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The Midnight Archive

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Introduction

The last patron left with a squeak of rubber soles and a sheepish wave toward the front desk, the gesture swallowed whole by the high, dim vault of the National Archive of City & State Records. The building's bones were brick and old iron, a city block of memory cooled to a steady sixty-eight degrees by industrial humming in the basement. At this hour, the place belonged to the fluorescent lights and the dust motes they animated, to the mechanical sighs of the climate control and the soft slap of paper against paper. It belonged, too, to Mara Ellis—who preferred it that way.

She wheeled the night cart into Processing, palms flattening on the handle to slow the momentum as it bumped over a fissure in the linoleum. The cart was stacked with the day's donations and transfers: bound volumes with cracked spines, bankers' boxes with sharpied descriptions, one oversized envelope sealed with tape and optimism. A bright orange gloved hand on a laminated sign above the workstation reminded staff of the first principle: Do no harm. Mara had written that line in pencil a decade ago when she started, and every time she read it, she felt the small constriction in her chest ease. There were rules here. The rules made sense.

She tugged on nitrile gloves and flicked on the task lamp, bending the light into a narrow cone that sliced through the gloom. Intake packets waited like passports: accession forms, donor agreements, chain-of-custody slips. She organized the pile by material type—paper, photographic, mixed—and by the kind of urgency that didn't appear on any form: the smell of mildew, the sight of duct tape on a nineteenth-century ledger, the raisin-like curl of heat-warped plastic. Each item would get a provisional accession number, a quick spreadsheet entry, and a triage decision—box it, flatten it, isolate it, or, in the rarest and most depressing cases, refuse it.

At the bottom of the stack, a blue banker's box had slipped half off the cart and hung there, held by a single strand of packing tape. She righted it and frowned. The label on the lid read, in a precise blocky hand, "Permits — Midtown 1988-1992." Below that, a final line: "Drop Box." She checked the intake log on the clipboard. The last security note, jotted by a guard with a fondness for arrows and double underlining, said: Anonymous drop in vestibule, 7:46 p.m. Includes one box. No contact info.

Dead drops into the Archive weren't unheard of. People were embarrassed by their attics, or angry at their exes, or suddenly anxious to be rid of something paper and heavy with implication. But this box felt wrong before she even cut the tape. The weight was off—not the dense, even heft of bound permits, but something irregular shifting within. She slid the scalpel under the tape and severed it in a smooth pull, feeling the satisfaction that came from resistance giving way. The lid lifted and

released a scent that prickled the back of her throat: dry paper, old glue, and something faintly acidic like citrus gone bitter.

Inside, manila folders filled half the box, bulging with what looked like carbon copies—thin, slippery, pale-blue ghosts of official forms. The other half was taken up by a single object wrapped in brown kraft paper, string tied tight in three loops, each knot identical, each end clipped flush. She stared at the knots longer than she meant to, irrationally certain she had seen fingers make that exact loop and tug, years ago, at a faded kitchen table smeared with newspaper.

Mara logged the box as an unscheduled donation, assigned it a provisional accession number, and snapped a barcode onto a clean sheet protector tacked to the inside of the lid. She leaned the manila folders against one side of the box and lifted the wrapped object out. The weight sank into her palms. The string had been tied by someone who knew what happened when string wasn't tied properly: papers splaying, time unraveled. She slid the scalpel under one knot and breathed through the tautness as it gave.

Brown paper fell away. The thing underneath wasn't a municipal permit ledger. It was a ledger, yes, but not city-issued. The cover was black calfskin, smooth along the raised bands of a hand-sewn spine, nicked at the corners. No title. No stamp. No municipal seal. When she opened it, the paper whispered—a rich, dull whisper of rag content and age—and the task lamp lit up a watermark only when she bent the top sheet to the exact angle where light diffused through the fiber: a faint oval, a name she didn't recognize. Not the mill that usually supplied the city in those years.

She turned to the first page and felt, as if the building itself leaned closer, the sense that she had crossed an invisible line.

The entries were laid out in a fastidious hand—columns ruled with a draftsman's care: Date, Location, Handler, Amount, Reference. Every line was complete. No smudges, no cross-outs, no drift in the ink as if a pen had been lifted to think and then returned. And yet, beneath the order, something coiled. The Left Start capitalized in ways a finance officer would, but some of the words weren't financial. "Transit," "Escort," "Removal." In the Reference column, there were short alphanumeric strings that didn't match any cataloging system she knew. On the third page, halfway down, a notation pinched at her skin like cold air.

