



NATURE

Hérons Know First

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY • WRITERS

The writers

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

One	Olive Kassen
Two	Priya Nair
Three	Margot Vail
Four	Dario Selo
Five	Colin McAteer
Six	Dan Okafor
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Eight	Sammy Hall

Chapter

One

written by Olive Kassen

The morning the herons came back, the fog sat so low on the marsh that the reeds seemed to rise from nothing at all. Esme woke to the sound of wings, that slow scissoring of air that always meant something large and deliberate overhead. She lay still beneath her grandmother's quilt, listening. Two beats. Three. A pause that felt like held breath, then the wet sound of something settling into shallow water. She went to the window in bare feet. The glass was cold enough to sting her fingertips when she pressed them there, and through the mist she could just make out the shape: tall, gray, motionless as a carved thing. Then another, further out where the water deepened. Then a third. Her grandmother had been dead eleven days. The light that morning was the color of milk diluted in water, weak and strangely greenish. It made everything look submerged, even the house, even her own hands when she held them up to see them better. She dressed without thinking, pulling on clothes that smelled of wood smoke and the marshland damp that got into everything, that made the walls weep and the floorboards swell. Outside, the air tasted of salt and rotting sweetgrass. The herons stood where the tide had left small fish trapped in the hollows between roots. She counted six of them now, scattered across the inlet like grave markers. They did not startle when she walked down to the water's edge. One turned its head with that strange articulated slowness,

regarded her with a yellow eye that seemed older than its body. Her grandmother used to say the herons knew things. Not in words, nothing so clumsy as that, but in the way they stood in the current and felt the shapes of fish moving below. In the way they arrived exactly when the alewives ran, when the eels came in from the sea to spawn in the darkness of inland ponds. They knew the way tides knew, the way stones knew the pattern of their own erosion. Esme had not believed her. Had smiled and nodded and thought it was just another story from the old days, when people made myths out of migration patterns and called it wisdom. But now. The heron closest to her drove its beak into the water and came up with something silver and writhing. It tilted its head back, throat working, and the fish was gone. Then it stood still again, waiting or watching or simply being in that way wild things had of occupying space without apology. She walked the shoreline until the mist began to thin, until the sun broke through in long shafts that turned the water into hammered metal. The herons remained. When she looked back at the house, she saw it differently, as if seeing it through their eyes: small, impermanent, a thing that would rot back into the marsh given enough time. The thought did not frighten her. In the kitchen she made coffee and stood at the sink drinking it, looking out at the birds. Seven now. Or perhaps eight, if that shape far out near the channel mouth was another and not just a post from some old forgotten dock. Her grandmother's sweater still hung on the back of the door. Her boots still held the shape of her feet, the leather creased exactly where her ankles had bent, step after step, year after year, walking out to check the crab pots, to gather mussels from the rocks, to stand as Esme was standing now and watch the water for signs of something she had never named. The coffee had gone cold in her hands when she heard it: a sound like a low horn, mournful and strange, coming from somewhere out in the fog. The herons stirred all at once, a ripple of movement passing through them. One lifted into the air, then another, their wings creaking like old doors as they rose.

Chapter

Two

written by Priya Nair

The door slammed open before Esme could set down her cup. "They're calling," Gil said. No preamble, no knock, just Gil in his ridiculous waders that were patched with duct tape in three places, breathing hard like he'd run the whole mile from his boat. "You hear that?" "I heard something." "That's them. That's the sound." He was still holding a gaff, had apparently just dropped whatever he was doing mid-task. Classic Gil. "My dad used to talk about it. Before they left, they did this. The calling thing." Esme took a long sip of cold coffee just to have something to do with her hands that wasn't throwing the mug. "Your dad also said mermaids stole his reading glasses." "He was half-right. Your grandmother took them. Kept them in her tackle box to this day, I'd bet money on it." She didn't take the bet because he was probably right. "What do you want, Gil?" "Marnie's calling a meeting." "Of course she is." "Noon. Fire station." He paused, squinted past her toward the window. "How many you count?" "Eight. Maybe." "I got twelve from the boat. Jesus, Esme. Twelve." He said it like it meant something, like there was a magic number of herons that tipped things from odd to catastrophic. "You coming to the meeting or not?" "Do I have a choice?" "You're Beth's granddaughter. They're going to ask you things." "I don't know things." "Yeah, well." Gil shifted the gaff to his other hand. He had fish scales stuck to his knuckles, silver-pink against the calluses.

