

COURAGE

The Building Calls Three Times

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

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Chapter

One

written by Cora Lindgren

The smell hit me first. Not rot, not yet. Something thicker, sweeter. Like fruit left too long in a hot car, fermenting in its own sugar. The phone was still warm against my palm when I pushed open the door to apartment 4C, and that sweetness crawled into my mouth, coated my tongue. I could taste it between my teeth. The carpet squelched under my boots. Not wet, exactly. Yielding. Like stepping on meat that's been sitting at room temperature, that give just before the fiber tears. I'd never been in Helen's apartment before. Three years of hellos in the stairwell, of holding the lobby door, of her Christmas cookies wrapped in wax paper that left grease stains through the bag. Three years, and I'd never once stepped inside. Now I was here because of ten words on a phone call: She's not answering. Could you check. I'm worried. Please. Helen's daughter, voice tight as wire. The curtains were drawn but daylight leaked around the edges, turning everything amber, sick with heat. August in the city. The radiator had been going full blast. I could see the air shimmer above it, and my shirt was already sticking to the small of my back, that particular dampness that makes you want to peel your own skin off. I touched the wall to steady myself and my fingers came away dusty, but underneath the dust was something else. A slight tackiness, like old adhesive. Helen was in the chair by the window. Facing it, not me, her head tilted back in a way that didn't look like sleep.

The phone cord, still attached to the kitchen wall, stretched across the floor and disappeared behind the chair. When I got closer I could see it was wrapped around her wrist, loose coils that had left red grooves in the skin. Not angry red. The dull red of meat at the butcher's counter. I made myself breathe through my mouth but that was worse. I could feel the air coating my throat, leaving residue. Her hand was still curled around the receiver. Someone must have called her while she... while this happened. Or she'd been calling out. Reaching. The mouthpiece was pointed up at her face like a microphone, like she'd been about to speak into it or sing, and I had this wild thought: what if she had sung? What if in her last moment Helen had decided to sing something, one of those old songs she hummed in the laundry room, and what came out was just air, just that last breath finding its way through the receiver into someone's ear on the other end of the line. My pocket buzzed. My own phone, the one I'd used to tell Helen's daughter I was going up, I'd check, not to worry. Three dots pulsing. Then: Is she okay? The apartment smelled like Helen's cookies, too. Under the sweetness. Brown sugar and vanilla and something burnt, like she'd forgotten them in the oven. I looked toward the kitchen and saw the oven was off, but there was a plate on the counter, covered with foil. The foil had slipped halfway off. I could see the dark rounds underneath, perfect circles, and my stomach twisted because they looked fine, they looked like she'd just made them, like she was about to knock on my door with another wax paper package. Is she okay? I typed: Calling 911 now But I didn't call. Not yet. Because Helen's other hand, the one not holding the phone, was pointing. Just one finger extended, the rest curled into her palm. Pointing at the window. At the curtain. At what was behind it, or beyond it, or maybe at nothing at all. Just the last direction her body chose, random firing of cooling nerves. I made myself look where she was pointing. Outside, eight stories down, the street baked in the heat.

Chapter

Two

written by Sammy Hall

I went to the window because you have to, don't you? When a dead woman is pointing at something, when her finger is aimed like a compass needle that's finally found true north, you can't just ignore it. That's not courage, by the way. People always think doing the scary thing is brave, but sometimes you do it because not doing it would be worse. Because you'd spend the rest of your life wondering what she was trying to tell you, if she was trying to tell you anything at all. The curtain felt like paper when I touched it. That thin kind that comes in cheap apartments, the kind that's supposed to block light but really just stains it yellow. I pulled it aside and the rings scraped against the rod, a sound like fingernails, and suddenly I was breathing hard, my chest pumping like I'd been running. Nothing down there. Just the street. Mrs. Kim opening her bodega, rolling the fruit stand onto the sidewalk. A kid on a bike weaving between parked cars. That guy who's always yelling at pigeons, gesturing at the sky like they've personally wronged him. Normal. Aggressively normal. The kind of normal that makes you feel insane for expecting anything else. But Helen's finger was so specific. Not just pointing at the window, pointing through it. Down and to the right, if I traced the line. At what, though? The bodega? The mailbox? The place where the sidewalk had buckled last winter and nobody ever fixed it? My phone buzzed again. Then again. Then started ringing,

