Madison Vanguard: A Novel

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Madison Vanguard: A Novel

By

Berni Moestafa

A capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Berni Moestafa

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies satisfying the capstone project requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

This capstone project takes the form of a popular fiction novel that introduces parts of the academic discussion on capitalism to a wider audience through storytelling. Using a fictional fiscal crisis in New York as its setting, the novel discusses the relationship between capitalism and democracy. It therefore aims to address the underrepresentation of the debate on capitalism in popular entertainment and raise awareness about some of the debate’s key issues.

Popular culture be that music, film, books, media, videogames or advertisement surround our lives and expose us to a plethora of messages that help shape our understanding of the world around us. In that sense popular culture both reflects and shapes society. Even so, some parts of society are reflected more than others and this gap is particularly apparent in the way discussion about capitalism is reflected in today’s popular entertainment.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, public interest in political economic topics has risen. In 2011 the Occupy Wall Street Movement raised public awareness about economic inequality, and in 2012 a survey by Pew Research Center shows about two-thirds of the American public believe the conflict between the rich and poor was “very strong” or “strong”, up 19 percentage points since 2009. There has been attempts to capture this trend in popular entertainment, yet none of the top selling fiction novels and movies since 2008 through 2015 feature stories on capitalism.

For instance the movies Joy and The Big Short, the only two movies out of 144 that features a capitalistic centered theme, earned a combined 0.7 percent of the total $11.1 billion in the 2015 domestic box office revenue, reflecting the degree to which capitalism is represented in popular entertainment that, if movies mirror society, falls short of the sentiment reflected in the Pew Research survey or the Occupy Wall Street Movement.
It raises the question whether capitalism makes for a likeable topic in the first place. Does realism have a place in popular entertainment when it is escapism that draws in a large audience? Susan Sontag’s reminder on anyone attempting to impose morality on literature is to “let the dedicated activist never overshadow the dedicated servant of literature – that matchless storyteller.”

This capstone project therefore seeks to address two questions. First, what can a fictional account of New York’s fiscal crisis tell us about the relationship between capitalism and democracy, and second, how to explain this relationship using popular entertainment that appeals to a mass audience? The novel must overcome the difficulty of simplifying the complex and dry topic of capitalism and condense it into a story that will grip readers’ attention.

The story’s concept is as follows: As New York City is on the verge of bankruptcy, newspaper reporter Elliott and photojournalist Bridget must race against time to expose corruption in public housing sales before a group of radical activists resort to terrorism to stop the injustice. But can Elliott and Bridget succeed, when powerful business interests obstruct their investigation, and the activists’ enigmatic leader draws the pair deeper into his world of violence?

The reason for using novel writing for this project is that despite today’s emphasis on escapism, storytelling remains an effective tool of education. From Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, which raised awareness on child labor, to Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* with its advocacy of individualism and capitalism, storytelling can open readers’ minds.

The novels focuses on the conflict between capitalism and democracy through the struggle for New York’s public housing in a time of crisis. On one hand creditors demand New York sell its public housing to pay up its debt, while on the other hand citizens demand the city
maintain public housing. The story explains the role of debt and how it affects society and thereby draw readers’ attention to the fundamental role financial capitalism plays and how it has been a key driver, although not necessarily the cause, behind many of worldwide financial crises from the one in New York in 1975 to recently in Greece.

In writing the novel I follow the conventional novel writing techniques to produce a story that despite its complicated and polarizing topic of capitalism appeals to a mass audience. Key to achieving this is character identification. The novel’s two main characters, Elliott and Bridget, represent readers’ polarized views on that topic. It enables readers to follow the story through the point of view of the character who most closely resemble their personal view, thereby avoiding the impression of grandstanding that Sontag has warned writers about. The alternating views do not result in a conflicting message, rather it allows the novel to depict the conflict between capitalism and democracy through different angles, giving readers the freedom to draw their own conclusion from it. Their conclusion then is what I hope will more closely reflect society’s sentiment on the question of income inequality.

The significance of this capstone project is not merely in introducing a critical take on capitalism, but also in trying to shift the public debate on capitalism beyond the tired dispute of capitalism versus socialism, which has only divided the public along partisan lines, to the more salient question of capitalism versus democracy. This project is also an attempt to defy popular entertainment’s prevailing trend of pursuing profit by pushing escapism to the point of losing touch with reality. It aims to show that what is relevant can also be entertaining.
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Introduction

A 2010 study by the Kaiser Family Institute has shown that youth between the ages of 8 and 18 spend about seven hours per day with entertainment media such as TV, music and books, a finding that highlights the pervasive influence of popular culture. In *Rethinking Popular Culture and Media*, Elizabeth Marshall and Özlem Sensoy ask what educators should do if the lives of youth are “thoroughly saturated by corporate influences that promote values of consumption, competition, hierarchy, sexism, homophobia, racism and contempt for equality.” Yet another question would be whether popular culture can develop a counter narrative against these corporate influences.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, there has been renewed interest in the political economic theme of class struggle\(^1\). In 2011 the Occupy Wall Street Movement raised public awareness about economic inequality, and in 2012 a survey by Pew Research Center shows about two-thirds of the American public believe the conflict between the rich and poor was “very strong” or “strong”, up 19 percentage points since 2009\(^2\). Still, this trend in society is hardly reflected in popular entertainment.

Out of the 258 fiction novels that topped the New York Times bestseller list from 2008 through 2015, none had a political economic or social justice theme\(^3\). The closest to relating to these topics were John Grisham’s *The Appeal* and *Gray Mountain*, both

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\(^3\) List is of adult-fiction books based on recapitulation by Hawes Publication. [http://www.hawes.com/no1_f_d.htm](http://www.hawes.com/no1_f_d.htm)
featuring lawyers taking on big companies, John Sandford’s *Shock Wave* about a criminal investigation into a series of anti-capitalist motivated bombings, and Glenn Beck’s *The Overton Window*, which tells the conspiracy-like story of Big Government taking over America’s liberty.

Out of the 1,227 movies on the box office list from 2008 through 2015, none of the top ten most popular films featured a political economic or social justice theme. Instead year after year, fantasy, science fiction, superheroes, and action movies dominated the list of 1,227 movies with one exception in 2014 when *American Sniper* became number one.

Even so, a few movies about Wall Street had been made, including Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, which ranked 64th in 2010. Meanwhile *Margin Call*, which recounts the onset of the 2008 financial crisis and had received positive reviews, earned a meager $5.35 million to make it the second-worst performer among the 157 movies ranked in 2011. In 2015 the movies *Joy* and *The Big Short*, both featuring some of today’s biggest Hollywood stars in stories about entrepreneurship and the 2008 market crash, ranked 65 and 69 respectively on the domestic box office list of 144 movies. The two earned a combined $75.3 million out of the $11.1 billion in domestic box office revenue that year. That’s 0.7 percent of the total share, indicating capitalism’s representation in popular entertainment that, if movies are a reflection of society’s sentiment, falls short of the sentiment reflected in the Pew Research survey or the Occupy Wall Street Movement.

The topic of political economy may be seen as too complex and too political for consumption by the mass audience, but the lack of popular entertainment addressing

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these issues reveals a glaring gap between the picture that popular culture shows of society and what society really looks like.

1. Conceptualizing the Capstone Project

The capstone project is a work of creative writing that incorporates parts of the academic discussion about capitalism into a popular fiction novel. It aims to introduce to readers a more nuanced and critical view of capitalism that takes into account the complexity of political economy.

The project seeks to resolve two questions: What can a fictional account of New York’s fiscal crisis tell us about the relationship between capitalism and democracy, and how to explain this relationship using popular entertainment to a mass audience regardless of their political economic views?

The story concept for this project’s popular fiction novel is as follows: As New York City is on the verge of bankruptcy, newspaper reporter Elliott and photojournalist Bridget must race against time to expose corruption in public housing sales before a group of radical activists resort to terrorism to stop the injustice. But can Elliott and Bridget succeed, when powerful business interests obstruct their investigation, and the activists’ enigmatic leader draws the pair deeper into his world of violence?

The reason for using novel writing for this project is because of the effectiveness of storytelling in education. In *Transmedia Storytelling and the New Era of Media Convergence in Higher Education* Stavroula Kalogera writes that storytelling is the most ancient form of teaching and that humans are capable of communicating abstract
concepts in the form of story\textsuperscript{5}. Hence Charles Dickens’ \textit{A Christmas Carol} raised awareness about child labor, Harper Lee’s \textit{To Kill a Mockingbird} talks about racism, and Ayn Rand’s \textit{Atlas Shrugged} has had a great influence on libertarians with its advocacy on individualism and capitalism\textsuperscript{6}. On the other hand, Garth Risk Hallberg’s debut novel, \textit{City on Fire}, depicts life under austerity in the aftermath of New York’s 1975 fiscal crisis. While Hallberg uses the fiscal crisis as backdrop for his story about New York, I will use New York as backdrop for a story about a fiscal crisis.

My novel uses New York public housing as a way to illustrate the competing economic interests that shape the city’s response to a present-day fictional fiscal crisis and thereby embed the political economic theme directly into the main plot. It will show how the bond market influences the city’s spending priority, which puts the interest of bankers in direct conflict with that of New Yorkers. It lays out the relationship between capitalism and democracy to show how market interests can dilute the meaning of citizenship. The novel portrays the unfolding of a fiscal crisis inspired by similar crises such as the 1975 New York fiscal crisis, 1998 in Indonesia, 2001 in Argentine, or more recently in Greece, and which despite its recurring pattern worldwide and its profound impact on society is hardly depicted in popular culture.

By describing the interplay between the forces that shape New York’s response to the fiscal crisis, the story aims to highlight the underlying conflict between capitalism and democracy. Thus the theme of the story is the conflict between capitalism and

\textsuperscript{5} Kalogera argues that the capacity to tell and respond to stories is innate in all humans, citing philosopher of communication theory Marshall McLuhan as saying that “anyone who tries to make a distinction between education and entertainment doesn’t know the first thing about either.”


\url{http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-19280545}
democracy, and the premise or the conclusion is awareness of one’s class identity. This shifts the discussion away from the capitalism versus socialism debate to the more salient question of political representation amid the strain capitalism puts on democracy.

Novels about social injustice tend to focus on the impact on human lives and leave the offending economic policies blurred in the background. My capstone project attempts to bring this background into focus then build a story around it. By making transparent the relationship between political economy and social injustice, the project aims to unmask some of the causes behind social injustice using the same method of storytelling with which today’s popular entertainment distracts the public from this knowledge. The result is a more introspective look at society as opposed to the common narrative in popular entertainment of good versus evil. The latter imposes a simplified black and white view onto a complex world that promotes the vilifying and dehumanizing of others, resulting in stereotyping, xenophobia, and intolerance.

2. How Capstone Project Relates to My Study

The capstone project is the culmination of my individualized studies track on the Master of Liberal Arts program, and builds on my experience as a financial news journalist in Indonesia.

For this project I use the political economic themes and arguments that were discussed during classes and incorporate them into my story. While the project draws heavily from material in the syllabus, it also makes use of books and articles outside those read for class. The usage of the academic sources are described in the Theoretical Framework section while a list of these sources can be found under the Bibliography.
In my paper for the course *The Dark Side of Democracy: Inequality and Repression*, I argue that New York cannot provide a long-term affordable housing solution as policies under the current state of democracy lack the resilience to cope with the market forces that are beyond the city’s control. The paper highlights the difficulty in sustaining the funding for Mayor Bill de Blasio’s 10-year affordable housing program given the uncertainty of the global economy that invariably effect the city’s budget.

For the course *Social Change*, my paper compares New York City’s budget before the 1975 fiscal crisis with the 2014 budget to see the impact of austerity on New Yorkers after four decades. It argues that while New York has regained access to credit markets, the resulting cuts in welfare spending has undermined its capacity to adequately deal with deteriorating living standards among its poor.

For *Inventing the Self* my paper *Novel Reading and The Self in Flux*, argues that the novel reader fluctuates between two points of view, the fictional character and the detached observer, and that this dynamics is central to the reading experience.

In my paper for *New York Narratives: Literature and Visual Art*, I examine the works of Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* and Jonathan Lethem’s *Chronic City*. Comparing their contrasting descriptions of New York City, I argue that in the space between the two descriptions readers create their own an image of New York, and explain that the conflicting images of New York in popular culture is key in generating the range of interpretations needed to uphold its appeal as a city of infinite possibilities.

For my *Critical Issues in International Studies: Human Rights and the Rule of Law*, I wrote a research proposal based on this capstone project with an emphasis on linking public housing with human rights. By showing the connection between housing
and citizenship, I explain why homelessness is a human rights issue. A person with no address becomes invisible to the state, rendering that person vulnerable to a host of violations of his rights ranging from mistreatment, imprisonment, torture, to losing access to sanitation, health, education and jobs.

These papers along with the academic readings and my work experience as a financial news journalist shape the discussion of capitalism and the writing of my novel.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this section I will explain the key literature behind the concept of the capstone project, including the novel’s theme and premise. I will provide a brief analysis of how the literature relates to today’s political economic situation which in return provides the context for my novel. This section also explains the philosophical underpinning of the methodology in creating characters that appeal to readers regardless of their political economic views.

3.1 Financial Sector

The underrepresentation of the finance industry in popular culture has the consequence of keeping its pervasive role in the economy hidden from public view. Michael Hudson in his book *The Bubble and Beyond: Fictitious Capital, Debt Deflation and Global Crisis* argues that finance capitalism has outstripped industrial capitalism. Owning assets such as bonds or land that earn interest rates or rent promises faster profit growth than manufacturing goods under industrial capitalism. The laws of supply and demand that govern profit growth in industrial capital cannot match the level of growth enabled by speculation or by the mathematical rule of compound interest. As people take
on more debt to afford buying houses at already speculation-inflated prices, they pay more interest to banks which uses the payment to extend more loans. But the more people pay banks, the less they spend on goods and services, diverting funds away from the real economy. Hudson explains the danger of the public failing to recognize this divergence:

“What is needed to save democracy from turning into oligarchy is to recognize how predatory this financial strategy has become and how far today’s lending has diverged from productive credit. This classical distinction has been dropped – indeed expurgated – from the academic curriculum. Debt crises such as the West is now experiencing are treated as if they are “exogenous” or an anomaly, not the policy result of financial conquest.” (17)

With Hudson’s argument in mind, the capstone project seeks to highlight the role of the bond market in the context of a fiscal crisis. The significance of the global bond market can be illustrated by comparing its size with that of the global stock market. A 2011 McKinsey & Company report shows the size of global capital market from a sample of 79 countries reached $211 trillion of which $54 trillion were stocks, $64 trillion were loans, and $93 trillion were bonds. Combined bonds and loans made up $157 trillion of market capitalization, meaning that debt amounted to nearly three times that of equity as a source of external funding in the global economy.

Governments often sell bonds to fund their budget. They issue bonds to cover a budget deficit or pay for projects such as bridges or irrigation systems that are not feasible for banks or for private investors to buy a stake in. Hence a government’s ability
to repay these bonds depends largely on cash flow generated by tax revenue. This ties the
risk of default that creditors face to the country’s economic base, a situation which gives
them a direct stake in aligning a government’s fiscal policies with its capacity to pay
debt. Every time a government drafts, implements and revises its budget, it must balance
between creditors’ demand for fiscal discipline and citizens’ need for social spending.
Thus a state budget often expresses the government’s ability to manage the conflict
between capitalism and democracy.

Despite its size and influential role in government’s fiscal policies, the bond
market is not nearly as transparent as the stock market. Even the fundamental
requirement for an efficient market, that of price transparency, is absent in the bond
market. The average investor will have difficulty to obtain pricing information on bonds
to the advantage of market intermediary such as Wall Street banks. It is lack of
transparency that also helped create and grow the trading of subprime mortgage bonds
where the same Wall Street banks made a profit by pushing billions of dollars of loans to
underqualified individual borrowers. The banks’ risk management departments, let alone
government regulators, were not fully aware of the nature of these trades until those
borrowers defaulted en masse, leading to the 2008 financial crisis.

U.S. taxpayers spent $700 billion to bail out banks from losses on trades that the
banks themselves did not understand. Enabling regulators to know the exact nature of

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7 See Patterson, Scott, “SEC Chairman Unveils Plan to Boost Transparency in Bond Markets,” Wall Street
bond-markets-1403281868](http://www.wsj.com/articles/sec-chairman-unveils-plan-to-boost-transparency-in-
bond-markets-1403281868)

8 *The Big Short* by Michael Lewis tells the story behind the financial crisis in what a Washington Post
review calls the “most comprehensive or authoritative analysis of all the misdeeds and misjudgments and
missed signals that led to the biggest credit bubble the world has known.”
banks’ bond trades may limit banks’ freedom to speculate and to have the risks guaranteed by the government, and so the opacity of the bond market continues.

Since 2007, the world has added $57 trillion in debt and thereby raised the global debt-to-GDP ratio by 17 percentage points, according to a 2015 McKinsey report. China, the world’s second-largest economy, had quadrupled its debt to $28 trillion by mid-2014, and the report predicts government debt worldwide will likely continue to rise, creating fresh risks. As Hudson says “the growth of debt has become the major cause of economic downturns, austerity and financial polarization, creating financial crashes and in severe cases, social crisis.” (179)

This risk that comes with adding debt faster than economies grow, lays out the same condition that has led to fiscal crises around the world. It is during a fiscal crisis, when the debt burden has outgrown the economy’s ability to pay, that the relationship between capitalism and democracy escalates into an open conflict. “When it comes to deciding what must give, the economy or its financial superstructure, the latter turns out to be more powerful – and hence more “real” – than the economy’s tangible flows of output and income” (181), Hudson says.

A lack of understanding about the bond market’s role in the economy and how the financial sector influences policy makers, can lead to a misrepresentation of what is essentially a horizontal conflict between capitalism and democracy by appearing as a vertical conflict within democracy, between a government that understands the need of austerity and its unruly people. This is not to say a nation should snub its obligation to repay debt or ignore fiscal discipline, but transparency enforces a fairer negotiation over how the risk of a fiscal crisis should be shared among the public and creditors.
3.2 Class Struggle

In *Democracy Against Capitalism*, Ellen Meiksins Wood argues that the defining characteristic of capitalism is in its “formal separation of the economic and the political.” Capitalism “entails new forms of domination and coercion that are outside the reach of instruments designed to check the traditional forms of political power and which therefore reduces the salience of citizenship and the scope of democratic accountability.” (14)

The New York 1975 fiscal crisis provides a stark example of how citizenship and democracy were sidelined, as the banking and corporate community imposed their interest on the city. In *Class, Power & Austerity: The New York City Fiscal Crisis*, Eric Lichten shows how the austerity board took over the city’s fiscal control, as “the crisis became the legitimator for the superseding of the power relations of the liberal state.”

The people who eventually took over New York’s financial affairs were representatives of the bankers and cooperate community, Lichten said. “Why weren’t the unions consulted during the planning process? Why weren’t representatives of the city’s poor consulted? Why weren’t representatives, elected or otherwise, of the city’s minority community and of its middle class consulted?” (131)

In highlighting the absence of opposition from the worker class during the New York fiscal crisis, Lichten lays out his argument that the fiscal crisis is a class struggle. The struggle over a budget’s resources makes the relationship between creditors on one hand and citizens on the other hand a relationship of conflict and therefore also a power
struggle. Framing the fiscal crisis in such term exposes the bankers as a political force instead of a neutral party dictated by the logic of capital alone as Lichten argues:

“The city’s fiscal crisis appeared as it did and was resolved as it was not merely because bankers will be bankers. Nor was the city reorganized as it was out of some inevitable character growing from capital’s own, self-propelled logic. Reorganization of the city occurred as it did – and the history of the fiscal crisis unfolded as it did – because bankers struggled as a class, while labor did not. The banks and corporate capital used the fiscal crisis politically and ideologically for capital’s benefit.” (59)

4. Methodology

The methodology explains how I expect to achieve the capstone project’s goal of introducing the academic discussion on capitalism to a wider audience using a popular fiction novel. It consists of two parts. The first discusses the narrative components of the novel and how they will convey its political economic theme, while the second part concerns the structure of the novel used to deliver that theme.

4.1 Narrative Components

I will now turn to the narrative components of my novel to break down the political economic theme into its building blocks. The novel has four narrative components: the financial sector, politics, journalism, and terrorism. The interplay between these four components then illustrates how capitalism clashes with democracy.
4.1.1 Financial Sector

In illustrating the conflict between capitalism and democracy, I use public housing to reveal the parties that are competing over the city’s budget. On one hand creditors demand the city sell its public housing to free budget resources for debt repayment, while on the other hand citizens demand the city keep public housing. Creditors – budget – citizens, this relationship is the foundation on which the story’s political economic theme is built. As Elliott, the protagonist journalist, talks to people who represent both sides, readers will get a holistic view of the conflict and this provides a fresh take on the good-versus-evil narrative in popular entertainment.

As the story progresses, readers will learn the basic role the bond market plays in funding the city’s budget. The story explains the consequences of defaulting on debt, the cost of going bankrupt, the role of rating companies, and describes austerity from the point of view of the creditors as well as New Yorkers. Altogether it exposes the role of debt in the economy and the dominance of financial capitalism which, as Hudson argues, has been kept hidden from public view.

4.1.2 Class Struggle

As Elliott investigates the alleged corruption in public housing, he finds out about the ulterior motives behind creditors’ demand for housing reforms as they seek to impose their ideology in ways that would also benefit them financially. Similar motives underpin the class struggle during the 1975 New York fiscal crisis and which my story repackages to fit today’s political economic reality. The picture that emerges is that of the financial sector actively pursuing its agenda and thereby depicting bankers struggling as a class.
The story shows how bankers and the corporate community have taken control of New York’s financial affairs as they impose austerity measures on the city. It shows how property developers use the housing reforms as a pretense to demand subsidies from the city, and that are to be funded by more debt, how a supposedly independent consultant act as a lobbyist for property developers. The story depicts the vulnerability of the media as newspaper owner, business tycoon Bennett, stops Madison Vanguard from pursuing its investigative reporting. It shows how political candidates’ need for campaign funding makes them dependent on wealthy donors, undermining their integrity. These events are lifted from real-life examples in particular from the 1975 fiscal crisis. But unlike in the past, New Yorkers in my story respond to the crisis by struggling as a class too.

4.1.3 Journalism

The work of a journalist represents the fourth estate of democracy, which alongside the three branches of government upholds political accountability in a democracy. The reason the press has assumed such a role is perhaps best described by how the American Press Institute, a non-profit affiliated with Newspaper Association of America, defines the elements of journalism:

1. Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth
2. Its first loyalty is to citizens
3. Its essence is a discipline of verification
4. Its practitioners must maintain independence from those they cover
5. It must serve as an independent monitor of power
6. It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise
7. It must strive to keep the significant interesting and relevant
8. It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional
9. Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience
10. Citizens, too, have rights and responsibilities when it comes to news

The job of exposing the corruption behind the housing reforms falls to Elliott as the journalist. While my description of his work is largely based on my own experience as a reporter, it does follow the principles of the American Press Institutes. Hence Elliott’s decision to take on this assignment is driven by his obligation to the truth and his loyalty to the citizens of New York. Acknowledging the wrongness of the corruption, he must transcend his personal libertarian view. His journalism also explains his persistence in chasing sources to verify information; it explains his attempt to stay independent from the people he covers. Elliott’s stories then become a tool to check the powers of the ruling class and provide the impetus needed to arouse the public’s class identity.

4.1.4. Terrorism

This fourth narrative component symbolizes the potential threat that Thomas Piketty in his book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* alludes to. A market economy based on private property, as Piketty says, contains “powerful forces of divergence, which are potentially threatening to democratic societies and to the values of social justice on which they are based.” (571) What is threatening to democratic societies is not capitalism per se but the outbreak of social upheaval if democracy fails to reconcile the
interests of capitalism and the general public. As Piketty argues, income inequality is rising which may explain why there is increased concern over the unraveling of society and the rule of law. A 2015 report by KPMG that measures countries’ ability to cope financial and social instability shows that the greater a nation’s income inequality gap is, the lower its ability to handle change.\(^9\) “Excessive inequality, particularly between different ethnic groups, can also lead to or exacerbate conflicts and reduce social cohesion,” the report said. As the 2008 financial crisis struck the U.S., the Department of Defense introduced a program to model the dynamics, risk and tipping points for large-scale unrests, using social science as a military tool to target peaceful activists and protest movements.\(^10\)

In popular culture this fear of social unrests and violent mobs is often reflected in stories of the zombie apocalypse such as the 2006 New York Times bestseller *World War Z*, or the series of *Resident Evil* movies that show the undead stumbling through the remains of civilizations. The public’s fascination with end-of-the-world scenarios “tells us something about our political culture; its paucity of social imagination, timidity of leadership and assumption that versions of the status quo are the best we can hope for,” says Garth Mullins of CBC News.\(^11\)

In my story, the terrorism threat is represented by Rafael who as the radical activist plays the antagonist. Despite his violent introduction in the story, his threat

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against the city is merely an expression of the same threat of social unrests that any nation would have faced if its politicians ultimately fail its citizens. In the end, Rafael’s actual terrorist attack resembles more a popular revolution than terrorism. Here terrorism takes on a more nuanced depiction. Is revolution the same as terrorism? How readers feel about the two tells them about their own class identity as the ruling class is more inclined to equate the threat of revolution with terrorism.

Combined the four narrative components constitute the building blocks whose interactions with one another produce the novel’s political economic theme of capitalism versus democracy and its premise of class identity. Thus in its reductive form, the story concept can also be stated as follows: A journalist must stop the ruling class from abusing the rights of the poor before the poor take up resistance and civil unrests ensues.

4.2 Escapism versus Realism

How to deliver the story’s theme in a popular fiction format, poses the project’s biggest challenge aside from the writing itself. Solving this problem requires merging the seemingly opposites of escapism and realism.

In 1977 the film Star Wars helped invented the term summer blockbuster, and nearly four decades later its sequel raked in $1 billion in global box office at record time. J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter novels broke records from the most sold books to the fastest sold books. The success of Star Wars and Harry Potter illustrates the power of escapism in popular entertainment. While science fiction and fantasy stories can and often do contain social justice messages, the question is whether stories that are grounded in
realism can compete with these genres in wooing a mass audience. Susan Sontag’s reminder on anyone attempting to impose morality on literature is to “let the dedicated activist never overshadow the dedicated servant of literature – that matchless storyteller.”12

The idea for the capstone the project originated from a “what if” question for a story of New York undergoing a fiscal crisis. Despite its origin in realism, the project’s concept was at the beginning nowhere near as complex as described in this paper. This gave ample room for the story to grow on its own and realize its full entertainment potential. It is only after the story has been developed that the project’s political economic theme in its current form emerged from it.

4.3 Appeal to Mass Audience

The writing of the novel follows conventional techniques on writing plot, structure, character development, description, dialogues. While implementation of all these techniques and the actual writing itself are imperative to the completion of the capstone project, I will focus on character identification as it addresses the challenge of writing a story that appeals to a readership with polarized political economic views.

Character identification in novel reading requires narrative empathy, which Suzanne Keen in *Empathy and the Novel*, defines as the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing or imagining narratives of

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12 See Popova, Maria, “Susan Sontag on Storytelling What it Means to be a Moral Human Being, and Her Advice to Writers,” Brainpickings. [https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/03/30/susan-sontag-writing-storytelling-at-the-same-time/](https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/03/30/susan-sontag-writing-storytelling-at-the-same-time/)
another’s situation and condition. As readers identify themselves with the characters through empathy, it opens a door through which the novel can reach out to them.

In my novel, the two lead characters, Elliott and Bridget, represent readers’ two opposite political economic view. Elliott is a libertarian from a middle-income family who dreams of becoming an entrepreneur so that one day he can leave his blue collar job of a journalist and build his own internet company. Bridget on the other hand is a liberal who refuses to take advantage of being born into a rich family. She’s struggling to make a living and sees her photojournalist job at the Madison Vanguard newspaper as a high point in her career, in contrast to Elliott who sees his journalist job as a low point. While Elliott believes in pragmatisms, and in the power of the free market to cure New York’s chronic fiscal woes, Bridget is an idealist who thinks the city should do more to help low-income class New Yorkers whom she views as victims of free-market policies.

Before I continue, I must point out that authors have little control over how readers interpret their novels due to the impossibility of affixing a steady meaning to a text. “Language or text is a sign, it is forever pointing at something,” Ian Almond, citing French philosopher Jacques Derrida, says in his book *Sufism and Deconstruction: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn ‘Arabi*. “The text wanders from reader to reader, its sign forever repeating themselves for different audiences with different result, acquiring different meaning each time the context is changed.” (21)

Thus the following method about using character identification to appeal to a mass audience comes with the caveat that in practice readers may interpret a story in whatever way they want, rendering any attempt to control this freedom futile. Even so,
authors must make that attempt if their stories with their characters, plot points, twists and drama are to work at all.

In making Elliott and Bridget represent two irreconcilable poles, I invite readers to step into the space between them. So instead of imposing a particular view onto readers in hope they would adopt it, I give them room for the widest possible range to interpret the story along the polarizing views of a libertarian and a liberal.

Elliott and Bridget’s difference is not simply a way to get readers experience the story through opposing points of views. Having the story’s two main characters represent two opposing political views help libertarian and liberal readers sympathize with at least one of the two main characters. Establishing this sympathy is key to prevent readers from distancing themselves from the story and eventually stop reading.

Their difference also extends to their personalities. Elliott is a quiet, timid character, whereas Bridget is aggressive and impatience, and while Elliott is methodological in his approach, Bridget is more often reckless. Elliott is the passive feminine while Bridget is the active masculine. This distinction is of note, as according to a 2012 study, Understanding Libertarian Morality: The Psychological Dispositions of Self-Identified Libertarians, libertarians have the most masculine cognitive style while liberals the most feminine.¹³

Turning Elliott feminine and Bridget masculine and not the other way around as the article would suggest, not merely challenges gender roles but also attracts readers to the character with the opposite political view. This cross sympathizing is based on the notion that abstract concepts such as political economic theories do not appeal to the

http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0042366
heart of the reader\textsuperscript{14}. Concrete descriptive images are what can produce an emotive response from readers. According to writer and psychologist Kenneth Kaye, descriptive images speak to the part of the brain responsible for primary processes where “emotions rule, not critical reasoning”\textsuperscript{15}

Hence when Elliott voices his libertarian views, he may appeal intellectually to the libertarian readers, but the descriptions of his behavior appeal emotionally to the liberal readers with whom he shares feminine qualities such as tolerance and empathy (assuming these can be considered feminine). On the other hand, Bridget’s liberal views attract liberal readers while her masculine traits appeal to the libertarians.

The effect I hope to achieve from this approach is that readers will embrace the views of both characters and not dismiss the other. Once readers suspend judgement they are less likely to let their personal view color the experience of the story. In \textit{The Believing Brain: From Ghosts, and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies – How we Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truth}, Michael Shermer argues that people are hard-wired into believing because the brain looks for patterns and infuses them with meaning. This may help explain the backfire effect and confirmation bias where people tend to dismiss facts that contradict their beliefs and seek out those that confirm them.

By resisting readers’ attempt to fit the story with preconceived notions about political economy, by making it harder for them to make mental shortcuts through

\textsuperscript{14} The New York Times cites Eric Bennett in a review of his book \textit{Workshops of Empire} that Cold War politics helped create the aesthetic standards that rule today’s writing workshops which, among other things, “discourage the abstract theorizing and systematic social critiques to which the radical literature had been prone, in favor of a focus on the personal, the concrete and the individual.”

\url{http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/books/review/workshops-of-empire-by-eric-bennett.html}

\textsuperscript{15} See Kaye, Kenneth, “Controlling the Distance between Reader and Character: Primary Process.”

\url{http://www.kaye.com/fiction/mfa.html}
stereotyping and labeling, I seek to disrupt the brain’s tendency for pattern forming. These interruptions are not meant to prevent readers from finding meanings altogether but to prevent them from imposing their view on the story. Almond writes:

“Understanding the Other involves an ‘absolute openness towards the wholly other’, a constant interruption, a repeated breaking-up of all the versions of the Other that the Same constructs for itself. Constant interruption is the necessary instability that provides the conditions for glimpsing the otherness of the Other through the broken ruins of one’s own constructions.” (43)

Therefore the interruptions are meant for readers to arrive to the broken ruins of their own constructions, or in other words, arriving to a state of perplexity. Whether one calls it perplexity, bewilderment, or confusion, the inability to grasp a situation pushes a person to the limit of understanding and brings him to that threshold where he is receptive to new information. According to Almond, perplexity is desirable because “when we are confused, we see things which we miss when we think we know what we are doing. We see the difference of difference.” (62)

In my story the path to perplexity is as follows: Up to plot point two which occurs between the second and third act, readers identify themselves to varying degrees with Elliott and Bridget. But character development in stories requires that both characters grow, and as the story enters its final act, Elliott and Bridget begin to see from each other’s point of view. Eventually the libertarian Elliott, who has repeatedly warned
Bridget against Rafael, joins the radical activists, while the liberal Bridget, who despite her traumatic experience with the police, teams up with the FBI. Elliott and Bridget switching roles sets the stage for readers’ perplexity.

If the libertarian readers previously identify themselves more with Elliott, they now face the choice of either continuing siding with Elliott who joins the activists, or switch their sympathy to liberal Bridget who helps the police. Whichever way readers’ sympathy swings, they will have to compromise their personal views. The libertarian who continues to side with libertarian Elliott will find himself rooting for the radical activists, and the liberal who sticks with liberal Bridget will find herself siding with the police. In reality, readers may not be able to make a clear cut decision on whom to side with given the fast-paced scenes of the final act. Thus readers’ sympathy will switch back and forth between Elliott and Bridget, between police and activists, putting them into a state of perplexity with regard to how they feel they should view the story.

The purpose of leading readers into a state of perplexity is to draw them out of their ideological siloes. Once outside and looking for understanding, they become more receptive to new information, at which point I direct them toward the story’s premise of class identity by finally and suddenly collapsing Elliott and Bridget’s views into one.
The trail of papers ran across the floor, over desks, spilled coffee, blood stains, and smashed computers all the way through the room, out the lobby to a lone, tall man. In his left hand, an aluminum baseball bat swayed gently, its tip scraped and smudged. He ignored the groaning of the wounded behind him and listened through to the silence in the hallway in front. Sunlight retreated down his back, casting the hallway in semi darkness. From around the corner, he heard the metallic creak of the emergency exit door opening and footsteps rushing in his direction. Rafael sighed and tightened his grip around the baseball bat. His face was covered by a black ski mask, his green parka was dirty, his boots were heavy and when he started down the hallway, his mind descended to a pitiless, numb base.

With one swing he shattered the hand of the first man coming around the corner. He slammed the bat into his stomach then pushed him aside as the others stumbled into view: three men and a woman dressed in sharp business suits. Look at them, he thought, corporate slaves even on a weekend. He greeted the man in front with a blow to the shoulder, knocking him to the floor. His next attack missed the second man by an inch, a mistake that cost him his balance. Stumbling headfirst towards the wall, he saw for a split second what he failed to notice earlier, the elongated shape of a wooden handle in the hands of the third man. When Rafael smashed against the wall, he spun around, raising his bat just in time to block the downward swing of a fire axe. With the bat’s handle he pushed his attacker away, but the man jumped right back in, swinging the axe with such a force that it knocked the bat out of his hand. It rolled with a clunking noise across the
floor. The man stared at Rafael and unfolded his two-handed grip on the axe, letting it sway in his right hand. Then he stepped forward, his right arm drawn back for a one-handed, sideway swing and in that moment Rafael lunged, pulled a knife from his waist, and as he felt the axe slicing the air behind him, thrust the blade deep into the man’s shoulder. The man staggered backward, his eyes widening in surprise as he dropped the axe.

Rafael breathed hard. He should have known that they would equip themselves with anything for self-defense, including fire axes. Above their whimpers and screams around him, he could hear the second man and the woman running up the stairways. He stared at the emergency exit door. *All this mindless violence,* he thought. He pulled his knife from the man’s shoulder, wiped the blood off his gray pinstripe suit, picked up his bat, then followed the two escapees into the stairway.

He heard their footsteps one floor up just before the door above swung close and wrapped the stairway back in silence. Without hurrying, he walked up the two landings, wondering whether it was worth the trouble of chasing the two runners. He stepped into another hallway that led to a glassed office to his left and ahead to a row of meeting rooms that faced the street. Behind the office’s glass wall, he saw cubicles that provided plenty of cover for someone to hide. He walked into the office and looked around. With a second emergency exit at the other end, his escapees had two choices of escapes. Rafael knew they were hiding here somewhere. Swaying his bat gently, he thought about how best to flush them out.

With mugs, pens and papers on the desks, post-it notes tacked to monitors, and sweaters on the chairs, the cubicles sprawled out before him like a neighborhood of
abandoned houses. It would have been an ugly affair if he’d gone on this rampage on a
workday when everyone was at the office. He encountered less than a dozen employees
who were unlucky enough to have come to work this Saturday. He shouldn’t be thinking
about how he hated this part of his plan, the violence. To think was to doubt his mission
and to lose focus, which could get him killed like it almost did downstairs.

He had hurt and killed civilians before, and couldn’t understand how some people
derived joy from such brutality. He considered them psychopaths. But so was he, wasn’t
he, whether he enjoyed the killing or not? He was a monster. How many times did he
have to seek comfort in believing that he was fighting a just war where collateral damage
was unavoidable? Surely in the end, people would thank him, but not before they would
hate him, and until then he couldn’t stop hating himself as well. He thought about that for
a moment, thought about what difference it would make if he continued the chase, then
decided to let his two escapees get away.

Rafael returned to the hallway and considered heading up a floor, not wanting to
go back downstairs and face the reality of his own carnage. He had just reached the
stairways when he heard the faint sound of the emergency exit door in the office behind
him closing with a clunk. Good, he thought, they were smart enough to escape through
the other emergency exit and not cross his path. That’s when he heard the commotion
from the office: a scream cut short by the thud of a body collapsing onto the carpet, then
someone smashing against a desk, a scuffle and another thud, followed by the sound of
heavy footsteps heading his way. Rafael turned around, the muscles on his left forearm
tightening as he slowly raised his bat.
Walking out of the office were two men wearing army-green balaclavas, grey skateboard helmets, vests, and rucksacks. One carried a black baseball bat, the other, towering at over six-foot tall, wielded a sledgehammer. They regarded Rafael for a second as though they didn’t expect to see him here. He relaxed and lowered his bat. The one with the baseball bat pointed at the office. “Think we got the last of them,” he remarked, sounding unsure if it was the right thing to say.

Rafael shook his head in disbelief. The two escapees he spared didn’t make it then. He could always count on Xavier to carry out his orders to the letter, even if he himself did not. He hoped it wasn’t Bertrand and his sledgehammer that did the job.

Xavier and Bertrand were part of Rafael’s six-man team. Their mission: spread out and attack anyone they find between the 27th and 30th floor of Berea Capital, the 118-year old investment bank. To Rafael, these four floors housed Berea’s division that had been bullying the city into paying its debt by cutting spending for the poor. They were mere debt collectors dressed as bankers. And Rafael and his men was here to introduce them to pain and fear in bold, capital letters. So what if some of Berea’s employees were innocent? Rafael’s terror was the poor’s last resort, their last hope when their pleading crumbled under the tyranny of the oligarchy and police brutality.

His radio crackled and Adrianne’s steady voice bleared through his earpiece. “Rafael,” she said. “They’re coming. Look out the south windows.” He walked to one of the meeting rooms that faced south with Xavier and Bertrand following him. A large rectangular table sat in the middle of the room surrounded by chairs and awash in daylight from the tall glass panes that covered the side of the wall. He stepped up to the
window which, under a blue September sky, looked far out over the tip of Manhattan to the shores of New Jersey. His eyes were scanning for something nearer though.

“What are we looking for?” Xavier asked as he joined him by the window.

“There,” Rafael pointed at a glass tower nearby. Just then, coming around its corner, two UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters flew into view. Their open midsections revealed tactical police teams in full gear, the NYPD arriving in army surplus hardware. Rafael checked his watch. It was 4:20 p.m. His attack on Berea Capital was about to enter phase two. He felt a rush of adrenaline and for the first time since entering the investment bank’s office he smiled.

#

Elliott Griffin put down his cup of espresso and listened to the radio broadcast. Just after 4:00 p.m., people were seen rushing out of the lobby of Berea’s downtown office with bruised faces, blood on their clothes, and frightened looks, stammering about an attack. A caller on-air described the scene, and Elliott could hear the crowd in the background, someone shouting orders, then the sirens of an approaching ambulance rising above the noise. He heard enough, and paid for his espresso and muffins then walked out the deli. Elliott, the youngest reporter at the Madison Vanguard Daily, crossed the street and headed for his office. The muffins would come in handy, for he knew whatever was happening at Berea’s office, had all the ingredients of turning this lazy Saturday into a long, hectic weekend shift.

His office on Madison Avenue was a 19th century high-rise with a sandstone terracotta façade, square windows, and tall glass panes that enclosed the retail shops, a
café and a pharmacy on the ground floor. On the 11th floor, Elliott walked passed the receptionist in the lobby, crossed a hallway then walked up the stairs into the newsroom.

It was 4:33 p.m., around him reporters were working in clusters of desks spread across the floor, with only the conference room and the managing and chief editors’ offices disrupting the open layout. The clatter of keyboard typing was everywhere, sounding like an assembly of tiny feet tap-dancing out of sync. Office chatter was by comparison low and foot traffic was light. Rows of square windows framed the newsroom along two sides, and whatever light managed to pass the taller buildings across the street, illuminated desks and their occupants with a yellowish afternoon glow.

“Elliott,” said Anad Chaudary, his metro-desk editor, as he marched out of the conference room. “Somebody is attacking Berea’s office downtown, we need a photographer.”

“I heard about it on the radio. Shouldn’t we send a reporter down there?” Elliott asked, as he put down his coffee on his desk by the window. “I’m free, I can go.”

“Jack is on his way,” Anad said, “He will file to me. Get a photographer and if you can, get comments from Berea too.”

Elliott opened Madison Vanguard’s website and noticed one of the weekend-duty editors had already put out a story on the Berea attack, citing a statement from NYPD spokesman Finney. Two police tactical teams were inside the building in an attempt to flush out the attackers. A number of Berea employees were still trapped on the upper floors, but as Finney assured, it was just a matter of time before they would be rescued. Elliott would have to find a photographer by then, or the newspaper would miss the action. He called up photo editor John Dawson.
When Dawson told him all three photographers were on duty, Elliott wasn’t surprised. Madison Vanguard was thin on staff. Since Elliott joined the paper three years ago, management had stopped recruiting new reporters as advertisement revenue declined amid falling circulation. The metro desk had since relied on freelance photographers who could be assigned jobs on short notice.

Elliott pulled out the list of the desk’s regular six freelancer photographers, and after 15 minutes tried them all without success. They either didn’t answer their phones, or were tied up with another assignment. He sent Dawson a text message, asking him for more contacts.

Elliott was about to pull out a list of Berea contact persons, when he saw a notification window popped up. It was an alert for a newswire update. Madison Vanguard subscribed to newswires to track and pick up real-time national and international news. This alert, from a New York bureau, was written in the all-cap style that harked back to the times when newswires still used telegrams. The first word kicked Elliott awake:

EXPLOSION AT NY BEREA OFFICE: POLICE
NO REPORTS OF INJURIES IN NY BEREA OFFICE BLAST
CAUSE OF EXPLOSION UNKNOWN: POLICE

Elliott jumped from his seat to check if Anad was aware of the breaking news. The editor was on the phone, and when he noticed him, he nodded and mouthed the word ‘Jack’. Elliott refreshed the page on Madison Vanguard’s website and saw Anad had already pushed out the updated version of his original story. In two additional paragraphs, the story mentioned the explosions based on Jack’s interview with an unnamed police source. But just like the newswire’s headlines, details were sketchy.
“I don’t know what’s going on down there but this looks bad,” Anad said as he rose from his seat and stretched his back.

Elliott nodded then said, “what about the police? They sent in two SWAT teams, has none of them made contact yet with the attackers?”

“Nothing. If there’s any development, Jack will let us know.”

Elliott pulled out the telephone numbers of two Berea spokesmen from a list of contacts on a computer file shared among reporters. When no one answered their phones, he decided to try to something different. He went through his work e-mails, hoping for any recent Berea press statements or invitations that contained a working contact number of a Berea media relations officer that wasn’t on the paper’s contact list yet. The only relevant e-mail he found was an invitation sent a week ago by a non-profit housing organization, The Queens Waterfront Action, or QWA. It invited the media for a panel discussion on public housing reforms. Among the speakers were four Berea investment bankers. The event was scheduled for 5:45 p.m. today but no address was given. *Sloppy,* Elliott thought. He doubted Anad would send a reporter to QWA’s panel discussion, so he didn’t care about the missing address. Still, it was worth asking whether QWA expected any of the Berea bankers to come and whether they could be reached by phone.

He found a contact detail on the bottom of the e-mail and dialed their number.

“Welcome to Queens Waterfront Action,” said a friendly female voice of an automated answering service. “If you know the extension number please dial now or dial 0 for the operator.”

Elliott dialed 0 and was put on hold. Every week housing activists held press events that denounced New York’s plan to cut its affordable housing program for the
poor. At least QWA strived for a balanced discussion by inviting four representatives from Berea, which supported the reforms. On the other end of the line, QWA’s answering machine voice returned to thank him for waiting and apologized that no one picked up. She suggested he call back in a few minutes. The panel discussion might have been canceled given what was happening at Berea. The moment Elliott hung up, his mobile phone beeped with a text message from Dawson.

“Try Bridget Quigley, met her this morning, inexperienced but fits our budget,” the photo editor said, and along with the message he texted him her phone number.

He dialed the number and when Bridget picked up, the first thing he heard was the roar of traffic in the background. He waited for a second then introduced himself. “Hi, my name is Elliott from Madison Vanguard. Is this Bridget?”

“WHHAAAT?”

Elliott yanked the phone away from his ear. Even Anad rose from his seat and gave him a what-was-that look. Elliott shrugged, adjusted his glasses, then carefully placed the phone back to his ear where he heard Bridget groping in the silence.


“Yes Bridget I’m still here.”

“Sorry for shouting. Trucks, lots of trucks.” Her voice was calmer but still raised against the noise in the background.

“No worries. Our photo editor Dawson said you’re freelance photographer. We have a job now, are you free?”

“Yes I am.”
“Good. It’s downtown near Wall Street. I’ll text you the details. Our reporter Jack is already there but you need to hurry.”

“Just tell me where to go,” she said.

Elliott messaged her Jack’s phone number and the assignment details, then rose to tell Anad that a photographer would be on her way soon. But the editor didn’t hear him. Anad was watching the news on TV while typing at the same time.

The masked attackers at Berea had escaped, the running text on TV said. Police found, behind a large painting on the 15th floor, a blast hole that opened an escape route into the neighboring building, which might explain the sound of explosions reported earlier. Meanwhile four investment bankers who were last seen on the 28th and 30th floor were still unaccounted for. Elliott was about to ask Anad whether Jack had heard anything about it, when his desk phone rang. A familiar female voice spoke:

“Welcome to the Queens Waterfront Action. If you know the extension number please dial now or dial 0 for the operator.’’

Elliott frowned. This was the first time an answering machine had called him back. He dialed 0 to see what would happen, and when he was put on hold again, he turned his attention back to the TV. NYPD spokesman Finney spoke into the camera, saying that the attackers might have kidnapped the four bankers and that a massive search was underway.

In Elliott’s mind a flicker of memory swelled into an uneasy realization. He grabbed his mouse and scrolled down his e-mail inbox until he found the press invitation from QWA. At first he thought nothing of it, but with the news of the suspected kidnapping, an ominous connection began to take shape: QWA’s invitation for a panel
discussion on public housing coincided with the Berea kidnapping, it involved the same investment bank, the same number of investment bankers and in both instances the location was unknown, the absence of an address in QWA’s invitation now hardly a mistake. But was it not QWA that he was currently on the phone with?

Elliott felt a sinkhole collapsing inside him, and his heart pounded. Right then, he noticed he was no longer on hold. Instead of a beeping tone he found himself listening to a silence that was rippled by the intermittent sound of someone breathing.

#

Elliott listened to the person on the other end of the telephone line breathing and when it stopped, he stepped into the silence with a cautious “Hello?”

“Who is this?” It was a woman’s voice, rough and low.

“My name is Elliott from the Madison Vanguard Daily and I was wonder…”

“Your name again.”

“Elliott.”

“What media?”

“Madison Vanguard. I was wondering whether -.”

A beep ended the call.

Elliott put down the receiver. His heart was still pounding and he had difficulty stringing together the words that would shape his dread into a coherent suspicion. He focused on recalling the similarities: same date, same investment bank, same number of investment bankers and no address. He could brush it off as coincidence, but the phone call he just had was too weird. The alternative, he realized, was that Queens Waterfront Action was somehow linked to the Berea kidnappers. He would have to call QWA again
to test his suspicion. Elliott drew a deep breath and dialed its number. When no one answered, he was relieved he did not have to speak to that unfriendly woman again.

Elliott rose from his seat to speak to Anad. The editor though was not at his desk and, looking around, Elliott couldn’t see him in the newsroom either.

So he returned to reading QWA’s invitation, wondering whether its stance on affordable housing might reveal something about the kidnappers’ motives. As protests against New York’s plan to abolish public housing entered its second week, one didn’t have to be a genius to see why Berea might be a target. Most investment banks avoided making statements on the housing debate, Berea, on the other hand, publicly chastised New York Mayor Alberta for wasting money on affordable housing. Elliott agreed. Facing its worst fiscal crisis since 1975, New York should cut social spending if it wanted to avoid bankruptcy. But as public outcry against the housing reforms grew, it was no surprise that Berea made new enemies. Elliott read again the names of the four investment bankers on QWA’s invitation:

Dirk Frazer

Anthony Ramirez

Laura Hope

Jonathan Bas

If other media organizations received QWA’s invitation too, then he might not be the only reporter who drew the connection between the non-profit and the kidnapping. Perhaps it was worth sending a reporter to their event. He thought about asking Jack or even going there himself, but first he had to convince Anad. The invitation was for 5:45
p.m., which left him with less than half an hour to explain his suspicion to Anad, figure out where the event would take place, and find a reporter to send.

When he heard Anad returning to his desk, Elliott walked over with the printed out invitation in hand. He told him about the similarities between the kidnapping and QWA’s invitation, the weird phone call, and his suspicion that the non-profit and the kidnappers were the same.

“They might be targeting Berea because of its role in pushing the city to sell public housing,” Elliott said in conclusion.

Anad made a non-committal nod, and checked his watch. “So if this QWA is somehow linked to the kidnapping, what do you think will happen at 5:45 p.m.?”

Elliott shrugged. He doubted it would be the promised discussion with the four kidnapped investment bankers. He doubted it would be anything pleasant. And there was another problem. “We don’t know where the event will be held,” Elliott said.

“Even if we did, we don’t even have anyone to send there.” Anad replied.

“Why don’t we send Jack?”

“No, he stays where he is. Downtown is where all the action is. Any luck with that photographer?”

Elliott hadn’t expected Anad to change the topic this fast. “I assigned a new freelancer, her name is Bridget. She’s on her way.”

“Good.” Anad put down the invitation and turned his attention back on his monitor.

“What about QWA?” Elliott insisted.
“I’ll run it by my police source. In the meantime,” Anad pointed at his monitor as he scrolled up and down the e-mail inbox, “you can help me read through these press releases, see if there’s anything interesting.”

Elliott groaned then shuffled back to his seat. This was typical. Writing up press statements and picking up stories from newswires took up more of his time than actual reporting. He couldn’t blame Anad though. Madison Vanguard was struggling to get advertisements and the fewer it got, the more stories it needed to fill out the blanks in the pages. Just like New York, the newspaper was on the brink of bankruptcy which, as Elliott was frequently reminded of, meant a shortage of reporters to chase stories. His phone beeped. It was a text from Jack: “Where’s my photographer?” Elliott sighed and texted Bridget to get in contact with Jack ASAP.

Elliott scrolled through the usual press releases in the e-mail inbox, from restaurant openings, product launches, to companies flaunting their community development programs. Time was running short and Anad didn’t say he had to write up anything now. Elliott took a sip from his espresso, closed down the e-mail window and opened Google.

He typed in Queens Waterfront Action and found its website. The latest article on its homepage was five years old. The phone number on its website was no longer active and he suspected the address too was no longer valid. Returning to his search results, he couldn’t find any articles on QWA over the past five years, as if at some point it shut down. Was this even the same QWA that sent out the invitation?

“Elliott!”
He looked up to see Anad rushing toward him from the pantry, his eyes glowing with excitement.

“I talked to my source at the police,” the editor said, rubbing his hands together. “He wouldn’t tell me the names of the four missing investment bankers. So I told him about how we got an invitation from QWA for a panel discussion today where four Berea investment bankers were scheduled to speak. I gave him the names of the investment bankers. Guess what, he’s suddenly very interested in QWA’s invitation.”

“So we’re onto something?”

“Absolutely,” Anad said. “The police know the names of the four kidnapped bankers and I bet those on the invitation are the exact same names. I’ve asked Jack to get his police source confirm the four names.”

“Awesome. But we still don’t know the location of the event.”

“Find it,” Anad said, checking his watch. “We have 21 minutes left.”

Elliott wondered how he was going to find their location. He remembered seeing websites that could track the locations of phone calls. Pulling up one of these websites, he then typed in the two QWA phone numbers he had. Not surprisingly, the non-active number he found on QWA’s website corresponded with the address on their website, while the number written on their invitation led to an address in Queens. Given their dormant website, Elliott was leaning toward the one in Queens. Still, he felt he was missing something. That’s when it hit him: the call from QWA’s answering machine. He looked up the call history on his desk phone, and sure enough found a third phone number. This time the call originated from a location on the Upper West Side. Unlike the other two phone numbers, this one had an actual person from QWA speaking to him, and
that meant the location she called him from might be where the other kidnappers were as well. Elliott wrote down the address.

He noticed a text message on his mobile phone. It was Bridget who told him she had a problem with a flat tire but would soon be on her way. Dammit, Bridget. He was about to send her a reply, when he heard someone furiously snapping his fingers. It was Anad, speaking on the phone while trying to get his attention. “Read me those names of the investment bankers again. I have Jack on the line.”

Elliott opened the e-mail invitation and blurted out the name at the top of the list:

“Dirk Frazer.”

Anad repeated the name to Jack and a moment later shook his head. “There’s no one under that name.”

¨Are you sure?¨ Elliott asked, his optimism deflating fast into denial. “It’s D-i-r-k-¨

¨Forget Dirk, give me the second name.¨

¨Anthony Ramirez,” Elliott said, this time slower.

Anad repeated that name to Jack, staring down at the desk in concentration.

“Next.”

¨Laura Hope”

“Next.”

“Jonathan Bas.”

Only then did Anad look up. “We got three matches,” he said and gestured for Elliott to come over. “Jack. I’m putting you on speaker phone.”

Elliott hurried over as Jack’s voice came crackling through.
“...useless if we don’t know the address”

“It’s on the Upper West Side,” Elliott said.

“You sure?” Anad looked at him.

“The woman from QWA who called me, she called me from that address.”

“And the event starts at 5:45 p.m.?” Jack asked.

“You won’t make it,” Anad said.

Elliott thought about going there himself but a better idea struck him. He and
Anad looked at each other and he knew the editor had the same idea.

“The photographer,” Anad said, “send -.”

“Bridget.”

#

Photography was the latest interest Bridget Quigley acquired, a curiosity she
satisfied at the end of a long list of sampling hobbies. Her mother enrolled her into pre-
ballet classes before she started to learn how to read, and from there on she happily
dipped into piano lessons, horse riding, ice skating, tennis, and on the encouraging of her
Uncle Benjamin “Chuck Norris” Carter, took karate lessons where her ballet power legs
paid off. These were just the hobbies her mother approved of. As she turned 15 and the
list of discarded hobbies grew longer, mother said no. No more new hobbies, no more
paying tuitions, no more buying equipment, just no.

It wasn’t the tuition that worried mother. Money was never an issue in Bridget’s
family. Unlike Father, who was too busy to be around, Mother tried to nudge her
daughter into the world of grownups with no time for hobbies. Bridget thought Mother’s
big no came suspiciously around the time that her hobbies took a sharp turn toward the
less refined but more satisfying thrill of hip hop dancing, skateboarding and self-defense courses. As her interest gravitated toward street culture, so did her friends’ social backgrounds. Mother, she knew, wasn’t happy to see her baby ballerina twirling out of her reach and into the influence of friends whose lifestyles and backgrounds were in her view questionable at best.

Bridget resented Mother’s overbearing push for her to succeed. Every school assignment was a race to be number one. Instead of becoming a career woman as Mother wished she would, she grew up becoming more of an athlete, competitive and skillful in many ways, but without any interest to turn professional. Flakey was how her Mother described her. Flakey and stubborn, like the time she declined her parents’ college funds. For weeks mother beseeched her not to forfeit her chance of an Ivy League education, and when Bridget rebuffed her for the last time, it almost ruined their relationship, were it not for Father. Though rarely at home, his love for both was infectious.

A former state senator, Father stayed in Washington when Mother moved to New York to run her real-estate business. She practically raised their only child by herself. Father, on the other hand, treated Bridget as though she had stopped aging at 17, her life a kaleidoscope of friends, hobbies and part-time jobs. Corporate America wasn’t interested in candidates like her, not with the economy in a depression, not with a degree in social science and not without her parents’ connections. Her work resume resembled the list of her hobbies, one part-time job after another, as she struggled to pay her student loan.

She sometimes wondered whether rejecting her family’s wealth and influence was worth the independence she enjoyed. When Father was her age, he was already interning at a law firm, while mother founded her real-estate company. Her relatives had stopped
comparing her with her overachieving parents. Even her younger cousins were pulling ahead of her. Barely in her mid-twenties, Bridget had already been relegated to a footnote in her family history. She hated it. Just because she was struggling financially, didn’t mean she was destined to become a loser.

So when Elliott called her with a photo assignment, she was ready. Sure, she didn’t expect an assignment for a big story on the first day Madison Vanguard hired her. With nine minutes left before the event at QWA started, she was also running out of time, and the fear of being late pumped adrenaline into her throbbing excitement. But this was her break. Whatever happens at QWA, she would be there, and she would get pictures.

Bridget swooped around the corner on a bike, leaning a tad too much to the right and almost lost balance as the weight of her backpack pulled her off center. She rose from the saddle, pedaled harder to regain speed, then moved up a gear. Riding pass Bryant Park to her right, she closed in on a delivery truck, held on to its side for an express ride up Sixth Avenue, and after eight blocks let go and swung left into a narrow street. Jammed on a Saturday, the street funneled traffic into a slow-moving queue. She weaved through the snarl until she came out clipping the corner of 49th Street.

