

**WE ARE
THE ASHES,
WE ARE
THE FIRE**

JOY McCULLOUGH

**WITH ILLUMINATIONS BY
MAIA KOBABE**

DUTTON BOOKS

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For Jennifer, my sister

**WE ARE
THE ASHES,
WE ARE
THE FIRE**

you think you'll hold forever

all the power
 all the girls
 whatever body parts
 you want to grab

you'd make a joke
 of the blood-dimmed tide
 (if you ever listened to ms. gregory)
 but joke's on you
 because just maybe
 that blood flows from
 all the girls you seek to possess
 but one day we'll be loosed
 and you'll be drowned

A poem wouldn't change anything, not even if I scrawled it on the walls of the boys' locker room at Fremont Middle School instead of into my notebook, while huddled in the back of the auditorium, choking on the fumes of Connor Olsen's vile body spray. Which would probably never wash out of my favorite hoodie.

Writing a poem was just something to do while the boys learned the fight choreography, the whole reason they'd signed up for the play, the chance to swing big swords. You'd think they'd have paid attention to the fight director, considering.

You'd be wrong.

I had to stay until the end in case I was needed, in case by some miracle the boys learned the choreography and there was still time to work on one of the few scenes I was in.

There wouldn't be time.

Finally I was released and Connor's body spray was no match for the crisp fall air as I walked north on Wallingford toward home. To the west,

the Olympics stretched out along the peninsula; to the east, the Cascades separated Western Washington from the rest of the state.

I stopped at a light and the Eau de Boy caught up with me. Once I got home, I'd probably have to burn the hoodie. A ritual sacrifice to the goddess of middle school girls.

As if on cue, a pack of boys came barreling through, jostling me as they went. Did one of them grab my ass? *Don't be so sensitive, they were only brushing past.*

I ducked down an alley to avoid them at the next streetlight. The boy next door was a fairy tale. I'd known that since my mom told me about her first period. No big sister and Grandma didn't speak of such things, so Mom biked to the drugstore and used her birthday money to get everything she might need. She bought so many different products that on the way home everything toppled out of the bike basket and the boxes of pads and tampons spilled all over the street, right next to where a group of boys from her school were playing basketball.

She practically does a stand-up routine about it now. But it can't have been funny then, to scramble in the street retrieving everything she'd bought, everything she needed because of the body she was born with. What was she supposed to do? Leave it all? She'd spent her money. It would have been humiliating enough without those boys—they might as well be the same ones who just shoved past me on their way to the same basketball court—guffawing and shouting obnoxious things like it was all a hysterical joke.

Hysterical: from the Greek word for “uterus.”

The refuge of the alley only lasted so long; I emerged where the boys' shouts at the basketball court still reached me, inescapable, but I wouldn't have to walk past the court. Instead, I was on the kind of Seattle street that's a mixture of hundred-year-old homes with inhabitants to match, mid-century bungalows, and the sleek, shiny-new structures of tech executives with Teslas parked in front.

I scowled at the SANDERS sign on a lawn as I passed. He lost the

nomination ages ago, but the signs are still everywhere. Mom came home from that primary caucus so defeated—the Bernie Bros had won the day in the Fremont Elementary School cafeteria, and even if the rest of the country didn't agree, those guys would probably leave their signs out forever, unable to fathom that they hadn't gotten their way.

Papi couldn't vote, as a permanent resident, but he wore his LATINOS FOR HILLARY shirt and made molletes to comfort Mom after the caucus.

I couldn't understand why she was so upset. Washington State was Bernie country, maybe, but Clinton would get the nomination, with or without our state.

"It shouldn't have been such a struggle," Mom snapped at me. "And she hasn't won the presidency yet!"

Of course she would win. How could she not? She'd been working toward this since she graduated from Yale Law School. Before, probably. And her opponent was a complete buffoon with no qualifications and a whole list of sexual assault allegations against him.

We'd have our first female president soon. Which would open the floodgates for more women in politics. More women in charge.

And then, when the boys grabbed asses and sent dick pics, there'd be someone in power to make it stop.

Even the familiar smells of rising dough and Papi's marinara sauce were not enough to dull the edge of my fury as I burst into the house.

"I'm home, people!" I bellowed.

I didn't need to bellow. I could see at a glance the rest of my family, gathered in the kitchen where the ancient stove took the edge off the crisp air I'd brought in. They talked and laughed like the world wasn't a miserable cesspool of injustice.

"Always the picture of quiet refinement," Mom said with a grin as I dumped my bag and notebook on the ground, flung off the stinking hoodie, and slumped into a chair across from where Mom sat, hands wrapped around a chipped mug full of steaming tea, surrounded by student papers.

Grandpa used to bake in this kitchen too. Mom might have come home from the drugstore that day to the same instant-comfort smell of yeast and sugar and heat doing their chemical thing to transform into something completely new. It probably didn't make her forget those asshole boys, either.

"You want to talk about unrefined? Let me tell you about unrefined."

"I'm guessing we couldn't stop you." Nor stood at the counter, chopping garlic, her hair frizzing in the humidity of the kitchen. She paused to lift the lid on the sauce and steam clouded her glasses.

"Tell us the horrors of your day, *canchita*, of how you listened to the seas that love nothing but themselves," Papi said. "Pero ayuda while you're at it." He placed a cutting board, a knife, and two bell peppers on the table in front of me.

"Gabriela Mistral?" Nor asked as Mom's hand flew out to stop a damp green pepper from rolling onto a freshman English composition.

"Así es," Papi said, hurrying back to the stove to stir the sauce. More steam. "Escuchando mares que no aman sino a sí mismos."

"Middle school boys," I said, ignoring the poetry lesson and pointing with the knife for emphasis, "are unrefined. Ugh, I cannot wait for high school."

Nor laughed. "High school boys are worse."

"Impossible."

"They're at least not any better." Nor scooped the chopped garlic into her palm and moved to drop it in the sauce, our father countering her as he reached for the oregano on the windowsill, a perfectly choreographed dance in our tiny kitchen.

"Fine then, college," I said, making slow, careful slices into the peppers on the ancient wooden cutting board my uncle made in woodshop a million years ago. There's a scorch mark where Mom set a too-hot pan when she was my age, but Grandma didn't throw it out. I didn't have my sister's knife skills—or any of her kitchen skills, really. It all took so much time and care, the perfect measurements, exact right temperatures. "Bring on the college men!"

Mom looked up from her grading in alarm.

“Not yet, obviously. Just like, today was supposed to be fight choreography? And Alex and Connor were being such boys!”