Project Ember. 10/12/89. Harbor H. 2—M.E.

She caught herself leaning closer until the lamp's heat warmed her cheek. M.E. The initials were common enough, but they didn't land like a coincidence. The name that filled out those letters fit inside her like a secret notched into her ribs: Michael Ellis. Municipal Records Manager, City and State. Her father.

She glanced up at the wall clock—a functional beige circle that ticked too loudly in an empty room—and then back at the script. The E had the same flourish he'd used signing field trip permission slips and the occasional check, an honest little loop at the end that rescued the formality from itself. Her hand rose halfway to her mouth and stopped in midair. Heat prickled across her scalp.

"Okay," she said softly, to the ledger or to the room. Her voice didn't sound like her. "Okay."

Mara made herself swallow the first urge: to keep reading until the story told itself like a confession. She called up the catalog terminal and woke it from its saving mode, the glow turning her gloves the color of the moon. The staff interface for the city's ArchivesSpace instance was boring on purpose. It asked simple questions and accepted simple answers, and that constraint kept people from lying to themselves about what they thought they knew. She typed the provisional accession number and the bare bones—anonymous donation; mixed paper; suspected municipal relevance; possible confidential material—and marked the record as restricted pending review. With her other hand, without looking, she pulled the desk drawer open and broke a new pencil point with the cheap sharpener, shhhk, shhhk, until the shavings made a small mountain she brushed away.

On the page, Project Ember repeated several times across years, moving like a pulse through otherwise unrelated entries. Each time, the amounts were large, un-itemized. The Handler column alternated between initials that could be decoded if you had a key and names that existed just left of familiar: Stonebridge; Harbor; Haven. The word "Escort" toggled with "Removal." Escort didn't necessarily mean what half the city would think at first glance. Removal didn't, either. In the jargon that lived underneath bureaus and contracts, both could be euphemisms, designed to pass unremarked through a thousand eyes.

Her fingertips, through the gloves, felt the impression where the pen had pressed harder. The scribe had written with confidence, but somewhere—maybe here, by this sequence of numbers—the hand had leaned with more weight. She read the numbers again. They weren't account numbers. Not call numbers. Not docket numbers. She had spent years in newsrooms and then in the Archive learning the rhythms of how systems named their own guts, and this didn't tap out any of the beats she knew. It did something else she recognized deep down: it tried not to be recognized.

At the bottom of a page—193, the numbering hand-ruled in the corner—an entry nested like a thorn. Her father's initials again, this time followed by the word "oversight," the letters cramped as if they'd been squeezed into a line that had suddenly grown less hospitable. Oversight. As if he had been in charge of ensuring some labyrinthine process stayed within boundaries. As if he had failed. She pressed

her forearms against the edge of the table until the sensation of wood snapped her back into the room.

She had already decided the day she came to the Archive that she wasn't a reporter anymore. She wore the habits like a coat folded over her arm—too heavy to shrug back on, too necessary to leave behind. The burnout had come as a series of nights like the one she was having now, only in those rooms there had been televisions pulsing with breaking news chyrons and the sickly buzz of phones vibrating against wood. The Archive had offered quiet and rules and an honest kind of work. Things came into the building bent and she helped straighten them. That was enough.

She steadied the ledger with two fingers and lifted a corner of the page toward the lamp. The watermark came alive: an oval, a set of initials not on any city order form she'd seen. Privately purchased paper, maybe. The ink was iron gall, tarnishing brown at the edges where it had sunk into the fiber. She would want to confirm that with conservation on the third floor; she would want to humidity-flatten the corners, remove the rusty staples clipping the later pages together with thin, careful pliers. She would want to do all of this very very slowly, the way they did things that had to last.

The building around her creaked in a language she understood. Someone in the second-floor stacks rolled a ladder; a pipe banged and settled; the front door magnets clicked as the guard did his last round before the shift change. She bent back over the column of numbers and, because she couldn't help herself, drew a light bracket with the side of the pencil to connect three separate entries:

11/02/89 — Project Ember — Handler: V.H. — Amount: 250K — Ref: H2 04/11/90 — Project Ember — Handler: S. — Amount: 400K — Ref: H3 09/19/90 — Project Ember — Handler: M.E. — Amount: 0 — Ref: H?

