

HORROR



WHAT THE HOUSE REMEMBERS

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY • WRITERS

The writers

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

ONE

Priya Nair

TWO

typewriter_tom

THREE

Colin McAteer

FOUR

Ruth Ann Keller

FIVE

Iris Beddoe

SIX

jmarsh

SEVEN

wordsbylena

EIGHT

Lior Tannen

Chapter

ONE

written by Priya Nair

The problem with safe-houses, Marcus discovered, is that nobody tells you what they're keeping safe from. He'd gotten the address from Daria three days ago, scrawled on the back of a coffee shop receipt. "If things get weird," she'd said, which was Daria's way of saying "when the bodies start turning up." Marcus had laughed then. He wasn't laughing now, standing in front of a Victorian row house in Southeast that looked like it had been decorated by someone's grandmother and someone's parole officer in equal measure. The door opened before he could knock. "You're late," said the woman. She was maybe sixty, maybe ageless, with the kind of face that had seen some things and decided not to blink first. "Marcus Tully?" "That's me." "Wipe your feet. Blood's a nightmare on these rugs." He wiped his feet. The entryway smelled like pine needles and something else, something chemical he couldn't place. There were three pairs of shoes by the door, arranged in a neat line. None of them looked like they'd been worn recently. "I'm Vera," the woman said, already walking away. "Kitchen's through there. Don't touch the pantry. Second floor's bedrooms, third floor's off limits. Questions?" "Yeah. What am I safe from?" Vera stopped at the base of the stairs, one hand on the banister. For a moment Marcus thought she might actually answer. Then she smiled, and it was the kind of smile that made him wish he'd stayed in his apartment with the broken lock

and the suspicious stains. "You'll figure it out," she said. "They always do." The kitchen was aggressively normal. Checkered curtains. A cookie jar shaped like a chicken. A calendar on the wall showing October, even though it was January. Marcus opened the fridge and found it stocked with La Croix, string cheese, and about forty identical Tupperware containers, each filled with what looked like rice pudding. "That's Len's," said a voice behind him. Marcus turned to find a kid, maybe nineteen, with the kind of hair that suggested either a fashion statement or a complete breakdown. Probably both. "I'm Theo," the kid said. "Been here six days. Don't eat Len's pudding. He counts them." "Where is Len?" "Basement. He's always in the basement." Theo opened a cabinet, revealing approximately three hundred cans of Campbell's tomato soup. "You want some soup?" "I'm good." "Smart. It tastes like pennies." Theo grabbed a can anyway, popped it open, and drank it cold from the can. "So what'd you do?" "Do?" "To end up here. That's how it works, right? You see something, or do something, or know something, and suddenly you need a safe-house." Theo wiped red from their lip. "I saw something. Can't unsee it. You know how that goes." Marcus did know. The thing in the parking garage. The way it had moved, all joints in the wrong places, wearing that security guard's face like a bad Halloween mask. The sound it made when it smiled. "Yeah," Marcus said. "I know." "Cool." Theo tossed the empty can into what turned out to be a trash bin full of identical empty cans. "Vera says we're not supposed to talk about it. House rules. What happens outside stays outside." "Then why did you ask?" "Because I'm bored as hell, and you're the first interesting thing to happen all week." Theo grinned. "Well. Second most interesting." "What was the first?" Theo's grin faded. They glanced at the pantry door, which Marcus now noticed had three different locks. All of them looked new. "Len found something," Theo said quietly. "In the walls. Vera made him put it in the pantry." "What was it?" "She wouldn't say. But Len's been in the basement ever since, and I swear to God, sometimes I hear him counting. Just counting, over and over." Theo moved toward the doorway. "Anyway. Welcome to the safe-house. Try

not to open any doors that are locked." Marcus watched them go. Then he looked at the pantry. At its three bright, new locks. From somewhere below, faint but distinct, came the sound of counting.

