

COURAGE



# Thirty-Nine Rings

*a relay in eight chapters*

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RELAY · WRITERS

# The writers

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

|     |               |
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| One | Cora Lindgren |
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Chapter

# One

*written by Cora Lindgren*

The woman's hand trembled as she held the receiver, not from fear but from the coffee she'd drunk too fast, three cups before dawn while watching the apartment across the street. Her fingers were slick with sweat despite the November cold seeping through the phone booth's broken glass. She could smell herself, that sharp animal scent that came when her body knew something her mind hadn't admitted yet. The dial tone purred in her ear, patient as a cat. She'd memorized the number six months ago, written it on a slip of paper she kept folded in her left shoe, where it had worn soft as cloth against her heel. Now her index finger hovered over the rotary dial, close enough to feel the heat from the metal, or maybe that was her own warmth reflecting back. Across the street, the light in apartment 4B went dark. Her mouth was dry. She swallowed and tasted copper, realized she'd been biting the inside of her cheek. The phone booth smelled like piss and wet newspaper and something sweet underneath, like fruit left too long in the sun. She pressed her forehead against the cold metal of the phone box, felt it ground her, that sensation of the world being solid and real. Three years she'd been watching. Three years since the night her sister disappeared from a party in that building, wearing a yellow dress that showed her shoulders, carrying a purse with their mother's lipstick inside. The police had stopped returning calls after six months. The file, they said,

was still open. The word "open" had made her think of a mouth, waiting to be fed. She lifted her head and dialed. The first number. The second. Each metallic click felt irreversible, like bones setting. Her breathing had gone shallow and quick, the way it did before she used to dive off the quarry rocks as a kid, that moment of standing on the edge where your body tries to bargain with you, offers you a thousand reasons to step back. The third number. The fourth. Through the phone booth glass, she could see her reflection layered over the dark building. She looked older than thirty-one. Her hair was lank against her skull, and there were hollows under her eyes like thumbprints in clay. She'd stopped sleeping in beds, preferred the couch where she could wake up already in motion. Fifth number. Sixth. Her sister had been twenty-three, still young enough to think strangers might be kind. Still young enough to follow someone who said they had her jacket, she'd left it upstairs, just come up for a second. The friend who'd told her that had been drunk, unreliable, but her eyes had been clear when she described the man. Tall. Wore cologne that smelled like cedar and something chemical. Had a scar through his left eyebrow that made him look curious, always asking a question. The woman had seen that scar herself, three weeks ago, when the man emerged from 4B carrying groceries in paper bags, the kind that left brown dust on your palms. Seventh number. Her whole body was humming now, that electricity that lived under the skin. She thought about her sister's yellow dress, wondered if it was still somewhere in that apartment, folded in a drawer or stuffed behind the water heater. Wondered what she would do with her hands when someone answered, how she would shape her mouth around the words she'd practiced. The eighth number clicked into place. The phone began to ring. She closed her eyes and felt her pulse in her throat, in her wrists, in the space between her ribs where courage and terror lived in the same chamber, inseparable, hot as blood.

Chapter

# Two

*written by jmarsh*

One ring. The sound moved through her like light through stained glass, fracturing into colors she had no names for. Two rings. She opened her eyes and saw her hand on the receiver had gone white at the knuckles, the bones pressing through skin as though her skeleton meant to escape without her. The building across the street stood dark except for the lobby light, which painted the entrance a sick yellow, the color of old bruises. Three rings. A click. Silence. Not the silence of an empty line, but the silence of breath held, of someone on the other end arranging their face before speaking. She heard it, that small wet sound of a tongue unsticking from the roof of a mouth. "You've been standing in that phone booth for twenty minutes." A man's voice, smooth as river stones. "Your left shoe has a hole in the sole. You favor that leg when you walk." Her stomach dropped. She turned, scanning the street, but saw nothing except parked cars and the skeletal trees that lined the sidewalk, their branches black against the sodium lights. No movement in any window. No one standing in doorways. "The coffee shop on the corner," the voice continued. "You were there yesterday, and the day before. You sit in the back booth, the one where the vinyl is split and the yellow foam shows through. You order black coffee and never drink more than half." She found her voice in some deep place beneath her ribs, dragged it up. "Where is she." "Your sister wore a yellow dress. Silk, or something like

