

A GOTHIC HOPEPUNK ROMANCE

# The House on Vellantry Street

*A mystery. A disappearance. A woman who refused  
to let the record stay buried.*

Mathew Kracken

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*A mystery. A disappearance. A woman who refused to let the record stay buried.  
And two people who found each other in the middle of all of it.*

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*For anyone who has ever stood at the edge of something dark  
and decided to walk toward the light anyway.*

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## ***A Note on the Story***

This is a gothic romance and a mystery. It takes place in a city where things go wrong and people get lost — which is to say, a real city, in real time. The darkness in these pages is not decorative. Some of it bites. But this is also a story about what people do when they refuse to give up on each other. About the stubborn, sometimes irrational, sometimes revolutionary act of caring when caring costs something. HopePunk is not optimism. Optimism is easy. HopePunk is the harder thing: the choice to keep going anyway, to reach for someone anyway, to believe in something worth building even when the evidence for it is thin. That is what this story is about.

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PART ONE

*The Living and the Almost-Forgotten*

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The house had been empty for eleven years when Maren Voss moved in.

She knew this because the realtor told her, nervously, as though it were a confession rather than a fact. Eleven years. A number long enough to accumulate its own weight. Long enough for the garden to go feral and the gutters to fill with the compressed residue of a decade of autumn and the neighbors on Vellantry Street to stop looking at the windows.

"The previous owner," the realtor said, and then stopped.

"What happened to her?" Maren asked.

"She disappeared." A pause. "The house passed to a nephew in Oregon. He's never visited. He's the one selling."

Maren stood on the front step and looked up at the house. It was a Victorian, narrow and tall, with a widow's walk and bay windows and the particular kind of ornamentation that had once signaled prosperity and now just signaled age. The paint was the color of old bone. The front door was dark green, almost black in the October light.

She had driven four hundred miles to see this house. She had two boxes in her car, a laptop bag, and a coffee that had gone cold somewhere around the state line.

"I'll take it," she said.

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The realtor, whose name was Tim and who had the energy of a man who regretted getting out of bed that morning, handed over the keys in the parking lot of the nearest coffee shop, as though proximity to civilization might soften the transaction.

"You should know," he said, "that the neighbors —"

"Are going to have opinions," Maren said. "Yes."

"Mrs. Aldren at number fourteen has called the county assessor four times about the property."

"I'll introduce myself."

Tim looked at her the way people sometimes looked at Maren: like they were trying to figure out what was wrong with her. She was thirty-one, which was not particularly young. She had dark circles that no amount of sleep

seemed to touch, and she wore the same expression whether she was happy or bracing herself, which made it hard for strangers to tell which state she was in most of the time.

The truth, which she did not share with Tim, was that she had come to Vellantry Street because of a name in a file. Iris Calloway. Disappeared October 14th, eleven years ago. No body. No suspects. No resolution.

Maren was a researcher — not a detective, not a journalist, just a person who could not leave mysteries alone. She had spent the last three years writing a book about disappeared women, about the bureaucratic indifference that allowed cases to go cold while families kept calling the same numbers and getting the same nothing. Iris Calloway was chapter seven.

What Maren had not expected was to find the house for rent. What she had not expected, renting it, was to feel, stepping through that dark green door for the first time, that she was expected.

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The first person she met on Vellantry Street was not Mrs. Aldren.

It was a man sitting on the front steps of number eighteen, across the narrow street and three doors down, eating an apple with the focused attention of someone who had nowhere better to be. He was tall even sitting down, dark-haired, wearing a canvas jacket that had been repaired at both elbows with different-colored thread — one brown, one rust — in a way that suggested either poverty or an interesting indifference to matching.

He looked up when she pulled in. She nodded. He nodded back.

She carried her two boxes inside without help, which she had not needed and had not asked for. But when she came out for her laptop bag, he was standing at the low iron gate, apple gone, hands in his pockets.

"You moved into the Calloway house," he said. Not a question.

"I rented it," Maren said. "Yes."

"I'm Ezra Fenn." He offered a hand. His grip was firm without performing firmness, which she always appreciated. "Maren Voss."

"You're not from here." "No." He considered her. She let him, returning the consideration. He had a scar that started somewhere in his left eyebrow and disappeared into his hairline, and eyes that were a complicated shade of brown-gray that didn't quite commit to either.

