

WITNESS SEVEN

A Locked-Room Case File Thriller

Six people entered Ashdown House.

One was murdered.

Police received seven witness statements.

N. K. KARAMEH

WITNESS SEVEN

Copyright © 2026 N. K. Karamah. All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, organizations, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or distributed without permission, except brief quotations used in reviews.

PREVIEW

CONTENTS

Prologue — 4:17 A.M.

Part One — Six Arrive

Part Two — Seven Speak

Part Three — The House Has a Memory

Part Four — The Last Lie

Epilogue — The Eighth Statement

Solution Notes

PREVIEW

A Note to the Reader

Everything you need to solve the case appears in these pages.

Some witnesses lie. Some witnesses misremember. Some tell the truth in a way designed to sound like a lie.

If you want to solve the case yourself, stop at the Reader Checkpoint before Part Three.

Do not ask only: Who had a reason to kill Adrian Vale?

Ask something harder:

Who knew something they should not have known?

PROLOGUE

4:17 A.M.

By four in the morning, Detective Lena Kerr had five living witnesses, one dead man, and six statements on her desk.

At 4:17, she received the seventh.

Ashdown House stood beyond the rain-streaked windows of the temporary police van, its windows black, its stone walls silver beneath floodlights. From a distance it looked less like a home than something uncovered by the storm.

Kerr had been inside three times already.

Once to see the body.

Once to see the study door, still splintered where officers had forced it open.

Once to stand in the dining room and count the chairs.

Seven.

There had been six people at dinner.

Her laptop chimed.

An email had reached the address printed on the card she had given each witness. No subject. No message. One attachment.

STATEMENT_7.pdf

Kerr stared at the filename for several seconds before opening it.

The document contained one page.

No letterhead. No signature image. No metadata that told her anything useful.

At the top, centered, were three words.

WITNESS STATEMENT SEVEN

Then:

My name is Celeste Vale.

Twenty years ago, my brother told the police I left Ashdown House at 10:12 p.m.

I did not.

Tonight, at approximately 11:31 p.m., I was inside the west service passage when someone entered Adrian's study through the wall.

I did not see the person's face.
I heard Adrian say, "You were always the easiest one to frighten."
I heard a struggle.
I heard one impact.
Then silence.
A person came back into the passage.
They were breathing hard.
They counted under their breath as they walked.
Six.
Seven.
Eight.
They stopped because they heard me.
I ran.
Adrian did not lock the room after the murder.
The room was already locked.
If you are reading this, then my brother is dead.
And if the five people downstairs tell you there were only six of us in
Ashdown House tonight, one of them is lying.
Not about the murder.
About me.

Kerr read it twice.

Then she opened the missing-person file sitting beside her coffee.

CELESTE VALE.

Age at disappearance: seventeen.

Date missing: November 14, twenty years earlier.

Location last seen: Ashdown House.

The file photograph showed a pale girl with dark hair cut badly at the
shoulders and the defiant expression of someone who did not like being
told to smile.

Kerr looked toward the house.

Seven dining chairs.

Six coats in the entrance hall.

Five surviving guests.

One dead host.

And now a woman who had been missing for twenty years claimed she
had been inside the walls.

Kerr closed the file.

At the bottom of the statement was one final line she had missed.

Ask Mara Quinn why she helped me disappear.

PART ONE

SIX ARRIVE

PREVIEW

CHAPTER ONE

THE INVITATION

Mara Quinn almost deleted Adrian Vale's email because the subject line contained only her name.

MARA.

No greeting. No explanation.

The message had arrived at 2:03 a.m. three weeks before the murder.

Come to Ashdown on November 14.

6 p.m.

The others are coming.

At midnight I will tell the truth about Celeste.

If you don't come, I will tell your part without you.

— A

Mara had not seen Adrian in eleven years.

She had spent most of those years pretending that was an accident.

The rain began halfway to Ashdown.

By the time she turned from the coastal road onto the private lane, the sky had collapsed into black water. Her headlights found stone walls, skeletal trees, and finally the iron gates she remembered from another life.

They stood open.

Ashdown House appeared at the end of the drive exactly as memory had preserved it: three stories of gray stone, narrow windows, two chimneys, and a central tower too small to be romantic and too tall to be useful.

Twenty years ago, seven teenagers had spent one night there.

