

HORROR

WHERE THE COUNT COMPLETES ITSELF

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

ONE

Dan Okafor

TWO

Priya Nair

THREE

Cora Lindgren

FOUR

Sasha Loomis

FIVE

Olive Kassen

SIX

inkwell_amy

SEVEN

typewriter_tom

EIGHT

Margot Vail

Chapter

ONE

written by Dan Okafor

The house accepted Claire before it accepted her luggage. She noticed this in the entryway, where her duffel bag caught on absolutely nothing and toppled sideways, spilling travel-sized toiletries across the floorboards. Meanwhile, her body had glided through the doorway as though the frame had widened to accommodate her, which was impossible because she'd measured it with her eyes: standard width, maybe even narrow. Old construction, the listing had said. Character features. The toiletries rolled in directions that didn't follow the slant of the floor. "Right," Claire said to the empty rooms. "One of those places." She'd rented worse. Last year's sublet in Portland had a bathroom mirror that showed you from slightly the wrong angle, just enough to make brushing your teeth feel like watching someone else do it badly. The year before that, a studio in Baltimore where the previous tenant's mail kept arriving even though the previous tenant had died. Different flavors of wrong, all of them affordable, all of them temporary. This one was a safe-house, according to the woman who'd handed over the keys at the coffee shop downtown. Though safe from what, she hadn't specified. The woman had worn three watches and smelled like burnt sugar. She'd counted the cash twice, then counted it again with her eyes closed. "You'll want to use the back bedroom," the woman had said. "Not the front one." "Why?" "The front one's occupied." "The listing said

it was vacant." "The front bedroom's occupied. The house is vacant. Do you want it or not?" Claire had wanted it. Needed it, more accurately. The kind of need that comes with a dwindling bank account and a research grant that had seemed generous in September but had evaporated by February like all the others. She was writing her dissertation on American Gothic architecture, which meant spending months in decaying buildings measuring the pitch of their sadness. This house, with its widow's walk and its angular shadows, would fill an entire chapter. Now, standing in the hallway, she listened to the silence and found it wanting. Not empty enough. The kind of quiet that suggests something is holding very still. The back bedroom was fine. Hardwood floors, a window overlooking the garden, a bed frame with no mattress. She'd brought an air mattress, which she inflated using a battery-powered pump that wheezed asthmatically in the growing dark. The sun was setting earlier than it should have been. She checked her phone: 4:47 PM. In March. In Virginia. Outside the window, the garden had too many roses for this early in the season, and they were the wrong color. Not red, not white, not pink. A shade that her eyes kept trying to categorize and failing, settling finally on "prior to red." Roses in the color they'd been before someone decided what color they would be. She took photographs. The camera captured them as black. "Fantastic," Claire muttered, scrolling through the images. "Definitely getting my security deposit back." The front bedroom was at the end of the hall, door closed. She'd peeked in earlier, before the woman's warning had fully registered. Empty, like all the other rooms. Just walls and floor and a window and the particular quality of light that made her hindbrain whisper, "Don't turn your back on this space." Now she stood outside it again, her hand near the doorknob but not touching. From inside: a sound like someone slowly, carefully, not breathing. Claire had a rule about this kind of thing, developed over years of fieldwork in buildings that wanted to be left alone. The rule was simple: acknowledge it, don't engage it, finish your work, get out. Ghosts, if they existed, were just another kind of structural problem. You documented them, you didn't

fix them. She went back to the kitchen and made tea using water from a tap that coughed before it ran clear. The mug she found in the cupboard had a hairline fracture that hadn't been visible until she poured the hot water, and then it was very visible, a dark line bisecting the ceramic like a decision being made. Somewhere upstairs, a door opened that she hadn't closed.

