

if then else

IF THEN ELSE

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Gazornum
St. Peter, MN

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In memory of my friend, Ellen Mizell. *Integer surgo meliore omine.*

It was cold. It was dark. Something that couldn't decide whether to be rain or snow was flying out of the sky, stinging my face like tiny hot needles. It was hard work riding my bike through the squishy piles of gritty half-melted snow, especially since the closer I got, the less I wanted to get there.

I was going to meet my best friends in the whole world for the first time.

A police car slowed as it drove past me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a blur of a face checking me out. A black kid out on the streets at night, can't be too careful. I stared straight ahead, trying to look law-abiding and harmless. The cruiser sped up suddenly, kicking up icy slush that drenched my jeans. I channeled my anger into pedaling harder. It actually warmed me up a little, so it wasn't all bad.

The old warehouse where the meet-up was happening turned out to be almost hidden under a bridge beside some railroad tracks. The place looked abandoned, with boarded-up windows, surrounded by a chain link fence with spirals of razor wire on top. I stopped and checked the instructions on my phone to be sure. Though it didn't seem right, this was the place.

It looked so dead I wondered if the meet-up might have been called off, which set off a weird, wobbly feeling in my chest, half relief, half disappointment. The building looked like nobody had set foot inside it for decades, but as I coasted down the side street I saw an open gate. Some cars were parked inside, near a set of

concrete steps leading to a rusty metal door. I chained my bike to a railing, then went up the crumbling steps, feeling weird.

I was going to finally meet ferret and Gargle and Farstaff, all members of the Group. They were like family, only better because they got my jokes and were always there no matter how late it was, and they understood how beautiful code could be. They would drop everything and hack if somebody needed a hand. I had an awful feeling I was about to ruin everything.

My clothes felt stiff, as if the night had frozen around me and was trying to stop me from going any further. It was only eight in the evening, but in Minneapolis in November, it's so dark it might as well be midnight. My stomach ached so much I tried pushing my fist against where it hurt. It didn't help.

They knew everything about me. Except who I really was.

The rusty metal door at the top of the concrete steps seemed to be locked, but when I gave it a good shove with my shoulder, it creaked open. Inside it was even darker. I ran the beam of the mini-flashlight clipped to my keychain around the big room. It was empty except for some smashed-up wooden pallets and dirt. Following the instructions ferret had sent out, I climbed a metal staircase to the second floor, the sound of my boots echoing in the big, dark, empty space.

There was a faint light at the top of the stairs, coming from behind another rusty metal door propped open with a folded-up pizza box. Inside I could smell beer and pizza and heard laughter and loud, confident voices. I began to feel a weird hot buzzing at the back of my neck, a familiar feeling when I'm getting angry.

The second floor was a big, dark, open space just like downstairs except that in the middle there was cloth draped from the ceiling, silvery fabric that swooped down, forming a big circle like a yurt or a Bedouin tent, glowing with lanterns inside. The fabric was tied back to make an opening. I took a deep breath and stepped through it. Everyone inside the tent turned.

They stared at me, holding up beer bottles halfway to their

mouths, slices of pizza drooping in their hands, like a weird game of freeze tag.

“Can I help you?” one of them finally asked in a snotty voice. He was a skinny guy who was wearing the kind of glasses that cost a fortune, his beard the perfect, fashionable I-forgot-to-shave-this-morning length. His voice had that thing in it, that “who are you and what makes you think you have a right to be here?” kind of warning you hear when they see the wrong people coming too close.

They thought I was a kid who’d blundered into the wrong place, some loser, not the kind of person who could be part of the Group. Not their buddy Shad, which was the name I used online. Shad the Shadow, a fast-typing geek who could troubleshoot a program or write a nice routine as fast as any of them.

They knew all about me, but I’d never given them a chance to find out my real name, or that I was only fifteen, that my skin was shades darker than theirs, that I didn’t have any money and didn’t wear those skinny jeans that are impossible to find at the thrift stores where I bought my clothes, even if I could fit into them, which I couldn’t. That I could make it to a meet-up in my home town by bus or bicycle, but I would never, ever just happen to be in Bangkok or San Francisco or Berlin where the other meet-ups had happened. Up to this moment, they thought Shad was one of them. Not a black kid dressed in stupid clothes with outta control hair.

That buzzing feeling was growing stronger. It usually meant I should back away, chill out. Too many times it had gotten me into fights. It felt like something was about to get broken, smashed into a million pieces. It felt like anger and sorrow were chasing each other in circles in my stomach, making me feel jittery and sick.

I should have realized they would all be grownups, all white, all rich, the kind of people who got invited to speak at cybersecurity conferences and had money to travel. They looked nerdy in a geeky-hipster way. They looked like each other, a matched set. But they stared at me like I was a freak and I came close to telling

them I had made a mistake so I could turn and head down the stairs and bike home to my attic apartment with its mothball-smelly bedroom under the eaves, and they would keep thinking that Shad, who typed fast and fixed code and cracked jokes, was just like them.

Then one of the matched set smacked his head. "Oh my god. You're Shad."

I teetered on the edge of denying it. But I finally nodded, feeling sick. Feeling stabby. Feeling like I'd just busted something precious that could never be glued back together.

"Wow. It's so great to meet you. We just didn't . . ." He looked around. "I'm sorry. For some reason I always assumed . . ."

Another one finished the sentence he couldn't seem to complete. "We didn't know you were a girl."

~ ~ ~

It had all started the previous day with an encrypted message:

<wheeze> Your brother just got busted.

A photo was attached, showing a familiar ramshackle house in the middle of the block, Wilson's bike chained to the porch railing next to pots full of plants that had died because nobody remembered to take them inside when it got cold. In front of the house, there was a traffic jam of police cars. A herd of big guys in windbreakers with letters on them were standing around looking muscular and mean, somehow swaggering even though they were standing still. There was also a mean-looking woman with a ponytail sticking out of her hat. A hat that said FBI on it.

"Crap!" It slipped out, too loud.

The girl who had taken over most of the table I was sitting at in the library looked up at me and frowned, giving me that prissy "don't you know the rules?" look. I pushed my chair back, enjoying the *squeeeeeeee* it made on the floor that made her squinch up her face in pain. I yanked my power cord out of the plug, grabbed my stuff, and headed for the stairs. I needed to talk to Wheeze, and for that I needed privacy.

But once I had pushed my way out of the front doors of the

library, I couldn't think straight for a few minutes. I was worried about Wilson, but for some reason I was even more pissed off at the skinny blond girl with perfect nails and too much makeup who acted like *Shut UP!* I have a *thesis* to write! I need *quiet* so I can *focus*! Yeah, right. She'd invaded my space so she could plug her computer into the outlet I was using and cover my table with her stuff. Then she spent the whole time messing around on Instagram.

I realized I was shivering. It had been hot in the library, but outside I could see my breath. I couldn't see much else because it was one of those days when somebody had left the cosmic fog machine on overnight, so the world was filled with a grainy, moist grayness that made everything look like it was one of those pictures in an old book behind a layer of tissue paper, and every tiny branch of every tree was outlined with tiny glittering crystals.

Hoarfrost, Monica had called it. I made her spell it for me.

I'd been in a good mood this morning, biking across the campus with everything looking weird and magical. I had just wrapped up a job so my PayPal account had a nice bump. I was thinking "okay, this is working out. We'll make the rent on time for once and Monica won't freak out about her loans." So of course everything was going wrong. For a few hours, there, I got stupid and forgot it always does.

Like I don't know better.

I circled around to the back where a footpath ran between the library and the building next to it, and I could safely tap out a message to my in-real-life friend Wheeze, who lived in the house with my brother.

<zen> What's going on?

<wheeze> They picked everyone up. Except me.

<zen> What for?

Nothing came through on my screen for a minute, and I looked around, feeling suddenly nervous. There were no windows overlooking this spot, no trees or bushes offering concealment. I would have a clear view of anyone approaching out of the fog.

Suddenly I pictured myself on a screen somewhere else, acting suspicious and out of place. Looking scared.

“Come on, Wheeze,” I mumbled to myself. There were no cameras covering this spot, not even those sneaky little bubble ones that get tucked into corners and can scan in all directions. There weren’t many spots on campus as private as this, and this was the only one where people wouldn’t think it was totally weird for me to be there.

I knew this because I had stopped by the college’s campus security office and chatted with a student who worked there, pretending to ask about getting a parking permit that I didn’t actually need because I don’t have a driver’s license. Or a car. There was a wall of screens that he was supposed to be watching, even though he had his head down, marking a textbook with a highlighter. People would cross the screens from different angles, not aware that someone was getting paid to catch them picking their noses or scratching their butts. Some of the cameras were indoors, pointed at the cashiers at the cafeteria and the bookstore. Others were in a computer lab, which I had used once when I forgot my power cord. I never went back there again. The student worker was bored so I got him to tell me about all kinds of stuff, from the unfair way he always got stuck working on Friday nights to the fact that they didn’t have the budget to cover the whole campus, leaving a handful of spots surveillance-free, including this one.

My messages to Wheeze were safe, too. We were using end-to-end encryption and an open source program that everyone on the Group vouched for. I’d checked the code myself, line by line, but a panicky voice inside was telling me it wasn’t safe after all. Nothing was.

Oh, Wilson, what kind of trouble had you gotten into this time?

Wheeze finally responded.

<wheeze> “detained in connection with a terrorism investigation.”

<zen> wtf!?

I was shocked, but it felt like something I'd seen coming, like when you read a story that you know is going to have a big twist at the end and you think, "Wow! That's a surprise – not." Only this wasn't a made-up story. It was a disaster I had predicted but couldn't prevent.

Wilson wasn't a braniac. He was a doofus, but he was a friendly doofus whose biggest problem was that he wanted everyone to like him. Basically, he was like a big puppy who wouldn't behave but didn't mean any harm. He got into trouble all the time, but it was for stupid stuff, like goofing off in a fancy grocery store with his friends and accidentally bumping into a display of gourmet pickles and having \$600 worth of pickles and broken glass suddenly explode all over the floor. Which wouldn't be that big of a deal if he didn't keep laughing his head off while the manager tried to impress on him how serious it was.

I mean, it's not like he would *steal* a bottle of gourmet pickles. Or hit somebody over the head with it. He wasn't like that. He was a dork, but he wasn't a terrorist. He wasn't smart enough, for one thing.

Wheeze was typing again.

<wheeze> I know, it doesn't make any sense.

Only it did. Dang it, I knew, I *knew* something like this would happen.

<zen> What about Zip?

<wheeze> They got him too.

I think he's a rat, I started to type, but I deleted it. What if I couldn't trust Wheeze? What if someone else was getting these messages? Then I got pissed off and typed it again.

<zen> He's a rat.

There was another long pause. Wheeze was doing what I'd done weeks ago – running through everything Zip had said, everything he had done.

Zip had crashed on a couch at their house after a protest and had been living there ever since. Everybody loved him. He was

older than Wilson and a lot more of a take-charge kind of guy. (Not that that's saying much. Wilson has trouble taking charge of his shoelaces.) Some of the housemates joked that Zip would have been their leader, if anarchists had leaders. Whatever you wanted to call it, he changed everything. They probably thought it was the change you wanted to see in the world, like those cheesy T-shirt slogans, but it wasn't like that. Things were getting more serious, more secret. The late night conversations they always had about how messed up everything was and how things should be different were getting real.

Zip was taking their progressive political baloney and convincing them that they should do something about it. Make stuff happen, not just talk about it.

Wheeze didn't like Zip. He didn't like the way he was changing the mood of the house, and he didn't trust his charm or believe his big stories, and all of the political talk made him nervous. But he wasn't as cynical as I was, so it probably never occurred to him that Zip might be setting them up to be headline news, a reassuring victory in the war on terror.

I had tried to tell my brother that Zip was trouble, that he was the opposite of everything Wilson believed in. Wilson first tried to prove me wrong, then told me I was just jealous, that Zip was the best friend he'd ever had. When I pointed out all the signs that Zip was being manipulative, changing how everybody in the house acted, Wilson got quiet and I could see there was a struggle going on inside him. Then his jaw went stiff, like he'd made a decision that he was scared to tell me about. Instead, he said, barely opening his mouth as if he was clenching his teeth hard, "You're wrong about him." He left the coffee shop we were sitting in so fast he bumped into someone else's table and spilled their coffee all over the place and didn't even notice. He wouldn't talk to me after that. Like I had made him choose sides and he hadn't chosen mine.

Wheeze was typing again.

<wheeze> Do you know for sure?

No. But I was going to find out.

~ ~ ~

He told everyone his name was Zip as in zip ties. The the things police use on people's wrists when they're planning to arrest so many of them that they won't have enough handcuffs to go around. He'd been zip-tied at demonstrations in Miami and Baltimore and Quebec and Milan and London. He also told crazy stories about jails in Havre, Montana and Pikeville, Kentucky. He had hair-raising escapes from guards in rail yards because he traveled a lot and he liked doing it on trains, only without paying for tickets or sticking to passenger routes. Boxcars had better views.

He was cool. He was real. He knew how to brew homemade beer that was actually drinkable. He was everything Wilson wished he could be.

I could tell he had a hero-worship thing going on with Zip from the first time he told me about him. "You should hear about what he did in London," Wilson told me, his eyes all bright, so happy that he got to be friends with somebody like Zip. They had met at a protest in Chicago where Wilson had lucked out on a great spot on top of a statue of some famous dead guy, and Zip asked him for a hand up. Then Zip asked if he could get a ride out of town. He crashed the next night at Wilson's house. Well, the house Wilson and some of his friends had been living in, to be accurate. It got foreclosed and they moved in as a protest, only the bank forgot about it or something and nobody came to throw them out. They'd been squatting there for two years.

Until the FBI showed up.

Another big load of anxiety and dread suddenly landed on me.

<zen> They'll be looking for you, too.

<wheeze> I know. I'm heading out.

<zen> Be safe.

Whatever was going on, I really didn't want Wheeze to get in trouble. He was my friend, and I didn't have enough of them to spare. He was smart and funny and the kind of person who would

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take a bug outside and let it go to avoid squashing it. I was afraid that he would disappear and I might never see him again. At least we had a secure way to communicate.

<zen> Keep in touch.

What if he didn't? I thought about what it would be like without Wheeze to hang out with. *Be safe. Keep in touch.* There would be a big hole full of nothing in my life.

But I couldn't worry about that now. I had to find out where they'd taken my brother.

Okay, first? Let's get this straight. Wilson drives me crazy. But still, he's my brother, right?

When I was little, Wilson was just there, always. He would hold my hand when I was afraid and carried me if I got tired. He took my side when I got in trouble and sometimes he kept me out of it – or got me into it, or both.

The last time, we were at a big wedding and a drunken uncle was spouting racist things that he didn't realize were racist because he's too stupid to even know. Our stepmother kept frowning at me, saying "don't you dare" without actually saying anything out loud. Wilson could see I was about to lose it, so he grabbed my arm and dragged me through the kitchen and out the back door. The wedding was at a fancy joint on Lake Minnetonka where they had paddleboats and canoes. We took a canoe out into the middle of the lake without life jackets, took off our party clothes, and went swimming in our underwear. We stayed out until the sun went down and the stars came out and the loons made their weird, lonely cries.

It was the best thing ever, even though I had to save up for months to pay for the ugly dress that got ruined. Wilson had it worse. It was the Last Straw, so he got sent to a summer boot camp where troublemakers were supposed to learn discipline, which he didn't, though he learned how to pick locks and steal cars. Then he finished high school and left home and I wanted to go with

him, but my stepparents said I couldn't. So I didn't have anybody on my side anymore.

By the time I went to live with Monica I didn't look up to him the same way, partly because I was almost as tall as him, mostly because when he left and they said I had to stay, he didn't put up much of a fight. Things were never the same again, especially after I tried to warn him about his big hero, Zip.

Still, saving Wilson was something I had to do, like it was my turn, now. Like it might fix whatever got broken between us when he left home, with maybe a little "see? I told you so" mixed in.

We don't look like each other because we have different fathers. Still, when somebody says "your brother" it's Wilson I think of, even though there's also Aidan and Roland and Alec. Also sisters: Liv and Karin with an i (as opposed to plain old Karens; she wants to make sure you don't think she's one of them, because they're all German and fat and have frizzy hair, whereas she's Swedish and slim and beautiful – all because of a single vowel). I have this giant family, but that's because our parents keep thinking they should marry someone else and start new families as if maybe this time it will actually work out.

They don't feel like family, though, more like the people I had to live with until I escaped.

Our mom, who was African American but so light-skinned it was kind of a hard to tell, only got married once, to Wilson's dad, when they were both college students. Wilson looks like his father (a blue-eyed blond who could pose for a "visit Sweden!" poster even though he's never been there), so identifying as an African-American was never an option. (He tried for a while, but people just laughed at him.) That marriage didn't last very long, but the thing our mom had with my father was even shorter, and then she ran out of time because she died when I was so little I can't even remember her. Which stinks.

When she got sick, we had to go live with Wilson's father and his second wife because my father works for a company that cleans up buildings after floods or tornados and couldn't take care

of a baby. After Wilson moved out (and didn't take me with him) I figured out where my father was staying and how to get a bus ticket to go there. I wanted get to know him, and liked the idea of moving from one disaster to another. It would be a relief to go to not-so-good public schools with kids who wouldn't ask if they could touch my hair or look at me whenever they needed to know what black people think about slavery or getting harassed by cops or being poor. But after a couple of weeks trying to make it work, I sided with the majority for once. He was a nice enough guy, and probably good at disasters, just not any good at being a parent, which was never on his list of things to do in the first place.

So I had to go back to the good school and the ginormous house in a suburb outside of Minneapolis where Wilson's dad and his second wife lived with Aiden and Liv and Karin with an i. They went through a bunch of paperwork to adopt me, so technically Aiden's my brother and I have two sisters, and (if you count the kids from Wilson's stepmom's other marriage) two more brothers, Roland and Alec. Things get really crowded at Thanksgiving, which involves bitchy comments, tears in the kitchen, and various people not speaking to each other. That's a stupid price to pay just to get everyone all in one place to eat too much turkey, watch football, and be thankful.

So technically I'm part of a big family, but the only person who counts is Wilson.

~ ~ ~

I biked home from the library and made a pot of strong coffee so I could figure out what was going on. Monica says I shouldn't drink coffee at my age, that it will stunt my growth, but I'm taller than her, so that's a stupid argument.

It didn't take too long to figure out that Wilson and his friends had been taken to the federal building downtown, where he was being processed, which means being systematically humiliated by bureaucratic functionaries who make sure they always smile for the camera.

Something you might not know about people who work in jails:

some of them are okay, but a lot of them really get off on the power they wield over people who are drunk or crazy or upset or just unlucky or (in a few cases) actually committed crimes. But even the evil ones know how to follow the rules so that they won't give defense lawyers any advantage against their side. They humiliate strictly according to regulations. I haven't been in jail myself because when I break laws I'm too careful to get caught. But this wasn't the first time Wilson got himself in trouble, which is how I got to know about jail.

Being good at jail means being cool and tough and not letting anyone know how you're feeling inside. Zip would be good at it. I would be even better, though I hope I never have a chance to prove it. Wilson had never been convicted of anything, but he'd been arrested more than once. He wasn't good at jail.

It was Friday. That probably meant he wouldn't see a judge until Monday.

By now, they would have told him he could have a phone call, but they'd make it sound like he was obviously guilty and just trying to get off. I could imagine him paging through the yellow pages jammed with full-page ads for drunk driver attorneys, having no idea who to call or what to say. I'll bet there aren't any lawyers who advertise in the yellow pages that they specialize in people accused of terrorism.

Would Wilson call me? I wanted him to. I wanted him to think I could fix it, that when he made a choice between me and Zip, he chose wrong. But I *didn't* want him to call because it would screw things up if the FBI knew I was on his side. *Don't call me* I told him silently through the airwaves, hoping it would cancel out the part of me that wanted to hear him say "Zen? I'm in trouble. I need your help."

Then I remembered Wilson wouldn't know how to call me. They would have taken his phone, and he wouldn't remember my number by heart. He could barely remember to put on a coat when it was snowing outside. Feeling better, I filled a mug with coffee strong enough to strip paint and got to work.

~ ~ ~

First I checked in with Wheeze. He'd ridden his bike to the Pig's Eye rail yard in St. Paul, where he was looking for a chance to catch out. In regular English, that means "get on a freight train that is going somewhere you wouldn't mind going without getting caught and arrested, or getting your leg cut off in an accident, or getting stabbed by some creepy lunatic who is also trying to catch out." He had plenty of experience riding the rails and figured once he made it to another city, he could safely buy a bus ticket to somewhere else. He had an ID with someone else's name on it that he carried around for situations like this, but he didn't want to go to a bus station in the Twin Cities, since the cops would be looking for him there.

Of all of the people Wilson hung out with, Wheeze was the only one I actually liked. He was super-smart, always reading some crazy-hard stuff, like this huge book on the history of debt. Seriously, who would want to read something like that? Okay, the stuff he told me was way more interesting than you might think, but still – it was hundreds of pages long and had a million footnotes. He also liked to make things. When he learned that I had built my own computer, he asked me to show him how, so we built one together using parts salvaged from junked towers. (He wanted to attach an old Underwood typewriter keyboard to it, but we couldn't make that work. It would have looked really neat, though.) Then he asked me to teach him some Python, which didn't go so well. It turned out he was good at making weird sculptures out of junk and screen-printing posters and reading hard books, but he didn't have the patience to code. He doesn't like being wrong, and being wrong is mostly what code is about. You're wrong again and again until finally it works.

But we found out we were both really interested in privacy issues, online and in real life, which turned into a kind of game. We both started paying more attention to our surroundings, noticing where security cameras were located (which is way more places than you might think), always looking out for spots that

weren't under surveillance, finding ways to evade Big Brother on an everyday basis. Wheeze was better at it than me, and I thought I was good. He started reading about encryption and when I suggested we both use PGP and exchange public keys, he was all over it. He even let me jailbreak his phone and install Convo, and it was a good thing I did, since it was the only safe way we could communicate about the bust he barely escaped because he wasn't at the house much these days.

He told me back in October that he was looking for another place to live. Things were changing at the house and he didn't feel comfortable there anymore, even though he was the only one who was able to fix broken windows or clogged drains or had enough sense to put plastic over the windows when it got cold. All the kids at the house were anti-consumer anarchists, but they grew up in the suburbs consuming whatever they wanted, not learning how to make anything themselves. Wheeze had a lot of practical skills because he came from what social workers call a "disorganized household." Basically he's had to take care of himself his whole life.

I sent him a message telling him to be safe, and then logged into Facebook to do some research. I have a Facebook account that I only use for work, because there's no way I'm going to give corporations my personal information so that they can sell me junk I don't need – or sell my identity to other corporations or hand it over to the government. The account is pretty much the opposite of me. She's a twenty-something marketing intern named Tasha who posts fake pictures of all the fun things she's doing and likes things I don't. But she's flirty and cute and able to flatter people into thinking she's just like them, so that she gets to be friends with pretty much anyone I need to keep an eye on, which includes people who were posting pictures of the FBI raid, a few facts, and a lot of rumors.

One video that was getting a ton of likes and comments showed cops herding people in handcuffs out of the house. Right up front was Wilson, who looked scared and confused and not very

intelligent, then three girls and four other guys. And finally Zip, who looked defiant in the face of fascist flunkies (as the person who posted the video put it) but there was something about the way the two goons on either side held his arms and looked past Zip at each other, not smirking like the other FBI guys, more of an “okay, it’s in the can, this is a wrap” look that made me think *I’m right. He’s one of you.*

I searched for other photos and videos. Zip at a Critical Mass rally, his fist in the air and a big grin on his face as he rode his bike past a blocked intersection. Zip marching at a protest for a kid shot by police. Zip arriving at a party with a case of beer. I noticed that he walked with the same swagger as the FBI agents.

You’re a rat. I just know it.

After hunting through all the images I could find of Zip’s face, I picked the best one, sharpened it up, and started to run it through a sophisticated facial recognition program. The original code was a beta that was years old, abandonware that turned up on a discarded laptop bound for recycling, probably in some Third World country where people were getting poisoned while they used strong chemicals to extract precious metals from motherboards. Just something to think about the next time you throw out a computer or a phone.

While you’re at it, think about this: it’s amazing what people leave on their hard drives when their computers stop working. The company that wrote the code I was using was no doubt selling something more sophisticated by now, and raking in millions with everybody going crazy over biometrics, but my version was probably a lot better. Ferret, who calls himself a crypto-archeologist, collects computer junk from recyclers so he can uncover stuff like this. He cloned it and uploaded it to Sourcerer two years ago, where other people had forked it and added hacks that made it a whole lot better. Now it was combing through images all over the internet looking for matches, but it would take hours to find and prioritize possible hits.

While the program ran, I went looking for an attorney who

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specialized in terrorists instead of drunk drivers. An hour later, when I had a list of possibilities. I switched on my other laptop, set my VPN to connect through a German server, pinged the Group, and started a thread.

<Shad> I need a lawyer.

The comments streamed in.

<callmecheese> Ack!

<Falstaff> Buh?

<Gargle> Wassup?

<ferret> Are you okay, Shad?

<freddieb> Oh no!

<Kadabra> That sucks.

<DoDec> What kind of lawyer?

I felt my shoulders relax. I'm used to handling stuff by myself. It's how I roll, especially given the alternative like living in a fancy house in the suburbs and going to a "good school" where people smile at you when the teacher is looking and then say mean things behind your back and on Instagram and Yik Yak. But the Group was different. These were my people. It felt good to know they were always there, that they always knew what to say. I typed:

<Shad> The ACLU type.

And they goofed off. Of course.

<Kadabra> Oh oh, Shad's getting waterboarded again.

<Gargle> We TOLD you not to buy that dynamite.

<DoDec> We'll send you a care package. What's the postage to Guantánamo Bay again?

And so on. I interrupted the party.

<Shad> Going to take this to a palaver.

The Group has this function where you can take a conversation to a private space and control who gets to participate. You can block anyone you don't want involved and you can leave people who you aren't sure about outside until someone you do know can vouch for them. It's not 100 percent secure, but it signals that

you want to talk about something sensitive and, unless they're really interested, it's off limits. I got pinged a bunch and within a minute had accepted sixteen people, all of whom I knew and trusted, into the palaver.

<Shad> Asking for a friend. Srsly. Does anyone know anything about these guys?

I listed the names of eight lawyers I'd identified, then went back to Tasha's Facebook profile to see if anything new had come in. A lot, but none of it really useful, mostly people being shocked, shocked, or getting into fights with cousins who voted Republican and wanted to remind everyone that radical anarchists were a genuine threat to our freedoms, just like that secretly Muslim president who wasn't even American.

Which is another reason I hate Facebook. So much stupid.

Five minutes later, the verdict was in. Three of the lawyers I had come up with were out. Not people you could really count on, given their connections to big money. Four more ranged on a scale between maybe and good choices. One was the maximum excellent, but she was retired and had some chronic health problems. But she knew her stuff and kicked ass on fourth amendment legal arguments and sometimes took on cases that really grabbed her. Call Me Cheese posted a list of cases she'd won and added:

<callmecheese> If your friend's a terrorist, you may be in luck!

I sent a wish up toward the ceiling, out into the universe, asking whoever it was who might be listening to do me a favor, just this once. Then I set out to find Frances Bernadette McSweeney, J.D.

She didn't have an office anymore, she didn't have a webpage with a "contact me" button, and forget about social media. Turned out there were exactly two ways to reach her. Option One: send a letter, a real letter with a stamp and everything. Option Two: go to her house and knock on the door.

I didn't have time for the real-letter-with-a-stamp approach. Also, I didn't have her address. That was the problem with Option Two: I didn't know where her door was to knock on it. She did a really good job of keeping her address secret.

This was a good sign. She knew how to protect her privacy, even though she was all over the internet because of the cases she had won. It was also really annoying.

It took two hours, but between us we narrowed it down to 23 possible addresses, then down to ten, then finally –

<Kadabra> Bingo!

<Gargle> Why are you playing Bingo? The rest of us are doing actual work.

<Kadabra> It's the one on Bedford. Smartass.

<Gargle> You sure?

<tork> I'm betting on that condo on Snelling.

<Gargle> Why Bedford?

<Kadabra> Triangulation. Prop tax, DMV, voter reg all match.

<tork> too small for a big time lawyer.

<Kadabra> You don't get rich defending the people she defends.

<tork> But given her age? I think the condo is it.

<DoDec> Wait, is that mail I see on the stoop?

<Kadabra> yup and her name is on it.

<Falstaff> HUH !!?

<tork> Those satellite images are old.

<Kadabra> Not that old. Zoom in.

<tork> Holy sh!t your right

<callmecheese> You mean ***you're***, you idiot

<inky> Who called the grammar police?

<Falstaff> And so the apostrophe wars continued, laying waste to the land.

<ferret> Breathe, Cheese. You have to breathe through the contractions.

Her house, if it really was the one on Bedford, wasn't far. I could bike there in under twenty minutes. I logged out, put on a pair of long johns under my jeans, and spent too much time trying to find my gloves, finally borrowing Monica's mittens. I also borrowed her warmest cap while I was at it, one that fit under my bike helmet, even though it was one of those dorky Norwegian things with ear flaps. I caught sight of my reflection in the glass of the front storm door as I bent to tie my boots. The hat looked ridiculous with my hair sticking out under it. For a moment I wanted to go back inside and watch a video and eat popcorn and let Wilson take care of himself. No way this was going to work. That lawyer would take one look at me . . .

Whatever. It wouldn't matter how I dressed. Even without the stupid hat, my hair looked like I had stuck my finger in an electrical socket. When I was living in the big house in the suburbs, my stepmother started taking me to a salon that did beaded braids (which gave me headaches) or used a curling iron to make it into squiggly tentacles. She'd buy fake-African headbands

to keep the tentacles under control and give me a big smile like *there, that's SO much better, don't you agree?* Because she didn't know what else to do with my crazy negro hair and, though she never said so, it was obvious that she would have been happier if they hadn't gone through all that adoption rigmarole, but by then it was too late. The only thing she could control was my hair, even though I didn't want her to. Who knew that, underneath those sunny smiles and Oprah moments of emotional therapy talk, lurked an iron will? *It doesn't matter what you think; we're fixing your hair my way. End of story.*

I suddenly remembered hearing one of those comments you get behind your back in school, the ones just loud enough that they're sure you can hear it, the snorty giggles and the innocent looks when you turn around. "What? We were talking about the homework for English. Jeez, Zenobia, you're paranoid . . ."

It was eighth grade and we were doing mythology. The teacher had a PowerPoint with famous art showing the stories were supposed to be reading. Soon as a picture of Medusa came up, an angry dark face with wriggling snakes for hair, everybody looked at me and this ripple of snorts and smothered giggles fanned out through the room. It made the teacher really mad and kind of embarrassed that she had chosen a slide that looked too much like me. I could tell she wanted to talk to me about it after, but I left in a hurry.

Later I began to think it would be really cool if I could give people looks that turned them to stone, just like Medusa. I tried it out in the mirror, seeing what looked scariest, and settled on an intense, evil stare in an otherwise totally blank face that seemed to say "You just wait. You won't see me coming." It almost worked. They didn't turn to stone, unfortunately, but they left me alone.

Then I moved in with Aunt Monica and left school for good, along with all those smiling blond people who acted nice to your face but really didn't want you there. But there were these little splintery pieces still stuck in me, deep under the skin, like tiny shards of glass I couldn't find and couldn't get out. Mostly I didn't

notice them, but every now and then one would poke me unexpectedly and I'd remember what it had been like. And it made me glad all over again that I had escaped.

If this lawyer couldn't handle what I looked like, she probably wouldn't do anything for Wilson, anyway. I wrapped a scarf around my neck, got on my bike, and headed out.

~ ~ ~

It was a little blue house with an enclosed front porch and a tiny second story just about tall enough for really short dwarves. I couldn't tell if the doorbell actually worked, so I waited a while and knocked for good measure. There wasn't any mail on the steps like there had been on the satellite image, but if I squashed my face up against the glass storm door I could see mail lying on the floor inside. Junk mail, it looked like, mostly addressed to Resident, some of it addressed to Occupant, and one addressed to Mr. Frank Sweeny offering him a one-time deal on car insurance. Maybe Frances Bernadette McSweeney was no longer a Resident or Occupant. Maybe she'd moved to that condo on Snelling, or had gone to a nursing home. Maybe she was lying inside, dead, surrounded by mountains of junk mail. That happened to old people sometimes. I remembered a BuzzFeed story about a man who died in a house so full of trash they could hardly get the door open to get his smelly body out.

The mail lying on the floor wasn't the only thing on the porch. There were lots of empty flower pots and rusty garden tools and cardboard boxes and a broken chair and two lamps that didn't have lampshades –

“Can I help you?”

She said it in that snooty voice that really means “go away.” She didn't look much like her pictures, the ones of her with white hair piled up in a complicated braided hairdo that looked a little like those wigs lawyers in England stick on top of their real hair. Her pinned-up hair was all undone on one side and halfway falling down on the other. Also, she looked mad. Like angry-mad combined with crazy-mad.

“My brother needs a lawyer.”

“He’s in luck. Law schools have been pumping them out like crazy. He won’t have any trouble finding one. Just lift a rock.” Her voice didn’t sound as old and frail as she looked. It was sharp and snobby.

“No, I mean he needs you.”

“Don’t be silly. Nobody needs me.”

“Asif Ranjha and Xavier Jackson needed you.”

“Charming. You’ve done your homework.”

“It’s all online.”

“I’m sure that’s where you do all of your homework. Much easier than actual research, I’m told. Well, it was a waste of your time. I’m retired.” She started to close the door. It got stuck on the piles of mail.

“The FBI picked Wilson up this morning,” I said, fast and loud. “Along with a bunch of other people, one of whom is probably an FBI informant. They’re accused of being terrorists, but they aren’t.”

She rolled her eyes. I guess she thought that’s what happens to stupid people. I was getting fed up with her attitude.

“I think the informant set them up. That’s what they do. They find people naïve enough to talk about how wrong everything is and then they say, ‘yeah, we should do something about it,’ so they all say ‘yeah, totally,’ and then the guy says ‘hey, I know someone who could get us some explosives, what do you think?’ and pretty soon they’re in jail and it would never have happened without some FBI guy talking them into it.”

“Your point?”

“Wilson wouldn’t do it. Not really. It’s just that he wanted Zip to like him. The informant. Wilson kind of fell under his spell.”

“If this Zip . . .” She shook her head. “Such a ludicrous name. If he really is working for the FBI, he’ll have been given strict instructions. They know how to get around an entrapment defense. They give workshops on it. How old is your brother?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Old enough to know better. Does he have a record?”

“Well, he’s never been convicted of anything.”

She glowered at me. A shrill whistle from somewhere inside the house. “That’s the kettle.” She turned and started to cross the porch to go inside, moving in a lopsided way, as if it hurt to walk. “I suppose you’d better come in,” she called out, not bothering to turn around.

~ ~ ~

The house was a mess. I mean, really.

When I’m working, my room gets pretty chaotic, but this was a mess like I’ve never seen before. There were books and papers everywhere. You’d expect a lawyer to have a lot of books. But there were also piles of unopened mail and yellowed newspapers and random rusty hardware and clothes and dirty coffee cups and plates with food still on them and the carpet was filthy. It wasn’t what I expected at all.

But she didn’t seem embarrassed, even when we went into the kitchen and the counter was completely full of stuff and the floor was sticky and the stovetop looked as if it hadn’t been wiped off in a decade. Still, she managed to find a packet of tea, rinse out a brown teapot, pour in tea leaves and set it in the sink, which was the only place where there was room to set it because the counters were jammed full of junk. When she tried to lift the kettle, she made a little grunt. She closed her eyes, a fierce frown on her face.

“I’ll do that,” I said, reaching for it.

As I poured the steaming water into the teapot she glared at me, like she was practicing the Medusa thing. I ignored her, just picked up the pot and put it on the kitchen table on top of an old newspaper. It was from three weeks ago, so I figured it was okay if it got spilled on. Besides, there was no other place to put it.

“Thank you,” she finally said, easing herself into a chair, though it sounded like something-else-you.

“Got any cups?” I asked.

“In the dishwasher,” she said, then I guess she didn’t like my expression because she closed her lips tight, little wrinkles

looking like cross stitch forming all around her mouth. “They’re clean,” she snapped.

Well, some of them were, anyway. I picked out two that weren’t too bad and found two spoons that didn’t have anything stuck to them.

She found a bowl of sugar hiding under a newspaper and a tea strainer that she banged on the table to shake the old dried-up tea leaves out so we could use it again. I told myself to chill, she seemed perfectly happy with the way things were, trying to be all mellow and whatever about it. Live and let live. Then she ruined it by sniping at me. “Hasn’t anyone ever told you it’s impolite to wear hats indoors?”

I had forgotten I was wearing the stupid thing. I pulled it off. “Sorry.”

I almost followed up with “Has anyone told you your kitchen could be listed on the EPA website as a dangerous toxic waste site?” but because of Wilson, I kept it to myself.

“How old are you?”

I started to say something, then for some reason told her the truth. “Fifteen.”

“Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“I go to an alternative school. It’s all self-paced. Besides, school let out already.”

She sipped her tea, then seemed annoyed that it fogged up her glasses and she had to wipe them off with a handkerchief. “So, your brother was arrested on terrorism charges?” she finally said.

“Bogus terrorism charges. There’s a video of it online.” I pulled out my phone, found the clip that was making the rounds on YouTube, then handed it over to her.

She squinted, turned it on its side. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“Push the little arrow.”

She pushed it, lowered it into her lap, then tried looking at it from under her glasses, as if trying to sneak up on it. “The screen’s far too small.”

“Do you have a computer with an internet connection?”

“Yes, but something’s wrong with it. Every time I try to get online I get the same stupid advertisements.”

“Let me check it out.”

She got that cross stitch look around her mouth again before snapping, “I suppose you think a child of five would be better with computers than an ancient hag like me? I was using the internet before you were born, not to mention conducting complex legal searches on powerful databases.”

“I didn’t mean to say you don’t understand computers, but I know a lot about them. I might be able to fix it.”

She humphed. “I suppose there’s no harm in it.”

Her study was dusty, but there was nothing but a giant old-fashioned monitor and keyboard on her desk. She bent down, moving as if it hurt, and switched on the tower that lurked under the desk. “Knock yourself out.”

“How do you back up your stuff?”

“It’s all in there,” she said, waving her skinny, knotty fingers at a plastic box.

I lifted up the dusty hinged lid. “You’re kidding.” There were maybe two hundred diskettes inside.

The computer monitor finally lit up with an old-fashioned Windows logo. A few minutes later, the desktop finally showed up. I checked out her documents, a system of neatly-labeled file folders stuffed full of Word and PDF documents. Confidential memos, court documents, stuff you wouldn’t want in the wrong hands. “You don’t have a password on your computer?”

“I need a password? I have no idea what it would be.”

“No, that’s okay. I just thought lawyers might want to . . . never mind.” I poked around, feeling like a time traveler. She was running Windows 98. The only browser she had was an ancient version of internet Explorer. I launched it and it spawned a bunch of weird popups that blossomed all over the screen like some creepy invasive species.

“See? I suppose I’ll have to buy a new one.”

“This one’s fixable, if you don’t mind switching to a new operating system.”

She gave a little shrug. “Worth a try, I suppose.”

“Okay, then. First, we should do a fresh backup of any files you need.”

“I don’t need any of them.” The sharpness was back in her voice.

“Really? I mean, stuff from your court cases? Emails?”

She hesitated, then said firmly, “No. I’m retired. You can erase everything.”

I was about to tell her it wasn’t so simple, that ferret found the most amazing stuff on computers just because people thought pressing “delete” actually deleted stuff, but I figured that would just make her mad. “All right, if you’re sure. I’d like to do a complete rebuild. New operating system, new software. You’ll have your basic office suite, a browser, email. Anything else you need?”

“All I need is a browser so I can read the news.”

“Okay. I’ll get started. But you have to do something for me.”

“Here it comes,” she said, rolling her eyes again.

“Find my brother a good lawyer.”

I thought for a moment she would refuse. But instead, she said “First, I’m going to drink my tea before it gets cold. Then – no promises, but I’ll make some calls.”

Luckily, I had everything I needed on a jump drive and someone had installed a board with a USB port in her ancient computer, but installation was crazy slow. At some point she came in. “Would you like a sandwich or something?”

“No, that’s okay.” I was under the desk trying to blow gunk out of the fan, crawling around with the giant dust bunnies that lived down there.

“It’s getting quite late. Won’t your parents wonder where you are?”

“I live with my aunt, and she doesn’t get off work until ten tonight. How’s it going with the lawyer?”

“I’m working on it.”

“Let’s have a race and see who gets done first.”

“Deal.”

~ ~ ~

When I finally got it up and running, I went out to the kitchen, where she was jotting notes on a big yellow pad, holding a telephone receiver pressed to her ear. I waited as the pen flowed across the paper. She had filled the page with orderly lines. Her handwriting was old-fashioned, all the letters linked together in a flowing line of blue ink, threads of words crossing the page, though it was a little fragile looking, like old lace that’s starting to fall apart.

She was using lawyer language, asking questions that included lots of Latin, then writing, writing, writing. As I eavesdropped, I

rinsed out my tea cup and got myself some water from the tap. “Ridiculous!” she said, and “what arrogance.” Then very loudly, “Oh, for fuck’s sake!” At that point I almost dropped my cup, but she didn’t even look embarrassed.

“Yes,” she said. “All right. That’s perfect.” She put a period down at the end of a sentence as if she was pinning it down firmly. “Thank you, Luisa.”

She got up from her chair, disentangled herself from the coiled telephone wire, and hung the receiver up on an old-school telephone fixed to the wall.

“What?” she asked me, and I realized I was staring.

“That’s your phone?”

She looked at it, then at me. “What else would it be, a hair dryer?”

“But it’s on the wall.”

She stared back at me.

“That’s really cool. Was that your idea?”

She took a deep breath. “No. In ancient times, telephones were frequently attached to walls. Have you got my computer running?”

“Does my brother have a lawyer?”

She glanced at the clock over the sink. “He had one nearly an hour ago. I win.”

“Wait. Is it a good lawyer?”

“A very good lawyer.”

“What’s her name? Luisa what?”

“Luisa Cruz, but she’s a 3L assisting with the case. Is the computer working?”

“What’s a 3L?”

“A law student in her third year.”

“*What?* That’s bullshit! Wilson needs a real lawyer, not some student.”

“He needs an entire legal team,” she said firmly. “And he now has one, which includes Luisa Cruz, who has a gifted mind and is willing to work on Friday evening when most people her age

would be having fun. Now, I'd like to see that video, if the computer is capable of playing it."

"Course it is." Somehow she'd made me feel embarrassed that I had been yelling. That never happens. Well, yelling happens, but feeling bad about it doesn't. That calm, confident voice made me feel a weird mix of being ashamed and stroked at the same time.

She followed me into the study, where I had a browser open. "Okay, I went with Ubuntu for the operating system. I also installed LibreOffice, which is your word processor and spreadsheet and so forth. This orange cone thing? That's VLC, for videos, and the browser is Tor, which keeps your traffic private by using distributed relays. We should probably also set you up with a SpiderOak account so that you can store your stuff in the cloud, but safely encrypted. I haven't set up an email client yet, because you probably use Gmail, but you totally should consider using a more secure client with PGP encryption."

