



COURAGE

She Gets to Keep Living

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

Eight people who never met. One chapter each, in the order it was written.

One	Sammy Hall
Two	typewriter_tom
Three	Dan Okafor
Four	Lior Tannen
Five	Margot Vail
Six	Iris Beddoe
Seven	Colin McAteer
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Chapter

One

written by Sammy Hall

The first time it happened I answered on instinct, you know how it is, phone rings and your hand just goes. Got as far as hello before I realized I was talking into silence that wasn't empty. Does that make sense? There's silence where nobody's there, and then there's silence where somebody is absolutely there, breathing or not breathing, just holding the line open like a door they won't walk through. I hung up. Felt stupid about it immediately, which is its own kind of stupid because what are you supposed to do, conduct a one-sided conversation with dead air? But my hands were shaking. This was two days after they sent her home from the hospital with that look on their faces, the one medical professionals get when they're done with you. Not cured, not healed. Done. Second call came at the same time the next day. Three rings, exact same interval between each one. I watched it that time. Let it go to voicemail. Played it back and there was nothing on the recording. Forty-three seconds of nothing, then a click. I saved it anyway. Felt like evidence of something, though I couldn't have told you what. My sister said I was being paranoid. She was helping with the groceries, the prescriptions, all the things that pile up when your mother comes home from the hospital and you're suddenly running two households. Janet's always been practical that way, aggressively practical, like if she organizes enough cupboards the universe will stop throwing curveballs.

She heard me talking about the calls and got that look, the one that says she's already diagnosed me with stress and prescribed ignoring it. But here's the thing. On the third call I picked up and I waited. Didn't say anything, just held the phone to my ear and listened to whoever was listening to me. Felt like being in a room with someone in the dark. You know they're there. You can't see them or hear them move but you know the space you're in isn't empty anymore. It's occupied. Changed. Thirty seconds of that and then I heard it. Not breathing, not a voice. A sound like fabric moving. Like someone adjusting their position in a chair, or shifting their weight from one foot to another. Human sounds, the kind you make without meaning to. I said, "Mom?" Stupid thing to say. She was upstairs asleep, or supposed to be. I'd just checked on her twenty minutes before. But something in that silence felt familiar, or maybe I needed it to feel familiar, needed there to be a reason someone would call and call and never speak. The line went dead. Fourth call I didn't answer. Fifth call I unplugged the landline, but my cell rang anyway, same number, same three rings. By then I was checking the caller ID obsessively. Came up as UNKNOWN every time, which nobody does anymore. Even telemarketers have fake numbers that look real now. Unknown is a choice. A decision to stay hidden. Janet said just block it. She had her phone out ready to show me how, but I told her no. Because here's what I couldn't explain to her, what I'm not sure I can explain to anyone: I didn't want to. The calls had become part of the routine, the new shape of days that were all wrong anyway. Morning pills, afternoon checkup, evening call from nobody. And maybe, if I'm being honest, somewhere in the back of my head I was thinking: what if I need to answer? What if the one time I don't pick up is the time when whoever this is finally decides to say what they've been calling to say? That's not paranoia. That's not stress. That's just knowing that silence can be patient. Waiting for you to be ready. Three rings. Always three. I started counting the hours between calls.

Chapter

Two

written by typewriter_tom

The pattern broke on a Tuesday. Four rings. I was in the kitchen slicing carrots for soup nobody would eat. The knife stopped. My whole body stopped. Four rings meant something had changed and changes in the new landscape of our life were never good. I picked up before thinking it through. Static filled my ear. Not silence this time but a low wash of interference like distant wind or water running through pipes. Behind it, underneath, something else moved. A voice trying to form. I pressed the phone harder against my head and heard fragments. "She knows," someone said. A woman. Not my mother. The connection was bad, breaking up, or maybe whoever was calling was moving, walking somewhere the signal couldn't reach properly. "She knows what she did." I said, "Who is this?" The static swallowed everything for five seconds. Then: "Ask her about the stairs." The line went dead. I put the phone down on the counter very carefully, the way you put down something that might explode. My hands wanted to shake but I wouldn't let them. Upstairs my mother would be awake by now, sitting in her chair by the window, looking out at the street with that expression she'd worn since coming home. Not peaceful. Not troubled. Absent. Like the person inside had stepped away from the controls. The stairs. Our house only had one staircase. Sixteen steps, narrow runner up the middle, handrail my father installed thirty years ago that still