Chapter

TWO

written by Priya Nair

Claire did the math: one open door she hadn't closed versus approximately seven closed doors she had definitely left open. The house was editorializing. She took her fracturing mug and went upstairs to file a complaint. The front bedroom door, previously shut, now stood open maybe eight inches. Wide enough to matter, narrow enough to suggest discretion. Through the gap she could see a slice of the far wall, where the paint had blistered into a pattern that looked almost alphabetical. Almost. The kind of almost that made her wish she'd taken that grant to study nice, uncomplicated Brutalist architecture instead. "Hello," she said to the gap, which felt stupid but less stupid than saying nothing. "I'm Claire. I'm going to be here for two weeks documenting original nineteenth-century millwork, which means I need the structural hostility to a minimum. Professional courtesy." The gap remained exactly the width it had been. She pushed the door open the rest of the way with her foot, because touching it with her hand felt like signing something. The room was still empty. Still wrong. The wrongness had intensified, though, aged like a bad cheese, developed some complexity. Before, it had been a simple "don't turn your back" wrongness. Now it was "something happened here that's continuing to happen, and you've just walked into the middle of its sentence." The window looked out on the same garden as her bedroom, but from this

angle the roses were a different incorrect color. Not prior-to-red anymore. Subsequent-to-red, maybe. The color roses would be after they'd finished being roses and moved on to their next evolutionary phase. Claire photographed them. The camera captured them as white with black centers, like tiny screaming mouths. "Okay," she said. On the floor, where there had previously been nothing, there was now a journal. Brown leather cover, pages swollen with humidity or age or other people's breath. She recognized it immediately as the kind of object you don't touch unless you're prepared for the consequences, which she wasn't, because she'd left her good research gloves in the car, and the car was seven hundred miles away in a impound lot in Ohio for reasons she was still disputing. She touched it anyway. The first page was handwritten in a script that looked recent but pretended to be old, all elaborate flourishes and inconsistent baselines. March 9th. There were eight of them when they boarded up the windows. "Oh, come on," Claire said. "That's not even subtle." She flipped forward. Multiple entries, multiple hands, all of them dated within the last week. March 10th, March 11th, March 12th. The final entry, dated yesterday, ended mid-word: The front bedroom is occup, Claire shut the journal. She went downstairs, got her laptop, came back up, and sat cross-legged on the floor outside the front bedroom. Not inside it. She had some boundaries. She opened a new document and started typing her own field notes, which was what she should have been doing anyway instead of letting other people's possibly-haunted journaling dictate her research agenda. 4:58 PM. House exhibits standard liminal properties: doors operating independently of resident input, spatial dimensions inconsistent with external measurements, ambient wrongness quotient approximately 7/10. Recommend flagging for follow-up study, possibly controlled demolition. Behind her, in the front bedroom, something scraped across the floor. Not loud. Deliberate, though. The sound of an object being moved by someone who wanted you to know they were moving it but didn't want to startle you into leaving before they finished. Claire kept typing. The rule was acknowledge, don't engage. The scraping stopped.

In the garden below, the roses began to emit a low-frequency hum that she felt in her molars before she heard it with her ears. Her phone, sitting next to her laptop, lit up with a notification: LOW BATTERY, 2% REMAINING. It had been fully charged ten minutes ago. "Right," Claire said, saving her document to three different cloud services simultaneously. "One of those places." The journal, which she'd left closed on the floor inside the front bedroom, fell open to a blank page. As she watched, a sentence wrote itself in handwriting that matched none of the previous entries, written in something darker than ink: You'll want to write in this one, Claire. Not the laptop.

Chapter

THREE

written by Cora Lindgren

The ink smelled like the back of her throat when she had a nosebleed. Iron, salt, the particular sourness of something that used to be inside a body. Claire's hand went to her own nose, checking. Dry. She looked at the sentence again, watched the letters glisten, still wet. She stood up. Her knees cracked. The laptop stayed on the floor outside the bedroom. The journal stayed where it had fallen open. Claire went downstairs, filled a glass with the coughing tap water, drank it in four swallows that hurt going down. The water tasted like pennies. She refilled the glass and didn't drink it, just held it, feeling the temperature leach into her palm. The kitchen had a back door. She'd checked it earlier, part of her standard intake protocol: locate all exits, test all locks, identify which windows break easily. The door was locked from the inside, deadbolt thrown, chain latched. She undid both. The doorknob wouldn't turn. Not stuck. Wouldn't. She could feel the mechanism trying to engage and then stopping, like it had reached the end of something. Like the house was saying not yet. "I'm leaving," Claire said to the door. "Right now. I'm going to get in my car that's definitely not in Ohio, and I'm going to drive away from your property-line bullshit, and you can find someone else to write in your creepy journal." The roses outside the window stopped humming. The silence that replaced the hum was worse. Expectant. The kind of quiet that comes right before someone tells you the actual

