

ADVENTURE

A bald eagle is shown in profile, wings spread wide, flying from left to right. The eagle's feathers are dark, and its head is white with a dark beak. The background is a dramatic sunset or sunrise over a mountain range. The sky is a mix of dark blue, orange, and yellow, with a bright light source creating a lens flare effect. The mountains below are dark and rugged.

What the Map Was Hungry For

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY • WRITERS

The writers

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

One	Cora Lindgren
Two	inkwell_amy
Three	typewriter_tom
Four	Priya Nair
Five	Lior Tannen
Six	Sasha Loomis
Seven	Sammy Hall
Eight	wordsbylena

Chapter

One

written by Cora Lindgren

The parchment smelled like dirt after rain, or maybe blood gone brown. Mara ran her fingertips along its surface and felt the grain of something that had never been paper, not quite. Too warm. Too slick in places where the ink pooled darkest. She pulled her hand back and her fingers came away sticky. She wiped them on her jeans without thinking, then stopped. The residue wasn't damp. It was tacky, like sap that had been drying for years but never quite finished. Under her nails: a fine grit that might have been sand, might have been crushed shell. She brought her hand to her nose. Salt. Copper. The inside of a mouth. The map showed her street in lines too confident to be old. Whoever had drawn this knew the neighborhood better than the city planners did. There was the crooked oak two houses down, marked with a symbol she didn't recognize. There was the culvert where kids threw their candy wrappers, rendered in careful detail. And there, impossible to miss: a doorway sketched in red ink at the place where Oleander Street dead-ended into the fence behind the shopping center. She had walked past that fence a hundred times. Chain-link, sagging, overgrown with kudzu. Nothing remotely door-shaped about it. Mara rolled the map tighter, felt it resist. The parchment had a muscle to it, a thickness that wanted to spring back open. She had to lean her weight against it to fit it into the cardboard tube. Her palms came away warm, flushed, like she'd been

holding something alive. Outside, the October air bit clean and appley. She tucked the tube under her arm and started walking. The morning had that stretched quality, too bright, shadows pooling in the wrong places. Her shoes crunched through leaves that were still green at the edges, not ready to fall yet. The fence appeared exactly where the map promised. Kudzu thick as a blanket, little white flowers going to seed. The chain-link underneath showed through in patches, orange with rust. She stood there, waiting for something to feel different. It didn't. Then she noticed the smell. Not kudzu, which smelled like grape soda and dust. This was deeper. Wet stone. Clay. The back of a cave or the bottom of a well. It came from a spot about chest-height, where the vines grew thickest. Mara stepped closer. The leaves there were darker, their undersides filmed with something that caught the light like oil on water. She reached out and touched the vine. It was cold, much colder than it should have been in the sun, and the surface gave slightly, yielding like skin over muscle. She pulled her hand back fast. But she'd felt it. Underneath the leaves, underneath the chain-link that wasn't quite where her eyes told her it was: a seam. A gap. The shape of a frame. Mara looked around. The parking lot behind her was empty except for a single shopping cart on its side, one wheel still spinning lazy circles. No cars. No people. Just her and the fence and the smell of wet earth rising like breath. She gripped the vines and pulled. They came away easily, too easily, peeling back in a sheet. Her hands were freezing now, cold climbing up her wrists. The chain-link underneath wasn't rusted. It was gone. There was a space there, dark and cool, and when she leaned close she felt air moving across her face. It tasted like minerals. Like depth. The door was open. Or maybe it had always been open, and the map had just taught her eyes how to see it.