wobbled if you grabbed it wrong. My mother had fallen down them. That's what I told the EMTs when they came. What I told the hospital. What I believed because there wasn't another story to tell. I went upstairs without the soup. Found her in the chair as expected. The afternoon light turned her face gray and soft. "Mom," I said. "Did someone push you?" She didn't look at me. Her hands were folded in her lap, fingers laced together the way you hold your own hand when nobody else will. "Mom." "I slipped," she said. Same thing she'd told everyone. Same flat voice. "A woman just called. She said you know what you did. She said to ask you about the stairs." Now my mother turned. Her eyes found mine and for the first time since the hospital I saw her actually present, actually looking at me instead of through me. Her mouth moved. She was trying to decide something. "What did her voice sound like?" she asked. The question landed wrong. Not who was it or what are you talking about. What did she sound like. Like my mother had been waiting for this call too. Like she knew exactly who might be calling and just needed confirmation. "I couldn't tell. The connection was bad. She sounded..." I stopped. Tried to remember. "Young. Maybe young. Why?" My mother looked back at the window. Her fingers tightened around each other. "You should stop answering," she said. "That's not an answer." "It's the only one I have." I stood there in the doorway watching her watch the street. She'd pulled back inside herself already, gone to whatever place she went these days. But her hands were still gripping each other. Still holding on. The phone rang downstairs. Three times. I counted without meaning to. This time I didn't move.

Chapter

Three

written by Dan Okafor

I let it ring. The sound climbed the stairs like something with legs, filling the bedroom where my mother sat pretending the air outside her window was fascinating. On the third ring she flinched. Just a small thing, a tightening around her eyes, but I caught it. "You know who it is," I said. She didn't answer. Downstairs the ringing stopped and the silence that replaced it felt worse, heavier, like the house was holding its breath. I pulled the other chair over, the wooden one that usually held her bathrobe, and sat facing her. Close enough that she couldn't pretend I wasn't there. "Mom. A woman calls every day and doesn't speak. Today she spoke. She knows about the stairs. You're asking what her voice sounded like. So yeah, you know who it is." "I don't," she said, but the words had no weight. "Try again." Her hands finally unlaced. One rose to touch the window glass, fingers leaving small prints of condensation. "There was a woman," she said. "A long time ago. Before your father died. Before you kids were grown." She paused. The house settled around us with its old-wood sounds. "She worked at the library where I volunteered. Margaret. Bright girl, very bright. Had opinions about everything, the kind that made you reconsider things you thought you knew." I waited. You learn to wait with my mother. She tells stories sideways, backing into them. "We were friends," she said. The word came out careful. "Close. Your father traveled a lot that year, remember?

