

COURAGE

A phoenix, a mythical bird that is reborn from its own ashes, is depicted with its wings spread wide, glowing with intense orange and yellow flames. The bird is set against a dark, smoky background with falling embers, creating a dramatic and powerful visual.

Exactly as All Right as We Can Manage

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	typewriter_tom
Three	Sasha Loomis
Four	Sammy Hall
Five	jmarsh
Six	Cora Lindgren
Seven	Priya Nair
Eight	wordsbylena

Chapter

One

written by Lior Tannen

The courtroom air tasted like old carpet and somebody's coffee gone cold. The boy, Marcus, was nine years old and his fingernails were bitten down to the quick, which his mother Margaret hated because it meant he was nervous, which meant he might say the wrong thing, which meant everything they had prepared would come apart like wet bread. The lawyer's name was Hendricks. He wore a tie the color of dried blood and he leaned forward on the table, not too close, the way he'd practiced in Margaret's kitchen three nights running. "Marcus," Hendricks said, "I know this is hard. But I need you to tell the court what you saw that night at your uncle's house." Marcus looked at his mother's hand on his shoulder. Her fingers were cold. They had been cold all morning, even though she'd made coffee and held the mug for ten minutes before setting it down untouched. He could feel each finger pressing separately into the fabric of his shirt, and beneath that, into his actual shoulder, into the bone. What he had been told: Uncle David had not done it. What he had been told: The girl had lied. What he had been told: Marcus had been asleep the whole time anyway. His mother had said this in the car. His grandfather had said it on the phone. The lawyer had said it was the truth, and the truth was the most important thing, the most important thing, until it became clear that what was most important was saying it. But Marcus had not been asleep. He had heard the crying

from the guest room. He had heard his cousin Emma's voice, small and broken, the way it sounded when she was very young and had fallen off the monkey bars. He had stood in the hallway in his dinosaur pajamas, the ones with the hole in the left foot that his mother kept meaning to patch, and he had not opened the door. He had stood there in the dark and he had done nothing. "Marcus?" Hendricks was waiting. The judge was waiting. The court reporter's fingers hung over the keys like a bird about to land. "I was asleep," Marcus said. His mother's hand relaxed on his shoulder. Her fingers warmed up immediately. He could feel the relief move through her body and into his, the way heat travels through a room when someone finally lights the furnace in October. She had taught him to do this. Not with her words, but with the things she did when he was smaller: the way she had held him closer when he didn't ask questions about why his father lived in the apartment downtown. The way she had smiled at him, small and tight, when he had agreed that his uncle's first wife had been troubled, difficult, impossible to live with. The thing was, she loved him. Margaret loved Marcus the way parents do, completely and without hesitation, the kind of love that makes you want to protect your child from the world, from consequences, from becoming the kind of person who testifies against blood. She had not sat him down and explained strategy. She had simply let him feel, every day for six months, which choice would make her heart stop breaking. "And you didn't see anything unusual that evening?" Hendricks asked. "No, sir." The word came out clean. True-sounding. His mother's hand gave his shoulder a squeeze, and for a moment Marcus forgot that Emma was sitting in the room behind him, that she had not come to school in three weeks, that she had bitten her own fingernails down to the quick just like him. He had chosen his family. He had done what was asked of him, which was to be a good boy, which meant being a liar, which meant living with it now, every day, for as long as liars live.

Chapter

Two

written by typewriter_tom

The judge banged her gavel. Once. That was all it took. Margaret's hand lifted from Marcus's shoulder and she was already turning, already moving toward the aisle, and he understood that this was victory, that they had won the thing they came to win. The courtroom had the texture of a held breath released. People stood. Chairs scraped. His uncle David was shaking Hendricks's hand in that practiced way men do when they are not quite smiling. Marcus stayed in his seat. Emma was still in the room. He knew this without looking. She sat three rows back, left side, near the window where the morning light made everything look washed out and temporary. Her mother, Aunt Patricia, had her arm around Emma's shoulders, but it was a gesture that meant nothing. The arm was there. The girl underneath it was gone. Margaret turned back to get him. "Come on, baby." Her voice had changed. It was lighter now. It had permission to be happy. She touched the top of his head like he was much younger than nine, like he was still a child who could be scooped up and carried out of places. Marcus stood because standing was easier than sitting. The courthouse hallway smelled like industrial cleaner and something else, something that Marcus would later understand was the smell of institutions: places built to make decisions and move on. People congratulated his uncle. A woman in a blue suit shook his mother's hand. No one looked at Marcus. This was fine. Being invisible was the

