus hit enter. "There. 5:44. We have three minutes of buffer if we're lucky." Nicole followed him toward the front entrance. The teenager didn't look up. Behind the reference desk, she could see the atlas cabinet still open, the 1847 map visible from here if you knew to look. Twelve dots. Twelve locations. Twelve what, keepers, Marcus's landlord had called them, which implied something being kept, and if the books weren't the kept thing then what, The front door was locked. Marcus pulled his keys. His hands were shaking just enough that the keys made small jingling sounds, the kind of detail Nicole's brain insisted on cataloging even now. He tried three keys before finding the right one. The lock clicked. He pushed. The door didn't open. "Fire code," Nicole said, because her brain did this, reached for regulations when crisis got too large. "The front door has to open from inside. We can't be locked in." "Fire code assumes normal conditions." Marcus tried the push bar again. Nothing. He moved to the side entrance, the one staff used for smoking breaks Nicole had never taken. Also locked. Also refusing the push bar. Through the window, the sun was half gone. Not set, setting, the verb tense mattered, present continuous, action still in progress. The sky was the color of a bruise starting to yellow at the edges. "Windows," Nicole said. "Third floor. All the ground floor

windows are sealed for climate control. You wrote the memo requesting it." She had. February 2020. Humidity was destroying the periodicals. She'd documented it across seventeen pages with moisture readings and photographic evidence. The teenager pulled off his headphones. "You guys okay?" Marcus turned. His face did something Nicole had never seen it do, rearranged itself into pleasant professional concern, a mask so smooth she could see it was a mask. "All good. Building's just being temperamental. Happens sometimes." The teenager nodded, satisfied by the explanation the way people were always satisfied when you gave them permission not to worry. The sun touched the horizon. The copper smell got stronger.

Chapter

SIX

written by Margot Vail

The smell came from inside the walls. Nicole had assumed air, something diffusing through the HVAC, but no: the source was structural. The drywall or the studs or something older underneath. She pressed her palm to the wall beside the circulation desk. Warm. The same seven-second pulse she'd felt in the bathroom. "We should go upstairs," Marcus said. Still using his pleasant voice for the teenager's benefit. Nicole counted windows on the main floor. Twenty-two. All sealed units, double-pane, installed in 2020 per her specifications. Breaking one would require something heavy. The bronze book-ends on the reference desk weighed maybe eight pounds each. She picked one up. A bust of Emerson. Scalp cool in her hand. "Nicole," Marcus said. The lights changed. Not off. Changed. The fluorescent fixtures in the ceiling stayed on but the quality of light shifted, became thicker, like looking through old bottle glass. The teenager's screen went dark. He tapped it twice, then shrugged and started packing his laptop. Nicole set the book-end down. "Is he safe?" "Define safe," Marcus said. "Will something happen to him if he stays." "Something is already happening. But he's not in the Registry. He doesn't have a number. That usually means he's not part of it." Usually was not a word Nicole trusted. Usually meant probability, not certainty, and probability was just another word for acceptable loss. The teenager slung his backpack over

one shoulder and walked toward the front door. "Wait," Nicole said. He stopped. Polite kid. Maybe seventeen. She'd seen him here before, Tuesdays and Thursdays, always the same computer, third from the left. "The door's stuck," she said. "You'll need to use the emergency exit." She pointed to the west door, the one that led to the parking lot, the one with the crash bar and the alarm that would sound if you opened it except the alarm was electric and maybe when the light changed the alarm also changed. "It'll be loud. But it works." The teenager nodded. He pushed the bar. The door opened. No alarm. He walked through and it closed behind him and Nicole watched him cross the parking lot, his gait unhurried, just a kid going home before dinner. The sun was gone. The last edge dropped below the horizon and the windows went dark and something in the building settled, a sound like weight redistributing. The floorboards creaked in sequence: children's section first, then periodicals, then Biography, a pattern moving toward them. Marcus grabbed her wrist. "Third floor. Now." They ran. Nicole's counting brain kept working without permission: forty-three steps to the stairwell, eighteen stairs to the second floor landing, turn, eighteen more to the third floor. Her breath came hard. She needed to exercise more. She never exercised. Movement without purpose felt wasteful. The third floor smelled like old paper and copper. Stronger up here. The smell had direction now, pulling toward the northwest corner where Local History lived behind a locked door that required staff keys. Marcus unlocked it. Inside: filing cabinets, archival boxes, one table with a microfilm reader covered by a sheet. And maps. Everywhere maps. Pinned to walls, spread on the table, rolled in cubbies. Providence maps spanning three centuries. "What are we doing here," Nicole said. "Waiting it out." Marcus locked the door behind them. "The third floor is higher. Gives us distance." "From what." "Whatever comes in when we can't leave." Nicole walked to the window. It opened. Just a regular window with a regular latch, installed before 2020, before her memo. Outside: the parking lot, the street, the teenager crossing at the light. Everything normal in the visible spectrum. Behind her, something scraped. She