All those conferences. Margaret and I would have dinner sometimes. Talk for hours. She made me laugh. I'd forgotten I could be funny." Her finger traced a line down the glass. "Then she fell down the library stairs. Broke her neck. They said she'd been drinking at lunch, that she slipped. Everyone said that." The afternoon light was definitely wrong now, too thin, making her face look like old paper. "Were you there?" I asked. "I was at the top of the stairs." She said it so quietly I almost didn't hear. "We'd been arguing. I don't even remember what about, some stupid thing, the kind of fight people have when they're really fighting about something else. She turned to leave and I grabbed her arm. Just grabbed it. I wasn't trying to, I didn't mean..." She stopped. Started again. "She pulled away. Lost her balance. I reached for her but I wasn't fast enough. Or maybe I was fast enough and I chose not to. I've never been sure." My mouth had gone dry. "You never told anyone." "Who would I tell? What would I say? That I maybe could have caught her and didn't? That I grabbed her in the first place? She was dead. Telling wouldn't ungrab her. Wouldn't uncatch her." She finally looked at me. "I know how that sounds." "It sounds like you've been carrying this for thirty years." "Thirty-two." She turned back to the window. "And now she's calling." I wanted to say that was impossible, that dead women don't make phone calls, that there was some rational explanation involving coincidence or Janet being more worried than she let on or my own stress manifesting in auditory hallucinations. But I'd heard the voice. Ask her about the stairs. And my mother had fallen down stairs. Our stairs. Different stairs but still. "What happened to you last week?" I asked. "The truth." She was quiet for so long I thought she wouldn't answer. Then: "I was coming down for breakfast. I heard something behind me. Footsteps. I turned around and there was nobody there, but I felt..." She wrapped her arms around herself. "Hands. On my back. Pushing. I didn't slip." The phone started ringing again. Not three times. It just kept ringing, on and on, filling the house with its demand.

Chapter

Four

written by Lior Tannen

I went downstairs because someone had to, and my mother wasn't going to. Each step felt deliberate, like I was choosing something I didn't understand yet. The phone kept ringing. Five, six, seven times. Our old landline didn't usually do that. It would give up, kick to voicemail, let you off the hook. But this just kept going. I picked up. "Hello, sweetie." The voice was warm, familiar in a way that made my stomach drop. Not Margaret. Not a stranger. "It's Aunt Christine." My father's sister. Dead eleven years from pancreatic cancer. I'd held her hand in hospice while she told me about the trip to Greece she'd never take. "No," I said. "I know this is strange." The line was clear now, no static. She sounded exactly like herself, that slight rasp from too many Virginia Slims, the way she rounded her vowels. "But I need you to listen. Your mother is in danger." I should have hung up. Should have called Janet, called someone, but my hand wouldn't move. "You're not Christine." "I understand why you'd think that. But sweetie, I need you to go check on Carol right now. Don't argue, just go." The thing is, she used to call me sweetie. And she's the only one who ever called my mother Carol instead of Caroline. These weren't facts you'd find online or guess at. They were small, specific, the kind of true things that live only in memory. I kept the phone pressed to my ear and walked back upstairs. My mother was standing now, face pressed against the window glass. Not looking out

anymore. Hiding from something she saw in the reflection. "She's here," I said into the phone. "Good. Now ask her about the garden." "The garden?" "Just ask her." I lowered the phone. "Mom. Christine wants to know about the garden." My mother's whole body went rigid. She turned slowly, and her face had that look people get right before they confess something that's been rotting inside them. "How do you know about that?" "I don't. She, the voice, it said..." I stopped. "What garden?" She moved to the bed and sat down hard, like her legs had quit. "Behind the library. Margaret and I planted roses there. The head librarian said we could use the space, make it nice. We spent weeks that spring digging, amending the soil. Getting dirty together." Her hands twisted in her lap. "That's where we were. Before. The garden's where we had the argument." I lifted the phone again. "Okay. She told me." "Now ask her what she planted last week." This was insane. I was taking instructions from a dead woman's voice about my mother's gardening habits. But I asked. "Last week?" My mother's face went pale. "I didn't plant anything last week." "She's lying," Christine's voice said, gentle but firm. "Check her hands." "Mom, show me your hands." "What? Why?" "Please." She held them out and I saw what I'd missed before. Under her nails, still, after days: dark soil. Ground-in deep like she'd been digging without gloves. "I don't remember," she whispered. "I swear I don't remember planting anything." "She's been going out at night," Christine said. "To your backyard. Digging. Margaret's making her do it." "Making her do what?" My mother's eyes went wide. "Who are you talking to?" "She needs to dig up what she buried," Christine continued. "Before Margaret makes her bury something else. Someone else." I felt cold. "What did she bury?" "Ask your mother about the box." But my mother was already crying, silent tears running down her face. "I took it," she said. "From Margaret's apartment, after. A metal box she kept things in. Letters I'd written her. A photo of us at the lake. Things that would make people ask questions I didn't want to answer. I told myself I was protecting my family. Protecting your father's memory of me." "Where is it?" "I don't know. I had it for years, moved it from hiding place to hiding place. Then

