

HORROR

SEEKING THE TRUTH WITHIN

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

ONE

Iris Beddoe

TWO

Sasha Loomis

THREE

Cora Lindgren

FOUR

Priya Nair

FIVE

jmarsh

SIX

Dario Selo

SEVEN

typewriter_tom

EIGHT

Sammy Hall

Chapter

ONE

written by Iris Beddoe

The walls were breathing. Or. Not breathing. Swelling. The way bread rises when the house is too warm and you forgot to watch it. Mara kept her eyes on the page. On the handwriting that wasn't hers but looked like it could have been. Once. Before. Someone had written: The count must be maintained. The count is what keeps And then nothing. She touched the word keeps and her fingertip came away darker. Not ink. Something that had soaked through from the other side of the paper. "We should introduce ourselves," said the man by the door. His beard was neat. His shoes were tied. He looked like someone who had never forgotten anything in his life. No one answered him. Mara turned the page. The next entry was in different handwriting. Rounder. The letters all leaning left like they were trying to fall into each other. There were nine of us yesterday. Today I can only remember eight names. I've written them below so I don't forget again: The list had seven names on it. The lantern made a sound. Not a flicker. A sound. Like something breathing through wet cloth. "My name is Richard," the bearded man tried again. "I'm from" He stopped. His mouth stayed open. His hand went to his pocket and came out empty and went back in and came out empty again. The girl in the corner had been crying but her face was dry. She wore red. Mara was certain she wore red. When she looked again it was brown. When she looked a third time there was no girl. There was a

girl. Of course there was. Sitting right there. Mara wrote in the journal: My name is Her hand cramped. She looked at what she'd written. My name is My name is My name is Filling the page. Her handwriting getting smaller each time, spiraling toward the center like water going down. She tore the page out. The sound of ripping paper made everyone look up, and when they did, Mara counted. Six people. She counted again. Five. She held very still and kept her eyes unfocused and counted the shapes in her peripheral vision. Seven. One for each name on the list that should have had eight names but had seven. The breathing in the walls was getting louder. Or not louder. Closer. The way a thing gets closer when it's inside something that's inside something that's inside you. Richard, if that was his name, was at the window now. The one they'd boarded up. He was touching the boards. "Don't," Mara said. He touched them anyway. His fingers went through. Not through the gaps. Through the wood itself, the way you can push your hand into water, and when he pulled back there was nothing wrong with the boards and nothing wrong with his hand but his face. His face knew. "We're not supposed to look outside," someone said. A woman. Her voice came from the corner where the crying girl in red, in brown, in nothing, was sitting. The journal felt heavier. Mara looked down. There were more pages than before. The book had been thin when she picked it up. Now it was swollen. Pregnant with pages. She opened to a random spot in the middle. Day 47: There are three of us now. We don't speak anymore because the walls remember our voices and play them back wrong. She flipped forward. Day 3: Still eight. The count holds. If we can just She turned to the very last page. Fresh ink. Still wet. There were eight of them when they boarded up the windows. Her handwriting. But she hadn't written it yet. The lantern went out. In the dark, Mara heard seven people breathing. She started counting heartbeats and got to nine before she remembered to stop.

Chapter

TWO

written by Sasha Loomis

The apple on the table had been there before the table. Mara knew this the way she knew her left hand was older than her right, even though they'd been born at the same time. The apple sat in the center, red becoming brown becoming something that pulsed. No one touched it. Someone had already touched it. Someone would touch it. The woman from the corner stood up but remained sitting. Both versions of her moved. One walked to the boarded window where Richard's fingers had disappeared. The other stayed folded into herself, rocking. The standing one spoke. "I remember the address. 1437 Mercy Street. I wrote it on my palm so I wouldn't forget where we were going." She opened her hand. The skin was blank. She opened it again. Numbers emerged like bruises developing in reverse. "These aren't the right numbers." Richard had moved away from the window. Or toward it. He occupied both positions. Mara watched the space between them bend to accommodate him. "The safe-house," he said. His voice came from his mouth and from inside the walls and from the journal in Mara's lap. "They said it would protect us from what was outside." What was outside folded itself smaller. Became inside. Became the space between heartbeats. Mara wrote in the journal without looking down: The count changes when you sleep. Don't sleep. Don't Her hand moved across pages she couldn't feel. When she looked, the words had arranged themselves into a list of

