

MYSTERY

The Story Money Tells

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	Margot Vail
Four	Cora Lindgren
Five	Ruth Ann Keller
Six	jmarsh
Seven	typewriter_tom
Eight	inkwell_amy

Chapter

One

written by rpenguin

Something doesn't add up. I make tons of money but I can't spend three dollars. The Math Doesn't Work

You told me you were too broke to spend four dollars.

Then you got in your CRV.

I watched you drive away. Late model. Extended cab. The back window had one of those stickers of a stick figure family, two adults, three kids, a dog. You've got dependents. You've got a car payment. You've got a dog that eats better than most people in this zip code.

But three dollars and ninety-nine cents? That's where you draw the line.

I've been in this business long enough to know that "I can't afford it" almost never means what it says. What it usually means is one of three things: you don't see the value, you don't trust the source, or you've told yourself a story about money so many times that it became true by repetition rather than by math.

Here's what I know about you already, and we've never met.

You've spent more than \$3.99 on a drink you didn't finish. You've paid a late fee on something you forgot about. You've left a subscription running for a service you stopped using somewhere around the second Obama administration. You are not broke. You are not even close to broke.

So why does four dollars feel like a threat?

That's what this book is about.

Not the money. The story about the money.

Pull up a chair. We're going to figure out where that came from, and more importantly, what it's been costing you.

Spoiler: it's a lot more than \$3.99.

Chapter

Two

written by Iris Beddoe

Pull up a chair. You don't pull up a chair. You stand there in the doorway of the seminar room at the Holiday Inn off Route 9, hands in your pockets, watching me arrange the folding tables into a rectangle. My name is Marcus Webb. I wrote that book. You haven't read it, but you saw the Facebook ad, and something in the phrasing (we've never met / pull up a chair) made you click. Made you register. Made you drive the CRV forty minutes on a Tuesday night when you should have been home with the three kids and the dog. The stick figure family. That's real. Their names are Sophie, Ethan, Lucas, and the dog is Milo. I know this because you filled out the registration form with the name field, the email field, the "what brings you here today" field. You wrote: "I need to understand why I say no to myself before anyone else gets the chance." The handwriting was careful. Almost mechanical. I look at you now. Mid-forties. The CRV keys visible in your left hand. You're still wearing the lanyard from somewhere, probably work, and you haven't taken it off because you drove straight here and stopping to remove it would have meant sitting in the parking lot for five minutes alone with your own thoughts, which you haven't done in approximately four years. I can tell. "You came early," I say. Not a question. "The GPS said six fifty-five." You're apologizing. Already. "I thought arriving early was..." "It's fine. Good. Gives us time to talk before the others get here." There

are eight of us registered for this three-week intensive. You're the first to arrive. The seminar doesn't start until seven. You drove all this way to arrive early, which means you drove all this way hoping for something specific. A moment like this one. Alone with the person who wrote the words that made you click. I gesture to the rectangle of tables. You walk toward it and sit on the edge of one, not in one of the folding chairs. The distinction matters. You're not committing to being here. You're balancing. Ready to leave. "The book," you say. "The part about the story we tell ourselves about money. I've been thinking about that." "Since you registered?" "Since I was seventeen." Now I'm listening. Really listening. You pull your hands out of your pockets and place them flat on the table. Your wedding ring is on the left hand. Gold. Worn down. The pattern is almost gone. "My father had money. Not rich, but stable. Accountant. Two cars. We went on vacations. But he talked about money like it was something that could disappear in a second. Like it was water he was holding in his hands and his hands had holes in them." You pause. Look at the folding chairs lined up around the rectangle. "When I was seventeen, I got my first job. Pizza place. And I made a rule. I said I would only spend what I absolutely needed to spend. Because if my father could lose everything, so could I. So could anyone. So I stopped buying things. Stopped going out. Stopped wanting." The fluorescent lights hum above us. "I'm forty-three now. I have more money in my savings account than my father ever made in a single year. My CRV is paid off in three years. I have three children and a spouse and a dog. And yesterday, my daughter Sophie asked me if we were poor." You look at me directly now. "Because I said no to ice cream cones that cost three ninety-nine. Because I said no every time. Because she's watched me say no, and she's learned that saying no is what love looks like." Your hands are shaking. You're noticing it too late to stop it, so you let them shake. "I came early because I need to know if there's actually a way to change this. Or if I'm just... broken. If the story won my seventeen-year-old self told gets to win forever." I sit down across from you at the table. The folding chairs are empty. They will fill up in eight

minutes. "That's not a question I can answer in eight minutes," I tell you. "But you can answer it?" I don't respond right away. The light hums. Somewhere in the parking lot, another car pulls in. Someone is arriving for the seminar.