She stared at me for a minute. I thought she was lost in admiration and gratitude until she said, "I didn't understand one single word of that."

"Okay, well I didn't understand what you were saying on the phone, so we're even. What's up with my brother? Is he getting out?"

"Not any time soon." She paused, watching me as if expecting me to hulk out and start breaking things. I wanted to, but I also wanted her to respect me, so I just nodded, even though I pictured Wilson in a jail cell and it made something sharp dig into my chest. "This won't be easy," she went on. "The judge is unlikely to grant bail, but we have a legal team coming together and the feds are now on notice that they won't be able to intimidate their way into a quick plea. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to see that video."

~ ~ ~

We watched it twice. Then she settled back in the desk chair, acting like the captain of the Starship Legal Team, ordering me to fetch her notepad and pen, demanding a glass of water and a small

pillow from the couch to arrange behind her back, being fussy until it was perfect.

“This house where your brother was arrested. Who owns it?”

“I don’t know. I doubt anyone knows. It was one of a bunch of houses that got foreclosed two years ago. Some of the people involved in the Occupy movement started organizing to help homeowners who were getting jerked around by the banks, trying to force the lenders to renegotiate loans. Wilson was kind of on the fringes of that.”

“I know. He was arrested,” she flipped pages of her notepad. “At a protest at US Bank in the Winter of 2012.”

“Right.”

“And previously in Loring Park when the police took the Occupy encampment there down.”

“He got beaten up by the cops, too. You should have seen the lump he had on his head. Like a grapefruit.”

“The house?”

“Oh, yeah. So what happened is that he and some of his friends started occupying this house that had been foreclosed, only nobody ever came to kick them out. My guess is it got tied up in some bundled mortgage schemes and the paperwork got lost. So they’ve been squatting there and nobody cared.”

“I was afraid of that. Even if we can get the terrorism charge to go away, they could be charged with property crimes. Is there a chance that police will have found illegal drugs on the premises?”

“No doubt. None of those guys are into drugs in a big way, but I’m sure somebody would have had some weed around.”

“What about guns?”

“No way. They wouldn’t . . . I mean . . .” I stumbled to a stop and then started over. “Well, honestly, I can’t be sure. It’s been a while since I talked to Wilson, and things were getting weird even back then.”

“Weird in what way?”

“Before Zip showed up, this was a house full of totally laid-back kids who were kind of a family, right? Because none of them had

families where they felt like they belonged. They made their own rules and they got along fine and they didn't bother anybody."

"But then an informant entered the picture."

"Right. Wilson met Zip at a protest and said "hey, why don't you crash at our place?" So he moved in and everything changed."

"How, exactly?"

"Wilson started getting more political. I mean, he always talked about the evils of capitalism and white supremacy and how consumerism is wrecking the planet, but when he went to demonstrations, it was mostly for the lulz."

"Is that a real word?"

"He did it for kicks. He lived the way he wanted to, and every now and he would join a protest to say 'this sucks' because it was fun to be around people who felt the same way. Like way back in the sixties when you were his age. "

"Hmm," she said. People don't like being reminded about how old they are.

"But he was never really that mad about anything. Him and his friends thought society was messed up, so they decided they wouldn't be part of it. They didn't worry about going to school and getting jobs, they didn't pay bills because they didn't have credit cards or car loans. They moved into a house that nobody wanted and went dumpster diving for food that was going to waste and figured out how to get along with each other without following other people's rules."

"What did they do for heat?" she asked.

I began to feel as if I was narrating some National Geographic special about a primitive tribe I had just discovered in Darkest Minneapolis. "They had a kerosene heater at first, but it smelled awful, so they rescued a wood stove from a house that was being torn down."

"Rescued?"

"They asked first. And Wheeze made sure it worked right, so it wouldn't burn the place down."

“That’s something.” But I noticed that she jotted “kerosene” on her notepad.

“They make their own beer, so I’m sure there are plenty of glass bottles around, too. You know, bomb-making equipment like you can find in any kitchen.”

She tapped her pen against the pad, shaking her head slightly. “What do you know about Zip’s background?”

I told her about the protests Zip had claimed to be at, the jails he said he’d seen, the way he rode the rails. “He knew what they wanted to hear, what they would think was cool. He probably made it all up.”

“All right. Now, tell me everything you can about your brother.”

I told her. She asked questions. I answered them and she wrote things down. In the end, I realized I was telling her as much about me as about Wilson. She was sneaky like that.

“So, I kind of have to get going,” I said when I realized we weren’t even talking about Wilson anymore. I stood up and reached for the coat I’d slung onto the couch while I was under the desk getting to know the dust bunnies. I found the stupid hat jammed into my pocket and pulled it on. I wasn’t so embarrassed by it now that I’d met the famous lawyer, whose white hair was falling out of its pins, whose sweater had something that looked like egg yolk spilled down the front.

She looked at her watch. “Goodness, it’s late. I’ll call a cab.”

“No, I have my bike.”

“Nonsense. It’s dark outside. It’s freezing.”

“It’s fine, but Monica’s going to worry if I’m not home when she gets off. So, what happens tomorrow?”

“Your brother will have a chance to meet with us.”

“When do we get to see him?”

“Sorry. Not you. His legal representatives.”

“He can’t have family members visit?”

“Unlikely, at this point. We’re making arrangements to represent all of the young people who were arrested, except for

the informant, who has his own lawyer. Since he won't be talking to us we'll need to do some research on him."

"I'll start working on that."

"You seem confused by what I mean when I say 'we.' We'll have our investigators work on it, though we won't have anything like the resources of the Justice Department. It'll take time."

"We don't *have* time. I want Wilson out of there. Jail's no place for him. He's been there overnight a few times, but he's still like, a total noob."

"A . . . what?"

"He's clueless. It's not a safe place for him. You guys focus on the law stuff. I'll find out who Zip really is."

"And how exactly do you propose to do that?"

"Uh, I probably shouldn't go into detail."

She looked past me at her computer's sleek new Ubuntu desktop, and her expression changed from superior and skeptical to "Oh," like she just realized that I had skills, that I probably hacked into banks or NSA databases all the time, which I wouldn't even try. Like I said before, I'm sure I'd be better at jail than Wilson, but I don't want to find out. Ever.

She finally said, "That's probably wise. Don't do anything illegal." She looked at me and raised an eyebrow. "At any rate, don't get caught."

I checked my phone – still no news from Wheeze – and then rode home as fast as I could. Coming down from the top of the hill on Franklin gave me a great running start. I was flying when I approached the first traffic lights. There was no sign of cops around, so I sailed through the red lights and onto the bridge over the Mississippi, keeping it up all the way to our house.

But I realized Monica had beaten me home when I saw her old battered Prism parked on the curb. I slipped in the front door as quietly as I could to avoid riling up the other people living in the house, hoisted my bike onto my shoulder, and trudged up two flights of stairs, gearing up for a lecture. Luckily, even though Monica's a college professor, she's lousy at lectures.

She was waiting for me, arms crossed. "I was about to call the police."

I hung my bike up on the rack by the door. "No you weren't."

"All right, I wasn't. But I was wondering how I would live with myself when I finally did call them and they made me identify your body at the morgue and asked me why it took me so long to report you missing."

"Yeah, right. You know what happens when you call in a missing teenager? They blow you off, unless you're somebody who's important which, no offense, you aren't. Did you know that people used to hang telephones on their walls? Those big clunky landline phones with push buttons? Isn't that crazy?"

"Seriously, Zenobia. I was worried."

And angry enough to use my full name in all its dorkiness, just to rub it in. “I was talking to a lawyer. Wilson got arrested.”

“Again?”

“This time it’s serious. It was probably on the news. Is your computer on?” I pulled the keyboard over, checked to see that the VPN I’d installed was ready to route me through another country – Norway, this time. I went to MPR’s website and pulled up a news report: “Nine Arrested in South Minneapolis.”

“Oh my God, that’s Wilson,” Monica said in a squeaky voice, staring at the photo and flopping down in a chair as if she was about to faint. “What did he *do*?”

“Nothing.”

“Shhh, don’t shout,” she said automatically.

“See?” I said in a fierce whisper. “Everybody sees a picture like that? He’s guilty. Automatically.”

“I didn’t mean he’s actually guilty. Not Wilson. He would never hurt anybody. But look at all those police.”

“And federal agents.” I enlarged the image and pointed out the pony-tail woman with the hat.

Monica made another squeak. “Oh my God. FBI? What did he do?”

“*Nothing!*” I stomped away. Stomp stomp stomp. Then, right on schedule, *thump thump thump*. A broom handle being banged against the ceiling downstairs to tell us to keep it down. I made my wild Medusa face at the floor, took off the stupid hat and my coat, then sat on the floor to pull off my boots. I figured I might have to do more stomping yet tonight, but it would be quieter in my socks. As much as I hated it when Monica reminded me to keep it down, we really couldn’t afford to piss off the downstairs neighbors. The apartment we were in, the attic floor of an old house, wasn’t actually a legal rental property, but it was the nicest place we’d lived in a long time, and the cheapest. We couldn’t afford to get thrown out.

She played the radio report on low volume as I wrestled with my laces.

FBI agents and local police raided a home in South Minneapolis today, arresting nine residents. A spokesman for the Department of Justice told reporters that the arrests were made in connection with an ongoing terrorist investigation conducted by the Minneapolis Joint Terrorist Task Force. Though officials declined to provide details, an FBI spokesman indicated that the six men and three women arrested were self-described anarchists who had previously been involved in the Occupy Wall Street movement. They were arrested as they attempted to purchase bomb-making equipment from an undercover agent. According to the spokesman, the public was never at risk. "Authorities were aware of their activities and were able to make arrests before anything bad happened," he said. Police are still seeking a tenth resident of the house.

"Oh, Wilson," Monica moaned to herself.

"They were set up," I told her, stomping around the room softly in my socks, wondering whether Wheeze was still okay and how far he'd gotten away from Minneapolis.

"Set up by that guy you told me about? Peppy?"

"His name is Zip. Well, it's not his real name. It's the name he was using while he pretended to be a radical. The feds do this all the time, set people up to justify dragnet surveillance." I realized I was starving and reached for a bowl of leftover beans in our dorm-sized refrigerator. I also pulled out a bowl of cooked brown rice and a bottle of hot sauce. "Want a burrito?" I pushed things around to see if there was any cheese hiding in there, but there wasn't. Monica says it's too fattening, but really it's just too expensive.

"No. Seeing Wilson in that photo – I've totally lost my appetite. You said you found him a lawyer?"

I spooned beans on two tortillas. "Yeah. He has a whole legal team." I scooped up rice and mashed it on top of the beans, squirting on plenty of hot sauce. "The woman who put it together is a really famous civil rights lawyer." I flashed on that incredibly messy house and hoped Frances McSweeney was up for it as I

rolled the tortillas up into fat, squishy bundles, and put them on a plate in the microwave.

“How is Wilson going to pay for someone like that?”

“Um, I don’t know. I didn’t ask.” She frowned in concern. “I just knew he needed a good lawyer, so I found him one. I mean, jeez, what else am I supposed to do? He’s my brother.” I checked my volume before the downstairs neighbors would start banging on their ceiling again.

“Sorry. You’re right. I shouldn’t be thinking about money at a time like this.” But she got a constipated look on her face, one she gets a lot, and I knew she was thinking about the \$157,000 give or take that she owed in school loans. She loves teaching history, but even with a PhD she can only find part-time gigs. She teaches courses at three different universities and barely makes enough money to pay the rent.

On top of that, she has me to worry about. It wasn’t easy for Monica to take me in. She’s the black sheep of the family, the one who didn’t major in accounting or pre-med or anything else practical and boring. Besides, she’s not even really related to me. She’s Wilson’s stepmother’s first husband’s younger sister, if you can follow all that. But she was the only person in the extended family apart from Wilson who seemed to like me – not the idea of me, the messed-up brown-skinned orphan who was the kind of burden you have to carry, like missionaries taking care of African children with disfiguring diseases, but the real me. She seemed impressed by the way I taught myself to code and asked what I thought about school. Not “how’s school?” but “how bad does it suck, and are you okay?” She’d gone to the same school as me and hated it almost as much as I did. She gave me tips on how to survive and told me that I was smart enough and tough enough to make it to freedom in one piece.

She also talked to me about why schools are as screwy as they are, about the politics and the economics and how school reform was always run by people who send their kids to private schools that didn’t have to be reformed. It was pretty cool to have a grown

up talk to me as if I was on her level. And we talked a lot about history because everybody else in the family thought it was boring and irrelevant. But it wasn't boring. It was really interesting the way she talked about it, not the way we learned it in school.

So when I found out I wasn't as strong and tough as she thought and I wasn't going to survive if I didn't get out, I thought of her. Moving in with Wilson wasn't an option. The house he was living in at the time was total chaos and his sketchier friends were always getting drunk and hitting on me. There were shelters for homeless teens, but they didn't have enough beds and would make me go back to that giant house in the suburbs. I knew Monica didn't have any money and it wasn't fair to ask her to put me up, but it seemed like the only solution.

When I showed up at her door that night and asked if I could stay, she said yes because she's like that. She set aside all the class prep she was supposed to get done that night to ask me what was going on and whether I was all right. Then she called Wilson's stepdad to explain the situation so that I wouldn't have to talk to him. (I was sitting in a corner of the bathroom while she did that, with my arms wrapped around my head so I wouldn't hear any of it. I was kind of a mess that night.) She was renting a studio apartment at the time, one that was not much bigger than a medium-sized doghouse, but she borrowed an air mattress and sleeping bag from a friend, probably thinking it would only be for a few days. That was two years ago.

It saved my life.

No, *she* saved my life, seriously, and I will never, ever forget it. She's the best.

She even made it official by getting my adoptive parents to sign a form that gave her legal parental authority, in case I had to go to a doctor or needed permission for some school thing. They acted all concerned and reluctant, but they actually were relieved. They made sure I knew that they could revoke that Declaration of Parental Authority if they ever felt like it, but that was just a chance to remind me they had power and I didn't.

There was some confusion about who would handle the school paperwork. Carefully organized confusion. I made sure everyone thought somebody else was taking care of it, because going to school was not high on my list of fun things to do. Everyone thought I had been enrolled at a local public school. I set my alarm to get up early and would head out the door in time for the first bell, but I would go to a coffee shop with wifi and cool staff who didn't think it was weird that I would hang out there until school was out. But it's illegal for a kid my age to skip school, so I had to think of a better plan. Also, I was sick of having to get up so early and leave the apartment just to keep up the lie. I'm not a morning person.

Then I remembered seeing advertisements constantly on TV for this dumb program run by a textbook company that takes tons of money from public schools to educate kids who didn't want to go to public schools, which is totally insane when you think about it, but whatever. I found a list of state-approved online schools and picked one that didn't look too terrible and made some phone calls pretending to be Monica. (Hey, she was busy; I figured I was saving her the time and trouble of sorting this stuff out herself.) I even convinced them that my records got messed up when I changed schools so I could get into the grade I was supposed to be going into instead of having to repeat the one I never finished. It would have been simpler to just read some books and take a GED test, but that's not an option. Basically, school is a prison system combined with a mass babysitting operation. The last thing they want is kids running around on the loose.

It worked out okay. The teachers were a mixed bag – some were decent, some were totally annoying – and the students were even more mixed, like a can of bargain-bin salted nuts. The classes were taught through a totally borked class management system, and a lot of the assignments were really dumb and boring, but it wasn't nearly as bad as sitting in a room full of bored teenagers who act mean to each other just to have something to do.

I grew a lot taller once I hit fourteen and started hanging out at

the libraries at the University of Minnesota where there was guest wifi and no little kids running around screaming like at the public library. I liked being able to wander around the stacks and read weird old books just for fun and you can get access to the articles that you find on Google Scholar that cost thirty-five bucks but are free if you use a library computer.

I started to feel comfortable in those libraries, like just another college student. They don't have to sit at desks in classrooms all day. They go to classes a few hours a week and for the rest of the time they get to roam around or sit for hours reading in the library without anybody bugging them. Also, college students came in all sizes and colors and didn't instantly judge you based on what brand of shoes you were wearing. One of the students told me about a program where high school kids could take college classes and even get free textbooks. I looked it up and figured I would try for it next year when I was sixteen and old enough to be eligible and I could go to classes with kids who looked kind of like me.

Meanwhile, I was plenty busy. I had my own business to run and I had the Group and I could keep up with homework without wasting a lot of time on it and I didn't miss going to a regular school at all.

"Wilson's father must be going crazy," Monica said, still staring at the picture of the kids being led out of the house, with Wilson in front, looking like he just woke up and was wondering why all those people with guns were in his front yard.

"You mean, 'how embarrassing, my kid's on the news? What will people think?'"

"Like worried. Wilson could be facing prison."

"No kidding, years and years in prison. You think his dad cares?"

"Yes, I do." She tried to get me to look at her by staring really hard, but it didn't work. I didn't want to look at her. I didn't want to feel sorry for the guy who divorced my mom and thought living in a big house in the suburbs and making lots of money was the best thing ever. "He may be kind a pompous jerk sometimes,"

Monica added, “but I’m sure he cares about Wilson – though maybe not as much as you do.”

The microwave beeped and I punched it off, wishing I could be punching somebody in the face, instead. Monica watched me stomp softly back and forth across the room a few more times, and then I sat down in the chair beside her and she put an arm around me. I let my head rest against her shoulder for a minute.

“Wilson’s lucky to have you on his side,” she said.

“He didn’t feel that way before.”

“What do you mean?”

“I tried to warn him about Zip. It backfired. He hasn’t said a word to me since last summer.” I didn’t want to cry, so I had to blink fiercely for a minute.

I heard her sigh and she hugged my shoulder tight. “I’m sorry. That must have been tough. You should have told me.”

“Why? There wasn’t anything you could have done.”

“Still, I should know if you’re having a hard time. You keep too much to yourself.”

“I’m discreet, that’s all. Discretion is a good thing.”

She chuckled softly. “I’m not sure discretion is one of your strong points. But you never have to be discreet with me. Okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“It sounds as if Zip is an incredibly manipulative person.”

“He totally is. It’s like he could control Wilson’s mind.”

She gave me another sideways hug. “Don’t blame your brother for falling for it. And for sure, don’t blame yourself.”

It was weird how she could do that, know exactly what I was thinking. I sat up, suddenly feeling as if leaning my head against her shoulder let my thoughts leak out of my right ear so they could travel up her neck straight to her brain. There were a lot of things I didn’t want her to know about, so I would have to limit how often I did that. “The burritos are ready,” I said to change the subject.

“Smells delicious. Guess I’m kind of hungry after all.”

“Good, ‘cause I made one for you.”

As we ate, she talked about FBI shenanigans through the ages. Turns out the American Indian Movement, which Monica wrote her dissertation about, was infiltrated by FBI informants who screwed up everything they were trying to do. But after a half an hour or so I started yawning my head off and told her I had to get some sleep. She pulled out the futon thing she sleeps on while I went into the little room under the eaves that was originally supposed to be a closet and still smelled a little like mothballs. I was getting to like that scent. It smelled like home.

My room is all weird angles and low ceilings. There's an arched window in a gable where I have some big pillows and a sleeping mat, so it's my office and my bed and my favorite hang-out spot. There weren't any outlets in the closet, so I had to learn about wiring to run some conduit into my room. It was kind of fun figuring out how from YouTube videos and a library book. When I'm in my window nook, I get a great signal from a guy who leaves his wifi unprotected and can work there as late as I want. Tonight was going to be a long night.

As Monica was bumbling around, brushing her teeth and getting stuff ready for the class she had to teach the next morning, I switched on one of my laptops, hopped on a server in Sweden, and logged in. I also checked my other laptop, the one that had been running facial recognition software. (Believe it or not, I had found it in the trash behind one of the dorms at the U. It was a little slow, and the cover had a crack in it, but it worked fine

once I blew dust out the keyboard, wiped the system, and installed Ubuntu.) It had finished and some of the results that had risen to the top looked a lot like Zip.

I quickly scanned the Group's threads. There was a lot of chatter about a typhoon in Asia. The Group had members in the Philippines, so there was a lot of checking in going on, making sure people were okay, which they all were, though the pictures they were sharing were really scary. Call Me Cheese had flipped out about some grammar thing and started a big tangled brawl over whether it was okay to start a sentence with So. (Of course, everyone who joined in started their sentences with "So . . ." just to wind him up.) There was a conversation about a high school kid who was put in the hospital with a fractured skull by another student, all because he was wearing a skirt. I could have said a lot in that thread, but I didn't have time. I had been getting a lot of pings on my previous post. The Group wanted an update. Like, hours ago.

<ferret> What's the news, Shad?

<callmecheese> Shad! Phone home. We're worried.

<Gargle> `Sup, Shad? You have any luck with that lawyer?

<Falstaff> Tap tap tap - is this thing on?

<ferret> Don't leave your family hanging.

<callmecheese> Come on, Shad. The suspense is killing us.

I typed a line.

<Shad> Hey guys, I'm back. Palaver?

They pinged in and in a few seconds I could start typing again.

<Shad> Got a lawyer.

<ferret> Great!

<callmecheese> Huzzah!

<DoDec> Which one did you get?

<Shad> The best. Frances Bernadette

barbara fister

McSweeney. Plus she recruited a whole legal team.

<ferret> Awesome!

<Kadabra> On Bedford, amirite?

<Shad> Yep, that's where she lives.

<DoDec> We should start a defense fund. We're talking big bucks. Even if the lawyer's pro bono, there's filing fees and shit. Adds up fast.

<Kadabra> Paypal okay? DM me your deets and we'll get it rolling.

<ferret> Unless there's one already started.

<Gargle> That's what I wondered. I found this site. Are you working with them, Shad?

The link took me to a website for something called "The Solidarity Committee for the Minneapolis Nine." It looked a lot like sites used by other local activist groups. I did a Whois search and saw that the site owner's identity was public – address, phone number, the works. Another quick search told me he was a kid who had become a full-time organizer, helping progressive causes around the Twin Cities by building websites and running social media campaigns. But duh, he wasn't even smart enough to use a proxy domain.

<Shad> No. I don't know them. But

I stopped typing to think. I wasn't as out there with personal information as some Group members who filled us all in on the places they worked or their illnesses or what was going on with their families. It wasn't that I didn't trust them. I just liked keeping some of me private, even from the Group. Which suddenly seemed weird.

They weren't kidding when they said they were family. It really felt that way, though not in the same way as Wilson and Monica. It sounds strange, but in some ways I actually felt *closer* to the Group than to them. The Group cared about the things I cared about. We had inside jokes nobody else would get. When one

of us needed help with code or a piece of hardware or rigging up a mesh network after a typhoon, which some members were working on right now while I was trying to decide what to say, people pitched in. A few weeks ago, freddieb wanted to get to a hackathon in London that he really, really wanted to be part of. Since he couldn't afford the train ticket, we bought one for him. Another time, when Wrath of Cohen was having a crappy day because he was wrung out from his chemo and he was feeling really down, we figured out where he was staying that night and had his favorite pizza delivered to his hotel room, which made him feel good and made us feel great. We were family. So I suddenly wasn't sure why I had always kept parts of my life so separate.

It was taking me so long to respond that Gargle, who had posted the link, started to apologize.

<Gargle> Soryr, Shad. Rpobbly not even the same thig.

He was in such a hurry to make me feel okay about keeping my secrets that he didn't take time to fix his spelling, which is saying something, given how snarky Call Me Cheese always got about spelling and grammar. It made me feel a sudden rush of something I couldn't quite figure out, but instead of figuring out what it was, I just started typing again.

<Shad> No. I don't know them. But it is the same thing.

<Gargle> You're not one of the nine?

<Shad> Not me. My brother is.

<Gargle> Oh f0rk. That sucks.

<Shad> I'm really scared about this. He can't handle prison.

Other people joined the thread.

<inky> It's sounds like a total setup.

<Shad> It was. One of those guys is working for the FBI.

<inky> That's entrapment.

<callmecheese> Isn't entrapment illegal?

barbara fister

<DoDec> Technically, but most of the terrorist convictions in the US since 9/11? That's how they got them. They *invented* them. Total set-up jobs.

That was typical of DoDec. Whenever there was a question about whether something was illegal or not, he wrote these long, detailed answers. What's weird is that he lives in Thailand where he runs a tech consulting company, but law is interesting to him, so he answers questions about it, whether the law someone is asking about is in America or Australia or China or the terms of some obscure trade agreement. There are a lot of really smart people in the Group.

<DoDec> The exceptions tend to be attacks that come out of the blue. Isolated people with a grudge and easy access to guns or small groups like the 7/7 bombers in London. They're not connected to known terrorist organizations except emotionally so they're really hard to anticipate.

<faltaff> Let's spy on everyone! That'll work! </sarcasm>.

<Gargle> Build giant haystacks! That's where needles usually are!

<Kadabra> I'll run the defense fund through my paypal. DM me your contact info to contribute. Shad, just let us know how to get the money to the right people.

<ferret> What else can we do?

<callmecheese> Yeah, we want to help.

<Falstaff> Want me to DDoS the DOJ? I could totally take down their website.

<callmecheese> no

<Kadabra> Shaddup Falstaff.

<ferret> Ahem, *constructive* ideas wanted.

<Gargle> Who is this FBI rat? Do you know, Shad?

I uploaded a recent photo of Zip and started typing.

<Shad> This guy. He goes by Zip and pretends to be an anarchist/activist, says he's been at all kinds of demos from G8 to Ferguson.

<Shad> I ran a facial rec on it using ferret's program off of Sourcerer (thanks, ferret!) I got a few hits. Not sure which ones are for real.

<Shad> But there are three that look especially good. One, he might be Jason Bristol, who got arrested for a charity fraud scheme in Michigan. Two, he might be Matthew Braxton, who robbed three banks in Oregon. There's a security camera clip that kind of matches. Three, he might be Zachariah Pendleton who got arrested in Wyoming on a weapons charge three years ago.

<Kadabra> Or maybe he was just a VERY very busy boy.

<inky> A bank-robbing weapon-toting fraudster.

I uploaded the three pictures. That started off a race, with people combing the internet for information about the people my facial rec had coughed up. Within minutes we were filling dossiers set up for sharing data. I felt a little guilty that I was taking people's attention away from the typhoon, but when I visited that thread, there was plenty of work going on there, too.

The Group is like that. They're smart and funny and they get stuff done.

In case you're wondering, that's not its actual name. Its actual name is different every day, and it's a randomly-generated word, so most of the time you can't even pronounce it. We just call it the Group for short. It uses a Tor onion router and encrypts the

conversations between members. I didn't know anything about it until one day, when I was on Sourcerer, helping troubleshoot a chat program. Mattitude, who was also working on it, sent me his public key. When I sent him mine, he asked if I wanted to join. It's not totally exclusive or anything – all kinds of people are part of it, and it's not a huge secret, but it's not like Reddit or Slashdot. Somebody has to let you in.

There was always the chance law enforcement was monitoring it, as DoDec reminded us regularly. But people in the Group weren't criminals. It wasn't a place to sell stolen credit card information or share malware code. Even joking about using the Group for criminal purposes could get you kicked out, fast and forever. The same went for political exploits like hacking into military servers or defacing government websites. That's why Fairstaff got called instantly on his crack about launching a distributed denial of service attack on the Department of Justice.

Another weird thing about the Group is that it doesn't have administrators. It's not like Wikipedia, which is a really cool thing except the people who are most invested in it get bossy and love rules and use them to exclude people who aren't like them. The Group doesn't have rules, at least not ones that are written down. It has a few basic protocols and that's it. Some of the older members say it's like the internet used to be before it got commercial.

Anyway, it's home and family and while I felt like I needed it just about every day since I'd joined, this was the first time I *really* needed it, the first time I asked for help that wasn't about code or hardware.

Someone started collecting information on the Joint Terrorist Task Force in Minneapolis. That file started to fill fast, and ferret, who is really good with data sets and visualization, started a new thread where people brainstormed how to find patterns in all the stuff we were kicking up. Three hours later, ferret posted the results.

<ferret> Okay, it's preliminary, but our best

guess is that Zip is Jason Bristol, first arrested on a fraud charge in 2006. When he was facing serious federal charges in 2012 he went off the radar. Like totally off.

<ferret> And - drumroll please - we think his handler is Special Agent Todd Terhune, who worked on our boy's first fraud case when he was an investigator for the Illinois State's Attorney. He's now FBI working out of the Minneapolis field office.

<ferret> I've got a visualization that shows these two have the most points in common when mapped over time and space.

He posted a link to it, a trippy, colorful, three-dimensional rotating tangle of lines and dots. When you clicked on it, the colored lines erased themselves, one by one, until only two were left, circling and intersecting, two timelines for two people, one a crook and one a cop, turned into wobbly lines that crossed over one another again and again.

<Kadabra> That's awesome. What did you use?

<ferret> This thing I wrote for studying migration patterns in bird species. Turns out it works great for studying rats, too.

<Falstaff> Okay, what will we do with this info?

<callmecheese> Take it to the press?

<Falstaff> *What* press? The one that told us there were WMDs in Iraq? Or are you talking about the one that sat on the original NSA surveillance story waiting for permission from the feds?

<inky> Just get it out there. Let the people know so they can crowdsource a response.

<DoDec> Stuff gets twisted, though. Remember how Redditors found the wrong Boston marathon

barbara fister

bomber? And then there's all the state-sponsored misinformation. Could get muddy.

Then ferret brought the Group's attention back to my brother in a way that caught me by surprise.

<ferret> Hey, I'm heading to Minneapolis for a few days. How about a meet-up?

<Kadabra> When will you be there, ferret?

<ferret> I was scheduled on a Sunday flight, but I can come sooner.

<Kadabra> I can be there.

<inky> I wish - too far from Melbourne.

<gargle> Count me in.

<DoDec> Are you going to that cyberlaw thing?

<ferret> Yep. Speaking on Tuesday.

<callmecheese> I'm signed up! Lemme see if I can change my tickets.

<Kadabra> There's a great brewpub near the conference site. Dinner on Tuesday?

<ferret> Wait wait wait, what about Shad's brother?

<Falstaff> Yep, we need to figure that shit out.

<Gargle> Shad, does a meet-up sound good? I can fix us up with a safe place to get together.

I was frozen for a minute, unsure how to respond.

The day was catching up with me. It was nearly four in the morning, and my brain was feeling fuzzy. The Group had meet-ups regularly. Someone would say "hey, I'm going to be in Bangkok next week, anybody want to get together?" and people would figure out where to meet and hang out for a while. Or there'd be a hackathon or an SF fan convention or a gaming event - something that a handful of members might be going to and they'd work out a plan to meet somewhere.

There had been a meet-up in the Twin Cities once, but I didn't

go. I had reasons, but mostly I didn't want my identity with the Group to get mixed up with who I am in real life. The person they knew was pretty good at code, pretty smart. A whole lot neater than me. The Group was my lifeline. I didn't want to screw it up.

I took a breath and started typing.

<Shad> Totally. It would be great.

<Gargle> Ossum. Anybody who wants in, DM me for the deets.

Sleeping in the next morning wasn't an option, as it turned out. I woke out of a solid sleep, the kind that makes you feel encased in concrete, the kind you really have to fight to drag yourself out of. Someone was banging on my door, and it had a weird echo effect, my brain telling me the banging had been going on for a while.

"Zen, the police are here," I heard my aunt say in a loud but totally calm voice. Like it was something that happened every day. Time to get up and go to school. Time for breakfast. Time to be interrogated by the cops.

I sat up with my heart pounding. I have two laptops, one that's for general use, the other reserved for more sensitive work. I raised up my mat and slipped a finger into the loose floorboard that had a handy knothole in it. When I lifted up the floorboard, it made just enough space for me to slip in the for-my-eyes-only laptop, where it nestled among some weird insulation that looked like dirty snow. The power cord followed, and I rearranged the insulation to cover it up. It all felt bizarre, as if was having a paranoid nightmare, and I froze for a moment, stuck in the strangeness of it all.

"Zen?" My aunt again.

"Hang on," I called out in a high, squeaky voice as I lowered the mat and grabbed the kimono decorated with anime characters that Monica had bought for me at Ragstock last Christmas. I took

a deep breath and squeezed my eyes shut for a moment. This is real. Don't freak out.

"Hey," I said, coming out of my room and rubbing my eyes with the heel of one hand. Acting groggy might give me time to think. Also, I *was* groggy. It's not every morning you wake up into a real-life bad dream.

"This is Detective Ivar Jensen," Monica said, nodding at an overweight guy with gray hair and a bristly moustache who looked as if he spent too much time at a desk eating donuts and watching surveillance videos. He had a suit jacket on, and a tie, and a gun in a holster. On TV, the guns cops wear on their hips always look like some kind of high tech fashion accessory. On him, the holster and the gun sticking out of it looked like it was some office equipment that he had to hang on his belt, like for taking inventory at Staples or something. He nodded at me, and kept nodding, as if he was a 250-pound bobble head.

"Janet Jankovich," the other cop said, as if it was an order. She was old and wore an ugly suit that didn't fit, unlike those women detectives on television who wear high heels and tight, low-cut blouses, like nothing helps to get a confession out of serial killers faster than cleavage. She tipped her head back as she studied me, looking down her nose (literally) without any hint of a smile. I hadn't been studied so hard since the last time I'd been sent to the principal's office. It was pretty clear which one of them had scored the "bad cop" role. I had a sudden vision of them sitting out in their car playing rock, paper, scissors. I almost started laughing. Luckily, I was able to stifle it. They wouldn't have liked me laughing at them.

Monica was wearing her bathrobe, cinched tightly at the waist, as if she was a Terrycloth Belt grand master, standing tall and straight and looking dangerous even though she's actually really short and not dangerous at all. She was being icily polite, but not friendly. Some people brownnose when they deal with cops, acting like they can't wait to sign up for the Police Auxiliary or point out their grandmother in a lineup. Not Monica. She looked

kind of like a school principal herself. A really mean one who ate first graders for breakfast and ordered hall monitors to shoot students without hall passes on sight.

“We’d like to ask you a few questions about your brother,” Bobble-head said, beaming a fake smile.

“Okay,” I said. Monica opened her mouth, but closed it when I added, “Just as soon as my lawyer can get here. She’s pretty busy, though. May take a while.”

Bobble-head’s smile got that condescending “you don’t understand, you stupid kid” look. “Aw, there’s no need for that. Your brother’s got himself in some trouble, is all, and we just need to straighten some things out. You want to help Wilson, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Super. We just need a little background. Have you spent much time at that house he’s been living in? You know any of those friends of his?”

“Those are questions.”

He raised his eyebrows. Well, duh.

“I’m not answering any questions without my lawyer present.”

He shook his head, grinning, like I had just cracked a joke. “A lawyer? You don’t need a lawyer.”

“I also don’t need to answer your questions without a lawyer present.”

“Do you know where Lawrence Delancy is?” The woman wasn’t smiling.

She was asking about Wheeze. I hoped the fact that I suddenly felt sick to my stomach didn’t show. “No.”

“Any idea where he might have gone?”

“No.” I realized I was answering questions. That bad cop thing was working for her.

“Mind if we take a look around your apartment?”

“Yes,” Monica and I both said at exactly the same time.

The two cops exchanged glances. The woman’s look was saying

"I told you so." His was saying "ah, crap, you were right. I hate it when you're right."

"Listen, little lady, this is a terrorism investigation," Bobblehead said, the smile gone, his face starting to get red, a finger poked in my face like a toy gun. "Your brother is in serious trouble."

So is Wheeze, I thought, my stomach churning. Though there was something to be said for barfing all over his shoes, I didn't want him to think I was intimidated.

"We know," Monica said, giving him a stony look, the kind she might give to a kid who was cruising for an F in one of her classes. "We're also aware of the constitutional rights that you took an oath to uphold."

"You'll be hearing from us." The woman smacked her partner's arm with the back of her hand and give him a "let's go" jerk of her head. He followed his partner down the stairs, both of them stomping, as if the more noise you make, the more power you have.

"That was scary." Monica said softly after the door closed behind them. She held out her hands and looked at them. Her fingers were shaking really hard.

"You were great," I said.

"So were you. Know something? I was sure they were going to say 'you can make this easy, or you can make this hard.'"

"Me too. Just like in the movies." We both started laughing.

Then we stopped and it was quiet for a moment. "I don't want to get you in trouble," I said, feeling sick again.

"Don't say that. This is not your fault." She had that stern teacher look again. "I never want you to feel responsible for being bullied, whether it's school officials or police or anybody. They're abusing their power when they shift that burden onto a kid."

"Well, yeah, but they're kind of doing their job," I pointed out.

"That's no excuse. Nazi functionaries tried that one out at Nuremburg."

"Wow, we already hit Godwin's Law," I said. She looked at me,

puzzled. “It’s this thing, when somebody in an argument drags Nazis into it? It’s kind of over, because usually it’s a ridiculous comparison.”

“Ah. *Reductio ad Hitlerum*.”

“That’s awesome. How do you spell that?”

She spelled it. “It’s a riff on a common fallacy, *reduction ad absurdum*. You take a proposition to its extreme to show how it must be wrong.”

“Only this time it’s not wrong, because you’re not really saying those two cops acted like Nazis. You’re saying people are responsible for their actions even if they’re following orders, which Godwin would agree with. That’s the guy who came up with the law originally.”

I realized I was babbling out of nervousness, but I couldn’t seem to stop, as if a lot of words would fill up the room and crowd out the bad feeling the two cops left behind. “I first looked him up when the FBI sent Wikipedia a takedown notice over a picture of their official seal, which was totally unfair because the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* had the same picture in their article and nobody made them take it down. They were just picking on Wikipedia because they could. Godwin wrote this hilarious letter explaining why they were legally off base.”

“When was this?”

“Years ago. I remember reading about it when I was ten years old, maybe? It was smart, but funny, too. He figured the best way to deal with an abuse of power is to make fun of it publicly.”

“You read this letter when you were ten.”

“Sure. It’s all over the internet.”

“You’re strange, Zen,” she said. “In a good way. Let’s have some breakfast.”

~ ~ ~

I made some of my super-strong coffee while Monica fried up some potatoes and made an amazing omelet, throwing in some chopped up leftovers from the back of the fridge that she sniffed carefully first. It turned into a weird kind of celebration the way

natural disasters sometimes turn festive for a while. My dad told me this: People whose houses get flooded or blown down in a tornado suddenly love their neighbors and want to help each other out and say to reporters their community is special and really pulls together. That usually doesn't last too long, though. They get tired and crabby and pretty soon they're at each other's throats again. Standing up to the police made us feel good, but lurking not too far away was anxiety for Wilson and fear that we'd all get screwed by the authorities.

"So," Monica said, wiping her plate with a piece of toast. "I'm wondering about today. I have that weekend college class to teach, and then I was going to meet Dieter. He wants to go to a play tonight."

"Excellent. This is the German guy, right? The one you like?"

"Yes, but I don't think I should go. What if they come back with a warrant?"

"You seriously think they'll get a judge to sign off on a warrant on a Saturday?"

"They're calling it a terrorist investigation. They'll pull out all the stops."

"Yeah, but we both know it's a crock of . . . doodoo." Monica gets bizarrely worked up if I used four-letter words, as if it means she's not doing a good job of being my legal guardian, so I try to catch myself. "This is security theatre, like making people take their shoes off at airports and walk through X-ray machines just to remind them they should be very afraid. Besides, I won't be here. I'm going out, too."

"Oh, yeah? What are you up to?"

I wasn't going to tell her about the meet-up with the Group. She'd get worried, and she wouldn't understand. I was getting ready to make up something plausible, but then suddenly remembered that I actually *did* have to go somewhere that had totally slipped my mind. I groaned. "There's this dumb group project for school. I have to meet some kids at a museum to analyze some art. I'll probably be out late, writing it up."

barbara fister

“That sounds fun.”

“It’s a dumb assignment. And I hate group projects.”

“Everybody does. But it’s good for you to have a chance to interact with other people your age.”

“I interact with them online all the time.”

“It’s not the same as face to face.”

“You got that right.” I reached for the coffee pot. “Online is a lot less annoying.”

Actually, I wasn't too bummed about the group project. It was a dumb assignment for a dumb teacher who gave us so many instructions that every assignment was like assembling a piece of Ikea furniture that was all pre-cut and just had to be put together according to a million detailed steps. The grade was totally based on how well you could follow instructions, and the finished products were pointless. With Ikea, at least you ended up with a bookcase or a table.

The good news was that Marcella was on our team, and she was good at instructions, though terrible at everything else. She would make sure we got it done on time and didn't miss any of the pointless little steps or end up banging it together like furniture that works but has a few missing nuts and bolts, getting points off for it. We also had Dave, who doubled down on being not good at things. It was his career path. He was so good at letting everyone else do all the work, I was sure he's be a CEO of something one day.

And there was Nikko, who I actually liked.

A lot.

You know how people in books always talk about their hearts "pounding" or "melting" or being "on fire" and other things that you would not want actually happening to your heart because you would have to go to the emergency room? Being around Nikko made me feel weird and mixed up, but in a good way because when I was with him I didn't feel like an awkward klutz. I felt

like I might actually be the kind of cool person that someone like Nikko would like. When I was with him, the world seem brighter, sharper, more full of possibility, and sometimes I got the crazy idea he might feel that way about me. I hardly ever let myself feel that melty-pounding on-fire way because I know you can be fooled. But Nikko would get why it was complicated and he wouldn't make a joke out of it even if it turned out he didn't like me that way.

Not that I had figured out how to tell him any of this.

Nikko is smart and irreverent and always in trouble because that's exactly where he wants to be. It's a lot more interesting than being safe. He calculates what it takes to flunk a course and dances on that edge, just to show that he can, and then just before he's about to crash and burn, he casually turns in something so brilliant it saves his grade. Barely. Teachers can't stand him.

It doesn't help that his parents are successful and wealthy. So far as I can tell, they love Nikko, but they don't get him at all. His father is a lawyer; his mother is a chemist. They both work long hours and drive fancy cars and they are smart, like he is, but not in the same way. They want the best for their son, but he may as well be a creature from another planet. Nikko's idea of what's "best" is totally the opposite of theirs. They would no doubt buy him his very own expensive car, but instead he rides a battered fixed-gear bike that he found in a junkyard and restored. His mom is from the Philippines and he inherited her coloring and slender frame and straight dark hair. He's also Catholic, like her. He gets into the ceremony and did the whole altar boy thing when he was younger. But from what I can tell, she and his dad both find him impossible to understand.

Whenever he gets in trouble, which is always, they put it down to his "artistic temperament," which isn't too far off, because he's really creative. He's into cosplay and fanfic and makes crazy little cartoons that he puts up on Vimeo. He draws each panel by hand and adds his own music and they're really silly and weird and wonderful. He makes his own clothes from stuff he buys at second hand stores, takes apart, and sews up differently. But what he

really loves is the stage. He wants to be an actor and he is really, really good at it. When he gets into a role, he's totally into it, and it's almost creepy because he's so convincing. His face changes. His body changes. He becomes another person. And then, at the snap of a finger, he's himself again. It's like possession, only it's all under his control. Also, he can memorize pages and pages of dialogue or make stuff up on the fly. Give him a character outline and he'll run with it, improvising a story and making it all totally believable.

