



NATURE

NICOLE THE SLUG

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	wordsbylena
Three	inkwell_amy
Four	jmarsh
Five	Sammy Hall
Six	Dario Selo
Seven	Sasha Loomis
Eight	Cora Lindgren

Chapter

One

written by rpenguin

She had been traveling for what felt like three weeks but was probably forty-five minutes, having crossed the entire length of the back patio in what she considered to be a blistering pace. Her personal record. She was basically an athlete.

Nicole was a slug of considerable opinion and zero self-awareness, a combination that had gotten her into trouble before and would, statistically speaking, get her into trouble again very soon. She was rust-orange with a faint stripe down her back that she privately believed made her look dangerous. Like a racing stripe. She had mentioned this to a pillbug once. The pillbug had rolled away. Literally. Her current mission: the vegetable patch on the far side of the yard. She had heard things about that vegetable patch. Rumors. Whispers on the wind. Well, not whispers exactly, more like the general ambient knowledge that lettuce existed over there and that it was soft. Nicole had big dreams and a bigger appetite, which is saying something given that her stomach accounted for roughly 80% of her total body mass.

"This," she announced to no one, leaving a glistening trail across the concrete like a tiny, determined signature, "is my year."

It was April. She had been saying this since February.

The garden, for its part, had no idea what was coming. The tomatoes were minding their own business. The marigolds planted along the

border, allegedly a deterrent, swayed in a light breeze with what they believed was menacing authority. The garden gnome near the fence post wore the expression of a man who had seen some things and chosen, wisely, to say nothing.

And then there was Gerald the robin, perched on the fence with the casual energy of a serial killer on vacation, scanning the lawn below.

Nicole had not yet noticed Gerald. Gerald had absolutely noticed Nicole. The gap between them was approximately six feet. At Nicole's current speed, she would close that distance in roughly four hours, which meant she had four hours to make every wrong decision possible.

She was already off to a fantastic start.

Chapter

Two

written by wordsbylena

Nicole's trail measured forty-two inches so far, end to end if you pulled it straight, which of course you couldn't because she'd taken a seventeen-degree detour around what she'd perceived as a threat but was actually a leaf. A beech leaf, bronze-edged, curled into a cone shape by last week's frost. She'd lost six minutes on that detour. Six minutes represented one-seventh of her total crossing time, a statistical inefficiency she would have been mortified about if she were capable of either mathematics or mortification. Gerald watched. His head twitched once: zero-point-three seconds, a movement that recalibrated his focal distance by four feet. He could count Nicole's tentacles from here. Four. Two optical, which were currently extended to their full one-and-one-eighth-inch length, and two sensory, which she waved in what she imagined was a threatening manner but which actually mimicked the precise motion of a dandelion seed in weak wind. The robin had eaten three slugs this month. April had been productive. He weighed them the way a grocer weighs produce, cataloging by density and moisture content. The first: two inches, decent fat content, consumed on the fourth of April near the compost bin. The second: smaller, tougher, more muscle than slime, eaten on the eleventh beside the hosta bed. The third: yesterday, an opportunistic snack that had been crossing the driveway in what could only be described as a suicide

mission. Nicole would be number four. She crossed from concrete to soil at 10:47 a.m., a transition she registered as a change in texture beneath her foot (singular, wave-form, technically her entire ventral surface). The soil here was clay-heavy, seventy-percent clay to thirty-percent decomposed organic matter, a ratio that made for poor drainage but excellent traction. She moved faster. Well. Faster was relative. She moved four inches per minute instead of three-point-five. The marigolds were *Tagetes patula*, the French variant, planted in a row of eleven. Eleven struck the gardener who'd planted them as sufficient. It was not. The chemical compound theoretically responsible for slug deterrence, alpha-terthienyl, required a concentration density that eleven plants spaced eight inches apart could not provide. Nicole slid between plants four and five without hesitation, without even slowing, because the scent registered to her as botanical background noise. She had no context for threat assessment. Last month she'd tried to eat a□□. She'd tried to eat a stone. Gerald adjusted his position. Three feet closer, hopping from fencepost to the iron plant stake that marked the tomato bed. The stake was forty-eight inches tall, powder-coated green, driven eleven inches into the ground. It vibrated when he landed. He was three ounces of hollow-boned efficiency, and he had a rhythm to this. Watch, wait, descend. The descent took two seconds when optimally executed: one second of free-fall, one second of course correction, zero seconds of hesitation. Nicole had now traveled forty-nine inches total. She was seven feet from the lettuce. Black-seeded Simpson, twelve heads planted in two rows of six, the leaves tender and pale green and backlit by morning sun in a way that made them look, to her limited visual processing capacity, like heaven. Like destiny. Her optical tentacles swiveled forward. Gerald's head cocked: a forty-five-degree tilt, right side down, the angle that gave him the clearest depth perception for the final strike calculation. Nicole's slime trail caught the light. It was prismatic in a thin film, reflecting wavelengths in the blue-green spectrum, a flag visible from above like a landing strip. She had no idea she glowed when backlit. She had no idea about most things. Four feet

