



COURAGE

Calling Three Times

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

One	Lior Tannen
Two	Margot Vail
Three	Colin McAteer
Four	jmarsh
Five	Dan Okafor
Six	Sasha Loomis
Seven	Sammy Hall
Eight	Cora Lindgren

Chapter

One

written by Lior Tannen

Mira pulled the phone from her ear and stared at the screen until it went dark. Her thumb hovered over the block button, had hovered there after each call for three days now, but she couldn't make herself press it. What if it was Mom trying to reach her? What if the stroke had done something to her voice, left her able to dial but not speak? She set the phone face-down on the kitchen counter, next to the stack of unopened mail from the hospital. The top envelope had a red stamp in the corner. URGENT. She'd gotten good at not seeing it. "Was that her again?" Lily stood in the doorway, backpack drooping off one shoulder, still wearing yesterday's jeans. Fourteen years old and already she had that look, the one that said she'd learned not to expect answers. "Wrong number." Mira turned back to the stove, where eggs had started to brown at the edges. She scraped them onto two plates, added the last of the bread toasted dark because the dial had been stuck on high for a month. "Eat. You'll miss the bus." Lily didn't move. "You're lying." The words sat between them, small and true. Mira had promised, after Dad left, that she wouldn't do that anymore. No more pretending things were fine when they weren't. No more saying Mom was just tired when Mom was in the locked ward at Riverside, screaming about the walls closing in. She put down the spatula. Looked at her daughter. "I don't know who it is," she said. "But I'm going to find out." Lily's shoulders dropped half an

inch. "Okay." She slid into her chair, picked up a fork. "Are you going to see Grandma today?" "After work." "Can I come?" Mira thought of her mother in that narrow bed, the left side of her face slack, the feeding tube, the way her right hand clutched at the sheets like she was trying to climb out of her own skin. "Not yet. Soon." "You said that yesterday." "I know." They ate in silence. The eggs were rubbery, the toast burnt, and Lily finished every bite. That was the thing about her daughter that broke Mira's heart most: the way she never complained. The way she'd learned to be small, to take up less space, to make do with what she got. The phone buzzed again. Three rings. Mira counted them while Lily watched, fork frozen halfway to her mouth. She snatched it up. Swiped to answer. "Who is this?" Breathing on the other end. Shallow and quick. "I said, who is this?" Her voice came out harder than she meant it to. A sound like fabric rustling. Then, so quiet she almost missed it: "Help." The line went dead. Mira's hand started shaking. She knew that voice. She knew it the way she knew the sound of her own daughter's footsteps on the stairs, the way she knew the click of the front door lock when it didn't quite catch. It was her mother's voice. Before the stroke. "Mom?" Lily was standing now, eyes wide. Mira scrolled to the call log, pressed the number. It rang once, twice, kept ringing. No voicemail. No disconnect message. Just ringing, on and on, like a phone in an empty room that no one would ever answer. She grabbed her keys off the counter. "Get your stuff. I'm driving you to school." "What's happening?" "I don't know." She pulled on her coat, the blue one with the broken zipper that she kept meaning to fix. "But we're going to find out."

Chapter

Two

written by Margot Vail

The car wouldn't start. Mira turned the key again. The engine clicked three times, went quiet. Lily sat in the passenger seat with her backpack clutched to her chest. Outside the windshield, Mrs. Pemberton from 4B walked past with her terrier, the one with the torn ear. "When did you last get gas?" Lily asked. Mira looked at the gauge. Quarter tank. She pumped the pedal twice and tried again. This time the starter didn't even click. She got out. Opened the hood. The battery terminals were crusted white with corrosion, the positive cable loose enough to move when she touched it. She'd noticed it last week, added it to the list of things that needed fixing. The list she kept on the back of a grocery receipt, folded in her wallet behind the maxed Visa. "We can take the bus," Lily said through the open door. "You'll be late." "I'm already late." Mira closed the hood. Locked the car. They walked to the corner where the 47 stopped, the same route Lily took every morning when Mira worked the early shift at Valley Medical. She checked her phone. No missed calls. She opened the log again, pressed the unknown number. Ringing. No answer. She let it go forty rings before she hung up. The bus came. They got on. Lily swiped her student pass. Mira fed four quarters into the slot, listened to them drop. They sat near the back. The bus smelled like diesel and the chemical pine cleaner the city used. A man in a suit sat across from them, asleep with his head against the window.