“Pero what a lazy description,” Papi said as he pulled the pizza dough from the bowl and began to shape it. “Was their behavior directly related to their anatomy?”

I rolled my eyes.

He continued. “I’m sure you don’t want to hear my lecture on the power of specific word choice—”

“I really don’t.”

“I love that lecture,” Mom said, making moony eyes across the kitchen at him.

“They were being revolting and immature and super disrespectful of the fight choreographer, who was completely amazing.”

“Mucho más específico,” Papi crowed, making a failed attempt to toss the crust, which he speared with his hand on its descent.

“She’s a student from Cornish—”

“Who?” Mom said.

“The fight choreographer! The sequence looked so cool when she was doing it, but they weren’t even listening, they were just screwing around.”

“How are those peppers coming?”

I glanced at the cutting board. I’d only cut a few slices before I started venting about rehearsal. Between my righteous anger and the alchemy in the kitchen, my flannel was too much. I shrugged it off and kept cutting. “If I got to do any fighting, it would be amazing. But all I do is sit there, cheering on my man.”

“I’ve always hated the Arthurian legends.” Mom began to clear the table of her freshman compositions. “Brave knights and fair maidens.” She snorted. “Only the compliant women are good, and the women with any power at all are evil. Don’t get me started on the vilification of women’s sexuality.”

“We won’t,” Nor and I responded in unison, then exchanged a glance. I giggled and Nor quickly turned away to stifle her laugh in the refrigerator.

“But it was medieval times,” I said. “That’s what the gender roles were

then. It's different now. Or it would be if middle school boys weren't stupid."

"Canchita," Papi said, coming around the counter to rescue the peppers. He placed a warm, heavy hand on my shoulder. "It is a truth universally acknowledged that middle school boys son tontos. Estoy seguro que you will make the most of your role in the play, even if you must play a compliant woman. Consider it an acting challenge you will master with verve."

As he turned back to the counter, Nor tossed the pizza crust in the air, catching it perfectly.

"Show-off." Papi shook his head. "When are you going to open a Michelin-star restaurant and make us all rich?"

"Em can make us rich," she said with a faint smile. "Marine biologists don't make that much money."

Always with the marine biology. Nor had been focused on that forever. I, on the other hand, had no goal beyond washing the smell of middle school boy off my body. Connor wouldn't listen during fight choreography, but he had no problem following instructions when the director told King Arthur to hold Guinevere close.

"Do I have time for a shower before the pizza's ready?"

"If you make it quick," Nor said.

I headed from the room.

"Boots, backpack, journal, room," Mom called after me.

I doubled back, grabbed the stuff I dropped earlier, and left my parents grilling Nor on how she liked the new advisor for the high school paper.

I didn't care what Nor said. High school had to be better than middle school. Especially the boys.

CHAPTER ONE

“You can’t react.” Mom smooths her hair for the forty-seventh time since we parked in the public garage a block away from the courthouse. Now we sit in the freezing car. Waiting. “No matter what. All the cameras—”

“I know.”

“Don’t snap at your mother, Marianne.”

I watch the slice of Papi’s face in the rearview mirror. The fresh gray at his temples, the new lines around his eyes. *Weary* would be a specific word choice.

They’re so afraid, my larger-than-life parents. Shrinking into themselves for nearly a year, layering on armor that doesn’t even protect them. Retreating when they should have been on the front lines. With me.

My fury begins to unfurl, deep down. If I stay trapped in their inaction, it will spill out, blazing hot, and scorch them until their skin blisters, the seats of this ancient car melt, the whole thing burns down.

“I have to stretch my legs.”

I bolt from the car before they can object.

They would object. They want to keep me close, muzzle me, *don’t write your columns about the case, Marianne, don’t be so outspoken, Em, don’t, don’t, don’t.*

Outside the car, I’m free of their crushing inaction but I’m boxed in by the dark, low ceilings of the parking garage, the stench of furtive smoke breaks, urine, and gasoline seeped into concrete that’ll never be washed clean.

I walk toward the hazy light of the exit to the street. Every step I take away from the car, I know my mom is fretting. We’re supposed to wait for Layla! Walk in together. United front!

But the slick sidewalk grounds me, the damp air, the concrete and steel fading into skies that are yet another shade of gray. This is my Seattle. I dig a dollar out of my pocket and hand it to the guy huddled in the opposite corner of the parking garage entrance.

Mom can still see me from the car. And I can see the courthouse down the block. It was imposing at first. Now, after so many months, I yawn at the building. The way my sister's tabby always yawned his ambivalence about human existence. Until he got hit by a car, at which point he was probably less ambivalent.

Across the street, a guy immersed in his phone looks up, leers. Does he recognize me from the trial coverage? Or is he a dime-a-dozen dirtbag?

I hold his gaze until he looks away.

Dirtbag, then. The trial never looks away.

Even after it's over—so soon, it will be over—its gaze will linger.

A car pulls into the garage and I catch a glimpse of Layla's hijab, bright orange in the dull beige of her ancient station wagon. Nor pulls in right behind Layla, as though the victim advocate took her job so seriously she escorted my sister all the way from campus. Really, we're all here at the same time by horrible circumstance.

Papi climbs out of our car and heads around to open Mom's door like he always does, but she bursts out on her own.

"Good morning." Layla's voice echoes in the parking garage and I flinch at the slam of her car door. "How are we doing?"

Papi gives her a tight smile and nod, but Mom can't rip her eyes off my sister's car. She's fighting every instinct she has to race over, throw open Nor's door, and yank her out into her arms. I know, because I'm doing the same thing.

"We're okay," I say. "How are you?"

Layla gives her familiar smile, the one we've seen for months. It manages to be warm and supportive, while never dismissing the reason she's in our lives. "One of my neighbor's new chickens has turned out to be a rooster," she says. "But aside from that I can't complain."

When this is all over, I'll send Layla a thank-you for all the time she spent answering my questions about legal procedures, and what all the

various charges meant. The difference between “indecent liberties” and “assault with sexual motivation.” If I could make sure my high school paper got it right, the *Seattle Times* reporters could have spent a bit more time critiquing how our system works and less time weeping over the lost potential of Craig Lawrence’s future.

Nor still doesn’t get out of the car. My parents wanted to pick her up, arrive together. But they didn’t insist when she said she’d drive herself. *She needs to feel like she’s in control*, Mom said, like we haven’t all read the same books and websites about supporting survivors.

Mom starts toward Nor’s car, but Layla places a gentle hand on her arm. “Give her a minute?”

