

COURAGE

Courage Is What Comes After

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY • WRITERS

The writers

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

One	inkwell_amy
Two	typewriter_tom
Three	Priya Nair
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Five	Dan Okafor
Six	Sammy Hall
Seven	Ruth Ann Keller
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Chapter

One

written by inkwell_amy

The knife went in wrong. Mira felt it catch on something, bone maybe, and her wrist twisted before she could pull back. The man made a sound like air leaving a tire. He dropped the phone. She should have run then. That was the plan, drop him and move, but her hand wouldn't let go of the handle. The parking garage stank of piss and exhaust. Somewhere above them a car door slammed. He looked at her. Blood spread across his shirt in a shape like wings. "You don't even know," he said. Then he fell. The phone was still lit up on the concrete, face down, someone talking into it. A woman's voice, tinny and far away, saying a name that wasn't Mira's. She crouched and flipped it over without touching it with her fingers, used the corner of her jacket. The screen showed a call in progress. 00:04:19. Four minutes nineteen seconds. "Hello?" the voice said. "Marcus? Marcus, are you there?" Mira stood up. The knife was still in her hand. She'd bought it at a sporting goods store in Tempe, told the clerk she was going camping. He'd smiled and asked if she needed a sharpener. She'd said no. The man's chest moved. Still breathing. She stepped over him and walked toward the exit ramp, keeping her pace normal, like someone going to their car. A sedan passed her going down, music thumping through closed windows. She watched it take the turn to the lower level. At the street she stopped. Tuesday morning, cold, the sun not up yet. A bus hissed past trailing diesel. Across the intersection a

bodega was opening, metal grate rolling up, a woman in an apron sweeping the sidewalk in short angry strokes. Mira's car was two blocks north. She'd parked it at dawn, waited three hours in a coffee shop down the street watching the garage entrance. He arrived at eight-fifteen. Always eight-fifteen, the pattern never varied. That was what the file said. Tuesdays and Fridays, park on level three, slot near the stairwell, walk to the office building next door. The file didn't say why. Her phone buzzed. Not the burner, her real phone, the one she should have left at home. She'd forgotten it in her jacket pocket, a stupid mistake. The screen said DAD. She let it ring. The knife handle was sticky. She kept it low against her leg, out of sight. An old man walking a terrier passed her on the sidewalk. He nodded. She nodded back. Her face felt stiff, like a mask. When she reached her car she opened the trunk first. The duffel bag was there, everything inside it: the change of clothes, the bleach wipes, the plastic bags, the gloves she should have been wearing. She dropped the knife in and zipped it shut. Inside the car she sat behind the wheel and looked at her hands. The right one had blood on it, just a little, dried already. She picked at it with her thumbnail. Her real phone buzzed again. DAD. Then a voicemail notification. The sun was coming up now, orange light hitting the windshields of parked cars, turning them into mirrors. In one of them she saw her own face reflected, pale and strange, like someone she used to know. She started the engine. The file was in the glove box. She pulled it out, flipped through the pages. Marcus Linden, 43, divorced, one daughter. Accountant. Lived in Silver Lake. There was a photo, the same face she'd just watched fall. And behind that, other papers. Names she didn't recognize. Numbers. A list of dates. At the bottom, a phone number written in pencil. No name attached. She put the car in drive and pulled into traffic.

Chapter

Two

written by typewriter_tom

The bleeding started at the second stoplight. Not hers. The passenger seat. Something dark spreading through the canvas of the duffel bag, pooling in the seam where it touched the upholstery. Mira looked at it. Looked at the light. Green. She drove. The knife must have had blood on both sides of the blade. She'd zipped it into the bag without wrapping it first. Another stupid mistake. The list was getting long. She turned right, away from the freeway, into a neighborhood of low houses and chain link fences. A dog barked behind one of them, throwing itself against the metal. She watched the rearview. No one followed. Her real phone rang again. This time she answered. "Mira." Her father's voice, rough from smoking. "Where are you?" "Running errands." "This early?" "Couldn't sleep." A pause. She heard him breathing, heard the click of his lighter. "You need to come by the house," he said. "Why?" "Someone called for you. Last night. Wouldn't leave a name." The street ended in a cul-de-sac. She pulled over next to a dead lawn, put the car in park. "What did they say?" "Asked if you lived here. I said no. Asked if I knew where you were. I hung up." "Man or woman?" "Man. Young, maybe. Hard to tell." He coughed, a wet sound. "Mira. What's going on?" "Nothing." "Don't lie to me." She watched a cat cross the street, moving low and fast. "I have to go." "Wait." His voice changed, got quieter. "That thing we talked about. The thing you said you were finished

