

Runtime

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PART I

One

I never planned to become Maggie Farnham. Blame the moose.

It had wandered far from its woodland home to the land of cornfields and cow pastures and into the path of our car one foggy morning. Poor moose.

Poor Maggie.

The day I was discharged from the hospital, I got a ride to the bus station from an aide going off shift. She looked tired in her scrubs, probably thinking about getting her kids off to school and throwing a load of laundry in the washer before she fell into bed, the kind of person who was habitually kind but distracted, constantly making to-do lists in her head. A person to hitch a ride with, too occupied with her own life to ask questions about mine. A good thing, too. I wasn't ready to deal with questions.

She pulled into the gas station where the Greyhound made its daily stop. My head ached and I was craving the coffee that might take the edge off. "Take care, now, Maggie," she said as I opened the passenger door.

I almost looked over my shoulder to see who she was talking to before I remembered: Oh right, that's me. I smiled, aiming for the kind of reassuring cheerfulness Maggie would surely have projected under the circumstances. "I will." It's Maggie now, I told myself. I should have been used to the name after being her for the past three weeks, but the morning sun was too bright and the pill I'd taken before leaving the hospital hadn't kicked in yet.

She hesitated, frowning. I thought she was going to say something neither of us wanted to hear.

"I'm good," I rushed in. "I'll be fine. Really." I tried the smile again, and it felt more natural. Like I was merging with that girl

I barely knew, whose life I had crawled into and was going to inhabit like a hermit crab, at least for now. “Thanks for the lift. For everything. You’ve all been so kind.”

I held the smile as she examined my bruised face and punk hairstyle, which was beginning to look like an intentional fashion choice now that it was almost a half-inch of bristle. I grinned fixedly as concern for a stranger fought for space on her to-do list. It was a relief when I was checked off with a nod. “Okay, then. If you’re sure. It’s your life.”

Mine? Or Maggie’s? I felt bubbles of totally inappropriate laughter rising in my chest. *Stop it.*

I held the smile and waved as the aide drove away, feeling as if I were waving at the girl I had been traveling with. So long, Maggie! Thanks for letting me borrow your identity! I’ll take good care of it! Then I burrowed into the plastic bag they’d put my stuff in at the hospital because nothing right now was more important than caffeine. The wallet was empty, I knew, except for an expired university ID, a tattered coffee shop punch card, three credit cards I couldn’t use, and the driver’s license that proved I was Maggie even if the face in the photo had a straighter nose, long hair, and a more genuine smile. I felt for the loose coins that had fallen to the bottom of the bag, hidden under some clothes that I would never have chosen. Wrap-around skirts made from repurposed saris, floaty floral dresses. That would have to be my style, now, at least until I had some cash and could hit up a second-hand store for jeans and tees. I groped under the corners of the battered but still working laptop and a book of essays by Annie Dillard that was full of Maggie’s underlining and scribbled notes, chasing every coin down. Good. Should be enough money to buy a large coffee.

The woman at the till gave me six cents change and a look that mixed sympathy and naked curiosity. “You the one that had the accident? The moose?”

“That’s me.”

“Terrible thing. You’re looking good, though.”

"Yeah, right." I made a face at myself in the big mirror tilted over the counter, the one positioned to watch for shoplifters. My nose had a bend in it, my cheek bones didn't quite align anymore, and the rainbow of purple and green had turned mostly yellow, like cheap spray-on tan unevenly applied.

"That bruise will be gone before you know it. You'll be your old self again." I felt another urge to laugh. Being the new self was taking all my energy. "I'm awful sorry about your friend," she added.

"Thanks." It didn't sound right. Maggie wouldn't snap out a single syllable, just because her head ached and she really needed that coffee. "It's really sad," I added, and for moment thought I'd captured her voice, all innocence, hope, and desperation.

"We had the jar out for her." She pointed to a jar by the cash register that now had a blurry photo taped to it of a woman named Phyllis who had breast cancer. "To help with the funeral expenses, you know. We raised almost two hundred dollars. I hear the service was nice."

Nice? No. Adequate, just barely. It had been held in the hospital chapel, a place I discovered when I was finally able to test my legs, rolling an IV pole with me as I hobbled down the hospital hallway. It was a dark little room with a few wooden benches, narrow slits of windows filled with colored glass. It smelled of wax and floor cleaner, but at least it was dark and quiet, away from the fluorescent lights, cheery voices, and squeaking shoes that passed by my room at all hours. There was only one person there that day, slumped in a pew and staring at nothing, probably taking a break from someone's bedside. We ignored each other, my preferred state.

The chapel was more crowded the day of Amber Grace Schultz's funeral service. My funeral. Around two dozen people were there, mostly staff in scrubs, a few administrators in suits, plus a couple of state cops who nodded to me, familiar from the accident investigation. They all listened to the hospital

chaplain say nice things about a woman none of them had ever met. Earlier the chaplain had asked if I wanted to speak about my friend, but I said it would be too hard. Instead, I sat in the front pew with a packet of those scratchy tissues they give you in hospitals, trying not to think about Maggie, whose ashes were in the next-to-lowest-cost urn on the altar.

If we hadn't switched drivers that foggy morning, if that urn had actually been full of my ashes, the real Maggie would have gone to the front to speak. She couldn't, though, because she was the one who'd been napping in the passenger seat when a sudden wall made out of solid moose appeared in front of our car, making the windshield explode and the roof crumple and twist in ways it didn't seem possible for something as substantial as a car to fold.

The real Maggie would have written a touching, beautifully crafted essay perfect for the occasion. It might have started out: *Her name was Amber. I only had a few days to get to know her, but in those few days I learned that she liked crisp apples and the smell of new-mown hay and that she wanted to travel to Tibet someday. That she had lost her mother a year ago and still missed her but was excited about finding a new job in Minneapolis. That she was funny and smart and yada yada, blah blah blah.*

She would say something like that, though none of it was true. Except for the apples. I do like crisp apples.

It was a relief to be done with Amber Grace Schultz. That name, Amber, it grated every time I had to write it down. It didn't fit me. Maggie was okay. Maggie Farnham, I muttered to myself, getting used to the sound of it as I filled a cup from one of the coffee urns and fitted a cover over it. It'll work, I thought, sipping my coffee.

Then I felt like shit because Maggie, bubbly and talkative and full of kindness and a ridiculous amount of innocence, had died and I hadn't.

But I didn't think about it for long. It wasn't like this was the

escape route I had intended. Blame the damned moose. I took my coffee outside to wait for the bus.

This is what led to the moose moment: Three weeks earlier, I'd seen the notice on the bulletin board in the coffee shop where I was working, one of those places with a university vibe where students with Norton Editions and highlighters studied among tables full of gray-haired faculty members talking to each other about Henry Giroux and the evils of neoliberalism and what their incredibly gifted grandchildren were up to.

Rideshare needed.

*Transportation to Minneapolis or points in between
share gas \$\$, driving, and good conversation.*

I could see another line, one written in invisible ink right above the tear-off telephone numbers: *Here's your chance. Take it.* Don't think, just do it. After seven months of peace and quiet, too many weird things were happening: a coworker was suddenly looking at me funny, the same black SUV showed up in the parking lot of our apartment and in front of the coffee shop, a new customer who didn't fit the profile of the usual clientele lined up at the counter to order coffee from a coworker, his hooded eyes reflected in the stainless refrigerator, staring at my back, looking away as soon as I turned. It could be nothing, but it was enough. I pulled off a strip of paper with a phone number on it and used the back office phone.

Fantastic! Maggie was sure we'd get along great. Was there any chance we could leave, like, maybe even today? She knew it was short notice but she wanted to get going, and anyway, she had been locked out of her apartment. Good thing she'd already packed, huh? We could trade off and drive through the night, would that be okay?

"Works for me." I took my apron off, told the shift supervisor I

was taking my break, slung my backpack over a shoulder, and took a round-about path to the campus parking lot where she told me to meet her. I didn't stop by the apartment I shared with three other women. I texted them to say I was moving and they could do whatever they wanted with my stuff, just some clothes and books. They had never been very friendly, and one of them had mentioned more than once that a friend needed a place, hint, hint. My boss would be pissed, but not for long. He was used to people walking off the job, but it never seemed to dawn on him it might have something to do with his being a total jerk.

As I passed a trash can I ejected the sim card from my cheap pay-as-you-go phone and dropped it in. The phone went into a dumpster a couple of blocks away. I'd get another burner to match my next identity. As soon as Maggie dropped me off in Minneapolis I'd have a few blissful hours to drift between being one person and whoever came next. Being nobody.

We shared the driving, though it took me a while to get used to Maggie's rusty Chevy Cavalier, with the trick it took to open the door on the driver's side so the handle wouldn't fall off in your hand, the way you had to jiggle the key just right for the engine to turn over. We didn't share the cost of gas as it turned out, not after all three of Maggie's cards were declined and she started to cry. I had enough cash to get us there, no worries. To make up for it, she did way more than her share of the talking.

Which was annoying at the time but turned out to be useful. I got to hear Maggie's entire life story, from her earliest memories to the death of both parents, her mother from cancer and her father from alcohol, through her struggle to finish the Dissertation from Hell while working a miserable combination of part-time gigs. She talked about her hopes for the new job, a whole year at Magnusson, a wonderful little college, where she would teach eight courses. Only eight! She'd taught as many as twelve a year at different universities to make ends meet, plus delivering Domino's and cashiering at

Walmart. She had completed her degree five years earlier, but it had taken until Fall 2019 to land something full time, with benefits. Now she would have reasonable class sizes, an office of her own—an office!—and employer-paid health insurance for the first time ever. For a whole year!

She'd been so happy until that moose came out of a bank of early-morning fog and ended her story. When I was lying in bed with the worst headache of my life, woozy with painkillers and tangled up in tubes, it dawned on me the police officer who was asking questions about the accident assumed I was Maggie and the deceased—that's what he called her, "the deceased"—was a woman named Amber Grace Schultz. This seemed impossible at first. I didn't look anything like the photo on Maggie's driver's license, with her wavy hair and sunny smile. But then, most of my hair had been shaved off and the part of my face that wasn't bandaged had been rearranged with a broken nose, cheekbone, and eye socket, all of it painted with lurid bruises. Our height, weight, and eye color matched, or close enough.

The dead girl, the one they thought was Amber Schultz, didn't look like Maggie either. She looked the way you do when you have to be removed in pieces from the twisted metal that didn't look much like a car anymore. They'd had to use the Jaws of Life. What if both of us had died, would they call it the Jaws of Death?

Fortunately, the original Maggie had never been arrested or lived in a state that took your fingerprints if you signed up for food stamps, and there was no telling where her dental records might be, if a woman as broke as she was even had dental records. "Poor Amber," I murmured when it finally sank in, when the identity swap seemed possible, then I pretended to doze off so I could think it through. Would it work? "I didn't really know her," I told the officer the next time he came to interview me, and he diligently wrote it in a notebook. "She was sweet, though. Worked in a coffee shop. Never went to

college, but liked to read. She didn't have any family to notify. She just wanted a ride to Minneapolis, even though she didn't have friends there. Just liked the idea of a fresh start, I guess."

It was too easy. So easy, it made me nervous. I figured I would have to call the people at Magnusson and explain I'd had a debilitating accident and couldn't take that one-year sabbatical replacement job after all. Go somewhere Maggie had never been before and tell anyone who asked that she was starting a new life. I would gradually taper off the messages and Facebook posts. Erase her history bit by bit so I would never find myself in a situation where people might squint and think "that's not the Maggie Farnham we know."

I started the process before leaving the hospital. As soon as I was physically able I booted up her old Toshiba laptop (which the original Maggie hadn't bothered to password-protect, bless her trusting heart). It still worked despite a cracked case and a noisy fan. I cleared out the malware and tracking cookies, reset the privacy settings on her programs and social media accounts, then read through her saved email. I connected to the hospital guest Wi-Fi long enough to download the Tor browser and look for any records of the woman I was supposed to be. A couple of digitized yearbooks from her undergraduate years. An article she'd written for a literary website, making a big fuss about some obscure poet. I read it carefully, committing the trivia to memory in case anyone asked about it. I found a blog she had started years ago and dropped after making a handful of posts about food and the weather and how she felt about a book she'd read. I poked deeper and found a few more tidbits: records from her overdrawn bank account and credit cards, North Carolina voter registration, some of her previous addresses. Her parents' obituaries.

Her hard drive and Facebook account were more informative, but not by much. As talkative as she had been, the old Maggie didn't seem to have many friends, and the men in her life didn't appear to last more than a date or two, thank goodness.

Nobody to sweep into the new Maggie's life to renew a romance and ask what happened to the birthmark on her back or the tattoo on her butt, if she'd had such things before ending up in an urn with the wrong person's name on it.

The emails revealed a part of my new identity that wasn't so great. I not only owed the hospital the ridiculous deductible and copays for the bare-bones coverage Maggie had signed up for, I had over \$100,000 worth of school loans to pay off. All that money for an English PhD? Girl, what were you thinking?

The job she had been so excited about didn't pay much more than my minimum-wage gigs, but I was tempted to stick with it, at least until I was fully healed from the moose encounter. I'd been living in a college town, and liked it. The vibe was chill, there were a lot of transients, and it wasn't hard to blend in with crowds. The work sounded easy and I could probably pick up something on the side while I figured out my next steps. How much effort would it take to teach bored college students how to write essays in classes that only met three hours a week?

It turned out to be a little more complicated than that.

The first problem was that I was supposed to get settled in and start teaching in the first week of September but wouldn't get a paycheck until the end of the month, and no, they didn't give advances, or so the woman who guarded the HR office said, looking a little scared. New faculty members probably didn't show up with a limp, a misshapen face full of bruises, and a wrinkled dress that didn't fit very well, asking for money a week before classes started. Or maybe she could tell, somehow, that the new English professor had slept on a Greyhound bus, hadn't eaten in nearly twenty-four hours and had nowhere to sleep. She suggested I talk to my department chair. Yeah, that's a nope. I had to be prepared before I talked to the people who'd hired Maggie and I was barely keeping it together.

The second problem was that it was dawning on me that I couldn't just settle into Maggie's job. No way this was going

to work. Magnusson College was in a tiny town two hours northwest of Minneapolis. Mitigomee, Minnesota had a water tower and a grain elevator by the tracks, a couple of gas stations, four bars, three churches, a two-block strip of old brick buildings they called “the downtown” full of dusty antique shops and “for rent” signs, and an ambient aroma of manure thanks to a big dairy operation somewhere upwind. It was the kind of town where everyone knew everyone’s business, where someone asking about Maggie Farnham would likely get helpful directions without a second thought. It could be on a poster for the American Heartland, so peaceful and sleepy—and completely unsafe for me.

But before I made any decisions, I needed to eat and a place to sleep for the night. Then I would figure it out.

A couple of blocks down Main Street from the so-called business district there was a Dollar Store. Of course there was, they grew like fungus in decaying towns. It looked a combination of sad and sinister, with grass growing up through cracks in the parking lot and cardboard patching the broken glass on the lower part of the door, like somebody had needed strawberry Twizzlers real bad in the middle of the night and tried to kick his way in.

Inside there were cameras and mirrors and a battle-ax of a woman at the cash register who glowered at me, her expression saying she knew shoplifters when she saw them and would keep her eye on me. Dammit. I paused by the corkboard near the entrance, pretending to read notices pinned up there. Maybe if some kids came in to buy snacks the woman would get distracted and I could sneak a candy bar into my pocket. Or maybe I could just faint gracefully onto the dirty linoleum floor and lie there until somebody took pity and gave me something to eat. Twizzlers would do.

Room and board. The large font letters swam a little on the stapled sheet of paper. Light housekeeping. Needed a valid driver’s license. Five hundred bucks a month. A fuzzy photo of

a Victorian house that looked haunted. I pulled it off the board and asked the woman at the cash register if I could make a local call.

Are you kidding? Of course not. Instead, I borrowed the cell phone of Latina woman who had pulled up outside in a carful of children. While she waited politely, swatting kids who were getting antsy about buying candy, I talked myself into a job and a place to live.

I mean, seriously? I wouldn't hire me, not without references or an actual interview. But clearly the woman who answered the phone was desperate.

"So, these are the house keys. This one's the front door, this is ... I don't know, you'll have to figure it out. These are the car keys. It probably needs an oil change. My mother isn't much for taking care of things. Just don't let her drive. She thinks she can, but she can't see a goddamn thing. It's only a matter of time before she—" The phone ringing in her bag made her pause. "Hang on."

Lara Stern turned away, swept her long and perfectly groomed hair back to put her phone to her ear with a sigh. Muffled voices in the background, strained patience in hers, snapping at last. "I'm about to leave. For god's sake, you're their father, deal with it." She jabbed the phone off and dropped it back in her bag. "Sorry about that. Unbelievable. I'm only here for a few days and ... well, anyway, they obviously can't cope, so I need to get going. You have my cell. Call if you need anything. And listen, Mom can be difficult. She's independent, she hates being old, she'll give you a hard time. Don't let her push you around. Make sure..." She flicked a forefinger against the corners of her eyes, grimacing, annoyed with her own spurt of emotion. "Make sure she eats, and takes her pills. I'll be back in a week or two. If this works out, if you can stand it, you've got the job for the rest of the academic year. But call if things get really bad."

"It should be fine," I said, remembering to give her a Maggie smile. "I'm looking forward to getting to know your mother."

"Huh!" Her laugh was half a sob. "Good luck. I mean, I love her dearly, but I wish she would just sell this dump and move into the place I found for her. It's really nice and it's close to us and they have all kinds of programs, it's *perfect*." She glared at the house, her mouth tight. "But, no. It was my idea, so it's out of the question, forget that it's incredibly hard for me to get down here with the kids and my work." Her glare turned on me. "I've done my best." As if I had accused her of neglect.

"I'm sure you have." Channeling Maggie, I put a hand on her arm, gave it a comforting squeeze. "She'll come around. It's just hard for her to come to terms with the situation. My own grandmother went through the same thing. But don't worry, I've got this."

She was still looking at the house, with the tilting porch, the peeling paint, the vines that swarmed up a chimney and seemed to be the only thing holding the crumbling bricks together. She heaved a sigh.

"We'll manage," I reassured her. "And I'll keep you up to date if anything comes up."

"I don't know." As my stomach rumbled, she turned to look at me, seeming to take in my own decrepitude. Go, I thought, before I pass out and you realize how weird it is to leave your mother with a stranger who looks like a veteran of the zombie invasion. "I mean, I feel so guilty, dumping her on you," she said.

"You're not dumping her. You're doing me a favor. I was just wondering where I'd find a rental in a small town like this, and you solved that problem. And honestly? I could use the money, what with school loans to pay off. The guest room will be perfect for me, and so convenient, just a few blocks to campus. Besides, I like her, and I hope she'll like me."

"I wouldn't count on it. We were ready to kill each other."

I gave a lighthearted Maggie laugh. "Families, right?" I gave a little shoo-wave. "We'll be *fine*. Get out of here. Go."

She gave one last, lingering glance at the house. Following her gaze, I saw she was checking to see if her mother would be at the window to see her off, but no one was there. She scrabbled in her bag, slipped on dark glasses, and climbed into her car. *Finally*. I waved as she drove away, doing my best to project competence and safety, but she didn't look back.

"She's gone at last?" the old woman croaked as I came in. Dr. Anna Mishkin, retired professor of mathematics, was pretending indifference, seated in a wingback chair and leafing through a book though it was too dark to see the pages. Her nose was long and straight, perfect for looking down at people with disdain, her fingers were knotted with arthritis, and silver hair escaped from a braided bun, tendrils framing her face like a halo made of a tangle of barbed wire.

"Yup."

She made a face, hacked up an impressive loogie, and swallowed it before pointing at a nearby chair. "Take a seat. We need to get some things straight." Unlike her daughter's Midwestern accent, hers was a mix of heavy-duty Brooklyn and East European.

"Sure. In a minute."

"Where do you think you're going?" she said crossly, but I pretended I hadn't heard her as I headed to the kitchen. Not much in the fridge: wilted celery, a wrinkled orange long past its sell-by date, some pickles, a mason jar full of shelled walnuts. I was scarfing nuts when she stumped into the kitchen, leaning on a cane. "Sorry," I mumbled, then finished chewing and swallowed. "Haven't had a chance to eat today."

She shook her head, disapproving. "My daughter goes and finds a street urchin to spy on me, typical."

I shrugged, stuffed another handful of nuts in my mouth. Maybe she would get on the phone and demand her daughter return to kick me out, but I didn't care. I needed food.

"Also, your face is a mess. You have a mean boyfriend?"

I shook my head, finished chewing and swallowed. “Mean car accident.”

“Is that why your hair style comes straight from the gulag?” I nodded, took another handful of nuts. She tipped her head, giving me a critical once-over. “It looks okay on you. And so practical, no fuss, no curly nonsense.” She fluttered a hand, sketching the long and perfectly-coifed beach waves that framed her daughter’s face. “Must be low maintenance. I should try it, you think?” She pointed to the silver braids that were wound in an impressive crown, anchored in a Medusa’s nest of loose ends.

“No, you have great hair, it would be a shame to cut it. But it must be a lot of work.”

“Pfff.” She flicked her fingers at me, as if I were a fly. “I’ve worn it like this since I was a girl, I can do it in my sleep. Later, the grocery store. But now, we feed you, skinny girl. Give me the car keys. We’ll go to the diner.”

“Sounds good, but I’m driving.”

She huffed and thumped her cane. She was a big woman, acting like a buffalo guarding its territory. I thought she was gearing up for a fight, but she was just repositioning to turn. Somehow from the back she didn’t look so big after all.

“So, you will teach English?” she asked.

“Four sections of first-semester composition this fall.”

“Good luck. These kids can’t write, and they’re lazy. They think a five-page paper is asking them to write *War and Peace*. Try the meatloaf, it’s good.”

“Your daughter told me you taught math at the college.”

“For nearly forty years. So many sections of calculus, my god.”

“When did you retire?”

“What is this, an interrogation? I’m the one giving you a roof over your head.”

Technically her daughter was the one who set it up, but I let

it pass. A waitress stopped by our table, pad in hand. “Hiyah, professor. What can I get for you today?”

“I will have the porketta. For my friend here—meatloaf.”

“I was thinking the fish,” I said. “Never tried Walleye before.”

The old woman was shaking her head before I finished. “You are new here. Let me explain: Walleye is boring. It has no flavor. Have the meatloaf.” She took my menu away and gave it to the waitress, who shot me a complicit grin. It was non-negotiable. Surrender was the only option.

“Meatloaf it is.” The waitress ran us through the choice of sides and salad dressings before leaving us alone.

“So, what brings you to Magnusson?” Dr. Mishkin asked.

“I saw the job announcement and applied.” I stalled out. Come on Maggie, help me out here. I tried to remember what she said on that long car trip, giving me her life story. “I know it’s only a visiting position, but it’s a great opportunity. I was so happy when I got the call. A liberal arts college has always been my dream. And it’s not easy to get teaching jobs these days.”

“In English? Hah! I was on a search committee once. Hundreds of applicants, all with long CVs full of publications on postcolonial this and interrogating that, trying to sound sophisticated and specialized. Their teaching statements were all about how they are so passionate about language, but they couldn’t write a clear sentence. I suppose this is when I should ask you about your dissertation.”

I braced myself. Shit, what was the name of that poet? What was the theory she was using to illuminate something-or-other? I had committed the abstract to memory, expecting this question, but now that space where it had been stored in my brain was as empty as my stomach.

“However, I won’t,” she added, “because I doubt you were allowed to write anything sensible. I myself am fond of literature. I’m well read. Dostoevsky when I was young and impressionable, Gogol when I was smarter. Pushkin, of course. Shakespeare, Milton, all the classics. But I couldn’t understand

a word of what those job candidates said. They want to make their research sound as rigorous as particle physics, but without any grounding in reality.” She glared, daring me to contradict her.

“That sounds about right. How did you end up here?”

“I’ll tell you some day. It’s a long and tiresome story. But don’t change the subject. We’re talking about you. For example, where do you call home?”

“Nowhere in particular.” She raised an eyebrow. “I mean, we moved a lot.” I searched my memory for Maggie’s early life. “Ohio, I guess? It’s where I was born.”

The waitress dropped off a basket of rolls and I fell on them. The professor watched as I scarfed them down, demurring when I offered her the last one, amused. “Whoa. Okay, that helped.” I sat back in the booth, suddenly sleepy.

“Next question: Why didn’t you eat today?”

“No money. Which—sorry, but I can’t pay for my dinner tonight. You’ll have to take an IOU.”

She gave her buffalo snort. “Did anybody tell you the checks don’t come out until October? It’s a tradition for the new faculty to haunt the campus, attending all the events that advertise refreshments, trying to sneak extra cookies into their pockets and purses.”

“Yeah, I know they pay late, but your daughter wrote a check. I just need to get to a bank and cash it.”

“She’s *paying* you?”

I realized I’d stepped in it. “Well, for doing housekeeping and cooking and taking you on errands.”

She thumped the table with a clenched fist as if it was a substitute for giving her daughter a black eye. Then she pointed a bony finger at me. “I keep my own house, thank you very much. And I can drive perfectly well, whatever she says. That interfering little...” She growled with fury.

“What’s the harm? I don’t mind doing chores,” I said. “And I can cook. It doesn’t look from the state of your fridge that

you're all that into it yourself. Besides, I've been taking care of myself since I was fifteen."

"I've been doing it much longer than you." She angrily rearranged her silverware. "This is completely unnecessary. She's only doing it because she wants me to sell my house and make me give up my independence."

"Look, I don't want to get in the middle of some family drama."

She took a breath and blew it out, then relaxed back into the booth. "Yes, of course. It's not your fault my only child is an idiot who wants to park me in some home for the elderly. And knowing how little the college pays adjuncts..." She shrugged. "Well, my daughter can spare the money and you could use it, so it will work out so long as you don't interfere with my life or spy on me for Lara. Do we have a deal?"

"Deal."

"Especially no spying. Did she ask you to report on me?"

"Nope, nothing like that. I said I would call if anything came up, that's all. Like, an emergency, not petty stuff. I value privacy, too. I'll give you all you want."

"Okay, so now I need to learn more about this person who will be living under my roof. Tell me about yourself. For instance, what happened when you were fifteen?"

So much for my privacy. "Things were messed up at home. I started staying with friends, but that didn't work out. I mean..." I suddenly realized I was giving her the wrong life story. "Well, actually, after my mom died I lived with my dad for a while, but had his own issues, and then he died, too."

"This was in Ohio?"

"We'd moved east by then. Delaware." I hope she didn't ask more about it, I'd never been there and wasn't even sure I could find it on a map.

"What did he do, your father?"

"Drink, mostly. I mean, if you asked him he'd say he was in logistics. His last job, he was a baggage handler at the airport

until he got canned." Thanks for sharing all that, Maggie. Helps round out the cover story.

"Any brothers or sisters?"

No, thank god. This was complicated enough. "Just me and him, and given his issues, I was pretty much on my own." Which was what Maggie had told me, something we had in common. I hoped the meatloaf would arrive soon so I would have an excuse to not talk with my mouth full.

"Yet you went to college, got your doctorate. Stupid choice of discipline, okay, but still I'm impressed."

"I always liked school, though writing the dissertation was another matter. I mean, I got through it, but I was working a bunch of jobs and my committee was terrible and by the time it was done I hated the subject." I could quote Maggie on that. She'd vented a lot about it. My cheeks suddenly felt hot, thinking about how I'd stolen her life just as things were looking up for her. To make up for it, I let her have the next lines. "It's going to be amazing to have a full-time job with benefits. An actual office. Like, with walls and a door. At a college that cares about students, that values teaching. This is a great opportunity." I felt my voice changing as slipped into my new role, optimistic and full of enthusiasm for coming semester.

"Spare me the college pep talk."

"Right."

"Eat your dinner," she ordered as plates were set in front of us. So I did.

I was too busy enjoying the sensation of not being hungry that I didn't notice my host staring at me narrowly as she picked at her food.

"This accident of yours." She speared a green bean, nibbled the end of it, and shook the rest of it off her fork. "It was serious?"

"Three weeks in the hospital. I had a lot of broken bones, and they had to take my spleen out." I unconsciously fingered the cheekbone that had been shattered and reconstructed. It

made my face look a little off kilter, and there was a new bend in my nose where it had broken, but on the upside there was a good chance all that rearrangement of bone structure might confuse facial recognition software.

"Three weeks of hospital food. No wonder you are so thin."

"A week and a half of it was through a straw. It was a big day when they let me have Jell-O. Lime Jell-O, a little bowl of it. The woman who was in the car with me, she died," I added, not meaning to.

I pictured her chatting beside me, flat broke and deep in debt but irrepressibly hopeful. The courses she was scheduled to teach, the office that would be mine instead. My eyes filled and I blinked the tears away. Jesus, it wasn't like we were actual friends. It felt wrong to mourn her, like I was indulging in an emotion I hadn't earned. But then, Maggie would have teared up, I told myself. At least I was in character.

"I'm sorry." Her face, so patrician and disapproving, had softened. Even her raspy voice had become gentler.

"I didn't even know her," I said, sounding angry, after blowing my nose on a napkin. Maggie wouldn't have said that, but for some reason it was hard to stay in character with Dr. Mishkin sitting across the booth from me. "We were just sharing a ride. I was driving. It was foggy and we hit a moose, if you can believe it. Anyway, I'm okay now. Just need to get organized. What can you tell me about the English department? Do you know any of the people in it?"

"I know them all. Impossible not to, at a small college. Also, English professors with tenure never leave. What would they do with themselves, read for fun? They've forgotten how. Your position only opened up because one of the faculty died, another is on sabbatical, and none of them want to teach additional sections of composition, which is actual work, when they could have intimate little seminars with a select number of deluded majors. Most of them are as old as I am, but they will never give up teaching."

“So, am I walking into a museum of mummies?”

“Hah! Byron Gleeson fits that description, he must be over eighty now, and he looks embalmed. But that’s not the phrase I would use. I’d say...” She frowned over my head for a moment. “It’s more like a tank of hungry sharks.”

“Oh. Okay.”

She seemed to feel sorry for me and hurried to reassure me. “Don’t be worried. They are so busy attacking each other, they won’t even notice you, small fry. Just be wary, and if you want to avoid making enemies, don’t make friends.”

“Got it.”

That wouldn’t be a challenge. I had plenty of practice not making friends.

Two

Not making friends got off to a good start.

I walked to campus the following morning and found my way to the English department, on the second floor of a 1950s-era box built of yellow bricks that were turning a strange green color, like they were growing mold. Tears of rust wept from the flashing around the windows. Somehow I doubted the humanities building was on the admissions tour. Once up the stairs, a pear-shaped woman with frizzed hair like a Brillo pad blocked my path as I turned down a dark corridor. “Hold on. Where’s your yellow card?”

“Sorry, I didn’t know I needed it. Where do I get one?” I assumed it was some sort of ID, which made sense. The campus was eerily quiet. It would be a reasonable security precaution to require clip-on badges for anyone who wandered into the dark, nearly empty buildings of the post-apocalyptically vacant campus.

“You can’t get one, not for this floor.” She folded her arms, triumphant, like she’d just won a debate. “Nobody in these departments has students authorized to work this summer.” So there.

“I’m not a student.”

She tilted her head back, taking my words as an insult or a threat. “Am going to have to call security?”

“Why? I’m just looking for my office. I’m Maggie Farnham. I teach here?” I couldn’t help turning it into a question. She seemed so skeptical I was about to produce my driver’s license when something brushed the back of my neck. I jumped, pivoting at the same time, and realized two things.

One, I should have heard the man behind me approach and been ready to either deck him or knee him in the balls and two, it was a good thing he had sneaked up on me so silently

because he looked important, and security definitely would have been called, and probably the police, if I'd assaulted him. Neck-touching is seriously creepy, but not strictly speaking illegal.

"Dr. Farnham." His voice was smooth and somehow sticky, like warm molasses. "I'm Peter Van Meter. Lovely to meet you in person at last." He opened his arms as if to embrace me but he must have seen something in my expression and turned it into a handshake. My hand was enveloped in a warm, moist, much-too-long clasp. He patted the back of it in an avuncular way, assuming your uncle was a perv. He gazed down at my chest, saying to it "I heard about your accident. How dreadful. Have you fully recovered?"

"Yeah." I recovered my hand, too, and pretended I was brushing something off my skirt so I could wipe it. Ugh. "Pretty much. I'm looking forward to classes starting. Thought I would set up my office and figure out stuff like making copies and getting onto the learning management system so I can upload my course materials." I didn't know what exactly that meant, but Maggie had talked about how important it was.

"The redoubtable Mrs. Anderson can help you." He beamed at the woman who had blocked my way.

She beamed back laser rays of disapproval. "Don't ask me to do the technology stuff."

"Nor me. I can't explain the 'learning management system'"—he wagged his fingers in air quotes—"because I refuse to use it."

"I thought we had to."

He cackled. It was an actual cackle that would have been at home in an old horror movie. "They send a scolding email about it every semester, along with a demand to include entire paragraphs of legalese in every syllabus. Ridiculous. As a senior member of the faculty I feel it's my duty to resist the neoliberal bureaucratization of the academy whenever I can." Somehow, as he stared at my bust, he made it sound like a pick-up line.

I had worn one of Maggie's floral prints, hoping to make an impression. It was working, but not in a good way. The scooped neckline was too low. When he eventually had enough of my boobs, he looked up and his leer turned into a frown. "I wouldn't have recognized you."

Shit. Had he been in on the interview? "I had this accident."

"Yes, we heard. What an ordeal. You poor thing."

"It kind of rearranged some things." I circled my face with a finger.

"And your hair! Those lovely tresses." I flinched as he reached toward my shoulder, as if to brush back my missing locks. "Almost pre-Raphaelite. Wasn't Christina Rossetti the subject of your dissertation?"

Maybe? It didn't ring a bell, though.

"That was one of the others," Mrs. Anderson said before I could come up with a response that wouldn't screw things up.

"Oh, the one who..." They exchanged glances. "Yes, of course. Ah well, no matter. You'll only be teaching the young heathens basic writing, so poetry isn't relevant, at least not these days. It's all social justice and critical interpretation of comic books." He winked and patted my shoulder in a lascivious-grandfather way before he passed down the hallway.

"Is he always like that?" I couldn't help shrugging as if it would somehow shake off the creepy-crawly feeling of his touch.

"He's old school," she said, as if that explained it. Then she added, "Also, he knows the sexual harassment policy by heart and manages to stay just this far from getting in trouble." She held up two fingers, the tips almost touching.

"Quite a skill."

"He's had decades of practice."

Since she seemed to be thawing I asked "What did he mean, 'the one who'?"

"You think you're the only one who applied?" The frost was

back. “I had to manage the files, nearly three hundred applications. All that, just for a visiting position.”

“Sorry.” Why was I apologizing to her?

“The other one turned us down. What a hassle. It’s not just English. I handle History, Philosophy, and Foreign Languages, too. History’s the worst. Four hundred and twenty applicants! CVs, teaching statements, research agenda, letters of reference, transcripts, all of it. If they used a modern HR system it wouldn’t be so bad, but I have to keep the files in order and handle all the correspondence. ‘Thanks for your application. No, we haven’t decided yet. No, we still haven’t decided. Guess what, you didn’t get the job,’ times four hundred. It’s not easy.”

Not my fault, lady. “Maybe you could point me toward my office.” I gave her a sweet Maggie smile.

“Two ten. Go down past History and Foreign Languages. You’ll be sharing with the other adjuncts.” She waited until I made it all the way down the hall, found the door and tried to open it, before she called out, “You have to go to Security to get your keys.” I limped back up the corridor. “Didn’t they put that in the orientation folder?” she complained.

“I lost some stuff in the accident.”

She rolled her eyes. How careless of me. “Wait.” After ducking back into her lair, she returned with a sheet of paper. A campus map. “Security is in the basement of this dorm. They’ll handle your keys and parking permit. Go to dining services for your ID.” She took a pen that was nested in her Brillo-hair and marked the spot. “You need it to get into events and use the library. The IT department is in Bjelland Hall.” She jabbed at the map. “They’ll explain how to get your courses loaded on Moodle, that’s not my job. I’ve added you to the all-department email alias. There’s a department meeting coming up. Make sure those messages don’t go into the spam folder.”

“Right.”

“Oh, by the way, whatever Peter says, don’t expect me to run copies for you. I don’t have time. Once the students are back, I

might have a work-study student who can do that if you plan ahead, but it all goes on your account, and I keep an eye on who's abusing the department budget. Just put everything online so the students are the ones who have to pay to print it."

I almost said "that doesn't seem fair when they're already paying tuition," but was smart enough to keep it to myself. I took the map from her and gave her another saccharine smile. "Thanks for all this. I really appreciate it. You've been so helpful." If she detected any sarcasm in my words, she didn't show it.

I plodded around campus, turning Maggie into an official employee, all the while feeling a little off kilter. Even though I had been exhausted from the long bus trip to Mitagomee, I hadn't slept well. After a run to the grocery store with Dr. Mishkin, who spent most of the time complaining about the poor quality and limited selection of food compared to the Russian enclave in New York where she'd lived decades ago, I made us a simple supper of mushroom and spinach omelets. She turned in early, and so did I.

Having a full belly had made me drowsy enough to start drifting off, comfy under a white sprigged bedspread in a bed that had saggy bits that probably were shaped to Lara's adolescent body. The guest room had been her childhood bedroom, though there wasn't much left to show for it apart from a shelf of schoolbooks and some old shoes in the closet. Though it was spare, the space tucked up under the eaves felt safe and comfortable. Through the open windows I could hear wind rustling through the trees and the chirping and whirring of crickets and cicadas.

But as happened all too often, a stray thought intruded just as I was dropping off that yanked me out of my drowsiness.

I couldn't get to sleep for hours, debating with myself whether I should stay in this comfortable place or leave in the morning, make my excuses and erase my tracks behind me. Had those prickly feelings that made me ready to leave my

coffee shop job at the first opportunity been early warning signals that I'd been found, or was that just my paranoia working overtime? Should I hopscotch a couple of identities before letting down my guard, or was it safe to be Maggie and stay put for a little while, at least until I cashed a couple of paychecks and had enough time to plan my next moves? I liked having this little room of my own and, even if Anna Mishkin seemed a little grumpy and opinionated, I enjoyed her company. She wasn't too nosy, not in ways that mattered, and I could use a few weeks to rest up and get my strength back, or at least lose the bruises that made me all too identifiable.

I lay awake in the dark and tried to do a straightforward risk assessment, but all I had were open questions. I was certain they would track down Amber Grace Schultz with her minimum wage job and lousy apartment at some point, and possibly already had, but would the trail stop with her? Surely they would look into the woman who was with her when she died, if only to tie off any loose ends. They wouldn't be as gullible as the accident investigators who had jumped to conclusions and then took my word for it that they'd identified the dead woman accurately.

I couldn't sleep until I outlined a plan. One: I would cash Lara's check tomorrow and keep a watchful eye out for any signs of trouble. Two: I would devise some way of leaving Mitagomee fast without leaving a trace, but if nothing spooked me I would postpone it until I collected my first month's wages from the college. Three: I would reassess and make a decision then.

With that settled, I took a dogeared copy of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* off the bookshelf and bored myself to sleep, giving me barely enough rest to take on my first day of college life.

When I returned to the second floor office with my activated keycard, it turned out I didn't need it. The door was ajar, and I heard voices inside. Two of them, a man and a woman. I eavesdropped long enough to peg them as legit college

employees. As I entered I saw the woman had claimed the desk near the window and had staked out her territory by piling papers on the windowsill, filling nearly all of the shelves that lined one wall with her books and folders, and laying claim to the best chairs, the one she was sitting in while the other was reserved with a pile of files and a massive leather bag. “I need to keep my books here,” she told us preemptively. “I have such a long commute, I plan do most of my research on campus. Besides, my advanced students will need to consult them, given the meager resources available at the library.”

“I don’t need much room.” The man, who was pulling a few books from his backpack, was tanned and skinny with the wiry-but-muscular build of a long distance runner. He straightened the stack of books on one corner of a battered metal desk that probably was as old as the building. “You joining us?”

“Guess so,” I said, resolving to spend as little time in this claustrophobic room as possible. According to the course handouts Maggie had already drafted, I would hold office hours here six hours a week. I’d had to look it up: office hours were a period of time set aside for meeting students who never showed up but who would instead send an email in the middle of the night expecting an instant response. I knocked her six hours down to one.

Maggie had also included a paragraph about “conferencing” with students regularly to discuss their papers, but I wasn’t sure what that was about, or how it would work in this cramped room. The only unoccupied desk—my desk by default—was half hidden behind the door. There was barely room for my chair, let alone space for a student.

I would have preferred a spot by the window, or at least one that offered a view of anyone approaching down the hall. The only desk that would do had been claimed by the lanky man, who was grasping its edge and trying to scoot his chair in. It seemed to have a wonky wheel. “Can’t steer this thing.”

“Want to trade desks?”

"No thanks, I'm good," he said quickly. When he tilted the chair to examine it, two of the wheels fell off.

"Typical," the woman sighed. "I taught here last year. Nothing ever gets fixed."

"Can I make a suggestion?" I said. "If we put that file cabinet in this corner and moved our desks over there and there..." It took a while to get them on board, but with some heavy lifting, a little swearing, and a running commentary from The Sighing Woman, the man had secured rights to a portion of the bookshelves, which made him happy, and I had a chance to sit with my back to the wall, a view of the hallway, quick access to the back stairwell, and less worry about being trapped.

In my visit to IT I had insisted my directory information on the campus website would be set to private and, instead of a headshot, my avatar would be a generic silhouette. But the name Maggie Farnham, office location, and campus email address were public by default, which could theoretically give the word "headshot" a different definition.

Another reason to spend as little time in this room as possible.

As we moved furniture we introduced ourselves. The Sighing Woman was Dr. Harriet Beasley, professor of romance languages. Her research area was modern and contemporary Lusophone literature, which sounded like a brass band instrument, but before I embarrassed myself asking about it I figured out from the titles on her bookshelves that it was a fancy word for Portuguese. Apparently there wasn't much demand for Portuguese at Magnusson, so she taught Spanish instead. She told us she had proposed a stimulating seminar on twentieth century Brazilian literature in translation but alas, it hadn't filled, so she was stuck with three sections of intro and one of first semester intermediate. I could tell she was the kind of person who would use words like "alas" a lot.

The man was a history teacher named Oak Larsson. "My parents were hippies," he said apologetically. "They went with

a nature theme. My sisters' names are Willow and Amaryllis. They're not too happy about it, but at least they're not as weird as Oak." He didn't seem to really mind his name, or anything else, including the chair that lost its wheels whenever he lifted it, which made him laugh his head off every time it happened. I wasn't sure I could put up with so much cheerfulness. Maybe between crabby Harriet Beasley and laid-back Oak Larsson it would balance out.

I had just started exploring the systems I was supposed to use for courses on the hand-me-down Windows laptop IT had signed out to me when Oak pulled a shiny new MacBook Pro out of his backpack. "Whoa, jealous. How'd you get that?"

He did a game show hostess impression, showing it off while relating its technical specs, before adding "I bought it myself. I don't want to have to use junk like that piece of crap they gave you."

"Neither do I. A twenty-seven inch?"

"Eat your heart out. I do a lot of digital humanities assignments in my classes, and since I've been teaching at so many different schools, it doesn't make sense to rely on their junk. Spent the summer on a roofing crew so I could splash out for a tool I'll use every day. As a bonus, I got to brush up on my Spanish."

Harriet Beasley sniffed. Not the right kind of Spanish, apparently.

I spent an hour figuring out Moodle, the platform we had to use to post schedules and assignments for our courses, then wrote up a guide since all of my students would be first-semester freshmen. They would be at least as confused as I was and the official documentation seemed to have been put through a bad translation engine. Then I spent nearly an hour figuring out the kinks of sending documents to the department's shared printer that also made copies, except that it didn't because the paper was being rationed by Mrs. Anderson. After I redesigned my handout to make it a single

double-sided page and coaxed her to give me enough paper to run copies for the 68 students enrolled in my courses (I had to point out you can't expect them to get into the system to print it themselves if they can't get into the system), it jammed so badly she had to call the office that managed copiers and report a malfunction. Which might be repaired before classes started. Or not. She wasn't encouraging about the situation.

"She's a dragon," Beasley said with a characteristic sniff.

"You think so?" Oak seemed genuinely surprised.

"I think she's scary," I said, wondering how to solve the copy problem. "Is there a Kinkos in town?"

Beasley snickered. "This town?"

"Don't be silly." Oak rolled back from his desk to face us, then paused and glanced under his seat to make sure the wheels weren't about to fall off again. "Adjuncts shouldn't pay for copies and no, there isn't a Kinkos."

"Or a Starbucks, or a Whole Foods," Beasley added sourly. "Or a bookstore that isn't entirely devoted to campus-branded gear and two-hundred-dollar textbooks."

"Don't be intimidated by Shirley," he said to me. "She's great. She knows everything about this place, and she doesn't sugar coat anything."

"Never sugar. She uses arsenic," Beasley muttered.

I squinted at Oak. "Shirley? You get away with calling her by her first name?"

"Sure. Look, I've taught at seven different schools." He paused, thinking. "No, eight, counting Magnusson. The first rule is you make friends with the admin assistant. Sure, don't piss off your chair, that's a given, but the real source of power is the person who knows all the budget lines and who to call with a question and how to fix it when you lost your password for the Banner system and—"

"The which system?"

"The one that you use to see your rosters and submit your grades. Didn't you get your orientation packet?"

"I was in a car accident. I lost a lot of stuff."

"Ah, is that why ... Well, here, borrow mine." He burrowed into his backpack and brought out a bulging folder, stamped with a logo that involved small mammals, a heraldic shield, and a slogan in Latin. "Lot of good stuff in there."

Beasley sniffed, or was that a stifled laugh? I felt drained all of a sudden. "I think I'll take it home to read through it, if that's okay."

"Sure. You look done in. Are you going to be okay to teach next week?"

"Guess I'll have to be." I smiled bravely, Maggie style.

"Hey, before you go—I was going to grab a beer at Bosco's tonight. Want to join me? Say, seven?" He looked at both of us.

"Maybe?" I said, remembering that name. A bar on Main Street, dark and sinister, the kind of tavern that emitted a waft of ancient cigarette smoke and mildew every time the door opened.

"The Nighthawk is the student bar," he added. "Bosco's is old school. Full of local character, and blessedly free of students."

"I have revisions due for an article," Beasley said. "But if I make progress, I may just reward myself with a glass of wine." She gave us an imperious nod, as if the real reward would be the gift of her presence.

I walked home, headed up to my bedroom to read the packet of college info, and fell asleep.

Three

After making a quick dinner, washing up, disentangling a prescription snafu with the pharmacy, and picking up some library books for Dr. Mishkin, I got to the bar around eight p.m. and located Oak and Beasley in a booth under a glassy-eyed deer head wearing a Vikings cap at a raffish angle. “You made it,” Oak cheered as Beasley raised her wineglass to me with an unexpectedly friendly smile.

“Sorry, I had to run some errands,” I said, sliding in next to her.

“We were just comparing notes,” Beasley said. “Who has the most dysfunctional department? I submit mine has the edge, given French and Swedish have conspired to seize all the best class periods. It’s nearly impossible to engage students after lunch, and eight in the morning is an impossible time to teach, especially when you have to commute from the cities. The traffic gets worse every year.” As she spoke, fumes of wine wafted toward me, and her gestures were extravagant enough to make her glass slosh dangerously. “All due to resentment because their programs are facing extinction. The only language students want to take is Shpanish.” Yup, she’d definitely had more than one glass.

“But in the history department we have epic battles over the soul of the discipline,” Oak said. “There’s Javier, who wants to decolonize the discipline, glaring across the table at George, who won’t let go of a curriculum based on the Western tradition. What’s English like?”

“I’ve only met one faculty member so far, and he’s a serial groper. Do I win?”

“Not even close.” Beasley was loud enough that some men dressed in camo looked over at our booth, alarmed. “I’ll see your groper and raise you a plagiarist.”

Oak exchanged glances with me and said “Have you eaten yet? We could share some appetizers.”

I wasn’t hungry, but I nodded. Something was clearly needed to soak up the alcohol, but as the server took our order Beasley wagged her glass for a refill.

“So these epic history battles,” I said. “Sounds like an opportunity. Maybe your department could start a sideline in reenactments. Like, George could build a trebuchet and Javier could, I don’t know...”

“*¡A las barricadas!*” Beasley drew herself up to belt out the opening bars of a revolutionary anthem, but Oak held up a warning finger.

“No singing. Also, no reenactments. George is a hundred years old. He couldn’t fire a trebuchet if his life depended on it. Besides, he would call it catering to entertainment culture. He is a staunch defender of lectures. I’m too much of a temp to be a threat, but that doesn’t stop him from sneering at digital humanities. He may not have kept up with the field, but he knows his era is over, and he’s a master of passive aggression. Which—you’re new to Minnesota. You’ll soon figure out what Minnesota Nice really means.”

“It’s not, like, Canada? Everyone saying ‘oh gosh’ and being cheery and helpful?”

Beasley giggled. “Oh, you poor, dear child.”

They proceeded to explain local food and customs to me as we consumed baskets of fried stuff. The onion rings were familiar, but they made me try deep-fried cheese curds and sauerkraut balls as part of the initiation.

I didn’t like the food, but I found myself enjoying the company. Beasley had shed her starchiness to release a wicked talent for barbed wit. Oak was smart and funny and added helpfulness to the mix, patiently explaining facts of college life that the real Maggie would probably have understood without asking. My experience with higher ed was limited to one

semester at a community college that bore no resemblance to Magnusson.

Besides, It had been a long time since I had a chance to hang out. I was friendly with some of the staff at the coffee shop where I had last worked, but we didn't socialize after we clocked out, and my roommates had been less than friendly. Conversation with Dr. Mishkin over dinner was fine in its own way, but being in a bar, getting to know people closer to my age, it stirred something in me I hadn't felt for a long time. A kind of belonging. A chance to let my guard down.

But as they compared notes on what they had planned for their courses, I began to feel nervous, as if I were an understudy about to be pushed on stage without a copy of the script.

"I am so not ready for this," I blurted out. Maybe it was the beer. I had carelessly let the server bring me a second, and getting buzzed in public suddenly seemed really stupid.

"Me too," Oak said. "I'll be finishing my syllabi the night before classes start."

"I have that part done already," I said. Maggie had left a collection of documents on her beat-up laptop, material she had been so excited about handing out to students. "It's me that's not ready. Like, how do you remember all their names? What do you do on day one?"

"As little as possible," Beasley said. "No point, until the musical chairs is over."

Oak must have seen cluelessness in my expression. "The first week is always a little chaotic, since students can change their course schedule up through the second week. Someone decides philosophy is boring, so they join a class their roommate says is easy. A seat opens up in the bio class another one needs because they're convinced they're going to be pre-med, so they take that slot and drop your course."

"Everyone thinks they're destined to be doctors," Beasley said bitterly.

"Until they flunk the midterm," Oak added. "But you won't

have as much churn. They might swap out sections, but first years all have to take composition.”

“Because they weren’t taught to write basic English in high school. It’s so depressing,” Beasley wailed. “Did I tell you my Brazilian literature course didn’t fill? I couldn’t get even six students to sign up.”

“At least you got a three-year contract with a full schedule,” Oak said. “Last spring I taught at four different schools. This semester I snagged two classes here and two online for Metro State.”

“I’m still an adjunct, though. It’s so unfair,” Beasley said, aggrieved. “Several university presses have shown interest in my dissertation, and I have publications in the top journals. Yet here I am teaching Spanish 101 to coddled children who only take it to check off a requirement.”

“Maybe this way you’ll have more time for your research,” I said to cheer her up.

“That’s not how it works.” She glared at me. “Trying to teach students who have no interests beyond partying and sports is soul-depleting. Just you wait. They’ll hand in papers they cut-and-pasted from the internet and spend all their time in class sleeping or fiddling with their phones.”

“That’s an exaggeration,” Oak said, hoping to reassure me. “Sure, Magnusson students like to put on an air of cynicism, but deep down they’re scared. Especially in that first semester, they’re terrified of failure, and the social pressures are massive. Give them a chance to write about things they care about, make sure your assignments don’t come off as busy work, and don’t worry about it if things go off schedule. Consider your syllabus speculative fiction. Things always come up, just roll with it.”

“That sounds like a good approach.”

“It’s harder for Harriet. She has to get through the material so her students are ready for 102.” She made a sound that combined hysterical laughter with a sob before stuffing a

handful of cheese curds into her mouth. “With a writing course, you just have to meet them where they are and help them improve.”

“Good luck with that,” Beasley muttered through cheesy mouthful.

“You’ve taught this course elsewhere, right?” Oak asked.

Maggie had. “Yeah, but ... not like this.”

“You’re trying out something new?” He said it like it was a good thing.

“Completely new. Like, I have this big assignment. It’ll run the whole semester using, what’s word for it? A lot of little assignments that build up to one big final project?”

“Scaffolding?”

“Yeah, that’s what...” What Maggie had said. “That’s the word I was searching for. They have to produce a podcast. I mean, not a real live one, but they have to do some background research and write up a script and create show notes with sources. I don’t know if it’s going to work. They’ll probably hate it.”

“Why? It sounds great.”

Maggie had thought so, too. I could hear her voice suddenly, describing it to me in the car as we drove west, heading toward Minnesota on that misty morning when her life ended. “This podcast, it’s going to be called Curious Campus, inspired by some NPR show,” I said, my words sounding strange. Not my own. “The students are supposed to come up with some question about the college and will interview people for answers. Like, how much food goes to waste in the campus cafeteria, where did the names of the buildings come from, what was dorm life like for students when the college was founded. Questions like that.”

“I’ve got one for them. Why does the Economics department get to call itself part of the social sciences when it’s really just a business major?” Beasley waved her empty glass for emphasis, her mood growing darker. “Why does the administration say we can’t afford tenure lines in foreign languages when we

consistently bring in more tuition dollars and cost the college less than physics?" She craned her neck, looking for someone to bring her more wine.

Oak ignored her gloom, zeroing in on my insecurity. "Talk to the college archivist, Zoe Chen. I've already scheduled several class sessions with her so students can work on local public history projects. She's full of good ideas, and students dig doing archival research."