Helen's daughter's name flashing on the screen. I let it ring. What was I supposed to say? Your mom is dead and also maybe trying to communicate from beyond the grave, hold please? That's when I noticed the marks on the window glass. Smudges, like someone had pressed their fingertips against it. Five distinct prints, splayed out like a hand reaching. But they were on the outside. Eight stories up, someone had touched this window from the outside. My skin went cold in spite of the heat. I looked back at Helen and that smell intensified, or maybe I just noticed it more now, the sweetness mixing with something chemical, something that made my sinuses burn. The phone was still in her hand. I thought about picking it up, putting it to my ear. Would there be a dial tone? Or would someone still be there, breathing on the other end, waiting? I didn't touch it. Instead I looked around the apartment, really looked this time. Everything neat. Everything in its place. Helen was a neat person, the kind who ironed her dish towels and alphabetized her spices. But there was a shoe in the middle of the floor. Just one. A brown loafer lying on its side, nowhere near the door, nowhere near anything. Like she'd been walking and it had fallen off and she'd just kept going. And the kitchen. I made myself go there, past Helen's body, trying not to look at the angle of her neck. The plate of cookies, yes. But also a pot on the stove, water still in it, evaporated down to a ring of white residue at the bottom. How long does water take to boil away? Hours? Days? The mug next to it said "World's Best Grandma" and had lipstick on the rim, a perfect pink half-moon. There was a note on the refrigerator, held up by a magnet shaped like a pineapple. Helen's handwriting, looping and old-fashioned. It said: If you're reading this, I was right. That's all. No explanation. No context. Just that one line that made my stomach drop through the floor. I took a picture of it with my phone. Don't ask me why. Evidence, maybe. Or maybe I just needed proof that this was happening, that I wasn't making it up. The phone in Helen's hand rang.

Chapter

Three

written by wordsbylena

The ringing started at seven seconds. I counted. Seven seconds between when I took the photograph and when the phone in Helen's dead hand began to ring, and that margin felt important somehow, like the universe had needed exactly that much time to notice what I'd done, to register the theft of information. The sound was wrong. Not the volume, which was normal, standard telephone jangle. Wrong in texture. Thinner than it should be, coming through a receiver that was forty years old, avocado green plastic that belonged to a decade when people still trusted their neighbors. The sound leaked out around Helen's fingers, three rings, four, five. I counted those too. At ring number eight it stopped. I started cataloging then, because that's what you do when your brain is trying to split itself open. You make lists. You put things in order. You convince yourself that if you can just organize the world correctly, it will start making sense again. Things in Helen's apartment that were green: the telephone, seven buttons on her cardigan, a ceramic frog on the bookshelf, the spine of a cookbook titled Joy, the dishtowel hanging from the oven handle, one throw pillow on the couch, a ballpoint pen on the counter, the minute hand on the wall clock. Things that were pointing: Helen's finger, the minute hand on the clock (toward the two), the ceramic frog's face (toward the bathroom), the antenna on the old television (toward the ceiling), the pen (toward the sink), a knife