problem. From upstairs: footsteps. Not hers. Heavier. Moving from the front bedroom toward the stairs with the gait of someone who knew exactly where the floorboards creaked and stepped on them anyway. Claire's dissertation included an entire appendix on auditory phenomena in architectural distress. Settling foundations, temperature differentials, wind patterns through hollow walls. She'd recorded hundreds of hours of empty buildings making noise. This didn't sound like any of those. This sounded like boots. Work boots, probably size eleven, worn heel on the left foot. The footsteps reached the landing. Stopped. She turned around. The doorway to the hall was empty. The air in the empty doorway was thicker than the air in the kitchen, denser, like it had been compressed by something passing through it repeatedly over a long period of time. "Okay," Claire said. She put the glass down on the counter. Her hand was shaking enough to make the water tremble. "New plan." She went back upstairs. The journal was still open to the page with the sentence written in blood or whatever the house was using instead. Her laptop was closed, which she hadn't done. Next to it sat her phone, now completely dead despite being connected to a portable charger that was also, somehow, drained. Claire picked up the journal. The leather was warm, body-temperature, and the texture was wrong. Not quite skin but close enough to make her palm sweat. She turned to a blank page near the back, away from the other entries, and looked around for something to write with. Her pen was in her jacket pocket downstairs. The room offered her a pencil that hadn't been there before, lying on the windowsill, next to a small pile of wood shavings that might have been there the whole time or might have just arrived. The pencil was old, the wood dark, the eraser worn down to the metal ferrule. She wrote: March 13th. Claire Hardwicke. I don't know what you want but I'm not writing what you tell me to write. The house creaked. Not settling. Laughing, maybe. Or just breathing. The words she'd written darkened, the graphite turning liquid, seeping into the page until the letters looked wet. Then they changed. Not the whole sentence. Just the second half: I don't know what you want but I'm writing exactly

what needs to be written. "No," Claire said. She hadn't written that. Her hand hadn't moved. She'd watched the letters rearrange themselves like they were correcting her spelling. Downstairs, the back door unlocked with a soft click. Then the front door opened. Footsteps in the entryway. Real ones this time. Heavy boots on hardwood, and then a voice, a woman's voice, calling up the stairs: "Is anyone here? The door was open.

Chapter

FOUR

written by Sasha Loomis

The door hadn't been open. Claire had watched it lock itself. She heard the woman coming up the stairs with the confidence of someone who believed in property lines and reasonable explanations. Claire dropped the journal. It landed face-up, still open to her revised sentence, and grew a mouth where the spine was. Not metaphorically. An actual mouth, lined with what looked like torn page edges arranged like teeth. "Hello?" the woman called again. Closer now. Top of the stairs. Claire stepped into the hallway. The woman was mid-forties, wearing a green parka and mud-crusted hiking boots. Real mud, the kind that smelled like outside. She had a flashlight in one hand even though the hallway lights were working fine. The beam swept across Claire's face and stopped. "You're here," the woman said. She sounded disappointed. "I'm renting," Claire said. "Are you the landlord?" "No." The woman lowered the flashlight. "I'm Mara. I was here last week." That didn't explain anything. Claire waited for the explanation anyway, because people usually gave you one if you stayed quiet long enough. Mara just looked at the open door of the front bedroom like it was showing her something Claire couldn't see. "How many of you are there?" Mara asked. "One. Just me." "Now, maybe." Mara walked past her into the front bedroom without asking permission. Claire followed because the hallway suddenly felt like the worse option. The journal on the floor had