"Thanks. I'll do that."

"Why not make it a real podcast? It would be cool for students to learn editing and production, and they are so much more motivated when there's an authentic audience involved. I can help you with the technical stuff."

"I can handle the tech, but these are kids. I mean, technically they're adults, but I don't want require them to put stuff out in public. It'll embarrass them in few years, and besides, there are too many creeps out there."

"It's obviously unpolished work, but in my experience students are comfortable with being out in public thanks to social media. A lot of our class projects end up online and we haven't had any problems."

"You've been incredibly lucky, then." It came out more sharply than I intended.

He looked abashed. "And privileged. Sorry. I've had a few skirmishes on Twitter, but men don't face the same risks as women." He paused, seeming to look for the words to ask a question I didn't want to hear, when Beasley decided to take charge of the conversation.

"Enough about teaching. Have you given thought to how you'll keep up your research agenda?"

"I need an agenda?"

"Silly girl. You must set aside time for writing. Be strict about it, otherwise students will take up all your time. They're voracious little bloodsuckers. Do you have any articles underway?"

“Uh, not at the moment.” I felt a sinking feeling. “Nobody told me I had to write articles.”

“It’s not expected of adjuncts,” Oak said.

“It’s expected of scholars,” Beasley said firmly. “The life of the mind, it’s what gives our lives meaning. Besides, if you ever hope to get a real job you’ll need publications. I’d be happy to mentor you. What would you say was the key concept of your dissertation?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t read it.” I only realized when it slipped out and they started laughing how stupid that sounded. “I mean, I got so sick of it, I haven’t looked at it lately.”

Two beers was definitely a mistake, but luckily Beasley decided I had cracked a hilarious joke and gave me a playful shove. “You’re a hoot.” She shoved me again, harder. “Let me out, I need to visit the loo.” I stood to let her out of the booth. We both watched her weave her way unsteadily toward the restrooms at the back of the bar.

“Oh boy. Is she planning to drive home tonight?” I asked.

“Ouch,” Oak said, wincing as she careened off a booth. Oak gestured for the purse she’d left behind on the bench we shared. “I’ll drive her home,” he said, taking the bag from me and finding her keys.

“Are you sure? Do you need me to—”

“Nope. We’ll take my van and I’ll give her a ride back to campus tomorrow. I have a place to crash in the city. It’ll be fine.”

“Okay. Thanks. Listen, um ... Thanks for the ideas. I’ll definitely look up that archivist. Zoe Chen is it?” He nodded. “Would you have time to get together before classes start? Take a look at my course materials?”

“I’d be happy to.”

“I don’t know why I’m so anxious about this. It’s not like I haven’t taught before.” Actually, it was exactly like I’d never taught before. I barely had experience being a student in a college classroom. It had sounded so simple in theory. I had

ready-made handouts and a schedule that spelled out what would happen each of those hours for the next fifteen weeks. How hard could it be? Or so I had thought. Now I had a growing sense of dread that on day one the students would see right through me.

"Let's get together. How about tomorrow afternoon?"

We settled up our tab and Oak turned on the charm to coax Beasley to leave her car overnight and take a ride home in his vintage VW. His charm offensive worked so well that she shook off her gloom and became gaily boisterous. As we steered her to the exit, she began to sing off-key. "*El bien máspreciado es la libertad!*" Her voice faded as he helped her into the passenger seat of his van before they drove off into the night.

"Where's Beasley? Sleeping it off?" I nodded at her empty chair as I entered our office the next afternoon.

"She's spending the day in the library," he said.

"I hope she's grateful you gave her a ride."

"Not so's you'd notice."

"Embarrassed?"

"Very. Turns out she lives with her parents. She's totally humiliated that I found out."

"Why? I mean, singing loudly in a redneck bar, yeah, that's embarrassing. But living with your parents? A ton of people do that these days, with rent so high."

"I know, but she maintains this public persona of being a serious, successful academic. Her folks seem really nice, but that doesn't matter. She thinks at thirty-seven she should be financially independent. Don't spread it around. She's really sensitive about it, I'm not sure why."

"Context collapse." He looked puzzled. "Like online, people have different identities depending on who they think they're interacting with. Then their grandma gets into their Facebook and things get all messed up. For her, it's the boundaries between her college identity and life at home collapsing."

"Ah, makes sense. Let's take a look at your stuff."

He pulled the battered wooden chair beside my desk around so he could look at my laptop as I walked him through the material Maggie had prepared. He was impressed with the Curious Campus pseudo-podcast assignment and pointed out ways I could change some wording so students wouldn't perceive the multiple check-points as busywork. Apparently busywork was the deepest of insults to college students. They should work in a coffee shop someday with a boss who's always watching for slackers, ordering employees to fill salt shakers and give the trash cans another scrubbing whenever things were slow to prove you were worth your minimum wage.

"Okay, that helps. I guess I'm ready," I said when we'd fine-tuned all the documents.

"You sure?"

Something about the look in his eyes made it hard to answer. I was suddenly buried under my own context collapse. Who was I fooling? I knew less about college than the kids who were going to face me on Monday. Sixty-eight of them. Every one of them would see right through me. I would be busted, and then what would I do?

He winced sympathetically, then rose, on a mission. "Don't tell Harriet, but I'm going to raid her tea supply. Sit tight."

I rubbed my face with my palms as he fetched her electric kettle and headed for the bathroom to fill it. Oak was reassuring and helpful, but it was far too easy to let my guard down around him. Time to take a lesson from Beasley and construct an impervious public persona. By the time he returned I was able to give him a brave smile. "I'm fine. Really. Just the jitters."

"Happens to me every semester." He clicked on the kettle and flipped through our officemate's tin of tea bags. "English Breakfast? Earl Grey?"

"Whatever."

When the water boiled he filled a cup that had a map of

the Iberian peninsula on it and handed it to me. He took the student chair again and blew on his own mug. "What was your T.A. experience like?" I looked at him, my mind a blank. "Did you get a lot of support? Like, did your graduate program include a course on teaching, or were you expected to figure it out on your own?"

I wasn't sure what T.A. stood for, but I had an answer anyway. "I had zero preparation."

"Oof. But that's not unusual. At least you have some experience under your belt."

"Sure, I've taught composition at several places," I lied, scrambling to remember Maggie's resume, "though none of them were full time jobs like this." I hoped he wouldn't ask me what places they were. I should know Maggie's work history by heart, but my thoughts felt scattered. Maybe that accident had done something to my brain. Usually I handled my cover stories like a seasoned spy, whole histories at my fingertips. But then, I had made those identities up. I didn't spend a few hours in a car with them before they had to be extracted from it in pieces.

"That syllabus proves you have all the right instincts," Oak was saying. "You're a natural."

You hear that Maggie? He thinks you're a natural. "Doesn't feel like it, but that's kind of you to say." I did my best to give him the smile Maggie would have given him.

He didn't return it. He was frowning, studying me thoughtfully. "How've you been feeling?"

"Nervous."

"I mean, since the accident. Did it..." He looked down into his mug, as if looking for tea leaves to read. "Judging from, you know," he pointed to his own head. "It looks like you got a pretty serious bang on the head. Did it affect your memory?"

I felt embarrassed for a moment, before I realized he'd thrown me a lifeline. "It affected everything. I don't even feel like the same person. And some things are just ... missing."

"God. I'm sorry you're having to go through this."

"Like with teaching. I feel like I'm starting from scratch." And now I had a medical excuse, sweet.

"Are you seeing a doctor?"

"The docs say I'm okay, and I feel fine. I'm just worried I don't know how to do this job anymore. Don't tell my boss."

"Course not. Look, once you get into the classroom, it'll probably be like riding a bicycle. You have a great plan for the whole semester. And you're not alone. I'll be here. I'll help in any way I can."

I felt myself withdrawing into a safe corner, hidden behind a sunny smile. He was such a nice guy, which made him a risk.

The smile didn't work this time. He still had a little frown tilting his right eyebrow, a concerned twist to his mouth. Even more reason to be cautious around this guy, he could tell when I was putting it on.

"Right, my turn," he said at last, briskly. "Do you have time to look over my syllabus? Something you mentioned last night made me wonder if I'm giving students enough of an intro to privacy. This project they're working on, they'll be adding content to a public website. I've always given students a choice whether to put their names on it or not, but we never really discussed the risks and they've always opted to use their real names. I'm thinking I should have a unit early on where we talk about how online harassment is unequally distributed and use examples of historians who get trolled. Maybe you can help me cook up an activity for gaming out how to handle online attacks."

We were deep in discussion when Beasley arrived. For a frozen moment she looked at me and then at Oak. He gave her a secretive nod that seemed to reassure her. Her dirty secret was safe. She sailed to her bookshelves and plucked two books. "I've been asked to contribute a chapter to a book on Brazilian postmodernism. Of course, the library lacks the most basic texts on the subject, but at least it's a quiet place to write.

I'll be proposing a completely new interpretation of Clarice Lispector's work, which should shake things up. *¡Adelante!*"

"*¡A las barricadas!*" I murmured as she retreated to her safe place, academic identity reestablished, and Oak turned his laughter into a discreet cough.

Four

"I had the weirdest nightmare," I told Dr. Mishkin as I poured her a cup of coffee at breakfast. She looked up from her newspaper. "I was teaching my course, but for some reason it was happening in my bedroom. Well, Lara's bedroom. I wasn't dressed yet, and I didn't have anything prepared."

"Pfft. This is the first day of classes. Everyone has a dream like that."

"Really? Even you?"

"Not anymore. I still have nightmares about endless faculty meetings, though. Pass the butter."

"Here you go. Say, did you take your pills?"

"Of course. Nag, nag, nag. You treat me like one of your freshman students." She shook her weekly pill box at me like a wagging finger. "I am a grown-up, you know. What day is it?"

"Monday."

She clicked open the lid for her Monday pills, and swallowed them before hiding the pill box under some newspapers, pretending it had never happened.

"I'll probably stay on campus all day. There's some soup you can reheat for lunch. Or I could put a sandwich together if you prefer." She harrumphed as she scraped more butter onto her toast. "I left my cell number beside the phone in case—"

She pointed the butter knife at me. "I am a capable adult. Do not infantilize me."

"Sorry."

"I find cooking and dusting tedious, so you may do it, even though there is no point to dusting. But I will not allow you to invade my life. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sorry."

"Stop repeating yourself." She took a bite of toast and a sip of coffee before shaking the paper and holding it up in front

of her. I knew by now she was not a morning person, and she wasn't going to make an exception just to calm my jangled nerves. I washed my dishes, put the milk back in the refrigerator, and picked up my bag. "Guess I'm off, then. Unless you'd like me to make you more toast?"

"Go away," she said from behind the paper.

The first two weeks of the term passed in a blur, but I started to get the hang of things. Class meetings happened three days a week. I used the days in between to respond to homework and answer a deluge of emails, all of which took more time and energy than I ever expected. Students asked to meet me to talk about assignments or argue over a grade, but somehow they never could make it during my one scheduled office hour, so I used that time for a gossip-and-advice session with Oak, who had somehow squeezed a cast-off couch and a coffee maker into our office to make it a comfortable nest.

Maggie's detailed syllabus was a sanity saver. I was able to soak up most of the fifty-minute class periods by putting students into groups to discuss questions she had already concocted or to critique each other's writing assignments. Spending most of their time talking to each other instead of me actually teaching didn't seem a fair deal, given what they paid in tuition, but the students didn't seem to mind. They were even excited about the podcast project.

I was still having trouble with names, though. A few of them were easy to remember: Abeba, who grew up in St. Paul but whose parents were from Ethiopia, and Bilan from Somalia who spent her early years in a refugee camp. Liv, who announced on day one they used they/them pronouns, had hair even shorter than mine, and an impressive collection of vintage Doc Martens. Jamal, a football player who had been recruited from Chicago and seemed in a constant state of dazed culture shock, kind of like me. And poor Luis, who had been valedictorian at some underfunded rural school; his

confidence was shaken by the challenge of college-level work. Nearly all of the students had the same trouble with subject-verb agreement and eccentric punctuation, but he was used to being a star student and he missed his family something awful.

One student blended into the rest, her voice an indistinguishable note in the bird-chatter as the students settled into their seats—until she handed in her first essay. They had to hand one in every Monday responding to questions Maggie had helpfully queued up for me, and then hand in a revision responding to my comments on Friday. Most of the results were painfully bad, so bad I quickly learned to set a timer so I didn't devote five times the effort to grading than they spent dashing off the damn things, but Sidonie's were in a class apart. Even Maggie wouldn't have had a thing to teach her.

The rest of the students were virtually indistinguishable, not just in what they handed in but how they looked. White and mostly blond, with the same hair styles and ball caps and names that I couldn't match to faces. There were three Emmas, four Madisons, two Jacobs, and a gaggle of girls named Kristen or Kirsten. I couldn't keep them all straight. I did my best to guess and they were good sports about it, their habitual niceness part of their sameness.

Then there was Michael Knutson, who fit the Scandinavian-American mold except he wasn't nice, which made him easy to remember but hard to take. Being not nice was apparently his brand. In addition to being an officer in the Investment Club and vice-president of the Magnusson Libertarians, he was the local point man for a national organization that trained college students for leadership positions in the rightest of right-wing national politics. He was always looking for opportunities to use his debate skills to take down the other students, who mostly retreated in confusion and private eye-rolls because niceness doesn't prepare you to confront ideologically-driven bullies. He was for free speech, against wokeness, and a complete asshole.

He was also the son of a member of the board of trustees, as my department chair made a point of letting me know the day classes started. Without saying it in so many words, I got the message: Don't piss him off.

At least he was a competent writer, which was a piece of luck. He followed assignment directions closely enough that his arguments were well organized and didn't rely entirely on extremist YouTube pundits. Though he was disruptive in class discussions and gleefully irritated the more politically involved students in his section of Comp 101, he turned in his homework on time and scored well on his first graded assignment. That was a relief. I didn't need to be trolled by a social-media savvy hothead who liked to complain about all the radical professors who were grading him unfairly due to his political beliefs.

Oak found himself in the crosshairs, though. Michael Knutson was enrolled in his American History I course. On day one, he challenged everything on the syllabus, from the readings to the assignments, as being leftist propaganda. The study of American history, he told the class, should celebrate the country's great accomplishments, its roots in Judeo-Christian values, and the wisdom of its founders, whose slaves were all well-cared for and obviously better off for being relocated from shithole countries to the finest nation in the world.

"There's always a knucklehead," Oak said philosophically, pouring me a cup of coffee during my otherwise unclaimed office hour.

"His dad's on the board of trustees."

"Believe me, he made sure I was aware of that."

"He's making a list of professors who discriminate against conservatives."

"If I don't make that list I'll be so bummed."

"He could get you fired."

"I'll let you in on a secret." He leaned close, eying Beasley

who was at her desk, scattering red ink on a pile of homework, pausing only to tut-tut and sigh. “I don’t give a shit.”

“But you might not get any courses next term. It could affect your career.”

“Can you call it a career when I’m paid a few thousand bucks per course? That’s poverty wages. I like history, and I love working with students, but I could make a better living restoring old houses. I know a guy who wants to take me on full time.”

“The only Plan B I have is being a barista.”

“That would be difficult in a town with no coffee shop,” Beasley chipped in before stabbing at another paper with her red pen. “The diner doesn’t count. Their coffee is dreadful.”

Oak tipped his chair back, then laughed when, as usual, one of the wheels fell off. “You sure about that? Teaching isn’t the only thing you can do with a PhD in English. What about technical writing? If you can explain Moodle so clearly to eighteen-year-olds, you obviously have the skills, and I’ll bet those giant tech companies pay well.”

“They pay engineers well, not contract workers doing the grunt work.”

“It’s got to be better than what places like this offer, though.”

No, it didn’t, for so many reasons. Besides, I was Maggie now, living her dream. “This was my ideal job. A liberal arts college. Also, benefits and an office.”

“Such as it is,” Beasley remarked dryly.

Oak got out of his chair to slot the wheel into place, then sat back down. “I mean, seriously. This is ideal?”

“The pay’s better than when I was a barista scrounging for tips, and it’s more fun.”

“Two weeks ago you were weren’t so excited about teaching. Now things seem to be going great, apart from Michael Knutson.”

“I still don’t know what I’m doing, but at least the podcast project is keeping them busy. They’re really getting into

researching college history. We've been to the archives twice. Zoe Chen has been super helpful."

"She's been great with the digital projects my course is working on. Are you sure you don't want to make it a live podcast? The alumni office would love it."

"So would the students. They keep begging me, but that's a big fat nope."

"I still think having an authentic audience is a great motivator."

"Authentic audience? You really think there is such a thing when the whole internet has been turned into a surveillance tool and a persuasion machine? When some loud-mouthed lunatic influencer can mobilize their fans to mob whoever they designate an enemy for fun and profit? What's authentic about that?"

"Sounds like you had a bad experience—"

"It's not that. I haven't been personally targeted. I rarely use social media. When I went through that exercise with them, the privacy one we developed? It was clear they have no idea how surveillance capitalism works, though I saw some lightbulbs go off." Not many. Maybe none, but that wasn't going to change my mind. "I just think it's a bad idea for students to put work out in public when it's half-baked."

"*Half-baked?* You exaggerate," Beasley said, putting down her pen and rubbing her wrist. "It's practically raw. I blame the admissions office. I've never seen a group of new students so unable to grasp the simplest nuances of plurals and pronouns. I'm not sure if it's stupidity or laziness." She stared at clouds through the window, deep in thought, before concluding, "probably both."

Between classes, I took a walk through the campus. During my first days in Mitagomee, I was too anxious and bruised to take a walk just for fun, but my limp had improved and I needed to recover some muscle strength after three weeks in

the hospital spent mostly in bed. Those daily excursions up and down the corridor, hanging onto an IV stand, didn't do the job. I needed to build up more stamina, and I was finally beginning to feel less like a trespasser who might be caught out as a fraud at any moment. It felt good to stroll through a place that looked like a well-kept park or the grounds of an historic estate. But it also felt incredibly strange.

My one semester of college was in a building that looked like the headquarters of an insurance company. This was more like the university scene I knew from Bates College, where in high school I would hang out, trying to look cool, trying to pass as a student among the green lawns and white pillars, though I didn't have the grades or the money to even dream about it. Magnusson was not as historic as Bates, and not nearly as exclusive. The students in my classes came from small towns or the Minneapolis metro. They all seemed to have work-study jobs in the cafeteria or grounds crew as part of their financial aid, and their easy-going Midwestern style lacked New England's extreme class consciousness, except maybe when it came to athletic shoe brands.

But even with its relatively modest pretentions, on a sunny autumn afternoon it managed to look like the set of a Hollywood campus, with wide lawns, shady groves of old trees, red brick buildings with Gothic arches, and a wooded path that wound around a small lake. The humanities building might be ugly and in need of repair, but it was surrounded by a landscape that made people feel special. Beasley complained about the college putting money into landscaping instead of faculty salaries, but I could see the appeal as I strolled along the lakeside path.

A gang of barely-clad young men jogged past. A woman sat on a rock beside the water with a sketch pad. A sunburned girl sprawled out on the grass among friends waved. "Hiyah, Maggie!" One of the Kristens, unless it was a Kirsten. I waved

back and strolled on. It felt weird, being here, seeming to belong, even though I knew I didn't.

Maggie wouldn't feel weird. She would have loved every minute of it.

After class one afternoon I went to the department office to check my mailbox. It was at the far end of a set of cubbyholes with faculty names taped to them. (Mine was the last, thick with layers of previous names taped there, a slot reserved for temps like me.) As usual, it was a pile of junk. A mass-mailing from the bookstore about textbook adoptions for spring, a flyer advertising a lecture, a random ad for an obscure journal with the suggestion I recommend it to the library, a memo from the library announcing they had to cut journal subscriptions again due to budget cuts. Nothing important, and it never was, yet something compelled me to check every day that I was on campus. I was half-expecting a letter to show up from someone who knew the real Maggie, introducing a tremor in my situation that would launch an avalanche of questions and discoveries. As I sorted through it, my heart still beating a little too fast, I felt something, a subtle change in the air, a barometric drop, that gave me the distinct sensation of being cornered.

"Maggie! How are you, my dear?" I turned to find myself hemmed in by the randy old goat of a professor, Peter Van Meter, standing far too close. I was trapped between the mailboxes and a table where a work-study student was assembling and stapling papers languidly. He grasped my situation and rolled his eyes. Professor Perv, at it again. "Settling in? Getting you sea legs in the classroom?" His voice seemed to leave something oily on my skin.

"Yes, thanks." I dumped my mail into a recycling bin and made a gesture as if to squeeze past him, but he was oblivious and smiled serenely at my boobs.

"Freshmen are so needy. If you ever need to chat, or a

shoulder to cry on, my office is just across the hall.” He leaned even closer and whispered. “I can even offer you a glass of rather decent sherry.” He tapped the side of his nose. Our little secret.

Another elderly professor arrived to scoop up her mail. She waved the library’s memo like a terrier with a rat. “Did you see this, Peter? Cutting our journals again.”

He turned to commiserate and I saw my chance. “Scuse me. Can I get by?”

They didn’t seem to hear me, keeping me wedged in the corner. “This college has no regard for the humanities at all,” she went on. “No wonder our society has become so ignorant and susceptible to social media and those, those ... what do you call them? Algorithms.” She wiggled fingers in the air and adjusted her gauzy scarf before unfolding another mailing. Apparently she was going to read all of her mail out loud, with commentary. “They want our course adoptions for spring already? Ridiculous. It didn’t used to be like this, so bureaucratized.” She ripped open an envelope and frowned. “Why do they keep sending me these announcements for digital humanities conferences? It’s hardly my area.”

“Perhaps our younger colleague would be interested,” Van Meter turned to pat me on the shoulder. “Have you met Maggie? She has four sections of 101 this fall.”

“You poor dear.” She peered at me over her half-moon reading glasses.

“They’re making podcasts, I hear,” he said approvingly, massaging my shoulder.

I swiveled to extend a hand to her, and to dislodge his. “Nice to meet you.”

“Rebecca Tolliver, early modern.” She brushed her fingers across my palm, then handed me the mail she didn’t want. “Podcasts? How trendy. This could be just the thing for you.”

I glanced at it. The registration fee was \$350. “Uh, does the department pay for it?”

They laughed. “Not the department. The provost’s office manages the travel fund,” she said. “Such as it is, never enough to pay the actual costs, of course.”

“Maggie’s an adjunct,” Van Meter said under his breath as if mentioning an embarrassing disability.

“Oh, of course. Then no, there’s no funding as such.”

“It’s in Vancouver.” I did the arithmetic in my head. Airfare, hotel, plus over three hundred bucks just for the conference. Not to mention I didn’t have a passport and no intention of submitting myself to high-tech border security. “Can’t afford it. Thanks, anyway.”

She wouldn’t take it back. “But it’s an investment in your career. You need to get out there, make connections.”

“You could submit a proposal to talk about your podcasts. It would look great on your CV,” Van Meter clasped his hands, pleased with himself. They were serious. Seriously clueless. I couldn’t help myself. I laughed. They looked mystified and a little offended.

This wasn’t the first time that I felt worlds collide, when I realized I was the only person in the room who wasn’t rich, except maybe the student stapling papers and eavesdropping. When I started at my first professional position, someone would ask about my weekend plans and drop that they were flying to Aruba for friend’s wedding. There’d be a casual invitation to get dinner at a five-star restaurant that just got reviewed in *The New York Times*.

At that job, my starting salary was many times what I was earning now, in an office with expensive ergonomic furniture and free food—and a pervasive feeling that people I worked with came from a parallel universe. Or that I had accidentally stumbled into *their* universe with no idea how to adjust to its fundamental laws. It felt that way now, though I wasn’t alone. Oak and Beasley were in the same underclass as me, even though Beasley pretended not to be.

“If you’re serious about an academic career, you need to

make sacrifices,” the woman said sternly. “Perhaps your parents could loan you the money?”

“They’re dead.” I wasn’t sure Maggie would have said it so bluntly, but then again, maybe she would.

The woman tilted her head and gave me a sympathetic purse of the lips, her palm spread across her chest. “How tragic.”

“I’m so sorry, Maggie,” Van Meter murmured, using the opportunity to wrap an arm around me and crush me to his chest. That was the last straw.

“Dude, back off!” I pushed him away.

He took a step back and raised his hands. “Sorry, sorry. I simply meant to give you moral support. No untoward intentions.”

There was something about his practiced moves that made me think he had been here before and knew exactly how to seize the high ground. “It’s not okay to touch people like that.”

“You misinterpreted—”

“Don’t do that again.”

“I’m sorry you’re upset.”

“You should be sorry you keep staring at my boobs.”

The student working at the table behind him snickered. Van Meter colored.

“You need to get with the times, Peter,” the woman said, patting his arm. “She’s right, you have to be more careful, you’ll get yourself in trouble.”

I had to work at it to unclench my hands and toss the crumpled conference announcement into the recycling bin. “I have to meet with a student.” I said, “Excuse me.” They parted and let me through, Dr. Perv making an exaggerated effort to flatten himself against the mailboxes, his hands still raised in a “don’t shoot” gesture. Shirley, the admin assistant, gave me a covert thumbs up as I left. But I had the distinct impression from the expression that flashed across Van Meter’s face, hearing the student laugh out loud, that I’d made an enemy.

The message came during my fourth class meeting on a Wednesday.

I was checking email while the students worked in their groups, their chairs pulled into clusters in each corner of the room. I had let them choose their own teams, which meant one corner had a group of academic nerds who were earnestly discussing their assignment while the one in the back was giggling at a TikTok that one of them was showing the others. The group with a bossy high achiever was quiet as she filled out the assignment sheet by herself while her teammates looked at their phones. The one that had coalesced around up-and-coming campus firebrand Michael Knutson was busy plotting something. At least, that's what it looked like, though maybe they were just on task.

I scrolled through my emails. A faculty meeting agenda, a survey from the curriculum committee, both nuked. A question from a student in another section that was answered in the syllabus. Link and a reminder to check the syllabus sent. A sales pitch from a company that was sure I would want to force my students to feed their papers into their plagiarism-detection system to prevent cheating. Spyware for educators, tagged as spam. A vaguely threatening message from the college president, couched in high-minded mission-speak, asking employees to prove their school spirit and employability by making a donation to the new capital campaign. Fat chance.

Then I froze as I saw the next email's subject line: Looking for Emily Callander.

The students' voices became a wordless chattering sound outside a chamber that locked itself around me like an invisible glass globe. The classroom itself, with its florescent light fixtures, was on the other side of the glass, in a different dimension. Inside the globe, a force squeeze me in a full-body

grip, an icy fist clenching me tight. It was cold inside that globe, and hard to breathe.

Something was tapping on the outside. The tapping sound turned hard and crisp, coalescing into words spoken by someone just outside the glass. “Doctor Farnham? Maggie?” It was like that nightmare I had told Dr. Mishkin about, only instead of being in my bedroom we were in a classroom drawn in wavering doubled lines, everything tilted strangely, warped. The glass globe dissolved, then, the lines joined together, and the blunt syllables turned into words that began to make sense.

“You okay?” The student in front of my desk looked scared

“Fine. I’m fine.” I took a breath, my head swimming. I took another breath, remembering to hold it in before releasing it, Breathe again, release.

My pausing for a moment of Zen didn’t reassure him. “Should I call 911?”

“No.” That didn’t help anything, it came out too loud. By this time my vision had cleared and I could see the faces of students who seemed to be thinking *yeah, for sure, call 911*. Another deep breath and then a smile. “I’m okay, really. I just got a weird email. It spooked me, that’s all. I’m going to delete it.” I made a show of bringing my finger down on the delete key. “There. Done. Sorry about that. What were you...” I managed to snatch a drifting bit of meaning that had been floating outside the globe before I came back to myself. “You’re wondering about the third question, right? It’s just meant to help your group get on the same page.”

“Okay?” He said it like a question.

“All you’re doing is writing an elevator pitch.” He nodded as his face went blank, the kind of neutral mask you wear when you don’t want to look stupid. “Like, imagine you just got into an elevator with the head of the public radio station. This is your chance to pitch your idea for a podcast. She hits a button for the eighth floor. That’s all the time you have to explain your

idea, the amount of time it takes to get to the eighth floor. Something concise and compelling. Make sense?"

"Right." He nodded.

What was his name, Adam? No, this was Steve. Maybe. I closed my laptop, trapping the weird email message inside for now, then stood to face the class. "Did you all get that? Convince me to give you the green light for an episode of Curious Campus, not that I'm a real podcast producer."

"Not that it's even a real podcast," one of the Emmas said, then waved her hands theatrically. "And that's fine! We know, we know!" causing some nervous chuckles around the room. She was smoothing an awkward moment over, genially mocking my earlier rant about why we weren't going public.

"It's a pretend green light," Liv said, inspecting their purple fingernails.

"Let me come around and see how you're all doing," I said, and strolled over to Ben's group, getting some distance from the email that was safely locked away, a letter bomb that had been temporarily secured so it couldn't detonate in a public place. It would have to be disarmed, but not here, not now.

I let the students' urgent concerns take over. They weren't done with their research yet, how could they know what their main point would be? How would they even have a main point when all they were doing was interviewing people who all had different things to say? Was it too late to change their topic?

Only Michael Knutson's group had no questions. "No problem. We got this," he said. I looked over the shoulder of the boy who had been designated the group's secretary. He had downloaded the assignment sheet and filled out the three questions. Unlike the scrawled word salad of the other groups (except for the TikTok one, which hadn't written anything) these answers were full sentences, even correctly punctuated, as if taken down in dictation. Knutson was not only obviously in charge of his group, he was all set for a world where he there would always be someone else to do the secretarial work.

His father is on the board of trustees. I heard the warning in the voice of my boss. I was going to have to tread carefully, and that meant I couldn't show my visceral response to self-important guys like him. I called up a sweet Maggie smile, wondering if it passed muster as the kind of niceness people expected around here. Syrupy, but not poured on so thick that it was transformed into irony. "Good work. You're ahead of the game."

"We already scheduled all our interviews," one of Knutson's minions told me smugly.

"Awesome. Did you manage a pretty representative sample?"

"Four departments with an equal gender balance, plus someone in admissions who's gay. We also got the head of the Diversity Center, so we have a person of color. Is that enough representation for you?"

I ignored the implied put-down. "Great, but things happen, people don't always come through. Have a second list of likely candidates you can call if need be."

"We also have a student survey developed," another member of the group said. Was he one of the Jasons? "We'll be beta testing it this week and rolling it out over the weekend."

"An online survey?"

"Nope, we'll randomly sample students at the caff and ask them the questions in person. My marketing prof said it would get better results."

"Sounds like a plan. Your answer to question three—it's very well stated, but a little unfocused. Let me play devil's advocate for a moment."

Knutson practically elevated in his seat with pleasure. He was used to being Satan's lead attorney, and was itching to parry whatever I might say. He even flexed his fingers, as if he were about to crack his knuckles but decided to avoid a cliché. "Sure. We're always open to ideas."

"Free speech on campus' is a huge topic. You have to narrow it down. What kind of framing do you plan to use?"

Knutson nodded to a loyal lieutenant, one who was apparently filling the role of press spokesman. "We want to focus on the tension between the spirit of the first amendment and the speech restrictions posed by multiculturalism as it's promoted on college campuses," he said. "Using examples from this college."

"Okay. Just watch out for creating straw men. You don't want to paint 'multiculturalism' with too broad a brush."

"You don't think it's already graffitied all over campus in a broad brush?" Knutson said. "There's a banner up in the admissions office quoting Malcolm X."

"Okay. And?"

"Just saying. They could have quoted Martin Luther King, something inspirational, but they chose a radical Black Muslim."

I checked myself before contradicting him. Board of trustees, father, watch it. "All right, but remember when we talked about approaching the project with an open mind? You don't want to go into these interviews with an agenda, you want to listen and be willing to learn. Who knows, maybe you'll think differently after you talk to people." Knutson's patient little smirk suggested that was totally naïve on my part. "What kind of background research have you done so far? Remember, that will all be in your show notes. Picking high-quality sources is a major part of the grade."

"We've divvied it up." He used a pricey Mont Blanc pen to point at his group members. "Mick is covering local history. Charlie is looking at current intellectual thought on the topic. Jase is developing biographical sketches for our interview subjects. I'm doing the Constitutional analysis."

"He's pre-law," Charlie said proudly. Look who we have on our side.

"You don't have to worry about us," Knutson said. "We have a strong team." His adjutants beamed with pride. "You might want to have a word with those girls, though. Excuse me, those

women.” Pointing his Mont Blanc at the TikTok group he lowered his voice. “They’ve been a little distracted.”

Masking my urge to smash his smug misogynistic face, I smiled as if I were grateful for his advice. “Maybe they just got done early.” They hadn’t, of course, but one of them quickly scribbled some stuff down as I moved across the classroom to check on their progress. At least the girl filling in the form had neat handwriting.

The period ended, as usual, with a sudden restlessness sweeping the room like a gust of wind. The clock on the wall was stuck permanently at half past nine, but they all knew almost by instinct when the fifty minutes ended. As if synchronized, students slapped laptops shut, gathered their things, and started talking differently, their voices louder, looser, more raucous. They shoved their circled chairs back into ragged rows and joined the great migration streaming through the hall as they moved to their next class or wherever they were headed. I shrugged on my jacket and picked up my laptop to slot it gingerly into my bag, knowing there was something in there ready to detonate.

“Um, Maggie?”

I turned. Liv and a girl whose name I couldn’t remember were standing side by side in the no-man’s-land between the untidy first row and the instructor’s desk where students typically lined up to petition for extensions or argue they deserved an A on that C+ assignment. I wasn’t in the mood for it. “Yes?”

They looked at each other. “We just wanted to check in. Are you okay?”

What were they up to? “I’m fine,” I snapped.

My tone made the girl who’d asked fall silent, so Liv took the lead. “It looked like you were going to pass out.”

The other girl added, “And since you had that accident, we thought maybe—”

“I’m over the accident,” I said firmly. “It was just a strange email.”

"Is somebody harassing you?" Liv asked, eyes narrowed. Gender-nonconforming warrior, ready to defend me with their chunky Doc Martens and purple nails.

"No. It's not from anyone I know." I was beginning to realize they were genuinely concerned. "It just weirded me out because it's about a person I used to know. Someone who died a long time ago. Not a big deal, it just caught me by surprise."

"Is there anything we can do?" the girl who wasn't Liv asked.

They weren't asking me for anything. They wanted to help. They lived in a world where things were simple enough that you could band together and defuse a problem with kindness. The confidence of youth—though in reality I wasn't that much older than them, just far more jaded. "No, there isn't. But thanks. Really. I appreciate your concern."

"Sure." They headed for the hallway. Before being swept away by the flood, Liv paused to add, "Don't worry about that asshole Michael Fucking Knutson, either. We won't let him push you around." And they were gone.

Five

When I let myself into Dr. Mishkin's house, I heard her voice booming from the study. Apparently she was from a generation that thought long distance phone calls required extra volume. "You must stop fussing. There is no need for you to visit this weekend. I am doing perfectly well." A pause. "Ridiculous. I told you I didn't need a babysitter."

She must be talking to her daughter, Lara, I realized. Apparently Dr. Mishkin didn't want me living in her home. Great, another complication to add to my life.

"That is not the point," she yelled into her phone. "She is tolerable, though she harasses me about my medication every morning, and I think she has hidden my car keys, most likely at your direction." A pause. "You can put your mind at rest, then. She cooks and cleans and does the laundry, though it's completely unnecessary. I am capable of doing it all myself, but if it makes you happy and stops your talk about putting me in a nursing home, fine."

Whew. She wasn't evicting me after all.

"Yes, we've talked about her accident, but not at length. She seems to be managing." Pause. "Perhaps. But she has a right to her privacy, and I have a right not to be bored by having someone nattering on about their health. Stop being such a fusspot. She appears perfectly fit, and I actually find her company rather enjoyable. Despite getting a degree in a completely useless field she seems reasonably intelligent, and she doesn't talk too much. Which reminds me, I have things to do and this conversation has gone on too long. Give my love to the grandchildren, not that they care."

I reached back to open the front door and closed it loudly to announce my presence, waved perfunctorily as I passed the

open door of Dr. Mishkin's study, then headed for the stairs and my bedroom under the eaves.

I had an email to deal with, a bomb to disarm.

I didn't want to use the college-issued laptop. It had basic security, but was too much potential for leaving a trail of network traffic. The changes I'd made to Maggie Farnham's creaky old laptop made it more secure. I settled on the bed, lifted the lid, and stared at the blank screen for a while before I powered it up and logged into the email account that was assigned to me by college IT. The message was still there, waiting to be read. I took a deep breath, clicked it open, and read the contents.

Dear Dr. Farnham:

I'm searching for information about Emily Callander. I have reason to believe you may have shared a ride with her when you relocated to Minnesota. Can you provide me any details about this trip?

Best,

Alexandra Saunier

I opened the header to see whether there were any signs it was a spoofed account. Nothing looked suspicious. The sender used Gmail which, say what you will about a software company eating the world along with all its personal data, has relatively robust security. I copied the header details into an IP locator and saw it originated from a service provider in Lewiston, Maine. There was nothing overtly suspicious in the path information.

Next I ran a malware check and did some searches to verify Alexandra Saunier's identity. I could go down rabbit holes forever, but called a halt after an hour. From what I could tell, this wasn't some digital doppelganger at work. The Alexandra

Saunier who sent the email was almost certainly Allie, the Allie I once knew. And she was looking for me.

I realized it was getting late. I pushed the questions I couldn't answer into a deep, dark corner of my brain as I logged off and went downstairs to fix dinner.

"So much clatter," Dr. Mishkin said, stumping into the kitchen as I was in the middle of prepping the meal. The counter and kitchen table looked like marauders had been through, assassinating the contents of the refrigerator with machetes and throwing explosive flour bombs. I had decided to make a curry out of some vegetables that were beginning to wilt, then thought maybe an additional dish of dahl was called for, and I might as well throw together a salad. Going for broke, I started to make an apple tart for dessert. "Why such a production? Are we expecting guests?"

"No. Sorry, I just got carried away. I'll clean up the mess."

"You certainly will. But you can do that later. Right now I want some tea."

"Sure. I'll bring a cup out to you."

"No, I want to enjoy my tea in a civilized manner. Some peace and quiet as we sit and calmly share a hot beverage and some conversation. I've been alone all day, I want company, not this ridiculous production." She waved at the mess as she eased herself into the kitchen chair that had a cushion on it molded into the shape of her ample rear end. "Besides, you have much to learn. Use the pot, and warm it properly. Make sure the water is boiling this time." As I filled the kettle she fastidiously cleared away her end of the table, piling apple peels and vegetable trimmings together and pushing dirty utensils to the center. "That microwaved mess you made me yesterday was an abomination. Slice a lemon and bring the sugar bowl. I would like two digestive biscuits as well." She reached for a dish towel and used it to scoop the flour off the table and onto the floor while I quietly followed instructions. When I tried to stack some dishes in the sink, making a clatter, she glared and I left them

alone. Once the pot was filled and placed on the table, with a saucer of lemon slices, a plate of biscuits, the sugar bowl, spoons, and two cups in saucers (she was not in favor of mugs, I had learned the hard way), she finally broke the silence.

"Much better, yes?" She swatted my hand as I reached for the pot. "I will pour. But only when it has steeped properly. Now, tell me about your day."

"What do you want to know?"

"Don't be foolish. This is conversation, not an interrogation."

"Well, uh, I had my classes today. The students are working on a semester-long project, producing podcasts about the campus."

"This thing, podcasts. I've heard of them, of course, but what exactly are they?"

"Recorded stories. Like a radio show, but you can subscribe to them on your phone and play the episodes whenever you want. Only these ones won't be online. I don't think it's good for first year students to put their work out in public. We've had some arguments about that."

"I don't understand. Arguments? You are the boss, you should be in control of your classroom."

"I am." Kind of. Not really. "They're just angry that I told them no. I'm not changing my mind, though."

"Wise. Too many people today are willing to make public fools of themselves."

"That's the attention economy for you."

"Explain."

"The attention economy?" She nodded, apparently genuinely unfamiliar with the concept. "It's about bringing in digital ad dollars. The more people spend time on internet platforms, the more those companies make money on ads. People can make a share of those ad dollars when they post stuff that will get attention, which means they learn to post things that will shock people or start a fight, which is easiest when people already have strong opinions about something. Like this one group

in my fourth period, they chose a controversial topic for their project. If their podcast was publicly posted, it could be shared by someone with a large following and go viral.”

“Viral. It sounds like an unpleasant infection.”

“Yeah, weird word choice, huh? Like we’re all in a petri dish for developing the most infectious content. But it’s more like gambling at a casino. There’s an addictive feeling to it. Metrics are built into these systems so you can see exactly how many times people interact with your stuff in real time, and as those numbers go up, it gives you a buzz and makes you more reckless. Added to that, recommendation engines amplify the most popular posts about the same controversial subject so more people will click. It becomes a self-reinforcing process of seeking more and more attention. This kid in my last period, the one who pushed the hot-button topic, he’s smart and connected with a national student organization. He could reach a huge audience, and his dad’s on the board of trustees.”

“What’s his father’s name?”

“Knutson. I don’t know his first name.”

“Anders. Anders Knutson.” She poured a few drops of tea into a cup, studied it, and apparently found it ready. “I had him for two semesters of calculus and one of advanced statistics. He is not stupid. Just deeply immoral.”

“How so?”

“He’s mathematically clever and ethically shallow. After graduation and a Harvard MBA he came up with a formula to turn a little money into a lot of money. He doesn’t actually produce anything, it’s just money being moved around, but he has come to believe his wealth is a sign that he is one of the chosen people. He was invited to be on the board so he could be coaxed into making a large donation. He hasn’t done that yet, but he holds out that possibility to shape the institution as he sees fit. Ensure that market fundamentalism is promoted. Emphasize ‘traditional Christian values’ that have nothing to do with what a working class Jewish carpenter actually said.

Oppose any policy that gives people who aren't like him any advantage while insisting people like him are the real victims of oppression and censorship. He has repeatedly tried to fire tenured professors, and it works."

"They actually get canned?"

"No, but they and their colleagues have become cautious, which is infuriating. Tenure is a social contract with two obligations. The institution offers professors protection to study and teach ideas regardless of whether they are unpopular or not. In turn, professors are expected to use that privilege to speak their truth. They owe it to society. But to earn this special protection they spend six years on probation, being very, very careful to follow the rules, please the authorities, and not rock the boat. It's training for cowardice, and it screens out troublemakers. Pass those biscuits."

I handed her the plate. "But you got tenure."

"Are you suggesting I'm a troublemaker?" She seemed pleased. "I got tenure eons ago. It was not a high-stakes ordeal, then, and there were no millionaire alumni to throw their weight around. So, this young Knutson, he is cut from the same cloth as his father?"

"Sounds like it. He's super conservative. He wants to interview people about free speech on campus, but his national rightwing student movement makes hit lists of leftist professors, so it's making me nervous."

"Pfft. Your salary is peanuts. Why not be brave and stand up for what you believe? You have so little to lose."

You have no idea, I thought. No idea at all.

"In Russia," she went on, brushing crumbs off her lap, "when I lived there as a young person, people risked their lives to copy poems and essays and circulate them secretly. Samizdat. You have heard of Andrei Sakharov? He was a Soviet physicist who became a champion of human rights. Of free speech, if you like, but his concerns were very different from young Knutson's. Photocopiers were strictly controlled for fear of words, of ideas

spreading. I wonder how Andrei Dmitrievich would react to the way the Russian state now encourages its operatives to fill the internet with malicious nonsense.”

“Flooding the zone with shit,” I said.

She nodded, delighted by the phrase. “Not the words I would choose, but quite descriptive. Sakharov was punished, of course. Stripped of his position and sent into exile.” She fell silent and sipped her tea, staring at the faded roses on the kitchen wallpaper. “He had such hopes for a better future,” she murmured. “And he played the piano beautifully.”

“You knew him?”

“Don’t be silly.” She topped off her cup. “He was a Nobel prize winner, a very famous man. But in those days fame was not the purpose of life. Russians had very little in the way of material possessions, but they had culture. Books, music, intellectual gatherings in tiny apartments. Now all they have is clothes and cars and shopping malls, just like here.”

“When did you come to America?”

“A very long time ago.” She clinked her cup into its saucer. “Let me know when dinner is ready. I will be in my study listening to music.”

After dinner, putting up leftovers, washing the dishes, and scrubbing the kitchen I couldn’t put it off any longer. I had to decide what to do about that email. Ignore it? Write something short and dismissive: Don’t know her, never heard of her, leave me alone? I sat on the bed, typed out something, and deleted it. Then did it again. I didn’t see how I could ignore it, but I didn’t want to get this wrong.

Then I thought: WWMD? What would Maggie do? I was playing a role, after all, and it needed consistency. I only knew Maggie from a few hours of traveling together, but I still had old email messages downloaded and stored on her laptop. I read through a number of them, getting a feel for her tone, her language choices. And after many revisions I sent a reply.

Dear Alexandra (if I may),

I'm terribly sorry to disappoint you, but I don't know anyone named Emily Callander. I realize from personal experience how dispiriting it is to meet with disappointment when doing research! I wish you the best of luck as you pursue your inquiries!

Warmly,

Maggie

I mentally gagged at “warmly” but she used it a lot in her messages, even when writing to strangers, and she seemed to have a thing for exclamation points. At least she didn't throw emojis around; that would have been a bridge too far for me. The boilerplate signature that appeared automatically below the message spelled out my job title—Visiting Professor of English—and the college's address. It was something that IT added automatically when they created my college email account. Every time I saw it, it was a reminder of how much Maggie would have relished sending emails signed with that badge of her value as a human being. It made me feel a little sick as I scanned my reply, though that might have simply been the anxiety knotting my stomach.

Why was Allie looking for me after all these years? Was she being set up as Judas goat?

My internet rabbit-hole burrowing had filled in some details about her life after high school, but it only told me so much. She still lived in Lewiston, Maine. She had two kids, three-year-old Amanda and baby Grace, as well as a fourteen-year-old cat named Beezus. Her husband Marty had a full beard and kind eyes and not much of an internet presence apart from a basic Facebook page for his landscaping and snowplowing business. She had a more professional website of her own, with a chatty blog and links to a handful of essays she'd published in magazines I'd never heard of. Apparently she still wanted to be

a writer. Unlike me, she had stuck with college, graduated from the University of Southern Maine, and was working on a low residency MFA, whatever that was. The photo on her website, posed before a bookcase, looked like the Allie I remembered, but with a fuller face, a haircut that flattered her, and something else. Maturity. Confidence, maybe. Or happiness.

I first met Allie when we were nine years old. I'd been dropped off at school one November morning, an alien stranded on a strange fourth grade planet, long after all the alliances had been made and the pariahs identified. Add one to the list: a knobby-kneed girl with uneven bangs and thrift-store clothing that my mother said was punk but was actually just shabby and weird. I had been attending an alternative school in Boston run by one of my mother's friends who liked to describe it as Waldorf-inspired. Unfortunately it didn't involve learning things like long division or how to sit still for long periods of time. I was lost and scared of the teacher, who wore a tight bun and shoes that clacked loudly on the linoleum. She was much more serious about classroom management than my previous teacher. She publicly shamed anyone who was staring out the window for the crime of daydreaming and never took breaks to mellow out with some weed. We weren't allowed to play, except at recess, which was mostly a bully obstacle course. We weren't allowed to talk unless we raised our hands and were called on. Basic stuff that was entirely new to me. Luckily, my desk was next to Allie's, and she secretly coached me whenever the teacher turned to write on the board. She wasn't one of the popular girls, but she wasn't a total outcast, either, just a nerd who always got As on the homework she always handed in on time. We were different in every way, but she was a good match for me. Without her coaching I would have been typecast as an idiot trouble-maker. Without her friendship I would have believed that's who I was.

When we moved away the next year—we never stayed in one place for long—Allie and I constantly messaged each other,

so it wasn't too hard to pick up again when we returned to Lewiston and I entered high school. Allie's house became my second home. Our interests diverged, though, and by the junior year she spent her time reading books and writing stories; I spent mine reading chat forums and writing code.

Why was she looking for me?

Her reply was quick, but it didn't answer my question.

Dear Dr. Farnham:

Attached is a photo. My research suggests this woman responded to a ride-share offer you posted at a coffee shop. Please let me know if you can confirm whether that is correct.

Best,

Alexandra Saunier

I left the bed and went downstairs to the bathroom, where I closed the door and leaned against it, fighting nausea. I closed my eyes and breathed the way I'd learned to from a YouTube yoga channel I'd turned to when I first had panic attacks. I couldn't handle the spiritual baloney that came with it, and I was too impatient to do most of the exercises, but breathing helped. My stomach eventually settled even if my nerves didn't. Once I was sure I wasn't going to throw up, I washed my face and went back upstairs.

The photo was taken inside the coffee shop where I'd worked. In the foreground, some students were clowning for a selfie. In the background, though it was a little fuzzy from being cropped and enlarged, was me as I stood at the counter, taking an order. Someone had helpfully circled my face.

Maggie would want to be helpful and would probably write a long, heartfelt story about the moose and the accident and would tactfully break the news that the woman Allie was looking for had been tragically killed. But then, Maggie was naïve enough to not even have a password on her laptop. From

what I knew of Allie, and from what I could piece together about her life after our friendship ended, I didn't think she had malicious intent, but she could easily have been manipulated into tracking me down. The people I had worked for were world-class experts at manipulation and tracking.

Sorry, Maggie, but I have to handle this one my way. No more "warmly."

Dear Alexandra,

I'm not entirely comfortable with your request. Could you please provide more information about why you have contacted me?

Best,

Maggie

I checked the time. It would be past midnight in Maine. I wasn't sure if I'd get an answer anytime soon, or at all. But I was much too wound up to sleep.

I went back to Allie's website and read all of her blog posts and followed the links, reading the essays that weren't paywalled. Lots about being a parent. Thoughts on her writing process. Some stories about her early childhood that made small things seem cosmically meaningful. Some commentary on politics and social justice issues linked to her life in a struggling small city in Maine. She was a good writer, but she put her personal life out there in a way that made me uncomfortable and, oddly enough, a little jealous. How could anyone ever feel safe enough to reveal so much?

What if we'd stayed friends? Would I be as comfortable in the public eye as she was? She pulled me through the fourth grade, and she helped me find my feet in high school. I'd spent more nights sleeping in her bedroom than in my own. I'd almost been part of the family, and spending time in that household showed me how family was supposed to work. A mother, a father, meals eaten around a table in the kitchen,

friendly squabbling among siblings, in a house that collected clutter and memories because they lived in the same place, year after year.

They would have let me stay. What was wrong with me that I chose not to? Things could have been so different, so much simpler.

Or not. It played out in my imagination like a sit-com where my lines would sound false. Too saccharine. Not the least bit believable.

Switching between tabs, I kept checking until another email had arrived. I took a breath and clicked it open.

Dear Dr. Farnham:

Emily Callander was my best friend when we were kids. When she was a junior in high school she entered into an unhealthy relationship with an older man who was manipulative, controlling, and possibly physically abusive. She started to work for Eventive, a marketing and data science company where he worked, and she claimed to be too busy to keep up with her friends. When I shared my concern about her boyfriend's behavior she stopped returning my calls and texts.

I didn't think I would ever see her again until a friend came across that photo on Instagram. She circled the face in the background and sent it to me, saying "doesn't that look like Emily?" In fact, it does.

I've been told Emily no longer works at Eventive. Her mobile number no longer is in service, and her social media accounts have been deleted.

When I contacted the coffee shop where the photo was taken I learned from a staff member that photo matched an employee named Amber who resigned just after she had taken a number from a ride-share sign

an English professor had posted. The manager of the business was unwilling to give me any further information. However, a student worker in the English department told me you had been hired for a position in Minnesota and had run off copies of a ride-share sign on the department copier and may well have posted one in that coffee shop. So you're my best lead.

Apologies for the length of this message. I'm sharing these details in the hope I will earn your trust. I simply want to find out if my friend needs help.

Best,
Allie

Deny or confirm? Allie had gone to considerable trouble to get this far. I wasn't sure if she would stop looking if I denied the connection. On the other hand, I didn't want her writing some sob-story blog post calling attention to her best friend's death, which could call attention to me.

Plus: Jesus Christ, so weird to hear from Allie after all these years. The memories bubbling up out of places I'd sealed shut years ago were messing with my head. I thought about sneaking downstairs and snagging that dusty bottle of Irish whiskey that I had spotted on a shelf in Dr. Mishkin's study, the room I'd once tried to clean before she told me it was off limits and stop fussing around with that duster, already. But getting hammered would only postpone what had to be done. Why hadn't I done more to disguise myself? Why hadn't I done a better job of staying out of people's stupid selfies? I finally got it together enough to write a response, hoping I could put an end to her search.

Dear Allie,
Thank you for your wonderfully open and honest

response. You were courageous to confront the abusive partner situation. I was in an abusive relationship myself and would have benefited greatly by having a friend as caring as you obviously are. I'm deeply touched, and I'm even more deeply troubled. You see, I have some terrible news for you. I did share a ride with the woman in that photo. I only knew her as Amber, and she wanted to ride with me as far as Minneapolis. Although she told me very little about herself, I enjoyed her company and could tell she was a lovely person.

But here's the part that's so hard to write.

We had a freak accident that totaled my car. I was seriously injured. Amber (as I knew her) was tragically killed on impact. Her funeral service was small, but incredibly beautiful. Everyone who responded to the accident was there, and in spite of being among strangers, at that moment I could tell she was loved.

Are you sure the woman I knew as Amber was actually your friend? I'm not saying you're wrong, but the photo is not very clear.

Warmly,
Maggie

The response was immediate.

It's her. And it wasn't an accident. He had her killed.

Oh boy. This wasn't going to go away easily. I stared at the computer screen, wondering if it was time to start packing up my stuff.

Six

I didn't have much cash. I didn't have transportation. I didn't have time to create another identity. Why hadn't I planned for this? Why was I spending my energies cooking fussy meals for a cranky old lady who barely noticed what she was eating, or spending hours writing comments on terrible essays dashed off in ten minutes by over-privileged kids who weren't even trying? I should have focused on saving my life. What an idiot.