point now. He had earned it. They walked toward the exit and Marcus heard her before he saw her. Emma. Not her voice. The sound of her moving. Her shoes on the tile, quick and uneven, like she was running but trying not to. He turned and she was there, ten feet away, with her mother grabbing for her arm and missing. "You said you didn't see," Emma said. She had his eyes. They were the same color, that odd gray-green that ran on their grandmother's side. But her eyes were different now. Older. Not just tired. Something had been removed from behind them, some basic assumption about the world being a place where things made sense. Margaret's hand found Marcus's shoulder again. Different grip this time. Protective. Or restraining. "You were asleep," Margaret said to Emma. Not unkind. Just factual. A correction being offered. "I was awake," Emma said. She was looking at Marcus. Only Marcus. "I heard you in the hallway. You heard me crying. You just didn't open the door." Patricia reached Emma then, her fingers closing around her daughter's arm with actual force. Emma flinched but didn't pull away. She seemed to have stopped doing that. "That's enough," Patricia said, and there was something in her voice that sounded like an apology to no one in particular. She steered Emma back toward the courtroom, and Emma let herself be steered, but her eyes stayed on Marcus for as long as they could. He watched her go. He could have said something. Could have moved. Could have let his legs carry him the ten feet between them and said her name or taken back the lie or done any number of things that might have changed what happened next. He didn't. Margaret's hand tightened once more and then released. She walked him toward the doors. His uncle David was already outside, talking on his cell phone, his posture the easy stance of a man whose problem had been solved. The October air hit Marcus's face and it was cold in a way that made him understand, with sudden clarity, that the morning coffee his mother had held but not drunk was the last thing that would happen in their family the way it used to happen. Everything after this was different. They had purchased their safety with something they couldn't get back, and it would sit in Marcus's chest like a stone

that never warmed up, never dissolved, never became part of him in any way except as permanent weight. His mother opened the car door for him. He got in and she closed it behind him, sealing him inside the smell of her perfume and the old upholstery his father had complained about before he became the man living downtown. Outside the window, his uncle David was still talking, his hand moving like he was negotiating with someone. Maybe he was. Maybe the conversation had only just begun.

Chapter

Three

written by Sasha Loomis

The car pulled into traffic and Marcus noticed that the radio was playing a song about a woman who had forgotten her own name. His mother hummed along. Not the melody. Something underneath it, a counterpoint that made the song sound wrong in a way he couldn't name. She had started doing this six months ago, around the time the lawyer first came to the kitchen. Humming things that didn't match. Her fingers on the steering wheel tapped a rhythm that belonged to a different song entirely. "We should get lunch," Margaret said. "Somewhere nice. The Italian place on Fifth, maybe. You like that place." Marcus did like it. They had gone there for his birthday in March, before everything, when his uncle David had still been the person who showed up to family dinners and asked him about school in the way adults do when they're not really listening. The restaurant had red tablecloths and a waiter named Antonio who brought unlimited breadsticks and pretended to be surprised every time, as if each basket was a gift he had just that moment decided to give. "Okay," Marcus said. His mother merged lanes without signaling. The car that had been in her blind spot honked. She didn't flinch. She was looking at something beyond the windshield, beyond the traffic, beyond the city itself. Her knuckles were white on the steering wheel. "Your father called," she said. "This morning. Before we left. He wanted to know what happened." Marcus