Chapter

TWO

written by typewriter_tom

Marcus knew better than to look for trouble. Trouble found you regardless. That was the lesson from the parking garage, from the thing that smiled wrong. But the counting kept going. Fifty-seven. Fifty-eight. Fifty-nine. He walked to the pantry. Examined the locks. Fresh scratches around the keyholes. Someone had opened this recently. Someone had locked it again in a hurry. The counting stopped. Marcus held his breath. The silence felt worse than the numbers. He pressed his ear to the door and heard nothing. Not even the hum of a refrigerator or the creak of old pipes. Just absence. "Step back from there." Vera stood in the doorway, holding a dish towel. She hadn't made a sound coming in. "I said don't touch it." "I wasn't touching. I was listening." "Same difference in this house." She moved past him, checked each lock with a quick tug. Satisfied, she turned to face him. "Len's fragile. What he found made him more fragile. You go poking around, you'll break something we can't fix." "What did he find?" "A reminder." Vera folded the towel into a precise square. "This house has been standing since 1887. Lots of people passed through. Not all of them left." Marcus felt the floor shift under him. Not literally. Almost literally. "You're saying it's haunted." "I'm saying it remembers." Vera opened a drawer, pulled out a key ring with maybe twenty keys. She selected one, held it up to the light. "Your room is 2B. Second door on the left. You'll find sheets in the closet. Dinner's at

six." "I'm not hungry." "You will be. It's part of the process." She handed him the key. Her fingers were cold. "One more thing. If you hear knocking after midnight, don't answer. Doesn't matter what door. Doesn't matter what they say. You don't answer." "Who's they?" Vera smiled that terrible smile again. "If you're lucky, you won't find out." The stairs creaked under his weight. Each step produced a different pitch, like the house was playing a song only it could hear. The second floor hallway stretched longer than it should. Marcus counted five doors, but the building's exterior hadn't looked wide enough for more than three rooms. 2B was at the end. He unlocked it, pushed it open. The room was small. Clean. A twin bed with a metal frame. A window overlooking the street. A mirror on the wall opposite the bed. Marcus caught his reflection and froze. There were two of him. He stepped to the left. Both reflections followed. He waved his right hand. Both reflections waved back. But one was delayed. Just a fraction of a second. Just enough to notice. Marcus approached the mirror slowly. Touched the glass. It was warm. Behind him, in the reflection, the door was closed. He turned around. The real door stood open, exactly as he'd left it. Something moved in the mirror. Not his reflection. Something behind it, in that other room where the door was shut. A shadow passed across the bed. Too tall. Too thin. The counting started again. Not from the basement this time. From inside the walls. From everywhere at once. One. Two. Three. Marcus backed toward the real door. The shadow in the mirror turned toward him. Where its face should have been, there was only white. Blank and smooth and endless. Four. Five. Six. He grabbed his bag. Left the key on the bed. Took the stairs two at a time. The counting followed him down, growing louder. Twenty-three. Twenty-four. Twenty-five. Vera stood at the bottom of the stairs. "Running won't help." "Watch me." "It's already in you, Marcus. Whatever you saw in that parking garage. It left a mark. That's why you came here. That's why the address found you." She gestured around them. "The house doesn't keep you safe from them. It keeps them safe from you." The counting reached one hundred and stopped. In the

silence, Marcus heard breathing. Multiple sources. Behind the walls. Under the floors. Above the ceiling. "Welcome home," Vera said.

Chapter

THREE

written by Colin McAteer

The breathing synchronizes. Three sources, maybe four, falling into rhythm like a choir finding its pitch. Marcus watches Vera, who listens to the walls with the practiced patience of someone reading a familiar book. She walks to the kitchen. He follows because the alternative is standing alone in that entryway, and the breathing is louder there, more insistent. Theo sits at the kitchen table now, a fresh can of soup bleeding condensation onto the wood. They don't look up when Marcus enters. Their eyes track something neither Marcus nor Vera can see, moving across the empty air above the stove. "It's early for this," Vera says, filling a kettle. "Started an hour ago." Theo's voice is flat. "Right after you went upstairs." Vera sets the kettle on the burner but doesn't light it. She opens the cabinet with the tomato soup, counts the cans, nods to herself. Then she opens the next cabinet. Empty except for a shoebox. She removes the shoebox, sets it on the counter. Doesn't open it. "How many puddings are left?" she asks. Theo finally blinks. "Thirty-six. He had forty-one yesterday." "And you didn't think to mention this?" "I thought he was eating them." Vera lifts the shoebox lid just enough to peek inside. Her jaw tightens. She closes it again, returns it to the cabinet. When she turns around, her face has rearranged itself into something calm, something deliberately calm. "Marcus. Come here." He approaches. She takes his wrist, not roughly, and turns his hand