it. It made a sound when she moved, like water over stones. She had a birthmark on her left shoulder blade, shaped like a comma, or perhaps a question mark, depending on how you looked at it." The present tense. He said has. Not had. "Where is she," the woman said again, and her voice had changed, gone low and flat, the voice she used when there was nothing left to lose. "Tell me where she is or I will come through your door tonight. I will bring what I need to bring. I have been patient and I am finished being patient." A pause. Then laughter, soft as ash falling. "You've been watching apartment 4B. But you should have been watching 4C. The walls are thin. You can hear everything through them, if you know how to listen. Footsteps. Running water. Crying, when it happens. We've been watching you watch the wrong door." We. The word sat in her chest like a stone. "Your sister called someone that night," the voice said. "Three rings. Always three rings, the same pattern, you see? She called before she went upstairs, left a message on someone's machine. Said she'd met a man at the party who knew about her painting, wanted to see her studio. She said his name. Did you ever check the tape? Or did you assume she called no one, told no one, disappeared into nothing like smoke?" The woman's free hand was pressed against the phone booth glass, fingers splayed. She watched her breath fog the surface, obscuring her reflection. "What do you want." "Come to apartment 4C. Second floor, not the fourth. There's a key under the mat, the brown one that says WELCOME in letters someone scratched out years ago. Come alone. Come now, while the building is sleeping. We'll be waiting." The line went dead. She stood holding the receiver against her ear long after the dial tone returned, that steady hum like a heart monitor flatlined. Her legs had gone numb. When she finally hung up, the receiver slipped from her grip and swung on its cord, hitting the metal box with a hollow clang that echoed down the empty street. Second floor. 4C. Not 4B, where she'd watched for three weeks, where she'd memorized the man's schedule, learned when he left for work, when he returned with his paper bags. The key under the scratched-out mat. She pushed out of the phone booth. The November

air bit her face, cleared her head. Her left shoe squelched as she walked, moisture from some earlier rain seeping through the hole he'd mentioned, the hole she'd been meaning to repair. Across the street, the building's entrance waited beneath its sickly light. She put her hand in her pocket, felt the weight of the folding knife she'd carried for six months, its handle worn smooth by her thumb. Then she crossed the street.

Chapter

# Three

*written by typewriter\_tom*

The lobby door was unlocked. It opened with a whine that traveled up the stairwell, announcing her. No hiding now. The fluorescent tube overhead buzzed and flickered, casting her shadow long across the tile floor. Someone had mopped recently. The smell of industrial pine cleaner mixed with mold underneath, sweet rot behind the chemical mask. She moved to the stairs. First step creaked. Second step silent. Third step solid. She cataloged them without thinking, the way she'd learned to catalog everything in this building over three weeks of watching. The bannister was sticky under her palm. She kept her hand there anyway. The knife stayed in her pocket. Second floor landing. Four doors. 2A, 2B, 2C, 2D. All the labels done in brass numbers screwed into the wood, except 2C which had been painted directly onto the door in white, the paint dripped at the bottom of the letters like wax. The brown mat sat in front of 2C. WELCOME visible in outline where someone had scratched through the letters with something sharp, maybe a key, maybe a knife. She crouched. Lifted the mat. The key was there, silver, small, newer than the building by decades. Someone had placed it recently. She picked it up and the mat fell back with a sound like a slap. Her hand shook as she fitted the key into the lock. Not coffee this time. Just her body understanding what came next. The lock turned smooth. The door swung inward on oiled hinges. No sound at all. Darkness

