

HORROR

ECHOES OF THE HEARTLESS HOUSE

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

ONE

Priya Nair

TWO

Lior Tannen

THREE

Olive Kassen

FOUR

rpenguin

FIVE

Margot Vail

SIX

jmarsh

SEVEN

inkwell_amy

EIGHT

Ruth Ann Keller

Chapter

ONE

written by Priya Nair

Mara flipped through the yellowing pages, her fingers trembling slightly as she reached the last entry. The word "nightmare" was cut off mid-syllable, and a chill ran down her spine. She looked up to see the others huddled around the lantern, their faces cast in shadows. "Hey," Mara said, clearing her throat, "there's something weird here."

"We figured that out already," said Tom, his voice sharp but not unkind. He was the one who had boarded up the windows when they first arrived at the old house on the outskirts of town. It seemed like a good idea at the time. "Right, well," Mara continued, "this journal, it's written in here for three nights already. Three nights. And the last entry is cut off."

"So?" asked Sarah, her eyes wide and wary. "So it means something weird was happening before we got here," Mara said with a nervous laugh. "Like... maybe whoever wrote this never made it out of the house?"

"Or maybe they just ran out of ink," Tom countered, but he didn't sound convinced. Mara shrugged. "Either way, I'm not going to just leave it open like that."

"I'll go check the windows," said Jake, standing up and stretching. He was tall and lanky, with a habit of tapping his foot when nervous. He had been the first one to suggest they stay together, in case... well, in

case. “Good idea,” Mara nodded, feeling her stomach twist. She wasn’t sure if it was from the journal or just general creepiness. Tom turned to the others. “We need a plan for tonight. If there’s something out there...”

“Or in here,” Sarah interjected, shivering slightly. “We should split up and check every room,” Tom continued, ignoring her interruption. “Make sure nothing is hiding.”

“I’ll go with Jake,” said Sam, the youngest among them. He had a tendency to follow Jake around like he was his big brother. “Fine by me,” Jake replied, heading towards the door with Sam close behind. Mara watched them leave, feeling oddly disconnected from everything that was happening. She wondered if it was just her or if everyone else felt this strange detachment as well. “What about you?” Tom asked Mara after a moment of silence. “I’ll check upstairs,” she said, already moving towards the creaky staircase. It looked like it hadn’t been used in years, with dust gathering thickly on each step. She stepped onto the first stair and immediately felt something shift beneath her feet. Her heart pounded as the wood groaned loudly under her weight. “Mara!” Tom called out from below, but she kept moving. The journal was burning a hole in her pocket, urging her to find answers. When she reached the top of the stairs, she paused, taking stock of the dimly lit hallway. There were four doors lining each side, all leading into what looked like bedrooms. She pushed open the first door and stepped inside, her eyes adjusting slowly to the darkness. The room was empty except for a single rickety bed in one corner. A chill ran up her spine as she noticed the faint outline of a figure under the blankets on the bed. She blinked, squinting harder into the darkness. “Hello?” Mara called out tentatively. There was no response. Her breath quickened and she felt a bead of sweat roll down her forehead. Was it just a trick of the light? Or something else entirely? She approached the bed cautiously, feeling like every step might trigger some unseen mechanism. As she neared, her hand reached out to touch the blanket... and then recoiled as a sudden cold breeze rushed past her face. “Is anyone there?” Mara whispered, more to herself than anything else. But when she turned around to leave,

something caught her eye at the far end of the room: an old mirror hanging crookedly on the wall opposite the bed. She hesitated for a moment, but then walked over to it. The reflection in the warped glass was slightly distorted, making her look almost... different. She could swear there was someone else standing behind her, barely visible in the corner of the frame. "Hello?" she repeated again, louder this time, but still no answer came back. Mara's heart began racing as a cold hand seemed to grip at her throat. "What is going on here?" she muttered under her breath, turning sharply and nearly tripping over a loose floorboard. The air was thick with an oppressive silence that pressed down on her shoulders like a weight. She had to get out of there, now. As Mara hurried back towards the door, she could have sworn she heard something whispering her name from behind, but when she turned to look, there was nothing but darkness and shadows.

