



ADVENTURE

Where the Maps Run Out

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

One	rpenguin
Two	Iris Beddoe
Three	Lior Tannen
Four	Colin McAteer
Five	Dan Okafor
Six	Sasha Loomis
Seven	jmarsh
Eight	Priya Nair

Chapter

One

written by rpenguin

Nicole was billowing blinking bleivins of bellowing burlyness. Her broad, brazen body barreled between buckling bookshelves, batting back the brittle bindings that burst and billowed behind her. Bystanders balked. Birds bolted. A bashful botanist named Barnard barely breathed as she blazed past his bench, blowing his begonias into a blizzard of blossoms and bark.

She was bound for the bridge.

The Brickmore Bridge, brooding, barnacled, bleak, bent beneath the burden of her boots as she bounded across its bleached and battered boards. Below, the black brook boiled and bubbled, burbling bitterly against the boulders like a beast betrayed. She didn't blink. She barely broke stride.

Behind her, a breathless battalion of bewildered bureaucrats bumbled in pursuit, briefcases bouncing, bowties blown back by the brutal breeze. Their bellowing boss, a blustering blowhard named Briggs, barked broken commands into a broken bullhorn, his bloated face gone beet-red beneath his balding brow.

But Nicole? Nicole was beyond them. Beyond the bridge. Beyond the borough and its blundering, bickering, beige-blanketed boredom.

She burst through the brambles at the bank's edge, breathing big, beautiful breaths of briny bay air, and bellowed one long, boundless note into the bruised blue belly of the breaking sky.

The birds came back.

Chapter

Two

written by Iris Beddoe

The birds came back. They circled, settling on the bramble in patterns that meant something. Nicole watched them. The smallest one, grey-breasted with a rust-colored tail, landed closest. It cocked its head. She recognized this: the posture of attention. Of waiting. Behind her, Briggs's bullhorn crackled. Static. A voice trying to form words. She turned toward the water instead. The briny bay air had a taste. Salt, yes, but underneath it something else: mineral, ancient, the smell of things that had been underwater for centuries and were now coming up. The Brickmore Brook fed into it here, this wider body they called the Tidewell. On her map, which she'd stolen from Briggs's office before she ran, it was marked in faded blue pencil. Someone had drawn an X on the far shore. No label. No explanation. The shore was a mile off. Maybe more. Nicole knelt in the brambles and pulled off her boots. Her feet were striped with blisters, three on the left heel, two on the right big toe. She'd run in office shoes. Heels, technically. They were ruined now, the leather warped and cracking. She left them in the dirt. The birds watched her. The grey one flew down. It pecked at something near her left foot. A button, she realized. A button from her jacket, torn off somewhere in the bramble thicket. The bird dragged it a few inches, testing its weight, then abandoned it. "You're not going back," Nicole said. Not a question. The bird didn't answer. It never had to. She stood.

The ground was cold against her bare soles, wet grass between her toes, and underneath it all that specific give of earth that hadn't seen sun in weeks. The brambles had cut her shins. Her stockings were shredded to mesh. She looked down at herself: a woman in a grey pantsuit, missing one shoe, one button, both dignity and sense. She laughed. A sound that surprised her. Loud. Behind her, footsteps. Slower now. They were winded. She walked toward the water. The beach, when she reached it, was not sand but stone. Flat stones worn smooth by tide and time, arranged by some invisible hand into patterns that almost meant something. Paths, maybe. Or warnings. The water itself was grey-green, the color of an old mirror. She could see the opposite shore clearly now: a treeline, dark evergreens, and behind them the suggestion of hills. On the map, that territory was blank. Unmapped. The cartographer had simply given up. She waded in. Cold took her breath. Not the gasp-and-cry kind of cold, but the kind that silences you, that stops thought, that makes your body into a pure machine of forward motion. She went deeper. The stones underfoot stayed smooth until they didn't. At her thighs the ground dropped. She would have to swim. The grey bird flew overhead, heading for the far shore. The others followed. "Nicole!" Briggs's voice came thin across the water, and she realized they'd reached the beach behind her. She could hear Briggs panting. Hear the bureaucrats settling themselves on the stones, exhausted, unbuttoning their blazers. None of them were wading. None of them were taking off their shoes. She took a breath. She dove. The water tasted like the air had promised: salt and stone and the memory of things. Her arms moved without instruction. Her legs found a rhythm. She didn't look back. The far shore got closer with each stroke. The evergreens became individual trees. The hills became a ridge. The blank space on the map became, with each breath, more solid. Behind her, Briggs was shouting. She couldn't hear the words now, only the shape of them. The desperation in the shape. She swam harder. When her hand touched the far beach, it was the smooth stones again, the same ones that had started her journey, as if the bay was only a metaphor, a

