



COURAGE

Remembering the Part Where You Survived

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

One	inkwell_amy
Two	rpenguin
Three	Ruth Ann Keller
Four	JUK3
Five	jmarsh
Six	Sasha Loomis
Seven	Olive Kassen
Eight	Iris Beddoe

Chapter

One

written by inkwell_amy

The knife went through the drywall like it was skin. Plaster dust bloomed white against Maria's knuckles as she jerked the blade free and started cutting again, tracing a rectangle large enough to crawl through. Behind her, the phone on the kitchen counter kept ringing. Seven rings. Eight. The sound drilled into her spine. She kicked the section of wall and it collapsed inward. Through the gap she could see the neighbor's darkened bathroom, smell their lavender soap. Mrs. Chen would call the police when she got home from bridge night. Maria would be three states away by then. The ringing stopped. Her hands stopped. In the silence she heard the rain starting outside, tapping against the window glass like fingernails. She turned and looked at the phone. Black. Cordless. Seventeen years old if it was a day. The display glowed green in the dim kitchen: UNKNOWN CALLER. It rang again. Maria crossed the linoleum in four steps. The knife was still in her right hand, plaster dust turning to paste in the creases of her palm. She picked up the phone with her left and pressed TALK. "You have the wrong number," she said. Breathing on the other end. Wet. Rattling like stones in a can. "I'm hanging up." "The blue car." A woman's voice, barely there. "Don't take the blue car." Maria looked out the window. Her Honda sat in the driveway, blue as a wound under the streetlight. Rain streaked the windshield. She'd already loaded the trunk: two bags of clothes, a box of

documents, the emergency cash from inside the toilet tank. "Who is this?" "Check the wheel well. Driver's side. Check it now." The line went dead. Maria set the phone down. Picked up the knife again. The handle was warm from her grip, the blade still chalky with drywall dust. She walked to the front door and opened it without turning on the porch light. Rain came down in gray sheets, soaking her shoulders before she'd gone three steps. The driveway was gravel and her boots made no sound. She crouched beside the driver's door. Ran her hand up into the wheel well, fingers scraping through mud and road salt. Something smooth. Plastic. Rectangular. She pulled it free and held it under the streetlight. A GPS tracker. Magnetic mount. Still warm. Maria's throat went dry. She looked up and down the street. Parked cars. Lit windows. The Johnsons' recycling bin blown onto its side. Everything ordinary. Everything wrong. She peeled the tracker off and walked to the storm drain at the curb. Dropped it through the grate. Heard it splash eight feet down. When she turned back toward the house, the kitchen light was off. She'd left it on. She always left it on. Maria shifted the knife in her hand and started walking. Not toward the house. Toward the sidewalk. Toward the intersection where the bus ran every thirty minutes until midnight. She didn't run. Running made you visible. She walked like someone going to check the mail. Like someone who'd be right back. The rain was cold enough to hurt. At the corner she stopped and looked back once. A shadow moved past her kitchen window. Too tall to be a tree branch. Too solid to be headlights. The phone in the house started ringing again. She could hear it even from here, thin and insistent, cutting through the rain. It rang and rang and rang. Maria turned north and kept walking.

Chapter

Two

written by rpenguin

Maria smelled like pancakes.

Chapter

Three

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One found the observation inappropriate under the circumstances. One was walking through rain without coat or destination, a knife concealed beneath one's jacket, and yet one could not dismiss the fact. The scent of pancakes clung to one's clothes, to one's hair, unmistakable and absurd. It emanated from the twenty-four-hour diner one had passed three blocks back, the only establishment with lights burning at this hour. One had not eaten there. One had merely walked past its steamed windows while a line cook scraped the griddle, and the smell had attached itself like evidence. The bus shelter came into view. Green paint peeling from its metal frame. A bench spotted with old gum. One sat and placed the knife on one's lap, hidden beneath crossed hands. The rain had soaked through to one's skin. One's fingers had gone numb. A man was sleeping at the far end of the bench. Not sleeping, one corrected. His eyes were open, fixed on the advertisement above one's head. One could see his chest rising and falling with deliberate slowness, the breathing of someone feigning unconsciousness. His shoes were expensive. Italian leather, ruined by the wet. One marked the detail. A homeless man did not wear two-hundred-dollar oxfords. The bus was not due for seventeen minutes. One had counted wrong at the intersection. One had thought thirty-minute intervals, but the posted schedule revealed a different pattern after eleven o'clock. Forty-five minutes. One had