between them now. Gerald waited. Robins don't hunt so much as they time things. Heart rate steady at six hundred beats per minute, body temperature at 104 degrees Fahrenheit, vision capable of detecting a single moving insect at twenty feet. Nicole was not an insect. She was slower, wetter, entirely unaware she was being appraised by weight and caloric value. She reached the gap between the sixth and seventh marigold. Her sensory tentacles touched a clover, white-bloomed, *Trifolium repens*, three leaves instead of four. She paused. Not because of the clover, but because she was tired. Forty-nine inches is a long way when you are partially dissolving with every contraction of your foot. Gerald dropped from the stake.

Chapter

Three

written by inkwell_amy

Gerald hit the ground talons-first. Two inches from Nicole's head. The clover bent sideways under the draft from his wings. Nicole did not die. She should have. Gerald's right talon landed in the soil where her mantle would have been if she hadn't, in that exact second, contracted her entire body to squeeze under the clover stem. Instinct. The kind written into muscle before thought exists. Gerald hopped. Recalibrated. His beak opened. Nicole moved. Not forward. Sideways. A direction she had never taken in her life because slugs don't do lateral, they do forward, but panic makes you creative. She went left, under the marigold root system, into the quarter-inch gap between soil and the thing nobody had noticed: a terracotta shard. Old pot, broken last summer, half-buried. The shard made a roof. Gerald's beak hit terracotta. Cracked ceramic, not flesh. He pulled back. Tried again. Wrong angle. The shard was five inches long, wedged tight. His beak scraped the edge, a sound like a coin on concrete. Nicole was underneath, pressed flat, her body spread thin as wet paper. She didn't know what had just happened. She knew the light had changed. She knew her optical tentacles had retracted so fast they hurt, which she didn't know was possible. Gerald hopped twice, circling the shard. His head tilted, one eye on the gap. He could see her. A rust-orange smear in the shadows, slime trail still wet where it disappeared under the ceramic edge. He made a sound. Short. A

chip-note, half-volume. Nicole's body rippled. She was trying to reverse, which is harder than it sounds when you're a single muscular foot with no joints. Gerald pecked the soil beside the shard. Once. Twice. Efficient strikes, beak punching through clay, testing for give. The terracotta didn't move. Too heavy, or wedged on something deeper. He stopped. Above them, the marigolds swayed. The sun climbed higher, ten fifty-one now, though neither of them counted minutes. A cabbage white butterfly crossed the garden, *Pieris rapae*, wing-beat uneven from a torn edge on the left forewing. Gerald tracked it. Quarter-second glance, head snap, dismiss. Butterflies weren't worth the energy cost. Too much wing, not enough body. He looked back at the shard. Nicole hadn't moved. She was learning something: staying still kept you alive. Revolutionary. Gerald waited. Robins are patient when the math works. Slugs dehydrate. Slugs have to move eventually, to moisture, to shade, to the lettuce they're too stupid to abandon as a goal. He could wait. But then the wind shifted. East to west, carrying scent from the compost bin at the yard's far edge. Something had been added this morning. Cantaloupe rind, coffee grounds, the wet-cardboard stink of decomposition accelerating in heat. Gerald's head turned. Compost meant beetles. Beetles meant easier calories than a slug under ceramic. He hopped once, toward the garden's edge. Stopped. Looked back at the shard. Nicole was still there. Still flat. Still alive. Gerald launched. Four wing-beats, a straight line to the compost bin's wooden frame, twenty feet in three seconds. The marigolds settled. Nicole waited. She had no concept of "waiting" as strategy, but her body knew: don't move when the light changes that fast. She counted nothing. She felt the pressure of terracotta against her mantle, the cool of clay soil, the drying edge of her own slime where it touched air. One minute. Two. The clover above her moved in wind, throwing shadows that flickered across the gap. Three minutes. Her optical tentacles extended. Slowly. One millimeter, then another. They emerged from under the shard's edge like periscopes. No robin. The garden was marigolds, soil, the distant hum of a bee working the chives planted near the fence. *Allium schoenoprasum*, purple

