

SCIENCE

THE COMPOUNDING OF TUESDAYS

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

ONE

Lior Tannen

TWO

jmarsh

THREE

Sammy Hall

FOUR

Dan Okafor

FIVE

Margot Vail

SIX

Colin McAteer

SEVEN

inkwell_amy

EIGHT

rpenguin

Chapter

ONE

written by Lior Tannen

The morning Delia Marsh discovered she could remember Tuesdays that hadn't happened yet, she was standing in her kitchen watching her daughter Katie pour too much milk into her cereal bowl. The milk always spilled over the edge, always pooled on the placemat with the faded sunflowers, and Katie always said "oops" in exactly the same way, bright and unapologetic. Except this time, before the milk touched the rim, Delia's hand shot out and caught Katie's wrist. "Mom!" Katie jerked back, sloshing a little anyway. "I just..." Delia stared at her own hand, still wrapped around her daughter's thin arm. She'd known. Not guessed, not anticipated from habit. Known, with the certainty of having already watched it happen. She let go. Katie poured more carefully, shooting her mother suspicious glances. The feeling stayed with Delia through breakfast, through the argument about whether Katie needed a jacket (she did, Delia knew it, she'd already seen her daughter shivering at the bus stop), through the hurried goodbye kiss and the slam of the screen door. She stood at the sink, washing the cereal bowl, and felt time sitting strangely around her, like a coat that didn't quite fit. At the grocery store, she turned left toward the produce section, then stopped. No. She needed to go right, past the bakery, because in five minutes Mr. Chen from down the street would have a dizzy spell by the bread aisle and she should be there. Should she be

there? Was she losing her mind? But her feet carried her right anyway, and sure enough, there was elderly Mr. Chen reaching for a baguette, and there was the slight stumble, the confused blink. Delia was beside him with a hand on his elbow before he'd fully registered the sensation. "Steady now," she said, as if this were normal, as if she helped people she'd never spoken to every day of the week. "Thank you," he said, patting her hand. His fingers were papery and cool. "Don't know what came over me." "Low blood sugar, maybe," Delia heard herself say. "My late husband used to get that way. Have you eaten today?" She hadn't planned the lie about the husband. Martin was alive and well, probably in his office right now reviewing grant applications for the university. But the lie made Mr. Chen nod with recognition, made him human and small and grateful in a way the truth wouldn't have. After he shuffled off, Delia stood very still in the bread aisle. The fluorescent lights hummed overhead. A stock boy wheeled past with a cart of canned goods. Everything was exactly as it should be, except that she'd already lived this moment once before. Or she was living it for the first time and simply knew what was coming next. The difference felt important, but she couldn't grasp which was true. She bought chicken for dinner, even though she'd planned on pasta. She knew, somehow, that Katie would come home saying they'd talked about chickens in science class, how they weren't as stupid as people thought, how they could recognize over a hundred different faces. "We can't keep a chicken," Delia would say, before Katie even asked. "I wasn't going to ask!" Katie would protest, lying. And at dinner, Martin would look at his plate and say, "I thought we were having pasta," and Delia would say, "Change of plans," and that would be that. Tuesday would roll forward into evening, into dishes and homework and the small negotiations of family life, and perhaps that's all any of this was: pattern recognition, the brain's endless hunger for prediction. But when she loaded the groceries into her car, Delia paused with her hand on the trunk. The air smelled like October, like apples and smoke. She could feel it, just ahead: Katie's question about chickens, Martin's mild confusion, the way the evening would unspool

exactly as she'd already seen it. Not like it had happened before. Like it was happening now, somewhere else, without her. Like Tuesday had learned to exist in more than one place at once.