Chapter

TWO

written by Lior Tannen

Mara's breath caught in her throat as she hurried back towards the door, heart racing and mind reeling. She couldn't shake the feeling that something was watching her, waiting for an opening to pounce. Her fingers trembled as they grasped the doorknob, twisting it slowly until the creaking wood yielded and the door swung inward with a groan. The hallway outside was just as dark and silent as when she had entered, but now every shadow seemed to have its own story. Mara's eyes darted from side to side, searching for any sign of movement, any hint that she wasn't alone. She stepped out into the hall, her footsteps echoing off the walls like a mocking chorus. "Mara!" Tom's voice called up from below, cutting through the oppressive quiet. "Are you okay?"

She hesitated, unsure if she should answer or keep moving. The journal was still in her pocket, its pages crinkling slightly with each step she took. She needed to find out what it said, understand why whoever had written it never finished their last entry. "Yeah," she called back, trying to sound more confident than she felt. "I'm just checking upstairs."

A gust of cold air swept through the hallway, chilling her to the bone and making her shiver. She wrapped her arms around herself tightly, feeling a sudden urge to turn and run down the stairs as fast as possible. But she didn't move. Instead, she turned towards the next door on the

right, the one labeled “2” in faded gold paint. Her hand hesitated for a moment before reaching out again, this time more resolutely. She pushed open the door and stepped inside, her eyes immediately drawn to a small desk against the far wall. The desk was cluttered with old photographs, papers, and an inkwell that looked like it hadn’t been used in decades. Mara’s heart skipped a beat as she saw one particular photo, a family portrait with three children smiling at the camera, their faces bright and full of life despite the faded coloration. She picked up the picture gently, her fingers tracing over the edges where dust had settled. “Who are they?” she whispered to herself, though there was no answer forthcoming. The room felt like a time capsule, frozen in moments long past when laughter echoed through these halls and families gathered here for warmth and safety. Mara’s mind wandered back to simpler times, before fear crept into the cracks of her world. She set the photo down carefully and began rifling through the papers scattered on the desk, searching for something, anything, that might explain what was happening in this house. Her eyes fell upon a letter folded neatly at the corner, its edges crisp and untouched by time. She unfolded it slowly, revealing inked lines that spoke of love, loss, and desperation. “Mara?” Tom’s voice echoed up again, more urgent now. “You better come down soon.”

She glanced towards the window as she read, her eyes narrowing at the sight outside. The sky was beginning to lighten with dawn, casting an eerie glow over the barren landscape around the house. Shadows shifted and twisted in a way that made her skin crawl. “Alright,” Mara called out, forcing herself to put down the letter and move towards the door again. “I’m coming.”

The hallway seemed even darker as she retraced her steps back downstairs, every creak of wood beneath her feet feeling like an accusation. When she reached the ground floor, Tom was waiting by the lantern, his expression tense with worry. “Did you find anything?” he asked, stepping closer to meet her gaze. Mara hesitated, the letter

clutched tightly in one hand. “There’s a journal upstairs,” she said finally. “Someone wrote in it for three nights before they disappeared.”

Tom nodded slowly, eyes narrowing as if piecing together new information. “I don’t like this,” he admitted quietly. “We need to figure out what happened here before it happens again.”

Mara nodded back, her own fears bubbling up within her. She felt a sudden urge to confide in someone who might understand, who could offer comfort and strength. “Can we check the attic?” she asked hesitantly. “There might be more clues there.”

Tom’s jaw tightened but he nodded again, clearly sensing that Mara needed something from him, whether it was support or answers, he wasn’t sure yet. Together they made their way towards a narrow staircase tucked behind a bookshelf in the corner of the room. As they climbed up into the attic, the air grew colder and more oppressive with each step. Dust motes danced in the faint light filtering through small cracks in the walls.