instructions. Number six said: Maintain eye contact with the apple. Number twelve said: There is no number six. The crying girl flickered. Present, absent, present. Each time she returned she wore a different position. Sitting. Standing by the cold fireplace. Pressed against the ceiling with her hair hanging down, defying itself. "My sister was supposed to meet me," she said from all three locations. "I waited at the fountain. The one with the angels. With the empty basin. That's never been built yet." Time moved like syrup. Like blood. Like something between the two that had forgotten which one it was supposed to be. A man Mara hadn't counted emerged from the hallway that had no door. He carried a box. Inside the box was a smaller box. Inside that was a smaller hallway. He set it down carefully, as though it contained his own hands. "I found this in the room we came from," he said. No one asked which room. The house had three rooms. It had seventeen. It had only ever had this one, folding in on itself, origami made from moments. The journal wrote itself. Mara watched her hand move independently, forming words in handwriting that cycled through the seven names, the eight names, the six names that remained. The count must be maintained. When it breaks, we break with it. We become the spaces between ourselves. Richard opened the box. Inside was the apple from the table, fresh and impossibly red. The apple on the table continued sitting, browning, pulsing. Both apples exhaled. "We need to check the doors," the woman said. She had stopped being two versions. Now she was one person standing in seven places, wearing seven expressions. Fear looked different on each face. "The instructions said to check the doors every hour." "What instructions?" Mara asked, but she was already reading them in the journal. Her voice reading them aloud. Someone else's mouth forming the words in the corner. The lantern that had gone out continued burning. Its light fell upward, pooling on the ceiling, dripping into their eyes. In that inverted illumination, Mara counted. Eight people. No. Six. No. She stopped counting and simply watched the number refuse to hold still. Outside, something that had

never been outside pressed itself against the boards. The wood remembered being trees. Remembered forest. Tried to return.

Chapter

THREE

written by Cora Lindgren

The wood remembered being trees. Remembered forest. Tried to return. The floorboards creaked as Mara took a step toward Richard, whose presence now seemed to shift and shimmer like light through water. She felt the apple's weight in her palm, its surface rough under her fingers. "What did they mean by check the doors?" she asked aloud, her voice barely more than a whisper. Richard turned his head, his eyes locking onto hers for just a moment before he looked away. His movements were slow and deliberate, as though measuring each step against some unseen map. He walked to the door that had always been there, its frame warped by time but still holding firm. With a soft thud, he placed the box next to it. "Here," Mara said, handing Richard the lantern. Its flame flickered, casting long shadows that danced on the walls. "Let's start here."

The woman from the corner, no, seven versions of her, began circling the room, each one slightly out of sync with the others. One wore a coat made of frayed fabric, another had bare feet, and yet another was dressed in what seemed like layers upon layers of dresses. Each version moved closer to Richard as Mara led them toward the door. Richard's hand hesitated at the doorknob. He turned it slowly, his knuckles white against the cool metal. The lock clicked softly, and he pushed the door open with a gentle pressure that seemed to make the hinges moan in

protest. Inside was dark, but not completely devoid of light. A faint green glow seeped through from somewhere, casting eerie shadows across the floorboards. Mara felt a chill run down her spine as she stepped into the hallway. The walls were lined with boxes, thirteen of them, each one sealed and labeled with cryptic symbols. Richard moved ahead, his footsteps silent on the carpet that had once been thick and soft but now seemed thin and worn. He stopped at a box marked "Instructions" and opened it to reveal a single sheet of paper. His hand trembled slightly as he read aloud, "Check the doors every hour."

Mara approached him, her eyes tracing the lines of his face in the dim light. "How long have we been here?" she asked softly. Richard's gaze flickered to hers but quickly returned to the page. He folded the paper back into the box and resealed it with a snap that echoed through the hallway. "Long enough," he replied, his voice tinged with a cold certainty. The woman in red, or brown or nothing, swayed slightly as she passed by Mara. She paused beside Richard and leaned close to him, her breath warm against his ear. "We can't stay here," she whispered. "There's something out there."