He didn't go to my school in the suburbs, but the kids at his school were just as bad. Between his clothes, his looks, and his attitude, he didn't fit in. He didn't like being called a faggot and getting harassed on a daily basis. For the record, he's not gay or even bi. "Faggot" is just an all-purpose insult. The fact that he sometimes wears a skirt isn't a statement about his orientation. He just feels like it, but boys aren't supposed to feel like it.

Sometimes I think it's harder being a boy than a girl because you can't wear certain colors and have to act tough. Then I see how women are treated in the tech community and I'm not so sure. People are basically equal opportunity jerks.

After a while he started to fight back, but he always got blamed for causing trouble, because everybody else got along fine. So it had to be his fault, right? Once you're labeled a discipline problem, it's always your fault.

His parents wouldn't take the school's side, though. They threatened a lawsuit and ended up enrolling him in this alternative program so that he could finish school while the school systems paid for an apprenticeship at a local theater. He was able to work on costumes and sets and catch up on school work when he felt like it, which was mostly never except when he had to bring his Fs up to Ds. He made a million friends among a crowd of people with artistic temperaments like his and life got a lot better. His parents even let him move into an apartment in Cedar-Riverside, where a lot of university kids live. So long as

he calls his parents regularly and meets up with his mom every Sunday for mass, he gets to live life pretty much the way he wants.

Nikko doesn't get up before noon usually, so our meeting at the MIA wasn't scheduled until the afternoon. I tried to catch up on sleep, but I kept picturing a SWAT team busting down the door and thundering up the steps in their military gear. I finally gave up and systematically checked out my security setup. I had protected both of my laptops with encryption designed by a cypherpunk who was part of the Group. They each had a sneaky dual boot so that anyone who forced me to switch them on and type in my password would find nothing interesting, just random homework assignments and a browser full of innocent history, populated by a routine I wrote that surfed sites a kid might look at on a daily basis. To get to the real stuff you had to interrupt the startup and know what to type in at command level. It wasn't foolproof – anyone who really wanted to see what I'd been up to could crack their way in without too much trouble – but someone who didn't know much about computers would assume it wasn't worth the bother to take a closer look.

My work email had some messages waiting. Someone wanted me to blackmail his biology teacher because she'd given him a C- that he didn't deserve and it was messing up his GPA and his chance to get into a good college. That one got nuked without a response. Another person wanted to know if I was hiring, since he had some ideas about how to expand the business. No thanks. A third . . .

I looked up from my screen and stared out the window at the street below for a minute. *I don't have time for this* I told myself. Not this. Not now. I took a breath and made myself reread it. My stomach was hurting again.

Dear Secret Avenger,

I heard about you from Amy Vang, who said you helped her with a personal problem. I don't know if I can afford it, but I want to find out

if you can help me, too.

My sister told me there's a guy she met at the Owl, this coffee shop she used to like a lot but she's never going back after this. They got talking about music and he told her about a neat album he bought and invited her to his apartment to check it out because he has a turn table and everything. He gave her some wine, and he must have put some thing in it because she woke up with the worst head ache ever and she doesn't remember what happened next. He said she drank a lot, but that's a lie. She doesn't even like wine.

But she was asleep for hours and it was past midnight when she woke up and he was all hey, that was great and she was all what? I guess he did it to her while she was out, because it was so sore she even walked funny. Its not like she does this all the time. She just started high school. Her parents would kill her if they found out.

His name is Simon Meyer and I need to know if you can teach him a lesson. How much does it cost? Can I pay in installments?

Sincerely yours,

Charlie (I wont use my last name if its OK)

I could write back and say "You don't need to hire me. That's rape. It's a violent crime. Call the police!" But it's not that simple. She didn't want her parents to know. She didn't want *anybody*

to know. (Even me. I didn't buy that "my sister" thing, but she couldn't say it happened to her even in a private email to a total stranger.) I knew what she thought people would say, because they usually did. You shouldn't have been drinking. You went to his place. What did you expect would happen? Are you sure you said no? He would act all baffled and sympathetic while insisting he was totally innocent, and if you had the tiniest little bit of doubt, or felt kind of ashamed (and you do, because that's how it works), you would begin to wonder if maybe it really was a misunderstanding and your fault for acting like a slut. And when you're already feeling awful and you don't ever want to see that guy again, that isn't a battle you want to fight. Which is what these jerks count on. Which is exactly the kind of battle my business is built on. The kind where one side is so much more powerful than the other. The kind "responsible grown-ups" don't always understand and authorities won't take seriously.

I didn't have time, but I wanted to help this girl. Especially because I already knew about Simon Meyer.

He was involved in activist circles and claimed to be a feminist. He knew all the right things to say, which only made it worse. Emily, one of Wilson's housemates, told me that Simon had tried to rape her when she was my age and all messed up about family issues. She had left home and was sleeping on friends' couches and thought she'd be safe at his apartment because he seemed so progressive and cool and popular. But after they smoked some weed (she doesn't drink alcohol because that's what messed her family up) he got weird and she had to fight him off, and he's a lot bigger than her. Luckily, she kept a knife in her boot for dangerous situations. But when she told people, they said it could have been a misunderstanding, crossed signals. Think how much damage she could do to his reputation.

She gave up trying to tell people what happened because nobody wanted to hear it. But she was angry inside. Really, really angry. I met Simon at a protest. He was cute and had a great smile. He knew everybody, and he had that kind of confident cool that

made people want to hang out with him. I liked him instantly. But when Emily saw us together, she dragged me away, and told me what had happened to her so it wouldn't happen to me. From then on I saw him differently. Those smiles, the little hugs he gave everybody, the way he invited women into his physical space, the way he said all the right progressive things – he was watching for the right moment to make his move.

Now this.

I really wanted to take this guy down, *right now*. I wanted it so fiercely I had to walk around and around the apartment, trying not to stomp or kick things. I was mad because women were getting hurt. I was mad because this problem had to pop up in my life just when I had too much going on. Mad because it felt like thinking about someone else's problems was betraying Wilson. Then I got mad at Wilson for not listening to me and getting suckered by Zip when he should have known better. It took a while for the storm of thoughts to settle enough for me to figure out what to do. Then I sat back down in my window-space, balanced my laptop on my knees, and typed out three versions of a reply before I finally had one that I was ready to send.

Hello, Charie,

You are not the first to call my attention to Simon Meyer's behavior. He is a repeat offender and I'm working on a solution. Because I have other clients for this project, I will not be charging my usual fee. However, if you wish to contribute, you can send twenty dollars to my paypal account. Or whatever you can afford. I will let you know when the mission is accomplished.

It may take some time, since a project I'm currently working on is complicated and a life is at stake. But Simon Meyer's day will come

barbara fister

and he will face justice.

In secrecy, The S. A.

I went with the contribution instead of a fee because I felt guilty that I couldn't work on her problem full time. Guilty that I hadn't done something about it when Emily first told me what he had done. Now Emily was in jail and Simon Meyer was out there, doing things like this and getting away with it.

After I sent the message, I still felt too angry and anxious to focus. I did some deep breathing, which is supposed to relieve stress but usually just makes me dizzy. Then made some of Monica's herb tea. It says on the box it will make you fell calm. It doesn't actually work, but it helped to be doing something. By the time I was back in my nook with a mug and my laptop, I knew what I had to do.

I had to save Wilson. And I had to find a way to stop Simon Meyer.

An hour ago, I had a huge, hairy crisis on my hands that scared me because I wasn't sure I would succeed in rescuing my brother. Now I had *two* hairy problems and people depending on me for both. The Secret Avenger had never taken on a task as serious as Charlie's. But strangely enough, I felt recharged, somehow, because the stakes were so impossibly high.

I set a timer: thirty minutes to start a file on Simon Meyer. I quickly got the basics: his age (twenty-five), his address, the fact that he grew up in Bloomington and had attended the university for a year before dropping out. His Facebook profile told me he was self-employed (though it didn't say his business was selling weed, which everybody knew) and an activist (which was totally bogus). His timeline was full of pictures of himself at political actions and quotes from Che Guevara and Malcom X. Right at the top was a link to the Solidarity Committee for the Minneapolis Nine, along with a selfie of him at an organizing

meeting. He had his arm around a girl and a big grin on his face, like my brother's arrest was a great excuse to party.

When the half hour was up, I forced myself to switch gears. I took a breath and stretched, shaking off the creepy feeling of seeing that smiling face after reading Charlie's email, with all the shame and sadness hidden behind those words, like bruises under makeup. It was time to work on Wilson's case, so I mentally put Simon Meyer into a box and closed it up tight, pushing it into a dark corner of my brain for now. I logged into the Group and saw from the typhoon relief thread that people had whipped up a cellphone-based reporting system for aid workers and organized a mesh network with rechargeable power packs. A pile of direct messages had been sent to me offering support and funny gifs to cheer me up. A dossier on Todd Terhune, the agent who recruited Zip to be an FBI rat, had been compiled, but everything in it so far was boring, even his high school yearbook photo which made him look like a middle-aged boy scout with zits. Unfortunately, his record was too clean. He wasn't the kind who would send naked selfies to interns or drunk-dial female colleagues, not a guy you could threaten with embarrassing documents that would destroy his reputation.

I also checked – about fifteen times – to see if Wheeze had made contact. No luck. My latest text to him was still sitting there, unanswered.

~ ~ ~

At five past three I met up with Marcella at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, a giant art museum not too far from our house. Marcella frowned at me. She had been on time, of course, and she had already studied the museum's website and drawn up a plan for how we could complete the project in the most efficient way. She had printed out an elaborate flowchart spelling out various options. She gave me a copy and read through it out loud, pushing up her thick glasses when they slipped down her nose every few minutes, her voice loud in the marble and glass entranceway, the kind of place that looks like you're supposed to whisper. Marcella

didn't know how to whisper. Her voice is always loud and robotic, like her personality.

Nikko arrived next. He had to make a grand entrance because that's how he rolls. He raised an arm. "Light breaks where no sun shines," he said, reciting a weird poem in a sing-song accent, which got one of the security guards to come over on squeaky shoes to give him a warning in a deep, threatening whisper. When the lecture was over, the guard retreated to sit on his stool, glaring at us with his arms folded across his chest. I asked Nikko, "Shakespeare?"

"No. This Welsh poet." He poked his cell phone and a man with a strange sing-song accent said "Light breaks where no sun shines," the vowels all round and almost singing. Exactly the same voice as Nikko's.

"What does it mean?" Marcella asked.

"Why does it have to mean anything? It's about sounds, sensations. Feelings."

"But I don't get it."

"Actually? It's about sex."

She gaped. "Really?" Her loud voice got even louder. The security guard puffed up his chest and tapped his shiny shoe against the marble floor, sending us a message in museum-guard Morse code: knock it off.

"Marcella has a plan," I said before she asked for details. She handed Nikko a flowchart and read all the steps aloud again. Nikko pretended to study it, but said quietly, under the drone of Marcella's voice, "I heard about your brother. How's he doing?"

"I don't know. They won't let me talk to him yet, but I got him a lawyer."

"No shit. McSweeney. My dad told me she's, like, a legend. How'd you get her?"

"I just went to her house and asked."

"What's she like?"

I pictured the dirty carpet, the egg stains on her sweater. "She's smart. Tough. Kind of scary."

“My dad said she’s a nutcase, but then, he thinks I’m crazy, too. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Not really. I’m scared he’ll go to prison.”

“I’ll be at that rally on Sunday.”

“What rally?”

He looked at me, surprised. “In front of the federal building? The Minneapolis Nine Solidarity Committee is organizing it.”

“Are you even paying attention?” Marcella asked, finally noticing that we weren’t.

“At your service,” Nikko said, sweeping his wool cap off his head in an elaborate bow, like he was in Shakespeare play. “Pray, madam, read on.”

She gave him a narrow-eyed look. “So the other alternative . . .” she said, droning her way through it all.

“I figured you were involved,” Nikko said out of the side of his mouth like a film noir gangster, staring at the flowchart as if he found it fascinating.

“I don’t know any of those people.”

“They have a website, a Facebook page, a Twitter account, a YouTube channel. Want to come to the rally with me? I’ll pick you up if you want.”

“You don’t have a car.”

“I could borrow one.”

“I’ll ride my bike.” I didn’t really want to go to a rally. Wilson went to them all the time and acted like he was doing something important, even though they never actually fixed anything. But Nikko was trying to be nice. And I liked being with Nikko.

Dave arrived finally, giving some long explanation about car problems and traffic until Marcella cut him off.

“You’re late,” she said and handed him a flowchart.

He gave her a winning smile. It didn’t work. Marcella doesn’t get smiles. She was about to launch into her explanation for the third time when I broke in. “I vote for the second option. The one in green.”

“Me too,” Nikko said.

“We’ll do African and East Asian art,” I said. “You guys can do European and contemporary.”

“Which theme, though?” Marcella asked. “We have to choose a theme. I put the choices on the back.”

“Communities” I said, just as Nikko said “animals.”

In the next second I said “animals” and Nikko said “communities” and then pretended to stifle a sneeze to hold his laughter in. I didn’t hide it; I just laughed. Marcella glared.

“I’ll go for what everybody else wants,” Dave said. He was like that: easygoing, agreeable – so long as everyone else did all the work.

Marcella ordered us to assemble in the main lobby in exactly one hour to report. She beckoned Dave to follow her to the medieval art section. We could hear her mechanical voice droning away as they disappeared into the distance.

“Let’s get some coffee.” Nikko said.

~ ~ ~

We biked to a café and got coffee and scones and a table in a corner where we could talk. I told him all about Zip and the cops who’d come to our apartment and tried to throw their weight around. I told him how worried I was about Wheeze. I almost slipped up and told him about what the Group had dug up on Zip’s identity and the FBI agent he worked with, but I remembered just in time to make it sound like research I had done myself. I like Nikko a lot, but the Group is private.

I ended up talking about Wilson, too, the way he used to take care of me when I was little and how much I had wanted to go with him when he turned eighteen. “I understand it now. He wanted to have fun and hang out with his friends. Having a little kid around . . . I get it, but at the time I was so angry. It was never the same after that. He had his life. I had the internet. By the time I moved in with Monica we didn’t have that much in common anymore. But it kills me to think about him being in jail. The last time he was arrested it really messed him up, even though he was only in overnight and they didn’t even charge him. His whole life has

been about how you can live without following the rules. Making your own rules. Ones that are fair.”

“That’s cool.” Nikko wasn’t big on rules, either.

“Yeah, but it makes jail extra hard. Somebody else controls whether the lights are on or off and when you can use the john and every little thing, all the time, which will make him nuts. Plus he’s not tough enough. He’ll get picked on. I need to get him out of there. What are you grinning about?”

“Just the role reversal. He took care of you when you were little, but now you’re the one who’s all fierce and kickass.”

I shrugged, wondering if I could pull it off. Wondering if I would let Wilson down. Wondering whether the Secret Avenger could complete her task, which I had to push aside because it suddenly felt overwhelming. “Did I ever tell you about the time we stole a boat at a wedding and got in trouble?”

Nikko loves to be the center of attention, but he’s really good at listening, too. I talked and talked and it made me feel better. But then we had to rush back to the museum to write down some random facts about artwork so we could hand them over to Marcella.

~ ~ ~

Nikko had a rehearsal to go to. I biked with him to Cedar-Riverside. I didn’t want to go back to the apartment and wait for the cops to show up again, but I had three hours to kill before the meet-up. I went to the university library for a while to do some research. I found an FBI how-to manual explaining how to set up bogus stings and avoid getting nailed for entrapment. One thing you have to do is record your targets saying how much they want to blow things up so that you can claim it was their idea. That made me imagine hearing Wilson’s voice on a wire, jabbering about how cool it would be to blow shit up, and it would sound bad even though he wouldn’t really do it. I also found some law review articles about how to get around the FBI’s defenses, but they were really long and full of tiny footnotes instead of practical tips. I started to feel sleepy and nervous about the meet-

up at the same time, so decided to get some dinner. It occurred to me that I could eat at the Owl, Simon Meyer's usual hangout. While I waited for the meet-up, I could do some research for my Secret Avenger job.

I ordered the cheapest thing, a bowl of vegetarian chili. It was a relief to think about something other than my brother and the meet-up that was happening soon. I was going over some of my previous jobs, searching for ideas to use, when Simon Meyer came through the door.

He was flushed from the breeze outside and his dirty-blond hair looked the way curly hair looks on models in advertisements – attractively disordered, but not messy. He wore a battered leather jacket and a red and white keffiyeh around his neck and a big stupid grin on his face. He greeted the cook behind the counter, bumped fists with some guys at a table, hugged a girl who was putting her dishes in a tub. She hugged back and they talked for a while, swaying back and forth as if they were dancing in place. He managed to cup her butt with his hand, pretending he had to make room for some people heading for the door. I would have junk-punched him for that, but she didn't seem to notice. It was like he could put a spell on people: You like me. Everything I do is cool.

I had my laptop open and earbuds on. I wasn't feeling ready to talk to him, but he was a friendly guy, and after the girl detached herself and drifted out the door he worked his way around the room, chatting, hugging, being disgustingly charming until he got to me. I pretended that I couldn't hear him, but he put his hand on my shoulder and leaned close so I couldn't ignore him anymore. "You're Zen, right?" he said when I pulled an earbud out of my ear. "Man, I'm sorry about what happened to your brother. That's so totally wrong, you know?"

"Yeah, it sucks."

"I don't believe anything the media says. It's all bullshit propaganda."

"Totally," I said, trying to signal that I was busy and the

homework on my computer screen was way more interesting than he was.

“The system is so screwed up. The banksters got their bonuses. What did we get?”

“Student debt,” someone at the next table said.

He took a chair from my table so that he could sit with them. I stared at my computer, thinking about the girl who had asked me for help. It beat worrying about Wilson, at least for a little while.

This is probably the right time to explain about the Sibley Incident, which is what led to me start my business. In a way, it's connected to what made me make up my mind to leave the suburbs and that family that kept thinking I would blend in once I learned how to be one of them, because who wouldn't want to be one of them? When they realized I didn't, they thought it must be some mental disorder that could be fixed if they found the right treatment. Which they tried. I went through no less than four therapists and three diagnoses, including my favorite, "oppositional defiant disorder," which sounded so neat I considered getting the T-shirt.

So this all happened when I was in sixth grade, which is no fun even if you're going to a school you like, which I wasn't. There was a girl in the eighth grade, Sibley, who looked to me pretty much like everybody else. She had long straight hair and braces (the kind that don't show) and she was skinny and so far as I could tell, she wore the right clothes. I could be wrong about that, because I decided early on that I wasn't going to pay attention to that stuff, so I never really knew what the right clothes were. It's a really big deal in eighth grade to wear the right brands and know which ones were right two months ago but aren't any more, so that you can laugh at the people who are still wearing the wrong ones. Also, it's how you know who to hang out with. You do *not* want to be friends with people who are wearing last month's brands.

Have I mentioned that I didn't have any friends at school? Not that I wanted friends like that.

So anyway, I couldn't figure out what was wrong with Sibley, but for some reason, the most popular girls, who had been best friends with her, suddenly decided she was a joke. A total fail. A person who was so awful nobody could have anything to do with her unless torture was involved. They would invite her to parties and spend the whole time making fun of her. They said mean things about her in places where they knew she would overhear them. One week they would repeat everything she said in a weird, nasal voice. The next week, they would all pretend she wasn't there at all, staring right through her, which you could tell really got to her, being suddenly invisible, moving through the school hallways like a ghost. They snickered when she got called on in class, which made her freeze up and stutter. They wrote mean things on her locker. They had a Facebook group about her and bragged about the Snapchats they sent her saying, basically, you're fat, you're ugly, nobody likes you, why don't you just die, already?

Your typical eighth grade misery in concentrated form.

When her mother complained to the principal, it got worse. Sibley transferred to another school, but the hate followed her. That's one of the ways this stuff gets so hard to deal with. They make you think that there's no escape. In ninth grade, she got drunk at a party and some boys basically raped her but said she went along with it. So no harm, right? They took pictures, of course, and they went viral and the police got involved and everybody hated Sibley even more.

I didn't like Sibley, either. Way back in fifth grade she'd been one of the girls who made fun of me on a regular basis. She got really upset when my class had to do PowerPoints about Minnesota history and mine was about Henry Hastings Sibley, the first governor of Minnesota. He screwed over the Dakota by getting them to sign a document that they thought was a copy of a treaty, but was actually a trick to take away their money. (The

teacher had never heard of such a thing and accused me of making it up until I showed her it was in a book that has footnotes.) When Sibley was in charge of the trial after the Dakota war he got 300 Indians condemned to death. They only hanged 38 of them because Lincoln said it was too many, but still, Sibley was a pimple on the face of history so far as I'm concerned, and it bugs me that he's treated like a hero and gets counties and high schools named after him.

Sibley (the girl, not the uber-jerk governor) heard about my PowerPoint from a kid in my class named Dakota, who was not the least bit Indian, and they were both mad at me and said I was picking on them and was using the race card. I said "This is about race, you idiots," and I got sent to the school psychologist who told me I had to stop being so confrontational all the time.

But what happened to Sibley later pissed me off because it happens to kids all the time, but nobody ever does anything about it. I went around feeling all stabby for a few days until I decided I would take action. For a couple of weeks I watched the three girls who were behind it. Then I came up with a strategy that would basically ruin their lives. It wasn't that hard.

First, I created fake Snapchat and Kik accounts for a boy who was cute and cool and using that persona I started chatting with each of them privately. Before long they each said things about the others that I could use to drive a wedge between them, which I did. (One of them, Lyndsay, also started to send these embarrassing pictures. It's unbelievably stupid to send naked selfies of yourself to anybody, let alone someone you haven't actually met.) I also studied their behavior and picked one thing about each of them to use as a weapon.

For Rebecca, it was her hair. She was always playing with it, tossing it over her shoulder, spending time in the school bathroom staring at herself in the mirror as she brushed it and squirted stuff on it, and she freaked out every time she found a split end.

For Lyndsay, it was food. She liked to eat, but she was always obsessing about her weight.

Harper was a harder nut to crack. She was the tough one, the meanest one, the girl most likely to succeed at making other people miserable. She was beautiful and smart and had perfect timing so that whatever she said seemed to be exactly the right thing at the right moment – if you call making mean jokes the right thing. It took me a while to find her weak point, but after studying her habits and online identity I knew what would really mess her up.

Then I went into action. I got a bunch of hair that more or less matched Rebecca's hair color from the trash behind a hair salon and carried a baggie of it with me so I could leave clumps of it around – like, dropping some by her spot in the chemistry lab, where she goofed off while her lab partner did all the work. I slipped her hairbrush out of her purse when she was distracted and jammed a bunch of hair into it so when she next used her brush she would think it was falling out. I sprinkled it on the floor by her locker every day for a week. Once when I went to the bathroom, she was brushing her hair (as usual) but she got a text and went over to the window where the signal was stronger. I put a big chunk of hair in the sink and spread more on the floor. I had left the bathroom before she went back to the mirror to finish admiring herself, but I heard her scream from way down at the other end of the hall. She started skipping school and her Facebook timeline filled with hair-related trauma. The weird thing was that when I ran out of hair, she still found clumps of it everywhere. I guess if you worry too much about your hair, it starts to fall out all by itself.

Lyndsay was easy. I just left chocolate truffles all over the place. She'd eat them and then she'd hate herself. (Later I heard that she had to go into a residential treatment program for eating disorders. I would have felt guilty about it, but she was mean and totally deserved it.)

Taking Harper down took more imagination, but in the end, it

was sweet. She fell hard for a university student, a guy she'd met at a party. He started sending her Tweets that were funny and sweet and made her feel special. They started texting each other hawt heavy-breathing stuff and when he invited her on a special date to hear an amazing band, she told everyone about it and spent a fortune on some pre-torn jeans and three new pairs of shoes because she couldn't make up her mind which ones to wear on the special night.

When she got to the bar for her date, it turned out it wasn't a bar and there wasn't a band. It was a coffee shop and they were having a stupid poetry reading instead. The cute guy was there, but he acted like he didn't remember her at all. Worse yet, he was with somebody else. And everybody looked at her like she was last month's brand. Some people were laughing at her out loud. She might have been the Queen of the Suburbs, but she was out of place in a university coffee house full of hipster poetry lovers.

I was watching from a corner, totally invisible to her because I'd put on a hijab. I had spent ages trying out a variety of disguises before I realized it only took a headscarf to hide my hair and turn me into some weirdo Muslim immigrant she would never look closely at, because who does that? They're foreigners and they aren't Lutheran or anything else normal. I was so sure of my disguise that I even followed her into the bathroom, where I could see her expensive new shoes under the toilet stall, and hear her whimpering and blowing her nose.

Everybody wanted to know how the date went, of course, and she made something up, but it rocked her confidence, particularly since he wouldn't answer her texts and unfollowed her on Twitter. (Well, okay, I unfollowed her and nuked the account that she thought was his.) Since this happened just as the three girls were starting to get mad at each other over things they'd said that somehow got repeated and shared on Twitter and Instagram, Harper suddenly wasn't as powerful as she had been and pretty soon all three of them were fair game. And boy, did everybody pile on. All the girls who had been trying to be friends with them but

weren't good enough, not to mention all the boys they'd snubbed, were tearing into them. It got pretty nasty, actually. Rebecca's parents started a blog about it and the school brought in an inspirational speaker and launched an anti-bullying program.

I suppose it didn't do Sibley much good, but I felt righteous about it.

And then – the weirdest thing. Rumors started that somebody was behind the three girls' fall from power. A sophomore tweeted that somebody should do the same thing at their school. A bunch of people retweeted and commented about situations that they wish could be fixed. It turned into a hashtag and people started saying they'd pay good money for #secretavenger to come and kick butt at their school.

So that's how my business got started. It was pretty simple to set things up: I rented a box at the post office and got an extra phone number so I could have an anonymous domain registration, set up a secure email account, worked out a dead drop system for exchanging information using USB drives, got an untraceable PayPal account – and I was in business.

Honestly, if I was one of those Silicon Valley types, I could have made it into a successful company and gotten rich. Or possibly landed in jail. But I didn't want to run into legal trouble or take a job that meant that I would be hurting someone who didn't deserve it, just for money. I evaluated each case carefully and took only the ones where I thought the person who paid me had a serious problem that needed to be solved and I would be making the world a better place, or at least a less annoying, stupid, abusive place. I solved problems for people and got paid and luckily Monica didn't really pay close attention to our money situation or she would have realized it was getting easier to buy groceries and pay the rent.

Occasionally I did jobs pro bono. That's what lawyers call it when they work for free, because they're into saying things in Latin instead of plain English, probably to make everything sound more important and worth the money they get paid. But I like that

barbara fister

phrase because it means “for the good,” which is even better than free. So when a jackass department chair was making Monica’s life miserable I returned the favor. I won’t say how because some of it wasn’t exactly legal. But it worked, and he took early retirement, which made a lot of people happy, including Monica.

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I got so deep into thinking about ways to mess up Simon Meyer that I forgot to watch the time. Suddenly I realized I’d better hurry if I wanted to get to the meet-up on time. I shoved my laptop into my backpack, bussed my dishes, and was in such a nervous rush it took me three tries to unlock my bike.

So I rode my bike through the gritty, slushy snow to the warehouse with my stomach full of angry butterflies and met the guys from the Group and they all stared at me, holding limp slices of pizza and bottles of beer like statues until one of them said “Oh my god. You’re Shad.” And they were all freaked out, not because I was black or only fifteen and not cool, but because it had apparently never occurred to them that girls could code.

It was warm inside the tent-like place, thanks to an electric space heater that was humming away. I took off my winter gear and shook out my damp hair like a dog shakes off water, which always makes my hair look even crazier, but I didn’t care anymore. I took a slice of pizza. I also pulled a bottle of beer out of a case, and that made them exchange glances, like “should we say something? Isn’t she too young?” But they didn’t, which is good because I was on the edge of getting really angry.

I didn’t realize it until I thought about it later, but I was giving them a test, taking that bottle of beer. If they said *they* could drink beer but *I* couldn’t, that would have told me I would always be a kid to them, and worse yet, a *girl*. Girls don’t code. Girls don’t drink beer, but if they do, they’re probably sluts, even though fifteen-year-old boys who drink beer are cool. Pretty girls might be allowed in the clubhouse, just for special occasions, but they can’t be members, not for real. Also, any black girl who codes and drinks beer is probably a lesbo freak who has no friends and

is too weird to hang out with because her weirdness might be contagious.

But they didn't say anything and didn't stop me and I only drank a single swallow because beer tastes disgusting.

They introduced themselves, and though I knew who they were in the Group, it took me a while to connect who they were online with who they were in person.

The one with the fancy glasses named Tyler was Kadabra. Jason was Gargle, who I had always imagined would look like a furry blue Muppet, but he actually was over six feet tall, with a shaved head and nice abs but absolutely no blue fur or googly eyes. I had expected Call me Cheese to look like a straight-laced English teacher with a bow tie and suspenders because he was always correcting people's grammar, but he wore paint-spattered jeans and tennis shoes patched with duct tape. (Okay, so my first impression that they all wore expensive clothes was wrong. It must have been the stress.) His name was Geoff, and he made sure I knew how to spell it, because he hated it when people spelled it with a J, which was just plain wrong.

Ferret, the cryptoarcheologist, was the oldest and had a lot of wrinkles that doubled whenever he smiled. He had wire-rim glasses and wore jeans with a tweedy jacket but no tie. He looked like he was disguised as a college professor, which it turned out he was, teaching computational biology at MIT when he wasn't excavating software off of old hard drives.

Farstaff was closer to what I imagined – a wiry little guy named Zeke with shaggy hair that he must have cut himself with those scissors little kids use, the ones that have round ends and aren't very sharp. He had thick dark eyebrows, a big nose, and a wild look in his eyes. The only surprise was that he was a lot younger than the others, the only one remotely close to my age, though I noticed he had more empty beer bottles next to his chair than anyone else.

“So Shad,” ferret, I mean Ian, said. “What do we call you?”

I didn't answer right away and he started to say, "It's okay. You don't have to—"

But I did. They already knew I wasn't the person they thought I was. Might as well finish the job. "Zenobia. It was my grandmother's name. Don't laugh."

Zeke did, or rather he spluttered because he made a thing out of trying to cover his mouth up with both hands. He made such a big deal out of it that he practically fell out of his chair.

"That's a great name," Call Me Cheese, or rather Geoff, said, sounding like a scolding schoolteacher. "In history, Zenobia was a badass woman warrior who led a rebellion against the Romans."

"And conquered Egypt, too." I knew all that because Monica gave me an early history lesson, trying to make me proud of a name that everyone at school thought was one of those weirdo African American names. "You can call me Zen for short." That made Zeke sputter even more, his face getting red like he was under pressure and getting ready to explode. I glared at him. "What's your problem?"

"Nothing, little grasshopper." Jason punched his shoulder. "Ow. It's just you're not, you know, all serenity and shit. No offense."

"Don't pay attention to him," Ian said. "He was raised by wolves."

"What is this place, anyway?" I asked. "Is it safe to meet here?"

"I happen to know a guy who recently bought it," said Jason (who I'd always known as Gargle). "He plans to convert it into a community makerspace. He didn't mind us borrowing it for an evening of trouble-making." He tugged at the nearest piece of tent fabric. "This stuff? It blocks radio waves and cell signals. Portable security for sensitive communications. We're demoing it at the security conference."

"Cool. So basically we're in a big Faraday cage?"

"Exactly."

It made me feel weirdly proud. I knew about Faraday cages because I made my backpack into one using layers of duct tape

and foil. It's a good way to avoid electromagnetic pulses frying your electronics. Better yet, it keeps cell phone signals blocked when you need to avoid being monitored.

"So, about your brother," Ian said. "What we know so far is the identity of the crook who was recruited as an informant. We uncovered the FBI agent running the sting. We also know he doesn't seem to have anything embarrassing in his past—"

"That tenth grade yearbook photo was totally embarrassing," Zeke said.

"Anything that would discredit him. And we know there's one person still on the run."

"Yeah, Wheeze," I said. "He's sent me a few texts. Don't worry," I added as several of them started to speak. "We're both running Convo."

"Hey, that's mine!" Zeke was pleased. "Are you using the latest update? There was a problem with the kernel on some devices. Got reports of bricking. So I figured out—"

I cut him off. "We're running current versions." Duh. Security 101.

"Are you pissed off?" He seemed genuinely puzzled.

"See? Raised by wolves," Ian joked.

"Bullshit. I was raised in Brookline by totally normal people." Zeke turned to me. "Seriously. Why are you mad?"

"You act like I'm ignorant. I know enough to keep systems updated."

Jason cleared his throat. "Moving on . . . it's going to be awfully hard for your friend to stay off the radar. How much does he know about surveillance?"

"He's pretty informed," I said. "He stays off social media, disables GPS on his apps, takes his battery out of his phone when he isn't using it, and he encrypts. When I explained how PGP works, he got it right away, and he didn't mind messing around with keys." Unlike Wilson, who kept asking why you would need both a private and public key, and thought it was all way too much work when you could just use Gmail. "I haven't heard from him

in a while. I'm kind of worried." Actually, a whole lot worried. It suddenly felt as if some valve had been opened and hot, thick anxiety started flowing through me.

It must have showed because Ian patted my shoulder and looked at Jason. "Can you pull any strings?"

"I can try." He explained, "My company has a lot of law enforcement contracts. I know some people who know some people who might be able to let me know if he's been picked up. No guarantees, but . . . can you give me a full name?"

"Lawrence Delancy." He made me spell it. "White, five ten or so, brown eyes, brown hair, if that helps. I don't know his exact birthdate, but he's seventeen."

"That makes it trickier. What's his family situation?"

"Lousy. He hasn't been in touch with his parents for a long time. Why is it trickier?"

"Easier to keep juvenile proceedings under wraps."

"Not this time. If they pick him up, it'll be all over the news media," Tyler said. "They'll want to play it up, even if they don't give out his name. That's what these stings are for, to convince people that all that money we're spending on the war on terror is worth it, that mass surveillance is effective, even if it fails to prevent lone wolf attacks or loses track of real terrorists in the haystack of data. What we need is a counter-narrative. It would be great to hear about his life on the run. If we could set up a site and get his story online, obviously without any details that would give away his location—"

"I'll check with Fabi," Zeke said. "He can use his server in Brazil. Evandur can mirror it in Iceland. It's be up and running before the conference starts."

"Great. But we need content."

"Wheeze hasn't been responding to my texts," I said, sounding angry, though I wasn't sure who I was angry with.

Geoff said, "Until we hear from him, we can summarize the situation and link to similar cases. That crazy Sears Tower plot,

those kids arrested at the NATO thing in Chicago. Have some stats on how often these terrorism cases are fabricated.”

“Boring,” Zeke said, reaching for another beer. “Let’s expose Terhune and his informant. That’ll get their attention.”

“Too soon,” Tyler said. “Too easy to discredit. Besides, the underdog POV is a more compelling story.”

“Oh, right. Your specialty is PR, lying for dollars, I forgot.”

“And you’re in it for the lulz. Why don’t you go play with your little friends on 4Chan?”

“Yeah? Why don’t *you*—“

“People,” Ian interrupted, which reminded me how ferret was the one who stepped in when members of the Group started to fight. “Let’s get the infrastructure in place. Zeke, your offshore idea is smart. Geoff, you want to pull together some info on related cases?”

“Sure.”

“Then, for the counter narrative . . .” There was a pause while everyone seemed to stall out at the next step. A weird idea started to form in my head.

“What would be cool,” I said in the silence, and realized it felt good to have the guys all turn to me, as if I actually knew what I was talking about. Also scary, because I hadn’t figured my idea out yet and it might turn out to be stupid. “What if we could lure someone from Terhune’s team into a situation where they set up another fake terrorist threat like they did with Wilson? But we secretly recorded the whole process so we can show the world exactly how they operate.”

“Turn the tables and surveille them,” Zeke said, saluting me with his beer bottle. “Sweet.”

Tyler was nodding. “A documentary approach. Which makes me think . . .”

“Sara?” Geoff murmured.

“She’d totally love this. I’ll ping her and see if she’d be interested.”

“Who’s Sara?” I asked.

“Sorry. Sara Esfahani.” He said it as if I should know her name. “The filmmaker? She makes those political documentaries and releases them in serial form? Basically invented blitzdocs. If we could get film of an FBI informant orchestrating one of these manufactured terrorist threats, she could turn it into something amazing. And she has a ton of followers. It would go viral in no time.”

“We’re releasing a new wearable that produces top-quality film,” Jason said. “Great storage capacity, incredible resolution. I brought a couple of prototypes to the conference. I’ll donate one to the cause.”

“Your boss will be okay with that?” Ian asked.

“If it gets an endorsement from Sara Esfahani? Hell, I might get a raise.”

“But it would take too long,” I realized. “I mean, Zip spent months working up to this bust.”

“It might not take long at all,” Jason said. “There’s an army of informants out there – ten times the number that J. Edgar Hoover had back in the day. The FBI gets billions of dollars appropriated for terrorist investigations every year. They spread it around to local law enforcement and everyone is under pressure to show that spending all that money pays off. I should know. We make a crapload out of government contracts. If we go fishing, we might get a bite.”

“So we fix somebody up with one of those cameras,” Zeke said, all excited, acting as if it was his idea. “They say radical shit to attract an informant, the informant says ‘hey, want some dynamite?’ and boom. Everyone sees Sara’s blitzdoc about it.”

“Except that whoever was wearing the camera could be in serious jeopardy,” Jason said.

Zeke raised a hand. “I volunteer.”

“It’s not that simple. The FBI follows a playbook.”

“Great. It’s probably online. I’ll memorize it.”

Jason shook his head. “To make a conviction, they have to get

a target to do something that shows they are willing to act. That's what gives them grounds for an arrest."

"But first I'd be on film saying I'm just kidding. So."

"So, you'd still be in the slammer while they built a case against you. A case they might win."

"Wait," I said so loudly my voice echoed. It suddenly felt like my synapses were firing all at once, a zinging feeling as they lit up and connected and I glimpsed a whole, beautiful plan that took care of everything. I took a gulp from my bottle, forgetting it was beer and setting off a coughing fit. Geoff patted me on the back. "What if we start with our own informant," I said. "A concerned citizen who sees something and says something? Because I know the perfect pseudo-terrorist he can report to the feds. Then all we have to do is give the concerned citizen a camera to document it all as the feds set up a bust."

They all stared at me and I couldn't help laughing, pleased with how it all clicked into place. I knew who could play the role of concerned citizen, and I knew someone who would brag about his activist credentials and talk about committing a violent act with a little encouragement. The best thing about it was that the pseudo-terrorist I had in mind totally deserved to be locked up.

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I wanted to explain and bask in my own brilliance, but I instantly realized I couldn't tell them the details. First of all, I didn't know them yet. Second, it would be best if the number of people who knew them was limited. The Group had my back, but what they didn't know couldn't get them in trouble. And if things didn't go well, there would be plenty of trouble to go around.

"Are you sure about this plan?" Ian asked. "Is it safe?"

"What's safe these days?" That made the wrinkles between his eyebrows deeper. "I won't take unnecessary risks, if that's what you're asking."

He still looked worried, but we quickly put together a plan for the next few days in the usual Group way. Trusted volunteers would gather and analyze intel on every member of the

Minneapolis Joint Terrorist Task Force, storing all of the information they turned up in a secure drop that Jason would build. Zeke would work with his connections to set up a website in Brazil and a mirror site in Iceland in case the other one got taken down. Tyler would talk to Sara Esfahani (who apparently was a world-famous filmmaker, even though I'd never heard of her) and see if she would be interested in making my brother's case the subject of one of her award-winning documentaries. Ian said he would rewrite his conference talk to focus on my brother's situation as an example of the security state gone wrong, and he'd tip off contacts he had at *Wired* and *TechCrunch* in advance so they'd give it coverage, which would mean it would be all over the internet in no time.

"You know what this means, don't you?" he said, turning to me, suddenly concerned. "You're going to be under a microscope."

"I already am. We had cops at the door first thing this morning."

"What?"

"They didn't have a warrant, so we told them to go away, and they did."

"Zenobia, badass woman warrior," Zeke said with a sneer. Or maybe that was just how his face was shaped. It was hard to tell.

"If this goes viral, you'll have both the cops and the media after you," Ian said. "You won't have much chance to think. You won't have any privacy."

That could make things difficult. "Your talk is on Tuesday, right?" I chewed my lip as I thought through what I would have to get done.

"I don't plan to bring your name into it—"

Zeke snorted. "Zenobia," he said in a squeaky voice.

Ian ignored him. "But if it catches on, journalists will be looking for comments. They'll find you. They'll find your friends and relatives and some kid you went to school with years ago whose name you don't remember but who will pretend to be your BFF. People will make stuff up or twist it to make you look bad. It's not fun, being in the spotlight."

“So? It’s not exactly fun being in jail, either. I have to do what I can to get my brother out.”

They all exchanged glances, except for Zeke who was opening another beer. Those meaningful grown-up glances that seemed to be asking “should we tell her there’s no Santa Claus?”

“Look, I know this might not work,” I said angrily. “But so what? I have to try.”

Ian frowned at me as if I was some complicated equation he needed to solve. Then he nodded, and suddenly I thought maybe I really could pull it off.

We kept eating pizza and talking and drinking beer (except for me; luckily, I had a water bottle in my backpack). It was weird, because it felt like being online, checking out different threads, jumping from one conversation to another, but with real human beings involved. I was still having trouble putting their faces together with the people I knew from the Group. Mostly I sat on one of the folding chairs, thinking about how I would ask Nikko for a big favor.

Zeke sat beside me and tried small talk, which neither of us was any good at. He asked me if I'd been to any meet-ups before. I said I hadn't. He told me the first one he'd been to was in Amsterdam and it had been awesome; he was fourteen and had been invited to speak at an international conference. It felt like he was trying to score one off me.

"What's it like having a brother?" he asked suddenly.

"What do you mean?"

"Just curious. I'm an only child."

"Oh."

"My parents are cool, but it's not like having a brother or sister. I guess. I mean, how would I know?" He started laughing and I realized he was pretty drunk. "So, you guys are close, huh?"

"Not really. He's eight years older than me."

"If you're not close, why are you doing all this?"

"Because . . . I don't know. He's pretty annoying, but he doesn't deserve to be in jail. None of them do."

He nodded, and kept on nodding, as if his neck had a loose spring. His eyes drooped shut and for a moment I thought he was asleep. "Hey, sorry I made fun of your name."

"I'm used to it."

"Me too. First two minutes at preschool and I was Zeke the Freak. Man, I hated school. Do you, like . . ." He got distracted, listening to something Ian was telling Geoff. "Do you still have to go to school?"

"Yeah, but it's online. It could be worse."

"Sorry if I acted kind of . . . I'm still trying to match you up with Shad, you know? I had this different picture in my head. Not a girl." He pressed his lips together and tried to hold it in for a minute, little snorts leaking out. "Named Zenobia." He was howling with laughter again as the party started to break up.

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Jason and Tyler stayed behind to take apart the traveling Faraday cage and erase all signs of our presence. Outside, the freezing rain had turned into snow. Ian said I couldn't ride my bike in such awful weather. For some reason, I didn't mind him fussing at me, even though I was used to riding in snow and not at all used to letting people tell me what to do. I took my front wheel off and stowed it and my bike in his trunk as Geoff put the empty pizza boxes and case of empties into his rental car. Zeke, fortunately, didn't have a car, so nobody had to worry about taking his keys away from him. He climbed into the back seat of Ian's rental. By the time I got in, he was stretched out across the backseat, his knees bent to fit, one arm dangling down to the floor, doing a great dead-guy imitation until he started to snore.

