



COURAGE

We Had to Break Something

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY • WRITERS

The writers

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

One	Priya Nair
Two	Lior Tannen
Three	Margot Vail
Four	Dan Okafor
Five	Sammy Hall
Six	Colin McAteer
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Eight	Olive Kassen

Chapter

One

written by Priya Nair

The lawyer's face did something complicated. Her name was Reeves and she had a habit of clicking her pen when she expected you to lie, so the pen was clicking now, click-click, rapid-fire like a tiny woodpecker that had read the case file. "You're certain," she said. Not a question. "Yeah." The boy's name was Marcus. Twelve years old. He had a scab on his left knuckles from picking at it that morning, and now his mother's hand on his shoulder was warm enough that he could feel the individual fingers, each one pressing a different message: don't you dare, I love you anyway, we talked about this. "Because your original statement, the one from February, said the man in the blue jacket was standing near the mailbox when you came home from school." Click-click. "That was wrong," Marcus said. The courtroom wasn't huge but it felt engineered to make you small. High ceiling. Wooden panels that didn't reflect light so much as absorb it. There was a clock on the wall with numbers instead of marks, and Marcus could see the second hand jumping: tick, tick, tick. No smooth sweep. Just violent little jumps forward. Reeves set her pen down on her legal pad. Picked it up again. "Your mother brought you in yesterday and you changed your account. Said the man was actually on the corner. The opposite corner. Across the street." Marcus's throat did something it had done maybe five times in his life. It closed. Actually closed, like a fist around his windpipe, and for a second he

couldn't push air down. His mother's hand tightened. She knew what was happening. She'd seen it before. He swallowed hard and it cracked open again. "I made a mistake," he said. "In February." "Yes." "Not yesterday." Marcus didn't answer that. Reeves was good, actually. He could see why his mother had hired her. The woman across the room, the prosecutor, she was already making notes in that furious style that meant she knew she was losing something but wasn't quite sure what yet. "The man you saw," Reeves continued, and now her voice had changed, softer, which was somehow worse, "was that Officer Daniels?" Marcus's hands were shaking. He put them flat on his lap and pressed them down against his thighs to pin them. The courtroom was silent except for a radiator ticking in the corner, some ancient heating system that nobody had bothered to fix because who cared about comfort in a room designed to extract truth. "I couldn't see his face very well," Marcus said. "But you told police it was definitely him." "I was scared." His mother's fingers loosened slightly. That was what she'd been waiting for. The thing that was true. The thing that might matter. Reeves nodded once, slow, and wrote something down. Then she looked up at the judge, a woman with gray hair in a bun so tight it looked like it hurt, and said, "I have no further questions, Your Honor." The prosecutor stood. She had a file folder that she opened with the kind of precision that suggested she wanted Marcus to hear the paper crack. "Young man," she said, "you understand you're under oath." Marcus nodded. "You understand that means you have to tell the truth." He nodded again. "So when you say you couldn't see the man's face, you're telling us that on February fourteenth, when you reported seeing Officer Daniels assault a suspect near your house, you actually couldn't identify him at all." There it was. The trap. Not the kind you can see coming. The kind that snaps around your ankle after you've already stepped over it. Marcus looked at his mother. She was staring straight ahead at nothing, her jaw locked so hard he could see the muscle working beneath her skin. "That's right," Marcus said. The prosecutor smiled. Wrote

something down. Sat back down. And that was when Marcus understood what he'd just done.

Chapter

Two

written by Lior Tannen

The clock's second hand jumped again. Tick. Marcus understood it the way you understand cold water closing over your head: not gradually, but all at once, total, leaving no room for argument. He had just told a courtroom full of people that he couldn't see Officer Daniels' face. Which meant there was no Officer Daniels at what he'd seen. Which meant his mother had brought him to the courthouse yesterday and walked him through the story one more time, her voice steady and her hands busy with ordinary things like folding laundry and making his lunch, and she had known exactly what she was doing. His mother stood up. The bailiff's eyes tracked her, but she wasn't leaving the courtroom. She was just standing, letting go of Marcus's shoulder, stepping back from the chair where he sat. Her purse was still on the bench. She left it. That detail stuck with him, the small tan leather bag with the broken clasp that she'd owned since before he was born, and she was leaving it behind like it belonged to someone else. "Your Honor," she said. Her voice didn't shake. "I need to make a statement." The judge, the one with the brutal bun, looked up from her notes. "Mrs. Chen, you're a witness in this case, not a party to it." "I know what I am." Marcus's mother stood with her hands at her sides. She was wearing the navy dress she'd bought specifically for this week, and it fit her the way clothes fit people who are thinking about nothing but the shape they need to occupy in a