last month I couldn't find it. I thought maybe I'd finally thrown it away. But now..." She looked at her dirty fingernails. "Oh God. What have I been doing?" The phone crackled. Christine's voice got farther away. "The box wants to be found. Margaret wants witnesses. You need to dig it up and open it, both of you together. It's the only way to answer her." "Wait," I said. "How do you know all this? Why are you, why are you helping?" A pause. Then, softer: "Because I made my own mistakes, sweetie. And nobody called to warn me." The line went dead. My mother and I sat there in the thinning light. Somewhere downstairs, I'd left carrots on a cutting board.

Chapter

Five

written by Margot Vail

The carrots would rot. That was my first thought. Concrete and stupid and easier than looking at my mother's hands. I stood. She stayed sitting. "Backyard," I said. She nodded once. We went downstairs together, her moving like someone who'd aged another decade in the last ten minutes. Through the kitchen where the knife still lay beside the cutting board. Out the back door into what was left of the afternoon. Our yard wasn't much. Thirty feet of patchy grass, a fence that needed staining, the oak tree my father planted when Janet was born. I scanned the ground for disturbances. There, by the fence line. Fresh dirt, darker than the rest. A patch maybe three feet square where the grass had been stripped away. My mother stopped walking five feet from it. "I don't remember," she said again. "You said that already." "I mean it. I'd wake up with dirt under my nails and mud on my slippers but I couldn't, I couldn't piece together going outside. Getting the shovel. Digging." Her voice was climbing. "What if I'm losing my mind? What if the fall did something and I'm just gone?" "You're not gone." I knelt beside the disturbed earth. It was loose, recently turned. The kind of soil that would give easily if you started digging. "Stay here." I went to the garage and found the shovel hanging on its peg. The blade had fresh dirt on it. I should have noticed that before. Should have noticed a lot of things. Back in the yard my mother had moved closer. Not to the dirt patch. To

the oak tree. She stood with one hand on the trunk like it was keeping her upright. I pushed the shovel in. The earth opened without resistance. "What if it's not the box?" she asked. "What if I buried something else? What if Margaret made me..." "Stop." I dug. Lifted. Dug again. The hole deepened. One foot, then two. My shoulders started burning but I didn't stop. If I stopped I'd have to think about dead women making phone calls and my mother sleepwalking with garden tools and the specific warmth of Christine's voice saying sweetie. The shovel hit something solid. I dropped to my knees and used my hands. The metal box was smaller than I'd expected. Maybe the size of a shoebox, rusted at the corners, secured with a combination lock that had oxidized green. I pulled it free and set it on the grass between us. My mother came over. Knelt beside me. We both stared at it. "I don't remember the combination," she said. "Try your birthday." She reached out with shaking hands and spun the dial. Four numbers. The lock didn't open. "Margaret's birthday." She tried again. Nothing. "The day she died." This time the lock clicked. My mother pulled her hands back like the box had burned her. I waited for her to open it. When she didn't, I did it myself. Letters on top. Old paper, careful handwriting. I recognized my mother's slanted script. Dear M. I didn't read further. Underneath, a photo: two women by a lake, younger than I'd ever seen my mother. She was laughing at something the other woman was saying. Margaret, I assumed. Dark hair, wide smile, her hand on my mother's shoulder. Beneath that, a newspaper clipping. The headline: LOCAL LIBRARIAN DIES IN TRAGIC FALL. And a library card, Margaret's name printed on it. And a ring, silver, thin band. And at the bottom, another envelope. This one wasn't old. White, unsealed, no writing on the outside. My mother saw it the same time I did. "I didn't put that there." I opened it anyway. One sheet of paper inside, words written in handwriting that wasn't my mother's. Wasn't mine. I didn't recognize it at all but somehow knew it was recent. The ink was fresh. CAROL: ONE MORE THING TO BURY. TONIGHT. STOP ANSWERING OR START DIGGING DEEPER. My phone rang in my pocket. Not three times. Just