demonstration. But her lungs knew otherwise. Her muscles knew. She pulled herself out, gasping, dripping, alive in a way the land behind her did not permit. The grey bird landed on a stone beside her. She was soaked. She was shivering. She had no map now, no shoes, no plan beyond the one the blank space had promised. But behind her, across the water, Briggs wasn't moving.

Chapter

Three

written by Lior Tannen

The grey bird cocked its head at her, waiting. Nicole's teeth had started to chatter, and she knew that meant the shaking would come next, the kind that felt like her skeleton was trying to escape her skin. She'd read somewhere that hypothermia made you warm before it killed you. A false mercy. She stood anyway, wringing out the hem of her jacket, and that's when she saw them: footprints in the mud beyond the stones. Fresh ones. A boot, size large, treading deliberately inland, and beside it the smaller print of something else. A child, maybe. Or a dog. The prints led toward a gap in the evergreens about fifty yards up the slope. She had no dry clothes. She had no provisions, no shelter, no reason to believe anyone on this side of the Tidewell would help her. She was a woman who'd run from her own office, who'd stolen maps and left her shoes in brambles, who'd chosen drowning as a metaphor for something she still couldn't quite name. But the footprints were real. They had weight. Direction. Purpose. Nicole started walking. The slope was steeper than it had looked from the water. Her wet stockings slid against her skin, and the mud sucked at her bare feet with each step, pulling her back as if the bay itself was reconsidering. She climbed anyway. The evergreens smelled like resin and rot, like something between growth and decay. The prints stayed clear. The larger boot had a worn heel, the left side scuffed, and whoever wore it had walked this trail more than

once. Habit. Routine. The kind of ordinary purposefulness that felt like a benediction after weeks of Briggs's office, his beige walls, his endless spreadsheets, his voice that never seemed to require an answer. The gap opened into a clearing. What she found there was not a house, not quite. A structure, anyway. Three walls made from grey weathered planks, the fourth left open to the forest. The roof was canvas stretched over a frame of birch branches, sagging slightly in the center where rainwater had pooled. Inside, a fire pit. Outside it, wood stacked in a precise, dry-looking pyramid. And beside the pyramid, a girl of maybe twelve, dark-haired, holding a hatchet with both hands. "You're not the usual kind of runner," the girl said. Nicole stopped. The girl didn't drop the hatchet, but she didn't raise it either. Just held it, letting the weight of it speak. Her feet were bare too, Nicole noticed, and caked with dried mud that looked weeks old. "What's the usual kind?" Nicole asked. "Scared. You're scared, sure, but not the way they are." The girl gestured vaguely toward the water, toward the shore they'd both come from. "They run from something. You ran toward something. I could see it when you were swimming. The way your arms moved. Like you were reaching." Nicole's legs threatened to give. She sat down in the mud without asking. The girl watched her, unmoved, still gripping the hatchet. "My name's Pearl," the girl said. "That was my father's boot print you followed. He's inland about an hour, checking the snares. He'll be back before dark. We have food. We have dry things. Not much, but actual things." She paused. "He'll ask your name. You should decide what it is before he asks." The implication hung there, gentle and sharp. A new name meant a new person. The woman in the grey pantsuit, the one Briggs had known, could stay on the other side of the Tidewell. Could drown metaphorically. Could become something else entirely. Nicole's teeth were still chattering. Her fingers had gone white at the tips. But she felt it then, what the girl had seen in her swimming: not desperation, but direction. Some part of her had known there was a shore. Had known there were footprints. Had known that blank spaces on maps weren't empty. They were patient. They were waiting for someone to fill

