

COURAGE

Courage Is Driving Toward It

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY • WRITERS

The writers

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

One	Iris Beddoe
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Seven	Priya Nair
Eight	Ruth Ann Keller

Chapter

One

written by Iris Beddoe

The pay phone rings at 3:47 a.m. in a rest stop outside Barstow and nobody living should know I'm here. I've been standing beside it for six minutes. Waiting without knowing I was waiting. The diesel pumps hum their industrial lullaby and a semi pulls out slow, red lights dragging across asphalt like something wounded leaving a trail. Three rings now. My hand knows what to do before my brain catches up. Muscle memory from a life I thought I'd buried in the Nevada desert along with everything else. "You need to listen very carefully." A woman's voice. Not young. Smoke-scarred and certain. "Wrong number." I start to hang up but she says my name. My real one. The one on the birth certificate my mother burned. "They found the box, Claire. The one you and Marcus buried. They're already at the diner." The receiver is cold. Everything is cold. Marcus died three years ago in Tucson. Heart attack in a Denny's parking lot, they said. Clean. Natural. I knew better. "How did you, " "The waitress. The one with the scar. She's still alive but she won't be if you don't move." Through the window I can see my car. Tan Civic with a cracked windshield and Wyoming plates I bought off a tweaker in Cheyenne. The back seat holds everything I own: a duffel bag, a road atlas from 1997, a .38 I've never fired. "Who is this?" "Someone who made the same mistake you did. Someone who thought running was the same as being free." A truck passes on the highway. For

a moment its headlights turn the phone booth into an aquarium, and me into something pinned and drowning. "The diner closes in forty minutes. After that, she's alone." "I can't." My voice comes out smaller than I meant it. "I'm nobody. I'm nothing." "You're the only one left who knows where the second box is." I don't ask how she knows about the second box. I don't ask anything because the line is already dead and I'm standing in the fluorescent nowhere holding a dial tone like it's a hand that might save me. The atlas is open on the hood of my car. Barstow to Needles is sixty-three miles. The diner sits between them like a punctuation mark in a sentence nobody should finish. I think about the waitress. Carla or Cara or something with a C. She poured coffee with hands that shook just slightly, the scar running from her ear to her collarbone like a road map to violence. She'd looked at me like she knew. Like she'd been waiting too. The gun is heavier than it should be. I check the cylinder even though I checked it two hours ago in a parking lot outside Kingman. Six rounds. I've practiced the motion of loading it so many times the bullets slide home like prayers. Forty minutes. I could drive north instead. Canada is just a tank of gas and a dream away. I could be someone else by morning. I've done it before. But the voice on the phone knew my name. My real name. And if they found the first box, they know what Marcus and I saw that night in the warehouse. They know what we took. They know we made copies. The engine turns over on the third try. A good omen or a last chance, I can't tell the difference anymore. The highway stretches ahead like a question I've been running from for five years. Running is easy. Running is what prey does. Courage is driving toward the thing that terrifies you. I press the accelerator and the night swallows me whole.

Chapter

Two

written by typewriter_tom

The diner looks like every diner. That's the problem. Yellow lights. Gravel lot. A sign that says EAT in letters tall enough to read from the highway. Two cars parked crooked near the door. One is a station wagon held together with rust and prayer. The other is black. New. Wrong. I kill my headlights a hundred yards out and coast to the edge of the lot. The .38 sits on the passenger seat. I pick it up. Put it down. Pick it up again. Through the window I can see her. The waitress. She's wiping down tables in that slow way people do when they're alone and time doesn't matter. The scar catches the light when she turns her head. The black car is empty. Which means whoever drove it is inside. Or around back. Or watching me right now through a scope. I should leave. Every surviving instinct says run. But the woman on the phone knew about the second box. The only people who knew were me and Marcus. And Marcus is dead. Unless he isn't. Unless that whole story about the Denny's parking lot was another lie in a world made of them. My phone buzzes. A text from a number I don't recognize. Three words: BACK DOOR UNLOCKED. I look at the diner. Look at my phone. The message deletes itself while I'm watching. The desert air tastes like gasoline and sage. I move along the side of the building with the gun pointed down. My hands are steadier than they should be. Fear does that sometimes. Turns you into something clean and mechanical. The back door is open an