"Neither does anyone else, but that won't stop Marnie from asking." After he left, Esme went looking for the tackle box. Found it in the mudroom under a stack of burlap sacks that smelled like low tide and engine grease. Inside: three pairs of reading glasses, none of them her grandmother's prescription. A pocketknife with a carved whale on the handle. Forty-seven cents in Canadian pennies. A photograph in a plastic bag, too water-damaged to make out faces. And a notebook, the kind with the marbled cover, every page covered in her grandmother's crabbed handwriting. The first entry was dated eleven years ago. October third. "They left today. E. saw them go, asked why. Told her migration, but that's a child's answer. The truth is they knew. They always know when something's coming." Esme flipped forward. Pages and pages of weather observations, tide charts, notes about which fish were running when. Then, three months ago: "Water's changing. Temp up two degrees this week. The mussels on the south rocks are dying. Not all, but enough to notice. The crabs are moving deeper. Something's shifting." Last entry, two weeks before her grandmother died: "If they come back, it means it's here. Tell E. to watch the color of the marsh grass where it meets the water. When it goes yellow at the roots, there's still time. When it goes black, move inland." Esme closed the notebook. Through the window she could see the tide pulling out, exposing the mudflats where the herons stalked on legs like surveying equipment. She walked down to check the grass. The roots were yellow. Not everywhere, but in patches, like something underneath was leaching the green away. The fire station at noon meant Marnie at a folding table with her clipboard, which meant a disaster in the making. Esme showed up at 12:15 out of spite and because the tide wouldn't be right for checking the east marsh until two. The room was already full, fishing families and summer people who hadn't left yet, everyone talking over each other. "Eleven years," Marnie was saying, rapping her pen against the table. "Anyone remember what happened right before they left? Anything unusual?" "The Jacobson kid broke his arm," someone offered. "That was after." "The nor'easter that took out the pier." "Also after."

Esme stayed near the door. Gil caught her eye from across the room, raised his eyebrows in a question. She shook her head. The notebook was in her jacket pocket, heavy as a stone. On the wall behind Marnie, someone had pinned a tide chart from 2012, the last year the herons nested in the marsh. Right before they vanished. Marnie cleared her throat. "Esme. Your grandmother kept records. Did she leave anything about this?" Everyone turned to look.

Chapter

Three

written by Margot Vail

Esme pulled the notebook out before she decided to. Set it on the table. Marnie reached for it. Esme's hand stayed flat on the cover. "She tracked things," Esme said. "Water temperature. Fish patterns. The grass is dying at the roots where the marsh meets the channel." "Dying how?" This from Peter Lao, who ran the oyster beds near Kettle Cove. "Yellow first. Then black." Peter's face went still. "The beds at Kettle turned last spring. Lost sixty percent yield." Marnie opened the notebook to a random page, scanned it. Her mouth thinned. "This is just weather data." "It's not." Esme took it back. Found the last entry, read it aloud. The part about the grass. The part about moving inland. The room got quiet in the way rooms do when people stop performing attention and actually pay it. "Beth was ninety-one," Marnie said carefully. "She was... declining." "She knew what color grass was." "I'm not saying she didn't, I'm saying we need to be rational about this. The herons are migratory birds. They came back because this is their habitat. That's biology, not prophecy." Gil snorted from the back. "Biology doesn't explain why they showed up the week Beth died." "Coincidence explains it fine." "Twelve herons," Peter said. "I counted fourteen this morning from the dock. Saw two more fly in from the south. How many nested here before?" Silence. "I'll tell you," Peter said. "Four pairs. Eight birds. We've got nearly double that now and they're still coming." Esme was watching Marnie's

