

Chapter One: The New Caretaker

The address had been folded and unfolded so many times that the creases had gone soft as cloth. Mara Voss did not need to look at it again. She had it memorized the way she had memorized the sound of her father's voice in his last week, thin and searching, saying a word she had not understood until three months later: *nine*.

114 Bellhaven Row. The Aldermoor.

She stood across the street from it with her duffel bag against her leg and looked up at a building that had clearly once been someone's pride. Six stories of dark red brick, a stone lintel over the door carved with a wreath and the year 1926, tall windows with old wavy glass that caught the late afternoon light and threw it back in soft, imperfect gold. A fire escape zigzagged up one side like a black seam. Ivy had taken over the east corner and nobody had bothered to cut it back.

It was beautiful in the way a photograph of a dead relative is beautiful. You could love it and still feel the cold coming off it.

Mara crossed the street.

The lobby door stuck, then gave all at once, and she nearly stumbled into a space that smelled of floor wax and old radiator heat. A chandelier missing half its bulbs hung over a lobby floored in black and white tile, the pattern worn pale in a path from the door to the elevator, like a river had cut it there over decades of feet. A brass mailbox wall held forty-some little doors, tarnished, a few of them hanging crooked on broken hinges.

"You're the new one." The voice came from behind a half-open office door to her left. A woman appeared, sixty-something,

cardigan the color of a paper bag, glasses pushed up into gray hair. “Marion, is it?”

“Mara.”

“Right. Sorry. I’m Denise, I do the books two days a week for Colvin Property. Mr. Colvin’s expecting you, but he got called away, so it’s just me to get you settled.” She held out a ring of keys so heavy it looked like it belonged to a jailer. “Basement unit’s yours. Through there, down the stairs. There’s a list on the counter of what needs doing first — Frank let some things go toward the end.”

“Frank was the last caretaker.”

“Forty-one years.” Denise said it like a fact she’d recited before and would recite again. “Died three weeks ago Tuesday. Went down to check the boiler and his heart gave out, best anybody can tell. Found him the next morning when the couple in 4B called about no hot water.” She said this without any particular grief, the way you’d report a delayed train. “Building’s been running on prayer since.”

Mara took the keys. They were warm from Denise’s hand and heavier than she expected, an old iron ring threaded with brass and steel in a dozen shapes, some of them worn to a shine, some black with age and never used at all.

“How many units?” Mara asked, mostly to have something to say.

“Forty-two. Six floors, seven to a floor, plus the basement flat, which is yours now.” Denise was already turning back toward her office, the conversation apparently concluded in her mind. “Emergency numbers are on the fridge. Mr. Colvin does walk-throughs Thursdays. Don’t let the pipes in the west stairwell fool you, they clank like the end of the world but they’re original to the building and they’re not going anywhere.”

“Seven to a floor,” Mara repeated, half to herself, because something about the number had already snagged.

Denise didn't hear her, or didn't care to. Her office door clicked shut.

Mara stood alone in the lobby a moment longer. Above her the chandelier's remaining bulbs buzzed faintly, an old sound, insect-like. She thought about her father's hospital room, the machines making their patient beeping, and the way he'd gripped her wrist near the end with a strength she hadn't known was still in him.

Nine, he'd said. Tell them. I'm sorry. Nine.

She had asked him nine what, sorry for what, tell who what, and he had only shaken his head against the pillow, exhausted by the effort of having said anything at all, and two days later he was gone, and the word had gone with him into a silence Mara had spent six months trying to fill.

It was the business card that had done it. Cleaning out his wallet after the funeral — canceling cards, closing accounts, the small brutal admin of death — she had found it tucked behind his driver's license, so old the ink had gone the color of weak tea. *The Aldermoor Apartments, 114 Bellhaven Row, Millhaven.* No name on it. Just the address, and on the back, in handwriting she recognized as her father's young hand, decades younger than the shaking scrawl of his last years, one word.

Sorry.

Her father had never once, in Mara's whole life, mentioned working in Millhaven. He'd talked about the garage he ran two towns over, about the years before that doing odd mechanical work, vaguely, the way people talk about a decade they'd rather skip. Mara had been a small child when they left this city — four years old, no memories of her own, nothing but a hole in the family history that nobody had ever offered to fill and that she, as a child and then a teenager and then a busy adult with her own locksmith shop and her own life, had never thought to ask about.

Now the shop was gone — rent had eaten it alive the year before her father got sick, and grief had finished the job of making her unable to imagine reopening it — and her father was gone, and the only thread she had left to pull was a business card and a word said twice by a dying man.

She had searched the address. Found, instead of answers, a job listing: *Live-in caretaker wanted, The Aldermoor, 114 Bellhaven Row. Experience with mechanical repair and locksmithing preferred. Free housing plus wage.*

It had felt, in the moment she saw it, less like a coincidence and more like a door opening in a wall she hadn't known was there.

Mara picked up her duffel bag and went to find the basement stairs.

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The caretaker's flat was small and low-ceilinged, one bedroom, a kitchenette, a bathroom with a tub stained the color of tea. It smelled like the man who had died here — not unpleasantly, just human, cigarettes long since smoked and the particular mustiness of a bachelor's home that nobody had aired out. A calendar on the wall was still turned to the month Frank Doyle had died in, a red circle around a dentist appointment he never made.

Mara set her bag on the bed and went looking for the fuse box, because that was the kind of thing you did first in a new place, and that was how she found the ledger.

It was wedged behind the water heater in a utility closet just off the kitchen, an old accounting book with a cracked black spine, the pages gone soft and brown at the edges. She almost left it — junk, she told herself, old records nobody wanted — but something about the handwriting on the cover stopped her. *Building Log — F. Doyle*. Under that, in different ink, added later: *and before that, T.V.*

T.V.

Her father's name had been Tomasz Voss. Nobody but his mother, dead thirty years now, had ever called him Tomasz. Everyone else called him Tom.

Mara sat down on the closet floor with the ledger in her lap and did not open it, not yet. She just held it, feeling the weight of it, feeling the cold basement air against the back of her neck, and thought: *seven to a floor.*

Six floors. Forty-two units plus the caretaker's flat. Seven times six was forty-two.

There was no floor with an apartment numbered nine.

She opened the ledger.