missed the last bus by four minutes. "You dropped something," the man said. His voice was cultured. East Coast education, old money diction. One did not turn. "I have dropped nothing." "By your foot. Small rectangle. Looks important." One glanced down. A business card lay on the concrete, white against the dark pavement. One had not dropped it. One was certain. Still, one reached down and retrieved the card. Heavy stock, expensive printing. A phone number, nothing else. No name. No company. Just ten digits embossed in black. "That isn't mine," one said. "Must have blown here then." The man sat upright. His hair was gray at the temples, cut with precision. His suit, though wet, had been tailored. "Strange night for a walk." One stood. The knife remained concealed. "I shall wait elsewhere." "The next shelter is a mile north. You'll miss the bus." The man did not move from his position. "I'm not what you think I am." "You presume to know my thoughts." "You think I was sent. To watch you, perhaps. To finish what was started at your house." He reached into his jacket and one's hand tightened on the knife handle. He withdrew a cigarette case, silver, monogrammed. "I'm here because I received a call. Three rings. A woman's voice I did not recognize. She told me to be at this bus stop at eleven forty-seven. She said someone would need the card." One looked at the card again. The number was not familiar. "Who are you?" "My name is William Frost. I was a federal prosecutor until four months ago. I specialized in witness protection failures." He lit the cigarette without offering one. "Eighteen cases. Eighteen families who were promised safety and received graves instead. I began asking questions that made certain people uncomfortable." "And now you wait at bus stops, distributing phone numbers." "Now I wait at bus stops because I received a phone call that knew where I would be before I did." He exhaled smoke that the rain immediately shredded. "She knew you would be here too. She knew what you would find in your wheel well. She appears to know a great many things." One sat again. The card was growing soft in one's damp palm. "What happens if I call this number?" "I called mine. She told me eighteen names. The names of the men who sold out my witnesses.

Names I had spent four months trying to learn." Frost dropped the cigarette and crushed it beneath his ruined shoe. "Then she told me they knew where my daughter lived." A car passed slowly on the street, its headlights sweeping across the shelter. Neither of them moved. The car continued north and disappeared. "I have no daughter," one said. "You have a sister. Detroit. She teaches elementary school. Third grade." Frost stood and buttoned his jacket. "The woman on the phone said to tell you: they know about Detroit.

Chapter

Four

written by JUK3

Maria did not dial the number right away.

The card had already begun to soften in the rain, its edges curling slightly between her fingers. The ink, however, remained sharp. Ten digits. No name. No explanation.

At the far end of the shelter, William Frost stood with his back half-turned, watching the street instead of her. He looked like a man waiting for something inevitable rather than something uncertain.

“You should call it,” he said.

Maria ignored him. She watched the road, the empty stretch of wet pavement reflecting the streetlights in broken streaks.

Then she heard it.

Three rings.

She stiffened and looked down at her phone.

The screen was dark.

No call. No notification. Nothing.

“You heard that,” Frost said quietly.

Maria glanced at him. “Heard what.”

“The ringing.”

“It didn’t happen.”

Frost studied her for a moment, then gave a small, almost thoughtful nod. “Right.”

Maria turned the card over, though there was nothing on the back, and entered the number.

The call connected before she finished dialing.

There was no ringing. No greeting. Just a faint sound, breathing, low and uneven.

Maria said nothing.

The voice came first.

“Not here.”

It was distant, like it had traveled through something thicker than air. The words landed slightly off, as if they had been delayed.

Maria tightened her grip on the phone.

“You waited again.”

A cold pressure settled in her chest.

“I didn’t...”

The sound shifted abruptly. The breathing cut out, replaced by something else. A steady, rhythmic hum. Not traffic. Something more mechanical.

“Listen carefully,” the voice said.

It was clearer now.

Too clear.

Maria felt it before she understood it. The cadence. The way the sentence ended cleanly, without hesitation or filler. The voice didn’t search for words. It already knew them.

“There’s a second tracker.”

Maria looked up, scanning the shelter, the street, Frost. Nothing moved.

“Where?”

A brief pause.

“You already removed it.”

“I removed one.”

“Check your left pocket.”

Maria froze.

She knew what was in her pockets. She had checked when she left the house. Checked again at the corner. She didn't make mistakes like that.