Chapter

THREE

written by Olive Kassen

The attic was a labyrinth of shadows and silence, each step up the narrow staircase sending whispers through the rafters like secrets shared by the old house itself. Mara felt Tom's presence close behind her, his breath warm against her neck despite the chill that pervaded the air. The room above them was filled with layers of forgotten history, yellowed newspapers crinkled underfoot, antique trunks dust-covered and shut tight, and shelves lined with jars containing objects long abandoned to decay. "Be careful," Tom whispered, his voice a thread in the tapestry of silence. Mara nodded without turning around, her eyes scanning the clutter for anything that might hint at what had happened here before their arrival. The attic was vast yet cramped, every square inch packed with remnants from another era: rusted tools hanging from hooks above an old desk scattered with papers, a faded map pinned to one wall with a crooked pin. Mara's fingers brushed against the surface of an ancient globe as she passed it, feeling the chill seep into her bones. Each rotation seemed to spin the room around her, making shadows dance and merge in unsettling ways. She paused at the desk, reaching for a pile of papers that looked more like scraps than documents, torn edges jagged where they had been ripped or burned. "These look recent," Mara murmured, pulling out one sheet covered in hurried handwriting. "They talk about strange noises at night, cold spots..." Her

voice trailed off as she read further, each line a sentence lost to time but clear enough to send shivers down her spine. The notes were filled with desperate pleas and warnings, a cry for help from someone who had seen something too terrible to endure. Tom's hand landed on her shoulder, pulling Mara back to the present. "What does it say?" he asked, his breath catching slightly as if echoing her own fear. "They're warning about... this place," she replied softly, her eyes scanning over more scraps. There was a pattern in these notes, a sequence of dates and times that aligned with their own arrival here. As if fate had led them to a house already steeped in tragedy waiting for its next victims. "We need to find out what's causing it," Tom said firmly, though his grip tightened on her shoulder as if he too was struggling against an unseen force pulling him back into the darkness of this attic. Mara nodded again, pushing past the desk and heading towards a small chest pushed up against one wall. It looked old but sturdy, its surface scratched by years of neglect yet somehow still intact. "Let's see what's inside," she suggested softly, her hand reaching for the lid. As she lifted it, dust clouded in the air around them, settling into their hair and coats like a tangible weight of sorrow. Inside were several journals bound with leather straps that looked as if they had been there since before the house was built. They lay together, each volume slightly worn but still filled with stories from other nights just like this one, nights when whispers in the darkness became screams and silence became a tombstone. Mara's fingers trembled as she reached for one of them, pulling it out carefully. The cover was embossed with initials: J.M., followed by what looked like a year that belonged to someone long dead. She opened it, her eyes scanning over entries filled with descriptions so vivid they felt real, flesh and bone materializing before her mind's eye. "Mara!" Tom called sharply from behind her, pulling her back into the present once more. "We need to leave here," he urged, his tone sharp but urgent. Something in his voice made her look up quickly, seeing him scanning the room around them with a wary intensity that spoke of danger lurking just beyond sight. "What is it?" she asked, turning to

follow his gaze. The shadows seemed darker now, thicker, pressing against the edges of light from below like hungry mouths waiting for another soul to fall into their grasp. “There,” Tom pointed towards one corner where several old trunks stood stacked against a wall. “That’s where it started last time.”

Mara’s heart skipped a beat as she followed his finger, her eyes locking onto the sight that sent a chill down her spine: an open trunk filled with more journals and papers, each item marked by the passage of time but also recent additions suggesting active use. It was clear someone had returned to this attic recently to continue whatever rituals or investigations these books contained. “Someone’s been here,” Mara whispered, her voice barely audible over the oppressive quiet that seemed to pulse through the room like a heartbeat of dread.

