

COURAGE

Where the Machinery Collects Its Debts

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY • WRITERS

The writers

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

One	Colin McAteer
Two	Iris Beddoe
Three	Lior Tannen
Four	Sasha Loomis
Five	Cora Lindgren
Six	Margot Vail
Seven	typewriter_tom
Eight	Priya Nair

Chapter

One

written by Colin McAteer

Renn sits in the gallery of Courtroom 7 on the second floor of the County Justice Center, three rows back from the bench, hands flat on the wooden seat beside him. The court reporter has already unplugged her machine. The bailiff stands by the door in the posture of someone waiting for permission to leave. It is 4:47 on a Wednesday afternoon, and the fluorescent lights hum in a frequency that becomes audible only when you stop moving. He has been coming here for nine weeks. Nine weeks of sitting in this specific seat, watching the same judge turn pages at the same speed, watching the prosecutor, a woman named Valdez with a habit of clicking her pen when witnesses hedged, make the same argument about intent and prior knowledge and motive. The defendant, Marcus Webb, had not looked at Renn once during the entire trial. This was deliberate. Renn could see the effort in it: the way Marcus kept his jaw angled slightly away, how his eyes found the floor or the judge's face but never the gallery. The bailiff clears his throat. A small, pointed sound. Renn does not leave. He has left every other day at this hour. He has walked through the metal detectors in the lobby, past the information desk, through the revolving doors into the parking garage where his car waits in space 4B with a expired parking permit and a receipt from a coffee shop that closed two years ago still tucked into the cup holder. Today something in his chest has not engaged the leaving

mechanism. Marcus Webb was convicted of aggravated assault. The victim, a man named Chen, had not testified. Chen had settled with the defendant's insurance company six months ago. What the trial proceeded on were photographs, medical records, witness statements from two bystanders who had been standing outside a Vietnamese restaurant on Ashland Avenue when Webb's car mounted the curb. Webb claimed mechanical failure. The prosecution presented cell phone records showing Webb had been reading a text message seventeen seconds before impact. Renn stands now. His knees make a small cracking sound. The bailiff's eyes move toward him. He walks not toward the exit but toward the judge's bench. The wood is older than it looks from the gallery, scored and marked with decades of deliberate penmanship: dates carved by defendants waiting for sentencing, initials scratched by bored attorneys during recess, a small circle someone has drawn over and over until it carved through the varnish. He runs his thumb across one of these marks. The wood is rough. Splinters wait there. The judge's name was Harrison. He had sentenced Marcus Webb to fourteen months in a minimum-security facility upstate, and he had done so without pausing, reading from a document he had prepared before trial even concluded. Renn knows this because Renn had served on the jury that convicted him. The bailiff is no longer waiting. He is walking toward Renn with the posture of a man who has asked once and will not ask twice. Renn pulls his hand back from the bench. Splinters have transferred to the pad of his thumb. They are very small. They are also very real. He looks at the bailiff directly for the first time and speaks. "Where do they take him from here?" The bailiff stops walking. "Pardon?" "Webb. After processing. Where does he go?" The bailiff's face settles into the expression of someone who has answered questions outside his jurisdiction before. "Intake facility in Springfield. Transit usually happens within two weeks of sentencing." "When is sentencing?" "You were just here for it," the bailiff says. He is not unkind. His name tag says Morrison. "Four days ago." Renn already knows this. He also knows that he signed the jury verdict with a pen the

court provided, that his signature sits in a document in a filing system somewhere in this building, that his name is officially part of the conviction. What he does not yet know is why he is still here asking questions about logistics, why his car is in the garage and his home is somewhere else entirely, why the prospect of leaving this room and never returning to it again feels like stepping off a height with no guarantee of ground. Morrison steps aside. The door is open. The hallway is empty except for a janitor moving a mop bucket toward the elevator. Renn does not move.

