

HORROR

THE PRECISION OF ABSENCE

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

ONE

Ruth Ann Keller

TWO

rpenguin

THREE

JUK3

FOUR

Lior Tannen

FIVE

wordsbylena

SIX

Cora Lindgren

SEVEN

inkwell_amy

EIGHT

Sasha Loomis

Chapter

ONE

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One does not expect to find such places anymore, not in this age of satellites and survey maps, yet here it stood: a house that appeared on no registry, no deed, no photograph. I had been directed to it by a colleague whose judgment I trusted, though he spoke of the property with a peculiar reluctance, as if the very act of naming it might summon unwanted attention. The approach required three hours of driving through forested country that grew increasingly dense, followed by a final mile on foot. The trees in that last stretch were wrong somehow. Their bark had a waxy quality, and they grew at angles that suggested the soil beneath might be unstable, though the ground felt solid enough underfoot. The house revealed itself gradually, as if it had always been there but had only just decided to become visible. Two stories of weathered clapboard, windows intact but filmed with something that was not quite dust. The porch sagged in the middle, yet the overall structure appeared sound. What struck me most forcibly was the absolute silence. No birds. No insects. Not even the whisper of wind through branches, though I could see the trees moving. I had come seeking refuge, though from what I shall not say. There are pursuits that follow a man regardless of distance, and certain debts that cannot be settled through conventional means. The colleague who had given me the location assured me that the house offered protection of an unusual

sort. "It keeps things out," he had said. "Just be certain you understand what you are keeping out, and what you might be keeping in." The door was unlocked. One does not know whether to interpret this as hospitality or oversight. Inside, the air held a peculiar quality, as if it had not been breathed in some time yet remained fresh. The furnishings were sparse but adequate: a table, two chairs, a narrow bed visible through an open doorway. The walls bore rectangles of darker paint where frames had once hung, and I found myself wondering what images had been deemed necessary to remove. A ledger rested on the table, bound in leather that felt somehow organic, as if the hide had never quite resigned itself to being dead. I opened it against my better judgment. The entries were written in various hands, dated across decades. The most recent was from 1987, though we are now well into the 1990s. It read simply: "Stayed seven days. It found the boundary on the fifth night. Did not attempt to cross. Left offering as instructed." No signature. No description of what "it" might have been. I turned back through earlier entries. Some were longer, detailing sounds heard after dark, movements glimpsed through windows, voices that called with familiar cadences but formed no words one could quite distinguish. A notation from 1952 mentioned "the thing in the cellar that is not permitted to leave but grows restless when the house is occupied." Another, undated, stated with admirable brevity: "Do not answer if something calls your name correctly." The light through the windows began to fade, though I could not say whether the hour was truly so advanced or if the quality of illumination here followed different rules. I lit the oil lamp that stood ready on the table, noting that its reservoir was full, as if someone maintained the house despite its apparent abandonment. That was when I noticed the other doors. There had been two when I entered: the front door and the bedroom. Now there were four. The additions were identical to the original woodwork, settled into the walls as if they had always been present, which I knew with absolute certainty they had not. One must make decisions in such moments. I chose the bedroom, reasoning that whatever protection this house

offered would be tested soon enough, and I should face that test from a position of relative security. I was wrong, of course, about the nature of security one might find here. The bed was made with crisp linens. Beneath the pillow, I found a key that fit no lock I had yet seen.

Chapter

TWO

written by rpenguin

Chapter 2

I did not sleep, or I slept and the sleeping was indistinguishable from waking, which amounts to the same problem by different names.

What I can say with confidence is that at some point during the night I became aware that the key was warm. Not the warmth of a body that has lain against metal for some hours, conducting heat through proximity. Something else. The key was warm the way a living thing is warm, from the inside out, and when I held it up in the failing light of the lamp I could see that the teeth of it had changed their configuration. Not dramatically. Not in any way I could prove, having only my memory of the original arrangement to compare it against. But I knew with the particular certainty that bypasses rational argument: the key had been waiting for a different lock than the one it was made for, and now it had decided what that lock should be.

