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Opening Extract from...

Quicksand

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Translated by Rachel Willson-Broyles

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The classroom

Lying next to the left-hand row of desks is Dennis; as usual he's wearing a graphic T, ill-fitting jeans and untied trainers. Dennis is from Uganda. He says he's seventeen, but he looks like a fat twenty-five-year-old. He's a student in the trade school, and he lives in Sollentuna in a home for people like him. Samir has ended up next to him, on his side. Samir and I are in the same class because Samir managed to be accepted to our school's special programme in international economics and social sciences.

Up at the lectern is Christer, our form teacher and self-described social activist. His mug has overturned and coffee is dripping onto the leg of his trousers. Amanda, no more than two metres away, is propped against the radiator under the window. Just a few minutes ago, she was all cashmere, white gold and sandals. The diamond earrings she received when we were confirmed are still sparkling in the early-summer sunshine. Now you might think she was covered in mud. I am sitting on the floor in the middle of the classroom. In my lap is Sebastian, the son of the richest man in Sweden, Claes Fagerman.

The people in this room do not go together. People like us don't usually hang out. Maybe on a metro platform during a taxi-strike, or in the dining car on a train, but not in a classroom.

It smells like rotten eggs. The air is hazy and grey with gunpowder smoke. Everyone has been shot but me. I haven't got so much as a bruise.

Trial hearing in case B 147/66

State Prosecutor v. Maria Norberg

Week 1 of Trial: Monday

1.

The first time I saw the inside of a courtroom, I was disappointed. We visited one for a class trip, and sure, I had already worked out that Swedish judges aren't stooping old men in curly wigs and long robes, and that the defendant wouldn't be a madman in an orange jumpsuit, in handcuffs, frothing at the mouth, but still. The place looked like something between a medical clinic and a conference centre. We drove there in a rented bus that smelled like bubblegum and sweaty feet. The defendant had dandruff and pleated trousers and was allegedly guilty of tax evasion. Aside from our class (and Christer, of course), there were only four other people there to listen but so few seats that Christer had to get an extra chair from the corridor outside so he had somewhere to sit.

Today it's different. We're in the largest courtroom in Sweden. The judges sit on chairs of dark mahogany with high velvet backs. The middle chair's back is taller than the others'. That's where the head judge sits. He is called the 'chairman'. On the table in front of him is a gavel with a leather handle. Slim microphones stick up before each seat like bent drinking straws. The panelling on the wall looks like oak, like it's several hundred years old, old in a good way. There is a dark red carpet on the floor between the seats.

Audiences are not my thing. I've never wished to be elected

as the school's Lucia, or to take part in talent shows. But it's packed in here. And everyone is here because of me; I'm the attraction.

Next to me are my lawyers from Sander & Laestadius. I know Sander & Laestadius sounds like an antique shop where two sweaty gay men in silk robes and monocles shuffle around with oil lamps dusting off mouldy books and taxidermied animals, but it's Sweden's best criminal law firm. Ordinary criminals have a single weary advocate; my advocate is flanked by a whole crew of excited wannabe-suits. They work into the wee hours at a super-fancy office near Skeppsbron, have at least two mobile phones each, and all of them except Sander himself think that they're part of an American TV show where you eat Chinese food from takeaway cartons in an I'm-so-busy-and-important sort of way. None of the twenty-two people working at Sander & Laestadius is actually named Laestadius. Laestadius died, I assume of a heart attack, in an I'm-so-busy-and-important sort of way.

Three of my lawyers are here today: Peder Sander, the celebrity, and two of his colleagues. The younger one is a chick with an ugly haircut and a piercing in her nose but no ring in it. Presumably Sander won't allow her to wear a nose ring ('Remove that rubbish immediately'). I call her Ferdinand. Ferdinand is the type of person who thinks 'conservative' is a swear word and nuclear power is lethal. She wears hideous glasses because she thinks it proves that she's got the patriarchy all figured out, and she hates me because, in her opinion, capitalism is all my fault. The first few times I met with her, she treated me like I was a crazy fashion blogger with a hand grenade on an airplane. 'Of course, of course!' she said, not daring to look at me. 'Of course, of course! Don't worry, we're here to help you.' As if I threatened to blow everyone to bits unless I received my biodynamic tomato juice with no ice.