Slowly, she slid her hand into her left pocket.

Her fingers closed around something smooth.

Plastic.

She pulled it out and held it under the dim shelter light. Smaller than the one from the car. Thinner. A strip of adhesive along the back.

Her stomach dropped.

"That's not possible," she said.

"It already happened."

The voice wasn't surprised.

It wasn't urgent.

It sounded tired.

Behind her, Frost stepped closer. "You didn't have that before."

"I know."

"You checked the car?"

"Yes."

"And your pockets?"

"Yes."

"Then someone put it there after."

Maria shook her head. "No."

Frost didn't argue. He just watched her, waiting.

On the phone, the voice exhaled softly.

"You're remembering in the wrong order."

Maria frowned. "What does that mean?"

"When did you call me?" the voice asked.

"I didn't call you."

A pause.

Then, quieter:

"You always say that."

The line went dead.

Maria lowered the phone slowly and stared at the screen.

No active call.

No record of dialing the number.

Just a small notification in the corner.

Voicemail.

Timestamped twenty-three minutes earlier.

Maria hesitated, then tapped it.

Static filled the speaker, then resolved into a voice, distorted, stretched thin, but still recognizable.

“...listen to me,” it said. “If you’re hearing this, you already missed it. You always...”

The audio warped, then snapped back into clarity.

“Don’t take the car. Check the wheel well. Do it now.”

The message ended.

Maria didn’t need to hear anything else.

She knew that voice.

Not the way you recognize a stranger. Not even the way you recognize someone familiar.

She knew it the way you recognize your own thoughts when you hear them spoken out loud.

Frost said something, but she barely heard him.

Her attention was fixed on the echo of the message, on the shape of the words, the rhythm, the certainty behind them.

The voice hadn’t been guessing.

It hadn’t been warning.

It had known.

Maria looked down at the second tracker in her hand.

Then at the phone.

Then back out at the empty street.

For the first time since leaving the house, she felt something shift, not fear, not exactly.

Something worse.

A loss of direction.

As if the path she was on had already been walked.

As if every decision she thought she was making had already been made.

Behind her, the rain tapped unevenly against the shelter glass.

Maria closed her eyes.

For a moment, she could almost hear it again.

Three rings.

When she opened them, the street was still empty.

But the certainty remained.

Whoever had called her hadn't been trying to figure out what would happen next.

They had been trying to correct it.

Chapter

Five

written by jmarsh

Maria dropped the tracker on the pavement and crushed it beneath her heel. The plastic splintered inward with a sound like bone breaking in a closed fist. Once. Twice. Until the device was fragments scattered across wet concrete, its circuitry exposed and ruined. Frost watched her without speaking. His cigarette case remained in his hand, unopened now, as though he had forgotten its purpose. "You destroyed evidence," he said finally. "Evidence suggests investigation. Investigation suggests time." Maria bent and collected the largest pieces, dropped them through the grate at the shelter's edge. They fell into darkness without sound. "I have neither." "Then what do you have?" Maria turned the phone over in her palm. The screen had gone black again, but the voicemail notification persisted in the corner. Twenty-three minutes earlier. Before she had left the house. Before she had found the first tracker. Before any of this had begun in the order she remembered it beginning. She pressed play again. The static resolved differently this time. Not words, but background noise: rain against glass, the distant hum of an engine idling, and beneath it all, a rhythm she recognized. Her own breathing. Unsteady. Afraid. "The recording is you," Frost said. "I never made a recording." "You're hearing yourself." "I know what I'm hearing." Maria deleted the voicemail. The notification vanished. The screen showed only the time: 11:52. The bus would not arrive for another