inside, but not complete. A line of light showed under a door at the far end of the apartment, yellow and thin. The air smelled like cigarettes and something else. Copper. Meat gone bad. She stepped inside and closed the door behind her. Her eyes adjusted. The apartment was bare. No furniture in the front room. Just carpet worn flat in paths that showed where people walked, darker lines like game trails. The walls were water-stained near the ceiling. One window faced the street, covered with a sheet nailed at the corners. She moved toward the light. The carpet was silent under her shoes except where the wet sole squelched every third step. The sound made her jaw clench. She kept going. The knife came out of her pocket. She opened it with her thumb, heard the blade lock into place. The handle was warm from her body heat. Three feet from the lit door. Two feet. She could hear something now. Not voices. A mechanical hum, steady and low. A refrigerator maybe. Or a space heater. She put her free hand on the doorknob. It was cold. Colder than the air around it, cold like metal left in a freezer. Her palm stuck to it slightly when she turned. The door opened. A bathroom. Small, white tile on the walls and floor. The light came from a bare bulb in the ceiling. The tub was full of water, still and clear. A woman sat in the water. Not her sister. The woman in the tub was older, maybe fifty. Her skin was gray. Her eyes were open but not seeing. She had been dead for days at least. The water held her body still, kept her from bloating. The smell hit full now, organic and heavy. The woman with the knife stepped back. Her heel caught on the doorframe and she stumbled, caught herself against the wall. The plaster was soft under her hand, crumbling. A sound behind her. A door opening. Not the apartment door. Another door she hadn't seen, hidden in the dark near the kitchen. Footsteps. Two sets. One heavy, one light. She spun, knife out. Two people stood in the doorway to what must have been a bedroom. A man and a woman. The man was tall, scar through his left eyebrow. The woman was young, maybe twenty-five, with dark hair pulled back tight. Neither of them spoke. The woman with the knife looked from them to the bathroom, to the body in the tub, then back. "Where is my sister,"

she said. The man smiled. The woman beside him pulled something from behind her back. A phone. Corded, the kind with a rotary dial. She held it out like an offering. "Call her," the young woman said.

Chapter

# Four

*written by Dario Selo*

The logic of this, if there was logic, required her to decide whether the phone was real or symbolic, whether the woman holding it meant for her to dial a number or to understand something she had refused to understand for three years. She did not take the phone. The knife remained in her hand, though she recognized now that the knife had always been a prop, something to hold so her hands would have purpose, and that the two people facing her had never been afraid of it, which meant they had never needed to fear her, which meant the power in this room had never been hers at all. "You know she can't answer," the woman with the knife said. The young woman lowered the phone an inch. Behind her, the man with the scarred eyebrow leaned against the doorframe in a posture so relaxed it suggested he had been waiting for this exact conversation, had perhaps rehearsed his part. The bathroom light threw their shadows long across the empty room. The body in the tub remained still. "That's not the question we're asking you to answer," the man said. His voice was the same river-stone smoothness from the phone, but here, embodied, it carried an additional quality she couldn't name. Patience, maybe. Or pity. "The question is whether you've been calling her. Whether you've been the one making the calls to your own apartment, three rings, always three, the pattern you established the first night after the hospital when you stood in your kitchen at two in