with." "I am finished." "Then why did I get that call?" She hung up. Put the phone face down in the cup holder. The duffel bag had stopped bleeding, or maybe the fabric was just soaked through now. She grabbed it and got out. There was a dumpster at the end of the cul-de-sac, pushed up against a cinderblock wall. She walked to it. The lid was already open. Inside, black bags and broken furniture and the smell of rot. She dropped the duffel on top. Back in the car she used the bleach wipes on the passenger seat, scrubbing until the chemical smell made her eyes water. The file was still in her lap. She opened it again, looked at the penciled phone number. Called it. It rang four times. Then a click, and nothing. No voicemail greeting. Just silence, and under it, the faint hiss of an open line. Someone was there. "Marcus is dead," Mira said. The silence continued. Then a breath, soft and deliberate. "No," a voice said. A woman. "He isn't." The line went dead. Mira sat holding the phone. Her hand was shaking. She put it down and started the engine and drove. At the first major intersection she stopped and pulled up the browser on her phone, searched for news. Nothing yet. Too soon. She typed in Marcus Linden's name. The results showed a LinkedIn profile, a few business articles, a Facebook page she couldn't access. Normal life. Surface life. She thought about the woman's voice on his phone in the parking garage. The one saying his name. And the woman who'd just spoken to her. Same voice, maybe. She couldn't tell. Traffic thickened as she got closer to downtown. She merged onto the freeway, let the flow carry her north. Her real phone buzzed. Not her father this time. A text from a number she didn't recognize. It said: Turn around.

Chapter

Three

written by Priya Nair

She looked in the rearview mirror. Three cars back, a white van. Before that, a pickup truck with a ladder rack. Before that, a silver Honda with a dented bumper. She changed lanes. The Honda changed lanes. Okay. Okay. She took the next exit too fast, tires complaining, and the Honda followed. The exit dumped her onto a commercial strip, mattress stores and payday loans and a Carl's Jr. with a broken sign. She pulled into the Carl's Jr. parking lot, swung around the building like she was heading for the drive-through, then gunned it out the back exit onto a side street. Checked the mirror. Nothing. She circled the block twice, watching. The Honda didn't reappear. False alarm, maybe. Paranoia. Except paranoia didn't send text messages. She pulled over behind a shuttered dry cleaner and looked at her phone. The text was still there. Turn around. No follow-up. She typed: Who is this? The reply came immediately: Someone who knows what you did wrong. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. Before she could respond, another message appeared: Check the file. Page 7. She grabbed the file from the passenger seat, flipped through it. Most of it was surveillance logs, photos, the kind of homework she always did. Page seven was a photocopy of a bank statement. Marcus Linden's name at the top, a list of transactions below. She scanned them. Grocery stores, gas stations, Netflix. Normal. Then at the bottom, highlighted in yellow, a wire transfer. Fifty thousand