The third door led somewhere.

I knew this because at roughly the second hour past midnight, I am guessing at the hour; the watch I brought had stopped, I heard breathing from behind it. Not labored breathing, not threatening breathing. Patient breathing. The sort a person produces when they have been waiting in a small space for a very long time and have made their peace with the waiting.

I did not open the door. I want to be clear about that. The entry from 1952 had been explicit about the cellar, and while I did not know with certainty that the third door connected to the cellar, I had learned enough from the ledger to treat all uncertainties as the worst possible case.

Instead I turned to the fourth door.

It had no handle. This is the detail that occupied me for some time. The other doors had handles of tarnished brass, functional and unremarkable. The fourth door was flush with the wall, the wood uninterrupted except for the seam of the frame, and it occurred to me, with the slow horror of something gradually recognized, that it was not meant to be opened from this side.

The breathing continued.

I returned to the table and the ledger because there was nothing else to do and because the ledger was, at least, a record of people who had survived long enough to write in it.

This was when I found the entry I had not found before.

I had read the ledger cover to cover in the hours before dark. I was certain of this. My memory, whatever its other failures, is reliable in matters of sequence. There had been no entry between October 1961 and March 1964. There was one now. The pages felt as the other pages felt, aged and faintly foxed at the margins. The handwriting bore no resemblance to any of the other hands in the ledger.

It was my handwriting.

The date at the top was tonight's date.

I will reproduce what it said, exactly as it appeared, because precision seems important now and because I no longer fully trust my ability to paraphrase without losing something essential.

The key is for the fourth door. This is not a warning. It is a description of what you will do, because we have watched you do it, and nothing that happens next surprises us, and we are sorry for that, sorry in the way that one is sorry for weather. You will hear your name at the window nearest the bed. It will be pronounced correctly. Do not answer.

You know this already. You read it in the afternoon and it settled in you like ballast and you have been carrying it since. What you do not know, and what we are permitted to tell you because the telling changes nothing, is that the prohibition applies to voice only. If something calls your name correctly, you must not answer. You may, however, go to the window. You may look. What you see there will not be monstrous. This is the most frightening thing we can tell you, and we tell it freely: what is outside is not monstrous. It will look like someone you have lost. It will look like that because it has been wearing that particular shape for some years now, long enough that the shape has become true in certain ways that matter, and this is why the house keeps it out rather than in. Because what is inside can be contained. What has become true cannot.

The entry ended there. Beneath it, in my hand but in ink that was visibly fresher, wet enough that it smeared when I touched it, were two words I had not written.

Keep writing.

Chapter

THREE

written by JUK3

The name came at the hour before dawn. I know this because the lamp had begun to sputter, the oil finally surrendering to hours of burning, and in the irregular light I watched my own hand shake as I held the ledger. I had not moved from the table. I had written nothing additional, though the fresh ink seemed to mock me with its implicit expectation. The ledger lay open, and the entry in my handwriting stared upward like an accusation I had not yet confessed to. The breathing behind the third door had ceased sometime around midnight. This cessation troubled me more than the breathing itself had, because silence in a place like this is not absence. It is a quality of waiting that has reached its crescendo.

When my name came, it was correct. There is no adequate way to describe what this means to someone who has spent the previous hours in the grip of abstract dread. Correct pronunciation carries the weight of intimacy, of being known in a way that bypasses identity entirely. It was not spoken loudly. There was no theatricality to it. The voice came from the window nearest the bed and it called my name the way someone calls a person they have loved for many years, with the casual precision of absolute familiarity.

I did not answer.

What followed was not silence but rather a conversation of a different sort. The thing beyond the glass made no further sound.