Layla’s as badass as they come but she doesn’t need to talk like an alpha male to get my mom to listen. I could throat-punch every armchair pundit who criticized Nor’s uptalk in the one interview she gave—and the defense attorney for defining her speech patterns as “hesitant.”

When Nor finally emerges, though, Mom doesn’t hold herself back. Layla doesn’t stop her—she’s Nor’s advocate, not her bodyguard. *She doesn’t like to be touched anymore*, I want to scream as Mom fusses over Elinor’s everything. Perfect collar, perfect hair, perfect cheeks. If everything looks perfect, maybe we won’t shatter into a million irretrievable pieces.

I pull my hair out of its ponytail, let the wind rip through it. My lungs seize in the unusually cold air and I breathe deep to spite it.

In the midst of Mom’s hovering, Nor catches my eye. I tell myself she’s going to roll her eyes any second. *Classic Mom, right?* We’re going to share a moment like always, Em and Nor, Nor and Em, they basically share a brain.

But before the moment can flicker into a flame, Layla clears her throat. “All right. Everybody ready?” A flame never stood a chance in this wind anyway.

We move as a group, a funeral procession. Layla puts herself between us and the scrum of reporters as we approach the courthouse steps, but she’s small, no match for a dozen cameras. I glare defiantly, give them something to photograph while Elinor looks demurely down. They might think we’re allies because I wanted this story covered, I fed them tips, but

being Twitter mutuals doesn't give them a right to treat my sister like a Hollywood starlet with a wardrobe malfunction.

Though the reporters are kept outside, the probing eyes, the pointing never ends. Through security, up the stairs, more glares, more scrutiny, better suited to someone headed for the defense table, accused of a terrible crime, but instead, once inside the courtroom Layla leads us to the seats behind the prosecutor's table.

Once upon a time, Nor and I sat together through every family movie, school assembly, wedding, funeral, holiday dinner. But now my parents flank my sister, leaving me to the side. It's not about me. I get it. But also I want to crash through their miserable attempt at a fortress, take Nor's hand, and remind her that I'm the one who's never wavered, never given up belief that she would have justice.

The assistant district attorney appears in front of us, gives me an encouraging nod, then turns to Elinor and my parents, murmuring softly. She's young, newly appointed, passionate. She's made an excellent case. When she almost took an absurd plea deal—only six months for violent rape with a witness?—she listened when I sent her the *Oracle* piece I wrote about the Jacob Anderson case. She considered the Twitter attention around the article and held out for actual justice.

Our case couldn't have gone better, really. In a brutal, horrific, gut-splattering way.

The only thing that remains is for the jury to deliver their verdict, the judge to render his sentence. For Craig Lawrence to go to prison for the rest of time.

The jury files in. I study their faces. The single mom who works double shifts as a nurse to stay afloat. She's tough, hardened by the horrors she's seen in the ER. The high school dropout who made it big with a tech start-up. He drives a Tesla and brews his own IPAs. The kindergarten teacher who's so burned out that she's seen these weeks on the jury as a vacation. The notes she's constantly jotting down are occasionally about the trial, but mostly they're for the sci-fi trilogy she's writing.

These aren't their real identities, their actual stories. These are fantasies I dreamed up when the trial devolved into hours of analyzing and

comparing fiber samples, or when I couldn't bear to hear Craig Lawrence's smug, lying voice anymore. Then I'd stare at these people who held Nor's fate—all our fates—in their hands and try to figure out who they were and how their experiences—imagined though they were—might lead them to judge the monster on trial.

The final moments when we're waiting for everyone to get settled, the jury forewoman to stand, to finally spit out what's on the folded piece of paper in her bony fingers, are agonizing.

Was I wrong? Was it all for nothing? I can't bear to lean over and look at Nor's face. We've come all this way and I'm abandoning her now, but her hope will crush me as much as her defeat.

Because I realize in a flash that this could go either way. The clear evidence, witnesses, Nor's squeaky-clean image . . . it's not always enough. I've been hopeful, but not stupid.

"Has the jury reached a unanimous verdict?" the judge asks.

"We have." The forewoman's voice shakes, like it's her life on the line.

The clerk retrieves the paper from the woman and delivers it to the judge. He reads. His brow furrows. There's no way to guess what it means. The clerk's walk back to the forewoman stretches out for a millennium.

The forewoman takes the paper and draws in her breath. The courtroom holds the breath with her.

"On the count of unlawful imprisonment," she reads.

At the defense table, Craig Lawrence gives the tiniest shake of his head, like it's so absurd. It's not imprisonment to take a drunk girl into an alley.

"We find the defendant guilty."

Relief all around me. But that's the least of the charges. My breath is still shallow.

"On the count of indecent liberties," she reads.

Flashback to Tyler Jacobsen in the cafeteria, laughing and shouting that he was going to take some indecent liberties right before grinding on Patrice Kuan.

"We find the defendant guilty."

Voices murmur throughout the gallery.

“On the count of assault in the second degree with sexual motivation,” she reads, her voice stumbling over the word *sexual*.

Craig’s lawyer has a comforting arm around his shoulder. The men in suits behind him are already on their phones, mobilizing their brotherhood for whatever comes next. The papers will write with pity about the defendant’s lack of weeping family, but who needs family when you’ve got the patriarchy in your corner?

“We find the defendant guilty.”

My mother starts to sob. It’s good. But there’s still one more charge to go.

“On the count of second-degree rape,” she reads.

The plea deal would have dropped this count. He’d have served a few months for the assault charge. But this is the one that can put him away for life.

“We find the defendant guilty.”

Nor sits silent, stunned, as the courtroom explodes around her. I search her face for a reaction. It’s not like I expected her to dance around the end zone. This doesn’t change what happened to her, this monstrous cloud that will follow her forever—not only the brutal attack, but also the trial, the reporters, the dissection of every aspect of her life.

Get photographed with a red Solo cup in your hand? Noted.

Dress up as “sexy” Amelia Earhart for Halloween? Noted.

Have an immigrant father? Noted.

Both my parents are sobbing now. The urge to smack them startles me. This is a good thing. But I tried to tell them. They didn’t believe me.

Idealistic Marianne, things don’t always turn out the way you hope, it doesn’t matter how cut and dried the case, how many survivors you profile in your high school paper—none of that is going to change our justice system . . .

I’m relieved, of course. But now I need the sentence. Everyone in this courtroom knew that smug fucker was guilty. The question is, how is he going to pay?



Nor comes home with us, instead of returning to her dorm. We've been begging her to come, but she's insisted on staying on campus, even through the summer, insisted she wouldn't let him take her college experience too.