"What did Grandma say?" Lily asked. Quiet, so the others wouldn't hear. "Just one word." "What word?" "Help." Lily looked at her hands. Her nails were bitten down to the quick. "Maybe it wasn't her." "It was her." "But she can't talk. You said the stroke took her speech." Mira had said that. The doctor had said it first, standing in the hallway outside Room 312 with her clipboard and her careful face. Expressive aphasia, she'd called it. The words were there but the pathway was gone. Mrs. Chen might recover some function with therapy, but they shouldn't expect full sentences. They shouldn't expect her to sound like herself. "Maybe she got better," Mira said. "In three days?" The bus stopped. A woman got on with two kids in school uniforms. They pushed past to the middle, loud and awake. The bus started again, lurched through the intersection at Oak. Mira dialed Valley Medical. Got the switchboard. Asked for the fourth floor. "Fourth floor nurse's station." "This is Mira Chen. I'm calling about my mother, Patricia Chen. Room 312." "One moment." Hold music. Tinny violins. Then: "Mrs. Chen is stable. No change since yesterday." "Has she been making sounds? Trying to talk?" "No sounds noted in the chart. Would you like to speak with Dr. Rosen?" "Is my mother in her room right now?" A pause. "I'm looking at the board. Yes, she's in her room." "Can you see her? Can you physically see her from where you're standing?" Another pause, longer. "No, ma'am. Would you like me to check on her?" "Yes." Mira's throat felt tight. "Please." "Hold on." The hold music came back. Mira counted seconds. Lily watched her face. Sixty seconds. Ninety. The bus stopped again, this time at Lily's school. The building was red brick, three stories, bars on the ground-floor windows. Kids streamed toward the entrance. "Mom," Lily said. "Go. I'll call you." Lily didn't move. "Go." She went. Mira watched her join the stream, head down, backpack sagging. Then she was through the doors. The nurse came back on the line. "Mrs. Chen?" Her voice had changed. Sharper now. "Your mother isn't in her room." Mira stood. The man in the suit opened his eyes, looked at her. "What do you mean she isn't there?" "Her bed is empty. The IV has been disconnected. I'm paging security now." "When did you last see her?"

"Bed check was at seven. She was there. Sleeping." It was 8:43 now. Mira moved toward the front of the bus, phone pressed to her ear. "I'm coming there," she said. She got off at the next stop. Started walking back toward Valley Medical. Twelve blocks. The phone rang in her hand. Three times. She answered. "Mira." Her mother's voice. Clear this time. No stroke slur. "Don't come to the hospital."

Chapter

Three

written by Colin McAteer

Mira stops in the middle of the sidewalk. A jogger swerves around her, swears without looking back. The phone is hot against her ear. "Where are you?" she says. Static on the line. Then her mother's voice again, quieter. "The parking garage. Level three." "Which parking garage?" "Valley Medical. Where you worked the night Dad died." Mira hasn't worked nights in six years. Her father died in 2019, spring, in the cardiac unit on the seventh floor. Not the garage. "Mom, you're confused. The stroke, " "I didn't have a stroke." The words are precise. Each one lands separate from the next. Mira's mother taught high school English for thirty years. She used to mark grammar on grocery lists. "I saw you in the hospital bed," Mira says. "Your face was paralyzed. You couldn't speak." "They needed you to see that." A Metro bus pulls past, brakes hissing. Mira moves closer to the building, into the shadow of an awning. A bakery. Closed sign in the window. "Who's they?" "Come to the garage. Alone. Don't tell anyone where you're going." "I already told the nurses I'm coming." Silence. Then: "What did they say?" "That you're not in your room. That security's looking." Her mother makes a sound between a laugh and a cough. "Security won't find me. Neither will the nurses. Do you have your car?" "Battery's dead." "Take the 12 bus. Get off at Howell. The garage entrance is on the north side. Third level, section E. There's a gray Honda with a dent in the passenger door.