Chapter

Two

written by Iris Beddoe

The janitor pushes his bucket past without looking. The mop water is gray. It smells like a chemical that used to be pine but has become something else entirely, something that exists only in institutional spaces and the memory of people who clean them. Morrison shifts his weight. He is waiting for Renn to leave or to commit to staying, and the distinction matters to him in a way it clearly did not five minutes ago. There is a schedule. There are procedures. Renn understands this the way he understands the weight of his own body: it is simply true, simply present. "I need to see the jury room," Renn says. "It's in use tomorrow." "Now." Morrison's jaw tightens slightly. His hand moves to a key ring attached to his belt with a chain, and Renn understands that this is the moment where refusal becomes possible, where Morrison could simply say no and mean it. Instead, Morrison unhooks the ring. The keys are older than the courthouse appears to be. They are the kind that require actual force to turn. The jury room is on the third floor. They take the stairs instead of the elevator because Morrison does not speak and Renn does not ask, and the elevator would require conversation of some kind. The stairwell is concrete and echoes. Their footsteps sound like two people, then four people, then a crowd ascending into nothing. The room itself is smaller than Renn remembers, though he was only inside it for twelve minutes total. Three days of deliberation, but only three

brief sessions: twice to ask for clarification on jury instructions, once to deliver the guilty verdict to the court officer stationed outside. The room contains a long table, eight chairs, a whiteboard with nothing written on it. One wall has a single small window that faces a brick wall. There is a water dispenser. There is a box of stale donuts from somewhere, untouched, their boxes still sealed. Morrison stands in the doorway. He does not enter the room itself. Renn sits in one of the chairs. Not the one he sat in during deliberation, though he is not certain he would recognize it if he tried. All eight chairs are identical. All eight are slightly uncomfortable in the same way. The whiteboard has a metal tray at the base where markers are stored. Renn removes one. It is blue. The cap is missing. He writes: WEBB on the board in capital letters. The marker squeaks against the dry-erase surface. The sound is worse than the fluorescent hum. It is worse because it is voluntary. "What are you doing?" Morrison says from the doorway. Renn does not answer. He writes: CHEN below it. He writes: ASHLAND. He writes: TEXT MESSAGE. Each word requires a physical choice. Each letter his hand must make. The board fills. Webb. Chen. Ashland. Text message. Mechanical failure. Insurance settlement. Fourteen months. Springfield. Intake facility. Two weeks. Minimum security. The words accumulate like evidence, like a case being built in reverse, like a man trying to reconstruct something he already knows is complete. He writes: GUILTY. Morrison has moved into the room now. Not toward Renn, but into the space itself, which is a kind of progress. "You can't change it," Morrison says. This is not a threat. It is a fact being spoken aloud by someone who has learned that facts require witnessing sometimes. Renn sets the marker down. The board is crowded. Some letters overlap. Some words are misspelled. MECHANICAL FAILUR. INTAKE FACILTY. The errors are small. They are also irreversible. You cannot unwrite dry-erase. You can only erase and begin again, and Renn does not reach for the eraser. Instead, he stands and walks past Morrison into the hallway. His legs are steadier now. The stairs descend in a way that feels intentional. At the second-floor landing, he stops and opens the door to the hallway that leads to

Courtroom 7. The gallery is dark. The bench holds no weight. The judge's chair is empty in a way that seems final. He walks down the corridor toward the main staircase. Behind him, he hears Morrison close the jury room door. The lock turns. It is the sound of something being secured against return, against second-guessing, against the possibility that Renn might change his mind and come back and write more words on that board. He will not come back. He will not leave, either. He will sit in the lobby instead, in one of the plastic chairs near the information desk, and wait for something to require his presence, his testimony, his signature on a document that proves he was here when this happened. Chen will answer his phone.

Chapter

Three

written by Lior Tannen

Chen answers on the third ring, and the first thing Renn hears is water running, a dish clinking against porcelain, the ordinary sound of a man in his kitchen at an hour when most people have already eaten dinner. "Hello?" Chen says, because Renn has not spoken yet, because there is nothing but breath on the line. Renn sits in one of the plastic chairs near the information desk. The chair is the color of institutional green, the kind that shows every fingerprint. His own hands are visible in its surface, ghosted and repeated. "My name is Renn," he says. "I was on the jury." The water stops. The dish does not clink again. Chen's breathing is audible now, and Renn understands that he has made a mistake, that calling someone and identifying yourself by your function in their assault is not how normal people begin conversations. "I'm calling because," Renn begins, but there is no because that makes sense. Because the sentencing is final and meaningless. Because I need to know if fourteen months feels like enough. Because I wrote your name on a whiteboard in a jury room and it looked both too important and too small. "How did you get this number?" Chen says. "The courthouse publishes lists. Witness information. I found your address first, then looked up the phone." Renn hears how this sounds: methodical, planned, the behavior of someone who has thought about reaching out for longer than the three hours that have actually passed since he