"The house hasn't had a tenant in eleven years," he said.

"I'm aware."

"Are you aware of why?"

"Iris Calloway disappeared," Maren said. "October fourteen, eleven years ago. No body found, no cause of death determined, case officially inactive but not closed. The nephew inherited the property and has been paying taxes on it from Oregon ever since." She paused. "I'm writing about it."

Something shifted in his face. Not surprise — something older than surprise. Recognition, maybe, mixed with something she couldn't name yet.

"You should come in for coffee," he said. "There are things you probably don't know."

"There are always things I don't know," Maren said. "That's generally the problem."

Ezra Fenn's house was the opposite of the Calloway house in almost every visible way. Where number twenty-three was tall and closed and holding something back, number eighteen was lower-ceilinged, warm, cluttered in the way of someone who read constantly and had arrived at a private system of organization that looked like chaos to outsiders. There were plants in every window. There were books in stacks on the floor and books on shelves and at least one book that appeared to be living in the kitchen for no clear reason.

There was a dog, large and gray-muzzled, who rose from a rug near the radiator, assessed Maren without urgency, and lay back down.

"That's Fig," Ezra said. "Short for Figment. He was a stray. I thought he might be imaginary for the first two weeks." He filled the kettle. "What do you already know about Iris?"

"I know what's in the file," Maren said. "Sixty-four years old. Retired librarian. Lived alone since her husband died, three years before she disappeared. No children. A sister in Quebec who gave a statement and then went silent. No close friends who came forward, which the case notes treat as suspicious but which I think just means she was private." She sat down at the kitchen table, which was pine and scarred with years of use and had a drawer that didn't quite close. "The investigating officer was a man named Dressler who retired six months after the case went cold, and whose notes are —"

"Inadequate," Ezra said.

"I was going to say insulting, but yes." She looked at him. "How do you know that?"

"Because Iris was my neighbor for eight years," he said. "And because I was the one who reported her missing."

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He told her what the file didn't contain, which was the texture of a person.

Iris Calloway had been, by Ezra's account, a woman of fierce opinions and genuine kindness, which is a combination rarer than it should be. She had read widely and argued cheerfully and kept a garden that was the opposite of everything the garden was now — a precise and joyful thing, full of roses she'd named and herbs she cooked with and a small fountain that attracted the birds she catalogued in a notebook she carried in her cardigan pocket.

She had also, in the last year before she disappeared, been afraid.

"Afraid of what?" Maren asked.

"That's what I don't know." Ezra wrapped both hands around his mug. "She was not a frightened person by nature. She had lived alone for three years after Gerald died and she was fine. Better than fine. She told me once that solitude suited her, that she'd had to be quiet her whole life and now she got to simply be quiet, and it was a gift." He paused. "But something changed. She started checking the locks. She stopped going out after dark. She asked me once, almost casually, whether I thought a person could be followed without knowing it."

"What did you say?"

"I said I thought it was possible, and I asked why she was asking." His jaw tightened slightly. "She said she was writing a novel. Which was not true. Iris had never written a novel and had no interest in doing so."

"She was protecting you," Maren said.

"That's what I think now. At the time I accepted it too easily." His voice was level, but there was an old fault line in it that Maren recognized. Guilt that had long since calcified into something he carried rather than bled from. "The last time I saw her was October thirteenth. She brought over a pot of soup. She said she was making too much and would I take some."

"Did she seem frightened that day?"

He was quiet for a moment. "She seemed like she was saying goodbye." He looked up. "I didn't recognize it as that until afterward."

"And Dressler," Maren said.

"Dressler decided she had wandered off voluntarily. A woman of sixty-four, in good health, clear-minded, who had lived in the same house for thirty years — he decided she had simply walked away from her life. He spent, I

believe, four days on it."

"Six," Maren said. "I counted."

"There's a river two miles from here." "I know." She had read that too. Searched. Never found anything.

"There are also woods. And there is the question of who Iris might have been afraid of that she didn't want me to know about." He looked at her steadily. "And there is the question of what, exactly, you're planning to do about any of this."

"I'm planning to find out what happened to her," Maren said.

"You're a writer."

"I'm a writer who finds things out." She met his gaze. "I'm good at it."

He studied her for a long moment. Fig stirred by the radiator and resettled. Outside, the October wind pushed through the street and the tall house across the road held its silence, as it had held its silence for eleven years.