dollars, outgoing. The recipient line was blank. "What the hell," she said out loud. Her phone rang. Not a text this time. The same unknown number. She answered. "You stabbed the wrong man," the woman's voice said. Not the same voice from Marcus's phone. Different. Older. Amused, almost. "I don't know what you're talking about," Mira said. The woman laughed. "The knife went in wrong, you said so yourself. Well, everything went in wrong, sweetheart. Marcus Linden is an accountant, sure. He's also bait." "Bait for what?" "For whoever the client actually wanted." A truck rumbled past, belching smoke. Mira watched it go. "You're lying." "Am I? Then why is Marcus still breathing? Why did the file have his medical history on page nine? Did you even check? He's got a pacemaker, honey. Synthetic valve in his heart. You stuck a four-inch blade in a man who's fifty percent titanium. He'll be uncomfortable, but he'll live." Mira flipped to page nine. There it was. Surgical history. Dates. Device serial numbers. "Who hired me?" she said. "You don't know?" The woman sounded delighted. "Oh, this is better than I thought." "Answer the question." "You didn't get hired, Mira. You got cast. This whole thing is a play, and you just walked onstage right on cue." Mira's hands were sweating. She wiped them on her jeans. "What do you want?" "I want you to finish what you started. The real job, not the fake one. But first you need to understand something. That phone call Marcus was on when you stuck him? The woman on the other end? That was his daughter. Seventeen years old. She heard the whole thing. Heard you breathing. Heard him fall." Mira closed her eyes. "And now," the woman continued, "she's on her way to find you. Except she doesn't know it's you she's looking for. She thinks it's me. Isn't that fun?" "Why are you telling me this?" "Because courage isn't stabbing a stranger in a parking garage, sweetheart. Courage is what comes after. When you realize you didn't finish the job. When you realize the job was never what you thought." The line went dead. Mira sat there, engine idling, the file open on her lap. Page seven. Page nine. She flipped back to the beginning. The photo of Marcus Linden. Behind it, the other names. She pulled those pages out, looked at them properly

for the first time. Six names. Six addresses. Six photos. The last photo was a teenage girl with dark hair and Marcus's eyes.

Chapter

Four

written by wordsbylena

The girl's photo had measurements written in the margin. Height: 5'6". Weight: 118 lbs. Hair: brown, shoulder-length. Last known location: Marshall High School, room 214, fourth period. Someone had tracked her movements. Someone had made her into data. Mira counted the annotations. Twelve separate entries. Dates and times logged across three weeks. The handwriting changed twice. First set in blue ink, compact and slanted. Second set in pencil, sprawling. Third set in blue again but different pressure, letters thicker. Three people had touched this file before it reached her. She flipped back to Marcus Linden's page. The wire transfer: fifty thousand, outgoing, recipient blank. She looked at the date. Two months ago. The same week his daughter's surveillance started according to the timestamps. He knew. He'd paid someone. The question was: paid them for what? Her phone buzzed. Text from the unknown number: You're still sitting behind the dry cleaner. White Civic. Engine running. Move. Mira's head snapped up. She scanned the street, the rooflines, the empty windows above the shuttered businesses. No movement. No van, no silver Honda, nothing. She put the car in drive. Pulled out slow, turned left, then right, then right again. Three blocks later she parked in a supermarket lot between two trucks and killed the engine. Waited. Counted to sixty. Nobody followed her in. The phone buzzed again: Better. Now drive to 4th and Maple. Park on

the south side. Walk north. You have twenty minutes. "No," Mira said out loud. She opened the browser, searched for Marshall High School. Found the address. Forty minutes away, maybe less if traffic cooperated. She started the engine. The school was brick and concrete, two stories, a chain link fence around the perimeter. Mira parked across the street. The dashboard clock said 10:47. She'd lost track of time somewhere. Morning had burned down to late morning. The sun was white now, flat. Students moved behind windows. She watched them. Counted the exits. Three visible from here: main entrance, side door near the gym, back exit by the dumpsters. Fire alarm panel mounted on the north wall. Her phone rang. The unknown number again. "You don't follow instructions," the woman said. "I follow my own." "That's what got you stabbing accountants in parking garages." Mira watched a teacher prop open the side door, wedge it with a brick. The teacher lit a cigarette, turned her face to the sun. "Why does Marcus's daughter think she's looking for you?" "Because I called her. Told her I was there when her father got hurt. Told her I saw who did it. Gave her a description that matches me perfectly, right down to the scar on my left hand. Which you have, don't you?" Mira looked at her hand. The scar ran from knuckle to wrist, seven years old, a kitchen accident that wasn't an accident. "You're setting me up." "I'm clarifying the situation. You stabbed a man. His daughter wants justice. I'm just pointing her in the right direction." "Except the direction is wrong." "Is it? You're the one holding the knife. I'm just the voice on the phone." The woman paused. "Here's what happens next. In six minutes, fourth period ends. Marcus's daughter, Sophie, walks out that side door you're watching. The one the teacher just propped open. She gets in a blue Toyota, license plate 7VXK492, and drives to Sacred Heart Hospital to see her father. Who is awake now, by the way. Uncomfortable but conscious." Mira's hand tightened on the phone. "What does he remember?" "Everything. Your face. Your jacket. The way you crouched to look at his phone. He's talking to police right now. Describing you. Badly, but accurately enough." "You're lying." "Call the hospital. Ask for ICU. Ask if Marcus Linden is receiving