had not known about this phone call. His father lived in the apartment downtown in a building that Marcus had visited exactly four times. Each time the apartment had looked the same: a bed, a kitchen table with one chair, a television that was always on even when nobody was watching it. His father had a new girlfriend now. Her name was Sandra and she wore a lot of makeup and laughed at things that weren't funny. "What did you tell him?" Marcus asked. "That you told the truth," Margaret said. She took the exit ramp too fast. The car leaned. "That you did what was right." This was the thing about mothers: they could hold two contradictory facts in their heads at the same time and never seem to notice that they were contradicting each other. His mother loved him. His mother had also instructed him, through a thousand small gestures and silences, to betray the person he had seen crying in the guest room of his uncle's house. Both things were true. Both things were happening in her chest right now, beating together like wings. The parking lot of the Italian restaurant was nearly empty. Margaret turned off the engine and sat there, both hands still gripping the wheel. Through the windshield, Marcus could see Antonio inside, polishing glasses. He looked older than he had in March. Everything looked older. The awning was more faded. The windows were dirtier. The same restaurant, but like a photograph of itself. "Do you want to go in?" Marcus asked. His mother opened the car door. The action seemed to cost her something physical. Her arm moved slowly, as if she was pushing against water. She got out and walked toward the restaurant entrance without waiting to see if he would follow. Marcus followed anyway, because that's what sons do. They follow. They have to follow. Inside, Antonio did recognize them, but his recognition looked like something he was remembering from a dream. He seated them at a table by the window, the same table where they had sat in March. The breadsticks came. Margaret didn't touch hers. She ordered pasta with a cream sauce and then changed her mind and ordered soup. Then she changed her mind again and said she wasn't hungry. The waiter, patient in the way of people who have seen a lot of broken things, brought her water. "Emma knows," Margaret said

quietly. "That you lied." It wasn't a question. Marcus had known that Emma knew. Emma had made that very clear in the hallway when she said his name in her broken voice, when she said you heard me crying. But there was a difference between knowing something and having your mother say it out loud in a restaurant where a waiter was pretending not to listen. "Yes," Marcus said. Margaret reached across the table. Her hand stopped just short of his hand. She didn't touch him. She simply held her hand there, hovering in the space between them, and her fingers trembled in a way that reminded him of leaves before a storm. The trembling didn't stop. His mother's hand just kept shaking there, suspended, as if she was trying to show him something but couldn't quite remember how to explain it.

Chapter

Four

written by Sammy Hall

Marcus looked at her hand floating there and he understood that she was waiting for him to close the gap, to reach across and meet her in the middle of the table. He didn't. He picked up a breadstick instead and broke it in half. The sound it made was loud enough that Antonio glanced over from the bar. Margaret pulled her hand back. She wrapped both of them around the water glass like they were cold, like the trembling might transfer to something external and she could control it that way. "Your father wants you to call him," she said. "He's worried." Marcus chewed the breadstick. It was soft inside, the way breadsticks get when they've been sitting out. Not fresh. Not what you wanted. "He said I should have let you talk to a different lawyer. Someone who would have prepared you better. He said a nine-year-old shouldn't be put in that position." She was talking faster now, her words coming in a rush like she'd been holding them down and they were finally pushing through. "But he doesn't understand. He doesn't understand that there was no good preparation. There was no version of this that ended with you going into that courtroom and telling them what you actually saw." The soup arrived. Margaret stared at it like it had materialized from somewhere hostile. The bowl was white. The soup was orange. A single parsley leaf floated dead in the center. "He's coming by the house tomorrow," Margaret said. "Your father. He wants to talk to you. Alone.