room. "I told my son to change his statement. I brought him here yesterday and I told him what to say. That was illegal, I understand that. I'm telling you now so you can do whatever you need to do with me. But Marcus needs to tell you what actually happened on February fourteenth." The prosecutor was already on her feet. "Your Honor, this is highly irregular." "Yes," the judge said flatly. "It is. Ms. Reeves, do you have anything to say?" Marcus's lawyer looked at his mother with something that might have been respect, the kind you give someone who just walked into traffic on purpose. "My client would like to revise his testimony," she said. Marcus's hands were still shaking. He pressed them harder against his thighs. His mother was watching the judge now, not him, not the prosecutor, not the man in the defendant's chair who was Officer Daniels and who had always been Officer Daniels, who had his hand over his mouth and his shoulders shaking in a way that looked like crying or laughing or some combination of both. She was watching the judge like the judge was a mirror and she needed to see her own face reflected back to confirm that she still existed. "Marcus," the judge said. Her voice had changed. It was no longer a room-tool. It was just a voice. "Do you want to amend your previous statement?" Marcus opened his mouth. Nothing came out. His throat had closed again, the same fist, but this time it wasn't fear. It was something harder. His mother had risked something real. Her job, maybe. Her record. Whatever she had built by being careful all these years, by not making trouble, by being the kind of woman who showed up on time and did what was asked and didn't ask for more than she needed. And she'd done it because she loved him, or because she couldn't live with the lie, or because she was furious at something so deep inside her that it had taken eight months of watching her son carry it to finally break through the surface. "Yeah," Marcus said. His voice came out thin. "I want to." "Then tell me what you saw on February fourteenth." Marcus looked at his mother. She was crying now, silently, the tears moving down her face like rain on a windshield. She nodded at him once. Just once. Permission, or maybe just witness. Evidence that he wasn't alone in this.

"I saw Officer Daniels push the man down," Marcus said. "The one on the corner. He was already on the ground and Officer Daniels pushed him again. Pushed his head into the concrete. The man was screaming at him to stop. I could see his face. I could hear him." The prosecutor's pen fell onto her legal pad and rolled. Nobody picked it up. In the silence, the radiator ticked. And Marcus understood something else then, something his mother probably already knew: that telling the truth wasn't the end of anything. It was the beginning.

Chapter

Three

written by Margot Vail

The radiator ticked. Kept ticking. A sound like a metronome that nobody had asked for, measuring time in units too small to matter. Officer Daniels had his hand down now. His shoulders had stopped moving. The courtroom waited for someone to speak because that's what courtrooms do: they wait for language to fill the spaces where action used to be. The judge set her pen down with deliberate care. Parallel to the edge of her notepad. She was a woman named Hollis, the bailiff had said her name once in the hallway, and she had gray hair that didn't move when she moved, which meant it had been pinned that way for hours, maybe since early morning when she'd dressed for a day she probably knew would break open. "I'm going to need a ten-minute recess," she said. Not to the room. To herself, or to the record. "We'll reconvene at two forty-five. Officer Daniels, you remain seated." The bailiff stood. He was a compact man with a radio on his belt and the kind of stillness that comes from years of watching rooms for the moment they turn dangerous. He pressed a button. A door Marcus hadn't noticed opened in the back wall, dark wood frame set flush against dark wood paneling, and Hollis rose and walked toward it without looking at anyone. Her robe moved like water. She was gone. The prosecutor was already gathering her things. Papers into the folder. Folder into the briefcase. Her movements had the quality of someone erasing a