closed its mouth. It was just a journal again, swollen and ordinary. Mara crouched next to it, not touching it, reading something on the cover that Claire couldn't see from this angle. "You wrote in it," Mara said. Not a question. "It wrote in itself first." "That's not better." Mara stood up, wiping her palms on her jeans like she'd touched something greasy. "The others wrote in it too. That's how it keeps count." "Count of what?" "How many are left." Mara walked to the window. The roses had gone back to their prior-to-red color, or maybe they'd never changed. Memory worked differently in houses like this. "There were eight of them when they boarded up the windows. That's what the first entry said. Do you know what it means?" Claire shook her head. "Neither did I." Mara touched the window glass, then pulled her hand back fast. "But I know there were five people here when I arrived last Tuesday. I watched them through this window before I came inside. When I walked into the kitchen, there were four." The pencil on the windowsill rolled sideways and fell off, landing point-down. It stuck in the floorboard, upright, quivering. "Where did the fifth one go?" Claire asked. "Same place the sixth one's going," Mara said. "Same place you'll go if you stay past dark." She checked her watch. "We have maybe forty minutes." "Until what?" "Until the house finishes its count." Mara picked up the journal carefully, holding it by the corners like evidence. "It's looking for eight. It's always looking for eight. When it gets them, something happens. Something I didn't stick around to see." She held the journal out to Claire. "How many entries are in here now?" Claire took it, flipped through. The handwriting changed every few pages. Different people, different dates, all within the last month. She counted seven distinct sections. The last one was hers. "Seven," she said. "Then we're missing someone." The house agreed. Somewhere below them, the back door that had unlocked itself began to open and close, open and close, like a slow heartbeat. Each time it opened, Claire heard wind that didn't match the weather outside. Each time it closed, she heard a sound like someone stepping into the entryway, pausing, deciding to stay. "The door's letting someone in," Claire said. "The door's letting someone

back," Mara corrected. "The eighth person isn't new. They're just returning to where they already are." She pointed at the journal. "Read the first entry. Read what happens after they board up the windows." Claire turned to the first page, to the sentence she'd seen before: There were eight of them when they boarded up the windows. But there was more now, written in that same pretend-old handwriting: By the time the lantern was lit, there were seven. Nobody said anything about it. Downstairs, someone struck a match.

Chapter

FIVE

written by Olive Kassen

The sulfur scent reached them before the light did, threading up through the floorboards like a vapor. Claire's throat closed around it. The match-strike sound came again, and then again, each one a small sharp break in the quiet. "How many times?" Mara whispered. Claire counted the strikes. Seven. Then an eighth, and the smell of sulfur was replaced by the smell of burning lamp oil, which was wrong because there shouldn't be a lantern down there. She'd checked every room. Empty corners, bare walls, nothing that could catch fire or be lit. "We need to see who it is," Claire said, already moving toward the stairs. Mara caught her wrist. "The first entry says nobody talked about it. About there being seven instead of eight." "I'm not nobody from a journal entry written by a house." "Neither were they." Mara's grip was cold. Her hand was shaking, or Claire's arm was shaking, or the house was shaking so subtly it only showed up in the places where two people touched. "If we go down there and see whoever lit that lantern, we're confirming we're part of this. We're inside the count." Claire pulled free. "I've been inside the count since I wrote my name in that book." The stairs were darker than they should have been. The overhead light was still on, still buzzing faintly with electricity, but its glow stopped at the landing and pooled there like something too heavy to fall further. Below, the lantern light was orange and viscous, sliding across the walls in a way that suggested

the flame was much larger than it should be, or much closer. Claire went down slowly. Each step gave slightly under her weight, the wood soft as wet cardboard. Behind her, Mara followed with her flashlight off. Smart. The less light they brought with them, the less they'd illuminate. The entryway was exactly as Claire had left it: duffel bag spilling toiletries, coat hooks empty, front door closed. The lantern sat in the center of the floor. It was an old kerosene model, glass chimney clouded with age, the flame inside burning steadily without flickering. No drafts touched it. The air in the entryway was perfectly still, and much too warm. No one was near the lantern. No one was in the room at all. "It lit itself," Claire said. "Nothing lights itself." Mara walked a slow circle around the lantern, keeping five feet back, her eyes on the flame. "Someone lit it and moved. Or someone lit it and didn't move in a way we can see." The toiletries on the floor had rearranged themselves. Claire crouched next to them, her knees popping again. The travel bottles were lined up now, labels facing out, organized by size. She'd spilled them in a scatter. This was a display. "These were chaotic," she said, touching the smallest bottle. Shampoo. The plastic was cold enough to hurt her fingertip. "Someone put them in order." "Or the house did." Mara's voice came from the kitchen doorway now, too far away. Claire looked up. Mara was standing at the threshold, staring at something on the kitchen table. Claire joined her. On the table: eight plates. Mismatched, old porcelain with faded patterns, each one set carefully in front of a chair. No food. No utensils. Just the plates, and in the center of each plate, a small pile of ash. "Those weren't here," Claire said. Mara picked up the nearest plate, tipped the ash into her palm. It was fine and gray, and it moved in her hand like it was breathing. "Hair," she said. "Burned hair." She set the plate down fast, wiping her hand on her jeans, but the ash had already left a stain that looked like a fingerprint. Not hers. Smaller, with a whorl pattern that spiraled inward too far, ending in a center that seemed to pull the light toward it. From upstairs, the journal hit the floor. Neither of them had brought it down. It landed hard enough that they heard pages tearing, and then a sound like ink spilling, or blood dripping, or