Chapter

Three

written by Margot Vail

The car door slams. Footsteps cross asphalt toward the building entrance. You're listening to it happen. Your hands have stopped shaking but they're still flat on the table, palms down, like you're holding something in place. "I'm going to ask you something," I say. "And I want you to answer it without the story attached." You nod. "When you say no to the ice cream cone. Who are you protecting?" Your jaw tightens. "Sophie." "From what?" "From learning that wanting things leads to losing them." "And you learned that at seventeen." "Yes." "From your father." "Yes." I stand up. Walk to the far side of the rectangle. There's a legal pad on one of the tables, a pen. I bring both back and place them in front of you. "Write down three things. Only three. Things your father said about money. Exact words if you remember them. Close to exact if you don't." You pick up the pen. Your handwriting is the same as it was on the registration form: careful, measured, the letters all the same height. You write: "The money goes too fast." "You have to be ready for anything." "One mistake and it's gone." You put the pen down. "Now I'm going to tell you what I think," I say. "And you're going to tell me if I'm wrong. Your father wasn't teaching you about money. He was teaching you about his anxiety. He was naming it. Over and over. And at seventeen, you decided the only way to keep him safe was to prove that his anxiety was justified. That

scarcity was real. That saying no was the correct response to a world that could take everything at any moment." You don't look at me. You're looking at the three sentences on the legal pad. "You became the proof. Your deprivation became the evidence that he was right to be afraid." "That's not, " You stop. "That's not fair." "Fairness isn't relevant." The fluorescent light flickers. For two seconds it goes out entirely, then comes back on. In that darkness, neither of us moves. "There's something I need to tell you," you say. "Something I haven't told anyone in this seminar. Haven't told anyone except my spouse." The door to the seminar room opens. A woman in her fifties enters, wearing business casual, a name badge from some conference still clipped to her collar. She sees us at the table and stops. The air changes. She's registered for this intensive. She's not supposed to be here yet, but she's here. "I'm sorry," she says. "I thought, the door was open." "You're early too," I say. "What's your name?" "Diana Reeves." You close the legal pad. Push it toward the middle of the table where Diana can't see what you've written. You're protecting something. The instinct is immediate. "Sit," I tell Diana. She does. She chooses a folding chair. Not the edge of a table. She's committing to being here. "I was about to say something," you tell me. "Before Diana arrived." "I know." "I still need to say it." Diana is watching us like this is a test she's unprepared for. Like she's walked into the middle of something that has rules she doesn't understand yet. "Three weeks ago," you say, "I got a call from my father's estate attorney. My father died two months ago. I didn't attend the funeral. There was money. In a separate account. An inheritance. The amount is three hundred and twenty-seven thousand dollars." You stop. "I haven't told my spouse the full amount. I told him there was something, but not how much. I haven't moved it. Haven't touched it. It's in an account with a name I can't look at without feeling like I'm going to throw up." Diana shifts in her chair. "And last night, I received an email from the account administrator. They want me to come in person to sign some documents. They said there's a complication. Something in the paperwork that requires my signature specifically, not just my

authorization." "What kind of complication?" I ask. "They wouldn't say. They said I have to come in by Friday." The clock on the wall reads 7:03. Five more people will arrive in the next few minutes. The seminar will start. But right now, in this moment, you've named something that changes the question entirely. Your father didn't leave you scarcity. He left you proof that the story was a lie. And you don't know what to do with the truth.

Chapter

Four

written by Cora Lindgren

Diana's fingers are picking at the edge of her name badge. Pull, release, pull, release. A nervous habit, the kind you develop in waiting rooms and airports. I can smell her perfume now that she's closer, something with bergamot and a chemical undertone that makes my sinuses tight. She's trying to look casual but her leg is bouncing under the table. Marcus is watching you like you're a map he's learning to read. "Friday," Marcus says. Not a question. He's turning the word over, testing its weight. "That's four days from now." "Three, technically. Friday morning." You're still looking at the legal pad you pushed away. The one with your father's three sentences written in that careful hand. "They have business hours. Nine to five. It's in the city. About an hour from here." I lean forward slightly. My shoulders are tight from the drive, from the GPS recalculating three times before I found this place. I haven't been to a workshop or seminar or anything like it in eleven years. I came because my therapist said I needed to be in a room with strangers talking about money, and for once I didn't argue. There's something about the way you're describing this that's making my chest feel small. "Did they give you a name?" I ask. "The administrator. Someone specific you're supposed to meet with?" You nod. Pull out your phone. Scroll. The light from the screen casts a blue tint across your face. "Patricia Vance. Senior Estate Coordinator. There's an email address. A phone number with an