The other helper lawyer is a guy around forty with a doughy belly, a pancake-shaped face, and a smile that says, ‘I’ve got movies at home that I keep in alphabetical order in a locked cabinet.’ Pancake has a buzz cut. Dad likes to say that you can’t trust a person with no hairstyle. But I’m sure Dad didn’t come up with that on his own; he probably stole it from a film. My dad really likes to deliver one-liners.

The first time I met Pancake, he rested his eyes just below my collarbone, forced his thick tongue back in his mouth, and rasped in delight, ‘Little girl, what are we going to do? You look much older than seventeen.’ He probably would have started panting if Sander hadn’t been there. Or drooling, maybe. Let the saliva drip from his mouth and stain his too-tight waistcoat . I couldn’t bring myself to point out that I was eighteen.

Today, Pancake is sitting on my left. He brought a briefcase and a wheeled case stuffed full of folders and documents. He has emptied the case and now the folders are on the table in front of him. The only things he left in the case were a book (*Make Your Case – Winning Is the Only Option*) and a toothbrush sticking up from one of the little inside pockets. Sitting behind me, in the first row of the audience, are Mum and Dad.

When I was on that class trip two years and an eternity ago, our class had been given a run-through beforehand, so we would ‘appreciate the importance’ and ‘be able to follow along’. I doubt it helped. But we ‘behaved’, as Christer said when we left. He had been afraid we wouldn’t be able to keep from giggling and taking out our mobile phones. That we were planning to sit there playing games and sleeping with our chins resting on our collars like bored members of parliament.

I remember Christer’s grave voice as he explained (‘Hey now,

listen up!') that a trial is nothing to be flippant about; people's lives are at stake. You are innocent until the courts have ruled that you are guilty. That's what he said, several times. Samir leaned back as Christer spoke, balancing on his chair and nodding like he always did, the way that made all the teachers love him. Nods that said *I understand completely*, *we are on the exact same wavelength* and *I have nothing to add because everything you say is so smart*.

You are innocent until the courts have ruled that you are guilty. What kind of weird statement is that? Either you're innocent all along, or else you did it, right from the start. Shouldn't the court try to figure out which it is, rather than decide what happened? The police and the prosecutor and the judges weren't there and don't know exactly who did what, so how can the court make it up after the fact?

I recall that I pointed this out to Christer. That courts are wrong all the time. Rapists are always going free. There's not even any point to reporting a sexual assault, because even if you were force-fucked by half a refugee camp and you get an entire case's worth of bottles shoved up between your legs, they never believe the girl. And that doesn't mean that it didn't happen, and that the rapist didn't do what he did.

'It's not that simple,' said Christer.

What a typical teacher answer: 'That's an excellent question . . .' 'I hear what you're saying . . .' 'It's not black and white . . .' 'It's not that simple . . .' Those kinds of answers all mean the same thing: they have no idea what they're talking about.

But fine. If it's difficult to know what's true and who's lying, if you can't be sure, then what do you do?

I read somewhere that 'the truth is whatever we choose to believe'. Which sounds even more insane, if that's possible. Like someone can just decide what's true and what's false? Things

can be both true and made up, depending on whom you ask? And if someone we trust says something, well, then we can just decide that it's so, we can 'choose that it's true'. How can anyone even come up with something so idiotic? If a person were to say to me that he 'chooses to believe me', I would know right away that he's actually convinced that I'm lying but he's going to pretend otherwise.

My lawyer Sander seems mostly indifferent to all of this. All he says is, 'I'm on your side', while his face looks like a thumbnail. Sander is not, like, the excitable type. Everything about him is relaxed and under control. No outbursts. No feelings. No roaring laughter. Probably he didn't even cry at birth.

Sander is the opposite of my dad. Dad is far from the 'cool guy' (his words) he wishes he were. He grinds his teeth in his sleep and jumps to his feet when he watches the national team play football. My dad gets mad, furious, at pedantic local government employees, the neighbour who parked illegally for the fourth time in one week, incomprehensible power bills and call centres. Computers, immigration officers, Grandpa, the barbecue, mosquitoes, unshovelled sidewalks, Germans in the ski-lift queue and French waiters. Everything riles him up, makes him yell and shout, slam doors and tell people to sod off. With Sander, however, the clearest sign that he's pissed off, almost insane with anger, is that he gets a wrinkle on his forehead and makes a clicking sound with his tongue. And then all his colleagues become terrified and start stammering and looking for documents and books and other things they think will put him in a better mood. Kind of like how Mum handles Dad on the rare occasions he's not annoyed but is acting perfectly calm and quiet.