My thoughts were banging around inside my head seeking an escape route. The old lady might be cranky, but I had a feeling she was trustworthy. If I left her a note and told her where I would leave the car, I could probably drive it to Minneapolis and then ... something. Or I could call Oak. He would help.

Another email pinged into my inbox.

Hi, Maggie,

I'm sorry. I know I sound a little crazy. I'm just kind of upset right now. Could I give you a call?

Allie

Hell, no. She would recognize my voice. She would say something that would trigger a response from me and she'd figure it out and what was the point of all this if I couldn't continue being Maggie?

Allie -

Sorry, but the volume on my phone is messed up. Until I get a new phone I can't really use it for calls, and I can't afford a new phone right now. Also—look, I realize you think the woman who died was your friend and you want to blame someone for

whatever happened to her, but I was there. It was definitely an accident. It put me in the hospital for three weeks. I still limp and I get headaches and I just started a new job. I'm barely holding it together.

Another thing: I found your website. You're a gifted writer. I really liked the essay about your daughter and the ducks. But please, please don't post anything about this online. I told you I was in a bad relationship. I've been able to get some distance from him, but I worry every day he's going to come find me. So you can't write about this. About me. Seriously.

Maggie

Are we done now? Will you leave me alone? I skimmed the message I'd just sent. I didn't sound like Maggie anymore. I sounded desperate. *I was desperate.*

The computer hummed away, nothing happening other than the old Toshiba's fan muttering about giving up for good. Every now and then the hum got louder, as if it was angry at having to work overtime. I suddenly had a raging headache, as if my body had decided to validate what I'd written to Allie. It had been a long, difficult day, and I was so tired my bones actually hurt, but I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep.

My heart gave a jolt when an email pinged in, but it was from a student who'd skipped class, asking if she had missed anything important. Why did they always ask that? So rude. I almost sent a sarcastic reply, something along the lines of how carefully I had designed the course so that most class meetings had absolutely nothing of value in them, but I stopped myself. She wouldn't get it, anyway. Better to drive her a little nuts by not answering for a couple of days.

I lay back on the bed, rubbing my temples, wondering if it was too late to sneak into the study and grab that whiskey,

realizing I probably needed to drink some water instead. Didn't dehydration give you headaches? I had just decided to sneak down the stairs to the bathroom to get some water, avoiding the noisiest treads on the stairs, when Allie's final message arrived.

Dear Maggie,

I will respect your privacy. But I can't promise I won't write about this after I've done more research into what happened to Emily at Eventive. There's something really bad going on.

Allie

Well, shit. I'd better get my escape plan in order.

I slept in the next day, since I hadn't been able to get to sleep until the sky began to grow light. I had decided not to replied to Allie's last email, but that didn't stop my brain composing endless drafts of things I couldn't say. Girl, write another story about ducks. Think of your kids. You have no idea what you're getting into. Let an actual journalist tackle it and take the risk of having their lives ruined by a ruthless company. And for god's sake, get someone to fix your website security, your WordPress install is way out of date and you registered your domain with your home address and phone number. Not that a proxy would be any defense against Eventive finding out where you live, but jeez, whoever built that site committed malpractice.

Dr. Mishkin gave me a raised eyebrow when I finally stumbled down to the kitchen to make some coffee, but she finished making the sandwich she was having for lunch and took it into the study, giving me the kind of space she usually demanded in the morning. I made it to campus for my so-called office hour, looking forward to shooting the shit with Oak, but the department chair called out my name as I reached the head of the stairs. He beckoned me into the admin

assistant's office where he was collecting his mail from the row of mail cubbyholes. Shirley Anderson, the admin assistant, was frowning at her computer screen, pretending not to eavesdrop.

"I've been hearing about your podcast assignment," he said with a strained smile. "The other sections of 101 are all assigning a standard research paper. Your approach is very creative, so ... contemporary. But I'm a little concerned. These are first semester students, after all. Digital natives. They hardly need instruction in all this technology stuff."

"You'd be surprised. They actually don't know much. I mean, even basic word processing. It blew their minds when I showed them control-z."

"Well, that may be, but 101 is meant to prepare students new to college for academic writing. How to craft an argument, how to cite sources."

"We're definitely working on that. Their show notes have to include sources documented in MLA style."

He nodded, not listening. "Because college is so different from high school, and so many of these students are under prepared. I really think it would be better to assign a standard research paper."

"This is kind of a research paper. They have to do a lot of research."

"But it's not a paper at all. They're making a..." He flapped his hands, and dropped some of the mail he was holding. "A recording."

I scooped up the fallen envelopes and fliers and handed them to him. "Most of the grade will be based on the script they hand in. Like, printed out on paper, with citations. The recording itself only counts a few points. And it won't be public, it's just for the class."

Professor Perv came in to gather up his mail. He stood beside the mailboxes, leafing through papers while listening for gossip. When I glanced at him he raised his eyebrows, as if to say "you're in trouble," then waved toward the recycling bin.

"Pardon me, I'm just going to..." He mimed nudging me aside, even though he had plenty of room. I stepped back and he edged around, bending away from me, ostentatiously keeping his distance. The department chair look puzzled as he watched his colleague scuttle away.

"That's reassuring, but still. They need to practice academic forms of expression, and a podcast is simply not academic. Besides, isn't it a group project? Those are always ... well, you know. They'll divide up the work for efficiency." He framed the word with air quotes and nearly dropped his mail again. "They'll pick the strongest writer to do all the work. How can you ensure each student gets sufficient writing experience?"

"They have to hand in individual essays every week, a draft and then a revised version. Also, I conference with them." Well, I might at some point. I hoped I had the right word. Wasn't that what it was called on Maggie's syllabus?

Apparently it was, because he nodded. "Good, good. We want to develop each student's abilities, and conferencing is a well-established pedagogy." He kept nodding like a bobblehead as he thought up what to say next. "And revision, that's good. The revision cycle is so critical. I'm glad you're building that in."

"Okay." I glanced at the clock on the wall, which was pointless. None of them told the same time, if they worked at all. "I should get to my office hours."

He finally came to the point. "I strongly advise you to scrap that assignment and, as I've said, have them write a research paper instead. A standard research paper, like the other sections. It will be less work for you in the end."

"Wait. Just to be clear—you're ordering me to drop the podcast assignment?"

He made a stuttering noise that was a combination of a sigh and a dismissive chuckle. "Of course not. I can't *order* you to do anything. It's just, it's for the best. You're so early in your career, you don't want to do anything that would derail it." He lowered

his voice. "The thing is, some of your students have asked to interview faculty about sensitive matters."

"You're talking about Michael Knutson's group."

"His father is on the—"

"The board of trustees, you told me. I don't think Michael would be too happy if I told him the podcast was being canceled by the college."

He reared back, triggered by the word. "We're not 'canceling' anything. I'm just recommending — for your own good, mind you — that you avoid trouble and give the students a more appropriate and conventional task."

"But I ran it by you, I thought it was okay."

"What do you mean?"

"I put a copy of the syllabus and assignment in your mailbox a week before classes started."

"You did?"

"I figured since you didn't say anything, it was good to go." I had to think. Maybe it would be better to assign papers that didn't involve poking hornets' nests. I could even make a rule their papers had to have a national focus, they couldn't write about the college and its policies. That would make it less likely Knutson and his minions would take to social media with cherry-picked quotes from faculty, manufacturing a controversy that could pull me into some social media meltdown. All I'd have to worry about is students downloading pre-written papers from the internet, and I didn't give a shit about that. Less work for everyone, and a lot less risk for me.

But I pictured how the students would react if I told them their projects were going to be replaced by a research paper. They'd already put in a lot of work. They were into their research, they were writing up a storm. It was really working. Maggie would have been so pleased. I could hear her burbling happily beside me in the car, excited to see how it would go.

It's going great, Maggie. You did good.

He had given me an excuse to opt for a safer option, but

something stubborn stiffened my spine. How dare he try to undermine Maggie's teaching? "So, um, thanks for the advice. I appreciate it. What I'll do is I'll talk to them about how to conduct their interviews without putting people on the spot."

"But I can easily find some research paper assignments for you," he said desperately. You could just swap them out."

"Thanks, but they've been working so hard on these projects, I'd hate to disappoint them. We'll stick with what we're doing."

For a moment I thought he was going to argue with me, or maybe have a stroke, but after doing a fish imitation, eyes bulging and his mouth opening and closing, he just sighed dramatically. "On your head be it," he muttered as he left.

"You 'ran it by him'?" the admin assistant said to me. "Nobody does that."

"Nobody does that," Beasley said, amusement mixed with outrage.

"At least I've never had to do it," Oak said. "Not at any of the institutions where I've taught. Was that required where you worked before?"

How should I know? "I just figured he's the boss. He'd want to know what his employees are doing."

Beasley laughed incredulously and Oak looked confused. "You're not his employee."

"Okay, but he's my supervisor."

"No, no, *no*, dear child." Beasley clutched the side of her face as if she had come down with a sudden toothache. "Goodness no. He's your chair. The first among equals."

"That doesn't even make sense. How can you be first if you're equal?"

She had to think about that. Oak said, "you did the right thing. He has no right to challenge your academic freedom."

"Huh. That's sounds like something Michael Knutson always says."

"Ridiculous. Academic freedom applies to teachers, not to

students," Beasley said firmly. "I wish these children would look things up before they spout them."

"I'll have to figure out how to talk to them about doing interviews diplomatically," I said. "Ways to avoid freaking out the faculty they talk to."

"I might have something that would help." Oak grabbed his laptop.

"Not that it will stop Michael Fucking Knutson from starting a ruckus. It's his mission in life."

"Tell me about it. See if this might work," Oak said. "The handout I'm emailing you is on conducting oral histories, but you could easily adapt it."

I downloaded the document and skimmed it. "Thanks. I can definitely use this. Knutson's probably a lost cause. He wants controversy, but the others are at risk of stepping on toes without meaning to. They have this weird mixture of confidence and cluelessness."

"So true," Beasley agreed.

"And not much experience with creating original content," Oak added. "So much of their education has been a matter of finding the right answers, filling in the blanks. College is challenging. You can't expect them to avoid every pitfall when all they've had to avoid in the past is wrong answers."

Fair enough. But given how excited students were about their projects, and how often they blabbed impulsively on social media, that original content could call attention to itself even without being produced as public podcasts. Which, no big deal, except it could call attention to me, as their teacher and instigator. And I had Michael Knutson on top of that, as eager to hunt down leftist professors as Joe McCarthy had been to find Communists under every bed. All the more reason to be prepared to vanish at any moment. I waited until the end of the hour, then headed home to Dr. Mishkin's dilapidated Victorian to start packing a digital go-bag.

That night I assembled the rudiments of two fresh identities. They weren't very solid, just basic information about two people who, conveniently, had died in infancy, but they would likely work as a patch until I could do the slower work of obtaining birth certificates and getting legal IDs. All of that could be bought off the shelf if I had enough cash, but I didn't.

Once I took flight I would have to rely on shadow jobs that paid under the table and informal housing options, the kind of ad hoc living arrangements that you resorted to when you were on the edge of broke, with no credit cards, bank accounts, or a fixed address. It wasn't comfortable, but I knew I could do it. I'd been doing it for more than a year, until we hit the moose.

I also made a list of ways I would send Maggie's identity off on a wild goose chase to confuse pursuers. My first paycheck from the college had been deposited at the local bank the previous week, and I signed up for an ATM card. I would drop it and the pin number in the mail addressed to a cypherpunk I met online when I was a teenager hanging out on IRC channels. We'd kept in touch over the years, bonding over shared interest in writing code, reading manga, and fucking with surveillance systems. She traveled a lot and knew how to evade security cameras. I could count on her to use the card to withdraw money from cash machines in different cities to throw anyone hunting for me off the scent. It was easy money for her as well as a fuck-you to the surveillance-industrial complex.

Using an encrypted account for note-taking, I composed email drafts that I would paste into messages from Maggie's official campus email when the time came, ready-made good-bye messages to be sent to Dr. Mishkin's daughter, my department chair, and (the hardest one to write) to Oak that told them I was feeling overwhelmed and had to go, sorry about that. Oak's draft message took the longest because I was just realizing how much I liked him. I ended up deleting the whole thing and wrote something short and efficient, if cold.

If I ever had to send it, it would be for the best. He'd have less reason to want to look for me.

My classes met for a final work session in the archives. Zoe was wearing a tee that said "Do Not Make Me Use My Archivist Voice" on it. As I took roll, I noticed my best writer was absent. Again. "Has anyone seen Sidonie lately?" I called out. Blank faces.

"I think I saw her a couple of days ago," someone said. "I waved, but she didn't see me."

"We had a meeting on Sunday, but she didn't show," someone from her group said. "Maybe she's sick."

I quickly checked my email to see if she'd responded to my last message. Nothing from her. She was behind on her essays, too, and the last draft she'd handed in was short and sloppy, not up to her usual off-the-charts awesome standard. I didn't want to report her absences on the snitchware we were supposed to use when students were falling behind. It would automatically send alerts to her academic advisor, the counseling center, and to the dean of students, which is why I hesitated to use it. I would rather ask her what was going on before making it a matter of record. Besides, I'd read the privacy policy for the platform and it was a trash fire, full of aggregated data uses and third-party sales hidden under a pile of misleading legalese.

I jotted another quick what's-up email to her before starting the class. "Okay, remember you have revisions due on Friday, and I'll collect progress reports from each group on Monday, so get your sh-, your stuff together." Zoe made her own set of announcements, including rules about not spilling coffee on historic documents, and then the groups got to work while Zoe and I circulated.

"Oh my GOD!" Ashley squealed halfway through the hour, pointing at her laptop. Since she was usually scrolling through Instagram instead of working, I tuned her out.

"Wow," one of the Madisons said. "Did you guys see this?" A crowd began to gather around Ashley's computer.

"They used blackface. Actual blackface. Here, at Magnusson!" Ashley pointed at the screen, excited and appalled. I strolled over and leaned in to see. Yup, there was even a grotesque photograph, four "coeds" singing and dancing and being extremely racist. "This is from 1959. My grandpa was a student here then."

"Does it give their names?" One of the students peered at the screen, trying to read the photo's caption. "We could get their info from the alumni office and call them to—"

"Whoa, time out!" I shouted. "Remember what we talked about? You can't just ambush people and ask them about touchy stuff. How would you like someone calling up your grandma to ask why she'd been a flaming racist when she was in college?"

"Not my grandma," Madison said. "She's a Democratic Socialist." But Ashley looked suddenly thoughtful.

"Do some research on the history of blackface," I said. "Think about why it seemed okay to do it at a college in Minnesota in 1959. Just don't cold-call old ladies, okay?"

There was some performative grumbling, but they seemed to understand. After class Zoe and I looked at each other. "Blackface?" I asked her. "For real?"

"I'm not surprised. This was a super-white college in 1959, and it hasn't changed a whole lot. But I'm glad you stopped them from contacting alumni. The first year I worked here I got in a lot of trouble when we made a digital exhibit about Greek life on campus, hazing and drunken parties and all. It got a lot of pushback."

"Ugh."

"But the worst was the personal attacks. Being Asian, and a woman ... We had to take down our post about the exhibit from the archives' Facebook account, the comments got so nasty."

I felt a sympathetic shudder. It was no joke, having violent

threats show up in your accounts, rage-filled venom from people you didn't know crowding into your online world, attacking in coordinated packs. "That's why we're not putting these podcasts online. Stuff like this? It would be asking for trouble. As it is, my chair wanted me to scrap this assignment, even though I ran it by him in advance and assumed he gave it the okay."

"You ran it by him?" she asked.

"I know, I know. Nobody does that."

It must have been Dark Secrets of Magnussun week because in the next section of the class, another group uncovered something that had been erased from the official histories. Dr. Arvid Bjelland, a beloved biology professor who became college president after World War II, was literally a campus icon. A cartoon version of his portrait appeared on the masthead of the student newspaper and on t-shirts in the bookstore. He was a safe if boring topic for a podcast. Or so I thought.

"Zoe?" Steve waved the archivist over to his table. "Was President Bjelland like, a Nazi or something?"

"No?" Zoe said it like a question. Where are we going with this?

"It's just, I'm reading research papers from when he was in the biology department. This one from 1931? It's about improving American genetic stock by sterilizing the unfit. Which seems a little Nazi-ish. Naziesque, or whatever."

"That's odd. I don't think I've seen that article among his research publications." She turned to a book truck laden with boxes of materials she'd pulled for the group, scanned their labels, opened one, and started flipping through the manilla envelopes inside.

"This article is in a regular science journal, but it sounds so..."

"Racist?" Devon suggested.

"Ableist?" Maya said.

"Fascist?" two other students said in a duet.

"Hey, Knutson." Liv crumpled up a piece of paper and tossed

it at his table to get his attention. “Was Bjelland one of your relatives?”

“As a matter of fact, he was not,” he said with a feral smile, picking up the ball of paper and bouncing it in his palm. “Though I can see you’re ready to tarnish his entire legacy over an article published in a reputable journal. What ever happened to academic freedom?”

“Freedom to promote genocide?” Liv crumpled another page and threw it at his head.

He caught it, enjoying her anger. “I haven’t read the paper, and neither have you. Don’t you think you should check it out before you jump to conclusions? You lefties are so driven by feelings instead of facts.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“See? Emotional.”

“Enough, you guys,” I said. Knutson began to juggle the two balls of paper, his entourage sniggering. “We’re here to work on your projects, remember?”

Steve was still scrolling through his document. “He’s got a chart here for the number of ‘feeble-minded’ people in institutions and how much money could be saved if they were prevented from reproducing.”

“There’s nothing in here from 1931,” Zoe said. “Can you send me a copy of that article?”

“Sure. Most of his articles are about plant science, but ... here’s another one.” Steve stared at his screen intently. “He’s talking about the ‘Indian problem.’ He wanted to sterilize Native American women on Minnesota reservations. This is nuts.”

“Look up ‘eugenics’ in Wikipedia,” Zoe told him. “It was a big movement in the late nineteenth century right up through World War II, and it directly influenced Nazism.”

“But ... I don’t get it. Nazis? He was American.”

“People had naïve ideas about genetics based on agricultural sciences. At the start of the twentieth century it was considered progressive social policy to apply it to improve the human race.

That doesn't mean it's okay, because it's not, but read up on eugenics. I'm sure we have books on the subject that could be helpful."

"If you want to be balanced, check out *The Bell Curve* by Charles Murray," Michael Knutson said, and Steve dutifully wrote it down. Zoe opened her mouth, then closed it.

"You could interview my history prof," Anna said. "I just remembered he said something about it in class. It was a big part of passing anti-immigration laws in the 1920s."

"I'll see if my advisor can do an interview, too," Steve said. "She talked a little about racism and genetic theories in a bio lecture, so she probably knows about ... what's it called again?"

"Eugenics." Zoe was looking a little sick as she spelled it for him.

"I'm a bio major, so I thought it would be cool to read President Bjelland's research. It's mostly boring stuff about sugar beets, but this ... do people know about it?"

"I don't believe they do," Zoe said, closing the box and lining it up neatly with the others.

A burst of laughter rippled around the room. One of the students had sent a classic GIF to the class alias, a British actor in a Nazi uniform looking puzzled, asking "Are we the baddies?" on repeat.

"Your podcast is going to be lit," a student in a different group said, holding up a palm to high-five one of Steve's group.

"Thanks for all your help with this course," I told Zoe after the students left.

"It's been fun, and so educational. Who knew Saint Arvid was a eugenicist? Blackface *and* eugenics." She fanned herself. "Whew, what a day."

"I'll use the next class meeting to talk about how to handle stuff like this without sensationalism. Is it going to cause problems for you?"

"If it goes viral on Twitter and Facebook? I doubt the marketing people will be too pleased."

"Michael Knutson will be. He's always grandstanding." And well-connected online. I felt a familiar knot of anxiety in the pit of my stomach.

"And his father—"

I nodded. "Yeah, I know."

"But all the same, it's great your students are so into it. This is what archives are for. This college needs to confront its own racism. It's part of our collective past." She shrugged. "And our present. The messages I got after our exhibit on Greek organizations were ugly."

"Well, this assignment is strictly for our class, not for the public."

"Excellent plan." We were laughing by the time we parted, but as I looked back, she was gathering up the last of the documents scattered on tables, looking worried.

With reason, as it turned out. The student-run weekly newspaper put it on the front page on the following Monday.

Seven

"You are famous," Dr. Mishkin remarked, showing me her copy of the *Magnusson Messenger*, with the headline across the top "Frosh Class Uncovers Racism in the Archives."

"That wasn't supposed to happen. I told the student reporter who contacted me 'no comment.'"

"And yet here is your name. One, two ... three times. Dr. Maggie Farnham, smearing the college's reputation with scandal and facts." She tut-tutted, enjoying my discomfort.

"I should have listened to the department chair. He told me to drop that assignment and have students write a regular research paper."

She scoffed. "Interfering with your teaching? Outrageous. Who is the chair now, David Parsons? Hah, that small-minded pedant. I was on a committee with him once, he's afraid of his own shadow. Good for you, standing up to him." She turned back to the paper and snorted. "Blackface. That will make the administration squirm. As for President Bjelland, it's time that local hero was brought down to earth. He was so full of himself."

"You knew him?"

"I knew everybody, though I haven't kept up with the new faculty, they all look like students to me with their tattoos and extreme youth. Dr. Bjelland was already retired when I started teaching at Magnusson, but he held court every morning at a particular table in a corner of the cafeteria that was unofficially reserved for him and his apostles. When he finally died, so much pageantry. They practically canonized him. Yet in all these years, nobody bothered to look at his CV and discover he had fascist tendencies." She started to chortle. She laughed so hard it turned into an uncontrollable cough. I ran to get her a glass of water.

She drank some water and coughed some more until she

hawked up a loogie and spat it into a napkin. After inspecting it, she crumpled the napkin and dropped it into an empty cup. “I thought it would be a nuisance having a lodger,” she said, patting her mouth with a fresh napkin. “But you’ve made things interesting.”

“Which is exactly what I don’t need.”

“Pfft. They won’t fire you. It would cause even more scandal.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.”

She gave me a sharp look, as if she had some special x-ray vision to see things I had kept hidden. “What is it that has you worried, then?”

For a moment I felt like telling her about Allie, about everything, but I just shook my head. “Nothing. I’m going for a walk.” I grabbed the jacket and scarf I’d bought at a second-hand store to supplement my skimpy wardrobe and left.

It was a crisp day, chilly enough to see my breath. Mitagomee was so small I passed decades of architectural history within a few blocks—frilly Victorian houses like Dr. Mishkin’s, though not as decrepit, four-square family homes with big porches, tidy little bungalows and, when the sidewalks ended, ranch houses that got bigger as their trees got smaller.

I came to the edge of town, where a recently-constructed complex of housing for the elderly was bordered by cornfields. Just down the road, conveniently enough, was the town cemetery, a hilly park-like area ringed by an old cast-iron fence, full of gnarled oak trees whose brown leaves murmured in the light breeze. The gates were open, so I wandered inside, aimlessly strolling past gravestones, some more than a century old, the names and dates weathered away, the newer ones decorated with sad bunches of deflated balloons, stuffed animals, small flags, or bunches of faded plastic flowers. It could have been depressing, but there was a stillness here that was calming. Time slowed, and my problems seemed to shrink in size, surrounded by all those dead people who’d probably had problems of their own, until they didn’t.

There was a stone chapel or mausoleum in the center of the graveyard. Facing it an old granite bench was decorated with carved vines and leaves, as if it had been overgrown by nature before being turned to stone. A girl sat there, hunched, hugging her knees. She was so still and pale she could have been made of stone, too.

“Sidonie?”

She turned, my voice breaking the spell. Emotions chased across her face—dread, confusion, embarrassment. “Oh.” She forced her lips into a shape that was meant to be a smile. “Hi.”

“I’ve never been here before. Mind if I sit?”

She gave me a neutral “be my guest” shrug and hugged herself more tightly, though there was plenty of room. I sat at the other end of the bench, wondering if butts could suffer from frostbite. People sometimes had to have frostbitten fingers and toes amputated, but what would you do about a frostbitten behind? “I’m trying to get more walks in since my accident. I should go to the gym, but it’s so noisy in there, and it smells like old socks.” She gave a twitch of a smile, just to be polite.

“I missed getting an assignment from you this week,” I went on. “You have no idea how much your essays keep me from slitting my wrists.” D’oh, that was the wrong thing to say. She looked like someone who had been thinking about it. “I mean, not to dunk on them or anything, but it’s painful reading what the other students hand in. You have a real talent. Are you planning to be writer? I mean, you already are a writer, but professionally?”

“No, I want to be a nursing major. Well, that was the plan, but I’m not sure my grades will be good enough.”

“If communication skills count, you’ll be a shoo-in. Only you haven’t been in class lately. Which—you obviously don’t need anyone teaching you how to write, so I understand if you think the course is a waste of your time.”

“No, I like the class. And anyway, it’s required.”

I watched two squirrels chase each other, spiraling up a tree. "I don't want to get up in your business, but is there something going on? Anything I can help with?"

"No. I just have to figure some stuff out."

"Okay." My butt felt as if it were turning to stone as we sat silently side-by-side. Maybe we'd both become part of the bench like the vines and leaves, another feature of the peaceful landscape, two statues carved in granite. Leaves would fall on us, and then snow, and after a while moss would grow on our arms and bird crap would spatter on our shoulders. A crow landed on the peak of the structure in front of us, cocking his head to check us out, maybe waiting to see if we'd make a good perch.

"I'm pregnant," Sidonie said, breaking the silence.

"That's a bummer." It wasn't the most sensitive thing to say, but its dorkiness seemed to give her permission to open up.

"It doesn't feel real. I mean, I don't even know the guy that well, we just ... I was at this party in the first week and everybody was drinking and I didn't want to look stupid so I did, too. And he was cute and we were both really blasted and it just happened."

"I think I read there's some sort of response team you can turn to when stuff like this happens."

"It's for sexual assault. That's not what it was."

"Sometimes it doesn't seem like it, but—"

"No, I was just as into it as he was. It was stupid. So stupid. I can't believe I let this happen. I haven't told my parents yet."

"Will they freak out?"

She gave a small, sad giggle. "Sure. I mean, my mom sends texts just about every day, and my dad keeps mailing me packages of things I don't need. Like, batteries. He just sent a huge package of double-A batteries. What am I going to do with those? They still think of me as their little girl. And now I'm pregnant." She bubbled with laughter as she brushed away tears. "What a mess."

"Say, do you mind if we walk around while we talk? My butt's frozen."

"Sure. I'm kind of cold, too." She said it as if she was surprised, even though her lips were practically blue.

"Have you been throwing up a lot?" I asked as we set out.

"You mean like morning sickness? No, but coffee tastes awful and I haven't felt like eating. I haven't felt like doing much of anything, honestly, except sleep. I know I've been missing class. Sorry about that. It feels like I'm in a fog. I can't make my mind up on anything. Even brushing my teeth is, like, a decision, you know?"

I steered us down a winding path, one that led us into an older section of the cemetery. It didn't seem like a good idea to pass by too many sad teddy bears at the moment. "I know how that feels. I got pregnant when I was fifteen. But I was barfing, like, constantly. Morning, noon, and night sickness. My mom kicked me out as soon as she found out."

"Wow. That's harsh."

"Yeah, well. We didn't get along anyway, and her boyfriend *du jour* really didn't like me, so I think it was kind of an excuse. To be fair, I was not easy to live with. We argued all the time. Big screaming arguments over dumb stuff. And then I was pregnant, which was serious drama. For some idiotic reason, after I finally guessed what was going on and bought one of those tests to be sure, I just assumed I would go live at my boyfriend's house with his folks and we'd be one big happy family, but that was delusional. He didn't want anything to do with it. Said he wasn't even sure it was his, which was ridiculous because he knew I hadn't been with anyone else. What a jerk he turned out to be. And unlike your guy, he wasn't even cute."

Sidonie smiled and sniffed beside me. "What did you do?"

"I couch surfed for a while with different kids from school, and then pretty much moved in with my best friend." I felt a pang, picturing Allie at fifteen, with her curtain of hair, her gawkiness, the way her glasses usually managed to be a little

crooked. She could have afforded cool clothes but she wore things she liked instead. Unlike everyone else in high school, she was completely comfortable with herself and didn't seem to notice that she didn't look or act like everyone else. "Her parents were amazingly cool about it. They didn't make a big fuss, just moved a futon into her bedroom and acted as if it was normal for a sleepover to last months. They didn't know why my mom kicked me out, though everybody knew she was a weirdo, and it wasn't the first time I needed a place to sleep."

"That's rough."

"Her life was kind of a mess. She dropped out of Princeton to deal weed, mainly to piss off her parents who were rich and bossy, and she had really bad taste in men. Word of advice: Dealing drugs is not a great way to meet guys. Anyway, I moved into Allie's bedroom and the thing is, even though I logically knew I couldn't raise a baby on my own, I didn't do anything about it. I just kept going to school, doing my homework, daydreaming about how it would how neat it would be to have a kid. I wasn't even old enough to get a job, no way I could raise a child. I just wasn't thinking straight."

"So ... did you have the baby?"

"No. I woke up one morning and realized how impossible it all was. I went to a clinic and got an abortion. And I didn't feel bad about it. Still don't."

That was stretching the facts a little. In reality, I had kept on daydreaming and I would have avoided reality until it was too late to do anything about it. But one afternoon when I went to lunch I realized I was bleeding, so I went into the girls' bathroom and locked myself in a stall decorated with messages like "Laura + Mitch 4evah" written with a purple sharpie and "I hate algebra" in sharp enraged scratches. I sat on a toilet surrounded by the angsty graffiti while I miscarried. A spontaneous abortion, fitting for the outcome of a spontaneous and unprotected moment with a boy who was into sex but not into consequences. Who immediately started

a rumor that I was a slut who slept around. Who, when it came down to it, didn't care about me at all. That was one thing I had in common with my mother: terrible judgment about men.

Allie went looking for me, found me crying in the bathroom, and coaxed me to tell her what was happening. She should have been pissed off that I had kept it from her. She was my best friend, she talked her parents into letting me stay with them, she was always there for me when I needed someone, which was pretty much every day, and I'd kept something so important a secret. But, being Allie, she didn't mess around. She snapped at anyone who tried to come into the bathroom and made them go away. She talked to me through the stall door while I cramped and bled and cried, then loaned me an oversized sweatshirt to hide the bloodstain on my jeans and swiped the keys to her brother's car to drive me to the clinic, even though she only had a learner's permit and could have gotten in trouble. She did get in trouble with her brother, who was angry when he found out she had lied about needing a notebook she'd left in the car and had taken his precious vehicle without permission. She was in trouble with her teachers, too, for skipping out of history and French without an excuse, but her grades were so good it didn't matter in the end.

"I should talk to my parents, I guess," Sidonie was saying, then heaved a sigh at the enormity of it.

"Will they throw you out?" I made it into a joke; somehow I knew they weren't like that, and she laughed.

"No. They'll be upset and disappointed, but they'll support whatever I decide to do." She flicked tears out of her eyes. "I'm way behind on my homework, though. I missed a bio quiz yesterday. I need a good grade for the nursing program."

"You can catch up. You're smart and hard-working, and you're a hell of a fine writer." She dipped her chin, embarrassed by the praise, but pleased. "And if you end up moving in a different direction with your life, that's not the end of the world. I mean, I only had a semester at a community college." Whoops, that

wasn't Maggie's history. None of this was. Get a grip. "That first semester, I pretty much bombed all my courses. But I had a do-over, and eventually I even got a PhD. You have options, and with parents who want to help, who send you texts and buy batteries you don't need, you'll have a chance to figure it out. Though selfishly I hope you can stick with my class because I really like reading your essays. They keep me going when I have to write 'run-on sentence' six times in a row."

We came to a car parked near the cemetery entrance. She got keys out her pocket. "Want a ride back to campus?"

"Thanks, but I'll walk. I need the exercise."

"Okay. Um, thanks for, you know, listening."

She looked like she was trying to find words to say something more, so I said "You'll have to email your bio prof about that quiz yourself. I'm not telling anyone about this."

She nodded her thanks. "I'm going to go get some stuff from my room and head home for a while." She flashed a strained smile, climbed into her car, and drove off.

I wandered around some more, finding myself standing in front of the same sad gravestones multiple times. The curving roads seemed to continually fold in on themselves like a maze I couldn't escape. I paused to straighten a straggling bunch of plastic flowers, folded up a deflated Mylar balloon and tucked it behind the bouquet, thinking about that urn that held Maggie's ashes, wondering where it ended up. She deserved better than having me move into the husk of her life, inhabiting it temporarily, keeping me safe before I had to move on again.

What I was avoiding, what I really needed to think about was how to warn Allie.

The road that I thought was leading out of the cemetery delivered me to the same bench where I'd earlier found Sidonie. I took a seat again and forced myself to face the problem. The only solution I could come up with was to track down Brian Friedman and persuade him to talk to Allie about the risk, let her know just how bad it could get, but the last time

I contacted him on the encrypted messaging app we'd been using, he blocked me.

I couldn't blame him. I had thought I was doing him a favor, handing him damning documents that he could turn into a blockbuster story, whistleblowing that would make his career and set things right. That's not what happened. No story was ever published, and he was disgraced. It not only cost him his job, it ruined his life. He would never take a call from me.

He hadn't blocked Maggie, though. He wouldn't recognize the number of the burner phone I was using. Maybe I could find a way to contact him and, if I was lucky, he would listen just long enough for me to get his help.

"Brian?"

"It's you," he said flatly, immediately recognizing my voice. I had spent a couple of hours up in my room searching the web and eventually finding the phone repair store where he was now working. I was lucky he was the one who picked up, but I had to work fast before he could slam the phone down.

"Don't hang up."

"I'm at work. I can't talk to you."

"It's not me you're talking to, I died. I don't exist anymore." I looked at the gravestones surrounding me, right at home.

"I don't care if you're dead and buried with a wooden stake through your heart, I don't want anything to do with you. Or is there some part of my life you haven't destroyed yet? Some remnant you want to finish off?"

It stung, but I pressed on. "There's a woman who's investigating Eventive. She has no idea how dangerous it is. I can't tell her to stop because I'm dead, but you could."

"Sure. I should just call some reporter out of the blue and tell her what to do. Like, hi there, I just want you to know you should really not follow up on that bonkers story a crazy woman is feeding you, because I work at a phone repair shop and know all about it."

"I'm not feeding her anything, and she's not a reporter."

"You can trust me," he said over my words, continuing with his imaginary phone call. "I'm that well-known drug-addicted plagiarist who maybe, probably, almost certainly abused his own children for years before the publication he worked for fired him."

"I'm sorry, Brian. I am so goddamn sorry."

"Lot of good that does me. Look, I need to—"

"*Don't hang up.* Please. You could tell her what happened to you."

"And she could Google my name and how much credibility would I have after that? Besides, I'm done. I'm out. I'm not touching this with a barge pole."

"She has kids. Two little girls."

He took a ragged breath. I thought for a moment I'd triggered his conscience, but I'd only pushed a rage button. "I had two sons." His voice shook with anger. "I don't get to see them anymore."

"At all?"

"We had a couple of supervised visits, but it was too weird, and then the mob started going after them, too. I couldn't keep—hold on, I got a customer."

A clunk, a mutter of voices. Laughter that sounded as if it was from a canned television soundtrack. I waited. I waited some more.

"The fuck is wrong with you, calling me?" His voice was back, a low growl, fury kept on a chain. "After everything that happened. How do you have the nerve—"

"She's in danger. Who else can I call? I'm desperate."

"You think I'm not? Thanks to you, I lost my career, my home, my kids. They swatted us, did you know that? How do you think it feels to see cops dressed like Darth Vader come busting into your home at four in the morning, screaming and pointing guns at your children?"

"I'm sorry."

"The damned thing is I have no idea if Eventive called in the SWAT team or if it was just one of the crazies they set off. Once this, this tsunami of hate gets stirred up, it replicates itself, like a virus you can't stop from spreading and mutating. I still get random waves of abuse from people who think I'm evil incarnate, and the accusations keep changing, getting weirder all the time. I never realized people could be so unhinged, so eager to go after someone they don't even know. I mean, I *knew*. I wrote stories about it, but it's not real until it you're the target. You know what's funny? Before all this happened, I was under contract to teach an online course at Medill, investigative journalism in the era of social media." He laughed. It sounded like harsh coughing. "Jesus Christ, the irony."

"Her name is Alexandra Saunier. She lives in Lewiston, Maine. She married a landscaper, she just had a baby, she wants to be a writer. She published a cute essay about ducks. Now she's got the idea Eventive had me killed and she's asking questions. She is so not ready for what will come down on her. Can you do something?"

"Why do you care? Is this to protect your anonymity, is that what it's really about?"

"No. She was my best friend in high school."

"Lucky woman. I made the mistake of thinking we were friends."

I couldn't respond. My throat felt as if it was suddenly jammed full of marbles.

He sighed. "Look, somebody is just pulled into the parking lot. I think it's the idiot who tried to replace his own iPhone battery and screwed it up. If I'm lucky he's going to the laundromat next door."

"Brian, Jesus. I'm so sorry. I should have known—"

"It's not your fault. And it's not like you didn't get a shitty deal, too. Speaking of which, how's life treating you, now that you're dead? Forget it. Don't tell me anything." We listened to each other breathing for a moment before he said "Oh crap,

he's coming here and he doesn't look happy." I heard the faint chime of a bell. "Hi. Be right with you," he said, his voice turned customer-service cheery and false. "Gotta go," he mumbled. "Uh, listen. Take care of yourself, whoever you are."

"You too," I said, but he'd already hung up.

Eight

In spite of the slight hint of warmth in his final words, I didn't think he would warn Allie. I couldn't blame him, wanting to keep his distance from my problems. From the whole mess. And the thing is, it really was my fault. I'd known enough about Eventive's no-holds-barred tactics that I should have realized how they'd respond before I got him involved.

I first connected with Brian years ago on a techie IRC channel when he asked a dumb question about setting up a dual boot on his laptop and got pelted with insults. They were funny insults, the kind of humorous hazing the geeks routinely inflicted on noobs. I thought was hilarious at the time because I had cracked the insider's code of lulz; joining in on the crude jokes made me feel like I belonged, like I was sophisticated and funny. But it got pretty cruel, which was a crummy way to feel superior. After piling on with my own insults, I felt ashamed enough to send him a private message and talked him through the setup. He stuck around on the IRC channel, mostly lurking but occasionally tossing in something funny or thoughtful and now and then something amazingly ignorant, but the group began to tolerate him, like a pet monkey. He'd earned enough trust that they didn't banish him when he revealed he was a reporter. He back-channeled me a few times for information or to share a private joke.

We had become pretty good virtual friends when he somehow became aware that I was a lot younger than him, and worse yet, a girl. That made him suddenly self-conscious about the raunchy banter on the channel, and he got weird about our private chats. Having a twelve-year-old walk him through tech problems that seemed complicated to him might have smarted a little, too.

He wasn't stupid, though, and he was determined to learn

as much as he could because he had somehow talked his way into writing a regular technology column for a newspaper chain. He might not have had mad skillz (what people actually called tech know-how back then), but he was good at talking to people and embedding himself in online spaces where he could get wind of the next big thing. Eventually he was able to pitch features to *Wired* and major newspapers, and by that time he was accurate about computer stuff at least half the time.

We kept in touch through various tech channels as I went through high school, sneaking into computer labs at Bates pretending to be a college student so I could use their network, and he cheered for me when I got hired at Eventive. I realized his friendship with me, especially after I started to work at a hot startup, had a utilitarian purpose: I was a source. But he was smart and funny and when he traveled to Boston he'd treat me to lunch or talk me into taking the afternoon off to go to the Gardner Museum with him.

I'd burned that bridge. Burned it so thoroughly there was still smoke rising from the charred remains. I couldn't count on Brian to warn Allie. But if the number listed at her domain registration belonged to a cell phone I could text her.

I downloaded an app that concealed my number from both Allie and my carrier and stared at my phone for ten minutes, trying to decide what message to send. Finally I started typing.

>Hi, I used to work for Eventive. Do you use the Signal app?

The message didn't bounce, so there was a good chance it was a cell number. I waited. Checked the time; dinner was going to be late tonight. Eventually—it felt like hours but had only been seventeen minutes—I got a response.

>Never used it before, just installed it.

I opened the encrypted messaging app and sent a new message to the same number.

>Thanks. I know this is kind of random, but I heard through the grapevine you were researching the company. You need to know something, they will destroy you if you ask too many questions. They will hurt your family, they will stop at nothing. It's not worth it.

Her reply came immediately.

>Nice try. Bye.

Well, shit. She knew enough about the company's methods that she must have assumed I was an Eventive operative.

>Seriously, I don't work for them anymore but I know what they are capable of. They don't just produce slick social ad campaigns. They have a whole network of shell companies that have contracts with US intelligence and with foreign governments. They once ran a political influence campaign in Turkey that involved planting false evidence to get people arrested and hiring thugs to beat up journalists. Promoting lies about political candidates to smear their reputations and muster troll armies is on-brand for Eventive. They're more powerful than you realize. Destroying an individual's life is a walk in the park for them.

>Scary stuff. I've seen rumors, but nothing concrete. Can you provide any evidence for these claims?

I could, lots of it, but that was the last thing I wanted to do. Goddamn it, I was trying to discourage her, but it seemed I was only whetting her appetite.

>What I'm telling you is that they will come for you and they will make sure your life is in ruins. It's what they do.

>So you're saying they can get away with murder and nobody should do anything about it?

That landed like a punch in the gut. They had gotten away with murder. Just not mine. Yet.

>A reporter already tried to expose them. He had the receipts, he had proof. He had credibility with major publications. It didn't matter. Eventive managed to smear his reputation, stir up a violent mob, and attack his family. It wrecked his life. I'm just trying to warn you.

>What was your role at Eventive?

>I worked in UX.

>?

>Sorry, user experience. Making the product work for customers, working with sales and tech support. But I knew people at the top, and I've seen firsthand what they do to whistleblowers. For your own safety you have to stop asking questions.

>Someone needs to.

>But I'm trying to tell you, it won't work.

>Who is the reporter who had documents?

He won't talk to you.

>Tell me anyway.

Shit. He wouldn't like it, but if anyone could talk her down, he could.

>Brian Friedman. Used to write for Wired. Don't believe what you read about him on the internet, he's a good guy. But what they did to him, they'll do to you.

She signed off. I deleted our exchange and went downstairs to cook a meal even though the thought of food made my stomach turn.

"You are very quiet tonight," Dr. Mishkin said. "Not that I'm complaining. Most people talk far too much. Since Lara's father died and she left for college I have enjoyed the quiet of my own thoughts quite happily. But tonight—it's not a peaceful kind of quiet, it's as if you've brought a storm cloud into the room with you." Since I didn't say anything, she clarified. "I don't require entertainment, but you seem unusually glum tonight."

"Sorry. I just have stuff on my mind."

"Obviously. Is it that foolish story in the student newspaper? This is a very small pond, and it doesn't take much to make a splash, but it will soon calm down. I wouldn't worry about it."

"I'll try not to," I said, though her reminder only made me worry more. Students would likely make catchy Instagram posts about how shockingly racist students at Magnusson had been, complete with all the gory details. If some thin-skinned alumni in Facebook groups got upset by the criticism, their angry comments could leak into the public sphere and flow through the social media fuel lines that power far-off outrage factories. Their turbines relied on a constant supply of grievances they could spread and amplify to keep up their metrics and profits, even if it was a nothing story from a nowhere college. Anything that called attention to me put a target on my back. But I didn't want to think about it, and I didn't want her to start asking questions. "How long have you been a widow?"

She looked momentarily blank. "A widow? I suppose I am. I met my husband when I moved here. He taught Russian, back when obscure and useless languages were offered at Magnusson. I was surprised when Daniel proposed marriage, quoting Pushkin no less, but it was a sensible arrangement for both of us and he was an excellent father. Very patient and attentive. Lara takes after him in both looks and temperament, which is fortunate on both counts, though I wish she had inherited my intelligence. He was a kind man, but not an intellectual. She was only twelve when he died. It was a difficult time for her."

"I'm sorry. He must have been young."

"Not that young. He was already in his sixties when we married. Quite a nice man, an introvert and too bashful to have much of a romantic life until it was nearly too late. You should have seen the look on his face when I said yes. He was so prepared for rejection he didn't know what to do. We were at an impasse until I forcibly took the ring from him and put it on myself." She stared at the wall and smiled ruefully. "You might call him a nerd. Do people still use that word? He dressed like an accountant but was proud of his collection of bow ties, his one affectation. His colleagues were scandalized that he would marry a woman thirty years his junior, and a foreigner at that. After all, I moved here from Brooklyn. I was quite exotic."

"I can imagine. It must have been a big change from Brighton Beach. How did you end up here?"

She sat back and sniffed. "Now you are becoming nosy. I liked it better when you were in a funk."

I shrugged and let it drop. She ate a few peas and dissected the baked chicken I'd made for dinner, examining the remains and taking a fastidious bite. "I do want you to know one thing." She pointed her fork at me. "Whatever it is that is troubling you, you can confide in me and it will go no further. I may even be able to help, who knows?"

"Okay." I took a drink of water. "Um, thanks."

She watched me for a long moment, waiting. I wanted to tell her everything, let it all come gushing out to relieve the pressure that had been building inside me, even warn her I might need to borrow her car one of these days if I had to make a run for it, but I couldn't decide how to start and she got tired of waiting. She went back to her chicken and the moment passed.

"What happened to the bow tie collection?" I asked her as she pushed her plate away and dabbed her mouth, signaling the end of the meal.

"Why? Are you in need of neck wear?" She straightened an imaginary tie at her neck, enjoying my expression. "I gave them to Lara when it was time to sort out his things. She kept them for a while but eventually donated them to a clothing drive. Perhaps they are still out in the world somewhere, flitting about like butterflies."

She hauled herself up and we went through the ritual of her offering to clear the table and me declining, all through practiced hand gestures and a few mumbled words. "All right, then. If you're planning to make tea, I'll be in the study. Daniel not only left me this house, he left quite a decent library of Russian literature. Reminiscing has put me in the mood for a bit of Nabokov. Do you know he was quite an accomplished lepidopterist? The study of butterflies," she added, seeing I was clueless. She didn't explain who Nabokov was, and I didn't ask.

When I finished cleaning up the kitchen and making tea according to her strict protocols, I carried a tray into the study. I set it on the table beside the armchair where she sat, wrapped in a floral shawl, her feet on a leather ottoman, a book open in her hands. The walls of the room were lined with bookshelves. Most of the books had Cyrillic writing on the spines, apparently ones her husband had left behind. Only one shelf was reserved for math, relics of her academic career. There was an open laptop on her desk, a bundle of papers and mail, and a silver photo frame that opened like a book. On one side a smiling

child with blond braids tied with big white bows, a hint of the adult Lara in the shape of her face. On the other, a white-haired elf with wire-rimmed glasses, dimples in his cheeks, and a paisley-patterned bow tie.

"You may borrow books if you like," she said without looking up. "Though unless you are fluent in Russian or mathematics most of them would be difficult to read."

I took my mug up to Lara's room, thinking about the essays I needed to mark, the classes I had to prepare for the next day, the dreaded chore of checking social media for the fallout from the student newspaper story, but all I could think about was an elderly man with a bowtie collection and the young Russian mathematician he had married. I ended up reading everything I could find about Dr. Miskhin and her husband, Daniel Faulkner, in the digital records available at the college archives site. Then I went further, into public records and news archives.

There were a few photos of her in the college yearbooks and student newspaper, a tall, slim woman wearing fashionable clothes, her hair unfashionably pinned up in a crown of braids, that long nose looking even sharper in a face that was thin, almost gaunt. But she was always partially concealed in those photos, looking away from the camera, standing behind taller men, or her face blurred by movement. The only clear and candid photo I could find was in a yearbook. It was taken in her second year of teaching at Magnusson, a group shot of the math club. She was surrounded by boys looking geeky and awkward as one of them pointed at something complicated on the blackboard. She stood in the midst of them with a piece of chalk in her hand, not much older than them but seeming far more mature, looking directly at the camera, startled. Caught.

Her official profile on the math department page, where she was listed with two other retired faculty, was skimpy for someone who had worked there for decades: a PhD from Moscow State University, a handful of journal publications with

titles I didn't understand, a list of courses she taught semester after semester, mostly calculus. Lots of calculus. The place where her portrait should be sported the same generic vaguely-female silhouette of a head as appeared on my profile page.

The archival records were skimpy enough, but beyond the college site I found almost no trace of her existence. Marriage and Lara's birth dates noted on a handful of genealogy sites that tracked his side of the family, but provided nothing for hers; a brief obituary of her husband complete with a photo of him, a professional headshot that must have been taken before they even met, his hair dark, his sideburns long, and his glasses in thick black frames, wearing his signature bowtie. Her name was listed as the treasurer of a regional society for math teachers some twenty years ago on a website that looked its age. And while I didn't expect to find anything about her youth in Russia, I thought I would find something in public records from her life in Brooklyn. Maybe a teaching position at one of the universities there, or some other signs of life. But there was nothing at all. Not one thing.

It seemed we had something in common: We were both ghosts.

I was late to my first class the next day, and had to tell the students I didn't have feedback on their essays ready. I expected a wail of grievance, but they didn't seem fazed, too busy gossiping about how their friends were responding to the story in the student newspaper and relishing their fifteen minutes of fame. I tried to get them focused on a half-assed writing exercise I'd found online, but they were too restless to settle down and work. By the time the fourth section met, I gave up on the fill-in-the-blank worksheet and let them carry on with their podcast research instead. But even that turned out to be too much to ask.

"Have you seen this?" Steve asked me as he held up his

phone. Someone had created a meme—the cartoon version of Magnusson’s celebrated President Bjelland, but in lurid blackface, the kind of image that would be offensive whatever you thought about his eugenicist past, exactly the kind of meme that aimless jokers with nothing better to do would love to spread across the internet to stir up controversy. The other students brought up mentions on social media sites and obscure right-wing publications. Apparently, our small local discovery, promoted by an internet-famous activist student, had become the fuse to light up a host of grievances. My heart sank. The last thing I needed was a troll brigade bringing attention to my classes. To me.

“There’s a whole Reddit thread about what we’ve uncovered,” another student said, sounding smug about the attention.

“Shit. The Twitter account for the archives is blowing up, and it’s getting ugly.” Liv stood and whistled shrilly for attention. “Who’s on Twitter?” Some hands went up. “Go to the archives account and report those racist motherfuckers. Zoe doesn’t deserve this shit.”

“Same for Facebook and Insta,” Madison said. “She’s getting slammed, like it’s somehow her fault that we found out the college has some racism in its past. Are they going after you, too?” she asked me, her fingers busy searching for my accounts.

“I don’t really do social media,” I said. She looked startled and turned back to searching in case I was fooling.

I had checked Maggie’s skimpy Facebook presence earlier that morning. One of my “friends” who had been in the same graduate program but rarely showed up on Maggie’s feed had posted a link to the student newspaper story and a gossip-seeking message barely masquerading as concern. It had collected a few comments in the past twenty-four hours, but I had limited who could see these posts to Maggie’s small band of followers and had earlier posted a bland profile statement indicating I was loving my new job but simply too busy with

my teaching to keep up online, so please forgive any failure to respond, all worded with warm-and-fuzzy phrases to sound as much like Maggie as possible. I would have pulled the plug on the account, but a not-very-active Facebook account was less suspicious than no account at all. That said, given the low number of likes or comments she'd gathered over the years, maybe nobody would notice.

It was actually a little sad. Maggie hadn't intended to leave no trace. She just had never invested much of her time in turning herself into a brand. She was too busy teaching courses for peanuts and supplementing her income with low-wage jobs and writing a dissertation she hated about a poet nobody ever heard of. I sent up a small message of gratitude to her dead self for not wasting too much of her too-short life on joining the frantic competition for digital attention.

Chuckling my plans for the class period, I reminded the class of the exercise we'd done a couple of weeks earlier on privacy. I pulled up the handout and projected it so the class could review what we'd discussed—ways to block ads that collected personal data, search engine alternatives to Google and its data-sucking habits, steps to take in order to make social media accounts more private. We talked about the ways social platforms could be manipulated by bad actors through keyword squatting, filling data voids with misinformation, and using marketing ploys to drive crappy sites to the top of search results.

Well, mostly I talked, though Michael Knutson chimed in from time to time, obviously well-versed in clever techniques for using all the powers of the internet to complain to masses of followers that he didn't have free speech. "The more inflammatory the content, the more attention it generates," I told them, "and the more money it brings in, so guess what stuff the algorithm favors?" They nodded in their jaded we-know-all-this way as they surreptitiously checked their phones.

It wasn't until class was over that I opened my email. My

inbox was flooded with dozens of cloned messages with similar subject lines ranging from “President Bjelland was NOT a racist!!” to “Protecting the Reputation of Magnusson College” all containing copy-pasted complaints that I was indoctrinating students with left-wing commie radical beliefs.

Nestled among the cloned hate mail messages were an email from a public radio reporter hoping it found me well and wanting to talk soon, given a tight deadline (delete), a request for comment from someone working at a CBS news affiliate in Minneapolis, also on a deadline (delete), and a message from the college provost, who wanted to meet ASAP (oh shit).

I stopped by the department office to ask Shirley Anderson who the provost was and where would I find him, but before I could open my mouth she snapped out, “The provost wants to see you.”

“I just saw the email. I’m not even sure what a provost is.”

She rolled her eyes. “The big boss. I told him you were in class. He told me he wants to see you soon as it finished. Better get over there now.”

“I’m going, I’m going. But where to?”

She rolled her eyes again. I was a hopeless case. “Sundin Hall.” She saw that wasn’t helping. “The admin building in the middle of campus? You can’t miss it.”

“The big stone building with the bell tower?”

“That’s it. His office is just past the bursar’s counter.”

I had no idea what a bursar was, either, but it didn’t seem like the right time to ask. She was shooing me out of the office, enjoying the hell out of all the drama.