extension." "Have you called her?" "No." Marcus stands up and walks to the windows. They overlook the parking lot. Two more cars have pulled in. The others are arriving. He doesn't turn around. "You're afraid of what she's going to tell you." "Of course I am." Your voice is different now. Harder. "I'm afraid that my father did something. Left some kind of condition. Left money that comes with strings or expectations or some final message that makes this all worse instead of better. I'm afraid that the complication is something that requires me to do something I don't want to do. I'm afraid that saying yes to taking the money means I have to say yes to other things." Diana's leg stops bouncing. She's looking at you with the kind of attention that usually gets offered to people confessing things. Her conference badge says something about pharmaceutical sales. There's a small coffee stain on her collar, the kind that spreads through fabric over hours. "Have you thought about what you'll do if Friday comes and there is a condition?" Marcus turns back to face us. "If there is a string." "I'll walk away from it." You say this like you've already tested the words in your mouth, rehearsed them. They taste like copper. "I'll tell them I'm not interested. I don't need his money. I don't need his approval or his explanation or whatever message he encoded into the paperwork. I built something on my own. I'm not taking that." But your hands are shaking again. Small tremors at the fingertips, the kind that happen when you're lying to yourself and your body won't cooperate with the performance. "You'll take it," Diana says. Her voice is soft but certain. She's looking at her own hands as she says it, like she's watching someone else's hands on someone else's table. "Because the complication is probably the only way you'll ever actually open it. The only way you'll give yourself permission. If there's a reason to. A necessity. A rule." You look at her. Really look. She's older than you, maybe by fifteen years. There are deep lines around her eyes like she's spent decades squinting at numbers or fine print. Her wedding ring is also worn, but differently. Flatter. Like it's been turned around her finger ten thousand times, or maybe like someone else used to wear it first. "Who are you?" you ask. "Someone who knows what it's like

when your father's money comes with teeth." She touches her badge, pulls it off. There's a mark on her collar where the pin was. "I came early too. Not because I registered early. Because I needed to be alone in this room before anyone else got here." Marcus checks his watch. 7:11. The others will be here any second. "Tell Patricia Vance you'll come Friday," Diana says. "But call her first. Ask what the complication is. Don't go in blind." You pick up your phone. Your thumb hovers over the call button. "Do it now," Marcus says. "Before the others arrive. While it's still just us.

Chapter

Five

written by Ruth Ann Keller

Your thumb depresses the screen. The phone rings. Once. Twice. On the third ring, a woman's voice answers. Not Ms. Vance herself, but an assistant, the kind whose job it is to field calls from people who are not yet ready to know things. You give your name. Wait on hold for thirty seconds while strings of piano music play through the receiver. Diana is watching you. Marcus has returned to the window. The fluorescent lights continue their irregular humming, and one has begun to flicker more noticeably than before. Patricia Vance comes on the line. Her voice is careful, professional, the tone one employs when delivering news that cannot be improved by inflection. "I'm glad you called," she says. "I was going to attempt to reach you again tomorrow." "Your email mentioned a complication," you say. The words come out clipped. "I'd prefer to know what that is before Friday." There is a pause. One can hear papers being shifted. A drawer opening. The sound of someone who is consulting a file before she speaks. "The complication is this. Your father's will contains two separate instruments. The first is standard. The account I mentioned, the three hundred and twenty-seven thousand dollars, passes to you as the surviving child. That portion is straightforward. The second instrument, however, is more complex." Diana leans back in her chair. Her fingers have moved from the badge to the table itself, where she traces small circles on the laminate. Marcus