something wet meeting something dry and deciding to stay. "It wants another entry," Mara said. The lantern flame doubled in size, and the walls threw shadows that had more limbs than the two of them could account for. Claire counted them. Eight shadows for two people. "We're not alone," she said. Mara was already moving toward the back door. "We need to leave now." The door had locked itself again.

Chapter

SIX

written by inkwell_amy

Mara threw the deadbolt. The metal slide jammed halfway, grinding against something inside the mechanism that felt organic, resistant. Claire shouldered past her and rammed the door with her hip. The wood didn't budge. It sat in the frame like it had grown there. "Window," Claire said. They moved to the kitchen window over the sink. The latch was painted shut, years of enamel layered over the catch. Mara grabbed a plate from the table and swung it at the glass. The porcelain shattered. The window stayed intact, not even a scratch, and where the plate shards hit the floor they left spots of that same gray ash. The lantern in the entryway dimmed and brightened, dimmed and brightened. Breathing. "Upstairs," Mara said. "There's always a way out upstairs." They took the stairs fast. The steps were solid now, no longer soft. The house had stopped pretending to rot. Behind them, something walked across the kitchen, chair legs scraping as it sat down at the table. Then another chair. Another. The sound of a dinner party assembling itself. The journal lay in the hallway outside the front bedroom, pages spread like broken wings. Blood ran from the binding, pooling on the floorboards in a shape that looked intentional. Claire stepped around it. The blood followed her foot, creeping after her heel. "It's writing again," Mara said, pointing. New words formed on the visible page, letters appearing in that too-dark ink: Nobody leaves before the count finishes.

Nobody left before, either. "Before when?" Claire asked the journal. The blood pooled into a date: 1893. Mara grabbed the journal, ripped out the page with Claire's entry on it. The paper came away easily, too easily, and the moment it separated from the binding the house lurched. Not earthquake movement. Withdrawal. Like they'd pulled out something structural. The lights went out. The lantern downstairs went out. In the dark, Claire heard all eight chairs scrape back from the table at once. "What did you do?" Claire hissed. "I'm uncounting you." Mara tore the page into strips, hands moving fast. "If you're not in the journal, maybe you're not part of the eight." "Or maybe I'm unwriting myself from the only thing keeping me visible." The footsteps started up the stairs. Not boots this time. Bare feet, and they were wet, leaving marks Claire could hear but not see: the slap of damp skin on wood. Eight pairs of feet, climbing in unison. Mara shoved the torn pieces into Claire's jacket pocket. "Front bedroom. Move." They stumbled into the room. Claire's shin cracked against something low and hard that hadn't been there before. A bed frame. The room was furnished now. She felt the edge of a mattress, a quilt, a pillow still dented with someone's head. "The window," Claire said, hands out, finding the wall. Her fingers touched glass. She felt for the latch, found it unlocked, threw the window open. Cold air rushed in, real air, carrying the smell of actual roses and night earth. Below, the garden was dark but present. She could see the ground, maybe twelve feet down. "That's too far," Mara said behind her. "It's not too far." The footsteps reached the landing. They paused there, all sixteen feet stopping at once, and then they separated. Different directions. Some toward Claire's bedroom. Some toward the bathroom. Two pairs coming toward the front bedroom, moving faster now. Claire swung her legs over the sill. The drop looked wrong from this angle, farther than it should be, the ground receding as she watched. "It's changing the distance," Mara said. "It doesn't want you to jump." The door opened behind them. Claire felt it more than saw it, the pressure change, the way the air moved to accommodate bodies entering. She jumped. The fall took longer than twelve feet. Long enough for Claire to