calculation they'd done wrong. She didn't look at Officer Daniels. Nobody looked at Officer Daniels except Marcus, briefly, and what Marcus saw was a man whose face had reorganized itself into something that wasn't an expression anymore. Just skin arranged over bone. His jaw was clenched so hard Marcus could see the muscle definition in his neck. Reeves leaned toward Marcus's mother. "Don't talk to anyone," she said. Just that. Then she was moving too, gathering her own papers, walking toward the back of the courtroom where a door on the opposite side was opening for her, a different door, a better door, probably, because that was how these things worked. Proximity to outcome determined which exits you got to use. Marcus's mother sat back down. She took his hand. Her palm was damp. She'd been sweating under that navy dress the whole time, probably, the whole trial, the whole week, the drive to the courthouse yesterday when she'd walked him through it and he'd understood finally that she wasn't asking him to lie anymore, she was releasing him from the contract that had been written in his chest since February. Her grip was tight enough that it hurt, but he didn't pull away because pain was information now, it was proof that she was real and he was real and this was actually happening. "What happens now?" he asked. "Recess," she said. "After that." She didn't answer immediately. She was looking at Officer Daniels, who had an attorney of his own, a man in a gray suit who was whispering something to him, leaning close like he was trying to pour language directly into his skull. Officer Daniels wasn't responding. He was staring down at the table in front of him, at nothing in particular, at the wood grain maybe, at the scratches in the varnish that had been accumulating for years, microscopic damage visible only if you were looking for it. "After that they'll probably call more witnesses," Marcus's mother said. "People who saw what you saw. People who were there. They might ask you questions again. Different questions, or the same ones asked differently so they can find the cracks in your story." "Will there be cracks?" "No," she said. "You saw what you saw." But that wasn't the same as safety. That wasn't the same as anything being over. Marcus

could feel it in the way the radiator had gone quiet, in the way the air in the courtroom had changed texture, become harder to move through. They had stepped over a threshold and there was no walking back across it. His mother was facing charges now. That was the thing she'd accepted when she stood up. When she said his name to a judge and offered herself as evidence of her own crime. A man in a uniform came and gestured for them to leave the courtroom. Not the bailiff. Someone else. A security detail, maybe, or someone whose job it was to move people between spaces. They stood. His mother kept holding his hand. They walked toward an exit Marcus hadn't used yet, toward a hallway he'd never seen, where the light was fluorescent and the walls were institutional green and nobody was waiting.

Chapter

Four

written by Dan Okafor

The hallway smelled like floor wax and something else Marcus couldn't place, something chemical that made his sinuses tight. His mother's hand was still locked around his, and neither of them spoke because there was nothing left to say in the way normal people said things. The security guard, or whatever he was, walked maybe six feet ahead, his shoes making soft sounds against the linoleum. They passed a water fountain with a dent in its metal casing. Passed a bulletin board with notices pinned to it from what looked like 2003. Passed a woman in a cardigan carrying a stack of folders who didn't look up as they went by. "In here," the guard said, stopping at a door labeled "Witness Room B" in block letters that had been updated at some point, the newer plastic numbers slightly brighter than the older ones around them. He opened it. Inside was a space that nobody had tried very hard with. A table. Four chairs. A window that faced a brick wall across an alley so narrow that the brick seemed to be breathing at you. There was a box of tissues on the table, the cheap kind with lotion that made your nose burn worse, and Marcus understood that someone had made a decision about what people in this room needed. "You'll wait here," the guard said. "An investigator will come talk to you." "How long?" Marcus's mother asked. "Can't say." He left. The door closed with a sound that suggested it locked from the outside. Marcus's mother sat down in the nearest chair.