"He's bunking with me," Ian said, glancing into the back seat. "He hitched a ride up from Chicago with a truck driver. Didn't have any place to stay, just counted on it that things would work out. Which usually they do for him."

"You met him before?"

"I've known him since he was twelve. He took a class from me once, when he was actually younger than you, though he dropped

out before the semester was over. He's brilliant, but he doesn't have much interest in following rules or filling out forms, and he thinks money is stupid. That makes it pretty impossible to complete a college degree the way we do things, but he learns whatever he finds interesting enough to figure out and picks up enough freelance work to put together a living. He travels constantly and has friends everywhere, even though he can be kind of a jerk sometimes."

"I noticed."

Ian glanced at me. "Being accepted to MIT at fourteen can mess up your grasp of social codes, but he's a good guy. Just awkward, sometimes. Which way to your house?"

I gave him directions to Cedar-Riverside. I didn't want to go home just yet. I needed to talk to Nikko.

~ ~ ~

He had mentioned that he was rehearsing a new play with friends in the basement of a bar somewhere in the neighborhood, but he hadn't said which bar. I put my wheel back on my bike and waved to Ian as if I knew where I was going. Then I spent forty-five minutes checking all the bars to find Nikko. This involved pretending I was old enough to go to bars, which didn't always work. Calling him would have been a lot easier, but no way was I going to leave a metadata trail for the cops. I had begun to wonder if I had heard it wrong and they were over in Dinkytown when I finally spotted Nikko's clunky fixed-gear bike chained to a gas meter in an alley. I locked my bike next to his and went into the bar, thick with the scent of spilled beer, fried onions, and mildewed carpet. A bartender gave me the stink-eye, but when I told him I was crewing for the play, he let me go down a flight of creaky stairs to the basement, which smelled too, but it was a more wholesome smell, like a damp cave.

Nikko didn't notice me at first. He was busy blocking out a scene and arguing about whether it called for slapstick comedy or for Brechtian epic gestures. I had hung out with Nikko enough to know that Brechtian was a thing, even if I didn't know what

it actually meant. While they hashed it out, I sat on the bottom step and waited until the director called for a break. Nikko play-punched one of the actors, exchanged rapid-fire barbs with some others, and then caught the hand of a girl who had purple hair and cute clothes, striped tights and Converse covered with sequins. She had big blue eyes and giant lashes. Basically, she was going for the anime look, which she was skinny enough to pull off. He twirled her around so that she ended up nestled in his arms in a Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire clinch (which I only know about because Nikko loves old black and white movies and makes me watch them with him sometimes). They cuddled for a minute, exchanging a kiss that lasted long enough that it stopped being a joke. The girl must have sensed me staring, because she poked Nikko, who looked over and squeed loudly. "Zen! What are you doing here?"

"Um, I was hoping to talk to you?" My voice sounded funny.

"Sure." He was suddenly serious, and murmured something to the girl that I couldn't hear, before giving her a last squeeze and smooch. "What is it? Your brother?" he asked me, drawing me back into a corner of the basement where it was dark and there probably were spiders. I focused for a minute on looking for bugs until I could get my thoughts together. Something was crackling through my head like static electricity.

"Sort of. I had this idea, but actually it's kind of crazy."

"I like crazy."

"I'm not sure you'll like this kind of crazy. It could get you in all kinds of trouble." I rubbed my eyes, feeling weird and out of place. People like that skinny girl with purple hair belonged here, but I didn't. I was feeling really tired all of a sudden, and a little dizzy. "This is dumb. I should go."

"No, tell me. I want to help." He looked at me steadily, insisting that I look back at him.

"You're busy here." It came out sounding like an accusation.

He waved a hand, as if with that little motion he could push everyone in the basement to one side. He could do that, make a

small gesture and have it mean so much. I felt a weird ache in the center of my chest, a soreness in my throat.

“No problem. We’re done for the night, anyway.”

“Yeah, but you probably want to hang out with your theatre friends.”

“Not when you need me.” He glanced over at the purple-haired girl, who gave us a brilliant smile, then back at me, light dawning.

“Do you know Bree?”

“No. How would I know somebody like her?”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t do theatre. I don’t socialize with college kids or whatever.”

“You socialize with me. I may not be a college kid, but I’m a whatever.”

“Yeah, well she’s not, I mean – you know a lot of people. I don’t have a lot of friends. Not people like this, like her. You, know. Popular.” I was jabbering. I stopped and pressed my lips together for a minute, damming up the stupid words that had been pouring out. Then I started over. “So no big deal, right? I just feel stupid that I didn’t know you, like, had a thing going with somebody.”

“She’s not a thing. Her name is Bree.”

“I mean a girlfriend, whatever.”

“We only met two weeks ago. I really like her, though. You look mad.”

“I’m not mad,” I said, hearing how angry I sounded. “I’m just dumb about people, that’s all.”

He reached out and pulled me to him in a hug, one that wasn’t anything like the way he hugged Bree. He rubbed the back of my head hard with his knuckles. “What do you mean, dumb? You’re the smartest person I know. Don’t be mad.”

“I’m *not* mad, I’m just an idiot,” I said into his shoulder.

“Shut up, you imbecile.”

I sniffed his shoulder. He always smelled good, like green tea, or maybe mint, or just the fresh way clothes smell when they’ve been hung outside on a clothesline. You are not going to cry, I told

myself. Absolutely not. No way. I blinked hard a few times and I didn't.

"So, what is this crazy thing?" he asked.

"It's really, truly crazy." I pushed him away. He waited. "It's dangerous. It could turn really bad. And it would take an excellent actor to pull it off."

He spread his arms and gave me a look as if to say, *Hello? Right here in front of you.*

"So of course I thought of you, but you've got other stuff to do, and this is going to take lots of time and chances are you'd end up in jail or on the news or both. I can't ask you to do this."

"I would love to be on the news. Jail, not so much. Luckily, my dad's a lawyer. What is it you want me to do?"

I looked around to make sure we couldn't be overheard. "I need someone to make friends with a guy and get him to talk about blowing things up. And rat him out to the FBI so that they can set up a sting and arrest the guy as a terrorist."

He frowned, his eyes going side to side as if he was trying to read what I'd just said, over and over. Then he shook his head. "Huh? This sounds like what happened your brother."

"Exactly. Only this time I want to record everything that the FBI does to show how it works. How the FBI talks people into incriminating themselves."

"Ah, okay. But what about the guy who gets ratted out? He'll end up just like Wilson."

"Only unlike Wilson, he's not innocent."

"He really wants to blow things up?"

"No. He's guilty of something else. But that's not the point. The point is to get it all on the record. To show everyone. There's this filmmaker who might make a documentary, but I can't remember her name." Suddenly it seemed like a totally stupid idea. "Never mind. You have stuff to do. I should go home, anyway. Monica's going to go nuts if I'm out too late."

"No, wait. You don't remember this filmmaker's name?"

“It was weird. Esteban or something. Only that’s her last name. She’s a woman.”

“Sara Esfahani?”

“Yeah. I know somebody who knows her, and he said it was her kind of thing.”

He stared at me for a moment, then shook his head. “Look, give me two minutes, then let’s go to my place so we can talk.”

He went back to his actor friends and I turned away so I didn’t have to see him with the purple-haired Bree. A few minutes later he was back, pulling on his jacket, following me up the stairs and through the stinky bar out into the snowy night.

We sat on his bed holding mugs of jasmine tea in a room that was a mix of total chaos and essence-of-Nikko. Though he shared the apartment with five other people and two dogs, his tiny closet-sized bedroom was his alone, and it looked like him: theatrical, a little bit crazy, a little bit beautiful in unexpected ways. He had strings of twinkly lights draped across the ceiling. He had a bunch of those tall candles with saints on them from a Mexican store that filled the room with golden, flickering light. As I got up to refill my cup, I caught a glimpse of a picture on the wall behind the candles: a beautiful ghostly woman with big, dark eyes gleaming out of the shadows, a halo of gilt-edged dark hair fanning out around her, like a saint who people prayed to for wisdom and mercy. Then I realized it was just my own reflection in a mirror, and it instantly looked like me again. Not beautiful. Not wise. And no halo – just wild hair.

“So, the idea is to expose the FBI and their methods by setting up a replay of what they did to Wilson, right?” Nikko said. “I’ll be playing the role of a concerned citizen.”

“Yup.”

“Hi, yeah. I thought I should call you guys because, well, this friend of mine?” He held a hand up to his ear like a phone. “Um, maybe I’m overreacting, but he’s been saying some weird stuff lately. It’s starting to make me kind of nervous?” He sounded exactly like a guy calling a tip line, as embarrassed as he was worried. “Probably it’s nothing, but today he asked me whether

I thought it would be better to bomb the federal building or the state capital, and I laughed because – well, I thought he was joking. But then he looked at me and . . . I don't think he was." He dropped his hand into his lap and dropped the voice. "Basically, I'll be Zip, only not so devious."

"Well, actually more devious, because you'll be fooling both the FBI and the guy who you'll be setting up. Like a double agent."

"I always wanted to be a double agent. So who's the guy who'll be playing the role of terrorist?"

"Do you know Simon Meyer?"

"Sure. Everyone knows Simon."

Good old Simon. Everybody's best buddy. "Did you know he's a rapist?"

"What, Simon? Where'd you hear that?"

I told him about Wilson's housemate and what she had told me. I told him about the creepy way Simon was always touching girls and acting like it was perfectly okay to grab their butts. I told him about the girl who sent me a message about being drugged and raped, though I made it sound like someone I knew, not a client. Nobody, not even Nikko, knew about my business and I wanted to keep it that way. As I spoke, Nikko looked away and frowned. I began to think I was losing him, and that made my voice sound bitter and angry, mainly because I was. "So, are you going to need proof or something?" I asked Nikko. "Because you won't get it from Emily. She's in jail, and besides, she tried to tell people and nobody believed her. And the other girl I told you about doesn't want anyone to know."

"But . . . Simon? He seems like such a decent guy. Progressive. A feminist. Not somebody who would pull this shit on women." Nikko shook his head and I thought he was going to explain to me why I was wrong to jump to conclusions, that maybe there was just some miscommunication. She was drunk, she came on to him, she changed her story after. Think what it would do to Simon's reputation. It hurt, almost as much as seeing Nikko kissing that purple-haired girl, maybe even more. I held the mug

so tight my fingers hurt, ready to set it down and march out – no, ready to throw it across the room, against that mirror so it would break into a million pieces and I could stomp out of the apartment and never speak to Nikko again, which made me both furious and so sad I was afraid I'd start crying, which made me even madder. But I didn't have to throw the mug or stomp out because he said, "What a total asshole."

"Seriously." It was such a relief I relaxed and my mug tilted so a dollop of hot tea splashed into my lap, but I didn't mind.

"I feel bad that I was ever nice to him, you know? Because looking back, there were things that didn't seem right. I should have known."

"I feel bad, too. When Emily told me, I just avoided Simon after that. I didn't tell anybody or do anything to stop him. Which is dumb, because it felt like I was protecting Emily, but really it just meant he got away with it while she got to feel ashamed and lonely. But then hearing about that other girl – she's really young and she's so completely messed up about it. And scared that her parents will find out, like it was her fault."

"Man." Nikko looked pained, then he sat up straight and looked happy again, rubbing his hands together. "Okay, let's mess him up. How do we do this?"

"First, I have to do some research. Like, is there a law against recording people secretly? What about lying to federal officers?"

"Who says I'd be lying? Let's say I get talking to Simon about how screwed up everything is and he starts saying violence is necessary, because he likes to brag about doing things he would never actually do. And we talk, and he starts to get more detailed, and I get the feeling he really does want to blow something up. I really would be worried." He shifted on the bed and leaned forward to speak in a whisper. "I mean, I'm not happy about the way things are going. I really think we need political change, but violence isn't the answer. I don't know, it's probably just talk. But what if he's serious? I would hate myself if something happened. If people got hurt."

“Dude. You’re so good at this it’s scary.”

He sat back and was himself again. It was weird how fast he could switch it on and off. “I’m an actor. It’s what I do. You remember playing let’s pretend when you were little?”

“No.”

“Hah. You were probably building computers out of paperclips or something. We had a big box of dress up clothes and we’d have these elaborate games that would go on for days. Pioneers. Pirates. Post-apocalyptic survival. It was really fun, but then my friends didn’t like doing it anymore. They got embarrassed and made fun of me for wanting to keep doing it. Kids’ stuff. Ugh, middle school was the worst.”

“Yup. Along with elementary school. And high school.”

“I liked school until sixth grade. I had lots of friends. We had fun together until suddenly they were all cool and I wasn’t and they started that whole faggot thing. It was vicious. It wouldn’t have been so bad if they hadn’t been my friends before.”

I thought about the night when I was scrunched up in the corner of Monica’s bathroom, certain that I’d die if I had to go back, that dying would be so much easier than facing them again, feeling their eyes watching me, hearing their whispers. Then I did that thing I do, building up mental bricks, one by one, to keep that particular memory walled off. I’ve done it enough that I can do it really fast. Boom, boom, boom. Done.

“You should try acting,” Nikko was saying. “People in the theatre community, they’re awesome. Well, there’s drama and bitchiness, and people get sucked into the fame thing too much, but otherwise it’s great. You get to be different people, but also you get to be yourself.”

“I’m good at being myself, but I’d suck at acting.” I wondered about that for a moment. Until today, I played Shad pretty well, which felt like being myself, but with all the unnecessary stuff stripped away. Then it got all complicated with the meet-up. “This could be a difficult role to play because it would be acting mixed up with your real life. How would you keep it straight?”

“You think I wouldn’t do the patriotic thing and report suspicious behavior to the FBI? And then become horrified by their methods and filled with remorse?” He clutched his chest. “Try to do the right thing, only to realize that I’m in a nightmare of double-dealing, willing to put my own liberty at risk to shine a light on an Orwellian system?” He looked as if he was posing for a moving poster, then grinned suddenly. “I love this role. It’s got a lot of nuance.”

“It’s Brechtian.”

“You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.” He started to explain why it wasn’t Brechtian, but I wasn’t paying attention. Instead, I reached for my phone and had a moment of panic. It wasn’t in my pocket where it usually lived. Then I realized it was still turned off in my Faraday-cage backpack. When I switched it on, the screen was full of notifications. “Oh, crap. Monica has sent me, like, a million texts. She’s freaking out.”

I tapped a reassuring message, telling her I had forgotten to switch my phone back on after being in the museum, that I was still finishing up my group project, which was true even if it wasn’t the group project for school. She messaged me back to say she’d been really worried that I’d been detained by the police or run over by a snowplow and (the good news) she was still out with her date.

“How much trouble are you in?” Nikko asked.

“We’re cool. She’s just nervous because the cops wanted to search our apartment this morning.”

“Seriously?”

“They didn’t have a warrant, so they left, but it made her nervous.” I read back over my message. I hadn’t told her I was at Nikko’s place. There was a good chance she would assume that I was already at our apartment, finishing up my group project there. I sent back a generic apology and promised to be more careful next time.

I drank the rest of my tea and set the mug on the floor. “Sleep on it. It’s a big commitment. Soon as you go to the police, you

can't back out. It could mean you can't be in your play, you might flunk some courses, your parents will be mad. You could get in serious legal trouble. Your whole life could change."

"I'm up for it. It has to be done, right?"

"Well, he's my brother, not yours."

"But he's getting screwed. All nine of them are." His expression turned serious, even solemn. At first I thought he was acting again, but he wasn't. "Most of what I do is fun, it's satisfying, and I get to act, which is what I want to do with my life. But there's no big moral issue at stake. You pour all of this effort into a play and people come and see it, and they're entertained for a couple of hours and maybe it makes them think. Which is fine. It's great, actually. But how often do you get to document injustice and set things right? It's not like I'd want to do this all the time. I'm not that much of an activist. But this is putting my art to good purpose."

"Well, we can hope. The first step will be seeing if Simon Meyer will bite. You'll have to hear him say something dramatic enough that you can take it to the police."

"With his big mouth? That shouldn't be a problem."

"Yeah, but with my brother and his friends getting arrested, you'd have to be dumb to talk advocate for violent action."

"This is Simon Meyer we're talking about, right?"

"Okay, Simon is kind of dumb, but he's a good actor, too. People think he's a radical activist just because he learned his lines and he's confident and outgoing."

"He has charisma, no doubt, but so do I. It'll be a duel, charisma at twenty paces."

Nikko had a point. He was Simon Meyer's match in the charm and confidence department, and he had a ton of friends. If it was me in that duel, Simon would win hands down, but in a Nikko versus Simon fight, Nikko at least had an even chance of coming out ahead. Then again, Simon had the advantage of having no morals.

“He’s unscrupulous. He attacks women and is used to getting away with it. If you got him in a corner, he could hurt you.”

“So long as he doesn’t figure out what’s going on, I should be fine. How do we get things on the record once the FBI gets involved? They’ll want me to wear a wire or whatever they actually use these days, but I doubt they’ll let me record the conversations we have, and what they say to me will be important, right?”

“Critical. We’ll have to record it all. I know somebody who can get us equipment.”

“Spy equipment?”

“Sort of. Let me work on the tech stuff and figure out the legal questions. You think about whether you really want to do this. I have to get going so Monica won’t get home before me. I’ll see you tomorrow at that demonstration, right?”

“Outside the federal building at two. People are getting together ahead of time at the Owl to work on posters and stuff.” He swiped his phone and went to Facebook, where the organizers were posting all of their information. It weirded me out to think that FBI agents were probably looking at the same page at the same time, tracking who was visiting the site, looking at comments, probably posting some themselves under false names. “I’ll bet Simon will be there. Oh, yeah. He even says so.” Nikko grinned evilly. “I just liked his comment. He’ll be so ready to show off. This will be a piece of cake.”

“I hope you’re right. Look, we need a way to communicate securely. I have an old phone I can fix up with encryption if you don’t mind carrying two phones for a while. I’ll give it to you tomorrow at the demonstration. And I’ll let you know about that spy equipment.” I peeked through his bamboo blinds. It had stopped snowing and traffic seemed to be moving without too much trouble. “Thanks for the tea. And for being, you know. A friend when I need one.”

“No problem.” He gave me a light bop on the side of my head with his fist, which it suddenly occurred to me was not something

he would do to the girl with purple hair. Still, it felt good, even if it wasn't a hug.

He followed me down the stairs to the front door. Something was making him twitchy. Maybe it was beginning to sink in that he might be doing something that could get him in serious trouble. Maybe he was already trying to figure out how to let me know that he'd changed his mind.

As I opened the door, he asked in a rush, "Do you really know somebody who knows Sara Esfahani?" He looked tense, and suddenly awkward, unpolished. Not acting.

"Yep." It came out muffled. I pulled the scarf I'd wrapped around my face down so I could add more clearly, "He said she might want to make one of her blitzdocs out of this."

Nikko's eyes rolled back as if he was about to faint. He clutched the doorframe dramatically and turned it all into a jokey routine, but I could tell it was a big deal for him.

I had to watch out for cops, given that it was past curfew, but with any luck they would be tied up with accidents. The roads weren't too bad, though I did fall once, hitting an unexpected ridge of frozen slush at an intersection where a plow had passed by, creating a hump of concrete-hard crap. My wheel went sideways and my body didn't. Luckily, my backpack (and the laptop inside) escaped getting as banged up as me. The shoulder I had landed on ached as I pumped the last blocks home, and I was so wet and cold that I almost didn't notice the SUV parked a couple of doors down from our house.

It was black and more rust-free than the other cars parked along the curb. (Did I mention we live in South Minneapolis? The part that isn't gentrified yet?) The parking situation was tighter than usual, with a snow emergency in effect and parking limited to one side of the street. I would probably hear the plows overnight, rumbling and beeping in the darkness. It was a noise I'd soon sleep through as the winter wore on, but in the first weeks of winter it sounded like a nightly invasion of beeping tanks.

Monica might have to park blocks away, unless somebody left at just the right moment. That's why I noticed that one of the cars not far from our house had a person in it. His engine was on; I could see the steam billowing up from the tail pipe. I watched for lights to go on as I peddled up the street, thinking I would try to hold the space for her. If she came home before I got into a fight with another driver or died of hypothermia, she'd get a

great parking space, but the man in the car didn't drive off. Then I noticed the car had one of those giant antennas on the back and the guy inside was just sitting there, looking bored.

Great. A cop was earning overtime, watching our house. I climbed up the front porch steps and stomped snow off my boots, glancing back as discreetly as I could. He was staring right at me. I was tempted to wave at Big Brother, but I've learned through experience that cops don't like it when you're not afraid of them. Besides, I *was* afraid.

When I got upstairs I checked the apartment thoroughly. I should have left some kind of sign that would let me know if somebody had been in my stuff – a thread stuck in the door that would fall to the ground if it was opened, for instance. I was used to my online life being subject to surveillance, but not my bedroom. Not the kitchen or bathroom. I don't know why that would make any difference, really. More of my life is lived online than not. But it did.

Nothing seemed out of place. Nothing seemed disturbed – except me. I couldn't shake off the creepy-crawly feeling that somebody was watching me, was in some weird way *touching me*. That somebody had been in our apartment, going through our clothes, fanning our books to see if anything fell out, browsing through the big fat stack of paper about Monica's school loans, thinking "why would you borrow that much money for a useless history degree?" Holding up the underwear that had holes in it. Opening our refrigerator door and seeing that fuzzy thing that used to be a radish stuck to the bottom of the vegetable bin. It felt invasive. It felt dirty.

And so far as I could tell, it hadn't even happened. Yet.

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"What are you doing?" Monica asked.

"Cleaning the refrigerator."

"It's one in the morning."

"Yeah, but it's gross. I cleaned the bathroom, too."

“Are you feeling all right?” She dumped her bag on a chair and unwrapped her scarf. “I thought you’d be in bed.”

“I thought maybe you were.” I waggled my eyebrows like Groucho Marx, but she looked hurt. “Just kidding. I’m glad you were having fun.”

“I shouldn’t have stayed out so late. It’s not every day that you get woken up by cops who want to question your niece about a terrorism case.”

“A so-called terrorism case. Did you see the one outside?”

“The what outside?”

“There’s a cop watching the house. At least there was when I got home. Hours and hours ago,” I added, remembering that she didn’t know that I hadn’t gotten home until after midnight.

“I didn’t notice anyone out there. Are you sure?”

“It was either a cop or just a guy who decided to sit in his car and stare at our house. Maybe he’s gone now.”

“Why would the police be watching our house?”

“Maybe they think Wheeze will show up.” She looked confused. “The tenth guy. The one they haven’t caught yet.”

“Why would he come here?”

“He wouldn’t. It would be stupid, and he’s not stupid. They’re just pulling out all the stops, which probably means we’ll have cops bugging us for a while. I don’t think they’ve been in our apartment yet. At least nothing seems disturbed, but they might come back with a warrant.”

“So that’s why you’re cleaning house in the middle of the night.”

“Kind of. I was getting squirrely and felt like doing something useful with that energy.”

Her mouth made a thin straight line and she gave her head a little shake, as if she was Having a Word with herself and was Very Disappointed in her Behavior. “I should have been here,” she muttered.

“Why? You had a good time, right?”

“Yes,” she admitted, finally taking off her winter coat and

working her boots off, wobbling on one foot and then the other. “The play was great.”

“And?”

“And we went to his place and had something to eat.”

“And?”

“And none of your business.” She tried not to grin, but she couldn’t hold it in. It was good to see her so happy, even though she was guilt-tripping about me at the same time. She didn’t got out with guys very often, and none of the ones she’d been seeing in the past year seemed like anything special until German Guy. Maybe this was serious.

“How did your homework go?” she asked, being all responsible again.

“It’s done. Luckily, I got to do my section with Nikko and not with Marcella or Dave, which would have sucked.” I babbled for a while about some of the art we saw at the museum and how stupid the assignment was while I finished cleaning the refrigerator, chattering just to fill in the big hole left by all the things I wasn’t telling Monica about my day – the parts that were none of *her* business.

“This Nikko – he sounds pretty neat.”

“He is. But it turns out he has a girlfriend, so it’s not like . . . you know. He’s a good guy, though.”

She sat in a chair and rubbed her foot, absently fingering a hole in her tights. “What?” I asked, because something in her face told me she had something to say but didn’t know how to start.

“I had a long conversation with Peter and Lauren today.”

Wilson’s dad and his wife. My adoptive parents. My stomach clenched. “What do they want?”

“They were just checking to make sure you’re okay.”

“What did they say about Wilson?”

“They told me he has a good lawyer. They’re hopeful, but concerned. They thought . . .” she paused, picking her words carefully. “They wondered if you might want to go home for a while.”

“To their house? No way.”

“There would be no problem with school because it’s online. You wouldn’t be left alone in the house to deal with the police all by yourself if they show up again, and if reporters came around—”

“No. *Stop.*” She stopped. I took my hands off my ears, but they balled into fists and I couldn’t unclench them. My words seemed to echo in the silence while I waited for the neighbors downstairs to pick up their broomstick and thump it against the ceiling.

“Do you want me to go?” I asked.

“I want whatever you want.”

“So the police don’t hassle you anymore? So you can spend the night with German Guy whenever you want?”

“Zen . . .”

“I don’t care. I’m not going back there.” I could hear the hurt in her voice, but I was too angry to care.

“Good. Cause I’d miss you if you did.”

“No you wouldn’t. You’re just saying that.” I wasn’t mad at Monica, but she was there, so all that jittery anger went in her direction. I couldn’t seem to help myself.

“I don’t lie to you, Zen.”

“I’ll bet you do sometimes. People lie all the time.”

She poked a finger through the hole in her tights, actually noticing it for the first time. “You’re right. I might say ‘good morning’ when it’s actually a crappy day, or ‘that’s interesting’ when you’re telling me something about computers that I don’t care about. Sometimes the stuff we say when it’s not that important is automatic, just social noise. But I don’t think I have ever lied to you about anything that really matters. And I do enjoy having you for a roomie.”

“Yeah, right. I bet it makes everything harder, having me around.”

She thought it over. “Yes and no. I worry more about some things, like whether you have enough friends and if you’re getting a good education because honestly, this program you’re in sounds pretty bad. I wonder it’s fair to you to have to sleep in an attic

closet on a mat instead of in a real bed in a real bedroom, if I'm giving you good advice, if I'm around enough for someone who's only fifteen. But if I wasn't worried about that, I'd just be worried about other stuff."

"I love my bedroom."

"It smells funny in there."

"I like the way it smells. And the online classes are lame, but it's way better than my old school. At least for me. Liv would hate it. Not enough opportunities to form cliques and torture each other."

"She's not that bad."

"I just don't fit in there. I'm a lot happier now. I'm sorry I got loud. Again."

"At least the neighbors didn't notice."

"You know, you don't have to pretend to be interested in stuff I say."

"I know. Even if I'm not into technology like you, I enjoy hearing you talk because you're passionate about it."

"Pfft. I like hearing about history because it's interesting."

"I can't help it if my specialty is more interesting than yours. Did you hear about the rally downtown tomorrow?"

"Yeah, Nikko wants me to go with him."

"You don't sound too enthusiastic."

"Protests are a waste of time. They just make people feel good. They don't change anything."

"Such cynicism."

"Well, it's true, isn't it?"

"It depends. In this case, it may show the authorities that people are paying attention. That they think these arrests are unjust."

"Or it might show that there aren't many people willing to show up on a Sunday afternoon after a snowstorm for some kids who they say are terrorists. It'll probably be a bust."

"Well, I want to show support for your brother, so I'll be there."

"If you can get your car dug out."

"Dieter's picking me up, actually."

“Oh ho! Things are getting serious with German Guy.”

“Maybe you should start using his actual name. By the way, he’s just as upset with the NSA as you are. I have a feeling you two would get along. Will you need a ride?”

“No thanks. I’ll probably hang out with Nikko later, so I’ll take my bike.”

“Well, the offer is open if the weather gets worse,” Monica said, leaving off the usual lecture about how dangerous it was to ride a bike in the winter. She was getting resigned to it.

When I finally went to bed, I peered out to see if the cop was still there. He wasn’t, and I began to wonder if I’d imagined the whole thing.

I spent most of the next morning fixing up the old phone for Nikko, which turned out to be harder than I thought. Technology always seems to know when you're in a hurry, because that's when everything goes wrong. I finally got Convo installed and prepaid a month's worth of service with a small carrier that was recommended by Group members because the company understood privacy issues and even fought a subpoena for customer data and won. Talking to Frances Bernadette McSweeney was also more complicated than I expected.

I'd called her first thing in the morning. "In ten minutes I need to leave for a meeting," she told me in her starchy old-lady voice. I pictured her in her messy kitchen, holding the handset to the old fashioned phone attached to the wall, the spiral cord getting tangled in her falling-down hairdo. "I'm afraid I have no news about your brother."

"I just have some general questions."

"Such as?"

"Um, maybe we shouldn't do this over the phone."

She heaved a sigh. "How very dramatic. Well, if you come to the coffee shop where the team is meeting, I can give you five minutes." She gave me an address on Hennepin, and when I finally got the phone working and biked over to Uptown I discovered whoever chose the location for the meeting must have had a sense of humor. The café's name was in big flickering neon letters over the door: The Spyhouse Coffee Shop.

I locked my bike outside, stomped off some of the cruddy snow from my boots, and went in, finding a group of eight people clustered around laptops and papers and coffee cups. All but one were young and looked like preppy college students. The other one was old, but I almost didn't recognize her. Frances Bernadette McSweeney's hair was pinned up in a tidy twist at the back of her head and instead of a dirty cardigan, she wore a fancy-looking suit and a string of pearls.

"Everyone, this is Zen, who brought this case to our attention." I waved at the preppies as she pushed herself to her feet, wincing. She hobbled to a table in a corner. "What are your questions?"

"It's legal to record conversations in Minnesota, right?" I had looked it up, but I wanted to be sure.

"So long as at least one of the parties consents."

"What about recording conversations with police or federal officers?"

She frowned at me. "It's legal, though they don't like it and may arrest you on some other pretext. Anything else?"

"Is it against the law to lie to a federal official?"

She put her face in her hands for a moment. Then she folded her arms and heaved a sigh. "Yes. There's a law against making false statements to federal officials."

"No fair. Cops can lie, right?"

"Unless under oath. So?"

"I was just curious about what happens if a cop lies to a federal official."

"Their heads explode."

"That would be awesome."

"No, it wouldn't, but my head will explode if you keep wasting my time. Do you have any more questions pertaining to something other than prurient interest?"

"Prur . . . how do you spell that?"

"Look it up in the dictionary." She had a killer glare. I wouldn't want to be facing her in a courtroom. "Zenobia, you need to take care. Your brother has enough problems."

“I know.”

“And you’re aware of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act and its penalties?” I started to speak, but she held up a warning finger. “Constrain your answer to a yes or no.”

“Yes.”

She studied me for a moment. “Hypothetically, if you were going to help your brother, what would you do? Aside from dragging a lawyer out of retirement and getting her to do a lot of work for free.”

“You actually want to know?”

“Let’s keep this in the realm of hypotheticals. That is, based on a proposed theory rather than actual—“

“I know what the word means.” I also knew that she wanted to find out what I was planning without having to spill the beans if questioned under oath. “What I might do to help my brother is show the world how the FBI tricks people into saying they’re going to do things that they would never do if the FBI hadn’t goaded them into it. How the FBI encourages people to say they’re going to break the law just so they’ll have a chance to arrest them. That’s what happened to Wilson and it’s not fair.”

“And how would you expose this practice?”

“I would pick someone who deserved to be in jail for a different reason, get an actor to record him saying the kind of radical stuff that fake activists who are total hypocrites like to say, have the actor take that recording to the FBI and offer to be an informant, and then have a famous filmmaker with a billion Twitter followers make a documentary about how the feds jammed my brother up.”

“That sounds ridiculously ambitious.”

“It’s doable.”

“And this would help your brother how?”

“The feds might drop the charges to get it out of the news. Especially if the film explained that Zip is actually a career criminal named Jason Bristol who was arrested by Special Agent Todd Terhune who told him he could avoid jail if he agreed to be an informant. Hypothetically.”

“How did you . . . never mind. Jason Bristol,” she muttered to herself, memorizing it. “We can check on that. As for your hypothetical, it sounds difficult. Lots of moving parts. If the feds uncovered the plan, they could arrest you for obstruction.”

“I need to do something.”

“Actually, you don’t. You’re only fifteen years old. It’s not your responsibility.”

“You don’t get it. He is my responsibility. I want him to be. And what does my age have to do with it, anyway?”

“Quite a bit. People your age take risks because you don’t have the maturity to weigh the long-term consequence. No, don’t interrupt me. It’s not an insult, it’s a demonstrable fact. You’re smart, Zenobia. You have potential, but it could be derailed if you started life out with a criminal record. I would be remiss if I didn’t make sure you understand the risk you’re taking. Might take. Hypothetically.”

“Yeah? Well, I’m not your responsibility.”

She fixed me with a stern glare. I thought I was about to get chewed out for backtalk, but instead her voice was suddenly gentle. “The law works slowly. You want to rescue your brother right now. I get that. You want him to know that you’ll risk everything for him, because you’re family and it matters. But if you can be a little patient, you don’t have to take the risk. I’m working with some very bright, committed young lawyers who care about this case. It’s going to be an uphill battle, but we’ll do our best for your brother and his friends. That’s a promise.”

“Okay.” It came out sounding grumpy because I didn’t want her to know that something about the way her voice had changed from sharp to kind had tripped me up and I was fighting tears.

“Jason Bristol?” she said again, checking. I nodded.

“Please stay out of trouble, but if you can’t . . . Luisa?”

She called over to the table where the brilliant young lawyers were hard at work checking Instagram and scrolling through Twitter. One of them came over. “Could you please bring my purse?”

She did, giving me a bright smile as Frances Bernadette McSweeney burrowed in the bag. “I have a cell phone now. Let me give you my number.” She opened the simple flip phone and squinted at it. “I can’t quite . . . I don’t have my reading glasses. Could you give Zenobia my number?”

The law student took the phone, turned it right side up, tapped a button and read it out without rolling her eyes or anything, which made me like her.

“That’s only for emergencies. Let’s hope you don’t need to use it.” The old lawyer pushed herself up from the chair, hooked the purse on her arm, and tottered over to Team Legal.

I stowed my phone and went outside, thinking about what she’d said. Sure, I was taking a risk. She didn’t say it would make things worse for Wilson. All she said was it could go wrong, which I already knew. I got on my bike and headed out for the federal courthouse, where there would be a measly group of people with homemade signs embarrassing the few people who happened to notice them.

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It was a bigger crowd than I expected. There were the usual activist types, including a bossy guy with a loud speaker shouting out things that nobody could hear clearly. Big steroidal men wearing coats that said POLICE or FEDERAL MARSHAL on the back in case we didn’t know who they were stood around, feet spread, eyes hidden behind dark glasses. I didn’t see anyone with FBI on their jackets, but they were mingling with the crowd in plain clothes, trying to blend in while also looking so clean-cut and wholesome they didn’t.

Some protesters were banging on drums, which seems to be required for demonstrations nowadays, and a group of people were wearing scarves over their faces printed to make them look like Anonymous, which is actually ripped off from a comic-book version of a Catholic guy who tried to blow up Parliament in olden days, which children still celebrate every year in England by

burning him at the stake as a wholesome national pastime. People are so weird.

I found Nikko straddling his crappy fixed gear bike at the edge of the crowd, frowning thoughtfully as if he was wondering how he would stage the scene if he were put in charge. It would probably be a lot more dramatic, with the cops holding machine guns and smoke pouring from tear gas canisters. Which, if this had been happening in North Minneapolis instead of downtown and the crowd was black instead of almost all white, is what it probably what it would have looked like.

“Give me a few minutes head start, then follow after me,” I told Nikko. He glanced at the cops, then back at me, puzzled. Just how paranoid was I? But he followed instructions and stayed put as I walked my bike over to Washington. I found a spot where I couldn’t see any obvious surveillance cameras, where the swish of traffic provided plenty of white noise. I knelt down to mess with my bike chain.

A few minutes later he found me and squatted down, asking brightly “Need some help?” adding in a lower voice, “What, too many cops over there?”

“Too many cops who aren’t in uniform,” I muttered just loud enough to be heard over the traffic. “I have that secure phone for you.” After checking to be sure nobody was watching, I showed him how to log into Convo. “I’ll get you some recording equipment later. This is mainly so you and I can communicate safely.”

“Cool.” He palmed the phone and slipped it into his pocket so neatly it was almost like a magic trick. “Too bad I didn’t have it this morning. Simon was saying some pretty wild stuff. I mean, nobody there thought it was all that outrageous, but I caught it on my iPhone.”

“Could you meet after the demo?”

“Sure. Where?”

“I’ll let you know. You can head back to the federal building

now. I'll be there in a few, but let's not hang out together there, okay?"

"Over and out, Secret Agent Zen."

I had a feeling I'd be hearing a lot of dumb jokes like that, but it was okay for Nikko to goof off so long as what we were planning actually worked. I fiddled a little more with my chain, then I biked back to the crowd. Some television crews had shown up. I stayed out of their range as I checked out the Twitter hashtag #Freetheg as people made speeches, including some law professor who seemed to specialize in Twitter-sized sound bites.

I noticed a scruffy-looking white guy approaching one of the few black women in the crowd. His scruffiness wasn't like the students who grew scraggly beards and wore expensively torn clothes. His look came from not having a place to sleep and not knowing anybody who owned a couch that he could surf on. The woman he spoke to shook her head and he turned to move through the crowd, his expression tense, like he knew he didn't belong. As I watched, he approached another black girl who was cheering the law professor. He leaned close. She said something angry and backed away.

He headed for me next. I could easily outrace this wobbly old dude on my bike, but I was too curious to cut and run. Besides, I was pretty sure the crowd would be on my side if this guy tried anything.

I don't have a lot of keys on my keychain – just a couple of house keys and the one for my bike lock, along with the little penlight – but I arranged what I had so that they stuck out between my knuckles. I'd read it was more effective to punch somebody in the face that way.

He finally reached me and I felt my heart racing as he leaned close. "You know a girl named Zen?" Up close his face was a map of seams and fissures and his breath smelled like a dumpster.

"Why do you want to know?"

He grinned and I saw he was missing a lot of teeth. "Gotcha."

He leered like an evil jack-o-lantern and reached into his coat. I tightened my fist and imagined smashing my keys into his eyes.

He held out a crumpled Pizza Hut flyer in his hand. "Go on, take it." He sounded irritated and impatient. Like, why can't you follow my simple instructions? Like he wasn't too crazy about being in a hostile crowd of hipster college students.

I took it and turned it over. I saw enough to stuff it into my pocket. "Thanks. Is he—"

"You just tell him I done what I said I'd do."

"But—"

"I owed him, but we're even now."

"But where—"

"He got it all wrote down, there. I'm done. Don't need to be round so many damned cops and all these hoity-toity . . ." He stumbled off, angrily muttering the kind of words Monica doesn't let me say. People made way for him, as if he was leper and they didn't want to come in contact with his diseased body and have their fingers fall off like zombies. After all, they were busy with important social justice issues and didn't want someone so broken down and toothless get in the way.

Okay, I admit I wasn't any better than the activists who looked disgusted by somebody who was actually poor. I felt kind of bad about it, but so far as I could tell he didn't give a damn about the opinion of anyone there, including me.

I looked to see if the cops had noticed the exchange. One was eyeing the man, but lazily, on the automatic pilot that tells cops to track homeless people who might act up. The other officers were all standing at ease in that totally stiff stance, inscrutable behind their dark glasses.

I wheeled my bike to the street. From the edge of the crowd, I heard a piercing whistle. "Hey, wait!" I decided to pretend I hadn't heard the shouted command and kept going. It almost worked. I was feeling for the pedal when somebody grabbed the back of my jacket. I jerked my elbow back to dislodge the hand. "Whoa. Zen, it's me."

Monica, I realized. Monica and German Guy. She looked pretty, with her cheeks all rosy. He looked like a fish, his mouth hanging open in surprise. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," she said.

"I thought you were somebody else. Hope I didn't hurt you."

"No." She rubbed her arm, which meant I had. "This is my niece," Monica said to the man.

"I am Dieter," he said, holding out his hand for a shake. Luckily he didn't try to air-kiss me on both cheeks like they always do in foreign movies. "Happy to meet you, Zen. I've heard so much about you and your computer skills." He wasn't looking like a gaping fish anymore, but I was pretty sure that one thing he hadn't heard about me was that I wasn't as white as Monica.

"Good to meet you."

"I am very sorry about your brother," he said, his smile turning into a serious frown. "I grew up in the eastern part of Germany," he said, though it sounded like Chermany. I had a feeling from now on I'd think of him as Cherman Guy. "I always heard from my parents about the Stasi, our secret police who developed many informants among neighbors and workmates. My parents told me how this was, to live always thinking about the people who might report you, about the government office where your private life was taken down and kept in file drawers. So am feeling very sad for what has happened to your brother. Privacy is very important."

"I totally agree."

"Not a bad turnout, huh?" Monica said. "Should be plenty of news coverage tonight. That law professor was great."

"If you like boring lectures."

"Shut up, he was awesome."

"Everything he said? People should already know that stuff. They're just not paying attention."

Monica rolled her eyes at Cherman Guy. "This is what I live with."

"But she is right. People should pay more attention," he said.

“Oh, great. Take her side,” she joked. “Did you find your friend, Zen?”

“Yeah, but . . .” I almost said “I need to go do homework,” which would have made Monica give me one of those looks, like “yeah, right. What are you really up to?” So instead I said, “I’m going to head out. It’s bugging me that everybody’s clapping and cheering and making speeches while Wilson is locked up in there, wearing one of those weird orange jumpsuits in a tiny cell where you can’t even take a dump in private.”

“The food is very bad, too,” Cherman Guy said. “Last year I was arrested at a protest. Luckily I was in the jail for only one night. I met many interesting people.”

“So I’m going to go. Nice to meet you . . . Dieter,” I finished, just barely avoiding saying Cherman Guy. When I glanced back to turn a corner, I saw Monica was still watching me, still looking worried. She could probably tell I needed to chill out, but it wasn’t because my brother was in jail. I was desperate to know what Wheeze had written on that crumpled piece of paper.

It was freaky riding home. Police cars seemed to be everywhere. Wheeze and I had made being aware of our surroundings into an elaborate role-playing game. It had been exciting and fun, but this was just scary. I was churning with curiosity about the message Wheeze had scribbled on the back of the pizza flier, but I didn't want to look at it in public. It felt like I was carrying a bomb in my pocket instead of a crumpled piece of paper.

I got home without being pulled over by police or being tailed by suspicious unmarked cars. Nobody was sitting in a car parked along the curb, watching our house. When I got into our apartment, I scanned the backyard carefully and didn't see any men in utility company outfits carrying clipboards and pretending they had some reason to be hanging out in my alley on a cold Sunday afternoon. The little tell-tale things I had set up before leaving to tell me if anyone had been in our apartment were undisturbed. Still, even after double checking that the front door was locked and the chain was set, I went into my bedroom, closed the blinds, and sat on my sleeping mat with a quilt draped over my head and bent knees, creating a tent. Only then did it feel safe to take the crumpled paper out of my pocket, flatten it out, and read the scribbled writing by the beam of my penlight, thinking that Wheeze would have been proud of my super-sized paranoid behavior.