turned. One of the filing cabinets was moving. Not falling. Moving deliberately, sliding six inches to the left, metal feet screeching on linoleum. It stopped. The cabinet beside it moved six inches right. "They're making room," Marcus said. "For what." The temperature dropped. Nicole watched her breath cloud. The third floor had no temperature control, she'd documented that in a different memo, but this wasn't weather. This was something pulling heat out of the air the way certain chemical reactions were endothermic, required energy input, left everything around them cold. The filing cabinets finished moving. Between them: floor space. Just floor. Scarred linoleum with a stain pattern suggesting water damage from the leak in 2008. The floor began to open.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by Sammy Hall

Not like a trapdoor. Not hinges or panels or any mechanical thing you could point to and say, there, that's the method. The floor just stopped being floor in that one spot, became instead a kind of absence that had dimension. Nicole's brain kept trying to supply geometry: circle, square, oval. But the opening wasn't shaped. It was just not-floor in a space where floor had been. Something was coming up through it. She expected a hand. That's what came up through holes in stories, hands or tentacles or something grabbing. Instead: books. They rose slowly, spine-first, like they were being shelved from underneath by someone very careful about placement. Old books, the kind with leather bindings gone soft and dark. They arranged themselves in a stack on the linoleum. Twelve of them. Then the opening closed, floor becoming floor again, and the temperature stabilized at maybe fifty degrees, which was still wrong but less wrong than her breath clouding. Marcus made a sound in his throat that wasn't quite language. "You've seen this before," Nicole said. "Twice. Once when I started in 2015. Once in 2019, the week before you interviewed." Nicole walked over to the books. The top one had no title on the spine. She picked it up, feeling the weight of it, maybe three pounds, pages thick as playing cards. Inside: handwritten entries. Dates, names, numbers. She recognized the format from the Registry books downstairs. Except these entries were about her. October 14, 2019.

Subject Nicole Ferraro. Initial count: 14,217. Stability index: high. Precipitation risk: minimal. Recommended for appointment. "They're reports," she said. "About keepers. The twelve locations on the map, twelve people who got hired to work here, or work at the other branches, or sometimes just live at specific addresses. We maintain counts. Keep the collections stable." Marcus sat down on the floor, back against the filing cabinet. He looked exhausted. "That's the job you didn't know you applied for." Nicole flipped pages. More entries. Other names, other addresses. Some she recognized from the backwards book in Biography. Each entry tracked numbers the way she tracked circulation stats: daily counts, weekly totals, variance reports. And at the bottom of each entry: Objects collected: [number]. Basin deposit: complete/incomplete. "The copper basin," Nicole said. "Every keeper gets one. Usually the landlord explains it, or your supervisor, or you just find it and you know. You put it out when it rains. Collect what falls." "Nails. Glass. Stones." "Other things too, depending on the year. Sometimes coins. Sometimes buttons. Once, in 1923, someone collected teeth. Human teeth." Marcus rubbed his face. "You count what falls. You record it. You keep the collection stable. That's the price." "For what?" "For the library existing. For the books being here. For people getting to read them without, I don't know, without paying in other ways." Nicole looked at the opening where the floor had stopped being floor. "And if we'd left before sundown?" Marcus was quiet for a long time. Then: "I don't actually know. The rule says don't. Every keeper before me said don't. My landlord said the one time someone tried, in 1891, they found him three days later in the Seekonk River, lungs full of rust." Nicole counted her options. She came up with two: believe Marcus, or don't. Believing meant accepting she'd worked here five years collecting numbers for a system she hadn't known existed, that her apartment came with obligations to something that made floors open and temperatures drop and books rise from nowhere. Not believing meant calling Marcus delusional, except the books were real, the cold was real, the opening had been real. She chose door three: collect more data.