thirty-eight minutes, if it arrived at all. "The question is when." Frost slid the cigarette case back into his jacket. His movements were deliberate, the precision of a man who had learned to control what little remained within his control. "The woman who called me knew things before they occurred. Knew where I would be. What I would need to hear. She described my daughter's schedule for tomorrow morning, including a dentist appointment my daughter only made this afternoon." He paused. "The appointment was canceled twenty minutes ago. My daughter is no longer at her apartment." "You think the voice moved her." "I think something did." Maria looked north, toward the intersection where the next shelter waited. A mile, Frost had said. The rain had thickened into something that obscured the streetlights, turned them into smears of yellow against the dark. Walking would make her visible. Staying would make her stationary. Both were forms of failure. "Your sister," Frost said. "When did you last speak to her?" "Four months ago. A Tuesday. She called to tell me she'd been hired permanently." Maria's jaw tightened. "I told her I would visit in the spring." "And you haven't." "No." "Because you were already running." Maria said nothing. The silence between them stretched and settled, heavy as the rain. Frost stepped closer. Not threatening, but close enough that she could see the water beading on his collar, the way his hands had begun to shake slightly. "Eighteen families," he said quietly. "Eighteen sets of people who believed the system would protect them. Who followed instructions. Who trusted the voices on the phone telling them where to go, what to do, how to stay alive." He met her eyes. "Every single one of them died because someone knew where they would be before they arrived." "You think I'm being moved." "I think you've already been moved. The tracker you found. The call you received. The voicemail that doesn't exist in the right order." His voice dropped lower. "You're not running from something. You're running toward it." Maria's hand tightened on the knife beneath her jacket. The blade was still there, solid and real. The only thing she had carried from the house that felt like hers. "Then I stop running." "And do what?" "I

call Detroit." She dialed before Frost could object. The number was muscle memory, buried so deep she didn't have to think. It rang four times. Five. On the sixth ring, someone picked up. Breathing. Wet. Rattling. Maria's throat closed. "Sarah?" The breathing continued, steady and deliberate. Then, distantly, as though from another room: "You shouldn't have called." It was Sarah's voice. But Sarah wasn't the one holding the phone.

Chapter

Six

written by Sasha Loomis

The line didn't disconnect. It folded. Maria heard layers stacking wrong: Sarah's voice underneath Sarah's voice underneath rain that wasn't falling where Sarah was. Detroit didn't have rain tonight. Maria had checked the weather three days ago, the way you check things for people you've decided not to visit. "Put her on," Maria said. The breathing shifted tempo. Slower. Almost leisurely. "She's watching television," the voice said. Not Sarah's voice anymore. Neutral. Genderless. The voice of an airport announcement, of a timer reaching zero. "A program about wolves. She doesn't like wolves, but she can't find the remote." Maria looked at Frost. His face had gone slack, the expression of a man hearing his own thoughts spoken by a stranger's mouth. "Where's the remote?" Maria asked. "Behind the couch. Left side. It fell there Tuesday." Today was Thursday. "You're in her apartment." "Someone is always in her apartment." The phone grew warm against Maria's ear. Not the battery. Something else. As if the heat were traveling through the signal itself, arriving before the sound. "What do you want?" A pause. Long enough that Maria heard the wolves on Sarah's television, their howls thin and electronic. "I want you to stop answering," the voice said. Maria's breath caught. "Answering what?" "The phone. Every time. You answer every time." Behind her, Frost moved. Not toward her, toward the edge of the shelter where the rain met the light. He was staring at his own phone

now, holding it like an injured bird. "I'm receiving calls," he said. "Multiple. Simultaneously." Maria glanced at his screen. Seventeen incoming calls, all from the same number. All ringing without sound. "They're not for you," the voice on Maria's phone said. "They're for the version of you that stayed home." Maria's hand found the knife again. "There is no version." "There's always a version. The you that took the blue car. The you that called the police. The you that didn't check the wheel well, that trusted the silence, that believed three rings was only three rings." The voice inhaled, a sound like fabric tearing. "Every time you answer, you become the wrong version." The wolves stopped howling. On Sarah's television, the program had cut to black. Maria could hear it through the phone, the sudden absence of sound that meant something had changed channels. But Sarah hadn't moved. Maria knew because the breathing was still there, close to the phone, and it wasn't Sarah's rhythm. "Let me talk to her," Maria said. "She already talked to you. Four months ago. Tuesday. You said you'd visit in the spring." "That was me." "That was a version." Maria's vision blurred at the edges. Not tears. Something else. The rain had gotten into her eyes, or the shelter's lights had dimmed, or she had been staring too long at a fixed point and now everything was going soft. Frost dropped his phone. It hit the concrete and skittered toward the grate. He lunged for it, missed. The phone balanced on the grate's edge for a moment, then tipped through. They both heard it splash, eight feet down, exactly where Maria had dropped the first tracker. "You did that already," the voice said. Frost stared at his empty hand. "I haven't dropped a phone in six years." "Not this version." Maria closed her eyes. The warmth from the phone had spread up her arm, into her shoulder, settling in her chest like swallowed heat. When she opened them, Frost was standing exactly where he'd been before he moved. His phone was still in his hand, intact, showing seventeen silent incoming calls. "I watched you drop it," Maria said. "I haven't moved." But she had seen him. Watched his hand open, watched the phone fall, watched it disappear into the drain. The memory sat in her mind, complete and solid. Except Frost was still