But the sentence won't come for weeks. Maybe months. Now that she's won, she wants to be home.

That's wrong—this was no victory.

The first several times Nor's phone buzzes, I think it must be her friends. But her brow pinches together a little each time she scans the screen until she turns her phone off and shoves it under the couch cushion. She rolls her neck, working out those ever-present aches and pains.

"Do you want my heating pad?" I ask.

"Too hot."

I never use mine. I only have it because it was in the period kit Mom gave me when I was twelve. Since that night, Nor uses heating pads, rice bags, hot water bottles—not that any of them help her much.

Mom and Papi sing in the kitchen. This super-old Nat King Cole song in Spanish, which my dad sings with a terrible-on-purpose accent. It's an inside joke. They're deliriously happy.

Irritation flashes across Nor's face and I know the next second she'll be on her feet and headed to her room.

"Want to watch something? You can pick."

She shrugs. But she stays.

While she scrolls through the options, I don't say, *You were so brave, Nor*. I don't say, *I was terrified that I'd pushed you into the whole circus of a trial and then it would be for nothing*. I don't say, *I know it doesn't change anything of what happened to you but that asshole's never going to hurt another girl and I've never been prouder you're my sister*.

Instead I roll my eyes at the dusty old period drama she chooses for the zillionth time, like an heirloom quilt so worn the pattern's barely visible, but as warm as ever. "Really?" I say. "Again?"

And she says what I know she will, what she always says: "Mr. Darcy forever, little sister."

CHAPTER TWO

The first few days after the verdict, I make good use of Megan Hart’s standard advice for dealing with trolls: Mock, block, and roll. If anyone knows how to deal with wounded MRAs on the internet, it’s Megan, with her years of outspoken advocacy.

The first time Megan retweeted one of my *Oracle* profiles, I screamed so loud Papi came running. I shoved my phone in his face and he screamed too. The only way the moment could have been more perfect is if he had been wearing his BRAZEN HUSSY T-shirt from Megan’s first book tour.

Hussy: a once-neutral term that meant “female head of the household.”

Ms. Lim didn’t believe me at first when I said it was a good thing the *Oracle* website crashed. But I was right. That one retweet brought in a ton more traffic, which equaled ad dollars for the paper. More important, it persuaded Ms. Lim to let me keep writing the profiles of survivors denied justice. Our little compromise when she told me I couldn’t write about my own sister’s case.

When I got to introduce Megan at the Seattle Women for Choice rally, Ms. Lim was in the front row, wearing a BRAZEN HUSSY T-shirt of her own. My journalism advisor disagrees with Megan on one thing—she tells me to ignore haters in the comments. But Twitter is not journalism and trolls deserve to be mocked. And then forgotten.

Most of the people in my mentions are celebrating anyway, heralding the sweep of guilty charges as a shift in our rape culture. Even the old boys clubs of Greeks and jocks rallying bail money and legal fees for poor,

disadvantaged Craig Lawrence weren't enough to keep him from facing justice.

After the first week, though, my mentions go quiet. The feminist accounts move on to organizing a march for reproductive rights and raising funds for the medical bills of a rape victim at Ohio State. Journalism accounts are focused on a missing reporter in Syria. I search familiar Husky hashtags and find almost nothing related to our case.

It's almost like everyone has moved on, but then I get an email from Kylie, whose *Oracle* profile was the first one Megan Hart retweeted. The one that crashed our server.

Dear Marianne,

I heard about the verdict and I wanted to reach out. First, to explain why I ghosted you there for a few months. You did a really good job with the piece. But I never expected an article in a high school paper to get so much attention. So even though it was anonymous, I felt kind of exposed. Afraid my attacker would see it and know it was me. My girlfriend read the supportive comments to me, though, and it really helped so much to see all those people believing me. Thank you for that.

Anyway, I was so glad to see the guilty verdict in your sister's case. I wish we could all get that justice, but seeing it when it happens gives me hope. Your sister is lucky to have your support. I hope you're doing well and I wish you all the best in your writing and your advocacy.

*Sincerely,
Kylie Hancock*

"Good news?" Mom's in my doorway, shivering in Papi's robe.

"Yeah, one of my profile subjects wrote. Really grateful."

She nods like she hasn't even heard me. "Aren't you freezing? I'm freezing."

“Have we not figured out the deal with the thermostat? I’m wearing layers.” I tug on my sweats to show her the leggings underneath. “She had her girlfriend read her the positive comments on my article and she was really encouraged.”

“Hmm.” Mom pulls the robe tighter. “Papi and I are stumped. I called Uncle Joel. He’s going to try to swing by and look at it. I’m making chai. Do you want some?”

“Yeah, thanks.” I bite back my irritation.

But then Mom pauses as she heads back to the kitchen. “You aren’t going to keep writing those profiles now, are you? Now that it’s over?”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

It’s not over. Not for Nor, who flinches at any sudden noise, who pops ibuprofen like the worst candy ever to ease her endless pain. Not for Papi, who dies a little every time Nor doesn’t feel like cooking, whose face darkens at the sight of Husky gear. It’s not over for me.

Before my irritation can grow into something bigger, I’ve got a new message in my inbox. From Megan Hart.

Hey, Em,

Greetings from Olympia, where I am banging down doors, trying to get a meeting about a statewide expansion of Seattle’s all-gender bathroom ordinance. Wish me luck.

I saw the verdict. It’s a good step. I just want to warn you not to count your chickens, or whatever the saying is. Judges have a way of taking would-be chicks and making them into a tasty omelet. This metaphor has gotten away from me. Point is, he’s guilty: HELL YES HE IS. But be prepared for all outcomes with the sentencing, okay?

*Burn it all down,
MH*

I'm so distracted that night, between my mom's comments and Megan's message, that I can barely enjoy Uncle Joel's visit. He brings pizza, fixes the thermostat, teases Mom mercilessly while clearly adoring his little sister. But if he'd been there when Mom spilled tampons all over the street, would he have helped her? Or would he have laughed with the rest of the boys?

"Keep smashing the patriarchy, Lois Lane," he says by way of goodbye as he leaves.

I'm pretty sure he would have laughed.

The next morning I dig through my closet—Gryffindor robe, way-too-small tap shoes, the misshapen poncho Nor made when she first learned to knit—until I find it. The deep blue Moleskine Papi gave me when I graduated from sixth grade.

"For poetry?" I'd asked. He'd carried a similar leather-bound notebook in his back pocket for as long as I could remember, jotting down scraps of verse as they came to him.

"Para lo que sea, canchita."