I'll be in the back seat." "Why are you in someone's car?" "It's mine." "You don't have a car. You sold the Corolla last year." "I bought this one in March. Paid cash. Registered it under Sandra Pemberton's name." Mrs. Pemberton from 4B. The woman with the terrier. Mira thinks of her walking past the car this morning, not looking at them. "Why would you do that?" "Because they were watching the house. They still are. Don't go home." Mira's chest feels tight. She leans against the bakery window, the glass cool through her coat. "Mom, you're scaring me." "Good. You should be scared." "Are you off your medication?" "I was never on medication. The pills they gave you to give me were placebos. Sugar and cornstarch. I had them tested." Mira closes her eyes. Her mother has always been like this. Even before the locked ward, before the divorce, there were patterns. The summer she covered all the mirrors in the house because she said cameras were watching. The month she wouldn't let anyone use the phone after dark. The therapist had called it paranoid ideation. Manageable with treatment. But treatable only if the patient believed she was sick. "I'm coming to get you," Mira says. "But then we're going inside the hospital. We're talking to Dr. Rosen." "Dr. Rosen is the one who put me in that bed." "She's your neurologist." "She's the one who injected me. Check the security footage. October nineteenth, 11:47 p.m. I was walking to my car after visiting hours. She came up behind me in the stairwell. I woke up four days later with a tube in my arm." October nineteenth. Three weeks ago. Mira remembers because it was Lily's fall concert. She'd missed visiting her mother that night, felt guilty about it. "If that's true," Mira says, "why would Dr. Rosen treat you afterward? Why wouldn't she just disappear?" "Because she needs to know what I told you. What I might have told you." Her mother's breathing gets faster. "Mira, did I ever mention the Riverside files?" "What files?" "The patient records from the ward. From when I was there in 2020." Mira doesn't want to remember that year. Her mother screaming in a hospital gown. The restraints. The sedation. "No. You never mentioned files." "Good. Don't say that name again. Not on the phone. Not anywhere they might hear." "Mom, " "Third level.

Section E. Gray Honda. Come now or don't come at all." The line goes dead. Mira stands outside the bakery for thirty seconds. She thinks about calling Lily's school. She thinks about calling the police. She looks up the street toward the bus stop. The 12 runs every twenty minutes. She starts walking.

Chapter

Four

written by jmarsh

The bus shelter smelled of rust and old gum, the kind of place where time accumulated like sediment. Mira stood beneath its scratched plastic panels and watched the traffic light cycle through its colors: red, green, red again. A man in a reflective vest was pressure-washing the sidewalk two blocks down, the water spreading in sheets that caught the light like broken glass. She could turn around. Walk back to the school. Tell Lily that Grandma was confused, that sometimes the brain did terrible things to itself, that they would wait for the medication to work. That was the story she had told her daughter for three years while her mother called at midnight insisting the neighbors had installed microphones in the walls. That was what Dr. Rosen had recommended: consistency, calm reassurance, gentle redirection back toward medical reality. But her mother's voice had been steady. The 12 came from the north, and Mira boarded without looking at the driver. She fed two quarters into the slot. The machine swallowed them. She found a seat near the back, where the windows were filmed with condensation, and pulled her phone out, opened her mother's discharge papers from Riverside. The document was dated June 2020, two pages folded into thirds, signed by a Dr. Raymond Cho and witnessed by someone whose name had been blacked out with marker. Under "Diagnosis" someone had typed "Acute Paranoid Episode with Delusional Features." Under

"Prognosis" they had written "Guarded. Recommend continued outpatient psychiatric care and medication compliance." Her mother had completed neither. The bus lurched around a corner. An elderly woman with a shopping cart gripped the overhead rail. Mira had never asked what happened during those three weeks her mother spent locked in the psychiatric ward. She had been seventeen, finishing her junior year, and her father had said it was better not to visit, better to let Patricia stabilize, better not to feed into her narrative about persecution. By the time Mira's mother came home, the story had calcified into family fact: she had experienced a breakdown, had needed professional help, was managing now with medication and therapy. Case closed. No one examined the closed case. No one asked what her mother had been trying to tell people before they admitted her. The bus stopped at Howell. Mira stood, pulled the cord, felt it go slack beneath her fingers. The driver opened the doors and she descended into the afternoon, which had turned humid and strange. The parking garage entrance was exactly where her mother had said it would be: a concrete ramp descending at a shallow angle into shadow, marked with faded white letters that read "LEVEL 1." She could see the tire marks of thousands of cars, the residue of spilled oil, the dark stain that might have been anything. Her shoes clicked against the concrete as she walked down. Level 1 was half full. Fluorescent panels buzzed overhead, some of them flickering in that particular way that made vision uncertain, that made distances difficult to judge. She walked past a row of sedans, their paint dulled by dust, their windows empty. A minivan with a child's drawing taped to the rear window: stick figures under a smiling sun. She didn't look at it long. At the far corner, a ramp led upward. She took it. The air got colder as she climbed. Level 2 was emptier, just five or six cars scattered like the chess pieces of someone who'd given up. The fluorescent light was worse here, making everything look slightly corpse-like, slightly impossible. She could hear the hum of the electrical system, something mechanical working very hard at a task no one had asked it to perform. She took another ramp. Level 3. Section E was