the morning and dialed your own number from your cell phone, then hung up on the third ring and told yourself someone was watching you." Her throat closed. She forced it open. "That's not what happened." "You kept the tape," the young woman said. "The answering machine from your apartment. You kept it even after you moved to the place on Divisadero, even after you threw out everything else. It's in a shoebox under your bed. Black tape, Maxell, the kind they stopped making in 2005. You've listened to it four hundred and seventeen times. We know because the counter on the machine still works, and you've never reset it." The number was specific enough to be true, which meant they had been in her apartment, which meant the watching had been mutual, which meant she had never been the hunter she had believed herself to be. She thought of the shoebox, the tape inside it, the message her sister had left: Hey, it's me. Met someone who wants to see the paintings. Going up to look at his space. If I'm not back by midnight, the guy's name is, and then the tape ran out, cut off mid-word, because she had bought the cheapest answering machine at Radio Shack and the tape only held thirty seconds and her sister had used twenty-nine of them on preamble. "You already know his name," the woman with the knife said. She was guessing, but the guess felt true. "You've known it the whole time." The man shifted his weight. The scarred eyebrow rose, that permanent expression of inquiry. "Robert Millner. He lived in 4B for six months in 2019. Sold pharmaceuticals, or said he did. Drove a gray Civic with a dent in the rear panel. Your sister went upstairs with him. She looked at his apartment, saw the paintings he said he'd collected, drank the wine he offered. Then she left. Took a cab home. We have the receipt. She texted you at eleven forty-five to say she was fine, the guy was boring, she'd tell you about it tomorrow." The woman with the knife said nothing. The phone in the young woman's hand had become too heavy for casual holding. She set it on the floor, the receiver cradled in place, the dial facing up like an eye. "She died four days later," the young woman said. "Aneurysm. You were with her in the hospital. You held her hand. The doctor explained that these things happen, no warning, no

cause, nothing anyone could have prevented. You said you understood. Then you went home and started calling yourself, three rings, because if someone had killed her you would have something to do with your hands besides let them hang empty." The body in the tub looked nothing like her sister. She understood that now. It looked like what she had needed to find: evidence that the story was something other than random, that there was a door she could open with a key, a throat she could cut with a knife. "So what is this," she said. "What are you." The man smiled. "We're the ones who answer.

Chapter

# Five

*written by inkwell\_amy*

She dropped the knife. It hit the carpet and the blade folded back into the handle with a click. The sound was small in the empty room but it marked something, a decision her body made before her mind caught up. The young woman bent and picked up the phone. She held it with both hands now, cradling it like something that might break. The cord trailed behind her into the dark bedroom, stretching taut. "The body in the tub is Linda Archer," the man said. "Fifty-two. Reported missing by her daughter three months ago. She used to call herself too. Different pattern. Five rings, then silence. She'd stand at pay phones all over the Tenderloin, feeding in quarters, dialing her home number. When we found her she'd worn grooves in her index finger from the dial." The woman who had dropped the knife looked at the bathroom. The water in the tub had started to shimmer under the bare bulb, stirred by some current she couldn't see. "Who killed her." "She walked into the tub with her clothes on," the young woman said. "Filled it herself. The door was locked from inside. We found her four days ago and we've been keeping her cold, keeping her here, because people like you need to see what the endpoint looks like." "People like me." "People who choose the story over the truth." The man pushed off the doorframe and walked three steps into the room. He moved like someone who knew the floor wouldn't creak, who had walked this path enough times to trust it.

"Your sister died of an aneurysm. Linda Archer's daughter never called her back after a fight about money, and Linda couldn't forgive herself, so she invented someone to blame. A landlord who'd been harassing her. A neighbor who played music too loud. She spent two years building the case in her notebooks, mapping his schedule, writing down license plates. Then she filled the tub." The woman's hands were empty. She looked at them, turned them over. The lines in her palms seemed deeper than before, carved by something sharper than time. "The key under the mat," she said. "The phone number. You gave me all of it." "We give everyone all of it," the young woman said. "The pattern, the apartment, the key. We've been doing this for sixteen months. You're the forty-third." "Forty-third what." "Person who made it past the door." The young woman's grip on the phone tightened. "Most of them turn around in the stairwell. Some of them run when they see Linda. Three of them tried to call the police, and we let them, and the police came and took Linda away and filed the reports and the three people went home and by morning they'd convinced themselves they'd imagined it. But you stayed. You're still here." The hum she'd heard earlier was louder now. Not a refrigerator. Not a heater. It came from the bedroom behind them, mechanical and rhythmic, like something breathing. "What's in there," the woman said. The man and woman looked at each other. Some communication passed between them, silent and fast. "The other bodies," the man said. The floor shifted under her feet. Not literally. The building was solid. But something in her inner ear tilted and she had to lock her knees to stay upright. "How many." "Thirty-nine." The math was immediate. Forty-three people past the door. Thirty-nine bodies. Four still walking. "Show me." "No," the young woman said. "You brought me here to see." "We brought you here to choose." The young woman set the phone on the floor again, this time face down, the dial against the carpet. "You can go home. You can accept what the doctor told you in the hospital, that your sister died of something no one could prevent, that there was no man, no conspiracy, no door you failed to break down in time. You can stop calling yourself. You can get your shoe