left on the cutting board (toward nothing, or toward everything, depending on how you measured). I moved closer to Helen. Fifteen steps from the kitchen to the chair. I counted them. The carpet squelched on steps three, seven, and eleven. Arithmetic progression. Three distinct wet spots arranged in a pattern that might mean something if I could just think clearly enough to decode it. Her finger hadn't moved. I checked the angle against the window frame, did the mental geometry. She was pointing at approximately forty-three degrees from vertical, aimed at a spot I calculated to be twenty-two feet from the building's base, give or take six inches. The margin of error bothered me. Six inches could be the difference between the mailbox and the space beside it. Between something and nothing. The phone rang again. Three rings this time. I counted. Three rings and then silence, which meant someone was trying to reach Helen in a pattern: eight rings, pause, three rings. Eight and three. I added them: eleven. Prime number. I multiplied them: twenty-four. Hours in a day. I subtracted: five. Fingers that had touched the window from the outside. My own phone had twelve missed calls now. Helen's daughter, persistent. The last voicemail was eighteen seconds long. I didn't listen to it. Eighteen was three sixes, or two nines, or six threes, and I didn't like any of those divisions. I went back to the note on the refrigerator. If you're reading this, I was right. Thirty-one letters if you didn't count spaces. Thirty-one, another prime. But if you counted the apostrophe and the comma and the period, that made thirty-four. Two seventeens. Seventeen: the number of steps from Helen's apartment to mine, the number of tiles across her bathroom floor, the number of years since my mother died pointing at something nobody else could see. Stop it, I told myself. Stop counting. But I couldn't. The handprints on the window: I went back to look at them. Five fingers, yes, but not evenly spaced. I measured the gaps with my eyes, translated them into proportions. Index finger to middle finger: one inch. Middle to ring: one-point-five inches. Ring to pinky: two inches. The gaps were growing. Fibonacci sequence. The spiral pattern that shows up in seashells and galaxies and the curl of Helen's finger, if

you traced it right. The phone in her hand rang again. Thirteen times. I counted every one. Lucky or unlucky depending on which mythology you subscribed to, and I was beginning to think maybe both. Thirteen rings and then a click, audible even from where I stood, and then something else. Not a voice. A rhythm. Tap. Tap-tap. Tap. Pause. Tap-tap-tap. Morse code, maybe. Or a heartbeat. Or someone's fingernails on glass. I should have called 911 seventeen minutes ago. I knew this. I also knew that once I made that call, once I let other people into this apartment with their procedures and their forms and their explanations, whatever Helen had been trying to point me toward would dissolve. It would become a death, a sad story, a woman who lived alone. But if I could just count it right, measure it correctly, find the pattern, maybe... The clock's minute hand moved.

Chapter

Four

written by Dario Selo

The click of the minute hand (which was, I realized, not a smooth sweep but a discrete jump, a quartz mechanism ticking from one position to the next, sixty distinct moments per hour rather than a continuous arc) snapped something in me. Not into clarity. Into a different kind of confusion, the useful kind that lets you act while the thinking part of your brain is still catching up. I picked up the receiver. This was stupid. I knew it was stupid even as my hand closed around the avocado plastic, even as I worked it free from Helen's fingers (which released it easily, too easily, the rigor not yet set or already passed, I didn't know enough about bodies to tell which). But stupid felt better than standing there counting things, dividing the world into numbers that couldn't tell me what Helen had seen or why her last act had been to point. I put the phone to my ear. Silence. Not dead air. Not the hiss of an open line. Silence like a presence, like something was actively creating the absence of sound. I waited. Seven seconds. Then seven more. Then I heard it. Breathing. Not heavy. Not menacing. Just the soft intake and release of air, the sound of someone paying attention. The sound you make when you're listening so hard that breathing becomes conscious, intentional, something you have to remember to do. "Hello?" My voice cracked on the second syllable. The breathing stopped. The silence that replaced it was worse. "I found her," I said, which was maybe not the right way to