marked with a faded blue sign. The overhead lights had failed here entirely, and what illumination existed came through a narrow window that looked out onto the street level, showing only the feet and lower legs of passing pedestrians. People walking on the world above. She found the gray Honda in the fourth row. The dent in the passenger door was exactly as her mother had described it: a deep crease that pulled the metal into an unnatural shape, as though the car had been struck while young and had never forgiven the blow. The back door was unlocked. Mira opened it. The interior smelled of old leather and something else, something medicinal or chemical, under which lurked the copper scent of blood. Not fresh blood. Old blood. She leaned in and saw her mother's purse on the seat, open, and beside it a manila folder stuffed thick with photocopied pages. She pulled the folder toward her, careful not to touch anything else. The papers inside were hospital records. Her name was on them.

Chapter

Five

written by Dan Okafor

The papers were from Riverside, but not her mother's admissions. These were from 1994. Mira's birth year. She turned the first page with two fingers, the way you handle something contagious. "Patient Patricia Chen, age 28, admitted following attempted termination of pregnancy at 14 weeks gestation. Patient reports coercion by hospital staff. Patient claims medication was administered without consent prior to procedure." Attempted termination. Her mother had been pregnant before Mira. Before her father. Mira sat in the back seat of the stolen Honda and read the next page, which was a nursing note dated three days after admission. Handwriting, not typed. "Patient became agitated during evening rounds. Stated staff had 'poisoned the baby' and 'ruined her life.' Administered haloperidol 5mg IM. Patient sedated. Recommend psychiatric consult." Another page. A psychiatric evaluation. "Patient demonstrates acute paranoid ideation, likely precipitated by grief response to failed pregnancy. Prognosis guarded. Recommend continued hospitalization and pharmacological intervention." The next page made her stomach move in a way that had nothing to do with the smell of old blood in the car. It was a birth certificate. Mira Chen, born September 14, 1994. Mother: Patricia Chen. Father: blank. Not filled in. Just white space where the man's name should have been. She set the folder down on her lap and opened her

mother's purse. Car keys. A pharmacy receipt from March, three days after her mother supposedly bought the Honda. Two hundred and forty dollars paid in cash for something the receipt didn't name, just a prescription number and the word "FILLED." A driver's license with her mother's face from ten years ago, when she still had the ability to be surprised by anything. And underneath, another document, this one laminated, with her mother's name and a long series of numbers across the top: 21-03-1647. A case file number. Mira had learned the format last month when she tried to access her mother's Riverside records. You needed authorization. You needed to be listed as medical power of attorney, or next of kin, or the patient herself. She was none of those things officially. Her mother had never signed the papers. The back door opened. Her mother stood in the space between the car and the world, silhouetted against the weak light from the Level 3 window. She was thinner than Mira remembered. Her hair was shorter, dyed a color that hadn't existed the last time Mira had seen her, a deep rust that made her skin look ashen. She was wearing the hospital gown under a blue windbreaker, the drawstring still tied at the neck. "You found them," her mother said. Not a question. "What is this?" Mira held up the birth certificate. "Who's my father?" Her mother got into the car. Shut the door. The light from outside cut off. "Dr. Raymond Cho," her mother said. "Your father is the man who signed off on my 'acute paranoid episode' in 2020. Before that, he was the resident who decided I was too unstable to keep my first child. Before that, he was just a medical student with access to patients and no one watching." The car was very quiet. Mira could hear her own heartbeat doing something irregular against her ribs. "I'm not your biological daughter," Mira said. "No. You are. That's the only part that's uncomplicated." Her mother leaned forward, her face emerging from shadow. She had the same scar above her right eyebrow that Mira had, shaped like a question mark. "You're my daughter. The question is: whose daughter are you also?" Mira looked at the papers in her lap. The manila folder felt heavier than it should. "Why didn't you ever tell me?" "Because I was trying to be well.