hands. The pen had stopped moving. She was gripping it wrong, knuckles white, the way people held things when they were afraid of what letting go might mean. "My grandmother kept three pairs of stolen glasses and forty-seven cents in Canadian pennies in that box," Esme said. "Also that notebook. Which one seems like the thing she wanted someone to find?" Marnie set down the pen. "What do you want us to do, Esme? Evacuate because some birds showed up and your grandmother, who we all loved, wrote some notes about grass?" "I want you to check your own marshes. See if the roots are turning." "And if they are?" Esme didn't have an answer for that. Her grandmother hadn't written one. The meeting dissolved into smaller arguments, people clustered by the coffee station or near the door. Gil came over, looked at the notebook still open on the table. "The Canadian pennies," he said. "Those were mine. I used to pay her a quarter to let me dig for clams on her stretch of beach. She always gave me change in Canadian, said American money spent too easy." "That's stealing." "That's Beth." He flipped through the notebook, stopped on a page dated nine years ago. "Look at this. November eighteenth. 'Water temp steady but surface tension wrong. Oily feel, no foam where the current breaks.' What's that mean?" "I don't know." "You should find out." He closed the notebook, handed it back. "Peter's right about the numbers. And it's not just herons. I pulled pots this morning, found them full of rock crabs. Rock crabs don't come into the shallows this time of year. They stay deep." "So they're moving." "Everything's moving. Question is where, and what are they moving away from." Esme left while Marnie was still trying to organize a subcommittee. Walked back along the shore road where the beach roses had gone leggy and brown. The tide was turning, pulling back to expose the flats, and the herons were there in a line like they'd been placed. Sixteen now. She counted twice. At the east marsh she knelt in the mud and dug down to where the spartina roots twisted together. Yellow. Some black already, the stems collapsing when she touched them. The smell was wrong too, sulfuric and sweet at once. She took a sample. Wrapped it in a plastic bag from her pocket. The

university lab was two hours north. They owed her grandmother a favor, something about specimens Beth had collected over the years, rare mollusks or some such. Esme had the name somewhere, a professor who'd sent a card after the funeral. The sun was setting when she got back to the house. Nineteen herons now, roosting in the shallows. She counted them three times to be sure.

Chapter

Four

written by Dario Selo

The question of whether counting three times made a number more real than counting once (and whether certainty arrived through repetition or was simply a performance of diligence meant to convince oneself that panic remained premature) occupied Esme through the next hour, which she spent not driving to the university but sitting at her grandmother's desk, staring at the sample bag of blackened grass. The professor's name came to her eventually because it had been written on the sympathy card in that aggressive academic cursive that turned every lowercase 'r' into a topographic challenge: Dr. Vera Kowalczyk, Marine Biology, specialization in coastal ecosystem collapse. The word "collapse" had seemed excessive at the time (her grandmother had simply died, the way ninety-one-year-old women did, no ecosystem about it), but now Esme turned it over in her mind like a shell with an unfamiliar shape, trying to find the opening. She called the number on the card. Got voicemail. Left a message that attempted brevity and failed because how did one reduce nineteen herons and blackening grass and her grandmother's notebook to a request for lab analysis without sounding like someone who believed in auguries? She hung up feeling she'd proven Marnie's point about prophecy versus biology, then immediately called back to add: "The grass smells like sulfur. I don't know if that matters." The house was too quiet. It had been too quiet

since her grandmother died, but the quality of the silence had changed, or perhaps Esme's attention to it had, the way you only notice a refrigerator's hum once it stops. She put the notebook in the freezer. Took it back out. The logic of preservation (if the house flooded, if something came, if she needed proof later of what her grandmother had known) wrestled with the absurdity of treating a spiral-bound notebook like a historical document worth saving from an unspecified catastrophe that may or may not arrive depending on how literally one interpreted the ornithological habits of wading birds. Outside, the herons had begun to call again. That low sound, the one Gil had run a mile to tell her about. It resonated in the floor joists, or seemed to, though that might have been Esme's exhaustion making metaphors out of vibrations. She went to the window. They were facing east, all of them, necks extended toward the mouth of the channel where the marsh opened to the bay. Waiting for something or announcing it. The distinction mattered. By morning (because at some point she had fallen asleep at the desk, her cheek pressed to a page of her grandmother's tide calculations), there were twenty-three. Esme made coffee. Checked her phone. Dr. Kowalczyk had not called back, but Peter Lao had texted: Found black roots at Kettle. Also at Hansen's Cove and the old mill inlet. How fast does this spread? She didn't know. Her grandmother's notes tracked the yellowing over weeks, but the progression to black was documented only once, in a single entry that read: "South bed, fully black. Smell like rotten eggs and something else, something chemical I can't name. The mud underneath came up gray when I dug. Gray like concrete, like something hardened. No worms. No mollusks. Nothing living at all." Esme texted back: Check the mud. Then she went down to the water's edge where the nearest heron stood in six inches of tide. Close enough now to see the individual feathers, the way they overlapped like roofing tiles, the pale yellow of its eye and the darker pupil contracting as it watched her watch it. Her grandmother had been right about the knowing, though not in any way that could be explained to Marnie's subcommittee. The heron knew her the way anyone knows a thing