Six had gone home.

Mara parked beside a black sedan and remained behind the wheel until the engine began warning her about the open door she had not opened.

She whispered the old sentence aloud.

"Celeste left at ten twelve."

The lie still came easily.

That frightened her more than the house.

The front door opened before she reached it.

Adrian Vale stood beneath the porch light.

At forty, he looked disappointingly human.

Television had made him larger: the severe cheekbones, the dark suits, the careful pauses before he told audiences what murderers were thinking. In person he was thinner than Mara expected. Gray had begun at his temples. He held a glass of amber liquor in one hand.

"You came," he said.

"You threatened me."

"I invited you with context."

"You haven't changed."

"That would make one of us."

He stepped aside.

Mara did not move.

"What happens at midnight?"

Adrian smiled.

It was the same smile he had worn at nineteen when he told the police his sister had stormed out of the house after an argument.

"The seventh witness speaks."

A car door slammed behind Mara.

She turned.

Daniel Holt was climbing out of a silver coupe with the collar of his coat raised against the rain.

For one absurd second, Mara was nineteen again.

Daniel saw her.

Stopped.

Then looked past her to Adrian.

"No," he said.

Adrian lifted his glass.

"Yes."

From inside the house came a woman's laugh.

Another voice answered it.

They were already here.

All of them.

Mara finally crossed the threshold.

Adrian closed the door behind her.

The lock clicked.

"Welcome home," he said.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SEVENTH PLACE

The dining room had changed less than Mara had.

Same long walnut table.

Same brass chandelier.

Same portrait of Adrian and Celeste's mother watching dinner with exhausted disapproval.

Elise Mercer stood by the fireplace, warming her hands. She had become a trauma surgeon and had acquired the stillness of someone who had learned to panic internally.

Jonah Reed was inspecting a crack above the window as if the house were a patient he had failed to save. He had restored Ashdown five years earlier and seemed personally offended by every sign that time had continued after the invoice was paid.

Sophie Bell sat at the table.

Mara noticed the counting before she noticed anything else.

Sophie touched the base of each wineglass with one finger.

"One, two, three, four, five, six."

Then she looked at the empty setting at the far end.

"Seven."

Her hand stopped.

Nobody spoke.

Daniel entered behind Mara, saw the table, and swore.

Seven plates.

Seven wineglasses.

Seven linen napkins folded into sharp white triangles.

Adrian walked to the head of the table.

"You always did appreciate staging," Mara said.

"I appreciate accuracy."

"There are six of us."

"For dinner."

Sophie looked at him. "Who is the seventh place for?"

Adrian sat.

"The only person in this house who has never lied to me."

Daniel's chair scraped hard against the floor.

"If this is some publicity stunt—"

"You still assume everything is about your reputation."

"My reputation is the only reason I'm here."

"No," Adrian said. "Fear is the reason you're here. Reputation is just the suit fear wears in public."

Elise sighed. "Can we skip the performance? You said you had information about Celeste."

"I do."

"Is she alive?"

Adrian took a drink.

Jonah turned from the window.

For twenty years, that question had lived between them like a sealed room.

Mara watched Adrian's face.

He knew.

She knew he knew because he avoided looking at her.

"Yes," Adrian said.

The word did not sound dramatic.

That made it worse.

Sophie inhaled sharply.

Daniel laughed once, without humor. "Bullshit."

"I spoke to her forty-three days ago."

Mara's pulse climbed.

She kept her hands beneath the table.

Elise whispered, "Where?"

"That is not tonight's first question."

"What is?" Jonah asked.

Adrian looked around the table.

"Which one of you has been helping her hide?"

Silence.

Rain struck the windows.

Sophie began rubbing her thumb across her index finger.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Mara remembered that habit too.

She counted when she was afraid.

Adrian reached beneath his chair and placed a red file on the table.

On its cover was a title printed in black capitals.

WITNESS SEVEN

Beneath it:

THE TRUE STORY OF CELESTE VALE

A TRUE-CRIME ACCOUNT OF MEMORY, MURDER, AND THE SIX
PEOPLE WHO LIED

Mara stared at the word murder.

“Celeste wasn’t murdered,” Elise said.

Adrian met her eyes.

“No,” he said. “But someone else was.”

PREVIEW