start a conversation with a potential murderer or ghost or whatever category of being leaves fingerprints on eighth-story windows. "Helen. I found her. She's... you know." I waited. The silence waited with me, patient in a way that felt practiced. "She was pointing," I continued, because apparently I had decided to narrate the scene to a stranger who might not be strange at all, who might be Helen's daughter calling back on a different line, who might be anyone. "At the window. Or through it. I can't tell if she was trying to show me something or if it's just..." I trailed off. Just what? Just a coincidence? Just the random orientation of a dying body? Just me making patterns because patterns are easier than chaos? Three taps on the line. Deliberate. Then two. Then one. Countdown or sequence? I gripped the phone tighter. "Who is this?" The voice, when it came, was not Helen's. Female but younger, or older, I couldn't tell. The kind of voice that doesn't carry age well, that could be anywhere from thirty to sixty. "Did you look down?" Four words. Simple question. But my chest tightened because yes, I had looked down, I had traced Helen's finger to the street below, and I had seen nothing worth dying while pointing at. "Yes." "Look again." The line went dead. Not a click, not a dial tone. Just dead, like it had never been alive at all. I stood there holding the receiver (still warm from Helen's hand, or from my own, I couldn't tell) and faced a choice that wasn't really a choice because I was already moving toward the window, already pulling the curtain aside. Mrs. Kim was gone now. The fruit stand remained, apples and oranges arranged in neat pyramids that would probably collapse the moment someone tried to buy one. The pigeon man had moved down the block. The kid on the bike had vanished. But there was someone standing directly below Helen's window. Looking up. Man or woman, I couldn't tell from this angle, just a figure in dark clothes, face tilted toward me (toward Helen, I corrected myself, because Helen had been the one pointing first). The figure raised one hand. Not waving. Just raising it, palm forward, the way you'd press your hand against glass if you wanted to leave a mark. Five fingers. Splayed wide. Matching the prints on Helen's window. My phone buzzed. Text from Helen's

daughter: Please. Tell me. The figure below lowered their hand. Started walking toward the building entrance. Toward the lobby. Toward the stairs. Toward here. I had maybe two minutes to decide what to do with that information.

Chapter

Five

written by inkwell_amy

I moved before the decision finished forming. Left the phone dangling by its cord, Helen's body in the chair, her finger still aimed at the street. Seventeen steps to the apartment door, but I took them in nine. The hallway smelled like boiled cabbage and bleach. Mrs. Kowalski's door, 4B, was cracked open the way she always left it, the chain lock catching. I could hear her game show through the gap. The stairwell door was thirty feet away. The elevator was closer. I chose the stairs. Pushed through the door and listened. Footsteps below, climbing. Steady rhythm, not rushed. Someone who knew exactly where they were going and didn't need to hurry because they knew I'd wait. Or because they knew I'd run, and running wouldn't matter. I went down. Fourth floor to third, my boots loud on the concrete. The footsteps below stopped. I stopped. Listened to the building tick and settle around us, whoever us was. Water in the pipes. Someone's bass vibrating through the walls. My own pulse in my ears, too fast, too hard. Then the footsteps started again. Still climbing. I took the stairs two at a time. Third floor to second. The handrail was sticky under my palm, old paint that never dried right. My shoulder hit the wall on the turn and I didn't slow down. Second floor to first. The footsteps had gotten faster but not faster enough. I was gaining ground, putting distance between us. The lobby door was heavier than it should have been. I shouldered through it and the heat

hit me like walking into a mouth. August sun through the glass entrance, turning everything white and sharp. Mr. Chen was checking his mailbox. He looked up when I came through, started to say something. "Don't go upstairs," I told him. He blinked. I kept moving. Outside, the street was exactly as I'd seen it from above. Fruit stand, sidewalk crack, the spot where the figure had been standing. I looked down. The concrete was clean. No footprints, no scuff marks, nothing to prove anyone had been there at all. I turned in a slow circle. The bodega, the mailbox, the place where the sidewalk buckled. A woman with a stroller. Two men carrying a mattress. Nobody in dark clothes. Nobody looking up. My phone buzzed. Helen's daughter again. I answered this time. "She's dead," I said before she could ask. "I'm sorry. I should have called. I'm calling 911 now." Silence on her end. Not the presence kind. The gutted kind, the silence of someone whose last hope just got confirmed as a corpse. "How?" Her voice was small. "I don't know." I was moving while I talked, pacing the perimeter of where the figure had stood. "She was in her chair. The phone was in her hand." "What phone?" I stopped walking. "Her landline. The cord was wrapped around her wrist." "My mother hasn't had a landline in three years," Helen's daughter said. "She got rid of it when she upgraded her cell. Said she was tired of telemarketers." The street tilted. I put my hand against the mailbox to steady myself, and the metal was hot enough to burn. "That's not possible," I said. "I held it. I picked it up and someone was breathing on the other end." "Who?" "I don't know." "What did they say?" I opened my mouth. Closed it. Tried to remember the exact words, the exact voice. Did you look down? Look again. But the memory was already fuzzy, dissolving the way dreams do when you try to hold them too tight. "They told me to look out the window," I said finally. "At what?" I scanned the street one more time. Nothing. Nobody. Just the city doing what cities do, churning through its daily script of small transactions and smaller tragedies. "I'm calling 911," I said. "Wait." Her voice sharpened. "The cookies. Are they there?" "What?" "The cookies she baked. She was bringing them to you today. She called me this