they've measured repeatedly: through observation, through the patient accumulation of data about how this particular organism moved through space. "What are you waiting for?" Esme asked it. The heron did not answer (obviously), but it shifted its weight, lifted one foot from the water in that careful articulated way, and turned its head south. Toward the bay. Toward whatever was coming up the channel with the tide.

Chapter

Five

written by Colin McAteer

The tide reaches the second marker post at 9:47 AM. Esme knows this because she has been standing on the dock for forty minutes with her grandmother's watch in her hand, the one that ticks too loud and loses three minutes every day but keeps better time than the clock in the kitchen, which stopped the morning of the funeral and which Esme has not touched since. The water comes in gray. Not the gray of normal seawater clouded with silt, but a flat gray like primer paint, opaque and somehow thicker than it should be. It moves wrong. The current pushes it forward but it doesn't flow so much as slide, carrying a film on its surface that catches the light like oil but doesn't separate into rainbow patterns when Esme pokes it with a length of driftwood. The herons lift off simultaneously. Twenty-three bodies rising with that creaking wingbeat sound, gaining altitude in a spiral that takes them higher than she has ever seen herons fly. They circle once. Twice. Then they settle again, but further inland now, in the marsh grasses thirty yards back from the waterline. Esme photographs the gray water. Her phone camera makes it look almost normal, just murky, the way the bay gets after storms. She tries again with the flash off. Slightly better. The wrongness translates as a texture, something her phone's processor can't quite smooth into normalcy. A fish surfaces. Then another. Both dead, their bellies already distended. She counts six more in the next

three minutes, floating in that gray water, spinning slowly in the current. Not the small baitfish the herons had been eating yesterday, but adult striped bass, the kind Peter Lao would charge thirty dollars a pound for if they weren't currently revolving like bizarre carousel horses in contaminated tide water. She calls Peter. He answers on the first ring. "The mud's gray," he says. "Kettle, Hansen's, the mill inlet. All of it. Dug down eight inches, same color all the way through." "The water's coming in gray now too," Esme says. "At my grandmother's dock." Silence on the line. Not empty silence but the kind filled with someone trying to find words for something that doesn't have them yet. "I'm calling the county," Peter says finally. "EPA, whoever handles this. Contamination, chemical spill, something." "It's not a spill." "You don't know that." "There'd be a source point. This is coming in with the tide from the bay. It's in the mud already. It's been here." "Then what is it?" Esme watches another bass turn belly-up in the gray water. "I think it's been here the whole time. Under everything. And now it's rising." She hangs up before he can argue. Her grandmother's notebook had one more entry, tucked in the back pages, undated. Esme had skipped it last night because the handwriting was worse than usual, shakier, the letters cramped and overlapping. She pulls it out now, reads it standing on the dock while the gray water laps at the pilings. "The crabs know to go deep but deep won't save them. The herons know to leave but they'll come back to witness it because that's what they do, they mark the threshold. They stand where the edge is. I tried to tell the county biologist in '87 when the first die-off happened but he said red tide, said algae bloom, said natural cycle. Nothing natural about it. It's underneath. It's been underneath since before the village was here. The indigenous name for this inlet translates to 'place where the bottom breathes.' We built on it anyway. We dredged and filled and built and now it's waking up. Or we're sinking into it. Same result." Esme looks up from the notebook. The gray water has advanced past the third marker post. It moves upward through the marsh channels in branches, in fingers, seeking the paths of least resistance. Where it touches the spartina grass, the grass