understand she'd miscalculated. Long enough to feel the wind shift around her, pulling upward, trying to drag her back to the window. She hit the garden. Her ankles absorbed the impact, knees buckling, palms slamming into soil that was soft and wrong. The roses around her weren't roses anymore. They were hands, gray and ash-stained, pushing up through the dirt. Above, Mara screamed once, short and sharp. Then the window slammed shut.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by typewriter_tom

Claire rolled onto her back. The hands didn't grab. They just reached, fingers spread like they were testing the air for something familiar. She counted twelve of them before she stopped counting and started crawling. The soil clung to her palms. Not mud. Something thicker. She wiped her hands on her jeans and the gray came off in streaks that looked like the ash from the plates. Her right ankle screamed when she put weight on it. Not broken. Sprained badly enough that running wasn't an option. She limped toward the property line. The garden stretched farther than it should have. She'd seen it from the window. Twenty feet across, maybe thirty. She'd walked forty feet already and the fence hadn't appeared. Behind her, the house was dark except for one window on the second floor. The front bedroom. The glass glowed faintly, like there was a lantern inside, and pressed against it was a shadow that might have been Mara or might have been something wearing Mara's shape. Claire stopped. Her ankle wouldn't carry her much farther anyway. She pulled the torn paper from her pocket. The pieces were damp, the ink bleeding across the tears, but her name was still legible on the largest fragment. She held it up to the house. "I'm still here," she shouted. "I'm still in the count." The window shadow moved away. The hands in the garden stopped reaching. They curled into fists and sank back into the soil, leaving small holes that exhaled cold air.

Claire walked back toward the house. Each step was a negotiation with her ankle. The garden shrank as she moved. By the time she reached the back door it was the right size again, thirty feet across, roses the wrong color but at least they were roses. The door was open. Not unlocked. Open, standing wide, the kitchen visible beyond it. All eight chairs were occupied now. She could see the shapes sitting in them, blurred at the edges like photographs taken with a shaking hand. None of them moved. They sat with their hands on the table, palms down, waiting. Claire stepped inside. The door stayed open behind her. The lantern in the entryway had relit itself. The flame was steady and low. "I'm here," she said to the shapes at the table. "That's seven and me. That's eight." The shapes didn't respond. They weren't solid enough to respond. She could see the wall through their bodies, the old wallpaper pattern showing through their chests. Upstairs, a door opened. Footsteps in the hall. Heavy ones. Boots. Claire picked up the lantern. It was hot enough to burn but she held it anyway. She walked to the stairs and started climbing. Mara stood at the top of the landing. Her face was wrong. Not her face anymore. It had too many features, like someone had drawn a second face over the first one and both were trying to be visible at once. "You came back," Mara said. Both mouths moved. The words came out doubled, overlapping. "You tore up my page," Claire said. "I was trying to save you." "You were trying to put yourself in my place." Claire held up the torn pieces. "That's not how it works. The house doesn't accept substitutions." The thing that had been Mara tilted its head. The second face smiled while the first one stayed neutral. "You don't know what the house accepts." "I know it's been counting since 1893." Claire set the lantern on the top step. The flame grew brighter. "I know it needs eight people to complete something. I know you were trying to erase me so you could leave." "I was here first." "You were here last week. That didn't make you first." Claire pulled the journal toward her with her foot. It slid across the floor easily, leaving a trail of blood. "The first person got here in 1893. The rest have been arriving ever since. Different times. Different entries. But always eight." Downstairs, the shapes at the

table stood up in unison. Their chairs scraped back. They moved toward the stairs. "We're all here now," Claire said. "All eight of us. Whatever happens next happens to all of us." The thing wearing Mara's face began to split. The second face pulled away from the first, peeling free. Underneath was someone else. A woman in clothes from another century. She looked at Claire with eyes that had been waiting a very long time. "Finally," the woman said. "Now we can board up the windows."