"All right," Ezra Fenn said. "Then I'll help you."

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PART TWO

***What the House Knows***

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The house on Vellantry Street did not creak in the way of haunted houses in stories. It did something subtler. It held its breath.

Maren noticed it the second night, lying awake at two in the morning with the particular insomnia of a new place, listening to the unfamiliar grammar of an old building. The Calloway house was not noisy. But it had a quality of attention. A stillness that felt less like emptiness and more like waiting.

She had told herself, driving here, that this was a professional trip. Research. Documentation. She had talked to the families of forty-three disappeared women and she had learned, in that process, a precise discipline about not bringing herself into the story. You listened. You recorded. You tried to find what had been left out of the official account, because something was always left out, because official accounts were made by people who wanted cases to close, not people who wanted to understand them.

But she was sleeping in Iris Calloway's house. In Iris Calloway's bedroom, because it was the only room with a bed.

The room was empty of personal items — the nephew had cleared it out — but not of presence. There was a bookshelf that still held a dozen volumes someone had overlooked: a bird identification guide, two P.D. James novels, a well-worn copy of *Middlemarch*, a book of Scottish poetry with a receipt from a bookshop as a bookmark, dated nine years before Iris disappeared. There was a mark on the wall by the window, at sitting height, where the paint was worn thin — where someone had sat, often and for a long time, looking out at the street below.

Maren sat in that spot on the second night. She could see the lit window of number eighteen from there. Ezra's kitchen. He was a late-night person too. She could see the shape of him moving, the warm light, Fig occasionally crossing the frame.

She thought: *What were you afraid of, Iris?*

The house held its breath.

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She started, as she always started, with what was documented. The police file. The newspaper coverage, which was thin — a four-paragraph item in the local paper, a brief follow-up six months later when the case was shelved. The obituary the sister had placed, two years after the disappearance, which declared Iris dead without a body and used the word *beloved* twice and the phrase *at peace* once, in the way people used that phrase when they needed to believe it.

Then she went wider.

Iris had worked at the Harwick Public Library for twenty-two years before retiring. Maren drove to the library on the third day and introduced herself to the head librarian, a compact woman named Delia with reading glasses on a beaded chain and the manner of someone who had absorbed a great deal of information about the town and had strong opinions about most of it.

"Iris," Delia said, and there was a pause before she continued that told Maren this was not a neutral topic. "You knew her," Maren said. "I was her colleague for twelve years." Delia set down the catalog she'd been holding. "I knew her well enough to know that she didn't just walk away from her life."

"Did you tell the police that?"

"I told Officer Dressler that three times." Her tone was dry and precise. "He told me that people surprise you. Which is a thing men say when they don't intend to do any more work."

Maren liked Delia immediately. "What do you think happened?"

"I think Iris found something she wasn't meant to find. She was a researcher. Even in retirement. She had a project — something local. Historical, she said, but I'm not sure the historical part was entirely true." Delia glanced toward the back of the library. "About eight months before she disappeared."

"Do you know if she spoke to anyone else about it?"

"There was one person." Delia hesitated. "A man who came in on the same day Iris did, every week for most of that year. They had coffee together once — I saw them across the street. Late fifties, early sixties. Silver hair, always wore a tie. Drove a dark blue car — I noticed it because he always parked illegally and never got a ticket, which annoyed me." She paused. "After Iris disappeared, he never came back."

The Harwick Historical Society occupied the upper floor of a building that also housed an insurance broker and, inexplicably, a shop that sold only things made of cork. It was open Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturday mornings, staffed by volunteers with a collective enthusiasm for local records that Maren found genuinely moving.

The volunteer on Thursday morning was a man in his eighties named Clarence who had been born in Harwick and had opinions about every decade of its history and was delighted to share them with someone who had a notebook and a willingness to listen.

He pulled records. Land transfers, 1965 through 1980. Development approvals. Meeting minutes from the city council, dense, euphemistic, and occasionally accidentally revealing.

Maren sat with them for four hours. What she found, slowly and then all at once, was a pattern.

Between 1967 and 1975, forty-seven properties on the east side of Harwick had been acquired — some through eminent domain, some through what the records called "negotiated purchase" and what the circumstances suggested was something closer to coercion — by a holding company called Pallister Land Associates. The stated purpose varied: a road, a park, an industrial development. In most cases, the stated purpose never materialized. The land sat empty for two to four years and then was sold, at a substantial profit, to private developers.