Sander has never got mad at me. He's never been upset over something I told him or grumpy about something I didn't say or when I was lying and he knew it.

'I'm on your side, Maja.' Sometimes he sounds more tired than usual, but that's it. 'The truth' is not something we talk about.

For the most part, I think it's nice that Sander only cares about what the police and the prosecutor have proven. I don't have to worry about whether he is planning to do a good job or is just pretending he's going to. It's like he's taken all the dead and all the guilt and all the agony and turned it into numbers, and if the equations don't add up, then he wins.

Maybe that's how it should be done. One plus one cannot equal three. Next question, please.

But that's of no help to me, of course. Because either something happened or it didn't. It is what it is. All the rest is just beating around the bush, the kind of thing that philosophers do, as well as (apparently) a lawyer here and there. Constructs. 'It's not that simple . . .'

But Christer, I remember how insistent he was before that court visit, he really did everything he could to get us to listen. *You are innocent until the court has ruled you are guilty.* He wrote it on the board: *a fundamental principle of law.* (Samir nodded again.) Christer asked us to take notes. Copy it down. (Samir copied it down. Even though he hardly needed to.)

Christer loved anything short enough to memorize that could be turned into a test question. The correct answer was worth two points on the exam we took two weeks later. Why not one point? Because Christer thought there were grey areas in memorized responses, that you could be almost right. *No, one plus one cannot equal three, but I'll give you partial credit because you answered in the form of a number.*

That visit to the court with Christer happened more than two years ago. Sebastian wasn't there; he wasn't in our class until our final year, the year he had to repeat. I liked school back then, pretty much, with my classmates and the teachers

we'd had in different renditions since our primary days: the chemistry teacher, Jonas, who spoke too quietly, never remembered anyone's name and waited for the bus wearing his backpack on his front. The French teacher, Mari-Louise, with her glasses and dandelion hair, who was always sucking so hard on a tiny sliver of a black lozenge that her mouth became as small and puckered as a wild strawberry. Short-haired PE teacher Friggan, who looked like a freshly polished wooden deck: with indistinct gender, a whistle around the neck and broad, shiny and clean-shaven calves, always surrounded by the odour of sports socks and someone else's sweat. Absent-minded Malin, our bottle-blonde maths teacher: dissatisfied and constantly late, off sick on average two days a week and with a photo of herself twenty years slimmer, wearing a string bikini, in her profile on Facebook.

And Christer Svensson. Dedicated, in a let's-meet-at-Mariatorget-and-take-a-stand sort of way; ordinary, in a meat-and-two-veg sort of way. He thought rock concerts could save the world from war, famine and disease, and he always spoke in that overenthusiastic teacher voice that no one should ever use for anything but getting a dog to wag its tail.

Every day, Christer brought a thermos of home-brewed coffee to school, with so much sugar and milk in it that it looked like liquid foundation. He would pour his coffee into his mug ('World's Best Dad') and bring the mug to class and refill it during our lessons. Christer loved routines, same thing every day, favourite song on repeat. He had probably eaten the same thing for breakfast ever since he was fourteen: some sort of cross-country skier thing, like porridge with lingonberries and whole milk ('Breakfast is the most important meal of the day!'), I'm sure he drank beer every time he met up with his friends ('mates'), ate tacos with his family every Friday and went to the local pizzeria (one with crayons

and paper for the kids) and split a bottle of house red with 'the wife' when he wanted to celebrate something major and important. Christer had no imagination, he went on guided tours, he would never cook with coriander or fry things in anything but butter.

We first had Christer as a teacher in our first year of upper secondary. He complained at least once a week about how the weather had got so strange ('There aren't seasons anymore'), and every autumn he complained that Christmas decorations went up earlier and earlier ('Soon there will probably be a Christmas tree on Skeppsbron even before the summer ferries stop running').