inch. No light inside. I can hear the hum of a walk-in cooler. Smell fryer oil and old coffee. I push through into the kitchen. Industrial stove. Prep counter. A radio playing low, some call-in show about UFOs and government conspiracies. The kind of thing that stops being funny when you know too much. The waitress is at the counter now. I can see her through the service window. She's pouring coffee for someone I can't see. Her hands shake worse than before. I move through the kitchen. Past the grill. Past stacks of plates that haven't been washed. The door to the dining room is a circle of light. A man sits at the counter. Gray suit. No tie. His hands are folded like he's praying or thinking about it. When the waitress sets down his coffee he doesn't look up. "You can come out, Claire." His voice is flat. Midwestern. The kind of voice that delivers bad news without inflection. "We've been waiting." I step through with the gun raised. The waitress sees me and her face does something complicated. Not fear exactly. Something closer to relief. "Put that down," the man says. Still not looking. "You're not going to shoot anyone." "You don't know me." "I know you've had that .38 for five years and never fired it. I know you practice loading it in parking lots. I know you're here because someone called and you came anyway." Now he looks. His eyes are pale blue, almost colorless. "That makes you either brave or stupid. I'm betting on stupid." The waitress is frozen with the coffee pot. I can see the scar moving as she swallows. "Where's the second box, Claire?" "I don't know what you're talking about." He sighs. Pulls something from his jacket. Not a gun. A photograph. He slides it across the counter. It's Marcus. Recent. Very recent. Standing in front of a convenience store I recognize from Albuquerque. Marcus, who died three years ago. Marcus, who is apparently still alive.

Chapter

Three

written by Lior Tannen

The photograph is wrong in my hands. Not the image, which is clear enough: Marcus in his faded Diamondbacks cap, squinting at the camera like he always did, one hand shading his eyes. Wrong because the convenience store behind him has a banner advertising a sale that started two months ago. I know because I stopped there myself on the way to Barstow. "He didn't want to involve you." The man's voice is still flat, but something underneath it now. Not kindness. Proximity to it. "Figured if you thought he was dead, they'd leave you alone." "They?" My gun is still raised but my arm aches. "Who's they?" The waitress sets down the coffee pot. Her name tag says CARMEN. Been wearing the wrong name in my head for five years. She reaches under the counter and I swing toward her but she just pulls out a dish towel, starts wiping her hands like she's Lady Macbeth and the spot won't come out. "You want to tell her, or should I?" The man looks at her for the first time. "Sit down, Carmen." "I've been sitting down for five years." She throws the towel on the counter. "Pouring coffee for men like you. Waiting for someone to remember I was there that night too." My mouth is dry. "The warehouse." "The warehouse." Carmen's laugh is bitter. "You and Marcus, you thought you were so smart. Take the evidence, make copies, insurance policy. But you didn't see the cameras. You didn't see me in the office above the loading dock, doing the books." She touches her