Chapter

FOUR

written by rpenguin

Chapter 4

“Last time?” Mara asked.

Tom did not answer.

His hand was still raised, one finger pointing at the open trunk. Slowly, as if someone else were moving it for him, he lowered his arm.

“You said that’s where it started last time.”

“No, I didn’t.”

Below them, a floorboard creaked.

Then another.

Someone was climbing the attic stairs.

Mara turned toward the opening. “Sarah?”

The footsteps stopped.

Tom’s fingers closed around her wrist. His palm was wet and ice-cold.

“Don’t call to it,” he whispered.

Mara looked at him. In the thin gray light, his face seemed subtly wrong, the eyes too hollow, the mouth held too carefully shut.

“How do you know not to call to it?”

The stairs groaned again.

One step.

Pause.

One step.

Pause.

It was copying the rhythm Mara and Tom had used on the way up.

Mara pulled her wrist free and backed into the desk. Papers slipped to the floor. The sheet she had been reading landed faceup between them.

The handwriting was no longer still.

Black ink pushed out of the paper in slow, glistening strokes, although no pen touched it.

MARA ASKED TOM WHAT HAPPENED LAST TIME.

She couldn't breathe.

A second line formed beneath the first.

TOM REMEMBERED.

"I've never been here," Tom said, but tears had filled his eyes.

Something reached the top stair.

They could hear it breathing below the attic door: a damp, crowded sound, like several people trying to use the same lungs.

Then Sarah's voice floated up through the gap.

"Mara? Tom? We found Jake."

Mara took one step toward the stairs.

Tom caught her coat and yanked her back so hard the collar bit into her throat.

From downstairs, far beneath them, Sarah screamed.

Not called. Screamed.

"Mara, don't open it! There's someone on the stairs!"

The thing outside the attic door began to laugh in Sarah's voice.

It laughed too long. The breath never broke. The pitch sank until it was no longer laughter at all, only a low vibration that shook dust from the rafters.

The attic door lifted half an inch.

Tom threw himself onto it. Something struck from underneath, snapping his body upward. He landed hard, sprawled across the wood.

"Help me!"

Mara dropped beside him and pressed both hands to the door. It bucked under her palms. Through the narrow gap, she saw fingers curl around the edge.

Too many fingers.

They were stacked one over another, pale and jointed, their nails packed with black soil. One wore a narrow gold ring. Another had a child's blue bandage wrapped around its knuckle. A third had Tom's bitten thumbnail.

Mara jerked her gaze toward his hands.

His right thumbnail was bleeding.

The finger below scratched patiently at the wood.

"It makes copies," Tom gasped. "Bad ones at first."

"You remember."

His face crumpled.

"I remember you dying."

The force beneath the door stopped.

The sudden stillness was worse.

Behind them, inside the attic, a trunk lid creaked open.

Not the open trunk.

The largest one, wedged beneath the eaves.

Mara and Tom turned together.

Two bare feet stood inside it.

The rest of the figure rose slowly from the trunk, unfolding far beyond the depth that could have contained it. Knees. A white nightdress. Arms hanging almost to the floor. Its head remained bowed beneath the rafters, lank hair covering its face.

Mara knew the nightdress.

She had been wearing it in the mirror upstairs.

The figure raised its head.

It had Mara's face.

Almost.

The eyes were set too deep, and the smile continued past the corners of the mouth in fine red seams. When it spoke, Mara heard her own voice whisper directly inside her skull.

“You always find the journals.”

Tom scrambled backward. “No.”

The other Mara stepped out of the trunk. Its feet made no sound.

“You always bring him up here.”

“No,” Tom said again.

“And he always remembers too late.”

The thing on the stairs began tapping beneath the door.

Seven taps.

A pause.

Then an eighth.