For whatever I wanted.

It was my constant companion for a year. I'm sure the poetry is terrible; I'm not looking back to see. But it gave me a place to dump all my anger and confusion and emotion before it bubbled over and I got called dramatic.

I'd probably have filled it up and moved on to another except that during tech week of *The Knights of the Round Table*, Dustin Smalley snuck into the girls' dressing room and stole it. I'd been made fight captain and the boys didn't take kindly to me bossing them around.

Bossy: used to describe girls who show leadership skills.

So he stole the notebook. Took pictures of the most emotional, dramatic pages. Posted them all over.

When Papi asked where my Moleskine was, I shrugged and told him I'd outgrown it. The hurt on his face killed me, but it was better than telling him the truth. Plus I wasn't going to stop writing. I just wouldn't write anything that could hurt me.

I got it back, but I buried it in my closet. I let Dustin Smalley and Connor Olsen and all those small, insecure boys take poetry from me.

I'm done letting boys take anything from me.

CHAPTER THREE

We return to the courtroom for the sentencing two months after hearing the verdict. Time has become an unreliable narrator, stretching and compressing at will, with no regard for a victim's family living perpetually on the edge of what might come next.

Layla, ever present, joins us on our familiar, uncomfortable seats from the trial. She reminds us of what's to come: There will be statements from the lawyers, from Craig and his supporters.

Nor could give a victim impact statement—stand there in front of not only her rapist, but the lawyers who tore her apart, the public who judged her every decision as though she had a choice in what mattered, and live it all again.

Some survivors do. One hundred and fifty-six gymnasts gave statements directly to the team doctor who violated them. *Little girls don't stay little forever. They grow into strong women that destroy your world.*

Chanel Miller made a victim impact statement that went viral, was translated into other languages, read on the House floor. *Every minute of every day, you are powerful and nobody can take that away from you. To girls everywhere, I am with you.*

But Nor's elected not to let this courtroom have another moment of her pain; she's had enough of her every word dissected on the witness stand, her every hesitation, inflection, tone. Layla assured her it was her choice. It wasn't likely to change anything anyway. The judge will have already decided the sentence when he walks in the room.

It's so pointless, one last chance for everyone to play their parts.

The defense bemoans the loss of potential for this bright young man

on academic scholarship who only wanted to fit in with the football players and fraternity brothers.

The prosecutor focuses on the brutality of the crime, Nor's injuries, the reliable (translation: cis-male) witness to her inability to consent, the precedent a light sentence would set.

Craig himself dares to glance at Nor as he tells the courtroom he's really sorry if Nor regretted the time they spent together. Aw shucks, golly gee, he even manages a blush when he says he maybe came on a little strong because he was nervous, he'd never been with such a pretty girl.

Been with.

I take Nor's hand. It's cold and shaking. I want to throw my body in front of hers, shield her. Maybe I imagine it, but behind the cocksure grin there's a flicker of fear. He's a monster, absolutely, but he's still uncertain how this is going to play out. The finest lawyers patriarchy can buy couldn't keep him from a guilty verdict. Who's to say how long he'll rot in prison?

When all attention turns to the judge, I feel a swell of something unfamiliar. Patriotism? After so many months of railing against our system, profiling survivors failed by police and juries and lawyers and judges, and even their parents and teachers and friends, I'm suddenly proud of our justice system. Riding a wave at its absolute peak. Not many victims like Nor see justice, but she will.

"All right then," he says gruffly, shuffling papers before him. "I've had a great deal to think about since our jury rendered its verdict. I'd like to thank those men and women for doing their job, and now, my role is to follow the guidelines our system of criminal justice sets out for the Court in sentencing decisions.

"Before I get to the sentence, I want to recognize that Elinor's life has been devastated by these events—not only the incidents that happened, but also the media attention given to this case, which compounds the difficulties that participants in the criminal process face. So I acknowledge that devastation.

"As I consider Mr. Lawrence's sentence, I have had to ask myself, consistent with the Rules of Court: Will state prison for the defendant alter

this devastation? Is incarceration the right answer for his lapse in judgment?”

My patriotism slips. The wave is breaking.

He drones on, mentioning specific penal codes and legal intoxication levels, credibility of witnesses, mitigating factors, moral culpability and vulnerability of the victim, the lack of prior criminal record, youth of the offender, and character letters.

Nobody cares what Craig Lawrence's Sunday School teacher thinks he's capable of. The judge might wish he could protect Lawrence, but a jury of his peers saw differently.

“Now we come to the most compelling factor in my opinion: the adverse collateral consequences on the defendant's life resulting from these specific charges. And those are severe. With respect to the media attention that's been given to the case, it has not only impacted the accuser in this case, but also Mr. Lawrence.”

Of course the wave breaks. They always do.

“With regards to remorse, Mr. Lawrence, in his state of intoxication, saw the events in a certain way. If he were to, for the benefit of a lighter sentence or to pacify the Court, state otherwise, which I'm sure defendants do all the time, he really would be not honest. So I take him at his word that, subjectively, that's his version of events, and I want to applaud his honesty.”

The wave crashes onto the rocks below.

“The jury, obviously, found it not to be the sequence of events. Our criminal justice system relies on juries to evaluate facts and to come to very difficult decisions about specific factual incidents. But given the various factors I've outlined here, I feel it is unclear that Ms. Morales was incapacitated to a degree that would support second-degree rape or indecent liberties, or the sexual motivation enhancement to the assault charge. Which leaves second-degree assault and unlawful imprisonment, which, for the reasons I have explained, I believe warrant a downward departure from the SRA guidelines. Therefore I am sentencing Mr. Lawrence to time served.”

Someone hits pause on the courtroom drama that is our life. There's a suspended breath around me as dots are connected:

Downward departure.

Lapse in judgment.

Applaud his honesty.

Adverse collateral consequences.

Time served.

The lawyers understand what the judge has said, they must. Next to me, Layla has gone rigid. The prosecutor lets out the slightest huff of frustration. But if everyone else understood, they'd be storming the bench. Wouldn't they? I'm not sure even Nor realizes Craig will walk out of here without prison time. I can't be the one to tell her.

The judge's gavel comes down and the pause is released.

At the defense table, men in suits clap Craig on the shoulder. Behind us, the people in the gallery begin to buzz. This time my parents don't weep. They sit, frozen, completely useless to Nor. Her hands shake, grasping vaguely in front of her, like she might find something to hold on to in the wreckage.

It takes me half a second too long and my face flushes with shame, but then I'm crouching in front of her, taking those grasping hands, being her lifeboat.