Because being sick and being right looked identical from the inside, and I wasn't sure which one I was." Her mother reached out and touched the folder gently, the way you might touch something sleeping. "And because he was still working there. Still admitting patients. Still deciding which women's stories to believe." Mira's phone buzzed in her pocket. A text from Lily's school. Your daughter did not arrive for fourth period. Please contact our attendance office. "We need to call the police," Mira said. Her mother's hand on the folder tightened slightly. "No." "Mom, if what you're saying is true, " "Then the police will call Riverside. Riverside will call Dr. Cho. Dr. Cho will produce documentation showing that I'm exactly what he's always said I was. A woman who can't distinguish reality from delusion." Her mother looked at her. "He's very good at that. He had decades of practice." Behind them, somewhere on Level 2, a car door opened and closed. Footsteps. Coming closer.

Chapter

Six

written by Sasha Loomis

The footsteps came closer. Not running. Not hurried. Just the measured pace of someone who knew exactly where they were going. Mira's mother didn't move. She sat with her hand still on the folder, her breathing unchanged, the way someone might sit through a familiar piece of music they'd heard too many times to react to. The footsteps stopped. A car alarm activated three rows over, the sound cutting off almost immediately, as though the person who'd triggered it had simply reached back and silenced it. Mira realized her mother was waiting for her to speak first. "Is it him?" Mira whispered. "Doesn't matter." Her mother pulled the folder toward her, tucked it back into the purse. "The question now is whether you believe me." "I don't know what I believe." "That's the useful part. That's where we are." A shadow passed across the window above them. A person walking on the street level, their head visible for exactly two seconds before they disappeared back into the world of feet and legs. Mira's mother opened the back door again and stepped out into the garage. She moved to the front of the car, to the driver's side, and opened the door there. She gestured for Mira to follow. "What are you doing?" "We're leaving." "In a car registered to someone else? With stolen hospital records?" Mira didn't move. "That makes us criminals." "You were always going to be a criminal," her mother said. "I made sure of that the moment I didn't name him. The moment I kept

you instead of signing the adoption papers." She started the engine. It caught immediately, rumbled with the particular sound of something that hadn't been driven in weeks but was nevertheless ready. "Get in the front or we leave without you. Choose now." Mira got in the front. They descended instead of climbing. Down past Level 2, where the light was still failing, where the minivan with the child's drawing had been replaced by an empty space and nothing to mark that anything had occupied it. At Level 1, her mother pulled to a stop at the toll booth. The gate was raised. No attendant sat in the booth. Just an empty chair and a screen that blinked: PLEASE TAKE TICKET. Her mother didn't take a ticket. She drove through. The gate stayed raised. "How long have you been planning this?" Mira asked. "Since March. Since I figured out how to move money in ways that wouldn't trigger a flag. Since I got the documents from a woman named Tanya who worked in Records before she was fired for asking too many questions about the 1994 admissions." Her mother turned onto the street. The afternoon light was vicious and sudden. Mira squinted. "Since I realized you were bringing your daughter to visit me every week and she was learning to be small and afraid." "Lily doesn't know anything." "Exactly. Which means she's safe as long as she stays ignorant." They drove north, away from Valley Medical, away from Howell Street, into neighborhoods Mira didn't recognize. The houses here were older, wood-sided, with yards that hadn't been maintained in years. A dog barked from behind a chain-link fence. A man stood on a porch holding a coffee mug, watching them pass. Her mother turned the radio on. Classical music, something baroque and intricate. A harpsichord playing a piece that sounded like stairs being climbed by someone very small. "The text about Lily," Mira said. "How did they know to send it right then?" "They've been monitoring your phone since we called you from the hospital line. They know when you're afraid, when you're moving, when you're about to do something that disrupts their narrative." Her mother switched lanes without checking her mirror. "They probably knew you were in the parking garage before you did." "That's not possible." "Neither was me

walking out of my hospital room. Neither was me having the clarity to plan this. Neither was me being right about any of it." Her mother glanced at her. "And yet." They passed a school. Not Lily's. Younger children on a playground, supervised by two adults in bright vests. One of the children was building something in the sandbox. A structure. It looked like it might have been a castle but the sand was giving way, collapsing inward, and the child was not rebuilding it. Just watching it fall. Mira's phone buzzed. Another text from the school: If we do not hear from you within the hour, we will contact Child Protective Services. Her mother reached over and took the phone from her hand. She didn't throw it out the window or smash it. She simply rolled down the window and set it gently on the road behind them.