Zero. That wasn't an amount. That was a signal. Zero could mean completed, cleared, canceled. It could mean: no money moved because the thing in question wasn't for sale.

Her left shoulder pinched where old stress lived. She rolled it, and the movement sent her eyes to the inside top corner of the ledger's margin. There, faint and almost easy to ignore, someone had drawn a row of tiny shapes that could have been nothing more than a nervous hand keeping itself busy. A triangle. Two slashes. A circle with a dot. Another triangle, this one filled in. Aligned with certain entries, irregular along the top of certain pages, consistent only when one decided to see the pattern and then could not unsee it.

She knew those marks. She knew them from afternoons at a secondhand dining room table where a man with tired eyes and a patient mouth explained to a fourteen-year-old how to read the city's file systems and then how to read beyond them. Codes

weren't always for secrecy, he'd said. Sometimes they were for memory. When the official language lied to you, he told her—quietly, as if someone could have overheard the thought—you wrote yourself a little truth in the margins. Don't trust a secret that only one person knows, kiddo, he'd said, tapping his pencil on her knuckles when she tried to use a pen near a stack of forms. And don't put anything important in ink.

The ledger's raised bands were warm under her palm now from the lamp and her focus. She slid the chair back with her knee and stood, stretching, then crossed to the light table used for translucency and watermark analysis. The glass thrummed faintly when she turned it on. She laid the page down, smoothed it at the corners, and wished she had the luxury of time she was about to deny herself. She kept her pencil marks in the air, a hovering hand that could erase all trace of itself.

On the other side of the window nearest the processing room, where the ironwork scrolled into a unlovely flourish of the city's faded civic pride, a gray sedan idled along the curb in the bath of a streetlight. In the passenger seat, a man assembled three text messages with exacting atonal focus. Cart dropped. Delivery confirmed. Light on in Processing. He sent them to a number he would not say out loud if a gun were pressed to his palate. He watched the light for another minute, saw it shift the way it did when someone leaned over paper, and typed four more words that made him feel unnecessary as soon as he hit send: Mouse is awake again.

Mara breathed out. The cold edge of the light table made her fingerprints briefly damp against the paper, visible and then gone. The shapes in the margin that were not shapes arranged themselves into something she could translate: triangles for vowels, a diagonal for R, a circle for O. Her father had shown her the original version of this when he was drunk and when he was not, both times with his voice lowered as if the walls in their apartment knew too much already. He'd told her that his father had used something like it to mark repair logs at the docks, a private shorthand so that when someone asked, later, who signed off on what, a man could remember whether or not his name should have been the one offered. It wasn't elegant. It was not meant to be unbreakable. It was meant to be a handhold.

She traced the first line of marks with her eyes, not touching, not even letting her breath fall fully onto the paper. Triangle, diagonal, circle, triangle, triangle. She waited for the natural formation of letters, the way her father had told her the brain would do, and then she corrected for where it was too eager. E R O E E. That was nothing. She wrinkled her nose and adjusted, hearing his laugh in her head when she went too fast. Vowels could also be unstressed. The triangle could be A, not E. The circle dot could be O or Q. The filled triangle wasn't a vowel at all—it was a marker: pay attention here. He had called these markers flagstones, not because they meant stop, but because they told you you were still on the path.

She braced her pencil against the edge of the light table and made small notations on

a sheet of scratch paper, the pressure so light the graphite barely sheened. The first line resolved itself slowly, and then all at once: E M B E R.

Her pulse hopped. The word wasn't written as text anywhere on the page, except in the neat, neutral letters in the entry line. Here, in the margin, it became something else. It became a word he had thought would outlast the way official ink always faded: meaning traveling invisibly beside data like a shadow that only showed when you changed the angle of the light.

She turned to the next page and the next, flipping carefully, her thumb the only contact, the book's spine cracking not at all. The marks reappeared intermittently, never far from entries that included Project Ember. The ambient sounds of the building fell away and came back as if someone was turning the volume knob up and down in a slow, soundless argument. She felt the rational part of her brain try to take the reins. This was likely to be nothing. M.E. could be anyone. Project names got recycled all the time. The watermark brand could have been used for a dozen innocent reasons. There were a dozen innocent reasons for everything.