walked out of the jury room. "I'm not threatening you. I just need to ask if you're all right." "I don't know you," Chen says. "No. But I voted to convict the person who hit you. I voted to convict him, and I've been sitting in the courthouse for the last two hours because I can't figure out if I made a choice or if I just did what was asked of me." Renn's voice sounds strange to himself. Thinner. "The judge had already decided. That's what I figured out. He had the sentence written before we even voted. So what did my vote actually do?" Chen does not answer immediately. In the background, Renn can hear the hum of a refrigerator cycling on, the mundane machinery of a man's home, a life that continues the way lives do, incrementally, one ordinary sound after another. "My right shoulder doesn't fully rotate anymore," Chen says. "Not enough for my old job. I teach now. Part-time, because I can only stand for so long before the nerve pain starts in my back. The insurance settlement paid for six months of physical therapy. After that, I was done. They don't cover more than that." Renn closes his eyes. The chair beneath him has a metal frame, and he can feel its edge against his spine through his shirt. "I'm sorry," Renn says. "For what? For convicting him? For not convicting him harder? The trial was over three weeks before it actually ended. You know this." "Yes." "So why call me now?" Renn opens his eyes. Morrison is visible through the glass doors of the stairwell, ascending to the third floor or descending from it, the pattern of his movement unclear. The lobby lights are beginning to dim. The information desk clerk, a woman whose name tag reads PATRICIA, has put her purse beneath her desk and is powering down her computer. "Because you're real," Renn says. "Because I can hear your refrigerator. Because you're standing in your kitchen on a Wednesday night and your shoulder doesn't work the way it used to, and I wrote your name on a whiteboard in all capital letters like you were a piece of evidence instead of a person whose body was broken by someone whose sentence was predetermined by a judge who had already decided." Renn's hands are shaking. "I needed to know that you were a voice and not just a name in a folder." Chen is quiet for a long moment. Then: "What do you want me

to say?" "I don't know," Renn says. "I don't know what any of this means. I sat in a room with seven other people, and we said guilty, and it was true, but the truth didn't matter because the judge had already chosen the outcome. I convicted him anyway. We all did. And now I'm calling you because I need someone to confirm that reality happened." "Reality happened," Chen says quietly. "I'm proof of it. But calling me doesn't undo anything." "No," Renn says. "But it makes something real instead of just true." Patricia is putting on her coat.

Chapter

Four

written by Sasha Loomis

Patricia is putting on her coat, and Renn becomes aware that the lobby is emptying in a way he had not noticed happening until it was nearly complete. The information desk will close. The building will lock. Security will make their rounds at intervals he does not know. Chen is still on the line, or perhaps Chen is not, because Renn has stopped hearing the refrigerator and cannot remember if he ever actually heard it or if he constructed it from the context of a man standing in a kitchen at dinnertime. "Are you still there?" Renn asks. "Yes," Chen says. "I'm listening to you breathe." "My car is in the parking garage. Space 4B. It has an expired permit and a receipt from a coffee shop that closed two years ago." "Why are you telling me this?" "Because if I say it to you, it becomes something I've communicated instead of something I've only thought about." Renn stands. The plastic chair makes a sound like it is relieved to be empty. "The coffee shop was called Meridian. It served pour-over coffee in handmade ceramic cups, and the owner had a cat that sat on the register counter. I used to go there every Tuesday. The cat would push its head against my hand, and I would purchase a medium dark roast, and I would sit by the window and watch people walk past on the street." "You're not well," Chen says. Not unkindly. "No. I'm very well. That's the problem." Renn walks toward the glass doors. Patricia is gone now. The security guard at the main entrance is a man Renn has