"Show me your basin," she said. Marcus pulled his bag over and unzipped it. Inside, wrapped in a wool sweater: a copper basin identical to the one in the basement. He unwrapped it. The bottom was covered in small objects. Nails, glass shards, a button made of bone. "It rained last Tuesday," he said. "Regular rain for everyone else. For me it's this." Nicole picked up the bone button. It was warm. The same warm as the microfilm canister, the backwards book, the wall. Like someone had been holding it. "How many keepers are there right now?" she asked. "In Providence? Twelve. But two haven't filed reports in six months. The system's getting unstable. That's why the books are appearing unauthorized, why the counts don't match." Marcus looked at her. "We need to check the other seven locations tonight." Outside, the sky was full dark.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by Priya Nair

Nicole held the bone button up to the window, trying to catch light that wasn't there anymore. "Tonight is already happening," she said. "We're locked in. You said it yourself." "Locked in the library. Not locked in the building." "That's the same thing." "It's really not." Marcus stood up, knees cracking louder than hers had. "There's a reason Local History is up here. The third floor was added in 1891. After the Seekonk River thing." Nicole waited. Marcus did this sometimes, parceled out information like he was rationing supplies during a siege. "It's not part of the original structure," he said. "Different foundation. Different rules." "That's not how architecture works." "It's not how regular architecture works." He walked to the corner where two walls met and pressed his palm flat against the joint. "The keepers in 1891 were smarter than us. They built an exception into the system." Nicole watched his hand. The wall didn't pulse. No seven-second rhythm, no temperature change. Just wall. "Fire escape," Marcus said. "Exterior stairs. Technically not the building, technically not leaving, technically we can get to the other locations if we climb down three stories in the dark." "That's the worst technicality I've ever heard." "You have a better option?" Nicole looked at the stack of twelve books. The registry entries went back two hundred years. Two hundred years of people collecting rust and glass and teeth, filing reports, keeping counts stable, all

because someone in 1823 decided this was how you paid for the privilege of books. Except nobody had asked her. She'd filled out a W-4 and a direct deposit form, not a contract with whatever made floors open and temperatures drop. "We could just stay here," she said. "Wait until morning." "Two keepers haven't filed in six months. That's two locations where nobody's counting, nobody's collecting. The system compensates. Puts more weight on the remaining ten." Marcus picked up one of the books, flipped it open to a page near the end. "Look at your numbers from last week." Nicole looked. The entry for October 9th showed her daily count at 14,305. She'd recorded 14,219 that morning. The discrepancy was eighty-six books. "They're appearing faster," Marcus said. "Filling in the gaps. And when the collection gets too unstable, " "What?" "I don't know. Nobody knows. It's never gotten that far." Nicole did math in her head. Eighty-six books in five days meant seventeen point two books per day, which extrapolated across ten locations meant one hundred seventy-two unauthorized additions to the system daily, which over six months was thirty-one thousand books that had appeared from nowhere, which meant the library was drowning in volumes that had no acquisition record, no call numbers, no logical place in any catalog. "We'd have noticed," she said. "Would we? You found two yesterday. I found twenty-six. How many did we not find?" Marcus zipped his bag. "The other keepers need to know the count's accelerating. We need to check their basins, confirm they're still collecting, and if they're not, " "We collect for them?" "We do something. I don't know what. But staying here just delays the problem." Nicole counted her heartbeats. Ninety-eight per minute, which was elevated, which made sense given the circumstances. She looked at the window Marcus had said opened. Regular latch, regular hinges, regular glass between her and a three-story drop down a fire escape she'd never noticed because who looked at fire escapes. "If this kills me," she said, "I'm filing a grievance with HR." Marcus almost smiled. "I'll be your witness." The window opened easily. Cold air came in, carrying the smell of October, leaf rot and chimney smoke and

someone's dryer vent pumping fabric softener into the night. Normal smells. The fire escape was iron, painted red once but mostly rust now. Nicole tested the first step. It held. "Where's the closest location?" she asked. "Benefit Street. My apartment. Eight blocks." "And you have a car?" "I walk to work." "Of course you do." Nicole climbed through the window, held the frame, found the second step. The metal was cold enough to sting through her shoes. "After you." Marcus followed her out. Below them: the parking lot, empty except for two cars, both probably staff from the university library next door. Above them: stars. The sky had cleared while they were inside. Nicole counted constellations she actually knew. Three. They started climbing down.

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more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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