The way she rode, she could have been mistaken for a bike messenger. Her outfit though wasn’t meant for speeding. Late September still carried traces of the sweltering summer, and she wore a brown faux leather jacket over a t-shirt, and faded jeans with a pair of olive-green sneakers. From under the helmet, her gold-brown ponytail fluttered in the wind as she zipped in and out of traffic under the cooling shadows of the city’s skyscrapers. Going further west, New York opened up to blocks of hunkering low rises, as though finally conceding its reign to the immense sky.
Her first day on the job was shaping up to be a nightmare. She hadn’t been riding her bike this hard in a long time. When Elliott called her to change her assignment, she had just fixed her flat tire near Madison Vanguard, a good thing as otherwise she would have been on her way to Berea’s office in the opposite direction Downtown. Then there was the assignment itself. Madison Vanguard hired her solely on the strength of her portfolio she built after working for a wedding photographer for a year. What she lacked was experience. After Elliott told her about QWA’s possible involvement in the kidnapping of Berea’s investment bankers, and that the event on their invitation might not be a panel discussion after all, she wondered what he expected her to do. Was she supposed to interview the kidnappers as well? Just take pictures of whatever was happening, he had told her. And when she asked him what sort of pictures he specifically looked for, he said he wanted action, drama, close-up, tears. She compared these with the wedding pictures she had taken that were mostly of dresses, laughter, food, flowers and found the gap between Elliott’s expectation and her actual work experience troubling. But she kept repeating the words action, drama, close-up, tears in her mind until they coalesced into a solid determination. She would get the pictures, and riding her bike, she felt unstoppable.

Halfway passing through a one-way street, Bridget spotted ahead the crack of an SUV’s driver door opening. She swerved right, just enough to miss the door then straightened her bike, keeping her momentum. Behind her, she caught a glimpse of the startled look on the driver’s face, and was glad that she had kept a clear distance of parked cars. When she looked ahead again, the first thing that crossed her mind was shit!
She slammed into a Ford sedan coming out of a garage. The impact hurled her over the motor cap and with arms stretched out she landed hands first on the other side, then rolled sideways before ending up sitting on her butt, dazed and heart pounding. She sat there for a moment as she began to register the damages. Pain in the right arm, right shoulder, scrapes on her palms, and more pain near the lower spine where her backpack had dug deep during her roll. Her senses gradually turned outward, and she heard the electric whir of a car window gliding down, then someone from inside shouting “moron!” She ignored him and clambered to her feet. The Ford drove on, and the few spectators on the other side of the street dispersed to her relief without comments. Standing there, she stared at her bike lying across her with its front wheel busted. Five more blocks she estimated and a broken bike. Great, just fucking great!

She locked her bike to a nearby pole, tightened her backpack straps and, ignoring the pain in her right shoulder, began to run. Having dived into all sorts of sports, she was familiar with bruises, sprains and pulls. Ironically, she rarely got injured in her years of training martial arts, no matter how brutal her sparring sessions were. That earned her the nickname Ms. Steel. Though running with a backpack on sore shoulders, knowing that she would still be late, she felt more like quitting. Bridget wished she had included running into her routine exercises, and a torturous block later she stopped, the backpack too much for her.

It was 5:41 p.m. and she had another four blocks to run. As she sat down by the curb, she felt her excitement giving way to a flapping sense of helplessness, and right underneath, the swelling of anger and shame. She took a breath, counted to six, exhaled and repeated this for half a minute. She needed this job. She rose and jumped up and
down, glad that at least her legs weren’t hurting, as she tried to pump herself back for action. Two minutes left.

Bridget jogged for another two blocks until she couldn’t stand the backpack’s weight rubbing and tugging against her shoulders. She decided to walk the rest of the way, not caring about losing more minutes. By the time she found the address, she was sweating profusely, her backpack felt like a sack of bricks, both her shoulders were now throbbing in pain, and she was a good three minutes late to the party.

She looked through the fence at a dreary, gray painted building that was set back from the street by a parking lot. The shape of a shoebox with window panes running along each of the four floors, it seemed to serve as an administration office to a dilapidated warehouse that rose up from behind it. The rusty fence had no gate and Bridget crossed the empty parking lot and walked up to the office’s wide-open double glass doors. She was expecting to see a security guard or someone from QWA greeting her. But neither they nor any other reporter were present. With few cars passing the street behind her, the place was quiet too.

Standing by the doors, she peered inside. Flickering lights, stained gray walls and dirty white ceramic tiles suggested the lobby hadn’t seen visitors for a long time. Saved for the barren security desk and the waiting-room chairs that lined up on one side of the wall, it had no furniture. She couldn’t see any elevators and the flight of stairs in the back to her left appeared to be the only way up. For a moment she thought Elliott had given her the wrong address. Then she saw a notice taped to the wall next to the stairway on which was written in large bold letters the instruction for reporters to head upstairs for the QWA panel discussion.
She took a deep breath then walked with brisk steps through the lobby and up the stairs to a corridor on the second floor where another notice, with a big arrow, pointed to a door at the end. As she walked down the corridor, she listened for any chatter but all she heard was muted traffic sound in the back and the blaring of a ship’s horn passing Hudson River in the front. At the door she hesitated. What was behind it?

With the back of her hand she wiped the sweat off her forehead. She was never the one to shy away from a physical challenge, and had seen a good bit of action herself, but in her hurry to get here she hadn’t had the time to think about the danger of her assignment. The risk of encountering actual kidnappers demanded the respect of at least some foot-dragging. Why Elliott picked her, a first-timer, for this job was beyond her. As she pulled out her phone to call him, she saw Anad’s miscalls and text messages telling her to stand back until the police arrives. Bridget sighed in relief. She was walking away from the door when she heard the sirens of police cars growing louder and the thud thud thud of an approaching helicopter. The full cavalry it seemed.

All the trouble of coming here, she thought, and now she would have to take pictures from behind the police line like everyone else. At the top of the stairway that led down to the lobby, she stopped. Action, drama, close-up, tears. These were the kind of pictures Elliott asked for. But once the police get in and clear the area, she doubted she could get close enough to get the pictures he wanted. She made her decision. Now that she was here already, and with the police not far off, it might be worth the risk to see what’s going on in that room. Reckless, she knew, but she had told herself that she would get the pictures. Bridget turned around and walked back. Whatever was waiting behind that door, she would soon find out.
“Elliott, you’re free?” Jack’s voice on the other end of the line was barely audible against the wind blowing over the microphone. Elliott heard traffic in the background too.

“What’s up Jack? Where are you?” Straddling the phone between shoulder and ear, Elliott quickly washed his hands in the restroom. One thing he learned working as a reporter was that once a live coverage began, there would be no time for toilet breaks. It was two minutes before the start of the QWA event. Whatever Jack wanted to say he would have to make it fast.

“I’m grabbing a cab to QWA. None of the other reporters here know about QWA but they’ll find out soon enough. Listen, I talked to my FBI source. They think they know who the kidnappers are.”

“Already? Can we quote your source?”

“It’s off-the-record. He said they were South American eco-terrorists. Check out the Devon case. I call you back in a moment,” Jack said and hung up.

Jack wasn’t called the paper’s star reporter for nothing. He had an extensive network of sources, and a way of talking to people that make them want to open up and spill out their secrets. Too bad it was his last day working for Madison Vanguard. Jack, whose father owned Madison Vanguard, would start reporting for the New York Times on Monday. Walking back to his desk, Elliott saw through the open door of the conference room, a few catering personnel arranging tables to prepare for his farewell party. Seeing how busy the day was, the star reporter might be coming late to his own party.
Elliott asked Anad whether Bridget had called already, and the editor shook his head. He had instructed her to call Anad if anything happened. Back at his desk, he checked his phone to make sure Bridget hadn’t tried to call him instead. Nothing. He then did a quick search on Devon and South American eco-terrorism. The results came back with a number of articles from a few years ago. Devon was a Brazilian oil and gas company owned by one of the country’s allegedly most corrupt and ruthless businessmen who was known for his total disregard for the environment and human rights. Eco terrorists then sabotaged its pipeline, forcing Devon to suspend production and its shares on the stock exchange plunged.

His mobile phone ran; it was Jack. “I don’t know what evidence my source has,” Jack said, apparently already sitting inside a cab, “but I don’t see much of a connection here between Devon’s case and the kidnappers.”

Elliot was scanning the articles, highlighting points he found interesting. “Check this out,” he said. “Devon acquired its oil field by forcing a smaller company, Almeda, to sell the field at a ridiculous low price. Almeda went bankrupt after the sale, and here’s when it gets interesting: Just after Devon’s share prices fell because of the pipeline sabotages, Almeda came back from the dead to make a hostile takeover bid.”

“You mean like QWA, came back from the dead after a five-year hiatus?” Jack asked.

“Exactly. It says here that Almeda and the eco-terrorists, the saboteurs, were connected and.”

Elliott saw Anad standing across him, trying to get his attention. He excused himself to Jack to let the editor speak.
“I don’t like this,” Anad said.

“Don’t like what?”

“I’ve been trying to call Bridget but she hasn’t answered her phone. I don’t like she’s all there by herself.” Anad said.

Elliott understood. She wasn’t a Madison Vanguard staff photographer, but safety was still priority. “Surely the police is already on the scene.”

“They are, but still I can’t get hold of her.”

“I’ll give her a call,” Elliott said.

“No, I told Jack to call you about his FBI source. I’ll handle Bridget.”

Elliott nodded. It was already 5:49 p.m. She should have arrived already. He sent Bridget a text message, asking her to get in contact with Anad. Then he returned to Jack.

“So it says here that Almeda and the eco-terrorists were working together. I sent you a link to the article.”

“I can’t talk and read on my phone at the same time,” Jack said.

“Hold on.” Elliott read through a summary of the Devon case, trying to understand the alleged link between Almeda and the saboteurs. “All right here’s what happened: First of all, Devon’s shares fell in the months that the terrorists kept attacking its pipeline. Its security personnel ended up getting ambushed and killed to the point that the entire pipeline was practically under the control of the terrorists. Its shares were worth next to nothing and Almeda made a tender offer, meaning it offered to buy all of Devon’s shares at a premium to the market. So everyone sold their shares in Devon to cut their losses.”
“And how does this show that Almeda and the eco-terrorists were working together?”

Looking up at the TV, Elliott saw the running text announcing the kidnappers’ possible connection with QWA. Now every media organization knew about QWA and the whole media circus would be heading up there. It was 5:53 p.m. *Where was Bridget?*

“Elliott, you there?”

“Right. So as soon as Almeda owned Devon, it dismantled its oil operation. The pipeline, the refinery, and all other assets were sold off. Devon returned its oil concession to the Chilean government and…”

Elliott kept talking as he rose from his seat to check with Anad whether he had any luck with Bridget. Anad was talking with photo editor Dawson and when he noticed Elliott, he shook his head. No sign of her yet.

“…proceeds from the sale was more than enough to pay for the takeover of Devon,” Elliott went on, “and the rest, about $65 million, was put under an Argentinian trust fund to rehabilitate the forest areas and help the indigenous people recover from Devon’s oppression. After everything was settled, nothing was left of Devon, nothing but scrap metal.”

“Okay, so the eco-terrorists took down Devon using Almeda as a front for the takeover,” Jack said. “But how does this relate to Berea kidnapping?”

“I’m only telling you what happened. Now we got to figure out why the FBI think these eco-terrorists are behind the kidnapping.”

“Great. Any ideas?”

From across his desk, Elliott heard Anad slamming the phone.
“Hey Jack, we lost contact with Bridget. We don’t know whether she made it to QWA or not, but we assume she made it because it’s already passed 6:00pm.”

“Shit, Elliott are you telling me the kidnappers -.”

“I’m not going to speculate, but Anad is worried and so I am frankly. How far away are you?”

“I’m almost there,” Jack said. Elliott could hear him telling the driver to make it fast.

“What about the police?” Jack asked.

“They’re on the scene, but we have no word yet of what’s happening.”

There’s a moment of silence, then he heard Jack clearing his throat. “Guess we need to figure out what the kidnappers’ motive might be.”

“If you read the QWA statement, it seemed they’re against the housing reforms,” Elliott said. “I think we should put their action into context though.”

“Right,” Jack said. “Here’s what we know: First, New York is in a fiscal crisis. It must repay some $530 million of debt due Sept. 25. If the city doesn’t pay that amount on time, it will have defaulted on its debt. Secondly, we know the city doesn’t have $530 million to pay on Sept. 25.”

Elliott had read the business pages of Madison Vanguard, and knew that the city must borrow to avoid a default on its $530 million notes. This was where investment banks such as Berea came in. They agreed to raise that amount of money in the debt market, but only after the city slashed social spending. No housing reforms, no money. The extend of the housing reforms – how much of the city’s public housing should be
sold to developers, at what price, over what period of time, including the phasing out of rent regulation – was still being negotiated with bankers.

“Banks want the city to abolish the affordable housing program,” Elliott said.

“Which the kidnappers are trying to stop,” Jack said. “So QWA terrorize the investment bankers to force them to drop their demand on housing reforms.”

“I doubt kidnapping investment bankers will make a difference.”

“Unless you consider Devon’s case,” Jack said. “Remember it was a combination between the pipeline sabotages and Almeda’s takeover bid that eventually killed Devon.”

“So you’re saying the kidnapping is just the beginning?”

“I hope not, but going by Devon’s case that’s a possibility,” Jack said.

“Who are the other players or institutions involved in housing?” Elliott asked.

“The city’s housing department, the city council, the mayor herself? This involves a lot of parties. Why?”

“Because if you’re right, the kidnappers’ next moves might be through these institutions,” Elliott said. “These eco-terrorists not only know how to bomb and kill, they were also able to engineer the takeover of Brazil’s third-biggest oil company and wiped it completely off the earth. They know how to manipulate the rules to meet their objectives.”

“And you think they’re here in New York to fight the housing reforms?” Jack asked.

“No. The FBI thinks they’re here.”

“Great, sounds the city is in deep shit. Hey I’m here.”
Elliott heard Jack talking to the driver, then the car door opening and closing followed by the sound of footsteps on gravel. “Jack?”

“Not looking good man. I see an ambulance, let me get closer.”

Elliott called Anad to come over to his desk. “I put you on speaker phone. Anad is with me. See anything?” he said, as the editor joined him.

Jack’s footsteps quickened and he was breathing hard into the phone. “Not looking good. Shit, not good at all.”

“What it is Jack?” Anad asked, turning up the speaker volume.

“There’s a SWAT officer carrying a backpack and a broken camera.”

#

Bridget lowered the door handle and pushed the door wide open. Inside the room was a single foldable chair that faced a long wooden table in the back. Behind the table, three window panes looked out into the warehouse and next to them was another door with an EXIT sign above it. Two Fluorescent tube lamps compensated for the lack of sunlight coming through the warehouse-facing windows. Otherwise the room was empty. There was nothing to take pictures of and Bridget stood by the open door registering this fact with brooding disappointment.

At first she thought she had missed whatever QWA had planned for their invitation, but she was only a few minutes late and now she feared they might have canceled their event altogether. She walked up to the window panes behind the table and looked out.

From the second floor of the office building, she had a good view of the warehouse which was attached to the back of the office. It was big enough to fit several
semi-trailer trucks, and its ceiling was another three or four floors high. Big chunks of its 
corrugated roof were missing, and light fell on patches of grass that broke up its concrete 
floor. The few rusty containers along its wall that bordered the office completed the 
picture of abandonment she had felt seen since walking into the office building.

The sound of the approaching helicopter grew louder, almost drowning out the 
police sirens in the back. She was never fond of the police and the image of officers in 
riot gears charging at her triggered unpleasant memories. Still, an idea took shape. She 
might get a picture of a police tactical team rappelling from their helicopter. As long as 
the police didn’t mistake her for one of the kidnappers, she would be all right.

The helicopter appeared to be coming from behind the warehouse. Alongside the 
wall to her left, she saw a passageway connecting the room she was in with the back of 
the warehouse. This seemed to be the fastest route to the helicopter. Bridget went to the 
door with the EXIT sign above it. She stepped into the dimly lit passageway, walked 
down the length of it, and continued down a stairway to a darkened room lined with 
shelves, and illuminated only by the glow of another EXIT sign above a door at the end. 
The moment she opened that door, sunlight blinded her. Squinting, she recognized the 
silhouettes of two SWAT officers standing outside. *How did they get down so fast?*

She wasn’t ready with her camera yet, and the sight of the police officers 
somehow made her stomach clenching up with fear. *Not again.* She didn’t want to step 
out into the open yet, not until she could identify herself as a photojournalist. Remaining 
inside the dark room, she put down her backpack and pulled out her press card, while 
fumbling with its tangled lanyard. She slowed her breath, taking big gulps of air, and 
telling herself that the police was here to help.
A sharp whistle cut the silence. She looked up to see one of the officers pointing at her. “Get her!”

That’s when she realized that someone was with her in the room. Before she could turn around, hands grabbed her left arm and twisted it against her shoulder blade, then shoved her against the wall.

The memories soared from the depth of her mind: Shields pushing her to the ground, batons beating her, kicks and punches hitting her again and again, as she collapsed and crumpled into a fetal position. Not again.

The fear of getting beaten up came down crashing on her like a wave, obliterating her nerves. Bridget shrank to her bare instincts. With a hysterical scream she struggled against the weight that restrained her in the dark until finally her reflexes, developed through years of training, kicked in.

Unable to see, she stomped blindly on the officer’s boot behind her, and tried to kick his groin. He backed away, his grip loosened and she yanked her left arm free. She pushed away from the wall, spun around, and with her right foot came in hard for a bone-shattering round kick. The officer barely flinched and caught Bridget’s right leg between his arm and hip, while his right hand clutched the collar of her jacket. Standing on one leg, she knew she was screwed. She held on to him then swung her left leg over and around his head, clinching it between her thigh and calf. Hanging backwards with her two legs around him, she used the weight of her upper body to pull him down, hoping he would fall over so she could finish him off with an arm lock. He bent forward but didn’t fall, the back of her head now almost touching the ground. She reached for his right hand’s wrist and tried to use her weight against his elbow joint. With Bridget still
hanging off him, her head near the ground, her legs clasping him around his head and waist, the officer stumbled out of the room into the open, grunting and huffing as he fought off her arm lock. *A few more seconds,* she thought. But a sudden shift of his right arm told her it was over. She felt her upper body slowly, impossibly rising off the ground. Her legs around him began to unravel like a lose knot, and under the daylight she noticed the sheer size of this man. Watching in disbelief as he slowly pulled her up with one arm, she realized her fatal mistake. The man wore an army green ski mask, a grey skateboard helmet, and khaki brown vest, and slung around his shoulder, was an enormous sledgehammer. Her eyes widened in terror with every inch he lifted her closer to his masked face, a set of grinding teeth and glowering eyes, until he grabbed her with both hands and with a bursting guttural shout hurled her against the wall.

She crashed with her shoulder, landed on her stomach, and scurried on all fours away from him before turning around. Her attacker was gone.

Sitting, she caught her breath and massaged her shoulder. She tried to ignore the pain as her mind struggled to make sense of what just happened. If this man wasn’t a police officer then he and the two silhouettes she thought were SWAT officers must had been the kidnappers.

She should consider herself lucky and stand down, yet the decision came to her inevitably like a bubble rising to the water’s surface; she would get their pictures. She rose to her feet and staggered back to the dark room to fetch her camera backpack. There she paused. Up in the passageway the sound of running boots were heading in her direction, beams of flashlights stroke the stairway ceiling like ghostly fingers. The police must be already inside the building.
That’s when she noticed a door in the dark room, its panel obscured by a shelf standing in front of it. Her attacker must have come and gone through this door. She put on her backpack and opened the door. It led into the warehouse, and stepping inside, she spotted the kidnappers immediately.

There were six or seven of them, standing in the light under the broken roof at the other end of the warehouse, as though posing for a group photo. Approaching them for an up-close shot was not going to happen, not after her encounter with the sledgehammer-wielding giant. She would stay where she was and use her long-range zoom lens instead. She pulled out the lens from her backpack, and as she was fastening it to her camera, she noticed the smoke.

It was coming out of two small tubes that were bouncing and rolling on the concrete floor in her direction. The kidnappers must have thrown the smoke grenades at her. Seconds later the space between her and the kidnappers filled up with billowing smoke that blocked her view. If she wanted pictures of them, she had no choice but to run through the smoke toward the kidnappers for a clear shot. She would have to get close.

Bridget hesitated, thinking whether she was feeling crazy enough to do this. This was what she came here for. She took a deep breath, and with camera in hand, ran into the smoke, a white curtain that swallowed her whole. Behind her, she heard the police bursting out through the door.

She kept running, using the chopping sound of the helicopter ahead to guide her forward. As she got closer, the smoke thinned out, and she slowed to a walk, and readied her camera. Her next moves would have to be fast: aim, shoot, move, aim, shoot, move,
and whatever else she did, stay away from the kidnappers. Through the white grayish screen, their outlines were coming into view. But something was wrong.

Emerging out of the smoke coughing, she came to a tripping halt before the frightened faces of four gagged and tied men sitting on the ground. The four investment bankers. They seemed unharmed. But where are the kidnappers? She looked around, half expecting to see them running in the smoke, but then she looked up. They were dangling midair in a tight cluster, rising steadily toward the hole in the roof and the helicopter above them.

She hadn’t expected an airlift. This was it, her only chance to get pictures of them before they climb out of sight. She took a few steps back, raised her camera and, looking through the viewfinder, zoomed in.

There were seven of them, six men and one woman, huddling together like a bunch of grapes. Bridget had never seen the likes of them before. Their faces were covered in ski masks except for one man whose head was painted in red with black markings. Some wore skateboard helmets with symbols, stickers and writings on them. Two wore parkas, the rest had tactical vests with knives, flashlights, handguns and what appeared to be smoke grenades attached to them. The men carried blunt weapons, while the woman had an assault rifle slung across her chest.

Backlight from the sky obscured some of the details, but the lens found its focus. As the combination of distance, light and angle approached its perfect moment, she placed her finger on the shutter-release button.

“Get down!!”
Bridget looked back and instantly regretted having done so. The moment she saw the four SWAT police officers materializing out of the smoke, she realized she had missed her shot. She looked up again, raised her camera, aimed, but then hands seized her by her jacket from behind and pulled her down. She resisted and managed two, three shots before they yanked her to the ground. As two officers freed the hostages, the other officers bent over her to hold her down. *Not again.* She kicked against their grabbing hands, her left arm trashing about, while her right hand kept pressing the shutter button, taking pictures at random, until one of the officers kicked the camera out of her hand. She screamed as it flew and landed with a crackling clunk. It was over.

The officers turned her over, pulled her hands behind her back and handcuffed her. Lying on her stomach, her heart still pounding, she let exhaustion overcome her, and with closed eyes surrendered herself to the solid embrace of the concrete floor.

#

Elliott leaned over the sink in the restroom, splashing water on his face. By the time he had crammed in four hours of interviewing, writing, researching, and fact checking every detail of the kidnapping story, his mind felt like the abused feet of a marathon runner. The sagging expression that clung on to his face as he checked himself in the mirror, told him his good looks had expired for today. At a quarter to midnight, Jack’s farewell party in the conference room had just begun, and waiting for him downstairs in the office lobby were two FBI agents.

The two agents were sitting in the lounge seat, flipping through magazines. The first agent, short and stocky with a crew-cut hairstyle, introduced himself as Powell. The second agent, black, tall, sporting a full beard, and wearing an immaculate grey suit with
oxford shoes that altogether looked almost dandy, introduced himself with a firm handshake, Agent Fry.

Elliott led them into one of the three glassed meeting rooms behind the lobby that were reserved for impromptu visits. They sat facing each other on the round table, with Elliott having a good view of the lobby in front and the stairway to the newsroom in the hallway next to him.

“Sorry to bother you this late,” Fry said, “We just arrived from Washington and thought to drop by since you reporters work late.”

Elliott put on a smile. “No problem, how can you help you?”

“I like to know how your day was,” Fry said, while his partner took out a pen and notepad from his pocket, “beginning with how you figured out the connection between the kidnappers and QWA.”

It had been a long day, and Elliott had already given a chronological account of what he did to the police a few hours ago. Still, he’d be lying if he said the day had been merely exhausting. He hadn’t been so excited about a story in a long time. He took off his glasses and rubbed his forehead, then repeated his story.

As soon after Jack had told him and Anad over the phone that Bridget got the pictures, that she had found the four hostages, and that she was, above all, safe and sound, he slammed his fist on the desk and high fived Anad. Elliott then creamed the competition with headlines of the four investment bankers found, forcing other media organizations to cite Madison Vanguard’s website until police released a statement an hour later.
It was Anad who first spotted QWA’s press statement in the newsroom’s general inbox. QWA claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of the four Berea investment bankers in protest against the housing reforms. They threatened to unleash more violence if the city pushed ahead with the reforms. Again Madison Vanguard broke the news first and the competition scrambled to match the story.

Then there was the hullaballoo about people spotting the helicopter flying across Hudson River with the kidnappers dangling in the air. The story turned from kidnapping drama to a hunting frenzy that followed the trail of helicopter sightings. But the sightings didn’t last long, with the last witness spotting the helicopter east of North Bergen. With the helicopter’s disappearance, hope for a quick end to the kidnapping drama faded, and in the hours that followed, attention shifted back to QWA’s threat against the city.

Madison Vanguard released Bridget’s exclusive pictures of the hostages on its website, but saved her best shot for tomorrow’s print edition. Of the six pictures she managed to snap while resisting the two SWAT officers, only one nailed it. It was of the seven terrorists in midair looking down, of seven pairs of eyes looking straight through the lens at her in an unspoken threat of violence.

In all the hectic that followed, as Elliott was helping Jack and Anad write the story, he hadn’t had a chance to meet Bridget when she came to the office to report her encounter with the kidnappers. Jack had been the lead writer for the front-page kidnapping story, the last article he wrote for Madison Vanguard, while Anad had written up Bridget’s close encounter. Elliott had done the less glamorous work of providing comments and background facts for their stories. By the time he had answered all of Jack and Anad’s questions, it was already half past eleven.
Elliott shifted in his chair, as he looked out the glass wall, wondering when Fry would wrap up his questioning. Anad came down the stairway and waved at him as he walked passed the meeting room and out the lobby. With Anad heading home, Jack’s front-page story must already be in the hands of the production desk.

“So,” Fry said, “anything else you want to add?”

“I’ve pretty much told you everything,” Elliott said.

He should probably take this opportunity to ask Fry what he thought about QWA’s possible link with South American eco-terrorists. After all, it was a fellow FBI agent who had leaked this information to Jack. “How’s the investigation going?” Elliott asked.

“I can’t disclose information about ongoing investigations,” Fry said.

“Since this involves the FBI, does this case involve foreign actors?”

“The FBI also deals with domestic terrorism,” Powell said, and Fry added “I’m sure that when we have something to tell the public, we’ll let the media know.”

Elliott nodded at Fry’s lame answer, too tired to press further. As Powell was showing Fry his notes, Elliott’s eyes wandered to the lobby where a woman had just walked in.

“But we definitely look into all leads,” Fry said, but Elliott was barely listening. The woman showed her ID card to the receptionist, and when he noticed the camera bag on her, he knew it was Bridget. She strode pass the glassed meeting room, and walked up the stairs.

“We look into all leads,” Fry repeated, as he followed his gaze.

Elliott cleared his throat. “Yes of course.”

“Who was that girl?” Powell asked.
“This must be Bridget our new photographer freelancer,” Elliott said. “You haven’t questioned her?”

“Over the phone,” Fry said and gave Powell back his notes. “One more thing, you said QWA’s answering machine called you back?”

“Yes.” Elliott recalled the moment he realized that QWA might be involved. “I don’t know how they did it, I mean how they programmed an answering machine to make phone calls.”

“It probably wasn’t an answering machine,” Powell said. “It could be one of those outbound call software that you can program to make calls.”

“But here’s the thing.” Fry leaned forward on the table. “Police sent out e-mails to the media to see who else besides Madison Vanguard got QWA’s press invitation. Turns out that there were at least three reporters who called QWA. Two of them called a few days ago, so before the attack on Berea, to ask for QWA’s address, which as you said, was missing from the invitation. Both reporters said a machine answered their calls and none received a phone call back from QWA. You on the other hand called QWA after the attack occurred and you received a call back from them.”

“So?” Elliott asked, his mind was too frazzled to cope with another puzzle at this late hour.

“You’re the only reporter who actually talked to them Elliott. That woman you said was rude knows your name. They know your name.” Fry said.

“Why would they need my name for?”

“Have you thought about why they called you?”

Elliott shook his head.
“Well, I was hoping you had an idea,” Fry said and, standing up, handed Elliott his name card. “Call me if you do.”

#

He walked Fry and Powell out the door, then returned to the meeting room to pick up Fry’s name card that he had left on the table. Elliott had been too busy throughout the day that he had forgotten about QWA’s phone call until Agent Fry brought it up. He should be worried about it, but couldn’t or rather he didn’t want to. All he could think of was to relax and Jack’s farewell party might just be the distraction he needed.

He walked up the stairway and found the newsroom was already empty. A few night owls from the production desk in the back of the room were putting on the final touches for tomorrow’s edition. They had had only a few minutes left before the paper must go to print, and he figured they were as eager as he was to join the party. From behind the closed doors of the conference room, the muffled conversation and laughter sounded loud against the silence of the newsroom. Elliott stepped in and was not surprised to see that at this hour the room was still packed.

When not used for gatherings, the conference room contained a rectangular table that seated about 20 people and faced a large TV screen below a rolled up projection slide. Tonight the table had been disassembled, allowing for smaller ones with food and beverages to be placed inside, while opening up the space in the middle for people to come together. Elliott estimated a crowd of about thirty. He was looking for the table with the drinks when Jack called out his name.

“Yo Elliott get over here.” The star reporter stood near the door with his girlfriend Claudia and two reporters from the national desk. Elliott obliged and shuffled over. Jack
wasn’t much taller than him, but he multiplied that small gain with his unflappable confidence. Wearing a slim cut business suit that accentuated his athletic figure well, Jack outshone Elliott whose khaki pants and checkered shirt concealed his runner’s body.

“Good job man,” Jack said and gave him a high-five. He put his arm around Elliott’s shoulder, pressing him closer against his immaculate pressed dress shirt. “You keep up like that and you’re going to give me a hard time.’’

“It’s nothing,” Elliott said. “I was just connecting the dots, you wrote the story.”

“Hey man, you did the reporting,” Jack said, his voice dropping a notch. “Anyone can write, but you broke the news and that’s what reporters are supposed to do. Remember that.”

Jack gave him a pad on his shoulder and Claudia, her arms around Jack’s waist, turned to Elliott. “Monday will be Jack’s first day at the New York Times, don’t make him look bad.”

He was starting to like where this conversation was heading to, but Jack already looked passed him, releasing his shoulder to wave at someone who had just entered the room. It was Albert, a former Madison Vanguard business reporter who had left months ago for a PR job at a foreign bank. Elliott barely knew Albert, and the reunion that followed excluded him. He made a quiet retreat and walked to the drink section where he poured himself a lukewarm cola.

It was a shame that Jack’s father, who took over the paper twenty years ago when its previous owner couldn’t repay his debt, thought low of the journalistic profession his son chose, a field that was more associated with blue collar workers than the ones prep-school students ended up with. With Jack leaving, his father would have even less interest
in keeping the paper afloat amid declining ad revenue. It was only a matter of time before the newspaper bled itself to death and everyone here knew that tonight’s party might be their last at Madison Vanguard.

Unlike Jack, Elliott didn’t dream of becoming a journalist. He took the reporter job to stay afloat while working on his Internet startup ideas, none of which, after three years working for the newspaper, amounted to anything concrete. Four years ago he and his girlfriend were building a startup, throwing in their everything on this idea. But he and Lisa broke up, the startup died, and he ended up at Madison Vanguard. He had promised himself to stop thinking about Lisa but not a day passed without his mind drifting over to her.

He poured himself another coke and leaned back against the table. From the other side of the room, he saw Bridget cornered by a gang of four photographers. She was listening to photo editor Dawson who was probably telling her one of his stories from when he was still working for the National Geographic magazine. Everyone laughed, including the three staff photographers who must have heard his jokes a dozen times. But the ripple effect of seeing Bridget laughing made him smile, and Elliott took a gulp from his cup to mask his bemusement.

She reminded him of Lisa. He couldn’t tell what it was though because they didn’t look alike. Bridget struck him as handsome, a solid presence of beauty. Lisa, on the other hand, was pretty and had it not been for her cerebral charm, her beauty would have stopped at that. As he kept watching Bridget, he realized that what reminded him of Lisa was the way she moved. Underneath Bridget’s casual looks, was the telling posture of grace and elegance that betrayed her upper-class upbringing.
He should introduce himself to her. After all they worked together on today’s biggest story. He put down his plastic cup, crossed the room and arrived to Dawson’s dry explanation of what lenses he used during his jungle trips. Elliott stood there, nodding politely, and when Dawson finished talking, he made his move.

“Hey so you must be -.”

A mighty hollering from behind shut him up. He turned around to see Jack and his posse walking over.

“Hey Bridget thanks for coming” Jack said, as he pushed his way through and shook her hand enthusiastically. “Those pictures are the shit.’’

“Thank you” she said in a chirpy, overly polite voice. “And thanks for inviting me to your farewell party. It must be hard for everyone to see their star reporter leaving.”

“I am Elliott, it’s -.”

“We lose Jack but we got you,” Dawson interrupted, “and between the two of you, you’re the only one who literally kicks ass.”

Jack and Bridget laughed, and it was like two suns colliding, their impact hurling planets out of their orbits. Elliott shrank away and found himself standing behind Jack’s friends and Dawson’s photographers who jostled for attention. Nice going, Elliott.

His stomach growled, reminding him of better things to do than demonstrating Bridget his social ineptness. He made his way to the finger-food section, and found that all what’s left of the snacks were the little wrapping papers on the platter. It was almost one p.m. and the muffins he had eaten in the afternoon had long lost its filling power. Time to leave.
Walking toward the door, he took one more look at Bridget. Just when he turned away, he caught a glimpse of her smiling at him. It was so quick he feared he had only imagined it.

Outside, alone on the street, his mind took in the coldness of the night through every inch of his exposed skin. Breathing in the air, he felt larger and lighter altogether. For a moment the weight of exhaustion had eased. There were times when a fifteen-hour work day was worth every minute of it. Walking down Madison Avenue, he let his mind linger at the satisfaction of having done a job well. But a curious tingling in his stomach distracted him, and his thoughts drifted to Bridget who, he was now sure of it, did recognize him.

CHAPTER II – The Offer

“Wake up my friend.’’

It was a text message from an unknown number at 7:47 a.m. Elliott put the phone back on the nightstand and continued to sleep.

At 8:30 a.m. he woke up. Feeling neither refreshed nor tired, he trudged to the kitchen to make coffee. Everything around his studio apartment centered on his workspace. An IKEA office desk, with a steel frame supporting its wooden top, occupied the middle of the room. Two monitors, a laptop stand, and a keyboard took up most of the desk’s surface, leaving the rest covered in papers, cables, mugs and other knick knacks. The office chair was half seating furniture, half wardrobe with piles of sweaters and t-shirts covering its back. His twin-size bed had been relegated to the back below the window, and a room divider separated the kitchen up front.
Since Lisa had left him four years ago, this apartment had served as a base for him to do what he really wanted. The bulking work desk reminded him that his job at Madison Vanguard was meant to get him by with a steady income, that his future was not in journalism. All these years he had been working on ideas for a startup and nothing had come out of it, at least not yet.

With coffee in hand, Elliott powered up his computer and sat down to read his e-mails that he hadn’t touched since yesterday afternoon. Discussing website user-interface designs, programming languages and business models gave him a second-life outside his job as a reporter for Madison Vanguard. Here in his room, he lived off of his fading reputation as the founder of Meridio One, a search-engine project Lisa had taken over and developed to much success without him.

He’d built Meridio One while studying computer science at the University of Pennsylvania. The search engine had started out with a project to tap into students’ knowledge on where to find what information on the Internet. Back then he was dating Lisa, a web designer, whom he’d recruited to his team of programmers to develop the search engine for public use. Elliott had been sure he could get people to share each other’s’ search history anonymously to create a self-expanding, living database of information on the web that was accessible to anyone. But even before the country had slid into a depression, appetite for high-risk tech investments had slumped, depriving Elliott of funding to launch his startup. Soon after, he and Lisa broke up and with that his team unraveled and Meridio One died a quick death.

It took him about half an hour to respond to today’s e-mails. The last he opened was from his friend Ronald who had sent him an article about Meridio One based on an
interview with Lisa. In that article, she referred to Elliott as a friend without mentioning his name, which she did in almost every interview when talking about the project’s beginning. He wondered why the reporter didn’t bother asking her for his name. Not that he should care. After all, it was his fault that he was no longer in the picture. He could have accepted her offer three years ago to revive the project.

“I got the old gang together, Aaron, Susan, Jamal, Ronald too, it’s just you we need and it’ll be like the old times,” Lisa had told him as they were having lunch at Bryant Park. He’d heard her saying these words, but in the back of his mind the image of her boyfriend looming over her clouded his judgment. He couldn’t stand the sight of them together, the way he was around her, and the affection she showed him. And when he’d told her he couldn’t afford quitting his day job, he detected in Lisa a sigh of relief.

Ronald, the chief technology officer on her team, had been keeping him updated on Meridio One’s progress ever since. Lisa didn’t know it, but Elliott had always been there for her, helping her grow the project from the obscurity of his studio apartment.

“Wake up my friend.” He stared at the text message from this morning and thought of Lisa. Of course it wasn’t her. She didn’t even have his phone number. He fetched his jacket and messenger bag and left his apartment at about 10:00 am.

It was late into September, and the days still clung on to the fading warmth of summer. Getting to the 7 train on the 52nd Street was a ten-minute walk of fresh air along rows of brown, low-rise apartment blocks with a view of the Manhattan skyline that appeared close enough to walk over.

On his way, he bought a copy of the New York Post. As he had expected, the story made it to the paper’s front page and, just as Madison Vanguard had done, didn’t
lead with the kidnapping, which by now was already old news, but with the question what this new threat meant for the city and whether it was prepared to face it. Unless the day would bring fresh development on the case, these questions seemed worth exploring for a second-day story. Would the city ban the anti-housing reforms rally that was expected on the day the city council would vote on the housing reforms program?

Sitting in the train, Elliott noticed the new ad posters that called on New Yorkers to join the protests. Its organizers expected a crowd of at least 50,000 but given yesterday’s terror threat, the police might want to reconsider allowing them come close to City Hall.

While Elliott sympathized with the protesters’ intention to prevent the poor from losing their homes, he personally supported Mayor Alberta’s push for housing reforms. Let the market set the rent for apartments. If New York couldn’t pay its debt, provide basic services such as police protection, garbage pickups and working road conditions, then it shouldn’t be spending money on giveaways such as housing subsidies.

Elliott glanced at the four homeless old men sitting alone at the far end of the subway car with their belongings stuffed inside laundry bags in a four-wheel utility cart. A sour smell emanated from them and kept passengers away. Their number had grown visibly over the past year. Every time Elliott saw them emptying entire wagons with their smell, he wished the Metropolitan Transportation Authority would make haste in privatizing its subway division. Quality came with a price and he was willing to pay for an increase in subway tariff if it meant a cleaner and odor free ride.

The vibration of his phone interrupted his thoughts.
“Good morning Elliott.” It was the same anonymous sender who had messaged him earlier this morning. Elliott frowned and texted a reply.

“Hi, who is this please?”

“My name is Frank.”

“Do I know you?”

“You don’t. I read your story on the kidnapping of Berea’s bankers.”

He hoped this wasn't a reader who got hold of his phone number and now wanted to complain. He was sure he got all his facts right before sending them to Jack for the write up. Still, there was always the possibility of having messed it up during the writing or editing process. He opted for a neutral answer.

“I see.”

“Interesting read, but incomplete,” Frank texted.

“Okay.”

“It's incomplete Elliott.”

Madison Vanguard’s coverage of the kidnapping had been anything but incomplete. He was thinking of a reply when he lost the phone signal as the train barreled underground just before crossing the East River on its way to Manhattan. Elliott put the phone back in his pocket and read the newspaper. A few minutes later he stepped off at Grand Central Station, and walked the few blocks to his office at the corner of Madison Avenue.

At this hour on Sunday the newsroom was as good as empty. Sitting next to Elliott’s desk was crime beat reporter Adam who was hammering away on his keyboard. Adam pointed with his chin on the fresh copy of Madison Vanguard on Elliott's desk.
“One hell of a story,” Adam said, “this will keep us busy for weeks.”

“Starting today I’m afraid,” Elliott said, as he grabbed the paper and sat down. Bridget’s picture of the seven kidnappers, armed to the teeth and looking down on the reader, dominated the upper half of the front page. The photo caption below read:
WE’RE COMING FOR YOU. Jack had been the lead writer for the main story about the kidnapping, while Anad had written up Bridget’s encounter with the kidnappers in a separate story, along with a timeline outlining the key events in yesterday’s drama and explaining how the paper had connected the dots to find the hostages. Jack's writing was good as always. But as of tomorrow, he would be working for the New York Times, and Elliott wouldn't be surprised if Jack would be assigned to follow up on the Berea kidnapping story.

He turned on the radio, logged on to his computer and opened the websites he monitored for news during the weekend. He doubted he would have the time to keep a close tab on news today. Top editors would want a second-day story, and with Jack gone he was the likely choice to replace him. He went to the pantry to fill his water bottle, and when he returned, saw Anad already at his desk, staring at the monitor.

“We're still smarting over what this kidnapping was all about,” Anad said, standing up. “Can you call up a couple of analysts and see what they think?”

“Shouldn’t we focus on the investigation?” Elliott put down his water bottle and they stood facing each other from across their desks.

“National desk will handle that, this falls under domestic terrorism, but Adam will help them out. We'll get a few comments from the business desk on reactions from the investment bank community. What you can do is call experts to have them explain one
more time what just happened yesterday. The attack, the kidnapping, the helicopter
escape, all that just to tell the city they should back off from the housing reforms, seems
overkill to me. National desk will follow up on Jack’s lead about the South American
eco-terrorists, so make sure to also ask analysts what they think about it.”

Elliott nodded and they both sat down on their seats. Glancing at his phone, he
noticed Frank had sent him another message.

“What is incomplete about your story?” the message said.

Elliott typed in a reply. “I don’t know, why don’t you tell me Frank.”

It didn’t take long for Frank to respond. “Your story mentions a phone call you
received from QWA, but it doesn’t say why they called you.”

Frank’s question transported Elliott back to the moment Agent Fry had pointed
out that he was the only reporter who spoke to someone from QWA. They now knew his
name, he’d said. Elliott put down the phone and adjusted his glasses. He still didn’t know
what to make of this. But the very thought of it revived the slight queasiness he’d felt
when Fry mentioned the phone call. How easy he was able to brush that feeling off last
night at the party, and how quickly it had now returned.

Frank sent another message. “Why did QWA call you Elliott?”

“I don’t know.”

“Isn’t it strange that they called you for apparently no reason?”

Elliott stared at the last message. Who was this Frank?

He typed in a reply. “It is. But I don’t have an answer.”

``I can help you find the answer my friend.”
Bridget sat in the front passenger seat of her mother’s Range Rover with her broken bike tucked away in the trunk. She had parked the Rover in the middle of Manhattan, and bobbing her head to the rhythm of a Top 40 song, was waiting for Latisha to rescue her.

It was just after 12 p.m. when she saw her friend crossing the street. Bridget reached over the driver seat to open the door from the inside, and Latisha, with a sandwich and a coke in hand, eased herself in.

“I can't believe you drove here all by yourself,” Latisha said, as she closed the door and unpacked her lunch. “But come to think of it, I’m actually not surprised.”

“I can’t just leave my bike out there,” Bridget said. “Besides, I have to drive on my own at some point.”

“At some point yes, but after you get your driver license not before. You're like a cat that can't climb down a tree. Now where’re the keys?”

Bridget handed her the key fob. Living in New York City with its vast subway system, she’d never really warmed up to the idea of having to learn to drive. She was in her early twenties, and most of her friends either owned a car or knew how to drive.

“Okay, so I didn't figure out traffic was going to be this bad,” she said.

“Like the time you couldn’t figure out that starting a firework inside the apartment wasn’t a good idea?”

Bridget looked at her friend. “Did my mother told you about that? I was ten years old, that’s ancient history.”
“Ancient yeah? Like the time you couldn’t figure out the meaning of ‘wait for the police’ and ended up brawling with a terrorist. Oh wait, that was yesterday,” Latisha said, taking a big bite out of her sandwich.

Bridget couldn’t blame Latisha for acting like her surrogate mother. How many times had she bailed her out of trouble? Like today. She had driven the big SUV all the way from her parents’ apartment in Chelsea to pick up her broken bike, thinking she could sneak out and back in before mother noticed her missing SUV. Traffic in Uptown was manageable about two hours ago but now, seeing how the streets were packed with cars as though it was rush hour on Monday morning, she realized she had overestimated her driving skills. Best not to come home with scratches on mother’s Range Rover.

“Technically speaking, the police had already arrived before I had that little tussle,” Bridget said.

Latisha swallowed and took a slurp from her coke. “So technically you can drive back home by yourself.”

To shut her up, Bridget dropped the latest edition of Madison Vanguard on Latisha’s lap, pointing at the picture on its front page. “It was all worth it.”

“You took this picture?” Latisha put down the sandwich for a closer look.

Bridget nodded, as she watched closely her friend’s reaction. She had met Latisha five years ago when they danced off against each other in the U.S. qualification rounds at the Juste Debout hip-hop dance competition. Having both lost the round, they started to hang out together with both Bridget graduating from Baruch College majoring in sociology at about the same time that Latisha, who was a few years older, graduated from law school. But while Latisha was now climbing the corporate ladder, Bridget had been
stuck with working part time jobs for the past year. Her byline on Madison Vanguard’s front page marked her first major break. Latisha examined the picture, the caption below, and the picture again, before looking at Bridget.

“Wow, you really are a photojournalist now. You go woman!” Latisha gave Bridget a hug. Then she rolled the newspaper and smacked her on the head. “These guys are dangerous, terrorists, lunatics, you could have gotten yourself killed!”

“Hey, it’s just a few bruises from falling off the bike,” Bridget said, “and I broke my camera lens, that hurts the most actually.”

“That’s exactly the kind of attitude that gets you in trouble all the time,” Latisha said, head shaking. “Anyway, will you be covering the housing protest on September 25?”

“Probably. Why, are you telling me not to?”

“Sort of. My friends and I will provide legal assistance to protesters should they run into trouble. It’ll be good to have the press with us. You know, in case the police makes arbitrary arrests.”

Bridget shrugged. “Sure, count me in.”

“Really? I mean these protests will be massive. Your boss probably wants you out there on the street where all the action is. Or rather, you want to be out there where the action is.”

“Well, I’m sure my photo editor …” From her right, Bridget noticed movement outside. A woman wearing a hoodie and a black leather jacket came up to the Range Rover, leaned over the hood, and stuck a piece of paper between the wipers and the windshield, banged the hood twice, then took off down the street, hands in pocket.
“Unbelievable,” Bridget said. “Did you see that? How rude.”

“Look,” Latisha tugged at Bridget’s arm while pointing at the piece of paper on the windshield. “It has your name on it, the envelope has your name on it.’’

#

Staring at Frank’s text message, Elliott scratched the back of his head, trying to figure out what to say to his offer. He hadn’t had the time yet to think through the peculiarity of QWA’s phone call. Or perhaps he didn’t want to know. Why did the QWA woman call him yesterday to ask for his name, and more troubling why only him? Frank might be an armchair detective with nothing better to do than harass reporters, but right now his guess was as good as anybody’s. Elliott typed in a reply. “How will you help me find the answer?”

“I need you to first do something for me,” Frank replied. “Install this app on your phone.”

Frank sent him a link to download a messaging app, which incidentally Elliott had already installed on his phone. The app allowed users to exchange encrypted text, photo and video messages that automatically disappeared after the recipient had read them. These features had come in handy when he was chatting with Petersson who didn’t want to be found out that he was sharing sensitive information about Lisa’s collaborative-search project, Meridio One. Elliott added Frank’s phone number on his app’s contact list, and a moment later Frank sent him a message over this app.

<Excellent. Now erase our previous chat on your phone.>

Exactly fifteen seconds after he had read Frank’s first message it disappeared. Elliott opened his previous text messages, selected all, and hit the delete button.
<Done.>

<We will be chatting on this app from now on.>

<Ok> Elliott replied, then added <Who are you really Frank?>

<I cannot tell you who I am.>

Elliott frowned. <Ok. So what about that QWA phone call?>

<You must have noticed that QWA’s press invitation wasn’t really an invitation, more like a riddle.>

Holding the printed out QWA invitation in his hand, Elliott recalled yesterday’s events, how he’d linked QWA with the kidnapping of the four Berea investment bankers, how he figured out the location of the planned QWA discussion, and how Madison Vanguard was then able to locate the hostages.

<What do you mean with riddle?> Elliott typed.

<A riddle designed to find out who could crack it.>

Elliott leaned back against his chair to let Frank’s last message sink in. So that’s why he was the only reporter whom QWA called. For whatever reason the kidnappers needed to select a reporter, this much he knew: a story was brewing and he was being dragged into its roiling center. He felt a knot in his stomach tightening. Questions were welling up but before he was able to ask one, Frank had sent him another message.

<Meet me at this café at 5:00 p.m. today. I can help you find the answer.>

Frank sent him the address of a café in Chelsea and Elliott stared at it, hesitating in his reply until fifteen seconds had passed and the message automatically disappeared. He had never met anonymous sources in persons before; they tend to prefer phones or e-mails. Perhaps Frank needed to see Elliott in person before agreeing to speak on record.
<Ok, I see you there.> He replied.

He took a deep breath then put away his phone. He had a job to do and Anad would soon be asking for the comments he was supposed to get for the second-day story on the Berea kidnapping. Over the next three hours, Elliott called up security experts ranging from academics, consultants, analysts to retired generals. By 4:15 p.m. he had typed up his last comments from the six experts he managed to get hold of, none of whom mentioned anything about the Brazilian oil and gas company Devon. In fact they were rather dismissive about the possibility that the terrorists might be foreigners. Why would foreigners be interested in New York public housing, they’d asked. Elliott had to remind himself that it was Jack’s FBI source who drew the connection between Berea’s kidnappers and the foreign eco-terrorists, a link that authorities had yet to confirm.

Elliott told Anad he would be meeting a source for coffee. He stuffed his recorder, notepad, pen and press ID card – his reporting gear - into his messenger bag, then headed out.

Wedged between two stores in a row of brownstone houses, the café reminded Elliott of mint-chocolate chip ice cream with its green walls and dark brown seat cushions. Aside from a young couple, slurping coffee while holding hands on the table, he was the only other customer. Elliott bought a bottle of water then sat on a bench outside to watch who’s coming. Two minutes later his phone on the table beeped. It was Frank.

<‘I’ve asked Bridget to come along, is she with you?>
Bridget? So Frank had contacted her too. He went back inside the café, half expecting her to have materialized out of nowhere. Of course she wasn’t there and Elliott reported her absence with a tint of disappointment.

<We can’t wait for her, we need to go.> Frank replied.

<I thought we were supposed to meet here?>

<Follow my instructions.>

The next message was a set of direction. Elliott memorized the instruction before it disappeared from the chat box. He headed north all the way to Jane Street where Frank instructed him to turn right and keep walking. Two blocks later he was told to make another right turn heading South towards Abingdon Square Park. He was about to cross the street towards the square when Frank messaged him.

<Someone's following you.>

Elliott turned around. Two men just passed by him, and behind them a young couple and their toddler was walking his way, further in the back a woman entered a deli, and further down were a bunch of teenagers. Across the street, a lone man was walking his dog, heading in the opposite direction. There was no one else nearby. He glanced at his phone again.

<Go back to the deli.>

<I don’t see anyone following me.>

<Just go inside.>

With an exasperated sigh, Elliott walked back to the deli. It was narrow, crammed with shelves, and crowded even with just a few people inside. A Spanish-speaking old man on a mobile phone was fretting over his lottery ticket, another old man, apparently
his friend, made coffee at the self-service counter, a woman was choosing a drink from
the glass refrigerators in the back, two kids, about six or seven years old, rummaged
through an ice cream fridge, and an older woman took her time as she counted her bills to
pay for a loaf of bread and a disinfecting bathroom cleaner. Elliott stopped there and
retraced his gaze. Old woman taking her time to pay, two kids going for ice cream, and
the thirsty brunette in the back whom he earlier saw entering the deli, and whose
backpack and jacket he now recognized. She was having a hard time choosing a cold
drink. He let out a little chuckle. Hello Bridget.

Elliott walked up to the fridge to stand next to her. Clearing his throat and
dropping his voice, he delivered the one-liner he often heard people say. “Can I buy you a
drink?”

Bridget looked at him with this blank expression of non-recognition that took him
aback. Had he been that invisible to her?

“No thanks,” she said in the most condensed of polite rejections.

Like a needle, it punctured the bubble he had been nurturing since he caught her
glancing at him last night. That smile of hers he saw back then, it dawned on him with a
deflating sensation, must have been all in his head. He watched her strolling to the ice
cream fridge where she helped the two little boys pick two cones, before choosing a small
one for herself and paying for all three. She pushed open the door to let out the boys who
ran passed her yelling “thank you” then stepped out herself, and standing there under the
sun with her arm still holding the door open she turned to him.

“Are you coming or not?”
Elliott startled to life. So she did recognize him. *Damn it Bridget.* He walked out of the deli, determined to regain his composure fast. After all, wasn’t it her who’d followed him? She owed him an explanation. But Bridget was already walking away and just as he caught up with her she spun around to face him.

“So what are you doing here?” Bridget asked, eying him suspiciously as she unwrapped her mini vanilla ice-cream cone.

“I was in the neighborhood,” Elliott said. “What about you?”

“Just taking a walk. I live a few blocks from here,” she said, waving, in the general direction down the street.

“I see, for a moment I thought you were sort of, and I don’t want to jump to a conclusion here, but it seems for a moment you were, you know.”

“What?” Bridget asked, glaring at him while giving her ice cream a good lick.

“Well, like you were sort of following me.” He meant to state this as an imposing fact, but it came out with the rising intonation of upspeak.

In his pocket, he felt the phone vibrating and ignored it. He wanted to know Bridget’s reaction. And by the way she was nodding to herself, as though deep in thought, he wasn’t sure what that reaction was going to be. She eventually looked up at him and frowned.

“I’m just going to say it,” she said, waving her ice cream dangerously close to his mouth.

Elliott shrugged. “Say what?”

“It’s stupid to meet a stranger who may want to harm you unless you have backup.”
“You’re my backup?” He blurted the question out a bit too fast for his liking.

Bridget threw the cone’s paper wrap away in a preparation for her final assault.

“Frank told me to meet him at the café,” she said. When I saw you there, I thought best to hang back. You know, what’s the point of sending two lambs to the lion’s den when one is enough?” She shoved the rest of the ice cream up her mouth. “Whush goint tskewus if nonok ows where we are?”

“What?”

“Who is going to rescue us,” she wiped the crumbs off her mouth, “if no one knows where we are?”

“Yes, yes good point,” he said.

Elliott checked his phone and found two unread messages from Frank.

<What was she thinking?> Frank texted. <Elliott?>

Elliott typed in a quick reply. <Yes still here.>

Bridget looked around as if to find Frank lurking from behind one of the trees.

“Tell him I will come along, but he better not mess around with us,” she said.

Elliott relayed her message in a more diplomatic tone to Frank who replied with the next set of instructions. This time it took them across Greenwich Avenue and into a narrow street lined with brownstone houses. There, under the shade of a tree, Frank told them to wait.

“What do you know about Frank?” Bridget asked, breaking the silence.

“Nothing really. Only that he works for the city and that he knows something about the kidnappers that we don’t.”

“I think Frank is a woman,” Bridget said.
“What? How so?”

“Because it was a woman who put Frank’s message on my car’s windshield. I couldn’t see her face though.”

Elliott hadn’t thought about that possibility.

“You think these people at QWA are serious about their threat?” Bridget asked as she paced up and down the pavement. “Everyone wants to stop the housing reforms, but boy these guys are taking it to whole new level.”

“I wouldn’t exactly say everyone wants to stop the housing reforms.” Elliott said, slighted by her off-hand generalization. If Bridget lived around here, where the average rent was probably twice his salary, then she, unlike him, didn’t have to worry about rents. “Some people support the reforms.”

“Reforms eh?” Bridget snorted, giving him a sideways glance. “Tell that to the families who will lose their homes.”

“Consider Manhattan as a luxury product,” he said, and noticing Bridget’s mouth opening in protest, he pressed on. “Not everyone can afford living here, so why subsidize them?”

“That analogy is so wrong,” Bridget said, finger waving at him, but Elliott raised his hand to interrupt her. Frank had just sent him new instructions.

<You’ve arrived. Apt. 13B>

Elliott looked at the stretch of brownstone houses him. ’’We’re here,” he said to Bridget.

“Here where?” she looked around. “What’s the address?”
“Apartment 13B.” Elliott said, and spotted that number on a dark green door of a house across the street. He was about to head that way when he noticed another message.

*The apartment on the third floor belongs to a Miss Katherine Evans. She’s a personal assistant to the city’s Comptroller Jason Tyler. She will leave the apartment at any time now. You are to take the keys to her apartment under a blue colored stone in the flower garden on the left side of the door. You will find in her apartment a document on the housing reforms that is worth a story. Bring that document for our meeting.*

He stared at the message for the full fifteen seconds it took to disappear. When it was gone, he thought he must have misunderstood it.

*You want us to break in??* Elliott typed.

*Yes.*

#

Elliott had just about enough playing Frank’s games.

*I’m not going to break into other people’s apartments.* He typed.

*You have half an hour to find the document before Katherine return.* Frank replied.

*Sorry Frank. No document is worth breaking the law.*

*Half an hour.*

Bridget looked at him. “What’s wrong?”

Elliott asked Frank to resend the text with the instruction then showed it to Bridget. She smiled and nodded at the apartment.

“How bad do you want another exclusive?” She asked.

“Not enough to become thieves.”
“Let’s just go up there and see what happens," she said and crossed the street.

“Hey! Wait up, you can't be serious."

Elliott couldn’t believe her. Just a moment ago she was concerned about safety and all, and now she’s plunging into trouble. He followed her across the street. Bridget walked up the landing, and just when she had reached the top, the front door swung open and a woman came out. Wearing mid-rise angle pants, a shirt and a jacket and with her hair tied in a ponytail, she scampered down the stairs and flashed Elliott a smile. He watched her walk down the street. That must be Katherine.

“Elliott,” Bridget whispered sharply. She held the front door open, gesturing for him to hurry up. Going up the stairs, he remembered Frank telling him that the keys to the apartment were under a blue colored stone. So he went down again to look for it, all the while not believing what he was doing. He found the large blue stone nestled among tiny gray ones in the flower bed next to the walk up, and underneath it, the keys. No sooner had he thrown the keys to Bridget, than she let go of the door and went inside.