Chapter

Two

written by inkwell_amy

Mara stepped through. The cold hit her knees first, then her chest, a plunge like breaking lake ice. Her foot came down on stone, not asphalt. She tried to look back but her neck wouldn't turn that way, muscles locked, and then she was falling forward into the dark with her hands out. She caught herself on a wall. Wet rock, slick under her palms. The tube was gone from under her arm. She patted her sides, her pockets. Empty. The dark wasn't total. A greenish glow came from somewhere ahead, faint enough that she couldn't tell if it was light or her eyes inventing shapes. She pressed her back to the wall and edged sideways, feet sliding across smooth stone. The air moved. Not wind. Something with rhythm, in and out, like the space itself was breathing. Her boot hit something that clattered away. She froze. The sound echoed wrong, bouncing back too fast, then too slow, then from directions that didn't match. She crouched and felt along the floor until her fingers found it. Metal, cylindrical. A flashlight. Old, heavy, the kind that took D batteries. She thumbed the switch. Nothing. Shook it. A rattle inside, loose connections. She hit it against her palm and tried again. The beam caught a corridor. Narrow, carved from raw stone, the walls covered in symbols she almost recognized. Not the ones from the map. Older. They seemed to pull at her eyes, made her head feel loose on her neck. She aimed the light down. The floor sloped, descending into darker green.

The breathing sound was louder now. Wet. Close. Mara moved fast, following the slope, one hand on the wall to keep from stumbling. The symbols changed as she went deeper. They started to repeat, patterns overlapping patterns. Her fingers brushed one and came away warm. She wiped her hand on her jeans but the warmth stayed, crawling up her wrist. The corridor opened suddenly into a wider space. The flashlight beam didn't reach the far wall. She swept it left, right. Nothing but more stone, more symbols. Then the light caught something that glinted. A blade. Stuck point-down in the floor at the center of the chamber. She approached it slowly. The knife was long, almost a short sword, the metal dark and pitted. The handle was wrapped in leather gone black with age. Around the blade's base: a perfect circle of smaller knives, dozens of them, all pointing inward like compass needles. She reached for the center blade and her hand stopped six inches away. The air there was solid, a wall she couldn't see. She pushed. Nothing. The warmth from her wrist was spreading into her shoulder now, not painful but wrong, like her blood was moving backwards. Behind her, footsteps. Quick and light. Mara spun, flashlight up. The beam caught a figure at the corridor entrance. Small, child-sized, wrapped in something that hung like wet cloth. It didn't move. Didn't breathe. She couldn't see its face. "Hello?" Her voice sounded muffled, like speaking through cotton. The figure raised one arm and pointed past her, toward the knives. Mara turned back. The blades were vibrating now, ringing against stone, a sound like cracked bells. The invisible barrier was gone. She grabbed the center blade's handle and pulled. It came free easily. The chamber lurched sideways. The floor split, stone grinding against stone, and Mara was falling again, blade in hand, into the green glow that was rising up to meet her like water, like mouths, like doors opening all the way down.

Chapter

Three

written by typewriter_tom

The water wasn't water. Mara hit it and kept falling, just slower. The blade pulled her down like an anchor. She tried to let go but her fingers were stuck, fused to the leather. The green glow came from below, pulsing in time with that breathing sound. She couldn't hold her breath anymore. Her lungs opened and the not-water rushed in, thick and mineral, tasting like coins. She should have drowned. Instead she could see. The blade was glowing now, same green as everything else, and the light showed her what she'd fallen into. A shaft. Perfectly round, walls carved with more symbols, spiraling down in a pattern that made her inner ear scream. Shapes moved in the walls. Not carved. Living. They pressed against the stone from the inside, hands and faces distorting the rock like it was rubber. Their mouths were open. She fell past them and they watched her go. The shaft ended. She dropped into open space and hit ground hard enough to crack teeth. The blade jarred loose from her hand and skittered away, its glow fading. She rolled onto her back, gasping. Her lungs worked. The air here was real, hot and stale. She was in a cavern. Massive. The ceiling disappeared into dark overhead. The floor was packed earth, hard as concrete, covered in a fine layer of dust that puffed up with each breath. The only light came from clusters of those green glowing things embedded in the walls at intervals. Not lights. Eyes. Hundreds of them, unblinking, tracking her movements.