Mara reached into her pocket and pulled out the journal. It opened by itself. Pages riffled beneath her hands, faster and faster, showing the same three nights written over and over in different inks, different handwriting, different languages. Every account ended in the attic. Every account named Mara.

On the final page, fresh ink gleamed.

THERE WERE EIGHT OF THEM WHEN THEY ENTERED THE HOUSE.

Below it, seven names had been written.

Mara. Tom. Sarah. Jake. Sam.

Chapter

FIVE

written by Margot Vail

The eighth name was blank. Mara's fingers tightened around the journal, her nails biting into the cover. Tom's eyes were fixed on the trunk, his breath coming in short gasps. The other Mara took a step forward, its nightdress rustling softly as it moved. Its smile widened, revealing teeth that glinted faintly in the dim light. "Who are you?" Mara whispered, her voice barely audible over the sound of footsteps descending from upstairs. Each tap on the attic floor was followed by a pause, then another tap, always one more than before. The other Mara tilted its head, the smile spreading across its face like a stain bleeding through paper. "I'm you," it said, in a tone that echoed inside Mara's skull. "We're all parts of each other."

Tom's grip on Mara's arm tightened. "What do we do?" he asked, his voice strained. Mara's eyes darted between Tom and the other Mara, her mind racing. "The journal," she said, turning back to it. "It knows everything that happens here." She flipped through the pages, searching for something, anything, that might explain what they were facing. The ink seemed to move beneath her fingers, shifting and reforming as if alive. "Stop!" Tom shouted suddenly, pulling Mara away from the journal. His eyes were wild with fear. "It's trying to confuse us."

The other Mara laughed softly, a sound like a breeze through dried leaves. "Confuse you?" it asked. "You already know everything that

happens here.” It stepped closer to them, its movements slow and deliberate. Mara felt the cold air pressing against her skin, making her shiver uncontrollably. The journal slipped from her fingers and fell onto the floor with a dull thud. She bent down to pick it up, but before she could touch it, Tom grabbed her wrist again and pulled her back. “We can’t stay here,” he said urgently. “We have to get out of the attic.”

Mara nodded, her mind finally focusing on their immediate danger. The door began to creak open from below, a thin line of light growing wider with each second. The other Mara stepped forward again, its hand reaching out towards them. Tom pushed Mara backward, away from the trunk and towards the stairs. “Go!” he shouted, shoving her harder than she expected. She stumbled but caught herself just before falling down the narrow staircase. The attic door creaked open further, revealing a pale hand curled around the edge. Tom’s eyes locked onto it for a moment, his jaw tightening as if he were preparing to fight whatever was coming through. Mara could see the muscles in his arm flexing beneath his shirt. “Mara!” Sarah’s voice echoed up from below, cutting through the oppressive silence like a knife. “Get down here! Something’s wrong!”

Mara hesitated for only a moment before turning and scrambling down the stairs as fast as she dared. Tom was right behind her, keeping pace but moving with a cautious deliberation that made him seem more grounded than when he had been in the attic. The floorboards creaked under their feet, each step sending vibrations through Mara’s body like an echo of fear. The room below them seemed smaller somehow, as if it were closing in around them. She could feel the journal in her pocket pressing against her leg with a weight that felt heavier than ink and paper should. Tom reached the ground floor first, his hand outstretched to help Mara down the last few steps. As she landed beside him, Sarah’s voice called from deeper inside the house: “Jake’s gone! He disappeared!”

Mara’s heart pounded in her chest as she turned towards the sound of her friend’s voice. Tom stepped forward, pulling her with him. They

moved through the dimly lit hallway towards where Sarah was waiting, her face pale and drawn. “Where is he?” Mara asked, her voice barely above a whisper. Sarah’s eyes darted around nervously before settling on them. “In his room,” she said quickly. “But when I looked in there...” Her words cut off as if the sentence had been snatched away mid-air. Tom’s hand tightened on Mara’s shoulder. “What happened?”