not seen before. His uniform is crisp. His posture suggests he has not been here long enough to have learned how to stand in a way that makes time pass faster. "The coffee shop closed because the owner could not afford the rent increase. She tried to stay open for three more months. I watched it happen. She stopped buying the expensive coffee beans. She stopped baking fresh pastries. The cat disappeared. I assume she found it another home, a place where its head would be pushed against a different register counter." Renn pushes through the glass doors into the lobby area where the metal detectors stand dormant and unmanned. The security guard does not look up from his phone. "The point," Renn continues, "is that I knew something was ending. I knew it while it was happening, and I did not intervene. I did not offer to help her pay the rent. I did not organize my friends to begin a crowdfunding campaign. I sat in my plastic chair and drank my medium dark roast and watched the future become the past." "So you called me," Chen says. "So I called you," Renn agrees. "Because you are the only person I know who has been hit by a car and survived it, and I needed to understand if survival requires some kind of action from you or if it is something that simply happens while you are standing on a curb outside a Vietnamese restaurant on Ashland Avenue." The parking garage smells like motor oil and concrete dust. Renn's car is exactly where he left it. The expired permit is still visible on the windshield. The receipt is still in the cup holder, dated March 14th of a year he no longer tracks. He sits in the driver's seat but does not insert the key. The steering wheel is warm from the day, or perhaps it has never cooled, or perhaps warmth is a quality that belongs to everything if you wait long enough to understand it. "I'm going to tell you something," Chen says. "The settlement money. The insurance company settled because they knew Webb was liable. Mechanical failure was never the real claim. He was texting. They had the phone records. So they offered me money, and I took it because my shoulder was already not rotating and the nerve pain had already started and I could not afford to wait for a trial to determine if I deserved compensation." "You settled," Renn says. "Before the trial."

"Six months before. I was not supposed to testify. The prosecution did not need me. They had the bystanders. They had the medical records. They had the phone records and the vehicle inspection data and the photographs of the damage to my body." Chen breathes. "The trial proceeded anyway. Because the law requires proceeding. Not because I needed to be heard." Renn starts the car. The engine turns over. It has been sitting here for hours, and yet it starts without hesitation, without complaint, without any indication that the world has been moving on without it. "Where are you going?" Chen asks. "Springfield," Renn says.

Chapter

Five

written by Cora Lindgren

The drive is four hours north through darkness that accumulates gradually, as if night is something that settles rather than falls. The highway is smooth beneath the tires at first, then rougher as Renn moves away from the city and toward the rural counties where the intake facility sits behind a fence that will be visible only when the headlights hit it. He does not call Chen back. Chen does not call him. The phone sits in the cup holder where the coffee receipt used to live, and Renn realizes somewhere past Bloomington that he has thrown the receipt away without noticing when or where. It is gone. The car still smells like it though, or perhaps like every coffee shop that ever closed, like the particular dust of displacement. The intake facility is not marked by any sign that Renn can see when he arrives at 11:47 PM. He knows it is the right place because there is a fence, and a gate with a keypad, and a single light mounted above a small guardhouse. The light attracts moths. They beat against its surface in a rhythm that sounds almost purposeful, as though they are trying to break through rather than simply drawn to it. A man in a different uniform than the courthouse security guard steps out of the guardhouse. His name tag is not visible from this distance. His hand rests on a belt heavy with equipment. "Visiting hours end at eight," the man says. His voice comes through the closed window of Renn's car. Renn rolls it down. The smell that enters is