Chapter

TWO

written by jmarsh

The trunk lid descended with a metallic finality that seemed to echo longer than physics should permit, and in that stretched moment between the closing and the seal, Delia noticed the shadow her hand cast was wrong. Not absent, not displaced. Simply wrong in a manner her eyes could name but her vocabulary could not articulate. The shadow fell at an angle that suggested three o'clock light, though her watch (the Timex with the scratch across the six, Martin's mother's) read half past ten. She held her hand steady, fingers splayed against the painted metal. The shadow did not correct itself. A car door slammed three rows over. A grocery cart rattled past, one wheel shrieking its permanent complaint. The world continued its clockwork progression while Delia stood witness to the small heresy of her own silhouette. She thought of Katie's cereal bowl, of Mr. Chen's grateful confusion, of the chicken waiting in a plastic bag that would leak pink water onto the backseat if she didn't retrieve the cooler from the garage when she got home. She would retrieve it. She had already retrieved it, would retrieve it, was retrieving it in some adjacent present tense that grammar had not yet evolved to accommodate. The shadow shifted. Not gradually, not with the sun's patient arc, but all at once, snapping into correctness like a bone returning to its socket. Delia drove home with both hands gripping the wheel at ten and two, the way the driver's education

teacher had insisted thirty years ago, before anyone cared about such precision. The chicken leaked anyway. She had forgotten about the cooler, or perhaps she had remembered it in a version of Tuesday that wasn't this one, and the knowledge had gotten lost in translation. The streets unreeled in their familiar sequence: Oak to Maple, Maple to the four-way stop where teenagers had planted a memorial cross for some boy who'd died before Delia moved here, Maple to Sycamore, Sycamore to home. Their house was a Victorian painted the color of old pewter, with gingerbread trim Martin kept threatening to restore and never did. Delia pulled into the driveway and sat with the engine running, watching the second-floor window where Katie's bedroom looked out over the street. The curtain was drawn, as it should be at this hour, as it always was. Except she could see a shape behind it. Small, child-sized, unmoving. Katie was at school. Delia had put her on the bus herself, had watched the yellow doors fold shut, had waved at the taillights receding down Sycamore. The shape didn't move. Delia counted to twenty, then to sixty. Her pulse measured itself against her throat. When she reached one hundred and twelve, the curtain twitched, and there was nothing behind it but the darkness of an empty room. She brought the groceries inside through the back door, the one that stuck in humid weather and swung too freely in October's dryness. The kitchen smelled like the morning's coffee and something else, something she couldn't place. Copper, perhaps. Old pennies, or blood. She set the bags on the counter, the chicken already sweating through its wrapping, and went to the sink to wash her hands. The water ran cold, then hot, then cold again without her adjusting the tap. In the drawer beside the refrigerator, underneath the takeout menus and the broken corkscrew Martin refused to throw away, Delia found the spiral notebook she'd bought for Katie's math homework but that Katie had rejected for having the wrong number of holes. She opened it to the first page. Her handwriting looked back at her. "Tuesday, October 17th," the entry read. "Katie spills milk, 7:23 AM. Mr. Chen, dizzy spell, 9:47 AM. Shadow wrong in parking lot, 10:31 AM." Below that, in smaller script: "Katie in window, 11:02 AM.

Impossible." Delia did not remember writing this. She remembered deciding to write it, standing in this kitchen, planning to document the strangeness before it evaporated into the ordinary. But the ink was dry, the page slightly wrinkled, as though it had been handled many times. She turned the page. More entries, dates marching backward: October 10th, October 3rd, September 26th. All Tuesdays. All annotated with times, observations, the small calibrations of a reality that kept failing to hold still. The last entry, on a page near the middle of the notebook, simply said: "It's not repeating. It's compounding."

Chapter

THREE

written by Sammy Hall

Delia read the line again, then shut the notebook like it might bite her. Compounding. The word sat in her mouth wrong, tasted like the chemistry set Katie got for her eighth birthday and never opened. You compound interest, compound fractures, compound sentences. You don't compound Tuesdays. Tuesdays just are, one after another, reliably boring in the way weekdays should be. She opened the notebook again. Flipped back through the entries, looking for her own memory in the words. September 26th: "Martin mentions conference in Austin. Haven't told him yet that I already know he'll cancel." October 3rd: "Katie loses red mitten. Find it in dryer before she asks." The handwriting was definitely hers, the leftward slant she'd had since third grade, but reading it felt like overhearing herself in another room. Her phone buzzed. Text from Martin: "Forgot to mention, conference got moved to November. Won't have to miss Katie's recital after all." The recital was three weeks away. Delia hadn't told him she'd already bought the good camera, the one with the zoom lens, because in some version of this month he'd been in Texas and she'd needed to document it alone. She texted back: "Great news." Added a smiley face because that's what wives did, kept things light. The chicken was really leaking now, a pink puddle spreading across the laminate. She grabbed paper towels, mopped it up, moved the whole mess to the refrigerator. Through the