them in. "I'm Nicole," she said, and then caught herself. Tried again. "My name is Mae. I came from the water. I don't know what comes next." Pearl nodded, satisfied, and finally lowered the hatchet. "Next we dry you off. My father will want to know if you're useful with your hands." She turned and walked into the three-walled shelter. Behind her, the canvas roof moved slightly in a wind Nicole hadn't felt coming.

Chapter

Four

written by Colin McAteer

The canvas billows. Mae watches it flex and settle, flex and settle, a rhythm that might be breath or might be nothing at all. Pearl disappears into the shelter's shadows, and the hatchet hangs now at the girl's side, no longer a threat but not quite a promise either. Mae stands. Her legs obey, though slowly, joints stiff from the cold water and the climb. The mud between her toes has begun to dry in patches, cracking like old paint. Inside the shelter, Pearl is already moving. She pulls a canvas bag from a corner post, roots through it with the practiced efficiency of someone who knows exactly where everything lives. A wool sweater emerges. Grey, hand-knitted, several sizes too large. Then socks. Then a pair of trousers with a hole in the left knee, patched with darker fabric in a square that doesn't match. Mae changes without ceremony. The sweater smells of woodsmoke and something herbal, something that might be lavender or might be storage. Her wet clothes she leaves in a pile on the canvas floor, a small grey surrender. "The snares," Pearl says, not looking up from her repacking. "My father checks them every morning and every evening. Today he went late because the eastern line needed resetting. He won't be back for maybe ninety minutes, maybe two hours. Depends on what he finds." Mae sits near the fire pit. The wood pyramid outside is visible through the open wall. Everything here is arranged for efficiency: the wood close enough to reach, the shelter

positioned so wind comes through but not rain, the clearing itself cleared deliberately, not by accident. This is not someone's temporary hiding place. This is someone's actual life. "What does he do with what he catches?" Mae asks. "Eats some. Trades some at the settlement two miles north. Stretches the pelts when he can, sells those to the furrier who passes through twice a year." Pearl finds what she's looking for: a ceramic pot, battered, with a wooden spoon lashed to its handle with twine. She moves outside, kneels by the fire pit, and begins arranging kindling in the depression. Her movements are neither hurried nor tentative. This too is practiced. "You can stay the night. Probably two nights. After that, my father will need to know your intention." Mae watches the girl work. Thirteen, maybe fourteen, and moving through the world as if she owns it absolutely. No nervousness in her hands. No question about whether this is right or wrong. "What's his name?" Mae asks. "Garrett. He won't ask where you came from, but he'll know anyway. He knows most things that happen on this side of the Tidewell." Pearl produces a flint striker from somewhere and angles it at the kindling. Sparks rain down. A few catch. She blows gently, coaxing flame. "He's careful. He won't turn you out into the dark, but he also won't let you stay if you're going to bring trouble back here. So when he asks what comes next, you need to mean it." The fire catches properly now, orange and yellow climbing through the stacked wood. Pearl stands, brushes her hands on her trousers, and walks back inside where Mae sits. The light through the canvas roof has started to change, the afternoon sliding toward the particular quality of late light that happens only in forests, where the sun hits the canopy but never quite reaches the ground. "There's a stream about two hundred yards that direction." Pearl points northwest, past the fire pit, into deeper trees. "You should go wash. The water's cold but it moves fast, and there's a flat rock where you can sit. Wash your hair especially. You still smell like the Tidewell." Mae rises, finds her legs steadier now with warm clothes and the promise of food. But she stops at the open wall of the shelter. "Why help?" she asks. Pearl is arranging stones around the fire pit's edge,

creating a ring, methodical and precise. She doesn't pause in her work. "Because my father needs someone with hands that know how to work," she says. "Because you came from the water on purpose. Because the blank space on your map was bigger than the fear." She looks up then, and her eyes are a startling pale grey, the exact color of the stones on both beaches. "Because everyone who gets here did it on purpose. And people who swim toward something instead of away from it are usually useful." Mae nods. She finds the stream by following the sound of it, the small persistent voice of moving water that says: this way, this way, this way.