“Thank you for coming.” The provost shook my hand, saying it like I had a choice. I had been passed along by two layers of assistants before being ushered reverentially into an office lined with books that looked as if they’d been ordered up wholesale as intellectual wall decor. He nodded at the much younger man beside him. “This is Charlie, head of media

relations." I shook his hand, too. He looked to be about my age, maybe even younger, roly-poly in his build and with the kind of chubby cheeks grandmas would want to pinch. They both seemed to tower over me, even though they weren't especially tall, and I felt strangely vulnerable in my flimsy wrap-around sari skirt and second-hand t-shirt that was a little too tight. Somehow I had never had the time or money to replace Maggie's limited wardrobe and it had grown on me as part of my camouflage. It worked in a classroom, but it seemed somehow juvenile in this formal setting that combined ivory tower with corporate boardroom.

They settled comfortably at a conference table and I took the extra chair. The afternoon sun pouring through the blinds made them into looming, sinister shadows against the brightness. I had a feeling that was intentional.

"We have a bit of a public relations problem on our hands," the provost said, taking off his glasses and pinching the top of his nose to illustrate what a nuisance I had become. "It's marvelous that your students are delving into local history with such passion. Unfortunately the student paper got a few things wrong." He chuckled fondly. "Student reporters. Still learning the ropes. I've already had a word with their faculty advisor about tightening editorial standards, but it's a little late for that now. The cat, as it were, is out of the proverbial bag. Charlie, here, would like to walk us through some options for ensuring a coordinated response."

Charlie tapped a pen against a blank notepad. "First, refer all press requests to my office, okay?"

"Absolutely. I have no interest in speaking to reporters."

"Great. If we decide to include quotes from you, I'll handle it so we don't run into any misunderstandings."

"I'm fine with you handling the whole shebang."

"Excellent. Second, we should throw together something positive to put on our site and run through our social media. I'm thinking a short piece about this class project. Curious

Campus? That's a catchy name." He paused for a moment, head tilted. "I think we can get a decent photo of you with the right lighting."

"I'd rather not."

He hesitated, caught by surprise. "Uh, okay? We could get some students together for a shot, I suppose."

"Even better," the provost said. "A couple of students holding old documents in the archives?" He framed the imaginary photoshoot with his hands. "Or, I know, holding some yearbooks. Alums would love that."

Charlie nodded. "We'll have a write-up with a little background on the course, some quotes—don't worry, I can work those up myself—to talk up the kind of experiential learning you're promoting with this podcast thing."

"It's not a real podcast. They're just writing scripts. It's basically a research paper in a slightly different format."

The provost snapped his fingers. "We could highlight it as digital pedagogy, so long as we can downplay the, the more ... the controversial material. Surely some of the projects reflect well on the college."

"Like sports," Charlie said helpfully. "Are any of the groups focused on our athletics programs? Or music? Our choral program is popular with the senior crowd, they love our Christmas event."

"Well, the group doing music got sidetracked with the blackface thing, so—"

"Oh, right." Charlie winced.

"I can get you a list of the projects. They're mostly pretty boring, honestly, they wouldn't get anyone worked up. But I really don't want to be part of the story. Can we leave my name out of it?"

"I'm not sure we can avoid it. I mean, it's already out there."

"Yeah, but I'm getting all this angry email."

"You're not the only one," the provost said with a pained chuckle.

"And the archivist is getting hassled online, too," I said. "Including racist messages. It looks to me like there's an organized campaign. The wording of the emails is too alike for it to be anything else, and I'm guessing it originated with Michael Knutson. His father—"

"We know," the provost said. "He called the president as soon as he saw the story online, and the president called me. That's why we need to deal with this right away. Damage control."

"Tell you what," I said to Charlie. "I'll email you a list of projects today. I'll include the names of students who would do a good job of representing the interests of the company. I mean, the college. I think you should give Michael Knutson's group some play. Since his research project on free speech on campus is clearly coming from a right-wing playbook, it would throw a bone to the trustees who are pissed off and balance out the claims of being too lefty."

Charlie nodded, taking notes. "You're right about the coordinated campaign."

"You should also check in with Zoe Chen. She may not want the spotlight, but if she's okay with it, she's smart and used to dealing with alumni. This could give her a chance to promote the work she's doing in the college archives and repair some of the damage. But only if she wants."

"And if we got her in the photo shoot we'd get some diversity in there, too," the provost said, pleased.

"Okay, but right now she's getting harassed like crazy. What's your policy for protecting staff when they get brigaded?"

"When they get—" They looked at each other.

"When the mob attacks." I took a breath and tamped down my impatience with their cluelessness. "When there's a campaign to recruit a large numbers of people to fan out across social media platforms to attack someone who works here. Like, an Asian woman archivist who tries to promote the college's history through social media but gets hassled and threatened. Also known as brigading."

"I don't think we have a policy, per se," the provost said. "It's never happened before."

"Yes it has. It's happened to her, and probably other people, too. You need to put a policy in place and procedures to back it up. She deserves to know you have her back. So does anybody who gets in a situation like this."

"She's not thinking of suing, is she?" He blanched.

"Not that I know of, but risk management is something you need to think about these days." Plus, you should protect your employees from violent trolls, but that obviously didn't make his list of Things to Do.

"We should get a committee on that," the provost said to Charlie.

"Form a task force, maybe? I could drop a line to the chair of the all-campus IT advisory board, see if they'll put it on next month's agenda."

"Good, good. I'm going to a conference in a couple of weeks, I'll ask around and see what our peers do. Maybe someone already developed a policy we can copy. Thanks, Maggie. You're input has been really valuable."

I opened my mouth to object. They needed to do something now, not weeks from now, but stopped myself. That clearly wasn't how things worked here. And anyway, given the exaggerated gesture the provost made, visibly checking his watch, the meeting was at an end.

As Charlie and I passed the desks of assistants who provided a protective shield in front of the provost's door, he said "you're good at this."

"At what?"

"Media relations. Understanding the social media environment we're in. It's hard to get the crusty old guard to understand how the world works now. You seem to have all the right instincts, even if it gets the conservatives riled up."

"That was not my intention, believe me."

"I'm sure. I mean, that trustee, Knutson, he's on a power trip.

Being on the board, he thinks he can order people around. And his kid apparently is connected to some pretty fringe groups.”

Charlie kept talking before he peeled off to head to his office. “That assignment of yours—that’s exactly what our students need, experiential learning for the twenty-first century.” He paused, scribbled something on his notepad. “That should be in the lede. You sure you don’t want to be the star of the show? We could get a great pic of you and your students. I hope I didn’t ... I mean, I didn’t mean to imply it would be hard to get a good photo. Your accident and all.”

“I look better than I did a few weeks ago. Not so technicolor.”

“Plus you’re really rocking that punk look. Trendy.”

“I didn’t have any choice. I used to have long hair, but I had to get stitches in my head, so.”

“You have the face for it. It looks terrific, if you don’t mind me saying.”

I did mind, but Maggie would say something polite. “That’s kind of you to say.” Did Maggie ever hate herself for being nice to jerks?

“And I really liked the way you handled that meeting. You had good ideas, and you didn’t let the provost intimidate you. You took charge.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” She wasn’t stupid, she probably used niceness for camouflage. Her life wasn’t any easier than mine, and she would have run into plenty of creepy, entitled academics while earning her PhD.

“It almost seemed like you’ve done this kind of work before. Media relations. I mean, podcasts, how cool is that? Do you have a background in marketing?”

“Gosh, no,” I laughed. “Me? I’m an English PhD.” Who had, in my real life, worked for a company that peddled marketing campaigns that could totally destroy a small college’s reputation using the latest in persuasion technology and psychographic profiling, not something I was proud of. And not something I would ever tell him.

"English! Of course. No wonder you're good with words. Say, I need to stop by my office, but you feel like getting a coffee later? Or we could meet at the Nighthawk for a beer after work. They have good burgers, too."

It took me a minute to realize the roly-poly doughboy was hitting on me. "The Nighthawk? Isn't that the student bar? I haven't been there."

"It's a Magnusson institution. Everyone goes to the Nighthawk. You'll love it."

"I'm sure I would, but I really need to catch up on grading. I'm hideously behind. I hope we can do it another time when things aren't so busy." I smiled at the creep, for some reason imagining myself pinching those chubby cheeks hard enough to leave a bruise, though that would definitely send the wrong message. He'd probably think it was some kinky punk thing. "I'll send you that list of project topics and students who you could interview. I'm sure you're eager to get on top of this situation."

"Oh, right. Yeah, I need to try to get something out in the next couple of days. Thanks for your help."

"Of course," I said, pushing out of the door into the fresh air. I wasn't sure whether to head to the office to see if Oak was there and find out if he had been caught up in Magnusson College's version of coordinated inauthentic activity, or whether to check in on Zoe first and see how she was doing.

Maybe it had been the mention of having a beer that influenced the texts I sent them. We all ended up meeting that evening at Bosco's instead.

Nine

“Hey, how’s it going?” I asked as I shed my jacket and signaled for a drink, pointing at the bottles already on the table. We had agreed to meet at seven, but Dr. Mishkin had started quizzing me about how Facebook worked—her daughter had been pestering her to join—and I’d lost track of time.

“Absolutely terrible!” Zoe said with a sunny smile that contrasted with the circles under her eyes. “This is way worse than Greek-gate.”

“Than what?” Oak asked as I slid into the booth beside Zoe.

“My first year here, I made the mistake of launching a digital exhibit on Greek organizations, warts and all. Documenting the quaint tradition of streaking naked through the chapel at the end of midterms. The annual competition to down a case of beer in the shortest possible time. The time hazing got so bad all fraternities and sororities were suspended for a year.” She toasted us with her beer bottle and took a sip. “I got a lot of angry feedback, but this ... this time is different. If I were to scrape my accounts and do a word frequency analysis, ‘Asian cunt’ and ‘go back to China’ would show a noticeable increase in the past few days. I was born in Woodbury, by the way.”

“Shit,” Oak groaned. “Have you reported it?”

“To whom? My boss doesn’t get it. The only advice she gave me was ‘Don’t feed the trolls.’”

“Seriously?” I said. “That’s not okay.”

“This is the same boss who just last month asked for stats to include in some report so she could brag about our social media impact. She wants us to be online, but doesn’t want to hear about it if things go sideways. I’ve set my personal accounts to private, but I don’t know what to do about the social accounts we set up for the archives. They’ve been a great outreach tool. People were so positive. We posted quizzes and

memes and asked for help identifying people in old photos. It was fun. Now it's all a hot mess. To be fair, the majority of the comments we're getting are supportive, but some of them, they're just ... icky. It'll drive ordinary people away. Who needs to get involved in all that toxicity?"

"Liv organized her section of 101 to report the bigots on the archives Twitter account. Not that it's going to help much."

"Oh, she's so sweet. I mean they're sweet. Don't tell them I messed up on their pronouns."

"She's cool about it. I mean, they are. Crap."

"Is Liv one of your students?" Oak asked.

"Yes they are. They are one of my best students. They don't get along with Michael Knutson at all. Makes that section of Comp 101 extra spicy."

"I wish they were in my American history class. It's a pretty quiet bunch. It's really hard to get discussion going—except for Knutson, who has something to say about everything, so it ends up being me and him debating reality, like some terrible talk show where people are brought on to joust with each other. I imagine you're getting plenty of online crap, too."

"Just emails. Lots of them, all using the exact same content to accuse me of being a commie left-wing extremist indoctrinating innocent students into antifa, which is apparently a form of Satan worship. Who knew?"

"I've been getting those, too. Had over a hundred by my last count, word-for-word the same, with my department chair copied so she's inundated, too. I wonder how many faculty have been getting the damned things?"

"Michael's pretty industrious. I can see him going through the catalog and making a list of faculty targets based on course descriptions. He must be enjoying the hell out of this."

"My chair got a call from a guy who works in Alumni Relations. Apparently it originated with a posting to a Facebook group for alums called Magnusson Traditions. It used to be a place for sharing heart-warming stories. Sledding down Swede

Hill on cafeteria trays. Memorable hockey wins. Parties held in the barn half a mile down County Road 15 that used to be a student hangout before it burned down.”

“We have photos of that barn.” Zoe sipped her beer daintily.

“A group like that could have been a goldmine for an archivist, a place for alumni to share their experiences of college life in the past. Crowd-sourced local history. But like everything else, it’s become politicized. It was taken over by a faction that’s backing the trustees who want to turn the clock back. Make Magnusson white again. Make sure what gets taught in the history department doesn’t include depressing information about slavery or genocide. Whoever moderates that group has kicked out anyone who pushes back. It’s gotten hardcore.”

“Ugh, those private groups.” I was still riding a wave of aggro from explaining how the platform worked and all the mischief it caused to Dr. Mishkin. “What a shitty decision Facebook made setting those up. Everyone could see that train wreck coming.”

“Apparently Mark Zuckerberg didn’t.”

“Like hell. He was facing a shitstorm over failing to take hate speech and extremism seriously, so he let people draw the curtains and hold their racist rallies in private. He knew it was going to get worse, but setting up private groups made it less visible, less likely to lead to government regulation, and just as profitable.” I realized my voice had risen, and glanced around. Most of the customers seemed glued to an outdoors program on the TV over the bar.

“My theory about Mark Zuckerberg,” I continued at a lower volume, “is that somebody wrote a machine learning routine that used an archive of *Wired* articles as a training set, bought a spare wax figure from Madame Tussaud’s, copied some specs from Boston Dynamics, and assembled him in a Silicon Valley garage. One of those multi-stall garages for the family Lamborghinis.”

"You're funny," Zoe said.

"Seriously, look at him. The guy's an android. Google should sue him for trademark violation."

Oak choked on his beer.

"And boy, were you ever right about not making those podcasts public," Zoe said. "I thought you were being over-cautious."

"Same," Oak said.

"I should have just assigned a research paper. Let them copy and paste some shit off the internet and grade them on whether they formatted their citations correctly. Sorry I got you all into this."

"Hey, you can't take all the credit," Oak objected. "I dug my own grave, thank you very much."

"How'd you do that?"

"By teaching American history? Duh, I thought that was my job, but apparently there's a parallel universe where manifest destiny is still a thing and everything American is exceptional and beyond reproach."

"How did things get so messed up?" Zoe looked sad, but brightened up when a waitress brought my beer and dropped off a clutch of laminated menus. "I'm starving. What's good here? Is there anything vegetarian?"

"The onion rings are edible," I said. "If you like grease."

"Come on, this is classic Minnesota bar food. They even have pickled eggs." Oak pointed to a giant jar sitting on the bar near the cash register full of unnaturally pink hard-boiled eggs.

I shuddered. "I've already eaten. Fortunately."

They debated the options and settled on splitting a cheese pizza, the only thing available that was both meatless and not deep-fried.

"The provost called me into his office," I told them after the waitress returned to take orders and we surrendered our menus. They both winced in sympathy. "I'm afraid you might hear from the marketing folks, Zoe. The guy they put in charge

of propaganda wants to do a feel-good story about my students doing research in the archives. They seem to think that will neutralize the hate about that student newspaper article. You don't have to be part of it, though. In fact, we can help you practice saying 'no' if it helps."

"I'm up for that," Oak said.

"It would be good publicity for the archives," she said uncertainly. "I know Charlie, we've worked together on some things. I can probably keep him from writing anything too stupid. Besides, I doubt it could hurt, considering what's already happened."

"You don't have to, though," Oak said. "Say it with me: No, no, absolutely not." He wagged two fingers as if conducting an orchestra.

She laughed. "I don't mind, really. I can keep Charlie in line. He's kind of sweet, really, though he's not very good at his job. He's a pretty terrible writer."

"Also, he might hit on you," I said.

"He tried, once. Oh my god, did he flirt with you, too?"

"Yup. He must be desperate. You know something weird? I found out the college doesn't have any policy for responding to social media attacks on employees, can you believe it?"

"Totally," they both said, and Oak added "Actually, there is a policy and it's CYA. Cover the college's ass, that is. We're on our own. This thing is not likely to go away too quickly. Michael Knutson already posted an episode on his YouTube channel about those archives discoveries your students made. He called you out by name, claiming professors always try to make everything about race."

"He has a YouTube channel?" I asked, then answered myself. "Of course he does. He loves himself, and he loves being a provocateur. Michael and YouTube were made for each other."

"My American History I syllabus got to star in a double episode," Oak said. "His ideas are terrible, but his production

values aren't bad. He could go places on the angry pundit circuit."

"Oh god, he has a lot of subscribers," Zoe said, looking it up on her phone.

"He's hooked into a national right-wing student organization," Oak pointed out. "He's aiming to build a brand as an internet influencer. And his dad is on a fast power trip, which will likely connect young Michael's YouTube tirades to an older demographic, and that will bring in even more followers. Eventually, some other cultural crises will come along to distract him, but this could get worse before it gets better."

The image of a network diagram bloomed in my head. A set of tight little local nodes spreading like a malignant fungus as recommendation engines connected our little college drama to extremely-online right-wing fanatics, amplified by influencers who could boost it to millions of followers. I wondered how to warn my friends what would happen if Eventive got involved, mobilizing troll armies to flush me out and hunt me down.

They had tracked me to that coffee shop where I was a barista, I felt suddenly sure. They would have followed the trail to the collision with the moose, and would be checking for any loose ends to tie off. They wouldn't fail to notice a trending story correlated to the name of one of those loose ends...

A load of lead-lined guilt landed on my shoulders. I wished I had never dragged Zoe and Oak into this mess. Maybe the best thing to do would be to pack up and leave now, before Eventive tracked me down. Because they would, I was convinced, and they wouldn't hesitate to hurt anyone near me.

Oak was looking at me, concerned. I gave him the best smile I could muster, picked up my beer, and drank.

"This is kind of scary," Zoe said quietly.

"I'm sorry this is happening to you. Especially all that racist stuff, that's disgusting."

"But you don't have anything to apologize for. I mean, it's not

your fault that alumni have turned into such angry lunatics. How did this happen?"

"I could give you a lecture on the history of right-wing media, from Father Coughlin to the present, but I'll spare you," Oak said.

I took it as a moment to steer the conversation away from ugly messages and looming fear. "I had a really interesting conversation with my landlady tonight," I told them.

"I love your landlady," Oak said. "I've never met her, but I'm a huge fan. Maggie tells me all these stories. I really want to meet her one of these days."

"I'll see what I can do. She's a retired math prof, Dr. Mishkin. Do you know her?"

Zoe shook her head. "Not offhand. There might be something in our clippings files for faculty."

I doubted it. Dr. Mishkin seemed pretty determined to avoid leaving a trail. "She was married to a Russian professor, back when Russian was offered at Magnusson. He had a different last name. Daniel something. Daniel Hemingway?"

"Daniel ... Faulkner?"

"That's it."

"That rings a bell for some reason. Oh, I remember now. His daughter contacted us a few years ago asking if we wanted his ties. So weird. I had to tell her no. See, I do know how to say no!"

"I guess he really rocked his bow ties. Anyway, after we talked about Facebook for a while, and why she shouldn't join it, Dr. Mishkin loaned me a book about Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union with a title something like 'everything is possible and nothing is true' or maybe the other way around. It's about how weird things got when reality TV shows got mashed together with propaganda and how Putin wanted to make people get so confused and jaded they just gave up trying figuring out what was going on. Which sounds like the situation over here these days, reality TV and all."

"That title sounds familiar," Oak said. "Isn't it from Hannah Arendt?"

"Could be. Dr. Mishkin gave me a whole stack of books about totalitarianism. Not sure I'll have time to read any of them, but it was a fun conversation. She's pretty sharp for her age."

The pizza came and so did my second beer. They kindly offered me a slice, though I declined. Oak looked hungry enough to eat it all by himself.

"So, looks like I may have to move," Zoe said after licking her fingers clean. "I live in one of those old houses near campus that has been carved up into apartments. The landlord is talking about remodeling the building, and raising the rent. I found this out when I called to tell him the bathroom ceiling had finally collapsed. I mean, the place seriously needs work, but I can't afford another two hundred a month. And unlike some people, my car's too small to sleep in. Did you know Oak sleeps in his van?"

"You mean like ... regularly?"

He nodded. "I like the simple life. Besides, I don't earn enough to pay for rent and food, and leases are impossible when you don't know where you'll find work next semester. There's a guy who lets me camp on his land out County Road 15—actually, near where that barn we were talking about burned down."

"So how do you ... I mean, what do you do about—"

"It's an old homestead. There's a privy."

"Okay. Rustic, but functional. What will you do in the winter?"

"The privy will still work."

"I mean to stay warm?"

"I have a small propane heater, and plenty of warm blankets. It works, for now anyway. Sooner or later I'm going to have to either win the lottery or do something else for a living."

"Like fix up old houses, your Plan B. Dr. Mishkin's house is kind of falling apart. I'll bet she'd pay you to make some repairs around the place. Her daughter wants her to sell the house and move to an old folks' place, but she's stubborn. If we spiffed

it up a little, maybe she could stay put and I won't end up homeless."

He was agreeable. Now I just needed to see if Dr. Mishkin would be. I had an ulterior motive—if I did have to take off suddenly, Dr. Mishkin would have someone local who could drive her to the grocery store and help her with errands. It would ease my mind if she could continue to defend herself from being forcibly moved into senior housing.

We chatted as the slices of pizza disappeared and we had another round of beer before settling our bill and heading into the night.

"Let me know how it goes," I told Zoe as she headed up the hill toward her apartment. "With the trolls."

"Will do. I'll probably talk to Charlie tomorrow to see about putting that feel-good story together."

"I've sent him the names of some students in my course who might be good to interview. Look, um ... don't be surprised if things get worse. It's a local issue at the moment, but I have a feeling it will become bigger than that. We could get bombarded with random abuse, even uglier than what you're already getting. Try not to let it get you down. I mean, 'don't feed the trolls' is useless advice, but you might want to be prepared to deactivate the social accounts for the archives until it blows over. And maybe set up some filters for your email so you don't have to look at racist shit. There are also ways to remove your personal information from data brokers, which can help make doxing more difficult. I could help if you want. I've done it before."

"Thanks. I may take you up on that. This was fun, tonight. It helps to know other people, unlike my boss, get what it feels like to be ganged up on." She did seem to be in better spirits. I hoped she would sleep better tonight, and lose some of the shadows under her eyes.

Oak's van was parked down the street, in the direction I took to walk home. "I hate that Zoe's being picked on."

"Intersectionally, at that," he said.

"Women of color always get more shit than anyone."

"True, though sounds as if you've had your share."

He said it in a neutral way, not fishing but signaling he was ready to listen. Maybe it was the third beer that made me feel like confiding in him—a little. "I once broke up with a guy who was extremely online. It's never fun. Can I see inside your van?"

"Sure, though it's kind of a mess." He slid the side door open, stepped inside, and shook out a quilt to cover the rumpled bed. There was wooden cabinetry under the mattress, a sink and stove over cupboards along one side, even a bookcase above the bed, filled with books held in place with a bungie cord. He sat on the bed and gave a "be my guest" wave at a chest topped with a cushion. I climbed in and sat.

"Cozy."

"It's roomier than it looks. The top pops up, so you can stand up when you're cooking, plus there's a big screen window. When it's warm outside, I like to leave it open at night so I can see the stars."

"It looks like a tiny house. Everything tucked into its place. How does it all fit?"

"A friend of mine is a cabinetmaker. He helped me design all the storage, him and a lot of YouTube videos. You wouldn't believe how many people make a living off of filming themselves living out of their vehicles. Hashtag van life."

"It would not surprise me at all. People have no concept of how much money there is in influencer culture. Or how many hours people spend staring at those videos and letting automated recommendations take them down rabbit holes."

He tucked a pillow behind his back and leaned against the side of the van, kicking off his shoes to stretch his legs across the bed. "Those videos weren't all that helpful, though. They tend to focus more on demonstrating products I can't afford—"

"Which they got for free to promote them."

"No doubt. That, plus some blah-blah about freedom and

independence, and tons of financial advice about how you should get a job with a huge salary and invest it all wisely so you can check out of the rat race early and spend the rest of your life as an adventurous vagabond. I seem to be doing this backward."

"How long have you been living in this?"

"Since I defended my dissertation. Four years. This may be my last year, though. My future self keeps telling me I need to settle down and earn some dough so I can climb out of poverty someday. I can't afford to keep teaching."

A car passed by, its lights sliding across him and up across the ceiling, bands of light stripping the darkness before the shadows took over again.

"I may quit, too," I said.

"Do you want me to talk you out of it, or help you decide to chuck the academic life? I'm good at both arguments, I've been practicing ever since I got the damn degree."

"Teaching this class has been more fun than I expected, but things may ... I may have to leave."

He nodded. Again that patient open door, that unspoken invitation to trust him. I looked over his kitchen setup. "How does that stove work?"

"Propane. For refrigeration, I just put ice in the cooler every few days. You're sitting on it, by the way. Does double duty as a bench."

"What about electricity?"

"I have batteries to charge my phone and laptop, and there's some lighting installed that runs off the car battery."

"This is cool. I like it."

We were silent for a minute. "I should—"

"If you—" He stopped. "You first."

"I was just going to say I should go."

"And I was going to say whatever's going on, I'm here if you need anything."

"Thanks."

“Seriously. I don’t want to pry, but I get the impression you’re in some kind of trouble. You don’t have to tell me what it is, but if shit starts to go down, let me help. I like you, and I don’t want you to get hurt. Whatever it is.”

I nodded, and I thought about telling him. That was the second time in the past two days that I was ready to spill my guts. I wasn’t used to having offers of help. I wasn’t used to having friends, not since I went on the run. It felt good. It felt scary.

I took a breath and gathered myself up, ready to give an excuse and leave. Then, for some reason, I started to tell him everything.

PART II

Ten

It started when Aurora died, I told him.

Well, no, it started when I got hired at Eventive.

Actually, none of it made sense unless you went back to the day I met Robbie.

"I met this guy when I was still in high school. We seemed like a perfect fit," I told Oak. "I moved in with him. He got me a job at Eventive."

I didn't go into all the gory details, but it was meeting Robbie that afternoon that set my life on the course that zigged and zagged all the way to Magnusson.

I had ditched out of my high school classes and was hanging out in a college computer lab when a student wearing his ID on a lanyard arrived and began to inspect the guts of a malfunctioning tower, muttering to himself. I'd seen him before. He had a work-study job with the campus IT department. He had dark curly hair, long fingers, and a palpable intensity as he crouched down to study the machine. "Fan's shot," he said when he looked up and saw me watching him. His eyes skittered away. "Probably not worth replacing. These things are junk."

"Still better than my garbage fire of a laptop," I said, and he stole another look at me.

We were in a computer lab at Bates College library, where I was pretending to be an undergraduate. It was a few weeks into my junior year. My grades were in the toilet, and I didn't care. What would a high school degree get me? It all seemed like such a waste of time when I had found a whole world of learning available online. Learning I cared about. Learning I could do on my own, without the rigid schedules, endless busywork, and routine humiliations of high school.

The previous year I had been an A student. That was Allie's doing; she had taught me how to do school. Just by hanging out with her I learned some useful hacks for my daily habits that made life easier, like paying attention to deadlines and doing my homework. What a concept. In return, I was able to help her with her algebra problems. She effortlessly excelled in most of her classes, but was easily intimidated by math and struggled to turn word problems into formulas when what she wanted to know was why John and David were rowing up the river and what would happen next.

Without her help, though, I would have struggled with English and social studies. She brought me up to speed on how to make an argument and polish a paragraph and what to do to avoid the kind of basic grammar and punctuation problems that, years later, I would see college students struggle to master. It was down to her that I knew what a run-on sentence was and what "subject-verb agreement" meant so I could pretend to be an English teacher.

After my mother kicked me out, I stayed with Allie's family for the whole of my tenth grade year, having a cake for my sixteenth birthday, opening presents on Christmas morning with her family, helping out in the kitchen and doing chores, finishing homework at the kitchen table with the other kids. It was a weird interlude of Norman Rockwell life, a strange practice run of who I could be if I just made an effort to fit in and act normal. But by the end of that year, things were changing. Allie signed up for the drama club and was spending most of her free time in rehearsals and hanging out with the theatre kids. I joined Math Counts and the computer club. After another student sold me his old laptop for cheap I dialed back on the homework and spent most of my free time online, working on my programming skills and hanging out in the IRC channels where I felt at home, shitposting and code-wrangling among the nerds.

In the summer before my junior year, I moved back in with

my mother, who was single again and lonely. I got a job in a restaurant and Allie got a job with a veterinarian. She got a boyfriend, and when they broke up she got another one; I didn't get a boyfriend, not even one. By the time school started again we only had one social studies class in common. We were still friends, but we weren't as close as we had been, that temporary interlude of being almost sisters.

That was the year I began hanging out daily on the campus of Bates college, dying my hair electric blue and doing my best to wear the same kind of clothes as the college students: hoodies, black tees, and the kind of ripped-up jeans that wealthy kids bought pre-tattered. Paying attention to my surroundings and doing what I could to blend in was good training for adopting identities that weren't mine, something that would come in handy later, though I didn't know it at the time.

All I knew was that there were some computers in the library that you could use to access the internet without a campus login. They were better than the high school computers because they were newer and faster and didn't require the annoying workarounds it took to get past the spyware and filters that all the school computers had. The internet speed in the college library was a lot faster and more reliable than the wifi signal I had to mooch off unsecured routers when school was out. (My mother claimed she had electromagnetic hypersensitivity so we couldn't have internet at home, but the truth was she didn't want to pay for it.) Most of the college students used their own laptops, so I could squat on a PC and spend hours working on whatever I wanted without anyone batting an eye.

It was intoxicating to be on campus. There was a kind of freedom in the air, a sense of permission, a feeling of being someone new, and nobody ever asked me "why aren't you in school?" like they did the one time I tried to use the internet at the public library during the day. My camouflage worked:

everyone seemed to assume I was in school. The kind of school where you didn't have to sit for hours until the final bell rang. The kind of school where I could practice being the person I wanted to be, merging myself IRL with the person I presented online. I was beginning to feel whole, even though it was all based on a lie.

The day I met Robbie I was hacking away at a Python program that refused to execute, and I couldn't figure out why. I watched him for a minute as he replaced the chassis on the computer with the faulty fan. After I had turned back to debugging and swearing under my breath, I saw his reflection in my screen. He had put the problem computer on a cart and was rolling it away when he paused. I turned and gave him a sheepish smile. He stared at my screen. "I can't get this to run," I shrugged.

He stared some more, came closer to peer over my shoulder, then pointed. "There. Try commenting that line out."

I did. It ran. "Damn. Why didn't I see that?"

"You were looking too hard. I'm Robbie, by the way."

"Emily."

He wiped his hand on his jeans and held it out to shake, shifting his gaze from the screen to my face. He had intense blue eyes, uncomfortably direct, but only for a moment before he looked away. "You're here a lot."

"My laptop kind of sucks."

"You're not a CS major, though."

"No." I felt suddenly worried he might report me. "I haven't picked a major yet."

"You should declare CS so you can use their lab. The equipment is a lot better. You can't run UNIX on these."

"Is CS your major?"

"I'm a double major in math and CS with a minor in Classical and Medieval Studies."

"Wow."

He started rubbing his palm against the edge of the table.

"I would take business courses, but they don't offer that here. I've been supplementing my education with Coursera. Online courses, they're free. Like, I'm taking one now on entrepreneurship from Wharton. I also took courses on project management and running a startup. You want to get a coffee sometime?" He blurted the last words.

"Sure. That would be great."

He rubbed his palm harder. "Like, now?" Every muscle in his body was tensed.

"Yeah, okay."

He took a deep breath, nodding sharply. "Let me dump this junk and clock out, and then we can go."

We fell into a regular pattern. I made sure I was on campus when he finished working or had his last class for the day. He even shared his Google calendar with me so I would know. We'd get coffee or something to eat and then hang out in the CS lab late in the day, when nobody was around to check my credentials. He worked on homework and I didn't. Homework was something I could throw together at the last minute, if I ever felt like it. Instead, I would work on whatever programming problem I was trying to master. He gave me his two-year-old laptop because he had bought a new one. It was hard for me to imagine just giving away a computer, but he dismissed the idea of selling it as too much of a hassle. "Just take it," he'd said, a little impatiently, as if it were a stick of gum or a paperback book.

We were a little stiff with each other at first—he was stiff with everyone except a handful of friends from the computer science program. But when he realized we had hung out on the same IRC channel for years he loosened up, as if that was an endorsement that I was trustworthy. He started calling me his girlfriend, and his friends took me into their circle, though a little warily, as if I were a tropical bird they'd never seen before. But since they were all geeks, I felt a kind of belonging that I

didn't feel around the other college students. And once I'd met Robbie I didn't even try.

There was a visible caste system on campus, one I recognized when I got to Magnusson, though at a compressed scale. There were the wealthy kids destined to Wall Street or Harvard Law, like their dads, hard partiers who couldn't fail no matter how hard they worked at it. There were the activists and anarchists who despised wealth without realizing how much of it they had. Then there were the first gens, the ones whose family members had never attended college, trying to find their niche, kids who didn't have money but made up for it with grants, hard work, desperation, and a long record of high achievement.

Robbie would have fit into the first category, but you wouldn't know it from his clothes (white t-shirts, jeans, and converse sneakers every day) or his car (an old Mazda). He didn't pay attention to status symbols and only bought a new pair of shoes when his soles began to flap, ordering the exact same style to avoid the aggravation of having to evaluate alternatives. But despite his simple-life aesthetic he was ambitious. He knew his future meant building exciting things and making a ton of money.

I didn't know what my future held, but I wanted it to be with Robbie. I loved him, everything from his knobby Adam's apple to the way his shoulder blades stuck out like hangers for his t-shirts, to the way he concentrated so hard he shut the rest of the world out, his eyebrows scrunched together, his mouth slightly open as he scanned the screen, motionless except when his fingers began to rattle off commands or when something didn't work and he threw himself back in his chair and stared at the ceiling, intently reviewing his code in his head.

In the spring semester of my junior year I calculated the bare minimum of work it would take to pass my courses and titrated my attendance to see how often I could skip class without

too much trouble. According to the official rules, if I missed more than ten days, I would be considered a truant, but illness and family emergencies didn't count, so I made the most of the mess my family was and played on the kindness of those teachers who were used to having fuckups in their classrooms. I signed up for the easiest courses I could with teachers who were either too bored with their jobs to pay attention or saw themselves as saviors of troubled kids, willing to bend the rules. One of those, an English teacher, gently harassed me about not taking classes I'd need for college, saying I was plenty smart enough, and did I know about financial aid? I might be able to get a free ride. But she didn't push too hard, and let me slide through without reporting my many absences.

Allie, on the other hand, was taking all the AP courses she could and homework ate all her free time. She even gave up the drama club because she needed a perfect GPA to get a good financial aid package for college and could save a semester of tuition payments if she scored high enough on her AP tests. We saw each other in the hall sometimes but were both too busy to hang out much, and she had completed the required math courses, so didn't need my help. I still thought of her as my best friend. My only high school friend, really. She was excited when I told her I was seeing this intense guy who was hella smart, who wrote elegant code, and was going into the same line of work I aspired to.

"You really like him," she said.

"I do." I would have said I loved him, but I didn't want to jinx it.

"Sounds nothing like the last guy."

"Ugh, don't remind me. No, this one's the real deal."

She scrunched me toward her in a half-hug. "That's so great."

One afternoon, as I walked to the coffee shop with Robbie and his friends, somehow the fact I'd had a previous boyfriend came up, though I didn't mention the jerk had ditched me as

soon as he heard I was pregnant. Robbie's pace faltered. "Who's that?"

"Just a guy."

He frowned. "What do you mean, 'just a guy'?"

"Jealous," one of his friends giggled, and Robbie punched his arm, a little harder than the usual joking-around kind of punch.

"It wasn't anything serious," I backtracked. "He was an idiot. Also, he wasn't really my boyfriend. We just went to a couple of games together." Trying to bury it as just typical high school stuff.

"You don't like sports."

"Board games," I ad-libbed. "Scrabble. An after-school thing. He was terrible at it. This was, like, eighth grade, when kids talk about boyfriends but it's just a, a label, not real."

He nodded, but once we were at the coffee shop, he gave me the cold shoulder, ignoring everything I said until I got the message and shut up, letting the friends talk around me. For the next several days he told me he was busy with a project and couldn't hang out. I felt sick with anxiety, sick with longing, until he came up to me as I left the library one afternoon and slipped his hand into mine. Back to normal. Forgiven.

I wasn't about to make the same mistake as before. By the time we started having sex I had an IUD. Robbie approved, since he didn't want to hassle with condoms. I wasn't too worried about catching anything from him, and felt even more reassured after our first fumbling attempt—he was clearly inexperienced, but luckily was so focused on his own performance that he didn't suspect I knew more than he did. We got better with practice.

When summer rolled around he got a fulltime job with the college's IT department. He could have stayed in a dorm, but I encouraged him to look into the possibility of getting an apartment. We'd have more privacy, I told him, but I didn't mention I was nervous about not having a place to live. My mother's landlord was threatening eviction, and she was

talking about moving in with one of her old flames. The way she talked about it, I got the message there wouldn't be room for me. I dug around on the college website and found out he could apply to live off campus during his senior year, so he did and got permission. The rental market was tight, which made me worry all over again that we would be out of luck, but before I had a chance to panic his parents contacted a realtor and bought a house within walking distance of campus. It was big enough for his geek friends to move in, so they did. And so did I.

High school felt like it belonged to a different life, a child's life, something I'd left behind when I met Robbie, though during my junior year it had clung to me like sticky cobwebs. Now I had turned seventeen and wasn't legally required to be in school. I dropped out.

In the fall, after midterms, I invited Allie to at a raucous off-campus college party. She'd been to our house a couple of times, when it was just the two of us sitting on the porch and talking, but I wanted to show off Robbie and my new life. I wanted her to understand that, after my first loser boyfriend, I'd found the perfect match. He was smart and talented and didn't have to worry about money, poised to rocket to professional success in the industry where I wanted to make my mark. People were already calling him about jobs. Sure, he could be socially awkward, but I loved his I-don't-care-if-I-fit-in attitude. It was kind of like Allie's comfortable self-confidence, but it came from a different place. He was simply more intelligent than other people, and didn't have time for their bullshit.

"You two are really serious," Allie said as we wandered with Solo cups filled with box wine out into the backyard of the house where the party was rocking. It was a warm day in late October. The air was fresh and crisp, a breather from the smoke and beer and impossible-to-have-a-conversation roar of party noise inside.

"We're good together, and Robbie's amazing. What?" Her expression as she gazed down into her Solo cup wasn't as happy for me as it should have been.

"Did you notice how every time we started to talk he came over and cut me out?"

"No. That's not ... you're imagining things."

"Four times."

"He just wanted to be sure I got to meet everyone. There's a lot of people here I don't know."

"He did it when you talked to that guy, too. Mike? You were laughing about something with him and Robbie grabbed your arm and pulled you away."

"He doesn't like Mike."

"He doesn't like me, either. I have the feeling he doesn't like anyone who likes you."

"Don't be ridiculous." I laughed.

She didn't even smile. "Some guys are like that. They see everyone as competition."

"He is competitive. So? He's incredibly smart, and there's nothing wrong with being ambitious."

"That's not what I'm talking about. He wants to be your only friend. He's possessive."

"That's silly. You don't even know him. Besides, we have lots of friends." I shook my head and took a big gulp of my wine. This wasn't funny anymore.

"I hope I'm wrong. It's just ... I don't want to make you mad, but I'll be honest with you: it's giving me a bad feeling."

I felt a flare of anger. "A bad feeling? I think it's called jealousy. I used to be your special project, your charity case, and now I'm meeting new people and making a name for myself doing something you think is boring and stupid."

"That's not true. I don't think—"

"It's something I'm really good at it, and Robbie is even better. I'm learning a ton from him. Plus he's really into me. I've never

been happier." I had to blink back tears. This wasn't going the way I'd hoped at all. "If that pisses you off, that's your problem."

"I'm not pissed off, I'm just a little concerned, that's all."

"Maybe you're the possessive one."

She sighed. "Em, I know I haven't been a good friend lately. I should have made more of an effort to keep in touch. We don't hardly see each other anymore."

"We just have different interests, that's all. We're not nine years old anymore. You have your friends, and I have mine. Lots of them. I mean, look how crowded it is in there. I meet new people all the time. Besides, you'll be going off to college somewhere next fall."

"You could, too."

"Yeah, sure. With my grades? Besides, I'm sick of school, and I'll be able to make a good salary without running up a bunch of debt."

"That's true, and it's awesome. Unlike me, you're good at something people actually want." She laughed, a brittle sound, and offered a toast with her Solo cup. "I probably won't be able to get a job even after running up piles of debt. Nobody wants to pay writers." She drank, and a little wine dripped down her chin. She wiped her mouth with her wrist, looked at it, and sighed. "My parents keep bugging me to major in bio so I can become a doctor, but that's not what I want to do with my life, and it wouldn't even work. I mean, I only got through my math classes thanks to your help. I'd flunk out of pre-med. But tuition costs so much they freak out whenever I talk about majoring in English or creative writing. Like, why would you spend all that money for something so useless? How are you going to support yourself?" She picked at the edge of her cup, staring down into it. "But I want to be a writer. There's nothing else I want to do. Dad jokes about starving in a garret, but he's not really joking. He's worried."

"That's dumb. I'm sure you'll do okay. You're really good at it."

"I'm not sure that matters much."

"The stories you've written, those A-plus essays? You could knock ten pages out before I could finish one. I'd rather go to the dentist than write a paper."

"Remember Mrs. Tatum's class in tenth grade? That research paper?"

"God, that was traumatic. She was tough. And then there was all that Shakespeare we had to read." I made a gagging sound.

"You liked it." She bopped me on the shoulder.

"I liked some of it. Hamlet had some good lines. Oh god, remember that time, when she had some of us read out loud that scene from *King Lear*—'Out vile jelly!'"

"And Larry laughed so hard he fell out of his chair."

"He thought it was hilarious that what's-his-name got his eyes poked out. What a weirdo."

"What ever happened to Larry, anyway?"

"I heard his family moved away."

"Or he's in an insane asylum, where he belongs."

We were laughing when the back door opened. "Emmie? What are doing out there?"

"Just getting some fresh air."

I went to Robbie, and he wrapped an arm around me. "You're so cold. You should come inside." He was looking at Allie.

I glanced back. She raised her Solo cup at us in a toast, smiling, as if everything was fine.

I didn't notice when she left the party.

Eleven

In the spring Robbie started traveling to job interviews. I was thrilled when he accepted a job with Eventive. I'd never heard of it, but it was based in Boston, not on the west coast. It was becoming increasingly clear that it wasn't guaranteed that he would take me with him. He might not even notice if I wasn't there, at least not until he got sick of eating pizza and living in a pigsty. I did all the cooking, and if I didn't clean the toilets, no one would. But with his new employer so close, he might not mind if I climbed into his Mazda and rode down with him and helped him carry his stuff into wherever he was living. If he moved to California I worried he wouldn't buy me a plane ticket. He could afford it, but he might not think of it, and he would get mad if I asked. He would feel like I was hemming him in, and he hated being hemmed in.

I tried to bring it up, once, our future. He didn't want to talk about it.

In June the house emptied as Robbie and his friends graduated and moved away. Robbie signed over the title of the Mazda to me; it would just be in the way in Boston. His parents put the house up for sale. I got a job at a Chipotle and another one at a warehouse and found a studio apartment in a rougher part of town that I could just about afford if I was careful. I signed up for a couple of classes at a community college; they were open-enrollment and willing to overlook my high school record, though they told me I'd need to get a GED if I wanted to get a degree.

Allie messaged me from her dorm room at Southern Maine, but I didn't respond. I stopped visiting the IRC channels I had grown up with and tried to focus on simply surviving day by day. It didn't always work, but that's what box wine was for, and I had a neighbor who would pick it up for me when she

made her weekly run to the liquor store, never questioning my age. Basically, I was miserable, but on the upside, I was too exhausted to dwell on what a wreck my life had become.

In early November, Robbie texted to see if I could visit him in Boston over the weekend. I called in sick to my jobs and bought a Concord bus ticket, which was cheaper than driving and paying for parking. I was so excited as I approached his building my hands shook and my stomach was in knots.

Robbie buzzed me in and met me at the door of his condo in his standard t-shirt and jeans, feet bare, hair uncombed. He seemed a little disappointed—he told me he missed his old Mazda—and thought it was hilarious that I walked from the bus station instead of calling an Uber like a normal person. But he was happy to show me into his barely furnished yet somehow incredibly messy apartment. He got us both beers—some craft brew I'd never heard of – and started to tell me all about his new DevOps job, a torrent of words charged with excitement. He dropped the name of his boss, Adam Barton, a lot.

“He’s so freaking smart. Not just about tech, though he knows his shit; he’s incredibly visionary about how to grow the enterprise. He travels all the time to talk to heads of state and billionaires. He’s got a million things going on, but still, he takes the time to talk to me about what I want to do, about where I see potential. He had a party for us at his summer place, which is amazing. Even took us out on his yacht. Well, he says it’s not a yacht, it’s a sailboat, but it was pretty big and had, like, a crew. I wish you could have been there.”

“I’m so glad this is working out for you.”

“It’s perfect. Emily, I’m in heaven. I interviewed for a lot of jobs, but I could tell this place was different. Adam has such a big vision, and he’s assembled some top-notch talent. Plus secured millions in investment. There’s no limit to what we could do.

None. I feel like I'm in on the ground floor of the next Google or Facebook."

"I thought you hated Facebook."

"I do. But I mean in terms of innovation, growth, even market cap maybe, someday. But right now, the company is new enough, small enough, that I can play a major role in deciding our direction. There's something incredibly bold about Adam. Nothing's off the table, nothing is impossible. I'm telling you, Eventive is going to do amazing things. I can't believe I'm part of it. I'm so lucky."

"They're lucky to have *you*." I play-punched him, but he answered seriously.

"That's true. I'm working really hard. I may not have a PhD from Stanford or MIT like some of them, but I do better work than most of the other guys. I mean, they're talented, but I'm better. I know I am. I've got a lot of ideas. Before the year's out I'll be moving up to Senior DevOps Engineer to lead a special project. Adam says I could become a VP if I keep it up." He was staring out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the city, lights starting to come on as light faded from the sky. "I missed you, Em." He sounded surprised.

"God, I've missed you, too, Robbie. So much."

There was a party that weekend. I didn't have anything to wear, so Robbie withdrew a wad of cash from an ATM and I went shopping while he went in to the office to work on an idea that occurred to him that morning. I got a dress and shoes and got my hair cut and the blue tint touched up with streaks of purple, and a manicure—my first ever. I even got up the nerve to buy some lipstick at a cosmetics counter, but chickened out when it came to the complicated makeup the girl was trying to talk me into. There was still a lot of money left over and I thought about getting Robbie a present. He lived a monkish lifestyle, not interested in owning things, which made it hard. I finally stopped at a used bookstore and asked if they had

Knuth's *Art of Computer Programming*. They didn't, but the staffer suggested I go to Cambridge and try the stores around Harvard. I did, and found what I was looking for, the three original volumes in a first edition.

Yeah, it was kind of weird to buy him a present with his money, but it felt right.

I got back to Robbie's place in plenty of time to shower and get dressed. I looked at myself in the mirror: Who are you? The dress fit perfectly and cost more than anything I'd ever owned. The shoes made clackity noises on the tiled floor and made me feel both taller and unsteady. I wasn't used to wearing heels, even the low-rise ones I chose. I had to practice walking until I was sure I wouldn't fall over and embarrass Robbie with my klutziness. By the time he got back, I was ready to go, and he was pleased with my gift, even though a previous owner had used a highlighter and jotted notes in the margins. "Cool. This is, like, a classic."

"I was afraid you might have a copy, but..."

"Not in print." He caressed the spine. "Also, did you see who owned it?" He pointed to a signature inside the front cover. "Brilliant guy. Did some of the early work on natural language processing. These are probably his notes." He paged through, tilting his head to read the scribbles. He flipped the page, and read some more, totally absorbed.

"Maybe we should get ready?" I said five minutes later. He looked up from where he had slumped on the couch. "For the party?"

He looked at the complicated watch he had taken to wearing since moving to Boston, one with multiple dials that looked like equipment you'd find on a submarine. "It's real close, it won't take long to get there."

"I thought you might want to shower and change." His eyebrows came together in that puzzled look I knew so well. I wanted to kiss that spot at the top of his nose where the skin

folded into a little knot of confusion. “Not that you have to. I just thought ... It’s fine. We can just go. Whenever.”

He lifted an arm and sniffed. “You’re right, I should probably clean up.” He headed for the bathroom. “You look nice, by the way,” he tossed over his shoulder.

He noticed! I nearly swooned.

I was not myself.

It was loud. There was a DJ and people were shouting at each other to be heard. The decibels may have been juiced up by the open bar. Servers were circulating with expensive hors d’oeuvres featuring things like caviar and lobster. Everyone had a beer bottle or a glass of something stronger in their hands, and there was something jittery, electric in the air. Robbie steered me around as he introduced me to people, some of whom politely tried to include me in the conversation. What do you do? Where did you two meet? What do you think? Gesturing at the gathering.

I thought it was intoxicating, and not because of the glass of wine Robbie had given me. It was the collage of conversational fragments I snatched out of the din, hints of technical projects and bugs that had been stomped out. Scraps of fuzzy linguistic modeling, sentiment analysis, gesture recognition, and quantum computing tumbled past me, mixed in with cars and football and planned vacations to places that sounded mythical. It was like one of my long-time IRC channels brought to life, but glitzier.

There weren’t many women there. Those who I caught glimpses of looked like models, slim, blonde, with perfect teeth and makeup. One of them tried to strike up a conversation with me. Maine? She loved Maine, her parents had a little place in Rockport right on the harbor. So rustic, so authentic. They used to spend six weeks there every summer when she was little. Must be awful in the off-season, though. What do you do for fun? Her eyes wandered as I tried to play my part in the

conversation, feeling out of place. She brightened when she saw another model across the room. Emitting a little squeak of delight, she pointed and waved before she murmured something polite and sashayed away.

Robbie kept tabs on me and every now and then took my arm to steer me through the crowd to introduce me to work colleagues who weren't quite sure what to say to me. In the middle of one of those awkward conversations, his grip tightened as he stared across the room, toward the plate glass windows overlooking the harbor. "That's Adam," he said in a tense whisper. "Adam Barton."

As he spoke, the man himself turned and looked right at us, as if he'd somehow overheard. He curled two fingers to beckon us over. Robbie's grip become painful as we moved through the crowd, as if he were holding onto me while drowning.

"Aren't you going to introduce us?" Adam Barton was strikingly handsome, tall and broad-shouldered but fit, wearing snug jeans and a well-cut jacket. He was holding a glass of something dark, a chunky ring on his finger. He looked like a congressman or a mafioso, though maybe movie star was a better fit. There was something immersive about his charisma. It enveloped us, emitted like an animal musk drifting in clouds around him.

"This is Emily. My friend."

He cocked an eyebrow and held out a hand to shake. "Hello, Emily. I'm Adam."

"Hi. Robbie has told me all about you."

"Good things, I hope."

"Very good things. He's really excited to work at Eventive."

"Good to hear. I'd sure hate to lose him to the competition. He's turning into my right-hand man." He reached out an arm slung it over Robbie's shoulder. Robbie's cheeks flooded with patches of red. "As many hours as he's putting in, you probably don't get to see him much." He squeezed Robbie's shoulder

and released him. “Maybe you should use some of that vacation time, kiddo. You got to have a life.”

“I’m good. I’m making headway. Just this morning, I patched that problem with the—”

“It’s the weekend, Rob. Smell the roses. Enjoy yourself. Have you known each other long?” he asked me, the full force of his charm turned in my direction.

“About a year.”

He glanced at Robbie and back. “Where’s he been hiding you all this time?”

“I live in Maine. I just came down for the weekend.”

“Ah.” He gestured between us with his glass. “You must have met at school.”

“At Bates, yeah. In a computer lab, actually. He helped me find a bug in a program I was running.”

He raised his eyebrows, his attention zeroed in on my face. “So you code.”

“Some.”

“Tell me something you’ve made.”

It felt like a pop quiz. I sensed Robbie tensing beside me. “Uh, well, I built an environment for querying Twitter trends with a web-based front end. Also a tool for scraping Instagram to visualize words in titles. Just playing around with APIs, basically.”

He nodded as I spoke, appearing deeply interested. “She codes,” he murmured to Robbie, impressed—or at least doing a crack impression of being impressed. “I’d love to learn more,” he told me, something intimate and exclusive in his direct gaze, making my knees feel weak. He touched my elbow. “We should talk someday soon.”

It was a signal; the audience was over. Someone else approached and he turned to open his arms to them, as if they were exactly the people he was hoping to see. With his tractor beam of attention directed elsewhere, I was left floating in a cloud of excitement and happiness and a weird sense of

craving. Like that charismatic musk of his, that warmth, was a hit of a drug that made me want more.

Robbie breathed out hard, as if he'd been holding his breath. Maybe he had.

"My god," I whispered to him. "He's amazing."

"I know, right? He's why I joined Eventive instead of Alphabet or Cisco. He's the smartest person I've ever met."

"I hope I didn't sound too dorky."

"You were fine. I mean, that Twitter thing wasn't anything special, but he didn't ask to see it, so ... what's wrong with your arm?"

"Nothing." I had been rubbing it unconsciously. He'd been holding it so hard earlier, it ached. I glanced at it; there weren't any bruises. Still, I made sure my sleeve covered the spot if it started to show. "There's a guy over there waving at you."

"That's a client. I'd better go talk to him."

"Do you mind if I go out to the balcony? I need to sit down for a bit. Catch my breath."

He scoped it out through glass doors. A jutting platform over the harbor, some benches and potted evergreens. Vacant, apart from a couple who were headed inside to refill their empty glasses. "Fine. I'll be a few minutes." I reached out to give his hand a squeeze, but he had already turned to join his client, his mind occupied.

I stepped out onto the balcony and slid the door closed behind me, feeling relief. A salty breeze whipped my hair into my face and tried to flip my skirt up over my head. I pushed it down hastily; I hadn't bought new underwear to go with the fancy dress, and I didn't want my worn cotton bikinis displayed before Boston's tech glitterati.