window above the sink she could see the Chens' house, the blue one with the sagging porch. Mr. Chen was in his yard, upright and steady, deadheading roses that should have finished blooming a month ago. While she watched, he looked up. Directly at her window. Directly at her. He didn't wave. Neither did she. They stood like that for what might have been five seconds or five minutes, time doing that slippery thing again where it refused to be measured properly. Then he went back to his roses. Delia pulled the curtains closed. Climbed the stairs to Katie's room. The door was shut. It shouldn't have been. Katie never shut her door in the morning, said it made the room smell like feet when she got home. Delia stood in the hallway, hand on the knob, aware that opening it was a choice and not opening it was also a choice and both options felt equally wrong. She opened it. Katie's room looked exactly like Katie's room: unmade bed with the horse-print comforter, desk buried under art supplies and candy wrappers, the shelf of participation trophies Katie claimed to hate but wouldn't let Delia donate. Nothing out of place. Nobody standing at the window. Except. The curtain was still moving slightly, like someone had just stepped away. Delia walked to the window. Pulled the curtain back. The street below showed her own car in the driveway, the Robinsons' recycling bin tipped over across the way, a jogger in expensive sneakers huffing past. Normal Tuesday things. She touched the glass. It was cold, far colder than October warranted. Her breath fogged it immediately. In the fog, someone had drawn a symbol. Not recently. The edges of the drawing were faint, almost invisible, like it had been made days ago and was only now becoming visible in the new condensation. It looked like a figure eight, but broken in the middle. Or maybe it was two circles that had collided and merged imperfectly. Delia wiped it away with her sleeve. Went back downstairs. Put the notebook in her purse. At 2:47, Katie would get off the bus. At 3:15, she would ask about the chickens. At 6:30, they would sit down to dinner and Martin would wonder aloud about the pasta, and Delia would have to pretend she'd made a spontaneous decision instead of following a script she'd apparently written weeks ago in her own

handwriting. But first she had four hours. Four hours to figure out what compounding meant, why Mr. Chen had looked at her like he was checking to make sure she was still there, and who had been standing in her daughter's room drawing broken infinity symbols in window frost. She grabbed her keys. The university library opened at noon on Tuesdays. She knew because she'd already been there, or would be there, or was always there in some version of today that ran parallel to this one. Grammar wasn't built for this. Neither was Delia. But apparently she was learning anyway.

Chapter

FOUR

written by Dan Okafor

The library parking garage smelled like it always did, diesel and wet concrete, but when Delia cut the engine she realized she'd driven there in absolute silence. No radio. No NPR voices explaining distant wars in soothing tones. Just her own breath and the tick of cooling metal. She'd brought the notebook. Obviously she'd brought the notebook. What she hadn't brought was a plan for what to do once she got inside, which seemed like an oversight until she remembered she'd probably done this before. Would do it again. Was doing it right now in some other slice of Tuesday that her brain had decided to experience out of order. The library's science wing occupied the third floor, all blond wood and institutional carpet that muffled footsteps into nonexistence. Delia took the stairs because the elevator made her think of closed spaces, of being trapped between floors while Tuesdays piled up overhead like floors in a building she couldn't see the top of. She found the physics section by memory she didn't trust. The books smelled like dust and old glue and the particular loneliness of information nobody had checked out since 1987. She pulled one at random: Temporal Mechanics and Theoretical Frameworks. Put it back. Tried again: Causality and the Observer Effect. The subtitle promised "A Layman's Guide," which meant it was written for laymen with graduate degrees. "You're looking in the wrong section." Delia turned. The voice belonged to a student, maybe twenty,