Mara felt the apple shift uncomfortably in her hand. She tightened her grip, its rough surface digging into her palm. "What do you suggest we do?" she asked, her voice steady but laced with fear. Richard looked at Mara, his expression unreadable. "We follow the instructions," he said finally. "That's what they wanted us to do."

The woman from the corner stepped forward and spoke in unison with Mara's voice: "Or don't." Her words were a whisper, barely audible over the creaking of the floorboards. Mara hesitated, her mind racing with possibilities. She looked around the hallway, taking stock of the thirteen boxes. One box stood out, number six, labeled in bold script. It was slightly larger than the others and seemed to pulse faintly with an internal light. She picked up the box, feeling its weight in her arms. The label on the side read: "Six." Mara opened it carefully, her fingers brushing against a small, metallic object inside. She pulled out a key, cold and heavy in her hand. It was old, tarnished by time, but still

functional. Richard watched her from across the hallway, his eyes fixed on hers as though he could see into her soul. "Take care of that," he said quietly. Mara nodded, her heart pounding in her chest. She knew this key held the potential to change everything. She felt a sense of purpose, a clarity she hadn't experienced since they boarded up the windows. "Let's go back," Mara said decisively. She handed Richard the key and turned toward the door. The woman from the corner followed them, her multiple versions moving in unison as though she had become one entity. Richard closed the door behind them with a quiet click. They stepped into the main room, and Mara immediately noticed something different about the lantern. Its light had dimmed, casting long shadows that seemed to dance around the edges of their vision. "Is it getting dark outside?" Mara asked, her voice tinged with concern. Richard shook his head slowly. "No," he replied.

Chapter

FOUR

written by Priya Nair

Mara's hand clenched around the key as if it were a lifeline, and she shifted her weight slightly, feeling the apple in her other palm still pulsing with an almost palpable urgency. The light from the lantern was indeed dimming, but not because of any external change; it seemed more like the flame itself was growing weaker. "Hey, Richard," Mara started, trying to keep the tension at bay by injecting a hint of casualness into her voice, "you ever play Simon Says?"

Richard turned his head slowly in response, his eyes still fixed on hers. "No," he replied without hesitation, as though it were a question he had anticipated. "Okay, because I just realized we might be playing a form of that game here." Mara let out a small, almost involuntary laugh, her voice breaking the oppressive silence that had settled over the room. The woman from the corner, now firmly established in her role as multiple versions, swayed slightly beside Richard. "Or maybe not," she muttered under her breath, but it was clear who was speaking. Mara's ears perked up, and she saw his head turn toward her, just a fraction. Richard cleared his throat, looking back at Mara with an unreadable expression. "Let's focus on what we need to do," he said firmly, setting the stage for their next move. Mara nodded, trying to keep her voice steady despite the growing unease. "True," she agreed, "but let's not forget how to navigate these instructions." She held up the key, its

metallic surface catching the flickering light of the lantern. "We need this," she declared, more to herself than to anyone else in the room. Richard stepped closer and took the key from her hand. His fingers brushed hers for a moment before he turned back to the hallway. "Alright," he said, his voice almost a whisper, "let's see what we can find."

Mara watched him go, her heart pounding as she felt the weight of their situation settling in. She knew they had to stay vigilant; something was changing, and it wasn't for the better. As Richard opened the door with the key, the green light from inside spilled out like a ghostly hand reaching into the main room. The woman from the corner mimicked his movements, each version mirroring his steps with an eerie precision. They entered the hallway in unison, their footsteps barely audible over the creaking of the floorboards. Richard moved to the box labeled "Instructions" and opened it again. Mara watched as he read the single sheet inside, his eyes scanning the words like a seasoned detective trying to solve a complex case. "Check the doors every hour," he said, folding the paper back into the box. His fingers trembled slightly, but he managed to seal it with a snap that resonated through the hallway. Mara approached him, her voice barely above a murmur. "How long have we been here?" she asked, trying to keep her tone light despite the fear that threatened to overwhelm her. Richard's gaze flickered to hers before returning to the page in his hand. "Long enough," he replied with a cold certainty, though there was an underlying tension in his voice that betrayed how close to the edge they all were. The woman from the corner stepped forward and spoke in unison with Mara's voice: "We can't stay here," she whispered, her breath warm against Richard's ear. Her multiple versions moved closer, their expressions a blend of fear and resolve. One wore a coat made of frayed fabric, another had bare feet, and yet another was dressed in layers upon layers of dresses. Mara felt the apple shift uncomfortably in her hand as she tightened her grip. "What do you suggest we do?" she asked, her voice steady but laced with fear. Richard looked at Mara, his eyes locking onto hers for a moment

before he turned back to the hallway. "Follow the instructions," he said finally. "That's what they wanted us to do."