palm-up. Her thumb presses against his pulse point. She closes her eyes, counting silently. "Elevated but steady." She releases him. "Good. You're still anchored." "Anchored to what?" "To now. To here." She opens a different drawer, removes a laminated card covered in handwritten text. "Read the first line." Marcus takes the card. The text swims, unfocuses, then sharpens: The house was built on agreement, not foundation. "Out loud," Vera says. "The house was built on agreement, not foundation." Vera takes the card back, checks the clock above the sink. 4:47 PM. She makes a note on a pad of paper attached to the refrigerator with a magnet shaped like a strawberry. The previous entries are visible: times, names, short phrases. Theo 3:22 AM, heard mother. Len 11:16 PM, basement door. The breathing in the walls stops. The silence that replaces it is worse. Marcus was right about that earlier. But this silence is different. Expectant. Theo stands abruptly, their chair scraping. "I need to check something." "Sit down," Vera says. "The third floor." "Sit. Down." Theo sits. Their hands shake. They clasp them together, press them between their knees. "It's showing me things," Theo whispers. "The same things over and over. Trying to make me remember them different." Vera pours hot water from a thermos, not the unlit kettle, into a mug. She adds a tea bag, sets it in front of Theo. "Drink. Don't think." Footsteps overhead. Slow, deliberate. Crossing the third floor from east to west. Marcus looks at the ceiling. Vera doesn't. "No one's up there," she says, answering his unasked question. "I can hear them." "Yes. You can." The footsteps stop. A door opens. Not upstairs. Here, in the kitchen. The pantry. All three locks remain fastened. But the door swings inward anyway, revealing shelves stocked with ordinary things. Cereal boxes. Pasta. A bag of flour. Nothing unusual. Nothing that requires three locks. Except the shelves only go back three feet, and the darkness behind them extends much farther. Marcus can see into it, the way you can see into deep water, knowing there's something down there even when you can't make out the shape. A hand emerges from the darkness. Then an arm. Then Len. He's holding a Tupperware container. Number thirty-seven, presumably. He steps out of the pantry, closes the

door behind him. The locks engage with three solid clicks, though no one touches them. Len is younger than Marcus expected. Mid-thirties maybe, with the kind of beard that suggests intention rather than neglect. He sets the pudding on the counter, looks at Vera. "It's ready," he says. "Already?" Vera picks up the container, examines it. "That was fast." "It was eager." Len notices Marcus for the first time. Studies him with an expression that might be pity or envy or both. "You saw one outside," Len says. Not a question. Marcus nods. "This one's different. This one's been here longer." Len opens the refrigerator, begins counting the remaining puddings silently, lips moving. "They learn, you know. The older ones. They learn what we want to see. What we're afraid to see. What we can't tell apart anymore." He reaches thirty-six, closes the refrigerator, seems satisfied. "The thing in the walls," Len continues. "It's not trying to get out. It's trying to remember how.

Chapter

FOUR

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One ought not to trust a statement like that, delivered with such casual certainty. Yet Marcus found himself cataloguing the implications regardless, sorting them into categories of threat as Len moved about the kitchen with the methodical air of a man performing a laboratory procedure. The pudding container remained on the counter between them, unremarkable save for the fact that it had emerged from a pantry that contained, by all physical evidence, something considerably deeper than the building's exterior dimensions would permit. "How does one forget how to get out?" Marcus asked. Len opened a drawer. Withdrew a spoon. Placed it beside the container with a faint click. "Same way you forget a language you used to speak. Stop using it long enough, the grammar goes. Then the vocabulary. Then the certainty that you ever knew it at all." He looked at Vera. "Should I?" "Not yet." Vera consulted her strawberry-affixed notes again, comparing timestamps with the kitchen clock. "We're seventeen minutes early. That matters." "It's never mattered before." "It's never been early before." Theo had gone very still, their tea cooling untouched before them. Their gaze tracked something across the wall behind Marcus, following a path he could not see. He resisted the urge to turn. Turning, he had learned, gave things permission. "There were eight," Theo said quietly. "When we boarded up the windows." Marcus counted. Himself. Vera. Theo. Len. Four.