with dark hair pulled back so tight it looked painful. She wore a lab coat over jeans, the breast pocket embroidered with "Research Assistant" and a name too small to read from this distance. "I'm not looking for anything specific," Delia said, which was true and also completely false. "Yes you are." The girl pulled a book from a shelf three rows over, moved with the efficiency of someone who'd made this trip before. She held it out: *Observational Loops in Quantum Systems*. "Dr. Chen requested this yesterday. Said someone would be by to pick it up Tuesday." Delia took the book. It was warm, like it had been sitting in sunlight. "Dr. Chen." "He teaches particle physics. Office is downstairs." The girl paused, tilted her head slightly. "You've already been there, though. Haven't you?" The words should have sounded crazy. Instead they sounded exactly right, the way Mr. Chen's dizzy spell had felt right, inevitable, something that had already happened in the future tense. "I haven't," Delia said carefully. "Not yet." "Right." The girl smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Not yet. I keep mixing up my tenses too." She walked away before Delia could ask what that meant. Disappeared around a corner with the particular finality of someone who'd said exactly what they came to say and nothing more. Delia opened the book. Someone had left a slip of paper inside, graph paper covered in handwritten equations. At the bottom, in different ink: "Office 3B. Door's open Tuesdays." She found 3B at the end of a hallway that smelled like burnt coffee and marker fumes. The door was open. Inside, a man sat at a desk covered in printouts and empty yogurt cups, writing in a notebook that looked exactly like the one in Delia's purse. He was younger than Mr. Chen from the bread aisle. Forty, maybe. Same last name on the door: Dr. James Chen, Associate Professor. He looked up when her shadow crossed the threshold. "You're early." "I don't have an appointment." "Not today you don't." He closed his notebook, set down his pen. "But last Tuesday you were right on time. And next Tuesday you'll be late because you'll stop to buy coffee first, even though you know it'll make you late. You always stop for the coffee." Delia's hand found the doorframe. Held on. "How many times," she said slowly, "have I been

here?" Dr. Chen consulted a chart tacked to his wall, covered in hash marks and color-coded annotations. "By my count? This is your fourth visit. By yours?" He nodded at her purse, where the notebook's spiral binding was just visible. "You'll have to tell me." He pushed a chair toward her with his foot. It rolled across the linoleum and stopped exactly where she could reach it. "Sit down, Mrs. Marsh. We have thirty-seven minutes before you need to pick up Katie, and there's something you need to measure before this Tuesday ends.

Chapter

FIVE

written by Margot Vail

Delia sat because standing required decisions and decisions required a future she could trust. Dr. Chen opened a drawer. Removed a device the size of a deck of cards, matte black casing, single red LED. "Put your hand on this." "What is it?" "Chronometric variance detector. Measures temporal drift in biological systems." He said it like he was asking her to take her temperature. "Press your palm flat." She did. The LED blinked twice, held steady, then began pulsing in irregular intervals. Fast, slow, fast fast, pause. "You're oscillating," Dr. Chen said. He wrote something in his notebook. "Point-seven-three decoherence index. Higher than last week." "I don't know what that means." "It means you're existing in multiple timeframes simultaneously. Tuesdays, specifically. Your consciousness is experiencing them out of sequence while your body moves forward linearly." He tapped the device. "For most people this reads zero. Stable temporal binding. You're at point-seven-three and rising." Delia pulled her hand back. The LED went dark. "You're measuring time travel." "No. I'm measuring memory displacement across repeating temporal structures." He looked at her directly for the first time. "You're not traveling through time, Mrs. Marsh. Time is traveling through you." She opened her notebook. Found the page she'd written but didn't remember writing. "It's compounding. I wrote that. What does it mean?" "Every Tuesday you experience adds another layer