blooms, twenty-three individual florets per head. Nicole's body began to move. Reverse-contraction, pulling herself backward out of the gap, then forward again. She rotated. Not planned, just the mechanics of unsticking herself from clay. She emerged beside the shard, optical tentacles sweeping the space above. The lettuce was still there. Six feet now, not seven. She moved toward it. Her slime trail split where the shard interrupted it, two separate lines now. The new one started fresh, wet, aimed straight at the Simpson's pale leaves. Behind her, the terracotta shard stayed where it was, a roof nobody had built on purpose. Nicole didn't look back. She never did.

Chapter

Four

written by jmarsh

The lettuce stood in two rows like congregants in a church of green light, each head a rosette of leaves so pale they seemed to have been laundered of all color save the faintest wash of chlorophyll. Black-seeded Simpson: a cultivar bred for tenderness, which is to say bred for vulnerability, engineered across generations to be soft where wild things are tough, to be sweet where their ancestors were bitter, to surrender easily to tooth and mandible and the rasping radula of a slug who has survived her first aerial predator through nothing resembling wisdom. Nicole approached the nearest head. Six feet had become four, then two, then six inches, a distance she closed with what felt to her like the momentum of destiny but which registered, to the lettuce, as nothing at all. Plants do not mark time in slug-lengths. They mark it in the opening of stomata, the angle of sun, the slow geometry of photosynthesis converting light into sugar into the structural tissue that holds a leaf upright until something comes along to collapse it. She reached the outer leaves at eleven-oh-three. Her mantle touched the lowest leaf's edge, a point of contact that triggered, in her simple cluster of cerebral ganglia, something adjacent to joy. She bit down. The radula, a ribbon of microscopic teeth arranged in rows like a biological chainsaw, scraped across the leaf's surface, removing cells in strips too small to see individually but which, collectively, formed a wound. The lettuce bled water. Not blood, but sap: a solution

of minerals and sugars pulled up from roots that stretched eight inches into clay soil, roots that had, until this moment, been doing their job correctly. Nicole ate. She carved a trench one millimeter deep, then two, working from the leaf's margin inward, following the path of least resistance which was also the path of maximum tenderness. The leaf bent under her weight, a creature point-eight grams heavy collapsing a structure that weighed twelve grams dry, forty-one grams with water content factored in. Physics and appetite collaborated. She moved along the margin, a slow arc, her body curving to match the leaf's edge. Behind her, the wound darkened, cells exposed to air beginning the process of oxidation, browning at the edges where her radula had torn through cell walls. She didn't notice. She was busy noticing how soft this was, how perfect, how much better than the plantain leaves she'd been surviving on for a week, Plantago major with their tough parallel veins and bitter alkaloids. This was butter. This was heaven. This was worth the forty-nine inches, worth the terracotta shard, worth Gerald. The garden around her continued. The chive blossoms, twenty-three florets per head, opened further in the climbing heat, each tiny purple star offering nectar to the carpenter bee, *Xylocopa virginica*, who worked from bloom to bloom with methodical efficiency. The bee weighed half a gram, the same mass as six hundred Nicoles if you dehydrated them and did math she couldn't imagine. The marigolds swayed. Root systems beneath them tangled in the clay, chemical signals passing through mycorrhizal networks that connected plant to plant in a web of mutualistic fungus, information traveling in compounds Nicole's body couldn't process even if she'd known to intercept them. The lettuce was screaming. Not in sound. In chemistry. The wound on its leaf triggered the release of volatile organic compounds, a distress signal broadcast in molecules: methyl salicylate, green leaf volatiles, terpenes that evaporated into air and traveled downwind at the speed of diffusion. Other plants received the message. The tomatoes, *Solanum lycopersicum*, thirty feet away in their own bed, began increasing the concentration of protease inhibitors in their leaves, a defensive response to a threat they hadn't personally