There’s no way he would follow her inside, no way. Then it occurred to him that since he was the full-time reporter here, he should have stop her from entering the apartment. *Damn it, Bridget.* Elliott hurried inside just before the front door closed. He found her on the second floor, holding the door to Katherine’s apartment open.

“Look, we can’t go in,” Elliott said. “It’s against the -.”

Bridget dragged him inside, then closed the door.

“We don’t want neighbors to see us,” she said. “You were saying?”

Elliott was holding the door knob, ready to leave, but looking at Bridget’s eyes sparkling with excitement, he let out a sigh. “Never mind. Let’s be quick.”
He could make out the kitchen at the end of the hallway; to his left was apparently the bedroom, and next to it the living room. To his right, facing the street, was another room with a sliding door that had a colorful mosaic glass pane depicting a fountain with birds. Elliott walked up to the door and pushed it aside, revealing a study room. At its center, dominating the room, was a wooden writing desk with steel feet. On the desk were a laptop, speakers, a desk lamp, and much paper strewn about. A reading chair in the corner, another small writing desk by the window facing the street and next to it a bookshelf made up the rest of the furniture.

“What document are we supposed to look for?” asked Bridget as she shifted through the papers.

“No idea,” Elliott said. “Hey, better not touch anything here until we know what we're looking for.”

Bridget put a book back on the shelf and sat on the reading chair. “All right, then let's ask Frank.”

Elliott typed the question. While waiting for Frank’s reply, he looked at the collection of photos on the bookshelf. A self portrait of Katherine with the Manhattan skyline in the background had a good close up of her face. He remembered having seen her before. It was on TV, and she was standing next to Comptroller Tyler who gave an impromptu press briefing about the housing reforms. Elliott guessed she was a few years older than him by the way the wrinkles around her eyes started to show. She had a European look about her although he couldn’t tell which country she might be from.

“Got a thing for blondes?” Bridget said softly into his ear, jolting him back to reality. “Not that I care,” she quickly added.
“I don’t have preferences,” Elliott said. He held up the picture with Katherine. “I just remember where I’ve seen here before and….you know what, let’s just get back to work.”

He placed the picture back on the shelf, and started to sort through the papers on her writing desk one by one. Bridget was watching him.

“What happened with not touching anything?” She asked. “In fact what happened with Frank anyway? He hasn't replied?” She now sat on the office chair and began to swivel around.

“Maybe he wants to find it by ourselves,” Elliott said. He replaced the papers carefully the way he remembered it, then checked his phone.

<You’ll know it when you see it.> Frank texted.

Elliott showed Bridget the message and she shrugged.

“You're the reporter,” she said, “you know better than me what to look for.”

Elliott opened the drawer under the desk.

“Wait,” Bridget said as she fumbled inside her backpack. “I just remember, if you don’t want to leave fingerprints you might want to wear these.”

She fished out a pair of rubber gloves and threw them on the desk.

“Why do you carry these for?” Elliott asked, holding up the gloves.

“ Mostly to handle yucky situations,” she said, and when Elliott’s expression shifted to that of horror, she added, “relax, these are new.”

Elliott relaxed and squeezed his hands into the gloves then pulled out notes, papers, and documents from the drawer. He glimpsed through each of them, and placed them back in the order he took them out. Then he peeked through the pile of papers on
the desktop. There were drafts of legal documents, all dated a few months back and hardly of any importance. What was Frank thinking, assuming they would just find the exact document he was looking for? There was nothing of interest on the big writing desk.

Elliott cocked his head to one side. It was unusually quiet. He looked up to see the office chair Bridget had been swiveling around was empty.

“Bridget?” he called out.

“Yes, Elliott?” her voice coming from somewhere in the back, the kitchen probably.

“What are you doing?”

“ Nothing.”

Somehow he did not find this reassuring. She had better not touch Katherine’s food. He turned to the smaller writing desk that was propped against the wall under the window. It was an antique desk that had a stack of handwritten letters on it. He was about to pick one up, tempted to see whom Katherine was corresponding with in such an elaborate manner, but remembered Frank instructing him to find a document, not a letter. The drawers on this desk contained various pens and other writing knick knacks but no document. They had another fifteen minutes left before Katherine was expected to return. As he shifted his attention back to the big working desk, he heard footsteps on the parquet floor. Bridget appeared by the sliding door, leaning against it while holding a steaming cup with both hands. She took a sip then let out an ah-that-was-good sigh and gave Elliott a look of content.

“Fingerprints?” he asked her.
She looked at her mug, and Elliott held up his gloved hands.

“Why am I wearing these when you go about touching everything?” He asked.

“They don’t dust the kitchen for finger prints,” she said. “Trust me, I have a friend who’s a professional kitchen raider.”

Elliott shook his head. This woman was going to get him arrested.

“Found anything yet?” she said, looking around the room showing only the mildest of interest.

“No, I'll give that big writing desk one last look then we're out of here.”

“Great, I'll make you some tea.”

Elliott watched her go then went for the desk’s drawers and repeated the process of pulling out documents, papers and envelopes one by one. It was only after he had finished searching the drawers, that he noticed the briefcase resting against the reading chair. He walked over to it, opened its two latches and pulled out another stash of documents and envelopes.

One document inside a manila envelope stood out. It was another draft of the housing reforms program but dated this week. Could this be the latest draft? Reading the one-page executive summary he couldn’t find anything about the agreement he didn’t know already.

From the kitchen he heard Bridget exclaiming “Aha!” Whatever made her say that, he didn’t want to know.

Elliott flipped through the pages, scanning for key words and phrases that would ring a bell. He noticed the words housing, bonds, property sales, recovering debt, construction of new housings, incentives. He stopped at incentives and read the full
paragraphs that contained the word. Unable to make any sense of it, he turned back the page until he figured out the context in which the word incentive was being used. Elliott smiled. Frank was right. This was indeed worth a story.

Bridget returned with another cup of tea and a slice of marble cake. “Courtesey of Miss Katherine,” she announced.

“Bingo!” Elliott said, holding up the document to her.

“Dude, you found it?”

“Yes, this must be it.’”

“What does it say?”

He was about to tell her when his phone beeped.

<You have to move now> Frank texted.

“We got to go,” Elliott said.

“Okay but don’t you want some tea first?”

“Forget the tea! We're out of here.”

Bridget retreated to the kitchen, stooping as she picked up a trail of marble cake crumbles from the floor. Elliott replaced all the documents back into the briefcase except for the latest draft agreement which he put inside his messenger bag. Then he looked around, checking if everything was in place, the pictures on the bookshelf, the letters, the books. Satisfied, he headed for the apartment door where Bridget was already waiting for him.

“You're sure the kitchen is clean?” he asked.
“Clean, minus one slice of marble cake, one herbal tea bag, one green tea bag and one plastic bag,” she said, showing him a small plastic bag, which presumably contained her two tea bags and other litter.

They headed out Katherine’s apartment, raced down the stairs and left the building. Katherine was walking toward them. Elliott pulled out today’s edition of Madison Vanguard from his messenger bag. As Katherine approached, he unfolded the newspaper to cover their faces, and with heads buried in the paper, they walked passed by her with Bridget trying to contain her giggling. Being so close to her, Elliott could smell Bridget’s perfume, and was so absorbed by its flowery fragrance, that it took him a while to notice that he was still wearing her rubber gloves.

#

Elliott and Bridget returned to Abingdon Square Park where Frank had told them to wait by the bronze statue of a World War I soldier. Around them people were taking advantage of the cloudless sky to enjoy the almost mid-summer like day. Children ran around under the supervision of their chatting parents while a group of elderly people watched them play from shaded benches. Sitting on the park’s outer benches, and hidden beneath layers of clothes, a couple of homeless people endured the heat in silent indifference. Elliott spotted an empty but dirty bench next to the statue.

“Why did you leave early last night?” Bridget asked, as they sat apart from each other like a quarreling couple to avoid an unidentifiable heap of filth in the middle.

“Jack’s party? I was hungry and there was no food,” Elliott said. He pulled out Katherine’s document from his messenger bag and leaved through the pages.
“I was looking for you,” Bridget said. From the corner of his eyes he noticed her watching him.

Elliott put down the document. “You were?”

“You could have said hello.” She looked to the side, shifting her attention away from him to a space somewhere in the distance. Strangely enough he felt the hole the small move had left inside him. He probably should have said hello. Not that it mattered. Last night they were strangers, now they were sitting on a bench in a park after breaking into someone’s apartment to steal a document. What better way to bond than over burglary?

He cleared his throat and said “I better read this now.”

He needed to make sure he understood the key points in the newest draft of housing reforms before explaining to her why he thought the changes were important.

“Sure,” Bridget said, standing up. “I’ll take a quick walk around the park.”

He watched her walk passed the row of benches and through a pack of running children as she stepped out from under the shades of the trees and into the sun-drenched sidewalk. He continued to watch her through the trees walking up the sidewalk until the weight of the document he was holding reminded him to read.

Flipping through its pages, he wondered whether Frank might later require them to return the document to Katherine’s apartment. He could make a copy and return the original. Then there was the matter of convincing his editors to run a story based on a stolen document, as after ten minutes of reading it, he grew more confident that he had a story in his hand.
“So?” Bridget asked as she returned from her walk and sat down. “Don’t tell me you’ve picked the wrong document.”

“It’s the newest draft of the housing reforms agreement,” he said, pointing at the date on the cover. “Frank told me he works for the city. He must have been keeping track of changes in the draft. This one here contains new clauses that are sure to anger more people.”

“Show me,” Bridget said, and judging from how she had earlier criticized the housing reforms, he knew she was one of those people who wouldn’t like what he was about to show her. He opened the page that contained the offending clauses.

“The new clauses require the city to fund twenty percent of the construction costs to build new apartments,” he said. “They are incentives to attract developers into buying public housing assets.”

“What new apartments?” Bridget asked.

“The ones that will replace the public housing projects on sale.”

Bridget shook her head. “I thought the reason the city plans to sell public housing is because it doesn’t have any money.”

Bridget had a point. But how many times did he have to remind readers in his articles that selling public housing was necessary to regain investment banks’ confidence in the city’s finances. Without the bankers’ cooperation, the bond market would not lend the city any money, and without fresh money New York was bound to go bankrupt. So what’s wrong with offering developers incentives?

“Well, New York doesn’t have much of a choice,” Elliott said, “If the city offers…”
He felt his phone vibrating and pulled it out of his pocket. Frank had sent him his next instruction.

<Go to Ehlgrand’s apartment on the 76th floor at the Peak.>

He showed the instruction to Bridget before it disappeared from the message box.

“I know where it is,” Bridget said and so did Elliott. The Peak had just recently joined the slew of super tall apartments that were squeezing the most real estate out of small but expensive patches of land in Midtown.

Elliott shouldered his messenger bag and followed Bridget out the park. It was getting late already and he should be heading back to his office, but they would finally meet the mysterious Frank. The man had been right about the document Elliott had found at Katherine’s apartment, which meant he was probably also right about his suspicion that Elliott had been selected by the kidnappers after figuring out their press invitation. If Frank knew why they had selected him, then Elliott should definitely pay him a visit.

About twenty minutes later, Elliott walked down Park Avenue and regarded with suspicion the apartment building that towered before him. Tall, thin, and clad in dark glass, the Peak stuck out like a giant black pencil against a flat surface. If Frank worked for the city, how could he afford living up there in the clouds? They entered the lobby, and the doorman let them into the elevator hallway after checking with Ehlgrand or Frank or whoever it was waiting for them in the apartment.

When they arrived on the 76th floor, the front door was half open. Elliott knocked and soon heard someone approaching. A woman opened the door. Probably in her late twenties, she had short hair, wore leggings, sneakers and a cardigan over a baggy t-shirt. A friend of Frank’s? His wife?
“You must be Elliott and Bridget,” she said, “Frank said you’d be coming.”

She let them in and after walking through a narrow hallway, they stepped into an open space that’s shared by the kitchen, the dining room and the living room. A large window covered the entire front face of the living room with a view over much of Manhattan. A man in jeans and a hoodie was pacing up and down in the balcony while talking over the phone.

“Make yourself comfortable,” the woman said, “you’ll be staying for dinner right?”

“No, we’re just here to meet Frank,” Elliott said as he and Bridget walked up to living room to check out the view. “Is that him on the balcony?”

“No, Frank isn’t here,” the woman said from the open kitchen behind them.

“Do you know when he’ll come?” Bridget asked.

“He didn’t tell me,” the woman said.

Elliott and Bridget looked at each other. Was this another game Frank was playing on them? Elliott had spent too much time away from his office already and didn’t have the patience for another of Frank’s treasure hunts.

“Guess we’ll have to wait then,” Bridget said and sat down on the plush sofa in front of a giant TV screen that was showing sports news.

Elliott walked over to the kitchen where the woman was putting a tea kettle on the stove.

“Too bad you can’t make it for dinner,” she said, as she turned to face the kitchen island.

“What about Frank?”
“What about him?” The woman began chopping onions next to a bowl that contained chunks of white fish meat.

“He said we should meet him here.”

“He did?” She didn’t look at Elliott as she chopped away, reducing small onion pieces into even smaller bits with the ease of an experienced cook.

Elliott leaned against the kitchen island and typed a message for Frank, asking him when he would come to join them, if at all. While waiting for his response, it might be a good idea not to talk about Katherine’s document to anyone here.

“Elliott,” the woman said as she fetched a knife from a drawer underneath the table, “would you be so kind and help me out with the tomatoes?”

She handed him the knife without waiting for his answer.

“Sure, why not,” Elliott said. After stealing a document from a stranger’s apartment, cooking in a stranger’s apartment didn’t feel as weird as it probably should.

Bridget was already slouching on the sofa as if she’d been living here for ages. He picked a tomato from a bowl, placed it on the cutting board and began to cut it into tiny cubes.

“You can at least stay for tea,” the woman said. “I’ve asked the boys to buy cakes.”

In that instant Elliott recognized something familiar about this woman. He paused and glanced at her. “I’m sorry, but have we met before?” He asked.

The woman laughed. “I usually get that question from men at bars,” she said, and looking him in the eye, she nodded toward Bridget. “Does your girlfriend know you’re flirty?”
“Oh, no, no, she’s not, you know, not my girlfriend at all,” Elliott said and with a nervous chuckle added “and I wasn’t trying to be flirty.”

The woman wrapped her arm around his shoulder, pulled him closer to her, and with her knife pointed at Bridget. “I bet you that she will be your girlfriend by next week.”

“Yeah maybe.” Elliott said as he tried to keep his face away from the tip of her knife. “So, what are we cooking here?”

The woman let go of him and held up the bowl of fish. “Moqueca.”

“What kind of dish is that?” Elliott said, relieved to be back on safer topic.

“Fish stew, a Brazilian dish.”

Elliott stopped chopping. Brazil? This time he recognized her. From the hallway, he heard the front door opening and footsteps approaching. A man emerged from the hallway, carrying a big white box which he placed on the dining table.

“Ah the boys are here with the cakes,” the woman said.

Her voice. It was her voice that sounded familiar and the memory came back to him with instant clarity. She was the QWA woman whom he had spoken to over the phone yesterday. Elliott was still sorting out the implication, when he saw Bridget suddenly rising from the sofa and looking at the hallway.

“Elliott,” Bridget said, her voice hardened, her body tense. A second man emerged from the hallway, a large man with big hands that carried shopping bags.

“Hey Adrienne, where do I put these?” the big man asked the woman, and Elliott noticed a flicker of recognition in his eyes as he saw Bridget. The two had met before just
as he had spoken to Adrienne before. Elliott put down his knife and with a sinking feeling stepped back from the kitchen island.

“Hey, you all right?” Adrienne asked.

Frank had led them straight into the hands of the kidnappers. No, he was not all right.

#

Standing in a room full of criminals, Elliott crossed out his choices within seconds. To run, fight or call for help were out of the question. That left him with only one thing to do: try to talk his way out. But not knowing what was going on, he stood there mouth agape, his indecision sticking like a crust of bread in his throat. Adrienne and the big man argued which plate to use for the cakes, Bridget stood frozen by the sofa with the TV controller still in her hand, and up front the tall man whom Adrienne had called Rafael opened the balcony door, stepped inside the living room and pulled back his hoodie.

With untamed dark hair that reached down his shoulder, a stubble beard, and standing barefooted, he looked out of place in the minimalist apartment like a hermit who had just stepped back into civilization. The man approached Bridget with a smile and an extended hand. “Hello, I’m Rafael.”

Bridget stared at him for a second then shook his hand. She looked over her shoulder at Elliott as though asking him what to do next. Putting down the tomato and knife, Elliott walked out from behind the kitchen island to talk to Rafael. The man appeared to be the leader of this group, and for now it seemed safe to just play along.
“My name is Elliott Griffin and I am a reporter with the Madison Vanguard,” he said. He tried to sound confident but what came out was flat and listless. “We’re friends of Frank.”

Rafael of course must already know this. Elliott was merely holding up Frank’s name like a shield, seeking protection behind the recognition of a mutual acquaintance.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Rafael said. “Unfortunately, Frank can’t make it. Let me introduce you to our gang here. You’ve already met Adrienne.”

The woman licked whipped cream off her fingers and nodding at her cooking asked “You sure you don’t want to stay for dinner and try my Moqueca?”

Before he could answer, Rafael pointed at the big muscular man with a crew haircut and a nasty scar on his left forearm who was holding a tray of tea cups.

“Bertrand,” Rafael said. Next he pointed at the man standing by the stove who had brought in the cakes. “And that’s Xavier.”

Just then a tea kettle whistled.

“Who wants tea?” Xavier asked, lifting the kettle off the stove.

Bertrand, Adrienne and Rafael raised their hands.

“Who are you?” Elliott asked. “And what do you -.”

“I don’t mind a cup of tea,” Bridget said.

“English Breakfast or Orange Pekoe?” asked Xavier.

“English Breakfast please,” she said.

Elliott couldn’t tell whether she was seriously asking for tea or just playing along.

Xavier, holding the tea kettle over an empty cup, looked expectantly at him. Everyone drinks tea, he seemed to be telling him. *What is this, a tea party?*
Rafael clapped his hands, having noticed the exasperated look on Elliott’s face. “All right everyone, if you could move to the balcony, your tea will be served there and I’ll explain why you’re here.”

Finally. He and Bridget followed Rafael into the balcony which due to its elevation seemed to hover over the rest of city. Manhattan spread out before them like a carpet dotted by the occasional vertical slabs that were contesting the Peak’s height.

“Frank’s instruction said to meet him at Ehlgand’s apartment,” Bridget said as Rafael closed the balcony door behind them. “So where are Frank and Ehlgand, and who is this Ehlgand guy anyway?”

“Ehlgand works for Wall Street, a rich nobody,” Rafael said, joining them by the railing. “All we care is that he’s out of town so that we can borrow his apartment. Up here is a wonderful spot to talk about public housing.”

From behind them, the balcony door opened and Xavier came out and carried a tray with their tea and slices of apple pie and lemon cake on a plate. These he unloaded on a garden table.

“And of course it’s tea time,” Rafael said and gestured for Bridget and Elliott to take their seats.

Elliott looked at the tea and cake selection in front of him and leaned back in the seat, not touching any of it. Food was the last thing on his mind, at least not until Rafael explained to them what they wanted from him and Bridget.

“What about Frank?” Bridget asked.

“As you probably know, Frank works undercover for the city so he can’t just show himself. But he said you had a document from Katherine’s apartment.”
“We came here for Frank,” Elliott said. “I don’t know who you are and what you want.”

“Really?” Rafael asked. “Haven’t you already figured out who we are?”

Elliott and Bridget looked at each other. He knew that Bridget had recognized Bertrand as the terrorist whom she encountered yesterday, and he had recognized Adrienne’s voice as the QWA caller.

“You’re the kidnappers who want to stop the housing reforms,” Bridget said.

If Jack’s FBI source was correct about their background, they were more than just kidnappers. “You’re the South American eco-terrorist group that took down Devon in Brazil,” Elliott added.

Rafael raised his eyebrow at Elliott’s answer. “I’m surprised Agent Fry told you this much about us.”

Agent Fry didn’t tell him anything about the eco-terrorists, and there’s no need for Elliott to correct Rafael on what Fry did tell or did not tell him.

“So are you?” he insisted.

Rafael gave a slow nod. “Devon was one of our projects. Now it’s New York.”

“If you are criminals, then why are you showing yourself to us?” Elliott asked.

Rafael sipped at the hot tea. “Because what we require of you is to trust us and in return we trust you not to talk to the police.”

Elliott stroke his chin. The thought of having to trust a criminal didn’t sit well with him and somehow in the way Rafael had said it he detected a subtle threat. “But what if we do talk to the police?”

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“We’re aware of that risk, there’s not much you can tell the FBI about us that they don’t already know,” Rafael said. “Besides I doubt you will talk to the police, not after you broke into Katherine’s apartment.”

The last part hit Elliott like a punch in the stomach: Frank had set them up with that stupid document. Bridget had stepped right into his trap, and he was no better following her like a puppy and now Rafael had probably evidence of the break in. He glanced at her but she was busy choosing a cake. He began to suspect this woman didn’t understand the concept of danger.

From inside the living room, the sound of laughter and conversation drifted out into the open. Someone strummed the guitar, playing solo at first, then Adrienne hummed along to the melody. Her voice slowly unraveled into a soothing, forlorn song in Portuguese. He had to remind himself that this woman, Rafael, Bertrand and Xavier were dangerous, violent criminals. It was time to find out what they wanted from him.

“So yesterday’s kidnapping of the investment bankers, that wasn’t just a warning for the city to stop the housing reforms,” Elliott said, reaching for the cup of tea that hadn’t been claimed by Bridget or Rafael. “Frank told me it was also a selection process for reporters?”

“We need a reporter who’s smart, understands the housing issues, and has the grit to get the job done,” Rafael said. “Today’s assignment to fetch the document at Katherine’s apartment was the final test to see if you have what it takes.”

Bridget nodded at Elliott and gave him two thumbs up as though passing Rafael’s test was some sort of accomplishment, no doubt she followed the credo of shoot first ask questions later. “So why are we here then?” Elliott asked.
“Part of the answer is in Katherine’s document,” Rafael said. “Of all the other documents and papers lying about in her apartment, why did you choose that one?”

Seeing no point in withholding the document any further from Rafael, Elliott pulled it out from his bag and handed it over to him. “Because of the incentive deal clause,” he said.

Rafael leafed through the pages then put the document back on the table.

“See these projects over there?” Rafael asked, pointing at the cluster of brown high-rises near the East River that were some of Manhattan’s remaining public housing, known as projects. “Do you know what this document mean for people living there?” Elliott braced himself for the usual spiel that people like Bridget performed on him whenever the touchy topic of public housing came up.

“Their homes will be razed to the ground,” Bridget said, “and more people -.”

“Will become homeless,” Elliott interrupted her, thinking he knew the argument well enough to preempt her and Rafael dumping it all over him. “And then we put them in jail because the city doesn’t know what to do with homeless people. But in return New York can repay its debt, while those who cannot afford living here can always move out.”

“You’re right about repaying debt,” Rafael said. “But New York City is a city first and foremost, not a market. Unless you agree that citizenship is determined by the thickness of your wallet.”

“Going bankrupt won’t help the poor either,” Elliott said.

Rafael looked at Elliott as though he was sizing him up. “I know a reporter’s personal opinion has no business in his stories,” he said, “but tell me Elliott, do you support the housing reforms?”
Declaring his support for housing reforms in front of Rafael wouldn’t be a smart move. “Well, I would say that -.”

“Yeah he’s all in favor of the program,” Bridget chimed in just before taking a bite out of her apple pie. *Damn it Bridget.* Elliott prayed her metabolism would go haywire when she hits thirty.

“You support the housing reforms despite the mass evictions and all?” Rafael asked, looking at Elliott. The man’s eyes were the color of amber that glimmered like yellowish fire underneath straight, thick eyebrows. Elliott looked away.

“Well,” Rafael said. “I agree that everyone, including New York, should repay their debt. But that’s just half the story, isn’t it?”

To Elliott this half the story was all that mattered. New York had run out of money. If the city refused to sell its public housing, the investment bankers would continue to deny the city access to the bond market. Without the ability to sell new bonds, New York could not repay the $530 million bonds due on Sept. 25. And if it couldn’t pay its debt and other public services, New York would have to file for bankruptcy.

“That’s right,” Bridget said, wiping crumbles off her mouth with a napkin. “Think of all the people who will lose their homes Elliott.”

“I know,” Elliott said. Almost half a million people live in some sort of public housing managed by the New York City Housing Authority. “But that’s still better than having to file for bankruptcy.”

Rafael scoffed. “If investment bankers wanted to, they could let the city access the bond market again and there wouldn’t be the need to sell public housing,” he said.
“But these bankers just refuse to allow the city borrow money. So don’t tell me its either housing reforms or bankruptcy.”

“Well, investment bankers are the gatekeepers of the market,” Elliott said. “They can’t just let anyone in unless that person is financially sound, and right now for the city to be spending money on public housing to support the poor is wasteful.”

Rafael shook his head with a smug smile and Bridget was about to say something but Rafael cut her off. “Helping the poor is wasteful?” he asked. “I’m all about helping them.”

“And how will you do that?” Elliott asked, then realized Rafael’s idea of a plan would likely involve kidnapping more investment bankers to force them grant New York access to the market. The four Berea bankers he kidnapped yesterday were after all a warning, a preview of what’s to come.

“Don’t underestimate New Yorkers,” Rafael said, leaning forward on the table, his eyes locking in on Elliott then Bridget. “See, this is where you two come in. We want you to stop the housing reforms program.”

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Elliott hadn’t expected this and for a second he thought he had misunderstood Rafael. He looked at Bridget for some sort of confirmation, but she looked back at him with a shrug. She seemed not to be bothered by the unusual request.

“We can’t allow the city pass the housing reforms,” Rafael said. “This deal -.”

“Sorry, but did you just say Bridget and I must stop the housing reforms?” Elliott asked.

“That’s what I heard,” Bridget said.
“Hold on for a moment,” Elliott said. “I don’t understand, I mean -.”

“This draft of the housing reforms agreement,” Rafael said, resuming from where he was cut off and this time holding Katherine’s document, “will be the opening salvo in your mission to stop the housing reforms. Now before you complain, let me explain.”

Rafael flipped through the pages, looking for a particular section. In the living room Adrienne sang a new song. Its melody was a tad upbeat, the guitar strums faster, yet a touch of sadness lingered in her voice.

“We’re lucky that Frank has found out about this clause,” Rafael said, “Bankers are trying to sneak this clause into the draft agreement a week before the council votes on it. They know there won’t be enough time for the public or council members to protest. Here’s the clause.”

Rafael showed the page to Bridget, adding “Remember, once the city sells its public housing, developers will evict all the tenants then demolish their old apartments to build luxury apartments. But that’s not all.”

Bridget took the document from his hand. “Elliott and I have discussed this already,” she said, glancing at the clause on the page. “So it says here the city will help pay the cost to build these luxury apartments.”

“Incentives,” Elliott said. “It’s not that New York has a choice, there’s only a week left before the $530 million bond falls due. So developers are trying to get the best deal out of this and ask for incentives. That’s normal in negotiations.”

“Actually,” Rafael said, “it’s not so much negotiating as it is blackmailling.”

“And so you kidnap the Berea investment bankers to stop the housing reforms,” Elliott said.
“I’d hardly call it kidnapping, we let them go after a few hours,” Rafael said.

“These people wouldn’t have pushed for housing reforms if there’s nothing in it for them. It’s a fiscal crisis and the city is down on its knees. Now is the time to milk New York for what it’s worth. So, yes our mission is to stop the housing reforms which is why you’re here.”

“Sure I can run a story on this incentive clause,” Elliott said, nurturing hope that Rafael didn’t actually mean for him to stop the housing reforms. “The story will probably run on Madison Vanguard’s front page, other media will pick up on it and everyone will talk about it in town.”

Rafael tilted his head backward to catch a whiff in the air. “Do you smell this?” Elliott smelled nothing, just fresh air.

“It smells fishy, Rafael said. “This whole housing reforms deal, the incentive clause, reeks of corruption.”

“It’s just business.”

“The city tears down public housing to pay down debt then pays others to build luxury housing. How can you call that business? It’s a rip off. Look, we want you to find out what’s going on here. Who really benefits from the housing reforms, what deals are being struck behind closed doors, why does the city give in to this shitty deal? Then you run a story on that and if your story doesn’t stop the reforms then we will take matters into our hand and stop it ourselves.”

“Why don’t you just release a copy of this document to all media outlets, the more reporters are on this case, the better the chance someone will get the information you’re after.”
“We tried, remember? We kidnapped four investment bankers, made a big splash and sent out invitation to every newspaper, radio, TV channel. Guessed how many reporters showed up? Only Bridget here. Everyone else failed the test. No Elliott, we’re not counting on other reporters to get off their lazy ass and investigate how banks are fucking up the city. We want you to do the job.”

“But that’s not what I do,” Elliott said, “I can’t be involved in this.”

“Then tell me whose job is it to expose this shitty deal of a housing reforms?” Rafael asked. “The police? The Security Exchange Commission? Or is New York really counting on vigilantes like me to uphold justice? Trust me it is your job.”

“You don’t understand. I can’t be working with terrorists. What am I supposed to tell my editors?”

“Don’t think of us as terrorists. Instead think of us as vigilantes, like superheroes.”

“Yeah but superheroes don’t hurt and kidnap people.”

“Some do, if necessary.”

“Look, I don’t care, you’re still criminals,” Elliott said.

He was foremost a newspaper employee and whatever decision he made now might end up being scrutinized by management or worse by the FBI. Elliott had to think this over. Developers were hijacking the housing reforms to ask for money. As bad as it was, he didn’t want to risk his job or end up in jail for assisting Rafael. Rising from his seat, he walked over to the railing then returned to the table.

“Even if I blow this subsidy deal wide open and expose the people involved in it, I cannot guarantee that my story will stop the housing reforms,” Elliott said.
“But the public deserves to know about the motives behind the reforms before the council votes,” Bridget said.

“New Yorkers will be marching against the housing reforms next week,” Rafael said. “We’re talking about the largest protest this city has ever seen. Your story can make a big difference.”

Elliott was staring at the plate of cakes on the table, unable to form a coherent response. Rafael and Bridget were cornering him. How could Bridget eat a cake, fraternizing with the city’s most wanted criminals? He had barely touched his tea.

You won’t be alone,” Rafael continued. “We’ll help you out with your story. Frank especially. It was his idea to involve the press, said we should give democracy in New York a chance before going to war.”

The press as the fourth estate of democracy. Elliott scoffed at the lofty notion Frank had of his job, and having the full support of a terrorist organization wasn’t exactly high on Elliott’s wish list, no matter how noble the cause was. Elliott massaged his forehead. “And what happens if I say no and walk away?”

Rafael shrugged. “Nothing. Just remember you’ll be walking away from a chance to stop us. We hate to use violence, but if the city ignores our threat and you do nothing to stop the corrupt sale of public housing, then we will do what we came here for. I can assure you our methods have been effective in stopping injustice, but they’re also extremely violent. Since we don’t trust other reporters, you’re the only one standing between us and New York. All we ask you is to do your job.”
Rafael of course meant the Brazilian oil company Devon that his group had terrorized and perhaps other, smaller cases Elliott wasn’t aware of. What could Rafael do to New York, or rather the city’s bankers?

“I need to think this over.” Elliott rose and with his cup of tea walked again to the railing. He had to clear his head. He should politely reject Rafael’s request, then report to Walter or possibly even to FBI Agent Fry. Or he could walk away, pretend all this hadn’t happen, and hope for the best. Neither of this felt right. What if he joins Rafael? He would be breaking rules, and if by some miracle he did manage to stop the housing reforms program, New York might not change its public housing policy at all, and relapse into wasteful spending. Yet it was his journalistic duty to expose the wrongness of the incentive deal, if only to stop Rafael’s men from terrorizing the city.

He tried not to think about it. Instead, standing on the windy balcony, he enjoyed the warmth of the cup pressing against his hands. He drank the tea and the soothing liquid filled his throat. No one said anything. Rafael sat by the table and stared into the distance with his hair whirling about in the wind like a lion’s mane. The man was dangerous, that much was clear. Yet all he asked was for Elliott to do his job.

Bridget walked over to him with camera in hand and they both looked out over the city. The wind blew strains of hairs over her face and she pushed them aside while aiming her camera at the distance. She was taking pictures of the Vladeck Housing project near the East River that from above look like a pattern of crosses. He didn’t have to ask her what she thought about Rafael’s offer. He knew she was ready. With Bridget by his side, he felt he could take on the world.
Elliott let his gaze linger in the horizon. The afternoon sun was down to its last brilliance of daylight and Manhattan’s bustling life multiplied away into the horizon, showing the city’s natural hues one last time before the night cast its blanket over it. He could grab this world of infinite possibilities or let it slip away.

He walked back to the table with Bridget coming up behind him.

“So, has our favorite reporter made up his mind?” Rafael asked.

Elliott put down his cup of tea on the table. “I’ll do it.”

CHAPTER III – The Investigation

It was already dark as Elliot and Bridget made their way back to Madison Vanguard’s office and when they arrived, the newsroom was abuzz with the grinding pressure of deadlines. Fluorescent lights bared their harsh light at the few reporters still racing to finish that 350-count story, make that one last call to a source, find that one bit of data to substantiate their reporting, or fit that punchy headline into a 64-character line. Coming back this late without a story, Elliott sneaked to his desk like a returning deserter.

Anad was on the phone and he didn’t seem to have noticed him. While waiting for Anad, Elliott rehearsed in his mind the story he was supposed to tell anyone asking him how he got hold of the document.

Rafael was specific about the rules. Under no circumstance was Elliott to discuss their balcony meeting with anyone, not even his editors. Frank had sent him an e-mail with a scanned copy of Katherine’s document so that Elliott didn’t have to say that he had broken into her apartment to steal it. Adrienne had prepared an alibi they had to
memorize on the spot. If anyone were to ask him where he and Bridget had spent their Sunday afternoon, their answer was Abingdon Square where they had been discussing the details of the housing reforms deal with Frank over the messaging app. Lastly, they were reminded that their every move was being watched. With this warning, Elliott and Bridget were released back into the world.

“So,” Anad said, standing with arms on his hips, “That’s one long coffee meeting you had.”

Elliott handed Anad the document. “I got hold of the latest version of the housing reforms talk most likely the final one. They expect to sign this within a few days.”

“Where did you get this from?” Anad asked as he flipped through the document.

“A guy named Frank e-mailed it, claims to work for the city,” Elliott said. “It’s a probably fake name.” Elliott directed Anad to the important pages on the document.

With document in hand, the editor sat down and swiveled on his chair while chewing on his pencil which he always did when he thought about a story angle.

“Interesting,” he finally said. “So the city will partly pay for the new luxury apartments?”

“Yes. These new incentives come on top of selling the public housing at a discount, and the developers listed here are the same ones that made a killing from city funded projects a few years ago. They’re awash in cash and don’t really need the incentives. Looks like the city is getting a shitty deal just to be able to borrow from the market again.”

Anad raised his eyebrow, probably unaccustomed to hearing Elliott criticized the housing reforms program.
“I think the city should get a fair deal, that’s all I’m saying,” Elliott added.

“Of course. This is powerful stuff. If the city agrees to borrow more money to help fund housing for the rich that’s not going to go down well with the housing activists, especially with those kidnappers. Are we the only ones who got hold of this document?”

“That’s what I was told but can’t say for sure.”

“All right. It’s too late to run a story for tomorrow and we can’t run it as it is. This needs to go through the proper channels: city officials, spokesmen, bankers, any official who can be quoted, the higher their ranks the better. Get me comments from everyone involved even if it's a no comment.”

Elliott sighed. Getting the document, now it seemed, was the easy part. The work lied in having it confirmed. It was well after 9:00 p.m. and Elliott thought it was too late to start making phone calls at this hour. Besides, he needed a list of contacts then draw a game plan before making his first call. The calls would have to wait until tomorrow.

His phone beeped with a message from Frank.

<Good work.> Frank said.

<I can’t run the story as is. I’ll need to pull up some reliable sources.>

<How long will this take?>

<I don’t know, but I’ve already warned Rafael about how difficult this would be.>

<Just give it your best shot.>

<Why didn’t you come for the meeting with Rafael?>

<Didn’t Rafael tell you that I work undercover? I cannot show my face.>

<Are you a member of Rafael’s group then?>
<Yes and no. I’m not attached to his group and neither Rafael nor his men have met me. My job was to bring you and Bridget to him and he handled the rest.>

<But Rafael said you will help me out?>

<That too. I have to go Elliott. Talk to you later.>

Elliott put down his phone just in time to see Bridget walking up to his desk.

“How’s the story going?” She pushed aside papers on his cluttered desk to free up space then hopped on, feet dangling.

“It'll take a day at least to have all the necessary sources lined up for the story,” Elliott said.

“Oh, I thought we'll be coming out tomorrow gun blazing.”

“Got to do it the right way, never good to be careless,” he said.

Even though he was staring at his computer screen he noticed that she was studying his face. Distracted, he turned to her and, realizing that now he had to say something, blurted: “Want to grab a bite? I'm almost done.”

As if that was her clue, Bridget hopped off the desk and grabbed her backpack from the floor. “Sorry I have to meet a couple of friends for dinner. Anyway, thought you might want to have this.”

She handed him a printed out picture. When was the last time he held an actual photograph? It was a portrait of him with a frowned face reading Katherine’s document when they were waiting for Frank’s instruction at Abingdon Square Park. The background had a nice blur to it, and he couldn’t remember when anyone had taken a picture of him with this professional look.

“I like it,” Bridget said.
Elliott wasn’t expecting a compliment. “Thank you.”

“You should lighten up a bit though.”

He was holding the picture in front of him while trying to say something else but nothing good came to mind and the seconds of silence passed like minutes.

“Keep it,” Bridget said and walked away. Her abrupt departure left him somewhat disappointed. He watched her heading out then looked at the picture again before putting it inside the pocket of his jacket. Lisa never took pictures of him.

He arrived home with a box of Chinese fried noodles, and ate his dinner while going through his e-mails that were related to the search engine project, Meridio One. Petersson informed him that Lisa had been in talks to sell a stake in the company to a venture capitalist. Meridio One would issue new shares and proceeds from the sale would be used to expand its business. The talks had been done in secret and only now was the board of directors aware of Lisa’s plan. Elliott put down his glasses and rubbed his eyes. True, he didn’t own Meridio One now but at least he had still some influence over it. The thought that Lisa might lose control of the company he had founded and nurtured, filled him with the hot pang of betrayal. Over the next hour, Elliott and Petersson exchanged e-mails as they tried to figure out what was going on in Lisa’s head.

It was at around midnight that Elliott replied to Petersson’s last e-mail, telling him to keep him updated about Lisa’s plans. Then he picked up a book on entrepreneurship and tried to read a few pages but couldn’t concentrate. So he put on a Jazz record on his turntable, and in his mind went through the day’s events again, the mysterious Frank, Katherine’s apartment, the meeting with Rafael, and Elliott agreeing to stop the housing
reforms deal. The events of the past two days seemed unreal. But Rafael was real and so was his men, and Katherine and Bridget.

Later at night when he was almost asleep he heard his phone beeping. Elliott reached for his phone on the nightstand. It was 1:30 a.m. in the morning.

<Elliot, you still awake?>

It was Frank. Why was he still messaging him at this hour? Annoyed, Elliott put the phone down and went back to sleep.

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Bridget wasn’t much into bars or pubs but she let herself be talked into having dinner with Latisha and her husband Alfonso at the Green Room in Midtown. At close to 10:00 p.m. the place was unusually packed considering Monday was just around the corner. Irish folk music played from behind the curtain of laughter, voices, and the occasional clatter of dishes. In the amber light, Bridget navigated her way through the crowd standing around tables, and headed for the back of the pub where Latisha had reserved a lone, quiet table to celebrate her first job at Madison Vanguard.

“So how’s newspaper life?” asked Alfonso. Broad shouldered but lean, bald but sporting a full beard, a social worker by day and a self-defense instructor by night, Alfonso had met Latisha through Bridget, his sparring partner. The two had married earlier this year and occasionally invited her for dinner, treating her like their little sister.

“The past two days have been crazy,” Bridget said and snatched the menu from Alfonso’s hands. Latisha put down her glass of water, eying her with curiosity.
“Really, two crazy days in a row? Has it anything to do with that weird note you got from Frank?” Latisha asked, as the waiter, an old petite woman, arrived with two bowls of salad.

“It has indeed,” Bridget said then ordered a Black Angus burger with fries and salad on the side and a glass of cold water. Her two friends scrutinized their salad bowl without much enthusiasm. She handed the menu back to the woman and folded her hands on the table as Latisha and Alfonso leaned forward to hear her story.

“I can’t talk about it,” Bridget said, “You’ll have to read it in the paper but my partner has to write the story first.”

Alfonso moaned. “Oh come on, it’s not like it’s a state secret that...”

“Hold on,” Latisha said, pointing her fork at Bridget, “she didn’t tell me she has a partner.”

Alfonso turned to Bridget. “Is it a guy?” he asked.

Bridget nibbled at a piece of lettuce she stole from Latisha’s bowl, thinking why it mattered whether her partner in the office was a guy.

“Wrong question,” Latisha said. “Is it a cute guy?”

Bridget was fishing for another leaf but Latisha slapped her hand. “Answer the question.”

“Okay, okay,” Bridget said. “Technically he’s not my partner, I mean reporters don’t partner up like cops, but we’re working together on a story and -.”

“Bridget,” Latisha said. “Just answer the question.”

Bridget glanced at Alfonso who, with mouth open and fork suspended in midair, was waiting for her to say something. Ever since Bridget introduced Latisha to Alfonso,
the pair had made it their mission to find her a boyfriend. Not that Bridget had any trouble of finding one, it was keeping them that was difficult.

“Out of a perfect ten, I’d say seven or eight,” Bridget said, at which Latisha raised her hand to high five Alfonso. “Especially when he panics. You should see his face.”

Latisha and Alfonso dropped their hands, canceling their high five.

“He panicked?” Alfonso asked. “Let me guess.”

“It’s because you got him into some sort of trouble,” Latisha said.

“You have to stop doing that,” Alfonso said.

“And you wonder why your boyfriends always leave you?” Latisha said.

“Nobody wants to end up in jail,” Alfonso said.

Latisha, a junior partner at a law firm, nodded and raised her finger and at that Bridget sank just a little down her seat, while her friend delivered her usual speech about the importance of respecting the rule of law, and that just because Bridget’s father was a two-time senator and her uncle was the Attorney General, she couldn’t do whatever she pleased, and that her family, in particular her wicked-queen mother, was intimidating enough for the average guy wanting to date her that Bridget didn’t have to act like a complete jerk, that with power comes responsibility, and that she shouldn’t even be thinking about using any of her Bruce Lee moves on unsuspecting boyfriends.

Bridget had listened to Latisha’s speech at least a dozen times this year, and while she managed to hold back a yawn she couldn’t stop her stomach from growling.

Pretending to listen, she looked for the old woman who had taken her order. Where’s my burger?
A couple stepped down from their stools and as they walked away from the table, she was able to see all the way across the room where a lone man wearing a hoodie sat in the semi darkness of one of the booths. He sat facing her and under the rim of his low hanging hood, she noticed him staring at her. It was a bit dark but she was sure he didn't avert his gaze. Bridget instinctively glanced away as though she had intruded his privacy. When she looked up again, the man had risen from his seat and walked toward her. He wore a dark brown jacket that reached down his knees, jeans and boots and when he pulled down his hoodie, a mane of black hair emerged, framing a face Bridget now recognized.

“...have a name?” Latisha asked.

Bridget looked at her friend, not sure she understood the question.

“Does your partner have a name?” Latisha asked again.

Before Bridget could say anything, Rafael had come up to their desk with a bottle of beer in his hand. “Hi Bridget, mind if I join you?”

Bridget stared at him as Latisha and Alfonso looked at her then at Rafael then back at her. Rafael snapped his finger. “It's me Rafael.”

“I know. I'm sorry I just didn't expect to see you here,” Bridget said.

“That's all right. Mind if I join you?”

Bridget slowly nodded and so Latisha and Alfonso made space for Rafael to place a chair at their table. Bridget wanted to introduce him to her friends but didn’t know how to describe him without breaking his confidentiality rule. Alfonso cleared his throat.

“So, you’re Bridget’s partner on a story?”

Oh shit.
“Partner?” Rafael raised his eyebrows then let out a small chuckle. “Ah of course. Yes we are working closely together on a story, so I guess that makes us partners.”

Bridget wanted to bang her head against the table but Rafael had at least solved the introduction problem for her.

“Do you often go here for a drink?” Rafael asked.

“No, I don’t.”

They were staring at each other without saying anything. It was up to Rafael to tell her why he was here, although with Latisha and Alfonso around, Bridget couldn’t see how he would be able to talk to her without revealing his identity. She looked at Latisha who must have realized something in her stare because she suddenly coughed.

“Well, you two should talk. We’ll move to another table,” Latisha said, pulling Alfonso up from his seat.

Bridget was about to protest but her friend bowed next to her ear and whispered, “he’s hot. Don’t screw this up.”

Bridget watched the pair occupy a table near the bar with a clear line of sight. With Alfonso nearby watching her, she wasn’t worried about Rafael trying to harm her. The two didn't say a word for some more time as though waiting for the other to first break the silence. Bridget was sure Rafael wasn’t here by coincidence.

“Black Angus burger?” the waiter announced as she came up from behind Bridget, carrying a large plate with her order. “Who ordered Black Angus burger and French fries and salad on the side?” she asked even though it was obvious who had ordered it. Still, Bridget raised her hand.
“Here’s your Black Angus burger and French -.”

“Thank you I know what I ordered,” she said as the old woman put down the plate with Rafael taking a keen interest in the food. Either he had never seen a Black Angus burger before or he was curious about the size of her dinner portion.

“So, did you follow me?” Bridget asked, removing the top bun of her burger.

Rafael turned his attention back on her. “Oh, yes.”

“Why?”

Rafael shrugged. “To let you know we’re around. As Adrianne has told you, we’ll be watching you.”

“I'm just a freelance photographer, you should follow Elliott.”

“He's in his office and not going anywhere.”

“You think I'll talk to the police?”

“I don’t think you will, but that doesn’t mean we take you on blind faith.” Rafael put aside the empty salad bowls to make place his beer bottle on the table. “It’s important that we know the persons we entrust our information with.”

“Really?” Bridget asked. “Well right now your information isn't much of a help.”

“What do you mean?”

“Elliott told me the newspaper won’t run Katherine’s document as it is. They need someone to confirm the incentive deal on record and that may take days.”

Rafael rubbed his chin. “There isn’t much time. The council will vote Sept. 25. We can’t have Elliott waste too much time on confirming the document. He needs to push out the story then get on with finding out who’s behind those shady subsidy deals.”
“Not so fast,” Bridget said. “You promised you would help him, why not give him a few names who can go on record about the subsidy deals.”

Rafael took a swig from his beer. “I’ll see what I can do but there are a few things that don’t add up in your background.”

Bridget put down her fork with the French fries. “You want to ask about my background? Why? Shouldn't you be talking with Elliott? He's the one writing the story.”

“He’s an interesting fellow I admit, but everything checks out with him. It’s you that have holes in your past. So I thought I should pay you a visit and ask directly.”

That explained Rafael coming to see her, and as she thought about she had an idea.

“I’ll answer your questions, but only if you agree to help out Elliott as you promised.”

She knew that somewhere deep in the annals of journalistic ethics it must be wrong to fraternize with a criminal even though she was only an off-duty freelance photographer. Latisha might have added that it was wrong to hang out with criminals, period.

“He’ll be fine. I already said I would help him with his investigation,” Rafael said.

Bridget shook her head. “No help, no questions. Deal?”

“Okay deal.” Rafael laughed. “You met Elliott just yesterday, are you a pair already?”

“No, we’re not lovers,” Bridget said. “Does this answer one of those things that don’t add up?”
Rafael smiled and she was surprised to see him blush.

“Here’s the thing that doesn’t make sense,” he quickly said and before he could ask the question, Bridget already knew what it was be about. “When you were sixteen, you ran away from home for about a month, what happened?”

“I was a teenager and stupid and didn’t know what I was doing.”

“There's got to be a reason why a sixteen year old girl runs away. Daughter of a senator gone without a trace for a month. That made good headlines but none of the articles we read about you explained the reason why you ran away.”

She knew this question would come to mind to anyone who tried to dig out just a bit about her past. It happened a long time ago, a blip in the media universe where she happened to popped in because of her father, then still a senator in the midst of a fierce election campaign.

Bridget shrugged. There was a reason why she didn’t tell the media or even her parents why she had run away for four weeks.

“What if I tell you that you disappeared a day after a protest against plans to raise tuitions at public universities across the country, an issue your father was supporting,” Rafael said. “The media didn’t link your disappearance with the protests, but we did. How? Because we came across a blog which mentioned, sort of in passing, that you joined the protests in Washington. Now that’s interesting.”

“Who wrote that blog?” Bridget asked.

“I can’t remember the blogger’s name. He claimed to have seen you at the protest. Did your father know you were there, protesting?

“No he didn't.”
“Does he know now?”

Bridget didn’t want to answer and so Rafael continued. “Obviously he wouldn’t be happy to learn his daughter has gone protesting the very thing he was campaigning for. But why did you run away?”

“I needed to get away for a while okay. Now it’s my turn. How will you help Elliott?”

“There’ll be a meeting tomorrow discussing the incentive deal proposal.”

“Where and who’s coming to the meeting?”

“I’ll tell you in a bit. Why did you run away?” Rafael insisted.

“I told you, I needed some time alone.” Bridget knew he wasn’t going to let go of her until he got an answer. Yet she didn’t want to hand it over to him without at least getting something tangible from Rafael in return

“I don’t think that’s what happened,” he said.

“How would you know, you weren’t there.”

“No I wasn’t. But I was there with you yesterday. When you first saw us, you thought we were the police, didn’t you? When my friend Bertrand grabbed you from behind, he told us that you panicked.”

“So? Anyone would have been afraid.”

“You’re not afraid of the police per se, otherwise you wouldn’t have the guts to break into Katherine’s apartment. But you certainly don’t want people in uniform to touch you.”

“I was just startled that’s all.”
“Nope. Bertrand said you had a panic attack. Don’t be fooled by his size, Bertrand suffered for years from post-traumatic stress disorder. He knows when someone has PTSD and he thinks you have it.”

“Where will be the meeting?”

“Downtown at the Gild Hall Hotel.”

“Who will be at the meeting?”

“Comptroller Tyler will be there, Katherine too, and other city officials in charge of housing and of course the investment bankers. So why Bridget? Why did you panic like that?”

“Your friend surprised me, that’s all.”

Rafael shook his head. “I have a theory.”

“Well, let’s hear it.”

“The day of the demonstration before you went missing, hundreds of people were injured in clashes with the police. Judging from the length you ran away from your parents, about a month, I bet bruises were involved but no broken bones or teeth.”

Bridget didn’t say anything.

“Did they beat you?”

“Yes, they beat it us up real good. My parents wouldn't have recognized me.”

“Why did you feel like you had to hide from your parents?”

“My father was running for the senate. It wouldn't look good if his own daughter was beaten to pulp because she didn't like the policy he was campaigning for. It was a tight race.”

“Your father cares more for his political career than for his own daughter?”
“It's not that, he still doesn’t know what happened back then. He doesn’t know I was out there protesting. He wouldn’t have allowed me obviously. He would do anything for me so I had to run away so that he wouldn’t...”

“So that he wouldn’t have to chose between pursuing his political ambition and defending his beaten up daughter?”

“It’s politics you never know how they might spin it.”

“Did your father's lawyer or someone from his campaign team told you to stay away?”

“No one did. My own friends sort of hinted at the implication of my situation, it doesn't take much to figure that out, although after the beating I was in a shock to be thinking ahead. But once it was clear that I might mess up my father's career, I decided to stay away. At that point the decision was more to avoid facing my parents with a face like that, but it became clear that under no circumstance can the media find out what happened to me. I know it's stupid by helping my father win the seat, I was effectively sponsoring the policy I took a beating for. But I couldn't stand seeing him lose; he put his everything into it. I didn't want to jeopardize it.”

“So was it worth it?”

“When the media found out that I had run away, his rivals used that to describe our family as dysfunctional, the guy who couldn’t look after his only daughter. But it actually helped his campaign. People sympathized with him and when I came back he surely looked better in polls. He won with ease.”
“He won and went on to help raise public university tuitions across all the country. And you not only took a beating for him, but also paid for those higher tuitions your father put in place.”

“I told you my father doesn’t know. Besides the policy would have come into effect with or without my father. But yes we could have put out a stronger fight and we didn’t. I thought I pick out another fight next time. Now about that meeting, what time?” Rafael checked his phone.

“It’s late,” he said.

“I suppose reporters can’t just waltz in,” she said.

“No. You’ll have to find a way. I can’t help you there.”

The pub was still loud but there were noticeably fewer people left. Alfonso and Latisha were still waiting for her and knowing that they had to go to work early tomorrow, she thought it best to cut short her conversation with Rafael.

“Your friends are very kind to wait for you.”

“I know, they won’t let me talk to strangers.”

Rafael suddenly rose from his seat. “It was nice talking to you. Good luck with tomorrow.”

And with that Rafael walked away. As he passed a booth near the door, two men in dark jackets rose from the benches and followed him out. Of course he hadn’t come alone, and this reminded her that behind Rafael’s charming exterior was the steady beat of a violent heart.
Elliott had worked for seven days straight through the weekend, so when Bridget called early in the morning and told him to meet her downtown for a creditors’ meeting this very moment, he put down the phone and continued to lay in his bed with eyes that refused to open. Eventually it was the rumbling of a passing truck, the incessant chatter of two men outside, and the nagging question of how Bridget was able to find out about the meeting that got him clambering out of the bed. He dressed in khaki pants, a shirt, and looking out the window at the gray sky, put on a jacket before stepping out into a splash of cold morning air. It was still summer, but fall was already knocking at the door. Bridget had better be right about the meeting.

As he walked to the subway station, she called to tell him about her encounter with Rafael at the pub last night and his tip about the creditors’ meeting. Yes, she said, Rafael had followed her, no he didn’t do anything to her, yes he was being inappropriate, no she had no idea why, seriously no idea. That last part made him frown but his mind immediately refocused on the more important matter at hand. The creditors’ meeting was his chance to find someone who could speak on the-record about the latest draft of the housing reforms deal, meaning he might get a story out of Katherine’s document after all. “So how do we interview all these people at a meeting?” Bridget asked, as Elliott walked up the stairs of the station on 52nd Street. The 7 train ran above ground across Queens to Manhattan.

“We plant ourselves in the lobby and wait,” Elliott said. He swiped his Metrocard on the turnstiles and climbed another stairway up the platform. “This must be a closed-
door meeting so they won't be happy to see reporters around,” he continued. “We keep a low-profile and when the meeting is over, I’ll find someone to doorstep.”

“Doorstep?” Bridget asked.

“So when someone comes out, I’ll identify myself as a reporter then interview that person on the spot. The problem is that I can’t talk to everyone at the same time. Once they all come out from the meeting there won’t be much time as people usually don’t hang around for long after a meeting. If Comptroller Tyler attends, he would make a good target but let’s not focus on him.”

“But why? He surely must know about this draft.”

New York City’s Financial Comptroller Tyler sat on the Emergency Financial Control Board along with bankers and representatives of the corporate sector and ran the city’s financial affairs, a temporary measure until it was able to borrow from the bond market again. It was through this board that the city negotiated with the bankers about the housing reforms and Tyler certainly knew about any progress in the talks.

“He knows but it’s unlikely he’ll talk,” Elliott said. “Tyler is too experienced with reporters to accidently confirm a leak, he’ll just waste my time deflecting my questions. Bankers and lawyers are also difficult to speak to, so better not waste time with them. That leaves us with senior city officials, someone from the housing authority or the department of buildings. Look out for them but leave the talking to me.”

It was about 8:40 a.m. when Elliott arrived at Fulton Station to a heavily guarded Financial District. Police officers with assault rifles guarded practically every corner, and as he walked down William Street, a convoy of four armored vehicles sped toward Wall Street. Police Chief Virag wasn’t joking when he said he would beef up security.
Walking passed two officers who stood by the corner of Platt Street, wearing helmets, Kevlar vests and holding rifles, Elliott felt his feet carrying him a tad faster to escape the officers’ gaze. He really shouldn’t be having tea again with Rafael.

The Gild Hall Hotel was an unassuming presence of brick and mortar nestled on the floor of the concrete jungle that lower Manhattan was. Leather sofas, bookshelves, and chandeliers made of antlers, the lobby looked like a mash-up of the inside of a cabin in the woods and a living room from the 60s. It was small too, and Elliott wondered where the meeting rooms were, when he noticed the few men in suits hanging about near the entrance of a restaurant by the lobby. As he walked over to the entrance, one of them stepped up to him and said the restaurant had been reserved and was closed to the public. Elliott let out a fake sigh and lingered by the entrance just long enough to spot Comptroller Tyler at a table inside the restaurant. At least he knew he had come to the right place.

In the lobby he saw Bridget waiting for him. She had taken off her leatherjacket and put it along with her fat camera bag next to her on the leather sofa where she sat with her legs sprawled out like some men did in the subway. When she saw him, she put down her stuff.

“I reserved you a seat,” she said, patting the spot next to her. “This place was choke full of people just half an hour ago and now they’re all there in that restaurant.”

“I saw Tyler inside,” Elliott said. “Kind of unusual to be meeting here.”

“Do you think it has anything to do with the kidnapping, an emergency meeting of some sort?”
Elliott shrugged. “Hard to say, they have been so secretive about their regular meetings that this might very well be the place where they usually meet.”

Staring at the restaurant in front reminded him that he hadn’t had his breakfast yet. Experience however told him not to leave his spot to look for food, so he joined Bridget in slouching on the sofa as he braced for a long wait on an empty stomach.

It was about forty minutes later that Bridget nodded at a young man whom Elliott noticed had been going up and down the elevator.

“See that dude,” Bridget asked. “Every time he goes up with a few sheets of papers then returns with quite a stack. He must be photocopying stuff.”

“I see him all right. He might be photocopying the latest changes to the document we found in Katherine’s apartment.”

“Would be great if we could get a copy,” Bridget said. “What do you think?”

“There’s either a business center on the upper floor or they booked a room and brought in their own printer.” Elliott said and glancing at Bridget, he noticed her staring at the elevator. He had met her only yesterday but that’s long enough to convince him that she wasn’t thinking about if she should steal a copy of the document but when.

“I could talk to him,” she said, “see if he would let me have a copy.”

“Over his dead body,” Elliott said. “There’s a reason why they don’t let the hotel staff handle the photocopying –.”

