

Three Scratches

POV: Eleanor Price

Timeline: Years before Book 1

Mrs. Eleanor Price has lived at Hawthorne Apartments long enough to know which sounds belong to an old building.

Pipes knock.

Radiators hiss.

Floorboards complain.

But wolves don't scratch from inside walls. At 2:03 one morning, Eleanor wakes to three slow scratches.

Scrape.

Scrape.

Scrape.

She sits upright.

Silence.

Her bedroom shares a wall with the apartment next door, but that unit has been vacant for months. Another three scratches. This time she gets up. She presses her ear against the wall.

Nothing.

Then a voice whispers:

"Don't open it."

Eleanor jerks backward. She calls the superintendent. By morning, maintenance finds nothing.

No animal.

No damaged wall.

No explanation.

But Eleanor notices something the workers don't. Three enormous muddy paw prints lead from the hallway toward **Apartment 9**. They stop directly in front of its door. Eleanor looks down at them.

Then at the door.

The brass number **9** hangs slightly crooked. Something scratches from the other side.

Three times.

Eleanor backs away.

She never tells anyone what she heard. Not until people begin disappearing.