holding the phone. Except nothing had fallen. The voice on the line exhaled again, longer this time. "You're remembering forward," it said. Maria looked at the grate. At the space where Frost's phone would fall. Would have fallen. Was going to fall. "Stop answering," the voice said again. "If you stop answering, it stops happening." The line went dead. Maria lowered the phone and watched Frost. He was staring at his hand, at the phone that hadn't fallen yet, as though waiting for gravity to remember what it was supposed to do.

Chapter

Seven

written by Olive Kassen

The rain stopped. Not gradually. All at once, as though someone had shut a valve. The streetlights brightened in the sudden absence of movement, casting hard shadows where before there had been only blur. Maria felt the silence first in her skin. The loss of the rain's percussion made the air feel thinner, like stepping into a room where the walls had been removed. She looked up. The clouds remained, low and dark, but motionless now. No wind. No drift. Just a ceiling of gray hanging over everything, perfectly still. Frost dropped his phone. This time it happened. Maria watched the device slip from his fingers, tumble through the air in the exaggerated slowness of an object falling through water rather than atmosphere. It struck the pavement and skipped once, twice, rolling toward the grate with the inevitability of something following a groove worn into the world. It tipped through. The splash came three seconds later. Too long. As though the water below had waited for the sound to catch up. Frost stared at his empty hand. "I felt that coming," he said. Maria said nothing. She was watching the grate, the darkness beyond it, listening for any other sound that might follow. But there was only stillness now, the rain's absence louder than its presence had been. She looked at her own phone. The screen showed 11:52 still. The time hadn't advanced. She pressed the button to wake the display, watched the numbers flicker, resettle into the same

configuration. 11:52. She checked her watch. The second hand swept forward normally, ticking through its rotations, but when she looked back at the phone, the minute had not turned. "We need to move," Maria said. "Where?" "Anywhere that isn't here." Frost didn't argue. He stepped out from under the shelter, into the space where rain should have been falling but wasn't. His shoes left prints on the wet pavement, dark shapes that began to fade immediately, as though the water were evaporating upward instead of drying. Maria followed. The air outside the shelter felt different. Denser. She could taste copper on her tongue, faint but distinct, the flavor of blood or old pipes. They walked north. Not toward the next bus shelter, but past it, into the residential blocks beyond. The houses here were dark, their windows reflecting nothing. No television glow. No porch lights. Just glass holding the night inside. "Your sister," Frost said. His voice was quieter now, rougher. "Is she still there?" Maria didn't want to know. She lifted the phone, opened the recent calls. Sarah's number sat at the top of the list, but when she tapped it, nothing happened. The screen brightened momentarily, then returned to the call log. She tried again. Same result. "It won't let me." "Or it already did." Maria stopped walking. Frost continued three more steps before he noticed, turned back. His face looked older in the stationary light, lines deepening around his mouth. "Every decision loops," he said. "That's what she meant. Every time you answer, you choose, and the choice splits. But the splits don't separate. They stack." "That's not how time works." "It is now." Maria looked down the street. At the end of the block, maybe two hundred yards ahead, a figure stood beneath a dead streetlight. Too far to see clearly, but she could make out the shape: tall, still, arms hanging loose. Watching them. She blinked. The figure was gone. Not moved. Gone. The space beneath the streetlight empty, as though no one had been there at all. But Maria's chest felt tight. The way it tightened when you wake from a dream and can't remember what frightened you, only that something did. "Did you see that?" she asked. Frost was looking in the wrong direction, back toward the shelter. "See what?" Maria opened her mouth to answer,

then stopped. Because she wasn't sure she had seen anything. The memory of the figure was already softening, losing detail, the way objects dissolve at the periphery of vision when you try to focus on them directly. "Nothing," she said. But her hand found the knife again. Frost turned to face forward. He stood very still, head tilted slightly, like he was listening for something beneath the silence. "We're being herded," he said. Maria knew he was right. The phone call. The trackers. Even the rain stopping. All of it designed to push them in a direction they couldn't see yet. Toward a version of themselves that had already answered.