After taking a deep breath, I realized my feet were screaming for mercy. I saw a bench placed at the far end, blessedly beyond the plate glass that made me feel on display. It was warm for November. The air outdoors was brisk but refreshing. The noise had fallen off as soon as I closed the door, as if a volume dial

had been turned down. I only heard the city's bass line of traffic, with grace notes of sirens and occasional car horns, muted and calming compared to the din inside. I hobbled to the bench and sat, kicking the attractive torture devices off my feet.

"If it isn't Marilyn."

"Sorry?"

I hadn't seen the tall woman who had her elbows on the railing. She was in shadow, blended into the night apart from the red ember of a cigarette as she drew on it. "Your dress. It looked like that famous photo of Marilyn. Marilyn Monroe?"

"Oh. Yeah. Windy out here."

"Not too bad in this corner, and it's quiet. I can't take all that commotion." She pointed her cigarette at the party. From here it looked like an aquarium filled with phosphorescent fish swirling around in frantic schools. She turned to lean over the railing, peering down at the cars crawling below, ribbons of light stretching across bridges. "When I was a kid, whenever I was in a place like this, I would go right up to the edge and think 'I ought to jump.' You ever have that feeling?"

"I guess so," I said. "Like, I would picture it. I never wanted to really do it."

"Me neither. It was just a ... feeling. An impulse." She tapped her cigarette, making a tiny firefly of glowing tobacco rise up and dart into the wind before vanishing in the darkness, then turned around to look at me and gave a wry grin. "New kicks?"

"They're killing me."

"What is it with women's shoes? What sadist designs these things?" She pointed to her own, discarded under the bench. She padded in stocking feet over to my bench. "I'll put this out."

"No, it's okay."

She stubbed her cigarette out anyway and flicked the butt into a nearby potted plant. "Such a stupid habit. My mom got on my case, used to send me clippings of articles about how bad it was for my health, how crooked Big Tobacco is. I finally

told her I quit just to get her to stop. I'm trying, but it's hard. I keep slipping back." She held out her hand. "Aurora."

"Emily."

We shook. Her hand was strong and surprisingly warm. "I work at Eventive."

"So does my boyfriend. Robbie."

"Robbie Martens?" she squealed, then cupped her palm over her mouth, embarrassed. "Sorry. It's just ... I didn't know. Never guessed. He works all hours of the day, married to his keyboard. I think he sleeps in the office half the time. Smart guy, though. You can almost hear him thinking, his brain going clickety-clack as he stares at the wall, still as a statue."

"I know that look."

"He's young and inexperienced, but he's a diamond in the rough. I'll say one thing about Adam—he's the CEO—he colors outside the lines when it comes to hiring. Forget all those legends about starting in a garage. A lot of tech firms think you have to graduate from Stanford or MIT, maybe Cal Tech, Harvard in a pinch. They skip right over talent that doesn't come with a fancy degree. Not Adam."

"That's great. Though I didn't see many women in there."

"True. I keep getting on him about that. He just looks at me, like 'Why? I hired you.' And I'm a trifecta—a woman, Black *and* Asian. My mom's people are from India, my dad's Nigerian. So I tick a lot of boxes, but that's no excuse. He has a blind spot when it comes to female talent."

"I just met him. Adam Barton. He's ... impressive."

"He turned on the charm? Got that 'semper fi' thing going. He was in the Marines, doing some cryptology stuff. Then he went to work for the NSA and got a top clearance. From there, contracting, because that's where the money is. While he was doing that, he volunteered to handle social for a friend of his who was running for congress—and the guy won, of course, because that's what Adam does. He wins. He attacked it like a data science challenge, which it is if you're serious about it.

Handling social meant finding out what the capabilities were, scraping data from everywhere, and running some high-level analysis. He brought in a couple of anthropologists, a young marketing firm, and some four-channers. They helped fine-tune Facebook messages for the olds, tested an Insta campaign for suburban women, and created viral memes for the Reddit crowd, then Adam used data to deploy them. That's the origin story for all this." She flicked a finger toward the party. "And the rest is history," she intoned in a deep voice like a narrator for a documentary. As she spoke, her hand groped in her bag and pulled out a crumpled cigarette package. She looked at it and pushed it back with a groan. "Dammit. I hate this habit."

"How long have you worked at Eventive?"

"I was one of his early hires. He heard about my dissertation project and said he'd fund my research for as long as I liked. Didn't have to do the D part of R and D, people in DevOps would handle implementation. People like Robbie. He's a builder. He'll hear me throw out an idea and two weeks later—boom. It's integrated into one of the products. He's smart and hard-working. And he worships at the altar of Adam. That doesn't hurt. Has Robbie told you much about the firm?"

"Not really. I know he's happy, but he hasn't told me what he's working on. We don't see each other much these days. I live in Lewiston. In Maine."

"So you're still in college?" Aurora didn't have the powerful charisma of her boss, but she had a quiet intensity of focus that invited real conversation.

"Sort of. I mean, I'm taking a couple of classes at the community college, but I don't know if there's much point."

"What do you want to do?"

I sighed. I wanted things to go back to the way they had been. To sit across the table from Robbie with our laptops open, bashing away at some code until three in the morning. Make dinner for a handful of geeks who stuffed themselves on food

I cooked, talking with their mouths full about some program they forked from GitHub, or a game that just came out, or Star Wars trivia. “Write code. That’s what I really want to do, but I don’t have any qualifications. They have some kind of network security certificate program at this college, but...”

“That ain’t it. I get you. What languages?”

“Python, Java, some C++. I was fooling around with Go, but I haven’t had time to do much with it.”

“Good start. Why don’t you move down here? With that skillset you could find work, or you go to school. You can’t move around this city without tripping over a college.”

“I know. My grandfather taught at Harvard.” She made an impressed face. “They still live in Cambridge. They’re one of the reasons I’m not too keen on moving down here.”

She laughed, a warm, full-throated sound. “Like that, huh?”

“I had to live with them sometimes when I was little. It didn’t go well. They don’t like kids.”

“Including their own kin?”

“Especially their own kin.”

“What about the rest of your family?”

“My mother lives in Maine these days, though she’s talking about moving down here. We don’t get along. That’s kind of a family tradition.”

“Dad? Brothers, sisters?”

“None of the above.”

“Damn. I’m an only child, but I get along fine with my parents and have extended family on three continents. Uncles, aunties, cousins by the dozen. My folks live in Queens, and so do my mother’s brother and my dad’s three sisters. We’re real close. I take the train down to spend a weekend whenever I can, but I can’t make it too often, too much going on at work. Have you met Robbie’s family?”

“No.” What a terrifying thought.

“Adam told me they’re old-time New England wealth. They’d be Boston Brahmins, except they live in Connecticut. Robbie

doesn't have any of that attitude, though, that landed gentry entitlement. Speak of the devil."

"There you are." Robbie stepped out onto the balcony. "I couldn't see you there in the corner. So you met Aurora."

"Yup. We have the same taste in footwear." I showed him my bare feet, and Aurora did the same.

He looked puzzled. "Cool. I think I talked to everyone I have to. Are you ready to go? I had a better idea for that patch that I want to work on."

"Sure, we can leave. Great meeting you, Aurora."

"Same. Hey Robbie, we should talk to Adam about hiring more women, don't you think?" She pointed at me. "Hint, hint."

He didn't connect the dots. "Sure. Did you want to schedule a meeting, or can we do it by email?" She just laughed and waved us away.

As we left the building, a man who was smoking a sweet-smelling cheroot nodded at us. "Who's this, then?" he asked before blowing three perfect smoke rings into the cool night air.

"My girlfriend," Robbie said, sounding some combination of defensive and proud. "Emily Callander."

"Aren't you a dark horse." He was tall and wiry, his face weathered like an old tree trunk. He looked me up and down, and nodded his approval before he dropped his butt and ground it out with the toe of his boot. "G'night," he said before pushing inside.

"Who was that?" I asked Robbie.

"Connie. Connie Uys. He heads up another division. I don't know much about it. It's mostly HUMINT."

He said it dismissively, but that didn't help me out. "What's that?"

"Human intelligence. Meatspace operations to supplement digital analysis. It's tailored to specific clients, mostly international. He came out of the intelligence community, but he's an old-school field operator. Not like Adam. I'm not sure

what he contributes to the company, but they go back, so I guess Adam decided to do him a favor and give him a job.”

“He sounds English.”

“South African. Why are you walking funny?”

“New shoes. I’m getting blisters.”

“I can call an Uber, but—”

“It’s fine. Only a few blocks.”

We walked on in silence. Robbie had that intense-but-spaced-out look he got when he was working out a problem in his head.

Twelve

Two weeks later I got a text from Adam Barton. I read it. I read it again. Then, almost without thinking, I did something I had been avoiding. I called Allie.

"Howdy, stranger. What's up?"

"I have a job interview with a tech company."

"That's great!"

"It's in Boston, the day after tomorrow. I'm terrified."

"That doesn't sound like you."

"I really, really want this job."

"What's it about?"

"I don't even know. The message I got just asked me to a meeting."

"So it's not, like, you saw a job ad and applied?"

"No. I just got a text from the CEO. Here's what it says." I opened my messages and read it out to her: "Would you be interested in working with us? If so, come to my office at HQ this Thursday 2pm so we can talk."

"Wow. How did ... I mean, did you contact them or something?"

"Robbie works there."

"Oh."

"He must have given him my number. I talked to him. The CEO. At a party that Robbie took me to. He shook my hand and we talked. I don't remember what I said. It was weird, like meeting Sergei Brin or Steve Jobs. How do I prepare for this? I don't know what he's going to ask."

"You must have made a good impression, though, enough that he's inviting you to an interview. Maybe you just need to be yourself. Tell him about your interests. Do some research on the company ahead of time and be prepared to ask questions."

"Right. That makes sense." I had looked Eventive up when

Robbie got his interview. I could reread the handful of short articles I'd found. I could even poke around the IRC channels I used to spend time on to see if there was any chatter.

"The library here has a bunch of databases. I'll see what I can find. What's the company?"

"Eventive. They do data analytics."

"What's that?"

"I'm not sure. Oh god, Allie, what am I going to do? I don't even have clothes to wear, except a dress, but I wore that to the party. I can't wear it again, can I?"

"Do you still have those classy black jeans? The ones you got at the consignment shop? Those look good on you and they should be formal enough. That and a nice button-down shirt or a silk top."

"I have a cowlneck blouse that might work." If it didn't have any stains on it, or holes. I had nice boots from the same consignment shop, I'd just have to polish them and make sure I avoided showing the worn-out soles. I would have to take time off from my jobs. Coming so soon after my last request for time off, I'd probably get canned, even if I called in sick. It all began to feel overwhelming. "I don't have a resume or anything. What would I put on it? I didn't even finish high school."

"Do you still have that website?"

"My GitHub profile?"

"I don't know what that means, but you showed me some programs you put online."

"Yes, but ugh, I'd better clean my repos up. Some of those projects were seriously bad." Some of them weren't embarrassing, though, and my profile showed a solid record of contributing to other people's code. "Thanks, that's a good idea. I'll work on that tonight. And I'd better get my tickets ordered. I don't know if I can get it all done in time, though, and I really need this job. Allie, I've been so messed up lately. Robbie moved to Boston and I had to find another place to live and I'm

working all the time at jobs that suck and trying to take classes at the community college and I can't ... keep ... doing this."

"It's okay, Emily. Breathe."

"Sorry, sorry." I wiped my face. Nice mixture of tears and snot transferred to my sleeve. "I didn't mean to fall apart on you. I just ... you think those jeans would be okay to wear?"

"They look great on you. Do you have the same email address? I'll send you anything I find about the company. Look, there's a speaker tonight and I'll get extra credit if I attend the lecture, which is about to start. But if you—"

"No. Sure. You should go. Sorry to—"

"Stop saying you're sorry. It's great to hear from you. I'll send that stuff as soon as I can. And the day after tomorrow—two p.m. is it? I will light a candle for you."

I laughed. It was a long-standing joke between us. She had an elderly Franco-American neighbor who practiced a superstitious kind of Catholicism. Whenever Allie told her she had a big test coming up or a doctor's appointment, the woman would tap her wrist with a wrinkled finger and say in her trembly heavily-accented voice "I will light a candle for you." In high school, when Allie got a scented candle as a gift, she put it on her windowsill and lit it every time we had something big coming up. It made the room stink of fake apple-cinnamon scent, but it was somehow comforting.

I texted Robbie to see if I could crash at his place for a couple of nights, then spent hours cleaning up my GitHub presence, deleting stupid projects, reviewing code to get rid of cruft, and cleaning up readme files. Then I wasted hours making a cover website for all my repos using Jekyll, which was new to me. It suddenly seemed more important to choose the right layout and fonts than deciding what I was going to wear. I barely had time to find my interview outfit and throw it into my bag, grab a toothbrush, and make it to the bus station for a mid-morning departure. I didn't sleep at all until I was on the bus, halfway to Boston, my brain churning with anxiety.

In the morning I made our breakfast and walked Robbie to work so I was absolutely sure I knew how to find the place. Returning to the condo, I chugged coffee and studied up on everything Allie and I had found about the company. It wasn't much.

Eventive was mentioned in business publications as a hot startup when it was founded five years earlier. It popped up in articles about data-driven marketing, described as a next-generation approach, and was mentioned in three papers presented at computer science conferences that were posted to arXiv. Aurora Bello was the lead author for all three, and Eventive had funded the research. I tried to read them, but they were technically way over my head.

Adam Barton was pictured in local news at a handful of Boston charity events and had a four-sentence bio in a Wired article about up-and-coming tech leaders. It mentioned his time in the Marines but didn't say anything about intelligence work. He didn't appear to have any social media accounts or a website of his own, and there was no Wikipedia entry for him and only a stub for the company. The company's website was stylish but not very informative. For a business that Robbie described as an emerging powerhouse, there surprisingly little info out there. It had to be deliberate. Most startups tried to get as much publicity as they could, hoping to use hype in the tech press as a lure for venture capital.

It all reminded me that I knew a tech journalist from my IRC communities. I sent a direct message to Brian Friedman: what can you tell me about Eventive? He replied instantly that he didn't know anything, really, except that it was a newish data analytics corporation based in Boston that had hired an MIT star researcher who had been hotly recruited by several Silicon Valley giants. Why was I asking? When I told him I was interviewing for a job there he sent a string of exclamation points and some random emojis (he never really got the hang of emojis) along with a request that I keep in touch.

As I walked to Eventive HQ, insecurity sneaked up and grabbed me around the throat, stealing my breath. I didn't have a high school degree, much less college credentials. All the code I'd posted to GitHub was trivial, something a kid would write. Eventive hired people like Robbie, whose brain was the size of a planet. But I needed the job. I wanted it more than I ever wanted anything. It would kill me to blow this chance.

My phone vibrated as I reached the building. Allie had texted me a photo of the candle she'd lit. I laughed and took a breath.

Be yourself, I thought. Not the warehouse employee or counter clerk, not the high school dropout, be the self you want to be. The self you've always been online. Be that person.

The security guard lounging in the building's foyer made a call and a bespectacled, owlish man with a tablet in his hand and a posh British accent came to take me upstairs and show me into the CEO's office. Adam waved me in as he wrapped up a phone conversation. "You made it."

"I'm very interested in working at Eventive."

"Good. I'm interested in you." He studied me, tapping a pen against his desk. "Tell me how you got started writing code."

I talked and he gave every appearance of listening closely. He prompted me with questions, some of them seeming to come out left field, but all of them related, somehow, to my work with computers. When I offered to send him a link to my GitHub page he waved it away. "Seen it," he said, and moved on to something else. He didn't ask about my education or my work experience or the usual interview questions like what my greatest weakness was. I didn't even get a chance to ask the questions I'd prepared, which was probably just as well; they weren't very sophisticated and they might have reflected badly on Robbie.

He put me at ease and let me talk, and it was a fast and fun hour, over when the Englishman with the tablet showed up to escort me out. It wasn't until I was on the street, headed for

South Station and my bus ride home, that I wondered whether chatting so informally was a strategy to show my weaknesses without asking directly. I went over it in my head again and again. Had he seen my GitHub page and thought it was amateurish? Was he giving me an interview just to humor Robbie? Did he get me talking just to fill up the time? I tortured myself all the way home, until the bus was on the outskirts of Lewiston. Then I checked my email and yelped. Passengers turned to look at me.

“I just got a job,” I explained, feeling dizzy.

“Awwright.” The man across the aisle from me said, reaching out to slap my palm.

A week later, I moved in with Robbie and started my new role at Eventive as a Client Solutions Analyst.

Thirteen

“Welcome!” Aurora came by my desk on my first day, lugging a giant potted plant. “I forget what kind it is, but they told me it was nearly impossible to kill. Where should we put it?” It was so big, it ended up on the floor next to my desk, a spot of green marking my place.

“Right, let’s synchronize our calendars. Bring up the system we use here. Not that one, it’s...” She pointed at my laptop screen. “That’s it. I want to set aside some girl time. An hour a month for starters, is that okay?”

“Sure.”

“Not for work. Just to chat, compare notes, figure out how to survive in a joint like this. I mean, look around. It’s all men. I’m so excited to have a woman to talk to finally.” She danced a little in place as she tapped on her phone, scheduling a dozen get-togethers. “We’ll have a glass of wine, or take a walk or whatever. If we don’t set time aside right now, you’ll get too busy and you would not believe how hard it is to schedule meetings. Busyness is a cult around here. Did you accept all of those appointments?” She looked over my shoulder and nodded; I’d figured out how to add her times to my so-far nearly blank calendar.

“We don’t use Google Calendar?”

“Girl, please. That spyware? No way. We host our own email, calendars, everything we need. You signed the NDA, didn’t you?”

“The don’t-tell-anybody-anything form? I couldn’t even get past the lobby until I signed it.”

“Everyone uses them in tech, but here the security is serious. People would love to get their hands on our code. We even have white-hat hackers on retainer to test our defenses. You do not want to get caught fraternizing with the enemy or, you

know, sending a work-related message to someone through a plain vanilla gmail account. You'll get the spiel during orientation. Eventive's motto: we're paranoid and proud of it. The other motto is 'work harder.' You'll find out soon enough, you'll never feel caught up. Speaking of which, I have to get across town to meet with my advisor. He's finished reading the latest chapter of my dissertation. Almost done, hallelujah!"

She danced away and left me to be shown around the office and its amenities by another client solutions analyst, an intense young man from Hong Kong whose thick black hair bristled like a hedgehog. Then someone from HR took me through company policies and got me signed up for the benefits package, and I was handed over to my manager, who gave me a blitzkrieg introduction to the job. After a hasty company-supplied lunch with Robbie, I was turned loose to master the contents of a digital library full of technical manuals. I needed to be a quick study, since I would start providing support and training for a daunting portfolio of clients before the week was out, and the back end of the product was a tangle of AI-powered subsystems that were invisible from the client side. I would have to dig into the code to understand what it could do.

I was in heaven.

Eventive HQ occupied the top floor of an old red-brick warehouse in the Seaport District, six blocks from Robbie's condo. It preserved vestiges of its historic identity with arched windows and accents of exposed brick and thick wood beams, along with some mysterious cast-iron mechanical equipment hanging from the ceiling like brutalist industrial mobiles. It was otherwise thoroughly contemporary: an open-plan office with lots of rolling whiteboards, and ergonomic chairs and adjustable tables that could be pulled into pods for meetings. While there wasn't any visible privacy, the renovation had included some clever acoustical modifications that made the

wide-open workspace surprisingly quiet. I could be talking with a client without being overheard at the next desk.

There were enclosed offices at one end—Robbie had one, and so did Aurora—and at the other a set of meeting rooms with walls coated with whiteboard paint where consultants presented their work and technical challenges were hammered out. In the center there was a well-equipped galley where you could pick up fruit, a croissant, or make yourself a latte whenever you liked. For those who preferred junk food, there were bags of chips, a gum ball machine, and a small freezer full of frozen burritos that could be heated in a microwave. Lunch was delivered daily and pizzas arrived at ten p.m. for anyone who worked late. Twice a week, a masseuse dropped by. You had to go to the basement to use the gym, shared with other tenants of the building, but the company supplied a personal trainer.

I'd heard about perks like these. It was part of the mystique of Silicon Valley, the idea that the Chosen People who rose through the meritocracy got special treatment precisely because they were so special, working in an industry that was reinventing everything. It was another thing to experience the perks, especially after months of a budget so tight I was barely being able to afford food, let alone a good cup of coffee. The galley was my favorite place until Robbie said something about my weight and I began to ration myself. I also made a resolution to go to the gym regularly, but that didn't happen. Aurora hadn't been kidding. I didn't have time.

Nobody did. That was another feature borrowed from Silicon Valley culture: an almost competitive devotion to putting in long hours. Our client base was growing, and new projects were constantly in various stages of development. We were all working flat out. Robbie and I hardly saw each other except in passing at work.

I was disappointed that first day when I learned what a Client Solutions Analyst was. I wasn't going to be doing the work

Robbie did, writing code for new products. I was the person clients called when something went wrong, or when a new release was rolled out and they needed help customizing its features. In between those tasks, I routinely checked in with the clients on my list to see how things were working out and to gently nudge them toward upgrades or new products. After doing that for six months, my duties began to include flying out to talk to companies who'd shown interest, after doing extensive background research to create customized pitch decks. I would seek out programmatic marketing, SEO, and AI conferences I could attend while on the road to scout out potential clients or competitors.

So it was a bummer that I was in sales and tech support instead of DevOps, but there was a silver lining. To solve the problems that cropped up, I got to dig into the code to see what tweaks and modifications were possible. After demonstrating that I wasn't going to break anything, I earned the permissions to make minor fixes. It was an opportunity to learn by reading through lines of code that I never could have written. As with any debugging chore, some of it was frustrating and tedious, but those moments were countered by bursts of dopamine when I kicked a problem's ass.

I was also making money. A lot of it.

I wasn't completely unfamiliar with wealth. My grandparents were rich. They lived in a Victorian town house in Cambridge and had a "cottage" on the coast of Maine worth several million dollars. They thought nothing of vacationing in expensive resorts in the tropics or taking an educational trip to Laos. Most of the money was inherited on my grandmother's side, so she came to their marriage already accustomed to the lifestyle. My grandfather, a professor of Comparative Literature at Harvard, took to it naturally. I had lived with them for a few months at a time, twice in Cambridge and once at their summer place, when it was either them or foster care, so I knew what it felt like to live in a household where people were paid to clean and

cook, you were supposed to know which fork to use, and the napkins were made of cloth. In spite of all that money, they were self-important, miserable people who didn't care much for each other and cared not at all about me.

Though my rebellious mother had walked away from all that, making sure we lived in poverty just to spite them, there was an indelible stain of education and privilege left on her that she couldn't scrub out. I had inherited some of that—at least enough to pass. But it felt deeply strange at first, not having to worry about money, and in the early weeks of my employment I often made mistakes, doing things like going to the bus stop instead of ordering an Uber. Within a few months, that strangeness passed, I learned how to spend money like the rest of them, and I almost got used to not being broke.

Still, some things I hadn't learned, like how to dress the part. Shopping for clothes anywhere other than thrift stores made me incredibly anxious. When I was preparing for my first pitch, the woman brought in to coach me on making winning sales presentations was horrified by my first attempt to dress professionally. She told me where to have my hair and nails done and gave me the name of a personal shopper who also worked for several of the higher ups. The shopper took my measurements, made a few notes about my preferences ("I don't know, comfortable?"), and a week later showed up with a closet-full of clothes and a chart of what went with what so I wouldn't make mistakes.

Robbie didn't have to dress up, even when he traveled, because his usual gear was what everyone expected geeks to wear, but his basic jeans and hoodies were surprisingly expensive and he began to collect high-end watches with a steampunk vibe. Between us, we spent a lot, but we didn't have to worry about it. We had more money than time to spend it.

That was another thing to get used to: there was no such thing as free time at Eventive, and not much time for sleep. I

counted on those ten p.m. pizzas more often than not to keep me going.

Aside from the pizzas, though, what kept me alert and engaged was the product itself. I was amazed at what Eventive was building. It was based on a dizzying combination of qualitative and quantitative research, massive amounts of data, and computing power harnessed to automate highly-targeted messaging. Eventive had built up an astonishing collection of data, scraped from social media, bought from data brokers, gathered through sophisticated surveys and fieldwork, parsed from public records and websites, swept up by browser plugins that monitored behind-the-scenes programmatic ad auctions that captured information about individuals' religion, sexuality, mental health problems, or whether they like the color yellow.

In my first days on the job, Robbie mentioned nonchalantly that they had compiled profiles of virtually every American over age thirteen, as well as collating a similar level of detail for citizens of several more countries where Eventive operated. (It was easier in some of those places, he said, the ones with powerful leadership; they were often able to get direct access to internet use by individuals through telecom providers.) To handle all that data, some bright data analysts recruited from intelligence contractors had found ways to automate merging and cleaning complex data dumps so the profiles could be updated continually.

A rotating collection of eager researchers without permanent employment but with PhDs in anthropology, psychology, marketing, and media studies gathered in the conference rooms with Robbie and Aurora to plan out ethnographic fieldwork and large-scale experiments that could enhance the products we sold to customers who wanted to customize messages down to the individual level. What made a person afraid or angry? What deep cultural narratives influenced their behavior? How could we identify individuals by

psychological traits that would make them especially receptive to a certain kind of message?

"Wait, hold on a sec," Oak said when I took a breath while explaining what Eventive was all about. "You're saying they have detailed profiles of ... everyone?"

I nodded. "In the States, at least, and a few other countries."

"And they know enough about people to..."

"To basically mess with our heads. Prediction, nudging. Emotionally-effective messaging. They know us through the data exhaust we leave behind, the trails we generate every minute of the day."

"It sounds like that scandal last year. What was it, Cambridge Analytica?"

"Except it actually works. CA promised more than it could deliver. Eventive delivers."

"I can't wrap my head around this."

"It's inevitable. Our phones track our movements, our connections, and practically our thoughts, and that data is for sale, along with what can be scraped from the web and bought from data brokers. Once you put all that information together and add in insights from fieldwork and massage it with artificial intelligence, it means Eventive knows more about people than their mother does, than their therapist. Than themselves. Eventive knows what we care about, what we fear, what it takes to persuade us of whatever it is you're selling. That's the product."

"That's terrifying."

"It's not just Eventive, either. It just does a better job of applying cutting-edge computing than most, and they provide clients with a front end that makes it easy to build campaigns."

"Like, political campaigns?"

"Sure. Selling a politician or party, selling a new line of dill pickles, whatever you're trying to do. It's a tool for personalized

persuasion at scale. I used to make pitch decks for sales calls. When I got to the part where I showed just how detailed our profiles were I'd watch their jaws drop."

"No shit."

"I lived for those moments."

"And you didn't ... I mean, you never..." He was struggling to find the words.

"No. It's hard for me to understand it now, but I was so excited about the code, about what we were building, about the challenge of going from a 'what if' scenario to rolling it out, I just didn't think about how unethical it all was. How dangerous. Not for a long time, and then it was too late."

Just for kicks, one of the engineers created a simple bot that acted like ELIZA, one of the earliest artificial intelligence programs written in the 1960s that mimicked a psychotherapist by simply turning statements typed into the program, like "I feel sad," into questions: "how long have you felt sad?" or, when stumped, would simply prompt for more input with "I see. Tell me more." Though the original ELIZA was created to demonstrate a central flaw in artificial intelligence—it doesn't understand the words it's using, it only knows how to construct a response by recognizing textual patterns—people who tested it out wanted to believe it worked. They felt a weird sort of intimacy and comfort with the non-judgmental box that made it feel safer than a real-life human interaction. That false intimacy worked great for people turning to Facebook or Telegram to vent about the state of the world. By injecting seemingly benign questions into a conversation among like-minded obsessives, it egged them on, leading them to make more extreme statements. These were ingested into the system, creating a cascade of emotional engagement in real time while simultaneously building up the cultural vocabularies of our training sets. It was simple code, but it never failed to generate a bountiful harvest of linguistic data

that could be used to craft new messages to keep the pot boiling.

Could we automate some of the work of devising effective messages beyond basic A/B testing? Why yes, we could, once we hired an engineer away from Microsoft who had worked on natural language processing. He was able use an API to gobble up massive amounts of language scraped from social interactions. A small army of contract workers were hired to screen AI-generated statements during the development phase and tag anything that sounded weird. Those tagged messages then were fed back into the training set as patterns to avoid. The end result was to generate natural-sounding messages with a minimum amount of human intervention. Robbie was then able to integrate that feature into the product, so it could generate messages designed to match an individual's personality and emotional triggers. That was another highlight of my sales pitches: it made it possible to scale up a campaign with highly-personalized emotional appeals at a much lower cost-per-conversion.

Things didn't always work smoothly, of course. A lot of the off-the-shelf data from data brokers was inaccurate and needed extensive clean-up, which was expensive even after our dataset processing algorithms took a whack at it. Sometimes the automated language processing slipped from being just a little stilted to being disturbingly not-right. But the Eventive dashboard gave clients more than enough power to fool most of the people most of the time.

It was a thing of beauty, that dashboard. We had designers who customized the look based on inferences about a client's tastes. Depending on how much they paid, the dashboard offered different capabilities. Basic clients could use it to identify individuals who would be likely susceptible to particular messages. If they paid a lot more, they could use the system to create and test AI-generated personalized marketing aimed at individuals. For a bit more, they had the capability to

infiltrate closed groups on Facebook or Telegram or WhatsApp to scoop up data and increase buy-in.

Or for big bucks, mostly laundered through untraceable shell companies, our engineers created specialized datasets and algorithms supplemented by boots on the ground—field operatives or, in some foreign markets, subcontracted mercenaries with military training. This was an especially popular option among billionaire kingmakers who wanted to sway elections or authoritarian leaders who wanted to engineer their preferred reality and crush their enemies.

I didn't know this, of course, not until later. All of my clients were licensing the less-expensive plain-vanilla products for reaching their customers. Aurora and Robbie met with the big spenders to pitch what Eventive could do for them through customization. Adam Barton himself worked with the most valuable clients, the ones whose names were never mentioned.

Fourteen

“So, how’s it going?” Aurora asked when we had our first get-together. She had become aware, by then, that I wasn’t legally old enough to go to a bar for a glass of wine, so we met at a coffee house she liked instead.

“Great. I’m learning a ton, and it’s fun. To be honest, I wasn’t sure I would like doing tech support, but there’s a lot of problem-solving involved.”

“Your team manager tells me you’re a fast learner and the clients love you.”

“Uh ... wow.”

“Look at you blush. He also said you had great tech skills for troubleshooting. Thing is, he seemed surprised. Like, how weird that a girl can do this job. He didn’t come right out and say it, but it was pretty obvious. That’s a thing you’ll see them do, kind of stutter and stumble around when they just caught themselves about to say something that’s sexist as hell.”

“I haven’t seen that.”

“You mean, you haven’t noticed it yet. You will. It’s because they haven’t had to edit themselves before. I mostly see it when we’re prototyping and I have to remind them that not all of the target audience is male, white, affluent—basically exactly like them. They’re lacking in the cultural competence department. It gets me in trouble sometimes, but mostly they just don’t know. They spent all their time around guys who crack sexist, racist jokes and nobody says anything because proving you’re part of the same culture is the price of being an insider.”

I nodded, thinking about the banter on the IRC channels where I wanted nothing more than to blend in. Being raunchy and offensive was how you showed you belonged. One of the guys.

“Whatever, that’s their limitation. But when it comes to the

code, I have to point it out. This isn't like some, I don't know, a delivery service. We're trying to get inside people's heads."

"It's not brain surgery—oh wait, it is!"

"Ha!" She laughed, then made a face. "Kind of? I mean, we have plenty of data, but if you ignore people's actual lived experiences, their perspectives, if you make too many lazy assumptions when you're writing the code, it won't work. I can be a real pain in the ass about it."

She started to tell me about her dissertation, and how her committee was making final recommendations, which was extra fun when they gave her conflicting advice. There were some strong personalities involved, and they wanted to ride their own hobby horses whenever they critiqued her work. It was exhausting. "But I'm nearly done, praise Jesus. Oh! I know what I wanted to ask you. Will you come to my defense?"

"Sure. What's going on?"

She frowned, puzzled.

"Is it something at work? I'm new, so I don't know if anyone will listen to me, but whatever it is, of course I'll defend you."

She looked blank for a moment, then giggled. "My dissertation defense, silly. It's the final step of getting my degree. Like a job talk, or an oral exam. You don't have to do anything, just let me put you to sleep talking about my research while my professors throw trick questions at me. You'll be bored silly."

"No, I won't. Your work is fascinating."

"Well, my family will be bored silly, and I need you to keep them company. I'd like that, I really would love having you there. Bored or not."

"It would be an honor."

I relied on touching base with Robbie over lunch or late-night pizza while at work. We talked idly about where we might want to take a vacation. Cabo or a mountain trek in Nepal? But that depended on having time, and we didn't.

Hanging out with Aurora was already on the sched, though, and I fiercely defended those blocks of time. We kept on meeting once a month for coffee or, if the weather was nice, for a walk. It was only for an hour, but it was a chance to unwind, to let down my guard, and learn more about the inner workings of the company. She was close to the top, in constant contact with Adam Barton and the clients whose deep pockets funded experiments that made use of Aurora's combination of imagination and her deep knowledge of neural networks, machine learning, and the latest developments in artificial intelligence.

I got to know her moods, too. Sometimes her energy threw off sparks, and other times she seemed relatively listless. She told me she was on medication for a mood disorder that had first surfaced in her adolescence. Luckily her parents didn't dismiss it as just the usual mood swings of puberty and found a doctor who she trusted and who, in turn, recommended someone in Boston when she left for college. I wouldn't have guessed if she hadn't told me. It certainly didn't appear to affect her work. She thought of it as just part of who she was, a condition that was not so much an illness as a trait that helped her achieve, so long as she paid it respect, tuned in to herself to monitor her moods, and kept up with medication and regular check-ins with her shrink.

I sensed she was nervous as her defense approached, but also excited and resolute. On the big day, I joined the small crowd in a room at MIT where an odd mixture of geeks in jeans and tees and members of her family dressed as if for church were gathered. I fit in with the church congregation since, having no idea what would be appropriate for the occasion, I had decided to wear the dress I'd had on the day I met her. As I found a seat, I guessed that the stocky man with a glossy bald head and dark skin sitting close to the front was her father, and the woman dressed in a sari, a long braid trailing down her back, was her mother. They were clearly the audience-

members-of-honor at the center of a scrum of dressed-up cousins and aunties all twittering together nervously as the seats behind them filled.

I didn't see anyone else from Eventive, which surprised me; I had half expected to see Adam Barton, attended by the man who seemed to have a tablet grafted onto his hand. I also mentioned the event to Robbie, but he said he'd already heard all about her research, so there was no reason for him to waste time traveling across town to listen to a presentation. Maybe that was true of everyone at work but me. But I liked to think I was there because I was her friend.

The chatter subsided as Aurora strode to the podium. She looked dead serious and fierce until she saw her family and gave them a bright smile. She nodded at acquaintances as her eyes roamed the room and rewarded me with a deeply dimpled grin that had something mischievous and conspiratorial in it. I settled into my seat as she brought up her slides and began to talk.

There was something about the way she explained her work as she clicked through her slides and animated visualizations that made me think I understood every word of it during her talk, though afterward when I tried to describe it to Robbie I realized all of my understanding had melted away. "I guess it's over my head," I told him that night as we shared one of the late-night pizzas. He was planning to work through a stubborn problem even if it took all night, and I had to catch up on the emails and messages that had piled up while I was at MIT.

"Her stuff is pretty abstract," he said. "She has plenty of ideas, but some of them don't really amount to much. I mean, if you can't do something with it, if you can't use it to make something, what's the point?"

"You're the maker around here," I said. "The first time I met her she told me that, that you're able to take her ideas and turn them into code that works. She was impressed."

"Maybe now that she's done with that degree she'll be able to focus more on work."

I took a slice of pizza back to my desk to work through more of the backlog. I was glad to have attended the defense, but it left me with an avalanche of work to catch up on.

It had taken longer than planned since I'd stayed for the reception following the main event and even drank a glass of the bubbly that a fellow grad student was pouring, surrounded by the chatter of an international crowd of students, teachers, and family members. "Emily!" her mother called out when Aurora pointed to me.

She sailed across the room to grip my hands in a warm greeting while her daughter stayed behind, caught by one of the faculty members who wanted to quiz her further. "We've heard so much about you. Well, not really so very much, poor Aurora hardly has time for a phone call, much less a visit, but she's obviously delighted to have a girlfriend at work." She gave my hands a little jiggle before releasing them. "Boston is such a lonely place for her," she said, her voice lowered. "Plenty of intellectual company here, of course, and thank goodness for that, we can't keep up with her research. But friends, real friends? Not until you joined the company. And she works much too hard. She has no time to meet people."

"We miss her terribly," her father said, overhearing our conversation. "Our home feels so empty without her. But we're very proud of all she has accomplished."

"Maybe now that she has finished her PhD she will have more time to visit us," her mother said to him wistfully. I doubted that. Eventive had a way of laying claim to every free moment, but I just smiled.

Aurora impulsively invited me to join them in a celebratory dinner, but I begged off. It was family time. Besides, I knew from all the notifications pinging my phone that I had work to catch up on.

While I hacked my way through my messages, I found myself

envying Aurora. She had parents who obviously cherished her. A warm and welcoming extended family. Even when they complained about infrequent visits they didn't blame her; they understood the pressures of being a genius at a demanding job.

Nobody missed my calls or visits, except maybe Allie, and our friendship was more of a memory than a current reality. Robbie was the only family I had, and the only time we had together these days was stolen moments at work, when hunger drove him away from his keyboard. I often stayed late even when I was too tired to accomplish anything meaningful, just to have those minutes together when the pizza arrived. I was friendly with my team members, but Robbie didn't approve of wasting time with office chatter, so I mostly kept to myself.

It felt like a secret betrayal when I began to travel regularly for work and was able to enjoy a nice meal or explore whatever city the sales pitch was in. If I was honest with myself, at those times I didn't miss Robbie at all.

Allie came down for a weekend that first June, after her classes ended. I had been looking forward to it, but it turned out to be super awkward.

She was due in Friday night. I raced home to be available. The fridge was empty, as usual—no time to shop or cook, and no need with food available at work. At least we had a stash of beer and wine that Robbie ordered in bulk, which was fortunate because I wasn't yet old enough to buy it myself. I got on my phone and ordered up a random selection of snacks and breakfast goodies to be delivered from a gourmet grocery and made up the bed in the guest room with sheets that had sharp creases from being still in their original packaging. We'd never had guests before. When I finished, it had the sterile look of a hospital room.

She got in just as I straightened the brand-new duvet, and laughed good-naturedly at the bookcase along the wall, the

only furniture beyond the bed in the spare room. It had no books in it. “Don’t worry, I brought my own,” she said, taking four books out of her roller bag and arranging them on the shelf.

“Are you planning to read all weekend?” I asked.

“Hah, no. It’s just that I always panic if I think I’ll run out.”

“There are bookstores in Boston, you know.”

Her eyes lit up. “I *know*! I made a list.”

“You’re so weird. How about a glass of wine?”

We settled on the couch—another lonely piece of furniture in a room that suddenly looked too large—with our glasses and a plate of cheeses and crackers. She started to tell me about her freshman year, but my phone kept interrupting, buzzing with notifications. “Sorry. I have new client. They need a lot of hand-holding,” I explained as I fired off some texts. “You were saying?”

“This biology class, it had a lab, and I got the clumsiest guy as a partner. He broke so much glass, I had to take over the work while he stood over me and pretended to supervise.”

“Why were you taking biology?”

“Requirements. They make you take a bunch of different courses in case you discover you have an unexpected passion for science or economics.”

“I don’t see that happening.”

“Not for me. I know what I—go ahead.”

My phone was buzzing again. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine.” She got up to look at the view as I put out fires. “Thing is,” she said when I set my phone down, “I feel like I got all that already in high school, you know? Studying for a bio test feels like such a waste of—”

I winced apologetically and took a call. An emergency that couldn’t wait. I got out my laptop and spent the next forty minutes undoing the damage some hotshot did while customizing their reports function, all the while keeping up the soothing no-worries, we-can-fix-this chatter that clients

expected. This was a major customer. I couldn't afford to piss them off, even if they let one of their senior staff move stupidly and break things.

"I'm so sorry," I told Allie, who had settled back into the couch, reading her phone and munching snacks.

"New client?" she said sympathetically.

"No, actually, they've been with us for a while, but they might upgrade if they can tailor it to their own specs, which wouldn't be a problem if they let me do it, but they have a CTO who doesn't know what he's doing. Chief technology officer," I added, seeing her frown as if checking her internal dictionary.

"But it's Friday night. Don't you get weekends off?"

"It's the industry. Also, he was totally panicked. There would have been a shitstorm if management found out it was broken all weekend."

She nodded, but my brain filled in the words she wasn't saying out loud. *I came all the way down here to hang out. You're not going to make time for me?* She didn't get it. This was my life.

It went downhill from there.

We had planned to do some tourist things on Saturday, but I got called in to work when another one of the Client Solutions Analysts flaked out and went AWOL. He'd clearly been in over his head, and his client list was littered with unresolved tickets. Rumors were flying that his parents had lured him to a family dinner and then had him admitted to a hospital. I rolled up my sleeves, ready to prove I was talented, hard-working, and committed. To the company, that is, not to a locked ward like the other guy. I gave Allie a key to the apartment and a hasty apology. She said she understood.

I did manage to steal an hour on Sunday to take her to brunch at a restaurant recommended by the man with the tablet, supposedly one of the best in the city. It was a chance to show her just how successful I was, but it was uncomfortable, starting with a haughty waiter who described the glories of the

menu in a tone that somehow conveyed it would be wasted on plebes like us. Though maybe the discomfort was a hangover from Saturday night, when Robbie had come home from work and immediately took issue with something Allie said about regulating big tech. He always spoke his mind, unfiltered, totally honest. I felt caught in the middle, but naturally took Robbie's side out of loyalty.

At the restaurant, as large plates holding a small amount of food artfully arranged were slid in front of us, I was afraid she was going to start criticizing him again, but she didn't say much at all, just picked at her food. I filled the silence with chatter about the job, about Aurora's brilliant work, about how magnetic Adam Barton was, about nerdy co-workers and difficult clients. I finally remembered to thank her for giving me advice that night when I was freaking out about the job interview.

"You would have been hired anyway," she said.

"Maybe, but I was losing my mind and you talked me down."

"You'd been going through a tough time."

"Yeah. It was gruesome."

"You could have reached out. At least we could have texted, like old times."

"I guess I was embarrassed. You were in college and I was going nowhere. But I got the job, and I moved in with Robbie and everything changed. I mean..." I opened my hands. Look at us, in a place like this.

She looked around, nodded, and sipped her tea. There was even a tea menu, though she disappointed the waiter by ordering her usual English Breakfast. He was pushing some extra-special early harvest Darjeeling. She frowned and rubbed at some crumbs on the tablecloth before asking "How are things going with Robbie?"

"They're great. I mean, we don't get much time together because of work, but we're good. And working at Eventive is amazing."

"You sure work hard."

"Everyone does. It's the culture."

"Are you happy?"

I laughed. "I'm too busy to think about it." She didn't laugh with me, and I was suddenly fed up. "Look, I'm sorry I screwed up your weekend, but I love my job, and I'm good at it. And I love Robbie, too, even if you don't like him. So yeah, I'm happy." Was she trying to make me feel bad? Was she jealous?

"That's good," she said, giving me a tight little smile.

She sent me a thank-you card a week later, which made my irritation with her flare up again. I couldn't help it if I had to work instead of showing her around town. She spent her free time making up stories and dreaming about being a famous writer. She didn't know how the real world worked. I buried the card in the recycling before Robbie could see it. It wasn't good when contexts collapsed and worlds collided.

I thought of her from time to time, like when I dusted the unused guest room with the still-empty bookcase. She sent Christmas cards and the occasional text, but that uncomfortable meal was the last time we talked face to face.

A year later I was in San Jose, pitching a start-up that had so much capital it was burning a hole in their pocket. Afterward, I headed up to San Francisco, to the lobby of a hotel where I knew an international collection of AI geeks was holding an academic conference, aiming to pick up ideas and possibly leads on new clients. I was standing in line at a coffee stand when I glanced behind me and caught the name printed on a conference badge, one that said PRESS on it. "Brian?"

"Hi," he said, the vowel trailing off in that way it does when you're talking to someone you're supposed to recognize but don't.

"I'm Emily. Emily Callander." He still looked as if he were flipping through a mental address book. "Metamorph?" It was the nic I had used in my IRC hangouts where we'd first met.

He staggered back, clutching his badge theatrically. “Metamorph! Oh my god. So great to meet you in person finally.” He gripped my hand in a warm two-handed shake. “You’re not here to give a paper, are you?”

“No. I’m not even registered for the event. I’m in town for something else, thought I’d hang out in the lobby. The papers at things like this are over my head, but I can usually learn something just talking to people. Are you writing a story?”

“I’m not sure. I either picked all the wrong sessions to go to or this stuff really is completely beyond me. I’m hoping if I can talk to some of these guys informally they’ll translate it into English for me. What are you up to these days?”

“I got a job with a tech company in Boston. Eventive.”

“Fantastic. That’s ... let me think, is that Adam Barton’s outfit?”

“That’s the one.”

“Sweet. Do you like it?”

“I’m working my butt off, but I love it.”

We got our coffees, carried them to a table and exchanged news, or as much of it as I could. I’d been put through the workshop that all new hires had to attend with the company’s PR consultants, and we were reminded regularly about what we could and couldn’t say to competitors—or to reporters, who might tip off competitors. Telling them we had deep datasets was fine, for example. Bragging that we had the goods on every adult American was not. It was a great selling point for serious customers but liable to scare people who weren’t. I kept it generic and mostly talked about office culture and the ten p.m. pizzas, about living in Boston and working with the love of my life. Brian talked about some of the characters he had met while working on a big story on AI ethics and about his wife and kids. His phone was full of photos of the two boys, who I agreed were the cutest ever.

“I’m going to be in Boston in a few weeks. Let me take you out for lunch to celebrate your new job.”

“Not that new. I’ve been there for over a year.”

“Jeez, they’re robbing cradles these days. We’ll celebrate your first year anniversary, then.” He took my phone number and then went off to talk to one of the academics whose paper sounded as if it should be newsworthy if only the researcher could explain it to him.

A couple of weeks later I got a text from Brian telling me the dates he would be in Boston. After some back and forth we found an hour that worked for both of us and agreed to meet at a restaurant. A few hours later, taking my headset off after finishing a call and logging my notes, I realized Robbie was standing over my shoulder, asking a question. “Who’s Brian Friedman?” he asked, spreading the words out with irritated patience, making it clear I hadn’t been listening. Since I had just finished talking a client through a new feature that I barely understood myself it took me a moment to switch gears and figure out who he was talking about.

“Brian? Oh, him. He’s a journalist.”

“You’re having lunch with him?”

He must have seen it on my calendar. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to tell him anything sensitive.”

“But who is this guy? Why are you having lunch with him?”

“He’s just a friend. An acquaintance. I bumped into him at an AI conference a few weeks ago. He’s coming to Boston and wanted to get together.”

“How long have you known him?”

Feeling an itchy need to get up and move, I showed Robbie my empty water bottle, stood and led him toward the galley, trying to keep it casual. Robbie was clearly in a mood. “Oh, man, for ages. Since I was twelve? But only virtually. We hung out on the same IRC channels.” As I filled my water bottle I remembered how Robbie had responded when he heard I’d had a boyfriend before him, freezing me out for days. He was

just jealous, bless his nerdy heart. “He’s an old married guy,” I reassured him. “It’s just lunch.”

Robbie frowned, possibly relieved but still unhappy. “Don’t let him pump you for information. I’m not even sure you should be talking to a journalist.”

“Tell you what: I’ll talk to Bea, make sure I don’t accidentally cross any lines.” Bea was the PR contractor who regularly briefed us on what we could and couldn’t say to the press or anyone else. “Last time I talked to Brian, he mostly showed me pictures of his kids. I doubt he’s fishing for info, but I’ll be prepared just in case.”

Lunch was fun and thankfully uneventful. More kid pictures, more war stories from the front lines of tech reporting. Brian probed for intel about Eventive, but got the message when I stuck to the limited talking points Bea had approved for public consumption. We spent more time comparing notes on the food at airports we had both spent too much time in. Our hour was up before I knew it, and Brian said he’d look me up next time he was in town. He had asked me at some point what I thought of the Gardner Museum and was shocked and appalled when he learned I hadn’t been there. He didn’t have time to go on this trip, but he insisted he would take me there next time.

The well-dressed Englishman with the ever-present tablet in hand intercepted me as I returned to the office. (I could never remember whether his name was Alec or Alex. In my own mind, I called him Jeeves.) He leaned toward me, as if to bring himself down to my height, and asked with starchy politeness “Could you spare a moment to stop by Mr. Barton’s office? It shouldn’t take long.”

I swallowed “Sure. Of course.” Though it had been asked in the form of a question, it was obvious I didn’t have a choice. He waved me toward the elevator chivalrously.

I hadn’t been in the CEO’s office since my interview over

a year earlier. This time, Barton was tipped back in his chair, chatting with Connie Uys, the lean, wiry South African whose role at the company had been dismissed by Robbie as ... what was it? Something to do with human intelligence, “meatspace” operations of some kind. It figured: There was something carnivorous about the man. He vacated the chair in front of the boss’s desk for me, but he didn’t leave, just closed the door and leaned against the jamb, arms crossed.

“How’d it go with Friedman?” Barton asked, still tipped back in his chair, relaxed. “Bea told me,” he added, since I must have looked confused.

“Oh. It was fine. Bea was great, she helped me know what to say. What not to say.”

“What did he want to know?”

“Honestly? He barely got a question in before I cut him off. He asked what I was working on and I stuck to the job title and a generic description of my position, like Bea said. Then he asked about Aurora. He’d read her papers. I said she was really nice and smart and ... that was it. I mean, I don’t even know what she’s working on, but if I did I wouldn’t tell him. He got the message.”

“What else did you talk about?”

“His kids. Airports, which ones suck the most. He told me about some stories he’s working on.”

He raised his eyebrows, inviting more, so I told him which companies Brian was profiling and what issues he was researching. I offered that he wanted to drag me the Gardner art museum some time.

“You haven’t been? You hear that?” he asked Uys, who shook his head, disappointed in me. “You gotta go to the Gardner. Next time he’s in town, take the afternoon off. Enjoy yourselves. Right, Connie?”

He looked at Uys, who nodded. A man of few words.

“Okay.” Barton slapped his armrests with his palms. “I’m sure you’re busy. I’ll let you go.”

Uys moved aside and I opened the door. I was halfway out when Barton added, “oh hey, did you try the steak tips, or stick with pizza?”

I paused. “We split a pizza.”

“With sausage, I hope? Their sausage is famous. But try the steak tips one of these days. Santarpio’s looks like just a classic pizza joint, but their barbeque is surprisingly good.”

“Thanks, I’ll try it next time.” I smiled at him. At least I hoped what I did to my face came across as a smile.

I headed for my desk. Uys had followed me out, but peeled off for the elevator. I sat, opened my email, and stared at it. How did Adam Barton know where we’d eaten lunch? I opened my calendar—as I thought, I had an appointment block labeled “lunch w/ Brian Friedman,” but no mention of the location. Brian had texted the address to my personal phone.

The only thing I could think of was that I’d had my work phone in my bag. Maybe that gave Barton access to my geolocation. Or maybe Uys had followed me, old school surveillance. For some reason, Adam wanted me to know I was being watched.

“Don’t you think that’s weird?” I asked Robbie that night as we walked home from work. It was late, and the shadows looked spooky.

“Having lunch with a reporter is what’s weird.”

“We didn’t even talk about Eventive. He was town to interview some MIT guy about his research. I just think it’s creepy to be tracked like that.”

“You have any apps on your phone? You’re being tracked, and all of that info is bundled and sold over and over to all kinds of people.”

“I know, but this feels different.”

“Why? Isn’t it creepier to be tracked by someone you don’t even know?”

I shrugged. That made sense, logically, but people I didn’t

know were an abstraction. Adam Barton was real. “Bea ratted me out. She’s the one who told Adam I was having lunch with a journalist.”

“She’s supposed to keep Adam up to speed. That’s her job, helping him shape the company’s image.”

Or keep the company from having an image. I flashed back to the dearth of articles about the company when I was prepping for my interview. “I don’t understand why Eventive doesn’t want publicity.”

“What good would it do? We don’t have any trouble getting clients, or investments. You get media coverage, it’s usually negative. I mean, look at Facebook. Nobody writes stories lately about how billions of people use it every day to keep in touch, or about the technical challenges they’ve solved, they just get slammed for stupid stuff. Why look for trouble?”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“Our clients wouldn’t like it, either. Why would they want everyone knowing that we give them such a powerful edge over their competition? We’re their ace in the hole.”

“I’ll point that out next time somebody complains about the pricing structure.”

“Our metrics dashboard makes the benefits obvious. It’s totally worth the money. Do you show them the numbers?”

“They see the numbers, but sometimes people just want to vent. I always talk them around. I’m good at it.”

He stole a glance at me. “I’ll bet you are.” He surprised me by taking my hand. We walked the last block to the condo holding hands like a couple of people in love.

Fifteen

Five years in, I'd moved up from Client Solutions Analyst to Senior Client Development Manager. I had my own team, now, all men, all my age or younger, doing the kind of client hand-holding I'd done in my first two years. The product kept evolving, and I did too, developing training programs and traveling to client sites and sales meetings. I spent more time in airports than at home.

That was just as well; when I was around too much, Robbie and I tended to get in fights. It wasn't about anything in particular. We both were under stress, working all hours, never catching up, and having to placate difficult clients even when they were being jerks. When Robbie was anxious about something—a routine that wasn't working, an update that didn't ship on schedule, or when some offhand comment kindled his resentment toward the other engineers who had degrees from top schools and deep professional networks—his nerves would grow inflamed.

Whatever got him hot under the collar at work vented through a crack in our relationship, and the results were often scalding. He put a hole in a wall with his fist once, inches from my face. Another time, he grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me hard, leaving behind black and blue tattoos where his fingers and thumbs had pressed hard. Once he lost it so thoroughly he slapped me hard enough to make my ears ring. He apologized after he calmed down, and even cried a little. He swore it wouldn't happen again, and it didn't. But I had to ask my cosmetics advisor to recommend a concealer—just a silly accident; she didn't ask questions—and watch my step on those days when he came home in a mood to avoid setting him off.