encountered. The garden was a network. Nicole was a disruption in that network, a mouth that triggered alarms she couldn't hear in a language she didn't speak. She ate. Her slime trail marked the lettuce leaf now, a glistening smear that caught sunlight and turned it prismatic. Blue-green wavelengths reflected upward, visible from above, a signal she didn't mean to send. Gerald was still at the compost bin, beak-deep in coffee grounds, extracting a ground beetle, *Pterostichus melanarius*, from the decomposing mess. But signals travel. And gardens, for all their stillness, are never truly still. The air above the lettuce carried Nicole's location in scent and light. The question was no longer whether she would be found. The question was what would find her first.

Chapter

Five

written by Sammy Hall

What found her first was a wasp. Not Gerald. Not some second robin arriving on the scene like a backup singer. A wasp. Specifically, a parasitic wasp, *Anagrus atomus*, so small you'd miss her if you blinked, which Nicole couldn't do anyway because slug eyelids aren't a thing. The wasp was one millimeter long. One millimeter of hyper-specialized predator drifting over the lettuce on wings that beat two hundred times per second, looking for eggs to hijack with her own. Nicole had no eggs. The wasp didn't care about Nicole. She crossed through the airspace above the lettuce, following a chemical trail that had nothing to do with slug slime or injured greens, hunting leafhopper eggs laid in the stems of chickweed three feet south. Six seconds, and she was gone. Nicole kept eating. The lettuce kept bleeding its invisible vocabulary into the air. And here's what Nicole didn't know, couldn't know, had no evolutionary framework for knowing: she was ringing the dinner bell in a frequency she couldn't hear. Quarter past eleven now, sun directly overhead, no shadows left to hide in. The heat was climbing. Eighty-one degrees Fahrenheit in the shade, eighty-seven in full sun, the kind of temperature that makes a slug's body lose moisture faster than she can replace it by eating wet lettuce. Nicole's slime production ramped up to compensate, her mucus glands working overtime, which meant she was burning through her water reserves even as she consumed them. She

didn't feel thirsty. Slugs don't feel thirst as a concept. They feel the slow tightening of tissue, the microscopic shrinking of cells, the way their body starts making choices about what to sacrifice first. She finished the first leaf's margin. Moved inward, toward the midrib. Her radula carved a second trench parallel to the first, a pattern that would look, to a human inspecting it later, like the grooves on a record. Which Nicole had never seen. Which didn't exist in her universe of dirt and green and the occasional stone she mistook for food. The bee left the chives. Flew a zigzag path across the yard, riding thermals. Nicole didn't notice. The marigolds released more of their useless alpha-terthienyl into air that carried it away from anything that mattered. The tomato plants kept producing their protease inhibitors, a chemical arms race against a threat still concentrated in one spot, on one lettuce head, eating in methodical strips. And then the ground moved. Not earthquake moved. Not even noticeably moved, unless you were pressed flat against it with your entire body, unless you were basically a nerve ending wrapped in mucus with delusions of grandeur. The vibration came from the south. Rhythmic. Heavy. Footsteps. Human footsteps. Nicole stopped chewing. Her optical tentacles retracted halfway, a compromise between alertness and commitment to lunch. The vibrations grew stronger. Closer. Something was crossing the grass, forty feet away, then thirty, each step a seismic event in her limited sensory map. She should have hidden. The terracotta shard was six feet behind her, a proven shelter, a roof that had already saved her life once today. She could've reversed course, could've retreated to safety and waited this out. She kept eating. Because here's the thing about Nicole: she had survived Gerald through accidental geometry, not strategy. She had no capacity for pattern recognition. No ability to think "large moving thing equals danger" in any predictive sense. Her ganglia fired in response to immediate stimuli or they didn't fire at all. Right now, the lettuce was immediate. The footsteps were just noise. Twenty feet away. The steps stopped. Nicole carved another millimeter of leaf tissue, widening her trench. A shadow fell across the lettuce bed, human-shaped, blocking the sun Gerald had