morning, said she was making a batch for the girl in 4D who always holds the door. Are they there?" I looked up at Helen's window. Eight stories. The curtain had fallen back into place. "Yes," I said. "They're here." "Don't eat them," she said, and hung up.

Chapter

Six

written by Iris Beddoe

I stood there with the phone still pressed to my ear. Dial tone humming. The mailbox under my palm had left a red rectangle on my skin, heat transferred, cells responding. Don't eat them. The cookies were upstairs. Under foil that had slipped. Perfect circles that looked fresh. I went back inside. Mr. Chen was gone from the mailbox area. The lobby was empty except for the water-stained bulletin board and the plastic plant that had been dying in the same corner for five years. Someone had tried to make it look cared for. Dusty leaves arranged just so. The elevator would be faster. I took the stairs anyway. Fourth floor. The hallway was exactly as I'd left it except Mrs. Kowalski's door was closed now. Chain lock probably still on. Game show still humming through the walls, muffled voices guessing prices, failing. Helen's door stood open. I'd left it open. I remembered that. Pushed through it running, hadn't looked back. But I'd closed it partway. I was certain. Muscle memory of my hand on the knob, pulling. Now it was wide open. Inviting. The apartment smelled different. Less sweet. More burnt. Like someone had turned the oven on while I was gone, cranked it high, let something char. Helen was still in the chair. Same position. Finger pointing. But her hand had moved, I was almost sure of it. The angle was wrong, sharper now, aimed not at the window but at something closer. The bookshelf maybe. Or the couch. Or the kitchen where the cookies waited under their foil shroud. I

made myself walk past her. Didn't look at her face this time. Couldn't. The kitchen was exactly three steps from the living room. I counted them. One, two, three. The plate was where I'd left it on the counter. Brown circles visible through the gap in the foil. They smelled like my childhood. Brown sugar, vanilla, butter going amber in heat. My grandmother had made cookies like these. Burned her hand on the oven rack and kept pulling trays out anyway, saying pain was just heat in the wrong place. I lifted the foil. Twelve cookies. Even number, divisible by two, three, four, six. But arranged in a pattern that wasn't even at all. They spelled something. Or tried to. Letters made of dough: R U N. My hands started shaking. The foil crinkled. Someone had rearranged them. Helen, maybe, before she died. Or someone else. Someone who'd climbed eight stories, pressed their hand against the glass, come inside while I was standing in the street looking at nothing. The phone rang. Not Helen's phone. Mine. In my pocket, buzzing against my hip. Unknown number. I answered because not answering felt worse. "You saw them." Same voice from before. Female, ageless. Patient in a way that suggested eternity. "Who are you?" "You saw the message." "What message?" But I was looking at the cookies, at R U N spelled in baked dough, and my voice sounded hollow even to me. "Helen tried to warn the others too. Cookies, notes, phone calls. Three rings each time. Always three. The pattern matters." "Warn them about what?" "About the building," the voice said. "About what lives in the walls between walls. What climbs when everyone's sleeping. What leaves marks on windows and prints in the carpet and takes people in the night, leaves them pointing at the thing nobody wants to see." The line clicked. Once, twice. Morse code rhythm. Tap tap tap. "You're next," the voice said. "Unless you run. Unless you leave before dark. Before the walls start moving. Before you hear it climbing the pipes, scraping behind the plaster, breathing through the vents." I hung up. Dropped the phone on the counter. It landed face down, cracked screen I'd been meaning to fix for months. Helen's finger was pointing at me now. Directly at me. I was certain. The angle had changed while I was standing there, her whole

arm rotated in death, moved by something I couldn't see. I grabbed the plate of cookies. Don't ask me why. Evidence, maybe. Or warning. Or because some part of me still believed I could show them to someone, explain, make this someone else's problem. The apartment door swung shut behind me. Soft click of the latch catching. I hadn't touched it.