The name associated with Pallister Land Associates, as its registered agent, was a man named Gordon Crale. Gordon Crale had died twelve years ago. He had been a prominent local businessman, a donor to the public library, a member of the city council for three terms. His obituary was long and warm and contained no mention of Pallister Land Associates.

He had a son. David Crale. Currently a city planning commissioner. Approximately sixty years old. Silver hair.

\* \* \*

She called Ezra from the parking lot.

"David Crale," she said when he answered.

A beat. "I know that name."

"Planning commissioner. His father ran a holding company that spent a decade and a half stealing property from east side families — including possibly your grandmother."

"Yes." His voice was careful and very quiet. "I know exactly who David Crale is."

"The records are incomplete — some of the most important documents are missing from the county files, which could be coincidence and could be not. But what's there is enough to establish the pattern." She was walking toward her car, not quite able to stand still. "If Iris found this — if she was building a case —"

"Then someone with a great deal to protect would have had reason to want that stopped," Ezra said. His voice had a different quality now. Like a door that had been closed for a long time, opening.

"I need to find her notebook," Maren said. "The one she carried in her cardigan pocket. Ezra. Who was the first officer at the scene? Who arrived before Dressler?"

This pause was the longest.

"The morning after I called it in," he said slowly. "There was a car parked on the street. Dark blue." His voice had gone very still. "I assumed it was a neighbor. I didn't write it down."

Maren stood in the parking lot of the Harwick Historical Society in the October cold and felt the case, which had been a collection of separate pieces, begin to resolve into a shape.

"Go home," she said. "Lock your door. I'm on my way back."

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PART THREE

## *The Weight of Kept Things*

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She did not, in the event, go directly home.

She drove to the east side of Harwick, to a tidy bungalow with a light in the front window and a porch that held two chairs and a very healthy rosemary plant. Clarence had given her the address without being asked, which told Maren something about where Clarence stood on all of this.

The woman who answered was small and upright and had the kind of face that had been through considerable weather and come out the other side with its essential nature intact. She looked at Maren with neither welcome nor suspicion — the look of a person who had learned to wait before deciding.

"Mrs. Okonkwo? My name is Maren Voss. I'm a writer. I'm researching what happened to a woman named Iris Calloway, and I think it may be connected to something that happened to your family a long time ago. I don't want to take up your evening. I just wanted to ask whether you would be willing to talk."

A very long pause.

"Come in," said the woman. "I've been waiting for someone to ask."

\* \* \*

Her name was Eleanor Okonkwo, and she had been twenty-four when the men from Pallister Land Associates came to her parents' door.

"They were polite," she said, pouring tea with the calm of someone describing something they had described in their own mind ten thousand times. "Very polite. They explained to my father that the city required the property for a road-widening project. They had papers. My father could read perfectly well — he was an engineer — and he read the papers carefully and he said the price they were offering was less than half what the property was worth."

"What did they say?"

"They said it was a fair price given the circumstances." She set down the teapot. "The circumstances were not specified. But my father understood them. This was 1969."

"Did your family contest it?"

"My father consulted a lawyer. The lawyer told him it was a valid eminent domain proceeding. The lawyer was wrong — we found that out later, much later, but by then the house was gone and the road never came and the land was sold to a developer who built condominiums." She looked at her hands. "My father spent the rest of his life

believing he had failed to protect his family. He died believing that. He had not failed. He had been stolen from. But he never knew how to hold those two things apart."

Maren wrote, and listened, and felt the weight of it.

"A woman came to see me," Eleanor said after a moment. "About a year before you're describing. An older woman. A librarian, she said — retired. She had documents. She was building a record of what Pallister had done, house by house, family by family." A pause. "She was also frightened. I could see that, even though she tried not to show it."

"That was Iris," Maren said.

"I thought so, when I heard she had disappeared." Eleanor's voice was steady and very sad. "I thought: they got to her. I thought it, and then I didn't know what to do with the thought. I had no evidence. I was an old woman with a story about something that happened fifty years ago." She met Maren's eyes. "What are you going to do with what you find?"

"I'm going to write it down," Maren said. "All of it. Every family. Every house. Every name. And I'm going to make sure it can't be buried again."