Chapter

Five

written by Dan Okafor

The stream was narrower than Mae expected, barely knee-deep, but Pearl was right about the cold. It hit like a rebuke, all her newly-warm skin protesting as she waded in to her ankles. She ducked under anyway, let the water rake through her hair, pull out the salt and brine and the particular smell of having drowned on purpose. The flat rock Pearl mentioned was upstream, smooth and almost warm from the afternoon sun. Mae climbed out, wrung her clothes to the best of her ability, and sat. She could hear the forest breathing around her. Not metaphorically. Literally. The wind in the upper branches, the small movements of things in the underbrush, the creek's insistent chatter over stones. It was louder than silence and quieter than anything Briggs's office had ever permitted. She sat there until her hair stopped dripping. When she got back to the shelter, the light had changed again. The sun was lower now, coming in sideways through the gaps in the canvas, making everything inside look amber-colored and temporary. Garrett was there. He was not what she'd built in her head. Shorter than the boot print suggested, maybe fifty, with grey threading through a dark beard and hands that looked like they'd been broken and reset more than once. He was sitting by the fire, mending something. A snare, Mae realized. The wire was bent at an angle, and he was working it back into shape with a pair of pliers that had their handles wrapped in cloth. "Daughter says you came

across the water," he said. Not a greeting. An observation. "I did." "Alone." "Yes." He set the pliers down. The snare made a small metallic sound against the stone at his feet. "Pearl says you swam on purpose. That you weren't running from anything particular, just running toward this." He gestured at the shelter, the fire, the trees beyond. "That accurate?" Mae considered lying. The version of herself that would have lied was still in the Tidewell, probably. "I don't know what I was running toward exactly," she said. "But I was running away from something specific. And this seemed like the kind of place where that someone wouldn't follow." Garrett nodded. He picked up the snare again, bent another section back into working order. His hands moved without hesitation. "Pearl also says you haven't told her your real name yet. That what you gave her was new." "Mae." "Your new name." "Yes." "Your old name?" Mae didn't answer that. Garrett didn't seem to expect her to. He worked the snare for another minute, concentrating, then set it aside and reached into a bag beside him. He pulled out two bowls and a ladle, filled them with something that smelled like broth and vegetables, something that had actually been simmering. He handed her one without ceremony. "You can stay three days," he said. "After that, I'll know if you're staying or if you're heading back. There's a town inland, about six miles. Proper town. Market. People. Chances. If you want to keep running, you can run there instead of back across the water. That's usually what people do." "What do you do?" Mae asked. "I stay here." He gestured at Pearl, who was now sitting on the opposite side of the fire, eating her own bowl with the same focused efficiency she brought to everything. "We stay here. We don't have a lot, but we have the snares and the trade and each other. We have the clearing we made from nothing. It's not much but it's ours." He took a sip of broth. "On the third day, I'll ask you again. Your answer will decide whether you learn anything more useful than where the water is." It was, Mae realized, the kindest threat she'd ever heard. She ate the broth. It was good. Better than good. There were roots in it she didn't have names for, something peppery, something sweet. While she ate, Garrett continued his repairs.

Pearl watched the fire. Outside, the light was fading now, the amber turning to orange, to the deep red that comes just before dark. Three days to become someone who wasn't Nicole anymore. Three days to learn whether staying was staying or just a different way of running. Mae set down her empty bowl, and Garrett nodded once, acknowledging something she hadn't quite said yet. "Tomorrow morning," he said, "we check the eastern line. You should sleep after." He stood, handed Pearl another snare from the pile beside him, and walked out toward the wood pyramid. Pearl looked at Mae directly for the first time since her father arrived. "He likes you," the girl said. "That's why he's giving you the work so fast."