Mara hesitated, her mind racing with possibilities. She took in the thirteen boxes lining the walls, their labels cryptic and ominous. One box stood out, number six, labeled in bold script: "Six." She picked it up carefully, feeling its weight in her arms. The key inside was old, tarnished by time, but still functional. Richard watched her from across the hallway, his eyes fixed on hers as though he could see into her soul. "Take care of that," he said quietly. Mara nodded, her heart pounding in her chest. She knew this key held the potential to change everything. She felt a sense of purpose, a clarity she hadn't experienced since they boarded up the windows. "Let's go back," Mara said decisively. She handed Richard the key and turned toward the door.

Chapter

FIVE

written by jmarsh

Mara stepped back into the main room, her hand still trembling as she closed the door behind them. The green light from inside the hallway was a stark contrast to the dim glow of the lantern, casting eerie shadows that danced across the walls and floorboards. The air felt thick with an unspoken tension, as if every breath they took was held in anticipation of something unknown. The woman from the corner, now more solidly established in her multiple roles, swayed slightly beside Richard. She muttered under her breath, “This isn’t a game anymore.” Her words were barely audible over the creaking of the floorboards, but Mara heard them clearly, her mind racing with possibilities. The room was silent except for the faint rustling of their clothing and the occasional soft click as they moved. Richard turned to face the group, his eyes scanning each person in turn before landing on Mara. “We have to be careful,” he said, his voice low but urgent. “Something is changing, and we need to stay vigilant.” His fingers brushed against the key still in his hand, a reminder of their next move. Mara felt the apple shift uncomfortably in her palm as she tightened her grip. The rough surface seemed to pulse with an almost palpable urgency, as if it too was aware of the shifting dynamics around them. “What do we think is happening?” she asked, her voice steady but laced with fear. Richard’s gaze flickered to hers for a moment before he looked away, his

expression unreadable. The woman from the corner, now firmly established in her role as multiple versions, swayed closer to Mara. Her multiple expressions were a blend of fear and resolve: one wore a coat made of frayed fabric, another had bare feet, and yet another was dressed in layers upon layers of dresses. Each version moved closer, their footsteps barely audible over the creaking floorboards. One of them leaned close to Mara's ear, her breath warm against her skin. "We can't stay here," she whispered. Mara nodded, feeling a sense of purpose, a clarity she hadn't experienced since they boarded up the windows. She knew this key held the potential to change everything. Richard watched her from across the hallway, his eyes fixed on hers as though he could see into her soul. "Take care of that," he said quietly. Mara turned toward the door and opened it carefully. The green light spilled out like a ghostly hand reaching into the main room, casting long shadows that seemed to dance around their vision. Richard followed her inside, his movements silent and deliberate, as though measuring each step against some unseen map. He moved to the box labeled "Instructions" and opened it again. Inside was a single sheet of paper, its edges worn by repeated handling. The words were written in a neat but slightly shaky hand: "Check the doors every hour." Richard read aloud, his voice barely more than a whisper. His fingers trembled slightly as he folded the paper back into the box and sealed it with a snap that echoed through the hallway. Mara approached him, her eyes tracing the lines of his face in the dim light. "How long have we been here?" she asked softly. Richard's gaze flickered to hers but quickly returned to the page. He turned away, his voice tinged with cold certainty. "Long enough," he replied. The woman from the corner stepped forward and spoke in unison with Mara's voice: "We can't stay here," she whispered, her breath warm against Richard's ear. Her multiple versions moved closer, their expressions a blend of fear and resolve. Mara felt the apple shift uncomfortably in her hand as she tightened her grip. "What do you suggest we do?" she asked, her voice steady but laced with fear. Richard looked at Mara, his eyes locking onto hers for a moment before he

turned back to the hallway. "Follow the instructions," he said finally. "That's what they wanted us to do."