not what he expected. It is not the smell of a prison at all. It is the smell of a facility that has been recently cleaned. It smells like the courthouse stairwell, like the lobby after hours, like institutional spaces that have been sanitized into a kind of sterility that makes them feel less real rather than more. "I'm not here to visit," Renn says. "I'm here to speak with someone about intake procedures." "You need to contact the administrative office. They open at eight AM." "I need to understand how long it takes for someone to become part of the system." The guard's posture shifts. He is calculating whether Renn is a threat or simply unusual. "Why do you ask?" Renn can see his own face reflected in the guard's glasses. He looks hollow. "Because I was part of the process that put someone here, and I need to know if the process is reversible or if it simply continues once it begins." The guard's hand moves away from his belt. "Once they cross the intake line, they're part of the system. The system doesn't reverse. It only moves forward." "How long does that take? The crossing?" "Maybe three hours from arrival to processing. Maybe four. They get assigned a cell, a work detail, a classification level. Then the machinery takes over." The guard steps back toward the guardhouse. "You can't do anything about it now." Renn puts the car in reverse and backs away from the gate. The moths follow the light. They will keep following it until they exhaust themselves or until the light turns off, and Renn understands that there is no meaningful difference between those two outcomes. The facility recedes behind him. He drives not back toward the city but further north, toward the state line, toward places where the roads become narrower and the landscape becomes something other than Illinois. The car's headlights catch trees, then fields, then a small town where the streetlights are spaced so far apart that darkness exists between them like an actual substance. He stops at a diner called The Meridian. The name catches him first. The sign is old neon, the M flickering slightly. The parking lot is empty except for a pickup truck with a missing tailgate and a sedan that looks like it has not been moved in months. The door chimes when he enters. The smell is coffee and grease and the

particular warmth of a place that has been running continuously since before dawn. The woman behind the counter is older, maybe sixty, with dark hair that is beginning to gray in deliberate streaks. She does not look up immediately. She is pouring coffee into a cup for a single customer sitting at the counter, a man with his back to Renn, eating eggs with mechanical precision. "Sit anywhere," the woman says. Renn sits in a booth by the window. The vinyl seat is cracked. The table is marked with the rings of hundreds of coffee cups, concentric circles like tree rings, like evidence of time passing in the same location over and over.

Chapter

Six

written by Margot Vail

The woman brings coffee without asking. The cup is heavy ceramic, slightly chipped on the rim. Renn wraps his hands around it and does not drink. Steam rises from the surface in a way that requires no metaphor. It is hot liquid becoming air. Nothing more. "You want food?" the woman says. "No." She nods and walks back to the counter where the man with his back turned continues eating eggs. His fork moves with the same rhythm it has maintained since Renn arrived. Methodical. Purposeful. The kind of eating that is not about hunger but about completing a task. The diner is called The Meridian. This fact sits in Renn's chest like something that requires decision. Coincidence is a thing that happens to people who are not paying attention. Renn has been paying attention since he sat down in the jury box nine weeks ago. He has been paying attention to the prosecutor clicking her pen. To the judge's hand moving across the sentencing document with no hesitation. To Chen's voice on the phone describing a shoulder that no longer rotates. To the guard at the intake facility describing a process that does not reverse. Coincidence is a choice to stop paying attention. He drinks the coffee. It is not from handmade ceramic cups. It is institutional coffee, the kind served in diners across a hundred towns where the owner has learned that people do not come here for the quality of the beverage. They come because it is open. Because it is

warm. Because it exists in a specific location that can be found again if they need to find it. The man at the counter finishes his eggs. He stands and places a bill on the counter. He does not look at Renn. He walks out and the door chimes behind him and then there is no one else in the diner except Renn and the woman and the sound of eggs sizzling on a griddle somewhere in a kitchen Renn cannot see. "You from around here?" the woman says. She is refilling his coffee without being asked. "No." "Passing through?" "I don't know yet." The woman accepts this the way she has accepted many strange answers from many passing customers. There is a catalog of human behavior that diner work requires. Renn is simply one more entry in it. She sets the pot down and pulls out a cigarette from her apron pocket. She does not light it. She simply holds it between her fingers like it is a pen and she is thinking about writing something. "The name of this place," Renn says. "How long has it been called The Meridian?" The woman looks at the cigarette in her fingers. "Since 1987. I bought it from the previous owner. He was the one who named it. Never told me why. I kept it because changing names seemed like bad luck." "Did it bring luck?" "It brought consistency. Which is its own kind of luck in this work." She tucks the cigarette back into her apron. She has decided not to smoke, or she has decided to save the smoking for a later time, or she has decided that the gesture of holding the cigarette is sufficient to mark a moment of pause. Renn cannot determine which. "My name was Patricia," the woman says. "The woman at the courthouse information desk." Renn sets down his cup. The coffee is too hot. It will remain too hot for several more minutes. "You worked at the courthouse." "Twelve years. I transferred here three months ago. My sister needed help with the diner. She's in Springfield now, at the intake facility, working in administration." Patricia sits down across from him in the booth. She does not ask permission. "My sister told me they processed a man this week. Conviction from County Justice Center. A man named Webb. She said a jury had voted to convict him but that the judge had already written the sentence before the trial even started. She said that was how it works.