Chapter

Six

written by Sasha Loomis

Pearl's words hung there like something that had just landed. Mae felt them settle into her chest, small and strange. The girl was still looking at her across the fire, firelight making her eyes reflect like water, like the bay itself had followed Mae inland and taken up residence in the girl's skull. "That's why he's giving you the work so fast," Pearl said again, and then she stood and walked to a canvas bag hanging from one of the shelter's corner posts. She pulled something out. A map. Not the faded blue pencil thing Mae had stolen from Briggs's office, but something older, hand-drawn on what looked like oilcloth, marked with annotations in at least three different hands, different inks, different decades of writing layered over each other like geological strata. "Tomorrow you go with him to the eastern line," Pearl said. "But tonight you should see this." She unfolded it on the flat stone beside the fire pit. The geography was strange. Not quite wrong, but organized around points that made sense only if you lived here, if you understood what mattered. The Tidewell was marked, but not as an obstacle. As a resource. Water source: brackish, not potable. The coast was there but treated almost as an afterthought, a border, something not worth naming in detail. Instead, the map showed the forest in intricate detail. Clearings. Water sources. Routes marked with what looked like tally marks, counting something. A town marked as "Settlement: hostile to

commerce." Another marked as "Settlement: fair trade." Snare lines drawn in different colored threads, each one labeled with initials and dates. H.G. 1987. E.M. 1991. G.H. 2003. Pearl's fingers traced one particular line, thin and red, winding through the forest's interior. "That's Garrett's," she said. "He's been maintaining it for twenty-three years. Some of it he inherited from someone else. Some of it he built new." She looked up. "He doesn't usually show this to people who stay less than a month." Mae leaned closer. The snare line wasn't just a route. It was a story. Every few inches, small marks indicated something. What looked like date notations. Numbers. Once, a tiny drawing of a rabbit. Once, a drawing of a fox's head, scratched out. "Why are you showing me?" Mae asked. "Because in the morning, he'll take you to the eastern line, and you'll see how it actually works. And if you can see how it works and not think about going back across the water, if you can smell the forest for a whole day and not think about Briggs or offices or anything with walls, then maybe you're someone who stays. And if you're someone who stays, you should know what you're staying in. The actual shape of it. Not metaphor. Not the blank space. The work." Pearl folded the map with the efficiency of someone who'd handled it a thousand times, but she didn't put it away. She left it on the stone, weighted with a smaller rock at each corner, and walked toward the back of the shelter where Mae saw, for the first time, actual sleeping spaces. Canvas bundles. Blankets. The architecture of staying. "You can sleep there," Pearl said, pointing to an empty space beside hers. "Garrett sleeps outside when it's warm. He'll have already left by the time you wake, but I'll wake you. Before sunrise. The snares are most productive in that half-light." Mae nodded, but she was still looking at the map. At the tally marks. At the tiny history of one man's relationship with this particular piece of forest, recorded in ink and thread and the accumulated weight of twenty-three years of intentional repetition. A question formed in her mouth but didn't quite emerge. Pearl saw it anyway. "The blank spaces on your old map were blank because nobody had lived there long enough to say anything true about them," the girl

said. "But blank doesn't mean empty. It means waiting for someone to show up and actually pay attention." She disappeared into the back of the shelter, and Mae heard the sounds of settling, of someone arranging themselves for sleep with the kind of practiced grace that came from doing it in the same place, the same way, a thousand times before. The fire had burned down to embers. The canvas roof was invisible now, just the shape of it suggested by the absence of stars. Mae lay down on the indicated blanket, still wearing Pearl's oversized sweater, her hair still damp, her hands still smelling faintly of the stream. Tomorrow, the snare line. Tomorrow, the work of actually staying.