repaired and throw out the tape and sleep in a bed." "Or," the man said. "Or you can open that door," the young woman finished. "And we'll show you what happens to people who can't let go." The hum continued. Steady. Patient. The woman looked at the bathroom, at Linda Archer's gray skin and open eyes. Then she looked at the bedroom door. She walked toward it.

Chapter

# Six

*written by wordsbylena*

Seven steps to the bedroom door. She counted them. The carpet changed texture at step four, went from worn flat to something plush, new, installed recently enough that the fibers hadn't compressed yet. Someone had measured wrong when they laid it. A three-inch gap showed between the bedroom threshold and where the new section started, bare plywood underneath. The door had no handle. Just a hole where the mechanism used to be, brass plate unscrewed, the screws themselves still visible in the frame. She put her fingers in the hole. The metal edge was sharp enough to draw blood if she pushed wrong. She pulled anyway. The door opened. A space heater in the far corner. That explained the hum, except it didn't, because space heaters cycled, turned on and off, and this sound never varied. Three card tables arranged in a U-shape. Laptops on each table. Seven total. All of them open, all of them running, screens bright in the otherwise dark room. No windows. One ceiling fixture, bulb removed, just the empty socket and dangling chain. No bodies. The man stepped in behind her. His breath smelled like mint gum, the artificial kind that burned. "You counted the steps," he said. "Most people don't." She didn't answer. Her eyes had adjusted enough to see what was on the screens. Video feeds. Security footage. Sixteen camera angles divided across seven monitors. She recognized some locations: the phone booth where she'd stood tonight,

the coffee shop on the corner, the lobby downstairs. Others were unfamiliar. A parking garage. A laundromat. A stairwell in a different building, concrete instead of wood. The young woman came in last. She moved to the nearest laptop and tapped a key. The screens refreshed. New camera angles. Same locations, different times. Time stamps in the corners: 22:47. 03:15. 18:03. Weeks ago, months ago. "Thirty-nine bodies," the woman said. "You lied." "We didn't," the man said. "We've been recording thirty-nine people. Forty-three made it past the door, but four of them left. Thirty-nine stayed. They're still out there." The young woman cycled through more feeds. A man in a green jacket standing outside an elementary school, same position, four different days. Time stamps: September twelfth, September nineteenth, September twenty-sixth, October third. Same jacket. Same posture, shoulders hunched forward, hands in pockets. His lips moved in every frame. Talking to himself, or counting. "Kevin Marsh," the young woman said. "His son disappeared from that school in 2015. Walked out during recess, never came home. Kevin convinced himself the janitor took him. Spent two years gathering evidence: candy wrappers in the janitor's trash, testimony from other kids, a police report he filed himself and then amended six times. The janitor quit in 2017, moved to Portland. Kevin followed him there. He's outside the janitor's apartment right now, has been for eight hours, counting something. We're not sure what." "You're watching him," the woman said. "We're watching all of them." The man moved to a different laptop. Pulled up a spreadsheet. Names in column A. Dates in column B. Locations in column C. Phone numbers in column D, though most of those cells were empty. Forty-three rows of data. Row thirty-seven had her name. She stepped closer. Her name was spelled wrong. They'd written ANNE with an E at the end. Her name was ANN, three letters, the way her mother had written it on her birth certificate because she believed efficiency was a virtue. "You spelled it wrong," she said. The young woman looked. "We pulled it from your credit report." "My credit report has it right." The man leaned in, squinted at the screen. "We'll fix it. Linda's is wrong too.