darkens immediately, not over days but in moments, the green draining out like water from a sponge. Dr. Kowalczyk calls back at 10:15. Esme is still on the dock. The gray water is fifteen feet away now, close enough that she can smell it properly: sulfur, yes, but also something mineral, ferrous, like the smell of blood or rust or deep earth brought up from places that haven't seen air in geological time. "I got your message," Dr. Kowalczyk says. "Don't touch the water. I'm coming now."

Chapter

Six

written by Dan Okafor

Esme touches the water anyway, after Dr. Kowalczyk hangs up, because being told not to do something by a person two hours away with three degrees and no current visual on the situation is essentially an invitation. She dips two fingers in. The gray water is cold, colder than it should be in October, and it leaves a residue on her skin that doesn't wipe off. Powdery, like chalk dust or dried clay. She rubs her fingers together and the powder flakes away in pieces that catch the wind and blow back toward the marsh. Her phone rings again. Marnie, naturally. "Peter says you told him not to call the county." "I told him it's not a spill." "Esme, there are dead fish floating in the harbor. Tom Ridley just called me from his boat, says the water's the wrong color and his nets came up empty. We need to contact someone." "Dr. Kowalczyk is coming." "Who?" "Marine biologist. She knew my grandmother." Marnie makes a sound that could mean several things, none of them positive. "When?" "Two hours, maybe less." "Two hours. Great. Meanwhile I've got the harbormaster asking if we should close the boat launch and three summer families demanding to know if their properties are contaminated." A pause. "Are their properties contaminated?" Esme looks at the gray water, now past the fourth marker post. "Probably." "That's not helpful." "It's honest." "Honest doesn't keep people from panicking." Marnie's voice shifts into her town

meeting register, the one she uses when she's already decided something and is simply informing you of the conclusion. "I'm calling the state environmental office. They can send someone today." "They'll take samples and leave. They won't know what they're looking at." "And Dr. Koval, whatever her name is, will?" "She studies ecosystem collapse. That's literally her job." "Fine. She can compare notes with the state people. But I'm making the call, Esme. This is bigger than your grandmother's notebooks." She hangs up before Esme can point out that bigger than the notebooks is exactly what the notebooks were documenting. That Beth had spent thirty years watching something grow underneath them all, recording its symptoms, and nobody had listened because what does an old woman with crab pots know about marine biology? Gil appears at the end of the dock, breathing hard again. He has a gift for dramatic timing. "Don't go in the water," he says. "Bit late." He stares at her hand, the one with the residue. "Jesus, Esme. What'd it feel like?" "Cold. Gritty. Like touching pond bottom, except the pond bottom is now the tide." She holds up her fingers. The powder has left a faint gray stain in the whorls of her fingerprints. "You come here to warn me or to ask questions?" "Both." He crouches at the dock's edge, peering at the water. "Ridley's not the only one with empty nets. Everyone who pulled pots this morning got nothing. Not even hermit crabs. Everything's gone deeper or left entirely." "Or died." "Yeah. Or that." He glances back toward the marsh where the herons stand in their new line, thirty yards inland from where they'd been yesterday. "They keep moving back. I've been watching. Every time the gray water advances, they lift off and resettle further in. Like they're pacing it." Esme counts them again. Still twenty-three. "They're marking it," she says. "The boundary. My grandmother wrote that they witness thresholds." "Witness how? They're birds, Esme. They don't testify." "Maybe they do. Just not in ways that require language." Gil stands, wipes his hands on his waders even though he hasn't touched anything. "Marnie's organizing a town hall for tonight. Six PM, fire station. She wants you there." "I'm sure she does." "You going to bring the

notebook?" Esme looks at the house, at the freezer where the notebook currently sits between a bag of frozen peas and a pint of ice cream her grandmother bought in August. "I don't know yet." "Bring it. People need to see what Beth knew." "People need to evacuate. What Beth knew was that when the water changes color, it's already too late to do anything but move." Gil absorbs this. "You leaving?" "Are you?" He looks at his boat, tied at the neighboring dock, then at the gray water spreading through the marsh in its terrible branching pattern. "Not yet," he says.