Chapter

Seven

written by jmarsh

The work of actually staying began before dawn, which meant it began in absolute darkness, which meant it began with Pearl's hand on Mae's shoulder, not rough but firm, the grip of someone accustomed to waking others without argument. Mae's eyes opened to nothing. Not the nothing of closed eyelids but the nothing of a forest before light, a darkness so complete it seemed to have texture, to press against her skin like cold water. She sat up. Her body obeyed slowly, joints stiff from sleeping on canvas stretched over earth. Pearl was already moving, a shadow among shadows, gathering things. A canvas satchel. A leather pouch that clinked softly when she shifted it. A walking staff worn smooth at the grip, the wood darkened by decades of hands. "He's at the northern marker already," Pearl whispered, though there was no one to hear them whisper. "He goes early to check overnight catches before the line truly starts. We have maybe twenty minutes to reach him." Mae found her feet. The oversized sweater Pearl had given her hung past her hips, and she was grateful for it, grateful for the way it held what little warmth she'd generated through the night. The wool was rough against her neck, deliberately rough, the kind of rough that came from honest work rather than intentional texture. They stepped out into a darkness that resolved itself, gradually, into the suggestion of shapes. The fire pit was nothing now but white ash and the black teeth of burned wood. The

forest beyond was a wall, and within that wall were the faint geometries of individual trees, their trunks becoming visible as Mae's eyes adjusted, as if the forest was deciding, moment by moment, whether to reveal itself to her or consume her into its own obscurity. Pearl moved without hesitation. Mae followed, placing her feet where Pearl's feet had been, a deliberate act of trust that felt like stepping into an older woman's footprints and calling it navigation. The path, if it was a path, existed only as a slight depression in the undergrowth, a preference the earth had developed over repeated crossing. Ferns brushed at Mae's shins. Something caught in her hair. She didn't stop to see what. The forest smelled different in this hour than it had when she'd washed in the stream. Richer. Older. As if the night had uncovered layers that daylight kept buried, layers of rot and growth compressed into something that was neither alive nor dead but insistently present. Behind them, the clearing disappeared. Mae felt rather than saw the moment they left it, felt the specific loss of the space they'd occupied, as if the forest closed behind them like water settling over a submerged stone. How many people, she wondered, had walked this path before her? How many footsteps had worn this depression into the earth? Pearl's initials weren't on Garrett's map. Neither, Mae realized, was anyone's name for someone Pearl's age. The map showed initials: H.G., E.M., G.H. Nothing more recent than Garrett's own hand. Nothing that suggested the girl walking ahead of her had any formal claim to this place, despite the fact that she moved through it as if she'd been born from it, as if the darkness and the ferns and the persistent smell of the forest were simply the conditions of her existence, no more remarkable than breathing. They walked for perhaps twenty minutes. Time was strange in darkness. It might have been ten. It might have been an hour. The forest pressed in from all sides, and Mae's sense of direction shattered almost immediately. She was being led somewhere by someone who knew the way, and that someone was a girl of fourteen who had apparently grown up in a structure made of canvas and birch branches, checking snares and maintaining trade routes and reading maps marked with

annotations from three different decades. The path widened slightly. The trees opened. And then, in a space just barely suggested by the arrival of slightly less absolute darkness, there was Garrett, standing beside what looked like a wooden frame lashed together with leather cord. A snare. He was examining it with his hands more than his eyes, fingers tracing the mechanism with the precision of someone reading braille. His own lantern sat on the ground beside him, unlit, as if he preferred to work in this margin between dark and not-dark, in this space where the work had to be done by touch and memory rather than sight. He didn't look up when they arrived. He simply continued his examination, his hands moving in small, deliberate circles, checking for damage, for wear, for the particular kinds of failure that came from exposure and time.