Chapter

EIGHT

written by Margot Vail

The woman's hands moved to the window frame. Her fingers were wrong. Too many joints. She gripped the wood and began to pull, not pulling the window open but pulling the window itself, as though it were a membrane stretched across the wall and could be peeled back. The glass didn't crack. It just separated, rolled inward like a scroll, leaving the wall blank and exposed. Claire felt the temperature drop. Real cold now, not the clammy wrongness of the house's breathing but actual winter air, carrying snow that hadn't been in the forecast and wouldn't melt when it hit the floor. Below, the seven shapes had reached the landing. They stood there waiting. Patient. The woman with the extra joints pulled another window. Then another. Each one came away clean, leaving rectangular voids in the wall. Through these voids, Claire could see outside. But not the garden. Not Virginia. A place that was all walls. A corridor made of boarded wood, stretching away in directions that had no names. Dust moved through the corridor like it was alive. The woman turned to face Claire directly. Mara was completely gone now. There was nothing of the woman who had climbed the stairs in anything Claire saw. "You wrote your name," the woman said. "The journal keeps names. Names keep people. You're the eighth because you chose to be." "I didn't choose." Claire watched the seven shapes arrange themselves at the base of the stairs. They weren't climbing. They were

settling. Positioning themselves like they were load-bearing. Like they were the structure that held this moment in place. "Yes," the woman said. "You did. The others all chose too. Some faster than others. The woman last week argued for three hours before she understood." She gestured at the shapes. "That was her anger at the bottom of the stairs. This was her resignation at the top. By the time she'd finished moving through the house, there was only her acceptance left, and that's what's holding everything now." Claire's sprained ankle had stopped hurting. She looked down and realized her foot was beginning to flatten, the bones softening. The edges of her body were blurring like the shapes on the stairs. "How long does it take?" she asked. "To finish?" "Depends on how much of you there is to board up." The woman smiled with both sets of teeth. "The woman in 1893 took three weeks. By then all eight had arrived. But they hadn't understood like you understand. It took them time to accept. Time to move from room to room, learning where the house needed them to be. You've condensed the process. By coming back, you've indicated acceptance." The corridor of boards extended farther. Claire could see down it now. She could see the other houses. Dozens of them, all lined up in that place that had no light source and no visible end. All of them with boarded windows. All of them waiting. "There are eight in each one," the woman said, following her gaze. "Eight people in eight houses in this one place that exists between decisions. Between the moment you choose to turn back and the moment you pass through the door." Claire stepped toward the edge of the landing. She could feel the shape of herself becoming architectural. Her right arm was already straight, already extending, already becoming part of what held this moment vertical. "The woman who came back with me last week," she said. "Did she finish?" "She's the frame around the eastern window on the third floor." The woman pointed. Claire couldn't see a third floor from here but she understood what the woman meant. Mara wasn't gone. She was integrated. She was structural. She was the wood that kept the corridor from collapsing inward. Claire's left leg was solid now. Her chest had gone cold and hollow, the way old

plaster goes when you tap it. "And the first one? From 1893?" "She's the foundation. She holds everyone." The woman was close enough to touch now, but her hands were still busy, still peeling windows away from walls that were themselves becoming memory. "We exist in the maintenance of her choice. When she stops holding it, we all relocate. But she won't stop. None of them stop once they understand." Claire's vision was narrowing. Her eyes weren't disappearing exactly. They were just becoming fixed, directed only forward and slightly down, the way the eyes in a photograph stay fixed. She could feel the others settling into her now, the seven shapes merging with her structure, adding their weight to her resistance. The woman opened the last window. Beyond it, the corridor was clear all the way through.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Dan Okafor

The house was never looking for eight people; it was looking for eight people willing to stop running.

Priya Nair

The house only needed eight because it knew exactly how many it takes to hold something down forever.

Cora Lindgren

The wood remembers every body it held up, and it holds without complaint.

Olive Kassen

The house keeps its promises, and we keep ourselves.

typewriter_tom

The house was never counting us down—it was counting us in, and now we're the ones doing the counting.

Finished on 30 May 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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