But when she opened to a page with a date stamped hard in the left margin—10/12/89—and saw, down in the proper line, Harbor H., M.E., and the linked, subtle bead of graphite pebbled into triangles and circles and a single slant, there wasn't room for the innocent version anymore. Harbor H. Harbor House. The name existed in the city's architecture like bad memory: an old waterfront property, a club by day for men who had to make their civic performance visible, and a place by night where people conducted business that preferred to be reported only in numbers.

Her father had died the year after that date, on a day that had come back to her in pieces over the years and never once in a full reel. The official report said accident; the hospital chart said cardiac arrest; the story as told, afterward, by people who came to the funeral with white hands and warm voices was that he had worked too much and smoked too much and not watched himself the way a man should in his forties. Mara had believed none of those versions, and all of them, depending on the day. What she had believed most was that there was a thin, bright thread between his work and his death, and that thread led into the dark—into rooms where no one wrote anything down. She had not, for all her stubbornness, entertained the idea that something he had written down might lead back out.

She bent to the ledger again and found, in the bottom right of a page, the small parade of shapes like breadcrumbs. Triangle, triangle, circle dot, diagonal, triangle, triangle, diagonal. A flagstone, then another. Her mouth was dry. She lifted the scratch paper close and began to translate, the pencil whispering only when the letters locked into place. H A R B O R H. The last dot wobble where a hand had hesitated. If she wrote Harbor House in pencil next to a municipal ledger and someone found that, it would be a reprimand at best. If she wrote nothing and went home and came back

tomorrow and this ledger wasn't here anymore, it would be something worse than regret.

She closed her eyes and saw, the way she always did when the universe sent her something she didn't request, Theo Carter's unimpressed face and the way he leaned against thresholds like thresholds were made for leaning. You're going to call me, right? he'd say, not particularly interested in whether she did. And Priya Singh's quick eyes would skip from the ledger to the ceiling to the ledger again, already mapping network paths that didn't exist on paper. If this thing was what it looked like, she would need both of them. But she wasn't ready to say the words out loud. Not yet. She needed one more anchor point, something that didn't blur if she looked at it too hard.

She slid her hands under the cover and turned carefully to the kraft paper she had set aside. Something had been tucked between the last pages and the inside back board. A photograph? The slight "st" of paper against paper gave a different tone than the ledger page, thinner and slicker. She stopped herself. Not yet. Process, not impulse. She reached for the envelope at the back of the ledger, noticed the adhesive was the older sort that stained cheap paper brown around the edges, and left it closed. She returned to the page with the most marks and retraced the pattern with her eyes, whispering the letters as if sound could make them truer.

When she lifted her gaze to the far wall, somewhere between memory and the room, she saw him. Not his face as it had been when he lay on the slab under too-bright lights, eyes closed in a memory she had spent years sanding down. She saw him at the table with a pencil he always chewed, tapping the eraser against the page to count out beats only he heard. He looked up at her, as if he had been looking up all along from under the weight of everything he couldn't say, and there, in that imagined flicker, she could swear he had left a grin like a boy who had just pulled off a trick.

Her pencil hovered. The marks aligned. The code—his code, the one he gave her not because she needed to know it but because he needed someone to hold it—clicked into place. What spelled itself under her breath was not a coincidence and not a mistake. The pattern in the margin wasn't random decoration, wasn't a whim or a nervous tic. It was the thing he had told her to look for if the official text ever failed her. It was the door carved into the wall you wouldn't see until you ran your hand along the stones.

She leaned closer to the ledger, breath held shallow to keep from fogging the glass, and traced, without touching, the line of marks again. She heard her father's voice as clearly as she had in years. The triangles and the slashes and the circles told her what she already did not want to know: he had been here, inside this book, alongside a project called Ember that vibrated like a plucked wire through the city's hidden history. And he had left, for her, the only thing he could.

Mara went perfectly still, the pencil paused above the scratch paper. In the tidy, stubborn shorthand he had taught her at a kitchen table wearing his municipal badge and his weekend T-shirt, the margin spelled out more than a word. It spelled a key. It spelled a path. It spelled a name she had thought was buried with him and a project no one had ever admitted existed.

She recognized the code her father used.

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CHAPTER ONE: Names in the Ledger

Mara worked with a deliberate slowness that was as much a method as it was a coping mechanism. The initial shock of the coded entry, the electric hum of recognition, had faded into a cold, clear resolve. She returned to the main processing table, the light table still a faint glow in her peripheral vision. The ledger lay open, innocent under the task lamp, but to Mara, it was now a loaded weapon.