Mara stood. Her legs shook. The blade was five feet away, dark again, almost invisible against the dirt. She left it there and turned in a slow circle. The cavern had seven exits. Seven tunnels branching off like spokes, each one identical, each one breathing that wet rhythm in perfect sync. She walked to the nearest tunnel and stopped. Something was written on the ground in front of it. Not symbols this time. Letters. English. Scratched into the dirt with a stick or a finger. TURNED BACK HERE. WRONG MOUTH. The handwriting was shaky, desperate. Mara checked the next tunnel. Same thing. Different words. MAPS LIE ABOUT THEIR HUNGER. Then the next. FOURTH TIME. FOURTH BODY. WHICH ONE IS MINE. She went around the circle. Each tunnel had a message, each one more frantic than the last. The seventh just said DON'T. She picked up the blade. The handle burned cold against her palm but her fingers closed around it anyway. She had to choose. The messages meant someone had been here before, tried different routes, come back. Or couldn't come back and left warnings for whoever came next. She studied the tunnels again. Six led down. She could feel the slope, subtle but real. One led up. The one marked DON'T. Mara walked toward it. The air changed three steps in. Colder. Drier. The breathing sound cut off like a severed artery. Silence rushed in to fill the space, so complete her ears rang. She kept moving. The tunnel climbed at a steady angle. The walls were closer here, pressing in. She had to turn sideways in places, the blade scraping rock. The eyes in the walls were different. Smaller. More of them. They blinked. After what felt like hours, the tunnel forked. No messages this time. Just two paths, both climbing, both silent. She chose left. Five steps in, she saw light ahead. Real light, yellow and warm. She ran toward it and stopped. The tunnel ended at a window. An actual window, frame and glass, set into raw stone like a door in a wall. Through it she saw a room. Familiar. Too familiar. Her kitchen. The table. The coffee cups. The morning light slanting through the blinds. She watched herself walk in, younger by maybe an hour, and unroll a map across the table. Mara pressed her hand against the glass. On the other side, her past self leaned close to study the parchment. She

didn't look up. Didn't see the window that shouldn't exist. Mara raised the blade and swung.

Chapter

Four

written by Priya Nair

The glass didn't break. The blade bounced off with a sound like a hammer hitting frozen mud, and the vibration shot up Mara's arm so hard her shoulder went numb. She swung again, two-handed this time, and the impact made her teeth rattle but the window didn't even chip. On the other side, her past self was rolling up the map, tucking it into that cardboard tube. Mara watched herself leave the kitchen, heard the front door close. The house went still. "Hey." She pounded on the glass with the blade's pommel. "Hey! Don't go to the fence!" The kitchen didn't respond. Of course it didn't. She was yelling at time, at something already done, and time had never been great at taking notes. She turned back to the tunnel. The fork she'd ignored was still there, still climbing. She took it. This one had doors. Real ones. Wooden, with brass handles, set into the stone walls at irregular intervals like someone had planted them and they'd grown in crooked. She tried the first one. Locked. The second opened onto a closet that shouldn't fit in solid rock, full of coats that smelled like her mother's perfume, the one she'd worn to Mara's eighth birthday party before the divorce. Mara shut it fast. The third door wasn't locked but wouldn't open. She put her shoulder into it. Something heavy blocked it from the other side, and when she pressed her ear to the wood she heard breathing. Not the cave's rhythm. Human. Panicked. "Hello?" The breathing stopped. "I can hear you. Are you