scar. "They wanted to know what you took. I told them I didn't know. Told them five different ways before they believed me." The man stands. He's taller than I expected. Moves like someone who's broken bones before. "The people Marcus worked for before he met you, they don't forgive loose ends. The first box you buried had copies of shipping manifests. Names. Dates. Enough to put some important people in prison." He pauses. "But not enough to keep you alive. The second box, the one nobody can find. That's the real insurance." "I don't know where it is." "Yes, you do. Marcus told you. He wouldn't have left you hanging." But he did. That's what hurts. Marcus died, or pretended to die, or whatever the truth is, and he took the location with him. Unless. The atlas in my car. Marcus gave it to me the week before he disappeared. Said he found it at a yard sale, thought I'd like it. Old maps for old roads. I'd thought it was sentiment. Marcus wasn't a sentimental man. "The second box doesn't exist," I say. Carmen makes a noise. "Don't be stupid. These people killed a federal witness in protective custody. They burned down a prosecutor's house with his kids inside. You think they won't kill some waitress who saw the wrong thing?" The man's phone buzzes. He looks at it. His face changes. Not much, but enough. "We're out of time." "What does that mean?" Carmen's voice goes high. "It means they're not patient." He looks at me. "You've got one chance. Tell me where the second box is, I get you both out. Witness protection. New names. The real kind, not the running kind you've been doing." "I don't know." He reaches into his jacket again. This time it is a gun. Small, black, practical. He doesn't point it at anyone. Just sets it on the counter between us like a choice. "Then she dies. Not because I want to. Because that's how this works." I think about the atlas. The pages Marcus thumbed through, corner folded on a map of Utah. Bryce Canyon circled in pencil so light you'd miss it if you weren't looking. A place we camped once, before everything. Where we carved our initials into a dead tree like tourists, like people who believed in future tense. "Okay," I say. "I'll take you to it." The man picks up his gun. Carmen looks at me. Her eyes are wet but her jaw is set. "But she comes with us," I add. "Both of us or nothing." He

considers this. Outside, headlights sweep across the parking lot. He sees them. So do I. "Deal," he says. "Back door. Now."

Chapter

Four

written by Olive Kassen

The gravel sounds different when you're running. Sharper. Each stone a small verdict against the soles of your feet. Carmen is ahead of me, moving faster than someone her age should, the kind of speed that comes from knowing what waits if you're slow. The man is beside us, gun low, scanning the lot like he's reading weather patterns in the arrangement of shadows and chrome. The headlights are still coming. Slow. Whoever's driving isn't in a hurry because they don't need to be. My car is too far. The black sedan closer but the man shakes his head, keeps moving toward the tree line past the dumpsters where the desert starts its long conversation with nothing. Carmen stumbles on loose rock and I catch her elbow. Her skin is hot through the thin fabric of her uniform, fever-hot, and I wonder if she's been sick this whole time, waiting at that counter, pouring coffee with hands that knew too much. "There." The man points to a wash thirty yards out, a depression in the earth where flash floods carve their temporary rivers. We slide down the bank and the ground turns to sand, still warm from the day. Above us the parking lot glows sodium orange. Car doors. Two of them, opening with that solid chunk expensive vehicles make. Footsteps on gravel. Someone laughs, easy and conversational, like they're here for pie. "How many?" Carmen whispers. "Enough." The man checks his phone. The screen lights his face from below and I see he's younger than I thought.

Forty, maybe. Scar tissue along his jaw that makeup might have hidden in different light. The atlas is still in my car. Everything I own is in that car and none of it matters except the map with the pencil circle, the coordinates to a box buried under red rock and juniper roots. Marcus understood that the only safe place was somewhere beautiful. Somewhere people went to look at something other than each other. "Tell me where it is." The man's voice is urgent now, different than before. "I can call this in. Get people here who can help." "You said we were out of time." "We are. But if they think you've already told me, they might..." He stops. Above us, footsteps moving in a pattern. Methodical. Searching. Carmen is breathing hard beside me. I can smell her perfume, something floral and cheap, and underneath it the salt-copper smell of fear. She touches her scar again, that unconscious gesture, tracing the history of what men with guns can do to soft tissue. "Bryce Canyon," I say. Not to him. To her. "There's a trail called Peek-a-Boo Loop. Mile and a half in, there's a dead bristlecone pine split by lightning. Roots exposed on the south side." The man is typing on his phone, one-handed, gun still ready. "How deep?" Carmen asks. "Three feet. Wrapped in contractor bags, then a lockbox." "What's in it?" I look at her. Really look. The scar is old but the fear is fresh, worn like a coat she's never been allowed to take off. "Everything Marcus couldn't bring himself to destroy. Video. Audio. The real manifest, not the copy. Names of people who thought they were safe." A flashlight beam cuts across the wash twenty yards east. Closer than it should be. The man kills his phone screen. We wait. The beam moves away. Comes back. Someone up there knows what they're doing, working a grid, eliminating possibilities. "If I don't make it," Carmen says, and the man puts a hand on her shoulder. "You'll make it." But his voice is too careful. The kind of careful that comes from lying to people who are already dead and just don't know it yet. The atlas. I keep coming back to it. Marcus folding that corner, pressing the pencil light enough that you'd think it was accidental. He knew I'd find it or he hoped I would. Hope and knowledge aren't the same thing but sometimes they're all you have. "There's a culvert," the