Being on the road most days kept our fights to a minimum

and absence seemed to make us a happier couple. Sometimes Robbie had flowers sent to my hotel room. I'd text him photos of places I went, and he'd ask about how the pitch had gone, or whether the restaurant I'd tried was nice. He'd remind me to be careful. That's why we shared our locations on our phones, just in case I got in trouble, a single woman traveling alone. I didn't need to check on him, I knew where he was: staring at screens in his office or meeting with his DevOps group.

He had moved up in the organization, too, during those five years. He was now the Senior Engineer for Innovation, working directly under Adam Barton and with a team of his own. Robbie had become intrigued by the potential for combining automated language processing with improvements in deepfakes technology to create a tool for web-scale personalized video messages. The idea was that a busy client could record a few minutes of speech that could become the basis for messages that would adapt to whatever a person wanted to hear. Beyond that, he was refining the program to automate engaging in one-on-one conversations using natural-sounding phrases chosen by the algorithm for maximum impact. It would be an engine for highly personalized parasocial intimacy—like ELIZA, but at a far more sophisticated level.

Whenever I told potential clients this new add-on was in the works, they were intrigued. Robbie had hit on the holy grail for our clients: an intelligent bot with a human face.

Exciting times at Eventive HQ. It felt like anything was possible.

On the day things began to change I was taking a walk along the harbor with Aurora. She was uncharacteristically quiet during this monthly get-together, lost in thought, and not good thoughts, by the look of it. It was a blustery day in autumn with gulls complaining as they were sideswiped by the wind, the tink-tink-tink of a flagpole sounding like an uneven

metronome. She had asked, routinely, as we set out from the office how I was doing, and I chattered for a while about my work, but ran out of things to say. She wasn't paying attention, anyway. One of her moods, I assumed. They'd all been dark, lately.

"How about you?" I asked. "How's work treating you?"

She only shook her head and put up a palm, as if fending it off.

"Is it Adam?" I asked. She didn't respond. "Or Connie Uys? He gives me the creeps." She only sighed impatiently.

I scooted in front of her so I could look her in the eye. "Hey. We're friends. You can talk to me."

"No. I can't." She said it with a surprising amount of energy. It felt like a slap in the face.

"Okay."

She walked on, and I followed. Aurora hunched in her jacket as a gust slammed into us. "No, it's not okay," she said, and rubbed her raw cheeks. "But I really can't."

I knew she'd been working on something for a big client, one of the special projects that brought in a lot more money than my off-the-shelf applications. "If it's about a job you're working on, I signed the same NDA as you. I won't tell anyone."

"It isn't you. It's..." She watched a gull swoop over us and then down to skim low over the surface of the water. She glanced around. There were a few hardy tourists at the other end of the Harbor Walk, trying to look like they were enjoying themselves, but we were alone. She cocked an eyebrow at me—are you sure about this?—then put her fingers to her lips, reached into her bag, and pulled out a large black billfold. "Never mind," she said, and then made a show of putting her phone inside it. "I'm just not good company today." She held it out to me. I followed suit, putting both my work and personal phones into it. She closed the bag up and dropped it into her purse. "It blocks signals. Just a precaution."

I remembered that weird conversation with Adam Barton. "Got it."

She sat on a bench, and I sat beside her. "It's not my project that's bothering me. Although lord knows, I'm not too happy my work is being used by Bill Gibbons."

"Who's that?"

"He's running for Congress. Not here, in Michigan. He's a billionaire with fascist tendencies. Adam wants to make nice because Gibbons has connections with all the rich assholes who are looking for a tool to whip up the base by making hate and fear go viral. Us against them, the Blacks. The Commies. You ever notice it's all the pro-wealth, anti-regulation moneybags who want our services for political campaigns? The good guys keep trotting out hopeful messages and squabble among themselves about the details. They probably would feel morally conflicted about using psyops to rile up American citizens."

"Psyops? Is that what it is? Maybe it's just ... you, know. Really effective advertising."

She was shaking her head. "Nope. This isn't like persuading someone to buy something they don't need. It's propaganda at a scale and level of sophistication that's new. It's dangerous. I don't think I can keep doing this."

That landed like a knife in the chest. I lived for these monthly meetings where I could get advice and laugh and for just an hour let go of all that pressure. But it wasn't entirely unexpected. She had grown increasingly critical of Adam and his vision for the company. "I'd hate to see you go, but you could totally get a better job tomorrow."

She laughed. It had a bitter edge to it. "You think?"

"You're so smart. You know so much."

"That's kind of the problem," she muttered before giving herself a shake. "Anyway, it's not that. It's something my dad told me last night."

"Are they okay, your parents?"

"They're fine. Just worried. He told me about a situation back home in Nigeria. There's a general election coming up and one party has hired Global Comm Strategies, LLC to advise them on campaigns for the legislature and presidency. They're filling local communications channels and social media with toxic garbage and they hired local thugs to attack opponents. Physically. One of my cousins is in the hospital. He was out with friends and got caught up in some political violence. They got him good. He lost an eye."

"That's awful."

"Thing is, Adam founded Global Comm, and Connie Uys is over there right now. He's the one supervising the thugs."

"Uh, that's ... I mean, are you sure?"

"Certain. I know my code has been adapted for use in Global Comm products, and I overheard Adam say Connie was heading to Lagos a couple weeks back. Eventive may be Adam's main gig in public, but he has a handful of companies that are off the radar, including one that works exclusively for the NSA. That's where the real money is, federal contracts and international dirty work. My dad doesn't know about this. He would be so ashamed of me. *I'm* ashamed of me."

"But you're not working for this Global Whatsit. You're just working for a guy who started the company."

"It's still his company, and they're using our software. My code. I'm not sure what to do."

"Have you talked to Adam?"

"Not yet. I want to have all the facts before I meet with him. He's a very persuasive man. Every time I raise an issue he finds a way to make it seem totally okay and that I'm just a paranoid Black woman, hyper-sensitive, seeing problems that aren't there." She glanced at me with a little smile that had something anxious in it. "Maybe you think that too, given that I walk around with a Faraday pouch in my purse."

"No. I suspect Adam uses our phones to keep track of us. He doesn't seem to mind that I know, which is weird." I told her

about the day he called me into his office after I had lunch with a reporter.

“And ever since you’ve been behaving yourself, right? That’s why he told you. It’s a way of exerting control, letting you know you’re under surveillance. You’ll watch your step, now. Listen, we need to get our phones out or they might notice. Just don’t go looking up anything about Global Comm or Nigerian elections. Don’t talk about it with anyone. Even Robbie. I need to deal with this myself.”

“Okay, but—”

She shook her head to end the private conversation as she pulled out the pouch. “Mind yourself.” She opened it and handed me my phones. “Sorry I’m in such a crummy mood today, giving you the silent treatment. Not much of a mentor, am I?”

“You’re fine.”

“I should have made an effort. Next month, we’ll focus on your career goals, okay? Damn, it’s cold out here. Let’s get back to work.”

On the way back to the office she began to tell me about some problem she was interested in related to overfitting data in a recurrent neural network. I didn’t understand a word of it, but that’s not what it was for.

“Your girlfriend is in trouble,” Robbie told me one night a few weeks later as we left the office for home. It was a brutally cold night, near midnight, a salty breeze racing down the street, snatching at my scarf.

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I said. She’s making herself unpopular with the boss. You might want to stop having those cozy dates of yours.”

“They’re not dates,” I said automatically. He’d complained about our monthly meetings before. “It’s mentoring.”

“She’ll mentor you right out of the industry if you’re not careful. Seriously, she’s bad news. You should distance yourself.”

“What makes her bad news?”

“She refuses to work on projects she’s assigned to. She badmouths the customers. She takes a high and mighty tone with Adam, and it’s not like she’s god’s gift to programming. I could do what she does for the company and I’d do it faster. She halted a whole project because she decided she didn’t like the training data.”

I knew what that was about. She had told me about getting bad results when running a routine built on a set of data that skewed too white and male, full of raunch and racism. It might not have mattered to the client, but it mattered to her.

“If she wasn’t a minority and female, she’d have been canned long ago,” Robbie went on. “She’s not a team player. You shouldn’t hang out with her, it’ll look bad.”

“It’s just one hour a month.”

“It’ll make *me* look bad.”

I had to take a deep breath. “I don’t see how,” I said calmly. I knew from experience it would piss Robbie off if I made light of his anxieties, or if I got angry, too.

“She’s toxic. If you’re her friend, Adam will think I’m part of it.”

“He’s a smart man, he wouldn’t jump to conclusions.”

“I’m saying this for your own good. You should avoid her. Cancel those meetings.”

It wasn’t smart, but I couldn’t help myself. “You don’t realize how important they are to me. There’s nobody else I can talk to—well, apart from you, but that’s different. It’s not like there are a lot of women working at Eventive.”

“Girl talk is so important you’ll risk your career? And mine? This is why there aren’t many women working in the field. Everything’s about their feelings. They don’t even try to be part of the company culture.”

I bit my tongue and considered my words. “I get along with my team. The clients like me, mostly. Some of them are jackasses, but whatever. Aurora is fun to talk to, and she does some cool research.”

"Instead of actual work, stuff that benefits the company. Adam has given her way too much leeway to play around doing 'research' instead of making a contribution. That's the thing: if she got canned, nobody would notice. The product wouldn't suffer. But she acts like she's in charge."

"I see what you're saying. Thanks for clueing me in."

"Good. We don't need to run risks. I'm glad you're going to drop her."

I wasn't going to, but I didn't say so.

In the end, it didn't matter. Two days before our next meeting was scheduled I was on the phone with a client when I caught sight of her striding toward the elevators, a cardboard box in her arms, closely followed by two burly men in suits and the Englishman with the tablet. I tried to catch her eye, but she was staring straight ahead, a weird little grimace on her face. It was probably supposed to be a smile, but it looked robotic. I made an excuse and got off the phone, but before I could catch up with them, the elevator doors had closed. I went to the front windows and watched as she headed down the sidewalk to her car. She stowed the box in the backseat, adjusted one of the potted plants that was spilling over the side, said a few words to the goons, and drove away.

A rustle of uneasy chatter flowed across the open-plan office as I pressed my palm against the glass. Goodbye, my friend.

There was a lull as everyone paused to stare at their screens, followed by another wave of muttered conversation. I returned to my desk and read the email Adam had just sent. By mutual agreement. Different visions for the company. Grateful for her many contributions. A reminder that any inquiries were to be directed to Bea, our PR liaison. That we had all signed NDAs.

Robbie came out of his office to loom over me as I finished reading the email. He was flushed and triumphant, not bothering to mute his words. "See? I told you."

“What happened?” I asked in the low-pitched whisper everyone else was using.

“What should have happened a long time ago.” He looked around the room, realizing his voice was pitched at a different volume than the ambient murmur; even though the subtle acoustics dampened his words, he was attracting stares. He jerked his head and I followed him back to the cluster of offices where he worked.

I had rarely been in his workspace at Eventive. It had a weird familiar-but-off vibe. It reminded me of our old house in Maine where we worked together across an old scratched-up dining table picked up from a thrift store. Here, the furniture was nicer but every surface was cluttered with food wrappers and scrunched LaCroix and Red Bull cans. The walls with their whiteboard surfaces were scribbled with equations and spidery flow-charts. The cleaners might have kept the floor swept and the trash can emptied but, just as I had learned in our early days, they must have learned not to touch his stuff.

It was a strange feeling, as if time had folded up, all of our years at Eventive suddenly collapsed and nestled against who we were in Lewiston. Him, a geeky, socially inept college kid with an outsized ego, and me, a high school dropout in love with code, happy among coders. But I hardly recognized my reflection framed in the arched floor-to-ceiling window, a woman who thought nothing of dropping hundreds of dollars on a pair of shoes, who spent her time trekking through airports, polishing pitch decks, and training new Client Solutions Analysts.

“She was all upset about some project in Africa,” Robbie said. “It wasn’t even an Eventive operation, but she was yelling at Adam about it. I mean, actually screaming, like a crazy person. Then she got all high and mighty about one of our clients. Like, we’re supposed to dump a client because she personally doesn’t like the guy’s politics? That’s not our job. We write code. We design systems.”

"We change minds," I said. He frowned at me, confused. "It's something I say in pitches."

"Right. I mean, sure, we connect clients with new customers, we help them fine-tune messaging and meet their goals. We're good at it, but what we do isn't political, it can't be. It's just math, probabilities. Aurora never understood that. She was always going off on these social justice rants. This time, she went too far."

"What did she do?"

"Gave a whacko speech at a conference, all about how biased tech is, how it discriminates against women and Blacks and shit like that. She didn't trash Eventive by name, but she didn't have to. People know where she works. It was all over Twitter. That was the last straw. Though if I were Adam, she'd have been out years ago."

"Well, whatever happened, I'll miss her."

"No you won't," Robbie said. "You have me."

He nudged the office door shut with his foot, put his palms against the whiteboard on either side of me and leaned in for a kiss. A long, deep kiss, as sensual as he'd been in months.

After he pushed away he looked at his hands and laughed. He held them out to show me: a reverse image of the scribbles on the whiteboard wall. Then he grabbed a marker from his desk and studied the places where his hands had blurred his notes. When I told him I had to get back to my work he just nodded absently, already deep into his thoughts.

Instead of going to my desk, I headed for the bathroom where I rinsed the bad taste out of my mouth before locking myself in a stall to cry.

Sixteen

It was as if I had just been given a pair of glasses and discovered I'd been seeing the world through a myopic mist. When I went into the galley to make a coffee, I'd see guys laughing over a meme, one I would have laughed at myself not long ago, but now I saw something toxic in the image, the poison wrapped up inside a joke, something cruel in their sneers.

Or it was as if a dial had been twitched and for the first time I was hearing messages on a frequency I couldn't pick up before. A subtle insult. A sexist put-down. A casually racist remark. A statement tossed off in a kind of shorthand, certain everyone present agreed that anybody who raised concerns about how tech was warping people's behavior was an enemy of free speech, and probably a humorless lesbian bitch. It wasn't just in the office. I picked it up from the clients, too, ones I'd always gotten along with. It had been there all along. I'd been part of it.

I began to see it in my pitch decks, too, in the code itself, in the ways our products were engineered to turn people's vulnerabilities against them just to sell them crap they didn't need. Even worse, when I heard Robbie talk about his projects I grasped for the first time the extent of what Aurora had been worried about. We had built a powerful machine to sell ads, then retooled it to deliver personalized propaganda at scale, and we sold it to anyone who could pay for it, at home and abroad.

Everything had changed.

When I lay beside Robbie in the dark I couldn't help going over whatever had happened between us that day and in our entire history together. I had always dismissed his rough edges as a personality quirk, just part of who he was, but now I saw how he cut me off from getting close to other people, the ways

he gave or withheld his approval like dog treats. The many screaming fights that somehow were always my fault. The hole in the drywall where he'd punched it in frustration, still unrepaired, a reminder I saw regularly. The time he hit me (but it was only once, and he said he was sorry, so what's the big deal?). Without being conscious of it, I had always been aware of the heat of his anger, fed by resentment and all-too-frequent frustration, making me careful about what I said and did. I knew too well the banked heat of his fury would flare up and scorch me if he had a bad day.

He had a lot of bad days lately. The big project he had been working on, the one my clients were excited about, was behind schedule. He was convinced it was ready to ship, but Adam kept sending him back to retool it. The deepfakes looked too fakey, he said, the phrases they voiced came across as automated, robotic, weird. And it wasn't just Adam being picky, there was an unacceptable percentage of misfires according to test subjects. "I don't get it," he grouched one night as we headed for home. "It seems to me to be working fine, but Adam keeps telling me to keep at it. I guess that's what happens when you work for a perfectionist."

"That sounds like Adam, all right," I murmured, hoping it would come across as support. I was never entirely sure how Robbie would take my words, or what might set him off, and my nervousness just made it harder to figure out what to say.

"He totally knows what he's doing. He's a genius. But it's frustrating. I think the problem is mainly in the language processing routine. Something's throwing it off. I asked Sanjay to look into it. Maybe he'll see something we can tweak. He's pretty good with neural networks."

So was Aurora, I thought to myself, but I'd have to be suicidal to say it out loud. Robbie's attitude toward her had only grown more entrenched.

The day after Aurora got the boot I went through my

calendar to find all the blocks of time scheduled for my monthly meetings with her and changed each event name to things like “dentist” and “dry cleaning.” Something stubborn in me clung to having an hour dedicated to something other than the job. I would take a walk or have a cappuccino or a glass of wine all by myself, and hope Robbie didn’t notice. He didn’t always keep close track of my calendar—it was too full for me to keep track of it—but when he did, he was prone to finding things to fight about.

When the time for the first falsely-scheduled hour came around, I went to the coffee joint she took me to the first time, back when I was a noob. We often had our monthly meetings there. As soon as I stepped through the door a weighted load of memories landed on me and I felt that stuffed-up sinus pressure that came from holding back tears.

I missed her. I missed feeling good about what I was doing with my life. Coming here was a terrible idea. I would have turned around and left if the barista hadn’t recognized me with a beaming smile. She had served us often and always remembered my usual order, while coaxing the more adventurous Aurora to try something new.

Fine, I’d order my usual and then take a walk for the rest of the stolen hour, anything but sit in this place that only reminded me of who I’d been just a few weeks ago, before I began to doubt everything. I placed my order and snagged a corner table near the window where I could stare outside and try to empty my mind.

But when I went to collect my latte the barista told me to hang on a sec and started rummaging around a cluttered desk behind the counter. “Ah! Here it is.” She handed me a folded piece of paper. “Glad you came by before it got lost.”

My name was on it, and inside was a single line in block printing. “Install the Signal app on your phone (personal not work) and contact me. xoxo.” No signature, but I was sure it was from Aurora. Almost sure. I wasn’t completely confident about

anything anymore. But I followed instructions, downloaded the app, and sent a message to the number I had for Aurora's non-work phone.

>Hi

I had finished my drink before I got a text in response.

>Hi yourself. Sorry I didn't say goodbye.

>Not much chance.

>Can we meet?

Those tears tried to make an appearance again.

>YES. When and where?"

Right now, apparently. Following her directions, I called a cab and gave the driver an address in a neighborhood I'd never been to before. It turned out to be a residential street with working class houses and rust bucket cars parked on one side, a fence lined with overgrown shrubs on the other. I tapped a message into the app: "I'm here." She sent back instructions to head back the way I'd come and follow the fence around the corner until I got to the cemetery gates. Once inside, take the first left.

There she was, a short distance away, sitting on a concrete bench. She held out her Faraday pouch and I fumbled my phone into it. "Left my work phone at my desk," I said once it was sealed up, whispering for some reason.

"Good idea." She stood and pushed her palms against the small of her back. "Oof, I don't know who Arthur McTavish was," she pointed to the inscription on its back, In Memory Of. "But his seat sure is uncomfortable."

"I'm so glad to see you." I couldn't keep them back this time, the tears. She looked dismayed, but stood and wrapped me in

her arms, rubbed my back, made soothing noises until I broke away and wiped my face. "Sorry. It's just not the same anymore without you. I can't believe they did that to you."

"I can't believe I gave so many years of my life to that place."

I knuckled my nose again. "What's with the graveyard?"

"It seemed appropriate." She laughed. "Here lies the career of Aurora Bello, rest in pieces. Also, not a lot of security cameras in this neighborhood, and with all this open space there's less chance we'll be overheard."

"Shit. You're being watched?"

"Let's just say I don't want to run the risk of getting you in trouble for talking to a troublemaker. How much time do you have?"

"As much as you want." While I was in the cab, I'd juggled my afternoon schedule and put in some dummy errands, in case anyone checked.

"Up for a walk? I'm stiff, thanks to Arthur, need to stretch."

We strolled down the drive, then took a footpath through rows of headstones. "I can't believe Adam canned you," I said.

"Oh, I can."

"He just let a lot of talent walk out the door. Seems so stupid. How many job offers have you had?"

"Well, now, that's an interesting thing. I'm suddenly a pariah in the industry. Ain't nobody gonna give this crazy bitch a job."

"*What?*"

"I gave this talk, right? At a conference. A small one, mostly academics. Said stuff people have been saying for years. When I say people, I mean mostly women. Mar Hicks, Timnit Gebru, Safiya Noble, Virginia Eubanks. For some reason, the bros aren't all that concerned about what kind of damage they're doing as they move fast and break things. Anyway, I didn't think it was a big thing, but it's all it took. Adam used it as an excuse to cut me loose. Then he finished the job by cutting my career to shreds."

"No."

“Yes, it’s what Eventive is good at. They move quickly, I’ll say that for then. I started reaching out to my contacts thinking ‘fuck this shit, I’ll show him.’ And every door got slammed in my face. Even my old advisor at MIT got weird when I called him. He’d been hearing things. The old rumor mill grinding away, and turns out there’s all kinds of shit out there about me once you start poking around.”

“But people know you. You’re brilliant.”

She held up a finger. “No, I’m crazy. Which, okay, I have a mental illness, I’ll cop to that, but I didn’t do any of that stuff that you’ll read about me online. It’s part of the deluxe package, planting reputation-destroying stuff that forms a whole backstory, all of it detonated with the push of a button, then boosted with industry-leading SEO and hand-crafted fieldwork personally organized by Connie Uys. I should be flattered. This kind of operation usually targets heads of state or opposition leaders. It’s expensive.”

“But ... why? I mean, what’s the point? Is Adam that pissed off?”

“He’s pissed off, all right, but it’s tactical. Preemptive. He wants to make sure nobody will listen to me if I tell them what Eventive is doing. I know too much, and he thinks I’ll blab. What really gets me?” She shook her head and looked up at the sky, unable to speak for a minute. When she did, her voice trembled. “Goddammit, I helped build Eventive, and it’s doing so. Much. Harm.”

“I didn’t see it before, but now ... I don’t even want to work there anymore.”

“No.” She stopped to face me and put her hands on my shoulders, her grip painfully tight. “No, no, no. Wait. Let the dust settle. You leave now? They’ll freak. You don’t want them connecting you with me any more than they already do. You hear people saying shit, don’t stick up for me. Keep your head down and do your work. Plan an exit if that’s what you need to do, but put it off as long as you can. I don’t want them...” She

paused, her mouth tight. "What they did to me, they'd do to you if you're not careful. You have to take care of yourself, you hear me? Now, let's walk. Let's pretend we're here to visit the deceased."

"What are you going to do?" I asked after a while.

"Spend time with my folks. They're confused right now, and worried. I have to reassure them. See if I can rebuild my life. There might be a place for me in Germany. An old friend runs a center for AI ethics at a university. He's been trying to get me to work with him since before I got my doctorate. He seems to be on my side, or at least reserving judgment. I might be able to do research there, unofficially."

"Maybe I could come visit. Unofficially."

"Best thing for you to do is pretend you never knew me." She paused by a lichen-covered gravestone and crouched down to peer at it. "Look, I have a favor to ask, and I'm not sure I should."

"Ask away."

She traced a carved name with a fingertip, then rose from her crouch. She looked as if she were about to speak but closed her mouth and walked on. "Do you believe what I've been telling you?" she asked, looking out over rows of headstones that marched in a line down the swoop of the lawn.

"What? Of course."

"It's pretty whacky stuff. You aren't thinking somewhere at the back of your head 'sounds pretty paranoid. Maybe she did go off the rails. Maybe those rumors are true, and all this is just a symptom of her psychiatric condition.'"

"Hell, no. Don't even say that. I don't know if I can trust anyone else, but I trust you."

"What about Robbie?"

I sighed. "I think we're done. I just haven't figured out how to end it."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not. Well, I am, but only because I tried so hard for so

long. Anyway, I'm not going to tell him anything. What's this favor?"

She took a deep breath, blew it out, her hands jammed into her pockets. "Okay. I'm going to give you something. Don't do anything with it. Just keep it, in case. Hide it good. I shouldn't do this to you, but I don't have anyone else. Can you hold onto this for me?"

She reached for my hand and I felt something slipped into it. A thumb drive, warm from Aurora clutching it. I followed her lead and casually put my hands in my pockets, my fingers wrapped around it, holding onto that warmth. "Of course. I'll keep it safe. What is it?"

"Documents. If something happens ... you know a reporter, right? Someone you trust? Give it to him if something happens to me."

"Something already did happen. They're trashing your career. Why don't I—"

"No. Promise me." She glared at me, suddenly fierce. "Just hold onto it, okay? Don't let anyone know you have it. I'm going to call you a cab. You're not going to be able to flag one down out here." She fished out the pouch, got out her phone, then turned away and made the call. "He'll meet you at the gate. I'm going to go see if I can find where Arthur McTavish is buried, tell him what I think of his stupid bench. You take care of yourself."

She took my phone out and handed it to me before she crushed me in a hug. She whispered "thank you," then pushed me away before striding down the path, head held high. She didn't look back.

I stopped by our apartment before returning to work, sorted through the random thumb drives that had landed in a junk drawer, and found one that would do. It was similar in appearance apart from a piece of paper I'd taped to it years ago when I'd downloaded my favorite film from Pirate Bay and saved it on a stick. *Brazil*. The ink was a little smudged, and the

paper it was written on had yellowed. I carefully pried the tape off the USB and smoothed the label onto Aurora's thumb drive, dug around to find a roll of scotch tape and carefully added just enough to ensure it would stay put without looking too fresh. Robbie hated that movie, and it wasn't likely he would reuse an old USB when the new ones were so much faster. I pushed the thumb drive to the back of the drawer and scrambled its contents to restore it to its usual chaotic state. Then I went to the office.

The next months were strange. During the weeks after Aurora was fired I was adrift, confused, having trouble concentrating. But strangely enough, after our meeting in the cemetery I resumed my old identity, joking with clients, landing more contracts, talking up the capabilities of the product with my trainees as enthusiastically as ever. I had somehow switched on my previous self, as if it were a highly-realistic automaton equipped with the latest version of speech generation software, while the aware, human part of me stood back in the shadows, assessing my performance. My relationship with Robbie had returned to normal, too. I was able to parry the barbs he threw at me when he was irritable with even greater success than usual, smoothing his ruffled feathers and avoiding arguments. The love, or whatever it had been, was gone, but he didn't notice.

I had lost all faith in the company, in Adam, in Robbie, but work went on. I segmented my life so thoroughly that I didn't let my doubts surface except in private moments, like when I was waiting for a flight in an airport or waking up in a hotel room somewhere far from headquarters, or the times when I stopped by the coffee shop for a latte, hoping for another message from Aurora. I never got one on paper or through the Signal app. She was keeping me safe, I told myself, but it still stung.

At those times of doubt, with my guard lowered and my

automated identity switched off, my gut would twist and thoughts would circle, running on a hamster wheel, going nowhere frantically. It was a weird, bifurcated pause in my life, a hiatus between my years as a tech evangelist, unthinkingly helping Eventive run endless experiments on the public, perfecting its ability to surveil and influence, and the time that followed, when I was on the run from that hideous power.

Those weeks of performing my former self, a loyal employee happy to work at Eventive, stuttered to a stop the day I learned that Aurora was dead.

Seventeen

"She didn't kill herself." Aurora's mother glared fiercely at the air in front of her. Her shoulder twitched when her husband reached for it.

"My dear..."

"I'm telling you, I know my daughter. She would not do this." Pritha Bello shook off his consoling hand angrily. "She had plans. That job in Germany, that was promising. Even if it didn't come through, she had research she wanted to do. Writing projects. Lots of ideas. The last time we spoke, she said she was almost done packing up her apartment, she would bring her things down as soon as she gave the keys to the landlord." She turned to me, bereft. "She was going to stay here with us while she decided what to do next. I made up her bed with fresh sheets just a few days ago."

"The coroner ruled it an accident," her husband murmured to me.

"How?" his wife demanded. "How could she have made such a mistake? After all these years, an overdose by mistake?"

He sighed. "Who knows? She had her moods, Pritha, you know that. Losing her position was hard on her."

"I spoke to her that very morning. She was fine."

"I'm sorry." Winston Bello gave me a strained and joyless smile. "We are finding this situation very difficult."

"Difficult," Pritha muttered under her breath like a curse.

It was the afternoon of the funeral, a sad celebration of a life abruptly cut short. Some of her MIT connections attended, along with a few Eventive people—the man I called Jeeves, who had left his tablet behind for once and a couple of young engineers, associates of Robbie who I didn't know well. Our small number was dwarfed by dozens of relatives and friends of Aurora's parents, who adjourned from the service to the

small house where Aurora had grown up, swirling around the bereaved parents, offering condolences and food. I had gotten a ride from a cousin and stayed behind as the guests began to drift away, sharing hugs and tears as they departed. I was the last one there. It was becoming awkward. Why doesn't this girl go and leave us alone with our sorrow? But then Pritha began to speak from the heart and her anger had boiled over.

"I'll put the kettle on," Winston said in the uncomfortable silence, and he headed for the kitchen, where every surface was crowded with containers of food.

"I agree with you," I told Pritha. "I don't think she killed herself."

"So, you go for the accidental overdose theory?" She scrubbed an eye with the heel of her hand. "I don't know, it's all impossible. How did she seem to you?"

"I only saw her once after ... it was almost two months ago. I wanted to get together, but she said she didn't want to get me in trouble. With work."

She gave me a watery smile. "She liked you very much."

"She was the best. Really. I learned so much from her."

"I just don't understand why she was let go like that. She worked so hard for that company."

"She was the smartest person there, too." Not long ago I wouldn't have said that without feeling a twinge of disloyalty to Robbie. No more. It had become obvious that her absence left a gaping hole in the company's expertise, and a number of innovative projects, including Robbie's, were stalling out.

"So what happened?"

I chose my words carefully. "She had concerns about some things the company was doing. Did she talk to you about it?"

"No. Just that she and Adam could no longer work together. A matter of principle. Do you know what those concerns were?"

"I don't know all the details. But I'll find out what I can, I promise you that. She was a good friend. A good person."

"And she didn't kill herself," Pritha whispered, her eyes fixed

on mine, shadowed with trouble. I could see the question she wasn't asking in the crease of her brow, in the gaunt lines around her mouth. "There's all this ugliness online. People saying cruel things, sharing photos that aren't real. Ridiculous rumors. Everything they are saying about her is a lie."

"I know."

"I don't understand why there is so much hate in the world. Why people would attack her like that. What could have set it all off?"

"It was orchestrated, and she knew it."

"Oh my god. My poor girl." She gazed at a collection of framed photos arranged on the wall. A baby Aurora, swaddled in a blanket. A toddler Aurora. A dozen Auroras, marking the years, up to the latest one, a family picture with Aurora in the middle, wearing her PhD regalia, holding her dissertation and a bottle of champagne. Pritha began to tell me stories about each picture, each moment in her daughter's life, until Winston brought out mugs of tea. We sat and he added his own fond reminiscences of a child who was brilliant and funny and now, suddenly absent.

"She was very concerned about events in my home country, Nigeria," he said abruptly. "A cousin of hers was injured by some hooligans brawling about a political issue. He was just a bystander, but he was beaten badly."

"She told me. How is he doing?"

"He's recovering, though he permanently lost the sight in one eye. She was deeply upset about it. There's such a lot of misinformation being shared there on social media. She blamed her industry for profiting from lies, but it wasn't her fault. I mean, does the company even operate in Nigeria?"

"Eventive doesn't have an office there so far as I know."

"She was so troubled about it."

"There's plenty of reason to be troubled," I said. "In the industry, I mean."

"I never knew exactly what her work was about," Pritha said, studying me.

"She was finding new ways to teach computers to solve problems. The last time we talked about it, she was troubleshooting a recurrent neural network. I didn't really understand it. My job is just tech support for the businesses that use our platform. Her work was innovative, and way over my head. But whatever she did, she cared about doing the right thing. That's why she got into it with Adam Barton."

"She told us she had given a presentation that made him angry."

"Maybe. I mean, they already had disagreements."

"He used it as an excuse," Winston suggested, and I nodded. "It was so humiliating for her, being told to clean out her desk, escorted out of the building like a criminal in front of everyone. She was always top of her class, the one who went to state with her science fair projects. She told us she had chosen badly when she took that job. He had funded her research, you see. It made her feel beholden."

"That man," Pritha growled. "I'll never forgive him."

"Did you see what Pritha did with the flower arrangement?" Winston asked me. She ducked her head, embarrassed but obviously pleased by the proud tone of his voice. "Adam Barton had an arrangement sent to the funeral home, very showy, terribly expensive I'm sure. His assistant was there when she read the card. Expecting us to forgive and forget, I suppose."

"That smarmy little man." She shuddered.

Winston beamed at his wife. "She called the funeral director over and asked where the waste bins were. In front of everyone she picked up that huge bunch of flowers—almost bigger than her!—and took it out to the dumpster in the back, heaved it in. Came back inside..." He dusted his hands off theatrically and chuckled.

"Good for you," I said.

"I couldn't bear to look at it. After what he did? No." She

grasped her husband's outstretched hand as they looked at one another, for a moment sharing a triumph.

"She cared about you," I said. "A lot. It bothered her she didn't get to seem much of you. The schedule at work is insane. I mean, she couldn't get away, and I know it made her sad. You know something? I envied her. She told me about you, about the aunties and uncles and cousins and I don't have any of that, and I could tell it meant the world to her, knowing you always had her back."

"You're very kind," Winston said as his wife flicked tears from her eyes.

"We understood the pressures of work," she said. "She was so diligent. Even after she was let go, she wanted to tie up loose ends, staying up there in Boston until her lease was up. She didn't have to, but she wanted to make sure everything was tidied up. Shipshape. She was going to be here by the end of the week. I was so looking forward to..." She took a deep breath, shook her emotion away, then said in a brisk tone "Will you stay for supper? We have so much food. We would love to have you." In reality, she looked exhausted, holding it together by sheer will.

"No. I have to get to the airport." I glanced at my phone. "In fact, my ride will be here in just a couple of minutes. I should go wait on the sidewalk. I just wanted you to know ... those concerns she had, I won't let them drop. And also, I'm just really sorry about everything."

We all stood and I reached for my coat and bag. "I'll wait with you," Winston said. "Let me get my jacket."

Pritha gave me a firm hug, practically bruising my ribs. "Take care," she whispered, her eyes full of warning as her husband returned.

We stood on the stoop together looking down the street. It was a chilly autumn evening and the sun had already set. "She would never say it," Winston told me, "but it's actually my fault."

"What? How?"

"Aurora's illness. It runs in my family."

"But she was managing it."

"Yes, but being let go like that, discovering it would be hard to pick up the pieces, then all that ugliness online. It was too much. Her intelligence, that all came from Pritha. My side of the family only brought trouble. Her illness. I was spared, but it's in my genes. I passed it down." He said it with grim certainty, as if making a confession to a crime.

"Bullshit. Everything she got from both of you was positive," I said. "I saw her in all of her moods. She understood them, like weather patterns. The last time we talked, she was fine, she was determined. She wanted to make things right. I don't think she took her life. And none of this is your fault."

"It's kind of you to say." He wasn't convinced, I could see, but he put a good face on it. "This must be your driver."

Another hug, just as warm though gentler than Pritha's, then he picked up my bag as I climbed in. "Thank you for coming." He passed it to me.

"Of course."

"Do stay in touch." As we drove away I looked back at him, standing on the sidewalk, his shoulders slumped, his expression vacant, looking like a man who had paused while on a long journey, suddenly realizing he was lost.

I didn't get Robbie's text until I had landed and turned on my phone.

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>wtf you were at the funeral
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He must have been furious, typing those words. Jeeves must have clued him in, or the engineers he worked with. Those two had stuck their necks out, showing up. At first I had been bummed seeing them there, knowing word would get back and it would cause conflict, but I was glad to see Aurora had some friends in the upper echelons. I typed a reply.

>Had some downtime in NYC before my next flight, squeezed it in. Drunk guy in the seat next to me fell asleep and his head kept flopping over onto my shoulder, plus he slobbered, ugh. Just landed in Austin. It's HOT here!!

>why do you travel all the time? You should have your staff do these prezos.

>This one's too important. Big \$\$\$, cant risk having my minions screw it up. Gonna rest up for tomorrow. Make sure you eat something. xoxo

I checked into my hotel, ordered some food, went over my presentation and went to bed. The next day I did a bang-up job convincing some scuzzy PR outfit that we could revolutionize their workflow with tools that would obliterate the competition. When it became clear they were hoping to get in on some of the millions of dollars sloshing around political campaigns I organized a virtual meet-and-greet with one of the engineers who handled sensitive clients for a higher fee.

Then I headed off to California to touch base with one of our most profitable clients who had opted for several upgrades and wanted some hands-on assistance. I had built some extra time into the schedule to schmooze at a tech conference at Stanford—and made sure I had downtime in between to take a look at that thumb drive I'd been carrying with me ever since I left Boston.

After landing at the airport I rented a car and drove into San Francisco, where I stopped by a computer store and bought a new laptop. I went to a low-key café, ordered a beverage, then went to work. First I deleted all the bloatware that might try to call the mothership, edited the settings to disable all the virtual ports that could conceivably communicate with the outside world, and made sure the wifi and Bluetooth were disabled. Then, double-checking that nobody could see my

screen and there were no cameras within view, I plugged in the USB labeled “Brazil” and started to read.

There was a readme.txt file that outlined the contents. Aurora had somehow collected hundreds of documents: memos, emails, conversations screen-capped from our internal version of Slack, slide decks and proposals given to big-ticket clients, all organized by topic. Foreign campaigns. Domestic political. Domestic other. Projects in development. I chose the files dealing with the Nigerian operation first. Then I scrolled through random files until my eyes were gritty and my vision was starting to blur.

No wonder she had been so careful when she gave this information to me. It was a vast encyclopedia of highly sophisticated dirty tricks. And while I had been unsure before, I now was convinced that having these documents in her possession, or simply knowing what was in them, had gotten her killed.

I removed the USB drive, checked to make sure there wasn’t any trace of the documents cached anywhere, then checked again, before I restored the settings and returned it to the store, telling them I’d changed my mind. Robbie might notice it on my credit card statement—he monitored them haphazardly—but I wouldn’t have any trouble making up an excuse. Thought I could use it at home, but decided against it.

One more stop: a legendary community makerspace in the Mission. I paid for a membership, settled at a desktop running a Linux OS, made sure there was no spyware running in the background, downloaded the Tor browser, started up a VPN, and connected to a server in Switzerland that I had learned about years ago from the IRC channel where cypherpunks preached privacy. It was still running, and still provided free end-to-end encrypted storage for those in the know. I created an account, ran some checks to make sure it was maintaining the latest security protocols, and uploaded a copy of all of Aurora’s files. I took advantage of the makerspace’s coffee

machine while the files transferred and chatted with some pre-teens who were making a video game about zombies.

It wasn't until I tried to sleep that night that I questioned whether I should be doing this at all. If knowing what Eventive was up to had led to Aurora's murder, they might want me deleted, too. But as I thought about what she must have gone through to get those documents, and what her final weeks must have been like, alone and aware of what she was up against, I decided I had to do whatever I could to bring that cache of damning information to light.

"Metamorph!" Brian Friedman opened his arms in welcome as he saw me across the lobby. I waved back and went over to the coffee bar where he was waiting for a drink. "How are you doing?"

"Great. Here to network, as usual. You?" I shook his hand and made sure he got the scrap of paper I had passed over to him.

"Hoping to pick up a story idea." He glanced around, unfolded the note and squinted down at it.

"How are the kids?"

"Fantastic." He didn't skip a beat. "Jake has discovered jokes. He wants to be a stand-up comedian but his gags are terrible." He looked up at me, squinting in puzzlement, but nodded.

"Going to get some fresh air before it starts. See you around." I headed for the door, crossed the street and stood under a tree that had a canopy of gnarly arms stretching out overhead. Some kind of bird that doesn't live in Boston made strange wind-up toy noises from its branches. It wasn't as hot here as Austin had been, but it felt like a completely different season than the damp, chilly city I had left three days previously. Semi-tropical and balmy, with an acrid hint of smoke in the air. I vaguely remembered hearing about wildfires from the news channel running in the airport. The campus was beautiful and had that otherworldly vibe of being an island reserved for deep thoughts, but the air smelled like danger.

As Brian crossed the street and looked around for me, I found the Faraday pouch in my purse and pulled it out to show him. I'd purchased it at the store where I'd returned the laptop, paying cash. I dropped my phones in and he followed my example, bemused. "What's up?"

"I have some documents for you. But I need everything I tell you to be off the record. Is that what I mean? I can't have anyone trace this to me."

"Technically, 'off the record' ties my hands—I can't do anything with what you tell me. Can I use what you tell me for background? Or maybe quote you without identifying who you are?"

"No. No quotes. I just need to get this information out, and you're the only reporter I know."

"Okay. No quotes, and I will be careful not to write anything that could identify you, does that work? Tell me about these documents. What are they? How'd you get them?"

"You know Aurora Bello?"

His eyes glanced away, then back. Shit, he had heard the rumors. "I've read some of her papers. She worked with you at Eventive, right?" His tone was studiously neutral.

"Whatever you've been hearing about her, it's all lies. She got canned for objecting to things the company is doing and then they set out to smear her reputation. Made sure nobody would believe anything she said. That she would never work in the industry again."

"'They' being—"

"Eventive. Well, Adam Barton's various enterprises, he has a number of them. It's his business model. Manipulate the public for a price."

"You still work there?"

"For now. Brian, what they're doing is awful. I haven't read through all the documents, but ... it's bad. They have enormous amounts of data about every adult in the country and code that lets clients get inside their heads."

"Sounds like Facebook's ad program. Extreme market segmentation and a lot of A/B testing."

"It's way more powerful than what Facebook offers, and it's not just ads. The commercial version is what I've been pitching to businesses all these years. How to persuade people to buy your shit. But it goes much deeper than that. They have active political influence campaigns that back up media operations with actual violence. That's mostly done through Barton's other companies."

"What are these other companies?"

"He has a whole tangle of businesses that do essentially the same thing as Eventive but operate independently so they can offshore risk and keep sensitive information compartmentalized. One company specializes in political operations in foreign countries. During a Nigerian election they hired and directed mercenaries to literally attack members of an opposition party—like, beating people up with tire irons—to supplement a tech team that flooded social media with propaganda and incitements to mob violence. They did something similar in Turkey. Another case: this hacker in Romania, he worked for a shady outfit that did jobs for Barton's sleaziest clients and was paid in Bitcoin. He ran CNAs like DDoS attacks—"

"Hang on, I know what a DDoS attack is, you flood servers to take websites down, but CNA..."

"Computer network attacks. A whole menu of mischief on offer: phishing emails that insert malware, exfiltrating sensitive data, finding vulnerabilities to exploit. Basically fucking with your enemies for a fee. One of his coworkers got burned over a foreign operation and went to prison. Barton denied any responsibility, of course. That pissed the hacker off. He found Aurora and told her about all the shit they did. He was in the states to attend a hacker convention out west, but first he did some sightseeing in the mountains, where he had a fatal car accident. She got a copy of the police report. There was

no reason for his car to run off the road. The weather was fine, there wasn't any oncoming traffic. No skid marks. Nothing wrong with the vehicle. He just drove right off a cliff."

"You think it wasn't an accident."

"The vehicle he was driving was one of the models that can be remotely hacked through its onboard wifi system. The car maker sent out a patch, but a lot of people didn't install it. Somebody could have remotely jacked up the braking system or accelerator, or even the steering."

"And happened to do it right when he got to a handy cliff?"

"GPS. It's not that hard to track exactly where people are. Not if you know what you're doing, and Adam Barton knows."

Brian got that carefully neutral look on his face again. "Okay, but it could have just been an accident. The guy got distracted for a minute. It happens."

"Maybe. But once you read through those files you may think differently. Barton started out in military cyber ops, then went to the NSA. Now he does contract work for them. We're talking serious capabilities. He's hired a lot of talent, he's personally well informed about the latest in signals intelligence, he has a South African named Connie Uys running a crew of mercenaries, and he has no principles. Look, it's bad enough what Eventive is doing. They manipulate people at scale and they don't care who gets hurt. But it goes deeper, and darker. Aurora tried to change the company culture, but it wasn't possible. They kicked her out and did everything they could to destroy her. And now she's dead."

He studied me. "You think that's suspicious, too. That explains all the cloak-and-dagger."

Fuck. He wasn't buying it. "Forget it. I'll find someone else to work with."

He grabbed my elbow. "No, hold on. I'm definitely interested, and if it pans out it's a big story. It's just ... you know, it's a lot to take in."

"Wait till you go through the documents. There's a lot there. I

don't know how she got them all without getting caught, but if anyone could do it, Aurora could. She was really good. Smarter than anyone there."

"You seriously think she might have been murdered?"

"I don't know, but I talked to her parents a few days ago. Her mother is convinced it wasn't suicide or an accidental overdose, no matter what the official story is. And given everything I know about Aurora, I think her mom's right. She had a mental illness, that part of the gossip is true, but it was diagnosed when she was a teenager and she kept up with meds and therapy. She couldn't have accomplished everything she did if it wasn't well under control."

"But getting fired is tough. Getting brigaded online is emotionally exhausting. She had a lot going on."

"She was in regular touch with her parents. I'm sure her mother would have picked up on it if things were going sideways. She talked with Aurora the morning of her death and didn't get that vibe at all. Besides, Aurora wanted to do something about Eventive. She had a reason to live."

"What was she planning?"

"She wouldn't tell me. Said it would be dangerous for me to know. But she knew I had a journalist friend and gave me a copy of her documentation in case something happened to her. Which is why I'm doing this."

"Okay." He took a breath. "These documents. How do I get—"

Feeling exposed and vulnerable I passed him the thumb drive as casually as I could, just a friendly gesture, clasping his hand. It was hot from my hand, as if still carrying Aurora's warmth, or maybe a dose of radioactivity. He managed to slip it into his pocket unobtrusively. "You'll need to be careful," I told him. "I used an air-gapped computer, and you should, too. If you don't use tight security, they'll catch on and they'll kill the story. Maybe more than the story."

He laughed, even though it wasn't a joke. "Don't worry, I've handled sensitive info before, I know what to do. Can I reach out

to you, though? Not for comment, just for context. I'm going to have questions. Unless you can give me the name of someone else there who I could—"

"No. There's nobody I would trust." I had hoped I could leave it all in his lap and go back to pretending I was a good little employee, but even with Aurora's readme file there would be technical things he wouldn't understand. "Do you use Signal? We can communicate that way." I had a sudden vision of Robbie seeing a notification from Brian. He had a habit of picking up my phones and browsing my messages. He'll kill me, I thought, feeling sick to my stomach. Not literally, but he would be furious, and he'd run to Adam to tell him about it.

"Don't use my work or personal number," I added. "I'll get a burner. Give me a couple of weeks before I contact you. I need to organize some things. Figure out what to do."

"Got it."

"I'm scared, Brian. I don't know how I'm going to keep working there, knowing what I know, but if I leave now it'll just look suspicious. They know I was friends with Aurora. They won't let me go without protecting themselves, and they know how to do it. You'll see from those documents. They destroy people as a service." That smoky air was getting darker, suddenly. My chest felt tight, so tight I felt like I was suffocating.

"Deep breath. It's okay." I felt his hand on my arm, steadying me. "Just breathe." He gave me a moment to get it together. "We can do this," he said, sounding committed for the first time. "I'll take every precaution to keep these records safe and secret. You don't need to take any more risks. Don't even contact me if it doesn't feel safe."

"Okay." The wave of dizziness began to ebb. I got my breathing under control. "I'm all right."

"Just so you know, this is going to take time," he went on. "A story like this is complex, and it needs to be solid. Since I'm a freelancer, I'll need to pitch it to the right outlet and gain their support. Companies like Eventive have a lot of lawyers, and that

makes editors cautious. Speaking of which, you might want to consult with an attorney, yourself. It would be best if you found someone with experience representing whistleblowers.”

“Oh, man. I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“You’re being very brave.”

“No, Aurora was brave. I’m doing this because of her.”

“Leave it with me. Now, I’m going to go back in there and pretend I’m not in possession of a blockbuster story. Maybe you should take a break, go back to your hotel, or—”

“No. I need to act like normal. Even if normal means working for Evil Corp.”

He gave my arm a squeeze. “Let’s see what we can do to hold them accountable. Meanwhile, be safe.”

I was. For a while.

Eighteen

For the next six months I lived my life on autopilot, imitating my former self, my innocent self when I could throw myself into a grueling work schedule without giving the ethics of the company I worked for any thought. But that ability I'd had to act the part was failing me. I wasn't managing all that well, feeling scatterbrained and unusually incompetent, but I blamed it on chronic migraines, which had actually become a thing.

I rarely traveled anymore. Adam had suggested I delegate sales and field visits to the more experienced members of my team so I could focus on hiring and training additional staff to grow my unit. When it came from Adam, it wasn't optional, it was an order. It made me nervous—was he getting suspicious?—but he may have simply been doing a favor for Robbie, who didn't like me being on the road.

His big project continued to falter, and he was growing increasingly vocal about it with me, sometimes wanting an audience for his venting, other times wanting someone to blame. I wasn't supportive enough. I was trying to show him up. I was dragging him down. I was flirting with that engineer in the galley, he saw me. I had betrayed him by siding with Aurora. Nobody else mentioned her name, but for him it was a scab he couldn't resist picking when we were alone.

With no trips to give me breathing room, without anyone I could talk to, I was retreating into an interior part of myself, a place of solitary confinement, listening to him rage, speaking only if he insisted on a response. Waiting it out until those moments that usually came after a storm, when the script would flip and he would tell me how much he loved me, how much I mattered to him. This usually happened as we lay in bed after sex, which was the pivot from being pissed off to

cosplaying a rom-com. The next day, flowers would be delivered to my desk at work, a public display of his affection, of what a good guy he was, a signal that I was his. Don't touch.

A doctor prescribed yoga sessions for my migraines, so I would take my mat and a change of clothes to a studio twice a week. Some mornings before I left for work I would slip the burner phone I kept hidden in a box of tampons into my yoga bag so I could check in with Brian. He would queue up questions for me and I would work through them, sitting in a toilet stall, careful to avoid spending so much time in there it drew attention. Occasionally I would schedule an acupuncture treatment on the other side of town and, while outdoors and surrounded by ambient noise, would take ten minutes for a Signal phone call with Brian, who would fill me in on his progress.

He was getting more and more excited about the story, and I was getting increasingly nervous. After he had digested the contents of the document dump, he started to contact experts in AI, big data, political communication, and tech ethics to round out the story, though I begged him not to. He swore they wouldn't leak, but that didn't reassure me. It was clearly getting back to Adam that there was a disturbance in the force.

We all saw signs: A memo went out from the company's lawyers reminding everyone of the legal implications of violating our non-disclosure agreements. They were dire, and it caused a ripple of anxiety throughout the office as people read through it. After scaring everyone, Adam recorded a pep talk, rallying the troops by trumpeting our successes but reminding us all that competitors were at work, trying to steal our intellectual property through covert means. He needed our loyalty and commitment.

The two engineers who had attended Aurora's funeral were let go. One went to work for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, taking a financial hit that led to snide jokes and the general opinion that he just wasn't good enough. The

other was taking a gap year to go off the grid and hike the Appalachian Trail. That roused a combination of envy and disdain. What a loser. Eventive didn't need people who weren't fully committed. Robbie made sure I knew that he was personally protecting me from the same dismal fate.

One day in late April I was summoned to Adam Barton's office. He had a couple of others in there with him, a man in a suit and tie who I had never seen before, standing beside Adam's desk just behind his right shoulder. The other, slouched in an armchair, was a bearded man with a ponytail and full sleeve tattoos. I didn't know his name, but I thought he worked in cybersecurity.

"How's your health?" Adam asked me.

"Good." I folded my hands and trapped them between my knees to control the shaking.

"No more migraines?"

"I still have them, but they aren't so bad."

"The yoga helps?" Of course he knew about the yoga sessions.

"It does."

"How's your team doing?" He tapped a pen against the edge of his desk, looking bored.

"I think it's a strong group, with a couple real standouts—Benny Liu and Jake Anderson are doing great work with the clients." That pen tapping was mesmerizing. I watched it rise and fall, wondering why he had called me into his office. "I'm glad you recommended I delegate more, the team is getting stronger with the extra responsibilities. I still need to fill those three new lines I've been allocated, so that's my priority now."

"Sounds good. When's the last time you talked to Brian Friedman?"

My heart stuttered and my pulse began to race. It was a good thing I'd had months to practice concealing my anxieties behind a facade. My voice didn't shake when I replied. "Brian?

The reporter? It's been a few years, now. We went to a museum together one afternoon, like, three years ago? And he used to send me emails occasionally, asking about stuff going on in the industry, not about Eventive. He knew that was off the table. I haven't heard from him in over a year." Tap, tap, tap. Like a metronome. "No, that's not true, I bumped into him last fall at a Stanford conference. But we just said hello. He might have been at some other events that I went to, but if he was there I didn't notice him."

Adam leaned forward and slipped his pen into a jar full of sharpened pencils and pens. "If you hear from him, let me know, would you?"

"Sure."

"Someone's poking around. We'll find out who."

It seemed as if the conversation was over, but before I could rise, he added, "Oh, by the way, we're locking down permissions as a security precaution. If you need to get under the hood for some reason, you'll have to rope in the bug fix crew from now on."

"All right. I'll make sure the team gets the word."

"Why? They haven't been looking at the code. Just you. But if they bring an issue to you in future, or if you have ideas about making a change, it's going to the maintenance unit, and if necessary they'll escalate it to DevOps. All you have to do is file a ticket."

"Got it."

He studied me for a long minute. I forced my hands still, my expression placid until the cyberguy broke the silence with a juicy sneeze. He shifted in his seat, pulled a bandana out of a back pocket and blew his nose loudly.

"Gesundheit," Adam said. "You can go."

I messaged Brian the next day from the yoga studio bathroom.

> I'm pulling out. Adam knows something's up.
> What did he say?
> Enough. He's keeping an eye on me. I can't risk it.
> Can we meet? It's shaping up. I just have a few gaps to fill.
> No, I'm out.