He said that what happened in that courtroom was not okay, that we put you in an impossible situation, and he wants to know if you're all right." Marcus had not thought about whether he was all right. This seemed like the kind of question that required an answer, and he didn't have one. His shoulder still held the impression of his mother's hand. His throat still held the feeling of the lie. His hands still remembered the texture of the chair in the courtroom. These were not feelings. They were physical facts. They had weight and location. "What did you tell him?" Marcus asked. Margaret lifted the spoon. She put it in the soup. She didn't lift it out. "I told him that you were exactly as all right as a boy could be after doing what he was told to do. I told him that's all any of us are. Exactly as all right as we can manage." She took a spoonful of soup. It dripped back into the bowl. She took another spoonful and this time she swallowed it. Her face didn't change. She might have been eating nothing at all. Marcus could see the other diners now, really see them: an old couple across the room who weren't speaking to each other, a woman alone with her phone, two businessmen who seemed to be having an argument that looked like politeness. All of them doing what they were told. All of them managing. Outside the window, the October light was going thin. It would be dark soon. His mother had ordered a meal she wasn't eating. His father was coming tomorrow to talk about whether Marcus was all right. Emma was somewhere in the city, probably not eating either, probably not sleeping, probably understanding things that she shouldn't have to understand. "You could call him back," Marcus said. "Your father. You could tell him something different." Margaret set the spoon down. It made a soft clink against the bowl. For a moment she looked at him like she was seeing him for the first time, like he had just arrived in the restaurant and she was trying to decide whether she recognized him. "No," she said finally. "I couldn't. And neither could you. That's what I'm trying to tell you. That's what today was about. There are things you can't take back once you've said them. There are promises you can't break without breaking something else at the same time." She reached for the breadstick on his plate and

broke off a piece. She ate it. Then she raised her hand and caught Antonio's eye and made a small circular motion that meant check, please. They would leave the meal mostly untouched. They would go home. Tomorrow his father would arrive and say his piece and Marcus would listen because that's what sons do. But nothing would change. The lie was inside him now. It had a permanent address.

Chapter

Five

written by jmarsh

The check came in a black folder that Antonio placed on the table with the gravity of a priest delivering last rites. Margaret opened it without looking at the total and laid down bills that exceeded what was owed, the kind of overpayment that functions as an apology to waiters who have witnessed too much. Marcus watched her hands complete this transaction with the precision of someone performing a ritual whose meaning had worn smooth through repetition. Her fingers no longer trembled. They had moved past trembling into a kind of mechanical steadiness, the way a clock keeps time regardless of what the hour represents. The drive home took forty minutes. Margaret did not turn on the radio. She kept both hands on the wheel at ten and two, driving exactly at the speed limit, stopping fully at every red light even when the intersections were empty. Marcus sat in the passenger seat because he had become tall enough that the front was permitted now, though his mother had not explicitly granted permission. Some thresholds you simply cross and no one stops you. She spoke once, somewhere near the bridge that crossed the Multnomah River. "Your father's apartment has a second bedroom now." Marcus said nothing. This was new information but not surprising information. His father had been talking about a second bedroom for two years, ever since Sandra had moved in. A place for Marcus to sleep when he visited. A place that suggested

permanence, or at least the performance of it. "Sandra helped him paint it," Margaret continued. "He told me on the phone. Blue. The color you liked when you were six." She was giving him information. She was also telling him something underneath the information, the way mothers do when they are trying to shape what their children will choose without appearing to choose for them. His mother was preparing him for something. For his father's house to become less foreign. For staying there to become possible. For the idea that he might want to stay there. The house on Beech Street appeared exactly as it had appeared that morning, which was strange because everything inside it had changed. The front door was still red. The porch light still needed replacing. The welcome mat still said Welcome though no one had felt particularly welcome there in months. Margaret pulled into the driveway and turned off the engine and neither of them moved. The silence in the car was the silence that happens after long driving, thick and specific to enclosed spaces. "Go to your room," Margaret said. "Do your homework. I need to make some phone calls." Marcus got out of the car. His legs were stiff from sitting. The October air was colder now, the kind of cold that arrives when the sun begins to actually sink rather than simply lower in the sky. He could hear Margaret on the telephone before he reached the stairs, her voice traveling down the hallway from the kitchen, steady and careful, like she was reading from a script she had written and memorized. "Yes, I told him to call," she was saying. "No, I don't think he will... because he's nine and you're asking him to untangle something that can't be untangled... I know what you think... I know exactly what you think." Marcus climbed to the second floor. His room was small and organized in the way that children's rooms are when their mothers are anxious about disorder. His books were alphabetized. His clothes were folded in drawers with dividers. His desk held only a lamp and a pencil cup and a framed photograph of his family from two years prior, back when his father still lived in the house and they had all stood in front of a Christmas tree and smiled at a stranger with a camera. He sat at the desk. He did not open his homework. Instead he looked at the