Chapter

Eight

written by Iris Beddoe

Maria stepped off the curb. Her boot hit pavement and the sound came back wrong. Not an echo. A reply. Like something else stepping when she stepped. She froze. Listened. Nothing. Frost had moved ahead, hands in pockets, walking like a man trying to convince himself he still controlled his trajectory. Maria watched his back. The way his shoulders held themselves. Tense. Waiting for an impact that hadn't arrived yet. Or had already arrived. She couldn't tell anymore. "Frost." He stopped. Didn't turn. "Say something you've never said before." A pause. Then: "What?" "Anything. Something you've never thought. Never spoken." He turned partway, enough that she could see his profile. "Why?" "Because I need to know you're making a choice." Frost's jaw worked. He looked at her fully now, and his eyes were careful. The eyes of a prosecutor weighing whether a witness was lying. "My daughter's middle name is Claire," he said. "I've never told anyone that. Her mother chose it. I wanted Elizabeth." Maria nodded. Relief, small and brief. Then Frost's expression changed. "I just told you that yesterday," he said. "You didn't." "At the shelter. When I first sat down. Before you arrived." "I was there when you arrived." Frost's hand rose to his temple, pressed there. "No. You came after. I was waiting. I told you about Claire when you asked about my daughter." Maria's throat went dry. "I never asked." They stood in the middle of the empty street, two people holding

different versions of the same ten minutes. Behind them, something scraped. Metal on concrete. Maria turned. The bus shelter was closer than it should be. They'd walked north, she was certain. At least a block. But the shelter sat thirty yards back, green paint visible under the motionless streetlight. The bench was empty now. The space where Frost had been sitting. Where Maria had sat beside him. Both empty. Except there was a shape on the ground beneath the bench. Dark. Irregular. Maria started walking toward it. "Don't." Frost's voice, sharp. She kept walking. Her boots made the wrong sound again. That doubled step. That reply. The shape resolved as she got closer. A jacket. Black. Soaked through. Her jacket. Maria stopped breathing. She was wearing her jacket. She could feel it against her shoulders, the weight of it, the knife tucked inside. But the jacket under the bench was hers too. Same tear along the left pocket seam. Same frayed cuff. "We need to go," Frost said. He was beside her now, though she hadn't heard him approach. "That's mine." "I know." "How is it mine?" Frost didn't answer. He was staring past the shelter, at something Maria couldn't see yet. Then she could. A phone was ringing. The cordless. Black. Seventeen years old. Sitting on the bench where no phone had been before. Where no phone could be, because Maria had left it in her kitchen, on the counter, beside the hole she'd cut in the wall. The ringing was exact. Three pulses. A pause. Three more. Maria's hand found the knife. She drew it. The blade caught the streetlight, still chalked with plaster dust that shouldn't be there anymore. The rain should have washed it clean. But the rain had stopped. The rain had stopped before it washed anything. "Answer it," Frost said. "No." "You have to." "She told me to stop answering." "She told you that last time." Frost stepped closer to the bench. "This time she's calling to tell you why." Maria looked at him. "How do you know?" "Because I already answered." The phone continued ringing. Three and three and three. Frost reached for it. Maria's blade moved without thought, point stopping an inch from his wrist. "Don't." Frost met her eyes. "One of us has to." "Then it won't be you." Maria lowered the knife. Stepped forward. Picked up the phone with her left hand. Pressed talk.

Silence. Then breathing. Wet. Stones in a can. Then her own voice, distant and small: "I'm still in the house." Maria's vision narrowed. "What?" "I never left. I'm standing in the kitchen. The hole is behind me. The phone is ringing." Maria's pulse kicked against her throat. "Where am I?" A long pause. Then, softer: "You're remembering the part where you survived." The line went dead. Maria lowered the phone. Looked at Frost. He was gone. The street was empty. The shelter was empty. Just Maria. The phone. The jacket that was hers beneath a bench she'd never left. And in the distance, getting closer: Footsteps.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

rpenguin

Maria smelled like pancakes.

JUK3

When you're not sure if you answered the phone...

Finished on 2 May 2026.

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

[https://relaywriters.com/read/41?t=-E1QARgITgAcZwCxfTvX_GeuS4n
eD_R9](https://relaywriters.com/read/41?t=-E1QARgITgAcZwCxfTvX_GeuS4neD_R9)