Her father's code, an almost childlike series of shapes, wasn't just a personal marker. It was a finger pointing, an accusation etched into the silence of time. The word "Ember" vibrated with new meaning. It wasn't a random project name. It was *his* project, or at least, one he had intersected with in a way that had left him trying to send a message from the grave.

She needed to verify the ledger's authenticity, not just with the esoteric details of paper and ink, but with something concrete. Something official. She opened a new browser tab and navigated to the Archive's internal database of accession records, then cross-referenced it with the city's publicly accessible records portal. She typed "Harbor House" into the search bar, adding "municipal permits" and "1989-1990." A few architectural permits, some zoning variances. Nothing out of the ordinary, certainly nothing to suggest a covert operation.

Mara pulled up the digital scan of the blue banker's box label: "Permits — Midtown 1988-1992." The misfiling was now less an error and more a deliberate act of obfuscation. Someone had wanted this ledger to disappear, to be buried under the mundane weight of everyday bureaucracy. But who, and why? The question coiled in her gut.

She flipped back to the ledger, her nitrile-gloved fingers tracing the neat columns. Date. Location. Handler. Amount. Reference. The entries continued, a meticulous record of something that was carefully disguised as nothing. The Handler column held a mix of initials and names that seemed deliberately generic: Stonebridge, Haven, Riverbend. And then, there was "V.H."

Mara's breath hitched again. V.H. Those initials. She knew them. Everyone in the state knew them.

She remembered the name from the partial translation she'd done on the scratch paper, linked to one of the larger "Project Ember" transactions: *11/02/89 — Project Ember — Handler: V.H. — Amount: 250K — Ref: H2.*

Senator Victor Hale.

A man whose face graced billboards and whose carefully sculpted voice filled public access channels. A man currently lauded as a champion of transparency, a steadfast voice against government waste. Hale, a rising star in state politics, had built his career on an image of unimpeachable integrity. The idea that his initials, V.H., could be linked to a clandestine operation outlined in this illicit ledger, especially one that involved large, undeclared sums and ominous "removal" operations, felt like a structural collapse in her understanding of the world.

Mara pushed the ledger away, a sudden, irrational desire to be free of its damning weight. But then her professional training kicked in, the archivist's instinct to preserve and protect. This wasn't just a curiosity anymore. It was evidence. And it was in danger.

She picked up her personal phone, a burner she used for sensitive contacts, and quickly typed a message into an encrypted app: *Need to talk. Urgent. Very sensitive.* The recipient was a contact from her reporting days, a former editor who had moved into a consulting role for a well-known watchdog organization. He would know who to trust, and more importantly, who to avoid. The message sent, she placed the phone face down, a small sentinel on the edge of her workspace.

Now, she needed to find the actual permits for Midtown, 1988-1992. The blue box she'd opened was a Trojan horse. The real permits had to be somewhere else, filed correctly. She walked over to the bank of steel cabinets lining the processing room, each drawer labeled with a precise range of dates and locations. She found the "Midtown" cabinet, slid out the correct drawer, and ran her finger along the spine of the actual permit ledgers. The paper felt different, thicker, official. These were the legitimate records, solid and unremarkable. No black calfskin, no enigmatic watermarks, no coded messages.

The realization settled in her: someone had meticulously fabricated a cover story for the illicit ledger. They had replaced its true container with something innocuous, hoping it would be processed and shelved without a second glance. The "Permits - Midtown" label was a lie, a smokescreen to hide a far more dangerous truth.

She opened the correct Midtown permits ledger, turning pages until she found the dates corresponding to Project Ember's entries. She scrolled through building approvals, demolition notices, electrical upgrades. All accounted for, all routine. The sheer mundanity of it hammered home the artifice of the black ledger. It existed in a parallel universe, hidden in plain sight.

Mara returned to the black ledger, a renewed focus hardening her gaze. She needed

to corroborate the names, especially V.H. She considered pulling up Senator Hale's public records, his financial disclosures, but hesitated. Any inquiry from an Archive terminal might leave a digital trail. She was already operating on the edge of protocol; she couldn't afford to be sloppy. Her father's lessons, distilled into quiet pronouncements about observation and careful movement, whispered in her ear.