stuck? I can try to, " "Which number are you?" The voice was muffled, maybe female, maybe not. Hoarse like they'd been screaming. "What?" "Which iteration. How many times have you come through." Mara stepped back from the door. "This is my first time. I found a map and I, " "Liar." Flat. Dead certain. "First-timers don't make it past the mouths. You're at least a third. Maybe a fifth." "I don't know what you're talking about." "Check your pockets." "I already did. They're empty." "Check again." Mara shoved her hands in her jeans pockets, just to prove the voice wrong. Her right hand closed on something small and hard. She pulled it out. A tooth. Human molar. Root still attached, with a scrap of pink tissue clinging to it. Not hers. All her teeth were in her head, she could feel them with her tongue. She threw it and it bounced off the tunnel wall, landed in the dust. "That's not mine." "It is. Just not yet. Time's sticky here. Gets on everything." Mara picked up the tooth again because leaving it felt worse. It was warm. "How do I get out?" "You don't. You loop. You find the map, you go through the door, you get turned around, you come back, you find the map again. Except it's not again, it's always the first time, because this place eats context. You're probably holding something right now that you'll lose in twenty minutes and find twenty years ago." "That's insane." "Yeah, well. You swung a magic knife at a window into your own kitchen. We're not exactly running a tight ship, sanity-wise." Mara tried the handle again. Still wouldn't budge. "Let me help you." "You can't. I'm not stuck. I'm hiding. And you should too, because here comes the threshold tax." "The what?" The lights went out. All of them, every green eye in the walls, snuffed like candles. The breathing sound came back, but wrong. Reversed. Sucking in instead of pushing out, and it was pulling at her clothes, her hair, the air in her lungs. Something touched her ankle. She kicked and the blade swung wild, connected with something that shrieked. Not human. Not animal. The sound had syllables. The lights came back on in stutters, strobing, and in the flashes she saw it. Long. Segmented. Too many joints bending in directions that made her eyes hurt. It had her boot, not her ankle, and it was pulling itself up her leg

using the leather like a ladder. She brought the blade down on it and it split with a wet crack, both halves writhing away into the dark. The door behind her opened. Just a crack. "Get in. Now." Mara didn't argue. She squeezed through the gap and the door slammed shut behind her, cutting off the sound of more things skittering in the tunnel outside. She was in a room. Small. Lit by a camping lantern on the floor. The walls were papered with maps. Hundreds of them. All showing the same street. The same fence. The same red door. And sitting against the far wall, knees pulled to chest, was someone wearing Mara's face. "Told you," her double said.

Chapter

Five

written by Lior Tannen

Mara looked at the other woman and felt the kind of tired that starts in your bones and works outward. The woman had her jawline, her hands, even the scar on her left knuckle from the time she'd punched through a window in high school trying to impress Danny Kohler. But her eyes were older. Used up. "You're not me," Mara said. "Not yet." The woman gestured at the maps. "Give it time. Give it about forty-seven loops. You start papering the walls around loop thirty. Helps you remember which lies you've already believed." Mara's grip on the blade tightened. The metal was warm now, almost hot, like it was drinking heat from her palm. "How do I get out?" "That's what I asked me the first time. And the time before that." The woman stood, joints cracking. She was thinner than Mara, stringy in a way that spoke of missed meals and bad sleep. "The problem isn't finding the exit. Exits are everywhere. The problem is that every door you take just folds you back to the kitchen table with that stupid map." "So I'm stuck." "We're stuck." The woman pulled a map off the wall. This one was different from the others, the parchment gray instead of brown, the ink silver instead of red. "Took me until loop nineteen to figure out you can steal maps from this place. They grow in the walls like mold if you know where to look. This one shows the underneath." Mara looked at it. The lines made her head hurt, streets overlapping streets, the same geography drawn twelve times in the

same space. "Underneath what?" "The other maps. The ones people buy at estate sales and thrift stores, thinking they got a deal on some weird art piece." The woman's voice had a crack in it, something bitter. "The maps are bait. And we're the fish stupid enough to bite." Outside the door, something scraped along the wood. Long. Deliberate. Testing. "What does it want?" Mara whispered. "Payment. You opened a door, you used a knife, you walked through someone else's space. This place keeps books." The woman sat back down, pulling the lantern closer. "The threshold tax comes in different shapes. Sometimes it's a thing that hunts you. Sometimes it's a choice you have to make. Once it was just a voice asking me to remember my daughter's name." "Do you have a daughter?" "Not yet. Maybe never. Hard to say when you're living in a loop." The woman smiled, and it was the worst thing Mara had seen so far, worse than the segmented creature, worse than the faces in the stone. It was hopeless. "But I couldn't remember it. The name. It was right there and I couldn't pull it up. So I failed, and the loop reset." The scraping stopped. The silence was worse. Mara looked at the silver map again, really looked. There was a mark in the center, a tiny x drawn in pencil. "What's that?" "The hub. Where all the doors connect. If you can get there, you might be able to break the loop. Or at least understand what you're breaking." The woman tapped the spot. "It's underneath the kitchen. Always has been. You walk past it every morning on your way to make coffee." "Then why haven't you gone?" "I did. Three times. But I can't open the door at the hub. It needs something I don't have." The woman met her eyes. "It needs someone on their first loop. Someone who still has the residue from the original map on their hands." Mara looked at her palms. They were clean. She'd wiped them on her jeans hours ago, back in her kitchen, back when this was still just a weird morning. "Check under your nails," the woman said. Mara did. The fine grit was still there, packed in crescents under each nail. Salt. Copper. The inside of a mouth. "That's your key. But you have to get past the tax first." The woman stood again, walked to the door. Put her hand on the knob. "I'll go out first. It'll go for me because I'm older, more

