

THE
HOUSE
WE TOOK



ISAIAH HARLAND

THE SCRUTINY OF TRUTH SERIES • BOOK TWO

THE HOUSE WE TOOK

Prequel Dossier: Mill Court: The Winter Before



BY ISAIAH HARLAND

LLAN BOOKS

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The Housing Conflict: Two Mothers, One Address

Lenora Doss knows how much of a life can depend on a working heater, an affordable rent, and someone answering the phone. After months in temporary municipal housing, she is offered a second job helping residents return to their renovated apartments. The extra wages and rent credit mean a home she can afford: Apartment 2B at Mill Court. For her eleven-year-old son, Eli, they mean a bedroom door that closes and a friend just a short walk away. But Della Ward holds the signed agreement promising her return to the exact same home.

ARCHIVAL CASE SUMMARY • MILL COURT RELOCATION FILE

PROPERTY ADDRESS: Mill Court Apartments, Unit 2B (Corner of 4th & Elm)

CASE IDENTIFIER: MCRP-RELOC-2026-088

TENANT OF RECORD: Della Ward (Signed Relocation Voucher & Return Guarantee)

TENANT LIAISON: Lenora Doss (14-Year Hospital Laundry Technician)

DEPENDENT CHILD: Eli Doss (Age 11, Enrolled at Elm Street Elementary)

TEMPORARY PLACEMENT: Ash Street Extended-Stay Unit 114 (Emergency Winter Placement)

DISPUTE TRIGGER: Rehabilitation Inspection Handover vs. Unrevoked Return Right

“Being finished and being nearly finished have separate meanings. Lenora liked her a little for that.”

The Vacant Apartment



Lenora had rehearsed the interview without a child beside her. In the version she had practiced on the drive to work, she sat down, explained what she could do and left before anyone discovered how badly she needed the job. Now Eli was trying to fit a wet mitten into a pocket already occupied by the other one, and the woman opening the office door was looking at both of them.

"I'm sorry," Lenora said. "My sister had to take her youngest to the dentist. She was going to watch him."

"That's all right." Carmen Ellis held the door wider. "Come in out of that."

Eli attempted to step over the salt on the mat and landed in most of it. He had grown since the beginning of the school year without his coat taking the slightest interest. Lenora pulled the cuff over his wrist, then left him alone when he withdrew his hand. She could hear a printer working behind the reception desk. Someone called from an inner room that the attachment had come through sideways. For a moment it was an ordinary office, full of the same small failures as any other, and she could imagine working there.

Then she saw the board behind the desk. MILL COURT RETURN PROGRAM stood above a photograph of the courtyard in sunshine. The photograph had been taken before the works, from an angle which kept the broken entrance lock out of view. She had stood under that lock in rain with grocery bags hanging from both wrists. Above it, now, somebody had added a bright strip reading A NEW CHAPTER.

"Don't," she told Eli, who was reaching for a bowl of candy.

"Those are for people," Carmen said.

"He qualifies," Lenora said. "Unfortunately, he takes the whole qualification very seriously."

Eli selected one, then looked at Carmen until she told him he could take a second. He put both in his pocket. Lenora recognized the little economy and wished she hadn't.

Carmen was about fifty, with a narrow silver watch and a small tear at the seam of her coat pocket. At the residents' meetings she had worn the coat throughout, even when everybody else had begun complaining about the heat. She had replaced the first project manager in December. Lenora had already met her over the telephone, asking for the name of the person authorized to approve a room while her son sat cold in a stranger's kitchen.

The Bells had kept them that one night. The next afternoon the management company had put them in another furnished unit, on Ash Street, where the heating worked but the kitchen window faced a brick wall close enough to touch if the window had opened properly. By January 20, Lenora had learned which cupboard smelled of the previous tenant's cooking and which bus took Eli closest to school. She had stopped saying they would only be there a little longer.

"We can talk in the apartment," Carmen said. "The office is a mess today. You can see what we're discussing."

"I thought this was an interview."

"It is. Are you still interested?"

Lenora felt herself straighten. "Yes."

Carmen took keys from a hook. "It's just across the courtyard."

They crossed the courtyard past a planter full of dirty snow. The air smelled of mortar and the exhaust from a work van. On the far side, Lenora could see the windows of 4C. She had lived behind them long enough to recognize a defect in one blind from the ground. There was no blind there now, only a square of new glass giving back the pale afternoon. Eli noticed where she was looking.

"Are we going up to ours?"

"No. A different one."

"Why?"

"Because that's the one they're showing us."

He gave her a look which suggested she had mistaken repetition for explanation. She had corrected him for the same

thing over breakfast. Carmen was already at the entrance to the next stairwell, holding the door with her heel while she answered a call. She told someone the electrician had to return before the inspection, listened, then said that being finished and being nearly finished had separate meanings. Lenora liked her a little for that.

Apartment 2B was on the second floor. The landing had been painted, and the handrail no longer came away from the wall where it turned. Lenora pulled it once before remembering she was being interviewed. Carmen noticed.

“It’s fixed,” she said.

“I was checking.”

“You should.”

Inside, the apartment was warm enough that Eli began undoing his coat. He waited for permission to take it off, then laid it on the bare floor because there was no chair. The living room was smaller than the one in 4C but better shaped, with a broad stretch of wall free of doors. The kitchen had a proper stove. Lenora went to it first, turning the nearest knob without pressing it, feeling the little resistance that meant it hadn’t been stripped.

“Four burners,” Eli said.

“I can count.”

“The other place only had two that didn’t smoke.”

Carmen leaned against the counter with her arms crossed. “The liaison job pays eighteen hours a week. You check tenant files against the contractor schedules, take the intake calls from people whose dates move, and walk the units with the city inspector before the final sign-off. The credit against 2B brings the monthly rent to four hundred and ten dollars. That includes heat and hot water.”

Lenora stood by the clean white sink. Four hundred and ten dollars. On her hospital laundry salary, four hundred and ten dollars was the difference between breathing and drowning.

“When do I start?” she asked.

“Monday morning at eight,” Carmen said, handing her a brass key with a yellow paper tag. “You can bring your boxes over this weekend.”

Lenora closed her fingers around the key. It was cold against her palm, but solid. For the first time in seven months, she felt the knot in the center of her chest begin to loosen.

She did not know that forty-eight hours later, Della Ward would walk into the management office with a signed voucher stamped six months earlier, demanding the exact same key.

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The Story Continues



THE HOUSE WE TOOK

BY ISAIAH HARLAND

The Scrutiny of Truth Series • Book Two

When the city offers Lenora Doss an affordable apartment in exchange for managing resident returns, it feels like survival. But Della Ward holds the signed return guarantee for the exact same home. A powerful story of displacement, maternal resilience, and the impossible choices of modern housing.

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