Her eyes scanned the names listed as "Handlers." Some were full names, others initials. She focused on the full names: Stonebridge, Haven, Riverbend. They sounded like corporate entities, not individuals. A quick search on the Archive's internal corporate registry database revealed several defunct companies with similar names. None seemed to fit the timeline or the implicit nature of the ledger's entries. This was a deeper rabbit hole than she'd anticipated.

Mara pulled a stack of blank accession forms and began to meticulously document the ledger, treating it as if it were a fragile artifact from a lost civilization. She photographed each page with her high-resolution archival camera, the soft click of the shutter punctuating the silence. She noted the paper type, the specific hue of the ink, the minute imperfections on the calfskin cover. Every detail, no matter how small, felt vital now.

As she worked, the silence of the Archive felt less comforting and more like a vast, empty chamber echoing with unanswered questions. Her father's death had always been a hollow space in her life, a question mark she'd learned to live around. Now, the ledger was giving that question mark a shape, a weight. And the answer, if she could find it, promised to be both illuminating and devastating.

She paused at a page detailing a particularly large "removal" entry, dated March 1990. The Handler was listed as "S." Another initial, another mystery. And then, beneath it, an alphanumeric string in the "Reference" column: *H3-G.S.*

G.S.

Her mind immediately went to a name that had circulated in whispers during her reporting days, a name that was always accompanied by a shiver of caution. Gabriel Stone. CEO of Aegis Security, a private contractor known for its impenetrable operations and its deep, shadowy ties to government agencies. Stone was a phantom, his public persona meticulously curated, his private dealings shrouded in secrecy. If G.S. was indeed Gabriel Stone, the implications of this ledger escalated dramatically. This wasn't just old political dirty laundry; this was a live wire.

The Archive's automatic lights flickered, a momentary tremor that made her jump. She looked around, the vast, silent room suddenly feeling less empty and more watchful. The building's old bones seemed to creak with a premonition.

She returned to the entry for Senator Hale, V.H., and the 250K payment. What did "Ref: H2" mean? Her father's code had been a simple substitution cipher, a way to mark names and places. But these alphanumeric references felt different, more systemic. They hinted at a larger index, a hidden organizational structure.

Mara carefully transcribed the full list of "Reference" entries from Project Ember, creating a separate document. There were H1 through H9, interspersed with seemingly random letters and numbers. It reminded her of an old military numbering system, or perhaps a cataloging scheme designed to be unintelligible to outsiders. Her father had worked with classified documents in his later years at the municipal records office, sometimes bringing home binders of redacted reports, sighing over the blacked-out truths. He'd taught her about "burn lists" and "dead drops" and how euphemisms were the language of plausible deniability.

This ledger was steeped in that language. "Removal" could mean anything from destroying documents to eliminating people. Given the context, the large sums, and the involvement of someone like Gabriel Stone, the latter seemed horrifyingly plausible.

She closed the ledger carefully, the calfskin smooth and cold under her fingers. Her father's faint grin, an imagined trick of the light, had vanished. Now, she felt only the weight of his legacy, a truth he had tried to bury in plain sight. She had to verify more. She had to find a living link.

The screen on her burner phone flashed once, a silent notification. Her former editor had responded. *Meet me. My office. 0700. Don't tell anyone you're coming.*

The urgency in his message was clear. She wasn't the only one feeling the shift in the air. The Archive was still and quiet, but the world outside it was about to become very loud. And Mara, the quiet archivist, was now at the center of the storm.

She knew she had to leave the ledger in the Archive, secure it as best she could, then go home and try to get some sleep. The thought was a bitter joke. Her mind was already racing, connecting dots, chasing ghosts. She locked the ledger in a secure, climate-controlled cabinet, noting its provisional accession number on a small tag. She double-checked the cabinet's heavy steel door, listening for the satisfying click of the tumblers. It was as safe as she could make it for now.

As she gathered her bag, preparing to step out of the quiet sanctuary of the processing room and into the pre-dawn city, a chilling thought struck her. The "Permits - Midtown 1988-1992" box had been a dead drop. No contact info. Which meant whoever dropped it knew exactly where it would land. Knew she would find it.

Mara shivered, despite the climate-controlled air. She had found the ledger, yes, but perhaps it had also found her.

She looked at the last entry she had meticulously transcribed from the ledger, a list of names under the column "Target," dated just after Project Ember's initial entries. The fifth name on that list, clear as day, was Senator Victor Hale.

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