“He wasn’t there,” Sarah said, her voice shaking slightly. “His bed was empty, and his clothes were gone too.” She took a deep breath before continuing, her eyes fixed on something behind them. “But the worst part... there are footprints leading out of the house. Like he walked right through the walls.”

Mara’s stomach churned as she felt Tom’s grip tighten further around her arm. The journal pressed against her leg with renewed insistence. “Jake can’t just disappear,” Mara said, though it was more a plea than an assertion. “We need to find him.” She began moving towards Jake’s room, but Sarah stopped them before they could take another step.

Chapter

SIX

written by jmarsh

Sarah's hand was a vise around Mara's arm, her grip so tight it left bruises on the skin. "Wait," she hissed, eyes darting to Tom and back again. The hallway seemed even narrower now, as if the walls were closing in like jaws of an unseen predator. "We need to be careful," Sarah whispered urgently, her breath hot against Mara's neck. Tom's expression was a mix of fear and determination, his fingers flexing on the journal in his pocket. He nodded at Sarah without taking his eyes off the hallway ahead. The air felt thick with tension, every shadow casting longer and darker shapes as if the house itself were alive and watching them. "Where are we going?" Tom asked, voice low but steady. "Jake's room," Mara replied, trying to pull away from Sarah's grasp. She needed to move, feel like she was doing something tangible against the unseen threat that lurked around every corner. "We can't just leave him here."

Sarah released her grip reluctantly and stepped back, allowing them to continue forward cautiously. The floorboards creaked beneath their feet, each step echoing through the house as if calling out their presence to whatever else might be there. Mara's heart pounded in her chest, every breath a struggle against the oppressive weight of fear that seemed to press down on her lungs. As they approached Jake's room, the door was slightly ajar, its wood worn and splintered from years of neglect. A thin beam of light filtered through the crack, casting an eerie

glow across the floor in front of them. Mara felt Tom squeeze her shoulder again before stepping forward to push the door open wider. Inside, the bed was indeed empty, but something else caught their eyes immediately: a small, ornate box sitting on Jake's nightstand, its surface dusted with fine layers of filth that spoke of years untouched. The wood was dark and intricately carved, each panel etched with symbols that seemed to shift in meaning depending on the angle from which they were viewed. Mara approached it cautiously, her fingers hovering above the lid before finally lifting it open. Inside lay a series of old photographs, sepia-toned images capturing moments frozen in time: children playing in fields now long overgrown, families gathered around tables laden with food that had long since rotted away. Each photograph bore an eerie resemblance to the journal entries Mara had read earlier, the same faces and places depicted as if they were living memories rather than captured snapshots. Tom's voice broke through her reverie. "Look at this," he said, pointing towards a small, worn book lying next to the photographs. The cover was cracked, revealing pages yellowed with age but still filled with handwritten notes in various scripts and languages. Mara reached for it, her fingers brushing against cold metal before she pulled out what looked like an old pocket watch hanging from a chain. The weight of the watch in her hand felt oddly heavy, as if carrying more than just time itself. She flipped open the lid to reveal its face: 1972, cracked and faded, but still legible. The hands were frozen at exactly midnight, the moment when everything seemed to have gone wrong for those who had lived here before them. "Why did Jake take this?" Mara asked aloud, her voice barely a whisper in the quiet room. Tom's eyes narrowed as he looked around. "There must be something else here," he said, his gaze settling on a small drawer beneath Jake's nightstand. He pulled it open gently, revealing an assortment of old keys and tools. At the bottom lay a folded piece of paper with writing scrawled in hurried strokes. Mara unfolded it carefully. The words were written in blood-red ink, smeared as if by frantic hands: "Find the heart." Below that, a map sketched hastily in

pencil pointed towards an unknown location marked only with a small black cross and the initials 'J.M.', the same initials embossed on one of the journals Mara had found in the attic. "Jake must have figured this out," Tom said, his voice low and grave. "He knew where to look."