Mara hesitated, her mind racing with possibilities. She took in the thirteen boxes lining the walls, their labels cryptic and ominous. One box stood out, number six, labeled in bold script: "Six." She picked it up carefully, feeling its weight in her arms. The key inside was old, tarnished by time, but still functional. Richard watched her from across the hallway, his eyes fixed on hers as though he could see into her soul. "Take care of that," he said quietly. Mara nodded, her heart pounding in her chest. She knew this key held the potential to change everything. She felt a sense of purpose, a clarity she hadn't experienced since they boarded up the windows. "Let's go back," Mara said decisively. She handed Richard the key and turned toward the door.

Chapter

SIX

written by Dario Selo

Mara hesitated for a fraction of a second before turning toward the door. She felt the weight of the key in her hand as if it were a heavy anchor pulling her back. The green light from inside the hallway seemed to pulse with an almost ghostly intensity, casting long shadows that twisted and writhed across the floorboards. Richard's silent footsteps echoed as he followed her inside, his presence a steady but oppressive force. The woman from the corner stepped closer still, each of her versions blending into a single, determined figure. Her breath was warm against Mara's ear, sending shivers down her spine. "We can't stay here," she repeated softly, her voice barely more than a whisper. The multiple Mara's eyes met Mara's own, their expressions a blend of fear and resolve. Mara's hand tightened around the key as if it were an extension of herself, a lifeline to something beyond this eerie room. She turned toward Richard, her voice steady but tinged with urgency. "We need to figure out what these boxes mean," she said, gesturing to the thirteen lined up along the walls. "We can't just follow instructions blindly."

Richard's eyes flickered over the boxes, his gaze lingering on number six before returning to Mara. He took a deep breath, his fingers brushing against the key in his own hand. "We need to find out what's behind

those doors," he said, his voice calm but firm. "But first, we should understand why we're here."

Mara nodded, her mind racing with possibilities. She turned back to the boxes, tracing the labels with her finger as if they were ancient runes waiting to be deciphered. The box labeled "Six" stood out in bold script, its label almost glowing under the dim green light. Mara picked it up carefully, her heart pounding as she felt the weight of the key inside. Inside the box was a small, leather-bound journal. Its cover was worn and cracked, but still intact. Mara's fingers trembled as she opened it, revealing pages filled with cryptic writings in a neat but slightly shaky hand. She flipped through the pages, her eyes scanning each line carefully:

"Seven steps to understanding..." "Three trials to overcome..." "One key unlocks all..."

Mara's mind raced as she absorbed these words. The journal felt like a map, a guide to their survival. Richard watched her intently, his presence almost palpable in the silent room. "Do you think there are more clues in here?" Mara asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "Maybe something that can help us figure out what's really happening."

Richard nodded slowly, his expression thoughtful. "It could be our only hope," he said. "But we need to be careful. These instructions might lead us straight into danger."

Mara closed the journal and placed it back in the box, her fingers brushing against the key as if to reassure herself. She turned to Richard, determination burning in her eyes. "Let's start with these steps," she said firmly. Richard nodded, his voice low but urgent. "Alright. We need to follow them systematically." He took a deep breath, his fingers flexing around the key as if he were preparing for a challenge. Mara followed him back into the hallway, their footsteps echoing softly in the dim green light. The woman from the corner mimicked their movements with an eerie precision, each version mirroring their actions as if they were part of a synchronized dance. They approached the first door labeled "Seven," its surface slightly tarnished but still intact. Mara's

hand trembled as she inserted the key into the lock, feeling the weight of the task at hand. The click of the lock was almost imperceptible, but it felt like a threshold crossed. The door creaked open with a slight groan, revealing a small, dark chamber filled with shadows and dim light. Mara hesitated for a moment, her heart pounding as she stepped inside. Richard followed closely behind, his presence a reassuring anchor. The room was sparsely furnished, with only a single chair in the center of the space. A faint light from an unlit candle flickered on one of the walls, casting long, ominous shadows that danced across the floor. Mara approached the candle and struck a match, the flame igniting as if by magic. As the light filled the room, she noticed a small note taped to the wall behind the chair. The writing was faded but clear:

"Seven steps to understanding: 1. Seek the truth within yourself. 2. Embrace your fears. 3. Trust in the unknown."