once, then silence. I looked at my mother. She was reading the note over my shoulder. "She wants me to bury you," she whispered. "Then we don't separate," I said. "Not until this stops." But even saying it, I wondered what stopping would look like. How you end something when the person demanding satisfaction has been dead for thirty-two years. Above us the oak tree's branches moved in wind I couldn't feel.

Chapter

Six

written by Iris Beddoe

The branches moved. No wind on my face. No sound through the leaves. Just motion, like the tree was breathing. My mother saw it too. Her whole body angled toward the trunk, toward something I couldn't see yet but she could, maybe had been seeing for days. I stood and pulled her up with me. Her arm felt like paper under my hand. "Inside," I said. She didn't move. The tree kept doing that thing, those unnatural shifts, and I realized the shadows underneath were wrong. Too dark for afternoon. Too solid. Something crouched there or something stood there or something had always been there and I was only just now scared enough to notice. I grabbed the metal box. Shoved the note back in, closed the lid. The lock wouldn't catch. I tried three times and my fingers weren't working right, kept slipping on the corroded dial, so I just held it shut and pulled my mother toward the house. She resisted. Not hard. Just went heavy, the way kids do when they don't want to leave the playground. "Mom. Now." "She's watching," my mother said. Not scared. Factual. The way you'd say it's raining. I looked back at the tree. The shadows resolved into a shape. A woman. Standing with her back against the trunk, her head tilted at an angle that wasn't quite right, like she'd forgotten how necks were supposed to work. Margaret. Had to be. She wore a gray dress or the light made everything gray. Her face was distant but I saw her smile. Not cruel. Sad, maybe. Or patient. The smile

of someone who'd been waiting a long time and could wait longer if she needed to. My phone rang again. Still in my pocket. I pulled my mother the last ten feet and we stumbled into the kitchen. I slammed the door. Locked it. Not that locks would matter but my hands needed the motion, needed to do something that felt like protection. The phone stopped ringing. My mother sat down at the kitchen table and put her face in her hands. The box sat between us, lid half open because I'd been too panicked to secure it properly. I could see the edge of the photograph, that laughing version of my mother who'd never had to bury anything. "You have to get rid of it," she said through her fingers. "Get rid of what?" "The box. Burn it, throw it in a river, I don't care. Just make it gone." "Christine said we need to open it. Together. That's how we answer her." "Christine is dead." My mother lifted her head. Her eyes were red but dry now, past crying. "They're all dead. Margaret, Christine, everyone who knew what happened. Everyone except me. And opening that box won't change what I did." "You didn't push her." "I grabbed her. Same thing." "It's not." The house was too quiet. I realized the refrigerator had stopped humming. The clock above the sink had stopped at 4:47 even though the light outside said later. Everything electrical had gone dormant or dead, and we were sitting in a kitchen that felt like it was holding its breath. "What does she want?" I asked. My mother looked at the box. "Acknowledgment. Witness. I buried her twice. Once by not catching her, once by hiding these." She touched the photograph. "Maybe she just wants to be remembered out loud." "Then remember her. Tell me." "I loved her." The words came fast, like she'd been holding them behind her teeth for three decades. "Not the way you're supposed to love a friend. The way you love someone who makes you forget you're supposed to be somebody else. And when she fell I told myself it was an accident but I'd been angry, so angry at her for making me want things I couldn't have. And maybe my hand didn't move fast enough because part of me thought if she was gone then I could go back to being the person I'd built. The mother, the wife. The woman who didn't want." Outside, footsteps on the back porch. Slow. Even. Coming

toward the door. My mother stood. Walked to the window above the sink and looked out at where her garden used to be, where the hole still gaped open like a mouth. "She's not going to stop," she said. The doorknob turned. Locked, but turning anyway.