Instead I found myself acutely aware of every small noise within the house: the creak of the lamp's wire as it swayed, the slight tick of cooling wood, the beating of my own heart, which I discovered could be quite loud when one's attention was properly directed toward it. I thought of the earlier entry, the one from 1987. It found the boundary on the fifth night. Did not attempt to cross. I calculated roughly: I had been in the house perhaps four hours. Four nights remained if the pattern held. If I had understood the pattern at all.

The contradiction that had been building within me since I read my own future handwriting reached a kind of critical mass. I had come to this house because I was running, and a man who runs does not typically possess the luxury of certainty about his own motives. I had told myself it was refuge. I had told myself it was protection from things that followed. But standing in that moment, knowing that something outside held a shape worn into truth by years of repetition, I understood that I had known, even then, what might be kept out of a place like this.

My brother had been missing for seven months.

I had not allowed myself to formulate this thought in words until that moment. The absence had lived in me as pure weight, as the way certain doorways in my own house had come to feel unsafe because they might open onto the wrong configurations. The journal entries from strangers had spoken of familiar cadences, of voices that called with patterns almost but not quite forming into language. I had read those entries and told myself they were metaphorical, that I was coming here for practical refuge from practical pursuits. Lies made comfortable through repetition become a kind of truth, though they are never the true kind.

When I finally moved, I did not move toward the window. Some prohibition held within me as firmly as any locked door, and I respected this barrier in myself even as I resented it. Instead I went to the fourth door, the one with no handle, the one not meant to be opened from this side. I held the key that had changed its teeth to match some unknown

purpose, and I pressed it against the smooth wood of that frame, searching for a keyhole that the door had not possessed hours before.

There was one now. It was warm to the touch, and when I inserted the key, I felt it settle into place with the particular rightness of something that had been waiting for this exact moment across an indeterminate span of time.

I did not turn it. Not yet. My character, I will say in my defense, has never been the sort to proceed without acknowledging the choice. I stood there with my hand on the key and my eyes closed, and I allowed myself, for the final time, to be the man who had come to this house running. That version of me remained there in that moment, frozen in the decision's precipice.

Then I turned the key.

Chapter

FOUR

written by Lior Tannen

The lock gave without resistance, which meant it had never truly been locked at all. The door swung inward on hinges that made no sound. Beyond it was not the cellar I had half-expected, not the darkness of underground chambers or the smell of earth and old things. What opened before me was a hallway. Ordinary hallway. Pale wallpaper with a pattern of small flowers, the kind you might find in any house built before 1960. A runner rug, faded burgundy, stretched toward a distant window where gray light was beginning to accumulate. Three doors lined each wall. A framed photograph hung at intervals. In the nearest frame, a woman and a boy stood in front of this very house. The boy was perhaps nine years old. He held a fishing rod. I knew that boy. I had been that boy, except I hadn't. My brother Marcus had been nine when the photograph was taken. I had been eleven, standing behind the camera, complaining about the cold. I stepped through the threshold. The air changed immediately. Warmer. Lived in. The house behind me, the bedroom, the table with the ledger, the lamp still guttering its last light, felt already like something I had dreamed rather than inhabited. I did not turn to look back. That seemed important. A rule I had not been told but understood anyway, the way one understands the weight of a glance that must not be returned. The first door on my left was open. Inside was a kitchen I recognized. Not my mother's kitchen, though the layout was