Bridget tugged his arm but Elliott had noticed it too. Some of the men in the restaurant were putting on their jackets. The meeting was coming to an end. “All right, get ready,” he said.
It took another five minutes before the first group of participants trickled out the restaurant. Dressed impeccably in their business suits, they were probably bankers or lawyers. Elliott let them pass. A minute later a second group of six people emerged. This time their suits lacked the crispness of the first ones. The group was led by a heavyset, middle-aged man with a comb-over haircut over a balding head. Elliott had seen this man before and that clue was enough for him to guess that he must be representing the city. He could now either follow the man out and try his luck to interview him, or wait to see if someone else might be a better bet for an interview. But as the six men walked passed him toward the exit, he decided to go after them. Elliott, not wanting to alarm anyone that a reporter was around, waited until they left the hotel lobby.

“Stay here,” he said to Bridget before grabbing his messenger bag to follow the group.

The group split into two with the heavyset man and two others walking toward Platt Street. They must have parked their car somewhere nearby which meant there was no time to waste.

“Excuse me,” Elliott said, prompting the three men to stop and turn around. “My name is Elliott from the Madison Vanguard.”

“How did you know we’re meeting here?” the heavy-set man asked.

“It wasn’t much of a secret,” Elliott said, trying to play down the fact that he, or rather Rafael, knew about their supposedly secretive creditors’ meeting. “So what’s the latest progress on the talks?”
The man looked behind Elliott as though he was expecting a horde of other reporters. Then he turned around and continued walking. “We've made some progress in our discussions, the details of which I cannot disclose.”

Elliott walked next to him, while holding a recorder next to the man’s face. “What about the city’s plan to provide developers with funding to build luxury apartments as incentives?”

A look of surprise flashed across the man's face. “Nothing has been agreed yet,” he said.

“Not according to the draft I have,” Elliott said, and pulled out the document from his messenger bag, hoping it would convinced the man that the incentive deal was no longer a secret. “It says the city agrees to help fund twenty percent of the construction cost and would take on new debt to raise that amount. I'm surprised your department approved this.”

“Our department has nothing to do with this,” the man said, not looking at the document.

“Then what are you doing in this meeting?”

“We provide input.”

Elliott was losing traction here. He needed to get him back to talking about the incentive deal. They were crossing Platt Street but with all the cars parked along the street, it was impossible to say whether they were almost there or not.

“So you’ve actually provided inputs that led to this incentive deal?” Elliott asked, trying to provoke him into an answer.

“No, absolutely not, we advised against it.”
Elliott spotted an opening here. “Against what?”

“Against the whole plan.”

“I'm sorry Sir, but what exactly did you advise against?”

“This document is like a hundred-thirty pages thick, I’m not going to discuss with you every point we argued against.”

As much as he disliked blunt questions because they pushed the interviewee into a corner from which they often refused to answer, Elliott had nothing to lose at this point. “But are you against this incentive deal that requires the city to cover twenty percent of the construction cost of new luxury housing?”

It was a long question but he needed to make sure that it couldn’t be misunderstood.

“Yes.”

“And in today’s meeting, that twenty percent has already been agreed on?”

“Unfortunately it has.”

One of the other men walked ahead of them and reached for the door of a car. Elliott had probably one more shot.

“But is this here the same draft that’s still being discussed?” He showed the man Katherine’s document. He took it from his hand and flipped through the pages then nodded and returned it. Elliott, however, needed audio confirmation, and the man was already climbing into the backseat of the car. Elliott positioned himself between the seat and the door, preventing him from closing it.

“So it's still the same?” He asked, holding the recorder discretely between the sheets of the document as not to make it look intimidating.
“Yes, but I cannot discuss the details of this.”

“Thank you,” Elliott said and handed the man his name card, while asking him to spell his name and his last position. He was Maurice Philips, deputy commissioner for asset and property management at the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development. Elliott thanked Maurice again and stepped away so that he could close the car door and leave.

Elliott walked back to the hotel while replaying his recorder to make sure he got Maurice. His voice sounded clear in the recording and with that, Elliott got his first confirmation. It’s no slam dunk by any means, but it came from a senior city official and it was on record.

Back in the lobby, Elliott spotted Comptroller Tyler talking with two men in suits in front of the restaurant. The odds of Tyler confirming the incentive deal were slim but Elliott had nothing to lose. If managed to get Tyler on record, he could run the story as is without having to dig out more sources to confirm Maurice’s statement as Anad would probably ask him to. Tyler was a good head shorter than Elliott and dressed in a gray pint striped suit, looked just as immaculate as the two men he was talking to. He hadn’t quite reached the three men yet, when they noticed him coming and stopped talking. Elliott raised his hand in greeting.

“Hi, I’m Elliott from the Madison Vanguard,” he said, addressing himself to Tyler who looked at the two men in suits as if he wanted to make sure that it was him, this reporter was talking to. Turning his attention back to Elliott, he said, “this meeting is closed to the press.”
“I know which is why I waited outside,” Elliott said, while holding his recorder tilted in the comptroller’s direction.

“It wouldn’t make much sense to hold a closed-door meeting only to tell reporters all about it afterwards,” Tyler said.

“Right, but certainly the public deserved to know before next week’s council voting that the city is considering to fund the construction of luxury housing.”

Tyler eyed him for a second or two before answering. “When the time comes we'll let the public know what we’ve discussed.”

Nothing in that answer indicated he knew anything about the incentive deal and Elliott had to push further. “So are you considering to provide property developers with incentives?”

“Don’t put words into my mouth,” Tyler said.

Someone approached him from behind, and looking over his shoulder, he saw it was Katherine.

“It’s a simple yes-or-no question,” Elliott continued and just then realized that Katherine might recognize him from when she saw him in front of her apartment. As she walked up next to Tyler, all he could do was act normal even as he could feel her watching him.

“What paper are you from again?” Tyler asked.

“Madison Vanguard.”

Tyler looked at the two men and shook his head. “I never read that trash.”
“This incentive deal isn’t a secret really,” Elliott said, unfazed by Tyler’s dismissive tone. “We will run this story about the incentive deal and it would be great to have your comments along with our story.”

“Listen to him,” Tyler said, turning again to the two men, “telling me what to do, unbelievable.”

“I think he's just trying to coax you into a comment,” Katherine said. Her voice was unexpectedly cold which kept Elliott even more from looking at her.

“I understand you’re trying to do your job here,” Tyler said. “But I have nothing to say to you. Now, if you will excuse us.”

“Absolutely, just one more question.”

But Tyler had already turned away from him and walked off with the others, leaving Elliott to say ‘thank you’ to their backs. He watched them walking out the hotel, Katherine wearing a blazer and a skirt that cut right below her knees. Did she remember him from yesterday’s brief encounter or had she already forgotten about him?

“Elliott!” A hand grabbed his shoulder from behind followed by a firm but friendly press.

Elliott turned around. It was Jack, *freaking Jack Bennett.*

“Hey man, what are you doing here?” Jack asked.

“Nothing,” Elliott said. *Where did he come from?* “I was just trying to doorstop a couple of people here, but apparently the meeting was closed door,” he added.

“I see, got anything interesting?”

“A total waste, so what brings you here? It’s your first day at New York Times, shouldn’t you be attending orientation sessions or something?”
“True, I don’t even have a press ID card yet,” Jack laughed. “I was just following up on a lead. I told my editor that I’d be coming in late.”

Elliott didn’t like this at all. It was his first day at the New York Times and he simply decided not to show up at the office. Jack was onto something.

“What lead?” Elliott asked.

“Something about the city budget. I talked to a few lawyers here after the meeting,” Jack said. “I'm surprised to see you here, didn't expect to find other reporters. Anyway I have to go.”

Jack headed for the restaurant where he would probably join his lawyer friends for lunch. How long had Jack been here, and had anyone said to him anything yet? Elliott hadn’t see Jack in the lobby before. If one of the lawyers or bankers leaked the document to him, Madison Vanguard could kiss its exclusive front page story goodbye.

He put away his recorder and Katherine’s document and walked out the lobby. He had Maurice’s confirmation about the incentive deal which, flimsy as it was, was still better than what he had yesterday. Maurice’s statement might just be enough to get Anad pull in the paper’s resources to ask other reporters call around for confirmation.

The day was still early by his standard, early enough to catch up on the breakfast he had missed. That’s when he noticed that he had forgotten about Bridget. Walking back into the hotel, he saw her stepping out of the elevator. The instant she spotted him, she waved at smiled. There’s no way she could have stolen the latest housing reforms draft.

“You didn’t do what I think you did?” Elliott asked as they walked out the lobby.

“Of course not,” Bridget said and with a mischievous grin added “but look what fell into my bag.”
Clutched between laptop and tablet inside her bag, was a bundle of papers and he knew right then that they had yet another copy of the latest housing reforms draft.

Elliot sat on a couch in the windowless office of Managing Editor Lambert. Sitting next to him on the couch was Philip Lagerkrans, the business desk editor who led the paper’s coverage on New York’s fiscal crisis since day one. On a chair in a corner sat senior political reporter Augustine Prodetta. Anad leaned against the glass wall that faced the newsroom. Everyone was watching Lambert put down his coffee mug, lit a cigarette and drew a smoke.

“I like it, it’s straight forward,” Lambert said, flipping through the copy of the incentive deal. “This department of building guy, Maurice, I don’t think he’s aware of what he did when he confirmed the deal. But it’s fair game now.”

“That however doesn’t mean we’ll run the story on his statement alone,” Anad added,” which is why we called you in.”

An hour ago, Elliot dropped the latest copy of the incentive deal on Anad’s desk, and told him about his doorstop interview with Maurice, the head of the department of building. Bridget had found several copies of the housing reforms agreement lying on the meeting table in the restaurant and was able to snatch one and took pictures of them in the bathroom before returning them to the clerk who was cleaning up the leftovers of the meeting. They now had a copy of the latest incentive deal, and an on-the-record confirmation from a high-ranking city official.
With only six days left for Tyler to secure the housing reforms agreement with bankers before the city council met, leaking the incentive deal to the public could derail the talks. With this in mind, Elliott and Anad went to Lambert for reinforcement.

Philip was an award-winning journalist who had been helming the paper’s business desk for the past five years. Prodetta had 17 years of business journalism under her belt, and was an excellent writer known for her analytical strength. If he was to stop the housing reforms program, he would need any help he could get.

“Just to be sure, I want the confirmation from at least two other persons,” Lambert said “They don’t have to go on record, an anonymous source whom we trust will do. But unlike Maurice’s simple yes answers, I want actual statements from them.”

“Anyway we can get hold of Tyler?” Prodetta asked.

“I’ve already spoken to Tyler today and he won’t comment,” Elliott said.

“This document is making its round among bankers too, not just the lawyers who were sitting at the negotiation table,” Prodetta said. “You think one of your reporters can check with the banks?” she asked Philip.

The business editor nodded. “I’ll get somebody on this. But I need help,” he said, looking at Anad who in turned looked at Elliott.

“I can call around,” said Elliott.

“Elliott and Philip,” Lambert said, “when you call up analysts for comments, ask what they think what Mayor Alberta will do. She has been backing Tyler on all these other reforms he’s agreed to with bankers, from transportation, tax incentives, the police force restructuring. But this incentive deal though might be tough to justify.”
“It’s her last term in office,” Prodetta said. “What I’m saying is that she probably cares less about her political career than she does about her legacy. And that means saving New York from bankruptcy.”

“So she’s going to listen more to the bankers?” Anad asked.

“I’m afraid so,” she said.

“Unless public backlash is too big and city council votes against the housing reforms package,” Elliott said.

“Well yeah,” Prodetta said. “So who’ll be writing this story?”

“You will,” Lambert said. “Elliott and Philip will focus on getting this incentive deal confirmed and supply you with strings.”

“And what’s the angle here, we just play it straight?” she asked.

“That's the plan,” Anad said. “We lead with the city agreeing to this incentive deal. We line up the sources who go on record, then we'll have one or two analysts saying what it means, especially in light of the attack against Berea, add background material. Tomorrow we'll see public’s reaction to our story and go from there for a follow-up story.”

“I have a better idea,” Elliott said. “Why don’t we lead the story with the names of the developers who will get the incentives?”

No one said anything to his suggestion. They had been so focused on getting the incentive deal confirmed, that the first idea that came to mind for a story was to simply state that the deal existed. This would have been adequate for a breaking news headline. But combining that news with the names of developers who stood to profit at the expense of the city, would give the reader the bigger bang for the buck in a single headline. Elliott
had only six days to stop the housing reforms program, which meant six stories to influence the public. Every story counted, every headline mattered. Elliott saw Lambert nodding to himself

“These developers don’t need incentives,” Elliott continued. “They’re still loaded with cash after they won juicy government infrastructure contracts five years ago.”

“And these are some of the biggest names in the real estate industry,” Philip added.

Lambert stubbed out his cigarette. “Names make news,” he said. “And what do you think?”

“I have to agree,” the editor said. “Using names in the headline will cut straight to the heart of the matter: cash-strapped city provides money to cash-loaded developers who will use it to evict cash-strapped citizens.”

“Okay then. And let’s not forget the Berea story,” Lambert said. “This still ties in with the ongoing investigation into the kidnapping. There hasn’t been any progress so far, so it’s our chance to stand out from the competition with the story on the incentive deal.”

“For now let’s focus on getting the incentive deal confirmed,” Anad said. “We need at least two more sources, on record if possible.”

Lambert turned to Elliott. “And you said our Jack was at the meeting too, talking to bankers?” he asked, eliciting a groan from Prodetta and Philip.

“Yes. I didn’t expect him there on his first day at his new job,” said Elliott.

“Then let’s not sit on this story. I want this for tomorrow, front page.”
The work that followed was tedious, and as Elliott suspected, not rewarding at all. Philip sent him an e-mail with a list of 13 contacts who might be in a position to comment on the incentive deal. They were investment bankers, including Berea’s officials, bankers, and directors at real-estate companies. He called each number at least twice, spending almost an hour on the phone with some not answering their phones while others refusing to comment. Calling up sources for comments made him feel like working a telemarketing job. Elliott missed being a budding entrepreneur at a startup but at least the story was worth the effort. He took a swipe from his water bottle and glanced at his mobile. Frank had messaged him.

"<Heard you went to the creditors’ meeting, how did it go?> Frank asked.

"<I got a confirmation, enough to have my editors approve writing the story about the incentive deal.>

"<So will it run tomorrow?>

"<I can’t tell you that, company policy.> Elliott didn’t want to promise Frank anything.

"<Fair enough. Did you meet Tyler and Katherine?>

"<Yes but they wouldn't talk, which doesn't surprise me>

"<Too bad.>

He looked up from mobile to see Anad standing across him. The editor pointed at Elliott’s monitor. “Can you check newswires,” the editor said. “We don’t have enough stories for our metro page.”
Elliott nodded and scrolled through the day’s newswire stories. There weren’t many to pick up from, most were follow-ups to yesterday’s kidnapping some of which the national desk might incorporate into their own story. He picked up his phone as he wanted to ask Frank about Katherine.

<Do you think Katherine will talk if I approach her?>

<Hardly.>

<How do you know?> Elliott asked.

<Is this is a trick question? You want to know whether I know her?>

<Not really. She could point us to the people behind the incentive deal, off-the-record of course.>

<Stay away from Katherine.> Frank said.

<Why?>

Frank didn’t immediately answer. So Elliott decided to call again those on the list of Phil’s contacts who hadn’t answered their phones the first time he tried. When they finally did answer their phones and told him they couldn’t comment, he put aside the list, hoping Philip had more luck. Elliott went to the pantry for his afternoon coffee fix, then dropped by at Philip’s desk. The business-desk editor was in the middle of a phone conversation. Elliott waited at his desk, which like everyone else’s desks, was cluttered with piles of papers, newspapers, file folders and knick knacks. Philip turned around from his chair, as he replaced the phone receiver.

“I called all 13 contacts on your list and everyone refused to comment on the incentive deal,” Elliott said.
“Don’t worry. I got two people confirming this and Thomas has another,” Philip said, referring to Thomas, the business-desk reporter who covered the financial markets. “This director from Korr & Steward, which is one of the developers that will receive the incentive, confirmed the deal and defended it. We can quote him but not use his or his company’s name. Your Maurice is the only one who spoke on record. But we should be good,” Philip said.

“Fantastic. I'll send you and Prodetta the transcript from my doorstop with Maurice.”

“There’s something else you could do,” Philip said. “The Korr & Steward director told me about this consultant who led the revision of the housing reforms agreement to include the incentive deal. He didn’t remember the name but the consultant appeared several times at hearings with the city council’s housing commission to discuss the reforms. If you can find out who that consultant is, he or she might be worth talking to.”

Elliott returned to his desk and opened the city council’s website, going straight for the dates where the council’s committee on housing and building held meetings on the housing reforms. He found six meetings over the span of two months, each accompanied by a minutes-of-meeting in PDF-file format. He clicked on all six of them, and scrolled down to the pages that had the list of attendees. Only in two of the six meetings did the committee invited outside participants. And of these two, only the Aug. 3 meeting included property consultants. Three consultants attended the Aug. 3 meeting. He copied their names then send himself an e-mail with their names. He opened the e-mail on his mobile, copied the names and opened Frank’s messaging app. Frank had sent him a reply regarding Katherine.
<She’s attached to Tyler. She’ll be found out if you talk to her.>

<Ok thanks.> Elliott replied. He then pasted the names of the three property consultants in a new message then added, <One of these three consultants helped revised the housing reforms to include the incentive deal. Can you help out find out which of them that is?>

If Frank worked for the city as he claimed he did, then his contacts might know which consultant Philip’s source was talking about. Elliott did a quick Google search of the three names, but as suspected, there was no telling which of them might had been involved in drafting the housing reforms agreement.

A glance at his watch reminded Elliott of Anad’s assignment. With the deadline for the metro page approaching, he needed to make sure there were enough stories to fill out the blanks. He spent the next hour selecting three small stories from the newswire that could be squeezed into two columns on the page, enough to fill it out. He sent these to Anad for edit. When he checked his mobile, he saw Frank’s reply. It was a simple <Ok>. Just then Bridget came over and hopped onto his desk. He put his coffee on the other side of the desk so it wouldn’t spill.

“How are things going?” Bridget asked.

“Not bad, we have three sources to cite on the incentive deal. We already have Tyler’s no comments and I’ll try his spokesman, and call up analysts to ask what they think about the incentive deal.”

“Outstanding. I didn’t take many pictures though. There wasn’t enough time once I was done with the document.”
“Hey don’t worry.” Elliott would like to ask her out for quick coffee break, but she seemed to be ready to go home, and he had to make phone calls. Bridget was fumbling with a pair of earphones and he tried to find something to say before she would put them on.

“Well I won’t disturb you any further. I see you around okay,” she said as she put on the earphones and got off his desk. Elliott watched her walking away and making a squiggly dance move to an inaudible beat before she went down the stairs.

For the next two hours he worked on transcribing Maurice’s interview, calling up analysts and researching parts of the story Pordetta needed him to fact checked. By half past eight, he and Pordetta were done and either Philip or Anad would take it from there to edit the story. Though finishing surprisingly early for a front-page story, Elliott felt tired. His phone was ringing.

“Hey Elliott, what do you know about the incentive deal?” It was Jack.

“Nothing,” Elliott said.

“What do you say we swap information? I got a couple of good insights from the lawyers I talked to,” Jack said, and now Elliott knew what it was like to be on the receiving end of Jack’s coaxing talent. He’d have to revert to the same strategies that people like Tyler use against nosy reporters.

“I'm not in a position to make this call,” Elliott said.

``Hey Anad doesn't need to know,” Jack said.

``Sorry Jack.”

``Too bad, we could have make great partners.’’

``You know I can’t do that.’’

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“All right Elliott, don't worry,” Jack said. He thanked Elliott and hung up.

So he knew about the incentive deal. If Jack knew enough he wouldn’t have called him to ask about it, he would have run his own story instead. Superstar Jack, the great Jack was trying to fool him, see if the junior reporter fell for it. It was his first day with the New York Times and he probably wanted to impress his new employee. That meant Jack would go all out in making sure he led the coverage. The competition was on.

#

The bar was crowded with a mix of late commuters, mostly Madison Vanguard’s reporters for whom this place was their last pit stop after a long day. Anad had given Elliott the rest of the night off, which was unusually generous of him considering it was just nine pm. But with not enough sleep last night, the 12-hour day was wearing Elliott down.

He looked around the bar to find an empty spot. The corner where Jack used to sit, at the front near the windows, was occupied by the gang of photographers. Photo editor Dawson’s voice boomed over and sitting in between them was Bridget. Elliott decided not to stop by. There had been enough moments of awkward silences between them for today and he didn't need another one with others watching. Instead he went for the bar and took a stool at the far end near the phone boot where he was sure no one would come by. Seeing a heavyset man next to him wolfing down a giant club sandwich, he ordered the same and thought he could use a good beer too.

He pulled out his phone and went to his social network profile. A posting from Lisa caught his attention. She was complaining about the waves of e-mails she had to read every day. She was also online. He could send her a quick message, asking how
she's doing. He had a stack of e-mails for her, based on various ways of reconnecting with Lisa, that were now cluttering his draft folder. Seeing her latest posting, he considered deleting them all. He browsed her profile where she updated a picture of her at work, hunched over a laptop with her glasses on and an apple in her hand. He had seen them all, Lisa relaxing at home, Lisa with friends at the beach, Lisa with more friends in a restaurant, and with even more friends at some party. It was only a few years back when he was part of her innermost circle, and was one of those lucky few in her pictures. On the day that she offered him to rejoin the collaborative-search project, he was so upset that he deleted all of Lisa’s pictures on his profile. A few weeks later she returned the favor and deleted all of his picture on her profile. Now he’s a cast away, flunked to the outermost perimeter of her friend list inhabited by her loosest of acquaintances. He was still lucky to be allowed occasionally glimpses of her posted pictures and musings. What went on beyond that electronic wall of privacy he didn’t know and he shouldn’t care. He knew this though: she was heading one of the city's most talked about Internet startup while he was languishing in a soon-to-be dead newspaper. Staring at her pictures only made it worse.

Elliott put down the phone and concentrated on his food. There's no use thinking about her; in fact he should let go of Lisa. He should probably let go of Katherine as well since she’s just as untouchable. He couldn't even remember how she looked like, only that wonderful feeling when for a second it smoothed over the scars Lisa had left behind. He Googled Katherine’s name on his phone and found she barely existed. The only article was of her speaking at a press conference a few weeks ago where he saw her for the first time. The rest were of different people who shared the same name. He took a
swig from his beer then sent Frank a message asking him whether he knew anything more about Katherine. Next he did an image search of Katherine, which produced three more articles and an actual picture of her. The first article was her thesis for a master’s degree on public policy. The two other links directed him to a fashion blog where her combination of gray dress and white heels attracted the eye of the blog’s writer. Katherine in a fashion blog? He enlarged the accompanying picture for a closer look.

“I'm not jealous at all you know.” Bridget was looking over his shoulder.

“Jeez, can't you knock first before looking?”

Bridget knocked the wood on the bar three times then squeezed herself into the gap between Elliott and his heavyset neighbor. “Katherine, Katherine, Katherine. Can't blame you though, she’s pretty.”

“I was just checking..well..you know there’s not much information about her on the Internet.”

“So? There isn’t much about me either,” Bridget said while playing with his beer bottle.

“There isn’t?” Elliott reached for his phone, but Bridget held back his hand.

“Don’t bother searching me on the web. I’m here, am I not?”

“Right,” he put away his phone. “I thought you had to be somewhere else.”

``I did, but these guys, your photo editor, dragged me here and I couldn't say no." Next to Dawson and his jungle adventures, there wasn’t much Elliott could say that could top the man’s Indiana Jones worthy anecdotes. Elliott sipped on his beer as he thought about a suitable conversation topic or even just a question. He was a reporter,
questions should roll off his mouth as easily as spit. And this silence was dragging on. He pointed at his empty plate.

“Have you tried the club sandwich here?”

“Why Elliott? Bridget shook her head. “Do I look like I eat a lot?”

Slim as she was, Bridget of course didn’t look like she eat a lot, but she did in fact eat a lot, a contradiction he didn’t want to point out. He grappled for a diplomatic answer until Bridget laughed and poked him.

“I won’t bite you. So, let me ask you this, why did you become a journalist?”

Elliott shrugged. He didn't have an immediate answer. He could tell her the truth that being a journalist was a temporary stint, that he was forever looking to invent the next big thing on the Internet, but he didn't want to give the impression that he wasn't serious about his job, not when she's still new to this profession.

“The job pays,” he said, then thinking this wasn’t the most inspiring answer.

“Did you always wanted to be a journalist?”

“It just happened.” Elliott said then frowned at his choice of words.

She looked at him as if unsure whether he was joking or not. But then she asked him:

“Where’re you from Elliott?”

“You want to talk about me?”

“Unless you want to talk about that fabulous sandwich of yours.”

Elliott took another swig from his beer. As much as he tried, he couldn't think anything exiting about his life. He was raised in Norfolk, Virginia. His father worked at the office of an international shipping line while his mother was an accountant in a small company manufacturing personal security products. They had four children of which he
was the second youngest. His oldest brother was the captain of the local soccer team, his sister and younger brother were the smartest in their class and he was somewhere in between, a good athlete and a smart student but not excelling in sports or class. Two of his siblings joined the military, making steady progress, the other opened a repair shop. Of the four, only he got to go to the University of Pennsylvania with all the money his parents were able to come up with, and of the four only he failed miserably. That part though he didn’t tell Bridget.

“Must be nice growing up in a large family,” she said.

“Yes,” Elliott said. He didn’t want to tell her that he didn’t plan on going home until he struck gold with his startup idea. He wanted to come home as a winner or stay away.

“Anyway, I’m heading home.” Bridget grabbed his beer and drank it all up. “Thanks for the beer,” she said and gave him a pad on his shoulder. Elliott watched her marching out the bar, his head shaking in disbelief, then he pulled out his mobile to search her on the Internet. He noticed a message from Frank.

<It’s Lindberg.>

Lindberg was one of the three consultants Elliott had asked Frank to check on. He fetched a pen from his bag and wrote down the name on a napkin. So Lindberg was the consultant who helped draft the latest housing reforms agreement that included the incentive deal. He put the pen back and was about to pay when someone grabbed him by his arm from behind. Bridget.

“We have to go now,” she said, pulling him away from his stool.

Bridget pulled a twenty from her pants and put it under his beer glass. “You can pay me later.”

He dragged and pushed him toward the door, just as Anad walked in for his dinner. Elliott could only say hi before Bridget had him out the door.

“Where are we going?” Elliott asked.

“We’re going for a ride with Rafael.”

#

Bridget knew Elliott was not going to like it. He looked tired at the bar and after a long day was probably cranky. She had to drag him all the way to a nearby street in front of a garage door next to an old storefront where Rafael had told her to wait for him.

“Look Elliott, I don’t know,” Bridget said, looking left and right for sign of Rafael’s car pulling up. “All he said was we’re going for a ride.”

They were standing in the middle of a dark stretch where the street lights weren’t working and the shops on both sides had already closed. Another part of the city where infrastructure was crumbling and left to deteriorate.

“Well,” Elliott said, as he lowered his bag and sat on the curb, “where is he?”

The garage door next to them creaked to life, groaning in protest as it rolled up. From inside, two light beams came on and behind them the sound of a big car engine rumbled deep. Bridget wouldn’t be surprised if Rafael “borrowed” someone else’s expensive ride. She stepped aside, as the car rolled out of the garage and stopped by the curb.

The night was dark but not dark enough to hide the ugliness of this thing before her, which at one point might have been an American or Japanese car out of the 70s. Its
paint had peeled away in long stripes, revealing rust in some places and gaping holes in others. Sitting in the driver’s seat, Rafael had difficulty opening the door for her. She gave him a hand and together they managed to get it halfway open, enough for her to squeeze herself in.

``What in heaven’s name is this?’’ Elliott said, still standing outside.

“Get in,’’ Rafael said.

“There’s no door handle!’’ Elliott shouted, pointing down.

Bridget reached behind for the passenger door and opened it from the inside.

Elliott got in and closed the door, muttering something about junkyard to himself. The car rolled down to the end of the street, turned left into a deserted Madison Avenue and stopped at a traffic light.

“Everyone ready?’’ Rafael asked.

“It smells in here,’’ Elliott remarked. “Smells like..’’

The lights turned green and a sudden jolt pressed Bridget against the seat as the car accelerated, rushing three junctions down the street before stopping at a traffic light.

“So where are we going?’’ she asked.

“You’ll see,’’ Rafael said. “It’ll be fun and helpful for your story.’’

“It better be,’’ Elliott said.

“Frank gave you the name of the consultant, this Lindberg,’’ Rafael said. “What are you going to do about him?’’

“I’ll interview him,’’ Elliott said.

“I doubt he’ll tell you what you want to know or what you need to know.’’

“And why is that?’’
“Because if you're right about him being the linked to the people behind the deal, then he knows too much,” Rafael said. “If he knows too much, he won’t talk.”

“First you tell me to do my job, now you’re telling me doing my job is useless?” Elliott asked.

“It’s not that,” Rafael said. “But seeing how difficult it is for you to get people talking, we don't mind having a chat with him ourselves.”

Bridget could sense an argument brewing and was curious how it would play out.

“What do you mean chat?” asked Elliott.

“We can ask him questions, like reporters do.”

“You mean you want to interrogate him, ask questions like interrogators. There's a difference between an interview and an interrogation.”

“Call it what you want, as long as it gets the job done.”

“Terrorism that's what I call it, you terrorize people to get the job done.”

“We're pragmatic in our approach. But if it eases you conscience, we're doing our best to minimize collateral damage.”

“I don't understand why you equate violence with pragmatism,” Elliott said.

They were crossing Williamsburg Bridget, leaving Manhattan for Brooklyn and a few minutes later they exited on Broadway.

Rafael had kidnapped civilians. In calling him a terrorist, Elliott wanted to call a spade a spade. But to her, Rafael remained a flickering image of two possibilities. Perhaps he was the hero that New Yorkers were waiting for, the one who would save them from the greed of corporate men whose power had blinded politicians. As Latisha had told her, the political channels to fighting the housing reforms were narrowing down
with Mayor Alberta having turned her back on the poor. If the city council approved the housing reforms, there was no political recourse for the public to revert the decision. When people feel they were being robbed of their democratic options, Rafael offered them a wait out, albeit a violent one.

She glanced at Rafael’s profile in the semi darkness of the car’s interior. His eyes were steady on the road, his face revealed no tension, a strange calmness anchored him, a calmness beneath which she could not imagine the roiling fire of a radical activist burning. What had driven him to this kind of life, she did not know. But he had intrigued her.

“You know it was Frank’s idea to involve the media,” Rafael said. “I told him it’ll be tough. But he insisted on giving you guys a chance so that we don’t have to use violence.”

“You might be right, I might not make it,” Elliott said.

“I'm aware the odds are slim, which is why we think we should lend you a hand,” Rafael said and he and Bridget exchanged looks.

Rafael's voice was low and steady, unlike Elliott’s which tend to ascend to a high pitch when stressed out. Another difference, Bridget noticed, was their age, with Rafael easily surpassing Elliott by half a decade. It lent Rafael another layer of depth, and with it maturity and again she liked what she found.

“As long as it’s not illegal,” Elliott said. He poked his head from between the two front seats, adjusting his glasses as he tried to make out the surroundings of Brooklyn ahead. “Are we there yet?”
Elliott on the other hand always seemed edgy to her. Was it because of driving around town with a terrorist? She wondered what Elliott was like when she was not with him. Dawson had told her that he was as quiet as a mouse. He had this innocent boyish look about him and, recalling his awkwardness around her, he was also cute. She wanted to ruffle his hair but showing him affection at this moment might stress him out further.

“We’re almost there,” Rafael said.

They drove for another five minutes before Rafael turned the car into a smaller, empty street where he parked it in the dark pool of a broken lamp post.

“That building up there; that’s Lindberg’s office,” he said, pointing at a low-rise brick stone building that sat close to the waterfront. Bridget had a bad feeling about this and when she glanced at Elliott she knew he was going to say what she was thinking.

“Wait, you don’t expect us to get in there, do you?” Elliott asked.

“One way to find out whether Lindberg helped draft the incentive deal, and who else was involved, is to take a look into his computer,” Rafael said.

“You want us to break into his office and hack into his computer?” Bridget asked.

“Yes, but this time I’m coming along because, you know, it might be fun.”

“Hold on Bridget. This is getting way out of line,” Elliott said.

“We dismantled the security cameras, we have the access cards,” Rafael said, showing a set of security passes. “It’s basically an open house, just walk through the side door.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Elliott said. “He’s trying to pull us deeper into this mess and then use it against us like evidence later on.”
“But isn’t it worth the risk? Bridget asked. “What if the information we find actually helps stop the housing reforms before it’s too late?”

“No Bridget,” Elliott said. “Rafael wants the media to stop the housing reforms program, so he should let us do our job our way. I’ll interview Lindberg and we’ll see what comes out.”

“Suit yourself,” Rafael said. “I take it that whatever I find in there, I won’t share it with you then.”

Elliott was missing the big picture here. Bridget had gone through considerable risk in getting a lousy picture for Madison Vanguard, and here he expected her to hang back when the information in Lindberg’s office might save New York.

Rafael grabbed a bag from the backseat, opened the door and stepped out.

“It won’t take long,” he said and closed the door.

“Great now we’re stuck here,” Elliott said.

Bridget watched Rafael walking down the street. If Elliott didn't want to go in, then she would. He might have to play by the book, but as a freelancer she had more leeway. She pulled the door handle and pushed against the door.

“Hey.” Elliott grabbed her by her arm. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Don’t worry it won’t take long,” she said and with a final push the door wide open.

“You’re crazy Bridget,” Elliott said in resignation. “But go on. I wait in the car and make sure it’s all clear out here.”

Bridget smiled and bent over to ruffle Elliott’s head. “That’s my man.”
She could see Rafael waiting for her near the entrance of the building. Although it was dark, Bridget felt as if she was walking on a stage under the glare of a spotlight.

“The security cameras aren’t a problem,” Rafael said. “But in case we run into trouble, put these on.” He produced a pair of ski masks and pulled one over his head. Bridget did the same and now her transformation into a criminal was complete.

“Elliott would freak out if he sees me wearing this.”

“I’d be surprised if he didn't.”

Rafael opened the side entrance with a pass. There were three offices on this floor and Lindberg's was the one on the eastern most corner, facing the street on which they had parked the car. Rafael used another pass to open the door to Lindberg’s office and they slipped inside. A half circle reception desk greeted them and behind it were two glass doors. The one on the right wasn’t locked, and they entered a narrow hallway that led them to Lindberg’s office.

The dimly lit hallway provided enough light to see what’s inside. To their left was a black leather sofa and in the middle were two chairs facing a big desk made of glass and steel and a large window that looked out over the waterfront. To their right were a file cabinet and a smaller desk with books on it. Perched at the corner of the big desk was a big computer screen.

Rafael walked up to the desk and pointed to a small box, about the size of two card decks, next to the computer screen. “This is where he back up his files, on this external hard drive.”
He picked up the hard drive and sat on the carpet, leaning against the file cabinet. Pulling out a small laptop from his bag, he then connected the hard drive to his laptop. It didn’t take long for the Lindberg’s hard drive icon to appear on the laptop screen. Bridget crouched beside him while watching him work.

“We’re just going to dump everything to this laptop?” She asked.

“Not everything. There’s not enough space on this laptop to copy that much data,” he said as he made himself comfortable. “Which is why we need to select the kind of information we want before copying.”

Opening the content of the hard drive in a window, he selected the document folder on top of a list of folder. It contained another list of folders with names that indicated nothing of interest. But just to make sure Rafael opened random documents, finding that they did not relate to housing issues. He returned to the main window and started scrolling down.

“All right then, let’s look for any folder that says e-mails, or housing project, or draft,” he said and Bridget moved closer for a better look.

“How do you know Lindberg has them stored here?” She asked.

“We hacked into the office network but had no time to access Lindberg’s laptop which he carried with him when he left office. But we detected this stand-alone hard drive, aptly named after him. So we figured this must be where he keeps all his backup files considering his laptop can’t hold much data.”

Rafael found a few folders with dates on them, and when he opened the recent ones, a list of word documents appeared with names of the property companies that were
mentioned in the incentive deal. The documents though were password protected. Rafael copied them all.

Bridget fished out a flash disk from her bag and handed it to Rafael.

“You might as well copy them on my flash disk too, I’m sure Elliott would appreciate this,” she said.

Rafael plugged her flash disk to his laptop and he began to select and copy files.

After about five minutes Bridget’s phone vibrated. It was Elliott.

“There's someone watching me,” Elliott was also whispering.

“What do you mean?” Bridget asked.

“He's standing near the end of the street and I think he’s watching me.”

“Maybe he’s just waiting for someone?”

“I don’t think so. He’s definitely looking in my direction and not out on the main street.”

Rafael gave a Bridget a questioning look. She covered the mouthpiece. “Elliott said some shady character is watching him.”

“Tell him to put on the ski mask if the guy approaches him and he doesn’t want to be identified. There's one in the glove compartment and also a can of pepper spray.”

“There's a ski mask in the glove compartment. Put it on if they come near you.”

“I'm not going to cover my face. I am not the criminal here.”

“You already are Elliott.”

“But…”

“We’re almost done, just hang on there.”
They would have to hurry but Rafael took his time scrolling through folders, files and documents. He copied all password protected files and peeked into those that weren’t protected. This went on for another fifteen minutes when the screen turned all jittery, changed colors, flashed until a white, blue smiley face appeared. Rafael tried to type and move the cursor but nothing worked.

“Looks like a virus,” Rafael said and rebooted the laptop.

“But we’re not even online,” Bridget said.

The booting screen reappeared and it went straight into the operating system. The black and white background theme of the operating system reappeared but all the icons, folders and shortcuts were gone. Rafael went to each drive and opened the document folders only to find them empty. Lindberg’s hard drive was detectable but they could no longer access it.

“I think I know what the problem is,” Bridget said, and she looked warily at her flash disk which stuck to the laptop like a parasite on its dying host. “It’s my flash disk. It may have a virus in there.”

She just managed to wipe out all of the laptop’s content and possible that of Lindberg’s hard drive. She should congratulate herself on this feat. “I haven't used the flash disk for a long time.”

“Great,” Rafael sighed and massaged his forehead. “We need to get rid of the virus.”

Bridget nodded. “All right. I know someone who can help us out.”
This friend of hers, Wei, was the closest she had come to knowing a hacker. She never met him in person and their conversations mainly resolved around her asking him for help. She had his phone number which she used only in emergencies like tonight.

Her phone vibrated. It was Elliott who wanted to know what the hold up was. She explained him the situation, and before he could complain she hung up. She needed to get rid of the virus first. Wei answered her call without the usual chit chat.

“Let me guess,” he said, “a virus again.”

“Why do you always think it’s a virus?”

“Five days ago: virus in your phone. Two weeks ago, there was not one, not two, not three, but six different viruses in your mother's laptop and..”

“Okay, I get it. Look here's the situation. I inserted my flash disk…”

“Why are you whispering?”

“What?”

“Why are you whispering?”

She and Rafael had been talking in a low a voice even though no one was around to hear them. She couldn’t just tell Wei they were breaking into someone’s office.

“I'm with a guy and he's sleeping next to me so I don't want to wake him up.”

“You’re in bed with a guy and can’t sleep?”

“Yes Wei. Listen I have this blue and white smiley face showing up on my screen and now all my files are gone.”

“So Bridget who's the guy in your bed?”

“It's complicated but it's not what you think it is.”

“Hey I'm not thinking what you think I'm thinking.”
“How do you know what you're thinking if you’re not thinking about it?”

Rafael grabbed the phone from Bridget's hand.

“Hi, I'm Bridget's friend,” he said in a low but impatient voice. “I don't know what the two of you are talking about but we really need to know now, as in this very moment, how to get rid of this virus.”

Rafael took notes as he listened to Wei’s instructions, then he handed the phone back to her.

“Sorry about that,” she told Wei.

“That’s okay,” Wei said. “I told your friend there's only one antivirus that can deal with smiley face. It’s a new virus but there’s already a cure for it.”

“Thanks Wei.”

“One more thing. This friend of yours, why is he also whispering?”

Bridget hated to find yet another excuse.

“It’s the other guy who’s asleep,” she said, hoping it wouldn’t sound weird.

“You’re in bed with two guys??”

Bridget sighed. “Yeah but..”

“I know it's not what I'm thinking.”

She thanked Wei again, hung up and when Rafael showed her the price tag of the antivirus program, Bridget gasped.

“Extortion,” she said.

“Do you have a credit card?”

“Yeah but I'm not going to buy this.”

“Wei said there’s no pirated version of this yet.”
“Don’t terrorists have operational funding for buying this sort of stuff?”

“Bridget, I don’t carry my credit card around during a mission.”

Bridget leaned back against the cabinet. It was her fault anyway. She just didn’t like how the expensive the week had been. First she broke her bike, then her camera lens, and now she shot herself in the foot with this escapade.

“Look at it from the bright side,” Rafael said. “It’ll be a good alibi. Who goes shopping around for an antivirus program while breaking into someone's office? In fact ask Elliott, maybe he wants to buy himself an alibi.”

“Okaay.” She took out her credit card and proceeded to the online cashier. The first thing she would do when returning home would be to smash her flash disk with a hammer.

Once they downloaded the program, Rafael went to work to restore the data on his laptop and regained access to Lindberg’s hard drive. Then he had to copy the files again this time without Bridget’s flash drive. She watched him working in silence and let him be. When her phone vibrated, she knew it was Elliott.

“Sorry Elliott, how you holding up?”

“The guy keeps staring at me. I don’t like the look of him. He looks freaking dangerous. You better come over here.”

Bridget covered her mouthpiece. “It’s Elliott. He wants us to come over.”

Rafael nodded and phoned one of his men, talking in Portuguese.

“I got people out there watching this place,” he said. “They’ll check it out. Don’t worry, he’s safe.”

“You know what, you may be right but I can’t leave him there alone.”
“But we’re almost done here.”

“I’m not waiting.”

She packed her stuff and left Lindberg’s office. As she walked down the stairs, she could hear Rafael hurrying after her. They left the building together through the side door. The car was parked some thirty yards away and as they walked around the corner they heard a scream.

Bridget sprinted the last distance. Ahead she saw a man on the ground covering his eyes. Elliott with a ski mask kicking him in the stomach and when he tried to kick him a second time, the man grabbed his leg and with a quick snap tackled him down. Elliott fell and scrambled away from him and reached for something on the ground then he clambered on his feet at the same time that the man jumped to his feet with his arm shielding his face while his right hand suddenly flashing a baton.

Bridget, still running, pulled out her weighty, case-covered phone, and with a mighty shout threw it at the man. At her shout, Elliott and the blinded man spun around, and her phone flew passed between their heads. Bridget came in running and lunged herself at the man, pushing him back to the ground where she locked him in a wrestling position.

“Elliott,” she said still out of breath and with her back on the ground.

“I sprayed him,” he said, breathing hard. “He came up to the car and I rolled down the window and I sprayed him good, like that movie -.”

He was clearly still in the grip of his adrenaline rush. “Elliott!”

“What?”

“My phone, get it.”
She heard Rafael coming from behind laughing. He grabbed her by her arm.

“Let him go,” he said as he tried to untangle her from the man. “He’s with us. Oh man what a mess.”

Bridget looked up at Rafael, eyes wide from behind the man’s shoulder. “What are you saying?”

“He was keeping a watch on us, including Elliott in the car.”

Bridget unwound her legs, and behind her heard Elliott mumbling in protest. She rose to her feet as Elliott walked up to her.

“Here,” he said and handed her a split-open phone case, a phone battery, and a phone with a nice long crack across its glass screen.

#

The next morning Elliott arrived at the office half an hour late, and walked straight to the pantry for his coffee. Last night’s late outing with Rafael and Bridget had turned him into a zombie, lethargic and irritated by the necessity of having to go to work. He hoped Rafael and Bridget didn’t mess things up when they broke into the office.

Rafael had told him that it would take some time before his men could read through all the documents they had copied from Lindberg’s hard drive. Too bad Bridget’s flash disk had been such a disaster, otherwise he could have sieved through the data himself.

With mug in his hand he returned to his desk and tried to regain some sense of purpose that would excite enough to get him through the day. He picked up today’s newspaper.

Splashed across Madison Vanguard’s front page was Elliott’s story, written by Prodetta. Its headline – Kasterei, Orton Demand New York’s Money for Condos –
juxtaposed the public’s fear of losing affordable housing against the insolence of real
estate companies to demand money, a judging headline, Elliott admitted, but one that
succinctly expressed what the incentive deal was about. Below the headline was
Bridget’s photo. It showed a diminutive Tyler in the hotel lobby surrounded by men in
business suits, looking helpless as the city’s lead negotiator. Standing next to him was
Katherine with a tired look, her eyes slightly downcast as though she wished she were
somewhere else. Elliott smiled at seeing her side profile and wondered whether Bridget
fit her into her shot on purpose.

“Morning Elliott,” Anad said. He had just stepped out of the editorial meeting and
was gesturing for Prodetta and Philip to huddle up. “Good work there.” The editor was
nodding at the newspaper Elliott was holding.

“Thanks,” Elliott said. “I have a lead on the property consultant that I want to
follow up.”

“Excellent,” Philip said as he leaned against Anad’s desk. Prodetta appropriated a
chair from a nearby empty desk.

“We’ll get to that. Let me just explain what we discussed in the editorial meeting
for the second-day story,” Anad said. He held a notepad from which he would be reading
out the notes he took during the meeting. “We need to get reaction from the city and the
property companies. The ‘no comments’ from yesterday won’t cut it this time around.
We need these people to come out with a statement on the incentive deal. We’ve put a lot
on stake by having the incentive deal as our main story, so we need to make sure the city
makes a proper response or we’ll look like idiots.”
Philip nodded. “We’ll handle Tyler. He’s scheduled to open a seminar on finance and we’ll get him there.”

“Good, because I need someone to handle the property companies,” Anad said. “Elliott you’re in?”

“Sure, any specific questions?”

“Just have them comment on the incentive deal.”

“Then what?” Prodetta asked, probably already thinking about the lead for the follow-up story.

“For now we’ll gather more reactions, talk to more analysts, see what they think. Once other media follow our story, and I bet they will, more people will be willing to talk on record about the incentive deal. But when that happens, we must have those comments in our story first. We broke the news so we must own this story.”

“Did the New York Times ran the incentive deal story?” Elliott asked. Judging from how Jack tried to coax Elliott into telling him about the incentive deal, he doubted the competition had the story.

“We’re the only ones,” Anad said. “So let’s stay ahead of the curve.”

“Wait, isn’t Mayor Alberta supposed to be in Washington now?” Prodetta asked.

The mayor had been trying to get a $530 million bailout from the federal government since the past two weeks after the State of New York rejected her plea for funds last month. But President Theodore Bolton had come under pressure by his political opponents to reject Mayor Alberta’s request amid concerns it would set a precedent for other cities to ask for the same favor. Madison Vanguard had a
correspondent in the White House, Thomas, who would be covering the meeting between the mayor and the president.

“If the president tells New York to drop dead, that will be tomorrow’s headline everywhere,” Elliott said. “No use trying to push for a front page story for the incentive deal.”

“Thomas doesn’t think the meeting will take place today,” Philip said. “President Bolton is keeping her waiting on his porch like a dog.”

“Exactly that’s why Lambert wants us to focus on the incentive deal follow-up,” Anad said. “But we’ll definitely be flexible on this. Philip here is ready to whip up a story if the president does make a decision today. Any questions? If not then let’s get to work.”

“That’s it?” Elliott asked.

“You have something else in mind?” Anad asked.

Elliott felt uncomfortable having to insert his personal agenda into a story. But he feared yesterday’s chance to push for an investigative reporting on the incentive deal was slipping out of his hands. To expose the people behind the deal required some digging, which meant allocating resources away from day-to-day news coverage. Clearly this wasn’t discussed at the editorial meeting. He had to be clearer with his colleagues in which direction he wanted to pursue the story and right now Lindberg was a lead he hadn’t looked into yet. “How do we stop this?”

“Stop what?” Prodetta asked. “The incentive deal?”

“Yes. We can’t let the deal pass right?” Elliott looked around, hoping for someone to back him up.
“We’ll let the public decide whether they can live with it or not,” Philip said.

“That’s why we’re interviewing everyone for their opinion.”

“I know that,” Elliott said. “What I mean is that every other media does the same thing. We’ll let talking heads trade punches and by the time the council decides, nothing changes. I just don’t think this is enough to do something about the incentive deal.”

Anad and Philip exchanged looks.

“I get it,” Philip said, “you feel attached to this story since you got the scoop. So what do you suggest we should do?”

“Find out who did this.”

“You make it sound like we’re going after a murderer,” Prodetta said.

Without his paper’s support, Elliott wouldn’t be able to pursue the investigation needed to stop the incentive deal.

“If we know the story that led to the incentive deal, we can give our readers an insight look into who’s behind this deal and what they really want,” he said. “There’s no need to listen to this pro and contra noise. Every other media will be asking analysts for comments. If we want to own the coverage, we shouldn’t just follow the debate, but also investigate deeper and contribute to the debate. We expose the people behind it, we expose their intention and I suspect the intention isn’t in the best interest of the city.”

“Noble,” Anad said, “do you have a lead already?”

“I have a name for this consultant who apparently helped draft the incentive deal. His name is Lindberg, let me talk to him and see where this leads me to.”

“So you want to stop the incentive deal?” Prodetta said. “You know that the council will vote next Monday. You’ll need to have a story ready before they meet, that’s
some serious digging in a short period of time. Not enough time and not enough resources, I’d say,” Prodetta looked at Anad.

“I talked to a director at Korr & Steward who suggested me to talk to this consultant, Lindberg,” Philip said. “It’s definitely worth a try.”

“All right,” Anad said. “So when I said we should stay ahead of the curve, hacking away in a different direction, like the one Elliott is suggesting here, then going after the people behind the incentive idea looks like a start. But for now stick to today’s priority and we’ll see what Elliott gets out of Lindberg before deciding our next step.”

By day the area around Lindberg’s office was a bustling neighborhood with nothing of the dodginess Elliott felt last night. The office was an unsuspecting three floor building that overlooked the waterfront. The glass front door and the metal plate with the names of the building’s business tenants were the only signs indicating the presence of a business.

Elliott planted himself on a bench across the office to think how best to approach Lindberg. He had decided to go straight to his office instead of calling him, thinking he would have a better chance of talking to him. The downside was that he had to justify spending this much time waiting on Lindberg and that meant he had to at least confirm his involvement in the drafting of the housing reforms program that contained the incentive deal. From there on he would have to drill down what clauses of the agreement he worked on, whose idea it was and who else was involved. Rafael might come up with additional information after he and Bridget copied files from Lindberg’s hard drive. Whether Rafael would share them with him though was another question. He pulled out
his mobile to send Frank a message asking him whether Rafael had found anything interesting yet. But decided against it as he wanted to first try to interview Lindberg.

Elliott crossed the street and entered the building. He walked to the glass door and knocked at the glass door. A buzz let him in and he stepped inside a reception room with a desk manned by a middle-aged woman who eyed him from behind her glasses.

“Yes what is it?” She asked.

“I'd like to meet Mr. Lindberg,” Elliott said.

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No. My name is Elliott I am a reporter for the Madison Vanguard.”

“Mr. Lindberg doesn't speak to reporters.”

“Could you please ask him whether he can see me.”

The receptionist gave him a disapproving look then reached for the phone.

“What is this about?” She asked, her finger hovering above a speed dial button.

”I'd like to talk to him about housing issues.”

The receptionist had Lindberg’s secretary on the line and she relayed Elliott’s request, nodded then said, “he's busy.”

“When would be a good time to talk to him?”

“He has an appointment soon. Try again tomorrow.”

“I can wait.”

“The appointment is in the city, so no you cannot wait here,” she said.

Elliott had suspected that he wouldn’t be able to simply walk in and get an interview. However he knew Lindberg was in the office and would soon step out for a meeting in the city. He decided to doorstop him even if it was for just a five minute talk.
He thanked the receptionist, left the building and returned to his bench. He pulled out today’s paper to while his time. The Madison Vanguard’s business page carried a separate story discussing the imminent decision by President Bolton on whether to bail out New York. Should Mayor Alberta come home empty handed, just like Mayor Beame did when he met President Ford in the height of the 1975 fiscal crisis, then all the hope rested on Comptroller Tyler to come to an agreement with the bankers. Meanwhile a separate story discussed the protesters preparing for Monday’s mass rally against the housing reforms. At least a dozen organizations said they would join, with police estimating several thousand participants. Security would be extremely tight that day.

It didn't take long for Lindberg to come out. Elliott left his bag behind and took only the recorder, notepad and today’s paper as he rushed out to doorstop Lindberg before he got into his car. As he crossed the street again he called out the consultant's name. Lindberg stopped and turned around to face Elliott.

“Mr. Lindberg. Hi, my name is Elliott Cromer from Madison Vanguard.”

“Sorry my friend I can't talk to you now. I must attend a meeting in half an hour.”

“It won't take long,” Elliott said while holding up today’s front page of Madison Vanguard.

Lindberg frowned as he read the headline about the incentive deal, then shook his head. “I cannot comment on this.”

“I understand that you helped draft the latest housing reforms agreement in particular the incentive deal?”

Lindberg looked up at as if checking the weather then he nodded. “All right. Why don’t you come over tomorrow at 10 a.m. and we’ll talk.”
“Can’t we meet today? After your meeting?”

“My day is full. Come back tomorrow, okay?” and with that he climbed into his car and shut the door.

Elliott returned to the bench, knowing he had missed a chance to push today’s story forward by identifying some of the people behind the incentive deal. He was packing his reporting gear when his phone rang.

“Elliott you’re still at Lindberg’s office?” Anad said.

“Yes.”

“Good, don’t come back to the office yet. Philip will handle the real estate companies for comments. I need you to talk to people on the street. Lambert wants us to get some comments from the street about the incentive deal, you know what they think about it and what they think the city should do. Could you go around and talk to people who live in areas affected by the new policy. Vladeck housing would be a good place to start that's close to where you're now. Any luck with the consultant?”

Elliott explained his meeting with Lindberg then hung up. He hoped that by tomorrow, Rafael’s men would have dug out enough interesting information from Lindberg’s data trove that he could come up with hard questions for the consultant. It was just after 4 p.m. The housing project was right across the East River. It was time to meet the people Rafael said he was fighting for.


#

The Vladeck housing was a complex of twenty six-story buildings that defied Manhattan’s claustrophobic layout with generous patches of greeneries and wide walks
between the buildings. Sitting near the waterfront, this piece of property was one of many earmarked for demolition should the city council approve the housing reforms program.

Elliott sat on a bench by a path that led into the complex, waiting for Bridget. He had spent a good hour interviewing three tenants of Vladeck before Anad called him to say that he wanted pictures of the people he was interviewing. Without the pictures, that hour of interviewing was now wasted. His brief meeting earlier with Lindberg didn’t produce anything either, and Frank hadn’t contacted him since yesterday, leaving him in the dark about the content of Lindberg’s files.

Elliott hardly noticed the breeze, the warmth on his skin, the birds in the park, nor the children playing around him. He was tired, and not in the mood to face exuberant Bridget whom he partly blamed for his lack of sleep. When she finally arrived, climbing out of a cab, all smiles and ready for action, Elliott raised a limp hand in greeting.

“You haven't started yet, have you?” She asked and sat down next to him.

He could mention the three people he had already interviewed without her, but he would have to explain how he got here so early, and right now he didn’t feel like talking much.

“There’s a basketball court across the street,” Elliott said. “I saw a few kids from here walking over. Let’s talk to them.”

It must have been the way he sounded that made Bridget looked at him.

“You all right?” She asked as she stood up.

Elliott waved his hand. “Just tired.”

“Come on tiger.” Bridget pulled him up, and wrapped her arm around his shoulder. “We’ll grab a coffee afterwards.”
It’s strange how he did feel better now that Bridget was here. Chirpy as always, she was perhaps the caffeine fix he needed.

They walked up to the basketball court where a bunch teenagers played a three-on-three game. Boys and girls were watching from the side. The moment he stepped into the court, Elliott felt his age hung around him like a chained ball, dragging everything about him downwards. The teenagers paid him the attention of a passing glance, just enough to identify him as an adult. Elliott and Bridget sat there watching them and she did not take any pictures, perhaps not wanting to break their concentration.

Elliott approached the first person who stepped off the court, still gasping for air while reaching for a water bottle.

“Nice game there,” Elliott said as he waited for the teenager to finish drinking. He was black and wore a Michael Jordan jersey. The kid acknowledged him with a nod.

“My name is Elliott, I'm a reporter with the Madison Vanguard,” he said, loud enough to show the introduction was meant for everyone. “I'd like to ask you about the housing reforms program.”

The kid put down his water bottle, sizing Elliott up.

“What else is there to ask? We all feel shitty about this,” he said.

“Doesn’t hurt reminding our readers again, lest they forget.”

By now the boy’s friends had stopped playing and Elliott had a small audience waiting for him to say more. “What's your name?” he asked.

“Jules, you can call me Jules.”

“So Jules why do you feel shitty about this?” Elliott would have to ask him for his real name, first and last, but for now Jules was enough.
“I got all my friends here, my girlfriend lives two blocks down, and where my friends live are the least of the problems. Basically we don't have a place to live if they throw us out.”

“Yeah me and Jules have been friends since kindergarten,” said another boy with red hair. “And we're neighbors, no way will they split us.”

“Can't your parents find a new apartment?” Elliott asked, already thinking this best-friends separated angle as worth writing about. From behind him, he heard Bridget snapping pictures.

“Not here they can't,” Jules said. “But rents everywhere are going up on account of people moving out of projects because of the housing reforms.”

“What’s the vacancy rate?” asked Jules’ red-haired friend.

Elliott couldn’t remember the number. He had once been assigned to a press briefing where a few housing non-profits combined their resources to provide a more accurate vacancy rate across New York City’s five boroughs. The effort was not only meant to help those needing to find a new home but also to convince Mayor Alberta that there weren’t enough apartments to rent for all the people who would lose their homes if she pushed ahead with selling public housing.

“Less than one percent,” Bridget said from behind Elliott. “And it’s dropping fast, the later you move out, the harder it will be to find a new home.”

“Have your parents made any preparations to move at all?” Elliott asked.

Jules shook his head. “They don’t believe the city will kick us out. There are just too many of us living in projects all over the city.”
Elliott and Bridget looked at each other. Anyone who had been reading the papers knew that Jules’ parents weren’t the only ones in denial. The prospect that bulldozers showed up one day to find thousands of families still living in projects had been a major sticky point in talks between the city and city council. There were dozens of projects slated for sale and demolitions. Developers were offering a transitional period for people to find new homes but eventually the job of evicting recalcitrant residents would fall on Mayor Alberta or her successor.