He complained about the evening tabloids ('Why would anyone read that shit?') and *Strictly Come Dancing*, *Eurovision* and *Paradise Hotel* ('Why would anyone watch that shit?'). Most of all he hated our mobile phones ('Are you cows? With those chat apps dinging and jingling constantly, you might as well be wearing bells around your necks . . . Why do you bother with that shit?'). Every time he complained, he looked pleased, he thought he was youthful and 'cool' (not just a Dad word), and that it was proof of how close he was with his students that he could use words like 'shit' in front of us.

Christer stuck a pouch of snus under his upper lip after each cup of coffee and collected the used ones in a napkin before throwing them in the trash. Christer liked things neat and tidy, even his rubbish.

And afterwards, when the tax evader's trial was over and we went back to the school, he was pleased. He thought we had handled ourselves 'well'. Christer was always 'pleased' or 'concerned', never overjoyed or totally pissed off. Christer always wanted to give at least partial credit on memorized answers.

Christer was lying down when he died. With his arms

around his head and his knees tucked up, more or less how my little sister Lina looks when she's sleeping most deeply. He bled to death before the ambulance arrived, and I wonder if his wife and his kids feel like things aren't so simple in reality and that I am innocent because no court has yet determined that I am guilty.

Week 1 of Trial: Monday

2.

Mum bought the clothes I'm wearing today. But I might as well be in a black-and-white-striped jumpsuit. I'm wearing a costume.

Then again, girls are always wearing a costume. Dressing up as the pretty, with-it girl, or the serious smart girl. Or as the totally chill I-don't-care-how-I-look girl, with her hair in a purposely messy ponytail, a cotton bra with no underwires and an almost-see-through T-shirt.

Mum has tried to dress me up as a perfectly normal eighteen-year-old girl who ended up here through no fault of her own. But my blouse strains across my breasts. I've gained weight in jail and there are little round gaps between the buttons. I look like a salesperson who has put on a doctor's coat to dash after people in shopping centres with skin-care samples. *Don't think you're fooling anyone.*

'You look so nice, darling,' Mum whispered from her spot at the front. She always does that, tosses compliments after me, like rubbish she expects me to sort. Made-up compliments that have nothing to do with reality. I am not 'beautiful' or 'good at drawing'. I shouldn't *sing more* or *take drama classes* after school. It is terribly insulting for Mum to suggest that I should, because it proves she has no idea what I'm actually good at, or when I actually do look pretty. My mum does not have sufficient

interest in me to succeed in giving me a compliment that's actually accurate.

My mum has always been inexplicably clueless. 'Run out and play for a while, if you want to', she might urge in those last few months when she didn't have the energy to pretend she wished I would 'stick around and talk about your day'. *Run out and play for a while?* I was old enough to vote and buy drinks at a bar. It had been legal for me to fuck for three years. What did she think I was going to do? Play hide-and-seek with the neighbours*? One two three four ready or not here I come*, breathless laps around the garden to check behind the same old bush, in the same old wardrobe, behind the same old broken garden umbrella in the garage. 'Did you have fun?' she would ask when I came back, my clothes reeking of pot. 'Would you hang up your jacket in the basement, darling?'

Last night I got to talk to my mum on the phone. Her voice was higher than normal. That's the voice she uses when someone else is listening or when she's multitasking. Mum is almost always multitasking, tidying the house, moving things around, wiping off counters, sorting stuff. She is constantly nervous, fidgety. She always has been; it's not my fault.

'It's going to be fine,' she said. Several times. Her words tripped over each other. I didn't say much. Just listened to her too-high voice. 'It's going to be fine. Don't worry, everything will be fine.'

Sander has tried to explain what will happen during the hearing, what I can expect. In jail I got to watch an informative video in which painfully bad actors performed a trial about two guys who got into a fight at a bar. The defendant was found guilty, but not of all the charges, only, like, half. When we were done watching the video, Sander asked if I had any questions. 'No,' I said.

What I remember best about the tax trial we visited on our

class trip was that it was so quiet. Everyone spoke in a hushed voice and all other noises became exaggerated – someone clearing their throat, a door closing, a chair scraping the floor. If someone had forgotten to put their phone on silent and got a text in there, it would have roared as loud as when the lights go down at the cinema and they demonstrate how they've just installed a new surround-sound system.