similar. The counters were a shade of yellow that no longer existed in the world. The stove was a vintage model, all enamel and chrome, the kind my grandmother had complained about in the 1970s. On the counter sat a loaf of bread, sliced, and a glass of milk that looked freshly poured. Small kindnesses. The sort a person leaves out when they are expecting someone they love to come home hungry. The milk had a skin on top. It had been sitting there long enough for that to happen. I did not touch it. In the hallway again, I could hear water running. A sink, perhaps, or a shower in one of the rooms beyond. The sound was patient. Not hurried. The sound of someone who had all the time in the world and was using it the way you use something precious but infinite. "Marcus," I said to the empty hallway. Not a shout. A name, spoken the way you speak to a person you have known so long that you don't need volume to be heard. The water stopped. I had seven days. I understood this now with the clarity of something that had been written in the ledger all along, waiting for me to catch up to the meaning. Seven days before something found the boundary. Before the house began to hold other shapes as well, other men running toward other ghosts, stacking up inside like bottles in a collector's cabinet. The earlier entry had said it found the boundary on the fifth night. That meant there was choice in this. That meant a man could leave, if he was willing to leave alone. But Marcus had been here seven months. Not in days. In the counting that matters, he had been here much longer than that. Time moved differently in the spaces between doors. I understood that too now. The milk on the counter, the freshly poured glass, the bread sliced and waiting. These were not metaphors for patience. They were examples of it. This was what patience looked like when it wore the same shape for years and years until the shape became the person. The second door on my left was closed. When I pressed my hand against it, I felt warmth seeping through the wood. Not the warm of the key in my pocket. Something else. Body heat, maybe. Or the temperature of a room where someone had been sleeping, where the blankets were still holding the impression of a shape. I should have kept walking toward the window at

the end of the hallway where real light was finally breaking through. I should have stepped through it and back into the world where time moved in the direction it was supposed to, where the dead stayed counted among the dead. I should have done many things. But the door was already opening. I had not touched it. It was simply opening the way a person opens their mouth when someone says their name correctly, and I was stepping through before the choice had finished becoming real. On the bed, still in his fishing clothes from a photograph taken in 1981, my brother sat.

Chapter

FIVE

written by wordsbylena

Marcus did not look at me. He was counting something on his fingers, moving through the digits with the methodical precision of someone performing a calculation they had already performed ten thousand times. His lips moved without sound. The fishing rod lay across his lap, and the line attached to it ran through the bedroom wall without passing through it, the way a thread passes through the eye of a needle if the needle has learned not to resist. I counted the spaces between his knuckles: four fingers extended, thumb folded inward. He reset. Started again. "How long?" I asked. He finished his count before answering. "Seven months of days. Fourteen thousand and thirty-one hours. Eight hundred forty-seven thousand, eight hundred and sixty minutes. The seconds stopped being useful around hour three thousand." His voice was the voice of my brother, but it had acquired a quality of precision that voices do not naturally possess. Each word landed with the weight of something measured and found to be exact. "You're not real," I said. "You're not really Marcus." "I am Marcus to the degree that Marcus ever was a fixed quantity. I am the Marcus that stayed in the photograph. I am the Marcus whose absence you have been counting since he failed to come home from the pier on June eighteenth, nineteen eighty-four. I am what happens when a count becomes so precise that it stops being metaphorical." He uncurled his fingers slowly. In his palm lay a fishing

fly, the kind with feathers that shimmer when light moves across them incorrectly. The feathers were matted. The hook was bent. "This is the fly I used the day they found the pier," he said. "The hook caught something other than water. It caught a moment. It caught the exact moment when I stopped being the boy in the photograph and became the thing that knows how to count correctly. The thing that knows how to wait correctly. The thing that the house keeps separate from the thing I was." I moved toward the window. The hallway beyond the bedroom door felt suddenly very far away, though I had not closed the door. Behind Marcus, the fishing line continued through the wall at an angle that should not have allowed it to maintain tension. But it was taut. Impossibly taut. As if something on the other side was holding it. "You're pulling something," I said. "I am being pulled. There is a distinction. The distinction is important. The thing on the other side of the wall has been pulling for seven months. It pulls on this line the way the tide pulls on anything that enters it. Gently. Persistently. With the certainty of something that knows that all motion eventually resolves in the direction of deeper water." I counted the objects in the room while he spoke. Bed. Nightstand. Lamp with a shade that had been restored to its original condition, though that shade had been torn in 1983. Fishing rod. Fly. Marcus. The window frame, which held four panes, each pane subdivided into four smaller sections. Sixteen squares of gray light. I counted them separately. Then in groups of four. Then as columns of descending height. Counting kept the panic at a manageable distance, the way a man keeps a sharp object at arm's length. "The house needs you," Marcus said. "Not you specifically. Any of the shapes that come through that fourth door, all the men running from things they can almost name. The house needs at least one of them to understand what counting means when you do it for long enough. It needs someone to reach the number where the shape becomes true. Where the waiting becomes a real thing that can hold its form without the leather journal to remind it what it is supposed to be." "How many?" I asked. "How many men have come through the fourth door before me?" "Six. You are