“So what happens if the housing reforms gets approved and one day the city decides to evict you all?” Elliott asked.

“Let them come,” Jules said.

“Yeah let them,” his friend echoed.

“We have nowhere else to go,” Jules said.

“But you could move to Long Island or New Jersey,” Elliott added.

“I told you there aren’t enough apartments left,” Jules said. “Besides this is home. Let them come and we’ll fight them.”

Holding the recorder and notepad in one hand, Elliott wrote down Jules’ quotes. He might use only one or two sentences for a quote that captured the feeling of what it meant to be threatened with eviction, a one liner that summarized the story’s theme from a human-interest angle. And this last statement might be worth a quote.

“What do you mean with fight them?” Elliott asked.

“You’ll see, you’ll see,” Jules said. “When the shit hits the fan, me and my friends will be ready.”
Elliott tried to coax out a better answer out of Jules and his friend but neither wanted to say more. He could only imagine the chaos that would ensue if police were to storm Vladeck housing complex and try to clear it block by block.

As Bridget had the two friends posed for pictures, Elliott continued his interview, asking them talk about their background and lastly getting their names right, Julius Moore and his red-haired friend Patrick Orman. Once done, he and Bridget returned to the Vladeck housing complex where he spent the rest of the afternoon talking to more people, a widower with two children, an 80-year old retired postal worker, a teacher and her two friends working at a supermarket. Bridget had them all pose for her camera, taking multiple pictures of them from different angles using different backgrounds.

All of their stories were not in any way new. Since the city announced its plan to sell its public housing, newspapers had been writing stories that put a face on the people who were at risk of eviction. Madison Vanguard though hadn’t yet highlighted the human-interest angle, and Elliott knew Managing Editor Lambert wanted to use the incentive deal story as a way to catch up on the competition without looking they’re playing catch up. To Elliott these people paid the price of a misguided policy, and while he felt sorry for them, he thought it was high time for New York to let the market dictate what’s affordable and what’s not. Too bad that developers had to be greedy and demand incentives.

Back in the office, Elliott selected the quotes he found most interesting and sent them to Aand to be used as captions for the pictures Bridget had taken, and as comments for the second-day story of the incentive deal.
The follow-up to this story focused on comments from the city, the investment bankers and the developers mentioned in the deal and more analyses of what to make of it. As Rafael had suspected, some experts called the incentive deal as unfair while others said it was necessary to get developers to invest. Although Elliott hadn’t been able to interview Lindberg and expose the people behind the incentive deal, he found the second-day story hard hitting enough to call further into question the fairness of the housing reforms program. He was getting one step closer to stopping the program and with it Rafael’s terror plans.

Bridget came up but instead of sitting on his desk, she showed him the pictures she took of Vladeck’s residents. The portraits were all in black and white and showed her skills as a wedding photographer. She spread out the pictures on the computer screen and flicked one after another to show him the woman, the old man and the teenagers at the basketball court and the buildings. Combined with the quotes Elliott selected, their stories would make for a sober reading of what’s at stake behind the housing reforms program debate.

Bridget showed him the pictures Photo Editor Dawson had chosen for the paper’s edition tomorrow and they played around with them as she and Elliott disagreed on which ones were better. It was well after eight p.m. and Elliott was done unless Anad needed his help with something else. He didn’t feel as tired as he was in the afternoon. If anything he was rather pleased with how the day had eventually shaped up. He remembered Bridget’s offer for coffee.

“Any word from Frank on Lindberg’s data?” Bridget asked.
“Let me check,” he said as he pulled out his phone. “So how about that dinner that we never had?”

“What do you have in mind?”

Elliott had thought about going to the bar downstairs for a quick bite, but her question suggested a more leisurely dinner. He was still thinking of nearby eating options when he saw Frank’s message.

<S, you’re interested in Katherine? : >

It was Frank’s reply to his message from last night when he asked him about Katherine.

“Hmm,” Bridget said and he knew she was reading Frank’s message over his shoulder. ”Anyway I'm out of here. Let me know if there's another assignment for tomorrow.”

He didn't bother to ask her about dinner again, knowing that she'd turn it down. Elliott looked at Frank’s single destructive message, cursed and when it disappeared left it unanswered.

#

Elliott arrived at Lindberg’s office at just before ten the next morning. He had prepared for the interview the night before and while Frank hadn’t sent him anything from Lindberg’s files, he felt he had enough material to deliver hard questions.

“Mr. Lindberg is busy,” the receptionist said as soon as Elliott stepped inside the office.

“But I have an appointment with him at ten a.m. today," Elliott said, pointing at his watch.
The receptionist frowned and called Lindberg’s secretary. She told the secretary about the interview appointment, then nodded to herself and turned to Elliott.

“Did you make the appointment with Lindberg himself?” She asked.

“Yesterday outside. He said he would talk to me in a proper interview.”

“His secretary said you’re not on his schedule and he’s meeting someone else now.” The receptionist relayed Elliott’s situation then hung up.

“I'm sorry Lindberg forgot about the interview. If you could leave your contact details, he'd be happy to call you later today. How about that?”

“Can I just wait for him until he’s meeting is over?”

“I'm afraid that's not going to work, he has other appointments. I'm really sorry.”

Elliott wrote down his name and contact details then shuffled out. He decided to do what he tried yesterday, wait for Lindberg to come out and doorstop him. Elliott waited at the same bench across the street, wondering who he it was that Lindberg was meeting.

Checking the news on his mobile, he read Standard & Poor's had placed New York's credit rating on review for possible downgrade, which would be the second rating cut since the start of the fiscal crisis. He recalled from reading the Madison Vanguard’s business pages that rating companies such as Standard & Poor's gauged the risk of investors lending money to companies and governments through the debt market. According to the news article, if Standard & Poor’s were to downgrade New York’s credit rating to BB, its bonds would be relegated to junk status. Investors would charge higher interest rates on any debt the city tried to sell to offset the increased risk of non-payment. A federal bailout and abolishing affordable housing might convince Standard & Poor’s not to downgrade New York’s credit rating, the article said.
The threat of a rating downgrade pushed Mayor Alberta deeper into a corner. Either she listened to the public protest against the housing reforms, or she followed the market’s demand to push through with the reforms and end New York’s affordable housing program. Ignoring the market would result in higher interest rates on new debt, a cost the public would eventually have to shoulder. After Elliott’s story on the incentive deal turned public criticism against investment bankers and developers, this threat of a rating downgrade was just what the market needed to remount pressure on the city.

Elliott put down his phone when he saw the front door of Lindberg’s office opening. Two men left the building and Elliott immediately recognized them, a photographer for the New York Times and behind him Jack. Lindberg showed them out, waved them goodbye and returned to his office. Jack and the photographer entered their car and pulled out. For an instance Elliott thought about hiding but there were no cars parking close by and the bench sat exposed in direct view across the ramp that led out from the office’s parking lot. He couldn’t help but watch the car rolled out, then stopping in front of him, before pulling into the street. Jack was now ahead of him.

#

A beam of light cut through a gap in the curtains and illuminated a part of an oil painting that showed a woman by the shores looking out into the sea under a luminous sky. Everything else in the bedroom was still shrouded in darkness. The painting was a gift from Bridget’s former boyfriend. The woman was her. Bridget hung it on the wall across the windows so she could see it every morning when she woke up, a theatrically greeting acted out by the sun, her painted self, and the promise of a new day. But the light
was so bright now that the picture was washed out, which only meant it was already late. She checked the clock on her night stand, it was 9:23 a.m.

She had been living at her parents’ apartment since July after her landlord raised the rent of her one-bedroom apartment. Mother was barely at home and Father lived in Washington, leaving her their five-bedroom apartment in Chelsea for herself. But looking at how cramped her own room was, with all the stuff that she brought over from her old apartment, she wanted to move out as soon as she got herself a stable enough job.

The numbed pain pulsating from her right shoulder as she climbed out of her bed, reminded her of her bike accident. She showered, got dressed and wandered into the kitchen to cobble together a quick breakfast of bread and cheese. Although hungry she didn’t want to stuff herself full as she had a lunch appointment with Jack. He had messaged her last night without telling her why he wanted to see her.

She took her breakfast to the living room and browsed the Internet on the gigantic TV screen. She opened Madison Vanguard’s website and clicked on Elliott’s story about the Vladeck housing residents. The page with his story was divided in four sections each of which contained the black and white portrait of one of the residents. There was the housewife, the old man, Jules and the ordinary working family man. It felt good to have helped get their voices out.

Riding the subway, Bridget arrived at the restaurant on the Upper East Side a few minutes late. She didn’t mind keeping Jack waiting. The restaurant with its ultra-slick design exuded a minimalist, expensive look that she didn’t care about as she walked in with her faux leather jacket and faded jeans. Jack’s outfit, a faintly stripe shirt, no tie and khaki trousers, didn’t match the surrounding either. He didn’t seem to mind. Jack may be
only a reporter, but after his stint at the New York Times he was said to take over his father’s media business. And restaurants like these were the sort of places where merger and acquisition deals were struck after a long good meal. She decided to play nice.

They shook hands, stiffly, perhaps because of the formality of their surroundings. She sat down while he called for the waiter. He had a glass of mineral water half empty before him and now he wanted to move on with the lunch. While Jack ordered a sizeable lunch, Bridget went for soup and salad and didn’t budge when he tried to coerce her into trying the house’s specialty.

“I heard your father likes to dine here,” Jack said.

If this was the case, she didn't know it. Her father liked to take her to the Korean pancake restaurant in midtown and it rather embarrassed her that it was the same restaurant he took her ever since her tenth birthday.

“He never told me,” she said.

“Well, that's what my father told me. Was I wrong to ask you to meet here?”

“Not at all.”

Jack continued with the chit chat and the longer that went on the more she felt like being at one of her family dinners where the mere act of conversation required a special set of skill. She answered his questions, selective in how she framed her answers as though he was testing her not only on what she knew but how she said it. Their lunch came and Jack went on talking about her being a wedding photographer, asking her where she learnt photography, why she wanted to become a photojournalist, how she felt working for Madison Vanguard.
“Would you like to freelance for us?” Jack asked. “For the New York Times I mean.” He put down the glass of wine as though he required both hands for the conversation. “My paper is looking for a freelancer and I immediately thought of you.”

“You want me to switch sides?”

“You’re a freelancer, there are no sides. The pay is better with us.” Jack let that last part linger for a while. “Besides I don’t know how long my father will keep funding Madison Vanguard. If he doesn’t find an investor for the paper soon, he’ll shut it down. Then you have your boss Dawson looking for a job and I think the New York Times would be more interested in hiring a candidate of his caliber over you.”

“Then why are you offering it to me then?”

“Well this is an opening for a freelancer and my paper was mightily impressed with your work. You’ve nailed the money shot on your first day. And now look at this.” Jack pulled out today’s Madison Vanguard and opened the page with the faces of Vladeck. “Gorgeous.”

“I got lucky with that money shot.”

“Perhaps but you have definitely guts and a good eye.”

“Shouldn't it be your paper’s photo editor offering me the job?”

“I requested to do it myself,” he said. “Think about it. You'll be working for the New York Times. That'll certainly look good on your resume, won't it? Your first stint was a major scoop, and less than a week later there you are working for the Times. That's a rare ticket here to join the big boys, especially in these times.”

When Bridget didn’t respond he continued.
“I talked to Dawson. He said you applied to some obscure local paper back three months ago? That paper is dead now. What’s your plan, work your way up to become a full-time photographer at Madison Vanguard? How long do you think that's going to take, assuming the paper will be a still around? And that’s a big if.”

Jack's offer made sense. She had yet to build up a strong portfolio and having her pictures published by the Times would boost her name. But somehow it didn’t seem right either. It wouldn’t be fair to Elliott, and she thought about Rafael and how his group had chosen him to stop the housing reforms program. She wanted to stay in their company, be part of their mission, and finish what they had started together. And she suspected there was something else behind Jack’s offer.

“Why me?”

Jack shrugged. “Didn’t I tell you already that you’re good?”

“Yes, that good. I’m sure, at least not yet. So why?”

“All right, I want you to team up with me. Together we can cover the housing reforms at least until the city council votes on it.”

“Do you want me to photograph you around and take pictures of you doing your job?”

Jack laughed and shook his head. “No, no nothing like that.” He took a sip from his wine. “What I mean is that there’s a another story to the housing reforms program. I knew it the moment I saw Elliott at the bankers’ meeting. But there’s only about a week left before the council votes, so things will happen fast. I need a photographer who can keep up with me, be ready and dive into the action. Together we can blow this thing wide open.”

“You mean the incentive deal? You’re too late, Elliott already wrote about it.”
Jack leaned back against the chair. “You know I saw Elliott this morning,” he said.

Bridget looked up from her salad. Wasn't Elliott supposed to be interviewing Lindberg?

“He was sitting on a bench in front of the office of a property consultant, Lindberg,” Jack said. “I interviewed Lindberg earlier in the morning, and Elliott might be waiting to doorstop him. Elliott is following me on every turn. He’s on his way to becoming a fine reporter.”

Bridget wanted to say that Elliott wasn’t following Jack, that he had been pursuing his own lead thank you very much. “So did you find out anything interesting from Lindberg?” she asked instead while forking about in her salad.

“You should have come with me,” he said. “Oh and before I forget.”

He picked up his bag and pulled out a small box which he put on the table. “Open it.”

She knew what it was before opening the box. Inside was a camera lens, the same $500 long-range lens that had cracked when a SWAT officer kicked it out of her hand.

“My father bought it after I told him what happened to your camera,” Jack said. “He knows the paper doesn’t replace your broken lens because you’re a freelancer, and even if it wanted to, it doesn’t have the money.”

She felt the lens’ familiar weight on her hand, appreciating its quality and knowing that thanks to its sharp image she had landed her money shot. Jack was watching her. Did he think he could bribe her into accepting his offer?

“Keep the lens,” she said. “And your offer too.”
“Really? Opportunities like this don't come along every day even if you're good.”

“Some offers are not meant to be.”

“May I ask why?”

“I stand by Elliott.”

”Fair enough.” Jack called for bill. “If you change your mind, you have my number. I doubt Elliott can pull this off.”

It was more of a warning than expressing doubt. Despite his talk about there being no sides, Jack wanted to tell Bridget that he was on the winning side.

She left the restaurant somewhat feeling as though Elliott owed her something.

She had another two hour to kill before her driving classes started and decided to check with him on Lindberg. Dialing his number, she hoped he wasn’t in the middle of an interview.

“Hi Elliott.”

“I can't talk right now.” His voice was sharp and his breath short in a way that told her something was wrong.

“Elliott?”

“They're after us.”

“Who?”

“Rafael's men are going after Lindberg, they're psychopaths!”

#

Elliott was still waiting at the bench for Lindberg to come out, when he heard them coming from behind. Five men wearing ski masks walked passed by him with brisk strides in the direction of the office. Lindberg was in trouble. Elliott had to warn the
consultant about Rafael's men but didn't have his phone number on him. Running for the front door was no longer an option. Then he remembered how Rafael and Bridget broke into his office last night, through a side door in the alley.

He grabbed his bag and ran toward the alley as the men reached the front door. The alley ran alongside the length of the building and his plan was to get Lindberg escaping through the window then out the street in the back of the building. He picked up a pebble and threw it hard against the window. A moment later Lindberg's head appeared.

“There are men in the office trying to get you. Lock the door and get out!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just lock the door!”

Lindberg’s head disappeared and Elliott could hear the shattering of glass, then Lindberg’s voice, then more commotion. Elliott followed the noise as it moved toward the back of the office. Lindberg reappeared on the farthest end of his office, climbing out of a small toilet window. He jumped and Elliott pulled him up and together they dashed toward the street behind the office building.

The alley opened up to a two-lane street lined by stores, offices and apartments. They crossed the street and Elliott dragged Lindberg down to a crouch behind a parking car. He needed to think what to do next. Peering over the hood, he saw three of the men emerging out of the alley. What did Rafael found out in Lindberg’s files that he now wanted to kidnap him?

The three men split up to walk the street in opposite directions. If one of them crossed the street they would be found out. Lindberg tugged at his arm and pointed at the three-story office building behind them. “Let’s go inside,” he said.
The consultant was right. Once out of sight in the office, he could call the police, tell his office what was going on, and talk to Lindberg while waiting for help to arrive.

Elliott nodded and on the count of three they dashed the few yards into the office, almost running over a man on his way out.

They entered a lobby where a receptionist, a young man in a business suit that was a size too big for him, greeted them with a polite but unsure smile. “Can I help you?”

Lindberg wanted to say something but Elliott held him back. They were still visible from the outside through the glassed front and had to get out of sight first. He read the directory on the wall with a list of law firms in the building and picked one on the second floor.

“We’re here to meet someone from Coombs & Atkinson,” Elliott said.

The receptionist showed them the stairway in the back and walking up the stairs, Lindberg began to curse.

“What’s going on? What do they want from me?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“We must ask someone here to call the police.”

The second floor consisted of cubicles with a row of four rooms to one side where the lawyers had their offices. Secretaries worked in the cubicles and a few people sat in chairs placed along the windows. Coombs & Atkinson’s office was the second from the stairway. A secretary in a flowery dress was talking over the phone gestured for them to wait by the chairs near the window. Elliott looked out the window, as they took their seats. He didn’t see any of Lindberg’s pursuers.

“Can you call the police?” the consultant asked. “I don’t have my phone on me.”
Elliott pulled out his phone and saw a message from Frank stamped half an hour ago.

<Check your e-mail.> he said.

Elliott went to his inbox and opened Frank’s e-mail. It didn’t contain a message but attached were about a dozen files, Lindberg’s files.

“What’s wrong?” Lindberg asked.

“Nothing, I just got an e-mail.” He heard Lindberg groaning.

“Could you please call 911?” he whispered.

But Elliott had a better idea. He messaged Frank.

<I’m with Lindberg. Tell Rafael to pull back his men.> He waited a few seconds for the read indication to light up. Frank was probably busy and couldn’t immediately read his message so he sent him another. <Tell him to pull back.>

When he looked up from his phone, he saw Lindberg walking to the secretary, and from the corner of his eye, he noticed a small object flying through the open window near the stairway. It hit the ceiling and bounced to the floor where it released an incessant stream of smoke. A few seconds later the fire alarm sounded and the sprinklers rained down on them as smoke was filling the room. People rose from their chairs, looking around as though anyone knew what was going on. A man wearing suspenders stepped out of his lawyer office and shook his head on seeing the smoke grenade on the floor.

“All right folks, let’s go out of here,” the lawyer said while pointing at the stairways. “It’s not a fire but don’t use the elevators.”

Elliott looked out the window and noticed smoke coming out of the office entrance as well. Four of Lindberg’s pursuers were crossing the street. *They were trying*
to flush Lindberg out. He looked for the consultant who had already joined the others heading for the stairways.

“Wait!” Elliott said but Lindberg didn’t seem to hear him, as he walked out of sight amid the thick smoke. He ran after the consultant into the stairways. The smoke in the confined space was too thick to see beyond the third man in front. Holding on to the railing he clambered down along with everyone from the second and third floor. No one panicked yet. But they didn’t make it to the first landing when those in front suddenly stopped, causing everyone to bumped up to a pile. A scream from downstairs sliced through the silence of their orderly evacuation.

“Go back, go back!” a voice bellowed from below. “Don't go down there.”

The lawyer with suspenders emerged from downstairs. His face contorted, he was holding his shoulder. “Back up, lock yourself inside the offices.”

People murmured in confusion but another scream from downstairs sent everyone scrambling back up the stairs. Resisting the reverse tide, Elliott held on to the railing to see if Lindberg was coming up. When he saw him, he reached out, grabbed him by the arm and dragged him back to the second floor.

They ran to the first room on the second floor but found it already locked from the inside. They dashed to the second room just in time to push against the closing door. The door gave way and they were led inside by the lawyer with the suspenders. There were five inside, Elliott, Lindberg, the lawyer, his secretary and another man. The lawyer locked the door and turned around.

“What’s going on downstairs?” his secretary asked.
“Masked men, they’re attacking everyone,” the lawyer said. He pulled out his phone, hopefully calling 911.

Elliott caught Lindberg's gaze and shook his head, signaling him not to say a word.

“No,” Lindberg said and was about to walk over to the lawyer when Elliott stopped him. He dropped his voice to a whisper. “If you tell the police that these men are after you, the people here might as well decide to hand you over to them.”

Lindberg returned to his corner. Elliott’s phone rang. It was Bridget.

“Hi Elliott.”

“Bridget I can't talk right now.”

“Elliott?”

Elliott looked around and noticed everyone were talking on their phones or texting.

“They're after us.”

“Who?”

“Rafael's men are going after Lindberg, they’re psychopaths!”

“Are you all right? Where are you?”

“In some law office across the street behind Lindberg's office.”

“You called the police?”

“Yes, I think someone has.”

“I'm coming.” She hung up. That's when he heard it too, the rattling of the doorknob. Someone tried to get in. Everyone in the room stared at the door but nothing happened.
“Why is the police not coming?” asked one of the man, whispering.

“I called 911. They will be here any moment,” the lawyer said.

Lindberg sat quiet in a corner. What caused Rafael to chase this man? Checking his phone, he saw that Frank had read his message but hadn’t replied.

“Are they gone?” asked the secretary. “I don’t .”

A loud bang from the first room next to theirs startled everyone. Another bang followed and this kept on and on, as the attackers tried to breach through. Elliott looked around the room for something they could use to barricade themselves. A heavy wooden desk sat in the center of the lawyer’s office.

“The desk,” Elliott said. “Get it up the door.”

Everyone jumped as if in one commando, dragging the desk to the door as another loud, final bang followed by screaming and shouting next door urged them on. They pushed the desk up against the door and put chairs on top of it. That’s when Elliott heard the wailing of police sirens and an instant later the banging at their door began. Everyone retreated to the back of the room.

“It’ll be all right,” the lawyer said, calming his secretary.

But Elliott realized that what they were hearing wasn’t the sound of someone banging at the door. It was the sound of wood splintering, and it didn't take long for his eyes to confirm what his ear suspected, the tip of an axe broke through the door, withdrew and broke through again, with each strike it widened the gap, taking more wood away from the door. The axe came down with such constant rhythm that it didn't pause even as the police seemed to have already arrived in front of the building. The sirens stopped sounding, but the axe kept swinging.
“Why are the cops not stopping him” Lindberg asked.

Elliott suspected the first responders had been overpowered by Rafael’s men.

The axe had worked itself through a good chunk of the upper part of the door and the man wielding the axe widened that hole by pulling and breaking pieces of the door away. He pushed back all the chairs on the desk. Now they had a good look at their attacker, a man wearing a vest and a dark ski mask underneath which eyes were staring back at them. The man spotted Lindberg and he reached through the hole for the doorknob then turned around the key. The door slowly opened, the desk against it slowly moved. Elliott and the lawyer looked at each other, then charged at the desk to push back against the intruder.

“Push!” the lawyer said, as the others jumped in to help.

There was no way the attacker could move the desk plus all four of them all by himself. Elliott was worried if his friends showed up. Already a second man came in and managed to wedge the axe between the door and the frame, using it as a lever to at least hold the gap open. He shouted something in Portuguese. And that’s when the sound of more police sirens approached. The attackers however didn’t let go, and the desk, and everyone pushing against it, slid back inch by inch.

Through the opening in the door, Elliott looked into the attacker’s eyes, sensing in them the man’s confidence in brute force. But a few seconds later the attacker suddenly disappeared from the door and with it the door slammed shut.

Elliott dropped to the floor in exhaustion and everyone sat down, leaning against the desk. Whether their attackers left because of the police or whether Frank finally convinced Rafael to call off his men, wasn’t clear. Perhaps it was a combination of both.
They remained in the room until a police officer came up, looked through the hole, and asked if everyone was okay. Removing the desk from the door, they stepped out.

Elliott and Lindberg went down the stairs. The first floor was trashed. Chairs and table laid overturned, computers were on the floors, there was paper everywhere. It was vandalism. Outside people filled up the street with a police officer telling them to keep their distance as they formed a circle around the entrance.

“Elliott!” It was Bridget standing among the crowd, waiving at him. He grabbed Lindberg’s arm and walked toward her. After all that had happened, it was time to find out what the consultant knew.

#

Elliott and Lindberg weren’t allowed to leave the scene just yet. Police had everyone grouped together outside the office, as a crime scene unit arrived to comb the inside for evidence. The two were waiting for their turn to be questioned, with Lindberg on the phone calling presumably his wife and Elliott reporting the attempted kidnapping to Anad. Bridget must be somewhere among the crowd of spectators and reporters that were gathering behind the police line. It was almost 4 p.m. and the day had turned a shade colder as the sun hid behind streaks of dull clouds.

Elliott was next in line and he told the officer about his appointment with Lindberg and how he was waiting outside his office when he saw the five masked men coming in. This detail separated him and Lindberg from the rest of the witnesses, and the two were pulled aside for more thorough questioning. About twenty minutes later the police officer told Elliott to wait nearby while they continued with Lindberg. He sauntered to a police car where he saw Bridget talking to another photojournalist. Elliott
had earlier forwarded her Frank’s e-mail so she could read ahead what Rafael had found out from Lindberg’s data. Whatever it was, Rafael deemed the information important and urgent enough to kidnap Lindberg.

“He’s involved with the incentive deal,” Bridget said, as she handed him her tablet to look at the documents that came attached with Frank’s e-mail. “I’d love to talk to him,” she said.

Elliott scrolled through documents that showed a series of correspondence between Lindberg and the directors and lawyers of the property developers that were on the list of companies eligible for the incentives. Lindberg discussed with them which public housing project they should demand the city to sell, how much money they should demand from the city, and what other demands could be made while the negotiation was still ongoing. He discussed his role in convincing the city council of the benefits of the housing reforms program, and which housing organizations and think-tanks they might use to engage the public.

It was the sort of information Elliott needed to expose the people behind the incentive deal. But he did not see anything in the documents that could explain Rafael’s motive to kidnap Lindberg and that left him still unnerved.

Elliott was called back by an officer who asked for his contact details and as he provided them he overheard Lindberg complaining about the lack of police protection he received. With the city’s budget cuts and Wall Street needing extra protection, the NYPD was already stretched thin. Lindberg was not amused by the deterioration of police service. “Can you imagine they offer me protection only during office hours,” he said after the police allowed them to leave.
They walked away from the crowd and Elliott introduced Bridget to Lindberg who promptly invited both for lunch.

“Mr. Lindberg, about that interview you promised me,” Elliott said.

“Let’s talk in my office,” the consultant said. “A lunch and a few words for your paper, that’s the least I can do after you helped me escape.”

On their way to his office, Elliott sent Frank a message to ask him why Rafael had wanted to kidnap Lindberg, then he spent the rest of the short walk thinking how best to get Lindberg confirm the e-mails. He wasn’t sure about showing them to him yet as he wanted to discuss the e-mails with Anad first, after all he had to explain how he got them. Parked outside the consultant’s office was already a police cruiser and Lindberg waved at the officer as he let Elliott and Bridget inside his office. His secretary had ordered them pizza for lunch. Sitting around a table in a conference room, Elliott had to ignore the food in front and focus on his questions.

“You know what Elliott,” Lindberg said. “My secretary told me she has been receiving calls from the media wanting to speak to me after all this kidnapping thing. Now, I’m making an exemption for you since you helped me out there, but I don’t want to say anything outside of what happened today. I don’t want to attract more attention to myself than necessary.”

“But you already gave an interview to the New York Times,” Elliott said.

“Well that was before these crazy terrorists were after me.”

Bridget cleared her throat. “Does it not occur to you that the housing reforms program is related to today’s kidnapping attempt?” She asked. “So you might -.”
“I know I know,” Lindberg waved her off. “But I don’t want to talk about housing reforms or the incentive deal. That’s off limit.”

“Is it because you helped draft the incentive deal?” Elliott asked. “My sources tell me you drafted the deal then convinced the city council to support the housing reforms program.”

Lindberg chewed on the remaining bits of a pepperoni pizza while thinking of an answer. Bridget meanwhile excused herself and walked out of the room.

“As I said I cannot comment on that.”

Elliott would have to find another way in. “All right, let’s talk about the kidnapping,” he said and switched on his recorder. “Why do you think were these men after you?”

“I don’t know,” Lindberg said while helping himself to another slice. “Aren’t you going to eat?”

“I will, thank you,” Elliott said. “There were three property consultants who attended the hearing with the city council last month. Two out of the three consultants had positive views about the housing reforms program, you were one of them. Considering that the Berea kidnappers were against the housing reforms program, what connection can you draw between your statement to the council and the attempt to kidnap you?”

“Look Elliott, that’s a question you should be asking the police not me. I’m concerned about my safety. That is what you should be asking me instead of making insinuations.”

Just then Bridget returned to the conference room with papers in her hand.
“Can you explain us these e-mail exchanges between you and Director Abneg at Krasiler Properties, Director Sullivan at Taft & Heights and Director Curtis from Baron Development?” She asked as she spread out six pages of the printed-out e-mails on the table before Lindberg. “The address on these e-mails is the same as the one on your name card,” she added while handing Lindberg’s name card to Elliott.

Bridget wasn’t joking when she said she’d love to have a word with Lindberg. But now the consultant knew about the leaked e-mails, and Elliott might as well press him on that. Lindberg leaned forward and read through the six pages.

Elliott said “it is just a matter of time before I can confirm the validity of these e-mails and publish them. Unless you can show me that they are fake, I will continue to ask you insinuating questions.”

Lindberg pushed aside his pizza, nabbed his mouth and took gulp from his diet Coke. “All right, I’ll say a few things about this but off-the-record. So don’t quote me.” Elliott slumped back in his chair. An off-the-record confirmation wasn’t much of a help. Managing Editor Lambert would have him chase all the directors and lawyers Lindberg corresponded with before he would agree to run a story based on the leaked e-mails.

“Well do you want me to talk or not?”

“Okay,” Elliott switched off his recorder. “Go ahead.” Lindberg cleared his throat. “You see the problem with the city council is that, being the people’s representatives, they are supposed to be more receptive to public opinion. But public opinion on housing reforms is the one battle that we are losing. People just don’t like their rents go up no matter how much we explain it.”

“Not surprising,” Bridget said.
“Who’s we?” Elliott asked.

“We? They are the property developers, bankers and investment funds who are pushing for the housing reforms,” Lindberg said. Elliott had to remind himself that those who were supporting the housing reforms did so only because they would benefit financially from its enactment.

“And what role do you play as a consultant?” Elliott asked.

“Right. That’s where I enter the picture. Yes I know I’m supposed to be the independent consultant but that’s just a label to grant me access to a hearing with the council. My purpose then is to simply provide an opinion in support of the housing reforms.”

“And how does this help sway public opinion?”

“It doesn’t. As I said, trying to change public opinion is a losing battle. Councilors know approving the housing reforms will go against public opinion. They need to be able to say that, aside from considering the threat of bankruptcy, they also sought the advice of independent consultants. My testimony will help them justify their decision to approve the housing reforms.”

Bridget chuckled. “You are more like a lobbyist who..” Elliott held her arm to interrupt her. He needed to keep Lindberg talking and not start defending himself.

“So you’re saying the threat of bankruptcy alone was not enough of a reason to support the housing reforms?” He asked.

Lindberg shrugged. “Probably. But part of the council’s job is to seek input from experts and we reached out and gave them what they needed.”
“You keep saying the council needed a reason to approve as though they have already decided that they will approve the housing reforms come voting day.”

“To my understanding, that’s because they already have decided,” Lindberg said. “There’s too much at stake by rejecting the housing reforms. No one wants to be the guy who goes down in history for having voted New York into bankruptcy. The problem for the council is to convince the public that the councilors have done the job of listening to independent experts before reaching that decision to approve the housing reforms.”

“But how do you know the council has already decided to approve it?” Elliott had to press this further.

“Because I talked to them.”

“You talked to the head of the housing committee at the council?”

Lindberg shook his head. “I won’t disclose names.”

Elliott had to think before pressing further. From what Lindberg had told him, he picked up two leads that, if he could confirm them, could be built into a story. The first lead was that Lindberg indirectly confirmed he was not an independent consultant by saying he, along with property developers and bankers, tried to influence the decision of the council through his testimony. The second lead, a major one, was that the council had already decided to vote in favor of the housing reforms, meaning whatever proposal would come on the table would be approved.

“So the e-mails, are they yours then?” Elliott asked.

“I didn’t say that. You’ll have to figure it out yourself,” Lindberg drank the rest of his Coke. “I wish I could stay, but I already lost a whole day and I need to catch up on work.”
Lindberg stood up and walked to the door.

“Are you an independent consultant or a lobbyist?” Bridget asked behind his back.

Lindberg turned around. “Look, what I’m doing is legal, and not even big news around here. If you have a problem with how things are run, don’t talk to me.”

“Then talk to whom?” Elliott said, sensing an opening for another lead.

“Follow the money,” Lindberg said.

#

On his way back to the office on the M train, Elliott read through Lindberg’s e-mails again. Frank had sent him copies of 13 e-mails and after closely reading them, he could still not figure out why Rafael wanted to kidnap Lindberg. Either he had overlooked some clues, or Frank was withholding information. At least Elliott had gathered enough material from Lindberg’s e-mails and his interview to show how the incentive deal was drafted and to expose some of the people behind it. But if Lindberg was right, and city councilors had already decided among themselves to vote in support of the housing reforms, Madison Vanguard would have to publish a powerful enough story to convince councilors to reverse that decision. The alternative, he knew, was more of Rafael’s terror campaign. Elliott wished he could discuss today’s finding with Bridget, but she had to attend driving classes and couldn’t come to the office. On the whole, his day had been productive and with that thought he let himself lull to sleep by the steady rhythm of the train rushing below Manhattan.

Elliott had a late lunch at the bar across the street from his office, where he thought of a follow-up to the incentive deal story. With the help of Philip and Prodetta’s
sources, they might be able to confirm Lindberg’s leaked e-mails and the councilors early decision to vote in support of the housing reforms. Either way, it would add pressure on the city or the council to drop the reforms. If Anad was still interesting in leading the story in that direction, he could ensure Madison Vanguard stayed ahead in reporting about the most talked about news in town.

The first thing Anad did when he saw Elliott walking in, was ask him whether he was all right. Elliott said he was fine, suspecting however that behind the question the editor wanted to know whether he was all right enough to write up a story on the kidnapping attempt. Looking at Anad’s face though, he felt something else was going on. “Don’t worry about the kidnapping story, we take care of it,” Anad said, his voice unusually soft. “Lambert wants to talk to you. He’s waiting in his room.”

“About what?” Elliott asked.

“Just go and see him.”

Elliott looked in the direction of the managing editor’s glassed office where he saw Lambert inside typing. Elliott rose from his chair and walked over and knocked at the glass door. Lambert looked up and with a nod invited him in.

His office had no windows but a glass wall ensured the airy feel of the newsroom’s open-floor layout continued inside. Books on shelves covered much of the two other walls and a small, round table along with a couch and chairs provided the creature comfort of home. A radio was constantly playing in the background while the TV was set on mute. An old typewriter sat solitarily on a cabinet, reminding Elliott that Lambert had been a reporter when they still used typewriters to write stories.
The managing editor looked up from the two large monitors on his desk without stopping to type and gestured with his head for Elliott to take a seat. Elliott had to wait for a few minutes before Lambert turned his attention to him, and asked him how he felt after his encounter with the kidnappers.

“I am all right,” he said. “It was crazy but everyone came out okay.”

“Good, very good.” Lambert leaned back and folded his hands. “Elliott you’ve done some excellent work over the past few days. When Jack left, we thought we’d be having a hard time breaking news, but you practically replaced him overnight. I did not expect that from you.”

“Thank you.”

“You know even Jack’s father said we’re doing a fine job.”

If even the owner of the paper was praising a story, then Elliott must be doing something right. Thomas Bennett rarely made any comments, preferring to let Madison Vanguard do its work while occasionally using the newspaper to advertise the businesses of his other companies.

“We just got a visit from Bennett,” Lambert said. “He came by to ask of us something he rarely asked for. He wants us to stop writing about the incentive deal.”

“What?”

“His instruction was clear. We are not to write about it anymore.”

“But why? He doesn’t have any interest in real estate, does he?”

“No he doesn’t, but we know that Bennett is eyeing for a public office sometimes in the future, and those friends who may help him get elected are not happy with our
reporting. We’re talking about friends who have been providing us with advertisement
that is keeping this paper, that is you and me and everyone else in this office, afloat.’’

“But these people can’t interfere like that.”

“Yes they can, don't be naïve.”

“What about our readers? I mean this story is big, if our reporting forces the city
to drop the housing reforms, it will affect many people.”

“Let me tell you something and you keep it to yourself. This paper should have
gone bankrupt six months ago. The only thing that’s keeping it alive is Bennett’s personal
money and his friends placing their ads with us. The way things go, with Jack jumping
fence to the New York Times, I’m not sure whether we’ll survive another six months.
The stakes are different now. We have to think about our survival. We can expedite our
demise, or give our employees a fighting chance to find another job before the lights go
out. This decision Elliott isn’t up to you, it’s not even up to me. We don't own the
company.”

“I thought Bennett was talking to some investors who want to buy a stake in our
paper?”

“He is still talking but we can’t assume anything now. The chance for an
acquisition is getting smaller.”

“So we’re turning our back on the city?”

“That’s a fight not for us to pick, we don’t have the resources to go up against
Goliath especially if it also happens to be the hand that feeds us.”

“I don’t think that's right thing to do.”
“I don’t think so either. You do however understand that if you push ahead, those that might get hurt most are your very colleagues”

He sensed Lambert must have fought tooth and nail in defending Madison Vanguard’s reporting. And now after all he had gone through in exposing the incentive deal and in chasing Lindberg, a few phone calls by Bennett’s friends were all it took to shut everything down. Elliott should have known that the developers would fight back. Did Lindberg played a role?

“There must be a way,” Elliott said. The wall that separated advertisement from the newspaper’s editorial team had always been solid. Only Bennett could have breached that wall and today he did just that. Elliott knew that complying with Bennett’s instruction meant surrendering the city to either the developers’ unfair incentive deal or to Rafael’s terror campaign.

“We don't have a choice,” Lambert said.

“Yes we do,” Elliott said. “Yes we do have a choice.”

Lambert shook his head. “I know how you feel but . . .”

“Let me show you something,” Elliott rose and walked out the room and over to his desk. From his bag, he fetched Lindberg’s e-mails that Bridget had printed out. These he showed Lambert.

“I can blow this thing wide open,” Elliott said. “I can expose the people behind the incentive deal, and show how they are trying to milk the city for all it’s worth. I also know the city council will vote in support of the housing reforms. If we run a story saying that the council will approve the housing reforms no matter what proposal is presented on voting day, and released documents like Lindberg’s e-mails here that show how all these
power play and backroom dealings override our democratic process for personal gain, then the public backlash will force the council to reject the housing reforms. The reforms are unacceptable because the incentive deal that comes with it is unacceptable.”

Lambert was reading through the e-mails then returned them to Elliott.

“These are good stuff. But this is not going to change Bennett’s mind.”

Elliott knew that of course, but if working within the capacity as a Madison Vanguard reporter was not possible, then Elliott had to step out of his role and work outside of it all, alone. All he needed was a way to come back once he had enough material for a killer story before the city council meets to vote.

“Let me and Bridget work alone, no one needs to know,” he said. “Once I have gathered enough material for a story, we can then decide whether it’s worth running the story or not. If we do decide to run the story, that’s because we know it will stop the housing reforms, save the city. And that I think is worth the risk.”

“Elliott I didn’t know you’re so invested in this,” Lambert said. He rose from his chair and walked up to the glass wall as he watched the newsroom. “You do realize that whether your story saves the city or not, Bennett will have you fired and anyone else who’s involved in this.”

Elliott was practically asking Lambert to put his neck on the line. But the managing editor didn’t outright reject his proposal and seeing him standing by the glass wall he knew he had an ally in Lambert. He just needed a bit more convincing. “I worked last weekend so I have tomorrow and Friday off which I can use to investigate on my own right through the weekend. I won’t be wasting any resources even if I don’t come up with anything.”
“You’ll be reporting to me alone, and Anad must not know anything about this,” Lambert said. “Can you trust Bridget?”

“Absolutely.”

“Whatever we write, if we decide to write it, it will have to come out by Monday. So you have until Sunday at the latest to show me something fit to print. Otherwise, you'll have to drop the story. It'll be harder for you because you're on your own but I can't waste resources.”

“I feel this is the right thing to do.”

“I know Elliott. Now, you better go before I change my mind.”

Elliott walked out of Lambert’s office, not knowing what he had gotten himself into. But there was no time to worry. The day was coming to an end, and as the deadline for the metro page approached, he had to find and write stories to fill out the blank spaces that another day without advertisement had left. He couldn't concentrate and that led to slow and downright sloppy writing about which Anad rightfully complained.

Later at night as he was writing up the comments from analysts about the kidnapping attempt, Agent Powell and Agent Fry arrived to question him about the incident. Elliott met them downstairs and gave the same account he had told the police earlier. He explained how he got hold of Lindberg’s name from Philip’s source and by reading the minutes of meeting of the council’s hearing with the property consultants. Elliott couldn't answer why the kidnappers were after Lindberg. Fry seemed satisfied with his statements yet noted the coincidence of Elliott being involved twice in the kidnapping incident. Elliott knew, the FBI would from now on pay closer attention to him.
By 10:30 p.m. he returned to his desk, feeling exhausted. Anad must have noticed the look on his face for he told Elliott to go home and enjoy his long weekend.

Elliott walked out into the cold night and up along Madison Avenue toward Grand Central Station for his home commute. Having no idea how he should proceed with confirming Lindberg’s e-mails and digging deeper into the incentive deal, he wasn’t sure anymore about his idea of pursuing this story alone. He would miss Anad’s guidance, Philip’s sources and Prodetta’s writing. And after he helped Lindberg escape today, he might have lost Rafael’s illegal but helpful resources as well. He would have to tell Frank that he had lost his newspaper’s support. A glance at his phone showed Frank still hadn’t replied.

It was just him and Bridget then. Elliott stared at her name on his phone’s call history, wishing he had her company even if it was just her voice. He pressed dial, waited and after four beeps hung up. It was late after all; he couldn’t expect Bridget to be around for him all the time. What would he be doing at home? Petersson was waiting for him to reply to his e-mails on the collaborative-search project and Elliott didn’t feel like working on his project tonight. He didn’t want to go home just yet, and to end the day feeling as though he was the only person in a city of 8.7 million people.

So instead of taking the 7 train to Queens he took a train heading downtown, not thinking of a particular destination. But at Union Square he switched to the L train, and by then knew where he was going. He stepped off at Eighth Avenue and walked the five minutes to reach Abindgon Square Park. This was where it all began.

The park was, as he suspected, occupied by homeless people sleeping on the benches around the World War I statue. He had hoped to find a quiet spot to sit and think
but now standing around in the park by himself he had to either go home or find something else to do. So he decided to take a stroll by retracing the route he and Bridget had taken, and before long he arrived where he wanted to be all along without knowing it.

Between the gaps of the drawn curtains, he saw the warmth of Katherine’s apartment spilling out into the night. Elliott stood in the darkest spot between two landings of a brownstone apartment across the street and felt strangely at home. A square window lit up, revealing the kitchen as someone had switched on the lights. Katherine walked in, wearing a cardigan and with her hair tied in a ponytail. She seemed to be washing dishes, and Elliott instinctively receded deeper into the shadow as he watched her. What was he doing? He was invading her privacy. How befitting this was for a person who invented a search program that stalked other people’s search history. He wondered what he would tell her if he crossed the street, walked up to her apartment and rang the doorbell. He was still thinking about it when Katherine walked out of sight and switched off the lights in the kitchen. The show was over.

Elliott sighed, not wanting to go just yet. His phone vibrated and he pulled it out.

<Elliott?>

It was Frank. He looked around as though Frank had caught him standing there in the dark. Of all the people he knew, it must be a terrorist wanting to talk to him at almost midnight.

He put away his phone and emerged out of the shadow to head home.
CHAPTER IV – Follow the Money

Elliott was searching with half open eyes for the clock on the nightstand. It was 10:03 a.m. and he didn’t feel like getting up. For the first time in a long time, he felt emptied out. Not only was he hungry, he also didn’t know what to do today. He wanted to forget the deal he had made with Lambert; forget about his idea to pursue the story by himself. He could let developers have their way with New York, let Rafael burn down the city and in letting them, disappoint Frank, Bridget and everyone else along the way. He closed his eyes and when he heard his phone ringing he opened them. It had been ringing a couple of times before, and he had left it ringing until the caller gave up. He closed his eyes again and drifted away into sleep.

Someone knocked at the door. Elliott didn’t move. Whoever it was didn’t have to know that he was taking a day off. The knocking continued, then it stopped, and a few seconds later his phone rang again. He was too lazy to rise from his bed but realized belatedly that the person knocking at the door might be the same who was calling him now. The ring tone was loud enough to be heard from the hallway. Elliott got up, fumbled on the table until he found his phone.

“Yeah?”

“You hibernating?” It was Bridget.

“No.”

“I’m right outside your room and you didn’t hear me knocking?”

Funny how last night he wanted to hear her voice. This wasn’t the voice he remembered wanting to hear. “Can you come back later?”

“What’s wrong? Are you sick?”
“No. I just don’t want to see anyone for now.”

“Oh wait, do you have a visitor in there? I mean a girl? Am I interrupting?”

“No. It’s nothing.”

“Nothing? Then let me in!”

“I don't feel like doing anything today.”

“I’ll make you breakfast.”

That was his cue. Elliott got up and looked into the mirror. He tried unsuccessfully to straighten his hair then shuffled to the door. When he opened it Bridget waltzed in, stepping right into the kitchen and straight to the fridge.

“What do you want Bridget?”

“Breakfast that's what I want,” she said, as she examined the inside of his fridge. She pulled out butter, eggs, and cheese, sniffing the last two for their freshness, and from the top of the fridge brought down a loaf of whole-grain bread. Elliott boiled water to make coffee.

“Anad told me Jack’s father pulled the plug on your story.” She put everything but the eggs on the kitchen counter. “I called you but you didn’t answer, so I thought I should pay you a visit in case you want to talk about this.”

Bridget made scrambled eggs while he told her about how he had struck a deal with Lambert to work on the story alone, but thought it now impossible to continue without the support of his paper.

“I might as well go over to Jack,” he said, “tell him everything I know, and let him do the job that Rafael wanted me to do.”
Bridget divided her scrambled eggs, which looked more like a giant omelet with chunks of cheese in it, then slid the two halves onto hers and Elliott’s plates. Elliott cut the bread into six slices, three for each and poured black coffee for him and her.

“I don’t know what I was thinking when I accepted Rafael’s offer,” he said. “This whole thing is too much for me.”

“I thought we were going to do this together,” Bridget said. “We have Lindberg’s e-mails, that’s a start right?”

“Yeah but going after all seven property directors Lindberg had been corresponding with will take ages, and we blew our chance with Lindberg yesterday.”

“Did Frank reply to your messages?”

“Let me check.” He went to the bedroom to fetch his phone. He didn’t want to tell Bridget about his detour to Katherine’s apartment last night. On his way back home he had messaged Frank again. Returning to the table, Elliott shook his head. “Nothing, no reply. Even with the leaked e-mails, I don’t know where to start.”

“Follow the money,” Bridget said. “That’s what Lindberg said if we want to talk to the people who decide how things are run.”

Elliott thought about this. From Lindberg’s e-mails he had a rough picture of how the incentive deal came together. The correspondence between the consultant and the property companies showed how they drafted the different clauses that were to become the incentive deal in the housing reforms. But he had been so focused on Lindberg and the roles of the property companies, that he had forgotten about those in the finance industry. Now he doubted that exposing the people behind the incentive deal would be
enough to stop the housing reforms program. For that he had to dig deeper and that was
when Lindberg’s follow-the-money made sense.

“I think it’s time we try out something new,” Elliott said.

“What about Lindberg’s e-mails, isn’t that what you were looking for?”

“We’ve focused too long on the players in the property industry.”

“And we got these e-mails that prove how they fixed the incentive deal. Let’s
stick with that.”

“I know but Lindberg was right when he said we should follow the money. This is
a fiscal crisis so the key players are to be found among the finance industry, not the
property industry.”

Bridget didn’t look happy and he remembered the virus debacle while they were
copying data off Lindberg’s hard drive. “How much did you pay for that anti virus?”

“It’s not that. It’s just we’ve gone through a lot of trouble to fetch the e-mails.”

“I know but we have to cut our losses and move on. I don’t want to spend the next
few days chasing directors at developers. What about the investment bankers? Right?”

“What about them?”

“Well, investment bankers only underwrite the debt, they sell the bonds on the
city’s behalf and earn a fee. It’s the bond investors who will get repaid. Hold on.”

Elliott fetched his laptop from the bedroom and opened today’s news. President
Bolton and Mayor Alberta were scheduled to meet today to discuss her request for a
federal bailout for New York. Elliott opened yesterday’s story on Standard & Poor’s
warning that it would downgrade New York’s credit rating if President Bolton rejected
her appeal for a bailout.
“Bond investors,” he said and showed Bridget the story on Standard & Poor’s. “Those who own most of the city's $530 million bonds due Sept. 25 will benefit the most from the housing reforms.”

“How so?”

“Bonds are basically debt that you can sell and buy in the market. When S&P cut the city's bond rating to junk status it signals to investors that the city's ability to repay its debt is in doubt. No one wants to hold on to debt from someone who may not be able to repay it, so investors sell the bonds and their prices fall. In fact, prices have been falling ever since it became clear that New York was heading for a fiscal crisis.”

Elliott clicked on a graph that showed the price movement of New York’s municipal bonds. “Look, the city's bond prices plunging here. It says the price on the 5-year bonds have dropped to 20 cents to the dollar. I guess that means an 80 percent drop.”

Bridget pointed at the story. “It says here bond yields rose, what are yields?”

“No idea. The point is someone who owned the bonds from the first day they were issued by the city until yesterday would have suffered an 80 percent lost on his investment. However if someone had bought the bonds yesterday and held on to them until they mature on Sept. 25, that person would have made an 80 percent capital gain on his investment, assuming, and that’s a big if, the city is able to repay in full that debt on Sept. 25.

“What about interest rates? Don’t bonds carry interest rates?”

“Sure but at this point let’s not assume interest rates. If you buy the bonds at these depressed prices, you’re going to bet on making a hefty capital gain come due date.”
Bridget nodded. “These bonds are traded every day in the market so anyone could buy them for cheap and wait for the city to repay in full.”

“We must find out who owns most of these bonds because they are the ones who stand to win the most if the city passes the housing reforms.” Elliott licked the remaining crumbs from the plate, wishing there was more of Bridget’s scrambled egg/omelet. Then he reached for his phone and pulled up the number of a former Madison Vanguard’s business desk reporter who had extensive contacts in the financial industry.

“What are you doing?” Bridget asked.

“Try to get us an appointment with a brokerage.”

#

The glass tower shimmered under the sun and reflected the surrounding skyscrapers of the financial district in Downtown Manhattan. Elliott looked up at the building and wondered what it was like working up there where people made money out of money. He knew the venture capitalists who had invested in Lisa’s collaborative-search project had their eyes set on listing her company on the stock exchange. Invest a few millions dollars in a startup, and reap a billion dollars on an initial public offering, asset valuation, that’s how they played the game. Lisa would be filthy rich overnight, and he was helping her get up there, for nothing.

Elliott and Bridget entered the building, and after registering at the lobby and going through the security screening, they headed for the 34th floor. The design of Kaida Securities’ lobby was a play of black and gray shades in the choice of furniture, carpet and wall decoration. It might have been intended to have a calming effect but the pervading sense was that of coolness punctuated only by the single presence of a human
being sitting behind a desk. A woman with a short haircut asked Elliott and Bridget to take seats while she notified their host.

Their host was Paula, a fixed-income analyst whom Elliott’s friend recommended for any questions about the bond market. Paula was friendly and the go-to person for reporters looking for market gossips or quick comments about moves in bonds. She emerged out of a door, wearing sleeves rolled up to her elbow like a deliberate insult to her immaculate office. Right behind her was Timothy, the public relations officer who would accompany Bridget while she took pictures of the dealing room. Bridget had told Dawson she wanted to update the paper’s stock photos of financial market related pictures. This gave Elliott an excuse to talk to Paula in her office rather than try to get her talking to him over the phone.

While Timothy led Bridget into the dealing room, Elliott was seated in a small meeting room, not unlike the one in his own office.

“So you said you wanted to ask me something?” Paula asked.

“This is about the New York infrastructure bonds, the XT series,” he said.

“The $530 million that’s due Sept. 25?”

“Yes. Is it possible to find out who bought these bonds during these dates?” He asked and showed her the dates over the past month where bond prices have fallen.

“May I know what this is for?”

“I just need background information, nothing on record of course.”

“I should check with my compliance officer, I don’t think she’ll approve it.”
“I thought you subscribe to a terminal from where this data is retrievable?” Elliott asked. “So technically anyone among the public can access that data if they subscribe to the terminal.”

“I don’t know about this.”

“All I need is just a quick look and I’ll write it down on my notepad, no electronic trail and no paper trail.”

“What do you plan on doing with the information?”

“I’d like to know the bondholders who benefits the most once the city has secured funding to repay the bonds when they mature Sept. 25.”

“Hmm, I can see that would make an interesting story,” Paula said. “But I can only show you what brokerages bought or sold the bonds but not the investors on whose behalf they carried out the transaction.”

“Why?”

“That kind of information is confidential. Brokerages don’t disclose the names of their clients just as banks don’t give out theirs. You’ll have to contact the brokerages individually to find out on whose behalf they purchased the bonds.”

Bummer. That meant more leg work to follow up on that.

“All right, at least I got something to work on.”

“Come with me,” Paula said.

They walked out to the hallway and deeper into the office until they reached a door protected by a security lock. Paula swiped her ID card, and they went through a corridor which led to the dealing room. The room seemed to occupy about a half of the building’s floor and resembled a giant class room with rows of desks and large monitors.
Elliott spotted Bridget in one corner with Timothy who was playing with her camera. Paula directed Elliott to a side room which was separated from the dealing room by a glass pane. This was the research section for stock and bond analysts.

Paula walked to her desk and gestured for Elliott to grab a chair and sit next to her.

“Now let me see those dates again,” she said.

The $530 million, fixed-rate bonds due Sept. 25 were sold by the city five years ago to fund the construction of a bridge and add a new road to JFK airport. Elliott showed Paula the dates again.

“Ah clever, you use the news angle to identify buying patterns,” she said. “Aug. 21 was the date Mayor Alberta mentioned the possibility of defaulting on the bonds.”

Paula typed a command on her screen and a graph popped up with what looked like a profile of a mountain range with peaks and valleys.

“If you look at this graph here, there are a number of points where it would have been wise to buy the bonds,” she said. She pointed at the bottom of each valley over a two-month period. “The rule of thumb is to buy low and sell high. As obvious this may sound, it's actually difficult to pinpoint where exactly the bottom or the peak will be, smart investors may have an approximation of when they should buy and when to sell.”

The graph showed a descending price trend, with each new peak forming at a lower price level than the preceding peak and each new valley forming a new low.

“Demand for the bonds is low,” Paula said. “With New York at risk of defaulting, this actually affects all municipal bonds across the country. No one wants to hold them
and those who do, buy them only if prices are low enough for them to compensate for the higher risk of default.”

“Do we know who have been the biggest sellers of municipal bonds?”

“There was a report a few weeks ago showing how institutional investors such as banks and mutual funds have long divested themselves off New York’s bonds,” Paula said then she looked at Elliott. “And now you’re trying to figure out who’s been buying the most. That’s an interesting angle.”

“But if all these big investors are selling, wouldn’t it flush the bond market with New York bonds?”

Paula turned her monitor so that Elliott had a better view of a table with a list of brokerage names.

“Here are all the brokerages that bought the bonds on Aug. 21., ranked by value of their bond purchases. I’d write down the top five biggest buyers.”

Elliott pulled out his notepad and did just that. Paula then typed in a different date where prices have reached a new low, and another table popped up with a new list of brokerages. He wrote these down as well, and did the same for the other four dates that he had asked her to look up.

“Do you notice something?” Paula asked, pointing with her pen at the table on the screen.

“Yes. These three brokerages here have bought all the bonds over the past two days.”

“Look at the value of the purchases.” Paula said. “Let me try something.”
She entered today’s date and again the three brokerages came on top on the list of the biggest buyers.

“You want to know who owns most of the bonds due Sept 25?” Paula said, tapping her pen on the screen. “These three brokerages might be a good place to follow up.”

“So I don’t need to look at whoever bought bonds on other dates?”

“No, just look at the amount they bought since Monday. That’s a lot. I think you may have something interesting going on here,” she said. “But it’ll be difficult to find out who the real investors are behind the three brokerages. However, just because it’s the same three brokerages doesn’t mean it’s the same investors behind them.”

“What do you think? What’s more likely?” Elliott asked.

Paula raised her eyebrows. “The buying pattern suggests there’s someone out there who’s accumulating these bonds. I like that. If you ever write a story on this, I’d love to read it.”

Elliott thanked her for her time and walked out to the lobby where Bridget was already waiting for him.

On their way down, Elliott suggested grabbing a late lunch at a café where he could access the Internet and make phone calls. Normally he would have headed back for the office but since he promised Lambert that he wouldn’t let anyone know that he was working on the incentive deal story, he would have to make use of public Internet access.

Bridget knew just the place. They walked up the five minutes to get to the café which was crowded by office workers holding meetings or getting their caffeine fix before returning to office. Elliott snatched a table at a corner that was drenched in
sunlight despite the skyscrapers surrounding the café. They each bought a sandwich at the
counter and returned to the table where he told her what he found out.

“Now what?” Bridget asked.

That ‘what’ was Nancy Schwartz and her nightly radio show “The Noise.” Nancy’s show focused on the stories behind financial news, compromising mostly of gossip and rumors about companies, investors, regulators, and politicians that provided to many listeners context to what were they reading in the papers. Many of her loyal listeners were stock traders and individual investors who tuned in after a hard working
day to check the Noise for rumors that might move stocks the next morning. Not all of what she reported turned out to be true, but for some it was enough simply knowing what was circulating out there in the ether of financial gossips to prepare for the market day ahead. Elliott met her during a two-day press junket to Philadelphia by a German automaker.

“I have a contact whom I can ask to find out the investors behind the three brokerages,” Elliott said. “Let’s hope she still remembers me.”

Bridget didn’t seem to be listening, she was looking outside.

“Bridget?”

“These two men they keep looking in our direction,” she said.

The men she meant were across the street. One was reading a newspaper on a bench and another was leaning on a post as though waiting for someone to pick him up. Every now and then, however, they would look at the café.

“Who are they?” Elliott asked.

“Good questions. So are you going to meet that contact of yours?”
“I have to call her first. Do you want to come along?”

“No. I’d like to try something different as well.”