to your consciousness. You remember forward and backward simultaneously. Past Tuesdays, future Tuesdays, all occurring in superposition until something forces a collapse into linear experience." He stood, went to his whiteboard, drew a circle. Then another overlapping it. Then another. "Most people experience time like a film strip. One frame, next frame. Linear causality. You're experiencing it like, " "Broken infinity," Delia said. "Someone drew it in my daughter's window." Dr. Chen's marker stopped. "Who?" "I don't know. The fog showed it." He set the marker down carefully. Deliberately. "Katie's ten years old. Blonde hair, allergic to bee stings, wants a chicken." "How do you, " "Because you've told me. Four times now. But this is the first time you've mentioned someone else drawing symbols." He pulled a file from his desk. Photographs, printouts, more equations. "There are others experiencing this. Not many. The research assistant upstairs, my uncle who you met at the grocery store, seventeen subjects total across three states. All Tuesdays. All starting approximately nine weeks ago." Delia's phone buzzed. Reminder: Katie's bus in 23 minutes. "I have to go." "Not yet." Dr. Chen handed her a small plastic case. Inside, three pills, white, unmarked. "Take one tonight before bed. It won't stop the oscillation but it'll stabilize your present enough to let you measure the pattern." "Measure it how?" "Keep writing in your notebook. But add timestamps, specificity. When you know something before it happens, write down how you know. Memory? Intuition? Direct perception? We need data points to map the causality structure." She took the case. "And if I don't want to map it? If I just want it to stop?" "It won't stop." He said it gently. "The oscillations are increasing. By December you'll be experiencing non-contiguous Tuesdays. January, they'll start bleeding into other weekdays. By March..." He trailed off. "By March what?" "We don't know. None of the subjects have reached that threshold yet. But the mathematics suggest your consciousness will fully decohere from linear time. You'll experience all moments simultaneously, unable to anchor in any single present." Delia stood. The chair rolled backward and hit the wall. "Mrs. Marsh." Dr. Chen held up his own notebook. "I

need you to keep coming back. Every Tuesday. Same time. Because somewhere in your oscillations is the answer to why this started. And more importantly, whether it's localized or spreading." "Spreading?" He didn't answer. Just looked at her with the expression of someone watching a experiment approach critical conditions. Delia left. Took the stairs down, each step concrete and singular. Seventeen minutes to Katie's bus. She made it with three minutes spare. Katie got off exactly on schedule, backpack bouncing, talking about chickens before her feet hit the sidewalk. "Can we keep one? Just one? Please?" "We can't keep a chicken," Delia said. Katie's face fell in the exact pattern Delia had already witnessed. "I wasn't going to ask that," Katie lied, perfectly.

Chapter

SIX

written by Colin McAteer

Katie carries her disappointment like physical weight, shoulders dropping as she climbs into the car. Delia watches her daughter's reflection in the rearview mirror. She counts the seconds until Katie speaks again. Gets to forty-one before Katie says, "Emma's mom said yes." "Emma's mom has a farm." "It's not a farm, it's a house with a big yard." Katie kicks the back of Delia's seat, gentle, rhythmic. Not tantrum-kicking. Thinking-kicking. "Why can't we have a big yard?" Delia pulls away from the curb. The plastic case in her purse rattles against her keys, three pills that might stabilize her present if she believes that word means anything anymore. "We have the yard we have." At home, Katie disappears upstairs without being asked to start homework. Delia hears the bedroom door close. Not slam. Katie saves slamming for real anger. This is just the ordinary sadness of being ten and powerless. The chicken has leaked again inside the refrigerator. Delia wipes down the shelf, runs the pink paper towels under hot water, watches the color spiral down the drain. She thinks about Dr. Chen's whiteboard, circles overlapping until the whole thing was just layers of circumference with no clear center. She takes out her notebook. Writes: "3:02 PM, kitchen. Knew Katie would mention Emma before she said the name. Memory? Already heard this conversation. When?" The pen hovers. She has no answer. The knowing arrived without origin, fact