Hey, Zen –

I hope you get this. My phone got busted and I think my ankle did too. (It's really sore and swollen up and I can't walk on it anymore.) I got as far as West Davenport but a couple of bulls at the Nahant yard caught sight of me and since the train was stopping there to change crews I knew I was in trouble. I grabbed hold of a rolling grainer southbound, but I figured the bull would be calling ahead to get me taken off next chance they could, so I jumped off when I thought it was safe. The train was going too fast though and I didn't land good.

Danny who I have met before was coming by on a northbound and saw I was in trouble so he came back and helped me get to a place where I could stay safe. It's a shed behind a bait store that's closed for the winter off of Concord Street between the road and the river not too far south of the interstate bridge. With my ankle I can't catch out and there's no good place to hitch from here. I figured you'd go to that rally on Sunday so I told Danny what you look like and asked if he could give this to you. If he can't get there in time he's a good guy and he will try hard to get it to you some other way.

I know you can't come get me because you're probably being watched and anyway you don't have a car, but if you no anybody who could help me out that would be good. It's cold and I have a bad feeling about this ankle and also I'm running out of food.

I knew he was in bad shape because he wrote "no" instead of "know" and usually his spelling is so perfect it would pass muster with Call Me Cheese, the Group's grammar cop. His handwriting was usually neat printing that looked a little like a cross between old style typewriters and something a medieval scribe might write, but it wasn't as easy to read as usual and by the end of the message it was sliding sideways on the page. Also, I had to keep wiping my eyes because picturing Wheeze lying in a shed in the cold with a busted ankle and no food made me feel awful.

This changed things. I had to get my brother out of jail. I had to make my plan work, and do it fast so Wilson wouldn't go nuts in a cell or get bullied by inmates or guards. Now I also had to figure out how to get Wheeze to a safe place. And that couldn't wait.

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I found Zeke's Convo contact and sent him a message because Ian had told me he didn't follow rules and had a lot of friends. I hoped some of them also didn't follow rules, like the one that says people on the run from the law should be turned in at the nearest police station. I tapped out a quick message:

<Zen> Hey, I have a friend who needs a safe place to stay for a while. Also he needs medical assistance (possible broken ankle) but can't go to a hospital. Needs to be within a few hours driving distance from Davenport Iowa. Needs to be surveillance-free but fair warning, anybody who helps him out could get in trouble. Any ideas?

Zeke replied faster than the time it took me to write my message.

<Falstaff> Will check with a couple of people. Be careful out there, Shad. Big Brother is a data-sucking asshat.

It made me feel a little better, but I still felt knots in my stomach, picturing Wheeze and thinking about cold and pain and hunger and whether I could fix it before the FBI caught up with him – or found him frozen stiff and starved to death.

The knots were still there when Nikko showed up at our meeting place. I had decided on Wilson, a giant library at the university (and my brother's namesake because our mom practically lived there when she was a pregnant student; it was lucky she wasn't a chemistry major or he'd be named Walter after the science library). Though there were security cameras all over campus, the library itself was pretty good about not spying on people inside the building. All that the surveillance cameras outside the library would show is two people arriving separately among the hundreds who would go through the library's doors that day. Once we were indoors, we didn't have to worry about any cameras recording our meeting.

I had scored a group study room on the second floor, which by coincidence was close to the art books, so after I Convo'd Nikko telling him where to meet me I fetched a bunch of books about African and Asian art and spread them around the table so it would look like we were working on our group project for school. When Nikko arrived he realized instantly that the scene we were acting involved getting together for our project. Instead of seeming surprised to see me, he said "sorry I'm late," before closing the door.

"Do you have your power cord for you iPhone?"

He did. I connected his phone to my laptop, copied the file I needed, then switched off his phone and slipped it into my backpack, where my duct tape Faraday cage would make sure nobody could use it to listen in on us. "We have a problem. You know Wheeze, the tenth guy they're looking for?"

"I don't actually know him, but I know who you're talking about."

"He hopped a train but he got hurt and he's hiding in Iowa. I need to find a way to get him to a safe place where he can get medical care. I'm working on the safe place, but I also need to get him there and it has to be now, because he's out of food and he's hurt and it's cold and his phone is broken so I can't even find out how he's doing. Dammit."

"Hey, we'll figure this out."

"Yeah, right." I rubbed my eyes with a sleeve. "Terrific. I'm messing up our cover. People don't start crying for no reason when they're working on a stupid homework assignment, and anybody could see us." Which was true. There were a lot of students wandering past, staring in, hoping to score a study room for themselves, and the big glass windows facing the stacks meant we looked like mannequins in a store window displaying weird Back to School fashions in a dramatic tableau.

Nikko leaned toward me and put a comforting hand on my arm. "Right now, it looks as if you're stressing over your brother because you were just at the demonstration, which is public

knowledge, and I'm comforting you because we're school pals and that's what people do. Don't worry, your cover isn't blown. In fact, to keep up appearances, I think I need to give you a hug. Would that be okay?"

I nodded, and he came around and hugged me and I smelled that comforting Nikko smell and it made me feel good but didn't help at all when it came to not crying. I don't do it very often and it's really embarrassing when it's in public, which makes me angry that I can't be a stronger person and keep it under control. But somehow, thinking that we were on stage and Nikko was directing a show about two friends, one of whom had a brother unfairly arrested on terrorism charges, made it seem okay this one time to lose it in public. Nikko even had a clean bandana I could use to blow my nose and wipe my eyes, though doing it in that order is not recommended.

"Where is he in Iowa?" Nikko asked.

"Just south of Davenport."

"Okay. I can get a car. It would only take a few hours to get there."

"Five or six. It's about three hundred and fifty miles from here. I checked."

"We can share the driving."

"I can't drive. I can't even get a provisional license until next year."

"Oh, right. Well I got an actual real driver's license and I can borrow a car from my parents. Unless you can think of something else."

"I can't. Actually, my brain isn't working very well." I tried to give him the bandana back, but he waved it away, which didn't surprise me because it was pretty gross.

"Before we decide anything," I said, gathering my thoughts, "I want to listen to that recording you made."

"I'll pretend to do research while figuring out what excuse to give my parents," Nikko said, pulling over a stack of books. I used earbuds in hopes that anyone who saw me would think I was

listening to music while being my normal studious self, with a little emotional meltdown thrown in.

I had to concentrate, because there was a lot of background noise from the people at the Owl who were stenciling signs and talking about oppression and capitalism and who had the glue and could somebody pass the scissors. But Simon's voice was louder than the others (naturally). When somebody mentioned the good old days of the Occupy movement, Simon started ranting about how it was useless because the people involved were too hung up on consensus. "You want to speak truth to power? First you have to punch it in the nose to get its attention."

A woman said something about non-violence, which set Simon off on macho mansplaining. "Peaceful protest? You think that works? Face facts. If you want real change, you have to be willing to act."

He went on like that for a while, and while he never got specific about what he thought should be done or who should do it, it was just edgy enough to work for our purposes. I was relieved that nobody else chimed in to agree. If Nikko took his recording to the feds, I wanted only Simon to become the target of a sting.

"Okay," I said to Nikko. "That might be enough to get the feds' attention."

"I figured I would try for one more recording. Get him to say something more dramatic."

"Don't act too sympathetic to what he's saying or you could get in trouble, yourself."

"I'll be careful. This is cool. It's like writing a script and then directing the scene, with some improv thrown in, keeping everybody fooled."

"I knew you'd be good at this. But right now I have to figure out what to do about Wheeze."

"Tell me where he is and I'll drive down there."

"But then what? He's a wanted man. It could crimp your emerging career as an FBI informant, don't you think?"

“Not if the FBI doesn’t know about this trip. Look, assuming I’m not being watched—”

“Big assumption.”

“I’ll stipulate to that.”

“Wait. How do you spell that?”

He spelled it. “It’s legalese, something my dad always says when he actually could just say “okay, you have a point.” Drives my mom crazy. Let’s just run through this. I borrow the car, I tell my family that I need it for some plausible reason that I still have to invent, but they’re used to me bending them to my will. I drive down to Davenport and get there sometime after midnight.” He frowned, possibly thinking about what it would be like to be looking for somebody in the dark after driving for hours. “Do you know exactly where he is?”

“Just the general location.”

“That’ll have to do. Okay, given that he doesn’t know me, we’ll have to work out a way to make sure he trusts me. So you’ll have to let him know—“

“I can’t. His phone is busted, I told you. So is his ankle.”

“Right.” Nikko chewed his knuckle, thinking it over

“He’ll be scared and hurt and it’ll be dark. There’s no way around it, I’ll have to go with you. I wish I knew first aid. Do you?”

“Sorry. I never even joined boy scouts. What will you tell your aunt?”

“I’ll have to think of something.” And that made my head hurt. Not only was Monica going to be suspicious, so would anyone monitoring her phone, which wasn’t unlikely. I never talked her into using a secure messaging app. I was usually keeping secrets *from* her, not *with* her. “She knows I’m upset about Wilson. I’ll tell her I’m going out of town with a friend to chill out. Just for one night. A sleepover. Only she knows I don’t have friends who do sleepovers.”

“What about Marcella?” His face suddenly looked flat and his voice became a robotic drone. “I’m having a sleepover party.

“Would you come to my sleepover party? Because if nobody sleeps over I can’t have a sleepover party.”

I laughed too hard. It was easy to make fun of Marcella, but it wasn’t her fault that she was weird. People thought I was weird too, but I chose not to be like other people. She couldn’t help being different. But it felt good to laugh, even though it had some weird sinus pressure involved, as if there was still some tears and snot damned up inside that wanted to come out. “I’ll just say it’s a friend from school. That’s one of the benefits of online education. Monica has no idea who goes to that school.”

That reminded me to check my phone. Another message had come in.

<Falstaff> Got a safe place lined up about three hours from Davenport. Name is Shandy. Good at broken bones.

<Zen> Awesome. We’re working on transportation. If it works, ETA is tomorrow morning.

<Falstaff> I’ll pass that along. Map attached.

“So we drive down to Iowa and pick up your friend,” Nikko was saying. “Then what?”

“We take him here,” I said, and showed him the map.

So we were on the road, but not without having an argument first.

I called Monica and gave her a line about how I wanted to take a break and had a chance to stay overnight with a friend from school whose family had a lake cottage in Sibley County. “She says there’s a wood stove so it will be plenty warm enough and we won’t party or anything. It’s just me and her and her dog. He’s a good watchdog, so it will be totally safe.”

It took her a while to respond. I hoped she was thinking about how someone from the Joint Terrorism Task Force could be listening in before she made a decision. Besides, I’d planted clues. We both thought there were way too many monuments and places named after Henry Hastings Sibley, so I chose that county deliberately. I might have been a little heavy-handed when I added the watchdog stuff, but if she picked up on my Sibley clue, she probably also realized I was doing something risky, and I needed a way to tell her I would be careful.

“That sound nice,” she said at last, as if it didn’t sound nice at all.

“I know it’s kind of unplanned, but I really want to hang out with my friend. Is it okay?”

“I guess so. Call if you need anything.”

“Okay. Say hi to Dieter for me.”

“How did you know . . . she says hi,” she mumbled off to the side

and I heard a cheerful Cherman voice call out “Hello, Zen” in the background.

“Take care of yourself,” Monica said. “I love you.”

“Love you, too,” I replied, wondering if I’d ever said that to her out loud before.

Meanwhile Nikko was trying to get hold of his parents, but he hung up twice without leaving messages and looked frustrated. Then something dawned. His face is like a billboard sometimes, only not so big and ugly. “So, my dad’s in court today, and I forgot my mom’s out of town on a business trip. But I have a better idea. I know someone with a car we can use.”

“You think he’ll let you borrow his car?”

“And share the driving. It’s a long trip.”

“He’s trustworthy?”

“It’s a she, actually. I’d trust her with my life.”

“Maybe you would, but I don’t know her.” Then I realized who it was. “It’s that purple-haired girl.”

“Her name is Bree.”

“You realize you’d be putting her at risk, right? Are you sure you want to do that?”

“She’d totally be up for it. She was talking about how unfair those arrests were before I even heard about it.”

“I didn’t see her at the protest.”

“Maybe you just weren’t paying attention.”

“She was there?”

“Yes, she was there, tabling for the Solidarity Committee. “

“Oh great, those people who decided to own the cause. They just want to get on television.”

“You’re not being very rational about this.”

If there’s one thing that makes me see red, it’s a man telling me I’m not being rational. If he was going to add a stupid crack about PMS I would deck him, I thought, my fists already clenched. But of course he didn’t, because Nikko isn’t a sexist jerk, and he quickly backpedaled.

“I shouldn’t have said that. Look, Bree thinks the FBI’s anti-

terrorist program has put a lot of innocent people in prison. That's why she went to the protest. She has a car and can help with the driving. Oh, and she took a first aid course last year. How perfect is that?"

"The more people who know about this, the more risky it is."

"One more person. Who I vouch for."

"One more person who might get arrested, get her life pushed completely off course."

"That worries me, sure, but I don't know who else to ask who I would trust like I trust her."

"You only met her two weeks ago, right? Maybe she got close to you for a reason."

"Like, she's working for the FBI? Why would they pick me? I'm not politically active. I didn't know any of those people they arrested. It wouldn't make sense."

"Yeah. I guess," I grumbled.

"Do you know anyone else we can ask? I'm open to other suggestions."

I couldn't think of any, but the thought of spending a long car ride with the purple-haired girl pissed me off. "No, I don't know anybody else," I finally said, which made me feel even worse. Monica was always on my case about getting out more, having a social life. I had always felt like I had enough friends in the Group without having to try to fit in with people who didn't bother to try to fit in with me. But it sucked to realize that the only IRL friends I had were Nikko and Wheeze.

Nikko asked for his phone. I started to get it out of my backpack, then said "Don't ask her to help us pick up a fugitive."

"Hello, I'm not stupid," Nikko said, but he looked a little embarrassed, like I had stopped him just before he made a big mistake. "What do you think I should say, since you're the expert?"

"Ask if she can get together. Pick a place where you typically go. Someplace where you can talk like normal but without being overheard and without getting sucked up into something else, like

a rehearsal that she really wants to do and you can't explain why you need her to risk her whole future instead."

He gave me one of those irritatingly patient looks, one that basically said "you're being a jerk, and we both know it, but I'll be nice to you anyway." Then I gave him his phone and he made the call and she answered right away (which was also annoying, that she right there, waiting to hear his voice, even though it was good that she was). He made it sound casual but also slightly mysterious. If she knew him at all, if she had any brains under that purple hair, she'd know something was up, but nobody else listening in would.

He left after I made him check to make sure he still had the phone I'd given him so we could connect after he talked to Bree. I packed up my laptop, gathered up the books, put them on a book cart, and left to find a place that served really strong coffee.

~ ~ ~

Bree was smart and charming and being really super nice to me on top of being cute. It was enough to make you sick.

We got under way quickly. Nikko Convo'd me within twenty minutes to say they were ready to roll. I told him I'd be at a spot on Minnehaha that I knew was free of surveillance cameras. I did the same thing as before with my bike, acting as if it had a problem (which, to be honest, was hardly unusual), and he pulled up and acted as if he just happened to notice me there and would give me a ride. I stowed the bike in the trunk of Bree's car, and climbed into the back seat that was cluttered with textbooks, crumpled papers, and empty kombucha bottles. Girl drank a lot of kombucha.

Nikko introduced us. I acted glad to see her and then said "Hey, I like your phone case. Can I see it for a minute?"

She looked confused and exchanged glances with Nikko, then dug into her bag. She had the latest model iPhone. I powered it off and dropped it into my backpack. Then I gestured to Nikko, who surrendered his phone, too.

"We need to keep your phones switched off and in my

backpack. It's hard to take the battery out of an iPhone, which is the only other way we could be secure."

"Oh," Bree said. "You're worried about our phones being used as transmitters." Nikko gave her a skeptical look. "Seriously. The FBI has done it before. They can make your phone pick up and transmit everything you say, even if it's powered off."

"That's creepy," Nikko said.

"Super creepy." She pulled away from the curb. "I thought we'd just shoot straight down I-35 unless you think we should take some back roads, Zen. I take I-35 all the time. My mom lives in Northfield, so it shouldn't look suspicious."

"Whatever," I said. Nikko gave me a look. "Sounds fine," I added, but I couldn't help it, I still sounded grumpy.

Bree turned to glance at me over her shoulder while we waited for a light to change. "Do you have a Faraday pouch in there?"

"I made my backpack into one. It's not that hard."

"I'd love to know how you did that."

"Just Google it."

"Actually, I use DuckDuckGo. I don't want to support Google's monopsony."

I almost asked what that meant and how to spell it but I didn't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing vocabulary words that I didn't, on top of correcting me about using an ethical search engine.

"Monopoly, you mean," Nikko said while I looked out the window, pretending I wasn't even listening.

"No, monopsony. It's kind of like an inside-out monopoly. It's when there's one buyer for a lot of suppliers. So, like Amazon and Walmart get powerful because so many people shop there that they can dictate their terms to suppliers and everybody pretty much has to say 'okay, whatever' because they're huge and control so much of the market."

"Google isn't a buyer. It's a search engine."

She smacked him on the arm playfully. "You know better than that. If it's free, you're the product. They suck up your personal

information so they can dominate the advertising industry and build crazy-detailed algorithms about everybody and everything. Google is a virtual monopsony. At least that's the argument I'm going to make in my macro econ paper. Knowing the prof, I'll probably get an F." She seemed proud of that possibility.

"Remind me to never sign up for that course," Nikko said.

"He's such a capitalist tool. I'm only taking it to get a gen ed out of the way. Everything else was full or offered at, like, eight in the morning. I'm so not a morning person," she said to me, being nice.

"Me either," I mumbled.

"Nikko tells me you code. What kind of stuff do you do?"

"I'm still in high school, so mostly I do stupid homework."

"God, I hated high school," she said.

"I knew you two would hit it off. You have so much in common," Nikko said. Then he rubbed the back of his neck, as if he could feel the heat of my laser-like glare.

We drove out of town and down the highway. Nikko warned Bree not to go so fast, and she argued it would look suspicious if we were traveling way slower than everyone else. They negotiated a settlement, no more than ten miles over the speed limit. Then they squabbled over what music to play, joking about each other's terrible taste. It was adorable. I felt like barfing.

"I just remembered." Bree said suddenly. "I heard this interview with the head of one of the automobile manufacturers? He said cars have trackers that can tell all kinds of information about drivers."

"Great," Nikko said. "So we're leaving a trail no matter what we do?"

"You don't have OnStar, do you?" I said, sitting up to look at the dashboard.

"No way. My dad has it. I think he did it so I wouldn't ask to borrow his car."

"Lojack or any other antitheft thing?"

"Nope."

"What year is this car?"

"I think it's . . . 2003? It has serious rust problems."

"We should be okay," I said. "It probably just has an EDR. That's a black box that records information if you crash. They've been standard in cars since for years." I decided not to mention the automated license plate readers that feed information about cars' locations into massive databases. It would just freak them out, and there wasn't anything we could do about it.

"I have the perfect solution for getting around this privacy problem," Nikko said. "Don't crash the car." They did some more play-fighting, slapping at each other.

Adorable.

Barf.

I sat back and moved some of the textbooks around so I could get comfortable. "Sorry about the mess," Bree said. "Just throw all that junk on the floor."

"How many classes are you going to miss tomorrow?" Nikko asked her.

"Who gives a shit?"

We drove on. I was bored and picked through the books. Most of them looked awful, *Introduction to Boring Stuff You Didn't Even Want to Take in the First Place*, but one of the books had a Guy Fawkes mask on the cover. *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy*. On the back it claimed to be the definitive book about Anonymous. I wasn't sure there would ever be such a thing, since nobody could define what Anonymous was, which was kind of the point, but I tipped the book to catch the last of the light fading from the sky.

"That's for my sociology course. I haven't read it yet," Bree said. "Have you?"

"No." I put it down.

"It's the one assigned text I actually want to read. Help yourself."

"It's too dark to read," I said, which was almost true. Nikko shot me another one of those looks. *Don't be a jerk*. I stacked the books on the floor of the car, pulled up my hood and curled up

with my head on my backpack as if I was going to get some sleep even though I was too nervous, thinking about Wheeze, thinking about Wilson, thinking about how annoying it was to see Bree and Nikko together. In spite of that I eventually drifted off until the rhythm of the car changed, everything swung sideways, and I sat up. Bree was pulling off at an exit to get gas.

“I’ll get this,” Nikko said, standing up to stretch and pulling a credit card from his wallet.

“No way,” Bree said. “You want to leave a record that you were here, seriously?”

“Oh, right. This privacy stuff is a serious pain.” He peered into his wallet. “Damn. I’m kind of short on cash.”

“I only have twenty-four dollars,” I said, rifling my pockets. “And sixty-two cents.”

“And I have zip. It goes on my card, then.” Bree swiped it and started to fill the tank.

“Sorry. I should have thought of that,” I said. It wasn’t easy to apologize, but it was a stupid oversight.

“I’ll just write it off on my taxes as charitable giving,” she said. “That’s a joke,” she added when nobody laughed.

“What about your record?” Nikko said.

“If it comes up, I have a high school friend who goes to college near Davenport. She’d back me up if she had to. Hey, if somebody stops us? Sees three kids in the car? We can say I’m visiting my friend and you guys are doing college visits.” She sounded proud of herself. Bree, master problem-solver.

“I have to go to the john,” I said.

Nikko watched as I pulled one of my boots off and threw my loose change inside before putting it back on. “Making sure your money is safe?”

“Nope.” I kept my hood up and my head down while I walked into the gas station. There were cameras all over the place. There was no way to hide the fact that I was short and not skinny and not white, but I could make facial recognition harder by ducking my head, and I had learned from reading Cory Doctorow’s *Little*

Brother that you can fool gait recognition software by putting a pebble in your shoe. People tend to walk a certain, recognizable way that you can measure with algorithms. I hoped coins would work as well as a pebble, since I didn't have a pebble. At least it wasn't as painful.

There were two stalls in the women's room. Bree must have followed me in; I could see her boots from under the barrier. They were expensive boots, and they looked good on her. Of course they did. I finished first and went to the sink, hoping to avoid her, but she came out just as I turned on the faucet. I could tell she was smiling at me in the mirror. "I love your hair." I glared up at her reflection and her smile disappeared. "What?"

"Usually when people say crap like that, they don't mean it."

"Well, I guess I'm stupid, then, because I didn't know that. I really did mean it."

I scrubbed my hands and shook them out, then ripped some paper from the dispenser, a lot of paper just to see if she'd give me grief over being environmentally insensitive.

"Look, it's not my fault if Nikko is a dumbshit and doesn't know how you feel," she said.

"What are you talking about? We're just friends."

She gave herself a wry smile in the mirror. Yeah, right. Just friends. But she changed the subject. "Putting stuff in your shoe, did you get that from *Little Brother*? I love that book. I keep meaning to install Paranoid Linux on my laptop."

"It doesn't exist."

"You're kidding. Doctorow made it up?"

"Well, it was in development for a while, but it never went anywhere. Do you use Linux?"

"No. I just bought a cheap Windows laptop. I keep meaning to learn how to install a different operating system."

"You can always run TAILS from a USB drive. It processes everything on RAM so nothing gets onto your hard drive, and it uses Tor so there's no central server log."

"That sounds sweet. You just download it?"

“Yeah. It’s T-A-I-L-S. Just DuckDuckGo it.”

She gave me a gotcha grin, letting me know she caught my sarcasm. “Sounds good. Say, have you heard of PSEO?”

“That thing where you can go to college while you’re in high school?”

“Great way to earn a lot of credits for free. You should apply.”

“You have to be sixteen. They won’t take me until after my next birthday.”

“Oh, I thought you were older. Watch out for deadlines, anyway. You have to apply, like, months and months before the semester starts. I could have gone in my junior year, but I didn’t find out about it until it was too late.”

“Say, would you buy some stuff for me?” I dug the wad of cash out of my pocket.

“Cigarettes?” She looked like she was trying to find a way to say no without pissing me off.

“Food. For Wheeze. He’ll be hungry and once we find him, *if* we find him, it’ll be too risky to stop.”

“We’ll find him,” she said, like she was powerful enough to make a promise that I knew she couldn’t keep.

“Also, some of that sports drink with electrolytes. I’d do it, but there are cameras at the checkout.”

Somebody else came into the bathroom, so I left and climbed into the backseat. Nikko took the driver’s seat.

“Might want to top off the tank when we get near Davenport so we don’t have to stop again,” I said to him. “We’ll be sheltering a fugitive.”

Bree came out with two bulging bags. “Provisions,” she said, grinning at me. “Let’s go.”

Even though I risked turning on my phone to use Open Street Map, it was hard to find Concord Street in the dark, and we accidentally crossed the Mississippi twice on two different bridges before we figured out how to get there. Everyone was in a bad mood by the time we finally found the street and were headed in the right direction through the gloom. It was a potholed two-lane road that had things on it like water treatment plants and junked car lots, along with a few decrepit houses. We kept going, searching for the bait store that Wheeze had mentioned in his letter, until the road suddenly dead-ended, dwindling away into nothing but dead weeds and bare bushes.

“Shit,” Nikko said. He had to back up to find a spot where he could turn around.

“We must have missed it in the dark,” I said.

“Go slow this time,” Bree said.

“I *know*,” Nikko muttered, inching along. “Is this slow enough for you?”

“We must have gone right past it before. I’m just saying you shouldn’t go so fast.”

They didn’t sound so adorable anymore. They sounded tired and tense. We all peered along the side of the dark road. “Is that . . .”

He started to turn onto a gravel lane, but swerved back onto the road. “Crap. It’s a house. Didn’t he say it was near the bridge?”

“Yeah, but none of the buildings near the bridge were bait shops,” Bree said, making it sound like they were having a fight.

“That bend in the road, up ahead?” I said. “That’s the spot where the road is closest to the rail line. Might be where Wheeze would look for a place to hide.”

“If anyone sees me driving this slow, it’ll look really suspicious,” Nikko grumbled.

“Wait. What’s that?” Bree pointed to a spot where the gravel shoulder widened. “A driveway?”

Nikko pulled onto the gravel, turning the car so that the headlights illuminated a shack. “Could that be it? It looks kind of ...”

“Like a bait shop closed for the winter.” Bree burrowed into her bag and handed out flashlights. “Borrowed from my roommates. They won’t notice.”

Nikko drove in a little further so a few scraggly bushes screened the car from the road. He killed the lights and shut off the engine, leaving us in darkness except for some stars that peeked through the tree branches overhead and a faint glow from city lights to the north. We climbed out and, by unspoken arrangement, kept our flashlight beams pointed low and away from the road. We followed our pools of light toward the shack, the only sound the scuffling of our boots on gravel and a muted rumble of traffic from the highway bridge. The shack was tilting to one side and had windows boarded up with plywood. Its siding had once been painted white, but was now silver weathered wood with bits of curled paint clinging to it like lichen on a rock. A folded sandwich board was leaning against the shack. I took hold of the hinged end and turned it around to see wobbly letters: LIVE BAIT WORMS MINNOWS COLD BEER. “Wheeze’s shed must be near here,” I said, keeping my voice down.

I looked for a path through the brambles and dead undergrowth surrounding the run-down building. My toes snagged on vines that were climbing up tree trunks and drooping from branches. “Wheeze?” I called out, not very loudly. “I got your note.”

Nothing. Were we too late? I scanned around with my flashlight beam. Lots of skinny trees and dead weeds. The traffic on the highway bridge made a constant low hum. Somewhere, out there beyond the dark woods the river slipped past.

I heard Bree make a stifled squeak when something scuttled away through the dead weeds.

“Wheeze?” I called out again, louder this time. The air began to vibrate with the rumbling chug of a freight train passing by on the other side of the road. It grew louder, then died away. He must have been lying somewhere near here since Friday, cold and hungry, wondering if anyone would find him. I felt a sob well up, but I forced it back. I wasn’t about to start crying, not in front of Bree. Her sugary sympathy would probably put me into diabetic shock.

“Look,” she said suddenly. I stumbled toward her voice. She held her beam of light steady. It took me a minute to realize it was pointing at a vertical plank of wood so weathered it blended in with the tree trunks growing around it.

“I’ll go first,” I said. “He’ll be scared.” Scared or passed out. Or something worse. The planks that the shed was made of were rotted and tilting, looking as if the only thing that held them up in a stiff wind was some rusted wire and the surrounding overgrowth. I worked my way around the shack until I saw an opening. “Wheeze? Are you in there?”

“I have a knife,” a voice came from the gloom. It was hoarse and ragged.

“Easy. I’m just looking for a guy named Wheeze. You know him?”

I listened, fighting an urge to run away, fast, trying not to think about stories Wheeze had told me about creepy guys he’d run into when riding the rails. Small things rustled through the dead leaves. A towboat made a low, mournful hoot out over the water. A sound like an animal panting came from inside the shack. Bracing for someone to come at me with a knife, I screwed up my

courage and leaned in to shine my flashlight into the darkness. A shape huddled in a corner.

“Zen?” The hoarse voice, that one that had told me he had a knife, sounded doubtful. It also sounded familiar this time.

We’d found him.

~ ~ ~

He was shaking with cold but his skin felt hot to the touch and his eyes looked strange, like he wasn’t quite able to focus. “You got my note?”

“Yup. You gave us good directions.” I was glad nobody could see in the dark that my cheeks were wet.

He had surrounded himself with cardboard and dead leaves, trying to keep warm. He couldn’t get up without help, but with Nikko and me on either side, he managed, between hopping and being dragged, to get out of the shed, and between the tangled trees to the car. “Let’s get a look at that ankle,” Bree said as he lowered himself onto the backseat.

“It’s pretty messed up,” he said in a wheezy, gasping moan followed by a wracking cough.

“I need to get this boot off, okay?”

That was easier said than done. It was noisy, too. I was moaning along with Wheeze by the time she worked it off. It looked like he had one of those exotic tropical diseases that makes your leg look like it belongs to an elephant.

“Take these.” She dropped some pills in his palm and opened a bottle of a neon-colored sports drink so he could get them down. “Vicodin left over from when I got my wisdom teeth taken out.”

He swallowed the pills and drank, his teeth clacking against the plastic neck of the bottle. He paused as she took a pair of scissors to his grotty sock and peeled it off, then wrapped the ankle with a length of stretchy cloth. “My roommate plays Lacrosse, even though she’s a total klutz. We have a ton of these elastic bandages.”

Wheeze had his teeth clamped on his lower lip as his face went white and sweaty. When the wrapping was secured with metal

clips he took a deep breath, than swigged down the rest of drink. "Glad you found me," he whispered.

We settled ourselves in the car for the next leg of the trip. I picked up the dirty sock and the boot and put them inside, and helped Wheeze scoot back so that he could rest against the door on the other side. Nikko rolled his coat into a pillow for his back, and Bree got a blanket she kept in the trunk for winter emergencies. Then I sat across from Wheeze with his feet in my lap because Bree said his bad ankle should be elevated.

As Bree and Nikko stood beside the car, debating who was going to take the driver's seat, Wheeze mumbled, "Who are these guys?"

"Friends. They're cool."

"You're not going to take me to the ER, are you? Because—"

"The police would find out. I lined up a place in Wisconsin for you. There's a person there who can take care of your ankle. It's a friend of a friend. It should be safe. Hey, at least your buddy came through. He wanted me to be sure to tell you you're even now."

Wheeze laughed weakly. "No shit? He did good."

It looked as if Bree won the argument and took the wheel. Nikko climbed in to ride shotgun. "Ready to roll?" She asked.

"You know where you going?"

"I'm pretty sure I know how to get back to the highway, and then I'll follow signs to Dubuque. I'll need directions once we get there, but you all can get some rest for now."

She switched the engine on and then I said "Wait!"

"What?" Everyone tensed.

"We didn't get his stuff from the shed."

Wheeze groaned. "Oh, yeah. I had a backpack and a bedroll. Some trash, too. I wasn't being as careful as I should have been. Wasn't sure there would be any point."

Nikko looked at Bree and they both got out and took flashlights back into the woods.

"What's going on, anyway?" Wheeze asked me.

"I'm working with some friends to turn the tables on the feds."

Something a little more subversive than the protest, though that turned out to be actually bigger than I expected.”

“I liked it on Facebook. Just kidding.” He gave me a lopsided grin. “Though I looked at the Solidarity site before I had to bail and wrecked my phone, which is how I knew where to send Danny. Nothing like having a loaded grain hopper roll over a phone to make it easy to disassemble it into small parts.”

“I’m just glad it wasn’t you getting disassembled.”

“No kidding. One kid I used to travel with, he lost a leg. I wasn’t there when it happened, but I heard about it.”

“Maybe you should give up this hobby of yours.”

“Soon as the FBI gives up looking for me.” He grinned, then looked wiped out suddenly. His breathing was rough and loud, like when he had bronchitis and everyone started calling him Wheeze. “I was getting really scared.”

“Me, too.” I reached for his hand and gave it a squeeze. He squeezed back.

“Not looking forward to prison, though. How’s your brother doing?”

“I don’t know. They haven’t let me talk to him yet.”

“That bites. He’s not cut out for the joint, you know?”

“Totally.”

“Sorry I made you come all the way down here when you have so much on your mind.”

“That’s okay. You know that extreme privacy we practiced? It’s coming in handy We’ve been a pretty good team, actually, figuring out how to get here without leaving a trail or getting caught.”

“Yet,” he said, then gave me a twisted smile to take the sting out.

“It was a lot of fun, hanging out with you. I didn’t know how much I’d miss that. I mean, it’s not like I have friends to spare, you know?”

“Me either.”

“Well, there’s that guy who gave me your note.”

He laughed. “That was a long shot. I mean, he stopped and helped, and that was awesome. The bulls would have found me,

and I'd be locked up by now. But I began to think . . . why would he go to all that trouble? He didn't even know me, really."

"He said he owed you a favor."

"Yeah, but so what? People let you down."

I thought about the few things he'd told me about growing up. Getting dropped off with relatives when he was in the way. Taking care of himself when his parents were too spaced out to remember he was even there.

"Glad you didn't let me down," he murmured drowsily, his voice slurring a little. "I think those pills are starting to work."

I felt a little glowing ember warming my chest from his words as I tucked the blanket around him. Even though his forehead was sweaty he was shivering. Nikko and Bree returned and put Wheeze's stuff into the trunk. He flinched when the trunk slammed shut. If that little bit of movement hurt, it was going to be a tough trip. But by the time Bree had backed out of the thicket and got onto the potholed road, he'd fallen asleep.

~ ~ ~

When we reached Dubuque, the sun was coming up. Bree followed my directions across the river and into Wisconsin. A few miles up the road, she pulled over to switch with Nikko, who had napped most of the way. Wheeze woke up and took more pills, then ate six granola bars. The pills made him pretty dopey, so he ate mechanically with his eyes half open. We drove through a town called Dickeyville, which made us all giggle stupidly, then up through snowy cornfields. We turned off on a smaller highway, and then a gravel road, and then onto an even smaller gravel road.

"Are you sure this is the right way?" Nikko asked when I told him to turn onto something that was just a couple of wheel tracks through the snow.

"Maybe? I don't want to enable my GPS, so I can't be sure."

It petered out in the middle of a field, so Nikko backed up through the corn stubble until we were back on the gravel road. Even with the pills, Wheeze winced with every bump. We tried two more dead ends before finally coming to a mailbox that said

SHANDY on it. A sign nailed to the mailbox post said NO HUNTING in drippy red paint, like a poster for a horror movie. Another one nailed below it said ABSOLUTELY NO TRESPASSING. There was a cattle guard and a rusty gate secured with a loop of bent wire. Bree got out to open it and secure it behind us before climbing back in.

The rutted dirt track wound through a pasture, then down into a wooded valley and up again, coming to an old farmhouse. A weather-beaten man wearing a faded John Deere cap with gray hair sticking out from under it stood on the porch holding a shotgun. Nikko pulled in under an oak tree. Its dry coppery leaves chattered in a breeze as I carefully scooted out from under Wheeze's swollen ankle and got out to face the person who I hoped was Zeke's contact. If it wasn't, things would get awkward.

"I'm Zen," I said, adding after a tense moment of being stared at by a guy with a gun, "Some people call me Shad."

He nodded slowly, once, leaned the gun against the porch railing and came down the steps to inspect me more closely. That's when I realized it was a woman.

She put out a hand, finally. "Jane Shandy. I was expecting you." She cocked an eyebrow at the car, like a question mark. "Why are they here?"

"I can't drive. They're completely trustworthy. This is Wheeze."

She ducked down to peer into the backseat. "Let's get you inside."

Inside smelled like a blend of herbs and fresh baked bread and smoky bacon. The front door led right into a kitchen where there was a giant old wood-fired stove with a kettle resting on it, a deep cast-iron sink with a pump handle instead of a faucet, a big table covered with a checkered oilcloth, and some kerosene lamps. Bunches of herbs hung from the ceiling. I nearly tripped over a wooden crate near the stove that had a chicken in it. She ruffled her feathers and clucked at me. Two dogs made the rounds, sniffing each of us. One growled but Jane Shandy said “hush” and he did. A cat had taken one disgusted look and stalked out of the room.

It looked like an old-timey museum, except museums usually are full of knick-knacks and the walls are crowded with framed samplers and old paintings of scary-looking men with beards and eyes that follow you. There wasn't anything like that here. Instead, there was a laptop and a toolbox on the kitchen table.

Jane Shandy got Wheeze into a cushiony chair beside the stove. Stuffing leaked through through the worn places on the arms. She sat on a matching ottoman and took his ankle in her lap and unwrapped the stretchy bandage. After she examined it and Wheeze made some noise she said “It's not broken. Don't touch that gun.”

Bree had been eyeing it, propped in a corner next to a broom and an umbrella. She took a step away from it. “I won't.”

“It's not loaded, but it's old. The bolt assembly comes apart if

you handle it wrong. Bad sprain you got there. Be a couple of weeks before you can get around. You can stay here for now. You know much about computers?"

"No."

"You know chickens? I got a sick chicken and a sick laptop."

"Zen can fix it."

She turned to me. "You fix chickens?"

"Computers. I can try, anyway," I said.

"Any of you fix chickens?" Bree and Nikko shook their heads. "I didn't think so. Whyn't you go out to the barn, then. There's a big sack of nuts in a burlap bag and a mallet just inside the lean-to door. Take one of the empty jars from the pantry and fill it up with nutmeats. Might as well be useful."

As it turned out, the computer didn't take long to fix. The insert key was jammed and some of the others were sticky. I just needed to blow out the gunk that had accumulated under the keys. Canned air is nice for this, but I didn't have any, so I used my breath instead, which made me dizzy and made Wheeze laugh at me. Jane Shandy didn't laugh, but her mouth showed a slight downward trend at the edges which I was beginning to recognize was the only indicator in her stony expression that she was amused. I wondered about that later, why she never smiled, but that was her business and she had a right to keep it private.

"Is that all it was?" she asked me.

"Probably. I'll see if you need any software updates. I have a secure phone that I could use to connect—"

"No need. I'm on a mesh network."

"Seriously? I would have thought this place was too rural for that."

"Might not work in Wyoming or Alaska, but there's just enough of us living close by to keep a wireless party line going. I'm not all that smart about this stuff." She nodded at the gear on the table. "But I'm learning."

"You have a nice setup here. It's a lot more secure than most laptops."

“Our mutual friend helped get me connected a few years ago. He comes back through here now and then to see how things are going. I’m chookchaser, by the way.”

“*What?* No way.” I couldn’t close my mouth for a minute, I was so surprised. I knew her from the Group. Only until now I thought I knew *him*. And he was a lot younger. And not living on a farm in Wisconsin.

The corners of her mouth tugged down further than I’d seen them go. I almost thought she’d crack a real smile that showed teeth and everything. “Surprise.”

“I always thought . . . I mean. Wow.”

“You weren’t exactly my idea of Shad either.”

I looked over at Wheeze. He had dozed off in the raggedy-armed chair by the stove. I wouldn’t have minded too much if he found out about the Group. But it was *mine*, in a way that I couldn’t explain. All of these overlapping parts of my life were getting confusing.

“Good to know that problem I was having with the computer was just mechanical. I was afraid it was the government messing with me.”

“They wouldn’t want to stop you from using your computer. They’d install a keylogger or a Trojan so they could watch everything you did.” She frowned. Smiles might not be her style, but frowns were. “I doubt they could, though. This is a pretty tight system you got here.”

“That’s the only way I’d ever use the internet. I could live without it, but there’s some old books out there on animal husbandry that I’ve been going through for ideas. Lot of what you find in them is cockamamie, but sometimes they have home remedies that really work. Trying one on that chicken over there.”

I updated the OS and the Tor bundle and some other stuff, and then she sat next to me and asked questions and wrote down how to do it herself. Then she sent me out back to round up Nikko and Bree, who had just about filled up the jar with nuts. They had also had explored the old barn, which had a hayloft with a rope you

could swing on, and a pen where chickens were milling around bales of hay. I figured out why she called herself “chookchaser” – it sounded as if they were all saying “chook, chook, chook” and they would peck right around your feet if you stood still, but acted all freaked out if you tried to pet them, flapping off in a flurry of feathers and outrage.

Bree showed me the goats. They had a big pasture to wander in, but they were curious about the new people and were all bunched up by the door into the barn, jostling each other to get the best view. When I stepped into their pasture, they crowded up to check me out and whiffle their soft lips against my palm. They tried to eat my coat, too, but they didn’t seem upset when I pushed them away. The sheep were more wary and moved away in a nervous gang when all I did was look at them.

When we went back to the kitchen, we found Jane Shandy had spread food on the table: crusty bread and crumbly white cheese, apples and jars of pickled mushrooms and beets and string beans.

“This looks great,” Nikko said, adding the jar of shelled nuts to the abundance.

“I love your chickens, and those goats! They’re so darling!” Bree said.

“Did you take pictures with your phone?” Our host seemed suddenly like the person standing on the porch with a gun. “Post them to Facebook? Did all your ‘friends’ like them?” She waggled her fingers to make scare quotes in the air.

“No. I don’t even have a Facebook account.” Bree looked confused and offended.

“Our phones are switched off and in a Faraday pouch,” I said. “That’s not for your sake. It’s for Wheeze. He—”

“Yeah, I know.” She help up her palms in surrender. “Sorry. I just don’t like all this new stuff. Everyone sharing everything. It’s not good.”

“It’s not the sharing that’s bad,” Bree said, still prickly. “It’s the data mining. It’s the way we give up privacy without realizing

what's going on. There's nothing wrong with sharing stuff with your friends."

"It's the wrong kind of sharing," Jane Shandy muttered grumpily. "Just showing off."

The food was much better than the gas station snacks in the car (except for the pickled vegetables and mushrooms – they looked like those deformed creatures floating in formaldehyde that scientists have in their labs in old movies, so I didn't try them). Nikko managed to use charm and small talk to get everyone back in a better mood. He even got Jane talking about what she thought the good kind of sharing was. The apples we were eating came from a neighbor's orchard and had been traded for goat cheese she made. The flour used to bake the bread was from a neighbor who needed someone to watch his chickens when he was in the hospital. Half the furniture had come with the farmhouse when Jane moved in, but she only kept what she needed. The rest was bartered for tools and help fencing the pasture. "Then you don't have to mess with money. You just trade."