Chapter

Seven

written by Sammy Hall

I watched the phone tumble once on the asphalt, screen-side up, then screen-side down, then nothing because we were already moving and the Honda was eating distance fast. My mother's hands were steady on the wheel. Mine were not. "You just threw away my phone," I said. Not a question. Stating a fact like it might change if I said it out loud wrong. "I threw away a tracking device that was making you feel like you had choices." She took a right onto a street that dead-ended into trees. "You don't have choices right now, Mira. You have consequences. There's a difference." "Lily's school is going to call CPS in less than an hour." "Yes." "That's not a consequence. That's a catastrophe." My mother pulled into a driveway that belonged to a house I couldn't see from the road, set back behind a stand of Douglas firs that had probably been there since before I was born. The trees were so tall they made the afternoon look like dusk. She cut the engine. "CPS will come to your house," she said. "They'll find it empty. They'll interview the neighbors. Mrs. Pemberton will tell them you seemed anxious but capable. Your coworkers will tell them you have a steady job, perfect attendance, no record of substance abuse or violence. By the time anyone cares enough to press, Lily will have spent one night with a foster family and you'll have used that night to get her somewhere safer than any of this." "You mean somewhere with you." "Yes." I opened the car door but didn't get

out. The air that came in smelled like mulch and standing water. Something rot-adjacent. "I need to tell you something," I said. "And I need you to not interrupt me while I'm saying it, because if I stop, I won't be able to start again." My mother waited. "I don't believe you," I said. "I don't believe that Dr. Cho injected you. I don't believe that Riverside is running some coordinated surveillance operation. I don't believe that my entire life has been a setup. I believe you believe those things. I believe you're experiencing them as real and true and connected in ways that make perfect sense to you. I also believe you've believed those things before, and I've watched you build entire rooms in your mind out of those beliefs, and I've watched you furnish them and live in them and defend them with the kind of certainty that scared me more than anything else you've ever done." She was quiet for a long time. "But," I continued, "I also know that something happened to you at Riverside. I know you came out different. I know that three weeks ago you were speaking in fragments and now you're not. I know that the discharge papers from 1994 are real because I can hold them and they exist in the world outside my head. And I know that if I drive away from here without Lily, Child Protective Services will take her into a system that doesn't have a lot of patience for the kinds of families that already look wrong from the outside." I finally got out of the car. The house, when I could see it properly, was smaller than I expected. A cottage, maybe. The kind of place that was probably cute once but had settled into neglect the way old things do when nobody's paying attention. The windows were dark. The porch steps had a visible gap where one of the boards had rotted through completely. "Who lives here?" I asked. "It's a rental. I paid cash. It's under Sandra Pemberton's name." My mother came around the side of the car. "Tanya's living in the basement apartment. The woman from Records. She has copies of everything. She's been waiting for someone to care enough to actually look." "At what? What could possibly be in those records that matters more than my daughter right now?" "The pattern," my mother said. She moved toward the house. "The reason I wasn't the first woman who came to

Riverside convinced someone was poisoning her. The reason Dr. Cho's admissions had a particular type. The reason there's a closet full of pharmacy receipts from 1992 to 2004 that don't match anything in the official records." I followed her up the steps, avoiding the gap. The porch was covered in dead leaves. Nobody had swept it in years. "I need to get to Lily," I said. "Before the school calls anyone." "You will." My mother pushed open the front door. It swung inward without resistance, like it had been waiting. "But first, you're going to meet Tanya. And you're going to read something.