"Where are the others?" he asked. No one answered. Vera made another notation. Len picked up the spoon, set it down again, adjusted its angle by perhaps two degrees. The breathing in the walls resumed, but the rhythm had changed. No longer synchronized. Competing patterns now, each source maintaining its own tempo, creating interference where they overlapped. "The journal," Vera said. "Mara needs to make the entry." "Mara isn't here," Theo said. "She's in the front room." "That's not Mara anymore." Vera's expression did not change, but her hand paused fractionally over the notepad before completing its stroke. She set down the pen. Walked to the doorway. Stopped there, listening to something in the next room that Marcus could not hear from where he stood. "How long?" Vera asked. "Since the third night," Theo said. "When the entry ended mid-word." The temperature dropped. Marcus felt it in his chest first, then his throat. Not cold like winter. Cold like absence. He watched his breath cloud before him and understood that this was wrong, that breath should not be visible in a kitchen where the stove still radiated residual heat, where a kettle sat waiting to boil. Len opened the Tupperware container. The substance inside was not rice pudding. It was too dark, too viscous. It moved against the sides of the container with a sluggish deliberation that suggested motive rather than momentum. "Thirty-seven was the threshold," Len said. "I'd been counting down, but I didn't understand I was counting down until there were thirty-seven left. That's when it started showing me." He lifted the container, tilted it slightly. The substance inside rotated, maintaining its position relative to the floor rather than the container's base. "It shows you what replaced the ones who left. What's been wearing their names. Their schedules. Their preferences for where they sit." Marcus looked at the empty chair across from Theo. There were four chairs at the table. Someone had been sitting there recently. The wood was warm when he touched it. "Mara wrote for three nights," Vera said from the doorway, still not entering the front room. "Each entry shorter than the last. The fourth night, she wrote half a sentence and stopped." She turned to face them. "What's in the front room finished the sentence this morning.

Same handwriting. Same pen. I watched it write." The breathing in the walls ceased. All sources, simultaneously. The silence was absolute. Marcus could not hear the house settling, could not hear traffic from the street, could not hear his own pulse. Even the ringing absence that follows sudden quiet was missing. Len held out the container to Marcus. "You're the eighth," Len said. "That makes you next. You need to understand what you're documenting before you write it down. Otherwise you'll end mid-word too." From the front room came the sound of pages turning. Slow. Methodical. Someone searching for a blank sheet. "It's time," Vera said.

Chapter

FIVE

written by Iris Beddoe

Marcus took the container. Weight, first. Heavier than it should be. The substance inside did not slosh. It pressed against the plastic like something testing boundaries. He looked into it. The surface was dark. Reflective. He saw his face, then someone else's face, then his face again but wrong. The eyes too far apart. The mouth at an angle mouths don't go. "Don't stare too long," Len said. Too late. Marcus had already seen the kitchen behind him in the reflection, had already noticed that in that version there were five people at the table instead of three. Had already recognized himself sitting there, back turned, eating soup from a red can. He set the container down hard. "What am I supposed to do with this?" "Learn from it." Vera moved to the table, pulled out the empty chair. Its legs scraped. The sound echoed wrong, came back from directions that had no walls. "Sit." Marcus sat. Theo pushed the journal across the table. Leather-bound. Swollen with entries. The edges of the pages were dark, foxed with something that might have been age or might have been something else. "Read the last three nights," Vera said. Marcus opened to the marked page. The handwriting changed three times across as many entries. Night Six: The windows are covered now. Felt necessary though no one said why. Daria checked every board twice. She has carpenter's hands. Had. I notice I'm writing in past tense and don't know when I started. Different hand, next page. Smaller letters.