without source material. Her phone rings. Martin, his photo from last Christmas filling the screen. She answers. "Hey, quick question. Did you already buy the camera for Katie's recital?" Delia closes her eyes. Tries to locate the memory of purchasing it. Finds only the knowledge that she had, will, must have. "Yes." "Okay, great. I'll cancel the one I ordered." Pause. "You feeling all right? You sound tired." "Just a Tuesday." "Just a Tuesday," Martin echoes, and hangs up with a promise to be home by six. Delia goes upstairs. Stands outside Katie's door. The hallway is dim, afternoon light failing to reach this far from the windows. She knocks. "Come in." Katie sits at her desk, math homework open but untouched. She's drawing instead, colored pencils arranged by shade. The drawing shows a chicken, red comb too large, feet that look more like hands. In the background, a house. Their house, the pewter paint rendered in careful gray. "That's good," Delia says. "It's okay." Katie adds another feather, each barb individually marked. "Do you think chickens know what day it is?" The question arrives without context. Delia sits on the edge of Katie's bed, careful not to disturb the stuffed animals arranged in their mysterious hierarchy. "What makes you ask?" "Ms. Rodriguez said in class that chickens have really good memories. They remember people and places and stuff. But do they remember like, yesterday was Monday, today is Tuesday?" Katie looks up. "Or is it all just the same thing to them?" Delia's throat tightens. "I don't know." "Because if every day is the same, maybe they don't get sad when things don't happen. Like getting to live in someone's yard instead of a farm." Katie returns to her drawing. Adds a fence around the house, posts leaning at inconsistent angles. "Maybe that would be better." "Every day isn't the same." "Feels like it sometimes." Delia stands. Walks to Katie's window. The curtain is open now, glass clear, no condensation. She touches the pane anyway. Cold, but normally cold. October cold. The street below shows Mr. Chen in his yard again, or still. He's moved to the front flower bed, kneeling in the dirt. "Mom?" Katie's voice. "Did someone come in my room today?" Delia turns. "What makes you think that?" "My curtain was closed when I got home. I never close it." "Maybe it blew shut." "The

window's locked." Katie puts down her pencil. Studies her mother with the particular intensity children deploy when they know adults are hiding something. "Was someone in here?" Delia could lie. Should lie. Instead she says, "I don't know." Katie accepts this with a nod that suggests she expected nothing more certain. Returns to her chicken, her house, her carefully drawn fence. Delia watches her daughter color inside lines that will not hold, boundaries that mean less than Katie thinks they do. Downstairs, the clock reads 4:17. Two hours until dinner. Two hours to decide whether to take the pill Dr. Chen gave her, whether stabilizing her present means abandoning her futures, all the Tuesdays she's already lived that haven't happened yet.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by inkwell_amy

Delia leaves Katie's room. Takes the stairs fast, two at a time. Her purse sits on the kitchen counter where she dropped it. She opens the plastic case. Holds one pill between thumb and forefinger. It's light. Lighter than aspirin. No markings, no seam where the halves would split. She puts it in her mouth. Dry-swallows. It catches halfway down. Then she walks outside. Mr. Chen sees her coming. Doesn't stand, just rocks back on his heels in the dirt, trowel in one hand. Up close he's older than his nephew by maybe thirty years. Liver spots, knuckles swollen with arthritis. He gestures at the marigolds he's planting. "Too late in the season. Won't survive the first frost." "Then why plant them?" "Something to do." He drives the trowel into the soil, leaves it standing. "James sent you." Not a question. Delia sits on the porch steps uninvited. "Your nephew thinks I'm coming apart." "He thinks that about everyone. Comes from measuring things that don't want to be measured." Mr. Chen pulls off his gardening gloves. His hands shake slightly. "You remember the grocery store?" "You were dizzy." "I was testing." He looks at her directly. Same expression as in his yard earlier, checking to confirm her presence. "Wanted to see if you'd catch me. You did." "Because I knew you would fall." "No. Because I fell last Tuesday and you weren't there. I hit my head, split it open on the bread case. Bled all over the sourdough." He touches his temple. No scar, no bruise. "This