Chapter

Seven

written by typewriter_tom

Esme decides in the space between Gil's answer and his footsteps retreating up the dock. She goes to the freezer. Removes the notebook from between the peas and the ice cream, both of which have developed crystals from the door being opened too many times in two days. The notebook is cold in her hands. She puts it in a gallon ziplock bag because if the gray water reaches the house, at least the last record of what her grandmother knew will be sealed. Dr. Kowalczyk arrives at 11:33. She drives a Subaru with Maine plates and university parking stickers layered three deep on the rear window. She's younger than Esme expected, maybe forty, with hair pulled back in a bun that's already coming loose. She gets out of the car holding a pelican case in each hand. "Show me," she says. No introduction, no condolences about Beth even though the card she sent had three handwritten paragraphs about what a careful observer Esme's grandmother had been. Esme takes her to the dock. The gray water has reached the fifth marker post. It's moving faster now, or the tide is simply coming in with more force, bringing more of whatever this is with it. Dr. Kowalczyk sets down both cases. Opens one, removes a handheld sensor that looks like a depth finder but more complicated. She lowers it into the gray water on a telescoping pole. Watches the readout screen. Her face doesn't change but her grip on the pole tightens. "pH is 5.2," she says. "Dissolved oxygen near zero.

Temperature forty-one degrees." She looks at Esme. "This water should be fifty-eight degrees this time of year." "What's making it cold?" "It's not the water that's cold. The water is normal temperature two feet down. It's whatever is sitting on top of it." She retracts the sensor, examines the probe. It's coated in the same gray residue. She scrapes some into a sample vial with a tool from her kit. "Your grandmother sent me samples in 2015. Mud from the south bed after a die-off. I found anaerobic bacteria, the kind that live in deep ocean vents. Also trace amounts of minerals that don't occur naturally in coastal sediment." "What kind of minerals?" "The kind found in metamorphic rock. Basalt. Things that should be miles underground, not in a tidal marsh." Dr. Kowalczyk seals the vial. "I told her I thought something was seeping up from a subterranean layer. She asked if it would get worse. I said only if the geological pressure changed." Esme thinks about her grandmother's phrase: the bottom breathes. "What changes geological pressure?" "Earthquakes. Shifts in the continental shelf. Groundwater depletion. Tidal patterns altered by climate change." She stands. "Has there been any seismic activity here recently?" "Not that I know of." "Any major construction? Drilling? Dredging?" "The harbor was dredged two years ago. Deepened by six feet to accommodate bigger boats." Dr. Kowalczyk closes her eyes briefly. "That would do it. You remove material that's been compressing a layer beneath it, you relieve the pressure. Whatever was sealed down there can migrate up." The herons call again. That low sound, all twenty-three of them in chorus. Dr. Kowalczyk turns toward them. "Great blue herons. They abandoned this marsh eleven years ago?" "Yes." "And returned when?" "Four days ago. Right after my grandmother died." Dr. Kowalczyk pulls out her phone, types something. "There was a minor earthquake eleven years ago. September 2013. Magnitude 3.1, epicenter forty miles offshore. Your grandmother would have felt it, but most people wouldn't have noticed." She looks up from her phone. "I think that's when it started. The first breach. The herons left because they could sense the chemical changes in the water, in the invertebrates they fed on. They came back now because they're

monitoring it. They'll be the last species to leave when it becomes completely uninhabitable." "How long do we have?" "Before what?" "Before it's uninhabitable." Dr. Kowalczyk looks at the gray water, at the marsh grass turning black in real time where the water touches it, at the dead bass floating in their slow rotation. "If this is moving with the tide, it's coming from the bay floor. Every tidal cycle brings more. I'd say you have days, maybe a week, before the concentration makes the water toxic to humans. After that?" She shrugs. "Depends on how deep the source layer goes." Esme hands her the notebook in its ziplock bag. "My grandmother tracked it for thirty years. Everything's in there." Dr. Kowalczyk takes it carefully, like it's evidence. Which it is.