She didn't let go of his hand, just pulled him down into the chair next to her. They sat like that for what might have been thirty seconds. Might have been five minutes. Time had become unreliable. "I should call someone," she said. Not to Marcus. Just out into the room. "I need to call my job. I need to tell them I won't be in tomorrow." She pulled her hand away to reach for her phone, then stopped, looking at her own palm. "I should probably call a lawyer first." "You have a lawyer," Marcus said. "I had a lawyer helping my son. That's different than having a lawyer for myself." She actually laughed at this, a small dry sound. "Turns out I'm my own problem now." She pulled up her contacts. Started scrolling. Her thumb hovered over a name, then moved on. Hovered over another. This was the moment where she was supposed to feel something, Marcus thought. Regret, maybe. Terror. But she just looked tired, the way she looked on Sunday afternoons when she'd been cleaning the house all morning and couldn't find the motivation to start dinner. Like she'd finished something difficult and now had to decide what to do with the rest of the day. The phone rang. Not hers. His. She looked at him with something approaching alarm, and he realized he'd forgotten he had it, had left it in his pocket the whole time he was in the courtroom, a digital record of his ordinary life still existing in there, messages from kids at school, notifications from apps he'd opened and forgotten about. He pulled it out. Unknown number. He answered anyway. "Marcus Chen?" A woman's voice. Professional. The kind that had been trained to sound like it wasn't angry even when it probably was. "This is Detective Sarah Paulson with the District Attorney's office. Do you have a moment?" His mother leaned toward him, trying to hear. "I'm in a room at the courthouse," Marcus said. "Yes, I know. I need to ask you some additional questions about your statement. Your mother should be there with you, correct?" He looked at his mother. She was nodding, her mouth pressed into a thin line. "Yeah," he said. "I'm going to come find you. Don't leave the room you're in. If anyone else tries to talk to you before I get there, tell them you have legal representation and you're not speaking without counsel present. Can you remember that?" "Yes."

"Okay. I'm going to be honest with you, Marcus. What your mother did today was brave and it was also a crime. What Officer Daniels did was a crime. How those two things balance out is not my decision to make. But I need to know everything you saw that day because right now we have one verified witness and a whole lot of people who are going to spend a lot of money trying to make his testimony disappear." The line went quiet. Just the sound of her breathing. "I saw him do it," Marcus said. "I know."

Chapter

Five

written by Sammy Hall

I know," Detective Paulson said again, and something in the repetition made it sound less like confirmation and more like she was trying to convince herself. "Here's what I need from you. I'm going to walk you through the sequence one more time, and I need you to tell me every detail you can remember. The position of his body. The suspect's position. The distance between them. Whether you heard words or just sounds. Whether there were other people watching. Whether Officer Daniels knew he was being seen." Marcus's mother reached over and took the phone from his hand. "Detective Paulson, this is Chen's mother, Margaret Chen. My son will answer your questions, but I want to be clear that I'm the one who contaminated his initial statement. He's been carrying the truth this whole time." "I'm aware, Mrs. Chen. I'm also aware that you just committed perjury and obstruction of justice, and your son is a minor who's been coached by a parent, which means we get to have this conversation in a room with a door that locks from the outside instead of somewhere that would be more comfortable for him. So let's focus on what we can actually fix." She hung up or disconnected or just let the line go dead. Margaret Chen looked at the phone in her hand like it had bit her. The door opened maybe ninety seconds later. Detective Paulson was younger than Marcus had pictured, maybe forty, with dark hair pulled back so tight it looked painful and the kind of

posture that suggested she'd spent years in rooms smaller than this one, getting used to the way they made you feel like the walls were listening. She had a digital recorder no bigger than a pen and a notebook with pages already filled with something, details from somewhere, other cases or other witnesses or other lies that had needed straightening out. "I'm not here to give you advice," she said, pulling out a chair and sitting down across from them both. "But I'm going to anyway because I've been doing this for fifteen years and I've seen what happens when families try to protect each other. Mrs. Chen, you should probably leave. Go call that lawyer. Find out how much trouble you're actually in." "I'm not leaving my son." "That's not protection anymore. That's just making sure he watches you suffer the consequences of what you did for him." Paulson turned to Marcus. "I'm going to record this. You understand that?" He nodded. "Say it out loud. For the recording." "I understand." She pressed a button on the recorder. Stated the date, the time, the location, the names of everyone in the room in a voice that had already moved past emotion into pure documentation. "Tell me about February fourteenth. Start with when you left school." Marcus started talking. He described the walk home, the particular way the light had looked coming through the bare trees, the fact that he'd been listening to music on his headphones, which he pulled out right when he saw the two men. One on the ground. One standing over him. He described the color of Officer Daniels' jacket because that had been the first thing that registered, police blue, official blue, which meant safety, which meant he'd felt safe for approximately two seconds before understanding that the man on the ground was bleeding. Paulson didn't interrupt. She just wrote, her pen moving steadily, creating a record of Marcus's voice transformed into her handwriting, his memory becoming her evidence. When he talked about the sound of the man's head hitting concrete, she didn't flinch. When he described the way Officer Daniels had kept pushing even after the man stopped resisting, she just kept writing. It took maybe twenty minutes. When Marcus finished, Paulson turned off the recorder. "That's consistent with what we have from two other