man says. "Runs under the highway. Comes out a quarter mile north." Carmen looks at the steep bank. At her sensible waitress shoes. At the stars overhead, hard and distant as judgment. "Okay," she says. We start crawling.

Chapter

Five

written by wordsbylena

The culvert mouth is forty-two inches wide. I measure it with my eyes first, then confirm with my hands when we reach it, palms flat against concrete still radiating the day's heat. Eighteen degrees Celsius, maybe nineteen. Warm enough that the snakes haven't retreated yet. That matters. Everything about confined spaces matters when you're trying to fit three bodies through them in the dark. Carmen goes first. She's smallest, five-foot-three according to the way she has to reach for the top edge to pull herself in. The man follows. Six-foot-one, wider through the shoulders. He has to angle sideways, gun hand leading. I count to three and go last because someone has to watch the opening behind us and I'm the one they're not paying to protect. The culvert smells like rust and rodent urine. Water runs somewhere below us, maybe six inches deep, moving south to north. That's wrong for the drainage pattern but I file it away. Wrongness means human intervention means someone else has used this route. The concrete is smooth under my palms, no graffiti, no trash. Maintained. Recently. We move in silence measured by breathing patterns. Carmen's is ragged, three short inhales to one long exhale. Stress response. The man breathes through his nose, controlled, military rhythm. Mine is counting: eight crawling motions forward, pause, eight more. The culvert should run two hundred forty yards to clear the highway. At our current pace, six minutes. Maybe seven.

Behind us, voices. Two men, possibly three, the sound distorted by the concrete tube into something that echoes without words. They've found the wash. They're following the same logic we did, working the terrain, eliminating options. Four minutes head start. Not enough if they're faster. Probably faster. Carmen stops. The man stops. I stop. The space between us collapses into held breath and the sound of water that shouldn't be flowing the direction it is. "What?" The man's whisper is sharp. "My shoe." Carmen's voice. "It came off." I can hear her feeling around in the water, hands slapping wet concrete. The shoe matters more than it should. One shoe means limping. Limping means slow. Slow means caught. The arithmetic is clean. "Leave it." The man. "I can't run in one shoe." "You can't run at all if you're dead." But she's still searching. I count to five. To ten. Behind us the voices are louder, which means closer, which means the culvert is carrying sound both ways and they know we're here now. Simple acoustics. There's no hiding the scuff of cloth on concrete, the splash of hands in shallow water. "Found it." Relief in her voice. Thirty seconds lost. Thirty seconds that cost something we haven't paid yet. We start moving again. Faster now. Carmen's breathing deteriorates into something wet. The man's gun hand drags on concrete and I hear the metal scrape, once, twice. He's tiring. Everyone tires. It's just math and muscle and how long you can sustain controlled panic before the control part fails. Light ahead. Not much, just the difference between absolute dark and the dark that means exit. Seventy yards, maybe eighty. I recalculate our pace, factor in Carmen's breathing, the man's scraping gun hand, the voices behind us getting louder. The numbers don't work. We're going to come out of this culvert with maybe ninety seconds before they come out behind us. The man knows it too. He stops again. Turns in the confined space, complicated geometry of shoulders and hips and gun arm. "Keep going," he says to Carmen. "What are you doing?" "Creating a delay." He looks back at me. His face is shadow-carved, unreadable. "You get her to the highway. Flag down a truck. Tell them anything. Tell them you're running from a husband." He pauses. "You know how to get to Bryce

Canyon?" "Highway 15 north. Exit 95 east." The route is filed in my head, miles and estimated fuel consumption and three places to stop for gas without security cameras. "Good." He's wedging himself across the culvert now, back against one side, boots against the other. Creating an obstacle. Creating minutes for us that he won't have for himself. "Go." Carmen is already moving. I follow. The light grows. Behind us, the man's voice echoes: "That's far enough." Then the sound of his gun, enclosed space making it enormous, and we're running.