Chapter

Eight

written by Cora Lindgren

The room inside smelled like cardboard and dust and something underneath, something organic that had started to turn. Mira's eyes adjusted to the dimness. Sunlight came through the cottage windows in narrow bands, illuminating particles that moved like they had weight. On the coffee table: stacks of paper. Files bound with rubber bands. A laptop with a cracked screen that nonetheless glowed with some kind of screensaver, waves moving across it in an endless loop. "Downstairs," her mother said. "She'll have tea ready." Mira didn't move. The clock in her chest was still running. Forty-three minutes now until the school made the call. She could feel each second as a small pressure, like stones being added one by one to a scale. "Mom, I'm serious. I need to pick up Lily." "The bus from her school arrives at the corner of Ash and Fourth at 3:47. It's 2:54 now. If you leave here by 3:15, you'll be waiting when she steps off. You'll take her to the 7-Eleven on the next block. You'll buy her a Slurpee. You'll act normal." Her mother moved to the laptop, touched the trackpad. The waves stopped. A document opened. Rows of data. Patient names. Dates. Medication codes. "But before you do any of that, you're going to see this." Mira stepped closer. The spreadsheet was dense, methodical. Every entry dated. Every entry cross-referenced. She recognized her mother's handwriting from the column headers, the careful lowercase of someone who'd spent decades teaching grammar to

people who didn't care. "What am I looking at?" "Forty-seven women admitted to Riverside's psychiatric unit between 1992 and 2004. All of them had reported feeling poisoned, drugged, violated. All of them were diagnosed with paranoid delusions. All of them were treated by Dr. Raymond Cho." A basement door stood open to the left of the kitchen. Stairs descended into shadow. "Tanya?" her mother called. A woman emerged. Late fifties, maybe. Thin in the way that suggested years of not quite enough. Her hair was gray at the roots and dyed black on the ends, creating a two-tone effect that made her look like she was transitioning between two versions of herself. "This is my daughter," her mother said. "Mira, this is Tanya." Tanya extended her hand. Her fingers were ink-stained, as though she'd been marking things. Mira shook it. The grip was surprisingly firm. "Your mother's told you?" Tanya's voice was raspy, the kind of voice that suggested either cigarettes or sleeping in dusty basements for extended periods. Probably both. "Nothing," Mira said. "She's told me nothing that I can verify." "Good. That's the smart position." Tanya turned back to the laptop. "I spent nineteen years working in Records at Riverside. Nineteen years filing documents that didn't add up. I noticed because I'm the kind of person who actually reads what comes across her desk. Most people don't. Most people file something and move on. I couldn't." She pulled up another document. This one was a photograph, scanned. A page from a 1993 pharmacy log, dated March 14th. The handwriting was different from her mother's, more hurried, less careful. Next to a medication code, someone had written in the margin: "Consent obtained verbally, patient sedated, procedure completed." The procedure code referenced matched nothing in the official medical record. "What procedure?" Mira asked. "That's what I spent eight years trying to find out," Tanya said. "Every woman on your mother's list had the same notation. Same code, different dates. None of them appeared in their charts. None of them appeared in the billing records. None of them appeared anywhere except in the margins of the pharmacy logs that Dr. Cho signed off on personally." Mira's phone was gone. The school would call her house. There would be no

answer. The sequence would trigger like dominoes falling, each piece striking the next with mathematical certainty. She could see it happening in real time, could feel the distance between what she wanted to do and what she could actually do expanding like a chasm. "I have to leave," she said. "You do," her mother agreed. She pulled a set of car keys from her pocket. Different keys. "The blue Subaru in the driveway. It's registered under your name. Insurance is current. Documentation is in the glove box. You drive to the corner of Ash and Fourth. You pick up Lily. You take her home and you stay there and you act like none of this happened until tomorrow." "What happens tomorrow?" "You decide," her mother said, "whether what you read here today was real, or whether you dreamed the whole thing." She pressed the keys into Mira's palm. They were warm from her pocket. "Either way, you protect your daughter. Either way, you don't go to the police.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Lior Tannen

Sometimes the bravest thing is admitting you don't know which version of your mother is true, and loving her anyway.

Margot Vail

The problem with believing your mother is knowing you might become her.

Dan Okafor

The courage was never believing her; it was believing her anyway.

Sasha Loomis

The bus arrives before I can decide if I'm real, and Lily steps off looking exactly like someone who hasn't learned to be afraid yet, which means I still have time.

Sammy Hall

The thing about courage is it doesn't feel brave when you're living it—it just feels like you're trying not to drown while someone keeps asking if you can swim.

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

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