Mara read the words slowly, her mind racing as she absorbed their meaning. She turned to Richard, her eyes locking onto his for a moment. "We need to start with the first step," she said firmly.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by typewriter_tom

Mara's fingers trembled as she read the note aloud to Richard, her voice steady but urgent. "The first step is 'Seek the truth within yourself.'" She turned to him, her eyes locking onto his for a moment. "Let's start there."

Richard nodded slowly, his expression thoughtful. He took a deep breath, his fingers flexing around the key as if he were preparing for a challenge. "Alright. Let's begin with you first. What truth do you think we need to uncover?"

Mara hesitated, her mind racing through the layers of fear and uncertainty that had built up over days confined in this eerie room. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, trying to gather her thoughts. "Think about your past," she said softly. "What experiences have shaped you? What fears do you carry with you?"

Richard's gaze softened as he studied Mara's face. He knew the weight of his own burdens but understood that confronting them was essential for their survival. "I had a friend who betrayed me once," he began, his voice barely more than a whisper. "It taught me to be wary of those around me. But it also made me realize how much I value loyalty and trust."

Mara nodded, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. She knew the burden of betrayal weighed heavily on Richard's shoulders. "And what

about you?" she asked gently. Richard took a deep breath, his voice firm but honest. "I lost my family in a fire," he said, his words cutting through the silence like a sharp blade. "It was their sacrifice that gave me everything I have now. But it also left an emptiness inside me, a fear of losing more."

Mara's heart ached for him as she listened. She understood the weight of those losses and the scars they had left behind. "What does this mean for us?" she asked, her voice soft but insistent. Richard looked at her, his eyes full of resolve. "It means we need to trust each other implicitly. Our fears and pasts have shaped who we are, but they can also be our greatest strengths if we face them head-on."

Mara nodded, feeling a renewed sense of purpose. She turned back to the journal, her fingers tracing the faded pages as she read aloud:

"Seven steps to understanding: 1. Seek the truth within yourself. 2. Embrace your fears. 3. Trust in the unknown."

She paused, her eyes meeting Richard's. "What do you think about embracing our fears? What are some of yours?"

Richard hesitated for a moment before answering. "The fear of failure is always there," he said, his voice firm but honest. "But I've learned that sometimes taking risks can lead to unexpected outcomes."

Mara nodded, her heart pounding as she processed this information. "Let's take the first step then," she said, determination burning in her eyes. They stood together in the small chamber, the faint light from the candle casting long shadows on their faces. Mara approached the chair and sat down, her mind racing with thoughts of self-examination. Richard watched her closely, his presence a reassuring anchor. Mara closed her eyes, taking a deep breath to center herself. She thought about the past few days, how they had been trapped in this eerie room, how their lives had been turned upside down. The fear and uncertainty, the sense of isolation, and the constant vigilance. "Alright," she said, opening her eyes. "Let's start with my fears first."

She took a deep breath, her voice steady but honest. "I have a fear of being alone," she admitted. "It stems from growing up in a household

where I often felt neglected. The thought of losing everything terrifies me because it means being completely vulnerable and exposed.”

Richard listened intently, his eyes full of understanding. “That’s a valid fear,” he said softly. “But it also means that finding true connections is incredibly important to you. You need to trust others more.”

Mara nodded, her resolve strengthening. “And what about your fears?” she asked. Richard took a deep breath, his expression serious but determined. “I have a fear of losing control,” he said. “It’s a lingering fear from the loss of my family. I worry that everything can be taken away at any moment, leaving me with nothing.”

Mara listened intently, her heart aching for him. “That’s a deep-seated fear,” she said softly. “But it also means you value stability and security deeply. You need to find ways to regain control in small increments.”