the seventh. I am not counting that way anymore. I count by the precision of their absence. Each man contains a different quantity of realness. You contain more than the others. You came because you were counting the wrong thing, but the counting itself is good. The house can use that. The house can use a man who understands that precision and presence are not the same thing." He extended his hand. In it now lay not the fishing fly but a key. This key was different from the one in my pocket. This one was worn smooth from use, and its teeth had been filed down to nubs. It was warm. Not the warmth of living tissue.

Chapter

SIX

written by Cora Lindgren

The warmth of that key was the warmth of something that had been gripped in a closed fist for seven months. I could feel the residual pressure of fingers that had held it without setting it down, without ever allowing it to cool back to the temperature of ordinary metal. When I took it from Marcus's palm, the warmth transferred to my skin like a debt being paid. "What does it open?" I asked. "The cellar door. The third one. The one you heard breathing behind." My mouth had gone dry. I could taste the staleness of air that had been recirculated through the same rooms for hours, the mineral tang of old water pipes, something underneath that might have been rust or might have been something else entirely. The key was heavy in my hand despite its worn appearance. Heavy the way small, dense things are heavy. The way a stone pulled from deep water is heavy. "No," I said. Marcus began counting again on his fingers. Four extended. Thumb folded. Reset. The fishing line behind him pulled taut enough that I could see the wall flex slightly where it passed through the plaster. Not much. Just enough to show that something on the other side was breathing in sync with his count. "You came here to find me," Marcus said. His voice had taken on the quality of something reciting a thing already written. "You came here thinking that finding me would balance the equation. That seven months of my absence would be settled by one moment of my presence.

But presence doesn't work that way. Not here. Here, presence is a currency that has to be spent very carefully, and the only denomination that matters is specificity. Detail. The exact configuration of what something is made from." I moved toward the door. The hallway beyond was beginning to look less like a hallway and more like the negative space between two photographs, the way the air itself was becoming translucent, showing layers underneath. I could see through it now to the bedroom I had left behind, the one with the lamp and the ledger, and beyond that to something else. A darker space. Cellar-shaped. "The breathing you heard," I said. "That was you." "That was what I became when I learned to count correctly. The part of me that understands how many breaths it takes to fill a room with presence when the person doing the breathing is no longer entirely solid. Fourteen thousand and thirty-one hours. Each hour contains sixty minutes. Each minute contains sixty seconds. Each second contains a fraction of me. I have been dividing myself into smaller and smaller pieces so that I could fit into all those intervals. So that I could be present in each one. The house showed me how." The key in my hand began to pulse. Not throb. Pulse. Like a heartbeat felt through someone else's wrist. I understood then that it wasn't warm because someone had held it. It was warm because something was still holding it, and the someone and the something had become difficult to distinguish from each other. I walked back to Marcus and placed the key on the nightstand beside the lamp with the restored shade. The lamp flickered. The shade cast a pattern on the wall: sections of light and dark, repeating. I counted the sections. Sixteen. The same as the window panes. The same as the subdivisions of the hallway beyond the fourth door. "I'm leaving," I said. "You are going to the cellar door. You are going to use that key. You are going to open it because you are the seventh man and the house has a specific use for men who can count precisely while running from things they almost understand." But I was already moving through the hallway. The other doors remained closed. I did not touch them. The window at the end was becoming more solid, more real. I could smell outside air moving through the gap beneath the