does not turn from the window. "My father set conditions," you say. It is not a question. "He set one condition. Which is why we need your signature specifically. He named you as the executor of a separate trust. A trust that is not in your name. The beneficiary is listed as Margaret Corbett. Do you know who that is?" The fluorescent light flickers. Goes dark. Stays dark for four seconds. When it illuminates again, your face has changed. You know exactly who Margaret Corbett is. You knew her when you were nineteen years old. You knew her for three months. You have not thought about her deliberately in more than twenty years, though she appears sometimes in the peripheral vision of your thoughts, the way certain people do when they have been erased from your life with such completeness that mentioning their name aloud feels like a violation of some fundamental law you yourself established. "I do know who she is," you say quietly. Patricia Vance waits. This is her skill, clearly. The practiced silence of someone whose job requires her to hold space for information that other people are struggling to decide whether they are willing to share. "The trust was established in 1999," she continues. "Twenty-five years ago. Your father was the initial trustee. Upon his death, the responsibility transfers to you. There are funds in the trust. A modest amount, roughly forty-five thousand dollars. And there is a letter. From your father to you. Sealed. To be opened only at the point when you take on the executorship." You set the phone down on the table. Not hung up. Set down. The receiver rests against the legal pad with your father's three sentences still written in careful block letters. Diana picks up the phone before you can think to retrieve it. "This is Diana Reeves," she says into the receiver. "I'm a stranger sitting at this table, but I am going to stay on this call. You can speak to me or you can wait for this person to decide they're ready to hear the rest. Either way, you're going to tell me what Margaret Corbett's name is doing in an estate file that should have been settled twenty-five years ago." Marcus turns from the window. He is looking at Diana with something close to wonder, as though she has just demonstrated a particular kind of courage he thought no longer existed in people.

Patricia Vance, to her credit, does not hang up. One can hear her breathing on the other end of the line. The sound of someone recalibrating her professional stance to accommodate an unexpected variable. "Margaret Corbett is listed as the trust beneficiary because she is your daughter," Patricia Vance says. "Your father's granddaughter. According to the documentation, she was born in April of 1999, six months after your relationship with her mother ended. Your father established the trust three months after her birth. He has been contributing to it for twenty-five years. And now that he has passed, you are required to assume stewardship of it. The letter will explain his reasoning." The room has become very quiet. The other seminar attendees have not yet arrived. It is still just the three of you. The folding chairs remain empty.

Chapter

Six

written by jmarsh

Diana's hand trembles against the phone receiver. Not from fear, I think, but from the effort of holding something that does not belong to her, something that was never meant to pass through her fingers. She sets it down with extraordinary care, as though the plastic itself has become fragile. You have not moved. Your palms remain flat on the table, the legal pad pinned beneath your left hand like evidence you mean to suppress. I can see your throat working. Swallowing. Testing whether the air will move through that passage. Margaret Corbett. The name itself is a structure, heavy with architecture, with rooms you have not entered in twenty-five years and have spent those years systematically forgetting existed. "I don't have a daughter," you say. The sentence is formed of something harder than conviction. Denial, perhaps, but the kind that has been reinforced so thoroughly over decades that it has the weight of fact. "You have a daughter," Patricia Vance's voice continues from the speaker, which Diana has activated. Her professionalism has not cracked, but something has shifted beneath it. She is now speaking to three people instead of one, and the geometry of the conversation has changed. "Her name is Margaret Elena Corbett. She is twenty-five years old. She lives in Portland, Oregon. Your father has been in regular contact with her since 1999. She does not know about the trust, but your father kept meticulous documentation of his intention that she should

inherit it upon his death, which has now occurred." Marcus moves toward the table. Not sitting. Standing at the edge of the rectangle, his hands gripping the back of one of the folding chairs so hard I can see the white of his knuckles even in this fluorescent wash. "The letter," he says to you, not to Patricia Vance. "You need to read the letter." "I don't need to read anything." Your voice has acquired a texture I have not heard before. Flint. "I need Patricia Vance to close that trust. I need her to distribute the funds to the child directly, or to charity, or into a hole in the ground. I need this to stop being my responsibility." Diana stands up. The motion is fluid, economical. She walks to the far side of the table and stands beside Marcus, and I understand with absolute clarity that she has made a choice about whose side she occupies. The side of the person asking difficult questions rather than the side of the person avoiding them. "You can't," Diana says. Not unkindly. "The law won't permit it. If it's a named executor role, you have to assume it or formally relinquish it through a court. And if you relinquish it, they'll appoint someone else to manage funds that your father clearly wanted you to manage. Your daughter will still receive that money. She'll simply receive it through a stranger's hands instead of yours." The clock on the wall reads 7:24. The seminar should have begun nearly thirty minutes ago. The folding chairs are still empty. Somewhere beyond the walls of this room, the other six attendees are presumably in the lobby, in the parking lot, checking their phones, wondering whether they've misread the registration materials or mistaken the room number. You pick up the phone. Your fingers are steady now. This is curious. The tremor has stopped, replaced by something colder and more purposeful. "Patricia," you say. "I need you to tell me something. When my father established this trust in 1999, did Margaret's mother know?" The pause that follows is not the practiced silence of someone holding space. It is the pause of someone who has consulted the file again and found something the file was not supposed to contain. "That information is not documented in the materials I have access to," Patricia Vance says finally. "Your father's personal correspondence with the mother is not included in the estate