I shut the phone down and slipped out the sim card. The phone went into a trash can. I dropped the sim card into a barrel where some construction workers were burning trash. I was cautious and didn't see anyone following me, but then, they were professionals; I wouldn't see them if they didn't want me to.

Over the next few days I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched, and it didn't help that Connie Uys was suddenly crossing my path too frequently for it to be a coincidence, his vulpine gaze finding me from across the office or from down the street. Once, as I turned away from the coffee machine in the galley, I sloshed coffee over my hand, startled to find him right behind me, even though I hadn't heard his footsteps or seen anything out of my peripheral vision.

If he was watching me so closely, he probably had others doing it too, men I didn't know keeping me under observation. I couldn't stop by an ATM, as I had been doing at irregular moments to withdraw a couple of hundred dollars here, five hundred there. I hoped I had enough money already squirreled away. When the time came I would have to use cash to avoid leaving a trail.

Two weeks after that meeting with Adam I was brushing my teeth, getting ready for bed when I heard Robbie's voice in the bedroom. "What the *fuck*?"

I hurriedly turned the toothbrush off, rinsed, and went to the bedroom. "What is it?"

He thrust my phone toward me. I took it from him and read the notification. "Oh. Adam wants to see me tomorrow."

He knocked it out of my hand. "About that reporter."

"It doesn't say that."

"But that's what it's about. He got a phone call today from that guy. Your guy, good old Brian. He's writing a story about your girlfriend."

"Is he? I don't know anything about it."

"Bullshit. You've been cooking something up with him. You're working against the company, against Adam." He buried his face in his hands. "Jesus."

"No. That's not true."

"And what gets me most? You don't care what happens to me. You fucking *bitch*."

The blow knocked me against the wall, and I slid to the floor, clutching my cheek. "Robbie, no. I love you. I wouldn't—"

"You don't love me, you're just using me. I got you a job. I got you this." He gestured around the bedroom, another barely-furnished room in a barely-lived-in luxury apartment. "I taught you everything. I loved you. And you do this to me?" He aimed a kick at me. "If I don't get this program launched soon, it'll get scrapped, and then what? I can't let Adam down. You're sabotaging everything, for what? Some reporter?" He took a shaky breath. "You're fucking him, aren't you."

"Are you kidding me?" I was suddenly furious, acid anger eroding my caution. "When, exactly, would I have time to have an affair? I work constantly. Besides, you watch me like a hawk, you won't let me go anywhere. You don't trust me, but I've never given you reason to be that way."

He yanked me up and shook me hard. "All I ever did was love you, and you do this shit." His voice was twisted with anguish and fury.

"I love you, too, but—"

"Liar! You betrayed me."

He slapped me once, twice, making a growling sound as he

came at me, smacking me again and again as I retreated. I ended up in a corner, curled up with my arms over my head as he kicked screamed abuse at me.

When it stopped I heard he was sobbing, too. "I loved you so much," he whispered hoarsely, the words broken. Then he left.

I heard him moving around in the kitchen as I assessed the damage. Nothing broken. I got up and shakily sat on the edge of the bed. Heard splashing as he filled a tumbler with whiskey. Prepared myself for the make-up sex to come. It was what always happened.

But not this time.

I came to on the floor of the living room. My scalp stung. My face was crusted with blood. I ached everywhere. I limped into the bathroom and washed the blood off my face, then bandaged the cut that was still leaking into my left eye. There wasn't much I could do about the split lip. My nose, at least, had stopped bleeding.

Time to go.

I crept through the apartment. Robbie was sprawled across the bed, snoring, an empty bottle on the floor. He wouldn't wake up anytime soon. I took some ibuprofen, stuck the bottle into my bag, and then gathered some clothes and the cash I had withdrawn and squirreled away over the past few months. It was only a few thousand bucks, but it made an awkwardly thick wad. I spent ten nervous minutes searching for a money belt that Robbie had ordered when we planned a vacation in Bermuda that we never got around to taking. I found it in his dresser, under his socks, moving as quietly as I could, feeling every one of my muscles sing out as if each one was separately sending a distress signal. With the bulk of the money zipped into the belt, I wound it around my waist and fastened it, concealing it under my shirt. The rest went into my wallet.

By three a.m. I was slipping out of the apartment. I used the rear door of the building, where the garbage cans were stored.

Nobody was in sight, not that it meant I was safe. Hugging the shadows, I took a roundabout path through the Seaport District. Every street I crossed, every parking lot I passed left me exposed. Walking the length of the Summer Street bridge was the worst of it, an exercise in keeping my panic under control. There weren't many cars this time of night, but each one that passed brought my heart up in my chest. Across the bridge at last, I reached the South Station and made my way to the bus terminal. Only one ticket counter was open. I looked at the departure board and used cash to buy a ticket for the next Greyhound bus out of town. The man behind the counter gave my battered face a look as he counted my change, but slid the money and the ticket across the barrier without a word.

I spent some of the twenty minute wait hiding in a bathroom cubicle, but without a phone I had no way to tell the time. The ten minutes I had thought elapsed turned out to be less than five. I forced myself to calm down as I stood on the platform and watched the clock, trying to radiate confident solitude. Yes, I totally had planned to leave Boston at this hour of the night, I'm perfectly fine. The last thing I needed was for anyone, however well-meant, to start asking questions.

Once aboard, I took a seat by the window and set my backpack on the seat beside me. It wasn't full, this time of night, and the other passengers seemed to want privacy as much as I did. I leaned my aching head against the cold window as the coach pulled out of the station, letting the rumbling rhythm of the motor lull me to sleep as I headed somewhere else, a destination with a name I could no longer remember.

PART III

Nineteen

Oak listened intently as I sketched out the general picture: I wasn't Maggie Farnham. I wasn't the struggling PhD he thought I was. I was a tech worker on the run from a company that killed my friend and might kill me. There was just enough light from a streetlamp that I could see his expression, sober, concerned, a little dazed by what I was telling him.

"My god," he said when my words tapered off.

I couldn't be sure he believed me. It was a pretty wild story I had just laid on him.

He leaned forward, opened his hands, and frowned down at them, as if palm-reading, before looking me in the eye. "So, what do we do now?"

We? "I'm think I'm going to have to leave. Be someone else. Again."

"Because of Michael Knutson and all the social media crap he's stirred up?"

"Because Eventive has likely connected the dots between me and Maggie Farnham, especially now that I'm becoming internet famous. In fact, I probably should have left already. Staying here, pretending it will all go away, it's too risky. If they haven't figured it out yet, they will soon."

"Who were you before you were Maggie Farnham? I mean, besides your real self. Emily."

"I was a barista named Amber in North Carolina. Before that, I clerked at a Dollar Store in Ohio and my name was Jen. And before that I was Sarah and I cleaned rooms at a sleazy motel in Florida. I almost got caught there. Robbie tracked me down. I only got away because another of the girls who knew I'd been in a bad relationship tipped me off that some weird, intense guy was looking for me. I knew who it was even before she described him. I hitched a ride out of town with a seventy-

eight-year-old trucker who had a soft spot for damsels in distress.”

“Are you running from Robbie or from Adam Barton?”

“Both. For Robbie it’s personal, he wants me back, under his control. I’m his, and nobody else can have me. For Adam, it’s just business. I’m a threat that needs to be eliminated. He’s the one I’m most worried about. He has a lot of power.”

I ran through my escape plan in my head. I had a couple of half-baked identities ready to go that I could use until I could establish something more solid. I didn’t have much money; my escape fund was long gone, it hadn’t been possible to save any money with my previous minimum-wage jobs, and all of my savings from working at Eventive had long ago disappeared. I suspected it was Robbie who had emptied my bank account; he had no compunction about browsing my phone and laptop and had a habit of examining my finances while we were together. How had I not seen what a toxic freak he was?

But now I had a little cash in the local bank. I had access to a car, Dr. Mishkin’s old boat of a Buick. I could take it to Minneapolis tonight and dump it somewhere downtown, find the bus station and go back to living the way a lot of people did these days, scrounging off-the-books work and a place to sleep at night. Go to a city, this time; it would be easier to disappear into the crowd—except for the cameras everywhere. By now, Eventive would likely have an updated photo of me as Maggie, and would be able to match my current arrangement of facial bones to footage in Portland or Atlanta or wherever the hell I ended up next. It was exhausting just thinking about it.

“What’s the long-term goal here?” he asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“Uh ... stay alive?”

“Until when? I don’t see how you can do this indefinitely.”

“I know. But it takes everything I’ve got just to keep one step ahead.” This setup had been different than the others. I lucked into a decent job, a place to live. Friends. I’d let myself relax into

a full life, and that had been a mistake. “At least you believe me. You do, right?”

“Of course. I mean, Cambridge Analytica was doing stuff like this until they got exposed. But think of it this way: Eventive may be powerful, but it's also vulnerable. Once Cambridge Analytica was exposed, it closed up shop pretty quickly. We have to get the word out somehow, take these guys down.”

We, again. “I tried that already.”

“There's more than one journalist out there. And there are federal agencies, congressional committees. Am I'm being naïve?”

My expression must have clued him in. “Sorry, but yeah. Super naïve. Adam Barton has embedded himself into the halls of power. His clients live there. As for journalists ... what happened to Brian has probably poisoned the well. Nobody will want to touch this story, it's already tainted with suspicion.”

“And I suppose law enforcement is out.”

“You think? Brian talked to a detective who worked on Aurora's case. She was totally patronizing, basically accused him of cooking up clickbait and wasting her time with crackpot theories. The feds would be no different. They'd pat me on the head and say I'm imagining things. Chances are Adam would hear about it, with all his government connections.”

“And you're pretty sure your cover is blown. So to speak.”

“If it isn't already, it will be soon. It's just luck that got me this far.” Well, not so lucky for the original Maggie. She should have been the one enjoying a teaching gig, seeing her assignments come to life. Even weathering a right-wing attack on what her students accidentally uncovered. She would have risen to the occasion and taken a public stand, something I was too scared to do.

Oak rested his chin on his folded hands, pondering. “Got to be a way. If you still had those documents, you could put them online where anyone could see them and draw their own conclusions.”

I did have copies, safely encrypted on a server in Switzerland. But that wasn't a solution, either. "Eventive would just threaten the internet host and get them removed from the internet. That's a service they provide on a regular basis to silence their clients' enemies, and they're good at it."

"What's the best case scenario from your perspective? What would you ideally like to see happen?"

"What Aurora wanted. To make Eventive stop doing what they're doing."

"So, what do we—"

"It's my problem, not yours. I shouldn't have told you anything. It just puts you at risk."

"Sounds like everyone's at risk, so long as Eventive is free to do its thing. You shouldn't have to take the heat all by yourself. I'm not sure what the solution is, but you can't just keep running. Besides, I don't want to have you disappear on me. There has to be a way to confront them."

I just shrugged. I knew he was right, I couldn't run forever, but it seemed impossible to turn and fight against such a powerful enemy.

"Look, it's late," he said. "Why don't I drop you off at home. Get some rest. Don't do anything reckless tonight, I want a chance to think this over before you ... take off or whatever, okay? Give me that, at least?"

"I won't leave tonight," I said. No promises about tomorrow.

I was still mulling over my options when I woke up, but I couldn't think productively until I'd consumed some coffee, so I set about my morning routine, putting on the kettle and setting the table for breakfast.

"So you have a young man, now?" Dr. Mishkin smirked at me, settling into her chair. "I saw you sneak in late. Middle of the night and you're climbing out of a hippy van."

"I was out with friends. He gave me a ride."

"He is quite handsome." I didn't say anything, just buttered slices of toast. "Someone from the college?"

I put a plate of toast in front of her. "History department."

"An even less sensible discipline than English. No wonder he can't afford a proper car."

"It's better than proper. It's a classic VW camper, it has built-in cupboards and a kitchen and all."

"Including a bed?" she leered.

I gave her a look and went back to making more toast.

"Don't imagine I'm monitoring your movements. You are young. You should have a good time. You may stay out all hours for all I care, I only saw you because I couldn't sleep. It's one of the many joys of being an old crone." She refilled her cup from the teapot. "Lara called me last night. She's seeing things on the internet about your students causing trouble. She doesn't know what real trouble is, she's led a sheltered life. But of course she's in a state about it. She keeps texting me with things from her Facebook. It's quite astonishing what people will say." Her phone buzzed and she groped for it under the newspaper. "Ach, here's another one."

She put on her reading glasses and tipped her head back to read the message, then dropped the phone onto the table as if it was suddenly hot. She took off her glasses, folded them, and set them down carefully beside the phone.

"Are you okay?"

"Why are people so stupid?" She shook her head, disgusted but also looking a bit lost.

"I'm sorry about this."

"Why are you sorry?" she snapped out. "What does it have to do with you? These people have nothing better to do, so they crouch over their tiny little phones typing with their big thumbs, writing ignorant things. I don't understand this world anymore." She picked up a piece of toast and put it down, then seemed to make a decision. She nudged her phone across the table to me. "This one is special. It's about me."

It was a screenshot of a Facebook post, a demented rambling mess that somehow connected the takeover of colleges by radical professors like me to Dr. Mishkin's Russian background, suggesting she was a commie, working on undermining the country. Somehow they had found the only photograph available of her, the one from a yearbook that showed her surrounded by Math Club members, holding a piece of chalk and looking startled. Or guilty, as the post suggested. "Oh, man."

"Such ignorance. They say I am both a spy for Russia and a communist, but Putin is far from being a communist. You've seen those videos of him walking through palace halls with comic-opera toy soldiers saluting him? He is Tsar Vladimir the First, stealing everything he can while stirring up nationalist fervor among the people. Also, murdering journalists and dissidents. As for my politics, I am not, nor have I ever been, a member of the communist party."

Now I was feeling shaky. The only reason they would attack a long-retired math teacher was if someone knew I was staying at her house. How did this nutcase connect me to Dr. Mishkin? I had the impression the author of this weird screed was not local. It was too far out there, too strange, and it had the appearance of being concocted out of second-hand material by someone who spent hours a day "doing the research" to prove the moon landing was faked and 9/11 was an inside job. But it would take someone local to surfaced that photo and connected the two of us. "That's pretty weird, even for Facebook." I handed the phone back.

As she took it, it rang. Startled, she upset her teacup and a knife slipped off her plate noisily. "What?" she barked into the phone.

Though I couldn't make out the words, the voice coming through the phone in a mumble sounded like her daughter. I slipped out of my chair, mopped up spilled tea, then left the room. I was curious, but it was too awkward listening to half a

conversation between members of a family I didn't belong to. I couldn't help hearing Dr. Mishkin, though; she always spoke at a high volume on the phone, especially when she was annoyed.

"I have no idea. ... Don't be ridiculous. ... I disagree completely."

I wished I'd had the presence of mind to grab my coffee pot and mug before leaving the kitchen. I needed more caffeine before I could start the day's work of figuring out what I should do before it was too late. I tidied up the living room which didn't really need tidying, waiting for my chance. It didn't take long.

"Goodbye." She was frowning at her phone, snorting like a buffalo. "That was my daughter," she told me as I filled my mug. "She thinks I should go stay with her until things settle down. Ridiculous."

"I kind of see her point," I said. "It's scary seeing people talk about your mom like that. The guy seems pretty looney."

"Don't be alarmist. It's just words."

"Sometimes this kind of sh— nonsense spills over into the real world. It could get nasty."

"No, it's just an excuse." She set her teacup in its saucer angrily, with almost enough force to crack it. "She wants to put me in a home. I refuse."

"Okay, okay. You don't have to convince me."

She blinked at me, looking suddenly embarrassed. "No, of course not. It's just that I'm used to my independence. This home where I've lived for so long. My books, my solitude. Lara brought me brochures, once. 'Independent living,' they called it. Hah, it would be like being in an attractively decorated and expensive prison, having to make small talk at a dinner and attend programs like armchair yoga and bingo. Do you see me in a place like that?"

"No, but it's kind of fun to imagine it. You'd cause a lot of trouble."

"I would." She brightened at that. "They might have to expel me." She absent-mindedly spread a piece of toast with

marmalade and ate it. "One thing I don't understand. Where did this Facebook person find that photo of me?"

"It was in a college yearbook."

"How did you know that?"

"I ... uh, I looked you up."

"Hmm. Yes, it was in a yearbook many years ago, soon after I started to teach here. I don't like having my picture taken, but a student snuck up on me. I suppose there are still copies of that yearbook in the college archives, and in the hands of sad alumni who care about such things. Perhaps this person was a Magnusson student, took calculus from me and still holds a grudge."

"Possibly. But you wouldn't have to have a physical copy. The yearbooks have been digitized."

"Dear god. Why on earth go to so much trouble?" she scoffed, but she looked worried. After a moment she asked, "So anyone could find that picture?"

"Theoretically, but you'd have to know where to look. I don't think the database it's in is crawled by search engines." She frowned, awaiting an explanation. "I mean, they would have to go through the college library's website, they couldn't just Google it. And anyway, someone local must have been involved, someone who knows where I live. How else would anyone connect us? I'm guessing the rumor was planted by my student, Michael Knutson. He might have brought it up on one of his YouTube videos."

"What does this boy have against you?"

"Nothing personal, I don't think. He just found an opportunity to turn a small local drama into something bigger for his fanbase, further evidence of his claim that liberal college professors are indoctrinating American youth."

"As if youth are so easily indoctrinated. They were highly resistant to calculus, that much I know. What else did you find when you looked me up?" She stirred her tea, pretending not to care.

"Next to nothing. You were involved in a state math teachers' organization a long time ago. You published some papers. It's not easy to be invisible these days, but you've come very close."

"I see no reason to be part of ... what did you call it? The attention business?"

"The attention economy."

"Unlike this Knutson boy, who apparently craves attention. Very much like his father. I hope this is the end of it."

"I think you need to be prepared for more weirdness like this. Things can blow up on social media."

"Pfft, I couldn't care less. The only thing that matters is how Lara might blow it out of proportion. She always does. It was a lucky thing that you came to Mitagomee when you did. She was convinced I couldn't cope on my own. Which is nonsense, but having you here has given me some breathing room."

"Ah. About that." I hadn't planned to tell her anything, but suddenly it seemed unfair to leave her in the dark. "I might be leaving soon."

She sat back in her chair and studied me. "I see."

"I know someone who could step in to take my place, though. I mean, do what Lara wants done. He's handy, too. Could fix up the house for you. It's the guy who gave me a ride last night, actually. He's a historian, but he has a side gig of renovating old houses."

"You're in trouble, aren't you? I mean apart from this internet foolishness."

"Yes."

"I thought so. A problem with the law?"

"Not that. It's better if I don't go into details."

"That's up to you, though I am good at keeping secrets."

I just shook my head.

"I have secrets of my own, things even Lara doesn't know. When I left Russia it was sudden. I left everything behind. I had to change my name, abandon everyone and everything I knew. It wasn't easy, and I still feel as if a part of me is missing, all these

years later. So you see, I know what it's like to be in trouble. I'm quite serious: if there's any way I can help, you must let me know."

"Thanks, but..." Should I ask about borrowing her car, or just take it and hope she would forgive me? I had grown fond of this old woman, and for some reason I cared what she thought of me.

She watched me for a moment, then took charge of the situation. "Freshen up the teapot and bring it into the study where we can be more comfortable. I want to tell you a story."

I did as she instructed and brought the tea things in on a tray, setting it on a low table. She was settled in an armchair with worn, threadbare arms. I filled her cup, and passed it to her, settling myself on a footstool.

"So: I am going to tell you something nobody knows. Nobody apart from some case officers who no doubt retired long ago. I am not actually a mathematician. I trained as a physicist at Moscow University, then began graduate studies in nuclear physics at the Lebedyev Institute, a very prestigious opportunity for a precocious girl. That's where I first met Andrei Sakharov. After World War Two, or the 'great patriotic war' as we called it, he designed nuclear bombs for the state."

She drank from her cup, then cocked an eyebrow at me. "You young people have no idea what it was like, then. Both here in the States and in the Soviet Union, we all assumed a stupid political misunderstanding could trigger nuclear annihilation at any moment. We lived under a cloud, a mushroom cloud, aware that everything we knew, everyone we loved, could be gone in an instant. Like the climate catastrophe, but quicker. By the time I met Andrei Dmitrievich he had grown disillusioned with his military work. He became a peace activist, then a human rights advocate. I wanted to be part of his cause. I was very young. Could you get the blanket from the living room? This room is drafty."

I found the robe, and she spread it across her lap. "Thank

you. My old bones feel the cold these days. Where was I? Oh yes, being young and naïve. I attended public demonstrations, helped to distribute pamphlets, gather signatures on petitions. Spent hours in the kitchen of the Sakharov's apartment on Chkalov Street." She smiled faintly at the memory. "Such a cozy place, always full of people eating *zakuski* and talking about ideas. My parents were appalled, of course. They were very conventional, and my father worked for the state. He knew my activism was risky. He arranged for me to leave the institute for a teaching job at the university. I had no choice, but I continued to be involved with the human rights work in secret. Typing copies of forbidden essays on thick layers of carbon paper. You probably have no idea what that is."

"I saw it in an old movie once."

"Pfft." She smoothed the lap rug with a gnarled hand. "It was good to be still working on these clandestine activities with my friends, but it was dangerous. Sakharov was criticized by the state media, and constantly harassed by the police and KGB. Even random violent attacks that were no doubt orchestrated to intimidate him. I kept my involvement secret, giving every appearance of being a law-abiding Soviet citizen, and in 1976 was allowed to attend a conference in Sweden for science teachers. I suppose I have my father to thank for that, too, though he was infuriated by what I did."

She held out her cup and I refilled it. Clearly enjoying the suspense, she sipped it slowly.

"While in Stockholm, I went to the American embassy and became a defector. It was not as much fun as I expected. For a very long time I was grilled for information on the Soviet nuclear program, though I had never actually worked on it. Besides, I was a pacifist. I refused to share what little I knew. It was very tiresome. In the end they resettled me in Brooklyn under a new name."

"You haven't told this to Lara?"

"She would put it on Facebook. I am legally obliged to tell no one. And I haven't, until now."

"How did you end up here?"

"The Russian community where I lived in Brooklyn was full of émigrés and dissidents. My handler wanted me to report on things happening around me, on people who might be useful to them, and I refused. Oh, they were very cross with me. In the same year that Andrei was arrested and exiled from Moscow, I was deemed both a risk and useless, so was relocated to the frozen wastes of Minnesota with the understanding that, in return for being free of espionage duties, I would guard my secrets. Of course the Soviet Union fell apart long ago, and nobody seems to worry about nuclear war anymore, but I like to keep my word."

"Will it be a problem for you, your fifteen minutes of fame? Like, will the spooks get mad?"

"They stopped checking up on me some years ago. I doubt anyone in Langley remembers who I am, or would notice some silly Facebook rumor." She leaned forward and set her cup and saucer on the table, sat back, and regarded me with a small smile. "So, your turn. What is your story? Or do you still wish to keep it from me?"

"I don't, really, but it could get you in trouble if you knew."

"As we have established, I enjoy trouble, and I can keep secrets. Go on, tell me."

It was strange, after more than a year of hiding behind false names, to spill my deepest secrets twice in less than twenty-four hours, but it also felt like a fair trade, after she'd entrusted her past with me.

"So, ah, okay. I used to work for a tech company. Kind of a marketing outfit, but secretive, powerful, and dangerous. They gather personal data on just about everyone and use algorithms to mess with our heads, especially for targeted political campaigns run by sketchy people. The guy in charge used to work for the intelligence services and still has contracts

with the NSA. A friend of mine who worked at this company gathered a lot of damaging documents about their operations, but before she could blow the whistle she got killed. I gave a copy of the documents to a reporter, and they attacked his reputation and threatened his family and made sure he'd never publish anything again. Oh, and my boyfriend who also worked there got mad one night and nearly killed me. So I ran, and I've been living under fake names and trying to stay out of sight ever since, but now I'm all over social media, which means they are likely to find me before long, so ... I may need to borrow your car. I'll make sure you get it back."

She stared at me. Then shook her head as if to clear it. "Are you sure running is your only option?"

"No, but they killed my friend. At least I think they did."

"And the police—"

"They ruled it an accidental death."

"Your boyfriend sounds like another kind of trouble. Is he looking for you, too?"

"Probably."

"I don't know how to advise you. As a young woman I stood up for my beliefs. Then I tried to help in secret and after that ... when it became an option, I left. And here I am. A useless old woman."

"You're not useless. Think of all that calculus you taught." She snorted. "Do you miss Russia?"

"I miss those afternoons in Andrei Dmitievich's kitchen. I miss what I thought my country could be, but not the authoritarian kleptocracy it has become. I don't even recognize it anymore. If I had stayed, maybe..."

She looked down at her hands, then cleared her throat. "Of course you can take my car. What am I going to do with it?"

Twenty

Oak sent me a text asking to meet. He came to the house, where I introduced him to Dr. Mishkin. She was charmed, and charming. It took a good fifteen minutes to get Oak to myself. We decided to take a walk.

"I have an idea," he said, his hands jammed into his jacket, the breeze whipping his curly hair. "By the way, should I call you Maggie or Emily?"

"Maggie, for now."

"Yeah, it's probably best. You know Graham Turlow, the journalist?"

"Should I?"

"He won a Pulitzer for his work on the Iran-Contra affair years ago. He did a series on police corruption in Chicago that exposed false confessions and led to a bunch of exonerations. He wrote a book about crooked military contractors operating in Iraq. He's an old-school investigative reporter."

"Okay."

"I know him. He gave a lecture when I was an undergrad and I got up the nerve to speak to him afterward. He became sort of a mentor to me during grad school, and he's spoken to my classes about his experiences. He's working on a memoir right now, but your story would be right up his alley."

"Do you like this guy? Because you'd be landing him in the shit. I wouldn't do that to a friend."

"He has a lot of credibility and it's the kind of risk he'd be willing to take for a good story. And it is a good story: a tech tycoon up to his neck in dirty tricks, a suspected murder, connections to intelligence services, plus the damage these surveillance systems are doing to democracy. Somebody needs to get this information out."

"Eventive really screwed over the reporter who tried to write about it before."

"So you said, but they'd have a harder time doing that to a legend like Graham. The only thing is, he's not a techie. He's not on social media and he thinks the digital projects I do with students are stupid. He basically hates computers and the internet, so we'd have to help him out with the details. That said, he'd get a kick out of trashing a tech company. I'd like to talk to him about it, anyway."

"I don't know."

"You wouldn't have to go public, but it would take the heat off you, wouldn't it? If everyone knows what Eventive is up to, they would have no reason to shut you up. He'll need hard evidence, though. Do you think there's any way your friend, the one who got screwed over, still has those documents?"

"Probably not, but I have copies of all of it."

"That's fantastic! So, can I call Graham?"

We rounded a corner. Without thinking, I was leading us on the route I usually took to the college. The streets we were walking through looked exactly as always, sleepy and placid, a postcard of small town American life. The weather had turned warmer overnight, with a southerly breeze carrying the scent of damp soil, reminding me of how exciting it was as a kid in Maine when the long winter began to loosen its grip and green shoots began to push up through the soil. A magical renewal. A promise.

"Okay. Sure. Why not?"

Of course, it wasn't spring, it was late October, and by the time Oak called me that evening to report on his conversation with the reporter, a bitter wind was blowing from the north, carrying tiny pellets of ice. They zipped through the darkened sky like fireflies catching light from the streetlamps as I watched them through my bedroom window.

"He's interested," Oak said. "He wants to talk to you. But he didn't commit to anything."

"I hope he committed to keeping it quiet."

"No worries about that. He's been willing to go to jail for refusing to reveal his sources. He won't rat you out. Let me give you his number." He read it off. "He's kind of a character," he added hesitantly. "Don't let his style put you off."

I checked the time. Not too late to call. I dialed the number. "Turlow," a hoarse voice bellowed. Not exactly welcoming.

"Oak Larsson said I should call you."

"You're the girl, huh?"

"I'm the twenty-six year old."

"Jesus, it's the language police. Okay, you're the *woman* who thinks she has a story for me. Whaddya got?"

"What did Oak tell you?"

"I want to hear it from you."

"Okay, but I can't be sure this line is secure. Can you install the Signal app?"

"No, because I'm on a landline. Also because I don't do apps. Or social media, or any of that bullshit that wastes everyone's time and makes everyone crazy. For what it's worth, I'm no stranger to having my line tapped. The Chicago PD cooked up a bogus story and got a judge to sign off on it when I was getting ready to nail their asses for torturing confessions out of innocent guys. Also back in eighty-six when I was digging into Iran-Contra, and probably back in sixty-eight when I was at the Democratic national convention and the cops were busting heads. You ever hear of COINTELPRO? Supposedly ended after the Church Committee hearings, but that's baloney, it never did. Don't worry about any of that, though. Now I'm just an old fart working on his memoirs, so you can relax. Nobody's tapping this phone. What's this story that Oak's so excited about?"

I took a breath and was about to speak when he added, "You don't mind if I record this, do you?"

"What? Yes. I mean, it depends. Where are you going to store the audio?"

"What's it matter?"

"If the people I'm going to tell you about got hold of it, they'd recognize my voice. You need to be sure it's stored on a server with end-to-end encryption."

"I don't know what this end-to-end shit is, or what servers have to do with it. My desk drawer is where I keep my tapes. I don't get this new thing where all the reporters use their phones to record stuff. I mean, I don't trust these tech companies, do you? Of course not, which is why you're talking to me. So can you tell me what the deal is and let me record it?"

"Yeah, okay." I explained the situation as succinctly as I could, but it took a while. He interrupted me constantly to ask questions. Some of them were about the technology, which he clearly didn't understand, others were about people. Adam Barton, Aurora, Brian Friedman. There were long pauses between questions as he took notes by hand, on paper. I could hear pages of his notepad being flipped regularly. "Why are you talking to me?" he asked out of the blue.

"Oak said I should."

"No, I mean what do you get out of it if this story runs?"

"Me, personally? A shitload of trouble."

"Sounds like you got that regardless. You're not doing this to get even with your boyfriend? The one who allegedly knocked you around?"

"No. I don't care what happens to him. I don't want anything to do with him, ever. I just think what the company is doing is wrong, and I believe they had Aurora killed over it."

"This was in Boston, right?" I heard pages flipping. "Not Brookline or Cambridge or whatever?"

"Um, Cambridge I think. She had a place near MIT. I think that's where ... where it happened. But the cops say it was an accidental overdose."

"Overdose of what?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe her psych meds. She had bipolar disorder, but it was being treated successfully."

"Uh huh."

"You can ask her mother if you don't believe me. They were close."

"You got her name and contact info handy? And while you're at it, who can I talk to at this company? I can't just take your word for it. I'll need confirmation."

"There's nobody," I said, until I remembered the two engineers who attended Aurora's funeral and soon after left under a cloud. I gave him their names. "They don't work there anymore. I don't know how to reach them."

"Don't worry. I can find people. Larsson said you have documents?"

"Hundreds of them."

"Good deal. I'll need copies."

"They're on an encrypted drive in Switzerland. I can set up read permissions for you and get you a login."

"Nope. I want printed copies, on paper. Remember paper? Nice stuff, you can read the words on it even if your computer crashes. Harder to hack, too."

"We're talking hundreds of pages. And if someone got hold of them, they could trace them to me."

"What makes you think they didn't already? Getting hold of documents is easy to do online, from what I read in the news."

"Not where I put them. And paper can be tracked to its source. Laser printers encode invisible forensic information on every page you print, traceable to a particular printer."

"That's nuts. Is that for real?"

"It's how they nailed Reality Winner, the woman who tipped off the press about the NSA's proof of Russian election interference."

"What a load of horseshit that prosecution was. That poor kid thrown in the slammer for what, telling us the NSA knows something we all knew already?"

"And she got nailed because she gave a printout to a news organization. On paper."

"Yeah, well, it was one of those new online outfits. They should have known better. I've been around the block, I wouldn't hand anything to a government goon. Or to a corporate oligarch, which is kind of the same thing these days. Anyway, I'm going to need paper. Reading through hundreds of pages on a computer screen, trying to find through lines and connections? Not happening."

"Okay, but the information's really technical. I'm not sure you would understand them without some help."

"Jesus. Of all the gin joints in the world, she has to walk into mine. I'm going to need a translator, huh?" He sighed windily. "You know what? We're going to have to get together, face to face, talk this over. Minnesota's not that far from Chicago. I got a guest room. You could come down with those documents, spend a few days giving me the lay of the land—"

"I can't. I have to work."

"Well, I'll come up there, then. What's the name of that town? Micka Mucka?"

"Mitagomee."

"Home of nobody-ever-heard-of-it Magnusson College, where Larsson is wasting his talents and you're getting away with impersonating an actual professor of English, which nobody notices. That's hilarious. Can't make this stuff up. Okay, so here's the plan. First, I'm going to reach out to those two guys you told me about, get some confirmation of your story before I commit to anything. If it pans out, I gotta wrap up some stuff here, find someone to take care of my cat. Let my editor know the manuscript is on hold. It's already a year overdue, so who the hell cares? Anyway, as soon as I give this story of yours a green light, get that stuff printed out for me, okay? And I'll come up there so we can sit down and go through it."

"So ... you want to write this story?"

"If it checks out. This outfit sounds like a serious threat to democracy, assuming what you told me is true and I can confirm the basics. It also assumes we live in a democracy, but that's another matter. Give me your phone number and I'll get back to you."

I put my phone down, feeling as if I'd just crossed a border into new territory. This was really happening. After over a year on the run, I was preparing to turn and face the enemy.

I looked at the papers spread across my bed, unfinished grading for class the next day. I gathered it all up and thought about stuffing it into my backpack. What did it matter? Who even was I, now, Emily Callander or Maggie Farnham, PhD?

What would happen to Maggie's course, to Maggie's memory when I left and everyone found out the woman they thought they knew was a fake? I could hear her voice in the car beside me, excitedly telling me about her new job, about her dreams. About everything she'd gone through to get this far.

I sorted out the papers and got back to work. I'd try to be my best Maggie until the disguise had to come off.

Twenty-One

Friday morning, I handed out the graded essays. I also announced that I was cutting back on the workload, with an essay due only every other week. It had dawned on me that I was spending far too much time on these assignments, given there was no sign their writing was actually improving. To go by the cheers, students felt the same way.

The mood that day of all four sections was restless as students showed each other their social feeds and compared rumors. They were fizzy from their moment in the spotlight. The competing hashtags #TheRealMagnusson ("real" being the all-white 1950s) and #RacismAtMagnusson were lighting up our corner of the internet. When I checked my phone to see how things were trending, I could see the social media flood ramp up abruptly, though I wasn't sure what caused the sudden increase. I only figured it out after I dismissed the second section and stepped into the hallway.

"I can't believe a faculty member would do that," I overheard a teacher say.

"It's not like there haven't been rumors about him," another one said as they strolled through the current of students changing classes.

"But what he said was so misogynistic."

"It's his chance to get out ahead of hashtag MeToo and catch the patriarchal reactionary wave."

Her companion said something in response, but it was drowned out by ambient student chatter.

I found Beasley in our office, merrily spreading red ink on Spanish homework. "You've certainly made things interesting, around here," she greeted me.

"Somebody did something, but I don't know who or what."

"It's Peter Van Meter, Doctor Touchy-Feely. He went on a

student's internet talk show to stand up for American manhood. Apparently the real problem in this country is that manly men like him are no longer in charge."

"Oh, Christ." I opened my laptop and brought up Michael Knutson's YouTube channel. There he was, the handsy professor I had offended, seated before a shelf of books, looking traditionally professorial in a tweed jacket, racking up hundreds of thousands of views already. "I don't think I can stand to listen to this."

"Don't torture yourself. I can give you the highlights. His free speech has been canceled by angry women and emasculated men who police every word he says. Real literature, the stuff written by dead white men, has been censored in favor of second-rate dreck by women and minorities. Writing courses don't teach grammar nowadays, they're all about indoctrination. He actually used the phrase 'radical left madrasas.' Also, students don't even write papers anymore. That's when you got name-checked. What did you do to piss him off?"

"He cornered me in the department office once and tried to hug me, but I wouldn't let him," I said. "Also, when I said he should stop staring at my boobs, a student worker laughed at him. I've been waiting ever since for the fallout."

"The boy who posted the video, his name is familiar. Is he related to that fascist on the board of trustees?"

"Yup, he's his son, and he has classes with both me and Oak this semester."

"Ah, you've seen it," Oak said, catching sight of my computer screen as he came into our office. He slung his backpack onto his desk with a thump.

"Beasley watched it so I didn't have to," I said. I closed my laptop.

"I was late to class this morning but Michael Knutson filled the time by providing the class with a special showing. There

was a very loud argument in progress when I got there. He seems to want to turn History 112 into a civil war reenactment.”

“You look exhausted.”

He pulled his desk chair out, swore when the wheel fell off, then threw himself into a spare chair intended for students. “Didn’t get much sleep. Some asshole set fire to my outhouse last night. Well, it’s not my outhouse, but the one I’ve been using. Though not at the time.”

“Thank goodness for small mercies,” Beasley said.

“The property owner isn’t too happy about it. He’s rethinking the wisdom of having a college teacher squatting on his land at a time when a sizable percentage of the country is convinced professors are communist revolutionaries bent on brainwashing their children.”

“Shit. Did this happen because someone’s mad about what my class uncovered?” I asked.

“It happened because a lot of white Americans think any history that isn’t a patriotic whitewashed fantasy is somehow a personal attack on them.” He rubbed his eyes with a thumb. “Or it could just be teenagers acting out. Vandalism is a traditional rural pastime. In any case, I may need to find a different place to sleep pretty soon.”

“I can talk to Dr. Mishkin. She has an extra bedroom upstairs, and there’s plenty of space for the van. You could barter house repairs for rent. By the way, I talked to that guy.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“It went well, I think. He may come up here.”

“Cool.”

“What are you two conspiring about?” Beasley asked.

“Nothing,” we both said.

I gave up on my lesson plan for the third class period. Students were giddy that they didn’t have to write so many essays, and bubbling with a mix of outrage that a professor at their school would say such outdated and offensive things, and excited to be in the center of what was becoming a national

social media storm. Turning to the whiteboard, I drew the rhetorical triangle Maggie had so carefully outlined in an earlier lesson and told them to get into groups and analyze the media they were seeing in their social feeds. They dutifully pulled their chairs into circles and ignored my instructions as they proceeded to share gossip and opinions. If engagement were as important a metric for education as it is for social media platforms, it would have been a highly successful learning experience.

The only students in the room who were quiet were Bilan and Abeba. They sat together, physically part of a circle of desks but not participating. They only murmured occasionally to one another as they sat, dejected. Jamal seemed to pick up on their mood and went over to talk to them, duck-walking as if I couldn't see him if he crouched down low enough. They showed each other their phones and whispered. When class was dismissed I caught his eye as he headed for the door and asked if there was something going on. The girls had been getting hateful messages, he told me. Mostly on Facebook and WhatsApp but also slid under their dorm room door. "We're all getting them," he said with a shrug. "I mean, not the white students, but ... us."

"Goddamn it. Did they report it to campus security?"

He looked at me, puzzled by my naiveté. "Why?"

I didn't have an answer. "Let me know if there's anything I can do," I said, and he nodded politely, but we both knew it was meaningless.

I expected even higher engagement if not a fistfight during the fourth period, where Michael Knutson and his entourage routinely squared off against their classmates. But the discussion was less spicy than I expected, partly because Knutson emailed me to say he would be absent that day and his minions were a little lost without him and partly because Liv used the hour to quietly but efficiently organize an action

against racism. It made me feel a little better. Maybe I couldn't do anything helpful, but they were taking care of each other.

"You still getting weird emails?" Liv asked me as the period ended.

"Not like before. Just the run-of-the-mill messages accusing me of being a communist and a recruiter for antifa, like being anti-fascist is a bad thing. Some of the students are dealing with a lot worse. What about you?"

"The usual," they said cheerfully. "I'm a freak, I'm pushing a transsexual agenda on innocent kids, somebody should rape me to death. It's just coming in at a higher volume now. Thanks a lot, Michael fucking Knutson. Do you want to join us tonight? We're having a meeting to organize a community action, but you don't have to come."

"Honestly? I am totally bummed that you and other students are getting attacked over this stuff, but I don't think me being personally involved would be a good idea."

"No worries." Liv offered a clenched fist for a friendly bump and headed off to lead the revolution.

I headed home, mulling over an idea that Liv's question about emails had sparked. I hadn't had any further contact with Allie, either through my Maggie address or via my anonymous identity on Signal. I wasn't sure if she had talked to Brian Friedman and heard first-hand the risk she was running. But things had changed. I could tell her something that might keep her safe. After I made a cup of tea for Dr. Mishkin and carried my mug upstairs I messaged Allie.

>It's me again. The former Eventive employee. Would it be okay if I gave you a call via Signal?

The response came before I finished my tea.

>Sure.

I took a deep breath and made the call. "Hi. Is it a good time?"

"Fine. I'm alone, except for the baby and she's not going to rat us out."

"Um, listen—"

"You're Emily," she said flatly. Then, after an intake of breath, "Oh my god."

"Yeah, I'm alive. I'm sorry I didn't tell you when I messaged you before, but ... I've been keeping a low profile."

"It's really you." I heard a choke in her voice as she laughed. "Goddammit, I thought you were dead."

"Sorry about that."

"I'm not sorry." I could tell she was crying. She could probably tell I was, too. "It's awesome news. I'm so relieved."

"Me too. I mean, I'm so glad to talk to you. I can't tell you everything that's been going on, but I wanted to let you know I'm safe."

"Jesus. Emily, it's ... holy shit." She laughed again. "I actually wondered. I mean, a rando person who used to work at Eventive contacting me? I thought ... could it be Emily? Then I told myself that was just wishful thinking."

"No, that was me. I heard on the grapevine you were asking questions about Eventive and I was worried about what they might do to you. I've been on the run, but I'm safe, so you don't have to investigate my murder, because I'm not dead after all."

"Will you be able to stay that way? The thing is, I found out there was another woman who worked for Eventive who died. Supposedly it was an accident, but her family has questions."

"Aurora. She was a friend of mine. You talked to her parents?"

"Her mother is convinced it was no accident and Eventive was behind it. I'm sorry about your friend. It sounds like she was amazing."

"She was."

"I tried to read some of her research, but it's way over my head."

"Mine, too."

"There was a speech she gave, though. Her last public appearance, the one that got her fired. It was removed from YouTube but I found a copy on a German website. She talked about how algorithms can be discriminatory, how market fundamentalism has influenced the design of tech platforms, and how bad actors can use these systems to promote hate and violence. It was so good."

"She wanted the company to change. They didn't like that idea, and she knew enough about their operations she was dangerous. Did you ever track down Brian Friedman, that reporter?"

"I was going to, but he reached out first. Boy, did they ever mess up his life."

"Which is why I want you to hold back on poking around."

"That's what he said, too. He told me to back off for my own safety. But somebody needs to make this public."

"Somebody will. Probably. A famous journalist who people will listen to is looking into it. I'm not running anymore. I'm going to tell him my story. I'd tell you, but you know what happened to Brian, and you have a baby to protect. Plus a three-year-old."

"She's four now."

"Wow," I lay back on my bed, measuring the distance between then and now, between the time when we were best friends and everything since. "You have kids, a family, a life. I had a job at Evil Corp. I got so caught up in that world I stopped thinking. I should have known what we were building was dangerous, that we were doing everything Aurora talked about in that speech. You were right about Robbie, by the way."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I should have listened. What a jerk. Anyway, tell me more about your life. What's your guy like? What's it like to be a mom and a writer?"

We talked for an hour as she filled me in. It felt weirdly

comfortable, even though I avoided telling her what I'd been doing ever since leaving Eventive.

"Oh crap, I have to go," she said suddenly. "I need to pick up Grace. She's having a play date and I'm way late. But for a good cause. It's been so good to talk to you, Emily. Listen, I still want to write about this."

"You can write a whole book about how your idiot friend got sucked into working for an epically bad company. But hold off on the research. It's too risky for now. Speaking of which, have you had anything weird happen since you started working on this? Like your computer acting strange? Or a feeling you're being followed?"

"No. Except—" She fell silent.

"Except what?"

"Somebody broke into our house a couple of weeks ago. Well, they didn't break in, they walked in because we live in the country and nobody locks their doors around here, at least not until someone moves your stuff around when you're not at home. Nothing was stolen, it was just obvious someone had been inside, handling our stuff, moving knickknacks and chairs. Even in the girls' bedroom, the rocking chair was turned to face the wall. Creepy. We thought it must be bored teenagers playing a prank."

"Maybe it was, but—"

"Maybe it was a message. We lock the doors, now, don't worry, and we have a shotgun. Standard equipment in rural Maine. Oh, and another thing ... someone almost swiped my phone last week. I set it down for a moment at the grocery and a guy behind me in line picked it up, started to put it in his pocket."

"What guy?"

"I didn't know him. He apologized, said he thought it was his, and seemed so embarrassed he left without paying for his groceries. He was nice about it, and I assumed it was just an

honest mistake, but you're making me wonder. He wasn't a regular, the cashier told me."

"Do you have a security code on your phone?"

"I do now."

"End-to-end encryption is great, but it doesn't do any good if one of the ends is in the wrong hands. Do you know how to use that shotgun?"

"I do. And I hope you're joking."

"Not entirely. Watch yourself. And stop asking questions about Eventive."

"Right, I'll leave it alone until you give me the all clear. Look, I have to run. It's just so great to hear your voice."

"Me too."

"Call again sometime."

"I will." I hung up and laugh-cried. Whether it was relief at reconnecting with my friend or regret for all the years I had shut her out, I couldn't say.

Twenty-Two

Things began to spin out of control over the weekend. The spark was a nothing event, a handful of students discovering that their campus had some racism in its past, but the tiny spark landed in a pile of reactionary grievance, where it was fanned expertly by a kid with social media skills and right-wing connections. It turned something insignificant into a dumpster fire, boosted by Eventive's amplification algorithms.

Fox News picked up the story, framing Michael Knutson as an oppressed conservative student. Their loudest blowhard played it up as yet further evidence that political correctness was running amok on college campuses where innocent children were being brainwashed by socialist professors who were probably in the pay of evil globalist financier George Soros. Bonus points for antisemitism.

I got an email that had every appearance of authenticity, claiming to be from a genealogy buff who wondered if I might be her cousin, because GEDMatch suggested she and Maggie Farnham had DNA in common. She asked questions about relatives and places where I had supposedly lived. It looked like the kind of sophisticated phishing attack Eventive routinely designed for its customers, an attempt to check my identity. Whether it was genuine or not, I didn't respond, though the automatic away message I had set up would have gone out to whoever it was.

There were memes circulating across multiple platforms that put my face on the body of a BDSM dominatrix. (Nice boots.) There were also various video clips that altered movie or cartoon footage to show me being gruesomely attacked or grossly humiliated with jokey commentary. A video of one of Oak's lectures was edited so that it sounded like he was promoting violent action. You wouldn't know he was actually

reading primary documents from the Dakota War of 1862. It made the rounds, accruing layers of outrage and shedding factchecks effortlessly.

Dr. Mishkin's one and only public photo was also going viral, but fortunately in the form of a popular but harmless meme about calculus.

I was doxed. Dr. Mishkin was doxed. Our address and other personal information was shared around the darkest, dankest corners of the internet where troll armies harass people for shits and giggles. It didn't matter who we were or what we were accused of, they were on it, in droves.

Saturday afternoon, Dr. Mishkin saw a retired neighbor peering through the windows. He was trying to see if she was actually being held hostage by a crazy man with a gun, he told us when she invited him in. He was a member of the county sheriff's auxiliary and heard it on the scanner, a 911 call reporting a hostage situation. He called the local police to tell them they could call off the SWAT team that was on its way from St. Cloud. False alarm. He stayed for dinner.

Dr. Mishkin's daughter threatened to rescue her from the maelstrom. Dr. Mishkin threatened to disown her. It was only a busy schedule, with a kid's soccer tournament and a book club meeting that Lara was hosting at her home, that prevented her from coming to town to forcibly move her mother to a safe place. She tried to enlist me in her campaign, but I told her I was a neutral party. If she didn't want to pay me for my services anymore, that was okay. I would still do everything I could to ensure Dr. Mishkin's safety, even though there wasn't much I could do to stop the absurd claims being made about her online.

Oak called Sunday morning. His sleep had been interrupted again, this time by a group of ATV riders who drove in circles around his van, shouting taunts and threats. He didn't want to stay out in woods that suddenly felt full of danger. We parked

his van in Dr. Mishkin's backyard, out of sight from the street, and he moved into the spare room with her blessing.

The doorbell kept ringing. Gossip-seeking neighbors brought food, as if it were a funeral. Reporters showed up, too. Dr. Mishkin set up a schedule so we could take turns at the window to decide whether or not to open the door. By Sunday afternoon, Oak disconnected the doorbell and we drew the blinds.

Sunday evening Oak showed me a message from a friend whose dissertation project involved measuring pop culture trends through social media networks. She'd never seen anything blow up so fast. It wasn't the biggest trend she'd ever analyzed, but the exponential growth was unlike anything she'd ever seen. I took it as proof Eventive was involved, using its tools to fan the flames.

"Which means they know, or strongly suspect, I took Emily's identity after the accident," I told Oak, picking up a book Dr. Mishkin had loaned me and opening it. "I don't know if Graham is going to write a story, and even if he agrees to do it, it will take time." I grabbed a pencil and jotted down a URL and password in the margins. "Hang onto this. On page fifty there's a link for the server where the documents are stored. On page one hundred, the password that will get you in." He gave me raised eyebrows. "Just for backup."

"That sounds ominous."

"Just being practical in case, you know, something happens before Graham writes a story."

"Are you getting ready to leave?"

I shrugged. "I don't know where I'd go."

He frowned and nodded, then wandered off, typing on his phone. Half an hour later he found me in the kitchen and said "I have a place lined up if you decide you need to go. An old lakeside cabin in northern Wisconsin. It's rustic, and there's no internet, but there's decent cell phone coverage. A friend of

mine uses it on weekends. He says we can stay there whenever we want."

There was that "we" again. I was getting used to it.

Though I didn't know it at the time, I had my final class meetings on Monday. The students were restless. The drama was getting old, and they were resentful of the tone of the national attention and the way their campus was being portrayed. "It's not like we're a hotbed of radicalism," complained one of the Kristens (or Kirstens, I still had trouble keeping those names straight). "We're in Mitagomee. It's not a hotbed of anything!"

"Which is why my parents wanted me to go here."

"It bugs me that we're being misrepresented as a bunch of lefties," said Leo, who grew up on a farm and politely took off his MAGA hat when he came into the classroom.

"Or like, we're being brainwashed. Sure, my sociology prof is pretty out there, but I can think for myself."

"Or like all we do here is talk about is politics. I'm a biochem major. I even don't care about politics."

One of the Madisons said, "Guys, my boyfriend has a mixer and a good microphone. We should produce our Curious Campus podcasts. Like, for real."

Enthusiasm rippled through the room. They had been good sports, handing in elevator pitches, doing interviews, digging around in the archives under Zoe Chen's direction. They had appeared to enjoy the assignment, but now I sensed a different kind of energy.

"I'm emailing the other classes," somebody said.

"I'll start a Google doc for episodes."

"We'll need a Facebook page."

"How do we get on Spotify?"

"Whoa, guys, wait," I called out. "I don't think this is a good idea. It's risky. People are riled up. You might get weirdos coming after you."

“So? That’s already happening,” Luis said. “Why not go public, try to set the record straight? I mean, my group? Our episode is about the hockey team. We’re regular people, we’re not what they’re saying about us.”

“We got a great interview with the custodian for my dorm section. She’s awesome, and she really cares about the work she does. Who’s speaking for her? If the only thing people know about Magnusson is that some people in the past were kind of racist, that’s not cool.”

“Yeah! Plus I could really use it on my resume. I’m trying to line up a summer internship.”

I tried to calm them down. “But I told you from the start, this isn’t real. It’s just an assignment. It was never intended to be public.”

Luis sat back, his arms crossed over his chest. “Yeah? How are you going to stop us? Give us all Fs?”

Maybe it no longer mattered. I didn’t have to worry about Adam Barton tracking me down. He already had. And the students’ reputations were already being trashed. Putting their stories on the internet might actually bring some reality into the situation.

I threw up my hands in surrender. They got back to work.

When I finished my final class that day, I stopped by the office where I found Oak and Beasley chatting about the event Liv and fellow activists had organized for Tuesday night, in the plaza in front of the library. It was being billed as an old-school teach-in. In addition to student speakers, several faculty had agreed to speak on subjects like “Academic Freedom From McCarthyism to Today” and “Systemic Racism and Higher Education.”

Beasley planned to read a poem by Pablo Neruda. I opted not to be involved in the program, but Oak planned to speak about the parallels between the romantic “lost cause” version of the confederacy and the current pressure to erase racism

from US history. Unsurprisingly, Michael Knutson and his far-right national student organization were planning a counter-demonstration with alumni support stirred up by his post to the Magnusson Traditions Facebook group.

"Knutson missed class again today," Oak said. "It was so peaceful without him."

"He skipped mine, too. Said he was tied up with a television appearance. Is that the new 'dog ate my homework' excuse?"

"Oh my god, you haven't heard the rumors?" Beasley squealed. "He and Peter Van Meter are going on Tucker Carlson. Or maybe it's Laura Ingram, one of those Fox talk shows."

We looked at each other and started to laugh. The idea of Van Meter taking a stand for the literary canon and his freedom to harass women without a hassle was just too absurd.

Oak had a meeting scheduled with a student, but I was finished for the day, so I headed home. As I reached the house, two men were descending the porch steps, headed toward a dark SUV parked along the curb. Both were dressed formally in overcoats and wearing shiny shoes, an unusual sight in Mitagomee, and both slid on Ray-Bans as they climbed into the car. I crouched down, pretending to tie my boot laces until they pulled away and rounded the corner. My heart was beating so fast I could feel it in my ears, like a loud bass line.

I had been ready to make a joke about the Blues Brothers, but Dr. Mishkin was looking frail and shaky. "Who was that?"

She made her way to an armchair and lowered herself carefully, as if she might break something. "They gave me their cards. I put them somewhere."

I spotted them on the windowsill and picked them up. "FBI?"
"From Minneapolis."

"So they said. Anyone can print cards."