Chapter

Seven

written by Margot Vail

The plate was warm. Not from the cookies. From my hands. I stood in the hallway. 4C's door was closed. Lock engaged. I could hear it, the small metal tongue seated in the strike plate, settling. Mrs. Kowalski's game show had stopped. The silence from 4B was complete. No television. No shuffling feet. Just the hum of the fluorescent tube overhead, sixty-cycle buzz that most people stopped hearing after the first week of living here. I walked to the stairwell. Twelve steps. The plate stayed level in my hands. R U N faced upward. Three letters in dough that should have been circles, that Helen had shaped with arthritic fingers into a warning I was supposed to decode before she died pointing. The stairwell was cooler. Concrete and cinder block, no insulation. My boots echoed going down. Fourth floor to third. The handrail was sticky again. I didn't touch it this time. On the third-floor landing, someone had dropped a key. Single brass Yale, no ring, no fob. Just the key lying in the center of the concrete square, placed too perfectly to have fallen. I stepped over it. Third to second. The door to 2F was ajar. Not cracked like Mrs. Kowalski's. Wide open. I could see inside to the living room, the kitchen beyond. Empty apartment. Not vacant, empty. Furniture still there. Couch, coffee table, lamp. But no people. No sounds. The refrigerator wasn't running. I kept walking. Second to first. My shoulder didn't hit the wall this time. I knew the turn now. Muscle

memory from seventeen minutes ago, or however long it had been. Time was slipping. The numbers weren't adding up the way they should. The lobby had changed. Not the furniture. That was the same. Mailboxes, bulletin board, dying plastic plant. But the light was different. Wrong angle for the sun. Too low, too orange. Like hours had passed while I was upstairs holding a phone that shouldn't exist, reading cookies that spelled instructions. I checked my watch. 2:47 p.m. Same as when I'd come back inside. The second hand wasn't moving. The front door was fifteen feet away. Glass and metal frame, push bar, street visible beyond. I could see the bodega. Mrs. Kim was back, arranging fruit. The same fruit, in the same pyramids, with the same precise geometry she'd used an hour ago. I pushed through the door. Heat again. August pressing down. The cookies smelled stronger now, cloying, that burnt sugar edge sharper. I looked down at the plate. The letters were bleeding. R U N was becoming R U, the N melting back into a circle, dough spreading in the heat. Something moved in my peripheral vision. I turned. The figure was back. Same dark clothes. Same position, directly below Helen's window. But closer now. Twenty feet away instead of the width of the street. They were standing on the sidewalk between me and the bodega. I could see their face this time. It was Helen. Not Helen's corpse. Not Helen dead in the chair with her finger pointing. Helen alive, or something wearing her shape. Same silver hair, same cardigan with the green buttons, same slight stoop to her shoulders. But her eyes were wrong. Too dark. Too fixed. Staring without blinking at a point six inches to my left. She raised her hand. Palm forward. Five fingers splayed. I stepped backward. My heel caught the door frame. The plate tilted. R U became R. The N was completely gone. Helen's mouth opened. No sound came out. Or it did and I couldn't hear it, frequency too high or too low for human ears. But I felt it. Vibration in my chest, behind my sternum, like standing too close to a speaker. She pointed. Not at me. Past me. At the building entrance. At the lobby. At the stairs I'd just descended. I turned and looked. Every window was filled with a face. Every apartment, every floor, pressed against the glass looking down. Mr. Chen. Mrs. Kowalski.