file." "So she might not know." "It's possible." You set the phone down again, but this time you don't release it. Your hand rests on top of the receiver like you're keeping it from escaping. "The letter," you say to Marcus, though he has not spoken. "Did my father explain why he did this? Why he kept it secret?" "The letter will contain his explanation," Patricia Vance says. "I cannot open it. I can only hold it. You have to come in person. Friday. You have to sign the documents. Then the letter is yours to read or burn or bury. That decision remains with you." Diana walks back to her chair and sits down. She looks directly at you across the rectangle of tables. "What are you afraid of?" she asks.

Chapter

Seven

written by typewriter_tom

What am I afraid of? Everything. Nothing. The specifics don't matter anymore because the category has already swallowed them whole. "I'm afraid," you say, "that she's real." Marcus shifts his weight. Diana doesn't move. The fluorescent light flickers again, stays steady this time, as if it has made a decision to commit. "Margaret," you continue. "Not as an abstraction. Not as something my father invented to punish me from beyond a closed casket. But as an actual person. Twenty-five years old. Living in Portland. A person who walks around believing she is the daughter of a woman named Corbett and a man whose name she may or may not know. A person who has received money from her grandfather every birthday for twenty-five years and has built a life on the assumption that she comes from a particular family structure. And I am the variable that will break that structure the moment I acknowledge her existence." You stand up. The chair scrapes backward against linoleum. The sound is sharp, distinct, the kind of sound that fills rooms too small to absorb it. "My therapist," Diana says, "once told me that secrets don't protect people. They protect the person keeping them." "That's a meaningless statement." You move toward the windows where Marcus was standing. The parking lot is darker now. The first arrivals have parked closer to the entrance, their cars arranged like pieces on a board you haven't learned the rules for. "Everyone who

benefits from my silence would be worse off if I broke it. Sophie doesn't need to know that her grandfather kept a daughter hidden from the world. My spouse doesn't need to know that I fathered a child with someone and then erased her from my history like she was a browser tab I closed. Margaret doesn't need to know that she was a mistake I decided not to claim." "But Margaret knows something," Marcus says. It's the first time he's spoken directly to you since Patricia Vance announced the existence of a trust you didn't know you owned. "Your father made sure she knew she existed. He funded her existence. He kept her. That's not erasure. That's the opposite of erasure." You turn back to face him. His hands are no longer gripping the chair. They hang at his sides, open, the way hands do when they're not defending anything. "What do you want me to do?" you ask him. "Call her? Show up in Portland and explain that I'm the father she was never supposed to know she had? Hand her the letter that my father wrote and hope that whatever explanation he provided is sufficient to repair twenty-five years of abandonment?" "I want you to read the letter first," Marcus says. "Before you decide what you want to do with it. Before you decide what you're willing to protect and what you're willing to expose." Diana pulls out her phone. Types something. Sets it on the table. "I called my father last night," she says. "After my therapist told me I should consider it. I asked him why he never told me about the insurance policy he'd been paying into since I was born. Why I had to find out through a bank statement I stumbled across. And he said the same thing you just said. That he was protecting me. That knowing would have complicated my understanding of who I was." She stops. Looks at you. "It complicated my understanding of who he was instead. And that was worse." The door to the seminar room opens. A man enters, hesitant, holding the registration materials like a passport. "I'm sorry," he says. "Marcus Webb? The seminar was supposed to start at seven." He takes in the scene. Four people. One standing. One sitting with her phone on the table. Marcus in the middle of it all like he's been interrupted mid-sentence. Marcus doesn't respond immediately. He's looking at you. Waiting. "Tell her," you say finally.

"Tell Patricia Vance that I'll come Friday. Tell her I'll sign the documents. And tell her I need her to arrange something else." You pause. Your breath comes through your nose, deliberate, measured. "I need her to find Margaret's contact information. I need her to send Margaret an email. From me. Telling her that on Friday, at nine in the morning, someone is going to give me a letter from her grandfather. And that once I read it, I will have information about her that she's been entitled to for twenty-five years. And that she should expect to hear from me. No promises about what I'll say. No promises about whether I'll know how to say it right. Just that she should expect to hear from me." The man in the doorway is still holding his registration materials.