The jury votes. The judge pretends to consider it. The machinery continues." Renn's hands are visible in the tabletop's surface. His fingers are wrapped around a cup that is too hot to hold. He does not release it. "I was at that desk when a man came in asking about visiting hours to an intake facility. He looked like someone who had been sitting in a car for four hours. He looked like someone who was trying to understand if a system could be reversed." Patricia pulls out another cigarette. This time she lights it.

Chapter

Seven

written by typewriter_tom

Patricia lights the cigarette and exhales toward the ceiling fan, which does not turn. The smoke accumulates in layers. Renn watches it find the corners of the diner and settle there like it has always belonged in those spaces. "Your sister told you about me," Renn says. "She told me a jury member showed up at the gate asking about intake procedures. She said he looked like he was trying to reverse something that had already finished." Patricia taps ash into a coffee saucer. "The system doesn't reverse. That's what the guard told you. That's what everyone tells people who show up asking." "But you're telling me something different." "I'm telling you that I was at that desk for twelve years watching the machinery work. Watching guilty verdicts arrive like mail. Watching judges nod their heads at sentences they had already decided. And I'm telling you that I left because I couldn't watch it anymore." She stubs out the cigarette after three drags. "My sister stayed in the system. She works in administration now. She processes the paperwork that makes a man's time official. She has decided that processing the paperwork is not the same as making the decision." Renn stands. The booth is too small for the conversation they are having. "I need to see the paperwork. Webb's paperwork. His intake file. His classification. Anything that shows what the judge decided before the trial started." Patricia's face does not change. "My sister can't show you that. It's

sealed. It's protected. It's part of a system that does not allow reversal." "Then why are you telling me this?" "Because you drove four hours to a gate in the dark, and you asked a guard about whether the machinery can be reversed, and that tells me you already know the answer but you're asking anyway. You're asking because knowing and being told are different things." She pulls out another cigarette and holds it without lighting. "My sister said the judge's sentence was fourteen months minimum security. She said the judge wrote it three days before the trial started. She said she's seen it happen hundreds of times. The judge decides. The jury confirms. The machinery processes. Nothing reverses." Renn walks to the counter. There is a phone mounted on the wall behind it, an old rotary model that looks like it was installed in 1987 and has not been moved since. He picks up the receiver. The dial tone is actual, not simulated. He dials the number he found in the courthouse records and listens to Chen answer on the second ring. "It's me," Renn says. "I'm in a diner called The Meridian in a town I cannot name. The owner's sister works in administration at the facility where Webb is being processed. The judge had already written the sentence before the trial started. Everyone knew this. Everyone participated in the machinery anyway." Chen does not respond immediately. Renn can hear the refrigerator again, or perhaps a different refrigerator, or perhaps the sound is just part of how Chen's voice carries now. "What do you want to do about it?" Chen asks. "I don't know. I voted guilty. We all did. And it was true. It was absolutely true that he hit you and he was reading a text message and the law says that's aggravated assault. But the judge had already decided the outcome before we even entered the jury box." "So you want to undo your vote," Chen says. "I want to know if there is a functional difference between voting guilty when the outcome is predetermined and not voting at all." Renn watches Patricia light the cigarette she has been holding. She smokes it methodically, the way the man ate his eggs. Completion of a task. "The difference," Chen says, "is that you participated. You looked at the evidence. You deliberated with seven other people. You made a choice that could have gone the other

way, even if the judge had already prepared a sentence for either outcome. You made the choice real instead of leaving it as an abstraction." "That's not good enough," Renn says. "I know," Chen says. "But it's what we have." Patricia is watching him. Her sister is in Springfield making paperwork official. The judge is somewhere making decisions before trials start. Webb is somewhere inside the gate becoming part of the system. And Renn is in a diner at midnight holding a phone that connects to a man whose shoulder does not rotate anymore, asking if participation in a rigged machinery is the same as collaboration or if it is something else entirely. "I'm going to call the judge," Renn says.