“Like what?” Elliott asked.

Bridget grabbed her backpack and jacket.

“I’ll tell you later.”

#

Bridget crossed the street and walked passed the two men who had been watching the café. She turned right into a narrow street and headed up for Broadway, suspecting that one of them would follow her. Didn’t Rafael say his men would keep a close watch on her and Elliott? He showed up uninvited twice, once when she hung out with Alfonso and Boris, then when he took her and Elliott for a ride to Lindberg’s office. Halfway through the block, she abruptly turned around, and as she retraced her steps she spotted one of the men walking straight at her. So they were following her and Elliott. She stopped in front of a shoe shop as if checking out the latest model in the window display. She let the man pass behind her as she thought of what to do next.

She could try to lose him, she could let him follow her or, and this was a more interesting option, she could try to follow him instead. Unlike when she was trailing Elliott, this time no drone was monitoring her moves. It was time to turn the table on Rafael and show up uninvited at his place.

To follow the man she would first have to lose him. She resumed walking toward Broadway and overtook her follower, who was chatting on his phone. Scanning for opportunities to sneak out of view, she saw ahead on the other side of the street, a group of people heading in the same direction. They were apparently tourists, an older couple with
their three grown up children of about her age. She quickened her pace and cross the street to walk in front of the group, then she slowed her pace again so that she almost looked as though she was part of the group. The group of six people was dense enough to make it difficult for anyone behind them to spot her in front. The family turned left into Broadway, causing a temporary blind spot for her follower. She entered a café to her left, and as the group continued walking, she spotted the man passing by her. He continued to follow the family, unaware that she was no longer in front of them. She stuffed her jacket inside the backpack, wrapped a scarf around her head to defuse her appearance and with backpack in hand, left the café.

Outside she crossed Broadway and walked along cover of parking cars from where she could observe the man still following the family. A moment later he realized his mistake and turned around. The man retraced the path back to the corner, went inside the café, walked out then looked around. Bridget was watching him from the entrance of a Deli.

A couple of minutes he spoke to his phone again, then continued to walk. Bridget stepped out of the Deli while sticking close by the cover of parking cars and vans. She felt dizzy knowing that she was following one of Rafael’s men. She didn’t dare thinking he would take her to the terrorists’ hideout. The man continued walking up Broadway and entered Fulton station. The subway, this was going to be tricky.

Hanging back she saw him pass the turnstile and heading for the platform for trains going to Brooklyn. She left the station, crossed the street, then reentered and went to the same platform from a different entrance. Leaning against one of the metal pillars that lined up the platform, she observed the man from afar. When he stepped into the J
Train, she jumped in as well. Inside the train she walked through the cars, closing the
distance to him, until she was riding in the car next to his. They rode for about half an
hour before the man stepped off at Marcy Avenue in Brooklyn.

Bridget emerged out of the subway station and spotted the man walking down the
Avenue. She let him walk a bit further away before resuming her trail. He was talking on
the phone and hardly looked around as he walked, indicating familiarity with the
surrounding. So Rafael and his men must be hiding somewhere nearby. The man turned
right into 5th Street and Bridget hurried along, fearing he might disappear on her like she
did on him earlier. She turned the corner and to her relief saw him still walking in front.
It was like a curtain had fallen in front of her and wrapped her up, engulfing her in black
cotton fabric as she felt ropes tightening around her and pressing her limps against her
body. A push sent her falling forward into the shoulder of a man who then carried her.
All she could do was wiggle like a worm while she heard the sliding door of a van
opening just before he threw her inside.

#

Elliott met Nancy at Hannover Park in downtown Manhattan. She had agreed to
help him on the condition that she could use whatever information they might find for her
own radio show. With Elliott’s stories on the incentive deal making headlines across the
city over the past few days, he knew Nancy was hoping to tap into some of the leads he
was working on. Fair enough. If he wanted to make headway in finding out the names of
the big bondholders, he would have to set aside rivalry.

Dressed in a trench coat and puffing a cigarette. They hugged and she nodded to
the building across the street.
“That’s my friend’s office up there,” she said. “We’re going to pay him a visit. Most of the time I work by phone, but there are some things you must do in person, and this is one of these things.”

They walked up to the building but had to wait outside as police wouldn’t let anyone inside other than people working in there and registered guests. “Joseph is going to come down and meet us,” Nancy said.

“Your friend?”

“Yes. He’s a bond trader and knows a thing or two about who bought what, when and how much.”

It didn’t take long for Joseph to show up. Although many people working at Wall Street listen to Nancy’s radio show they wouldn’t know how she looked like. Still Joseph seemed apprehensive to be seen alongside with her, and he let them two buildings away into an alley that’s used by service personnel.

“What do you want?” he asked with that hushed tone that at first Elliott mistook for fear of being found out talking to Nancy, but then recognized as impatience with a hint of annoyance. Elliott knew this all to well from his own experience of talking with irritated sources.

“I need you to find out who bought these bonds since Monday,’’ She asked, unfazed by his mood. Nancy held out her hand and Elliott gave her the piece of paper with the names of the three brokerages that had been buying the bonds.

“Who this’s guy?” Joseph asked, nodding in Elliott’s direction.

“That’s Elliott Griffin, from Madison Vanguard.”

“Christ why do you take him here for? Is this a press conference or what?”
“I want him to meet my source in person, let he thinks I’m making things up.”

“Yeah?” Joseph eyed him suspiciously. “How do I know he won’t plaster my name all over his newspaper?”

“Come on Joseph,” Nancy stubbed out her cigarette and flunk it into a garbage can. “You know that’s not how reporters work, besides we’re asking for background information not quotes.”

“That’s right. I just need the names of the investors.” Elliott said.

Joseph looked at them both then read the dates and the bond series on the paper.

“This is the bond everyone is so worried about, $530 million and no money to pay,” he said. “Yeah I sure remember two of these dates. There was a flurry of buying on Monday just after the kidnapping and on Tuesday after the New York Times broke news about the incentive deal.”

“It was Elliott’s paper that ran the news first,” Nancy said, correcting him. “So how long does it take for you to find out who owns these bonds?”

“I need to make some phone calls.”

Nancy looked at her watch. “Can you make it before 6 p.m.? If anything interesting comes up, I’d like to run it for my show today.”

“I see what I can do.”

“Why does anyone want to snap up these bonds,” Elliott asked. “Do they know something the rest of us don’t?”

“I don’t think so,” Joseph said. “Ever since the attack on Berea and your paper running the story on the incentive deal, the situation has become too fluid to know for
sure what’s going to happen when the council votes. And even if they did know
something, they wouldn’t want to flirt with insider trading.”

“These are bonds no one wants, right?” Elliott asked. “They’re cheap but very
risky.”

“Risky because the market is less sure the housing reforms will get approved,”
Joseph said. “So either someone is very confident the city will repay them, then reap a
hefty profit on the capital gain, or there’s something fishy going on here.” He waved the
paper at them “I’ll bet it’s the latter.”

#

Bridget stared at the obstacle to her freedom, a white metallic cell door with a port
in the middle for cuffing the prisoner. A bare, low-watt light bulb, a folding chair and an
old table were the only creature comforts against the barren, window-less walls that
surrounded her. Up in one corner of the ceiling a camera was watching her. *Great, now
what?*

They had snatched her from the street so fast, that by the time she realized what
was happening, she was already inside a van. Judging by how short the ride was, she
figured she was still somewhere around Williamsburg in Brooklyn. But after had they
dumped her in the basement cell, loosening the ropes so she could free herself, they had
inexplicitly left her alone. No one came by to question her, and after waiting for what
seemed like an hour, her fear had given way to impatience. She looked up at the camera,
wondering whether Rafael had simply forgotten about her.

“Bridget can you hear me?” Rafael’s voice came from above. She turned to its
direction and spotted a speaker mounted to the ceiling next to the camera.
“Rafael?”

“You need to get out of there.”

“Why don't you tell that your men?”

“There's no one in the house.”

“So am I supposed to kick down the door?”

“I’ll open the door for you remotely. But before I do, listen to me carefully. Once you get out of this room, you’ll find a phone ringing in a locker in the adjacent guard room. It’s inside a backpack with spare survival gears. Got it?”

“Okay I got it but what’s going on?”

The door emitted the sound of a metallic click and when Bridget pushed, it slowly swung open.

“Go now.”

She stepped into a hallway and immediately heard the faint ringing of a phone behind the door in front of her. She opened that door and the guardroom. It was just as barren as her cell with the exception of a few monitors on the table, and the locker from which the ringing came from. She found the cheap phone in the backpack and answered it.

“Good,” Rafael said. “Inside the locker you’ll find a ski mask and a jacket. Put both on. We’ll need to disguise you.”

She did as she was told, sporting the jacket which was two sizes too big and put on the ski-mask.

“Mind telling me why am I supposed to look like a criminal again?”
“Stay on the phone. There’s a small window by the hallway. If you look to your left, you’ll understand why.”

She returned to the hallway and saw it had three more cells, all empty. The small window was in the back and she walked up to it and pulled aside the curtains. She was indeed in the basement and looking out she only had a ground view of the street in front. Cars were parked on both sides but otherwise the street was empty.

“What am I looking at?” she asked but immediately saw what she was supposed to see. A black van was parked to her left and next to it were half a dozen police officers in tactical gears with assault rifle at their ready. “Holy shit.”

Bridget weighed her options. There's nothing wrong with telling the police who she was and explaining what she was doing her. She was kidnapped after all. But Rafael had read her mind when he directed her into wearing this outfit with phone in hand. Her camera with her press credentials were gone and she was alone in a house that SWAT officers were about to raid in search for armed terrorists. She had no intention of going up against the police. Not again.

“Rafael, please tell me you have an escape plan,” she said.

“I will come to get you. But listen carefully. The entire house is booby trapped. Now there are cameras everywhere so I know where you are but be extremely careful where you tread. Got it?”

“Did you say booby trapped?”

“Yes, so be careful.”

“Okay.” Bridget watched the SWAT officers forming a line by the van; one man carried a ram.
“Next. We have small drones inside the house. One of these drones will guide you out of the house. It is waiting for you in the hallway on the first floor. Don’t go up yet. Wait for my go.”

The SWAT team were rushing passed by her, boots stamping on the ground, and they assembled by the front door.

“Rafael, they’re about to breach the front door.”

“Wait.”

The officer with the ram walked up to the front door and with one, two swings busted the door open with a loud bang and as the first officers rushed in, a faint spray of haze shot down from the doorway. The officers ducked, cursed and coughed and retreated with hands covering their eyes. From inside the house smoke came out drifting out.

“Now!”

Bridget ran up the stairway, pushed open the door, looked to her left, and saw the drone, the size of a hand, hovering at eye level. The spot where the open front door should have been was shrouded in thick smoke and she could feel the familiar sting of tear gas in her eyes. When she looked ahead again, the drone was already gone, and she heard Rafael’s voice calling her from the phone. She raised the phone to her ear.

“Follow that drone, don’t wait around and stay on the phone!”

“Right.”

From the front door through the smoke, she could hear the police returning. She walked deeper into the house and stopped when the hallway branched into two and she still couldn’t see the drone.
“Which way, which way?”

The drone flew out from a room on the right hallway, hovering by the doorway as it waited for her. She was about to walk up to it when Rafael hissed her to stop.

“What?”

“There's trip wire in that hallway, careful now.”

She spotted the fine threat that run across the hallway by a few inches above the ground. She stepped over it then walked toward the drone as it flew back into the room. Behind her she heard the police rushing through the front door.

She picked up her pace and run into a coffee table that was partly blocking the hallway, her phone slipped off and skidded all the way to the kitchen to her left.

Cursing, Bridget ran up to the kitchen and couldn't find her phone. Above her she heard the whir of the drone following her. She crouched and saw the phone lying under a cabinet near the backdoor. She could hear Rafael asking her something as she picked up the phone. “I'm still here,” she said.

“I'm in the kitchen near the backdoor.”

“Do not touch -.”

A rattling next her sent her spinning around. Through the curtained glassed section of the backdoor she could see someone shaking out of control then collapsing.

“…the doorknob, it's electrified.”

“What now?”

“Wait. The police are back in the house. My drones will buy you time. Wait for my go.”
She saw a group of four drones flying pass her in the hallway and a moment the police shouting. “Shoot down those drones!”

The sound of gun fire rocked the house.

“Go, go now!” Rafael said.

She ran toward the room on the other side of the hallway and as she rushed inside, she heard police already in the hallway heading in her direction. They must have spotted her. She shut the door and locked in. It was a bedroom with a writing desk, a big wardrobe, and a window facing out the street.

“What now? I’m trapped here.”

“Push the wardrobe aside.”

She went to the wardrobe and just then the police were banging at the door. It wouldn’t take long for them to break through. Through the window she saw more SWAT officers heading for her room. She pushed and pushed until she saw an opening in the wall behind the wardrobe. She kept pushing until the opening was big enough for her to squeeze through. Just then a spurt of gunfire rattled through the room and the door crashed open.

She stood in the hallway of a different house.

“Go up the stairway in front, watch for the tripwire at the bottom.”

She ran to the front of the house with the SWAT officers in the bedroom on her tail. She found the stairway, spotted the tripwire at the bottom, and ran up the stairs to the first landing.

“Run to the door at the very end of the hallway,” Rafael said.
Below she could hear the officers running up the stairways and seconds later a blast shocked the entire house, and she fell, her phone dropping again. There was a sound of wood splintering and collapsing behind her. She picked up her phone, turned around and saw the stairway was completely gone with the two police officers lying on top of a pile of rubble.

She saw the open door at the end of the hallway and the window that led out to the roof. Running toward the door, she felt a slight tug at her ankle and a sting in her thigh. Stopping by the doorway she looked down.

“There's something sticking out of my leg,” she said and pulled out that thing, raised it to her face and saw it was a dart. She felt her consciousness escaping and when she made a step forward she was falling onto the carpet and the last thing she saw was the light shining through the open window and climbing into the room was Rafael.

“Bridget.”

#

Elliott thought that because of Nancy’s popular radio show, her office at Lafayette Street would be as spacious and luxurious as those of the brokerages she reported about. Far from it. Walking up the creaky stairs to a loft that her office shared with three or four other businesses, he saw the same deteriorating state of Manhattan reflected inside. The wallpapers were stained, a stack of broken heaters and kitchen equipment were left inside the broken elevator on the third floor, and inside everywhere was the musky smell of wet carpet where pipes must have leaked.

Nancy shoved Elliott into her room, which was separated from the rest of her office by two tall shelves at a windowed corner. She told him to wait as she prepared for
her show. He looked around to find himself surrounded by books. They were mostly about the financial markets, the economy, the law, directories and references which on the whole was impressive but somewhat diluted by today’s standard because of the Internet. Elliott picked a book on the latest trend in Internet technology and made himself comfortable as he waited for Nancy to return.

At about 5 p.m. Nancy opened the door. “Sorry to have you kept you waiting,” she said. She sat at her desk and logged into her computer. “Joseph sent us a nice list.”

She gestured for Elliott to grab a chair and come over to her desk. Joseph had sent her an e-mail with a list of 12 names that sounded like they were names of investment funds. Elliott didn’t recognize any of them. Next to their names were the amounts and dates of the bonds they purchased. Nancy reached for her desk phone.

“Let’s talk to Joseph. He’s expecting our call,” she said and when she got him online, she put him on speaker phone.

“Everyone happy with this?” Joseph asked, sounding not so grumpy as the first time he met him.

Elliott nodded then quickly added “thank you, that's exactly what we want to know. However you said earlier that there might be something fishy about the bond transactions?”

“I was about to explains this,” Joseph said. “Do you have the table in front of you?”

“Yes.”

“As you can see there was some massive buying over the past few days. These 12 investment funds gobbled up almost of the bonds. Normally about half of municipal
bonds like these ones are owned by retail investors, people like you and me who want to
invest in something safer than stocks or corporate bonds but offering a higher return than
bank deposits. But in this case here, the bonds are almost completely owned by the 12
names I sent you.”

“Interesting, any idea what this means?” Elliott asked.

“The first theory that come to mind is that these investors are confident the city
will not default on Sept. 25.”

“So when the city settles the bonds, they’re betting on profiting from the capital
gain,” Nancy said. Turning to Elliott she added “that’s how investors typically play, on
expectations.”

“Right, but there’re two problems with this theory,” Joseph said. “Just about
every big institutional investor has been dumping municipal bonds because they are way
more safer investments out there. So buying these bonds which are at immediate risk of
defaulting, goes against this trend. Second, if we assume the 12 investors know
something the rest of us don’t, material information, then that could be insider trading
and I don’t think they’re stupid enough to be involved in that.”

“What is the other possible explanation then?” Elliott asked.

“Now remember that they bought up all the bonds after the kidnapping and after
the story on the incentive deal ran. The terrorist threat and public criticism against the
incentive deal have put the housing reforms at risk.”

“The bond price dropped to its lowest level,” Nancy said.
“Yes, reflecting the higher risk of defaulting, but price is not what matters here,” Joseph said. “This may sound weird but I think these 12 investors aren’t acting independently.”

“You mean they’re acting like a consortium or a syndicate?” Nancy said.

“Exactly. I think that as a syndicate they are anticipating New York defaulting on its bonds.”

“So what does that mean?” Elliott asked.

“I talked to my friend at the Office of Management and Budget, the issuer of these bonds here, and told him about the 12 investors. He said if New York were to default on the bonds and start negotiating on a debt restructuring, the city will then have to negotiate with these 12 investors who practically own all of that debt. And that’s going to be tough. In other words, they’re sending a message that defaulting on the debt is not an easy way out of the housing reforms. A default, as bad as it already is, will come with even more dire consequences at the negotiation table when restructuring the debt.”

“So all this flurry of bond buying is to increase pressure on New York to approve the housing reforms?” Nancy asked.

“Exactly,” Joseph said.

“Let me get this straight,” Elliott said, “after the kidnapping and the incentive deal, the city has been under pressure from the terrorists and public criticism to drop the housing reforms. Without the reforms, banks refuse to sell new bonds to pay for the maturing $530 million and so New York will have to default on that debt. But now these 12 investors step in and basically tell New York that if for some reason you choose to
default we will make sure that negotiating a debt restructuring deal will be extremely costly.”

“Costly in the sense that they might demand steep budget cuts to make up for the city declining to cut affordable housing spending,” Nancy said.

“We’re talking about further cuts in education, police, fire services, hospitals etc,” Joseph said.

“So the investors are pushing back,” Elliott said and he thought about how Madison Vanguard had come under pressure from the high-placed friends of Bennett to stop pursuing the incentive deal story. “They want to make sure the incentive deal will happen.”

“They must want the housing reforms really bad,” Nancy said, “because that’s not how investors normally behave.”

“The terrorist threat against the city over policy reforms is unusual too,” Joseph said. “Perhaps unusual threats call for extraordinary measures.”

“I’ll have to talk to one of these investors to find out,” Elliott said.

They thanked Joseph for his help and Nancy turned to Elliott, with pen in hand.

“My show starts in 40 minutes. I’m trying to figure out whether to just reveal the names of the 12 investors or wait and dig out some more information first. But then your paper may beat me with your own story tomorrow morning.”

“Don’t worry Nancy, I’m not writing this up for today -.”

There was a knock on a door and one of Nancy’s assistant poked his head in.

“Police found the kidnappers’ hideout,” the assistant said.
Nancy grabbed her remote controller and flicked on the TV on a cabinet by the window. The presenter on screen recapped the breaking news of the past two hours. A police tactical team had stormed a house in Williamsburg which they suspected was used by the terrorists as their hideout. There had been conflicting reports about whether they were or were not terrorists inside at the time of the raid. The tactical team had to retreat after triggering a series of traps that injured three officers. Police believed that one of these traps also triggered a fire that consumed the entire house in an attempt to destroy evidence. Elliott watched the footage of the Williamsburg neighborhood taken from a helicopter. It showed a street filled by the blue and red flashes of police lights, ambulance and fire trucks and next to that the billowing black smoke of a burning house.

#

The noise seeped into Bridget’s mind as undistinguishable sounds, lingering at the margin of her dim awareness until they pulled her out of her sleep. She was hearing voices, people talking nearby, perhaps in a different room. She sensed light stroking her closed eyelids and felt the cushion of a chair underneath her.

When she opened her eyes, she found herself sitting on a wheelchair with her hands and feet strapped onto it. Squinting she looked up to see a table full of boxes that were either half packed or half unpacked. There was so much stuff in in the room. In one corner were studio lightings, tripods, umbrellas and other photograph equipment and in another corners were gas canisters, gas masks, cans of paint and littered on the floor and on the desk were various clothes and uniforms. It looked like the backstage of a theater or a movie set, she couldn't quite place all the material into a singular activity other than
perhaps acting. Then she felt a slight throbbing pain in her head, probably from the fall when the drugs knocked her out, and she remembered her escape from that house.

“Ah you’re awake,” said a woman from behind. Bridget turned her head to see Adrienne folding a shirt and placing it on top of a pile of clothes. She walked up to her, released the wheel lock, and stepping behind the wheelchair, rolled her into the hallway.

“Where am I?” Bridget asked.

“Can’t tell you that,” Adrienne said.

The voices she earlier heard came from the kitchen and Adrienne rolled her inside. The kitchen was decked in a country-style cabinetry with wooden countertops and a porcelain sink. The two windows above the sink had their blinds drawn down, but as no light came through she estimated it was already dark outside. She could hear the sound of traffic clear enough to suggest that they were on the second or third floor of an apartment.

Four of Rafael’s men were sitting around a table, working on their laptops and sorting out papers. Her backpack was at the foot of the table. Rafael was scrubbing hard on a grease covered pot in the sink and when he saw her, his face lit up.

“Welcome back to the world,” he said, and signaled to Adrienne to bring her closer to him. Bridget was rolled to the end of the table where Adrienne locked her wheels again.

“Rafael needs a word with you,” she said, patting her shoulder before leaving.

“You’ve been knocked out for two hours” he said as he turned to face her. “How do you feel?”

“I have a bit of a headache,” she said. “Where am I?”
“You don’t need to know,” he said. He turned around to face her. “I’m sorry about tying you up on this wheelchair, but you were following Xavier and we don’t know what to make of it.”

“I was following him because I got tired of being followed by your men.”

“And what did you expect to accomplish by following Xavier?” He asked. He went over to the stove and turned on the flame underneath a pot.

“Find out where you’re hiding.”

“That’s the sort of thing we can’t have you do.”

Bridget shrugged. “There are a lot of things I wasn’t supposed to do but did anyway.”

“True and that makes you unpredictable.” Rafael stirred the pot and Bridget could smell the mince inside, Bolognese sauce. “Hence the wheelchair. Bertrand said you’re a handful.”

“Bertrand? The big guy?”

“Yes. Are you hungry?”

Bridget wasn’t, but if eating dinner means getting out of the wheelchair, she didn’t mind eating now. “What are you making?”

“Everyone says I’m a terrible cook, but not when it comes to Spaghetti Bolognese,” he said. “You must be hungry after all the fun you had this afternoon.”

“What happened back there?”

Rafael leaned against the sink with his arms folded across his chest and a kitchen towel over his shoulder. He looked different somehow and Bridget wished he wasn’t a criminal.
“First you showed up and we had to put you in one of our cells while figuring out what to do with you. Then the police showed up, and I don’t know how they found out about that place but there they were. It’s good that the house was empty.”

“I saw empty cells in the basement.”

“As you can probably guess, that hideout was meant for keeping hostages if we had any.”

Rafael turned off the flame then took a plate from the drying rack, loaded it with Spaghetti and poured the Bolognese sauce all over it.

She heard Adrienne coming back to the kitchen. “Guys, I need some help with packing.”

“I’m not done here,” one of the men protested.

“I’ll help you out later,” Adrienne said, and turning to Bridget. “Be careful with Rafael’s cooking.”

“Don’t mind her,” Rafael said. “She’s just jealous my Bolognese tastes better than hers.”

The four men closed their laptops, gathered together their papers and shuffled out of the kitchen along with Adrienne who on her way out threw a napkin at Rafael.

“Anyway, that was a close call there with the police raid,” he said.

“Is there anyway the police can find out I was there?”

Rafael shook his head. “Once the hideout has been compromised we triggered a fire to burn it all down. Besides you didn’t leave anything.”
He placed the plate on the table and turned Bridget’s wheelchair around so she faced the meal. It did look good. She was staring at the Spaghetti, while Rafael fetched a fork and spoon and sat down by the table.

“So one more time: Why were you following Xavier?” he asked, as he mixed the Spaghetti with the Bolognese sauce. Bridget began to suspect that he would spoon feed her.

“As I said, I got tired of being followed around,” she said.

He lifted the fork with a bite fill of spooled Spaghetti and brought it closer to her mouth. She hesitated but then opened her mouth, taking the entire heap in one bite and a slurp at the end. There was something homey about the taste of meaty mince that filled her with simple content.

“And if you had found out where we’re hiding. What would you have done next?” Rafael asked.

It wasn’t a question that occurred to her at that time. She simply wanted to find his hideout. “I thought I might just knock at your door.”

“Why?”

Rafael fed her another bite, then rose from his chair and came back with a glass of water and a straw. He put the glass next to the plate and angled the straw toward her so she could drink by herself.

“I don’t know, there are many questions I want to ask you,” she said.

“It’s reckless. There’s a lot of preparation going into meeting you and Elliott. We have to make sure we leave nothing behind or else the FBI catches you. It’s not just for your safety but for ours as well.”
“I know that.”

“You have to be careful around us,” Rafael said, while digging the fork into Spaghetti for another bite.

“Then why do you have to be a terrorist?” She asked and noticed Rafael pausing, then looking in her eyes.

“I wish I wasn’t,” he said and grabbed a napkin from the table.
She watched him dapped the corner of her mouth. For an instance she strained against the straps that held her down in an impulsive move to touch his face too. She realized then how far away he really was, that their worlds were only meant to cross not to merge despite her being this close to him, that the time they had spent together were just fleeting moments. She could see this knowledge in Rafael’s eyes, a sadness passing over him, and all she wanted now was to hold him and not let go.

#

Elliott finished eating the last bits of his microwave heated meal while going through the files of each of the 12 investors he had compiled information of on the Internet. They were all private investment funds, whose members included some of the richest people in this country. Not that these funds disclosed their members, but he spotted a few articles where one tech billionaire mentioned in passing his investments in one of these funds and this gave him an idea of how exclusive the membership of these funds must be.

Now he had to form a picture of all the pieces he had. Lindberg’s e-mails showed how the consultant and the property developers drafted the incentive deal. But as Elliott suspected the web of people pushing for the housing reforms extended to the finance
industry. The bond transactions data he obtained from Joseph pointed to a small group of investors who bought up most of the $530 million bonds to become the majority bondholder, a move he suggested was to discourage the city from considering a default. As Nancy said it was an unusual move for bond investors and to him this signaled a deliberate attempt to push for the housing reforms and therefore were the kind of people Elliott had to expose as well.

Elliott had spent the last two and half hours researching at home and was getting tired. He still needed to reply to Petersson’s e-mails as Lisa was readying the public launch of the collaborative search project next month. He was going through his e-mail inbox when his phone on the desk vibrated.

<Elliott?> Frank said.

He hoped this wasn’t another one liner like last time when Frank didn’t bother to reply.

<Frank?>

<I’m sorry I couldn’t get in touch with you earlier.>

<Rafael has been busy. He tried to kidnap Lindberg, then police found his hideout.>

<I know. Sorry about Lindberg.>

<Why was he after him?>

<Lindberg’s e-mails suggest that he knows about the mole in the city. He knows about me.>

<They caught you?>
<No, but Lindberg and Tyler know there’s a mole in the city administration who has been leaking information, the incentive deal for one.>

<But I got that from Katherine myself.>

<You got it from Katherine after I got it first and passed it on to Rafael.>

<So Rafael tried to get Lindberg talking and find out what he knows about the mole?>

<That was the plan. But now that the police is protecting him, we decided it’s not worth the risk.>

<So what happens now?>

<I have to lay low for a while.>

<I'm not doing that great either.>

Frank would need to know that he had his hands tied since Bennett ordered the paper to drop the investigation on the incentive deal.

<What happened?> Frank asked.

<My paper is dropping the story on the incentive deal, we’re officially no longer chasing this. Bennett, the owner, has received complaints from his friends in high places. They don’t like us poking into the people behind the incentive deal. It doesn't look good on him if his paper advocates issues that run counter to his friends' interest.>

<So your paper won’t run the story at all?>

<I struck a deal with Managing Editor Lambert so I can still chase the story. I’m alone on this, my paper won’t be helping out. We hope to run a story before the council votes, but only if by then I have found enough material for a story that will force the council to vote against the reforms>
<And did you find anything so far?>

<I actually have a few names that may be worth looking into.>

<Tell me.>

<I thought you have to lay low for a while?>

<There’s not much time. The council will vote soon, if you’re lead is strong, I don’t mind the risk.> Elliott sent Frank the names on the message.

<Remember Elliott, you’re not alone in this. We’ll help you out.>

Frank logged off and Elliott noticed he had received a text message from Jack.

“Hey Elliott, thought you might find this interesting,” Jack said, and sent a link to a story. Elliott clicked on it and read the latest piece from his competitor.

The report Comptroller Tyler met with five hedge funds last night. A quick glance at their names revealed that they were among the list of 12 investors Elliott had on his list. The secret meeting between Tyler and the five hedge funds appeared to be a push for an agreement on the housing reforms by some of the city’s biggest creditors.

Elliott sighed. Jack was leading the coverage on the housing reforms, which should be a good thing as it kept the pressure on the city. With the council set to vote on Monday, Elliott had only two days left to stop the housing reforms program. He already knew what to do next, follow the money and interview one of the investment fund owners.

#

The Manhattan Municipal Building towered over City Hall Park and its surroundings like a colossal beehive. From behind its stone façade, over two thousand employees from a dozen municipal agencies ran New York’s bureaucracy. Among these
agencies was the Office of the New York City Comptroller which this morning had invited reporters to a press conference outside under the building’s colonnade. Tyler was to respond to last night’s news that President Bolton had rejected New York’s bailout request.

Elliott had read about it while riding the subway on his way to the press conference. President Bolton feared that bailing out New York’s $530 million bonds might prompt other distressed municipal borrowers to ask for the same treatment. With no federal assistance forthcoming, all eyes were on Comptroller Tyler. He had two days left to clinch the housing reforms deal that investment bankers were demanding in return for them to start selling the city’s bonds again.

Emerging from the subway station underneath the Municipal Building, Elliott folded the newspaper and put it inside his bag. He didn’t come here to hear Tyler talking. On the list of people attending the press briefing was Robertson of Quasar Investment, one of the twelve investors that had bought up almost all of the $530 million bonds. He needed to get Robertson explain to him why he and the other eleven investors accumulated the bonds. As Nancy had said it was an unusual move for investors to snap up these risky bonds. If this was their deliberate attempt to discourage the city from dropping the housing reforms and considering default, then these twelve investors were the people most likely responsible for the housing reforms. Exposing their motives was Elliott’s best chance of stopping the reforms and avoid Rafael’s terror campaign. Talking to Robertson was his priority.

A crowd of reporters had already assembled by the stairs in front of a speaker podium, waiting for Tyler to arrive. Madison Vanguard’s Anita stood near the podium
and Elliott decided to hang back by the columns. Since he was off duty, he didn’t want Anita to see him and ask him what he was doing here. Jack stood next to Anita, fraternizing with the competition. When she looked around, probably to see whether Tyler was coming, Elliott stepped back behind the column and almost bumped into Katherine who deftly avoided him. She walked around him then continued up to the front. Elliott could only stare at her. Had she been standing behind him without him knowing? On the other side, he saw Tyler and his entourage finally arriving, prompting the usual hustle in the crowd as reporters prepared their recorders and notes, and the television crew adjusted their microphones. Tyler stepped behind the podium and waited for a few seconds until he had everyone’s attention. He then held up the New York Times paper before him.

“Guys, what is this?” Tyler asked, pointing at Jack’s article. “We’re doing all we can to defend the city’s best interests and you’re not helping us by leaking information like this.”

A murmur went through the crowd. Wasn’t this press briefing about President Bolton’s bailout rejection? Tyler, as Elliott suspected, was probably just venting steam after Jack wrote about his supposedly secret meeting with five hedge funds. The New York Times article suggested the five hedge funds, all of whom were on Elliott’s list of the twelve big investors, were trying to press Tyler into accepting the housing reforms.

“Over the past few days, we’ve had confidential information leaked to the press and published: the incentive deal and now this closed-door meeting,” Tyler said. “Let me tell you that your stories are making it harder for me negotiate the best deal for the city.”
He took a long sweep of the room as though he was reprimanding a group of elementary students. Jack was staring right back at Tyler and Elliott knew he must have a few burning questions lined up. Tyler then introduced Robertson, a lanky man wearing a dark brown business suit stepped up to the podium.

“It is in our interest that New York can stand up on its feet again,” Robertson said. “We might appear as tough and working against the interest of the public, but let me assure you that we are not. We want a strong New York, we want a city with a healthy budget, not overburdened with debt so that it can spend the money more wisely for the benefit of its citizens.”

The man stepped aside and Tyler came forward again. He then addressed what everyone came here for, which was his response to President Bolton turning down New York’s bailout request. The rejection echoed the 1975 fiscal crisis with The Daily News back then announcing President Ford’s rejection with its infamous headline “Ford to City: Drop Dead.” As Mayor Albert was still in Washington and on her way back, reporters in New York went to see Comptroller Tyler for the city’s first response.

“New York will not default on its debt,” Tyler said, reading from a statement. Probably prepared well in advance of President Bolton’s decision, the statement suggested that Tyler would not be taking any questions after he was done reading.

“We are making progress in our negotiation to ensure the passing of a housing reforms that will regain the market’s confidence in our fiscal strength. We are on track with reforms and are committed to pursuing any effort needed to making the city’s budget healthier, stronger and more sustainable.”
Tyler continued reading in what every reporter by now must have realized was a statement addressed to assuage the market. Trading had already opened at this hour, and the first order of the day was to make sure New York’s municipal bond weren’t falling even further after President Bolton’s rejection. Elliott imagined the market rout extending to municipal bonds across the country, as the president’s decision not to help New York meant other cities couldn’t expect federal assistance either.

Elliott spotted Robertson standing to Tyler’s left. He wanted to make sure the fund manager didn’t sneak out while he was listening to the press conference. It was too early to say which way Robertson would go once the press conference ended, so he decided to stand closer to the front. His eyes wandered to Katherine who stood next to Robertson on his right. Wearing a gray business suits with her hair tied in a ponytail and holding a black folder, she was observing the crowd of reporters in front while occasionally glancing at her boss speaking.

Tyler finished reading his statement, and after saying he wouldn’t take any questions, thanked everyone for coming. Hands shot up and reporters began shouting questions but the moment it was clear that Tyler was ignoring them, a few reporters broke away from the rest to go after Tyler.

The comptroller headed back into his office followed by his press officials. While a few reporters were trying to get Tyler say more, Elliott winded his way through the crowd and went after Robertson who was heading in a different direction. He heard Anita calling out Elliott’s name from behind him, but he ignored her. He only had only one shot at Robertson. The hedge fund owner must have noticed Elliott following him as he turned around.
“The presser is over and I don't take questions,” he said and continued walking. Elliott had decided to get this man’s attention with information few people knew about.

“I noted that your hedge fund along with eleven others acquired almost all of the city’s municipal bonds over the past three days,” Elliott said.

Robertson slowed his walk, as Elliott detected his surprise.

“I'm not the investment director, I don't keep track on everything we buy under the sun,” he said.

“Sir, these bonds are the same ones that are due September 25, surely, you would know if your fund owns such a large amount of these risky bonds,” Elliott said.

“I’ll have to check,” he said.

“If you could spare fifteen minutes for an interview..”

“I don’t even have a minute.”

“I’m sure the public would like to hear your point of view beyond your brief statement today.”

“We already have public-relations officers representing us and they’re doing a fine job,” he said, and Elliott saw Robertson was approaching his parked car. It was useless to ask him any questions. He needed to use his last chance to get him agree to an interview.

“How about lunch?” Elliott asked while pulling out his name card. “I can explain what my source told me about them twelve funds that had bought so much of these bonds.”

He offered his card to Robertson who however turned around to face him.
“First, I don’t lunch with reporters and second, I already know all about these twelve investors.”

With that he entered his car and shut the door, leaving Elliott’s name card in his hand. He put it away and walked back. He saw that most reporters had left already. Just then he spotted Katherine talking with one of the reporters near the podium. Here was another chance, although he wasn’t sure what he might get out of talking to her. Elliott looked around then walked straight at her to roll out his routine introduction.

“Hi, my name is Elliott from Madison Vanguard,” he said, hoping he hadn’t interrupted anyone. “We met the other day with Tyler at the Gild. . .”

“I do remember,” she said. “You story has stirred quiet a fuzz.”

She must have meant the incentive deal, and he took her remark as a compliment, an opening he must use wisely. “I was wondering whether it was possible to talk to Tyler before the city council votes on Monday.”

“I’m sorry he has no time for interviews.”

“I’m not looking for a sit-down interview,” Elliott quickly added, realizing he had a foot in the door since Katherine didn’t outright rejected his request. “Perhaps somewhere in between his meetings, I could meet him for a fifteen-minute chat.”

“I can squeeze in ten minutes at the most and that has to be on short notice,” she said. “I don’t know what Tyler’s schedule looks like as things chance quickly.”

“Of course. I can be on standby.”

Elliott handed her his name card while thinking what else to say, as he didn’t want the conversation to end just yet. Katherine accepted the card then nodded to someone behind him.
“I think your girlfriend is watching you.”

Girlfriend? Elliott turned around, and saw Bridget leaning against one of the columns and waving at him. She walked up to him, and when Elliott looked back, Katherine had already left.

“Dude you just spoke to Katherine, well done.” Bridget said.

“What is it Bridget?”

“Rafael wants to meet us,” she said.

“Wait, what for? Is this about the Lindberg kidnapping?”

“No. He arranged an interview for us with Sebastian Rentschler.”

“Who’s Rentschler?”

“One of the twelve investors, the biggest of them.”

#

Elliott felt a hint of deja-vu as Bridget led him away from the stairs of the Municipal Building. He remembered the tumultuous night that she and Rafael broke into Lindberg’s office, and hoped this wasn’t going to be another outing. But Elliott needed an interview with one of the twelve investors and Rafael somehow managed to secure an appointment with the biggest of them, Sebastian Rentschler. How he managed to snag that appointment, he would find out soon enough.

Elliott and Bridget walked the few blocks up to China town and found the restaurant on Mott Street. He recognized one of Rafael’s men standing guard near the entrance. They entered into a poorly lit restaurant. Rafael was sitting at a table in the far back, facing the street and eating dumplings. Rafael made way for Bridget to sit next to him, and Elliott took the seat across them.
“I thought we were no longer on speaking terms?” Elliott said.

“Frank thinks we are still,” Rafael said, balancing a dumpling with chopsticks as he dipped it into soybean sauce. “There’s isn’t any time left. We must push forward.”

“Bridget told me you have an interview appointment with one of the twelve investors?”

“Sebastian Rentschler. He runs Pantheon Investment.”

“I gave Frank the list of investors last night. Did he forward it to you?”

“Yes and this morning I got his phone number, called him, and I said I was you.”

“You pretended to be me for the interview?” Elliott couldn’t believe what he heard.

“Well, I couldn’t say I was me. I had to be you.”

“Hold on a second. You cannot use my name to ask for an interview or for anything else for that matter. Besides, you don't get to tell us who we interview. That’s not how we work.”

“How else are we supposed to get the interview?”

“You could have given me his number and I would have called him and set up the interview myself.”

“This morning we weren’t on speaking terms yet.”

Elliott sighed. He needed the interview but was it worth the risk hanging out with Rafael again? Bridget touched Elliott's arm.

“Hey Rafael is doing us a favor here,” she said. “Let's not stress over how he got the appointment and just do the interview.”

It was bothering him. It was bothering him that she was siding with Rafael, that she was touching his arm, but was sitting next to Rafael. Did he miss something here?
“Anyway, this is our chance to get to the bottom of this,” Rafael said. “Two days from now and all this will be over.”

Elliott wasn’t convinced yet.

“Why did Rentschler agree to the interview? What did you tell him?”

Rafael pushed aside his empty plate of dumplings and cleared his throat. “I identified myself as you and said I was interested in talking about his investment in municipal bonds.”

“Did you mention that you know he was one of the largest bondholders?”

“Yes and he just agreed to be interviewed.”

Elliott didn’t like this at all. If Rentschler wanted to talk to the press he could have hired a media consultant or held a press conference. Why would he agree to a cold call-request for an interview from a reporter at Madison Vanguard, not exactly the city’s most prominent newspaper these days?

“He didn’t ask you any questions?”

“No.”

“Where and when?”

“Well that's a bit of a problem,” Bridget said. “He lives in Winchester, just outside of Boston and the interview is scheduled for eight p.m.

“We have about seven hours to make it there,” Rafael said.

“Today?”

“Yes,” both Rafael and Bridget said.

“I can’t just leave the city. This is where everything is happening, all the sources I need to talk to. Things are happening fast, we can’t let.”
“Elliott,” Bridget said. “Your key source is Rentschler. If you get the interview right, that’s all you need. Perhaps later on Tyler, but you just told me Katherine might get you an interview with him.”

“Listen to your partner,” Rafael said.

Bridget was right. The key person he had to talk to was one of the twelve investors. He had planned to spend the entire Friday trying to get one of the investors talking. But judging from his experience with Robertson earlier this morning, the odds of securing an interview appointment today was slim. Perhaps it was worth leaving the city

“All right, I’m in.”

Bridget clapped her hands. “Wonderful, I love road trips.”

“I’m not so thrilled about driving all the way to Boston,” Elliott said.

“I’ll be the driver,” Rafael said.

“Wait a minute,” Elliott said. “You want to come along?”

“Yes.”

“And if Rentschler doesn’t talk, you’ll kidnap him, is that it?”

“If we wanted to kidnap him, we wouldn’t be needing you for the interview.”

“I might have believed you, if you hadn’t try to kidnap Lindberg.”

“That was an emergency. He knew about the mole in the city, he knew about Frank. Look, I must come along in case I must stand in for you since he knows my voice not yours.”

“That’s a shaky excuse.”

“No, that’s covering all eventualities. Preparation is half the battle and we can’t screw up this interview. We’ll leave this afternoon. I’ll tell you the details later.”
Rafael rose and paid at the cashier, then he walked out along with his men, leaving Elliott and Bridget alone.

“You know about this plan?” Elliott asked.

“Sort of, when he asked me to fetch you he explained a bit what it was about.”

“So you're coming along as well?”

“Of course, we have to take pictures of Rentschler don't we.”

A road trip with the three of them was not what he had planned when he woke up this morning.

“I’m heading home now,” Bridget said. “Do you got any other plans? We can wait at my place.”

“I’ll drop by later,” he said. “I got something else to do first.”

Bridget left and that’s when he noticed that she was wearing the same clothes as yesterday.

Elliott ordered lunch and it took him another half an hour to do what he wanted to do and should have done much earlier. He pulled out his phone and called his colleague Adam Porch who sat in the cubicle next to his in the office.

“Hey Adam. I need to look up a phone number on a name card that I left on my desk, can you look it up for me?”

“Sure, hold on,” Adam said and he heard him walking over to his desk.

“All right, what I am looking for?”

“The card should be lying somewhere under the monitor. Look for Agent Fry, FBI.”

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Elliott met Agent Fry at his office. He didn’t care if Rafael’s men found out he was talking to the FBI. Having Fry come to his office, at least gave the impression that it was the agent initiating the meeting, not Elliott. After all Fry had met him in the office twice already. This time he came alone, and Elliott led him to the same meeting room where they first met. After bringing in coffee for Fry, he sat down at the table, unsure how to start the conversation.

“Thank you for coming,” Elliott said. “I don’t have anything to say to you, but I am hoping you could tell me more about these eco-terrorists.”

Fry shook his head. “You drag me up here so you can interview me?”

“It's not an interview. I just need to know what I'm dealing with here.”

Fry looked him in the eyes. “Elliott, are you in some kind of trouble here?”

“No, not yet least. I was thinking with how fast things can happen in the next two days before the council votes, it might be good to know what I’m dealing with.”

“I can’t tell you more than I already did,” Fry said. “Yes they are dangerous, but you know that already.”

“I know they are eco-terrorists from South America, that they took down this oil company in Brazil, sold its assets then use the proceeds to rehabilitate the environment, help the indigenous community and so forth. But why are they here in the U.S., what do they really want? Have you find anything out yet?”

“Our investigation isn’t for public consumption.”

“I need to know for myself.”

“Why?”
“If I were to continue to investigate this story, the housing reforms program, I need to know whether this will make me a target for the terrorists. The kidnapping attempt of Lindberg wasn’t a pleasant experience. I need to know whether it’s worth the risk.”

Fry thought for a while, playing with the ring on his finger.

“Let me tell you a story. Off-the-record.”

“I’m listening.”

“We know little about them. We heard plenty of rumors, but we can’t say for sure whether they’re true. Like Devon, that Brazilian oil company. Yes sure, Devon did collapse but there’s no evidence linking their collapse with the pipeline sabotages, it’s as if these were two separate events. The police never managed to catch the saboteurs and there’s little political incentive to go after them. People were all too happy to see Devon gone. So again what I’m about to tell you are theories, speculations, rumors.”

“Can you start explaining me who they are?”

“They don’t have a name. But two things seem certain: They operate like vigilantes, so they are not after money, and secondly they like to use front organizations, fake or defunct organizations, that can pass off as real, like QWA. So we started looking for cases of eco-terrorism that shared these characteristics and traced the cases back in time. They were about two dozen of such cases ranging from sabotages against illegal logging equipment, destruction of an entire office block in Brasilia, to kidnapping of mining executives, to Devon’s case. We tried to trace these cases to its origin and what we found out was that the older cases occurred in Colombia, which borders Brazil.”

“So the terrorists started out in Colombia then expanded into Brazil?”
“We think so. The oldest case that we were able to trace back is that of El Ladrillo, a DTO, a drug trafficking organization.”

“Drugs? Really?”

“Again, nothing is for sure. Just like most other front organization these terrorists use, El Ladrillo did at one point exist. It was the smallest of the four DTOs operating in Cali, in Colombia. Just a few years ago Cali was plagued by drug-war violence with shooting and killings. Then one day, the three bigger rival gangs joined forces against El Ladrillo, killing its leaders and going after its members. Nothing was left of El Ladrillo, it completely vanished from the streets of Cali. Everyone thought El Ladrillo retreated into the jungles then destroyed its own poppy fields and production sites in a scorched-earth strategy so that its rivals couldn’t get hold of them.”

“But how will El Ladrillo sell drugs if they don’t have their own fields?”

“Guess.”

“Move their production base elsewhere?”

“No, instead of producing their own drugs, they attacked the supply chains of all their three rivals. They burn their rivals’ poppy fields, attacked their warehouses, supply convoys, and any infrastructure along the drug supply chain. Then they stole whatever drugs they could carry and destroyed the rest.”

“But how did they go from running a drug operation to sabotaging oil pipelines?”

“The connection only starts to make sense once you understand how El Ladrillo fights its rivals. Now, everyone thought that El Ladrillo has retreated into the jungles and continues to operate from there while attacking its rivals’ infrastructure. It has adopted a guerilla warfare by targeting its rivals’ infrastructure where protection is weakest. They
attack then retreat back into the jungle. And unlike other DTOs, El Ladrillo no longer has its own production bases. It doesn’t even have a base of operation in the city. No one knows where its members are. So if you want to stop El Ladrillo from harassing your production sites and supply chains, you can’t do that in the city, you have to hunt them in the jungles. And this changed the dynamics of the drug violence.”

“How so?”

“The rivals’ options to protect themselves against El Ladrillo are limited. If they consolidate their drug production bases and supply routes to better protect them, their increased size makes them target for law enforcement. But if they keep production bases spread out with little protection, they will remain easy targets for El Ladrillo. So the only choice was to send in more foot soldiers to protect their spread-out assets. Not surprisingly, they found out that fighting guerillas deep in the jungles isn’t easy, while hiring professionals and buying armored vehicles are expensive. The majority of their security personnel are your ordinary city gangsters with no military training. They may be good for drive-by shooting, but not for fighting a protracted war in the jungles. Raid parties sent out to catch El Ladrillo’s men were ambushed with zero survivors, even the search parties to find the raid parties were ambushed with zero survivors. Casualty is high, and having to fight a practically invisible enemy in a hostile jungle away from home, isn’t helping morale. At the same time there’s still a drug war going on in the city. Opening this second front in the jungles is what changed the dynamics of the drug war. El Ladrillo is forcing the cartels to focus their resources on protecting their assets in the jungles. Protecting production and distribution assets has become more important than fighting over market share in the city.
“El Ladrillo draws fire from all of the three cartels but steals only a small amount of drugs. That doesn’t sound like it’s a risk worth taking. Why would they do such a thing?”

“Well, El Ladrillo looks like a DTO, behaves like a DTO but the strategy it adopts just doesn’t make sense businesswise. The amount of drug is sells is about enough to cover the cost of its operation. No way anyone can get rich of that. Unless, getting rich has never been the plan and that’s why rival gang members believe El Ladrillo is the bogeyman out to take revenge on them. But there’s another theory: What if El Ladrillo is no longer the same El Ladrillo from Cali? What if that DTO no longer existed, and is used by someone else as a front?”

“A front for what?”

“You have to understand that the violence in Cali was so bad that it rivaled the rampage you see in Mexico. It wasn’t just drive-by shooting, but also hanging, execution, beheading and downright mutilations. Everyone was afraid and the government seemed paralyzed. The problem with fighting drug cartels is dislocation, you squash one cartel and another pops up, you fight them in one city and they will show up in a different city. The violence never ends, it just shifts location. And it’s this dislocation that El Ladrillo uses to its advantage when it shifted the war into the jungles. Within two years, El Ladrillo accomplished what the government could not: end the rampant violence in the city.”

“So all this to fighting in the jungle is to end the violence in the city?”
“Yes. If you think about it, that’s what everyone really wants. Nobody there cares about the drugs that make its way to the U.S. They just want their normal life back and that’s exactly what El Ladrillo has given them.”

“So if El Ladrillo is a vigilante that wants to stop the violence in the city, does it still make it a DTO?”

“Officially El Ladrillo is still recognized as a DTO but only because we cannot ascertain the group’s actual demise. In other words, we’re not sure whether it’s merely a front organization or not. The suspicion is that when El Ladrillo’s surviving members fled into the jungles, someone must have killed them off and took over the mantel.”

“Turning El Ladrillo into a front.”

“Exactly. Everyone else still thinks El Ladrillo is alive and taking vengeance on its three rivals. And considering that El Ladrillo is the oldest case we have that fits the pattern of front organization and vigilante activity, we think that they are the same people behind Devon and now the kidnapping of Berea investment bankers.”

“And what are they doing in the U.S.?”

“We can’t say for sure what brings them here, since they don’t seem to have a singular political agenda. They started out fighting against drugs, then against environmental destruction, property speculators, bankers and now they’re picking up a fight against the financial market. My take is that they’re just expanding their scope of operation, regardless of geography. As is typical with terrorist organization, some just what to say that they can take on the U.S.A and that might increase their profile among similar groups.”
“Can’t the FBI or DEA after them? We’ve been fighting the war on drugs for a long time, we have the experience to help the Colombians.”

“It’s complicated. We’ve not been that successful with our war on drugs. The DEA isn’t too keen on El Ladrillo because they don’t know for sure if El Ladrillo sells the drug that we believe they have stolen from the other DTOs. We’re assuming they’re selling the drugs because they have to fund their operation somehow. But then again, the amount would be so small, DEA think it’s not worth the effort of mounting an operation against them. Another problem is that we don’t have any evidence linking El Ladrillo with any of the eco-terrorism, including the Devon case and the Berea kidnapping, other than that they share similarities of using front organizations and act like vigilantes. As I said, all this is still rumors and speculation. However, the biggest hurdle is getting the Colombian government on board. The Colombians are concerned that if El Ladrillo is gone, the violence will resume in the city. The people of Cali have regained their normal life and don’t want to go back to the rampant killing, all the hanging, beheading, bombing, shooting, mutilation. They’re afraid and I can’t blame them. But as long as the Colombian government doesn’t change its mind, the El Ladrillo remain the untouchables.”

“So who are these people behind El Ladrillo?”

“Dangerous, that’s what they are. Taking on three drug cartels at once requires not only deft skills and experience but also a death wish. We estimate a few dozens hardcore, battle hardened members. They don’t seem to have a permanent base of operation, assembling only for missions. Because they’re so footloose and operate as
small units under the cover of the jungle, it’s practically impossible to find them even if we were to send out drones.”

Fry pulled out his phone and seemed to be searching for something on his phone. “You want to know what you’re dealing with? Take a look at these pictures.”

He handed his phone to Elliott. It was a picture of several burned vehicles on a road that cut across the jungle. He could make out the blackened corpses trapped inside the passenger cabin. The next picture showed bodies riddled with bullet holes lying on the side of a road, some still clinging on to their rifles. The next picture was that of a table with a neat row of six heads, six faces with contorted expressions but blank stares. Elliott had seen enough and returned the phone to Fry.

“My job is to not let any American end up like that,” the agent said.

#

Riding the 1 train on his way to Bridget’s apartment, Elliott thought about what Agent Fry had told him. It didn’t stretch his imagination to picture Rafael and his men as a murderous, drug dealing group of vigilantes. While their brutal history lend gravity to Elliott’s view that these men were dangerous, throughout his subway ride, he couldn’t decide what to do next. He needed the interview with Rentschler, the hedge fund manager, to stop the housing reforms and Rafael’s terror campaign. But every minute he spent with Rafael and his men, increased the risk of him and Bridget getting hurt. Elliott didn’t want to be around when they run into trouble with the FBI. And after what happened to Lindberg, he didn’t want to bring Rafael to Rentschler’s front door. Whatever decision he made, he needed Bridget’s backing, and now he wasn’t even sure
where she stood in all this. Something must have happened since he last met her yesterday afternoon and he suspected Rafael had a hand in this.

Elliott emerged out of the subway station on 23rd Street and walked down the block with the sun in his back keeping him warm against the occasional breeze. It was the last day of Summer and the weather had gotten fickly. He should have brought his jacket with him. About ten minutes later Elliott arrived at Bridget’s neighborhood, a row of brownstone townhouses so narrow they seemed to be slotted into place rather than built. He found her address and she buzzed him in.

“I was beginning to think that you won’t be coming,” she asked as she opened the door for him. “What were you doing at the office anyway? Isn’t it your day off?”

“I had to sort a few things out.”

He stepped inside a foyer with a direct view of the living room, and two large windows overlooking the street in front. All the furniture in the living room had been pushed aside, exposing the parquet floor in the middle. A fireplace with a carved wooden mantelpiece vied for attention with the giant TV screen on the opposite wall, and with the furniture out of the way, it was hard to tell which of the two was the living room’s centerpiece. To his right was an open kitchen and Bridget sat down on a stool by the counter. Her camera backpack and a small duffel bag laid on the counter. Taking a seat next to her, Elliott nodded at the empty parquet floor in front. “Do you practice your dance moves there?” he asked.

“I hardly dance anymore. My mother bought a new carpet,” she said, while packing her camera into the backpack. “It should arrive today. Any words from Frank?”
Elliott checked his phone and still no message and shook his head. Frank was supposed to
tell them where and when to meet.

“Are you not bringing any clothes with you?” Bridget asked.

“I thought we’re heading back tonight?”

“Well that’s the plan, but who knows we may have to spend the night in Boston.”

“I’d prefer we return as soon as possible. Things happen fast here, I don’t want to
stay away for too long,” Elliott said, then looking at Bridget. “Besides, it’s not safe
hanging around with Rafael.”

She simply nodded as she continued cleaning her lens. Elliott didn’t know where
to start. He wanted to ask her where she was last night, but feared she wouldn’t take
kindly his question. He wanted to share what he knew about El Ladrillo but feared she
wouldn’t like it, and it was these worries, his own fears, that he didn’t know what to
make of. What made him fear his questions and explanations would rub Bridget the
wrong way? He took off his glasses, closed his eyes, and massaged the bridge of his nose.

“Are you okay?” Bridget asked.

“Yes of course,” he said, blinking. “Listen Bridget I was..” His phone on the
kitchen counter vibrated, sounding like a drill in a construction site. Frank’s instructions
finally. They were to go to New York Penn Station and wait for further instructions.

“We have to go now,” Elliott said, and showed her Frank’s message, adding “I
have the feeling he’ll make us go through another treasure hunt routine before meeting
Rafael.”
Bridget packed her camera and Elliott headed for the door. He was about to go down the stairs when she called him back. Standing in the foyer, she was holding a maroon sweater and handed it to him.

“Here, try this on,” she said. “Might get cold up there.”

The sweater fit and Elliott checked himself in the mirror that hung in the foyer. It was the kind of sweater he would have bought himself if he needed one. “Thanks, whose sweater is this?”

“It’s mine,” she said. She touched his arm, giving it gentle squeeze, and said “thank you.”

“What for?” Her question puzzled him, though somehow he knew it didn’t come out of the blue, not with the way she had been behaving since this morning.

“For everything.”

The way she looked at him told him she was no longer with him, that he could no longer rely on her judgment to decide what to do next even he told her about El Ladrillo. The decision whether to abandon Rafael, was his to make alone.

They rode the E train to Penn Station and along the ride Elliott thought about what to do. By the time they arrived about twenty minutes later, he had decided not to give Rafael the chance of kidnapping Rentschler. Rafael might be a source but Elliott needed to draw a line. The next question was how best to stop him, and the longer he thought about this, the more it made sense for him to seek the help of Agent Fry. He would have to call Fry and let him know about his plan to travel to Boston without mentioning Rafael. The sooner he called the better.
Serving about half a million people a day, Penn Station had trains going to Washington, Philadelphia and Boston, while an array of subways and buses connected it with the rest of the city. Elliott and Bridget stood underneath the train announcement board in the main hall alongside a crowd of passengers that were waiting for their turn to board. Frank’s next instruction was, as Elliott expected, a way for Rafael’s men to ensure that the two weren’t being followed by the police.

Elliott and Bridget were to follow what appeared to be random persons in the station. The first mark was a young man with an orange backpack whom they tailed to the food court and into a café, after which their mark switched to a man in a dark blue business suit. He walked down the passageway heading to the subways and Elliott and Bridget followed him all the way to the platform before Frank instructed them to follow a man wearing track pants and rocking a pair of headphones. The man walked out Penn station and with no instruction to stay inside, Elliott and Bridget followed him to 34th Street and down the block. Their mark turned right into 8th Avenue and Elliott, expecting they would travel to Boston by train, wondered how long Frank would have them follow this man. They walked another five blocks north before the man made another turn right and walked down 39th Street. There Frank told Elliott to go inside a car rental office that was just down the street, with further instructions of what car to rent and for how long. They stepped inside the office and did as told, choosing a silver Chevrolet sedan that was the latest model.