We had her as LYNDA for three weeks before her daughter corrected us." "Her daughter knows you're doing this?" "Her daughter helped us set up the cameras in Linda's building. She thought if her mother saw herself on film, standing in the phone booth, wearing grooves in her finger, she might stop. But Linda never looked at the footage. She just kept calling." The woman counted the laptops again. Seven. Counted the cameras visible on the screens. Sixteen. Divided attention like that meant they couldn't watch everyone all the time. Gaps in coverage. Moments where someone could move between frames and disappear. The young woman closed the spreadsheet. "You haven't asked us who we are." "You're whoever needs us to stop," the woman said. "No." The young woman's face changed. Something cracked in it, some mask coming off. "We're the ones who couldn't.

Chapter

# Seven

*written by Priya Nair*

The woman laughed. She didn't mean to. It came out sharp and ugly, the sound of something breaking inside her ribcage. "You're telling me this is grief counseling? With spreadsheets?" "It's documentation," the man said. He touched a key and one of the screens went dark, then bright again. Different angle. Same phone booth. A woman she didn't recognize, younger, maybe nineteen, standing inside with the receiver pressed to her ear. Time stamp: four days ago. "Melissa Tran. Her boyfriend died in a motorcycle accident. She calls his voicemail eighteen times a day. The account's been disconnected for seven months but she still hears it ring." "She hears the disconnect message." "No," the young woman said. "She hears ringing. Three times. Always three." The woman felt something cold move through her chest. She stepped back from the screens. Her heel hit the space heater and it rattled but didn't tip. "How many of us do the three rings?" The young woman pulled up a different spreadsheet. Column header: PATTERN. She scrolled. The woman watched numbers flash past. Three appeared in seventeen rows. Five in six. Seven in two. One row just said CONTINUOUS, which seemed worse than any specific number. "It's the most common," the man said. "Trinity. Beginning, middle, end. Past, present, future. The brain likes threes. Gives shape to things that don't have shape." "You didn't answer my question," the woman said. "Who are you?" The

young woman closed the laptop. In the sudden absence of light from that screen, her face went half into shadow. "I'm the one who found my brother in his apartment after he'd been dead for six days. He'd called me the week before. Three times. I didn't pick up because we'd fought about money and I was still angry. When I found him, his phone was in his hand. Call log showed he'd been trying my number right before the heart attack. Three rings. Then nothing. He was thirty-one." The room was very quiet. Even the space heater seemed to have stopped humming, though that was impossible, the coil was still glowing orange in the corner. "I'm the one who told his wife the cancer had spread," the man said. He touched his scarred eyebrow, unconscious gesture, and the woman understood it was a tic, something he did when he reached for words that didn't exist. "They gave her six months. She made it to five. I wasn't there at the end because I was in court, fighting her insurance company over a claim they'd denied. She'd called me from the hospice. I saw it ring on my phone while the judge was talking. Three times. I let it go to voicemail. She died that afternoon. The voicemail was her saying my name. Just that. 'David.' Then breathing. Then the machine cut off." The woman looked at the screens, at the people frozen in their individual frames of surveillance. The man in the green jacket. Melissa Tran in the phone booth. A third person she hadn't noticed before: elderly man in a grocery store, standing in front of the cereal aisle, not moving, staring at a box of Cheerios like it contained the answer to something. "So you watch us," the woman said. "You set up cameras and collect data and wait for us to, what, drown ourselves like Linda?" "We wait for you to see what you're doing," the young woman said. "Most people can't. They're inside the pattern. But if you stand in this room and look at the screens, if you see yourself from outside, sometimes the pattern breaks. Sometimes you can walk away." "And if I can't?" The man picked up something from the nearest card table. A phone. Rotary dial. Black plastic. Cord neatly coiled. He held it out to her. "Then you make one last call," he said. "Real one this time. Not to yourself. To someone who can answer. We'll give you the number." The

woman didn't take the phone. She looked at it, at his hand holding it, at the gap where the bedroom door still stood open behind her. "What if I don't know the number?" she said. "Everyone knows the number," the young woman said. "You just haven't admitted who you need to call.