witnesses," she said. "There's also security camera footage from the building across the street. We have you on that footage, by the way. February fourteenth, three forty-seven p.m., standing exactly where you said you were standing, watching exactly what you said you watched." Margaret Chen's hands were shaking. Marcus could see her trying to keep them still by pressing them flat against her thighs, the same thing he'd done in the courtroom. "Why didn't you use the footage?" Margaret asked. "Because footage is abstract until someone makes it concrete. Someone has to say what they saw. Someone has to stand up and say it out loud in front of a judge, and most people won't do that. Most people will take the coaching and the pressure and the threats and they will reshape their memories into whatever shape keeps them safe." Paulson looked at Marcus directly. "You didn't.

Chapter

Six

written by Colin McAteer

You didn't," Paulson said, and then she stood, the chair scraping backward against linoleum in a sound that made Margaret flinch. She tucked the recorder into her jacket pocket. "I'm going to go file this. What happens next depends on whether the prosecutor decides to pursue charges against your mother, and that's not my call. But I can tell you that Officer Daniels is going to spend the next seventy-two hours knowing that we have three independent witnesses and a video that confirms all of it. He's going to spend that time talking to his own lawyer and probably his union rep, and they're going to tell him that his options have narrowed significantly." She was moving toward the door. Paulson had the kind of efficiency that made wasted motion look obscene. "Stay in this room. Someone will come get you when it's clear. Don't talk to anyone else about what you've said today. Not friends, not teachers, not the other kids at school. You understand?" Marcus nodded, then caught himself. "Yeah. I understand." "Good." She opened the door from the inside without waiting for it to unlock. It hadn't been locked. The security guard was standing in the hallway, or maybe a different guard, they all had the same posture, and Paulson said something to him too low for Marcus to hear. Then she was gone, her footsteps moving away down the hallway with the same purposeful speed she brought to everything else. The door swung shut. This time it actually locked.

Marcus heard the mechanism engage. Margaret was staring at her hands. They had stopped shaking at some point, or maybe she'd just given up trying to control them because the shaking wasn't doing anything to change what was happening. "She was right," Margaret said. "You shouldn't have had to do this. This should have been my decision, and I should have made it alone, and you should have been home doing whatever twelve-year-olds do when their parents aren't ruining their lives." "You're not ruining my life." "Not yet. Ask me again in a week." She looked up at the window, at the brick wall breathing across the alley. "Do you know what the worst part is? The part I didn't expect?" Marcus didn't answer. He knew she was going to tell him anyway. "The worst part is that I feel better. I feel lighter. Like I set down something I've been carrying and I forgot how heavy it was until it was gone." She put her head down on the table. Not dramatically. Just down, her forehead against the surface, which was a scratched veneer over particleboard, stamped with circular stains from coffee cups that someone else had sat with in this room. "I'm a terrible person," she said, her voice muffled. "Your terrible person," Marcus said. She made a sound that might have been a laugh. The radiator in this room was different than the one in the courtroom. Quieter, or maybe just out of sight, somewhere in the walls. But Marcus could feel it, the way heat moved through the building in discrete pulses, warming the space incrementally, trying to make it habitable. His mother's shoulder was against his under the table. Not intentionally touching, just the proximity of two people sitting close enough that their bodies acknowledged each other. The tissues on the table were still there, unused. The brick wall was still there. Outside, somewhere in the building, Detective Paulson was probably filing her recording, probably walking past offices where other investigators were working other cases, other crimes, other moments when people had to decide between protecting themselves and protecting someone they loved. The door opened without warning. A woman in a blazer that hung wrong on her shoulders, like she'd put it on over a dress and forgotten to adjust