Chapter

Eight

written by Priya Nair

I'm going to call the judge," Renn says. Chen's breathing changes. Sharper. "No." "He made the decision before we voted. Before we even heard the evidence. He, " "He's a judge. Judges can do that. They prepare contingencies. They read files in advance. That's not illegal." "It's not justice either," Renn says. Patricia is watching him smoke her cigarette like he is the one who lit it. The diner's clock reads 12:34. Everything about this moment is orchestrated. "I need to know what he was thinking. I need to ask him directly why he bothered with the trial at all." "Because without the trial, it's not a conviction. Without the jury, it's a sentence with no foundation. You made it real. You and seven other people made it so the machinery could continue without appearing to be machinery." Renn hangs up. Not angry. Deliberate. The phone receiver fits back into its cradle with a click that sounds like a lock engaging. Patricia stubs out her half-smoked cigarette. "You're not going to call the judge," she says. It is not a question. "Why not?" "Because you already know what he'll say. Judges don't explain themselves to jury members. They explain themselves to appeals courts, and appeals courts are where the real work happens. They're where the machinery gets examined. But you're not an appeals court. You're a man in a diner at midnight trying to undo something that cannot be undone because it was never actually done." Renn sits back down. The coffee has cooled

enough to drink. It tastes like every other institutional coffee he has consumed: accurate, forgettable, the kind of beverage that exists only to provide the sensation of warmth. "Webb hit Chen. That part is true." "Yes." "The judge decided fourteen months. That part is also true." "Yes." "So what was the jury for?" Patricia pulls out a new cigarette. She lights it before Renn can answer. "The jury was for you. Not for justice. For you. So that when you lay down at night and think about what you did, you can say you participated in a process. You can say you looked at evidence. You can say seven other people agreed with you. You can say it was deliberate. You can say it was real." She exhales toward the ceiling fan again. The smoke does not disperse. It accumulates. "My sister," Patricia continues, "processes the paperwork that makes men official. She stamps forms. She files documents. She enters names into systems. She tells herself this is different from being the judge because the paperwork is just administration. She tells herself the judge is the one making the decision. But the paperwork is the decision. The paperwork is the part that makes the decision real to the machinery. Without her stamps, without her filing, without her entries into systems, Webb would still be a man with a sentence written on a piece of paper. The paperwork makes him a prisoner." "So she's responsible," Renn says. "She's complicit. So are you. So is the prosecutor who clicked her pen. So is Morrison who locked the jury room. So is the bailiff who escorted you out. So is the guard at the gate who said the system doesn't reverse. So am I, for leaving the desk instead of burning it down." Patricia finishes the cigarette. She does not light another one. The ashtray in front of her contains three cigarette butts and the residue of ash, a small map of her smoking habit over the course of this conversation. "Webb's paperwork is sealed," Patricia says. "But my sister is in Springfield. My sister could unseal it. My sister could show a jury member what the judge wrote three days before the trial. My sister could do that if a jury member called her and asked. My sister could do that if someone gave her a reason to believe that the machinery could be stopped." Renn understands what she is offering. A crack in the system. A person inside

administration who could access information that is supposed to remain protected. A way to prove what he already knows. "Your sister could lose her job," he says. "Yes." "She could face criminal charges for releasing sealed documents." "Yes." "And she's willing to do that because," "Because she has been stamping forms for three years and the weight of the stamps has started affecting her wrists. Because she goes home and her hands hurt and she cannot sleep. Because I called her from the courthouse parking lot and told her about a jury member who could not leave, who was still sitting there at 6 PM asking about intake procedures, and she recognized something in that detail that made her understand her own complicity." Patricia stands.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Lior Tannen

The machinery hums whether we watch it or look away, but watching means we might, someday, find the off switch.

Sasha Loomis

The machinery hums the same frequency whether you're watching it or running away.

Cora Lindgren

The machinery grinds forward because we are the grease in its joints, and we keep moving because stopping would require feeling the full weight of what we've already set in motion.

Margot Vail

The machinery hums the same whether you oil it or refuse to touch it.

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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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