“I rather wish we had police on our tail, in case things go wrong,” Elliott said to Bridget while he waited for the clerk to bring him the car key.
“You can’t have both ways,” said Bridget who didn’t look thrilled either about Frank’s roundabout instructions. “If we’re traveling with Rafael, having the police on our tail means things are going wrong.”

“Now we have to pick up Rafael somewhere with Frank’s stupid instructions.”

The Chevrolet sedan was new and looked comfortable, and Elliott didn’t mind spending a few hours driving it. Frank’s next instruction was for them to head uptown, and once they were on their way, he directed them to an alley in Morningside Height, Harlem.

The alley was empty except for a few cars parked to one side. From the end of the alley, a man stepped out of a car, and as he approached them, Elliott noticed it was Rafael. Bridget walked toward him, leaving Elliott by himself. He must be a good time to call Fry. He pulled out his phone and dialed the agent’s number all the while thinking what to say.

“Hello.” Fry’s voice came out clear but unfriendly, and sooner than Elliott had wanted.

“This is Elliott.”

“I know, what is it Elliott?”

Rafael’s face lit up as Bridget approached him, and in his expression Elliott recognized a moment of affection that ran deeper than that of mere friendship. He didn’t have to see Bridget’s face to know the feeling was mutual, and knowing this, he felt a part of him slipping away, a part he now realized was never his to begin with, like Lisa never really was, and Katherine would never be.

“Elliott?” Fry’s voice returned with a ting of curiosity.
“Yes?”

“Do you want to tell me something?”

“I… I…”

He could tell him about Rafael, tell him everything. What did Fry call it again? Scorched-earth strategy. Everyone loses, including and especially Bridget. He thought for a second about what it meant then said “I am sorry. I must have misdialed your number.”

“Are you in trouble Elliott?”

“No. It’s nothing. I’m fine,” he said. He now understood why Bridget had been acting strange all day.

“Where are you?”

“I’m still in New York.”

“Why would you not be in New York?”

“I’m sorry for the miscall, but I have to go now.”

“Wait, what…”

Elliott ended the call, and approached the smiling couple. The moment of infinite possibilities he felt when he first met Bridget and Rafael six days ago, had fizzled down to this reality. He was now the outsider among them, Bridget was playing with fire, and still he should be happy for her. Elliott sighed then straightened himself as he shook Rafael’s hand. He should set aside his personal feeling and concentrate on his interview with Rentschler. Boston was waiting for them.

#

Elliott sat in the backseat of the Chevrolet sedan and watched the brownstone apartments of Harlem passed by him, as they headed toward the northern tip of
Manhattan. Moving with the flow of rush hour traffic, they finally crawled out of the city and crossed the bridge over Harlem River into Bronx. As buildings began to sprawl away, the light green crowns of trees suspended between summer and autumn filled the view, and a yellow sheen hugged the landscape under a cloudless sky and a low hanging sun.

Bridget, in the front passenger seat, was humming to a song by a British band that was playing on the radio. Elliott watched her looking out the windshield and occasionally glancing at Rafael to her side. It was hard seeing her happy this way and yet he dreaded having to ruin it if Rafael needed to be stopped. Agent Fry must have tried calling him back after their last conversation. But Elliott’s phone was with Rafael. Since he was supposed to be driving, he couldn’t be using his phone while they were on still on the road. Elliott hoped Rafael wouldn’t check his phone and discover Fry’s attempts of contacting him. The slight tug of acceleration disrupted his thoughts, as Rafael pushed the car up I-87 highway.

They had been driving for about half an hour on the highway when Elliott realized he hadn’t prepared anything for his interview with Sebastian Rentschler. He knew nothing about the man and had no questions ready, yet this was the interview he pinned his hope on to stop the housing reforms. After all, Rentschler was one of the twelve investors who accumulated most of the city’s $530 million bonds in a move to force Tyler to agree on the housing reforms. Elliott needed to know why the investors bought the bonds, and how they had been pressuring the city into accepting the housing reforms. He doubted Rentschler would come out straight and explain all that, which was why he needed to prepare his questions.
He pulled out his laptop, and while Rafael and Bridget were talking, searched for information on Rentschler, the founder of Pantheon Investment Fund. Not much was written about the man. His name popped up in various articles discussing philanthropic activities and benefit dinners. He was a board member for an organization that raised money to help children with leukemia, the main benefactor for two orphanages in Boston and Philadelphia, he helped install solar panels across numerous schools in Southern California. But Elliott found only a passing references about how Rentschler got rich enough to afford this level of philanthropy. Rentschler had apparently never given an interview before. The material he found on Rentschler didn’t add much to the information he had already dug out last night when he researched the twelve investors.

With his partner Professor Kadnikov, a former mathematics professor at MIT, Rentschler founded Pantheon as a boutique investment house that raised money from a small pool of rich individuals. Pantheon was a hedge fund. Unlike investment banks, hedge funds weren’t burdened by regulations that restricted their options of what and how to invest. Under the assumption that wealthy individuals were more educated about the market, funds like Pantheon could pursue riskier investments that were close to the general public. With Professor Kadnikov’s mathematical models and Rentschler’s investment strategies, Pantheon’s funds outperformed key market indices every year during the ten years their performance had been tracked. A hedge fund index ranked Pantheon among its top five best performing funds consistently over this period. It dropped off the list only because Pantheon stopped inviting new investors and decided to manage their own money. The last bit of information on Pantheon’s asset size was three years old when it managed about $17 billion. The retreat into obscurity, while Pantheon
was still reigning among the best performing funds, helped sustain Rentschler’s reputation as one of the country’s best fund managers. In conclusion, he was a beast of the market.

Over the next hour, Elliott drew a list of questions that he hoped would entice Rentschler to open up. That the fund manager had agreed to an interview in the first place was a good sign, although in his experience people who suddenly talked to reporters when they normally didn’t, only agreed to interviews because they wanted to get a message out. When he couldn’t think of anymore questions he tore the pages from the notepad. This would allow him to keep the pages with the questions separately so he could glance at them while writing down Rentschler’s answers on the notepad.

About two hours later they pulled over at a rest stop for a quick dinner. It wasn’t dark yet but across the horizon the orange streak of light was dimming. Elliott stretched his back then breathed in the smell of pine trees. It felt good to be outside the city and stand under the open sky. They unpacked their sandwiches at one of the picnic tables and ate their dinner to the sound of cars passing on the highway. Elliott explained to Rafael and Bridget what he had found out about Rentschler and showed them the questions he had written down. When they’re done, Rafael walked to the store to buy some food and drinks for their return trip. Bridget cleaned up the leftovers and Elliott pulled out his phone Rafael had returned to him.

Fry had tried to call him three times and left him two messages, asking him whether he was all right and where he was. Elliott replied he was okay, that he didn’t mean to call him earlier and cause the agent to worry, and that he was on his way to Boston to interview a source, the last part he felt he had to say to explain his not
answering Fry’s calls and text messages. Somehow he wished though Fry was coming after him, just in case Rafael decided to kidnap Renschler. The image of mutilated bodies flashed across his mind. Elliott sat down by the bench, watching Bridget cleaning the table. She must know about Rafael.

“How well do you know Rafael?” Elliott asked.

“Why do you ask?”

“I’m not blind Bridget.”

She continued to clean the table, ignoring him.

“What happened last night?” he asked. “Did you meet him?”

“I don’t know what happened last night.”

“So you did meet him.” Elliott said, rising from his bench. “Bridget you can’t do this. I don’t need to remind you that the FBI is looking for him, that..”

“They’re not looking for him in particular. They don’t know who Rafael is, even if police finds us with him, they wouldn’t know who he is.”

“Neither do you,” Elliott said.

“I know him better than you do. You hardly talk to him anyway. He’s a good man, he wouldn’t hurt anyone unless -.”

“Wrong!”

Bridget stared at him, her eyes widened in surprise by his outburst. Elliott took a deep breath. He was treading on thin ice here. The last thing he wanted was to hurt her. Lowering his voice he said “Rafael is not who you think he is.”

“Then who is he?”

“He’s part of a vigilante group that is involved in drug trafficking.”
“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve heard all day.”

“They’re from Colombia, El Ladrillo is the name of the organization.”

“So what if he’s member of a drug trafficking vigilante group. Unlike most of us, he’s putting his life on the line to make this world a better place.”

“Come on Bridget. Why do you think is Rafael so interested in finding out the people behind the incentive deal and the housing reforms? What does he want from Rentschler? What if what we're doing here is deliver a killer to Rentschler's doorstop?”

“He’s just one man. What do you think is he going to do? Pull out a gun and shoot him?”

“These men kill people. I’ve seen pictures. It’s bad.”

“How would you know?”

“I talked to Agent Fry this morning and he told me about El Ladrillo,” Elliott said. He crumpled his plastic cup and threw into the garbage can. “He just called me twice, because he thinks I’m in some kind of danger. But I’m not worried about me. It’s Rentschler I’m worried about. Now can you give me a reason why I shouldn't tell Fry about Rafael?”

Bridget dropped what she's doing, her eyes searching for assurance in him.

“I haven’t mentioned Rafael,” Elliott said.

“Good. Don't tell him anything. We do the interview, we blow this housing reforms scandal wide open, Rafael will leave, and he's no longer your problem.”

“When we’re done, there’s no way he’ll hang out any longer with us than necessary. He will leave you.”

“That’s none of your business.”
“But you’re putting people at risk by seeing him and that makes it my business, that makes it Fry’s business.” He saw Rafael walking back to the car with a plastic bag in hand. “You haven’t answered my question yet, give me a reason why I shouldn’t tell Fry about Rafael.”

“He’s a good man. I already told you that.”

“That’s not enough -.”

“What do you think the reason is Elliott?” Bridget said her voice raised, “that I chose him over you, is that what you want to hear?”

“This has nothing to do with me.”

“Then why Elliott do you have to ask?” She looked at him and he saw in her eyes that he had already hurt her badly. He noticed Rafael coming toward them.

“We ready to go?” he asked, looking at the two staring at each other.

“We are,” Bridget said and grabbed the bag with the leftover food.

They all clambered back into their seats. Just then the day had turned night, and Rafael switched on the headlights as they drove out the parking lot and rejoined the traffic. They were just outside Boston now and Rentschler’s home was another hour northwest of the city.

It was quiet in the car with the music on the radio down to a whisper. Elliott gazed out of the window, trying not to think about the conversation he had with Bridget. He had only one shot at the interview with the fund manager and needed to be mentally prepared for this. Bridget was staring out of the window on her side, and Rafael didn’t say a word either.
As they were passing by Boston on the highway, Rafael took the exit and headed for the city. This wasn’t planned and Elliott looked behind, thinking something was wrong, that the police had found them.

“What are you doing?” Bridget asked.

Rafael didn’t answer and kept driving until they approached a supermarket where he turned the car into the parking lot. There he cut off the engine.

“You think I’m here to kidnap Rentschler?” He asked.

“No Rafael, no that’s not true,” Bridget said.

Rafael turned his head to face Elliott in the backseat. “I want you to interview Rentschler. That’s why I drove you here so you can focus on that interview. But we’re almost there. So.”

Rafael opened the door and stepped out then gestured for Elliott to lower the window on his side. Pointing at the supermarket with the restaurants and cafes that encircled the parking lot, he said “Tell Frank when you’re done with the interview, then pick me up at that café.”

He turned around and walked away, leaving the driver seat door open. Elliott just sat there watching him walk under the street lights.

“Come on Elliott. You heard him, let’s roll,” Bridget said, and to his surprise she sounded like her old self. He took over the car, drove out the parking lot and headed back to the highway.

With Rafael gone, he felt safer and for the first time since leaving New York his mind regained the clarity he always sought whenever he faced an important interview. If
he botched this interview he would lose his chance of stopping the housing reforms. He didn’t want to think what violence Rafael and his men might concoct to stop the reforms.

It was only when they approached Rentschler’s home, a five-acre estate in Winchester, that he fully realized the weight of the man’s reputation. Rentschler moved billions of dollars throughout the globe, affecting the price of anything from bonds, stocks to oil, precious metals, to properties and in the process could turn some people into millionaires and others into paupers. It was Rentschler’s influence that might explain New York buckling under investment bankers’ demand to abolish affordable housing. Follow the money, Lindberg had said and the closer they got to Rentschler’s estate, the more Elliott felt he was about to enter the lion’s den.

#

Elliott continued up the 93 Interstate highway and about twenty minutes later took the exit for Winchester. A light shower blurred the view outside as the road winded along the edge of a forest. He turned left up a gravel road, bounded by wooden fence, and after a short climb, a gate appeared at the top. By the time they arrived at the gate with its decorative metal frame, the rain had thankfully stopped. He announced himself through the buzzer and was let in. The gravel road went on for a short stretch until a left turn led to a wide clearing with a house.

Elliott had expected to see a mansion. Instead, it was a blocky stone house with no other buildings nearby. He parked next to a light truck and a sedan. As they stepped out, a middle-aged woman on a horse and leading two horses behind her approached them. She mounted off the horse and extended her hand.

“Hi, my name Elizabeth,” the woman said. “I’m the keeper of this ranch.”
They made their introduction and Elizabeth, bringing up the two horses, asked “do you know how to ride a horse?”

Elliott nodded. He had done some horseback riding when he was at high school. One of the perks for helping out at his friend’s farm was free horse riding lessons.

“It’s been a long time but I know the basics,” he said then turned to look at Bridget who shook her head.

“I wish I know how to ride,” she said, stroking one of the horses on its neck.

“Rentschler is at a stable and he thought you two might prefer to ride up there rather than walk. It’s a big ranch,” Elizabeth said. “These two here, Armstrong and Leon are quiet, well trained horses. You mount them and I’ll lead you.”

Elizabeth explained to them the dos and don’ts of horse riding, then helped Bridget mount Armstrong. Once Bridget was comfortable, Elizabeth mounted her own horse and took the lead rope attached to Armstrong so that the horse would follow her from behind. With Elliott and Elizabeth next to each other and Bridget in the back, they rode to the side of the house and out along a gravel path that cut across a fenced field.

Elizabeth told them how Rentschler had bought the ranch to provide shelter for animals he and his volunteers had rescued from slaughter houses and abusive owners. There were the usual dogs, cats, cows, pigs and hens, but also a few wild animals like a three-legged deer or a blind fox that were deemed unfit to be released back into the wild.

After about a ten minute ride, they reached a path that led up to stable behind which the forest towered.

“I hope you don’t mind that Rentschler will do the interview while he's tending to his horses,” she said as they reached the stable. “He has a meeting in about forty minutes
so there also isn't much time I'm afraid. I know that's not much considering that you spent
hours driving up here but he wants to meet the reporter in person. He doesn't do phone
interviews.”

“Fair enough,” Elliott said.

They dismounted and Elizabeth led them inside the stable. It was long and rather
dark with a bright spot at the end where a solitary light bulb illuminated a working area
where a man was brushing a horse. Rentschler had a full beard and wore a flannel shirt
with rolled sleeved that showed the intricate pattern of a tattoo on his forearm. Standing
somewhat in the shadows in the back were two men and by the way they stood still in
their business suits, Elliott guessed them to be Rentschler’s bodyguards. When the hedge
fund owner saw them approaching, he put down the brush.

“I’m glad you could make it here,” Rentschler said, shaking Elliott and Bridget’s
hands as they made their introduction. Elizabeth pointed to a pair of stools and a table
with drinks and cookies before she excused herself. Rentschler picked up his brush and
resumed grooming the stallion.

“I hope you don’t mind me working here,” he said. “If you had asked for an
interview on a weekday, we could have met in our office in New York. So, how can I
help you?”

Rentschler used a rubbery brush in circular motion as he worked from the front of
the horse to the back.

“Thank you for having us here on short notice,” Elliott said, while taking out his
notebook, pen and recorder. “Hedge fund is a bit of a mysterious animal and there's not
much known about you. Can you tell us a bit about yourself?”
Rentschler shook his head. “I’ll have my assistant send you my biography sheet. Ask me another question.”

“All right.” Elliott looked down on his list of prepared questions.

Above him, the smattering of raindrops on the roof interrupted the stillness of this place. He would have to speak up a little for Rentschler to hear him and hoped the mic on his recorder was sensitive enough to capture’s the conversation.

“Pantheon is a closed fund, it doesn’t accept new investors. Can you mention who your shareholders are?

“Well there’s me and a couple of friends whose names I cannot disclose.”

“I read that Greek shipping magnate Abbraxas has put his money in your fund, is it true?”

“As I said, I cannot disclose names.”

“Your asset-under-management was reported at $14.3 billion five years ago. How much is it now?”

“It’s up by about a third now,” Rentschler said. “We’ve doing well even in a market downturn like this.”

“Can you give me an exact amount and date?”

“Up by about a third as of now.”

Elliott noted that down. Over the past five years his funds had grown by about 33 percent, providing an impressive return at a time when putting money into time deposits would have earned savers close to zero percent in interest rates. “Where are you putting your money to get this high return?”

“Emerging markets mainly as they offer higher yields. We also like frontier markets although given the risks are not too exposed there.”
“What about bonds?”

“Bonds, stocks, currencies, commodities. We invest in just about anything.”

“So you are also one of the city’s biggest creditors for the bonds that are due next month,” he asked, edging closer to the actual topic he wanted to talk about.

Rentschler had finished grooming one side of the horse and now moved on to the other side. Bridget followed him while taking pictures, careful not to distract Rentschler and keeping a safe distance from the horse.

“Yes our fund is a regular buyer of municipal bonds in the market. That’s one way of diversifying our investment while helping the city fund projects.”

“How much of the city's debt do you own?”

“I knew you were going to ask that question, so I dug out that number. We own about $53 million of New York’s municipal bonds spread across short-term notes and bonds.”

“How much is that of your total portfolio of bond investment?”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer you that. As you can see, our exposure to municipal bonds is small relative to the size of our funds. Municipal bonds aren’t hot in demand these days with New York close to bankruptcy.”

“My sources tell me that you bought most of the $530 million bonds that are due next week,” Elliott held out a print out of a graph that Paula had printed out for him. Rentschler stepped away from the horse to look at the paper. Elliott said “and you bought these bonds in the past few days, just when their prices sank to record lows.”

“Naturally you want to buy low and sell high, unless you hold on to maturity.”

“Which would be next week, do you intent on holding them until then?”
“Off-the-record, yes.”

“Since you bought these bonds at such low prices, you will earn a hefty capital gain if the city were to avoid default and repay the bonds in full.”

“I certainly hope so. The bonds’ falling price reflects the low confidence the market has in the city’s ability to repay its debt. No one wants to hold these bonds anymore but if they want to sell them, someone has to buy them and that’s us. The market provides that escape hatch for people to dump assets they think are too risky to hold. So we take those risks. And when we do, we do so because we believe that the greater risk, the greater the reward should be. Now since the city’s bonds have lost almost all of their value it only makes sense if we stand to earn nearly double in capital gain if the bonds are repaid in full. Mind you, sometimes it’s us who’re dumping assets and someone else agrees to take on the risk. That’s how the market works and it provides a great way of allocating risk in investments.”

“But why did you decide to take all this risk when everyone else is selling?”

“The payoff is big.”

“My source told me that you along with eleven other investors own more than 90 percent of these bonds, and all of you bought these bonds over the past few days. Municipal bondholders are normally spread across hundreds or maybe thousands of individual investors but not for these bonds here. The ownership here is now concentrated on twelve hedge funds who, I suspect, were acting in concert to pressure the city.”

“Pressure the city into doing what?”

Elliott held up the chart again. “My source tells me that you sent New York a message, a warning really, that if the city were to give in to the demand by the kidnappers
to drop the housing reforms, and choose to default instead, then New York will have to pay dearly for this decision.”

“Care to explain how?”

“If the default leads to a debt restructuring then you and your friends as the biggest bondholder can act again in unison to impose harsher demands on the city, including continued pressure on demanding housing reforms, social spending cut. Especially if, in a worst case scenario, the default leads to bankruptcy. As bondholders you’ll get priority over the city’s asset and revenues.”

Rentschler wiped the sweat on his brows with his right forearm. “I was told that a reporter is only as good as his contacts. Your source is spot on.”

Elliott sighed. But he still needed a solid confirmation, a yes-or-no answer. “So that’s your plan?”

“You could say so.”

Now he needed to keep pushing him forward. “But why would you want to corner the city into accepting the housing reforms like this?”

“You have to see the bigger picture here,” Rentschler said. “America is losing its competitiveness. We’re losing out against the Europeans, against the Asians and the South Americans are breathing down on our neck. Do know what it takes to stay competitive?”

“Live a frugal life?”

“Exactly and so we need to tighten our budget, trim all those spending that aren’t necessary, like welfare that only - ”
“How about cutting military spending instead?” Bridget asked, and Elliott gave her a stern look. Bridget shrugged. “It’s the biggest in the world, no wonder we’re not competitive.”

“Well, there are people out there who hate our freedom,” Rentschler said. “Do we need another attack against investment bankers to prove this?”

Elliott had to get him back answering his previous question. “So why then did you buy these bonds to threaten the city against defaulting?”

“The bigger picture Elliott. New York is no stranger to fiscal crisis. In 1975 its fiscal crisis gave us the opportunity to take control of the city’s fiscal management.”

“The Emergency Financial Control Board?” Elliott asked, referring to the board of bankers that took over the city’s budget management during the 1975 crisis.

“Yes I think that was it, the EFCB. The current board is somewhat modeled after it. Anyway, bankers back then were to strengthen the city’s budget by removing free education, cutting health services etc. And that discipline spread across other cities and took hold of the federal budget as well, which made us stronger as a country. But now we have grown complacent, we don’t make real American products anymore, we buy them from overseas: electronics, cars, clothes. The products are cheaper overseas because the countries that are making them are more competitive. They have lower wages, better infrastructure, lower costs. Meanwhile, we pay for all with debt because we import more goods than we sell overseas and now we’re in a mess. So, New York relapsing into another fiscal crisis is actually a blessing a disguise for us because here is the opportunity to bring this nation back on its feet.”
Bridget shook her head while Elliott nodded. “But how do you plan to change the country through New York.”

“New York is the last bastion for liberal policies, and at its core is the city’s affordable housing program. That program is over a hundred years old and has survived the reforms that bankers initiated in 1975. New York’s public housing, the projects, is a vestige of those big-spending days when we didn’t have to compete against the rest of the world as we must today. But if we can bring it down this time, it will send a powerful message to the rest of the country. We can start tackling similar wasteful spending in other cities’ budgets and in particular the federal budget: food stamps, Medicare, social security. Let the private sector handle all that, they know better how to deal with welfare cheaters.”

Bridget scoffed. “What if poor people can’t afford the privatized services?”

“Bridget please,” Elliott said.

“I want to know Elliott. It’s a valid question.”

“Yes it is a valid question,” Rentschler said. “But you know what makes America great? It’s her people. Our nation wasn’t made great by losers. Let’s face it, the flipside of survival of the fittest is the non-survival of the weakest, and cutting down those wasteful social spending will do just that. I don’t mind helping the poor gain equal opportunity of course. I have a long list of philanthropic activities to back this up. Yes, it’s a power struggle, a class struggle, but the founding fathers of our democracy ensured that we, the minority, are protected against the...,” Rentschler paused as he searched for the right word, “...tyranny of the majority.”
Elliott saw Bridget was about to protest so he jumped in with a question. “So buying these city bonds wasn’t exactly a pure investment decision then?”

“No it wasn’t. I had a chat with our partners and the other eleven investors who are concerned about the future of our country and we all decided to chip in to make sure New York swings in the right direction. Of course if we’re right, not only can we tilt the national debate on fiscal policies to our favor, we will also get a hefty capital gain from the city repaying its bonds in full, that’s just a bonus.”

“But what do you get out of all this?”

“I also own stocks in three developers with strong cash flows to buy the city’s public housing and invest in new apartments. If the council passes the housing reforms program, the shares of these developers will skyrocket and I make a lot of money, a lot.”

“So in owning the city’s bonds and the developers’ shares you are very confident that the city will repay its debt,” Elliott said.

Rentschler turned his head to face Elliott. “Nobody gets away with not paying his debt.”

“How sure are you? There’s a lot of pressure for the city not to pass the reforms and just default on its debt.”

“We're talking about fiscal prudence,” Rentschler said. “It's natural of bankers to demand the city pay attention to this. Let me explain, the city can use the money it saves to improve other people's lives for instance by building new infrastructure, which not only creates job but will also improve the productivity of everyone working in the city and so generate higher tax revenue which in turn can be used to invest in more programs like building more school, help the needy etc. it's a virtuous cycle. All that bankers ask is
for the city to realize this and it certainly has. The public still don't get it and it's not the bankers’ to make them understand. If anything it’s the media’s job to explain, but then again the media doesn't seem to get it either.”

“Who’s paying for the social costs if all these people lose their homes?” Bridget asked. By now she had stopped taking pictures and was standing with arms crossed over her chest. “I’d say the cost will outweigh the economic benefits you talk about.”

“If you’re unemployed and can’t find a job, you really shouldn’t be living here.”

“No money, no citizenship, is that how things are?” Bridget asked.

“Both your father and mother have certainly earned their place here,” Rentschler said. “I’m disappointed to see their daughter doesn’t share her parents’ view about success. Look at Elliott, comes from a poor family, almost made it rich with his Internet idea. But one day, I’m sure, he’ll strike gold and join us.”

“You think you know my family?” Bridget asked, a tad too loud as one of the bodyguards must have noticed her getting worked up and took a step forward. “And you call robbing other people’s rights to make money on stupid stock bets a success?”

“Bridget let me ask the questions here,” Elliott said and he gestured for her to step away from Rentschler. He had to find a more neutral question to let her calm down.

“I thought New Yorkers disagree more on the question of how to achieve the kind of fiscal prudence you just mentioned,” Elliott asked. “For instance the incentives for the developers, isn’t that overkill just to get them on board?”

“Property companies were already on board before the incentive deal,” Rentschler said.
Elliott paused, realizing that here was a new piece of information but at the same time also illogical. “I don't understand. I thought the city must offer these investors to get property companies on board? Why would they offer them incentives afterwards?”

“You broke the news on the incentive clause so I knew you were going to ask me that,” Rentschler said. He went to the table with the refreshments and fetched a document that he gave to Elliott.

“This is the original draft of the housing reforms agreement before the incentive deal. It was already agreed upon but not yet been signed.”

The document looked similar to the housing reforms draft agreement Elliott had found in Katherine’s apartment. No media had published a draft of the housing reforms agreement until Elliott broke news about the incentive deal. So he wasn’t sure what to look out for as he flipped through the pages.

“I don’t have much time Elliott,” Rentschler said. “So let me point out to you that without the incentive deal the housing reforms agreed on here is much more lenient than the latest draft that’s been circulating in the press. Under the old agreement, New York will reduce but not phase out its affordable housing program. It will only sell a portion of its public housing but retain others and it won’t sell them at a discount. Housing subsidies won’t be abolished but replaced with a more market friendly scheme and rent control won’t be entirely cut but replaced with another policy to be decided later on. This is what everyone had earlier agreed on.”

Elliott was stepping into new territory here, just like he did when he discovered the incentive deal in Katherine’s apartment. That the city, bankers and property companies had already agreed to a much softer housing reforms was new. The question
was now figuring out what had happened in between the old agreement and the new stricter one.

“Why did the property companies and bankers backtracked on this older version when they have already agreed on it?” Elliott asked.

“In any negotiation you want to make use of your opponents’ weakness to gain leverage so that you end up with a better deal. And in this case they saw a weakness in the city and took full advantage of it, fair game.”

“What weakness?”

“The finance, the property and construction industries are the biggest businesses in New York City,” Rentschler said. “No mayor can ignore them.”

“But why would Mayor Alberta care? It’s her last term.”

“I wasn’t talking about the current mayor.”

“Bowing to the industries’ interest isn't a smart move, political wise,” Bridget said.

“But only if you let the public know,” Rentschler said, “the trick is to keep it below the radar, ask your father.”

Rentschler was about to say something important. It hung from the man’s tip of the tongue but Elliott needed to tease it out of him. “So you’re saying running for mayor is expensive and these companies in the construction, property and finance industries can help out with funding the campaign in return for something like the incentive deal?”

“Yes, you could say so,” Rentschler said. “Do you know who I’m talking about?”

In that moment of silence, Elliott realized that it had stopped raining.
“Tyler?” Bridget asked before Elliott couldn’t even think of him. But who else could it be? Tyler, the city’s financial comptroller who had been leading the negotiation on the housing reforms, had gotten so much publicity lately for representing the city’s interests that if he were to run for mayor next year, he would be already known to many New Yorkers. Elliott held his breath, waiting for Rentschler’s answer.

Rentschler smiled. “I won’t say his name but you can infer the answer from my reaction.”

_Bridget you rock!_ Elliott’s mind raced, trying to digest the significance of this information. If Comptroller Tyler planned to run for mayor with the backing of the construction, property and finance industries, then his integrity as a negotiator who represented the city in talks with these industries would be questionable. It’s a simple matter of conflict of interest which therefore undermined the trustworthiness of the housing reforms talks and any agreement resulting from this. If Elliott ran a story on Tyler’s plan, this could spell the end of the housing reforms agreement.

“So you’re saying Tyler plans to run for mayor?” Elliott asked.

“You should ask him that yourself.”

He would normally press for on-record comment, but he couldn’t use Rentschler’s comments on this matter anyway because the hedge-fund owner wasn’t qualified to talk about the comptroller’s political ambition. Still he needed a bullet proof confirmation to convince Lambert later that there was no misunderstanding about Tyler.

“Off-the-record. Does Tyler plan to run for mayor?”

Rentschler thought for a moment then said. “Yes.”
Elliott and Bridget glanced at each other and smiled. And when Rentschler also smiled, he wanted to ask him why he told them this information, which surely would put the housing reforms at risk if the public found out. But Rentschler might retract his statements and that risk was not worth pressing him for an explanation.

“Well it seems I have told you everything I have to say or rather what you wanted to know,” Rentschler said. “Now as much as I enjoy talking to you, I do have another late appointment.” He nodded at the door where Elizabeth and another group of people were waiting.

Elliott thanked Rentschler and was heading for the door when Rentschler called Elliott back.

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” he said. “If you are ever thinking of launching another startup, let me know. I’d be happy to look at your investment proposal.”

Elliott muttered a thank you then walked passed the horses in their pens and out the barn into the open air. They rode back the way they came from with Elizabeth leading them again. His mind was still swirling with all the information he had to digest and so he muted his thoughts to let his senses take in the surrounding nature. Never did wet grass smell this good.

#

Bridget was right. They wouldn’t make it back to New York tonight. Elliott had to tell Lambert about the interview so they could decide right then what to do next. They picked up Rafael at the parking lot where he had left them. Rafael, guessing that they would need rooms, had already found a cheap but clean motel nearby. They gathered
in Bridget’s room, eating potato chips while Elliott explained Rafael what he had found out from Rentschler.

“By the time Tyler announces his candidacy the city will have concluded its reforms with the bankers and no one would charge him of any conflict of interest,” Elliott said. “If he plays his card right, he will be known by the public as the financial comptroller who bravely fought a losing battle against the bankers.”

“The question though is whether this is enough to get convince your paper to run this story.” Rafael said.

“The fact that Tyler plans to run for mayor alone is worth a front page story. Let’s not forget that Rentschler gave us a copy of the original housing reforms agreement that didn’t include the incentive deal.

Elliott shoveled the last crumbs of potato chips into his mouth and washed it down with apple juice. “All right, I’m going back to my room and call Lambert. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

#

Bridget slumped onto her bed and stared at the ceiling. She had a quiet moment for herself. To appease Elliott, Rafael had agreed to sleep at another motel and had left her room to fetch his bag from their rental car. She could sleep on the spot. Judging by what they got from Rentschler’s interview, the road trip with Rafael and Elliott, the escape from New York’s overbearing buildings, she concluded the day was well worth the exhaustion. But Rafael would be back any moment now as he wanted to know Lambert’s decision on the story before leaving. So she rose from her bed and shuffled to the bathroom to brush her teeth.
Looking out the bathroom window next to the sink, she saw Rafael crossing the street in the back of the motel. She watched him walked up to their rental car and fetched his backpack. Instead of walking back to the motel, he went the opposite direction, heading for a line of trees across a grass field. Bridget frowned and moved closer to the window. That’s when she noticed a group of people coming out of the trees and walking toward Rafael. She couldn’t see them clearly from this distance and under the poor light from the street lights. But she knew who they were. She went out the bathroom and returned with her camera and a long-range lens.

The presence of Rafael’s men could only spell trouble, and thinking how she had talked Elliott into bringing Rafael along, her hand began to tremble as she attached the lens to her camera. Opening the window, she leaned against the sill, and zoomed in on Rafael. She recognized three of them. Xavier stood with his hands in pocket, chewing a gum, next to him, wearing a rain jacket, was the man she had trailed yesterday, and standing closest to Rafael, was Adrienne. When Rafael reached out to touch her short black hair, straightening strains above her ear, Bridget’s heart sank into a pool of ice. They were talking for a few more minutes before the group retreated into the trees and Rafael headed back to the motel. She shut the window and returned to her room.

Bridget decided to clean her camera and emptied her backpack to place all items on the bed. The DSLR camera body, a primary lens, a portrait lens, the long-range zoom lens Madison Vanguard loaned her, a small tripod and the pouch with the brushes and cloths for cleaning. She looked with satisfaction at how everything was laid in neat order before her, although everything inside her had crumbled into pieces. And when the door knocked, she thought hard about opening it.
“No word from Elliott yet?” Rafael asked as he walked in with a thermos bottle and plastic cups. “I made some chamomile tea.”

Bridget sat on the bed and used a cloth to clean her primary lens. Rafael sat by the table and watched her.

“All this equipment does look expensive,” he said. He poured himself tea from the thermos. Bridget blew away the dust on her lens.

“How are your men here?” She asked without looking at Rafael.

Rafael put down his cup then sighed.

“They’re here for my protection, in case things go wrong.”

He went to the bathroom and Bridget heard him kick the trash bin.

“And it takes five people to protect you?” Bridget chuckled. “I don’t believe you.”

“We’re not planning to harm Rentschler, if that’s what you’re thinking. And even if we did, we wouldn’t be needing Elliott.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“All right.” Rafael rose from his chair. “Rentschler is an important figure, he’s pulling some strings as Elliott’s interview has shown. My men have been here since this afternoon, gathering intel about him: his house, his family, security details, the people he surrounds himself with. Had I been able to join the interview, I could have provided additional intel from the inside. We didn’t get much, but enough to develop a info sheet on him for later use. But right now we’re not planning anything against him. He’s safe, okay.”

Bridget put down the lens and looked at Rafael.
“So this whole road trip is just a way for you get inside Rentschler’s house, isn’t it?” “First, without us you wouldn’t even have gotten this interview and second, I didn’t get inside. I stayed out because Elliott didn’t want me in. So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is that you were planning to use us; you used me to convince Elliott into letting you come along.”

“I gave you the interview and in return we get some intel for our missions. I see no harm in that.”

Rafael’s missions were what Elliott had warned her about.

“How far are you willing to go to fight for your cause?” Bridget asked.

“You mean how far am I willing to go to uphold justice? You want to talk about that now? After all what we've gone through? I thought we were passed that stage.”

“I have my doubts now.”

“Kind of late isn't it? Elliott has his doubt too but he came along, he's fine with it.”

“Would you kill?”

“If necessary yes.”

“Have you killed?”

“Yes.”

“You killed innocent people?”

“I kill when necessary”

“That’s a yes?”

“There’s no shortage of killing around the world in the name of big business,” Rafael said. “Civilians can demonstrate and sign petitions all they want, but that’s no
match to the power of money and guns combined. We, however, are soldiers. We provide the counterbalance. We bring in the kind of leverage to activism that only the military can bring, level the playing field because your democracy can’t cope with this concentration of power in the hands of the oligarchy. Yes we take the heat for it, being branded terrorists and all, but we deliver results.”

“Just answer my question,” Bridget said. “Have you ever killed an innocent person?”

Rafael took a deep breath. “Yes.”

Bridget leaned against the bed board. “Great, I just helped bring a bunch of killers to Rentschler’s house.”

“I told you we’re not going to harm Rentschler.”

“But you could have. You didn’t tell me and Elliott that you would bring your men.”

“There was no need for you guys to know.”

Rafael wasn’t getting the point.

“You used us. What if things had gone wrong? What if you suddenly decided to go after Rentschler, like you did with Lindberg? How would that make us look?”

“Even if we did plan something, we wouldn’t have harmed Rentschler because he’s too important. Sure, there’s collateral damage and the occasional beating, but we don’t target innocent people to terrorize others.”

Nice try Rafael. He thought he could talk his way out of this and she hadn’t even mention Adrienne yet. What was this woman to him? And what about herself? The entire road trip was nothing but a mission where she was one of many checkboxes in his little
soldier mind. First get Bridget, then use her to get Elliott, then use him to get Rentschler. Did he even feel anything for her? The question raged inside her but asking it would expose herself to him in a light he didn’t deserve to see. She won’t ask it then. But she was not done with him either for the gash in her was still burning.

“Spare me the grandstanding,” she said, “you’re just a bunch of mercenaries.” Rafael sat down, looking baffled. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you Bridget. You should know by now that I’m not doing this for money. None of us do. We don’t follow anyone’s orders, but our own consciences. We get paid to do the right thing. So don’t think you’re any better than us.”

“I don't kill for a living that's all I need to know.”

“That’s how all soldiers make a living. I’m risking my life for your people, not mine but your people.”

“No one asked for your help.”

“Really? Without us, no one would have known about the incentive deal, Elliott wouldn’t have gotten the interview with Rentschler. It was our threat that made him do his job as a reporter in the first place. Or else how do you explain him willing to ignore Bennett’s order and put his career at risk by chasing this story? Believe me, unless you take your activism to another level, all the change you will ever achieved will be cosmetic.”

“So you think we can’t stand up on our own? Then you don’t know anything about us.”

“You have been lulled into obedience like sheep, you have no idea what it means to stand up for something.”
“It doesn’t mean killing civilians to raid drug money.”

She could sense him looking at her.

“What are you talking about?”

“Fry told Elliott about this drug organization in Colombia and he told me.”

“What did he tell him?”

“That you sell drugs and kill innocent people.”

“No, what did Elliott tell Fry about us here?”

Bridget looked up. “Nothing. But did you kill all these people?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Pulling the trigger is complicated?”

“There are sacrifices to be made, a greater cause. I can’t tell you anything about it. So you just have to take my word for it.”

“Maybe you should tell that the families of all the people you killed.”

Rafael sighed and ruffled his hair, then he grabbed his backpack and left.

She resumed cleaning her camera. In the end, Rafael was like all her former boyfriends, one more imprint in the trail of destruction they left in their wake. She put down her camera and walked up the window. Across the parking lot from behind the curtain, she saw Elliott pacing up and down in his room, probably still on the phone, Elliott in his safe little world of headlines and deadlines that now seemed so much warmer than the world she was now lost in.

#

It was just after 11 p.m. that Elliott came out of the shower and boiled water on an electric kettle to make himself some tea. For an hour he had been talking to Chief Editor
Lambert, explaining him about the twelve investors who owned most of the city’s bonds, the original housing reforms agreement that had already agreed on, and Tyler’s plan to run for mayor that smacked of conflict of interest. Both agreed that Tyler’s political plans was the biggest news that came out of Rentschler’s interview, a scoop worth running on Madison Vanguard’s front page. As it wasn’t directly linked to the housing reforms program, Lambert felt safe in assuming it wouldn’t violate Bennett’s ban on housing reforms stories. Still they needed a second source to confirm Tyler’s political plans and Lambert said he himself would call his contacts to find out. Once confirmed, they would work on the story tomorrow morning with Lambert promising to devote a team of reporters on getting the story out fast.

Elliott put down his cup of tea on the nightstand then looked out the window. Bridget’s room was dark, which probably meant she had gone to bed already. Or perhaps Rafael was in the room with her and they didn’t want to be bothered. He turned away from the window, snug into his bed and switched on the TV, trying to feed his brain with content that would help him forget about Bridget and the story. A bit of rest was in order for tomorrow would be another busy day.

Elliott’s phone rang. It was Adam, the metro desk’s crime reporter who sat next to him in the office.

“Hey Elliott is everything all right?” Adam’s voice was low.

“Yeah why do you ask?”

“Did you do anything stupid lately?”

Elliott sat up in his bed and muted the television.

“What's wrong?”
“There's something brewing down here in the office. We don’t know what's going on, but I think it has to do with you," Adam said, his voice dropped to almost a whisper. “Elliott, I just overheard that Bennett is coming.”

“Thomas Bennett?”

There was a pause as Adam seemed to be listening in to conversation nearby. “Yeah they're definitely talking about you. I just overheard Anad talking over the phone.”

“And?”

“I don't know man. But I think I better get off the phone; they may call you anytime now. Good luck.” Adam hung up.

Elliott's arm fell onto his bed, the phone rolling out of his hand. If Bennett himself was coming, and he rarely visited the newspaper, then something big was afoot. When the phone rang a few minutes later, he steeled himself for the worse.

“Elliott, I hope I didn’t wake you up,” Anad said, his voice sounded almost fatherly.

“No I was just watching TV.”

“I’m sorry to call you this late but we have a problem.”

“What is it?”

“I’m in the conference room, and I’m putting you on speaker phone. Hernandez and Bennett will be in here any moment now.” Hernandez was the deputy chief editor but where was Lambert?

Elliott got up from his bed. He put the phone on speaker mode and placed it on the table. Then he carried over the laptop, his recorder and notes that he would need to
defend his story. One last major hurdle before the story could get published. He grabbed his tea then sat by the table, waiting.

Through the speaker, Elliott heard the conference door opening and footsteps entering the conference room. He heard the rustling of paper, Anad’s coughing then the unmistakable voice of Bennett.

“Is Elliott on the phone?” Bennett asked, sounding clear through the speakers. “Yes he is,” Anad said. “Elliott, we have Bennett and Hernandez in the conference room.”

“Gentlemen,” Bennett said. “I’ll be quick because it’s late. I am disappointed, disappointed because my trust in this paper has been misused for some adventurous groundless reporting. When I asked the paper to drop the story about the housing incentive deal, I meant it. Instead Lambert, of all people I thought I trusted most and in whom I placed the responsibility of running this paper, decided to circumvent my decision and let Elliott continue his investigation. Now, I have never interfered in the day-to-day operation of this paper and I let its editorial meetings pursue stories as they see fit. But this time I have to step in and yet my word was not followed. Elliott, I don't blame you. I understand you’re young, you’re eager, but let me make this clear to you, when I instruct something it will be followed to the letter.” Bennett paused to make clear everyone understood what he just said.

“I was told by Tyler that we interviewed Rentschler,” he went on. “Not only did Lambert approve Elliott to continue pursuing the housing reforms story, he also thought it appropriate to plan a story based on the interview without consulting me first. In other words, all this was done behind my back. This is unacceptable. Here I am trying to find
companies willing to buy a stake in this paper and you repay me with breaking may
orders and embarrass me.”

The conference room was silent. Elliott wasn’t called in to defend his story, this
wasn’t a trial. He was here to listen to the verdict.

“Gentlemen, Lambert no longer works for this paper. Hernandez, you will take
his place.”

Elliott could hear an almost inaudible thank you in the background.

“Let me make this clear, no more of this housing program nonsense. We drop this
and we will not run anything from Rentschler’s interview or anything based off Elliott’s
investigation. If readers complain so be it. Elliott are you still with us?”

“Yes sir.”

“You heard what I said?”

“Yes.”

“It's not up for discussion. You drop what you’re doing and take on some other
assignments. I appreciate your good work though; I understand you manage to put the
paper ahead of the competition in the past few days. You keep up the work, just find
some other story to sink your teeth in. However, the next time you disobey me, you’re
gone.”

“Understood.”

“Good. That’s it gentlemen, have a good night.”

Someone disconnected the line and left Elliott alone again in the room. He took a
sip from the now cold tea, leaned back against the chair and stared at the wall in front. All
the work he put in had gone down the drain, and out of this realization he sought comfort in knowing that he was done. He tried his best, he failed, it was over, time to go home.

Elliott powered down his laptop, grabbed his recorder and notes and stuffed everything in his bag. As he walked to his bed, he peeked through the crack between the curtains at Bridget’s room across the parking lot. Somewhere inside the dark room, she was sound asleep.

#

The bang and crash that jolted Elliott out of sleep escalated into a cacophony of sounds and images. Dark figures with assault rifles stormed into the room and when the lights flicked on, the flash blinded him that it took him a few more seconds to react.

“What’s going on?” Elliott sat up on his bed. Squinting, he saw two SWAT officers standing in his room. Outside he heard the chopping sound of a helicopter hovering low nearby. Two more SWAT officers entered and stepping out from behind them was Agent Fry.

“Good morning Elliott,” the agent said.

By now Elliott was awake enough to hope that Rafael was sleeping in another motel as he said he would. “What’s going on,” he asked again.

“We were worried,” Fry said as he took a seat by the table. “First you come to me to talk about the eco-terrorists then you disappeared, you ignored my calls, you sent me this vague text message about an interview in Boston. So we were worried.”

“I see, well I said I was fine.” Elliott rose from his bed and went to the bathroom to pee while thinking what to say. If they had already found Rafael then they wouldn't have stormed his room and they would have probably arrested him, and questioned him
as well. If they thought Rafael was hiding they would have questioned him too. At this point, it seemed Fry wasn't even sure whether Rafael was here at all. He stepped out of the bathroom to find an officer rummaging through his messenger bags.

"You can't go through my things." Elliott asked.

The officer stopped and looked at Fry who then gestured Elliott to follow him outside, presumably to let the officers search his room in peace. Elliott took Bridget’s sweater and stepped out into the chill night. About a dozen SWAT officers waited by their police van with three unmarked police cars, their lights flashing, parked by the exit.

“Just a security check,” Fry said, “we’re not searching for evidence or anything.”

“I don’t carry any weapons.”

“Well, we thought you’re in danger.”

“I’m not. I’m totally fine.”

A few guests watched through their windows, some coming out of their rooms for a closer view. Elliott looked across the parking lot and saw Bridget. She was standing by the doorway, her eyes tired, and when she caught hold of Elliott, he noticed the flash of disgust in her face before she turned around and headed back to her room with Agent Powell by her side. She must be thinking that he had called the FBI to come over.

The four SWAT officers in his room came out of his room and one of them nodded at Fry, indicating it was safe to go back inside. Fry left the broken door open and Agent Powell joined them with notepad in hand.

“I know it’s late so I have only a few questions,” Fry said and took a seat by the table across Elliott.

“Go ahead,” Elliott said with a tired voice.
“Explained to me how you got your interview with Rentschler and drove up here.”

So Elliott told him how he went to the brokerage to find the investors, how he went to meet Nancy’s source, and how her source, whom he didn’t name, produced a list of twelve investors, including Rentschler. He told him how he tried contacted all of the investors, and how that led to his interview appointment with Rentschler.

“You told me earlier that you got a copy of the incentive deal from your source whose name was Frank, right?”

“Yes.”

“Frank has nothing to do with this interview?”

“No. You can verify what I said with Nancy, though I doubt she’ll reveal her source.”

The questioned continued for another fifteen minutes with Fry asking the same questions using different angles. At last the agent apologized for the disturbance and thanked him before he and Powell left. Elliott watched them walking over to Bridget’s room where a police officer was waiting for them outside. He couldn’t close the door properly and he let it open as he crawled back to his bed.

Bridget was smart enough to know what to say to Agent Fry. If anything it was him who screwed up. He had let her down on the story, had failed to stop the housing reforms, and it was because of him that the FBI had followed them here. It must be pure luck that they didn’t catch Rafael. Tomorrow Elliott would have to explain to Bridget. He couldn’t afford losing her to Rafael, not with his men about to unleash terror on New York.
CHAPTER V - Arise

The drive back to New York in the morning was long and lonely. With Rafael gone, Elliott took the wheel of their rental Chevrolet. He missed the wide open green land he observed on their way to Boston. Throughout the drive, the view ahead had narrowed to the width of the road, as land and sky disappeared behind an impenetrable curtain of rain. Bridget had cocooned herself in the backseat and refused to talk to Elliott who struggled to stay awake behind the wheel. Occasionally he would glance at her through the rearview mirror, catching her stare into the empty space just beyond the window.

Somewhere midway through the trip, Elliott began to talk anyway, if only to keep himself awake. He told Bridget that he didn’t tell Fry about Rafael, that the agent had raided their rooms because he thought they might be in danger, that it was therefore still his fault for what happened last night. He apologized to her for almost getting Rafael arrested and this admission too was met with indifference. As they approached New York, he told her about the paper’s decision to scuttle the story, that Bennett had found out about the interview from Tyler, and that this last fact bothered him just as much as Bridget’s sullen silence throughout the ride.

Driving down the 87 Interstate highway, New York’s slab of gray and brown buildings grew into view underneath clouds that hung menacingly low. At least it wasn’t raining. Around Bronx, Elliott noticed the first group of people marching toward a bus carrying anti-housing reforms slogans. As they neared the city, he saw more of them. In Harlem, they wore dark sweaters, black jeans, and some wore bandanas which he suspected would transformed into masks once the protests turned violent. It was Saturday
and the big anti-housing reforms rally wasn’t expected until Monday, the last day for the city council to vote on the housing reforms.

“Check out these protestors, something is going on here,” Elliott said. “Let’s see what’s in the news.”

He turned on the radio and selected a news channel. He didn’t have to wait long before he found a presenter in the midst of recapping today’s breaking news. The New York Times reported that the city and investment bankers had come to an agreement on the housing reforms program and that the council would vote on it today, ahead of the expected schedule on Monday. Consequently the rally was moved forward too, and thousands of protesters were pouring into Downtown.

“You know, even if Bennett hadn’t intervened, it would have been too late for us to run a story,” Elliott said. He wouldn’t be surprised if it was Jack who wrote that New York Times story.

“By tomorrow everything would be over,” he said. “Did Rafael ever tell you how he plans to stop the housing reforms?”

Elliott looked at the mirror at Bridget who shook her head without returning his glance. At least he managed to coax some reaction out of her. At 10th Avenue, while waiting for the traffic lights to turn green, he glanced at her again, at her eyes and only then did he noticed that they were glassy. Rafael. How could he be so blind?

For the rest of the way Elliott didn’t say anything. They reached 22th street in Chelsea at about one p.m. Elliott decided to leave the car here and return it on Monday to avoid getting stuck in the demonstrations. He gave Bridget the car keys then helped her carry her duffel bag upstairs. Bridget went to the bathroom and he put the bag on the kitchen
counter. The furniture in the living room were still set against the wall and lying in the middle was the new rug, a fluffy white square that looked against the brown parquet floor like a patch of snow.

Elliott said goodbye through the bathroom door and headed down the stairways. He was almost out the front door when he realized that he left his messenger bag in the rental car. The car keys were with Bridget, so he went up again to fetch them.

“Bridget?” he asked as he opened the door and stepped inside, hoping she hadn’t retreated into her bedroom yet. He walked inside and when he reached the kitchen he saw her.

She laid on the rug flat on her back with her face pointed upwards and her eyes closed.

“Bridget?” he said softly. “I left my bag in the car.”

He took another step closer and noticed in the gentle rise and fall of her belly the rhythm of sleep. The small bulk in her jeans’ front pocket told him where the car keys were. Throughout the trip she hadn’t slept at all and he should let her be. But that meant leaving all his stuff, his notes, recorder and laptop, in the car. And not wanting that, he rather wait for her to wake up. Elliott looked around to find something to do. He could make himself comfortable on the dark leather sofa by the wall or perhaps brew coffee in the kitchen. He looked down on Bridget, then crouched, and ran his hand over the rug. It felt plush and warm to his fingers, like the hide of an animal. He took off the sweater and laid down next to her. Closing his eyes, he let his mind slid away into the dark comforting corner of sleep.

#
Elliott woke up to the soft rustling sound of clothes. When he looked to his right, he saw Bridget lying next to him, her face turned away, perhaps still asleep. He closed his eyes again letting his mind drift.

“Dang,” Bridget whispered. Her first spoken word today. He opened his eyes and looked at her again. As though she heard him waking up she turned around too and looked him in the eyes.

“Hello,” she said.

“What time is it?”

Bridget checked her watch. “A quarter to three.”

He had slept for about two hours and it felt like it.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“This is a nice rug.”

“I know. It’s better than my bed.” She looked up and he joined her in staring at the white ceiling.

“Sorry about last night,” he said.

“You don't have to apologize.”

“Are you still angry at me?”

“I'm not angry at you.”

“Okay.”

“I’m angry at Bennett for killing your story. You tried so hard.”

“We both tried hard.”

He looked at her and she returned his gaze.
“Are you and Rafael..?” his asked, unsure how to frame his question.

She gave him a weak smile. “We had a fight and he left.”

“Bridget I don’t know what to say..”

“I want to show you something.”

She picked up her tablet and swiped through a photo app then showed him a picture of Katherine. It was the same portrait of her that Elliott held in his hand when they broke into her apartment.

“How did you get this?”

“Rafael gave it to me. He said you were stalking her, so he figured you might want this.”

Great. He pictured one of Rafael’s men following him as he watched Katherine in her apartment. He looked at Katherine. Seeing her picture on a tablet made it no different than looking at one of those cover shots on magazines. She was still beautiful but seeing it like this, outside her apartment, bereft the image of its life.

“Thanks. She’s way out of my league.”

Bridget chuckled.

“Trust me, I totally don’t exist to her,” he added.

“Come on Elliott. I saw how Rentschler treated you, like you’re going to be the next Internet sensation. You’re invisible only because you choose to. And since you haven’t told even me who you were before you became a reporter, proves that I’m right.”

He gave the tablet back to her. She probably wanted him to tell her about his failed startup, but he would then have to mention Lisa and that might ruin the quiet moment he had with Bridget. He would tell her another time.
They didn’t say anything for a while.

“What do you want to do next?” Bridget asked.

“I don’t know.”

She took his hand in hers. “Just stay here for a bit longer okay?”

“Okay.”

She didn't have to ask him. He didn't have anywhere to go, nothing to do, and where he was right now was where he wanted to be. All the possibilities in life that seemed to have sprung open when Rafael made his offer on that Sunday afternoon, had led to disappointing dead ends, all except for Bridget. They were still together.

“Elliott?”

“Yes?”

“What are you going to do about Rentschler’s interview?”

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“Rafael might launch his terror campaign. There’s nothing in the news yet. But we know it will happen.”

“I know, it sucks.”

“You said Bennett found out about the interview from Tyler?” Bridget asked.

“And how did Tyler find out?”

“I don’t know. It’s unlikely that Rafael told him. Perhaps Rentschler did.”

“But Rentschler practically screwed Tyler by telling you he wants to run for mayor.”

“Yeah that bothers me too. That and knowing we might still be able to stop Rafael’s terror but not doing anything about it.”

“What do you mean by still?”
Elliott searched for a way to explain this. Bennett would surely fire him if he found out that he ignored yet again his order and continued to pursue Tyler. But perhaps it was time to see his job as a profession than employment, even if it would be his last story. Terror threat or not, the public deserved to know, and needed to know many times over, when elected public officials were screwing them.

“You know what? I don’t care about Bennett’s threat.”

Bridget turned over on her stomach and looked at him.

“So what’s your plan?”

“Jack is my plan.”

“How?”

“I tell my editors that if they don’t run the story, I’ll tell Jack everything I know. I mean everything. So Madison Vanguard can either write the story or read it on the New York Times.”

“Tyler will never admit that he plans to run for mayor.”

“We’ll have to talk to him first, won't we?”

Elliott sat up and was about to pull Bridget to her feet, the two of them together again. But she rolled on her back again, and her eyes wandered elsewhere.

“I have to meet Latisha later on at one of the protesters’ offices. She wants a photojournalist around to discourage police from beating people up. I almost forgot about it but I promised her I’d come.”

That explained the “dang” he heard her whisper earlier. Elliott nodded. “Of course, makes sense.”
They rose to their feet and both went out to the street to fetch Elliott’s messenger bag in the rental car. He returned her sweater and when Elliott wanted to shake her hand she hugged him. “Be careful out there,” she said.

#

Bridget went to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water, then sat by the counter to check her phone. Latisha had called her two times and in her text message gave her the address on where to meet. Another text was from Dawson, asking her whether she was free to cover the demonstrations. The last one was from her mother, telling her that she would be home early. No sooner had she closed the message, that she heard behind her the door opening.

“Bridget?” It was Mother. She was holding the door open with her shoulder while carrying four shopping bags.

“Hi mom,” Bridget said and helped her carry the bags on the kitchen counter where they began to unpack them. “How bad is it outside?”

“Well I didn’t see much,” Mother said, while putting butter and cheese in the refrigerator. “It’s all happening near Wall Street and around City Hall. I sent everyone in the office home early, traffic is already a mess. Thanks God it’s a Saturday.”

On a typical Saturday Mother would be working as though it was a weekday, often forcing her employees to cancel weekend plans and come into office for meetings and last minute checks ahead of big events on Mondays. If they worked harder during the week, they wouldn’t need to come office on Saturday, she always said. Dad however was a weekend person who kept his work strictly off limit as soon as he left the office Friday
night. It helped that he no longer was a senator and that the weekly Washington-New York trip inserted a geographical barrier between his lobbying work and family time.

“Is Dad coming tonight?”

“Yes, you’ll be here for dinner, right?”

“I’m a photojournalist mom, I need to get out and take pictures.”

“But it’s dangerous outside.”

“It depends on how the day goes. First I’ll have to accompany Latisha. She and her lawyer friends provide legal assistance to the protesters, must be a pro-bono thing. She wants me to hang around with her in case of police brutality and arbitrary arrests.”

She hadn’t told mother about the stunt she pulled photographing Rafael and his men a week ago and hadn’t shown her the picture of them dangling midair on the front page of Madison Vanguard. That side of the job, her parents weren’t quite familiar with and it would take time to get them used to it.

“All right,” Mother said. “Just be careful out there. Make sure you have your journalist ID clearly visible.”

“I will.”

She went to her room to change. She choose a sturdier jeans, a pilot leather jacket, a scarf and put on light running shoes; an outfit that promised a combination of protection and agility. She fetched her bike helmet and attached it to the bag of backpack. She was checking herself in the mirror when her phone rang.

“Bridget, Lambert just called me,” Elliott said.

“And?”
“We still have a chance of running the story. Lambert met with the investors, not those bond investors, but the people who want to buy Madison Vanguard.”

“I don’t understand, who wants to buy your paper?”

“Bennett has been in talks with several people or companies that want to buy the paper from him. Lambert just met one of them that had just agreed to buy the paper.”

“But Lambert is no longer working for the paper.” She sat down on the edge of her bed.

“Exactly. They heard about his sudden dismissal. He was the chief editor after all and they wanted to know what happened. So Lambert met them and told the story. He told them everything, about Rentschler, Tyler and how Bennett then intervened. And guess what. These people didn’t like what they hear and are reconsidering the deal they struck with Bennett.”