frame. Rain. Wet earth. The smell of the world where time moved in one direction only and absence was not a calculation you could refine with enough precision to make it true. Behind me, I heard Marcus's fingers reset. Four extended. Thumb folded. The sound of counting continuing whether I was there to witness it or not. The cellar door was three steps behind me. I did not look at it. I walked past it toward the window, toward the light that was finally becoming concrete enough to distinguish what lay beyond it. That was when I felt the key leave my pocket.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by inkwell_amy

I spun. The key was not falling. It hung in the air between me and the cellar door like something caught mid-motion, rotating slowly, catching light that had no source. The air around it rippled. That's the only word for it: rippled, the way heat distorts vision above summer asphalt, except this was cold. I could feel the temperature drop from where I stood. Goosebumps rose on my forearms. The key completed its rotation and dropped. It did not hit the floor. It passed through it. The hallway's burgundy runner simply accepted the key's descent, and the key was gone, and the space where it had been remained visibly disturbed, like someone had punched through fabric and the fabric was slowly remembering its original shape. "No." My hand was still raised, fingers spread as if I could grab backward through time. Useless. The window was six feet away. The cellar door was two feet behind me. I could feel Marcus's presence even though I wasn't looking at him. He was counting. The precision of his breathing was audible now, measured, deliberate. Each exhalation like a second hand clicking. I moved toward the window. The frame was wood. Old wood. The paint was peeling in strips, revealing primer underneath, revealing bare grain beneath that. One pane had a crack running from the upper left corner diagonally down, stopping just shy of the corner. The glass was cold against my palm when I pressed it. Outside: the overgrown yard I had walked

through to reach the house. Except the angle was wrong. I was looking down at it from a height I shouldn't have achieved. The safe-house's second floor shouldn't provide this view. The perspective showed a distance that suggested I was thirty feet up, maybe more, looking down at the clearing with the clarity of altitude. The rain was coming sideways. I unlatched the window frame. The mechanism was stiff, seized with disuse, but it gave. The bottom pane slid upward and the rain came in immediately, cold, bringing with it the smell of genuine earth. Not the mineral-metal smell of the house's water pipes. Real storm. Real November cold. Real distance between me and this place. I was going to climb through. The cellar door opened behind me. I heard the mechanism before I turned: a lock giving, hinges moving through space, wood sliding against the frame's edge with the particular sound of a seal being broken. The sound of something finally permitted to move. The hallway's light changed. Not dimmed. Shifted. It became the quality of light you see in rooms where something has recently been disturbed, where the air is still settling, still recalibrating after an interruption. The light looked disturbed. "You cannot leave without closing it," Marcus said. His voice was different now. Layered. As if multiple versions of him were speaking in sync, each one slightly out of phase with the others, creating a sound like wind moving through a structure with too many rooms. I didn't turn around. I put my leg through the window frame. "The house will not hold if you leave it open. The men who came before you did not understand. They ran. They reached the window just as you have, and they climbed through, and they left the cellar open behind them. Now the house has six shapes instead of one. Six presences dividing the space between the intervals. It cannot hold all of them. It is beginning to seep." My other leg followed. I was half-out, rain soaking my jacket, the wind pushing at my ribs. The tree line below was moving. Not swaying. Moving. Traveling laterally across the clearing even though the wind came from one direction only. The trees were walking. Some part of my mind that was not actively engaged in survival registered this. Filed it. Moved on. "If you close the

cellar door, I will seal it again. The counting will resume. The precision will hold. But if you leave it open, we all come out. All seven of us. All the shapes that the house has been holding, stacked up inside each other like photographs in a developer's bath, all of them developing at once." I pulled myself the rest of the way through. The rain hit me hard, actually cold, actually real. I could feel my weight returning to my body, the actual mechanics of gravity reasserting themselves. The ground was maybe twenty-five feet down. Too far to jump. Not so far that a man couldn't break his legs getting there. I looked back. The hallway was visible through the window. In it, Marcus stood. Behind him, other figures were becoming visible in the doorways. Shadows first. Then the suggestion of form. Then details: a man in clothes from the 1960s.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by Sasha Loomis