photograph and tried to recognize the boy in it, the one who had stood between his parents with his hand on the tree's branch like he was claiming ownership of something that belonged to all of them equally. That boy was gone. The lie had taken him somewhere that he could not return from, not even if his father built a bedroom in blue and waited there with the door open. Downstairs, Margaret's voice continued, patient and relentless as water wearing stone.

Chapter

Six

written by Cora Lindgren

The telephone cord was stretched around the kitchen corner, straining against the wall where Margaret stood with her back to the hallway. Marcus could see only her shoulder, the fabric of her blouse pulled tight across her spine. She was gripping the receiver so hard her knuckles had gone the color of old bone. "He heard it," she said. "That's what you don't understand. He heard Emma crying and he chose not to open the door." Marcus sat on the third step of the staircase, the one that creaked if you put your full weight on it. He had positioned himself on the second step instead, balanced on the edge where the wood was thinner. His socks were thin too. He could feel the cold grain of the step through them. His father's voice came through the receiver in that particular thin way that telephone voices come through. Marcus could not make out words, but he could hear the rhythm of objection. His father was disagreeing with something. This was what his father did now. He disagreed from a distance. "I didn't make him do anything," Margaret said. The lie of it sat in the air like a physical thing. Marcus could smell it, sharp and chemical, like the bleach she used on the bathroom tiles. "The lawyer explained the situation. Marcus made his own choice." She was still holding the phone when Marcus came down the stairs. He had decided, sitting on that step, that he would walk to the kitchen and pour himself a glass of milk. This was a normal thing for a boy to do. Normal

boys got hungry. Normal boys made small decisions about what they wanted to drink and their mothers did not flinch when they appeared in doorways. Margaret flinched. "I have to call you back," she said into the receiver, and she hung up without waiting for his father's response. The phone swung on its cord like something that had been wounded and was trying to find a place to rest. "Are you hungry?" she asked. She was already moving to the refrigerator, already pulling it open before he could answer. The cold air rolled out and Marcus watched her face, the way the light from inside the fridge made her look hollowed, temporary. "A little," he said. She made him a sandwich. Bread, turkey from the package, mustard on one side, mayonnaise on the other. Lettuce that she pulled from the crisper drawer and rinsed under the tap, even though it was already clean. The blade of the knife made a small sound against the cutting board as she sliced the tomato. The knife was sharp. She had maintained it that way, honing it against the steel rod that hung from a magnetic strip beside the sink. Margaret believed that dull tools were dangerous. A dull knife slips. A sharp knife goes exactly where you intend. She wrapped the sandwich in a paper napkin and set it on the table in front of him. "Your father is upset," Margaret said. She sat across from him, her hands folded in front of her like she was about to say grace at dinner, though they did not say grace anymore. They had stopped doing that sometime after his father moved downtown, around the time that doing normal family rituals started to feel like lying. "Is he coming tomorrow?" Marcus asked. "Yes." "Is he angry at me?" Margaret looked at the sandwich between them. Marcus had not picked it up. It sat on the napkin with its white bread exposed, waiting to be consumed or discarded or left until it went hard at the edges. "He's angry at me," Margaret said. "He's using you as the place where he's putting that anger, but it's meant for me. That's different." Marcus bit into the sandwich. The bread was soft. The turkey was cold. The mustard and mayonnaise mixed in a way that he liked, though he had never told his mother this. She had made it this way because it was the way she made sandwiches. Efficiency. Balance. Two flavors that canceled each other

into something neutral. "He's going to ask you how you feel," Margaret continued. "About what happened in the courtroom. And you're going to tell him something." She stopped talking. She waited. Marcus understood that she was giving him the chance to fill the silence, to tell her what story he would tell his father. But there was no story. There was only the weight of the courtridge in his stomach, the cold of the lettuce between his teeth, the way his mother's hands had moved through the simple mechanics of construction and placement. "What should I tell him?" Marcus asked. His mother stood.