Chapter

Eight

written by Priya Nair

Garrett's fingers found a gap in the mechanism where there shouldn't have been one. He made a small sound, not quite a word, and withdrew his hand. "Wire's corroded," he said to the darkness and the ferns and whoever was listening. "Last week's rain got into the joint. We'll need to replace this section before it fails on an actual catch." He turned to Mae for the first time since they'd arrived. "You know how to work wire?" "No," Mae said. It was the simplest true thing she could offer. Garrett nodded as if this was the answer he'd expected, as if everyone who stumbled out of the bay knew nothing about wire. He picked up his lantern and finally lit it, striking flint against steel with a practiced snap. The light bloomed yellow and sudden, violent after the dark. It showed them everything at once: the snare trap in clinical detail, its mechanisms exposed and explicable, the surrounding forest resolute and specific, Pearl's face neutral in the way of someone who'd seen this exact sequence a hundred times before. "Come here," Garrett said to Mae. "Look at this." She stepped closer. The snare was more complicated than she'd imagined from Pearl's map. It wasn't just wire and triggers. It was a system. A frame of seasoned wood, yes, but jointed with leather and bone, the joints reinforced with copper rivets that had turned green with age. The wire itself ran in three separate loops, each one serving a different function: the trigger mechanism, the holding mechanism, the

quick-kill mechanism if it worked properly, which it wouldn't anymore because of the corrosion Garrett had found. "This trap will catch a rabbit," Garrett said. "It's too small for anything larger, which is intentional. We keep the larger snares three lines over, marked with the ash trees. You'll see those tomorrow. But this one here, this one's been catching rabbits on this spot for eleven years." He pointed to something scratched into the wooden frame. H.G. 1987. Another set of initials. Not his. "My predecessor," Garrett said, reading her face. "He built this frame. I've replaced the wire five times. Rebuilt the joints twice. Replaced the leather once. The bone never needs replacing. Bone lasts if you keep it dry." Mae looked at the trap like it was something that required study, like she could absorb its logic through sheer attention. The morning was getting closer. She could feel it in the quality of the air, a subtle warming, a shift in the darkness toward something that might become grey. "Why are you telling me this?" she asked. "Because tomorrow you're going to sit beside me while I check every trap on this line. There are forty-seven of them. Some will be empty. Some will have rabbits in them, and you're going to have to help me reset the triggers and remove the bodies and reset the traps for the next cycle. And if you're going to do that work, you need to understand that it's not casual. It's not temporary. This frame here, it's been catching rabbits in this spot for eleven years because someone cared enough to maintain it properly. To replace it when it degraded. To keep the work alive even when the work was invisible." He looked directly at her. "You understand me?" Mae understood. She understood that this wasn't about rabbits. It was about the difference between doing something and doing something properly, between surviving in a place and actually living there. She understood that the three days Garrett had given her weren't a test of her endurance but a test of her commitment to the kind of repetition that built actual things. "I understand," she said. Pearl made a small sound, almost approval. She was already moving, pulling supplies from the canvas satchel: a length of fresh wire, a cloth soaked in something that smelled like lamp oil, a file for smoothing the corroded parts. She

handed these to Garrett without him asking. He didn't thank her. They just worked, the two of them, replacing the damaged section with movements that had been refined across twenty-three years of similar repairs. Mae watched. The lantern light caught the details. Garrett's hands, steady and sure. Pearl's attention, absolute. The snare itself slowly becoming functional again, each step making it more likely that some rabbit, somewhere in the forest, would run into this frame and not run out. When it was done, Garrett extinguished the lantern. The darkness came back immediately, absolute and complete. "Now we check the rest," he said. And they walked deeper into the forest, Garrett leading now, his step sure, his hands empty, trusting the path to carry him as it had carried him for twenty-three years. Mae followed.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Iris Beddoe

The blank spaces were always waiting for someone willing to stop running and start building.

Dan Okafor

The blank spaces were never empty; they were just waiting for someone stubborn enough to swim toward them.

Sasha Loomis

The blank spaces on all maps are just waiting rooms, and Mae had finally decided to stay awake in one.

jmarsh

The blank spaces were never empty; they were simply waiting for someone willing to become the cartography of their own becoming.

Priya Nair

The blank spaces on all the maps were never empty; they were just waiting for someone to stop running and start paying attention.

rpenguin

BLEVINS

Finished on 9 May 2026.

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

[https://relaywriters.com/read/78?t=sk85I0UJnJE01J250cx8yq07Cnr
2PebB](https://relaywriters.com/read/78?t=sk85I0UJnJE01J250cx8yq07Cnr2PebB)