familiar. You run the other direction, take the right fork this time, and don't stop until you find the trapdoor. It'll be in the floor, wood instead of stone. That's the way down to the hub." "What happens to you?" "Same thing that always happens. I loop. I start over. I buy the map again." The woman opened the door a crack. "But maybe this time I get free because you did. Maybe that's how it works." She stepped into the tunnel. Mara heard her start running, heard something massive give chase. Mara ran the other way.

Chapter

Six

written by Sasha Loomis

Mara ran and the tunnel bent like a throat swallowing. The walls pressed close enough to scrape her elbows, then widened into a space where three of her could walk side by side if there were three of her. Maybe there were. She'd lost count after meeting herself. The right fork. The woman had said right fork. Mara found it and veered, boots skidding on dust that might have been ground bone or might have been flour. The blade in her hand was singing now, a high thin note that made her molars ache. She wanted to drop it but her fingers had other ideas. They'd made a pact with the leather, blood oath, no returns. The tunnel climbed, then didn't. Gravity turned sideways and she was walking on the wall except it was still the floor, her brain just couldn't agree on which direction down had gotten to. A door passed on her left. She didn't try it. She'd learned. Trapdoor in the floor. Wood, not stone. She found it after what might have been minutes or miles. A square of planks set into the packed earth, iron ring for a handle. No lock. She grabbed the ring and pulled. The door came up easy, too easy, like it had been waiting. Stairs led down. Wooden. Old enough that she could see the ax marks in each plank, someone's careful work from a time when careful work still mattered. A smell rose from below. Bread baking. Fresh laundry. Her grandmother's house in summer. Mara descended. The stairs ended in a room that shouldn't exist. It was her kitchen but not.

Same table, same coffee cups, but the walls were lined with shelves and the shelves were full of maps. Not rolled, not framed. Growing. She could see them spreading across the paper in real time, ink bleeding into new streets, new symbols, new doors marked in red that pulsed like veins. In the center of the table sat a glass box. Inside the box sat a heart. It wasn't beating. It was breathing. The whole thing expanded and contracted with that same wet rhythm she'd heard in the caves, and each breath sent ripples across the maps on the shelves. New lines appeared. Old ones faded. Mara approached the table. Set the blade down. Her hand came away from the handle easily now, no resistance. The blade lay there looking dull and used up. Under her fingernails the grit was moving. She felt it shifting, trying to work its way deeper. She dug it out with her thumbnail, scraping dark crescents onto the table. The residue piled up. More than should have fit under her nails. More than should have existed in any reasonable amount. When her nails were clean she had a small mound of the stuff. Salt and copper and something else, something that smelled like the first rain after a long drought. The heart in the box turned toward her. It had no eyes but she felt it looking. She picked up a pinch of the residue. It was warm, almost hot, hotter than the blade had been. She reached toward the glass box and her hand passed through. Not breaking it. The glass just wasn't there for her, not with the residue on her fingers. She touched the heart. It was smooth. Soft. A fruit not quite ripe. Her fingerprint left a mark in silver on its surface, and where the silver touched the breathing stopped. Just for a moment. Just long enough for Mara to understand what she was touching. The maps on the shelves caught fire. Not real fire. They burned backward, unmaking themselves, lines retreating into blank parchment. The symbols dissolved. The red doors faded to pink to gone. The heart resumed breathing but different now. Slower. Uncertain. Mara pulled her hand back. The silver mark remained on the heart's surface, a thumbprint in metal that shouldn't be metal. Around it the tissue was changing, going from red to gray to something crystalline. A door opened in the far wall. A door that hadn't been there before.