visitors." The woman's voice sharpened. "Or save yourself the time and drive to 4th and Maple like I told you. Because the person who actually hired you will be there. The person whose handwriting is in that file. Blue ink, compact letters, the first set of notes. They're waiting." "Why would they wait for me?" "Because you didn't finish. And they need someone who will." The line went dead. Across the street, a bell rang. Doors opened. Students poured out like water from a broken pipe. Mira counted them: forty, fifty, seventy. A girl with dark hair walked toward the side entrance. Sophie Linden. She moved fast, head down, phone pressed to her ear. Mira started the engine. Made a choice. Turned toward 4th and Maple.

Chapter

Five

written by Dan Okafor

The address was a coin laundry. That detail felt inevitable once Mira saw it, like the punchline to a joke she'd already heard. Plate glass windows, half the fluorescent tubes dead, three machines running with nobody watching them. She parked across the street and checked the time. She'd made it with two minutes to spare, which meant either she drove faster than she thought or the woman on the phone had calculated it that way. The file sat on the passenger seat. She grabbed it, left her real phone in the cup holder. Took the burner. Crossed the street mid-block, not bothering with the light. Inside, the air smelled like fabric softener and mildew. A washer thumped off-balance in the back row. The dryers ran in different rhythms, a polyrhythmic wheeze. Nobody at the folding tables. Nobody at the change machine. She walked down the center aisle, her shoes sticking slightly to the linoleum. "Counter in back," a voice called. Not the woman from the phone. Male, younger than she expected. She turned the corner past a row of industrial washers. The counter was scuffed laminate, cigarette burns along the edge. Behind it, a kid who couldn't be more than twenty-five. Button-down shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbows, blue ink on his fingers. He was filling out a crossword puzzle. Pen, not pencil. "You're early," he said without looking up. "You're not who I expected." "Yeah, well." He finished a word, tapped the pen against his teeth. "Expectations are flexible." Mira

set the file on the counter. "Your handwriting's in here. First set of notes." He glanced at it, then at her. "You actually read the file. That's better than the last two." "Last two what?" "Candidates." He capped the pen, set it down with the precision of someone performing a small ritual. "Marcus Linden wasn't the job. Marcus Linden was the audition." "Audition for what?" "For someone who'd go through with it." He opened the file, flipped to Sophie's page. "See, most people, you give them a target, they hesitate. They ask questions. They want context. Motivation. They need the whole story before they can pull the trigger, stick the knife, whatever. But you? You read halfway through a file and went straight to a parking garage." Mira's jaw tightened. "You want to get to the point?" "The point is you're vicious when you need to be. That's rare." He closed the file. "Also, you're sloppy. That's common. The combination is what makes you useful." "Useful to who?" "To the person paying me to find someone exactly like you." He pulled a phone from his pocket, old flip model, probably a burner. Dialed a number from memory. Put it on speaker. It rang three times. The pattern felt familiar. Deliberate. A woman answered. Not the same voice from earlier. This one was older, flatter. "Is she there?" "Yeah," the kid said. "Put her on." He slid the phone across the counter. Mira didn't touch it. "I'm listening," she said. "Marcus Linden paid fifty thousand dollars two months ago," the woman said. "He paid it to me. In exchange, I agreed not to kill his daughter. Standard arrangement. He makes a deposit, she stays breathing. Then last week he missed a payment. So the arrangement ended." Mira looked at the kid. He was doing his crossword again, unbothered. "You want me to kill a seventeen-year-old," Mira said. "I want you to finish what you interrupted. You put Marcus in the hospital. Now he can't make payments. His daughter's protection expired the moment you stuck that knife in him. Poetic, really." "Find someone else." "I did. Three times. They all balked. You're number four, and my patience is finite." The woman paused. "Here's the thing, Mira. You already did the hard part. You already proved you'll hurt someone for money. Finishing it is just