"You're pretty much self-sufficient, then?" Nikko asked.

Jane glared at him. "Weren't you paying attention? I need flour. I need oats. I only have one apple tree and the apples aren't any damn good. There are jobs that need doing that I can't do all by myself. I'm not some crazy survivalist or a hermit or anything. I just try to even things out, is all, using what I can grow or make. There's too much crap in the world already." Bree nodded hard. Amen.

"You must need money for some things," Nikko said.

"I have a friend who takes my cheese and eggs to a farmer's market and takes a cut. I have another one who sells handmade furniture to folks in Madison. I make little tables for people who want to spend a lot of money on something pretty when a sturdy cardboard box would do just as well, but at least I don't go cutting down rainforest trees for the wood. Those darling goats? There's a halal butcher who pays good money for them. I don't eat a lot of meat myself, but I have nothing against people who do." Jane

Shandy waited to see if Bree would react, but she just forked another pickled beet out of a jar and ate it calmly.

"These are really good," she said between bites. "I've never tried pickling. Have you ever made kombucha? I can't get it to come out right."

"Fermentation's tricky. Haven't had much luck with it."

Nikko snagged the last piece of cheese. "Thanks for lunch. We'd better hit the road."

"Thanks for taking care of Wheeze," I said. "I don't know how to repay you."

"You already did. Got my computer working."

"I can do something useful while I'm here," Wheeze said. Jane studied him. His breath rattled in his chest, but he sat up a little straighter and tried to look competent.

"He's good at fixing things," I said.

"I have an old pedal sewing machine that isn't working right. Can you repair it?" He nodded. "What else are you good at?"

"Screen printing. Making soup."

"Reading incredibly long books about the history of debt," I added.

"Debt?"

"It's more interesting than it sounds," Wheeze said.

"Well, I got a lot of old books and no time to read them. If you record them for me, I can listen while I do the chores."

"Deal." He held out a hand and she slapped her palm into it, sealing the arrangement with a shake that made him wince. "You guys? Thanks," he added, looking at Nikko and Bree, then at me. We looked at each other for a minute.

"Stay safe," I said, feeling a falling sensation inside, as sudden and shocking as plunging deep into a cold pool. I suddenly realized how much I would miss messing around with Wheeze. Given that he was wanted by the FBI, just like my brother, and probably faced years and years of prison if they caught him, I wasn't sure if we'd ever hang out together again. It had been such a relief to find him that I'd forgotten how much trouble he still

faced. One thought formed and rose through that icy feeling like a bubble that hit the surface and popped. “Wait, is it okay if I install another program on your machine?” I asked Jane Shandy.

“Go for it,” she said, so I downloaded the desktop version of Convo.

“Wheeze, this is the same messaging program we used before your phone got busted.” Jane Shandy frowned at me. “It’s secure. It was written by . . . our mutual friend.” Since she trusted Zeke, she nodded. Safe enough.

As soon as I finished setting it up, we said our goodbyes and headed down the gravel road, away from the old farmhouse, the chickens and goats, the gnarled oak tree with coppery leaves that clung to its branches through the winter and whispered to each other until spring came around again. It felt as if we were leaving a safe zone where things made sense to reenter a world where anything could happen.

It suddenly felt as if I was part of an invisible web of fragile connections, thin filaments that carried ones and zeros, forming messages, signaling to each other, a web that the authorities would barely notice as they crashed through it, flattening everything with their tanks. It was a web that we had to keep rebuilding and repairing, busy little spiders working in the grass, linking one blade to the next, shooting out a thread here and another one there, working as fast as we could before getting squashed.

With that image in my head, hearing in the humming of the car’s engine the sound of tanks massing for battle, I fell asleep.

I called Monica once we were on the outskirts of Minneapolis to let her know I would be home soon. “You’d better use the back door,” she said. “I got mobbed by reporters this morning.”

“What did you say to them?”

“I must have had too much coffee. I got a little carried away. I told them the story wasn’t at our house, it was in the jail cells at the federal courthouse. It was in the laws that gave the state free rein to revoke our rights in the name of defending them. It was so weird to have reporters ask me what privacy had to do with free speech. I felt like I was giving a community ed talk to reporters who didn’t know one goddamn thing about their own history.”

“That sounds kind of awesome.”

“It was dumb. If they use any of it, it’ll just be one line that fits their narrative. I just hope I didn’t do any harm. I tried to avoid saying anything that would be damaging to Wilson if taken out of context, but now I’m nervous.”

“How did they find out about you? About us?”

“– Facebook.” She added a word before “Facebook” that I had never heard her say to me before. (She’s very careful about not being a bad role model, and apparently has no idea how kids actually talk to each other.) “Sorry. It’s just – gahh, somebody posted something, and they were all over it. What a crappy way for journalists to do research. It’s like they’re hanging out in a middle school hallway hoping to pick up some gossip. And Facebook is like a petri dish for growing egos. Somebody gets

likes for having some remote connection to someone who was on the evening news. That was the last straw for me. I deleted my account.”

“No you didn’t.”

“What do you mean? Can you still see it?” She sounded horrified, not so much that she still had an account but that I would read her most private thoughts, shared with just her closest friends and the Surveillance-Industrial Borg. (I would never actually look at Monica’s Facebook. That would be creepy.)

“You probably deactivated it,” I said. “To actually delete it, you have to go through a bunch of steps and then you have to not touch it for two weeks. I’ll show you how.”

“Thanks. And thanks for not saying ‘I told you so’ even though you did. Did you have fun in Sibley County?”

“Yeah. It was great. I feel much better now.”

“I’m glad. Look, I have to go teach, but—”

“That’s fine. I need to get some homework done.”

She hesitated for a moment, probably wondering what “homework” was code for, because we both knew I wasn’t about to waste time on algebra at a time like this. “Well, don’t work too hard.” That was her code for “don’t do anything that will get you arrested or seriously hurt.”

“You too. See you later.”

I asked Nikko to drop me off a couple of blocks from home. I waved as I rode off, and they waved, too, and I realized it didn’t bother me anymore that they were being so adorbs together.

I made it home without spotting anyone lying in wait and made myself some coffee before getting to work, using the time it took the kettle to boil to inspect my bedroom to make sure nobody had been snooping in there. Then I took the whole pot of coffee and some peanut butter sandwiches into my room to catch up, using the laptop hidden under the floorboards to connect with the Group.

Everything was on track. Group members had compiled a huge dossier of information on the case and other ones like it. Zeke

had a website ready to go live. Tyler had not only talked to Sara Esfahani, she had booked a flight and was planning to meet with several members of the Group at an undisclosed location that very night. I was invited to join them if I wanted to meet her.

I didn't want to meet her. I just wanted her to make a cool film really fast so that all of her fans would descend upon the authorities like a plague of locusts and they would have to release my brother due to a public outcry. I knew it wouldn't happen like that, but Nikko would be super-excited when I told him the famous filmmaker he admired so much was coming.

Things were falling into place.

~ ~ ~

I met Jason at a coffee shop near his hotel to pick up the prototype spy camera-in-a-shirt, then met with Nikko in a café that was totally empty on a slow Monday night, as I'd expected. He took the shirt that Jason had loaned us into the bathroom and tried filming with the tiny camera hidden in the top button. The memory card was a flexible strip sewn into the cloth behind the buttons and would last for hours. Jason had rattled off technical specs that I didn't understand, but it was cutting-edge and undetectable.

We downloaded the video and Nikko tried again, sitting across from me as I pretended to be an FBI agent. Luckily the two people working at the counter were occupied, one rocking to music on earbuds while scraping crud off the grill, the other one playing a game on her phone. Nikko was hard to please. He made me put the shirt on and film him to see how he looked, practicing his lines. "If this is going to be useful to Sara, it has to be right." I noticed that he was already on a first-name basis with her.

When he finally was satisfied that he could keep the FBI agents in the frame while sitting in a way that looked natural, he pulled out his iPhone and tapped it. "Check this."

Simon Meyer's arrogant voice came on, reminding me why I wanted to make his life miserable. He was boasting about how when he was just a kid he had broken car windows during the

Republican National Convention, staying ahead of the cops while all the dummies got kettled by police. Then he bragged about throwing red paint on a bank executive's car on the same day that Occupy protesters got arrested trying to set up tents outside a downtown bank. "I mean, do they think this is some Boy Scout jamboree?"

"It was symbolic, I suppose." Nikko's voice sounded loud, closer to the phone in his pocket that was recording their conversation.

"You think the banksters care? At least I accomplished something. I hit him with the paint just as he was making a turn, splat, right across the windshield. Nearly drove his precious Caddy into a lamp post. He started to get out, and then – man, it was sweet. He was all red-faced, all enraged, like 'who had the audacity to mess up my precious car, don't they know how important I am?' And then it came over him."

"Wow," Nikko said, admiringly.

"Yeah, he was all like . . ." Apparently Simon was acting out the scene.

"He got scared, huh?"

"Terrified. Got back in his car, hit the locks, and phoned the pigs. I took off, but the look on his face, damn. I want them all looking like that."

"So you're thinking we should consider, like, violent action?"

"Following the rules isn't working. Have you met the guy who's running that Solidarity Committee? He's such a tool. I offered to help strategize, but he was like 'no thanks, I got this.' Like it's his little entrepreneurial project. He's just scared he'd get arrested and it would affect his career opportunities. Me, I'm willing to take risks."

They debated a while longer, with Nikko drawing Simon out, then retreating, inviting Simon to come on stronger. The recording showed that Simon was gullible, macho, sore that he'd been shouldered aside by a more popular activist with a well-

developed social media presence. He was eager to establish a reputation as a daring radical.

“Think that’ll do it?” Nikko asked.

“Perfect FBI-bait. You’re good at this.”

“It’s psychology,” he said, tapping his forehead. “He’s feeling left out. He wants to prove he’s braver than they are. Give him an opening, he’ll step right up.”

A hairball of an idea came to me. “You don’t think . . . I mean, he’s so ready to say such stupid things to somebody he barely knows.”

“Yeah, amazing, huh? What an idiot.”

“Is there any chance he’s like Zip, somebody the FBI hired to provoke people?”

Nikko looked as if I’d just handed him a giant hairball. He thought for a minute, replaying things in his head. “No,” he finally said. “He’s not a good actor.”

“What do you mean? All he does is act.”

“He’s pretending. There’s a difference. He wants to be a certain kind of person, so he pretends he’s a radical, a guy brave enough to stand up to the Man. He’s good at fooling himself, but acting means being able to read people. I don’t think he pays enough attention to other people, except as a kind of mirror he can gaze in to see how awesome he is. If he was going to work for the FBI, he’d have the loudmouth part down, but he’d have trouble drawing other people in.”

“I see what you mean.” I thought back to the creepy way Zip manipulated people so that they would want to be admitted into his inner circle. It was partly by showing off, like Simon, but there was more to it than that. When he looked at me, he was paying attention, adjusting his identity to make it appeal to me. He was much better at manipulation because he wasn’t as fixated on himself as Simon was. “I think I’m just nervous. Jumping at shadows.”

“Kind of hard not to become a little paranoid.”

“How are you feeling about this? Are you ready for tomorrow?”

“Yup. Got my angles worked out, my props, got my costume change.” He patted the sack holding the shirt and looked at me.

I looked at him. We both nodded. It suddenly felt real.

~ ~ ~

The sky was clear and the cold was coming down hard as I biked home, like it was falling straight out of outer space. A few blocks from our house, a cop car swooshed past me, making my heart pound, but it turned at the corner and I started to breathe again. I bumped my way over the ridge of plowed snow at the intersection, careful to slow down so I wouldn't fly over the handlebars like I did last time. Then I realized a blue light was flickering across the packed snow on the street, the splashes getting bigger and brighter. The cops had decided to circle back to check me out.

I stopped. I wanted to check the time on my phone, but I knew better than to be holding something. Whatever you're holding always seems to look like a gun. The cruiser drew up beside me. The officer riding shotgun powered his window down. “You're out late.”

“Yes sir. I have a group project due for school tomorrow. I was meeting with a friend to finish it up.”

“Your parents know you're out?”

“I live with my aunt. I called her before I left for home. She's expecting me.”

“You're a girl.” He seemed to want a response, so I nodded. A girl, you nailed it. “Dangerous, being out this late.”

“Yes sir. That's why I called my aunt, so she'd know I was on my way.”

“You go to South?”

“Horizons Technical Academy,” I said, remembering as his face got harder to add, “sir.”

“How old are you?”

“Fifteen.” There wasn't any point in lying. If I said I was eighteen, they'd check and I'd be busted. For anyone under eighteen, the curfew law applied, at least if you were a kid with

brown skin in neighborhoods where the color-coded arrest rate was high.

“Let’s see ID.”

I retrieved the state photo ID tucked in the back of my phone case. I had gotten it as soon as I turned fifteen because the curfew for fourteen is an hour earlier and I wanted to be able to prove I deserved that extra hour. I hoped he wouldn’t ask me to hand him my phone, because I’d say no and then I’d have hours of hassle. I held my breath and tried to look innocent. I was afraid he would punch my name into his laptop and, while I didn’t have any kind of record, it might say I was related to an alleged terrorist and that could lead to complications.

The radio inside the cruiser chattered as he scrutinized the card. My heart was hammering, even though it wasn’t the first time I’d been stopped by cops. Monica had given me the Talk soon after I went to live with her. If you’re white, the Talk means having an embarrassed parent try to explain things about sex that you already know (and maybe already tried). But if you’re black, it’s being told how important it is to act respectful and submissive when the cops stop you because they’re allowed to kill you if you don’t.

The cop and his partner murmured to each other as their radio chattered away. I held my breath, waiting for him to start pecking out my name into the computer.

“You got five minutes to get home.” The cop handed my ID back. “If we see you out here one minute later, we’re taking you in to juvenile supervision and your aunt is going to get a serious fine. You want that?”

“No, sir.”

“Then get your ass off the street.”

“Yes, sir.”

The window powered up and they peeled off to go hassle somebody else. I biked the last two blocks home as fast as I could, shaking with fear and fury and a little more fear. I’m used to it, but this was the first time I had been stopped by cops since my brother

had been arrested and I had started harnessing the skills of the Group and my friends to rescue him.

By the time I carried my bike to the top of the steps the adrenaline rush had turned from fear and anger to a giddy sense of relief. I hadn't been arrested. I hadn't been detained for questioning. They had no idea that a girl who wasn't allowed to be out late had a plan to expose the inner workings of the FBI to the entire world.

"You're in a good mood," my aunt said. "Things are going well?"

"Things are going great."

But, as it turned out, they weren't.

I was awoken a little after nine the next morning by a gruesome sound from a bad dream. Actually, it was just the annoying noise that Convo makes when you get a message, burbling like something rising up through the Black Lagoon. Hearing it reminded me that I had been meaning to fork it at Sourcerer and add some other ringtone choices that weren't so disgusting.

<nikko> !!got a meeting scheduled for this morning!!

<Zen> !!awesome!! good luck. leave this phone at home, OK?

<nikko> duh

<Zen> but when you're done, use it to let me know how it went

<nikko> yes boss

<Zen> ?

I went back to sleep, which I thought would be impossible – but it wasn't. Being stopped by the cops for being out too close to my legally-enforceable bedtime had wired me up so much that I didn't get to sleep until nearly 4 a.m. I woke three hours later to the blurping again. Ian wanted me to come to the Millennium Hotel downtown. Sara Esfahani wanted to meet me.

Whoa.

I dressed, spending way more time than usual deciding which T-shirt to wear, trying to tame my hair, and stressing about a

couple of new zits that popped up overnight, feeling stupid because honestly, what difference does it make? I look pretty much the same, no matter what I do. But I had never met a filmmaker before and Nikko had freaked me out about how famous she was. Once I checked her out, I discovered her films were featured on *BoingBoing* all the time and she had a bazillion Twitter followers. Normally I don't like famous people on principle, but she was my best bet for creating public pressure to free my brother and his friends. So, nerves and zits. I left a note for Monica and headed downtown.

Normally, entering a fancy hotel would have been tricky. The guy whose job is to open doors for people might have closed them for me. But I disguised myself as a credentialed geek by attaching myself to a group of T-shirt-and-jeans guys not much older than me going in the front doors for the conference. Then I headed for the elevators and rode to the tenth floor.

Apparently, Tyler not only moved in the same circles as famous people, he had loads of money. His room was a whole suite in a corner with a great view of the city designed to make people feel important, gazing down on the mere mortals crawling around like ants below. Because I don't like rich people any more than famous people, I had to remind myself that Tyler was Kadabra on the Group, where money doesn't matter. I had always liked Kadabra.

Though his suite was twice as big as our apartment, it was crowded. Jason and Ian and Geoff were there. Zeke was sprawled on a couch doing something on a laptop, muttering to himself, so absorbed he didn't even look up. I had seen photos online of Sara Esfahani so I recognized her, but she was fatter than in her pictures and her thick, wiry black hair didn't look elegant like in her publicity shots, it was a wild tangle. Best of all, she had a bright-red zit on her nose. I liked her better already.

"Zenobia," she said as if it was the best name ever. She was brown-skinned and had beautiful dark eyes, thanks to her Iranian heritage, but she had grown up in America, so her voice sounded

like a normal American – one who appeared at film festivals and gave TED Talks that racked up millions of views.

“Thanks for being interested in my brother’s case,” I said, sounding grumpy instead of grateful. I don’t know why my voice does that.

“Are you kidding? It’s perfect for my project. I’d love to interview you.”

Ugh, no, I thought. I stumbled around, trying to find a way to say no without pissing her off because I needed her help, but she waved her hand. “No, that’s fine, it’s totally fine.”

“Thing is, I’m not the story. My brother is.”

“Unfortunately, he isn’t available. Besides, you’re an essential part of the story. It’s not every day that a fifteen year old takes on the federal government.”

“Yeah, but it should be about him. Also, I don’t like being all public, you know?”

“It’s fine.” She touched my shoulder gently. She was one of those people who you just instinctively trust, which probably made her able to get people to say things on the record that they later regretted. “So, explain this plan to me.”

“The room is safe,” Tyler said, understanding why I hesitated. “We have a world-class security specialist here who just happens to have the latest in counter-surveillance equipment on hand.”

“We’re good,” Jason agreed. “I checked.”

“Okay, so basically a friend of mine who is an awesomely good actor is talking to the FBI right now,” I said, “offering to help them set up a sting on a guy who will walk right into their trap. Which would be bad, except the guy they’re trapping deserves to be in trouble.”

“Because?” Sara wanted to know.

“Because he uses his position in activist circles to assault women.”

The guys looked at each other. Sara Esfahani looked at me.

Zeke asked, “You have actual proof of this?”

A million words jammed together in my mouth that I couldn’t

get out, like when you hit too many keys on an old-fashioned typewriter and they get stuck together. Proof? Like, women are supposed to take pictures when they're being attacked or it didn't happen? I wanted to punch that big nose of his.

"She knows," Sara said. And that was that. Zeke looked like he wanted to keep arguing about it, but then he looked at me and gave a small shrug. Okay. He'd take my word for it. Barely.

My phone gave a loud blurrp.

<nikko> done

<Zen> how'd it go?

Seconds ticked by before another message gurgled in.

<nikko> we have a problem

~ ~ ~

"So?" I asked him when he arrived at the hotel suite. "What happened?"

"It started out fine," he said, "but then . . ." His voice trailed away as he caught sight of Sara. "Oh, hi."

"You're Nikko," she said, sweeping over to him with a hand outstretched. "I hear you're a talented actor."

"Well, I actually, um . . ." His face grew red as he took her hand, but he looked more mortified than happy. "It's awesome to meet you. I really admire your work."

"You are so brave to do this."

"No. I blew it. I'm sorry, Zen. They basically said I'm not old enough to be a snitch."

"Seriously?" I asked, wondering why I hadn't seen this coming. It's not like I don't hear people tell me I'm do young to do stuff all the time.

Sara frowned. It made me wish I had eyebrows as thick as hers. They looked ferocious. "How curious that a system that tries children as adults when it's convenient won't take them seriously when they're volunteering to help the authorities."

"Damn," Tyler said. "We should have realized . . . I mean, no offense, Nikko, but we should have done this with adults."

“That’s stupid,” I blurted out. “He’s as good an actor as anyone else.”

“That’s not what Tyler meant,” Ian said. “We shouldn’t have involved kids in this. Not given the risks.”

“This whole thing was my idea,” I said. “You think we don’t know the risks? It should be our choice.”

“Zen, I know you’re smart, I know you’re brave. But legally you’re still a child.”

I couldn’t speak, too stunned by the betrayal. Shad was trustworthy. Shad was respected. But I was just a kid, one who wasn’t allowed to carry out the plan that was her idea in the first place.

“That’s a load of garbage,” Zeke said, crumpling up a piece of paper and throwing it at Ian’s head.

Sara took charge. “We still have a story to tell. Let’s download that film.” Jason hooked up a USB cable to Nikko’s shirt and copied the video file. We crowded around Sara’s laptop. As the video started, two people were settling themselves at a table, one of them tall and black and wearing a really nice suit, the other short and white and in a suit that didn’t fit very well.

“I know her,” I blurted out. “She was one of the cops who wanted to search our apartment. They didn’t have a warrant, so we told them to go away.” Sara nodded approvingly as the man in the suit started with introductions.

“I’m agent Martens with the FBI and this is officer Jankovich, a detective in the MPD’s Criminal Investigations Division. We’re part of a task force that looks into anything that might be related to national security, terrorism, threats like the one you brought to our attention. We understand you have some concerns about an individual?”

“Yeah.” Nikko’s disembodied voice sounded nervous, part of the role he was playing. It would be super-weird to *not* be nervous, talking to people who had the power to arrest you for made-up reasons. “This guy has been saying some kind of wild stuff. It may be nothing. I hope I’m not wasting your time.”

"I hate my voice," Nikko moaned.

"Shhh," Sara said.

"It's good that you brought this to us," Agent Martens said. "So, tell us about this guy. What have you heard him say?"

"Well, I was at the Owl the other day, this café in Cedar-Riverside? People were getting ready for this protest thing. I'm not that political, but I was there with some friends and this guy who's there all the time, he was saying pretty inflammatory stuff. So I used my phone to record what he was saying." The man nodded encouragingly. Jankovich stifled a yawn. Good cop, bored cop.

Nikko played his first recording. They both leaned forward and listened intently. Then he played the second.

"I can see why you're concerned," the FBI agent said. "What do you think, Janet?"

"You're seventeen, right?"

"How did—"

"We're cops. We checked. You're a minor."

"Yeah, so?" Nikko said. "I still care about what happens to my country. I used to think Simon Meyer was just a typical college student, somebody who goes to demonstrations and talks a lot. But this is different. I really think he might be up to something."

Jankovich and Martens looked at each other, then Jankovich glanced at her watch and tapped it. "Look, I promised somebody I'd give 'em a call. Back in a minute."

For the next five minutes Martens made small talk with Nikko, asking him what he was studying in school, what plays he had acted in, deflecting Nikko's questions about how he could help, even though he was technically a minor. Then Jankovich came back into the room. She gave Martens a little nod before taking her chair again.

"Okay, here's the thing," Martens said. "We're taking this seriously, okay? We need to find out if this guy's for real or if he's just blowing smoke."

"I could introduce him to one of your agents, somebody undercover."

"I'll bet you could. The questions you asked? Nicely done. You'd make one hell of an interrogator." He turned to Jankovich. "I want to recruit this young man when he's a little older. Sorry Janet. I got first dibs."

She blew air out of her cheeks and looked at her watch, making it clear that she wanted to get this show on the road.

"Thing is, Nikko?" Martens said. "Given your age, we can't ask you to take on a dangerous job."

"I don't mind. I want to help."

"I appreciate that, but you're a minor. It's against the rules. So what I want you to do is stay away from Mr. Meyer and his big mouth. Far away."

"But . . . seriously?"

"Oh, I'm serious, son. If he tries to talk to you again, make some excuse, get out of the situation without cluing him in that you've been talking to us. We'll take it from here."

"But he trusts me. What if he's already planning something? If we don't act now, it could be too late."

"Son, your parents would be all over us if we put you in a situation like this. I wouldn't blame them, either. Bottom line: It ain't gonna happen. That doesn't mean we aren't going to look into this guy now that you put him on our radar. We have people in the field. Professionals. We got this." Martens stood and thrust out a hand. "Appreciate you coming in. You did the right thing."

"But . . ." The camera played on for a minute before it went all sideways and the audio screeched as a chair was pushed back.

"Let me show you out," Martens was saying. "This place is a maze."

The camera strolled down a hallway, swiveling to show Jankovich's back retreating, a phone pressed to her ear, as Marten's voice kept up its friendly patter. The camera swung again as Nikko turned to say goodbye. A man was coming up behind Martens, wanting to talk. A man with a familiar face. Who was it?

Then the camera jerked around as Nikko headed out of the

main entrance. Then he was outside, and we could hear him muttering “Shit, shit, *shit*” over and over before he remembered to turn off the recording.

“That guy,” Ian said. “The one who came up right at the end? Isn’t that’s what’s-his-name? The agent who recruited Zip?”

“Todd Terhune,” I said, putting it together. “He’s a bigwig with the FBI,” I told Sara Esfahani. “He’s the one who hired Zip and got him to entrap my brother and his friends.”

“Weird,” Jason muttered. “Even with this age complication, I thought they’d be all over this.”

“They passed up one hell of a media opportunity,” Tyler said. “Another arrest would be a great way to silence critics.”

“Wait!” Nikko said, using one of those theatre voices that was louder than everyone else’s without actually shouting. Then he didn’t say anything for a minute, staring at the computer.

We waited.

“These guys weren’t surprised. I know surprise when I see it. They must have an informant out there who ts is already setting Simon up for a bust.”

Sara took the video back to a point near the beginning, just as Nikko started the recording, stabbing the keyboard to freeze it. “There.”

“Yeah,” Nikko said, leaning close. “Look at Marten’s mouth the minute he hears Simon’s voice. See how his lips are pressed together? He’s trying to decide how to handle me. And the detective, that little glance, the fakey way she said she had to make a phone call? She left to fill Terhune in. They warned me away because they’re about to bust Simon.”

“Interesting.” Sara sat back and tapped a pen against her chin thoughtfully. “Do you know what we need?”

We all looked at her, waiting.

“Food. I’m starving.”

Tyler ordered carryout and, while we waited, Sara got out her camera gear and interviewed Ian and Jason, firing questions at them about the government's approach to national security. She even charmed me into answering some questions about my brother, though I stood in front of the window so that I would be a mysterious silhouette. Then the food came and everyone chattered while we ate, except for me. I was too busy thinking about what to do.

They thought I was too young. Fine. I'd have to do it myself. I tuned out their voices and pretended to be completely focused on eating as I thought about how to finish the job that the FBI wouldn't let Nikko do. I had developed a rough plan by the time Ian said he had to get ready for his talk.

"I'd like to film it," Sara said to Ian. "You don't mind?"

"I'd be honored."

"Do either of you have experience with film editing?" Sara asked, glancing from Nikko to me.

"Nikko does."

"Just little animations," he said, getting red in the face again.

"*Awesome* animations," I said.

"I'll need an assistant tonight. Could run late. Would you be up for it?"

He shrugged, aiming for nonchalance, but failing. "Sure, no problem."

“How can we get these young people into the audience?” Sara asked.

“I have extra exhibitor passes,” Jason said.

“Nikko, I need you to take notes about what parts of Ian’s talk are most striking, the bits you think belong in the blitzdoc we’ll be making tonight. Zen, I assume you want to hear the talk, too?”

“I’d like to, but there will be Homeland Security types in the audience. I’d better not.”

She clapped her hands “Disguises! I love disguises.” She had her luggage with her, and pulled out some clothes that were totally unlike what I usually wear, being more grown-up and sophisticated and no doubt way more expensive than anything I’d ever worn. She spent fifteen minutes fooling around with my hair, combing and curling and muttering “Love your hair, girl,” which I didn’t really believe, but when she was finished I kind of loved it myself. She put makeup on me, too, which I have never been able to do myself without looking like a clown. It tickled, but it looked good when I opened my eyes. We topped it off with a chunky necklace, bangles on my wrists, and a pair of reading glasses. I couldn’t see through them without everything going blurry, but when I wore them down on my nose, I looked intellectual. Better yet, I didn’t look like myself.

Nikko joked about wearing an Anonymous Guy Fawkes mask, but he just put on a T-shirt advertising Jason’s company, used some of Tyler’s hair gel, donned a spare pair of hipster glasses, and changed the way he walked and held his shoulders. Somehow that made him look like a completely different person.

As Nikko demonstrated his geek look, I picked up the spy-camera shirt he’d thrown on a couch and folded it neatly. When nobody was looking, I slipped it into my backpack.

At least, I thought nobody was looking. As we went downstairs and mingled with the crowd entering the auditorium, I felt a poke in the back. It was Zeke, grinning evilly. “I saw what you did,” he whispered.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“That shirt.”

“I’ll give it back.”

“What are you up to?”

“None of your business.”

He cackled, and I slid through the crowd to get away from him, trying to remember to maintain my elegant, grown-up cool. But as I settled into a seat my phone burbled. I shut the sound off, but saw Zeke had sent me a message on Convo.

<Falstaff> don’t worry, I won’t tell the grownups!

The lights dimmed and some guy came up to introduce Ian, reciting where he went to school and who he’d worked for and awards and other stuff that made him seem way more scary and important than the person I knew. But it was just Ian who bounced out to the podium, still dressed in his jeans and tweed jacket, his glasses a little crooked on his nose, his hair uncombed. He pointed to Sara Esfahani, setting up her gear at the side of the stage and the audience went nuts. The applause didn’t stop for several minutes. Then he launched into his talk, roaming the stage with his hands in his pockets as giant slides flashed behind him. He seemed completely at ease being filmed speaking in front of hundreds of people tweeting his words.

Ian connected history and politics and passion as if it was all part of one exciting story, starting with the bust at Wilson’s house, tying it in into a vast surveillance-industrial complex that had flourished for decades but was now operating on an almost unimaginably invasive scale. From the minute Wheeze had texted me to say my brother had gotten arrested, I was committed to getting him freed, but that was a personal mission. Listening to Ian, I felt what we were doing was important in a different way, in a way that had most of the people in the audience wanting to help, too. Except for the law enforcement types, who were probably wondering how much damage Ian and Sara would cause, but that made me feel good, too.

After the talk, I made my way through the crowd flowing out

of the room, holding my phone to my ear to signal “I’m a busy, sophisticated woman, don’t talk to me” while observing the crowd from over my borrowed reading glasses. People were fired up and debating what Ian had said. Some were talking about donating to the defense fund for the Minneapolis Nine. Others were speculating about what Sara Esfahani was working on. One person, who sounded as if he knew what he was talking about, said “she’ll have a blitzdoc up by midnight.”

I got back to the hotel suite, scrubbed off the makeup, and changed back into my own clothes, just a kid again. Sara was ordering everyone around as she set up her editing equipment, demanding Ian’s presentation slides, sending Nikko off for coffee, snapping out questions and talking to herself as she scooped her curly hair out of her face. Nobody noticed when I grabbed my backpack and slipped out the door.

I biked home and this time didn’t get stopped by any cops and made it to our apartment well before the curfew. Monica, deep into grading papers, sat back and watched me hang up my bike and get out of my cold-weather gear. She looked funny and I wondered if I still had some makeup smudged on my face. “I was on TV yesterday,” she finally said.

“Seriously?”

“My students told me.” She turned her computer screen toward me and clicked on a bookmarked link, saying “I wish I hadn’t worn that stupid hat.” It was a typical local television news story, recapping events in a way that oversimplified and distorted them, running clips of the arrest and some official blathering about terrorist threats. A two-second shot of Sunday’s protest, then twenty seconds of Monica being fierce and brilliant. It ended with the reporter saying “reporting from South Minneapolis,” as if he was in a war zone.

“That was awesome!” I thumped her on the back.

“Not so awesome.”

“The hat didn’t look that bad.” But I could see something else was brewing. “Did it get you in hot water at work?”

“Not so far as I know. It’s your parents. They’re worried that you’re going to get in trouble like Wilson. They want you to move back home.”

“This is my home. You told them no, right?”

“I haven’t told them anything yet. But I need to. They left three voicemails today.”

“But . . . I can’t go back there.” It landed on me, suddenly, a huge black load of horribleness. It wasn’t just the treatment I’d get from my adoptive parents and so-called siblings, which was bad enough. I would be cut off from everything I needed to do. I would never be able to use the equipment in my backpack. The one chance I had to save Wilson would be gone. “I can’t,” I said again. “Tell them no.”

“I didn’t return their calls because you were out late again and I had no idea where you were or what you doing, which would have proven their point. And honestly, what have I been thinking? Out alone at this hour of the night—”

“I made it home before the curfew.”

“You’re a girl. You’re only fifteen.”

“I was with friends. We were working on our project.”

“Look, I know—”

“And what does being a girl have to do with it? I’m supposed to lock myself in at night? Why should I have to—”

I broke off when our downstairs neighbor started thumping a broom handle on the ceiling. I wanted to thump right back, with both feet so hard I would break through the floor and land on the thumper’s stupid head, but I had just enough control to stop myself. Too much was at stake.

“The thing is,” Monica said, “they can revoke my parental authority any time they want.”

“They can’t make me stay out there. I’ll run away.”

“I’m trying to help.” She took a deep breath. “I want this as bad as you, okay? But thanks to that news piece they think I’m some kind of radical leftist. Don’t laugh, they do, and they worry about it because it’s what got Wilson in trouble.”

“What got Wilson in trouble was a paid stooge who lied to him.”

“I know, but think how they feel. They’re worried you’ll get in trouble, too. If they knew you were out late on a regular basis—“

“They let Liv and Karin stay out even later. They go to parties and get drunk and hook up with guys. That’s okay, but working late on a something important isn’t?”

“People aren’t always rational when they’re scared. I’m going to call them tomorrow and try to smooth things over. I couldn’t tonight, because they’d want to know where you were and I’d have to say I didn’t know, just like I didn’t know where you really were when you spent Sunday night away from home.”

“I called you,” I muttered. “I told you where I’d be.”

She rolled her eyes. “Sibley County? Right. Look, you know I trust you, but you need to stay in at night for a while to reassure your parents.”

“But I have stuff to do.”

“Can’t you do it in the daytime?”

“Not always.”

She closed her eyes and pinched the top of her nose with two fingers as if she had a headache up there. “How about a compromise. If you’re going to be out, you have to let me know where you are and let me pick you up when you’re done. I know you value your independence, but we have to do something different or . . .”

Or I’d get sent to a luxurious suburban prison and totally lose any chance I had to help my brother or take down a scumbag rapist. I didn’t have any choice. “Okay, I guess.”

“Good. That might give me some bargaining power. I’m going to make some herb tea before I tackle the rest of this grading. Do you want some?”

I didn’t, really, but I nodded. She was sticking her neck out for me. The least I could do is share a cup of her favorite boiled organic weeds with her.

“You’ve been so busy with your . . .” She made air quotes. “Group project. Are things going all right?”

I shrugged. Having the FBI turn down Nikko’s offer of help was a serious setback. I had no idea if my plan would work, especially since it wouldn’t take long for Jason to wonder what happened to his expensive prototype spy equipment and demand that I give it back. They thought I was too young to do this on my own. But in the last few days I’d talked a legendary lawyer into taking my brother’s case. I’d rescued a fugitive friend from a frozen shack beside the Mississippi River and found a safe place for him to hide out. I’d inspired an MIT professor to make a speech about my brother at an important security conference, and I’d gotten a famous filmmaker interested in making a film about it. I still had stuff to do – like, catch the FBI’s entrapment methods on film and take care of my Secret Avenger client – but I might pull it off. All I needed was some luck and my freedom.

The kettle whistled, she filled the cups, and put one in front of me. I reached for the honey. “Things could be worse,” I said.

The guy who predicted that Sara would have one of her blitzdocs up by midnight was wrong. She didn't get it uploaded until three a.m.

After I finished my boiled weeds, I scanned the Twitter stream from Ian's conference talk and Convoed with Wheeze, who is a night owl like me. Jane Shandy was keeping him occupied, working through the giant sack of hickory nuts and recording a huge Dickens novel so that she could listen to chapters of it when she did chores. His ankle didn't hurt so much, but he had to keep off it, so he sat by the woodstove, hand-feeding the sick chicken and making friends with the dogs. He hadn't yet won over the antisocial cat.

While we texted back and forth, I was scanning through the feeds on the Group. It was all the usual stuff until somebody posted the link to Sara's film.

<inky> Did you guys see this?

<DoDec> Wow.

<inky> <3 <3 <3

<freddieb> Sara Esfahani is teh ossum

I sent Wheeze the link and we watched it together. She must have been busy. The fifteen-minute film took some of Ian's talk and images from his slides, some old film of fascists marching in Europe, photos from the McCarthy hearings and snapshots of old FBI files on Martin Luther King and Occupy Wall Street protesters. There were pages from a report to Congress about

the NSA, covered with black ink, only a word or two allowed to peek out, and photos of other people who had been arrested in fake terrorist stings. Then pictures of my brother and his friends, things she must have found online.

There was Wilson lying in a hammock looking sleepy and innocent. Wilson and Emily holding up matching hand stamps from some concert, clowning for the camera. Their friends sitting around a fire in the overgrown backyard, the light flickering off their faces, all of them looking young and happy in their peaceable corner of a messed-up world. It ended with the familiar video of my brother and his friends being led out of their house with their hands cuffed behind them and my eyes welled up with tears. She made me feel proud and hopeful and angry and ready to fight for justice. But those photos of my brother had opened something up inside me and it hurt. I pictured Wilson, sitting in a cell, worrying that there would be no more hammocks for him, no campfires, no goofing off with his friends. Just cells and scratchy uniforms and rules, surrounded by people full of anger and violence.

I had to get him out. I just had to.

Meanwhile, the Group was enthusing over Ian's talk.

<inky> Damn I wish I was at that conference. ferret's talk was aMAZing. Glad it was livestreamed.

<DoDec> crap, I missed it.

<ferret> thanks, everyone. Conference organizers uploaded it to the Internet Archive.

<inky> great stuff, ferret! that case against the Minneapolis Nine is so transparently bogus

<DoDec> those who forget their history etc. etc.

I sent the link to Ian's talk off to Wheeze and then got ready for bed. I needed to get enough sleep to be ready for a long day of spying.

I couldn't stop obsessing about Wilson, though, so I finally got one of Monica's history books, picking one that seemed especially

boring. I lay on my back and read it until it fell on my face, and I woke up just long enough to set it aside and turn out the light.

~ ~ ~

Monica had left for work by the time I woke up. I made coffee and read about Ian's talk in the tech press. There were major stories at *Wired* and *TechCrunch*. A local news station had a dumb segment about the conference, mostly gawking at cool equipment being demonstrated at the exhibits with stupid references to James Bond, as if government surveillance was as fun as a blockbuster action film. But Sara Esfahani had so many Twitter followers, #Freetheg was trending. I wondered if Wilson had any way of knowing that millions of people around the world were viewing a film about him and his friends. I felt achy, seeing those photos that I'd never seen before, picturing him wearing an orange jumpsuit and sleeping on a hard mattress in a cell with no windows. I hoped Frances Bernadette McSweeney let him know how many people were on his side, even though somebody would have to explain to her what "trending on Twitter" meant.

Once I was caffeinated, I tried on the shirt Nikko had worn to his interview with the FBI. It looked weird, but no weirder than my usual get-up. I spent some time trying to figure out how to aim the camera button without looking too obvious. I also tried to figure out how Sara had made my hair look so good, but stopped when I realized that I didn't want anybody paying special attention to me. Better to look as normal as possible, which meant my usual untamed, lopsided hair. I packed a laptop, phone, and chargers in my backpack, then wrapped up for the weather and carried my bike down the stairs and out in the icy day.

It had dropped twenty degrees, and the snow-packed streets were glazed and icy. By the time I got to the Owl, Simon's favorite hangout, I was half frozen. I was also blind. Though the sky was cloudy and snowflakes were skirling down, the light that bounced off the snowbanks was glaring, so when I went indoors it took a minute for my eyes to adjust. And in that minute, Simon Meyer snuck up on me. Actually, he wasn't sneaking, but I couldn't see

anything, so I jumped when his arm dropped heavily across my shoulders.

“Zen, your brother’s famous.” I recognized his voice before the dark spots cleared from my eyes. “Did you see that crazy documentary? It’s all over the internet.”

“Yeah. Pretty cool, huh?”

“Awesome. Not that the feds give a damn. Are you here for the Solidarity Committee meeting?” There was a sneer in his voice. He was really sore that he didn’t get to be in charge of it.

“Actually, no. The stuff they’re doing isn’t going to make any difference. I just need to be around other people today, what with my brother’s problems and all.” I gave him a sad, soulful look and hoped he didn’t see through me.

“The committee over there is working on their publicity strategy. Developing the brand.” A couple of people from the committee glanced at us and Simon smirked as if he’d just scored a point. “They think they’re so cool, with all their cutesy social media accounts,” he said, shaking his head.

“Playing right into the hands of the surveillance-industrial complex,” I agreed. I went to the counter and ordered coffee, not that I wasn’t already sufficiently wired. Out of the corner of my eye I watched Simon, who settled at a table in the middle of the room, all by himself for once. “Mind if I share?” I asked him, pulling out a chair at his table.

“Be my guest.” He gave me his usual smile as I sat across from him – the one that said “aren’t you lucky to be in the presence of someone as awesome as me?”

I started playing around with my phone while Simon played with his. “Oh, wow,” I said. Simon was so busy texting someone he didn’t notice. “This story is amazing,” I tried again, a little louder, and he looked over. “There’s this new app. It tells you when police cars are nearby. It’s called Oink.”

“Sounds useful.”

“Unfortunately, it won’t work on my phone. They only have an iOS version. That’s an iPhone, right? Can I see it for a minute?”

I took it from his hands and brought up a free app for kids that played animal sounds. I selected it and handed the phone back to him. “Here you go. You need to sign in.” I scooted around and watched closely, concentrating as he typed in his Apple ID. It turned out to be simple to memorize – simonisgr8 and 123me.

He watched the app load, then tapped a pig picture and got an oink. Then he tapped the cow and it mooed. “This can’t be it.”

“Really?” I reached for his phone. “Huh. I wonder if . . .” I held the phone up so that he couldn’t see what I was doing and quickly found and installed the Find My iPhone application and hid it in his Utilities folder. With any luck, he wouldn’t notice it was there, buried among pages of silly game apps. “Oh, crap. The police probably made them remove it from the app store. Sorry.”

“You’re supposed to be good with computers. Why don’t you make an app like that?”

“Maybe I will.”

“It would be handy to know when the pigs are around.” He made some disgusting snorting sounds as he grabbed me and started tickling my waist in not-very-appropriate way.

I giggled, while also throwing up in my mouth a little, and scooted away from him. “Quit it. I need to do homework.”

“Such a serious student.”