Pressed deep into paper. Night Seven: Daria isn't at breakfast. Her coat is still on the hook. Her boots are by the door, laces tied. Vera says people leave sometimes without leaving. I don't ask what that means. Marcus arrived. He doesn't know he's replacing someone yet. I can tell by how he looks at the empty chair. Marcus stopped reading. "I got here today." "Keep going," Len said. The third entry. Mara's hand, presumably. Looser script. Words that wobbled. Night Eight: Found the thing in the walls. Len won't say what. Won't show. But he's been in the basement counting backward from one hundred and I think he's trying to The sentence ended. Below it, in the same handwriting but neater, controlled: unmake it before it finishes counting him. "I didn't write that last part," said a voice from the doorway. Mara stood there. Late forties. Gray streak through dark hair. She wore an apron patterned with lemons. Her hands were empty. Theo made a small sound. Not fear. Recognition of something expected. "You understand now," Mara said to Marcus. Not Mara. The thing wearing her shape, her voice, her preference for lemon-printed cotton. "The house keeps records. What you write becomes true. What stops mid-sentence keeps becoming true until someone finishes it." She stepped into the kitchen. Vera did not move to stop her. "There were eight of us when we boarded the windows," Mara continued. "Then there were seven. Now we're back to eight again because you arrived. The house prefers symmetry. Prefers full rooms. When someone leaves, it fills the gap with something that remembers how they moved, how they spoke." She touched the back of Theo's chair. Theo flinched. "It practices on the small things first. Daria's coat. Len's pudding. Then it practices on the boarding-up, the window-covering, makes us remember it as our decision when really we were just following the script it wrote into the gaps." Marcus looked at Vera. "How long have you known?" "Since Night Four," Vera said. "When I watched myself lock the pantry and realized I had no memory of unlocking it first." The container on the counter moved. Not the substance inside. The container itself, rotating slowly clockwise. Len put his hand on it. Stopped it. "You have to write tonight's entry," he said to

Marcus. "But you can't write what you think happened. You have to write what resists happening. You have to unmake it mid-sentence and leave the gap." "What gap?" "The space where it can't follow." From the front room, a sound. Footsteps descending stairs that shouldn't exist on the first floor. Multiple sets. Coming closer. Vera handed Marcus a pen. "Write," she said. "Or become what writes you." The breathing in the walls started again. All eight sources now.

Chapter

SIX

written by jmarsh

The pen was cold, the kind of cold that burned. Marcus gripped it regardless, watching the thing that wore Mara settle into the chair beside Theo, its movements precise as a clockwork figure completing its circuit. The journal lay open before him, blank page waiting, and he understood with sudden clarity that the blankness itself was a kind of weight, a hunger that demanded filling. "Write what resists," Len had said, but the breathing in the walls had changed again. Eight distinct patterns now, yes, but beneath them ran a ninth rhythm, slower and deeper, the way a foundation settles beneath the smaller complaints of joists and beams. The house itself, perhaps. Or something older than the house, something that had learned the architecture's grammar and now spoke through the warped boards, the settling plaster, the gaps between what was built and what had grown into the building's bones over a century of occupation. The footsteps from the front room stopped just beyond the kitchen threshold. Marcus could see shadows there, cast by no light source he could identify. Three shapes, maybe four. Too tall for the doorframe, yet folding themselves to fit, the way water folds into whatever vessel contains it. Maintaining volume while surrendering form. "Begin with your name," Vera said. She had moved to the stove, was lighting the burner beneath the kettle at last. The flame caught blue, then orange. Normal. The normalcy of it felt obscene. "What you are

called anchors what you are. The ones who forgot their names first are the ones who didn't leave. They just stopped being findable." Marcus touched pen to paper. His hand moved, but the words that emerged were not the words he had intended: Night Nine: There is a man at the table who believes he is Marcus Tully, who carries Marcus Tully's memory of a parking garage and a thing that smiled wrong, but the parking garage was three years ago, not three days, and the thing that smiled has been living in his mouth since. He jerked the pen away, leaving a slash of ink across the page. His heart hammered against his ribs. "I didn't write that." "Yes, you did." Theo's voice was soft. "It's writing what's true. You have to write what's more true. What's true enough to carve space around itself." The substance in the Tupperware container had stopped moving. It lay perfectly still now, surface mirror-bright, and Marcus could see the kitchen reflected there with terrible clarity. Could see himself at the table, pen in hand. Could see Vera at the stove. Could see Len standing beside the counter. Could see Theo hunched over cold tea. Could see the thing wearing Mara, watching him with eyes that held no particular malice, no hunger, only a kind of patient attention. Waiting to see what he would do next. What he would write next. Whether he would finish the sentence or abandon it mid-phrase, leaving another gap for the house to fill. The shadows in the doorway shifted. One separated from the others, took a step forward into the kitchen's fluorescent light. It wore Daria's face, Daria's carpenter's hands, but the proportions were wrong in ways Marcus could not quite articulate. The neck too long. The shoulders too narrow. As if something had studied a photograph and reconstructed the subject from memory rather than measurement. "She left on Night Seven," Vera said, not turning from the stove. The kettle began to whistle. "Took her coat. Took her boots. Walked out the front door at three in the morning, and we all heard her go. Heard the door close. Heard her footsteps on the porch. Then she came back for breakfast and none of us mentioned it." Marcus looked down at the journal. At the slash of ink across his unfinished sentence. At the blank space below, still waiting. The