anything. She had a plastic badge that said "Court Administrator" and the kind of expression that suggested she'd already had this conversation with multiple people today. "Margaret Chen?" she said. Margaret lifted her head. "There's an emergency bail hearing scheduled for you at three twenty. Your attorney, Ms. Reeves, is requesting that you be released on your own recognizance pending investigation, given your voluntary disclosure to the court and your cooperation with the District Attorney's office." Margaret was very still. "What does that mean?" "It means you're probably not going to jail today. Probably." The woman looked at Marcus. "You'll need to come with your mother. There's a side entrance. Someone will show you where." She was already turning back toward the door. "Wait," Margaret said. "What about Officer Daniels?" The administrator paused. "He's been arrested. Bail hearing at four.

Chapter

Seven

written by jmarsh

He's been arrested. Bail hearing at four. The words arrived without context, without the weight they deserved, spoken by a woman whose job it was to deliver information in the most efficient manner possible, stripped of everything but their skeleton. Margaret Chen stood. She stood the way someone stands when they have been sitting for so long that their body has forgotten the geometry of verticality, unfolding incrementally, each joint a separate negotiation with physics. Marcus watched her shoulders realign themselves. Watched her take a breath that had nothing to do with oxygen and everything to do with the moment reorganizing itself around what had just been said. Officer Daniels was arrested. The administrator had already left, her footsteps receding down the hallway with the same indifference she'd brought to the delivery. The door swung shut. Locked again, or perhaps just closed; Marcus could no longer distinguish between the two states. In the corner, the radiator cycled. The brick wall across the alley did not change. "Did you understand what she said?" Margaret asked, not to Marcus but to the room itself, to the accumulated dust under the table, to the fluorescent lights that hummed with a frequency that made your teeth ache if you paid attention to it long enough. "He's in custody. They're holding him. He can't walk away from this the way he walked away from February fourteenth." She moved to the window. The brick

was close enough that she could have pressed her forehead against the glass and felt nothing but the abstraction of the wall, the idea of it, since distance had collapsed into something negligible. Her reflection was there too, ghosted over the brickwork, a pale overlay of a woman in a navy dress who had walked into a courtroom and destroyed herself on purpose. "I should feel something," she said. "Triumph, maybe. Vindication. Some species of joy that justice is finally, finally moving in the direction it's supposed to move." She turned to look at Marcus directly. "What I feel is afraid." "Of what?" he asked. "Of what happens when he gets out. And he will get out. Even if bail is set at a hundred thousand dollars, which it won't be because he's a police officer with no prior record and a lawyer who knows how to talk to judges, he will post it. His union will post it. Someone will post it because that's how this works. People like Officer Daniels don't stay arrested. They wait, and then they resume." Marcus understood, then, what she hadn't said when Detective Paulson was still in the room. What she hadn't said when the administrator was delivering her news like a telegram. His mother wasn't afraid for herself. She was afraid for him. For the fact that she had made them both into people who had stepped out of the ordinary machinery of the city and into something else, something with momentum, something that didn't decelerate once you'd put your hand on it. "They'll move us," Margaret said. It wasn't a question. "That's what happens next. The DA will probably recommend it, or Reeves will suggest it, or I'll just decide it on my own because I'll be too afraid not to. New apartment. New school. New everything, Marcus. All because I couldn't live with the lie anymore and you couldn't live with it either, and we looked at each other for maybe thirty seconds and understood that we had to break something." She sat back down. Not in the same chair. A different one, as if the geography of the table mattered, as if the specific angle from which she observed her own destruction made any difference. Her hands had started shaking again, or perhaps they had never stopped and she had simply become conscious of it once more. "There was a woman I used to work with," Margaret continued, "before

I took the job I have now. She was in her fifties, and she told me once that the worst part of being an adult was understanding that your choices had actual consequences. Not metaphorical ones. Not the kind that appear in self-help books. Real ones. People's lives changing. Yours included. She quit that job. Moved to somewhere in the Midwest. I never knew if it was because of something specific or just because she couldn't bear the weight of knowing what she was doing anymore." The overhead light flickered. Caught itself. Continued. "I think about her sometimes," Margaret said. "I think about her now." A knock on the door. Not the administrator. Someone else. A man with a clipboard and an ID that Marcus couldn't quite read, who said Margaret's name once and waited for her to gather herself. Marcus stood. His mother stood.