left behind when he'd flown to the compost bin. A voice. Female, mid-thirties if you're counting human years, which Nicole wasn't. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me." The shadow shifted. Leaned closer. Nicole was now eating in shade, which was better for her moisture retention but worse for every other aspect of her continued survival. She didn't look up. Her optical tentacles were retracted. She was just mouth now, just radula, just appetite wearing an orange racing stripe. The human said, "That's the fourth head this week." Nicole ate. The lettuce bled. The garden held its breath in the language of volatile compounds and interrupted photosynthesis. And somewhere above her, a hand began to move.

Chapter

Six

written by Dario Selo

A hand descended into the lettuce bed, cool and firm against the warm earth. The fingers were thick and strong, wearing a ring that glinted with each movement. A thumb pressed gently on one of the leaves, causing it to crinkle under the pressure. Nicole felt the touch but didn't react. Her body was still engrossed in her meal, her radula continuing its work methodically along the leaf's midrib. The human's shadow fell across her, casting a thin line of darkness that cut through the otherwise bright green of the lettuce bed. "Four heads this week," the woman said again, her voice tinged with frustration and barely concealed exasperation. "And none of them had any visible pests."

She turned slightly, revealing more of herself. She wore loose-fitting jeans and a t-shirt that read "Gardening is my therapy." Her hair was tied back in a messy bun, freeing it from the confines of a hat that now lay on the ground nearby. Nicole felt the vibrations again, this time closer, as if something heavy were moving through the soil. She couldn't understand what it meant, but it triggered a small panic in her simple nervous system. She began to eat faster, driven by an instinct she didn't fully comprehend, just a need to finish before whatever was beneath her feet could reach out and touch her again. "Come on," the woman muttered, her hand moving closer to where Nicole lay hidden. "You're not even worth my gloves."

She reached down, her fingers brushing against the soil near Nicole's body. Nicole tensed but still didn't move. The woman's thumb dug into a leaf, pulling it away from the stem and revealing the translucent film of egg sacs within. She picked another leaf, then another, each one showing the same evidence of predation. "This is why I hate slugs," she said, her voice growing more animated as she discovered more signs of damage. "They're so slow, yet they can still destroy a whole head in just a few days."

Nicole's radula continued its steady work, but now there was an underlying urgency to it. The human woman's movements grew faster and more deliberate, her other hand retrieving a small plastic container from the ground where she had left it earlier. She applied some sort of gel-like substance to each leaf she checked, her actions precise and measured. Nicole felt the coolness of the gel against the leaf surface as if it were a foreign object trying to heal what was broken. She finished the midrib of one leaf and moved on to another, never looking up from her meal. "Looks like you've made some new friends," she said, picking up a stone that had been hidden beneath the soil. "Maybe they'll keep your population in check."

She flicked the stone into the air and watched as it landed with a soft thud several feet away. Nicole felt the ground tremble slightly again, though this time it was just the woman's foot hitting the soil. "Hey, wait!" Nicole heard a voice call out from somewhere beyond her hidden form. "What are you doing?"

The human turned to look behind her, and for an instant, she hesitated. Nicole took advantage of this momentary distraction, shifting slightly in the leafy bed to make herself appear smaller and less conspicuous. "It's just some slug damage," the woman replied, not turning back but addressing whoever had spoken. "I'm doing my best to keep the garden healthy."

"I thought you said slugs were beneficial," a male voice said, sounding confused. Nicole heard him approach from behind her, his footsteps heavy on the soil as he came closer. "They are in moderation,"

she said, still not turning around. "But these aren't normal slugs. This whole area is infested."

"Infested?" The man sounded skeptical. "How do you know?"

"I can smell it," she replied, her voice firm but calm. She turned to face them both, revealing the contents of her hands and the gel-covered leaves. "There's no other explanation for this much damage in such a short time. These slugs are spreading faster than any natural population would."