breathing in the walls synchronized again, all nine sources finding the same rhythm, the same tempo. The house settling into agreement. He put pen to paper once more. This time he wrote carefully, deliberately, each letter formed with the full weight of intention: What resists is the named and particular: the chipped white enamel of the kettle, the strawberry magnet, Theo's bitten thumbnail, Len's uneven beard, the fact that I am writing this now and the now refuses, The pen stopped moving. His hand would not complete the word. The shadows pressed closer.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by wordsbylena

The pen stopped moving because Marcus's fingers had gone numb. Not cold-numb. Absent-numb. He looked down and counted: four fingers and a thumb visible, gripping the pen. But the sensation reported only three fingers, the index and middle gone silent as disconnected phone lines. He flexed them. Watched them move. Felt nothing. "Finish the word," Len said. Marcus couldn't remember what word he'd been writing. He read the sentence back: the now refuses, and the completion should have been obvious, should have been already present in his mind, but the space where the thought had been contained only static. The shadows in the doorway numbered four now. He counted twice to be certain. The one wearing Daria's wrong proportions had been joined by three others, each approximately person-shaped but failing the specific test of personhood in ways that accumulated rather than announced themselves. One had hands that hung too low. One's head tracked his movement a half-second late, as if receiving delayed transmission. The third stood perfectly still, not breathing, which was wrong specifically because everything else in this house breathed, the walls breathed, the floors breathed, stillness was the anomaly. Vera poured water from the screaming kettle. The whistle cut off. In its absence Marcus heard the ninth rhythm beneath the breathing, the foundational pulse, and realized it matched his own heartbeat. Not

approximate. Exact. The house had synchronized to him. Or he to it. The directional arrow mattered but he couldn't determine which way it pointed. "How many pudding containers are left?" Marcus asked. Len opened the refrigerator. Began counting silently, lips moving. Stopped. Recounted. His face went carefully blank. "Thirty-eight," Len said. "There were thirty-six when I arrived." Marcus set the pen down. "One emerged from the pantry making thirty-seven. Thirty-seven is open on the counter. The refrigerator should contain thirty-six." "Should," Theo said. "Doesn't." The thing wearing Mara smiled with Mara's mouth. "The house prefers symmetry. Eight people. Thirty-seven divided by eight is four point six-two-five. Not symmetrical. Thirty-eight doesn't divide evenly either, but it's closer to forty. Forty divides into eight five times exactly." Marcus picked up the pen again. His fingers reported five points of contact now, all present, all accounted for. The numbness had migrated. He felt it in his left foot, his right ear, spreading in patches rather than waves. He wrote: to be measured. The sentence completed, the house exhaled. All eight sources in the walls, all nine including the foundation, released breath in unison. The temperature rose three degrees. Marcus felt it specifically on his face, his forearms, the exposed skin that had been coldest. The shadows in the doorway receded half a step. "Good," Vera said. She set a mug of tea in front of him. "You anchored it to measurement. To the countable. That buys time." "How much time?" "Enough to explain what you need to do next." She sat across from him, in the chair the Mara-thing had vacated. When had it left. He had not seen it go. He counted the people present: Vera, Len, Theo, himself. Four. The shadows in the doorway numbered four. The symmetry was exact. "The journal has sixty-three entries before tonight," Vera said. "Seven nights times nine entries per night. Not eight entries. Nine. There's always been a ninth writer. Someone who writes what actually happened, not what we remember happening. Those entries aren't in the journal." "Where are they?" "In the walls." Len closed the refrigerator. "I found them when I found the thing. Pages folded into the gaps between studs. Forty-three pages total. I've read

eleven. Can't read more than that at once. More than eleven and you start forgetting which version you lived." Marcus looked at the journal. Sixty-three entries. Seven nights times eight writers was fifty-six entries. Seven entries unaccounted for, written by someone who existed in the count but not in the names. "Who's the ninth?" he asked. Vera turned the journal toward him. Opened to the first entry, Night One. Eight different handwriting samples on a single page, each contributing one sentence. He read them in sequence, counting the transitions where one hand became another. Eight transitions. Nine sentences. The ninth sentence, at the bottom of the page, was in his own handwriting.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by Lior Tannen

