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Chasing Vermeer

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Chapter One **three deliveries**

On a warm October night in Chicago, three deliveries were made in the same district. A plump tangerine moon had just risen over Lake Michigan. The doorbell had been rung at each place, and an envelope left propped outside.
Each front door was opened onto an empty street. Each of the three people who lived in those homes lived alone, and each had a hard time falling asleep that night.
The same letter went out to all three:

Dear Friend:
I would like your help in identifying a crime that is now centuries old. This crime has wronged one of the world,s greatest painters. As those in positions of authority are not brave enough to correct this error, I have taken it upon myself to reveal the truth. I have chosen you because of your discriminating eye, your intelligence and your ability to think outside of convention. If you wish to help me, you will be amply rewarded for any risks you take. You may not show this letter to anyone. Two other people in the world have received this document tonight. Although you may never meet, the three of you will work together in ways none of us can predict. If you show this to the authorities, you will most certainly be placing your life in danger. You will know how to respond. I congratulate you on your pursuit of justice.

The letter was not signed, and it had no return address.

The man had sat down to a late dinner. He liked to read when he ate, and he was on page four of a new novel. Book in hand, he answered the door. His spaghetti and meatballs were cold by the time he remembered them. He sat at the table for a long time, looking first at the letter and then out at the moon. Was this a joke? Who would go to the trouble of writing and sending such a letter? It was printed on expensive stationery, the kind you buy if you want to be impressive. Or pretentious. Should he feel flattered? Suspicious? What did this person want from him? What kind of reward were they talking about? And who was it who knew him well enough to know he'd say yes?

A woman tossed and turned in bed, her long hair trapping moonlight against the pillow. She was going over lists of names in her mind. The more she thought, the more agitated she became. She was not amused. Could this be a coincidence, or was it a clever warning? What exactly did this person know about her past? She finally got up. A cup of hot milk would calm her nerves. She moved carefully in the dark, using the watery rectangles of light that fell across the floor. She wasn't about to turn on the kitchen light. The names scrolled in tidy columns through her mind, each group belonging to a different chapter in her life. There was Milan, there was New York, there was Istanbul. . . But this was an invitation, not a threat. If things got strange or frightening, she could always change her mind. Or could she?

Another woman lay awake under the moon, listening to the wind and the occasional whine of a police siren. This was one of the weirdest coincidences ever. Was this letter insane, or inspired? And was she just being gullible, thinking this person was really

writing to *her*? Maybe hundreds of these letters had gone out. Had her name been picked out of a phone book? Fake or not, the letter was intriguing . . . A centuries old crime. What could this person be planning? And what about the spooky part? If you show this to the authorities, you will most certainly be placing your life in danger.
Maybe this was a maniac, one of those serial killers. She pictured the police going through her apartment and finding the letter, standing over her body and saying, 'Jeesh, she shoulda called us first thing. She coulda been alive today . . .'
A lone cat yowled in the alley below her bedroom, and she jumped, her heart pounding. Sitting up in bed, she shut the window and locked it. How could she not say yes? This was a letter that could alter history.