Eleanor looked at her for a long time. Then she stood and went to a cabinet in the corner and removed, from behind a stack of folded tablecloths, a small notebook with a floral cover and an elastic band around it.

"She trusted me with it," Eleanor said. "Now I'm trusting you."

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She drove back to Vellantry Street with the notebook in her bag and both hands very steady on the wheel.

There was a dark blue car parked on the street. Not in front of number twenty-three. In front of number eighteen.

Maren pulled past it and parked at the end of the block and sat for a moment, thinking. Then she got out and walked back to number eighteen and knocked.

Ezra answered quickly. Behind him, in the kitchen doorway, stood a man with silver hair and a tie and the expression of someone who had been in the middle of something and had just recalculated.

"Maren," Ezra said. His voice was measured. "This is David Crale. He came by to welcome you to the neighborhood."

The welcoming was clearly not what was happening.

Maren looked at David Crale. He was sixty or so, well-built, with the kind of steady gray eyes that had probably served him well in rooms full of people who could be impressed by steadiness. He was looking at her bag.

"Ms. Voss," he said. "I understand you've been asking around town about the Calloway case."

"That's right," Maren said pleasantly. "I've been spending time at the Historical Society. And speaking to some of the families affected by the Pallister Land Associates transactions. I understand your father was connected to that company."

Something behind his eyes tightened, almost imperceptibly. "My father had many business interests."

"Of course." She looked at him directly. "Mr. Crale, I'm going to be honest with you. I'm a researcher and I document things carefully. Whatever the record shows, that's what goes in the book." She paused. "Is there anything you'd like to tell me, for the record?"

A long silence. Fig appeared at Ezra's side and regarded David Crale with his large, calm eyes.

"I think," David Crale said, "that you should be careful about the conclusions you draw from incomplete records."

"I appreciate that advice," Maren said. "Goodnight, Mr. Crale."

She held his gaze until he moved. He left without rushing, which she gave him credit for, and got into the dark blue car and drove away. She watched until the taillights were gone.

"Are you all right?" she asked Ezra.

"I'm fine." He stepped back to let her in. "He was trying to find out how much you know." He looked at her bag. "He knows you've been in the archive."

"I found Eleanor Okonkwo," she said. She set her bag on the kitchen table. "She gave me Iris's notebook."

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They sat at the pine table with the notebook between them and read it together.

Iris Calloway had been methodical and precise — of course she had been, thirty years in archives — and the notebook was dense with names, dates, addresses, cross-references. Property records, meeting minutes, testimony from families. She had traced seventeen transactions in detail, connecting them to Pallister Land Associates and, through careful chain-of-title research, to Gordon Crale.

In the final pages of the notebook, she had noted something else.

*He knows I've been looking. D.C. — seen outside twice this week. Spoke to E. Fenn to say he should be watchful. Did not tell him why. Don't want to bring him into this.*

Maren looked up. Ezra was reading the same passage.

"She was protecting you," Maren said.

"Yes." His voice was rough. "She brought me soup and she was saying goodbye and she was protecting me."

"She was also giving you time," Maren said. "She came to you the night before she disappeared. She knew what she was going to do."

"What did she do?"

Maren turned to the last page.

*The full record is with E.O. The notebook alone isn't enough — it's a guide, not proof. The proof is in the original documents, which are in the county clerk's office, room 114, file cabinet 7, back of the third drawer. They were misfiled in 1972 and have never been found. They are still there.*

*If something happens to me: find someone who will look.*

Maren sat back. "She didn't run," she said. "She left. She planned it. She went somewhere safe and she left everything in place for someone to find." She looked at Ezra. "She's alive."

The word sat in the kitchen.

"She would be seventy-five," he said slowly.

"The sister in Quebec gave a statement and went silent." Maren was already reaching for her phone. "What if the silence wasn't grief? What if the silence was because Iris was there?"

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PART FOUR

## Coming Back

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CHAPTER 10

The county clerk's office was open weekdays until four. Maren was there at nine the following morning.

The clerk returned twenty minutes later with a folder that had, on its tab, the faded label of a zoning variance request from 1972. Inside it were twenty-three original documents.