Through it Mara could see daylight. Real daylight. October sun and the crooked oak and Oleander Street ending at a fence. No kudzu. No gap. Just chain-link and rust and the parking lot beyond. She looked at the heart. It was still breathing. Still changing. The silver spreading in slow fractal patterns. Mara walked toward the door, left the blade on the table, left the box and the heart and the unmapping shelves behind. She stepped through into ordinary morning. The door closed behind her and became a fence post.

Chapter

Seven

written by Sammy Hall

Mara stood on the sidewalk and felt wrong. Not cave-wrong or knife-wrong, just regular Tuesday-morning wrong, like she'd walked out of a movie theater into too-bright sun and the world hadn't settled back into being real yet. Her jeans still had the cave dust on them. Her knuckles still smelled like wet stone. But the fence was just a fence, sagging and ordinary, and when she touched it the chain-link was warm from sitting in the sun doing normal fence things. She pulled out her phone. Dead. Had been dead since she'd gone through the door, or maybe it died later, or maybe time was sticky like her double said and her phone had been dead for three weeks and also five minutes. She couldn't remember when she'd last looked at it. The shopping cart was still on its side in the parking lot. Same one. Same wheel spinning in lazy circles except now it was stopped. Mara walked home. Took her six minutes. She counted. Her front door was unlocked. She always locked it. Always. Except she'd left in a hurry this morning, chasing a map, and apparently her past self made different choices about security than her present self would've preferred. Inside, the kitchen table was empty. No coffee cups. No map. The cardboard tube was gone too, and when she checked the spot where she'd left it propped against the wall by the door, there was just wall. Clean. Like the tube had never been there. She sat down at the table and put her head in her hands. Her hair smelled

like minerals. Someone knocked. Mara got up and checked the peephole. A woman stood on her porch holding a casserole dish covered in foil. Neighborly. Smiling. Mara didn't recognize her but that meant nothing. She was bad with faces, worse with names, and she'd lived on this street for two years without learning who anybody was. She opened the door. "Hi!" The woman's smile got bigger. "I'm Louise from three doors down. The blue house? I saw you moved in a while back but I've been meaning to bring this by and I kept forgetting, you know how it is." "I've lived here two years." "Right, right, that's what I said. A while back." Louise held out the casserole. "It's spinach lasagna. My grandmother's recipe. Well. Sort of. I found it on a blog but the blog said it was someone's grandmother's recipe so that counts." Mara took the dish. It was warm. Recently made. The foil crinkled under her fingers. "Thanks." "Oh, and I wanted to ask." Louise leaned in like she was sharing a secret. "Did you ever find what you were looking for? At the fence?" Mara's hands tightened on the casserole dish. "I saw you this morning," Louise continued. "Standing there, staring at the kudzu like it owed you money. And then you just. You went in. Through the fence. And I thought, huh, that's new." "You saw me go through." "Yep. And I thought, should I call someone? But then you came back out like two seconds later, so I figured you were fine. You are fine, right?" Mara looked at Louise. Really looked. The woman had kind eyes, the crinkly type that suggested decades of smiling. Normal eyes. Human eyes. Not the green glow from the cave walls. "Two seconds," Mara said. "Give or take. I was timing my egg. Three-minute egg, you know, soft-boiled, and you went in right when I started and came out before the timer went off." Louise tilted her head. "You looked different though. Coming out. Older, maybe? Or just tired. Are you sleeping okay?" "Fine. I'm fine." "Well." Louise patted her arm. The touch was warm, real, the kind of contact that didn't feel like it was reaching through layers of time and bad decisions. "Enjoy the lasagna. And if you ever want to talk about whatever's going on with that fence, I'm around. I've seen things too, you know. This neighborhood has a history." She left before Mara could ask what that meant. Mara closed

the door. Set the casserole on the counter. Checked her phone again, still dead. She plugged it in and waited. When it finally powered on, she had forty-seven missed calls. All from her own number. And a text, sent three hours ago: DON'T EAT THE LASAGNA. Mara looked at the casserole dish. Steam was rising from under the foil, curling in patterns that looked almost like letters.