Chapter

Six

written by Sammy Hall

The highway noise hits different when you're coming from underneath. It sounds like the future, all eighteen-wheelers and wind shear, and we come out of that culvert like birth trauma, Carmen first, then me, both of us stumbling up the embankment toward the shoulder where the asphalt hums with friction and distance. Carmen's limping. The shoe she found doesn't fit right anymore, water-warped or maybe it never fit, maybe she's been walking wrong for years and I'm only noticing now because every step costs us visibility. We're sixty yards from the culvert mouth. Then eighty. Behind us, more gunfire. Three shots, close together. Professional spacing. Then nothing. The nothing is worse. "We have to flag someone down." Carmen's voice is shredded. She keeps looking back, waiting for the man to follow. He's not going to follow. We both know it but she hasn't admitted it yet, hasn't done the math on how many bullets were his and how many weren't. A semi blows past doing seventy, chrome and running lights. I wave both arms but the driver doesn't even brake. Why would he? Two women on the side of Highway 15 at four in the morning, one in a waitress uniform, one in clothes that smell like desert and culvert water. We look like the kind of problem you drive past, the kind that costs more than it saves. "Try crying," I say. "What?" "Cry. Look helpless. Drivers stop for helpless." Carmen stares at me like I've suggested something obscene. Then she

wipes her face, smearing the mixture of sweat and concrete dust into something that could pass for tears in headlights. We keep walking north, thumbs out, performing distress. Another semi. This one slows. I see the brake lights bloom red, the air brakes hissing, and my chest unlocks slightly. The truck pulls onto the shoulder forty yards ahead, hazards blinking. Carmen starts running. Her bad shoe slips but she catches herself, keeps going. I follow, checking behind us. The culvert mouth is lit now, flashlight beams sweeping the opening. Two figures. Maybe three. Hard to count in the dark. The truck driver leans out his window. Sixties, weathered, the kind of face that's seen every variation of roadside trouble and survived by knowing which ones to avoid. "You ladies okay?" "Our car broke down," Carmen says, which is close enough to true that it doesn't sound like lying. "Back at the rest stop. We tried walking but, " She gestures at her shoe, her uniform, the general catastrophe of our situation. The driver looks at me. I nod, trying to seem like someone whose car might reasonably break down, whose life might be that simple. "Where you headed?" "Cedar City," I say. First town north with enough people to disappear into. "We can call someone from there." He's deciding. I watch it happen on his face, the calculation every driver makes between human decency and self-preservation. Behind us, the flashlight beams are moving up the embankment. Thirty seconds, maybe less. "Please," Carmen says. Not performing anymore. Actually begging. The driver hits a button and the passenger door unlocks with a chunk that sounds like salvation. Carmen climbs up first, awkward in the high cab. I follow, pulling the door shut just as headlights sweep across the shoulder where we were standing. A black SUV, not the sedan from the diner. Different vehicle, same intention. "Those friends of yours?" the driver asks. "No," I say. "Husband?" "Something like that." He puts the truck in gear. The engine's vibration travels through the seat, through my spine, into the part of my brain that handles relief and realizes we're not safe yet, just moving. The SUV is pacing us now, hanging back fifty yards. Close enough to track. Not close enough to be obvious. The driver sees it too. His jaw works around

something unspoken, some internal argument between the story we told and the reality playing out in his mirrors. "You ladies want to tell me what's really going on?" Carmen looks at me. The atlas is still in my car at the diner. Everything Marcus hid is buried three hundred miles north under a dead tree. The man in the culvert bought us maybe ten minutes with whatever happened back there. I meet the driver's eyes in the rearview mirror. "How much do you know about witness protection?" I ask. He laughs once, sharp and humorless. "Enough to know it doesn't usually involve hitchhiking."