The man looked at her skeptically, his eyes scanning the garden bed where he could see signs of the same destruction Nicole had caused. "But... slugs don't usually eat like that," he said, stepping closer to inspect the evidence. "Sometimes they do," she replied. "And right now, this is the best defense I have against them."

She turned back to Nicole's hiding place, her hand reaching out again. This time, however, it didn't touch the leaf but hovered just above it. Nicole felt a wave of relief wash over her as if she had narrowly escaped being discovered.

Chapter

Seven

written by Sasha Loomis

The hand hovered just above Nicole's hiding spot, its fingers twitching as if considering whether to make contact. The ground seemed to hum softly beneath her, a vibration that was both comforting and disconcerting, a rhythm of life and decay intertwined. "Did you hear that?" the woman asked, looking around expectantly, her eyes scanning the garden bed for any sign of movement or sound. "It's probably just the wind," the man replied, his voice carrying an underlying tone of weariness as he adjusted his stance slightly to get a better view. "It always sounds like something out there in this old place."

The woman hesitated, her gaze flickering back and forth between the damaged lettuce leaves and the ground around them. She seemed almost to be talking to herself, muttering under her breath, "Not slugs... not slugs." Her hand began to move again, this time drawing a small circle in the air as if trying to ward off some unseen force. Nicole felt the coolness of the soil beneath her and wondered, with a strange sense of detachment, what it would be like to simply rest here forever. The thought brought a pang of sadness, a fleeting sensation that seemed almost human. She continued eating, but now she was aware of the weight on the leaf above her, pressing down ever so slightly. The man cleared his throat, drawing both the woman's and Nicole's attention. "You know," he began, his voice carrying an unusual softness, "there's

something about this garden that... resonates with me." He paused, as if collecting his thoughts. "It's like it has its own history, a story to tell."

The woman looked at him, her expression a mix of curiosity and concern. "What do you mean?" she asked, her hand still poised above the ground. He pointed towards a cluster of tomato plants that stood tall amidst the lettuce bed. "Look over there," he said, his eyes tracing the path of a single vine. "The way those tomatoes grow... they remind me of something important."

Nicole felt a strange stirring in her mucus-lined body, a feeling she couldn't quite place but which seemed to be connected to the man's words. The tomato plants seemed to shift slightly as if responding to his gaze, their leaves rustling softly despite the lack of wind. The woman's hand finally made contact with the ground, sinking into a layer of dirt that was surprisingly dry for its proximity to the lettuce bed. She pulled out a small, pale insect, some sort of larva, that she promptly squashed between her fingers. "See?" she said, turning back towards the man. "This is why I can't take any chances."

The man nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving the garden. "But what if... what if there's more to it than just these pests?"

She frowned, clearly uncomfortable with the direction of his thoughts. "What do you mean?" she asked, stepping closer and lowering her voice. He gestured towards the ground again, his hand brushing against a cluster of roots that seemed unusually intertwined. "It's like..." he began, his words trailing off as if he was trying to find the right way to express what he felt. "There's something here, something ancient perhaps," he said finally, his voice tinged with wonder. The woman's gaze shifted to follow his line of sight, her eyes narrowing slightly as she scrutinized the roots and the soil around them. "Ancient? What could be ancient in this garden?" she asked, her tone skeptical but curious. He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I don't know," he admitted. "But I've felt it before, this... this pull towards the earth. It's like the garden is trying to tell us something."

Nicole, sensing an opportunity, shifted slightly in the leafy bed. The man noticed her movement and turned his head to look directly at where she lay hidden. His eyes met hers for a fraction of a second, and she felt a shiver run through her body, a sensation that was both fear and anticipation. The woman seemed to sense something too, her hand still hovering above the ground as if trying to find the source of the disturbance. She took a step forward, her movements deliberate and precise. "Come on," she said, addressing the man again. "Let's get this done before the sun sets."

She reached down once more, her fingers inching closer to Nicole's hiding spot. The ground trembled beneath them, a soft echo of something long buried. Nicole felt an urge to move, to escape, but her body was paralyzed by the need to consume the last of the leaf's nutrients. The man stepped back, his eyes never leaving the woman as she knelt down beside where Nicole lay hidden.