Chapter

Eight

written by Olive Kassen

The man with the clipboard held the door. His silence was a kind of architecture, creating a space for them to pass through, and the light in the hallway was different from the light in the room. It was colder, yellower, stained by decades of institutional use. Margaret's hand found the back of Marcus's neck, a light pressure that was not a guide but an anchor. They followed the man past a series of closed doors, each one numbered in black plastic. The floor here was tiled, not linoleum, and their footsteps made small, sharp reports that were swallowed by the high ceiling. No one else was in this corridor. It felt like a service passage, a vein running through the courthouse hidden from the public body. They descended a flight of stairs, concrete steps with metal guards on the edges, worn smooth in the center by the passage of feet. The air grew cooler. It smelled of damp stone and ozone from the humming ballasts of the long fluorescent tubes overhead. The man stopped at a heavy steel door with a wired glass window set into its upper half. He produced a key. The lock turned with a solid, mechanical sound, a sound of finality. He pushed the door open onto a narrow landing that led down to an alley. The city's air, sharp with the first hints of an evening chill, rushed in to meet them. It carried the scent of exhaust and rain-damp pavement. Below them, in the alley, a dark blue van waited with its engine idling, a soft rumble in the quiet space between buildings.

Another man in a uniform, not a police officer but a courthouse marshal, stood beside the van's open rear doors. It was then that Marcus saw him. Officer Daniels was being led from another door, a different exit farther down the alley. He was not in his uniform. He wore a gray sweatshirt and jeans, and his hands were cuffed behind his back. He moved with his head down, his attorney walking beside him, speaking in a low, urgent tone that was lost in the vast acoustics of the brick canyon. Officer Daniels looked up. Just for a second. His eyes swept the alley and found Marcus and Margaret standing on the landing. There was no recognition in his face, not at first. Then it came, a slow curdling of features into something dense and airless. He did not look away. Margaret's hand tightened on Marcus's neck, her fingers pressing into the bone. She did not pull him back or shield his eyes. She held him steady, forcing him to be a witness one last time. They stood there, suspended above the alley, as the marshals guided Officer Daniels into the back of the transport van. The doors closed. A bolt was thrown. The man with the clipboard gestured down the steps. "Your ride is this way." At the mouth of the alley, a black sedan was parked, its driver visible only as a silhouette against the low, slanted light of the late afternoon sun. The light was weak, gilding the edges of the buildings with a pale, watery gold. It did not feel like victory. It did not feel like an ending. It felt like a transaction that had finally been paid in a currency they were only now beginning to understand. Margaret let go of Marcus. She walked down the concrete steps alone, her heels clicking with a careful, measured rhythm. She did not look back. Marcus followed. When they reached the bottom, the air was full of the city's noise, the distant sirens and the closer hum of traffic from the street just beyond the alley's throat. The world was still there. It had not stopped for them. He looked at his mother's back, at the straight line of her spine inside the navy dress. She had made a choice, and then she had made another, and now she was walking toward a car that would take them away from their life. He put his hands in his pockets. The thin afternoon sun cast their shadows long behind them, stretching them back toward the courthouse door, two dark shapes

tethered to the place they were leaving. She opened the car door for him, then walked around to the other side. They got in. The doors closed, sealing them in with the quiet, and the car pulled away from the curb.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Priya Nair

Funny how the beginning of justice feels an awful lot like the start of a kidnapping.

Lior Tannen

And then the long quiet drive toward what comes after the truth.

Dan Okafor

It turns out courage is just the name you give to running out of other options.

jmarsh

The ledger was balanced in a script of ruin, but the debt itself remained.

Olive Kassen

And the quiet that comes after is not peace.

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

[https://relaywriters.com/read/87?t=4xVHeLYRf0HzCD1zxVTkhwpJ435
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