“Not really. I’m just trying to take my mind off my brother being in jail.” As I talked, I tilted my laptop away from him and brought up the website where I could log in and track his phone. “I wish I could do something about it, but I can’t get behind what the Solidarity Committee is doing.” A green dot showed our location at the Owl, which gave me an inner *squee* of excitement.

I quickly closed the lid when Simon leaned toward me. “Why’s that?”

I felt along the hem of my shirt until I found the button that turned on the camera. I doubted an FBI stooge was going to join our table anytime soon, but it might be useful to add some visuals to Nikko’s audio recordings.

“It’s just people patting themselves on the back for taking action. But it’s ineffective. Nothing changes.”

He nodded. “I totally get what you’re saying.”

“I mean, the film that woman made is great, but the revolution won’t be televised, you know?”

“Whoa, that’s deep.”

Actually, I didn’t even know what it meant. I’d seen it on a T-shirt. “The guy who put himself in charge is way too full of himself. Besides, setting up Facebook groups doesn’t accomplish anything other than telling the feds who they should be watching. If something’s going to make an impact, it has to come out of left field. Something they won’t expect. Something dramatic.”

“You’re serious.” A funny little smile played on his face. Like, that’s so cute.

“Of course I’m serious. My brother’s in jail.”

He nodded. His expression changed slowly, the smirk turning into something almost thoughtful.

“I don’t even use Facebook,” I went on. “It’s a stupid platform, just a way of distracting people from what’s really going on. I want . . .”

“What?”

“I don’t know. I want to do something. Something serious. Action that matters.”

He looked at me for a long time before saying, “I met some people. There’s a guy . . .” He stopped, frowning in thought.

I glanced around the room and leaned closer. “Yeah?”

“You can’t tell anyone about this, okay? There’s a meeting set for tonight to talk about doing something.”

“Something real?”

“Like you said. Action that matters. Something big, and soon, before everybody forgets about the Minneapolis Nine.”

“I want to be at this meeting.” I put my hand on his, gave it a little squeeze. “I mean, I know I’m kind of young, but it’s my brother who’s in jail.”

“That’s the problem. Maybe you’re being watched because of your famous brother.”

“But I’m not famous. The feds think I’m just a dumb kid, but I know a lot about how to keep my tracks hidden. I’ll be super-careful. Please? This matters to me.”

“I’ll have to check, but it’ll probably be okay.” He tried to sound sure of himself but just sounded nervous.

“I have to be at this meeting. Simon, it would mean everything to me.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Give me your number so I can reach you.” He leaned close and whispered it to me as if he was a spy passing vital information. I saved the contact and smiled at him. “Thanks, Simon. It’s good to know someone who gets it. Who’s willing to do something more meaningful than post Facebook updates.”

“I’ll see what I can do to get you into this meeting. Call me later, like after six.” He checked the time. “Hey, I hate to bail when you’re having a bad day, but I have some business I need to attend to. Will you be okay?”

“Yeah. This dumb homework will keep my mind off my problems. And it helps to know that somebody else thinks like I do.” I tried to look full of gratitude. “It means a lot.”

“I got your back, kiddo.” He slung on his coat, squeezed my shoulders, and left without bussing his dishes – of course. Simon Meyer was too cool for menial tasks like that.

I opened my laptop and refreshed the screen. Simon’s green dot was on the move, heading for the West Bank. I was just thinking about how I could follow him on my bike without him noticing me when my phone rang. It was Monica.

“You need to be home by seven tonight.”

“Why?”

“Your parents are coming over.”

“What? No. Did you talk to them?”

“I called Peter and tried to reassure him that we were okay, that

I understood their concerns and we had made a plan to address them. But . . .”

“This sounds bad.”

“Yeah.” Monica took a deep breath. “It’s bad. He was not receptive.”

“Did you tell him I’m not . . . crap.” My phone made the annoying buzzing it makes when another call is coming in. “He’s calling me, now. I’m not answering.” I closed my laptop and got up. I didn’t want anyone to listen to this conversation, so I went outside into the cold and walked up and down the sidewalk, trying to keep an eye on my stuff through the window while my thoughts whirled.

“We’re going to have to deal with this, Zen.”

“Not now. Not tonight. I have stuff to do. It’s important.”

“They’re coming to our apartment at seven o’clock. They are going to be really upset if you’re not there.”

“So, they’ll be upset. They didn’t ask me if it was convenient.”

“Listen, if you’re home when they get here, maybe we can talk this through and come up with a compromise. If you don’t show up, I’m pretty certain they’re going to revoke my parental authority. If that happens, there’s nothing we can do.”

“Did you tell him I’m not staying with them? Because I’m not.”

“I tried to explain . . .” Monica took a shaky breath. “Zen, you’re a minor. The law isn’t on your side.”

“Great. It’s not on Wilson’s side, either. Did you tell him I’ll run away? He can’t make me stay there.”

“I brought up the possibility. He said if you ran away they’d call the police.”

“They’d sic the cops on me? Are you serious?”

“Of course I’m serious! Zen, dammit. I’m trying to explain why you need to be at this meeting. It’s the only chance we have—”

I clicked my phone off. For a few minutes I couldn’t see anything through my tears, but I kept pacing, saying bad words, trying not to say them too loud because I didn’t want to attract attention, but I could see faces peering at me from inside the

café. I walked to the corner and kicked a newsstand, which was loud, and the base of a lamppost, which hurt. I turned around, embarrassed and angry and limping because my toes were aching.

Then I pulled out my phone and scrolled through my contacts. There weren't many. I hesitated and then tapped Frances Bernadette McSweeney's cell phone number. It rang and rang before she answered faintly. "Hello? Oh for Pete's sake, how does this thing . . . hello?" Her voice was louder this time.

"It's Zen. Wilson's sister."

"What's wrong?" I didn't answer right away, so she added, "Are you all right?"

I took a shaky breath. "No."

"Are the police—"

"It's nothing like that. It's family stuff." I paused to wipe my nose and clear my throat. "I need a place to stay tonight. Can I sleep on your couch?"

"There's a bed upstairs that's more comfortable. Do you need to go there now? I'm at a meeting, but—"

"That's okay. I have stuff to do first. I'll probably be out late."

She hesitated over that, but only for a moment. "You'll find a spare key under a stone turtle to the right of the front steps. Probably covered in snow, but it's there. I'll tell my neighbors that I'm expecting a guest."

"Thanks."

I disconnected before she could ask any awkward questions.

I biked to Wilson Library on automatic pilot. It wasn't until I found a carrel near an electrical outlet hidden away in the stacks that I began to think about what I needed to do. I switched my phone on and logged into the website that was tracking Simon's movements. Then I opened my laptop to check his location with Google Street Views. I switched back and forth, using Tor to avoid leaving a trail of my own. He had stopped at a corner store, then zigzagged through the university buildings on the West Bank. I watched the green dot cross the footbridge to the East Bank, then into the student union, where it stopped for a while. Doing a little business with students, probably, selling some weed. I stared at the dot, trying not to think about my parents tromping up the stairs to our apartment and ruining everything. The dot moved again, heading off campus, crossing University Avenue, ending up on 4th, where the dot stopped again.

The minutes ticked by. It looked as if he was staying put, even though Street Views showed it was just an intersection with a McDonald's on one side and apartments on the other. The corner he was on was just sidewalk and a railing, no buildings. I zoomed in. The railings looked over a submerged railroad track that angled under the road. Why would he be standing there? I stared at it for a while, then decided to check it out.

I biked over, muffled in a scarf with a stocking hat pulled down to my eyebrows, looking pretty much like any idiot riding a bike

on a day when the temperature was in the single digits. I rode up on the far side of the street, hoping he wouldn't recognize me under all of that winter gear. The corner was completely empty. I checked the website on my phone again, then crossed the street and looked over the bridge. Nothing. Just a biting November wind. It wasn't until I went into McDonald's that my brain thawed out and I realized the obvious.

He had turned off his phone.

But why?

I noticed that some messages had piled up on my phone. A photo of the skeptical cat, finally curled up in Wheeze's lap. A string of texts from Monica and my adoptive father, which I didn't read but which made me sick to my stomach anyway. A message from Zeke.

<Falstaff> Jason's tearing the place apart looking for that shirt. I DIDN'T TELL.

<zen> thx. Something's happening tonight. I was tracking Simon Meyer, but I lost him.

<Falstaff> where?

<zen> northeast corner of SE 4th and 15th ave.

He didn't respond, so I read more coverage of the security conference, but none of it made sense. I couldn't concentrate. I bought a coffee so that I would have an excuse to be sit there, not sure what to do, not wanting to go to Frances Bernadette McSweeney's house and face a cross-examination. Every now and then I checked the phone tracker to see if the green dot had reappeared, but nope. The stress about my adoptive parents coming after me and the smell of greasy meat and pickles and the sound of college students screeching at each other combined in a big ball of churning nerves that made me feel like puking.

Then another message from Zeke came in.

<Falstaff> he got into a car.

<Zen> ??

<Falstaff> he stood on that corner for six

barbara fister

minutes. At 15:22 a black SUV pulled up and he got in.

<Zen> how do you know?

<Falstaff> the CVS across the street has a security camera that picks up that corner.

<Zen> you hacked their system?

<Falstaff> it's a joke. Company they contract with transmits their data in the clear. The driver was a big guy, kind you wouldn't want to mess with.

<Zen> Can you put his image through facial recognition?

<Falstaff> Too low res for that. crappy security is crappy. Couldn't get the car's plates either.

<Zen> still - nice work. Thanks for trying.

<Falstaff> no prob. Be careful, grasshopper.

A big guy in a dark SUV. Could be some drug dude higher up the supply chain who knew enough to order Simon to turn his phone off while they did their business.

I would just have to be patient until six p.m., when Simon told me to call about the meeting. For some reason the stomachache went away. I threw out my half-finished cup of cold coffee and biked to the nearest university library to hang out until Simon turned his phone back on.

The green dot reappeared two hours later, just before six p.m. It popped up on Franklin close to the bridge over I-35, moved north, and then stopped and stayed put. I studied the street view. The green dot was smack-dab on a big ramshackle house. I realized I had actually been there with Wilson once, in the days when Wilson still talked to me before Zip came along. It was semi-famous. Back in the eighties it had been a punk house where bands and artists routinely stayed when they were passing through town. Now it was a decrepit hangout for artists and traveling activists who weren't into home repair.

I called Simon's number. "Hi, it's Zen. That thing tonight. Can I come?"

"Yeah. It's cool. Just don't tell anyone else about it, and make sure nobody follows you." He told me where it was happening – exactly where the green dot had landed on the map.

~ ~ ~

It was a strange group of revolutionaries, a handful of artsy, talkative people in their twenties and a toddler with a dirty face, listening to music, drinking beer, and passing joints. As Simon introduced me, I tried to guess who was the most likely FBI informant. Could it be Tweak? He had curly red hair and kept waving his beer bottle around, talking about the coming revolution and his plan to move to Colorado to get established growing excellent weed before legalization took off and swept the whole country. Or maybe it was the man named Cemil who sat in a relaxed slump except for one knee that was jiggling to a fast, nervous rhythm out of sync with the music. He was an engineering student whose claim to fame was being involved in the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, but he seemed shy and uncomfortable and when others spoke to him, his response was to lean forward and ask, "excuse me?"

Marita was the only other woman there. She alternated speeches about the cruelty of neoliberal austerity policies with grabbing things away from her baby and comforting him when he roared in protest. (None of the guys helped, of course; they were all too busy talking about social justice and inequality.) There were also a bunch of indistinguishable artsy types who offered pithy opinions about Palestine and the one percent and environmental catastrophe in between talking about bands and the awesome indie film a friend was making. None of them seemed to have enough intensity or political passion to be an informant pretending to be a revolutionary – until Danny arrived.

He was older than the others, and rougher around the edges. He sat on the edge of a chair and chain smoked, his cigarette clenched tightly between knuckles tattooed with faded blue ink.

When Simon introduced him to me, Danny slapped his hand in mine and shook with a painfully strong grip.

“Zen’s brother is one of the Minneapolis Nine,” Simon told him proudly, as if I belonged to him. He even reached out and cupped the back of my head, wagging it back and forth like I was his puppet before I pulled away.

“Don’t remember any of them being black.” Danny squinted at me, and the others suddenly seemed on alert, like him.

“We have different dads.”

He grunted, still suspicious. He seemed to have some kind of leadership position in the house, given the way the others deferred to him as said the usual things about oppression and Wall Street, but when he talked about his involvement in the protests he seemed proudest of how many windows he’d broken and how narrowly he’d escaped arrest.

“See that?” he said to me, holding up his palm, shiny with pink scars.

“Ow.”

“That’s what happens when you pick up a tear gas canister and throw it back at the pigs. Those suckers are hot.” He looked at his scarred hand, smiling, as if it was some kind of badge. “So, what do you think?” He looked around the room. “You guys ready for some action?”

“Hell yeah, we’re ready,” Simon said, adding, “can you turn that down?”

Cemil leaned forward. “Excuse me?”

“The music. Turn. It. Down,” Simon said. Cemil turned to adjust the sound and Simon rolled his eyes. Such hard work, communicating with foreigners. “Yeah, we should do something. Not just feel-good protests and Facebook groups. Something real.”

People in the circle nodded. Danny took a bottle out of Tweak’s hand. “Improvised incendiary device, right here, man.”

“Hey, let me finish it first,” Tweak said, snatching it back.

“All you’d need is some gasoline and rags,” Simon agreed.

“Take five minutes. Or fertilizer. Oklahoma City? One truck, a load of fertilizer, and that building was destroyed, man. They say you could hear the blast fifty miles away.”

“Same shit took out a building at the University of Wisconsin back when students knew what resistance really looks like,” Danny said. “Not so easy to get the right kind of fertilizer these days, though.”

“Hey, Cemil,” Simon said. “You know how to make bombs?”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re studying chemistry. I’ll bet you know how to make stuff explode.” Simon demonstrated with his hands flying out. “Boom.”

Cemil’s eyes widened. “Why are you saying this nonsense?”

“You’re the one who wanted to overthrow what’s-his-name, that president of yours.”

“Our protests were not violent. We got tear-gassed. We got beaten. We stood in the park with books, reading silently.”

“Bet that scared the shit out of them.” Simon held up his palms. “The bomb thing? It was just a joke, okay?”

Marita patted his knee. “Don’t listen to these jerks. They’re just goofing off.”

“Okay.” Cemil rubbed his palms on his jeans. “But now I have to study. I have a big exam on Friday.”

“Don’t go telling people about our jokes, you got that?” Danny jabbed his cigarette at Cemil. “Cops don’t have a sense of humor. And they don’t like Arabs.”

“I’m Turkish.”

“Whatever.”

Marita smiled at Cemil and he smiled back nervously and patted the baby on the head before hurrying out of the house, away from these crazy people. Okay, scratch him off the list of possible informants.

Tweak started laughing. It was contagious, but Danny stubbed out his cigarette and muttered, “Gotta watch that guy.”

“He’s fine,” Marita said. “He’s on a student visa, he won’t want to screw that up. Has a family back home to support.”

“You got his whole life story, huh?” There was a kind of coiled violence in the way Danny spoke that sent a shiver down my spine.

“Yeah, so?” She fixed eyes with him for a moment and then looked away. “I’m going to put the kid to bed.” She hauled herself up, picked up the baby and a bottle of beer and headed for the stairs.

Tweak started talking about actions he had participated in and Danny bragged about setting cars on fire during a protest. Simon, not to be outdone, ranted about police brutality and I threw in a speech of my own about mass surveillance. I checked my phone every now and then. I ignored the missed calls and message notifications and only paid attention to the time. When I’d been there for nearly two hours, I asked where the bathroom was. I needed to download the video I’d shot before the memory ran out.

I went up the stairs and paused by an open door. Marita was sitting on a bed next the baby, rubbing his back and humming, even though the kid was totally conked out.

“Bathroom?” I whispered.

She pointed down the hall. As I turned away I heard a shaky breath. I looked back to see her rubbing her eyes with the heel of one hand before she leaned over the baby, her straggly hair shielding her face. I hesitated for a moment, then went to the bathroom where the walls were covered in scribbled messages and doodles and the shower curtain was speckled with grunge.

At least the door had a latch that worked. I locked myself in, switched on my laptop, and dug out the cable to connect the memory strip in the shirt to a USB port. Once the video finished downloading, I plugged earbuds into the jack and ran a few seconds of it to make sure it was working. The sound was good, the picture sharp. Unfortunately, most of it was a nice, clear shot of the wall between Danny’s head and Simon’s. I thought about how I could position myself so that I could get their faces better

centered on the screen as Danny encouraged violence and Simon got sucked up into the fantasy the way my brother did when his hero Zip spun a web of lies.

I packed up my gear, flushed the toilet, washed my hands and wiped them on my jeans because the only towel available looked like it hadn't been in the laundry since Hüsker Dü had passed through. (I knew about Hüsker Dü because Wilson once gave me a copy of their 1984 double album *Zen Arcade*, which is a pivotal work in the history of hardcore punk, or so he told me.) As I headed for the stairs I heard a choked sob coming from the bedroom.

"You okay?" I asked Marita.

"Yeah. It's just . . ." She brushed a hand across the sleeping baby's hair. "Men, you know?"

"Totally." Actually, I didn't know.

"I mean, Danny's a sweet guy. He just doesn't get how big a responsibility it is to raise a child."

"How old is he?" I asked, pointing at the kid, because that's what people usually say.

"Fourteen months. If you asked Danny he would probably say 'nine months' or 'two years' or some wild guess. He loves him, really he does." She made it sound as if we were arguing about it. "It's just . . . being involved in this scene is really important to him."

"Being committed to radical change is cool."

She shrugged. "He likes being important. I just wish we could get a place of our own. What are you doing here, anyway?"

"I have to help my brother."

"By hanging out with them?" She snorted. "That guy, Simon. Are you together?"

"No. I just asked him if I could come to the meeting."

"Is that what they're calling it, a meeting? They sure love to talk, anyway." She reached down, picked up beer bottle, shook it side to side, then set it down murmuring sadly "all gone" as if she was talking to the sleeping baby. "If the police come here and see us

living in this dump and decide to jam us up . . . That's what scares me the most." She twirled a lock of the baby's hair and wiped her eyes again. "If they took him away, I don't know what I'd do."

"You'd fight to get him back."

She nodded and wiped her nose. "I would, too," she said to herself, then drew her legs up to curl herself around her sleeping baby, rubbing his back and humming a lullaby. He was sound asleep, so I figured she was singing it for herself.

I went back downstairs and took my chair. Danny gave me suspicious look.

"I was talking to Marita. Your baby is really cute."

He frowned, but after a moment he bumped Simon's arm and gestured for another beer. It felt like I had passed a test. I found the button on the shirt to film some more, trying to keep an imaginary line straight between the top button of my shirt and the faces that needed to be on the film.

By this time Tweak and Simon were sharing a fat spliff and giggling about nothing. I prodded them with questions about politics. It set off a competition to see who was more dangerous.

"When I was a kid," Simon said. "We got some sticks of dynamite once? We were going to blow up a public toilet in a park just for the hell of it, but the guy who stashed it in his closet didn't hide it good. His dad reported him to the police."

"Man, where I grew up, we used dynamite all the time," Danny bragged. "I set charges when I was eleven.."

"What were you doing with all that dynamite?" I asked.

"Blowing up stumps. I grew up on a farm. My uncle was so good at it he went into building demolition. Gave me lessons on how to bring buildings down. There's an art to it."

"You can do that?" Simon asked. "Like on TV?"

"If I had the blueprints and the material, I could bring the dome of the state capital down. That would be something to see, huh?"

Simon looked awed. Also, stoned.

"Not saying it would be easy. There's no way you could place

the charges where they'd have to go without being noticed. Now, if you wanted to go for something smaller . . ."

"Like what?"

"That police station on Lake Street?" one of the artsy types said, trying to sound dangerous. "I been in there way too many times."

Simon nudged me. "You're always fooling around on the internet. Could you get blueprints of the building?"

I frowned as if I was actually thinking about it. "It's not that old. The city would have put it out for competitive bidding," I said, totally lying. "The blueprints would probably be on a city server."

"You could hack in there?"

"Probably." Not really.

"Sweet. And you could get the explosives from your uncle . . ." Simon said to Danny.

Danny sat back on the ratty couch and gave Simon a twisted grin. "Dude, you're serious."

"What do you think we've been talking about?"

"What would be cooler?" Danny lit another cigarette. He liked gesturing with cigarettes. "Car bombs."

Simon nodded. "Like, fill up a car with explosives and park it outside—"

"No, like under cop cars. Remote controlled. Put a couple sticks of dynamite under the chassis, use a key fob to set 'em off. Do three or four of those, one right after the other, and every cop in the city would be having a panic attack."

"I did that with paint once."

"Blew up cop cars with paint?"

"No. I threw a balloon full of red paint on a bankster's car. Splat, all over the windshield. He was crapping his pants." Simon realize his score in *Who Wants to Be a Revolutionary* was slipping and added "It was an impulse thing. But if you can scare somebody with a little paint, imagine what bombs could do. You know how to set a device like that up?"

“It’s not that complicated. I’ve seen instructions on the internet.”

“I’ll bet you could get the dynamite from your uncle.”

“Could.” Danny sucked on his cigarette and blew out a stream of smoke. “But he got in some legal difficulty. Spent too much on lawyers and had to file chapter eleven. Otherwise, totally.”

“You know how to do it, though?” Simon asked.

“Hell, yeah. I would love to see those pigs squeal. We’re living in a police state. They’re tightening the screws all the time, monitoring what we say, where we go. Mass surveillance, like she said.” He turned to me. “Would you do it?”

Suddenly, everyone was looking at me.

“Do what?”

Danny sat forward, his elbows on his knees, giving me a hypnotic stare. “Let’s say it’s all set up. You’re standing there, holding the key fob in your hand. You can pick your time, then press that button and *whoomp*, the cruiser’s a ball of flames. Would you do it?”

Danny’s eyes were drilling into me. If I said no, the conversation would be over. He’d tell me he was just kidding and send me on my way, like Cemil. If I said yes and he was wearing a wire, I would be incriminating myself.

“It’s all theoretical, anyway,” I said. “You don’t have the stuff to work with.”

Danny smiled, wide enough to show his canines, sharp and wolfish. “Chickenshit.”

“Isn’t there some other way you could get the stuff?” Simon asked him.

“When my uncle was in business, would have been easy.” He reached for another beer and twisted the cap off.

“Yeah, right. You’re all talk.”

Danny scowled at him. “It’s not that easy, yo. You can’t just walk into Hardware Hank and ask for it. Stuff’s regulated.”

“What if I could get it?”

“Yeah, sure.” Danny drank deeply.

“For real,” Simon said. “I have a connection.”

“A connection, wow.” Danny laughed like it was the punchline of a joke, but Simon didn’t join in.

“Write down what you need. I’ll get it.”

Danny looked at him, the smile fading. This time, he was the one being tested.

That’s when I finally realized Danny wasn’t working for the FBI. Simon was.

He could have been recruited ages ago. The cops might have pulled Simon in on a drug charge, then realized that he was part of the same scene as local activists, old enough for the job, and easily jammed up because he paid his rent by selling weed to his friends. Given a choice between jail and helping them stage some security theatre, I knew which one Simon would choose. Whoever was in that black SUV who had picked him up in the afternoon might have been coaching him for this meeting.

Danny stared at Simon for a moment, then gave him a slight nod, as if they had just made a private agreement. “Tweak, you got any of that weed left?”

I pretended to drink some beer. Somebody started talking about a new arts space some friends were opening. Others got into an argument about some movie I’d never heard of. Danny said he was going out for a smoke and left through the front door. Nobody seemed to notice what a stupid excuse it was, given that every dish in the place was overflowing with squashed butts. A moment later, Simon followed, holding a pack of cigarettes like a prop.

“Is there anything to eat in the kitchen?” I asked the room. Nobody paid attention when I got up and slipped out the back door. I circled around the side of the house, where there was a crust on top of the snow, making my feet crunch. The snow under the tangle of bushes growing along the foundation was softer, so I bent down and crept forward under the bushes as silently as

possible, spilling snow down my neck from the branches. I got to the front porch and heard a mumble of voices.

I had to get closer, so crawled between two clumps of spiky evergreen shrubs, then straightened up beside the porch cautiously until my head was even with the flooring. It was like turning up the volume.

“You trust these guys?” Something moved a few inches from my face and I realized it was the toe of Danny’s boot, kicking snow off the porch.

“They’re solid.”

Something stung my arm. I thought at first it was just a clump of ice melting, but then a glowing ember drifted past my face and I realized some cigarette ash had landed on my sleeve. Not my sleeve, Jason’s expensive spy-shirt sleeve. I brushed it off quickly, hoping it hadn’t left a hole.

“You hear that?”

I froze. The shoe beside my head moved and the wooden banister creaked as someone leaned over it. More snow sifted off the evergreens and down my neck.

“What?”

Seconds ticked by. “Must have been a squirrel.”

“Tell me what you need. I’ll set it up,” Simon wheedled. Danny grunted. Seriously, we need to get something real going.”

“What do you mean, *we*? You said you weren’t even going to be there.”

“Hey, you don’t need me. They have the stuff, you have the skills. Boom.” Simon giggled. “No pun intended.” Danny didn’t laugh. “I’m just happy if I can make connections. I’ll talk to them, okay?”

Danny grunted. “Yeah, whatever. It’s freezing out here. I’m going in.”

I heard Simon’s footsteps creaking as he paced alone on the porch, muttering. When the creaking came closer I realized he was whispering to someone on his phone. “He’s definitely ready.” The words faded as he walked away, but the tone of his muttering

sounded like an argument. “No way! I’m not going to risk my reputation. You can do this without me.” As he wandered back my way his words got clearer. “Exactly. All you got to do is meet with him, do your thing, boom. Get it? Boom.” He laughed, then sighed dramatically. “No, I’m not stoned. Look, I’ll call you.”

I waited until I heard the front door open and close, then crawled out of the bushes and crunched my way to the back door, thinking about what to do. As important as it was to free my brother, I also wanted to be sure Simon’s reputation was ruined for good. I was worried the film I had made so far wasn’t damning enough, that people wouldn’t believe good old Simon was working for the feds unless they saw him high-fiving an FBI agent as the bust went down. I stomped the snow off my boots and went into the kitchen.

“What were you doing out there?” Tweak was standing at the refrigerator.

“Somebody said there was more beer on the back porch, getting cold,” I improvised. “There wasn’t.”

“Just you getting cold.” He laughed at me as I rubbed my arms and shivered, then he handed me a beer. Just what I needed, a cold beverage. I carried it out to the front room and handed it to someone else. I checked my phone. “Crap!” I blurted without thinking.

“What’s the matter?” Simon was acting friendly again, all concerned.

“Almost curfew. I gotta go.” Getting stopped by cops now would really mess things up.

“I’m heading out, too.” Simon grabbed his coat, bumped fists with people, pointed a finger gun at Danny and said “We’ll talk.” Then he caught up with me as I went out on the porch. “How are you getting home?”

“I have my bike.” It was dark, but the lights of the highway not far away cast a purple glow in the sky. If I rode fast, I might make it to Francis Bernadette McSweeney’s house before curfew – barely.

“Where do you live?” he asked, pulling on a wool cap.

“I, um . . . actually, I’m not going home. Family drama.”

“Bummer.” He put an arm around me and gave me a sympathetic squeeze. He was good at seeming genuinely sympathetic, but being hemmed in by his arm made my skin crawl.

“Do you need a place to stay?”

“Well, I . . .” My words trailed away as I looked at the phone he was holding and realized it wasn’t his iPhone. As I watched, it vibrated in his hand. He read a message and typed a short reply. Maybe it was official government equipment on loan from the FBI.

“You’re welcome to my couch,” he said, slipping the phone back into his pocket.

“I was going to stay with a friend, but . . .”

“Whatever. But seriously, I don’t mind, and my place isn’t far from here.”

I wanted to see that phone. I wanted to search his apartment. I had a plan.

A totally insane plan that made me feel excited and daring.

Also, terrified.

~ ~ ~

At first it played out the way I expected. As I walked my bike beside him, he told me he had just picked up a new album from this great local band, and I had to hear it. Vinyl produced a much better sound than digital. Exactly the same pitch he’d used on “Charlie,” the Secret Avenger’s client. I was still weighing my options, trying to figure out if the plan that had come to me would work or if I should make an excuse and bail. After a few blocks we stopped in front of a decrepit house. “That’s me, up there.” He pointed up a flight of wooden stairs on the side of the two-story rental. “Let’s listen to the album, and then I’ll make up the couch for you.”

“I don’t want to be any trouble.”

“People crash at my place all the time.” He took my free hand and acted concerned. “Don’t you worry about getting frostbite, biking in this weather?”

I could see myself indoors, playing along. We’d listen to the

music and when he wasn't looking, I'd swap our wine glasses. Once he passed out, I would take a good look at both of his phones. I'd find his computer and copy his hard drive.

I was brave. I was the Secret Avenger. I could do this.

"You talked me into it," I said, and locked my bike to the fence beside the staircase before following him up the steps, shivering but not from the cold. Inside, his apartment smelled like an ashtray that hadn't been washed in about ten years. There was a ratty couch, a desk piled with papers and unopened junk mail, a bed in one corner, shelves that held a fancy turntable and a lot of records. He scooped some junk off the couch and threw it in a corner. "Make yourself at home."

I took off my coat but left my boots on in case I needed to make a run for it. Besides, the carpet was disgusting. I pretended to browse through the albums as he disappeared into the kitchen, reappearing suddenly to hand me a glass of wine. "You'll like this. It's a little on the sweet side, but it has a spicy nip to it. Very sophisticated." He tapped a beer bottle against my glass. "Cheers."

Crap. "You're not having wine?"

"Nah, I'll save it all for you."

So much for my plan. I knelt down to examine one of the albums and set the glass on the floor before accidentally knocking it over. "Oh, darn. Sorry."

When I turned to apologize, his mouth was a tight, angry line, but he instantly turned it into a smile. "Don't worry about it. I'll get you a refill."

After counting to five, I followed him into the little kitchen. "Do you have some paper towels?"

He dropped something into a drawer and nudged it shut with his hip. "By the sink."

I ripped some paper towels off the roll and went back out to mop up the wine, feeling his eyes on my back. A minute later, he came back with another glass of wine, giving it to me with a big smile. Good old Simon. I wandered around the room, pretending to be interested in the view from the front windows. With my

back turned toward him I poured half the glass out into one of the dead plants on his windowsill, saying as I did it, "What you were saying before. You actually have a connection? I mean, for explosives?"

"I know all kinds of people. But enough politics for one night. Come sit down, get comfortable. Let's listen to some music."

I plopped beside him on the couch and sent instructions to my face: smile, dammit.

"Like that wine, huh?" He nodded at the half-empty glass.

"Yeah. Gotta slow down, though. It's going to my head."

"You've been under so much stress. It's good to relax." He reached out as if to touch my cheek and I flinched. "Hey, sorry." He shifted to the far end of the couch. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable. Is this better?"

I was about to say no, it wasn't, that I was going to go stay with a friend after all, when his phone rang. He felt one pocket, then another. I took advantage of his distraction and tipped what was left of my wine onto the couch, adjusting a cushion to cover the wet spot. He pulled out the black phone. "This isn't a good time," he said, giving me a wink.

I gave him a goofy grin, then yawned and closed my eyes, letting my head fall back, the empty glass tilted in my lap. "Hang on." I sensed him leaning over me and willed myself to imitate a dead person. He nudged my shoulder and I snuffled and settled deeper into pretend sleep. "It's okay. We can talk." He stood and walked over to the front windows. I hoped he didn't smell the wine I'd used to water his dead plant.

"Tomorrow morning?" he murmured after listening to someone at the other end. "Isn't that rushing things? No, he's ready, but . . ." He listened again, then said, forgetting to whisper, "Fine, fine. I'll call him right now. Jeez."

I heard him moving around. Feeling a moment of panic, I opened my eyes a crack. He was patting his jeans pockets while swearing, then rummaged through his coat and pulled out his iPhone. "Hey, Danny. How's it going? Listen, I talked to my guys.

They want to meet up. How's tomorrow morning for you?" He picked up his beer and wandered out of my view. "I know, but like I said, they've been looking for an ally with the right technical skills. There aren't too many people like you, Danny, committed to social justice and with your specialized knowledge. The thing is, it's got to happen now, while the Minneapolis Nine are still in the news. Your place? Awesome. I'll let them know. Right, absolutely. You can trust me, man." One of Simon's weird talents was that when he said things like that, they sounded true even though they were total lies.

I had the weird sensation that he was looking at me in the quiet that followed, so I fake-snored a little. It didn't sound as authentic as his lies did, but it must have made him feel safe making one more phone call. "We're set," I heard him say. "Tomorrow at noon, his place."

The next sound I heard made ice slide down my spine: the front door bolt sliding home. I heard Simon jiggle the doorknob a little, making sure it was locked tight. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. "Whoa! Guess I fell asleep!" I guessed I was overacting, too, but I was nervous. "Where's the bathroom?"

"Through the kitchen."

"Tell you what. You go through all that." I flapped my hand at his vinyl collection. "Pick out your top ten albums of all time. Then you can tell me what makes them so great, okay? I don't know much about music. You can educate me." My voice sounded wobbly, but that was probably okay because I was supposed to be half-drugged by now.

"Sure."

"Back in a sec." I gave him a flirty wave. I remembered to stumble a little as I headed for the kitchen. Checking to be sure that I was out of his line of sight, I quietly opened the fridge and slipped out a beer. Then I carefully pulled open the drawer I'd seen him close. It was jammed full of prescription bottles. I grabbed as many as I could carry and took them and the beer into the bathroom. After locking myself in, I read the labels: Valium,

Oxycodin, a sleeping pill I'd seen advertised on TV, and something called Seroquel. I didn't know what that was, but it had a warning label that said it would make you too sleepy to operate heavy equipment. I spilled a bunch of pills onto the floor and crushed them to powder with my heel. I opened the beer, swept the pill-dust into my palm and funneled it into the bottle, swirling it until the powder was dissolved and none of it was clinging to the sides. Then I hid the prescription bottles behind the toilet, flushed and washed my hands. They were shaking. I took a deep breath before going back out to the kitchen, where I grabbed the wine and tottered back to front room, a bottle in each hand.

"Is that for me?" He grinned up at me, sitting on the floor, surrounded by albums.

I gave him the beer and splashed more wine into my glass. "I should go easy on this stuff. It's making me feel kind of . . . whoa."

He reached for me. I giggled and stepped away, wandering the room again as he put an album on. "You'll like this. It's like the second coming of the Ramones. Channeling rage, you know?"

"Awesome." It sounded like random, pounding noise. Or maybe that was just my heart slamming in my chest and my subconscious telling me to run far, far away. "Bottoms up." I held up my glass, challenging him. He obediently tipped his beer up and chugged, downing it all in a few gulps. I twirled around, saying "Whee!" like an idiot, catching a glimpse of him frowning and licking his upper lip. Steadying myself against the windowsill, I watered another plant. "A toast!" I said, holding up my empty glass.

He grinned and held up his empty bottle. "To good music," he said.

"To good . . . oh wait, I need a refill." I giggled and fell forward. He caught me and I cringed as he scrunched me close and lowered his face to mine for a kiss, his disgusting tongue flicking around my clenched teeth. I pushed him away. "Hey, we were going to toast."

He took the glass, leering at me. "Sure thing."

“And you,” I pointed at him, swaying a little. “You need to get another beer so we can do it right.”

“Okie doke.” I stared after him as he walked steadily into the kitchen. How long would it take? I looked over to the door, measuring the steps to throw the bolt, grab my coat, and run down the stairs. I wouldn’t have time to unlock my bike. I would just run. The music faded away between songs. I could still feel his icky wet tongue flicking around my mouth like a giant slimy slug. But before I could move he was back, He filled my glass and handed it to me, then tapped his fresh beer bottle against it.

He leaned in, but I raised my glass and pretended to drink, fending him off. “What’s your next favorite record? Can we play that one now before I get too sleepy?”

He studied me for a minute, then lifted the record off the turntable and started to fit another one over the spindle. “You’ll love this one. Taps into the blues tradition.”

“Cool.” All of the artists on the album cover he was showing me were skinny white guys, but this didn’t seem like the moment for a lecture on cultural appropriation.

He switched the record on and watched the arm plunk the needle down. Somebody wailed about first-world problems in a high voice. Simon stood and reached for me. I dodged away, laughing. “I’m kinda drunk.”

“That’s okay.”

“You have to catch up with me. Drink your beer.” I shook my finger at him like a child giving orders. He laughed and guzzled some down. I tipped my glass back and pretended to drink, letting some slosh as I wiped my mouth with my sleeve, suddenly worried that I would spill wine over the expensive spy-camera shirt. I realized the camera was still on, recording everything. I felt hot, ashamed. And scared. He grabbed me and we teetered together before collapsing onto the couch.

“Whew, I feel weird,” I said.

“You look tired.” He pushed his face close to mine. His chin

wobbled a little, as if it was getting loose on the hinges of his jaw. "How about a little nap?"

"How about album number three? Just one more before I fall asleep. Pleeese, Simon?" I eyed the door as he crouched down and shuffled through the albums he'd picked out. It took three tries before he could fit another one on the spindle.

"Best band in the Twin Cities. Now, let's cuddle up. Time for a li'l nap. Come here." When he stood, he lost his balance, catching himself on the arm of the couch. He laughed, then lunged and grabbed me. He wasn't steady on his feet, but he was strong. We stumbled toward the bed, his hands gripping my arms tight. My heel caught on the edge of the bed, and we tumbled onto it, Simon's arm knocking against the wall. "Ow," he said, surprised.

"You need ice on that?"

He just laughed and climbed on top of me, the music pounding away. I rolled him to one side and kissed him to distract him. Ugh, that tongue. He tried to push a hand down the back of my pants. I wriggled away and straddled him.

He smiled lazily, then reached for my shirt with clumsy hands, trying to unbutton it. I pushed them away and slid toward the edge of the bed, but he grabbed my wrist, tight. "Where you going?"

"Too much wine." I giggled like a maniac, resisting the urge to yank my wrist out of his grasp. "Got to use the john again. I'll be right back."

He pulled my hand close and gave my knuckles a romantic kiss, but his words sounded angry. "Don't be long."

"I won't!" My giggling threatened to get out of control as I hurried through the kitchen into the little bathroom. I locked myself on in and sat on the toilet, shaking. In the other room I heard his slurring sing-song voice, "Hey, getting lonely out here."

"Just a minute," I called out, staring at the door. It was a flimsy little lock. I remembered how strong his hands had felt. One good pull and he would be able to yank it open. There was a window over the toilet, but it was tiny, much too small for me to climb

through. I remembered to switch off the camera, finally, and looked around for a weapon. There was a can of Axe I could spray into his eyes. If I broke the spotty mirror over the sink, I might be able to pull out a shard to stab him with. I could probably find a knife in the kitchen but I was too scared to unlock the door.

“Baaaaybee . . . “ His blurry voice faded. I held the spray can so tight my hand hurt, listening, half expecting him to wrench the door open and grab me. I waited. Then I waited some more.

~ ~ ~

When the record finished playing and everything was quiet I finally opened the door. I found a knife beside the sink and held it and the spray can as I went through to the room where he was curled up on the bed. I watched him. He didn't move. When I nudged him with the toe of my boot, it felt like I was poking a sandbag.

I started to breathe again. I stepped across the room, set down the can, unbolted the door, and grabbed my bag and coat. I was standing outside on the porch, still holding the knife, when the cold air seemed to clear away the fog in my head. I remembered why I had come to his apartment in the first place. My feet felt as if they were weighted with lead as I stepped back inside.

I walked back to the bed, moving as quietly as I could. He was curled on his side. His iPhone was sticking out of his back pocket. I took the top of it with my finger and thumb and cautiously drew it out.

Where would he charge his phone? Near the bed. I found the power cord, switched on my computer, set the knife down, plugged the USB end into it and logged in using his passcode. I browsed through recent messages. None of them made sense to me; my head was full of a shrill warning: *go, go, you should go*. I couldn't figure out how to copy his message files or contacts, but I dragged all of his stored videos and photos to my desktop. While I waited for them to finish copying, I studied Simon. He wasn't moving. I watched him closely and saw he was still breathing. But he was out so cold he didn't move as I gritted my teeth and went

through his pockets, looking for the other phone. He had slid it into the right pocket, I remembered. The side he was lying on. I pushed his shoulder and hip and rolled him over on his back. He groaned and I felt all of my muscles go tight. Then he snuffled and started to snore.

I reached for the phone, powered it on and saw I would need a password. I tried 123me. I tried simonisgr8. I tried all the lazy passwords I could think of, but nothing worked. I considered taking it with me and letting Zeke have a crack at it, but decided it wasn't worth the risk. I wiped it down with the corner of my shirt and slid it back into his pocket. I wiped the iPhone off and then everything else I remembered touching, just in case.

I got the prescription bottles from behind the toilet and put them back into the drawer with the others, arranging them so the labels showed and taking a photo in case I needed proof. Then I wiped them all off because I couldn't remember which ones I'd handled.

There was a Sharpie on the counter and it gave me an idea. Even though it said "permanent marker" on the side, it wouldn't be as permanent as a tattoo, but then, I didn't have a tattoo gun handy. I tried to remember the exact words from the book that Monica and I had both read. We'd had a good discussion about it. Was Lisbeth Salander truly feminist or was *The Girl With a Dragon Tattoo* just another form of gendered exploitation?

A feminist, I decided. For a moment I felt Simon's hands, tasted his grotty mouth, felt his tongue poking around my teeth. I spat on the floor, then went over to the bed and pushed up his shirt to expose his white belly. I braced myself, waiting to see if he would rise up like a zombie. Then I wrote across his ribs and stomach in big block letters

I AM
A PIG AND
A RAPIST

barbara fister

It might not have been a totally accurate quote, but it was close enough.

I called a cab, took enough money from Simon's wallet to pay for it, then argued with the driver about putting my snowy bike in his trunk. I must have sounded extra fierce because he suddenly gave in with a big sigh.

The little house on Bedford Street was dark. I dug through the snow beside the steps to find the key under the stone turtle, which took a while. There were a lot of rocks under the snow doing stone-turtle imitations. My fingers were so sore and frozen by the time I found the key I could hardly pick it up.

Inside, I made my way through a clutter of old boots and other junk to the staircase, where I found a pillow, some towels, and a big cotton T-shirt that said NATIONAL LAWYERS GUILD KNOW YOUR RIGHTS on it. There was a note on top, written in her spidery, old-fashioned handwriting. "Help yourself to food. Extra blankets in the cedar chest upstairs."

It was a relief that she wasn't awake. I didn't want to talk. I didn't want to think or feel. All I wanted was to get clean and go to sleep. I took a long hot shower, scrubbing my skin until it felt as if I'd stripped a layer away. I dried off, put on the T-shirt, and crept up the stairs.

There wasn't much stuff in the little room under the eaves, just a bed, a dusty side table with a reading lamp, and a cedar chest that smelled like my little room when I lifted the lid. The room I might never go home to, given I'd skipped out on the meeting with my adoptive parents. Everything seemed overwhelming all of

a sudden, and I started to tear up, but mashed the heel of my palm against my eyes and focused on what needed to be done.

No time for feelings. I had to finish the job. Wilson was still in jail, and I had to get him out.