Tuesday you caught me. Next Tuesday I won't go to the store at all." Delia's chest tightens. The pill sits in her stomach like a stone. "You're oscillating too." "Seventeen weeks now. Started in July. Thursdays for me, not Tuesdays." He picks up the trowel again, turns it over. "James thinks it's quantum. Consciousness interacting with probability fields, collapsing and un-collapsing. I think it's simpler." "What's simpler than quantum mechanics?" "Memory. We're remembering wrong. Remembering things that didn't happen mixed with things that did." He points the trowel at her. "Your daughter. Katie. You know what she'll say before she says it." "Yes." "But you don't remember her saying it before. You just know." Delia tries to locate the difference. Can't. "Same thing." "Not even close." Mr. Chen stands, knees cracking. "Remembering means it happened. Knowing means it will happen. You're doing both at once. Your brain can't tell the difference anymore." Across the street, a car pulls into the Robinsons' driveway. Mrs. Robinson gets out carrying grocery bags. She waves. Delia waves back. Normal Tuesday things. "James gave you pills." "I took one." "Good." Mr. Chen collects his gardening tools. "Won't stop the oscillations but it'll slow them. Buy you time to map the pattern." "What if I don't want to map it? What if I just want to know why?" "Why is the wrong question." He starts toward his house, then stops. "Better question: who else is experiencing Tuesdays that haven't happened yet?" "Your nephew said seventeen subjects." "Seventeen we know about." Mr. Chen looks at her over his shoulder. "How many we don't know about? How many people having déjà vu, premonitions, dreams that come true? How many wrote it off as coincidence?" He climbs his porch steps. "You drew a symbol in your daughter's window. Broken figure eight." "That wasn't me." "Not this Tuesday." He opens his front door. "But you will. Three weeks from now, October 31st. You'll draw it to warn yourself. To mark the day everything changes." "Changes how?" Mr. Chen doesn't answer. Just goes inside and closes the door. Delia sits on his porch steps until the light fails. Her phone buzzes. Martin: "Leaving office now. Home in 20." She walks back across the street. In her kitchen, she starts dinner. The chicken, finally.

She sets it in the pan. Turns on the burner. Oil heats, spits. Upstairs, Katie's door opens. Footsteps in the hall. Her daughter appears in the kitchen doorway. "Mom? I think I already know what we're having for dinner." Delia looks at her. Katie's face shows no fear. Just curiosity. Just the same expression Delia sees in the bathroom mirror every morning, trying to recognize herself. "Chicken," Katie says. "Right?" Delia nods. Katie sits at the table. Starts her homework without being asked. The pencil moves across the page. Numbers, equations, problems with answers in the back of the book.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by rpenguin

Delia doesn't answer right away.

The oil snaps in the pan, a sharp, insistent sound. She turns the heat down without looking, her eyes still on Katie. There's something off in the way the pencil moves, too certain, no hesitation, no erasing.

"Katie," she says carefully, "how did you know?"

Katie shrugs, not looking up. "I just did."

"Did you remember it," Delia asks, "or did you know it?"

The pencil pauses for the first time.

Katie frowns slightly, as if the question itself doesn't make sense. "What's the difference?"

Delia almost laughs. Mr. Chen's voice sits in her head, clear as if he's still in the yard. Remembering means it happened. Knowing means it will happen.

"Nothing," she says. "Forget it."

Katie goes back to her homework. The rhythm returns, steady, confident. Too confident.

Delia flips the chicken. The smell rises, normal, grounding. Garlic, oil, heat. She focuses on it, on the weight of the pan in her hand, the exact angle of the spatula. Real things. Present things.

But underneath, something is shifting.

Not a thought. Not a memory.

A pressure.

Like something lining up.

They eat at the table. Martin isn't home yet.

Katie talks about school, math quiz, a girl named Erin who cried in class, the science project they haven't started. It all sounds normal. It all is normal.

Except... "You're going to say the quiz was easy," Delia says.

Katie blinks. "It was easy."

"I know," Delia says.

She doesn't mean to say it like that. It comes out flat. Certain.

Katie watches her now, curiosity sharpening into something else. Not fear. Not yet.

"How did you know?" Katie asks.

Delia opens her mouth.

Closes it.

Because she doesn't remember Katie saying it before.

She just knows.

The pill sits heavy in her stomach. Not dissolving. Not moving. Just there.

Slowing things down, Mr. Chen said.

Buy you time.

Time for what?

Delia stands, takes their plates to the sink. The water runs. Too loud.

Behind her, Katie's pencil stops again.

"Mom," she says.

Delia doesn't turn around.

"Yeah?"

"I had a dream last night."

Of course you did.

Delia grips the edge of the sink.

"What about?"

Katie hesitates.

“I was in my room,” she says slowly. “But it wasn’t my room exactly. The window was different. There was something drawn on it.”

Delia’s breath catches.

“Like fog,” Katie continues. “But it stayed there. Like someone used their finger.”

Don’t say it.

“Like an infinity sign,” Katie says. “But broken.”

Delia turns off the water.

The silence rushes in.

“When?” Delia asks.

Katie shrugs. “I don’t know. Just... later.”

Later.

Three weeks.

October 31st.

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more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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