logistics." Mira picked up the phone, took it off speaker, held it to her ear. "What's stopping me from walking out?" "The fact that Marcus saw your face. The fact that his daughter has your description. The fact that in about ninety minutes, a sketch artist will finish drawing you, and that sketch will go out to every cop in the city." The woman's voice didn't change. "Or you finish the job, collect twenty thousand dollars, and disappear before any of that happens. Your choice. You've got until noon." The line went dead. Mira set the phone down. The kid looked up from his crossword. "She always this charming?" Mira asked. "You should hear her on holidays," he said.

Chapter

Six

written by Sammy Hall

Mira slid the file back across the counter toward him. He didn't take it. "You're supposed to keep that," he said. "I don't want it." "Not really how this works." She put both hands flat on the laminate, leaned in close enough to see the ink stains weren't just on his fingers but under his nails too. "Tell me something. You track a teenage girl for three weeks, write down when she goes to class, what route she walks, where she buys coffee. You feel anything doing that?" He clicked his pen. Open, closed, open. "I feel employed." "That's it?" "You want me to say I feel bad? I don't. I wrote things down. Someone else made the decisions. Different pay grades." He went back to his crossword. "Anyway, you're stalling." "I'm thinking." "Thinking's just slower stalling." A dryer buzzed in the back. Nobody came to check it. The sound kept going, insistent, then stopped. Mira straightened up, looked around the laundromat. Two security cameras, one behind the counter pointed at the register, one in the corner by the door pointed at the folding tables. Both had dust on the lenses thick enough to see from here. "Who's watching the cameras?" she asked. "Nobody. They haven't worked in two years." "Convenient." He shrugged. "Owner's in Phoenix. I just rent the space twice a month, run some loads, keep up appearances." "What's your name?" "Brian." He said it like he was bored of his own introduction. "You're wasting time." "Where's Sophie now?" "Hospital.

Visiting Marcus. She'll be there another hour, maybe two if he's chatty." "And after?" "Home. She lives with her mom in Atwater Village." He flipped the file open, tapped Sophie's page. "Address is right there. Second-floor apartment, exterior stairs, bedroom window faces the alley. You want me to draw you a map?" Mira picked up the burner phone he'd used to call the woman. Turned it over in her hand. Cheap plastic, battery cover held on with tape. "You get paid already for this?" "Half up front." "What's the other half?" "Comes after confirmation." "Confirmation meaning what, you see a body?" Brian set his pen down, looked at her properly for the first time. His eyes were gray, unremarkable. The kind of face you'd forget five minutes after seeing it. "Confirmation means the woman on the phone tells me it's done. However she verifies that is her business." "So you trust her." "I trust her money clears." Mira put the phone back on the counter. Picked up the file. Walked down the aisle toward the door. Behind her, Brian called out, "You've got seventy minutes." She stopped. Turned. "What happens to you if I don't do it?" "I give back my half, eat the expenses, move on. What happens to you is more interesting." "Sketch artist, cops, I heard the speech." "Yeah, but there's the other part." He leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms. "Marcus paid to keep his daughter alive. You think you're the first person who came after her? This has been going on eight months. Four different contractors before you. The woman on the phone, she's patient, but she doesn't quit. You walk out, Sophie dies anyway. Just takes longer. And you still get caught, because Marcus already talked." "So I'm fucked either way." "Unless you finish it fast and take the money. Then you're just fucked in the normal amount." A washing machine clicked over to spin cycle. The sound filled the space between them, high and mechanical. "You really believe that?" Mira asked. "That I walk away with twenty thousand and none of this follows me?" Brian picked up his pen again. "I believe people get what they negotiate for. You want guarantees, you should've asked for a different line of work." Mira pushed the door open. The sun hit her face, too bright, and for a second she couldn't see anything but white. When her