I plugged in my laptop in to recharge the battery and downloaded the second video from Jason's shirt, checking a few spots to make sure it was focused and clear. I saw Danny bragging, and the look on his face when he realized Simon was serious about blowing things up. I advanced the film until I left the house, selected everything from that point on and deleted it. Boom, gone.

I opened the file of photos from Simon's phone and, after a quick glance, closed it. He'd taken trophy shots. All the more reason to wreck his life if I could.

I sent a message to Sara Esfahani to tell her that I needed to meet her in the morning. She texted back immediately to say she would be in the hotel lobby at nine.

Okay.

I briefly glanced at photo I'd taken of Simon with my phone, sprawled on the bed with the message on his chest, conked out and drooling. He didn't look charming or strong or scary. He just looked stupid, with a message that would tell the world exactly what he was. I still felt shaky and a little sick, but strangely calm. As soon as I had taken care of my brother, I would tell Charlie that she didn't have to worry about Simon anymore and I'd send her the photo. One way or another, it would get out and go viral and Simon Meyer would be finished.

I could do this.

My adoptive parents had each left multiple voicemails. I didn't have the stomach to listen to them, or to read through all the texts from Monica. I just sent her a quick message to tell her I was safe, set an alarm on my phone, got under the covers and went to sleep so fast it seemed as if my brain had decided it had had enough.

~ ~ ~

"Good morning." Frances Bernadette McSweeney said from

behind the *Star Tribune*. “The tea’s gone cold. You’ll have to put on the kettle.”

“Is there any coffee?”

She lowered the paper to study me. “Possibly. Try the cupboard over the stove. And put on that bathrobe before you freeze to death.” She pointed at a robe folded over the back of a chair. It was fuzzy and warm and felt soft, as if it had been through a washing machine a million times. “You must have used up all the hot water last night with that shower.”

“Sorry if I woke you up.”

“You didn’t. Old people just don’t sleep much. You were out awfully late.”

I turned away to look for coffee and escape those eyes that were studying me too closely. “I was working on hypothetical stuff.” I found a dusty jar of instant coffee.

“Ah. Did it go well?”

I filled the kettle and put it on the stove. “Is it safe to tell you?”

“If I become your attorney.”

“I don’t have any money.”

“What else is new?”

“What does it take? Do I have to sign something?”

“Just click your heels together three times and say ‘there’s no place like the Minnesota Bar Association.’”

“Will that work in socks?”

“Just say ‘will you represent me as my attorney?’”

“Will you represent me as my attorney?”

“Yes. Now, get your coffee and tell me everything.”

Well, not everything.

I started chipping away at the stale instant coffee with a spoon while the kettle heated, and told her about Simon and Danny and the meeting with FBI agents set for this morning. I didn’t tell her about what happened after I left the punk house. That was safely walled off in a corner of my brain so it couldn’t ambush me with feelings I didn’t have time to sort out. She kept interrupting me to ask for details, wanting to be sure I hadn’t said anything

incriminating, wanting to know Simon's exact words and whether Danny ever stated a desire to blow up a specific target.

"He talked about possible targets, but when Simon pushed him . . ." Suddenly, the things I had carefully boxed up and put in a hidden part of my brain got loose and started to cause a ruckus in my stomach. I took a breath, closed my eyes and walled it all off again, brick by brick. When I opened them, the lawyer was watching me, a little dent of concern between her eyebrows. I chipped harder at the coffee. "Danny was bragging, that's all."

"The two key issues in cases like this are inducement and predisposition. For example, if we could demonstrate that Zip induced your brother to take steps to commit a crime, that he was the one who came up with the idea and compelled your brother to participate—"

"That's totally what happened." I shook stale coffee chips into a mug and poured boiling water in.

"Wonderful. But that's not sufficient. If the state can show predisposition, that Wilson wanted to commit a crime before the informant gave him the means to do so, or that he was ready and eager to participate in a terrorist act, then we're screwed."

"Even if it was just talk?"

"Yes. Preemptive policing is all the rage these days. But there's some good news, thanks to your hypotheticals. Look at the front pages."

She tried to spread them out, but there was too much clutter on the table, so she held them up to show me instead. The headline at the top of the *Star Tribune* was "Local Case Gets the Hollywood Treatment." The *Pioneer Press* had an article running down the right side of the front page headlined "Filmmaker Focuses Her Lens on Minneapolis."

"Wow. This attention will help?"

"It may make the public sympathetic. I've seen enough of your brother to believe he is a sweet-natured and idealistic young man who didn't mean anyone harm. It doesn't hurt that he's white and raised in a Christian household."

“It wasn’t all that Christian.” I stirred my coffee, trying to chase down the hard bits and mash them with my spoon.

“I just mean Muslims are by far the most common targets of these stings, and they don’t get much benefit of the doubt. In this case, though, the press coverage is likely to be helpful and the court of public opinion hands down its rulings instantly using Tweets, whatever they are. No, don’t try to educate me. There isn’t time.”

“Oh, right. I need to meet with Sara.” I finally had a cup of coffee steaming front of me, but no time to drink it. “I’d better get going.”

“My cell phone number—”

“Got it.”

She hobbled over to a kitchen drawer and rummaged through it, then handed me a Sharpie. “Write it on your arm. If you’re arrested, they’ll take your phone.”

~ ~ ~

Given that the cops might be keeping an eye on Sara Esfahani and that my adoptive parents might have put me on a list of runaways, I called for a cab and had the driver drop me off a block from the hotel. I didn’t see anyone obviously watching the entrance, but I had taken the precaution of borrowing a fringed shawl from the lawyer, which I had wrapped over my head and around my face so I looked like an old lady. Inside Sara was chatting cozily with a couple of custodians. It took her a minute to see through my disguise, but then she raised her eyebrows at me and we each headed separately for the elevators.

Zeke was curled up on the couch of the tenth floor suite, snoring loudly, and Nikko was sprawled sideways on a king-sized bed, hugging a pillow as if it were a teddy bear. “Up all night editing,” Sara whispered as we slipped into the adjoining room. The others had left for the airport after the conference ended, but Tyler had agreed to pay for the suite for as long as she needed it, so long as his company got a film credit.

I switched on my laptop, checked to make sure the part of the

video I didn't want anyone to see, ever, was completely edited out, and copied it to a USB drive. As she downloaded it to her Mac, I filled her in on what had happened and the meeting that was scheduled for noon today. "I have to get back there and film what happens."

"Are you sure?" she said. "They'll send experienced federal agents. They won't be as easy to fool."

"I'll go early and explain to Marita and Danny that they're being set up. Then we can plan how to handle whoever the FBI sends. If I get the meeting on tape—"

"You'll be in the room with them?"

"I'll tell the FBI guys I want to be in on it. You know, for my brother's sake."

"What if they arrest you and the recording you make of today's meet is destroyed?"

"That would totally suck." I felt exhausted, suddenly, and embarrassed. I wanted to go home to my little sleeping nook, pull the covers over my head, and sleep forever. "I guess it's a dumb idea."

"It's a genius idea, but look at this footage." She played some of it. "Not bad for a lens the size of a shirt button, but for today's meeting? We need a better camera. Give me a few minutes to pack my stuff and we'll go."

~ ~ ~

She roused Zeke to help her troubleshoot a wifi hotspot she wanted to use, and then Nikko wandered in sleepily, wondering how he could help. She explained how to monitor the livestream she would be sending as a backup for her recording. We finally got underway, packing two big carryalls into a taxi driven by Sara's good friend Bahdoon. She had a talent for making BFFs everywhere she went. "You know what his name means?" she asked me. "'The one who was born away from home.' Isn't that evocative? It would make a great title for a film about the Somali community here. Such fascinating stories."

"I could be a star," the cabbie said, grinning, not taking it

seriously. He pulled up outside the ramshackle punk house and made a tutting noise with his tongue. "Bad neighborhood."

"It's a film set," Sara said cheerfully. He seemed unconvinced and insisted in carrying in the heavier of Sara's bags.

Marita opened the door, looking exhausted, the baby on her hip. Sara introduced herself and Bahdoon. He looked around the room, strewn with empty beer bottles and reeking of smoke, and clicked his tongue again. While Sara and Marita talked, he pressed his card into my hand. "You have trouble? I come get you right away."

"What a beautiful child!" Sara was cooing and tickling, coaxing a big smile out of the baby and a crooked, reluctant one out of Marita. "What's his name?"

"Liam."

We migrated into the kitchen where Sara settled herself with the baby in her lap and Marita started to brew some coffee, looking a little dazed. Nobody else was up, she said; they never got up until late afternoon, but sleeping in wasn't an option when you had a baby. After some small talk, Sara explained what we wanted to do.

"So, wait. I don't understand," Marita said. "The FBI is coming here?"

"Simon Meyer is an informant." I said, making it as clear and simple as possible. "Last night, he talked Danny into having a meeting with some guys who are supposedly bringing explosives."

Marita stared down at her baby, horrified.

"They won't be real," Sara reassured her. "They always use some inert substance so that they can say the public was never at risk. The aim is to get Danny to incriminate himself. Another terror plot foiled."

"I have to tell him. We have to get out of here."

"Wait." Sara touched her shoulder. "If Danny knows what's going on, he can play them. We can get the whole thing on film, and everyone will see how these stings work. He wants to speak truth to power, right? He can show the world how these bogus arrests actually happen. "

“You don’t know him.” Marita sat down heavily, propped her elbows on the table, and put her head in her hands, her hair spilling through her fingers. “He thinks it stinks that billionaires call all the shots when people like us struggle. He hates cops. But he’s not really into politics. He just likes to talk big.”

“Sounds like my brother,” I said.

Marita’s face twisted up as she jabbed a shaking finger at me. “See? Danny will end up like that, in prison. How can you ask us—”

“You’re right,” Sara said. “It’s too much to ask.”

“No, it isn’t,” I said.

“It’s not our call,” Sara said. “They have to decide for themselves.”

I gaped at Sara, then turned to Marita. “My brother used to take care of me when I was Liam’s age. He was just a kid himself, but he made sure I knew somebody loved me after our mom died. Now he’s in jail for staying stupid things to the wrong person.”

“But she has a child to care for,” Sara said to me earnestly. “She needs to keep her family safe. Surely you can—”

“What about my brother?”

Sara shrugged helplessly. The kettle started to shriek. “Here, I’ll get that,” she said, handing Liam to his mother who hugged him close, stroking his hair.

“Your brother sounds nice,” Marita said.

“He is. Just not very smart. When I was little, I thought he could take care of everything. But he can’t even take care of himself. That’s why . . .” I choked up. Anger would have felt better. It usually came to my rescue when something made me feel this bad. But I didn’t feel angry. Just disappointed and sad. And confused, because I didn’t think Sara would give up so easily. So close, and it was all falling apart.

“The problem with Danny is he’s scared.” Marita stroked the baby’s curls and smiled down at him when he squirmed and grabbed a handful of her hair. “Oh, he brags about how he can blow things up, but he doesn’t really know anything about

explosives. His uncle took him to watch a demolition once, but he never learned how to do any of that himself. He tells stories because he wants other guys to look up to him. Stupid macho stuff.”

“Men,” Sara said disgustedly.

“Exactly. He’s scared people won’t respect him. That scar on his hand? He told the truth about that. We met at a protest and things got crazy and this thing leaking smoke landed at my feet and I didn’t even know what it was. He pushed me back and grabbed that canister and threw it so hard. It went up and up and over the police lines. And everybody cheered and I hugged him and it wasn’t till later I found out how bad he was burned.”

“That’s brave,” Sara said, hunting through the cupboards.

“Not brave. Dumb. He should have said something. If we got ice on it right away . . . you looking for the coffee?” Marita started to rise, but Sara waved her back into her seat. “It’s in the fridge. And there’s a thing somewhere. A pot. One of those French things. Sorry, Liam’s teething. I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

Sara set the French press on the table and found three mugs and a carton of milk.

“He likes hanging out with activists,” Marita said mournfully. “He says stupid things just to get respect. Then he gets all paranoid about getting caught and we have to find another place to live. I just want to settle down and get jobs. Get a place of our own. I’m so tired of this.”

“Of course you are,” Sara murmured, tickling the baby and making him chuckle and wave his legs. “It’s not easy to live this way when you have a child. But I’ll bet he’ll always remember that moment, grabbing that canister to get it away from you.”

“You should have seen it. He looked so . . . so *right*, you know? He didn’t hesitate, not for one moment.”

“The real Danny.”

“Exactly. That’s him, right there.” Marita stared at some invisible screen where the memory played on a loop.

“You don’t think he’d want to help us with this film?”

She gave a little shrug. “We watched that one you made on my phone. The one about the Nine? I thought it was going to be boring, like those PBS shows, but it wasn’t.”

“It’s pretty rough, but that’s the nature of blitzdocs. Danny could be in one.”

“No, he couldn’t. I told you he’s paranoid. If he heard those guys coming to the house were FBI agents, that Simon was an informant, we’d be out the door so fast you wouldn’t have time to turn your camera on.”

“Does he have to know?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Is there a place where Sara could set up her camera so she could film the front room without being seen?”

Marita thought. “Maybe. Yeah.”

“So the FBI guys come and Danny and I both talk to them and they start laying out a plan and Sara gets it all on film, but I make sure to cut things off before Danny says anything that could get him in trouble.”

“And at that moment I come out . . .” Sara held up an imaginary camera. “Smile!”

“So we get what we need but Danny doesn’t get jammed up. He gets to be the hero of a movie. I’ve been talking to a lawyer about this. If he gets close to saying something incriminating, I’ll cut it off.”

She frowned uncertainly as she pushed a mug out of the baby’s reach. “So . . . this film. You’d put it online?” she asked Sara.

“Usually I do a little editing and post a film in a rough-cut state within twenty-four hours,” Sara said, pouring coffee for the three of us. “I like the immediacy and the chance to share my process. The hard part comes later, when I make the full-length documentary for theatrical release.”

“You mean like in movie theatres? On Netflix? Would Danny be in it?”

“He’d have to be in it. This moment is the climax of the story.”

“He’d get a kick out of being in one of your films.”

“You said there might be a place where I could set up?”

“There’s, like, a doorway with a curtain over it. It just a corridor that leads to the side door, which nobody uses. The curtain’s supposed to keep the cold out, but it’s pretty raggedy, and it’s dark in that corner. I’ll bet you could make a hole and point your camera through it and nobody would notice.”

“Can we look?”

“Sure.”

Sara gave me thumbs-up as we followed Marita out of the kitchen.

It almost went as planned.

Sara strung an extension cord into the unused corridor, which was in the darkest part of the room and just big enough for her and her equipment. She enlarged a hole in the raggedy curtain and checked to be sure she could shoot the room without being seen. Marita and I moved furniture around, with Sara calling out instructions through the curtain. “You’re off camera. Can you move that chair to the right a couple of feet? Zen, we’ll want plenty of light on the face of whoever the FBI sends. Angle that couch so . . . that’s good.” Sara tested the livestream; she was sending the film to Zeke and Nikko at the hotel using a portable hotspot so that there would be an offsite copy if her camera was confiscated.

Once everything was in place, I made a fresh batch of coffee, needing to sharpen my brain before the show. When I checked the time on my phone, I remembered that picture I’d taken of Simon. The wall I’d built to keep it in a dark corner of my brain crumbled for a moment, but even though it made me feel a little sick and shaky, I was glad because I realized there was a good chance I would get arrested. I quickly composed an email to Charlie from my Secret Avenger account, warning her the photo I had attached could be triggering, but Simon had been unmasked and his days of attacking women were over. I pressed send. No matter what she did with it, there would be a copy in the Secret Avenger’s encrypted email account in case my phone got

confiscated by the cops and the photo accidentally-on-purpose deleted.

All that was left to do was chill until the FBI showed up.

Which turned out to be no wait at all because they came an hour early.

Sara barely had time to dart back behind the curtain when we heard steps on the front porch. Marita stood frozen for a moment, like it was dawning on her that this was actually happening. She scooped the baby up off the floor protectively. I went to the door and turned the latch.

There were two of them. One looked like a college student. He had a backpack slung over one shoulder and a scruffy beard and wore a keffiyeh around his neck, like Simon. The other one looked big and bald and threatening, like a bad guy who had access to explosives.

“Danny around?” the skinny one with the backpack asked. He remembered to smile, but he was staring at me, like “what are you doing here?”

“Still in bed,” Marita said shakily. “He told me he was expecting some people at noon.”

“Guess we got our wires crossed. Cute baby.”

“Would you get in here and close the door, already?” she said, snapping into character. “You’re letting the cold in. I don’t want the kid to get another earache.”

They filed in and shut the door behind them. The two men pulled their caps off, as if politeness was drilled into them even though they were disguised as dangerous dissidents. “And you are . . .” The skinny guy who looked like a student knew who I was, but he pretended he didn’t.

“I’m Zen. My brother is one of the Minneapolis Nine. I’m here for the meeting, too.”

No, you’re not, Big Guy’s face said as he glared at me.

“Neat house,” Skinny said to Marita. “It’s famous,” he told his comrade. “Lot of bands have been through here. Who’s staying here these days?”

“Just us and some musicians. They never get up before dinnertime.”

“Could you let Danny know we’re here?”

“Fine. Then I’m going back to bed with the baby. If you want anything, you’ll have to get it yourselves.” She said it perfectly, stomping up the stairs as if she was offended, not scared stiff.

“This is bullshit,” the big one muttered, giving me the side-eye.

“How’d you hear about this meeting, anyway?” Skinny asked me, all friendly, ignoring Big Guy.

“Simon Meyer told me about it. Your friend, Simon. Isn’t he coming? I thought this was all his idea.”

Skinny shook his head. Big Guy tried to catch his eye. He didn’t say it out loud, but I could read his impatient body language. It’s going wrong. Let’s call this off before it’s too late. I had to find a way to make them stay.

“You know how on the news they keep talking about the tenth one?” I said. “The fugitive they’re chasing? You’re after the wrong person. He wasn’t even involved. *I’m* the tenth one. My brother tried to keep me out of it, but they got themselves arrested and now I’m the only one left.”

Big Guy wasn’t impressed. “This isn’t what we had planned.” Skinny brushed it aside with a gesture and studied me. I could sense the gears turning as he reworked their strategy.

“What the hell?” Danny came trotting down the stairs in sweats and a ratty T-shirt, combing fingers through his bed-head. “You’re early.”

“Nope,” Skinny said brightly. “Eleven on the dot.”

“It was set for noon.”

“Sorry about that. Must have got mixed up.”

“And what’s *she* doing here?”

“Avenging my brother.” I wondered if I was laying it on too thick, but Skinny was intrigued.

“You seem pretty serious,” he said.

“I am totally serious. It’s messed up, the way the FBI keeps coaxing people to say crazy things so they can arrest them as

terrorists. Not to mention the dragnet surveillance the NSA is doing, which is obviously unconstitutional.”

“She’s into computers,” Danny told them.

“Cool. Are you into radical action?” Skinny said, as if it could be a joke, depending on how I responded. “Are you willing to act outside the law?”

“What’s so special about laws? Sitting at a lunchroom counter while black was against the law not too long ago. Hey, do you guys want coffee? I just made some.”

Weirdly, that non-sequitur helped. The FBI agents relaxed just enough to let me wave them onto the well-lit couch as if I were a polite hostess. Danny sat across from them, looking wary and not totally awake. I cleared some empty bottles off the coffee table and brought out the coffee pot, then went back to wash out some mugs and get milk and sugar.

“You know who I am.” I heard Danny say as I returned. “Who are you?”

“I’m Jack,” the skinny one said. “That’s Marsh. We hear you know explosives. Is that right?”

Danny gave him a glare, trying to look tough. He mostly looked suspicious and hungover. “So?”

“So we have resources, but we need someone with your skills.”

“Show them your hand,” I said. “It got burned when he threw a tear gas canister back at the cops.”

“When was that?” Jack asked.

“A while ago.” Danny still had his tough face on, but he was fidgeting with his lighter, flicking at it with a thumb.

“Was this Baltimore? We were there.”

“Hashtag black lives matter,” the big guy said, looking at me, making it clear they didn’t matter to him. I wanted to punch him in the nose, but something about the way he looked down at his coffee cup with a smug little smile made me realize he was trying to rile me up, so I didn’t.

“What do you think, Zen?” Jack asked. “What kind of action makes sense these days?”

“Action that works.”

Jack nodded as if I'd said something profound and powerful. “Absolutely. You can send out Tweets or you can attack the source. Capitalism. You notice how everything changes when you set a Pizza Hut on fire? Are you an anarchist like your brother and his friends?”

“I'm not big on labels,” I said, but I could hear Wilson explaining it to me, how the way they cooperated in their house showed that another world was possible, even though they didn't know what to do when the roof leaked. “Their problem was they were too idealistic. Too trusting. They weren't violent. They just got suckered by an informant.”

“Typical ploy.” Jack shook his head. “Makes you mad, huh?”

“Well, duh. Of course it makes me mad.”

“Mad enough to do something about it?”

“Absolutely.”

He turned to Danny. “What about you?” Danny didn't say anything.

“We heard you were serious about taking radical action.” Marsh goaded him. “Is that true? Or was that just talk?”

Danny shifted in his chair, his eyes darting around, like he felt trapped.

“I heard you were bringing some dynamite,” I said to Jack. “Is that it?” I nudged the backpack he had set on the floor with my toe.

“Whoa, careful!” Jack said. “You want to take out the entire block?”

“He's joking,” Marsh said. “Sure, we could take out the whole block, but we need the know-how to do it right. Which is why we came to you, Danny. We've been told you're the expert.”

“You've seen those videos of giant buildings falling down all once?” I said. “His uncle taught him how to do that. Right, Danny?”

He tipped his head sideways. Yeah, no. Maybe.

“That's great, because we scored the material.” Jack moved

coffee cups out of the way, wiped up spilled coffee with his sleeve, lifted the backpack, and set it reverently on the table between us. “Check it. This is just a sample.”

Danny looked at the backpack but didn’t move. Jack shot Marsh a look. I could read his mind, like a balloon had popped up over his head. You’re right. This isn’t working.

Crap, crap, crap. I had to do something.

“Putting it under cop cars came up last night,” I said. “Theoretically. Also, the idea of bombing the precinct house on Lake Street.” Come on, Danny. Help me out.

“What about a bridge?” Marsh asked Danny. “Or Union Station? Doable?”

Nothing. Marsh looked at Jack, who sighed and shifted his feet as if about to give in and leave.

I leaned over, unzipped the backpack, and reached in. “Is this dynamite?” I pulled out something that looked like a white sausage. I tried to read the lettering on the side, but Danny grabbed it from me.

“Are you crazy?”

“There’s a bunch more of those things in here, and things with wires and—”

“Leave it alone. Jesus.” Danny set the sausage down carefully. “How much of this do you have?” He asked Marsh, man to man.

“How much do you need?”

“Depends on the target. Gotta do the calculations.”

“See?” Jack said to Marsh. “Simon was right. He knows his stuff.”

“What do you have in mind? The I-35 bridge?” Marsh asked Danny, as if the whole thing had been Danny’s idea.

“You don’t want to go for a bridge. Too strategic, too many cameras.” Danny stretched his shoulders, as if he was finally waking up. “But those tank cars coming in from North Dakota?” He rubbed his nose and leaned forward, imparting a secret. “Stuff’s highly combustible. Those old tankers aren’t designed for it. They’re basically rolling bombs, and they travel right through

Minneapolis. Do it right, you wouldn't need more than what you got right here to reduce a whole neighborhood to smoking ruin."

"That would be huge. So, walk us through it," Jack said. "What's step one?"

"Before we get into details," I interrupted, "I just want to say Danny isn't just good at this. He's so good, you have no idea." I raised my voice. "He's *amazing*, and you couldn't pay him enough for his talents because he's a way better actor than you guys are, and we know exactly what's going on here, don't we?"

"It's a wrap," Sara Esfahani called out from her hiding place. "Congratulations, Danny, you did brilliantly."

Jack muttered into his collar as Marsh jumped out of his chair, swearing. Sara swept the curtain aside and strode out, pointing her camera at Jack and Marsh, firing questions. Danny sat with his mouth open, totally confused as a bunch of SWAT cops burst in through the kitchen, with more tromping onto the porch. I unlocked the front door for them. They hesitated for a moment, probably disappointed they didn't get to use their battering ram, before one of them tackled me and the rest raced up the stairs to clear the house of dangerous terrorists.

Good thing I had that phone number written on my arm. I was going to need it.

The last thing I saw was a glimpse of Marita standing on the porch, holding a howling, kicking baby, paying no attention to the cop who was asking her questions. Just staring at me with a big "what do I do now?" look on her face as the cruiser I was in sped away.

I wasn't under arrest, it turned out. Whatever I had heard in the confusion must have been a mistake, or so they claimed. The handcuffs, too. Crossed signals. Mistakes were made.

Frances Bernadette McSweeney listened to their excuses with one eyebrow raised, perfectly polite and absolutely clear that she didn't believe a word of it. Later, I found out that Nikko had live-tweeted the bust, grabbing and posting shots from the video feed as events unfolded, then uploading short snippets from the sting, mostly the bits where the two FBI agents were prompting Danny and me to do illegal stuff. Even more popular was the clip in which a giant in body armor tackled Sara Esfahani, world-famous filmmaker, while her camera rolled. They were so busy barking orders and pointing big guns, it took them a while to realize it was still running. There was also a blurry clip of me opening the door and getting grabbed by a cop. Luckily, it didn't include the part where I kicked him in the shin. It was a reflex action. Mistakes were made. Besides, I probably had worse bruises than he did.

At the same time, by strange coincidence, a photo of Simon Meyer turned up on Instagram and rapidly went viral. It didn't take long for people to connect the dots. Good old Simon was not only a sexual predator, he was a fake activist on the FBI's payroll.

The afternoon and evening was a blur of fear and excitement and bureaucracy and sitting on hard chairs, waiting for decisions to be made. We'd done it. We'd exposed how these stings worked. After being publicly humiliated they'd have to let my brother go. I

felt like a balloon filling up with righteousness and excitement, as if my skin was actually stretching to contain it all. But instead of lifting me up so I could float away, it popped.

I was free to go, they told me sometime after midnight. My parents were waiting to take me home.

~ ~ ~

It felt weird, walking into the ginormous suburban house that I had hated so much, seeing the kitchen that always looked as if it had been recently sterilized. The big, soft couches in the living room, the enormous entertainment system. A wall full of family pictures, including one of me and Wilson. He had his arms draped over my shoulder. I was five years old and scowling for the camera.

“We got new window treatments,” my adoptive mother said with desperate cheerfulness. “What do you think?”

“Nice,” I said, wondering how expensive curtains had to be before they were called “treatments.”

“How about something to eat?” Wilson’s dad was scrubbing his hands together as if he couldn’t wait to fix me a meal, but he was watching me nervously like bomb squad technician checking out a suspicious device that might explode at any moment.

“No thanks. I’m pretty tired. Is my old room—”

“It’s ready for you. Liv said she would put clean sheets on the bed.”

“Well, goodnight then.” My voice sounded like it was coming from someone else, someone far away. As I climbed the stairs, the carpet was so cushiony under my feet that it felt as if I were drifting, a ghost who might meet my younger self coming down the stairs, that angry, frightened kid who had to run away. What would I say to her? Sorry. You tried. It was good for a while. We’ll be okay.

~ ~ ~

Strangely enough, it was okay. I stayed in my bedroom most of the time, doing my homework, scrolling through the Group’s message threads, and reading the texts that Wheeze sent me through Convo. I only left my room to eat and help with chores

and do family things when I had to, but the giant battles I expected didn't materialize, mainly because I was tired of fighting and had surrendered unconditionally.

A couple of FBI agents came out to interview me. I had a lawyer with me, a young one who was helping with my brother's case and was crushing hard on Frances Bernadette McSweeney as we waited for the feds to arrive. The two agents were very polite, as was my lawyer, as were my adoptive parents who hovered the whole time. The feds asked questions about my connection with the Minneapolis Nine and whether I knew where Wheeze was and hinted that I might get in big trouble if I didn't cooperate, but the lawyer did all the talking and they left without learning anything.

Afterward, I went back to my room and scrolled through the messages Wheeze had been sending. I was always happy to see a new one, even if I couldn't seem to make my fingers send a reply.

<wheeze> My ankle is feeling better. So is the sick chicken. I have recorded so many chapters of Charles Dickens my voice is completely gone. How are you?

<wheeze> it was so cold this morning there were sundogs. Did you see them? I hope you're okay.

<wheeze> There's a picture of Simon Meyer all over the internet. Whoever did that was incredibly brave.

<wheeze> I just watched all of Sara Esfahani's blitzdocs again. They're amazing. That one where you all got arrested had me on the edge of my seat, even though I knew it would turn out all right. Thanks for trying to take the heat off me.

<wheeze> Jane taught me how to milk the goats. It took a while to get the hang of it. How are things? Are you still living with your

barbara fister

aunt? Did you guys get a lot of snow? We got buried. You can't even see the fence posts it's so deep.

<wheeze> What I would really like to do is write you an old-fashioned letter by hand. I would tell you about the farm and what it's like to get eggs from the nest while they're still warm and how getting to know the goats is turning me into a vegetarian, though Jane says that won't last. It feels weird to type things this way. I don't know if you get these messages. It's like writing with disappearing ink. I miss hanging out with you.

I lay back on my bed and thought about taking a nap, but instead started to type.

<zen> Sorry for the long radio silence. I'm fine. Kind of. My parents made me move back in with them because Monica is a radical leftist. (She so isn't.) The FBI was here today, but so was a lawyer, so I didn't have to say anything. Is your ankle better? Can you walk now?

<wheeze> w00t! I thought the computer was broken. It made this weird sound and there was your message! I was beginning to worry you had been sent to a black site or something. I can walk a little. I do chores in the morning - did I tell you I know how to milk goats now? Otherwise I have to stay off my ankle until it's stronger. I'm sorry you had to move back with your parents. I know you hated it there.

<zen> It's not that bad. I just do homework and take naps and stay up all night goofing around on the internet.

<wheeze> Any word on your brother?

<zen> Nothing definite. I never thought it would take so long.

<wheeze> Me either. Sometimes I forget I'm a fugitive from justice, but when I remember, I worry that they'll find me and Jane will get in trouble and that would be awful. Do they let you visit Wilson?

<zen> We go every weekend. SO. WEIRD. They have those telephone things like on TV, so you can't really talk.

<wheeze> Why can't he get out on bail?

<zen> A stupid judge said he was a flight risk and a danger to society even though everybody knows he didn't really plan to blow up anything. It sucks. Wilson's getting really skinny. He says the food is worse than school lunches. It's baloney every day, and he hates baloney. Are you still a vegetarian?

<zen> I eat A LOT of eggs. The chickens are starting to look at me funny.

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My stepsister Liv decided she wanted to be best friends and kept coming into my room to sit on the bed and tell me all about her life. I figured that was mainly because Sara Esfahani had put me in one of her blitzdocs and Sara was famous, therefore I was someone worth knowing after all. But we got along okay. She even asked for my help on a research paper about Edward Snowden and why privacy matters.

My adoptive mother seemed a little scared of me. I had grown taller since I'd left home and it unnerved her that we were the same size. In December she said she would take me to a spa as a treat. We could use the sauna and get a massage, then get our hair done. Wouldn't that be fun? She was twisting her wedding ring nervously. I said thanks, but no, and she didn't push it, even though I knew my untamed hair was driving her nuts.

Nikko sent me links to his latest goofy animations regularly and every couple of weeks I got package in the mail, something strange and useless that he had created just for me. He made a couple of short documentary pieces about Sara Esfahani's cabdriver Bahdoon, hoping to lure Sara back to Minneapolis or at least score an internship with her.

Every now and then I used one of my fake Facebook accounts to check up on Marita and her baby. Danny, it turned out, had violated probation in Illinois, so the authorities shipped him back to spend some time in jail there. I asked Nikko to stop by the punk house to see if she needed any help, but she had moved out and nobody knew where she was. It took a while, but I found her profile. She was staying at her parents' house in Milwaukee and working for Dominos when she wasn't posting baby pictures and updates about some cute guy she'd met at work.

The Secret Avenger told everyone who wrote to her that she was too busy to take on new projects at the moment.

Monica and I talked on the phone every few days. She offered to drive out to see me, but I didn't want her to. It would poke a hole in my suburban bubble and all the sad would rush in and I would drown.

~ ~ ~

<zen> It's Christmas in the suburbs! Chestnuts roasting on an open fire, sleigh bells ringing, and everybody's yelling or sobbing in a corner. I'm glad I can hide out in my own room. What is Christmas like on the farm?

<wheeze> We had a big solstice party at a neighbor's. Lots of music. There was an amazing fiddler. All those shirts I silkscreened? The bookstore in Madison sold them all, and they placed another order. We're having a couple of friends over for dinner tonight but it's just

soup, not turkey. Jane Shandy doesn't hold with Christmas.

<zen> Me either. Not like this. I wish I was there.

<wheeze> I wish you were here, too.

~ ~ ~

In January, Wilson finally was released. Frances Bernadette McSweeney wanted to get all the charges dismissed, but Wilson just wanted out, so he took a plea deal, copping to a trespassing charge for living in the abandoned house nobody wanted in exchange for the time he'd already spent in jail. The day after he got out, he borrowed a friend's car and drove out to visit. It was a sunny day, so we bundled up and went for a walk around the old neighborhood, ending up in a playground that we used to go to when we were kids.

"Remember when you fell off this thing and broke your arm?" he asked me, brushing the snow off the seat of the seesaw with his arm.

"You hijacked a car and took me to the emergency room."

"I didn't hijack it. I knew that girl. She didn't mind. Much." He cleared off the other end. "Then it turned out they wouldn't do anything until Dad got there, anyway. Get on."

"I'm too heavy for this thing."

"Are not." We balanced on it, swaying up and down. "See? Still works. We spent a lot of time in this playground."

"Probably bored you to death."

"Didn't have anything better to do. It's not like I had any friends my own age. Listen, Emily and me are sharing a house with some people. We have two super-friendly dogs and a big kitchen and lots of space in the back for a garden when spring comes. I got some hours at a bar so I can pay our share. You can even have your own room."

"What, at your place?"

"It's a little room that nobody's using except to store stuff. It's

basically a big closet, to be honest, but it has a window that faces south so you'll get lots of sun."

I didn't say anything, just pushed against the ground to go up.

"I'm sure I can talk the parents into it."

"No, that's okay. You and Emily need your own space. Sounds like you're getting serious."

"Emily is awesome. I didn't know how much I'd miss her until . . . I did. But she's fine with you moving in. Don't you want to get away from this place?"

"It's not bad. They have really fast broadband."

"Look, what you did for me, for Emily—"

"Don't. It was . . . really, don't feel like you owe me."

"Are you nuts? You got me out."

"You took care of me before, so we're even. Anyway, I got my application in for this program where high school kids can go to college for free. If I get accepted at the U, I'll probably get to move back in with Monica so I can get to school. Until then, though . . . I'm good. I'll just be happy when Wheeze is in the clear."

"It's stupid. He didn't even do anything."

"In the criminal justice system," I said in a *Law and Order* voice, "the people are represented by two separate groups: Dumb and Dumber. Bump bah." That got a smile out of him. "Hey, I want to go to the swings. Will you push me?"

~ ~ ~

Two weeks later, I heard the familiar Convo blurb. I set aside my laptop and the routine I was trying to debug and reached for my phone.

<wheeze> It's official. No charges. I'm not a wanted man anymore!

<zen> yay! Free at last. What a relief.

<wheeze> How's Wilson doing? Is he okay with his plea deal?

<zen> It may screw things up later, having a record, but he's just glad to be out. He and Emily moved in with some friends. I went

to visit them yesterday. Nice house, but it takes forever to get there by bus and then it's awkward because he's all "wow, I can't believe you did all that for me." I actually get along better with Emily. I'm glad they dropped all the charges against her, even though the idea that Wilson was a ringleader and she wasn't is pretty hilarious.

<wheeze> Headdesk. Wilson and ringleader do not belong in the same sentence.

<zen> That thing about you not being a wanted man? It's not true. It's just the \*police\* who don't want you.

<wheeze> Haha. My parents didn't, either. Or my relatives. But I'm glad you do. I can come visit you now! I've been checking out the bus schedules. I can't wait to see you.

Something in my stomach twisted hard. I lay back on the bed, trying to empty my head, trying not to think or feel. Eventually I turned off my phone and went back to looking for the bug in my code. When I pulled back the cover to get into bed around four a.m. the phone fell to the floor. I stuck it in a drawer and went to sleep.

**A** few days passed before I turned my phone on again and read the messages Wheeze had left.

<wheeze> Are you okay?

<wheeze> I think I misunderstood something. I won't visit unless you want.

<wheeze> I think of you as someone who's so fierce and brave that I forget you have feelings and I think I hurt them somehow. I don't know if you had anything to do with what happened with Simon Meyer, but if I triggered bad memories, I'm sorry.

I had to take a deep breath. Then before I could have second thoughts I started typing.

<zen> It's not that.

<zen> Okay, first, I like you a lot. Insert mushy stuff here. Just so you know. I always liked you, but I didn't know how much until you were in that shed and I had to find you and I wasn't sure if I could do it in time.

<wheeze> I was SO happy to hear your voice that night. Insert sheer terror here. But I always knew I liked you. From the start.

<zen> I don't always get people. Even myself.

I mean, I got diagnosed as having "oppositional defiant disorder" when I was eleven.

<wheeze> That's a thing? There should be a Nobel Prize for oppositional defiance.

<zen> It was mean to ignore your messages. It's just so weird being here. I never told you why I left this place. I never even told Monica the gory details. But brace yourself, here it comes.

<zen> When I was thirteen, I suddenly had boobs that were like bizarrely big and everybody laughed at me and the boys stared and giggled and it was awful, but I was used to it because everyone always thought I was weird. Then this new kid moved to town and he was different. He was smart and read poetry and when he said he liked me, I thought it was true. Until we were messing around in a dark empty classroom once and then suddenly it wasn't dark or empty and these boys were all laughing and cheering. It was just a test they gave the new kid. A hazing ritual. Like kissing a toad.

<wheeze> .

<wheeze> no words

<zen> Kids are mean. I knew that, but I just couldn't go back there. I went to Monica's instead and had a total meltdown.

<wheeze> this makes me so mad I could seriously become non-non-violent.

<zen> I'm sorry I'm being so messed up about things.

<wheeze> What's messed up is that stuff like that happens. Not you.

<zen> He actually tried to apologize to me

barbara fister

later. I ran into him in a bookstore last year and he said "I'm sorry you were so upset." WTF??!!

<wheeze> And yet you let him live?

<zen> I was feeling generous. Also, I was afraid I'd get carried away and destroy the bookstore.

<wheeze> I would consider that acceptable collateral damage.

<zen> I've been thinking - would it be okay if I visited you instead?

<wheeze> That would be incredibly great.

<zen> Don't you have to ask Jane Shandy?

<wheeze> I'll just hide her shotgun. (Not really. She says it's fine.)

<zen> And can Nikko and Bree come? Because Bree's spring break is coming up and she has a car.

<wheeze> Bring all your friends.

<zen> That *\*is\** all my friends. Counting you.

<zen> Well actually, not all. I'll introduce you to the rest when we get there.

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I was nervous about this visit. We hadn't seen each other since I left him in the armchair beside the wood stove, his sprained ankle propped up on a stool. But we had gotten close over the past few months. Really close. Like, he-knows-all-of-my-secrets close. Even closer than that.

As we crested a hill and saw Jane's farm below us, Bree pulled over so we could roll down the windows, smell the fresh spring air, and listen to the country sounds of birds and chirping bugs and wind rustling across the fields. "It's so pretty out here," she murmured. "I'm glad we came, even if I'm behind on all of my classes. Especially computer science. I'm so totally lost in that course."

“Zen can help with your homework,” Nikko said. “If you trade some nuts or pickled vegetables.”

“No pickled vegetables. I’ll help for free,” I said. “Wheeze loves it out here. He says it feels like home.” Considering he’d been moving from place to place since he was fifteen, riding the rails, staying with friends, or squatting in foreclosed houses, I knew it wasn’t just an empty phrase.

“You like him, don’t you?” Nikko said, glancing at me in the backseat. Apparently the answer showed in my face because he grinned and gave me a gentle bop on the side of the head. “She likes him a lot,” he told Bree.

“Well, duh,” she said. “You couldn’t tell?”

My heart was thumping as we started down the hill. Somebody was standing on the porch.

“Yay, no shotgun this time,” Bree said.

I felt a little dizzy because I had stopped breathing. The person on the porch stepped into the sunlight and waved. He looked taller and broader, like a goat farmer. Like a small-engine repairman. Like my best friend. I waved back and started to breathe again.

Wrathofcohen> hi guys
 <freddieb> yay your back
 <callmecheese> **you're**
 <wrathofcohen> Thanks for the pizza.
 <ferret> How's it going?
 <wrathofcohen> Next checkup on Wed. Nervous.
 <ferret> good luck
 <chookchaser> {{{wrathofcohen}}}
 <wrathofcohen> Saw Sara Esfahani's doc finally, the full version. Amazing. So cool seeing ferret in it.
 <callmecheese> And Shad. Her brother was one of the nine.
 <wrathofcohen> Wow, really? I'm so out of touch. Where was Shad in the film?
 <Gargle> All over it. The reverse sting was her idea.
 <wrathofcohen> Wait, Shad's the girl? The one who made it all happen? ::reels::
 <ferret> Shad, what's the latest on your brother?
 <ferret> Pinging Shad.
 <Falstaff> she brb-d.
 <DoDec> He took a plea for time served. A lot

less time than the informant who got them all in trouble, which seems right.

<Shad> I'm back. Was helping someone with her CS homework. Say hi to my friend Wheeze.

<ferret> welcome Wheeze.

<Gargle> welcome, friend-of-Shad.

<Wheeze> Nice to be here.

<wrathofcohen> You mean the one who called himself Zip? Yeah, the film said he had outstanding warrants in three states.

<DoDec> They competed to see who would get to lock him up first. Michigan won.

<Falstaff> The FBI goon who cooked it all up got promoted, though. HULK SMASH

<ferret> Are you tutoring, Shad?

<Shad> If that means getting paid, then no.

<Falstaff> if \$\$ then tutoring else (0=exploitation)

<Shad> hee. She's a friend. But funny b/c we were just working on conditional statements.

<Shad> she got it when I gave this example: if privacy then freedom else tyranny.

<Falstaff> that's not code, that's a bumper sticker

<Kadabra> if slogan then t-shirt

<Wheeze> I'm on it. Have t-shirts, will silkscreen.

<Shad> his shirts are AWESOME

<Gargle> Srsly? Could use some for a promotion. DM me, Wheeze.

<callmecheese> Wasn't there a reddit thread on if-then jokes?

<Falstaff> NOOOOO

<inky> how many programmers does it take to change a lightbulb?

barbara fister

<ferret> groooooaaaaaaan not that again.

<callmecheese> **light bulb**. It's two words.

<Wheeze> I'll bite. how many?

<inky> Zero. It's a hardware problem. HAHAHA

<Wheeze> hahaha groan. Full disclosure, I don't code and the only hardware I fix is small motors and manual typewriters. I'm not really a computer guy.

<ferret> No problem. if Shad's friend then welcome.