Transfer agreements signed under conditions that clearly constituted duress. Internal memos from Pallister Land Associates discussing how to "manage" objections from property owners. A letter from a city official to Gordon Crale, using first names, describing how the eminent domain proceedings could be structured to limit appeal rights. And, most damning, a handwritten note in Gordon Crale's handwriting: *Once they're out, they won't be back. That's the point.*

She photographed every page. She called her editor from the parking lot. Then she called a lawyer she knew in the city, who specialized in civil rights and had strong feelings about property theft dressed up as municipal development.

Then she sat in her car for a few minutes and looked at the October sky, which was the particular blue of October skies in the northeast — thin and clear and cold and very bright — and felt the specific feeling of something that has been hidden for a long time coming into the light.

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She reached the sister. It took two days and a letter she sent to an address in the Quebec public directory — a real letter, handwritten, because some things needed to be said by hand.

The phone call came on a Wednesday evening.

"You found the notebook," the sister said. Her name was Ruth and she was seventy and her voice had the quality of someone who had been carrying something for a long time. "Eleanor Okonkwo had it," Maren said. "Iris left it with her." A pause. "Is she all right?" "Eleanor? Yes. She's —" "Iris," Ruth said. "Is my sister all right?"

"I don't know," Maren said. "I was hoping you did."

The pause this time was longer. "She's here," Ruth said finally. "She has been here for eleven years."

Maren closed her eyes.

"She left," Ruth said, "because she believed they would hurt her if she stayed. She was not running away. She was protecting the record. She needed it to survive long enough for someone to find it." Her voice was steady and sad and proud in equal measure. "She still believes that decision was correct."

"I found it."

"Yes." A breath. "She is going to want to speak to you."

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The call with Iris Calloway lasted three hours.

She was, as Ezra had said, a woman of fierce opinions and genuine kindness. She was also seventy-five and alive and living in a small apartment in Montreal with a garden on the balcony and a library card and eleven years of accumulated anger that was still, somehow, clean — more like a held flame than a grudge.

She had left because she had been cornered and outnumbered and alone. She had stayed away because she had no evidence that it was safe to come back.

"I didn't know if it would happen in my lifetime," she said.

"It's happening now," Maren said.

"The families," Iris said. "That's what matters. Not me. Not Crale. What matters is that those families get — not the houses back, that's not possible, but the truth. The record corrected. Their fathers' names cleared."

"That's what the book will do," Maren said.

"You'll need more than the book." Iris's voice was practical. "You'll need the lawyer. The original documents. Testimony from seventeen families." A pause. "Are you prepared for complicated feelings?"

"I've been doing this for three years," Maren said. "Complicated feelings are most of the job."

She could hear Iris smiling. "Tell me about Ezra. Is he well?"

"He's well." Maren looked across the street at the lit window of number eighteen. "He's been waiting for this too."

"He was always the best neighbor I ever had," Iris said. "I hated leaving without telling him. I hated it more than anything else." A pause. "When this is resolved — when it's safe — I'd like to come back."

"I think you should," Maren said. "I think a lot of people would like to see you."

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She told Ezra that night.

She had knocked and he had opened the door and looked at her face and said nothing, just stepped back and let her in, and she sat at the pine table and told him all of it.

He sat very still while she talked. His hands were flat on the table. When she got to the part about Iris being alive, in Montreal, on a balcony with a garden, he closed his eyes and kept them closed for a moment that she did not interrupt.

When he opened them, there were no tears, but there was something in his face that was more honest than tears — a kind of release, a long-held breath finally let go.

"She's all right," he said. "She's all right."

He looked at the table. "I've been angry at myself for eleven years."

"I know." She had heard it in his voice on the first day. "You did what you could with what you had. She knew that. She chose to protect you, which means she trusted you." She paused. "She asked about you. She said you were the best neighbor she ever had."

He made a sound that was almost a laugh. Fig came and put his head on Ezra's knee, and Ezra put his hand on the dog's head and sat for a moment in the particular quality of silence that follows relief.

"What happens now?" he said.

"The lawyer files on Monday. The book will take another year. I'll be here for most of it — there are seventeen families to interview, and the documents need to be authenticated." She looked at him. "I'll be here for a while."

"Good," he said. Simply, without elaboration, in the way of someone who means the thing they say.

She looked at him across the pine table, in the warm kitchen that smelled of coffee and dog and old books, with October pressing against the windows and the tall house across the street finally, after eleven years, not quite holding its breath.