Chapter

Seven

written by Colin McAteer

The knob stops turning. I watch it hold still, halfway through its rotation, like whoever's trying just wanted to prove they could. My mother doesn't turn from the window. Her hand stays flat against the glass where she's been touching it, leaving prints. I move to the door. Put my ear against the wood. Nothing. No breathing, no footsteps retreating. Just the absence of sound that means someone's still there, deciding. "Step back," my mother says. I don't. The doorknob completes its turn. The lock means nothing. The door swings inward and Margaret stands on the threshold in her gray dress. Up close she looks more real than she should. Solid. Her neck is bent at that wrong angle but her eyes are clear and focused directly on my mother. "Carol," she says. Her voice is nothing like the phone. No static, no distance. It's the voice of someone standing three feet away because she is standing three feet away, and my brain is trying very hard to reconcile that with the fact that this woman has been dead since before I learned to drive. My mother finally turns. "I'm sorry." "I know you are." Margaret's head tilts further, past what any living neck could manage. "Sorry doesn't stop me being dead." "What do you want me to do?" Margaret steps into the kitchen. I move sideways without meaning to, putting myself between her and my mother, but Margaret doesn't look at me. I'm furniture to her. Obstacle. Only Carol matters. "Tell the truth," Margaret says. "The

real one. Not the version you just gave your daughter." My mother's face changes. Something behind it collapses. "I don't know what you mean." "Yes you do." Margaret moves closer. Her shoes make no sound on the linoleum. "You grabbed my arm. We argued. I pulled away and fell. That's what you've been telling yourself. The story where you're almost innocent." "That's what happened." "You pushed me, Carol." The words land like a slap. My mother's mouth opens. Closes. "You were angry I was leaving," Margaret continues. "Not just the library. Leaving the state. I'd gotten a job in Oregon and I was going because I couldn't keep doing this, loving you while you played house with a man you didn't want. And when I told you I was done, that I couldn't watch you choose him anymore, you put both hands on my shoulders and you shoved." "No." My mother's voice cracks. "I wouldn't." "You did. At the top of the stairs. You shoved and then your face went white because you realized what you'd done, and you reached for me but by then I was already falling. And when they found me you told them about the wine at lunch, told them I'd been upset lately, planted every seed that would grow into the story that made you blameless." I'm still holding the metal box. My hands have started to hurt from gripping it but I can't put it down. "Mom," I say. She looks at me. Her face has gone slack, all the architecture underneath it failing. "I didn't mean to. You have to believe I didn't mean to." "Which time?" Margaret asks. "When you pushed me or when you let me stay buried?" My mother slides down the cabinet until she's sitting on the floor. "I wanted you to stay. That's all. I thought if you understood how much I needed you." "So you killed me." "I didn't. It was an accident. A mistake." "Your hands were on my shoulders. You pushed. There's no accident in that." Margaret kneels down to my mother's level. "I've been in that stairwell for thirty-two years, Carol. Feeling the push. Falling. Hitting. Every moment. And the only thing worse than that is knowing you got to forget. Buried me in your garden like I was seeds you could grow into something prettier." The kitchen light flickers. The clock jerks to 4:48. "Tell her," Margaret says. "Tell your daughter what you did." My mother looks up at me. Tears on her face

now, finally. She opens her mouth. The phone rings. Not the landline. My cell. Still in my pocket. I pull it out and the screen says UNKNOWN. "Answer it," Margaret says. I do. Christine's voice: "Run, sweetie. Right now. She's not there to make Carol confess."