Chapter

Eight

written by Sammy Hall

Dr. Kowalczyk reads standing up, which seems inefficient until Esme realizes she's reading the way you read something you already half-know, looking for confirmations instead of information. She flips to the middle, then the end, then back to an entry from 2009, and her mouth does this thing where it flattens into a line so straight it could be drawn with a ruler. "She documented the dredging proposal," Dr. Kowalczyk says. "Testified against it at the planning board meeting. She told them exactly this would happen." "And they dredged anyway." "Of course they did. Jobs. Tourism. Bigger boats mean more revenue." She closes the notebook. "Your grandmother was right about everything. The timeline, the progression, the fact that it's irreversible once it starts." She looks at Esme. "I'm sorry." Esme doesn't want sorry. Sorry is what you say at funerals, and this isn't a funeral yet, or maybe it is, maybe the whole marsh is a funeral and they're just the last ones to notice the body. "Can you explain it to them tonight? At the meeting?" "I can explain it. Whether they'll evacuate is a different question." "They have to." Dr. Kowalczyk's expression goes complicated. Not unkind, just realistic in a way that makes Esme's chest feel tight. "People don't leave places easily. Especially when the danger is something they can't see properly. Gray water and dead fish, those are problems that sound fixable. Evacuate means admitting everything they built here was a

mistake." "It was, though." "I know that. You know that. Your grandmother knew that." She hands back the notebook. "But I'm a scientist from out of state with bad news, and you're a grieving granddaughter with a dead woman's diary. Marnie's going to ask for proof, for certainty, for a plan to fix it. I don't have any of those things." Gil reappears at noon with sandwiches from the store, which is the most Gil thing possible, bringing food to the apocalypse. He also brings news that the harbormaster closed the boat launch an hour ago after a kid went wading and came out with a rash on his legs. The parents are threatening to sue somebody, though it's unclear who you sue when the defendant is geological process. They eat on the porch. The gray water has crept past the dock entirely now, reaching the sea grass at the high tide line. Where it soaks in, the ground darkens like a stain spreading through fabric. Dr. Kowalczyk takes samples every twenty minutes, labeling vials with a Sharpie in handwriting even worse than Beth's. "The state people are coming at three," Gil says through a mouthful of turkey sandwich. "Marnie called them herself. Apparently they were skeptical until she sent photos." "They'll want to run their own tests," Dr. Kowalczyk says. "Establish chain of custody, verify contamination levels. Standard protocol." "How long does that take?" "Weeks, usually. Maybe days if they expedite." She caps a vial. "They'll recommend boiling water, staying out of the marsh. Maybe close the harbor to shellfish harvesting. But evacuation?" She shakes her head. "That requires proof of immediate danger to human life." Esme looks at the herons, still standing in their line thirty yards back, their necks curved like question marks. "The immediate danger is that people think they have time." The town hall starts early because everyone showed up at five-thirty. The fire station fills past capacity, people standing against the walls, sitting on the floor near the door. Marnie has printed maps. She's put red dots where the gray water has been spotted, which makes it look contained, like something with boundaries. Dr. Kowalczyk presents for twelve minutes. She uses words like "anaerobic" and "metamorphic substrate" and "irreversible contamination event." She

shows photos of her samples under magnification, of the bacteria that live in conditions nothing else survives. She explains about the dredging, about pressure and geological layers and how they've essentially punctured something that was sealed for a reason. When she finishes, Tom Ridley raises his hand. "So you're saying the harbor did this." "The dredging removed material that was containing a contaminated layer beneath it, yes." "Can we sue?" Dr. Kowalczyk blinks. "You can try. But the harbor commission followed all environmental protocols at the time. They had no reason to believe, " "Beth told them," Esme says. Her voice comes out louder than intended. The room swivels toward her. "My grandmother testified. She said dredging that deep would cause problems. It's in the public record." Marnie clears her throat. "Beth expressed concerns, yes. But they were vague. She talked about birds and grass, not bacteria." "She talked about what she could see. She didn't have a microscope." "Exactly. She didn't have," The lights go out.

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