"Ezra," she said. "I think I should tell you something."

"All right."

"When I first drove here, I was thinking only about the work. I hadn't considered the possibility that I would —" She stopped. "I don't do this. I don't tell people things like this."

"I know," he said. "You're telling me anyway."

"Yes." She looked at him. "I think that might be significant."

He reached across the pine table and put his hand over hers — unhurried, deliberate, warm.

"I've been watching you go in and out of that house for three weeks," he said, "finding things nobody found for eleven years, and arguing with my bookshelves when you disagree with them, and feeding Fig as though you've known him for years. I have had extensive thoughts about the significance of that."

"Extensive thoughts," she said.

"Would you like to hear them?"

She looked at him — at the repaired elbows and the scar through his eyebrow and the particular way he held himself, like someone who had stood in hard weather and decided not to be changed by it into something smaller — and she felt, fully and without flinching, the thing she had been carefully not naming for three weeks.

"Yes," she said. "I would."

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PART FIVE

## *What Gets Built*

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The motion was filed on Monday. By Wednesday, the local paper had the story. By Friday, the regional wire had picked it up.

David Crale issued a statement through a lawyer calling the allegations "a mischaracterization of legitimate historical business practices." The city planning commission placed his participation in active projects under review.

Maren gave a single interview, factual and careful, citing documents.

She spent most of the week on the phone, talking to families. It was hard work, the hardest kind. Some of the people she called had never spoken about what had happened to anyone outside their families. Some of them had spent decades believing that their parents had failed, that they had accepted bad deals because they were weak or naive, and unlearning that belief — even when presented with evidence — was not something that happened in a phone call. Maren knew this from forty-three other cases and she was patient with it, because patience was what it required and because the people on the other end of the phone deserved patience.

Some of them wept. Some of them were angry in a way that had nowhere clean to go and Maren held the phone and let them be angry. Some of them said: *I always knew. I told them. Nobody listened.*

She wrote it all down.

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Ezra drove her to three of the interviews in person — the families who lived within an hour of Harwick. He was quiet in the car and present in the rooms. He introduced himself when appropriate and did not insert himself when it wasn't, and at one point, with an elderly man named Thomas Washington who had been eight years old when his family was displaced and had spent seventy years carrying the small specific wound of it, Ezra simply sat beside him while he talked, and the sitting-beside was more useful than anything Maren could have said.

In the car afterward she told him that.

"My grandmother did the same thing for people," he said. "I watched her do it. I think I learned it from her." He was quiet for a moment. "She would have wanted to know about this."

"I know." She reached over and put her hand on his without looking away from the road.

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Iris Calloway came home in December.

It was not dramatic. There was no press, no ceremony. Maren had arranged it that way deliberately — Iris had been invisible for eleven years by necessity and she got to choose, now, what visibility looked like and when.

She came on a Tuesday. Ruth drove her from Montreal. She was small and white-haired and wore a cardigan with a pocket in which she immediately put a new notebook, and she stood in the doorway of number twenty-three for a long time before she went in.

Maren stood on the sidewalk and let her.

When Iris finally turned around, she looked at Maren with an expression of deep and unguarded feeling. "You fixed the garden gate," she said. "It was hanging," Maren said. "I always meant to fix it." Iris looked at the street. Then she looked at number eighteen, where the lights were on. "Is he home?" "He's been home all day."

Iris nodded, once, and crossed the street. Maren watched her knock. Watched the door open. Watched Ezra stand in the doorway for a moment and then step out onto the front step and put his arms around her, and she leaned into it, this old woman who had been missing for eleven years, and Fig appeared behind them and pressed his large gray head against her knee.

Maren sat on the front step of number twenty-three and watched the December street and felt the cold and felt the thing that she had come here for — the truth, the record, the names — and also this other thing she had not come here for at all, this feeling of being somewhere that was hers in a way she hadn't had a place that was hers for a very long time.

She was still sitting there when Ezra's front door opened again.

"Maren," Iris called across the street. "Come inside. There's soup."

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## FINAL CHAPTER

The book took fourteen months. It was called *The Properties*, and it documented what Gordon Crale and Pallister Land Associates had done to seventeen families over a period of eight years, and what had happened to the one woman who had tried to bring that record to light, and what had come of it.

It was not a comfortable book. It was not meant to be.