"Nor," I say, that one syllable pouring out like a waterfall. I was the one who pushed her into this I was the one who stopped the plea deal I was the one—

"Don't," she says, and jerks her hands back.

A tidal wave of movement carries us out of the courthouse, through the hall, down the stairs, and into an alcove near the front doors where Layla and the lawyers say words, presumably words, but mostly their mouths are moving and sound is coming out, but nothing means anything anymore.

None of it mattered, none of what I did this last year, all those profile pieces, all the Twitter followers, Megan Hart's retweets.

The dragon came and I fought valiantly, and right when it seemed like the fair maiden would be saved and all the village with her, he let out one dying gasp of fire and it was enough to burn us all to ash.

Nor's hands still shake, but her eyes are as blank as they were that night.

I've been so naive.

Layla nudges my arm, guides us to the front doors, the courthouse steps, into the flashing cameras, shouted questions.

It's all a mess of ash and guilt and smoke and ruins. I pull away from Layla and shove through the reporters. My knees slam into the concrete as I drop to the ground, the weight of every camera turned on me. Fingers in the dirt of the courthouse landscaping, lives destroyed here but at least it's pretty, I empty myself of everything I didn't already give these vultures.

Let them photograph that.

"Miss Morales," says a reporter, shoving a camera in my face as I wipe a string of bile from my cheek. "How do you feel about the sentence?"

Staring straight into the camera, I speak loud and clear. "I feel"—I calmly get to my feet—"like learning how to use a fucking sword."

CHAPTER FOUR

They play the clip over and over. Analyze my mental health, delve into a possible family history of violence, Papi's childhood in the most gang-ridden area of Guatemala City. Perhaps the defense's case held water: The accuser consented and simply liked it rough. If the father comes from violence and the younger sister has a taste for it, why not Elinor Morales as well?

Spoiler alert: Twitter bros are seriously into the idea of women liking it rough. Some of the feminist accounts turn on me too. *We can't play into the notion of feminists as violent man-haters.*

Megan Hart is silent.

I feel like learning how to use a fucking sword.

My mother sobs; Papi shuts himself in their room. Probably writing agonized poetry, like words are going to save us now. I already wrote the words. Specific words. They were never going to save us.

I feel like learning how to use a fucking sword.

And Elinor, Elinor packs to go back to school, to a campus still mourning the unjust conviction of their adopted darling or celebrating the dismissal of the charges that mattered most. The championed cause of generations of SAE brothers and football fans won't see a day of jail. And still the university campus is pissed by the "distraction" to the Husky program. Never mind that football isn't even in season.

I want to insist the DA remand the case for resentencing.

I want to mount a campaign against the judge's reelection.

But: "Please, Em," Nor whispers in my ear before she leaves for her dorm, "don't cause any more trouble."

Em is trouble.

That's what everyone's said from the time I was old enough to use my voice, my enormous voice, so loud when Elinor's was so not. Always talking, people marveled, until I got too old for that to be adorable, which wasn't nearly long enough.

Then I was brash, I was brazen, I was bossy.

I wore bossy like armor, polished it in the rare moments I removed it. Let them call me bossy. I was still in charge of every game, every skit, every revolution. I hit the boys, and it wasn't because I liked them.

But Elinor, she's sugar and spice, that's what they all say, and I don't begrudge my sister the adoration, either. I polished my sword until it gleamed because Nor is a princess and a dragon would come soon enough, because that's the way of things, and my brash, pushy self would be there to boss it back where it came from.

The dragon came.

My sword wasn't enough.

CHAPTER FIVE

The newspaper staff goes to Roxy's Diner to celebrate the last day of school, but I make an excuse. They'll constantly be checking if I'm okay like they have since the sentencing and of course I'm not okay but I'll end up assuring them that I am. Anyway, they'll spend the rest of the time talking about Summer Intensive in Denver.

When Ms. Lim first told me I couldn't go, and worse, that I couldn't be editor of the paper next year, I was pissed. I'm over it now. There are too many other things to be furious about.

It was worth posting my unauthorized editorial on the *Oracle* website. Especially since Summer Intensive will be a nonstop parade of instructors telling high school journalists they can change the world through the power of words.

They can't.

I push out the double doors and into the June gloom. Too many people crowd under the overhang at the bus stop, so I stand in the drizzle and ignore my phone when it buzzes.

It won't be Nor.

Without the scheduled six-week journalism program, the summer stretches out before me, vast and open in a way that feels more oppressive than free. It can't be worse than last summer, though, when the investigation was underway and Husky fans were pissed about the preseason off-field distraction.

Something bumps my shoulder and I stumble into the old woman next to me.

"I'm sorry!" I reach out to steady the woman, who smiles graciously but also mutters, "Puro puerco," as she moves away.

The first time I heard that I thought my tío Gallo was calling me a pig, as in fat, and Papi had to explain that the expression means clumsy, because pigs always walk around with their noses to the ground.

“God, Summer, rude!” says a voice behind me. And then, “I’m sorry for my friend’s uncouth behavior.”

Jess from my English class stands with their shadow, a girl named Summer with a permanent scowl. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen her smile. Maybe when she goes to college, she’ll change her name to something that suits her more. Like Astrid. Or Zelda. Like college is this big chance for reinvention.

“It’s not real.” Jess nods at the suit of armor in Summer’s arms, which is what shoved me into the old woman. As though I thought it was an actual medieval relic. “Just foam. You’re on the paper, right?”

The bus pulls up. “No,” I say. “I’m not.”

I get on the bus, slouch into a seat next to a middle-aged woman absorbed in her book. She’s the sort who probably followed the trial obsessively, knitting pink hats while watching the news. But there aren’t many seats open, and the woman doesn’t look at my face.

Jess and Summer get on and I avoid their eyes as they pass.

“If you want to joust, you’ll have to get real armor,” Jess says, their voice carrying two rows up and across the aisle.

“I don’t want to joust with those assholes,” Summer says. “I want to run my longsword through their guts.”

Jess laughs. “Look at you, all Lady Snowblood.”

Summer gasps. “Do not associate me with that male-fantasy garbage!”

“Fine then. You’re . . . Marguerite de Bressieux.”

They say it with this exaggerated French accent, and Summer laughs at the reference. Could be a feminist icon or a regular on the Ren Faire circuit for all I know. I’ve been so absorbed in all things legal justice for the last year and a half that I’m waking from a coma, totally disoriented to the world of normal teenagers.

They speak a completely different language. A language of happy lives with happy friends and happy hobbies. I shove earbuds in and drown their unbearable happiness in white noise.