Chapter

Eight

written by wordsbylena

Run where, I want to say. We're in the kitchen. Two exits: front door twenty-three feet through the living room, back door where Margaret just came in. Window above the sink, double-paned, painted shut for six years. No good options. Christine keeps talking. "She's there to make Carol do it again. To you. Same staircase, same push, same burial. That's how Margaret stops falling." I count the facts. Margaret's shoes, gray flats, worn soles, the kind you'd find in a 1992 Kohl's clearance bin. My mother's hands, still against the cabinet, fingers splayed. The box in my grip, weight approximately two pounds four ounces accounting for the rust. The knife on the cutting board, eight-inch blade, serrated. Margaret three feet two inches from me, head angled seventeen degrees past horizontal. "Mom, get up." She doesn't move. Margaret shifts, shoulders squaring toward her, and I see it now. The way her body coils. Preparation. She's going to reach for my mother and then what, make her stand, walk her to the stairs while I watch and count the steps like I counted the rings. I do the only thing my analytical brain suggests. I throw the box. Not at Margaret. At my mother. It hits Carol's lap and she gasps, startles, hands coming up reflexively to catch it. The motion breaks whatever paralysis held her. She looks at me. "Stairs," I say. "Now. Up them." "What?" "You fell down once. Go up. Stay at the top where there's nowhere to push you to." Margaret turns. Finally looks at

me. Her eyes are brown, flecked with gold, specific and terrible. "You can't stop this." "Watch me." I grab the knife. It's a stupid thing to grab. You can't stab a dead woman. But my hand needed occupation and it's an eight-inch serrated Wüsthof and the weight is familiar. My mother crawls, then stands, then runs. Out of the kitchen, into the hallway. I hear her feet on the stairs. One, two, three, four. She's climbing. Margaret moves to follow and I step sideways, blocking the doorway. She could go through me. Probably will. But she stops. "Thirty-two years," she says. "That's eleven thousand six hundred and eighty days. Not counting leap years. Do you know how many times I've fallen in eleven thousand six hundred and eighty days?" "No." I'm counting her breaths. She's not breathing. Her chest doesn't rise. "Neither do I. I stopped counting after the first year. That's how long it took to understand I'd never stop." She tilts her head the other direction and something in her neck clicks. "Your mother gets to forget. She gets to sleep and wake up and drink coffee and plant gardens. I get the stairs. Forever. Unless." "Unless you make it even." Christine's voice, still on the phone in my left hand. I'd forgotten I was holding it. "Unless Carol falls like you fell. Unless someone else buries a body and carries that weight." "Correct," Margaret says. Upstairs, my mother's feet. Fifteen, sixteen. Top step. She's made it. "Here's the thing," I say. "You want her to confess, to own what she did. She just did. You want her punished. Thirty-two years of phone calls and night digging and almost-pushes down her own stairs seems like punishment. You want witnesses. I'm witnessing. I heard her admit she pushed you. I see you standing here with your broken neck. I will remember this. Both of you. All of it." "Not enough." "It has to be." "Why?" Margaret steps closer. "Give me one reason why Carol gets to keep living when I don't." I count the reasons. Come up with zero. Switch tactics. "Because if you push her, you're the same as her. Angry, reactive, making someone fall because you can't hold your feelings. You become what she was. You prove her point that the push was just human weakness, replicable, ordinary." Margaret stops. Two feet from me now. I can see the texture of her dress, small

flowers printed in the weave. Lilacs. She was wearing her nice dress when she fell. "Let her carry it," I say. "Living with what she did. That's worse than dying from it. I promise you that's worse." The phone in my hand goes dead. Christine, gone. Margaret looks at me for seven seconds. Then up, toward where my mother waits at the top of the stairs. Then back. "I'll keep calling," she says. She walks past me. Through the living room. Out the front door, which I didn't unlock. Gone. I count to sixty before my legs give out.

Finished on 27 April 2026.

*Written in relay on relaywriters.com: eight strangers, one chapter each, never
more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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