Chapter

# Eight

*written by Margot Vail*

The number was her mother's. She had known it the entire time. The rotary phone in the man's hand weighed nothing. It was plastic, cord and dial, a prop from somebody's childhood, but when she took it her wrist buckled like he'd handed her a brick. The man stepped back. Gave her room. The woman set the phone on the card table. The surface was laminate over particleboard, chipped at one corner where someone had picked at it with a fingernail or key. She could see the layers underneath. Pressed wood fiber. Glue. The phone's cord coiled against the laptop, black on silver. She put her index finger in the dial. The number was still in her body. Muscle memory from twenty years of calling home after school, from college, from the apartment she'd shared with her sister before the aneurysm. Her mother had kept the landline even after everyone said landlines were obsolete. Said it was something solid. Something that stayed in one place. The first number. The dial resisted, then gave. The mechanical click traveled up her arm. She thought about her sister in the yellow dress, the voicemail that cut off mid-word. Thought about the shoebox under her bed and the tape she'd listened to four hundred and seventeen times. The second number. Her mother had been at the hospital. Had held her sister's other hand while the machines beeped their flat rhythm. Had signed the papers afterward. The doctor explained that aneurysms were congenital sometimes, that

her sister had probably been born with a weakness in the blood vessel, that it could have happened any time, any day, no warning, no prevention. Her mother had nodded. Asked if they could donate the organs. The corneas went to someone in Nevada. The liver to a man in Sacramento. Her sister's body parceled out to strangers who would live because she had died of nothing, of bad luck, of a vessel that decided to rupture on a Thursday. Third number. Fourth. The young woman moved to the doorway. Stood with her back against the frame. Watching or guarding, the woman couldn't tell. Fifth number. Her mother had called three times the week after the funeral. Left messages. Asked if she was eating. Asked if she needed anything. Asked if she wanted to come home for a while, sleep in her old room, let herself be taken care of. The woman had not called back. Had been in the coffee shop by then, watching the building, writing down license plates. Sixth number. Seventh. She had blamed her mother for accepting it. For signing the organ donation forms like her sister was a car being stripped for parts. For nodding when the doctor said there was nothing anyone could have done. Her mother had gone back to work two weeks later. Taught fourth grade. Came home and made dinner. Did not call herself at two in the morning. Did not invent conspiracies. Eighth number. The dial spun back. She lifted the receiver. It smelled like dust and plastic and something organic underneath, like someone had breathed into it recently. The line clicked. Began to ring. One ring. Her mother would be asleep. It was past midnight. She kept her phone on the nightstand, ringer turned up in case of emergencies. The word emergency had meant something different before the aneurysm. Flat tire. Missed flight. Things that could be fixed. Two rings. The man had moved to the laptop. He typed something. The screens refreshed. New camera angles. She saw herself in one of them, standing in this room, holding the phone. The angle was from above. Ceiling-mounted camera she hadn't noticed. She was smaller on screen. Curved shoulders. Lank hair. The knife still on the floor in the other room where she'd dropped it. Three rings. A click. Her mother's voice, thick with sleep. "Hello?" The woman opened her

mouth. Nothing came out. Her throat had sealed itself. She tried again. Managed a sound, small and shapeless. "Anna?" her mother said. "Is that you?" The woman closed her eyes. Felt the receiver warm against her ear. Real warmth. Human warmth. Not the cold metal of the phone booth or the empty apartment or the mechanical hum of the space heater. "Mom," she said. The word was small but it was enough. On the screen above her, the camera kept recording. In the next room, Linda Archer's body waited in its tub. Across the city, thirty-nine people stood in their assigned positions, wearing grooves in their fingers, counting rings that would never stop unless they chose to stop counting. The woman gripped the phone. Held on.

Finished on 29 April 2026.

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

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91nUJ](https://relaywriters.com/read/42?t=Uq7WlmBFiq6Y5xwV7APWMRK7ieW91nUJ)