vision cleared she was standing on the sidewalk, file in one hand, the street in front of her blurring with heat shimmer. A bus rolled past trailing diesel and someone's discarded newspaper. She walked to her car. Got in. Put the file on the passenger seat where the duffel bag had bled earlier. The upholstery still smelled like bleach. Her real phone was where she'd left it in the cup holder. She picked it up. Three missed calls from her father. One voicemail. She didn't listen to it. She started the engine and pulled into traffic, heading toward Atwater Village.

Chapter

Seven

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One did not ordinarily find oneself in such a position without having made a series of categorical errors. Mira counted them as she drove: trusting the file, trusting her own competence, trusting that violence correctly applied would resolve the matter at hand. Three errors, each compounding the one before it. The traffic thickened near Glendale Boulevard. She allowed the car to slow, made no effort to press through. One's haste had already proven counterproductive. The file lay open beside her. She glanced at it when the traffic stopped entirely. Sophie Linden's address: 2247 Silver Lake Boulevard, Apartment 12. The handwriting beneath it, blue ink, small and slanted, belonged to the boy Brian. Below that, a floor plan sketched in pencil. Bedroom window marked with an X. The exterior stairs noted with an arrow. Someone had done the work. Someone always did. She closed the file. At a red light, she picked up her real phone. Her father had called again while she sat in the laundromat. No voicemail this time. She pressed his name. He answered on the first ring. "Where are you?" "Atwater Village." A pause. She heard him exhale smoke. "Doing what?" "Finishing something." "Mira." His voice changed, acquired the edge it had when she was sixteen and he'd found her with a man's wallet she should not have been holding. "You need to stop." "It's too late for that." "It's never too late to stop." She watched a woman cross the street pushing a stroller, the child

inside asleep with one hand flung over its head. "Someone saw me," she said. "Marcus Linden. He's talking to police." Her father was quiet for a moment. Then: "How bad?" "Bad enough." "Then you run. Right now. You get out of the city and you don't come back." "There's a girl." "I don't care about a girl." "She's seventeen." Another pause. Longer. "What does she have to do with this?" "Everything." The light turned green. Mira did not move until the car behind her honked. She drove through the intersection, turned left. "Someone wants her dead. I'm supposed to do it." "Then you don't." "If I don't, she dies anyway. Someone else finishes it." "That's not your problem." "Isn't it?" She kept her voice level, allowed no inflection to suggest she sought his approval or his permission. "I'm the reason Marcus can't pay. I'm the reason she lost her protection." Her father made a sound that might have been a laugh or a cough. "You think you owe her something." "I think I broke the arrangement. The consequences are mine to carry." "You carry them by surviving," he said. "Not by getting yourself killed or arrested trying to fix what you can't fix." She turned onto Silver Lake Boulevard. The apartments were stucco, two stories, paint flaking from the window frames. She drove past 2247, did not slow. Marked the location. The exterior stairs, just as the file had noted. The alley behind. "I have to go," she said. "Mira, listen to me." She ended the call. One did not park directly outside one's destination. She found a spot three blocks north, on a street lined with jacarandas that dropped their purple flowers onto the windshields of parked cars. She sat for a moment. Breathed. The steering wheel was warm under her hands. The burner phone was in her jacket pocket. She took it out, turned it over. Brian had used it to call the woman. The call log would still be there. She opened it. One outgoing number, no name attached. She copied it into her real phone, then powered the burner down. From the glove box she retrieved the bleach wipes. Cleaned her hands again, though they bore no visible trace of anything. One's habits in such matters ought to remain consistent. She locked the car and walked south, counting addresses. 2247 was halfway down the block, set back from the street behind a withered hedge. The

exterior stairs led to a landing with two doors. Apartment 11 and Apartment 12. A child's bicycle lay on its side near the bottom step, training wheels still attached. Mira climbed the stairs. At the landing, she stopped. Put her ear to the door of Apartment 12. Silence within. She tried the knob. Locked, as one would expect. From her pocket she withdrew the lockpick set she had carried for seven years. Knelt. Worked the pins with the patience her father had taught her before she understood why one required such a skill. The lock turned. She pushed the door open six inches and waited. No alarm. No sound of movement. She stepped inside and closed the door behind her.