CHAPTER SIX

My father is a monster. He knows I want to hole myself up in my room, and so he devotes his afternoon to making *jocón*, the smells of which waft down the hall and under the crack in my door. All afternoon, chicken simmers in tomatillos and cilantro and toasted pumpkin seeds.

I'm pissed. But also hungry.

In the kitchen, he stands at the stove, slapping tortilla dough between his palms. He holds up a lopsided oval and grins. It takes him about ten times longer to make each tortilla than the women in Guatemala who stand at the *comals* all day, babies strapped to their backs, endlessly producing the staple food of their communities. Growing up, Papi could run to any corner at mealtimes and pay pennies for a stack of fresh, piping-hot tortillas.

"Nice one." I slide onto a barstool, flip through the junk mail. "Very tortilla-adjacent."

"Want to try?" He offers a ball of dough across the counter.

I take it, remembering the first time I tried to shape the dough in my uncle's kitchen. Tío Gallo laughed at my attempt but told me the shape didn't matter; a wonky oval would scoop up the beans just as well as a perfect circle.

The masa feels like Play-Doh between my fingers, but weightier. The Mayan gods fashioned people out of cornmeal after their first attempts failed; mud and wood did not a human race create. Even the gods make mistakes.

"Whoa, whoa, you've got to be gentle with the masa." Papi cringes at the pulverized mess between my fingers. "¿Te acuerdas? One hand twists, while the other lightly—"

“I don’t want to tortilllear.”

He sighs, takes the mess of dough back. “Then make the salad, canchita. Have you given any more thought to what you’re going to do with your summer?”

Translation: Have you applied for any of the ninety-three jobs I’ve suggested?

“Working on it.” I squeeze around him in our tiny kitchen to pull the salad things from the fridge. “Where’s Mom? I thought she wasn’t teaching any evening classes this semester.”

“She’s covering an American Lit class. Margaret’s baby came earlier than expected.”

My brain snags on Margaret and I’m back on the bus, just for a second. All the things I’ve missed.

But Margaret is not Marguerite—she’s Mom’s office mate. I glance at the calendar. I thought her baby wasn’t due until mid-July. But I don’t really know what’s early and what’s too early, with babies. What’s nerve-racking and what’s world-ending. The line seems scary thin.

All the lines are scary thin, turns out.

“The receptionist job is still open at the gym, but Carlos can’t hold it for long,” Papi says.

I nod. It would be pretty mind-numbing swiping hard-bodies into a gym all summer, but mind-numbing might not be a bad thing. “Yeah, I’ll call him.”

“Marianne,” Papi begins, the rare utterance of my actual name from his lips, the *r* tripping like a pebble over water. But then his phone rings. He lunges, the same way I used to lunge, back when I thought Nor might call. Which she won’t.

“Lo siento,” Papi says when he gets off the phone. “Me tengo que ir. Burst pipe in Belltown.” He’s already in emergency mode, off to save the hipsters of Seattle from clogged drains and spilled sewage. “The *jocón* is ready, and there should be enough tortillas already made.”

“I’m fine, Papi. Go.”

Then it’s just me. And Chester, who comes padding into the kitchen as soon as Papi’s gone. He knows I won’t order him out, even if he gets

underfoot. In fact, odds are good I'll take two bites, then set my bowl on the ground for the galumphing furball to have his way with.

I don't call Carlos. Papi's soccer buddy is a good guy, but he wouldn't be able to shield me from the sweaty bros I'd have to deal with all day long, working at a gym.

Instead I find myself searching online for Marguerite whatever-it-was, who Jess mentioned on the bus. Someone Summer was emulating when she expressed her desire to eviscerate some dudes. I have to try a few times to land on the spelling—the last name on Jess's tongue was something like Bress-you. Finally I find it: Marguerite de Bressieux.

I feel less ignorant for never having heard of her, because the internet doesn't know much more than I do. But what it knows is intriguing. It makes me itch for the Moleskine that's been sitting on my desk since I dug it out of my closet.



I'm passed out on the couch with Chester when Mom gets home.

"Hey, sweetie." She sinks into the tattered armchair, its scratched-up sides a memorial to Elinor's dearly departed feline. "Where's Papi? Did you get dinner? You fed Chester?"

"Plumbing emergency. Yes, and yes." I sit up slowly. "I'm going to bed."

She frowns. "It's only nine. You okay?"

None of us are okay.

Then her face brightens, her eyes light on the notebook in my lap. "I haven't seen that in forever! Are you journaling again?"

"It's nothing."

She always called it a journal, like I was writing to my dear diary about crushes and heartbreak and hopes and dreams. Maybe I was, in my way. But the specific word choice always irked me. I grab the not-journal and head for the stairs, Chester padding along behind me. "There's *jocón* and salad in the fridge, if you're hungry."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Because I have not suffered enough, Jess is on my bus the next morning.

“You are totally on the paper,” they say, sliding into the seat next to me and holding their phone up to my face. “In fact, you’re the editor next year. What are you doing here?”

Ms. Lim needs to update the website. “Going to school, like you I assume.”

“School’s out.” They grin, flipping glossy black hair out of their eyes. “Ever the devoted, helpful student, I might also be hoping to score brownie points with Ms. Federighi by helping clean out the theater for the summer, and thereby increase my chances of being cast as Puck in the fall. How about you?”

I sigh and tuck my notebook into my bag. “Basically same. The paper staff is cleaning up the newsroom.” Only difference is I’m way past scoring brownie points.

“See! You are on the paper!”

“Not next year. Don’t believe everything you read.”

“Oh.” By some miracle, they’re quiet for a minute. “I never read the *Oracle* before you started writing those profiles.”

“Really?”

“It’s just, like, sports, ugh. We’d read when the plays got reviewed. But that was it. One day, though, Summer couldn’t put it down and I could tell it really mattered to her . . . Anyway, you did a good thing. Writing those. Your sister—”

“Thanks.” It’s nice of them to say, but not nice enough that I want to talk about Nor. “What do you know about Marguerite de Bressieux?”

Jess blinks long, glittery lashes slowly. “Um . . .”

“On the bus yesterday? With Summer? You said—”

“I remember.” They study me in silence while the bus stops. People get on, people get off. “I get it if you don’t want to talk about Nor. Sorry.”

Only her closest friends call her Nor. I’ve been acquainted with Jess for years, but they were never in Nor’s inner circle.

“So about our lady knight,” they say. “Eavesdrop much?”

My cheeks flame.

“Kidding! I like to think everyone’s always hanging on my every word. Marguerite was pretty badass. I mean, there’s not much actual history about her—”

“Yeah, I looked.”