She looked up, fixing me with a look, as if someone had given

her an injection of her old self. "I'm not a fool. I called the field office. Those two work there."

"Was this about the swatting? The fake nine-one-one call about the hostage situation?"

"I don't think so. Apparently people have been sending in lots of anonymous tips about me. Who's doing all this?"

"There are a lot of people out there with time on their hands and a warped sense of humor. They think it's fun."

"It's alarming to have government agents come to your door. Reminds me of the old days. They didn't say anything about the tipsters, they were mainly interested in my history—or rather, the lack of it. I finally gave them the name of my last CIA handler. One of them made phone calls while the other kept questioning me. They were polite, but it was ... unpleasant."

"Did they ask about me?"

"Yes, but I didn't tell them anything other than that you worked at the college and my daughter pays you to help out around the house."

"I'm really sorry I got you into this."

"Why are you always apologizing? The blame belongs to those small-minded bigots trying to get a bigger audience for their YouTube videos. It's straight out of a totalitarian playbook, and your former employer promotes all this nonsense. Did you not understand when you worked there where it could lead?"

"Not for a long time. I just thought it was cool, the technology. The code. It was intoxicating."

She nodded. "Andrei Dmitrievich talked about the early days of nuclear physics, how exciting the science was. How he didn't anticipate how stupidly people would handle that power."

"For me, the code was beautiful, but the system I was selling to customers was just a fancy way to get people to click on ads. The same code was used in political campaigns, but I wasn't interested in politics, so I didn't even think about the consequences."

"And now you understand. Perhaps you should warn people."

"I'm working on it. I'm going to make some tea. Do you want some? Or would you rather lie down for a bit?"

"Lie down? You sound like Lara. I'm not decrepit."

"Of course not." Not decrepit, but I didn't like seeing her so shaken. "She's texted me a few times. I keep telling her things are okay, but she seems pretty worried."

"That's her problem. Tea, please. And would you also bring some of those chocolate biscuits? I'll be in the study."

Tuesday was usually a day when I could catch up on marking papers and reviewing Maggie's detailed lesson plans for the rest of the week. Not this Tuesday. I knew it would be different when I got an early call from the assistant to the assistant to the provost. He had scheduled a meeting with me for ten a.m.

When I arrived, I was escorted to a meeting room and introduced to the head of campus security and the executive assistant to the president. My department chair was there, too, and Charlie, the pudgy media relations guy who was supposed to write an article about my podcast assignment to tamp down the controversy, but so far hadn't.

"We've been discussing our options," the provost said. "Apparently your students will be putting their podcasts on the internet. Are you sure that's wise?"

"No. I told them it was a bad idea."

"We hear they're going online."

"I told them not to, but they want to do it anyway."

"Can't you stop them?"

"How?"

"We're getting pressure from the board," the president's emissary said. "They want this whole thing to go away."

I was losing whatever niceness I had previously adopted as part of my persona. "Sure. Just go away, poof, like that. Do they each want a pony, too?"

"Maggie," my chair groaned.

"Do you think this is funny?" the provost said, his face

reddening. “My phone is ringing off the hook. We have parents who want to pull their children out.”

“Why aren’t you talking to Michael Knutson? He’s the one who made all this go viral. Oh right, his dad is on the board. Look, I can’t advise you how to stop the internet. It’s bigger than Magnusson.”

“The least you can do is tell us about this protest planned for tonight.”

“I’m not involved.”

The head of security leaned forward, pinning me with an interrogator’s glare. “That’s not good enough. Who’s running the show? Where are they meeting?”

“I have no idea.”

“Who are you protecting?”

“You’ve been watching too many *Law and Order* reruns. The students are organizing the event. I have no insider knowledge.” I almost added “and if I did, I wouldn’t tell you,” but decided I was already on thin ice.

“The VP for admissions shared some relevant figures with me,” the provost said, reading from his phone. “More than half of our students have a close relative who graduated from Magnusson, and nearly half of those live in red counties. Keeping alumni happy is crucial for recruiting, and our budget depends on tuition. Even if we lose only ten or fifteen students in the next entering class, we’re in trouble. We have to respect their feelings.”

“I have students who are getting hateful messages shoved under their doors. What about their feelings?”

“Let’s focus on the problem at hand,” the woman from the president’s office said, clasping her hands in front of her, all business. “Maggie, there’s a news crew coming to campus, a network affiliate from Minneapolis. We need you to make a statement on camera. You want to correct the false narrative the media has created about the Magnusson community. You

have always found it to be a warm and caring place that has a long tradition of excellence. Charlie can draft it for you."

"I'm on it," Charlie said, wagging his pen to show how ready he was.

"I don't want to be on TV."

"This isn't about what you want," the provost said. "We have to present a unified message, and we need people to see that you're not some flaming radical."

"Be reasonable." The chair leaned across the table, practically prostrating himself. "The board's talking about retrenchment. They might cut our major. Think of the department."

What would Maggie do? It was her assignment that set all this off, and the students loved it. She would lead with that, I decided. "What about my students? As far as I can tell, they did nothing wrong. They found out Magnusson has some racism in its past, just like every institution in this country. The only one who turned it into a shitshow is Michael Knutson, who is more interested in his influencer metrics than in the reputation of his school. What his father hopes to get out of it, I'll let you all figure that out. I can't help you with the TV spot."

"I told her to drop that podcast assignment," the chair muttered to the provost, who ignored him.

"You refuse?" the woman asked, pretending to be shocked.

I was fed up with being bullied by these people. "Yes, but here's something you can tell the TV crew: I quit. That should make the board happy."

There was a moment of stunned silence. "You're resigning?" the chair said. It felt good, hearing him say it with a note of panic in his voice.

"Effective when?" the president's executive assistant asked, all business.

"Immediately." I looked at the department chair. "I'll send you my course materials." I gave him a kindly Maggie smile. "I hope they will be useful for whoever takes over my classes."

"You signed a contract."

"No, this may be for the best," the provost overruled him. "Check in with your department's administrative assistant. She'll explain how to turn in your keys and laptop and so forth."

"Does this mean you're funding a replacement?" the chair asked him.

"Don't be silly."

"You can go." The executive assistant pointed at the door, saying to the others "Let's hammer this out."

I left, feeling reckless. Feeling happy.

Heading back to my office, I stopped first to talk to Shirley Anderson. "I hear you had a meeting," she said.

"Yup. They're still at it."

"It better not take too long. I need the chair to sign some invoices before lunch."

"Um, listen. I need to make some copies. A lot of copies."

"How many?"

"I'm not sure exactly. Hundreds of pages."

She squinted at me, disbelieving. "That'll tie the machine up for ages. And the last time you wanted to print something, it broke. Who's going to pay for this?"

"I will. Oh, the other thing, I just quit my job, so I'll need to turn in my keys and laptop. Do I give them to you?"

"You quit your job? Your teaching job?"

"They were so pissed off at me, it seemed like the thing to do."

"That'll ruin the chair's day," she said, visibly cheered. "Put the stuff you want to print on a stick. You can use the computer over there, it's faster than using wifi. I want to see the money up front."

"I quit my job," I told Oak and Beasley when I got to the office.

They looked stunned, then Oak gave me a hug. "How do you feel about it?"

"Good. Really good." I described the meeting and accepted their congratulations. Beasley was openly jealous.

"Oh, hey. I printed a map for you," Oak said, handing me a sheet of paper. "It shows where that lake cabin is."

"How come you can always use the printer without a hassle?"

"Shirley likes me. If you go, I assume you won't be using GPS, so I wrote down directions."

"Thanks."

"Or I could show you. It's kind of tricky to find." He turned to Beasley. "Say, you know how Maggie has been doing light housekeeping for Dr. Mishkin? Cooking dinner, running errands, nothing too time-consuming. If we went out of town for a few days, could you stay at her place and do a few chores? It would save you the commute to the cities, and Dr. Mishkin's good company. Her daughter wants to know someone is around, and she pays."

"I suppose I could manage that." Beasley pretended to be put out, but she was obviously pleased.

"I just talked to Shirley about printing out the stuff for Graham," I told Oak. "I'd better do that now." I would have preferred to use Maggie's old Toshiba, with its improved security, but I didn't want to waste time.

I found a USB from a textbook sales rep and wiped it, installed the Tor browser, then logged into the Swiss server and began to copy files. While I waited for them to finish downloading I sent off a short email to the aliases for my four course sections telling them I had resigned and the department chair was the person to talk to if they had questions about the rest of the semester. Then I sent an email to the department chair, attaching Maggie's course materials.

My phone rang. It was Graham Turlow. "So far I only reached one of the two engineers who used to work for Eventive, but he told me enough to confirm the general outlines of your story. I also spoke with Brian Friedman."

"He was willing to talk to you?"

There was a pause as he parsed my words. "Of course he talked to me. I'm Graham Turlow."

"Sure. It's just, he was so pissed off at me, I thought he might not want anything to do with it. Does this mean you want to write the story?"

"Graham?" Oak mouthed. I nodded, and he pumped his arm.

"Didn't I say so? Brian's fine with it. He already sent me his notes and the article he was drafting. Not the documents. He kept those on a separate laptop, which got stolen. We can guess who made that happen. His article's not terrible, though he got into the weeds too much. The average reader would tune out. Also, he screwed up, asking Adam Barton for a comment before he had an editor committed to it. You only talk to weasels like that if you have a law firm backing you up, one that someone else is paying for."

"Makes sense."

"I've been thinking about the pitch. I have an in with the *Post*, and some connections at the *Times*, though their lawyers are too cautious for my money. The one I'm toying with, though, is the *Journal*. What do you think? Their opinion pages are shit, but they've done some solid reporting on big tech and privacy. Or we could pitch it to the *Post*. Anyway, we can talk about it after we go through the documents. Did you get them printed for me yet?"

"Working on it right now."

"Good girl. I mean, good twenty-something-year-old woman. I'm going to book a flight to MSP for tomorrow. I'm not up for driving all the way from Chicago, it wrecks my back. How far is it from the airport to Michi Mochi or whatever it's called? Never mind, I'll pick up a map from the rental agency. I'll give you a call once I know the timeline. And look, clear your calendar. I know you gotta work, but—"

"Actually, I don't. I just quit my job."

"Really. How'd that go down? Never mind, you can fill me in later. My cat sitter is at the door. I have to show here around and introduce her to the beasts."

As I put my phone down Beasley made a squeak. "Have you checked your email? Word is out."

"I emailed my students." I opened the app. Messages began to flood in. "Shit. I didn't think they'd be so mad about it."

"They're not mad at you. They're demanding the admin rehire you."

I started to open random messages from students, ignoring the copy-pasted hate mail that had piled up. "This is wild. They're acting like it's the best class ever, which it isn't. I know it isn't. They're just mad that the college tried to shut their podcast down, which—guess what, I also tried to do that." I saw one arrive from a familiar name. Sidonie. She'd written in haste but, as usual, it was lovely. I had to blink away tears. "Man, this is amazing. I should have resigned weeks ago. Just kidding."

"Hey, Maggie?" A couple of students poked their heads in the door. "We wanted to tell you how bummed we are. They really railroaded you. Also, could you look over our script when you get a chance?"

"Sure. I have to finish a thing here, but we can talk. You're doing the ..."

"The custodial staff. We want to go first, but we just want to be sure it's ready."

They started to tell me about their podcast episode as another group showed up at the door. "Hey. It sucks that you got fired."

"Actually, I resigned."

"Right. We really like your class. Do you know who's going to teach our section, because we really don't want Van Meter, he's creepy. And most of the English faculty are too old."

"Will our podcasts count for the grade?" another student asked. "We already put in a ton of work on it."

"You'll have to ask the department chair." The downloading completed, I ejected the thumb drive. "I need to do a bunch of printing. Maybe we can meet later today?" I said to the pair of students who showed up first.

"I have choir practice," one of them said.

"Let me check my sched," the other said, tapping her phone. You'd think I was asking her for a favor. I was going to miss these kids, but not their cluelessness.

"Maggie?" Shirley Anderson bulldozed her way through the crowd at the door. Her cheeks were flushed, her chest heaving. "There's a man looking for you. He's acting weird. Says he's your boyfriend."

The world froze. I had been on a slight high, feeling good about impulsively throwing a resignation on the table, about Graham Turlow planning to tell my story, about Sidonie's sweet message. But suddenly I was thrust back into a dark place. I felt my scalp prickle, an embodied memory of the night when he had grabbed a hank of my hair to drag me across the room. I couldn't breathe, as if he already had his hands around my throat. Someone whimpered. It must have been me.

"Where is he?" Oak asked.

"He was headed this way. A gal who works for admissions called me. He asked directions. She says he's pretty..." She whistled and circled her ear with a finger. "You go down the back stairs. I'll head him off."

"We'll help," one of the students said.

"Is that what you need printed?" She pointed at me. "I'll take care of it. No charge."

I handed her the thumb drive numbly. "Don't let him have it. It's important."

"Don't worry, hon. We can handle this."

"Can you hold him up for five minutes?" Oak asked her. "So we can get away?"

"You got it."

"You're the best, Shirley," Oak said, pulling on his jacket and handing me mine. "Let's go."

Twenty-Three

We hurried out the rear exit and down the hill to Dr. Mishkin's house, where she unbolted the front door and welcomed us in to the darkened living room. "There's a guy looking for Maggie," Oak told her.

"I know. He was already here. Luckily I had time to lock the doors because he tried to get in, front door, back door. Banging with his fist and calling for you. He seems a bit unhinged."

"It's Robbie. My ex."

"Ah. Could you put the kettle on, dear?" Oak nodded and disappeared into the kitchen. She took my hands and guided me to an armchair. "You're so cold."

"I should leave. I should leave now before he comes back."

"You're safe here. First, we warm you up. Then we make decisions." She wrapped her lap blanket around my shoulders.

"He wants me back."

"Of course he does, but he can't have you."

"He'll kill me next time."

"We won't let that happen."

"My best friend warned me about him, but I didn't listen."

"Who is this best friend?"

"Allie. She has a baby. A baby and a four year old. I met her in fourth grade. I really should leave."

"Shhh." Dr. Mishkin sat beside me, enfolding my hands in hers. They looked like the roots of something ancient, knobby and gnarled. "Tell me about this Allie. How did you meet her in fourth grade?"

By the time Oak brought us tea—a mug for me, and a proper cup and saucer for Dr. Mishkin, because he is a quick study—I was coming out of my weird, icy paralysis. "Do you think Shirley's okay?" I asked him.

"She's tough, she can handle him. Plus, I just talked to

Beasley. Campus security already showed. They're communicating with the local cops. You're safe."

"For now. He'll come back."

"Good thing we have a place to go. After you finish your tea, why don't you pack up your stuff. I have a few things to do but I'll be ready soon."

"You're going too?"

"Of course. Two is better than one. Besides, I know the way."

"The way where?" Dr. Mishkin asked.

"Oak arranged a place in Wisconsin where I can hide out."

"A lake cabin," Oak said. "My friend takes his family there on weekends, but they don't go there much this time of year. His kids have too many school activities, so we can stay there as long as necessary. Oh, and we have a substitute lined up for Maggie, so you won't be alone. Our office mate, Harriet Beasley. She normally has to commute from the cities, so she's happy to step in."

"She can stay here if she likes," Dr. Mishkin said. "But I'm coming with you."

Two hours later we were on our way. Dr. Mishkin couldn't be dissuaded. "If it's large enough for a family, you will have room. What's the harm? Do you realize how boring my life has been? I am ready for an adventure. Besides, I want to meet Graham Turlow. I seem to recall his book about Iraq got good reviews." We told Beasley about the change of plans, and the key that would be left under a brick beneath the front steps. She was happy to house sit without the extra responsibilities.

Shirley Anderson had dropped by the house with a box full of the printed documents and waved away my thanks. "Sorry to see you leave, but it's almost worth it to see the English faculty go after each other. They're fighting over who has to finish your courses as an unpaid overload. At each other's throats." She and Dr. Mishkin roared with laughter. It turned out they

were old pals. Their children had attended elementary school together.

Oak cancelled his classes, claiming a family emergency, and called Graham Turlow to tell him we were changing locations, recommending he book a room at a bed-and-breakfast in Chance, the town nearest to our cabin. Since I'd lost my faraday pouch somewhere along the way, I patched together a makeshift one out of a small cardboard box, duct tape, and layers of tinfoil, inside and out. Dr. Mishkin teased me about making us all hats, but when we tested it, it worked.

On the way, we picked up a prepaid sim card to use in Oak's phone so he could keep teaching his online Metro State courses without being tracked, and we swapped cars with the help of another of Oak's many friends, parking Dr. Mishkin's in a South Minneapolis garage while we drove on in a borrowed rust bucket.

We arrived at the cabin after dark. It was cold and smelled like wood smoke and mildew. Oak built a fire in the wood stove while I brought in our bags and a cooler full of food brought from home. Dr. Mishkin sat in a padded rocking chair near the stove, bundled in her winter coat while the cottage warmed up. I swept up the mouse turds on the kitchen counter and hoped she didn't notice.

The world felt far away as night drew in around the cabin. It was an old-school summer cottage, a simple wooden structure in a clearing beside a lake with rafters made of birch logs, a chimney made out of local stone, and creaky wooden floors covered with threadbare oriental carpets. Three tiny bedrooms opened onto the main room, with its collection of rocking chairs, board games, and shelves full of tattered paperbacks. Windows on three sides could be hooked open to catch the breeze in the summer. In October they leaked cold drafts, but the wood stove put out enough heat to make up for it. As I made dinner in the kitchen (a counter with a sink, a dorm-

sized refrigerator, and a vintage range) I made a note of where the knives were kept. The biggest one was good and sharp. I closed my eyes and oriented myself. Third drawer from the sink. I could find it in the dark.

As the soup began to bubble, danger seemed to recede and we spent the evening playing cards at the kitchen table and drinking hot toddies made with rum I found in one of the cupboards.

Thanks to the rum, I fell asleep quickly but woke in the dark, thirsty and unsure of the time. I peered out the window beside my bed. The moon was up and the white bark of the birch trees at the edge of the clearing was brightly illuminated against the dark of the pine trees deeper into the woods. I lay back in bed, but sleep wouldn't come. It was strangely unsettling to not know the time, so I pushed the door open and stepped into the main room.

Moonlight streamed across the lake, a white path that glinted off ice and shivered where the water was still open. In the clearing beside the cabin two deer grazed. The larger one looked up, alert, ears twitching. I held my breath. For a moment, the doe seemed to stare straight at me before she sprinted away gracefully, followed by the yearling, their white tails waving like flags of surrender as they vanished into the surrounding woods.

"Wow," I said to Oak.

"Cool, huh?"

"What are you doing up?"

Oak was slumped in a rocking chair moved to a corner of the room, his feet up on the cooler, facing the path to the gravel drive where our borrowed car was parked. "Just keeping an eye out." He yawned and stretched.

"You can't stay awake all night."

"I can try."

"Don't be silly. We took precautions. We'll be okay."

"I saw your face when you heard Robbie was on campus, looking for you."

"Oh, right. I kind of freaked out. But the risk that he could find us here is low, so you should go to bed."

"I don't want you to feel that afraid, ever again."

I didn't know what to say. I gestured to the sink and came back with a glass of water. "Mm. Love this well water. What time is it?"

"Not sure. It was a little after two last I checked."

I pulled a chair closer and found an afghan to wrap around my shoulders. Oak had banked the fire for the night, and it was chilly. "Thanks for being here. This place is great, but it would be spooky if I were by myself."

"You'd have Dr. Mishkin."

"That was a surprise. She's so stubborn. I wonder what her daughter will say when she finds out we went on a road trip. I'll be so fired. Actually, I may already be fired."

"Resigning from one job and getting fired from another in the same day? You may have set a record."

"I think you set a record." He raised an eyebrow, a question mark. "For coming through. Getting us a car and a place to hide out on short notice."

"I just have good friends."

"I'm short on friends. I made more of them being Maggie Farnham than I've had for years."

"Probably hard when you're on the run."

"Even before. At Eventive, my only friend was Aurora. The work culture there made it hard to socialize. So did Robbie. We had friends back in Maine, a group of computer science majors we shared a house with. But when we moved to Boston, I think he felt insecure, worried he didn't measure up. Besides, he was always a little over-protective with me and prone to jealousy, but he wasn't violent, not at first. Things got a lot worse in the end. He couldn't get an important product off the ground, and he was frustrated. Scared, too. Scared he wasn't as good

as he thought he was. Scared of disappointing his hero, Adam Barton.”

“No excuse.”

“No, it’s not.” I yawned. “I’m not going to let him keep me awake tonight. I’m going back to bed. You should get some sleep, too.”

“I will.”

But he didn’t move, so I draped the afghan over him. “Here, I warmed it up for you.”

As he reached out for it, our hands met. “Thanks.” He gave mine a squeeze.

The morning was devoted to domestic matters. While I inventoried food and planned meals for the next few days, Dr. Mishkin inventoried the reading options. Oak checked out the wood supply. There was a massive wall of old logs stacked between two handy trees, but they would need splitting. He gave me lessons, then took the axe from me, claiming I was a danger to myself and others, before he rapidly filled a basket by himself. Then we all drove into Chance with the box of documents to meet up with Graham.

“I tried calling you soon as I got in,” he said crossly when we crowded into the lobby of his bed and breakfast, a charming Victorian cottage liberally decorated with duck-themed knickknacks.

“New number,” Oak told him, and texted it to him. “Otherwise we could be tracked.”

I introduced him to Dr. Mishkin. She shook his hand. “Very pleased to meet you. These young people have allowed me to come along. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not a bit. Is that a Polish accent?”

“Please. Brooklyn. But I was born and raised in Moscow.”

“Fascinating. Love to hear your story someday. Meanwhile...”

“We brought the papers with us,” I said, indicating the cardboard box I had set down at my feet. “It’s a lot.”

“Great.” He crouched down, his knees creaking, and opened the lid to take a look. He whistled through his teeth. “This is promising. We’ll need a place to work. This joint’s okay for sleeping, but the room is too small, and we can’t use the common areas, there are other guests. A bunch of guys just checked in from Chicago, up here to hunt turkeys. What’s up with that? You can get one at the grocery store for cheap. How about we take this stuff to your place?”

He followed us in his rental down the county highway and over the gravel roads to the cabin after grumbling when I made him leave his phone in his room.

Once at the cabin, he commandeered the kitchen table, the only surface big enough to sort out the box of documents. Dr. Mishkin claimed one end of the table, marking her place with a mug of tea (there were no proper cups with saucers, to her dismay). She pretended to read a random volume of the Harvard Classics that she found among the Readers Digest condensed books while actually listening to us.

We unloaded the box of documents and made piles, using Aurora’s readme text as a guide. Then we dug through each pile, sorting them into further categories as we sifted through them. He asked questions as we worked, his recorder placed in the middle of the table to capture everything I said.

After a break to fix and eat dinner, holding bowls of pasta in our laps as the sun set, we carried on by lamplight until we had spread the documents into a rough map of Eventive’s many problematic activities. Satisfied with the basic overview and ready to dig deeper, Graham drove back to his lodging.

That night I woke from a dream I couldn’t remember and lay in bed, wondering what had startled me. Then it came again, the sound of dead leaves being disturbed close by. I slipped on my jacket and tiptoed out to the main room. Oak had set up an army cot he found in a closet beside the front door. He was awake, too. We looked at each other when the noise came

again. Something or someone was making its way around the cabin.

It was a dark night, the moon glowing like a giant pearl behind the clouds. I stepped over to the kitchen counter, carefully slid open a drawer and drew out a knife, then went as quietly as I could to the door. Oak joined me, the phone in his hand. We listened. Carefully I opened it. Oak stepped outside and hit the flashlight app. "Oh, shit."

A handsome skunk was snuffling around the crawlspace under the steps, two smaller versions of her nearby. She turned to waddle back around the corner followed by her kits as we stumbled back inside, suppressing our laughter, limp with adrenaline and relief. I put the knife back and put on the kettle. That bottle of rum was coming in handy.

Graham and I worked for a week, with me talking into his recorder until I grew hoarse, he filling a legal pad with scribbled notes and occasionally giving my throat a rest by telling a long-winded story about his career. Oak alternated between splitting wood to keep the stove stoked and communicating with students in his online courses, using his phone with its burner sim card as a sluggish hotspot and setting his VPN to Minneapolis.

He also made routine scans of social media chatter, browsing Reddit and using newly-created Twitter and Facebook accounts, reporting in from time to time. The student-organized protest had been a success. The counter protest had been a bust, with less alumni turnout than expected. Michael Knutson, undeterred, had made another video, this one a point-by-point dissection of the event and its speakers, proving with devastating rationality (his words) that professors and woke students were engaged in a nefarious plot to make white students feel guilt and emotional distress, which clearly was racist.

After a couple of days reporting the news of the world, Oak

suggested Dr. Mishkin should check in with her daughter. "There are some weird rumors flying around about your whereabouts. Either you got kidnapped by antifa or you've been arrested by Homeland Security and will be tried for treason. She might be concerned."

"How tiresome." She looked around, vexed. "Where did I put my phone?"

"We put them away, remember?" I said.

"Yes, of course." That cheered her up. "Well, I don't know her number by heart, so I guess she will just have to evaluate these ridiculous claims using common sense, not that it's a strong point for her." She grumbled when Oak signed up for a fake LinkedIn account and used it to locate Lara's contact information, but sighed, took the burner phone from him, and made the call.

"Hello, Lara. ... Yes, I've heard about the silliness. I'm quite all right, I simply decided to take a small vacation. No, no, I didn't drive, though I'm perfectly capable. Maggie insisted on doing it, as you instructed. She had never been to the North Shore, and I told her she must see it while the fall color is so vibrant, and now that she is a woman of leisure...."

"North Shore?" Graham muttered, confused.

"Of Lake Superior," I clarified. "Minnesota's answer to the Riviera."

"That's not accurate," Dr. Mishkin said. "She wasn't fired. She resigned. It's the college's fault, they should have supported her during all this internet foolishness, but they were, as usual, quite stupid. At any rate, I wanted to put your mind at ease in case you were seeing absurd rumors on that Facebook of yours, which really, you should delete. Did you know they collect an enormous amount of personal data? They use it to design ads that will speak to you personally by putting you in narrow categories, such as suburban parents whose children play soccer and women who worry too much about their elderly

mothers.” She said goodbye and handed the phone back to Oak.

Graham mimed applause. “Nicely done, that bit of misdirection about our location.”

“I’ve had a great deal of practice.”

“I’m intrigued. Tell me more.” God, he was flirting with her.

We broke for dinner, and Graham used his best interrogation skills to learn how she practiced misdirection, but she serenely deflected him as if they were playing a game of chess. He pretended to be frustrated, but clearly was charmed, and Dr. Mishkin was enjoying it.

It was strange, delving into Aurora’s documents, learning things about Eventive I didn’t know while revisiting my own career there, only to surface in a cabin surrounded by miles of forests and fields. Once or twice a day, Oak and I stretched our legs, following deer paths through the woods. Most of the cabins in the area had been closed up for the winter, but at night we could see lights here and there across the lake. When the weekend came, a few motor boats and a kayak appeared on the lake, though enough ice had formed in our bay to keep them at a safe distance.

Though the natural world around the little cabin felt tranquil and ageless, I felt a constant undercurrent of anxiety that flooded my body with adrenaline when I heard the distant crunch of tires traveling on the gravel road or even a squirrel rustling for nuts in dead leaves on the forest floor. Had Robbie returned to Boston, or was he still somewhere nearby, poring over digital signals and electronic traces, trying to track me down? Graham was excited about the story we were constructing together, and confident that it would be a crowning achievement for his career as an investigative journalist. I tried to keep my jitters to myself.

By Tuesday, a week after we had left Mitagomee in a hurry,

Graham arrived from his lodgings with good news. He had successfully pitched the story to an editor at the *Post*. They had been talking it over for days, and it had been given the green light at a meeting that morning. He was ready to write the first installment of what would likely become a series.

"Awesome," Oak said, while I felt a mix of hope and dread. I'd been here before, and it had ended badly.

As if he had read my mind, Graham added "I talked to Brian Friedman about writing a sidebar. What Eventive did to him would make a great illustration of how they operate. Besides, this was his story originally. He put a lot of work into it, and it was decent stuff. Getting a byline in the *Post* would be a start on rebooting his career. Listen to me, 'rebooting,' I've been around you techies too long."

"What did he say?" I asked.

"He's not ready to go public yet. In fact, he thinks I may be in for the same treatment he got."

I was worried, too, though not just on Graham's account. I was getting used to the idea of having my life back, having friends and a future. Having a chance to do what Aurora tried to do, to expose Eventive. "Aren't you going to have to ask Adam Barton for a response? That's what started all the trouble for Brian."

"Sure, he'll have a chance to comment, but before that the paper will fact-check the shit out of it and make sure it's solid. Besides, what have I got to lose? Unlike Brian, I don't have a wife and kids, I don't have a boss who could can me, and it's not like I got a career to worry about, now that I'm older than dirt. What's the worst that could happen, my publisher yanks my book contract? It would be a relief. It's kind of nice, being this old," he said to Dr. Mishkin. "You don't have to give a shit, am I right?"

"Yes, absolutely. Though I'm not sure advanced age is required. I haven't given a shit since I was in my twenties."

"See? That's the spirit. You youngsters take note. Say, look.

I'm going to head back to the city tomorrow and start putting this together. Emily, keep that phone handy. As this first installment shapes up, I'm bound to have some questions, and I'm sure the fact checkers will, too. Today, though, let's give it a final push. I need you to explain how natural language processing works, again. And some of the other tech terminology. I was outlining the story last night, but when it comes to the nuts and bolts my notes don't make any sense."

We were three hours into it when Oak got a worrying email. His mother in California wanted him to call immediately. I knew him well enough to see the tension in his shoulders, in his voice as he called. "Hey, mom. What's up?"

He turned away, walking to a far corner of the room. "How bad is it? ... Okay, yeah, I get it. Which hospital?" By this time all three of us were listening in.

He turned around and shrugged helplessly. "It's my dad. He's at Fairview, in the ICU. They think it's a stroke. I'm the only family in the area, so I guess I have to go."

"Of course," I said. "I hope he'll be okay."

"Shit. That means I'll have to take the car. I don't like stranding you."

"I can stay here tonight," Graham said. "We'll have a vehicle, don't worry."

"Okay, thanks. You'd better have the sim card. I'll put mine back in when I get to Minneapolis and let you know what's going on."

We swapped out cards, then I walked with him to the car. "Good luck with your dad."

"I'm sorry, Maggie. I mean Emily."

"Don't stress about us. We'll be fine."

"Both Maggie and Emily?" He gave me a weak smile. "It's not like we're even close, me and my dad. We never were, even before my parents split up. I wish my sister still lived in the cities. They're both engineers, they speak the same language, but she's on a project in Taiwan, so."

"We've been careful. We'll be okay."

He nodded, unhappy about it. I gave him a hug before he climbed into the car, then watched him go, the borrowed Honda bouncing its way up the rutted drive to the gravel county road.

"Do you need to call the B and B?" I asked Graham when I got back to the cabin. "Let them know you'll be out tonight?"

"I should," he said, slipping his phone out of his pocket.

"No, use mine," I said.

He was looking at it. "Dammit. Forgot to switch it off again." He hastily powered it down and slipped it into his pocket, trying to hide his mistake.

I felt my stomach lurch. "What do you mean, 'again'?"

"I hardly ever use the damn thing, except when I travel. I forget it's there. Let's get back to work."

We did, but I couldn't let go of a nagging sense of vulnerability. Cell phones leave trails. I tried to dismiss it—would Eventive be monitoring Graham's phone? I had been careful to keep the number for my burner private, so they shouldn't be able to connect the two of us. But I couldn't quite relax. I knew too much about how few pieces of information it took to zero in on an individual, and how easy it was to obtain GPS location data from any number of sketchy companies.

We worked for another hour until the sun had set and streaks of cloud glowed orange and magenta, picking up the last of the light. It was getting cold in the cabin, and I realized it was past time to feed the wood stove. There was only one piece of wood left in the basket, so I took it outside to gather more. Luckily, Oak had left a tidy pile already split. I didn't trust myself to swing the axe he handled with such confidence. I filled the basket and was about to lift it when I felt an arm wrap around my neck.

"Gotcha," Robbie whispered. It sounded almost playful.

I dropped the basket. The axe was sunk into an upright log where Oak had left it. Close enough that I could grab it if I

managed to lurch one step forward, but Robbie must have sensed my thoughts. He tightened his grip, swung me away from the woodpile, and showed me the gun he held in his other hand.

I closed my eyes and reached for the old Emily, the loyal employee, the cheerful girlfriend. For what passed for normal, back when we were together, when I was skilled at talking him down. “God, Robbie. You scared me.”

“Cool how I got your boyfriend out of here, huh?”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

“He’s going to be mad when he gets to the hospital. Who are those old people in there? I thought your grandparents lived out East.”

“They’re just friends.” An old alarm rang. I wasn’t supposed to have friends. “People I met. Nobody important.”

“Remember when we were friends, back in Maine? That first day, in the computer lab? I thought you were the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“Those were good times.” I tried to steady the tremor in my voice.

“And at Eventive, eating pizza late at night, talking about my projects, then walking back to our place after midnight? In bed, I used to snuggle up against you. You were so warm and soft.” He nuzzled my temple, as if the arm he had around my neck was a hug. “Your hair wasn’t so short, though. I liked it better before.”

“I was in an accident, they had to cut it off. It’s growing it out. Maybe I’ll dye it blue, again. Remember when I used to do that?”

“You were different then.”

“What is it you want, Robbie?”

“I want you. I want to go back to how it was when we first met, I want to start over. He fired me, you believe that?”

“Adam did?”

"With a text message, a week ago. Said my productivity had fallen off."

"That's not fair. You worked your ass off for him."

"It's just a mistake. I've just been using vacation time. I didn't use any for five years, so I thought it would be okay if sometimes I took a few days off to look for you. I almost caught up with you in Florida, at that nasty motel. You don't belong in a place like that. Why did you leave?"

"You hurt me. You beat me up."

"What are you talking about?"

"Maybe you don't remember. You were upset, you got really drunk. I was scared."

"So, I was drunk. That's no reason to run away."

"I'm sorry, Robbie. Things just stopped working for us."

"I thought with Aurora gone, it would get better. But you changed. And then you left, and nothing has gone right since then."

He released my neck, but kept the gun he was holding trained on me. He gave me a wan smile, struggling for normal, as if he were, like me, trying to be the man he used to be, the hotshot coder, the confident guy who could write code better than anyone. His hand, the one holding the pistol, was shaking, and for some reason that pierced me with sorrow. "I just wanted to find you so we could talk, but you kept running away from me. Didn't you know how much I love you?"

"I loved you too, Robbie. But you hurt me. And I was scared of Adam. What he's doing with the company, it's wrong."

"No." He wagged the gun barrel as if it was a finger he was chiding me with. "You're wrong about Adam. He's a great man. Here's the deal: We're going to start over, and I'm going to prove to him he needs me. And things will be back the way they should be."

"Hey, Mr. Martens?" Graham let himself out of the door cautiously, feeling for the ground with his foot, keeping his eyes

fixed on us. He let the door close and raised his palms up. See? Harmless. “My name’s Graham Turlow.”

The gun pointed toward him, then back to me as he winced in frustration. “You should stay out of this.”

“I’m reporter. I’m writing a story for the *Washington Post* about Eventive. I’d love to have a chance to talk to you. Get your side of things.”

“Another reporter?” Robbie said to me. “What is it with you?”

“Graham, go inside.”

Robbie’s arm went around my neck again, and he pulled me back, toward the county road, the gun wavering between Graham and my head. “We’re going. Leave us alone.”

“Come on, man,” Graham said, trying for a calm, reasonable tone. “This isn’t going to work, you know that. I can help you. Why don’t we—”

A brilliant flash erupted beside my head. Graham went down on his back, arms splayed. I must have screamed, but I couldn’t hear anything but a loud roar in my ears. The arm choked me as Robbie stumbled back frantically, trying to drag me away from the cabin, from Graham. I couldn’t breathe.

As we both stumbled backward, his foot caught on a root and he let me go, struggling to stay upright. Still half blinded by the afterimage of the flash, I threw myself forward onto my hands and knees.

I felt Robbie drop on top of me, a heavy weight pinning me to the ground. I shrugged him off and rolled away, across rocks and roots and something solid and angular jabbing my ribs. The gun. I snatched it and held it for a moment before I threw it away into the trees.

It didn’t make sense. A dark pool of blood was seeping out from under him. Had he shot himself? I covered my ears, but the roar wouldn’t let up. I looked away, into the woods, then blinked and struggled to steady the image. A tall, lean shape far back among the trees, a long gun pointed at me. A surge of

adrenaline rushed through me, but I couldn't move, frozen in shock.

The gun barrel swung down to point at the ground, and the man nodded once, as if we had reached some kind of agreement. He slipped back through the trees until his dark clothing merged into the shadows among the pines, gone as if he'd never been there.

I huddled beside Robbie, hugging myself and shivering, thinking I should put my fingers against his neck like they do on TV, but I couldn't bring myself touch him. His back had a hole in it, a mess of blood and bone and rags of tissue. One arm was flung out, fingers clutching the footpath, the other reaching toward me. His cheek was pillowed against the earth, his eye staring past me with that blank look he used to have when running code through his head, hunting for the bug that kept his routine from running like it was supposed to.

I felt a gentle pressure on my shoulder, someone rubbing it. Dr. Mishkin had squatted beside me. She did the thing I couldn't, felt Robbie's neck with two fingers, unfazed. "He's gone," she said after a moment. Her words were faint and scrambled behind the roaring, ringing chaos inside my head.

"Graham?" I managed to ask.

She snorted. "He's fine. The shot went over head. He just tripped over his own feet and bumped his noggin, nothing serious. Could you help me up? My legs aren't as strong as they used to be."

Twenty-Four

"His name is Connie Uys. Cornelius Uys."

The sheriff's deputy looked at me. "Sorry?"

"The man in the woods. I recognized him."

He nodded politely, but his mouth was twisted to one side, holding back his skepticism. "How do you spell that?" I did, and he wrote it down. "Okay, then. I'll be sure to share that with the DCI agents when they get here." He flipped through his notes, closed the pad, and tapped it against his palm. "Though to be honest, I don't see how you could recognize anyone in that light, and he was a fair distance away." It came out in a burst, as if he wanted to be done with this conversation, but couldn't help himself.

"It was him. He looks like a wolf." That was a mistake, I could tell from his expression: embarrassed pity. My mouth and brain hadn't been syncing up ever since that bright muzzle flash had filled my head. The roar had faded to a loud hiss, but the flash left behind floating ghosts whenever I blinked.

"Connie Uys. Isn't that the guy who was involved in the Nigerian campaign?" Graham asked, lowering the bag of frozen corn from the back of his head, reaching for a pen and his legal pad.

"He's head of HUMINT, runs all of their IRL operations. I don't understand why he killed Robbie instead of me."

"We're not sure whoever it was wanted to kill anybody," the deputy said soothingly. "It's turkey season. We see a lot of accidents this time of year."

"Pretty accurate accident," Graham muttered.

"Or could be a hunter saw a guy with a gun mistreating a woman, thought somebody should do something. Who knows? Like I said, the guys from the state police will be taking charge. They'll get to the bottom of it."

Oak leaned forward, his knee jiggling. "Are we done? She's been through a lot. She needs to rest."

"For now."

"Are you looking for him, though?" I asked.

"For the shooter?" The deputy looked offended. "For sure, we're looking. Two deputies are searching those woods and we got roadblocks up, checking with drivers. We'll keep at it until we figure out what happened."

"You and your men are welcome to drink our coffee or use the bathroom," Dr. Mishkin said, taking charge. "But it's late and Emily had a shock. She needs her rest." She shooed me to my bedroom, followed me in and shut the door. "Shoes off. Under the covers." She sounded like a strict commissar.

"I don't think I can sleep."

"Perhaps not, but you can lie still and I will keep you company. Unless you would prefer Oak?"

"No. You're fine." He was acting like a protective guard dog, but he was dealing with his own shit. He called not long after Dr. Mishkin got me back to the cabin. His father wasn't in the ICU, after all. Oak was furious with himself for falling for the hoax. Furious that he hadn't been here to defend me from my psychotic boyfriend. He was so guilt-ridden it was exhausting.

She picked up the ragged paperback of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* from the chair beside my bed and sat down. "You are interested in astronomy?"

"Not especially. It's a book I read when I was a kid."

"And here it is, again, in this cabin in Wisconsin. Things tend to come full circle." She settled herself as comfortably as was possible on a hard ladder back chair and began to read to herself. "Don't panic," she muttered. Another page turned, a snort of laughter.

I pictured Uys and that little nod he gave me. Wondered why I was still alive, why poor, deluded Robbie wasn't. Was it really Uys who I had seen standing in the shadows among the trees,

or just a local hunter? In the moment, had I simply conjured up that hungry face?

A page turned. Another chuckle. “This is quite clever,” she murmured. I started to drift, the sound of an old lady reading silently beside me somehow nudging away the questions and the memories, a calm raft of sleep sending me off into a placid place where the hiss in my ears became the sound of waves lapping the shore.

The state investigators told me Uys had a rock-solid alibi; it couldn't have been him. I didn't bother pointing out that alibi-fabrication was a walk in the park for a seasoned operative. Their minds were made up. Over the next several days, they questioned an impressive number of hunters. As they wrapped up their investigation, they assured me someone would eventually have a few beers too many and spout off about it. That's how these things usually went.

Robbie's parents were happy to see it shelved quickly. They didn't like to have their distinguished family name in the news. Surely it was just an unfortunate accident.

We left the cabin and returned to Mitagomee, where Dr. Mishkin adjusted to life in the slow lane once again, Oak finished up the semester and made household repairs, and we embarked on a new phase of our relationship. It happened naturally. A lingering touch, a shared moment that felt intimate, a look that broke off before it led to something. Oak seemed hesitant about moving too fast after my former boyfriend had tried to kill me. I didn't have the patience for a trauma-informed courtship, so took charge and moved things along. Besides, the ancient fold-away bed in the spare room was wrecking his back.

Two weeks passed before Graham's first article was published. It was juicy enough to get picked up by the national press and abroad; apparently it created a scandal in Nigeria that took on a life of its own. Though Graham's story didn't

include my name or identifying information, and he was careful in the many interviews that followed to protect my privacy, word got out. I was inundated by interview requests, random troll attacks, and bill collectors. I still owed a fortune to the hospital that pieced me back together after the moose. At least I was able to tell the servicer for Maggie's staggering school debt that they were shit out of luck, not that it stopped the paperwork from continuing to arrive, zombie bills addressed to a dead woman.

Eventive brought suit against me for breaching my non-disclosure agreement, among other infractions. Graham found a lawyer willing to help me out pro bono. She talked so fast I wondered if she was coked up, but she reassured me that she could hold them off with a variety of courtroom tricks, at least until the whole story came out.

Week by week, the story kept unfolding. There were eight front-page stories in the *Post*, four by Graham and the rest by staffers analyzing the fallout or providing context. Brian Friedman wrote an op-ed about his ordeal, and that led to some shallow soul-searching in the tech press that had fallen for Eventive's slime. He began to get writing gigs again, but the best news was that he was able to see his boys, and that made him deliriously happy, even though his marriage apparently was beyond repair.

As the saga unfolded and Eventive's PR team launched a defense, I realized why Adam Barton would want Robbie dead. He wouldn't be able to speak for himself. To hear them tell it, Robbie was the mastermind behind everything. Handy to be able to blame it all on a dead guy.

I still wondered why I had been spared. Wouldn't it have been cleaner if I wasn't around to tell my story? It was a mystery until one day I got a Signal message from an unfamiliar number.

>you're welcome

>??

>I didn't kill you that day.

Connie Uys. I dropped my phone in shock and looked around, feeling vulnerable. Glancing down I saw three dots as another message was being typed.

>don't worry, I am retired. I live peacefully in a place where it never snows, people mind their own business, and there is no extradition treaty.

>Why didn't you kill me?

>somebody had to be alive to take that fucker down. It was supposed to be a murder-suicide, a convenient way to get rid of a threat. But I knew Barton was scheming to make me take the fall if those stolen documents came to light, so I changed the script before I disappeared.

>You're not afraid he'll come after you?

>he's not capable, not without me to do the dirty work. I look forward to seeing him go down.

>Did you kill Aurora?

The three dots appeared, lingered for a moment, then vanished. When I tried to text to that number again, it was unavailable.

When the semester ended, we said goodbye to Dr. Mishkin. Beasley moved in and took over household chores after negotiating a raise from Lara. Oak and I moved to a house in South Minneapolis that Oak's home-renovation pal had bought at auction and wanted to flip. We got to live in the run-down craftsman bungalow rent-free while we refinished floors, rehung windows, and stripped layers of paint from woodwork.

I got a call from a staffer on capitol hill. Then another one, from a different senator's office. The Cambridge Analytica affair had kick-started a techlash against data-sucking tech

companies and Congress was taking note. With the Eventive drama unfolding, they wanted my thoughts about how targeted profiling could be reined in. I was invited to be a witness at a hearing in DC, but before I could have a panic attack about it, it was postponed as a new illness that had scientists worried began to occupy everyone's attention.

Strange times.

Our world shrank to the house we were renovating, the streets around our neighborhood where we took socially-distanced walks, and the internet. Everyone cheered for healthcare workers and thanked cashiers at the grocery. That lasted about two weeks before the novelty wore off and everyone became crabby. Disinformation filled the voids that came from not yet knowing how this new virus would behave.

Allie tentatively broached the idea of writing a book together. I laughed, but she was serious. After a lot of back and forth, she settled on a plan to write it herself, once I promised to help her with the technical side of it. She published a couple of pieces related to the project, which led to an agent offering to take her on, which led to a book contract and a lot of angst as she polished and rewrote every word. Being a famous writer was harder than it looked, both the writing and the fame parts.

Dr. Mishkin and Graham Turlow talked regularly, too. If the pandemic hadn't kept them apart, they might have shacked up together. At least her daughter no longer bugged her about moving into a home for the elderly, since that's where so many people were dying. Beasley seemed to be taking good care of her, when she wasn't busy complaining about the misery of teaching remotely.

Pritha Bello was on a podcast, telling the world about Eventive, her daughter's death, and her belief she had been murdered. It kicked off a spate of crowd-sourced amateur crime-solving that didn't go anywhere but made Aurora and her mother short-term celebrities.

We adjusted to life after academia. Oak helped with his

friend's restoration business. I got invited to work on a project with the German academic who knew Aurora, developing processes for scraping data from a variety of social platforms to analyze the spread of disinformation. It was a temporary gig that didn't pay much, and it meant joining virtual meetings in the middle of the night, but it felt as if I was doing something to atone for my work at Eventive. In my spare time, I was conducting an audit of the coordinated attack Eventive made on Aurora's reputation to discredit her work, trying out open source digital forensic tools and developing a case study of the multiple actors, platforms, and attack surfaces used, reverse-engineering the dirty work my former employer routinely performed for its clients.

In April, facing several lawsuits and questions from legislators, Eventive announced it was shutting down operations and filing for bankruptcy. In a statement, Adam Barton denied all wrongdoing but attributed the company's demise to the actions of a couple of rogue actors and a hostile press that had destroyed their good reputation, rendering the business no longer viable. He would take no further questions at this time.

It seemed like something to celebrate, but Brian Friedman was skeptical. People like Barton didn't just disappear in a puff of shame.

On a late spring evening, George Floyd was murdered on a corner about eight blocks from our house. After a pause filled with collective shock and horror, we took to the streets, the whole city, pandemic be damned.

The spontaneous uprising was inspiring, scary, and confusing. People chanted and sang, they wept together and built a shrine, fires broke out. Rumors circulated that the "umbrella man" who broke the first window was a white supremacist. Cops abandoned the third precinct and it was set

on fire. Then they abandoned the neighborhood, and it caught fire, too.

Lake Street businesses were burned out. Boogaloo boys with their Hawaiian shirts and military cosplay filmed themselves grinning in front of burning vehicles. We set up a mutual aid group to protect our block from traveling arsonists, out of control cops, and any opportunist who wanted to take advantage of the chaos. The air was full of tear gas and smoke, and the sound of helicopters overhead was constant for weeks.

Strange times.

During those long nighttime watches on the front porch, Oak caught me up on the history lessons I had missed or slept through. So much I did not know, it was embarrassing. I thought of Aurora and her last public talk, explaining how the same gaps and biases I was discovering in me were magnified by the code that increasingly shaped our world.

Over the next months, Brian Friedman and I spoke frequently as he struggled to write a follow-up story, tracing the aftermath of Eventive. He believed assets from the company—both code and volumes of personal data—had been transferred in a musical-chairs game among several entities, including Barton's shadowy contracting firm that worked for the NSA. He'd managed to trace the movements of top company employees to new enterprises that had arisen from the ashes with new names and addresses, but run by the same people.

"So it's not over?"

"It's a hydra. Cut off one head, it just grows more. Did you see how Barton responded when the FTC asked him questions?"

"Let me guess: Robbie did it."

"Sure, he threw him under the bus, again, but he also claimed it was Uys who was responsible for the political shenanigans. Eventive was merely a marketing firm. They helped customers

sell shoes and toothpaste. Their political clientele was a tiny fraction of their business.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“And get this: When they pressed him for more details about what data was collected and how the algorithms worked, he claimed he couldn’t tell them. Since he had worked for the NSA, and still had contracts with the agency, he was prohibited for life from saying anything that might reveal tradecraft. Sure, it was tradecraft that sold toothpaste. Anyway, the White House got involved and the commission stopped asking questions. I’ve tried following the money, but that’s impossible. The funders are shady, everything gets funneled through shell companies, and there’s no way to trace federal spending on intelligence programs.”

“But you traced where people ended up. They’re still working in the same industry, offering similar services. That’s newsworthy.”

He finally wrote a piece about the new companies where Eventive staff continued to mine data and craft mischief for a fee, but hardly anyone noticed. The news cycle had moved on.

At the end of summer we took the van on a pilgrimage to retrace my journey to Mitagomee and the place where the accident happened. We found the spot: a nondescript stretch of grass, the ditch a tangle of brambles and weeds. Beyond the ditch, there was a barbed-wire fence and a field of corn that murmured and whispered in the breeze. I picked up the wreath a friend had made of grape vines and bittersweet, climbed out of the van, and squinted at the mile marker just up the road. “This must be it.”

“Do you remember it at all?”

“No. The last thing I recall was stopping for gas in the middle of the night. I got some coffee and we got back on the road.” In the ditch, a ragged plastic bag, snared on a twig, was twitching as if trying to escape. I walked down the slope to the bag and

picked it up. "I was the one driving." I spotted some more trash nestled in the weeds.

Not trash, a faded bundle of plastic flowers held together with wire and a shredded plastic ribbon, all of it bleached bone-white by the sun. I showed them to Oak. "Someone must have put them here for her."

We sat on the grass beside the ditch while I told him, again, everything I knew about Maggie Farnham, gleaned from those hours we spent in the car together, from the emails on her laptop, and from the lesson plans she had left me, a detailed vision of a semester she was looking forward to. "It should have been her in that classroom."

Oak rubbed my shoulder. We listened to the rustling corn, the chirp of insects and the hum of a passing bumblebee. Cars passed by on the highway. My foot fell asleep.

"We'd better go," I said, finally. I didn't know what to do with the bundle of plastic in my hands. Oak took the wreath from me, waded through the weeds to the other side of the ditch and used a twist of barbed wire to secure it to a fence post. I joined him and inserted the flowers some stranger had left, making sure they were well anchored in the grapevines. They looked like they belonged there.

We drove into the town nearby, past the gas station where I'd waited for the bus on my way to Mitagomee, past the hospital where I'd spent three weeks running up a bill I would probably never be able to repay. The address we were looking for turned out to be a 1950s ranch house on the edge of town. We slipped on our masks. An elderly man met us in the driveway and led us to his garage.

"I know it might seem a little undignified, but we ran out of space at the funeral home. Legally, I can dispose of them after a period of time, but I like to wait. Cases like this, you don't know if a relative didn't hear about it. Or the next of kin just didn't bother, but later someone says 'whatever happened to Aunt Ginny?' and they decide they want to honor her memory."

"Good lord," Oak said under his breath. Shelves lined one wall of the garage, and except for one that held gardening supplies and tools, they were filled with rows of neatly-labeled boxes.

"The space crunch has gotten worse since Covid, but it's always an issue. You'd be surprised how often people just don't bother to pick them up after the service. Kind of sad. You said you're her cousin, right?"

"Second cousin," I said.

"See, this is why I wait. I was told she didn't have any family, but people turn up. Now, I checked when you called and she should be..." He adjusted his mask and studied the shelves. "Oh, right. She has an urn. Here you go." He pulled the metal can off a far shelf and turned to me. "There's some paperwork I'll need you to fill out."

I held Maggie's ashes in my lap all the way home.

Six months later, I sat in front of a shelf of books with a glass of water, my laptop, and a prepared statement printed out next to it. I breathed in and out slowly and tried to still the tremor in my hands.

I had once been used to public speaking, running through a pitch deck and wooing a room full of potential customers with ease, but it had been a while and I didn't want to bomb. First the intro, then I'd give my statement—I'd timed it carefully to make sure it didn't go over the five minutes I was allotted—then questions. No telling what they would be, but I had practiced a variety of scenarios with staffers and watched a ton of CSPAN. I checked my look: the lighting was good, my hair was behaving as well as could be expected, and the background, thanks to Oak's personal library, made it look as if I really knew my American history.

The minutes ticked by, then the seconds until it was time. I cleared my throat as I was introduced. Wondered if it was too soon to take a sip of water, decided it was. I sought out the spot on the bookshelf behind me that was just over my left shoulder

in the Zoom window where Maggie's urn was tucked among books by her obscure poet, a tiny shrine.

It was my turn. "Good morning Senator, members of the committee. I'm here to tell you about how a company I worked for used behavioral profiling to manipulate people and influence society. Though that company was shut down, there are plenty of businesses doing the same thing, and it puts democracy at risk. I'm going to tell you what Eventive did and why it's a problem."

I glanced up at the photo of Aurora that I had pinned over my desk for encouragement. *This is for you.* And I kept speaking.