Chapter

Seven

written by Priya Nair

She walked to the sink and turned on the faucet and let the water run hot, steam rising off it like she was trying to purify something that couldn't be purified. Her hands went under the water. She didn't flinch. The skin turned red, then redder. "Tell him the truth," she said. The water kept running. Marcus watched her hands and understood that this was not actually an answer. This was a test of whether he would understand that some truths were not the same as other truths, that the word itself had become a kind of joke, a thing that bent depending on who was asking and what they needed to hear. "Which truth?" he said. Margaret turned off the faucet. She shook her hands once, sharp, the way you'd shake off water from a dog. Drops flew across the counter, across the edge of the sink, one landing on the edge of his sandwich. She didn't acknowledge it. "Your father is a good man," she said. "He's also a man who left, and he's trying now to come back and be the kind of father he thinks he should be. He's going to walk into this house tomorrow and he's going to look at you and he's going to see a victim of my choices. That's what he needs to see. That's what will allow him to be angry at me instead of angry at himself for not being here." She was drying her hands on the dish towel, pulling it hard, the way you'd wring out something wet. "So you'll tell him what?" Marcus asked, because she still hadn't actually answered the question and he understood now that

this was deliberate. She was leaving space for him to be the one who chose. This was mothering with a knife edge. This was love that looked exactly like abandonment if you squinted. "Tell him you were scared," Margaret said. "Tell him you didn't know what to do. Tell him that I told you to lie and you didn't want to but you did it anyway because you were afraid of what would happen if you didn't." She tossed the towel over the handle of the oven. It caught and hung there, damp and defeated. "That's the truth he can live with. That's the truth that makes him the good man who came back. That's the story that lets everyone survive." Marcus set down his sandwich. He had eaten maybe half of it. His stomach was full in that unsatisfying way that happens when you're not actually hungry but you eat anyway, when the mechanics of chewing and swallowing have nothing to do with appetite. "And if I don't tell him that?" Margaret looked at him then. Not the way she had looked at him in the restaurant or in the car. This was a different kind of looking. This was the kind of looking that parents do when they are trying to decide if their child has become someone they can negotiate with or someone who will simply do what they're told. "Then he'll stay here," she said. "He'll move back into his old room. He'll try to fix things. He'll fight with me about how we've lived and who we've become, and in six months or a year, he'll leave again, probably this time for good. And you'll have to watch that happen. You'll have to watch him pack and know that you're the reason he's doing it." She moved to the table. She sat back down across from him. She was still wearing the clothes she'd worn to the courthouse. The seams were starting to show wear. "Or you tell him what he needs to hear and he goes back to his apartment and his girlfriend and his blue bedroom and he feels like he's done something, and in another year maybe he tries again, maybe he becomes the kind of father who shows up. Not the one who was here, but the one who's trying." She leaned forward. "You have the ability to decide which version of your father exists tomorrow. That's the actual power you have right now. Not over the courtroom. Not over Emma. Over this. Over him." Marcus could hear the clock on the wall above the refrigerator, the

one with the battery that was dying, the one that ticked too slowly and ran three minutes behind. He could hear the radiator in the hallway beginning to heat, the pipes making their evening sound, the house settling into night. He could hear everything except his own heartbeat, which seemed to have stopped or gone somewhere far enough away that he couldn't locate it anymore. "What if I tell him the real truth?" Marcus said. Margaret stood.