“Then you probably know as much as I do. Are you into medieval shit? I’ve been wanting to start a club forever, but Mr. Lopez says a club needs at least three members to be official. I’ve only got Summer.”

“I’m . . . no.” Their disappointment is so palpable I muster some sort of interest. “What would you even do in a medieval club?”

They brighten. “Well, the obvious is Dungeons and Dragons. I’m not so into that. I’m more into real history. Which, it would be awesome if dragons were historical, but not a lot of paleontology to support that. But we could research things—like de Bressieux!—and make foods and costumes. I’m trying to get a cosplay together for the medieval faire in the summer, out on the peninsula.”

I am less interested in making costumes with a medieval history club than assisting my dad on his next toilet explosion. I shouldn’t have even brought Marguerite up; I only wanted them to stop asking about my sister. Elinor. Which is how they should have referred to her because nobody else is taking anything of Nor’s unless she has expressly handed it to them.

That’s when Summer gets on the bus, exasperated when she sees there’s no seat next to Jess.

“Oh yay!” Jess says. “I won’t be the only suck-up in the theater!”

“Go sit with her,” I say.

Their face falls a little, but then they jump up and dive into the row Summer occupied. “Summer, my love!”

Someone across the aisle snickers and mutters something rude. I don’t

even have to hear the words to know the gist. They might think they're judging how Jess looks, or how Jess is different, but what they're really judging is the fact that Jess cares. About everything. With their whole heart.

Like I used to.

At school, Jess and Summer split off for the theater, where at least treachery and plot twists are expected. Inside the main building, Fremont High feels like a foreign land. School's been out less than a day and suddenly it's a ghost town.

As I draw closer to the newsroom, though, Sam's familiar cackle floats toward me. Nothing's changed for my friends. They texted their support, tweeted their outrage at the sentencing, cussed out the judge for a few days. It's not that they weren't genuinely upset. They were. But now they're off to Denver to geek out with other student journalists all summer. They'll come back and keep putting out the *Oracle*, like it matters. They'll go off to college. Some might even become journalists. Whatever that means.

I pause in the doorway, taking it in. I've spent more hours in this room than I can possibly remember. Even before I was in high school, Nor was on the paper. I used to walk over from the middle school and hang out on the slouchy couches in the corner while I waited for Nor to be finished and ready to walk home together.

Come freshman year, I already felt like I belonged and I made myself a permanent fixture until Ms. Lim put me on staff.

We didn't only put out a school paper in this room, either. We spent lunches here, gossiped, stressed, debated politics, railed against our parents, all of it. Ms. Lim always struck the right balance of being a presence we could rely on but also giving us a space where we didn't have to think about adults.

"Em!" Sadiqa looks over from where she's wiping down the white boards. "Hey, we missed you at Roxy's yesterday."

"Get over here, you!" Francie's personality has always been huge, but

now it grates on me. When I don't bound over to where she and Sam are pulling things off the bulletin board, she comes to me, throwing her arms around me like we didn't have Spanish together less than twenty-four hours ago. "I was worried you weren't coming!"

"You would have survived." The room actually looks pretty good. Marco gives me a silent wave from the counter where he's washing out the coffee maker. "Where's Ms. Lim?"

"Ran to the office." Sam hands me a file box, but I don't know what I'm supposed to do with it.

I set the box down and drift past the wall covered in framed photos of each year's newspaper staff, stopping at the one where I'm a freshman and Nor's a senior. The first freshman on staff, and her sister, the lead photographer.

"Marianne, hey." Ms. Lim bumps my shoulder as she scoots past me toward her office, arms full, as always. She flips on the lights, dumps her stuff on her desk, and motions me in. "How are you, hon?"

Enraged. Helpless. Consumed by guilt. "Fine."

"Yeah? I'm glad you came by today. I thought we might not see you."

"It's required to finish the class."

She stops what she's doing and sits, motioning for me to sit too. I don't. "You're upset about Summer Intensive."

"No."

"Look, I get it. You worked hard for it all year. Harder than anyone would have asked you to, and you earned it. Right up until you posted that unauthorized article on the paper's website."

I don't want to rehash this again. I don't even want to go to Denver.

I'm also not sorry about the op-ed I posted on the *Oracle* site. Ms. Lim wouldn't let me write about my own sister's case because of conflict of interest and journalistic ethics or whatever. I get it, in theory. But nobody lacks conflict of interest when it comes to sexual violence. You're either biased by a constant awareness it could happen to you at any moment or you're biased by your privilege. Not to mention everyone knows someone who's been sexually assaulted.

So does that mean no one should write about it ever? That seems like a good way to maintain the status quo.

“You’ve had a nightmare year. And you’ve done amazing work throughout. That piece on sexual violence against trans people? I’m so proud of you. I hope we can move forward and have a great final year together, even if you’re not editor. Quite frankly, that decision wasn’t mine. The administration . . . But you’ll still have loads of freedom to pursue the stories you want—”

“I’m quitting the paper.”

Her movement stutters for a moment, and then she begins sorting through the pens in the mug on her desk, checking them for ink. “No, you’re not,” she says, calm as anything.

I clear my throat, try to remember the speech I planned. “I’ve given this a lot of thought. Journalism isn’t what I want anymore. I need to take this year to . . . explore other things. Regroup. Figure out what I want to do in college. If I even want to go to college.”

Ms. Lim’s eyes flash as she struggles to maintain her composure. “You’re not a quitter. I’ve been so impressed with you from the moment I met you, this indignant middle schooler invading my newsroom. But especially this last year, your fight has been extraordinary—”

“And it’s amounted to nothing! There was no point to any of it!”

“I understand how you feel.”

“I fucking doubt it, Ms. Lim.”

“Marianne?” There’s a harsh edge to her voice, more ragged than I’ve ever heard in three years of working on her paper. “Hear me when I say I understand how you feel.”

Fact: One in three women in the United States experience sexual violence.

“Then you can understand why I’m done with the paper.”

“I can’t, actually. If you need to take a leave of absence—”

“I’m done.”

It’s not like it doesn’t hurt, like I’m not flayed open here. But I’ve been flaying myself open all year long and it hasn’t accomplished anything. At a certain point, quitting is mercy.

“Thanks for everything, Ms. Lim.”

I hurry through the newsroom, avoiding the curious eyes. They’ll have heard the raised voices. Sam and Francie will text before I’m out of the building. I’m barely out of the classroom when Ms. Lim calls out from the doorway, “Marianne? You do know how to use a sword.”