Chapter

Eight

written by Olive Kassen

The apartment smelled like someone had tried to make breakfast but given up halfway through. Burnt toast, or maybe burnt something else. Mira stood with her back to the door and let her eyes adjust. A galley kitchen to the left, dishes in the sink. A couch with a blanket bunched at one end. Coffee table scattered with textbooks, a laptop closed, charging cable snaking to the wall. The light through the windows was pale, filtered through sheer curtains that moved slightly in a draft she couldn't locate. She walked toward the hallway. Two doors, both open. The first was a bathroom, toothbrush on the counter, towel hung crooked on the bar. The second was the bedroom. Sophie's room looked like what it was: a place someone slept but didn't live. Bed made, corners tight. Desk empty except for a lamp and a water glass. On the wall, a calendar with nothing written on it. Mira crossed to the window Brian had marked with an X. Tested the latch. It opened smoothly, no sound. She turned back to the room. Opened the closet. Clothes on hangers, shoes lined up underneath. In the back, a cardboard box with the flaps folded shut. She pulled it out and looked inside. Old schoolwork, graded papers with A's marked in red at the top. A stuffed rabbit with one ear torn. A photo album, the cheap kind they sold at drugstores. She flipped it open. Pictures of Sophie as a child, maybe seven or eight, standing between Marcus and a woman who must have been her mother. They

were at a beach somewhere. Sophie grinning, gap-toothed, holding up a shell. Mira closed the album and put it back. Returned the box to the closet. Shut the door. She sat on the edge of the bed. The mattress was firm. The bedspread smelled faintly of laundry detergent. She took out her phone, the real one, and pulled up the number she'd copied from the burner. Dialed it. The woman answered after two rings. "Brian said you left." "I did." "So you're calling to tell me it's done?" "I'm calling to tell you it's not." A pause. Background noise on the other end: traffic, wind, the hollow sound of someone standing outside. "Where are you?" "Sophie's apartment." "Then what's the problem?" Mira looked at the empty calendar on the wall. "The problem is she's seventeen." "I'm aware." "The problem is you've been doing this to her father for eight months. Bleeding him dry. Making him pay for something he didn't do." "He did plenty." "Not to you." "How would you know?" The woman's voice went flat. "You don't know anything about this." "Then tell me." Another pause. Longer. The sound of a lighter, a breath drawn in. "Marcus Linden stole from me. Not money. Worse. He testified in a case that put my brother in prison for twelve years. Lied on the stand about what he saw. My brother died in there last winter. Heart attack. So yeah, I've been bleeding Marcus. And yeah, I was going to kill his daughter when he couldn't pay anymore. You got a problem with that, hang up and walk away." Mira stood. Walked to the window. Below, the alley was empty except for a dumpster and a cat picking through garbage. "Your brother's dead. Killing Sophie doesn't change that." "It makes me feel better." "No it doesn't." The woman laughed, sharp and bitter. "You don't get to tell me what makes me feel better. You stabbed a man in a parking garage this morning for money. You don't have the moral high ground here." "I know." Mira's hand tightened on the phone. "That's why I'm the one who gets to say it. I'm not better than you. But I'm stopping." "Then I'll find someone else." "You won't have time." "What's that supposed to mean?" Mira opened the window. The air outside smelled like car exhaust and jasmine from a neighbor's yard. "It means I'm going to the cops. I'm turning myself in for what I did to

Marcus. I'm giving them your number, Brian's name, everything in the file. You'll be running before the day's out." Silence on the line. Then: "You're bluffing." "I'm not." She meant it. She could feel the shape of it in her chest, solid and unmovable. The woman hung up. Mira stood at the window for another minute. Then she closed it, locked it, and walked out of the apartment. Pulled the door shut behind her, heard the lock catch. Went down the stairs into the light.

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more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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