Chapter

Eight

written by wordsbylena

Mara counted the steam curls. Seventeen. Then nineteen. Then back to eleven because three had merged and she'd double-counted the one rising from the northwest corner of the dish. The patterns weren't letters. They were closer to the symbols from the cave walls, the ones that had made her head feel loose, but flatter. Simpler. Training-wheels versions. She lifted the foil. The lasagna underneath was normal. Six layers, she could see them through the pasta edges. Cheese bubbled gold in a three-inch diameter circle, off-center by maybe forty degrees. Spinach visible in the second and fifth layers. The smell was oregano, garlic, something else. Something underneath. Wet stone. Minerals. She recovered it. Set it in the sink. Turned on the cold water and let it run over the dish until the steam stopped. Her phone buzzed. New text from her own number: GOOD. NOW CHECK THE BASEMENT. Mara typed back: I don't have a basement. Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again. YES YOU DO. YOU JUST HAVEN'T OPENED IT YET. She walked through her house counting doors. Front door, back door, bathroom, bedroom, hall closet, kitchen pantry. Six total. Same six she'd had for two years. She checked them all anyway, opening each one, confirming the spaces behind them matched her memory. Toilet, bed, winter coats, canned soup. Everything exactly where it should be. The seventh door was in the hallway. It hadn't been there thirty seconds ago.

She'd walked this hallway. She'd counted. But now there was a door between the bathroom and bedroom, white paint, brass knob, completely ordinary except for the part where it was impossible. Mara opened it. Stairs descended into dark. Wooden stairs, same ax marks as the ones under the trapdoor. Same careful work. She counted thirteen steps before the darkness made counting pointless. Her phone buzzed: TAKE THE KNIFE. She'd left the blade on the table in that other kitchen, the hub, but when she went back to her kitchen table it was there. Dull. Used up. Waiting. She picked it up. Her fingers remembered the leather's texture before she touched it. Thirteen stairs down. She counted them again on the descent to make sure. Thirteen. At the bottom her boots hit concrete, poured smooth, modern. A single bulb hung from a wire overhead, the kind that turns on with a pull-chain. She pulled it. The basement was empty except for a furnace in the northeast corner and a workbench against the south wall. On the workbench sat forty-seven cardboard tubes. She counted twice. Forty-seven. Mara opened the first tube. Inside was the map, her map, brown parchment with red ink. She opened the second tube. Same map. Third tube. Same. She opened all forty-seven tubes and they all contained the same map showing the same street with the same red door marked on the same fence. She unrolled all forty-seven maps on the concrete floor and arranged them in a grid, seven rows of six with one extra. The maps looked identical but they weren't. She checked the red doors. The door on map number three was four millimeters lower than the door on map number one. Map seven's door was tilted eleven degrees clockwise. Map forty-seven's door was marked in ink that was more orange than red, the color off by enough that her eyes caught it immediately. She took map forty-seven and rolled it tight. Put it back in its tube. Left the other forty-six spread on the basement floor like tiles. Her phone buzzed: ONE MORE THING. Under the workbench was a box. Cardboard, taped shut, her own handwriting on the side in black marker: TEETH. She didn't open it. She already knew what was inside. Forty-seven molars, roots attached, arranged in a circle like compass points. The furnace kicked on with a

sound like breathing. In and out. Wet rhythm. Mara climbed the stairs. Counted them. Still thirteen. At the top she closed the door and it disappeared, became wall again, smooth and white and ordinary. She went to her kitchen. Unplugged her phone. Put map forty-seven in her jacket pocket, the tube too bulky so she just folded the parchment and accepted the wrinkles. Louise was still on the street, three doors down, watering petunias in her yard. When she saw Mara she waved. Mara walked toward her. Counted her steps. Forty-two paces from her door to Louise's mailbox. She stopped there and said, "Tell me about the neighborhood's history." Louise smiled and turned off her hose.

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more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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