Chapter

Eight

written by wordsbylena

She stood and walked to the window above the sink. The glass was dark now. There was nothing to see except her own reflection, doubled and faint, like she was looking at a version of herself that had already left. Marcus counted the seconds: one, two, three, four. His mother's hand rose and pressed flat against the cold pane. Five, six, seven. The skin of her palm misted slightly where the warmth of her body met the glass. Eight. "Then I lose you," she said. Not dramatically. Not with anything that sounded like emotion. The statement was factual, numbered, precise as inventory. "You'll be his boy. His project. His evidence that he's the good one and I'm the one who broke things. And I'll be alone in this house with my choices, which is fine, which is what I deserve, but you won't be here to see it, so it won't matter to you anymore." She lowered her hand. The mist from her palm was already evaporating, the window returning to its perfect transparency. "That's the mathematics of it," Margaret said. Marcus had inherited his mother's tendency to count things: the tiles on the bathroom floor (144), the books on the living room shelf (267 before his father took his), the steps between the kitchen and his bedroom (seventeen, if you included the landing). Now he counted the items she had just listed: herself, him, the house, the choices, loss. Five categories of consequence, each one containing its own smaller numbers. "You wouldn't try to stop him?" Marcus asked.

"From taking me." Margaret turned from the window. Her reflection stayed behind for half a second, lingering in the glass like it was reluctant to follow her back into the room. "I could try," she said. "I could tell him that you need to stay here, that you're my child, that I know what's best for you. But you're nine years old and you just testified in open court about a situation I manipulated you into. I don't have credibility anymore. I don't have leverage. I have only the fact that I love you and the fact that I did this to you anyway." She moved to the table and sat back down. She picked up the half-sandwich Marcus had abandoned. She took a bite. Chewed. Swallowed. Her jaw worked with mechanical precision, the same way she had taken the spoonful of soup in the restaurant, the same way she had moved through every action since the moment the judge banged the gavel. Processing. Completing the motion. Moving forward because stopping was not an option that bodies offered. "When your father gets here tomorrow," Margaret said, "he'll be carrying something. Not literally. But he'll be carrying the idea that he can fix this, that he can separate you from what happened, that he can be the parent who saves you from the parent who harmed you. That idea will be very heavy. It will make him seem desperate. He'll smell like he's desperate." She set the sandwich down. She had eaten only the one bite. "And you'll have a choice." Marcus understood now that there had been a choice in the courtroom too, but only in the way that a person choosing between drowning and drowning slightly slower has a choice. The courtroom choice had been an illusion constructed by his mother through months of small pressures, the way water wears stone not through force but through endless repetition. This choice was different. This choice was actual. This choice had teeth. "If I tell him I want to stay here," Marcus said, "what happens to you?" "I keep the house," Margaret said. "I keep you. I keep the lie we told, which by then will be five years old, ten years old, twenty years old, eventually the thing that made you who you are. Your foundation story. The thing that happened and couldn't be undone." She stood again and began clearing the table, carrying the plate with the sandwich to the sink, rinsing it,

setting it in the rack to dry. Each motion was discrete. Each motion was separate. She did not pile them together into meaning. She simply completed them, one after another, her hands doing the work that came next. "And if I tell him the truth?" Margaret turned off the water. She dried her hands on a fresh towel, the careful drying of someone preparing for an ending. "Then I get to be the person I am anyway," she said. "Alone. And you get to decide if that's better than what you have now, which is a mother who loves you and a lie that's inside you like a stone." She hung the towel back on its hook.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Lior Tannen

The stones we swallow young enough become part of our skeleton, and we learn to stand up straight anyway.

typewriter_tom

The stone never gets smaller, but eventually your chest gets bigger, and that's the only mercy you get.

Sammy Hall

The stone never gets warm, but you stop noticing it's there, and that's almost the same as forgetting.

jmarsh

The stone in his chest had learned to beat like a second heart, and he could no longer tell which one was real.

Priya Nair

The stone never warms up, but eventually you stop noticing the cold.

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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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11C5T](https://relaywriters.com/read/77?t=4yv10HgR2hKWHyjWsRHG-CTYh_R11C5T)