The city of Harwick issued a formal apology to the seventeen families and their descendants — a thing that had never happened before. A reparations fund was established, inadequate but real, a first step rather than a resolution. David Crale resigned from the planning commission and was under investigation for obstruction of justice. The city's cold-case unit, under pressure from the lawyer and the book and the families and the regional press, had reopened the file.

None of this was sufficient. Maren said that in the introduction, plainly. She said that a formal apology was not a house returned. She said that a reparations fund was not a life restored. She said that Iris Calloway had spent eleven years in exile, not because she was wrong, but because she was right and was a woman and was alone and had been outmatched by people with more power.

She also said this: that the seventeen families had been believed. That the record had been corrected. That their fathers and mothers and grandparents had been wronged, and that the wrongness had been documented, and that documentation mattered — not as a substitute for justice, but as the thing that made justice possible to pursue.

She said: *this is not enough, and it is also not nothing.*

\* \* \*

The night the book was published, Maren stood in Iris's garden — restored now, the roses named again, the fountain running — with a glass of wine and the feeling of something completed and something else, simultaneously, beginning.

Ezra came and stood beside her. They had been beside each other for fourteen months in a way that was easy and complicated and real in the way of things that have been tested rather than just felt. There had been hard conversations and long silences and more than one evening when the weight of the material pressed down on both of them and all they could do was sit with it. There had also been the other kind of evenings. The ones where Fig fell asleep across both their feet and the books were open and the kitchen was warm and the street outside was quiet.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

She considered the question seriously. "Like I did something worth doing," she said. "And like there are forty more things worth doing." She looked at him. "Like I don't want to leave."

"Then don't." He looked at her. "The next forty things worth doing — some of them could be here. The book you write in the office upstairs, which has good light in the morning. The things I'm working on, which could use another person who is very good at finding what's been hidden." He paused. "And some of them could just be this. Being here. With Fig and the garden and the street." Another pause. "And me, if that's something you want."

She looked up at the house on Vellantry Street — at the widow's walk and the bay windows and the dark green door, which was not the color of old bone anymore but the color of something alive.

"I think," she said carefully, "that you should know something." "Tell me." "I've been in this house for fourteen months and I have never once felt like it was just somewhere I was staying." She looked at him. "I've felt like it was somewhere I was becoming." She paused. "I don't know if that's the house or Harwick or the work or —"

"Or?" he said.

She looked at him in the December dark, in Iris's garden, with the window of number eighteen glowing warm across the street.

"You know what the or is," she said.

"Yes," he said. "But I'd like to hear it."

So she told him.

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*Iris Calloway still lives on Vellantry Street.*

*She is working on a second record — this one covering the east side of Harwick from 1945 to 1965, which is, she says, worse.*

*Eleanor Okonkwo came to the book launch. She and Iris sat together for three hours and talked without stopping.*

*Fig still puts his head in Maren's lap.*

*The garden is very good this year.*

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#### A NOTE ON HOPEPUNK

HopePunk is sometimes misunderstood as optimism — as stories where everything turns out fine and the heroes win and the darkness was never really that dark. That's not what it is.

HopePunk is the insistence on hope in full knowledge of the darkness. It is the choice, made deliberately and at real cost, to believe in something worth building even when the evidence is thin and the people with power would rather you didn't. It is the act of care as a form of resistance. The community that forms in the wreckage. The person who says *I will not let this be forgotten* and means it and does it.

Iris Calloway held her notebook for eleven years and trusted that someone would come. Maren Voss drove four hundred miles toward a mystery she couldn't leave alone. Ezra Fenn fixed the broken things he could fix and waited for the ones he couldn't. Eleanor Okonkwo kept the notebook behind the tablecloths and trusted.

That is HopePunk. Not that the world is safe. Not that justice is easy or quick or sufficient. Just that people keep showing up for each other anyway, and that this matters, and that it is enough to keep going.

THE HOUSE ON VELLANTRAY STREET • MATHEW KRACKEN • ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

## THE HOUSE ON VELLANTRY STREET

*Maren Voss rents the house of a woman who disappeared eleven years ago. Her neighbor across the street was the one who reported her missing – and has carried the weight of it ever since. Neither of them expects what they find.*

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*A gothic HopePunk romance about justice, memory, the people who refuse to let things stay buried, and two strangers who find each other in the middle of all of it.*

MATHEW KRACKEN