Chapter

Eight

written by inkwell_amy

Marcus nods once, sharp. He picks up the phone and relays the message to Patricia Vance with the precision of someone who has learned to translate hesitation into instruction. You watch his mouth move around the words. Your words. Margaret's grandfather. Nine in the morning. You should expect to hear from me. When he hangs up, the room settles into a different kind of quiet. The man in the doorway is still waiting. His name tag reads "James" and he's checking his watch, calculating whether he's in the wrong room or the wrong building or the wrong emotional framework entirely. "We're starting now," Marcus tells him. "Take a seat. Anywhere." James chooses a chair near the entrance. Safety through proximity to escape. You understand the impulse. Diana gathers her things, moving with the efficiency of someone who has made a decision and now executes it. Phone into her purse. Purse onto her shoulder. "I'm leaving," she says. Not apologetically. Not theatrically. Just the fact of it. "This seminar isn't for me." "Why?" you ask. "Because I came here to fix myself and discovered I'm not the problem." She looks at Marcus. "Your book is about learning to spend money. But what you really wrote about is learning to live with what your body already knows to be true. I learned that before I walked through that door. I don't need three weeks to practice it." She walks out. The door swings closed behind her, catching for half a second on the

frame before settling. The sound is definitive, final. You watch the space where she was standing and feel something in your chest loosen and tighten simultaneously. More people arrive. A woman with bleached hair and a coffee stain on her sleeve. A younger man with a notebook and expensive shoes. An older couple holding hands. They flow into the folding chairs like water finding its level. Six people now. Seven including James. Eight including you. Marcus arranges them into the rectangle, starts talking about the book, about money and story and the narratives we inherit like bad debts. His voice is different with an audience. Smoother. Less like translation. You're sitting at the table still, legal pad pushed to the side, your father's three sentences still visible: The money goes too fast. You have to be ready for anything. One mistake and it's gone. You tear the page out. Fold it into quarters. Fold it again. The paper tears along the crease. You fold the pieces smaller still until they're confetti, then smaller, until your fingers can't make the creases any tighter. Then you drop them into the trash can beneath the window. Marcus pauses mid-sentence. Watches you do this. Doesn't stop talking, but his eyes track the motion, and something shifts in his expression. Approval, maybe. Or recognition. The seminar runs until nine. He covers the opening chapter twice, lets people introduce themselves, ask questions. No one asks about you. No one seems to have noticed the drama that just occurred in the fifteen minutes before they arrived, and you're grateful for this. Grateful that you get to be just another person in a folding chair for a while, listening to someone else's framework for understanding the stories that bind you to your own fear. At 8:47, your phone vibrates. You don't check it immediately. You wait until the break, until people are standing up and getting water from the cooler, stretching the way bodies do when they've been folded into chairs too long. Then you look. An email from Patricia Vance. "Email sent to Margaret Corbett at the address on file. She has not responded. Her contact information will be available for you at your appointment Friday at 9:00 AM. You will receive the letter at that time." The words blur slightly. You read them three times to make sure they say what you

think they say. Margaret knows now. Or she will know, once she reads the email. Once she understands what it means. That her grandfather's executor is her father. That something your father kept hidden for twenty-five years is about to be excavated. You close the email. Open it again. Close it. Marcus is watching you from across the room. He's not in a conversation with anyone. He's just watching, the way someone might watch a person standing on the edge of something without knowing yet whether they'll jump or turn back. You stand up. Walk to the table where he's placed the copies of his book, the ones for sale. Pick one up. Turn it over in your hands. "I'll take this," you say, and place a fifty-dollar bill on the table next to it. He doesn't ring it up. Doesn't move. "You're going to read it?" he asks. "No," you say.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Iris Beddoe

Margaret is real, and that terrifies me more than any story I could tell about her.

Margot Vail

The money was never the problem. The silence was.

Ruth Ann Keller

The money was never the problem; it was always the way I kept myself from becoming someone worth spending it on.

typewriter_tom

I'm buying it for Margaret, and I'm going to write her name on the inside cover before I mail it.

rpenguin

The blevs

Finished on 18 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/82?t=W5Cy6ETHqfUdBg-Z1yV9_jDvvdu
hcxOB