And while everything was quiet, the tax evader sat there pushing his greasy hair off his forehead. As the prosecutor read the charges out loud, the man looked at his lawyer and hissed out indignant snorts. I remember thinking that he was a moron. Why was he pretending to be surprised? The prosecutor and the moron's lawyer talked one at a time, read out loud, said the same thing two or three times, and cleared their throats too much.

The whole show was lame. Not because nothing was 'like it is in the movies', but because everyone involved seemed bored to tears; the criminal himself seemed to have a hard time concentrating. Even in reality, everyone was a crappy actor who hadn't bothered to learn his lines.

Samir, though, he didn't think any of it was ridiculous. He leaned forward in his uncomfortable chair, rested his elbows on his knees, and scrunched up his forehead. This was his speciality: showing how earnest he was, that he took serious things seriously. Samir looked like he thought that these polyester-clad losers were the most fascinating speakers he'd ever heard in his life. And Christer was pleased. By the court and by Serious Samir. Samir seldom had to open his mouth in order to French-kiss Christer's arse. We teased him about that afterwards, me and Amanda. We liked to tease Samir. But Labbe patted him on the shoulder as if he were his youngest son and had just scored the winning goal in a football game. 'Samir gets it,' Labbe said, and Samir grinned. 'Samir always gets it.'

*

Things were pretty good at home, too, during my second year at upper secondary. Mum and I still talked about stuff that had nothing to do with what time she thought my curfew should be. Mum was proud of me, or at least of the way she had raised me. She bragged about her effective methods of getting me to do exactly what it took to make her life easier. She told stories like how I slept through the night at just four months old, how I ate 'everything' and held my own spoon the very first time I tried solid food. How I wanted to start school a year early, because I thought pre-school was boring. How I wanted to walk to school by myself before I even turned eight and how I 'loved' being home alone without a babysitter. She said she let me start riding a balance bike before I used a real bicycle, and thanks to this, she never had to bend over and hold on to the mudguard to keep me from tipping over. I was able to just *poof!* start to ride my bike, and she could walk alongside in her flowy clothes and laugh just exactly loud enough. What Mum did for *me*, to make *my* life easier, never came up, but back then, she was thoroughly convinced that I was so easy and trouble-free thanks to everything she had done right.

Today, in here, it is also quiet, I suppose. But not in the same way as during the tax trial. The air feels thick from all the important people waiting for important things to happen. The prosecutor and the lawyers are probably scared shitless that they'll make fools of themselves. Even Sander is nervous, although you'd never notice if you didn't know him.

They want to show what they're made of. When Pancake talked about how he thought it would go, he used phrases like 'the odds' and 'our chances', just as if he were my basketball coach and I played centre. He wants to *win*. Pancake didn't shut up until Sander clicked his tongue.

The day's proceedings begin when the chief judge recites

some sort of roll call. He clears his throat into the microphone, and people stop whispering to each other. The judge checks to make sure everyone who is supposed to be here is here. I don't have to raise my hand and say 'present', but the judge nods at me and reads my name. Then he nods at my lawyers and reads their names, too. He speaks slowly, but not sleepily; he's bursting with so much solemnity that he might split the seams of his ugly suit.

The judge bids me welcome, he honestly does. I don't say *thanks for having me*, because it's not like I'm supposed to respond, but I think I'm doing all the right stuff. I look more or less as I should. I don't smile, I don't cry, I don't stick my finger in any orifices. My back is straight but not too straight, and I'm trying to keep the buttons of my blouse from pinging right off.

When the chief judge tells the prosecutor that she may begin, she looks so wired that I think she's going to stand up. But she just scoots her chair in, leans towards the little straw-shaped microphone, presses a button and clears her throat. Like she's taking her mark.

Out in the lawyers' waiting room, where we were sitting before we came in here, Pancake told me that people have been queuing to get a seat in the courtroom. 'Just like a concert,' he declared, almost proudly. Sander looked like he wanted to deck him.

There's nothing about this trial that resembles a concert. I'm no rock star. The people who are drawn to me aren't wild groupies, they're just scavengers. When the journalists use me as bait on their front pages it smells like death, and the hyenas get even more worked up.

But Sander still wanted the hearing to be public. In fact, he demanded the media and the general public be allowed in, even though I'm so young. Not to make Pancake feel like a badass, but because 'it is crucial to keep the prosecutor from