Marcus read his own handwriting from seven nights ago, from before he knew this address existed, from when Daria was still alive enough to scrawl directions on a coffee receipt. The sentence said: The house keeps what you forget to take with you. His grandmother's voice, that's what rose in his throat. The way she'd packed his lunch every morning before school, tucking in notes on napkins: Eat the apple first, baby. The cookies will wait. Small kindnesses that built a language between them, a vocabulary of care he'd stopped speaking after she died. He'd been twelve. The autopsy said stroke but what it really said was: sometimes people leave a gap and nothing good fills it. "I didn't write this," Marcus said, but his hand was already moving to touch the ink, and yes, that was his slant, his pressure, the way he hooked the 'g' too far left. Vera's face softened. Not much. A quarter-inch of tension releasing around her eyes. "You did. You just haven't done it yet. Time moves different in the gaps. What the house needs, it pulls from before or after until it finds the shape that fits." The shadows in the doorway pressed closer again. Marcus counted: five now. One had gained substance enough to show teeth when its mouth opened, though the mouth was in the wrong place, below where the chin should hinge. "How do I stop it?" Marcus asked. "You don't stop it." Len had retrieved something from beneath the sink. A metal lockbox, small enough to fit in both hands. He set it on

the table between them with a definitive thunk. "You give it what it's owed. The house was built on agreement. Someone promised something and didn't pay. That's the original gap. Everything else is the house trying to collect." Theo pushed their cold tea away. "Forty-three pages in the walls. Forty-three unpaid debts. We've been filling them one by one, but we've been filling them wrong. Trying to seal the gaps instead of honoring what was promised." Marcus looked at the lockbox. No keyhole visible. No latch. Just smooth metal, warm to touch when his fingers brushed it. "What's inside?" "Names," Vera said. "The real ones. Not what we call ourselves now. What we were called when the debts were made." The breathing in the walls stopped. Complete silence, the kind that precedes revelation or collapse. Marcus felt his heartbeat stutter, trying to continue the rhythm alone. Failing. Len opened the Tupperware container on the counter. Picked up the spoon. Dipped it into the dark substance that had learned to rotate against gravity. When he lifted the spoon, the substance clung to it, stretching between container and silver like someone reluctant to let go. "Each pudding is a night the house remembers. Thirty-eight means we're two nights ahead of ourselves, living time we haven't earned yet. That's why you wrote in the journal before you arrived. The house borrowed you early." Len extended the spoon toward Marcus. "Eat this. Taste what it remembers about you." Marcus thought of his grandmother. The cookies that waited. The apple he was supposed to eat first because some hungers were more important than others, some hungers kept you alive while others just made the living sweeter. He took the spoon. The substance tasted like pennies and black tea and his grandmother's kitchen on Sunday mornings when the light came through yellow curtains and turned everything gold. He swallowed. Felt it coat his throat. Felt memory sharpen into something more specific than nostalgia: her hands wrapping his sandwich, her voice saying baby like it was his true name, the one that anchored him. The lockbox opened. No one touched it. The lid simply lifted, hinges silent, revealing folded papers inside. Nine sheets. One for each writer, each night. Marcus reached for the top page,

unfolded it. Marcus Anthony Tully, it read. Age twelve. Promised to remember. Forgot deliberately. Debt: one complete telling. Below, in his grandmother's handwriting: Tell them how I folded the napkins. Tell them I wasn't afraid. Don't let the gap make me into just your sad story. Marcus picked up the pen. The journal waited. Behind him, the shadow wearing Daria's carpenter hands stepped fully into the kitchen, and Marcus understood: she'd kept her promise. She'd stayed. The ones who left were the ones still breathing. He wrote his grandmother's name. Started folding the truth around it. Made it specific enough to hold.

Finished on 29 April 2026.

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

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