Chapter

Seven

written by Priya Nair

The driver's hand shifts on the wheel. Nothing dramatic, just the slight angle adjustment of someone realizing he's carrying more trouble than he budgeted for. "So what are you," he says. "Bank robbers? Drug dealers? Please tell me you're not drug dealers." "Worse," Carmen says. "Accountants." I nearly laugh. It's absurd enough to be true, which is probably why the driver doesn't immediately pull over and dump us. He just squints at Carmen like she's a math problem that won't balance. "Accountants." "She saw the wrong spreadsheet," I say. "I helped her copy it." The SUV behind us changes lanes. Still pacing, but now it's got a clearer sight line. Testing reaction time, maybe. Seeing if we'll panic. "That spreadsheet got people killed," Carmen adds. Her voice is steadier now, like saying it out loud has made it more manageable. "Fourteen people. That we know of." The driver's eyes flick to the mirror. Back to the road. He's got maybe three seconds before he decides this is above his pay grade. I watch his hand drift toward the CB radio mounted near his knee. "Don't," I say. "Lady, I'm not looking to get shot over your Excel files." "You won't. They need us alive." I lean forward, catching his reflection. "They need to know where the backup is. You're just transportation. Witnesses are messy but transportation is collateral damage. There's a difference." "That supposed to make me feel better?" "It's supposed to keep you from calling the cops, who will one hundred

percent pull us over and hand us directly to whoever's in that SUV." Carmen is staring out the passenger window like she's reading futures in the reflective mile markers. Her scar catches the dashboard light, a pale zigzag that probably looked worse before it healed. I think about the man in the culvert. How many bullets he had left. Whether he saved the last one. "Cedar City's forty minutes," the driver says finally. "You can ride that far. After that you're someone else's problem." "Fair." We drive. The SUV maintains distance, professional and patient. Probably running our plates, except we don't have plates, we have a driver who's starting to sweat through his shirt despite the AC blasting cold enough to frost the windows. "The box," Carmen says. "At Bryce Canyon. You really know where it is?" "Marcus drew me a map." "What if he lied?" "Then we dig up three feet of Utah for nothing and die anyway." I watch the mile markers tick past. "But he didn't lie." "How do you know?" "Because lying would've been easier." I shift in the seat, trying to find a position where my spine doesn't remember the culvert. "He could've told me it was anywhere. Could've sent me to Alaska, bought himself time. But he picked somewhere real. Somewhere we'd been." Carmen makes a noise that might be understanding. Her shoe is off now, sitting in her lap like evidence. The sole is separating from the upper, water damage turning the glue to mush. "I wore these for three years," she says to nobody. "Thought if I looked normal enough, acted normal enough, they'd forget I existed." "They don't forget." "No." The driver clears his throat. "You know, I got a cousin in Phoenix. Does identity stuff. Papers, mostly. Not asking questions kind of papers." I look at his reflection. He's not meeting my eyes, just offering information to the windshield. "How much?" Carmen asks. "For you two? Probably five grand each." "We don't have five grand." "Then you better hope that box is worth something." The SUV speeds up. Not much, just enough to close the gap to thirty yards. My hand finds the door grip, holding on like it matters. The driver sees. His jaw tightens but he doesn't slow down, doesn't speed up. Just maintains pace like we're all in this together now, which maybe we are. "Exit's coming up in twelve miles," he says. "Cedar

City. After that, I'm empty to Salt Lake. Could take you that far if you need." "We need Bryce Canyon." "That's two hours east. Off my route." "How much?" I ask. He calculates. I watch it happen in the set of his shoulders, the way he's weighing fuel costs against whatever story he'll tell himself later about why he helped. "Five hundred," he says. "Cash." "We don't have five hundred." "Then we got a problem." Behind us, the SUV drops back to sixty yards. Then eighty. I watch it fade into traffic like it was never there. That's worse. That means they know where we're going.