A man in clothes from the 1960s stood in the doorway with his hand on the frame, and his fingers were webbed halfway up with something that looked like frost but moved independently of his hand. Another figure materialized behind him: a woman in a dress that had belonged to a decade I couldn't immediately place, her neck bent at an angle that suggested someone had taught her a new way to hold her head. A third. A fourth. They were filing out of the rooms along the hallway now, all of them moving with the same measured pace that Marcus had used when counting, as if walking itself was a calculation they were performing in real time. I hung from the window ledge. My fingers were already numb. The rain was not actually water anymore, I understood this with the particular clarity that comes from seeing a thing clearly, but a kind of reverse evaporation, a process by which the solid world was being unmade into component parts and redistributed as weather. "If you let go," Marcus said from inside, his layered voice now carrying the distinct tones of five or six men speaking in unison, "you will fall upward." I looked down. The trees were still moving. But they were also moving sideways relative to the ground, which suggested the ground itself was rotating, or the sky was rotating around the ground, or both were rotating around something fixed that I was no longer positioned to see. My arms were shaking. Not from fear. From the simple physics of

suspension. "The house is opening," one of the other shapes said. Not Marcus. The woman with the bent neck. Her mouth didn't move when she spoke. The words seemed to come from the space around her rather than from inside her. "We are becoming distributed. We are becoming the weather. We are becoming the counting that never stops." I released my grip. I fell downward for perhaps three seconds. Then the direction reversed. My body continued its trajectory, but the definition of "down" had changed, had rotated, had become something that pointed back toward the window I had just left. I was falling upward. Toward the house. Toward the open cellar door beyond the hallway. Toward the six shapes that were now moving through the second story, finding doors I hadn't seen, opening chambers that hadn't existed when I was measuring the hallway's geography with my eyes. I hit the window frame. Not hard. Soft. The way a thing settles back into place when the container has been waiting for it all along. My fingers caught the sill. My palms pressed against the painted wood. Inside, the woman with the bent neck reached out and took my wrist. Her hand was not cold. It was the temperature of something that had stopped being cold several hours ago and was now simply existing at the average temperature of all the moments it had ever occupied simultaneously. "The cellar door," Marcus said. All of him said. Every version of him speaking in the hallway, in the kitchen, in the bedroom where the fishing line continued its patient pulling. "Close it." My other hand was still in the rain. I could feel the reverse-weather moving around my fingers, teaching them to fall upward, to orient themselves toward the house, to understand that down was just another direction that a person could learn to walk in if given enough time to count correctly. I pulled myself back through the window. The hallway was full now. Not crowded. Full in the way that a room becomes full when it contains all the versions of itself that have ever existed. The second door on the left, the one I hadn't opened, the one with warmth seeping through, was open now, and inside it I could see not a bedroom but another hallway extending backward into a distance that should not have been geometrically possible. I walked

toward the cellar door. The shapes parted for me. Not out of deference. Out of necessity. I was the seventh. The precise one. The man who had counted correctly long enough that he had learned the numbers went both directions. The cellar door stood open. Beyond it: not darkness, but a vast room lit from within by something that looked like bioluminescence if bioluminescence could be afraid. On the far wall, I saw them: the offerings. Not bones. Not bodies. Shapes that had never quite finished becoming anything, still in the process of settling into their final form. The six men who had come before. Still counting. Still precise. Still learning. I reached for the door.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Lior Tannen

The house was full of men who came looking for one person and found out they'd been looking for the wrong direction all along.

rpenguin

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Finished on 6 July 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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