The mattress men. People I'd never seen, people who might not exist, people whose names I'd never learned. All watching. All silent. All pointing at the same thing Helen had pointed at. I followed their fingers. They were aimed at the bodega. At the space behind Mrs. Kim's fruit stand. At the cellar door, propped open with a cinder block, spilling darkness onto the sidewalk.

Chapter

Eight

written by Sasha Loomis

The darkness was breathing. In and out, slow exhalation from the cellar opening, carrying the smell of dirt that's never seen sun and copper pipes oxidizing in groundwater and something else, something I recognized from Helen's apartment but couldn't name. The fruit stand began to tilt. Mrs. Kim didn't notice. She was arranging apples into the same pyramid they'd been in before, hands moving through the familiar pattern, muscle memory divorced from thought. The tilt accelerated. Apples rolled. Oranges followed. Perfect spheres gathering speed, crossing the sidewalk toward the cellar door like ball bearings drawn to a magnet. I walked forward because walking backward wasn't an option with Helen standing behind me wearing her own face wrong. The fruit hit the darkness and made no sound. Not even the wet thump of impact. Just vanished, swallowed, gone. Mrs. Kim kept stacking. I was ten feet from the cellar entrance when my phone rang. Three times. I counted. Then stopped. I pulled it from my pocket. The screen showed a call from my own number. My name displayed. I answered. "The basement connects everything," Helen's voice said through the receiver. Not the voice I'd heard before. Helen's actual voice, the one that had said good morning and these are for you and hold that door, sweetie. "Under the bodega, under the laundromat, under the building. All the same space down there. Always was." "You're dead," I said. "So are the others. So

will you be if you go down." The line crackled. "But you have to go down. That's the trick. That's why I had to point. You have to see what's making the calls." The plate was vibrating in my left hand. The last cookie, the R, had started to crack. Fissures spreading from the center like a windshield fracture. "What is it?" I asked. "We don't have names for it. It's old. It was here before the building. Before the street. It makes patterns to feed, calls people down, three rings at a time." Her voice fractured. "I couldn't warn them. Baked forty batches. Nobody reads cookies. Nobody looks at what the dead are pointing at." The R split completely. Crumbs scattered across the plate. Behind me, someone was climbing the stairs. I could hear boots on concrete. My own boots, same rhythm, same weight. Coming up from the basement of a building I was standing outside of. "Run or descend," Helen said. "Those are the only shapes this takes." The call ended. I looked down at the cellar entrance. Wooden stairs visible now that my eyes had adjusted. Twelve steps descending into foundation darkness. The smell was stronger. I knew what it was now. Fermented sugar and burnt vanilla and the specific scent of human bodies kept too warm for too long. The footsteps behind me stopped. I turned. Helen was gone. The faces in the windows were gone. The street was empty except for Mrs. Kim, who had finally noticed her fruit was missing and was standing motionless, hands frozen in the gesture of holding an apple that wasn't there. The footsteps started again. Coming up the cellar stairs. From below. My own boots on wood, climbing toward street level, toward the light I was standing in. I stepped to the edge of the opening and looked down. I was halfway up. Myself. Same clothes, same cracked phone clutched in my right hand, same white-knuckled grip. But my face was wrong the way Helen's had been. Eyes too dark. Mouth slightly open. I was pointing as I climbed. Finger aimed upward at the me standing at the top. The phone in my pocket rang. Three times. I dropped the plate. Ceramic shattered. No cookies left to spell anything. My other self reached the top stair. Stepped into sunlight. Stood facing me with my own face, pointing, mouth moving in words I couldn't hear but knew anyway because I was

saying them too, had always been saying them: Look down. I looked down. The basement was full of phones. Hundreds of them, thousands, stacked and tangled and ringing in sequence, three rings each, pattern spreading like contagion through decades of green plastic and rotary dials and bodies that had come when they were called. I started descending. Couldn't help it. The steps were warm. My other self watched me go. On the seventh step down, I understood. Helen had been right. The pointing wasn't a warning. It was an invitation we'd all already accepted.

Finished on 27 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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