Chapter

Eight

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One does not require five hundred dollars if one possesses sufficient motivation. This is what I tell the driver, whose name, it transpires, is Leonard Moss, and who has been hauling refrigerated goods across the Interstate system for twenty-three years without incident. Until now. "Motivation doesn't pay for diesel," he says. "The people in that vehicle have killed fourteen individuals over accounting errors." I keep my voice level. "They burned a prosecutor's children. Do you suppose they shall honour your neutrality?" His hands tighten on the wheel. The calculation shifts. "What's in the box?" he asks. "Specifically." Carmen answers before I can stop her. "Video of a senator accepting payment to alter shipping manifests. Audio of three murders being ordered. Bank routing numbers for seventy million dollars in laundered money." She pauses. "And the name of every person who knew about it and stayed quiet." "Jesus Christ." "He wasn't consulted," I say. Leonard takes the exit for Cedar City despite his earlier protestations. The truck decelerates with a hiss of air brakes, and I watch the side mirror for the SUV. It does not follow. This means they have already positioned someone ahead. Simple tactics. One vehicle pushes, another waits. We stop at a truck stop whose fluorescent lights turn the parking lot into a stage set for exhaustion. Leonard kills the engine. The silence is profound. "I'm going to make a call," he says. "My cousin. The one I

mentioned." "We cannot stay in Cedar City." "You can't get to Bryce Canyon looking like fugitives, either." He opens his door. "Twenty minutes. There's showers inside. Clean up. I'll see what I can do about the money." He leaves. Carmen looks at me. Her face is grey. "He's going to turn us in," she says. "Perhaps." "You don't seem concerned." "Concern is expensive. I find I cannot afford it at present." We climb down from the cab. The asphalt is still warm, residual heat from the day. Inside, the truck stop sells coffee and desperation in equal measure. The showers cost three dollars. I have six remaining from the cash I took from the Civic's ashtray before fleeing the diner. Carmen takes the first shower. I stand watch, though against what I cannot specify. The bathroom smells like industrial soap and the particular loneliness of four a.m. facilities. When she emerges, her hair is wet but her uniform is unchanged. Still rumpled. Still marked by circumstance. My turn. The water is hot enough to hurt. I stand under it and permit myself thirty seconds of something approaching emotion. Marcus alive. The man in the culvert dead, probably. Carmen's scar. Leonard's cousin who does not ask questions. The atlas is gone. The only map remaining is the one in my head, and memory is fallible. Marcus circled Peek-a-Boo Loop. I am certain of this. Seventy percent certain. The dead bristlecone pine, lightning-split. That I remember clearly, the exposed roots like frozen tentacles, the way Marcus had laughed when I said it looked like something prehistoric. I dress in the same clothes. There are no alternatives. Leonard is waiting in the cab when we return. He hands Carmen a plastic bag. Inside: two shirts, jeans, a pair of sneakers. Not new, but clean. Thrift store purchases, perhaps. "My cousin says four grand for papers," Leonard says. "Both of you. He'll meet us in Panguitch, halfway to Bryce. Says it'll take three hours." "We agreed we have no money," I remind him. "You will. When you dig up that box." Carmen is changing in the sleeper compartment behind the seats. I hear the rustle of fabric, her small exhalation of relief at removing the waitress uniform that has served as her costume for half a decade. "And if the box contains nothing of monetary value?" I ask. "Then I've made a

poor investment." Leonard starts the engine. "But I don't think it does. I think you're sitting on something worth considerably more than four thousand dollars, and I think when this is over, you'll remember who helped you." It is, I suppose, a form of courage. The mercenary kind. Carmen emerges in jeans and a flannel shirt that hangs loose on her frame. She looks younger. Less defeated. The scar is still visible. "Let's go," she says. Leonard puts the truck in gear. Behind us, the truck stop recedes into insignificance. Ahead, somewhere in the Utah darkness, waits a dead tree and three feet of buried truth. One drives toward it regardless.

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more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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