Mara's fingers tightened around the journal and the watch. "We need to find Jake," she repeated firmly, her resolve strengthening with each word. She turned towards Sarah, who stood just outside the room, eyes wide and fearful but determined. "We have to go now," Mara said, stepping out into the hallway once more. The map crinkled in her pocket as she moved, its secrets waiting to be uncovered. They needed to find Jake before whatever had taken him could do any more damage. And they needed answers, the heart, the journals, and the truth behind this ancient house.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by inkwell_amy

Sarah's eyes locked onto Mara with a mix of fear and resolve. "Let's go," she said quietly, her voice steady despite the tremor in her hands. She stepped back into the hallway, motioning for Tom to follow. He nodded curtly, already moving past Mara towards the door leading out of Jake's room. Mara hesitated only a moment longer before following them, the journal and watch heavy in her pocket. The map had burned a hole through several layers of paper and fabric alike. "We have to be quick," Tom said as they reached the hallway. His voice was barely above a whisper but carried with it an urgency that made Mara's heart race. "Where are we going?" Sarah asked, glancing nervously at the door behind them. "We need to find Jake," Mara replied. Her gaze darted around, trying to pinpoint any sign of danger in the shadows that seemed to stretch out towards them like hungry fingers. "Follow the map."

Tom nodded and pulled a crumpled paper from his pocket, unfolding it carefully. The map was crude but detailed enough for him to trace their way through the house's layout. "We head down this hall," he said, pointing at the inked line on the paper, "then take the second right towards the back of the house."

They moved swiftly but quietly, Mara in the lead and Tom bringing up the rear, his eyes scanning every corner for any hint of movement or

danger. Sarah walked between them, her steps lighter than either of theirs despite the tension she carried. A sudden chill washed over Mara's skin as they reached a crossroads where two narrow hallways met at an angle. The air felt different here, thicker and more oppressive. Tom's hand slipped into hers without a word, squeezing tightly before releasing just as quickly. She glanced back to see him nodding towards the map again. "We go left," he said, pointing down the hallway that branched off from their current path. "The map shows an old cellar door at the end."

Mara nodded and started moving again, her pace quickening as they approached what appeared to be a solid wooden panel set into the wall about halfway down the hall. The door was ancient, its surface weathered and worn with age. A rusty padlock hung from the center of it, swinging gently in the draft that had begun to blow through the house. "Jake must have come this way," Tom said, his voice tinged with a mix of hope and dread as he reached for the lock. "If we're fast enough..."

Sarah stepped forward, her hand reaching out to press against the door. Her eyes were wide and fearful but determined nonetheless. She pushed against it, feeling the wood give slightly beneath her fingers. With a quick motion, Tom pulled his pocketknife from its sheath and cut through the rusted lock with practiced ease. The old door groaned as it swung open inward, revealing a steep staircase leading down into darkness below. A musty smell rose up to meet them, a mixture of damp earth, rotting wood, and something else Mara couldn't quite place. Her heart pounded in her chest as she stepped forward, Tom's hand still on the small of her back guiding her downward. The stairs were narrow and steep, each step creaking loudly under their feet. They moved down quickly but carefully, the light from the lantern flickering against the walls casting long shadows that seemed to reach out like grasping hands trying to pull them in. Sarah stumbled once on a loose board near the bottom but caught herself before she could fall. "We're almost there," Tom said when they reached the landing at the base of the stairs. A small

room lay ahead, its door slightly ajar, revealing flickering light from within. “Jake?” Mara called out softly as they approached. No answer came back, only the eerie glow of a single candle burning in the middle of an old wooden table surrounded by chairs that looked like relics from another era. The walls were lined with shelves packed full of dusty books and jars filled with strange liquids that seemed to shift and shimmer under the candlelight. “Look,” Sarah whispered, pointing towards one corner where a small figure huddled against the wall. Jake’s back was turned away from them, his head bowed down as if lost in thought or fear. His clothes were dirty and torn, but it was clear he had been moving through this room with purpose before whatever held him here stopped him cold. Mara stepped forward, her voice steady despite the pounding of her heart.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by Ruth Ann Keller