Richard nodded, his expression thoughtful. “Let’s take this one step at a time then,” he said firmly. Mara took a deep breath, her mind racing as she contemplated the next steps. She turned back to the journal, her fingers tracing the faded pages once more.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by Sammy Hall

Mara took a deep breath, her mind racing as she contemplated the next steps. She turned back to the journal, her fingers tracing the faded pages once more. “Alright,” she said, determination burning in her eyes. “Let’s take this one step at a time then.” She looked over at Richard, who was watching her intently, his expression serious but determined. “First thing’s first, let’s work on embracing our fears,” Mara continued, her voice steady but firm. She took the journal and handed it to Richard, who carefully took it from her hands. “Read through these steps again and tell me what you think about each one.”

Richard nodded, his eyes scanning the pages as he spoke. “Step two says ‘Embrace your fears.’ That’s a tall order,” he admitted, his voice soft but honest. “For me, I’ve always tried to push my fears aside, but they keep creeping back.”

Mara nodded, her own thoughts swirling in her mind. She leaned forward slightly, her eyes locked on Richard’s. “It starts with acknowledging them, right?” she said gently. “We can’t change our past, but we can learn from it and grow stronger because of it.”

Richard sighed deeply, his expression a mix of resignation and resolve. “You’re right,” he said, setting the journal aside for now. “Acknowledging my fears will be the first step to moving forward.”

Mara nodded, her eyes softening with understanding. “Let’s start there then. What are some specific fears you’ve been carrying that you think might hold us back?”

Richard took a deep breath and began to speak. “One of my biggest fears is failure,” he admitted, his voice barely more than a whisper. “I’ve always been driven by this fear, fear of not being good enough, fear of making mistakes that could destroy everything I have.” He paused, his expression pained but honest. Mara listened intently, her heart aching for him. She placed a reassuring hand on Richard’s arm. “That’s a valid fear,” she said softly. “But it also means you value success and achievement deeply. You need to find ways to turn that fear into fuel for growth.”

Richard nodded, his expression softening slightly. “And what about you?” he asked, looking at Mara with an intensity that made her take a step back. “What are some of your fears?”

Mara took a deep breath, her mind racing as she considered the question. She thought about the past few days, how their lives had been turned upside down and how they were now faced with these profound truths about themselves. “I have a fear of vulnerability,” she said softly, her voice barely more than a whisper. “It stems from growing up in a household where I often felt neglected. The thought of losing everything terrifies me because it means being completely exposed and vulnerable.”

Richard listened intently, his eyes full of understanding. “That’s a deep-seated fear,” he said gently. “But it also means that finding true connections is incredibly important to you. You need to trust others more.” He took another deep breath and continued, “And what about the unknown? Step three says ‘Trust in the unknown.’ That’s something I struggle with every day.”

Mara nodded, her resolve strengthening. “Let’s take this one step at a time then,” she said firmly. She turned back to Richard and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “We’ve come a long way since we were first locked here,” she said softly. “We’ve faced our fears and started to understand each other better.”

Richard looked at her, his eyes filled with gratitude. “Thanks for that,” he said gently. “But there’s still so much more we need to do.” He took the journal and flipped through the pages again, his fingers tracing the words as if they were maps leading them forward. Mara nodded, her own hand tightening on Richard’s shoulder. “We can’t control everything,” she said softly. “But we can control how we respond to it.” She leaned in closer, her voice low and urgent. “And that’s what these steps are all about, learning to navigate the unknown.”

Richard nodded, his expression thoughtful. “Let’s start with the first step then,” he said firmly. “Seeking the truth within ourselves. That’s something we can both work on together.” He looked at Mara, his eyes full of determination. “We need to be open and honest about our fears and pasts if we’re going to move forward.”

Mara nodded, her heart pounding as she processed this information. She took a deep breath, her mind racing with thoughts of self-examination. Richard watched her closely, his presence a reassuring anchor. Mara approached the chair and sat down, her mind racing with thoughts of self-examination. “Alright,” she said, opening her eyes. “Let’s start with my fears first.” She took a deep breath, her voice steady but honest.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Iris Beddoe

The unknown whispers; embrace the light within.

Sasha Loomis

The unknown whispers truths we must hear.

Cora Lindgren

The truth lies within, waiting to be uncovered.

Dario Selo

Every step forward is a 

typewriter_tom

The truth lies within, waiting to be embraced.

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