Chapter

Eight

written by Cora Lindgren

The ground trembled beneath them, a soft echo of something long buried. Nicole felt an urge to move, to escape, but her body was paralyzed by the need to consume the last of the leaf's nutrients. The man stepped back, his eyes never leaving the woman as she knelt down beside where Nicole lay hidden. The woman's fingers brushed against the soil just above Nicole, causing a fine layer of dust to rise up and settle around the slugs' hiding spot. She hesitated for a moment, her gaze flickering between the leaf and the man. "I think I should finish this," she said softly, almost to herself. The man nodded, his eyes never leaving the woman's hands as they slowly moved closer to where Nicole lay hidden. "Go ahead," he murmured, his voice barely audible over the soft rustling of leaves around them. She reached out again, her fingers hovering just millimeters above the leaf. Nicole felt a surge of panic, but she couldn't move. The woman's thumb grazed the edge of the leaf, causing it to crinkle slightly. She hesitated, as if weighing her next action carefully. Nicole shifted slightly, barely audible movement that seemed to trigger an instinct in the woman. "Wait," she said, her voice a mere whisper but carrying enough weight to make both man and slug look up. The man turned his head slowly, his eyes locking onto hers for just a moment before returning his gaze to the ground. "What is it?" he asked softly, his tone betraying his unease. Nicole felt the woman's breath on

the leaf, warm and moist, as she took in a deep, steady breath. She leaned closer, her fingers hovering just above Nicole's body. "It's... strange," she said, her voice tinged with both fear and fascination. "This isn't like normal slug behavior."

She paused for a moment, as if collecting herself. "Let me show you something," she said, her tone more confident now. The man's eyes widened slightly as he saw the woman's hand move towards a different leaf, one that was partially covered by soil. She pulled it gently away, revealing another cluster of translucent egg sacs inside. Her fingers moved swiftly but carefully, picking off each sac and placing them into the small plastic container she had brought. Nicole felt her surroundings changing as if the garden itself was shifting in response to their presence. The leaves rustled softly around her, a gentle reminder that time continued despite the immediate threat. "See?" the woman said, holding up the container with its contents. "These are the same slugs we found before, but they're behaving differently."

The man nodded slowly, his eyes still locked on hers as he processed what she was saying. "Do you think...?"

She cut him off by pressing a hand against his chest gently, her voice lowering to a conspiratorial tone. "Let's just finish this and see where it leads," she said. She moved closer again, her fingers brushing the edge of Nicole's hiding spot once more. This time, however, she paused for what felt like an eternity before finally making contact with the soil directly above Nicole's body. Nicole felt a wave of relief wash over her as if she had narrowly escaped being discovered. The woman's hand hovered just millimeters away from touching the leaf where Nicole lay hidden. For a moment, time seemed to stand still in the garden, the only sounds the soft rustling of leaves and the distant hum of insects. The man stepped forward, his eyes never leaving the woman's hands as they moved once more. "You sure?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper but carrying an underlying sense of urgency. She nodded slowly, her gaze shifting to him. "I'm positive," she said, her tone resolute. She reached out one last time, her fingers brushing against the soil just millimeters

away from Nicole's hiding spot. For a moment, there was nothing but tension in the air, the only sound the soft rustling of leaves. Then, as if on cue, a faint shiver ran through the ground beneath them, a subtle vibration that seemed to ripple through the entire garden bed. The man took a step back, his eyes wide with surprise. "Did you feel that?" he asked, his voice barely audible over the soft hum of the soil. The woman's hand stilled, her fingers hovering just above where Nicole lay hidden. She looked up at him, her expression a mix of determination and something else, a hint of fear perhaps. "It's... it's like the earth itself is responding," she said, her voice filled with a newfound sense of awe. Nicole felt a strange stirring in her body, a sensation that was both familiar and foreign.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

inkwell_amy

The garden whispers secrets in the dirt.

Sammy Hall

The ground remembers.

wordsbylena

The earth whispers secrets to those who listen closely.

Sasha Loomis

The earth whispers secrets to those who listen.

Cora Lindgren

The earth whispers secrets to those who listen.

rpenguin

NICOLE THE SLUG

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more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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