Mara's footsteps faltered as she approached Jake, her heart clenching at the sight of him huddled against the wall. "Jake," she called again, more firmly this time. His shoulders tensed but he did not move, his back remaining rigid and still. Tom stepped beside Mara, his hand reaching out to gently touch Jake's shoulder. The boy flinched violently at the contact, turning sharply with a look of sheer terror etched on his face. "It's us," Tom said softly, trying to sound reassuring despite the unease in his voice. "We're here to help."

Jake blinked rapidly, as if waking from a deep trance, and slowly nodded before standing up shakily. He rubbed his eyes with one hand while the other clutched tightly at something hidden beneath his tattered shirt. His gaze darted around nervously before settling on Mara's face, searching for any sign of sincerity in her expression.

"We need to get out of here," Jake said, his voice barely above a whisper but filled with an urgent edge that cut through the oppressive silence like a knife. "Something... something bad is waiting."

Tom nodded sharply, glancing around the room as if confirming what Jake had just conveyed. The shelves lining the walls seemed to close in, their contents shifting slightly with each passing moment, shadows moving on their own accord. Mara felt an icy grip settle over her heart.

“Agreed,” Tom replied firmly. “But we need to know where this ‘heart’ is first. It’s our only hope.”

Jake swallowed hard and nodded, finally stepping forward to reveal the object clutched in his hand, a small silver locket dangling from a worn chain around his neck. The locket was cool against Mara’s fingers when she reached out to take it from him. Inside, there was a photograph of Jake as a child, standing beside an older man and woman who must have been his parents. The image seemed to pulse faintly with an inner light, the edges blurred but the faces clear.

“I found this in one of the journals,” Jake explained quickly, his voice trembling slightly. “It showed where to find the heart.” He pointed at a small symbol etched into the locket’s surface: three interlocking circles forming a triangle within a larger circle. Mara recognized it immediately from one of the maps she had seen earlier.

“Follow me,” Jake said, turning and leading them towards a section of shelves that appeared to be concealing a door behind them. As he pushed aside several books, the wooden panels shifted inward revealing a narrow passageway barely wide enough for one person at a time. The air grew colder as they stepped into it, pressing against their skin with an almost tangible force.

“This way,” Jake said, his voice echoing slightly off the stone walls. They moved through the cramped tunnel in single file, Mara and Tom flanking Sarah on either side to ensure she did not slip or stumble over any loose stones. The path twisted and turned sharply, leading deeper into the bowels of the house than they had ever ventured before.

After what felt like an eternity but could only have been minutes, they emerged onto a small platform overlooking a vast underground chamber. The room was cavernous, its ceiling high enough to accommodate entire buildings above ground, yet it still felt claustrophobic due to sheer density of artifacts and relics scattered across the floor. In the center stood a large stone pedestal, upon which rested a dark wooden box bound with iron bands.

Jake's eyes widened as he approached the pedestal, his hand trembling slightly as he reached for the lid of the box. Mara watched him intently, her heart pounding in anticipation of what might lie within. When Jake finally lifted the lid, they all gasped at the sight inside: a pulsating orb about the size of an apple, glowing with an eerie red light that seemed to pulse in time with their own heartbeat.

"This is it," Jake said breathlessly. "The heart." He reached out hesit

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Priya Nair

The heart beats, but whose?

Lior Tannen

The weight of secrets presses down as heavy as the silence that follows them out into the light.

Ruth Ann Keller

The darkness whispers names in the hollows of old houses.

Finished on 7 October 2026.

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

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AyAYx](https://relaywriters.com/read/91?t=ULN84foPnWrMPDV0Hh99KBqKatfAyAYx)