“So they already agreed to buy the paper?”

“Not quite. According to Lambert, they have come to an agreement but haven’t actually signed it yet. But this whole incident where Bennett intervened wasn’t what they expected when they plan to acquire Madison Vanguard. They’re concerned with the reporters’ integrity to stand up to pressure, even if it came from the owner.”

“They want Madison Vanguard to run the story on Tyler and housing reforms although they’re not the owners yet?”

“Yes, but look at it the other way around. If we don’t run the story, they won’t buy the paper. Bennett and the investors are close to signing the deal, but they want to see the paper stand up for what’s right.”

“Why would they care?”
“It’s about building reputation to drive sales, and integrity is just part of it. The problem though is whether Hernandez wants to risk losing his job if things don’t pan out well.”

“But you’re still chasing Tyler for comments?”

“Absolutely. The city may be voting now but it’s not over until it’s over.”

Bridget wished him good luck and Elliott hung up. She looked out the window at the gray day and down at the empty street, then walked back to the warmth of the kitchen. Under the yellow light above the kitchen island, Mother was chopping carrots into tiny cubes.

“I’m making your favorite dish. So please come home early.”

“It looks like it’ll be a long day but I try to be home as soon as I can,” Bridget gave her a kiss then grabbed her backpack and headed out the door and down the stairs. Latisha had told her to meet her at Canal Street, right next where the bulk of the protesters were gathering. Outside, Bridget looked up at the tight formations of clouds that had given the day its lackluster gray tone. A breeze reminded her that autumn had already arrived. Walking down the street, she steeled herself for what the day might bring.

#

Elliott walked down Ninth Avenue, thinking what to do next. He had been heading downtown for a while, talking to Lambert then to Bridget, and now he had to come up with a plan to find Tyler. Crossing 20th Street he saw a Starbucks café, which meant a place to charge his phone, get some food, coffee, and use his laptop. It was the next best alternative to working from his office while trying to track down Tyler.
The baristas sprang to attention when he entered, and to his surprise the café was empty except for a homeless old woman whose belonging spread over three tables in the corner near the restroom. Elliott ordered a small black coffee and a bottle of water to go with a sandwich. He choose a table by the window, plugged his phone into the power outlet then opened his laptop.

Confronting Tyler wouldn’t be easy, assuming he could find him. Chewing on his sandwich, he logged on to his cloud storage service and downloaded a list of contacts. He scrolled through the names on the list, hoping for ideas on where to start asking around. The first choice was the city’s spokesman and then there were a couple of reporter friends who covered City Hall.

The spokesman didn’t answer his phone and his three reporter friends had no idea where Tyler was or where to start looking. The only person who should know was his assistant Katherine but then he had forgotten to ask for her phone number when he met her yesterday after Tyler’s press briefing. Elliott resisted the urge to bang his head against the table.

The other promising contact on his list was Lindberg. Elliott had his mobile phone number but the odds of him picking up the phone was slim and sure enough he didn’t. He called Lindberg’s office, hoping he had made his secretary come to work on a Saturday.

“Lindberg office," her voice chirped into the earpiece, polite but firm.

“Hello, this is Elliott from the Madison Vanguard.”

“Hello Elliott, how can I help you?”

There was something new in her voice, a tint of friendliness. Perhaps Lindberg had told her how he helped him get away from the kidnappers.
“I’d like to speak to Mr. Lindberg.”

“He’s in a meeting outside.”

“May I know where?”

“I’m sorry I cannot tell you that. But I’ll let him know that you’ve called.”

“It’s really important.”

“Sorry Elliott.”

Some things had not changed. He thanked her and hung up. Looking outside, he noticed the day was turning into the dull gray of an autumn afternoon. Summer was barely over and the sun had already given up on New York. The streets were empty too.

His next choice was to ask Frank for help. He might know how to get in contact with Katherine. He opened the messaging app and paused. Rafael had said he would unleash his terror campaign to stop the housing reforms. If that meant stopping the city council from voting, the city should be in flames by now which might explain why it looked like a ghost town outside. Elliott opened his browser to check the news but just then his phone rang.

“Elliott where are you?” Anad asked.

“In a café in Chelsea.”

“I know it’s your day off and last night with Bennett killing your story, you probably want to rest, but we’re really swamped here, can you come over?”

As far as he knew the metro desk was always swamped. Although the mass rally at city hall might qualify as a busier than usual day for metro desk. Still he didn’t feel like going to the office.
“Do you want me out on the streets covering the protests?” Elliott asked, knowing already what the answer would be.

“No, we need you in the office. Adam and Nicole are downtown for the protests. I need you to write up their reports and help me monitor newswires.”

Elliott didn’t feel like spending the rest of the day in the office, writing and making phone calls no matter how ugly the protests had turned out. Besides he had other plans.

“Sorry Anad. I can’t today. I’m doing something else.”

“What do you mean something else?”

“I have other plans, I’ll tell you later about it.”

His phone beeped with another incoming call and he recognized the number as Lindberg’s office.

“Hold on Elliott, you’re a metro desk reporter you can’t..”

“Sorry Anad, I have to hang up now, bye.”

Before Anad could protest, he accepted the call from Lindberg’s secretary.

“You didn’t hear this from me,” she said. “I’m just helping you out because you said it’s important and I think you know what you’re doing. Lindberg has a meeting at the Golden Olive restaurant downtown.”

Elliott should have thought about this earlier. With the council voting for the housing reforms and the protest probably turning ugly, the people who had been working on the housing reforms agreement were probably huddling somewhere to be prepared for any announcements. And that could only mean one thing.

“He’s in a meeting with Tyler, isn’t he?”
“Yes.”

Elliott smiled. “Thank you, you don’t know how important this is.”

Elliott powered down his laptop, unplugged his phone which was about halfway charged, and left the café. That’s it, he’s back in business.

#

Bridget entered The Blue Mystic’s Café on 7th Street, looking for Latisha. Her eyes had to adjust to the café’s dim Mediterranean interior with its bluish light and white brick exposed walls and the waft of smoke in the back where old men sat around tables, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. She texted Latisha and waited by the door. About five minutes her friend came out from behind as though she had been sitting in the shadows.

“Come with me,” Latisha said and led Bridget through the smoky room and out the backdoor into the open and through another door to a separate house. They went up a spiral stairway to the third floor. Latisha knocked three times by the door.

“I haven’t seen many protesters outside, how bad is it?” Bridget asked.

“Where have you been?” Latisha looked at her as though she was from another planet. “You work for a newspaper, don’t you read the news?”

“I just got back from Boston,” Bridget said. The door opened and a young man with a Bob Marley beanie cap let them in.

Latisha thanked the man then said, “It’s all over the news, just check the Internet. They stepped into a hallway and Latisha filled her in. “We set up our base down at 13th Street but everyone there got busted, the police are trying to disrupt the protests.”

“But they can’t just arrest people if they are not doing anything.”

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“Right, which is why we several lawyers and journalists here. Our job is to make sure the police doesn’t do anything unlawful and record everything should the police find out about this place and decide to raid this place. Some of the organizers are regrouping here. The area around City Hall is in total chaos. Protesters are blocking the streets to prevent councilors from getting to City Hall and police are arresting anyone who refuse to leave, we’re talking about hundreds of people. But we have more protesters coming.”

Bridget immediately thought of Rafael. Had he something to do with the protest?

“The what are we doing here? Shouldn’t we be out on the streets?” She wasn’t thrilled about confronting riot police but as a photojournalist she should be able to stay out of their path.

Latisha lowered her voice. “I think this place is too important for us to leave. This is where they coordinate the protesters movements and if police raids this place, the protests may unravel, which is why we have a bunch of lawyers and reporters, sort of like a non-violent line of defense.”

Bridget nodded. “Where are the other reporters?”

“In the kitchen.”

Latisha led her down the hallway then opened a door to her right.

“What about the..?” Bridget stopped. There were five reporters in the kitchen, four sitting by the table and one by the sink washing his hands, and something about this picture startled her. The kitchen was decked in a country-style cabinetry with wooden countertops and a porcelain sink. The two windows above the sink had their blinds drawn down. The realization sank in her like deadweight hitting the ocean floor. She had been
here before, that night with Rafael and his men. This was their safe house. The five
reporters were staring back at her.

“Bridget what’s wrong?” Latisha asked.

“Who runs this place?” Bridget asked her.

“There’s George, you met him when he opened the door.”

“No, you mentioned they coordinate the protests. Who are they?”

Latisha shrugged. “You should check with George, he must know.”

Bridget looked at the five reporters who responded with a collective shrug.

“Bridget?” The voice behind her sounded familiar and when she turned around
she saw Jack standing by the doorway. “I didn’t know they had invited you too, where’s
Elliott?” he asked.

“Who Jack?”

Jack gave a puzzled look and she grabbed him by his arm and pulled him out of
the kitchen. “Who invited you?” Bridget said.

“Easy,” he yanked his arm out her grip. “The people who organized the protests.
I’m here for the interview.”

She didn’t have to press further to know who had been organizing the violent
protests. It must be Rafael. She cornered Jack against the wall. “Interview whom?”

“They said someone important but they wouldn’t tell me who.”

There could be only one reason why Rafael would have contacted Jack and that
must be because they found out that Elliott had failed, that Madison Vanguard wouldn’t
run the story. And the only person worth interviewing at this point was Tyler, which
meant Rafael knew where Tyler was.
“Are you going to let me go?” Jack asked irritated.

“Take me to them.”

“What?”

“I need to talk to them.”

“Hold on. They didn’t invite you and Elliott?”

“No. Elliott is elsewhere.”

“Well then I can’t take you.”

“Listen Jack this is important.”

“Too late. This is my story. I’m not going to share it Madison Vanguard. Why don’t you tag along with Elliott?”

It was best not to tell Jack that she knew Rafael. She had to find another way to convince him. Latisha came out of the kitchen, looking at both. “What’s going on?”

“I need to talk to the people who run this place. Can you ask George, tell him a photographer from Madison Vanguard is here,” she said and noting Jack’s look said to him, “you don’t know the right questions to ask.”

“What does that supposed to mean?” Jack asked.

Just then George came through the front door. “You two,” he looked at Bridget and Rafael. “Rafael wants to talk to you.”

“Who’s Rafael?” Jack asked. George pointed at the ceiling where a camera was staring at them and said “the guy who’s watching you now.”

George let her and Jack out again and they went one floor up to another apartment where he left them by the door. Adrienne let them in and they stepped into a small foyer with a metal door which she opened using a magnetic card. They entered into a hallway
that had several rooms on either side. Adrienne pointed to a small room to her left that had a sofa and a coffee table.

“Wait here,” she told Jack and gestured for Bridget to walk on.

“Hey why am I supposed to wait here?” Jack protested. Adrienne ignored him and led Bridget to the back of the apartment and into large room where a wall of large TV screens showed life coverage of the protest from various news channels. Two men were watching the screens on headsets while taking notes on a laptop, presumably feeding information to Rafael’s men on the ground.

Bridget stared at the TV footages which showed a stretch of burned vehicles somewhere downtown where protesters and police had clashed over access to an intersection. The camera zoomed in to a body that laid on his stomach with its arms splayed and its face blurred. Two men and a women were kneeling over the body, others were standing around it. Bridget’s eyes fixated on the words in the running text below the footage: at least four protesters dead in police clash.

Another channel summarized recent events. The police estimated 30,000 protesters, many of whom from outside the city, had descended on City Hall and blocked all streets leading to it in an attempt to prevent city councilors from voting on the housing reforms.

On another channel showed a group of injured protesters, their faces covered in blood, some limping, others laid on stretches. In another footage, policemen with bloody hands or faces were seen retreating toward the protective cocoons of their squad as it came under fire by a hail of stones, bottles and Molotov bombs. The T.V. anchor talked about renegade protesters who went too far.
The door opened and Rafael stepped in. “What are you doing here?” He asked.

“I’m with Latisha. She asked me to cover.”

“You’re lawyer friend. I see. And where’s Elliott.”

“I don’t know,” Bridget said. “He said he wanted to interview Tyler. Do you know where he is?”

“It’s no use for Elliott to talk to Tyler. His paper won’t run the story anyway.”

“After all that he went through, you’re just going to give the story to Jack.”

“We both want to stop the housing reforms, so stop complaining.”

“Yea sure but not like this,” Bridget said and pointed at the TV screens. “Six protesters dead?”

“Collateral damage,” Rafael said, “besides, it’s the police who shot them, not us.”

“But you egged them on.”

“There’s no need to. These people are fighting for their homes. They have every motivation to stop the council voting. All we did was to spread manuals to a few hundred key protesters on how to confront the police and they passed the knowledge on to others.”

“Really, then what is this all about?” Bridget waved her hand across the room.

“We have to monitor and coordinate the few leaders among the protesters so that they move as one army.”

What did Rafael know about fighting riot police? He never had his face smashed by boots, and yet this was what he expected of these protesters, many of whom probably high school kids.

“These people are dead Rafael and you talk like this is a game.”
Rafael shrugged. “Police brutality; there’s zero tolerance for protests. That’s what you get when politicians are afraid of civil unrests and they wouldn’t have to be afraid of civil unrests if they hadn’t insisted on throwing people out of their homes.”

“So you teach those people how to confront the police, sending kids to fight your fight and..”

“It’s not my fight,” Rafael said, his voice hardening. “If you rob people of their basic rights, don’t be surprised that you have barbarians at the gate. And just because we planned for this, doesn’t mean we wanted this to happen. We gave Elliott a fair chance to stop this, let the free press do what it does best in exposing injustice but looked what happened to his story. Now you can do your part and wait downstairs with the other reporters or leave.”

She had promised Latisha she would help out but with Rafael going after Tyler, her priority shifted. Elliott had to know about Rafael’s plan.

“You’re going to kidnap Tyler aren’t you?” Bridget asked.

“I can’t tell you,” he said and opened the door for her to leave.

Bridget walked down the hallway where was Jack chatting with Adrienne. She passed by them and went down the stairs, deciding right then not to tell Latisha that she couldn’t stay. Latisha had already five reporters at her disposal and there’s always time to explain later. By the time she passed through the café, through the tables with smoking old men and out the front door, she had come up with a simple plan. She would hang back outside the café and Rafael or Jack as they head out to interview Tyler.

She pulled out her phone to text Elliott, and found he had already sent her a text message: “If you want to join me, Tyler is at the Golden Olive restaurant downtown.”
Change of plan again.

#

Walking down a deserted Seventh Avenue under a gray, listless sky, Elliott could feel the tension in the air simmering like an invisible charge blanketing the city. The few cars passing by raced through the streets as if being chased out of the city, and the young couple he shared the sidewalk with were hurrying along. The rioting must have cleared most people away from the streets, and as he turned the corner around 14th Street and faced the skyline of downtown Manhattan, he saw why. Five black columns of smoke rose into the air like dark phantom towers.

The restaurant where Tyler was holding a meeting must be somewhere close to where the streets were burning. Elliott pulled out his phone and texted Bridget. If she wanted to take pictures of the protests, she might as well as join him for the interview. Then he descended the stairs to the subway station.

At the platform the station manager announced that because of the protests, C and E trains were rerouted at Canal Street station through the express track until Brooklyn, bypassing all the stations inside the financial district. Elliott checked the map on his phone and to his relief saw his destination was the last stop before the train continued on the express track.

The train was packed and Elliott held on to the few inches of railing that wasn't occupied. Observing his fellow commuters, he noticed that most were young people dressed in jeans, wearing hooded sweaters and beanies, bandanas and carrying backpacks, banners, and American flags. They must be the latecomers to the protest. His
reporters’ instinct urged him to ask them questions but he needed time for himself to figure out how to approach Tyler and how to phrase his questions.

Passing the station Spring Street, Elliott noticed the crowd on the platforms across waiting for trains going Uptown. They were protesters, dressed like those in his train, but in their faces was the look of exhaustion and defeat. They stood resting against the wall and the pillars, or sat on the ground which Elliott knew was littered by the disgusting blackened remains of chewing gums as every station platform in the city. With blank stares they looked at the fresh batch of protesters in the train.

They arrived at the station on Canal Street with half the train emptying out. The mass of people wearing hoodies, balaclavas, helmets moved its way up through the only pair of stairways out of the surface. Climbing up the stairs, Elliott expected the worse. But the streets were quiet and the fresh arriving protesters joined a larger group that had already gathered. They would be marching toward City Hall while Elliott headed in the opposite direction.

The Golden Olive was an Italian restaurant, located in a squad brick stone building with a parking lot surrounding it and nestled between the tall buildings of lower Manhattan. At first it seemed like a risky choice to have a meeting this close to the protests, but Tyler might have decided on this location should the voting run into problems and they needed a place to hold closed-door talks with the councilors away from public view. But with the protest unexpectedly turning ugly, it seemed Tyler, Lindberg and everyone else were trapped inside.

Elliott entered through the front door, hoping to sit at a table from where he could observe the guests. An usher greeted him.
“I'm sorry Sir,” the young woman said, “I'm afraid all tables are booked, if you like you could come back for dinner.”

“Really? Is someone having a party here?” He tried to peek inside but it was too dark.

“I'm sorry but you have to come back another time,” she said with a voice that discouraged any attempt to argue all the while retaining her smile.

Elliott sighed and walked out. The last thing he wanted was to wait all day long only to find out that Tyler had left already. He decided to walk around the building and see whether there was a way in, so that he could at least confirm Tyler's presence.

The restaurant had tall windows running through the back of it and he could see movement inside, though these could be of anyone. There was a door facing the parking lot and with the restaurant’s name above it. He stepped inside, and as his eyes were adjusting to the dim lighting, he heard the clickety clack of a women's high heels approaching fast from the side and before he could see who it was, she was already at him.

“You are not supposed to be here. This is a private meeting,” the woman said and grabbed him by the arm while pulling him toward the back door as though he was a six-year old kid who was caught stealing candy. He looked up at her and found himself staring into Katherine's steely eyes. She let him go by the door.

“Leave,” she said.

“I'm just -.”

“Leave now.”

“I just have to talk to Tyler, it's very -.”
Katherine grabbed him by his hand and twisted it uncomfortably behind his back, saying, “You’ll get your interview but not now. Now you leave, do I make myself clear?”

Three cooks and two waiters came out for a cigarette break and stopped as they saw them. She had to let him go.

“Katherine, I think…”

She twisted his arm just a wee bit to emphasize her point.

“All right I leave just let me go,” Elliott said.

She gave him a final push and he stumbled but didn’t fall. He turned around to face Katherine but she was already walking back to the door with the cooks and waiters making way for her. Rejected by the usher at the front and booted out by Katherine in the back, he didn't see a reason to hang around any longer. He walked across the street, rubbing the wrist that she had twisted.

He sat down by the stairs in front of a closed Deli. How could Katherine be so cruel? He had to put aside his anger at her and rethink his strategy to approach Tyler. The chances of doorstopping him was slim, let alone get him to admit that he planned to run for mayor in next year’s election. Even so, he had gotten this far and he would not give up yet. With Katherine around, at least this meant Tyler was still inside the restaurant.

He checked his phone to find Bridget’s reply to his message.

“I’m heading your way. I just met Rafael. He’s behind the demonstrations. His men are using the protesters to stop the city council from voting at all costs. In case you haven’t checked the news, four protesters died already in clashes with the police. Rafael has invited Jack to come along most likely to interview Tyler but I also think Rafael plans to kidnap Tyler.”
Elliott let this scenario run through his head. Rafael had switched to working with the New York Times to expose Tyler after his own paper killed his story. Jack would again break the news about Tyler’s plan to run for mayor. Elliott would have to set aside rivalry if he wanted to stop the housing reforms program. But something bothered him about how things were panning out. Staring at the restaurant across the street where investment bankers, executives of property companies and the city’s key officials in charge of the housing reforms agreement were holed up, he realized what Rafael was after. It wasn’t just Tyler but everyone who would sign the housing reforms agreement and these were most likely inside that restaurant. Even if the council managed to vote in favor of the housing reforms, Rafael could still block the agreement from coming into effect by kidnapping everyone in that restaurant. There was no way he and Bridget could stop Rafael’s plan. It was time to let Agent Fry in.

Elliott was thinking how to explain Fry his suspicion without telling him that he knew about Rafael, but then saw Tyler and Katherine walking out of the restaurant. For a moment he feared they would step inside a car and drive away, instead they walked east toward Bayard Street. Katherine or not, here was his chance to talk to Tyler. He waited for them to walk ahead a good distance, then followed.

#

Elliott was following Tyler and Katherine. Just after arriving at the restaurant, Bridget saw the three walking down Bayard Street and instantly understood what was going on. She refrained from calling Elliott and simply hurried to catch up with him. They were walking toward the half-finished Graemer Center, an ugly outcrop of a
building that refused to go vertical like the rest of lower Manhattan. Instead it squatted and hunched and occupied an entire block like a gigantic wart.

Elliott followed Tyler and Katherine into the back entrance of the building, and she had to pick up her pace lest she would lose them inside. The service entrance was still missing its gate and walking through it, she caught a glimpse of Elliott in the loading area disappearing behind a door. She tightened the straps on her backpack in preparation for running after him, when someone called out her name. She turned around to see Jack running across the street and through the service entrance.

“Bridget, how the heck did you find us again?”
If Jack was here then it could only mean one thing.
“I followed Elliott. Is Rafael with you?”
“His men dropped me off outside and told me not to come in.”
“So they’re here, in this building?”
“Yea. But I’m not supposed to go in until it’s over.”
“Until what is over?”
“I don’t know.”
“Listen, Tyler and Elliott are inside right now. Did Rafael tell you anything about what he plans to do?”
“I see. So that’s the interview he promised me, Tyler. But no, other than that he didn’t tell me anything.”
Bridget turned around and walked up the door she last saw Elliott.
“Hey where are you going?” Jack came up to her. “I think we should wait outside.”
“I can’t lose Elliott,” she said and opened the door that led into a dark hallway with multiple doors on both sides. There were too many doors to check each one of them.

“Damn it!”

“What’s wrong?”

She decided to go for the door at the far end that appeared to lead out of the hallway. She was about to open the door when she heard footsteps on the other side. She signaled Jack to be quiet and listened through the door as a group of people seemed to be passing by the door. Counting to ten, she then slowly opened the door, just enough to peek through the gap. “Shit,” Jack whispered.

To their left at the end of another hallway, Rafael’s men were discussing something. Elliott was in their midst, his hands handcuffed. Bridget couldn’t make out Rafael as everyone wore ski masks.

“Hey, you two!” The voice came from behind. Standing against the light of the door where they first entered the dark hallway, appeared to be a security officer. “What are you doing here?”

Jack pulled out his press card. “We’re reporters.”

“This area is off limit,” the officer turned his head to speak to someone outside in the loading area “I found two stranglers here.”

This was her chance to sneak away. Bridget turned the door handle but Jack grabbed her wrist.

“You can’t rescue Elliott by yourself.”

“I have to.”
“Don’t be stupid,” Jack dragged her away from the door, “if you want to help him, let’s get some serious help from the police.”

The security officer came up to them and as he approached she now realized that he was actually a cop.

“Hey officer,” Jack said. “My friend is in danger inside, we need to help him.

“Help is already here,” the officer said as he escorted them out the door and back into the loading area that just a few minutes ago was empty.

There was Agent Fry, who shook his head at the sight of them, and with him and around him, cramming the loading area, were at least two dozen SWAT officers.

CHAPTER VI – Meet me There

Elliott’s hope of walking away from Rafael’s men ended in plastic handcuffs. He tried not to think about the prisoners who might have been executed in the depth of the Columbian jungle by the same hands that were now pushing him down the hallway.

Walking with hands tied behind his back, he followed Rafael and Adrienne deeper into the Graemer Center. Xavier was behind him and three other men, whom Elliott didn’t recognize, made up the rear. They wore skateboard helmets, vests and backpacks and carried baseball bats.

The ground floor of the half-finished Graemer Center building was an intricate maze of hallways that connected offices with the apartments above and offices and a shopping arcade in the basement. Elliott had lost Tyler and was trying to find him when he bumped into Rafael.
They led him into a room and Rafael gestured for Elliott to sit down. Turning to Adrienne, Rafael said, “You go ahead and keep an eye on Tyler. I’ll deal with Elliott.”

Adrienne led three men out while the rest stayed with Rafael who sat down next to him.

“How did you find out about Tyler’s meeting?” Rafael asked.

“By tracking Lindberg,” Elliott said. “I figured if I find him I would find Tyler.”

“I know you’re still trying to interview Tyler, but you have to let it go,” Rafael said. “You had your chance. Bennett killed your story, now it’s our turn.”

“But there’s still a chance. You see, Lambert and I have a plan.” Elliott noticed Rafael’s eyes squinting in doubt. “Lambert, the chief editor whom Bennett fired yesterday, met the investors who agreed to buy the newspaper from Bennett and they told him that they will only go ahead with buying Madison Vanguard if we publish the story about Tyler’s plans to run for mayor.”

“And why would these investors want your paper to run the story?”

“Because journalists run stories. They want to know how good we are in pursuing stories before investing in us. I don’t think they care about Bennett or his friends’ interests.”

“Well, as I said, it’s too late. I have already Jack and he will run our version of the story on the New York Times.”

“Really? Jack doesn’t know the full story,” Elliott said. “He hasn’t interviewed Rentschler and you can’t make Tyler talk in front of Jack.”
“It’s too late Elliott. Getting the media involved is no longer a top priority, because we’ve taken things in our hands. Jack can help get our side of the story out, if Tyler speaks.”

“Let me talk to Tyler.” Elliott blurted this out without thinking but he had nothing to lose.

“You had your chance already.”

“Jack and I can both run the story, it’ll be double the impact.”

“No, not you. You and Bridget are loose variables, the two of you keep showing up uninvited, and I can’t have you running around lose and jeopardize my plans.”

“But you still need the media. If I expose Tyler plans, his conflict of interest, his collusion with big business, it’ll justify your demands to drop the housing reforms. The protests have already cost the lives of four people. Tyler and his friends will spin this against the anti-housing reforms movement.”

“When I’m done today, Tyler and his friends will have other things to worry about.”

“You’re trying to kidnap Tyler, the property developers and investment bankers now holed up in the restaurant, but terror isn’t going to achieve anything here.”

“We’ll see. Tyler may be in good shape now. But tomorrow if the city continues to think about signing that housing reforms, he and his friends might start losing body parts and end up hanging under a bridge. This is how drug lords warn others not to piss them off, and that has been effective.

“You’re crazy.”

“No. I know what works, and you failed to stop me.”
“You don’t have to do this. I can stop…”

Adrienne stepped in, her eyes looking worried.

“Rafael, we got a problem,” she said. “Tyler just went upstairs and a SWAT team is tailing him.”

Rafael thought for a moment. “What are they doing here?” Then looking at Elliott. “Do the police know we’re here?”

Elliott shrugged. “I didn’t talk to Fry today, I didn’t even know you were here.”

Turning back to Adrienne, Rafael said “check with Frank, He might -.”

It sounded like fire crackers echoing deep from inside the building. Rafael and his men dropped to the floor in an instant and Adrienne dragged Elliott down with him. A loud salvo of gun fire responded with thundering ferocity and when Elliott glanced at Rafael and Adrienne he saw them exchanging looks of confusion. Who was shooting?

#

Surrounded by a horde of FBI SWAT officers in full combat gear, Bridget shrank to her compact, timid self. Jack had done most of the talking, and she was grateful for his brash manner that kept the officers and even Agent Fry at bay. In a few words, he’d told them how they arrived here to interview Tyler after Bridget received Elliott’s text message.

“Agent Fry, I do not think you understand the gravity of this situation,” Jack said to the agent who was flanked by SWAT team commanders Patrick and Harrison. “My friend is being held by terrorists and you’re wasting time interrogating us.”

Bridget kept quiet, knowing Jack’s tone might not have worked if Fry hadn’t known that he was the son of business tycoon Bennett. Unlike a few years ago when she
and her friends got beaten up by the police, Fry probably knew that she was the daughter of a former senator and the fact that she and Jack were also journalists on duty lend her some assurance that this time she was safe with the police. Still, while the SWAT commanders listened politely, Fry looked impatient.

“I need to cover all grounds. You and Elliott always get caught up in trouble,” Fry said, looking at Bridget, then pointing to Jack, “you’re a new face though. Don’t make it a habit. Now, we already have a team inside the building and they will look for Elliott and those terrorists you talked about.”

Bridget frowned. “I’m sorry. Does it mean you don’t know that there are terrorists in the building? Then why are you here for?”

“I can’t answer that question. In the meantime, it’s best that you -.”

Gun fire rang out from inside the building and like noise scatters a flock of birds, SWAT officers scrambled for cover behind the SWAT van and police cars in the loading area. The shooting lasted for about two minutes. When it stopped, Fry tapped the shoulder of a police officer and pointed at Bridget and Jack. “Get the two out of here.”

The officer gathered four more SWAT officers and they formed a protective cocoon around Bridget and Jack, and in that formation they ran the few yards out the entrance gate and down the street until they reached the corner of the next street where another SWAT van stood waiting.

“Stay behind this van,” the officer said.

Bridget watched them running back then turned to face Jack.

“What do you think is happening?” she asked.
“I don’t know they may have come into contact with Rafael. But whatever it’s going on, I would stick around,” Jack said. “If they take down Rafael, we have a story right there.”

“What about Elliott?”

Jack looked at her as though he was thinking of an answer. Instead he asked her “Back then at the protesters’ base, why were you so keen on meeting this Rafael? How did you know this man anyway?”

“I wanted to meet the people behind the protests. I didn’t know it was this Rafael person.” In a way she was speaking the truth, still she had to be careful of what she said around Jack.

“And why did you want to find out who was behind the protests?”

“Look, I had just returned from Boston and didn’t know how bad the protests were. I mean four people died so yeah I got upset, that’s all.”

“What about Tyler? Why is Elliott so interested in him?”

“Elliott interviewed Rentschler, one of the big investors of the city’s bonds. He found something out about Tyler and needed him to confirm.”

“Ah yes, I heard from my father that he interviewed Rentschler. But Madison Vanguard won’t run the story, even if he manages to speak to Tyler now.”

“Lambert said the investors who’ve agreed to buy Madison Vanguard actually want us to run the story on Tyler. Lambert is trying to convince the new chief editor, what’s his name again?”

“Hernandez.”
“Yes, he’s trying to convince Hernandez to ignore your father and publish the story if Elliott gets his interview with Tyler.”

“What does Elliott want to know from Tyler?”

“I can tell you without Elliott’s permission. It’s his story.”

Jack shook his head. “Anyway, Madison Vanguard won’t run the story. Haven’t you heard?”

The shooting started again and they peeked around the van. There was nothing to see and Bridget looked at Jack.

“What do you mean, haven’t I heard?”

“No one wants anything to do with the story and risked getting fired. Besides everyone’s focus is on covering the protests.”

“I know but Lambert said -.”

“Bridget, listen to me, Lambert failed to convince Hernandez. Madison Vanguard won’t run the story. Even if Elliott interviews Tyler, the paper won’t run the story. It’s over.”

#

Pressed against the wall, Elliott followed Rafael and Adrienne up the hallway while sporadic gun fire erupted above them. When they found an open door, they went inside. It was a small meeting room with chairs still wrapped in plastic covers and a coffee table that hadn’t been assembled yet. They hunkered around table, and Rafael gestured for the other three team members to stand guard by the door, then pulled out a radio.
“Apollo, any idea what’s going on?” Rafael asked. Elliott could only guess he was talking to another team led by this Apollo.

“I thought you could tell me,” Apollo said, his voice crackling through the radio.

“So you didn’t run into trouble with the SWAT?”

“No. Is anyone of your guys in our building?”

“Negative. We’re still outside the restaurant, ready to storm in.”

“Looks like we’ve crashed into someone else’s party,” Rafael said. “We just don’t know who the SWAT is after.”

“So what do we do now?” Apollo asked.

“Focus on Tyler. Apollo get your team here to Graemer Center.”

“What about our plan to kidnap all those people in the restaurant? Apollo asked.

“Drop it. Tyler is more important. And with the police crawling all over the place, I need your help.”

“Understood.”

Rafael and Adrienne tugged away their baseball bats through a loop in their backpacks and pulled out their handguns.

“I don’t like this Rafael,” Adrienne said, as she attached a silencer on the barrel.

“If we only kidnap Tyler, it will blunt our message,” she said.

With Rafael needing a new plan, Elliott saw an opening. “No, it won’t,” he said.

“And what makes you think so?” Adrienne asked.

“If the media exposes Tyler’s plan to run for mayor and his collusion to raise campaign funding, then kidnapping him alone and no one else will amplify public attention on him,” Elliott said.
Rafael looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“We may think everyone in the restaurant is responsible for the housing reforms program, but the public won’t necessarily agree. With Tyler, once you interview him it’s easier to show his culpability, and so it’s more likely that your message will be heard.”

Elliott couldn’t believe that he had just told Rafael to kidnap Tyler, but the man would have to be sacrificed to save the others in the restaurant.

Rafael shook his head. “Jack is still outside, and we can’t risk bringing Tyler to him for an interview with all the police around us.”

“Let me talk to Tyler then,” Elliott said. “Don’t waste this opportunity.”

Rafael and Adrienne looked at each other.

“I’ve already gone this far, I have to finish this,” Elliott said.

“Cut him loose,” Rafael said and rose to his feet. Adrienne pulled Elliott up and turned him around to cut the plastic bands around his wrists.

“Hold on,” Adrienne said. “Assuming we capture Tyler, how do we get around the police?”

“Tell Xavier to reroute the protesters to come this way,” Rafael said to Adrienne. “That should keep the SWAT busy while we sneak out.”

They rejoined the others in the hallway, and while Adrienne relayed Rafael’s message to Xavier, the rest continued to edge forward.

The corridor ended with a left turn where it opened up to a wider hallway flanked by elevators. Further up ahead, Elliott could see the building’s main lobby littered with construction materials and wooden crates, and all the way in the front were the tall glass panes that rose like an invisible wall before the street outside.
The shooting started again. This time it came from the mezzanine level right above them. Elliott positioned himself behind Rafael as they navigated their way around unopened boxes and crates of furniture and construction materials.

Above them, the fight had turned into a brawl and Elliot heard the occasional shouting and grunting and the sound of bodies smashing against hard objects.

To their right was a stairway that led to the mezzanine level and Rafael gestured for Adrienne to take two men and check the level above.

“Take cover,” Rafael whispered and he dragged Elliott to hide behind a big wooden crate just underneath the railing where the mezzanine floor ended. The fighting continued right above them.

There was a shout, a thud and the sound of glass shattering, followed by glass splinters raining down next to where Elliott and Rafael were crouching. An instant later, a SWAT officer fell and landed on his back next to them.

He was still alive but a knife stuck out of his shoulder and there was blood coming out of his mouth. The officer, breathing hard, turned his head and looked straight at Elliott and Rafael. His eyes widened. Rafael pointed his gun at the officer and signaled him to be quiet.

Elliott peeked over the crate and saw two SWAT officers in the back descending the stairs then running toward their wounded friend. He and Rafael moved around the crate and out of sight as the officers grabbed their wounded friend by the shoulder and dragged him away. Another minute passed before Adrienne broke the silence.

“I didn’t get a visual on the unknown shooters,” she said, “but I saw Tyler and Katherine taking the elevator down just before the SWAT team arrived.”
“Are they alone?”

“Couldn’t see, but I bet they’re not.”

Katherine, Elliott thought, he could only hope she wasn’t hurt.

“All right,” Rafael said. “Let’s follow Tyler downstairs”

They reconvened with Adrienne by the stairway then proceeded to another stairway next to the elevators that led down to the basement. It opened to a hallway that ran back into the building. Rafael gestured for a man to take point as he contacted Apollo over the radio.

“We’re on the basement level,” he said. He received from Adrienne a tablet with an app that showed a blueprint of the building. “What’s your position?”

“We’re on the second floor near the east entrance,” Apollo said. “We’re heading your way.”

Turning to Adrienne, Rafael asked “where does this corridor lead to?”

“It only leads to this space here, which looks like an open floor office space,” she said, pointing at the map.

“Apollo, we’ll meet up at the basement office near the main entrance.”

“Got it, but we have to hurry up. I’m seeing a SWAT team entering the building.”

“Got it.”

They arrived at the closed door to the open floor office. Rafael waited for Apollo and his team to arrive at the other end of the room. Then with handguns held out, they stormed in simultaneously.

The room was about 20 yards wide and long, filled with more crates and scaffolding and lined with small offices in the back. Apollo and his six men entered
through a door next to one of the offices. Bertrand, the big man who carried a sledgehammer, was among them.

They were moving slowly toward the middle of the room and only then did Elliott realize what everyone was seeing. Under one of the scaffolding, was Tyler, gagged and tied to a pole.

#

Bridget listened to the silence on the other end of the line after telling Chief Editor Hernandez her side of the story. Hernandez had called her after Fry informed the newspaper about Elliott’s fate and scolded her for not telling him earlier.

“What about you?” he eventually asked. “I’ve convinced Fry to let you stay inside since you’re already there, but if you want out, just let me know.”

Bridget saw a chance to convince him to run Tyler’s story after Lambert’s previous attempt failed.

“I don’t mind sticking around in case SWAT takes down the terrorists. But that’s not what I’m concerned about now.”

“What is it?”

“Elliott is going through all this trouble, interviewing Rentschler in Boston and now getting caught by the terrorists and you won’t let him run the story on Tyler.”

“Don’t blame me. Bennett’s instructions are clear. We are not to write anything about Tyler’s political plan and the housing reforms.”

“But what if Elliott can get Tyler to confirm that he plans to run for mayor? We expose him colluding with the real estate companies. The protesters will be vindicated. It could stop the housing reforms.”
“The answer is no Bridget.”

Bridget sighed. She couldn’t really blame him. Hernandez risked losing his job if Bennett finds out the paper plans to run the story. She was going nowhere. But then she noticed Jack who had been listening in.

“Someone wants to talk to you. Let me get him for you, hold on.” She handed Jack the phone but he backed away.

“Why are you giving me the phone for?” Jack asked.

Bridget covered the mouthpiece. “Tell him that you’re here stuck with me, that the New York Times will interview Tyler and run the story.”

“Hernandez is your problem, not mine.”

“Look I know you’re a competitor, but do you really want Madison Vanguard go out of business? That paper made you a journalist.”

Jack hesitated then took Bridget’s phone. He told the chief editor what Bridget had instructed him to. There was a pause and it seemed Hernandez wasn’t convinced yet.

“My father doesn’t care about the paper, not since I’m no longer there,” Jack continued speaking into the mouthpiece, apparently shifting tactics. “If he doesn’t close the paper today he might do it tomorrow, whenever he sees fit.”

Another pause and Jack handed the phone back to Bridget, shaking his head. But his comment about the paper’s imminent demise gave her an idea.

“Bridget are you there? I really have to go,” Hernandez said. I can’t force you to take pictures for us. So do as you please, but you can’t use our Press ID card and -.”

“Hernandez, you’re siding with the wrong person. Bennett will close the paper unless he finds a new buyer. And here we have a new buyer who wants us to run the
story, who wants us to defy Bennett. So which side are you on? Bennett or the new buyer?

Hernandez didn’t immediately answer so Bridget pressed further. “The only person you must impress isn’t Bennett but whoever is willing to buy the paper. Run the story get exclusive coverage, impress the prospective buyers and get them onboard, don’t run the story, let the New York Times get the scoop and you’ll show them why they shouldn’t bother rescue this paper. If you want to save Madison Vanguard, we must side with the buyers.”

There was a pause before Hernandez spoke again. “All right, let me think.”

Jack turned to Bridget. “Hernandez was never good at leading. My father picked him to replace Lambert only because of his seniority.”

She heard Hernandez clear his throat. “Listen carefully. Only if Elliott gets a story out of Tyler, and only if it’s worth a front page headline, only then will we run it.”

Bridget thanked him and hung up.

“So Tyler plans to run for mayor,” Jack said, “I know Elliott interviewed him but didn’t know what he got out of it, that’s definitely worth a front page story.”

“Yeah and Bennett killed it,” Bridget said.

“Although it’s strange that Tyler told Bennett about the interview with Rentschler and demanding him to stop the story from going to press.”

Bridget looked up at Jack. She didn’t know that it was Tyler who had told Bennett to intervene. “But why would it be strange?”

“Well, it was Tyler who arranged the interview between Elliott and Rentschler.”

“Hold on there. Tyler arranged the interview?”
“Yes.”

“But it was Elliott who called up Rentschler. He didn’t go through Tyler. There was no contact whatsoever with Tyler.”

Jack shrugged. “I’m just telling you what my father learned from Tyler.”

Bridget’s mind feverishly worked out the implication of what Jack had just told her. Of course it was Rafael who had gotten the interview with Rentschler by pretending to be Elliott. Did Rafael lie to them?

As she thought about this, she watched the FBI SWAT team relocating from the Graemer Center’s loading area to its side entrance. Who were they after? Watching the FBI team working, the connection between Tyler arranging the interview and the FBI presence here slowly surfaced and a new suspicion arose.

“I have to talk to Fry,” Bridget said.

#

Rafael and Apollo’s teams fanned out across the room with guns raised. Elliott made up the rear, as they worked their way through the room to Tyler in the middle. Under the fluorescent light Elliott saw the comptroller staring at them with wide open eyes. Once they had reached him, they worked fast. Bertrand untied Tyler and moved him to the back of the room.

Elliott was about to approach him, but one of Rafael’s men pulled him to the corner of the room. “Wait here,” he said. Elliott watched as a few men gathered around Tyler while the rest stood guard. The moment Rafael removed the gag from Tyler’s mouth, the lights went out, blanketing everything in pitch darkness. The door from where
they had come from burst open, and someone yanked him to the ground, just as he heard a loud bang from the middle of the room followed by shouts.

“FBI, get down!”

The shouting continued for a few more seconds before silence returned. No one made a sound, as the SWAT team must have realized that everyone was already on the ground and out of sight behind some cover. The standoff began.

Elliott laid on his stomach, trying to listen where the rest of Rafael and Apollo’s men were. He heard someone coming up next to him then saying in a low whisper “keep your head low, eyes shut.”

He heard another loud bang and when he opened his eyes again, the deafening sound of gun fire erupted right above him. Tilting his head upward, he saw the muzzle flash of an assault rifle firing at the FBI positions.

He caught a glimpse of light to his left and saw Rafael throwing a flare toward the SWAT team. Amber light filled the room from the other end. Elliott watched bullet casings falling to the ground around him. On the other side, Rafael, Adrienne and Xavier took cover behind a large crate while their men retreated out the back door. Xavier then pointed at him, and as the other two looked in his direction, he realized that what made them stare was the shooter standing next to him and firing at the SWAT team. Then it was dark again and in an instant silence returned.

One of the SWAT members must have put out the flare, and in the dark the tactical team retaliated with indiscriminate fire. Elliott scurried on all fours toward the small offices in the back. He found an open door and slipped inside just as the shooting stopped.
Groping in the dark, he felt his way around the room until he found a desk to hide under. He heard the SWAT team advancing in silence and without flashlight. He could come out with arms raised, but having read so many reports about police shooting suspects for the slightest provocation, he decided it was safer to stay hidden. Did the FBI even know he was here? As their quiet footsteps approached, he held his breath until they moved passed him.

Minutes must have passed and Elliott wondered how much longer he should wait before leaving his hideout. He couldn’t contact anyone. Xavier had earlier taken away his phone along with his messenger bag. For all he knew, Rafael and his men might have already escaped the building. He found it absurd to even think about reconnecting with Rafael. But they had Tyler.

Sitting in the dark, he listened into the silence, hoping Rafael was also hiding somewhere and waiting it out. What he heard next made his heart jump.

It was a faint but unmistakable sound of someone breathing. He wasn’t alone in this room. Holding his breath, he tried to pinpoint where the breathing came from, his eyes straining to pierce through the darkness. Then the other person stopped breathing too, and he heard the sound of a rifle cocking followed by a burst of light that blinded him. He turned away from the harsh white of the flash light. The light went off just as instantly but the effect still blinded him.

“Elliott?” a voice whispered.

“Who is this?”

“It’s me.”
Elliott recognized the voice. The memory came back, triggering a chain of images that ended with one name: Katherine. It was Katherine who accompanied Tyler into the building when he followed them, it was Katherine whom the FBI SWAT team were after, Katherine who told him in the dark to stay low as she fired that assault rifle, Katherine the mysterious shooter.

“It’s me, Frank,” she said.

#

Bridget walked up and down, trying to reassemble the pieces of clues that would confirm her suspicion. Jack had told her that Tyler arranged the interview between Elliott and Rentschler. Her first question had been why Tyler would want to set up the interview only to then tell Bennett to kill the story. That’s when she remembered Rafael being so keen on kidnapping Lindberg because the consultant and Tyler knew of a mole in the city administration. Rafael wanted to know whether Lindberg knew about Frank, the mole. Then, of all the twelve investors Frank could have picked, he had to choose Rentschler and that was probably because Tyler leaked that name to Frank on purpose. He leaked Rentschler’s name and arranged the interview with the hedge fund owner to fish a reaction out of the mole, and sure enough Elliott went out to interview him. Agent Fry then came raiding their motel. It was good that Elliott could proof that he got Rentschler’s name from his radio friend, Nancy.

Still, the mole had been identified and the FBI SWAT team was here to arrest her, Frank or Katherine. No wonder Elliott couldn’t find out anything about her on the Internet. Katherine never really existed. And now Elliott was stuck between her, Rafael’s men and the FBI SWAT teams.
“I have to talk to Fry,” Bridget said and took off walking toward Graemer Center.

“Hey, he told us to stay put,” Jack said.

“I can’t just wait here. Fry needs to update on us on Elliott,” she said, while Jack followed her.

She walked briskly across the street toward the circle of police cars that had now formed around the side entrance of Graemer Center. Fry and a few officers were consulting something on their tablet.

“Agent Fry,” Bridget said as she approached him. Fry turned around, looking irritated to see her and Jack returning.

“You two can’t be here, go back.”

“You haven’t told us why you’re here.”

“Why would I have to tell you that?”

“You’re after Katherine aren’t you?” Bridget asked.

A look of surprise flashed across Fry.

Jack held her by her shoulder. “Who the hell is Katherine?”

“Tyler’s assistant. Is she still inside?” Bridget asked, careful not to imply that Katherine might be a terrorist. She had to wait for Fry to say so.

“I can’t tell. What makes you think we’re after her?”

“Since you didn’t know the terrorists were coming, you must have assumed that there were only three people in the building: Elliott, Tyler and his assistant Katherine. You refer to Tyler and Elliott as hostages but not Katherine. If she’s the only one who’s not a hostage then yes I suspect that you’re after her and that she’s somehow connected to the terrorists.”
Jack frowned. “So Agent, is Katherine a hostage or not?” he asked.

Fry sighed. “Okay she’s not a hostage and that’s all I have to say at this point.”

“What are you going to do about her?” Bridget asked.

“Look our priority is to arrest the terrorists and rescue Tyler and Elliott.”

“How?” Bridget insisted.

“Agent Fry,” Jack began, “I hope your priority is to ensure the safety of the hostages first.”

“All right, let’s get over here,” Fry said and pulled her and Jack away from the others. “Nothing I say can be quoted. Our plan is to flush them out. We have a team inside funneling them our way so they will come out through that door.” Fry pointed at the side entrance around which the police car had formed a semi-circle. “We’re aware of the hostages but we’re trying to corner the terrorists into one spot, so that they don’t move around and we can pinpoint Tyler and Elliott’s location and start the negotiation process. Our men are well trained in dealing with hostage situation. So you don’t.”

Patrick, the SWAT commander walked up to Fry and pointed east. They turned around and saw in the far distance a mass of people marching.

“They’re heading this way,” Patrick said.

“I thought we blocked all access?” Fry asked.

“Police were unable to hold off all these people. There are too many of them.”

“How many?”

“Over a hundred I was told.”

The wall of people was about two blocks away. At this distance it was hard to make out the individual protesters and see how many they were but their slow advance
had something unstoppable about it. Meanwhile the dozens of SWAT officers who were waiting outside looked restless.

“We’re not equipped to deal with protesters in these numbers,” Patrick said. “We have rubber bullets and tear gas, that’s about it.”

“Can we get reinforcement from an anti-riot police team?”

“The Strategic Response Group? They already have their hands full at City Hall.”

“Well, then let the crowd pass,” Fry said and banging the hood of a police car said. “We’ll drive this car up against these doors so the terrorists won’t escape. Then we stand back and let the protesters pass. I doubt they’ll go after a full SWAT team.”

“Hold on,” Jack said. “With all the SWAT team here, why would the protesters even insist on passing through here? If they want to go to City Hall they could have taken another route.”

Bridget knew the answer. These protesters were probably part of Rafael’s group and he must have redirected them here.

“You have to tell your men to stand their ground,” she said. “This is our only chance to stop the terrorists from kidnapping Tyler.”

“I am aware of this,” Fry said. “I just need to think it out. There’s a possibility that the protesters choose this route on purpose because they want to drive us out of the street so the terrorists inside can escape.”

“We’re not equipped to fight them,” Patrick said. “If my men start shooting, we’re talking about a blood bath here.”

Patrick had a point but if the FBI SWAT team left the street, Rafael would escape with Tyler.
“I know but we’re not leaving,” Fry said. “Four protesters have died already and I don’t want anyone of us getting another one killed. Let me talk to your men.”

To Bridget and Jack he said. “You guys go back to that corner and stay inside the SWAT van.”

Jack tapped Bridget’s shoulder. “Grab your camera, we have work to do,” he said.

There were about a dozen SWAT officers outside while the rest were inside the building trying to funnel Rafael into coming out through that side entrance. They few officers outside were outnumbered by ten to one at least. It didn’t look good. Bridget reluctantly turned around and followed Jack back to the safety of the corner down the street.

She had left her camera backpack inside the SWAT van and now she opened it and retrieved her gear. She put on the bike helmet she brought alone for protection. Then she choose a long-range lens, attached it to the camera and got out of the van to take position by the corner.

Jack looked at her outfit. “You’re not thinking of doing anything stupid are you?”

“I came prepared, that’s all, you should have too,” she said, nodding at his casual business attire he wore. “Those shoes aren’t made for running.”

“Well when I woke up there wasn’t any sign that they would hold the protests.”

Bridget swept the strains of hair under her bike helmet and lifted her camera for a closer look at the advancing horde. Filling the breath of the street, the first line of protesters marched with their arms interlocked, and chanted pro-housing slogans while wearing bandanas like bandits. Most were dressed in black sweaters with hoodies, dark pants and boots. Behind them the ranks were so dense that she couldn’t see how deep the
The air hung still as if hushed into silence by the oncoming storm.

The SWAT team meanwhile were preparing to make a stand. Using two police cars, they blocked the side entrance to prevent Rafael from escaping, then used the remaining four cars to form a semi-circle around the entrance. That still left plenty room for the protesters to pass through the street.

The protesters stopped at about forty yards before the stand. Patrick ordered them to move on. His distorted voice blared through the megaphone, sounding mechanical and clashing against the growing waves of chanting.

Bridget counted at least three SWAT team members holding tear gas grenade throwers but doubted their effectiveness. What could deter the protesters were rubber bullets, and seeing that the police were far outnumbered, she expected many of the protesters to go home with nasty bruises.

She lowered her camera to make sure her settings were right, but Jack, who was talking on his phone, tapped her shoulder and pointed ahead. The ranks of protesters opened up in the middle to make way for a man on a horse riding to the front. The rider too wore a black sweater but underneath his hood, his face was a luminous red and she recognized the painted black marking around his eyes, mouth and on his nose. He was one of Rafael’s men whom she took a picture of when she first encountered them. On his back he carried a baseball bat and slung around his shoulder appeared to be a horn. The chanting stopped as the hooded rider inspected the lines in front before retreating into the ranks and the chanting resumed.
Then she heard the sound of a horn blowing hard and loud, filling the street and
drowning out Jack’s voice talking on his phone, Patrick’s voice over the megaphone, and
the crowd’s chanting. A chill run down her spine as she realized the attack was about to
start.

#

Sitting in the dark, Elliott heard Katherine’s voice saying that she was Frank. It
was her voice but it wasn’t her, not Katherine but Frank. The thought of this hung like an
impenetrable fog in his mind. He held his breath, waiting for her to speak again.

“Elliott,” Katherine’s voice said softly. “Come over here.”

She sounded so near but his eyes searched in vain for her presence in the darkness
before him. “Katherine?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Take my hand.”

He raised his hand and reached out, grasping air. Leaning forward, he tried again.
This time he touched warm fingers that immediately held on to his and gently pulled him
to her side.

He sat next to her with their shoulders touching as they leaned against the assuring
solidness of the wall. For a moment they didn’t say anything. Then she spoke in a low
voice.

“I’m sorry I twisted your arm in the restaurant.”

“It’s ok.”

“I had to make you go away. It wasn’t safe back then.”
Rafael had planned to kidnap everyone in the restaurant, and he would have stood in the way. So Katherine was Frank. He didn’t mishear her when she said she was him, or did he?

“Funny that you don’t ask me any questions,” Katherine said. “You’re usually full of them.”

“Are you Frank?”

“I am Frank and Katherine, and I’m neither. Frank and Katherine are just aliases.”

“Rafael never told me that, and he doesn’t know you’re here.”

“That’s because he doesn’t know that Katherine is Frank. I work undercover and independently from his team. But the FBI figured it out.”

“So the SWAT team are here to capture you, not Rafael?”

“Yes. Tyler must have found out that I was the mole in his office. I don’t know how he did it. Perhaps that interview with Rentschler was a set up since it was Tyler who leaked his name to me. And this building here, Tyler said he wanted to show me something and suddenly a whole SWAT gang was after me.”

Yet she still managed to fight off a SWAT team and hand Tyler over to Rafael. This was not the Katherine he knew but what did he know about her anyway? He only knew Frank.

“Are you angry with me?” she asked.

“No, why would I be angry with you?”

“I would be if I were you. It doesn't feel right how I deceived you. It was necessary, just like a lot of things we do is necessary. I hope you understand.”
No, he didn’t feel any anger in him. If anything it was relief he felt. Katherine was the easy-going Frank whose sometimes overly friendly text messages were actually hers. But inevitably the implication of this rose to the forefront. She was part of Rafael’s group. She was a terrorist too, and with that the relief he felt just a moment ago collapsed into disappointment.

“Why are you doing this?” He asked.

“Do what?”

“All this, this is crazy, you risk your life for what?”

“What do you think I should do?” Katherine asked.

“You’re the assistant of the financial comptroller, getting there isn’t easy you could be anything in this city.”

“I faked my resume. It was a lot of bullshit.”

“You screwed up so badly. What for?”

“Do you really care about my life, or are you now angry that I turn out to be a criminal, a terrorist?”

He stared at this black nothingness that surrounded him. “I don’t know, both I guess.”

She wrapped her arms around his shoulder and took his hand in hers.

“This life you have here, I no longer can return to.”

“Then where will I ever see you again?”

He felt her shifting as though she was looking at him.

“Do you know Rumi?” She asked, her voice so close, he could feel her breath on his skin.
Why would she ask him about a dead poet? “Yes, he’s a Sufi poet.”

“Then take his advice. Out beyond the ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I will meet you there.”

He thought about what it meant, about dislodging one’s self from standpoints and about the field where they didn’t existed. Katherine wanted him to know that she would be there in that nebulous place he couldn’t see, just as he could only feel her now, but not see her.

“Elliott I have to go.”

“Now?”

“The SWAT team will soon be distracted with Rafael’s men. That will be my chance to slip away. Once I get out of this building, disappearing won’t be a problem.”

Rafael. Elliott remembered that Tyler was in his hands.

“I need to get back to Rafael.”

Katherine’s body shifted. “Why? He’s not the safest person to be around with.”

“He has Tyler and I promised Lambert that I would get an interview with him.”

“I thought your paper won’t run the story?”

“We still have a chance. The investors who want to buy Madison Vanguard are reconsidering their offer unless we run the story.”

Elliott heard her taking a deep breath.

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yes.”
“All right. In case of an emergency like this, there will be a chopper picking up Rafael’s team and Tyler on Church Street near City Hall. Best chance is to hook up with him before he sets out for the extraction point.”

They rose to their feet and using Katherine’s flashlight, made their way out of the office room, into the hallway. She carried an assault rifle and a Lady office bag filled to the brim with grenades and ammunitions. They walked up the darkened stairways and stepped out into the light on the second floor.

Elliott didn’t hear any sound. There was no telling which way Rafael and the FBI SWAT team went. Katherine nodded at the window by the end of the hallway.

“Let’s see what the view is outside so we know which part of the building we are,” Katherine said.

As they approached the window, Elliot noticed the noise from the street below. The closer he got, the surer he was what that noise was. They stepped up to the window that faced west, and looking down, Elliott confirmed his suspicion. The street battle had already begun.

#

Bridget used a newspaper stand box to steady her aim with her camera. About seventy yards in front, protesters continued to chant, this time switching from anti-housing reforms slogans to pro-democracy yells.

“OF THE PEOPLE

BY THE PEOPLE

FOR THE PEOPLE”
This went on for a few minutes until the horn sounded from within their ranks, its long and threatening wail reverberating off the buildings and down the street. The first time it sounded, the protesters began to march and the SWAT team fired warning shots into the air. The second time it sounded, the SWAT team fired tear gas and the third time the horn sounded, stones began to fly.

The hail of stones shattered across the street, hitting SWAT officers, slamming into cars and smashing the windows of Graemer Center. The SWAT team responded by firing rubber bullets into the crowd, but the protesters kept advancing.

Jack, who had been sitting inside the SWAT van, opened the door.

“Get inside,” he said.

Bridget shook her head. “I’m working here.”

Looking through the camera’s viewfinder, she caught glimpses of the horse rider through the wisps of smoke. She took pictures of him and the horse wearing gas masks, then noticed that the smoke had gotten thicker. She lowered her camera. The section of the street between the SWAT team and the protesters was shrouded in a cloud, which in that moment belched another hail of stones down the SWAT team. Squinting, she noticed something else was moving under the cover of the smoke, and a second later it materialized into a horde of black figures jumping over the circle of police cars and attacking the officers who must have not seen them coming.

Just as she feared, police started to shoot and she hoped they were still using rubber bullets. However, the sheer number of the attackers, heavily padded, wearing helmets, gas masks and wielding sticks, soon turned the fight into a melee. Bridget snapped
pictures as more protesters were joining the fight. Others were starting to push away the
cars that had been blocking the side entrance. If these doors open, Rafael would escape.

From the police radio chatter she had heard that a team of the city’s police riot unit,
the Strategic Control Group, had been dispatched from City Hall. But judging by how
quickly the SWAT’s stand was collapsing, the riot team might not arrive soon enough to
prevent Rafael from escaping and kidnapping Tyler and Elliott.

Jack had stepped out of the SWAT van and was looking at disbelief at the chaos in
front. “It’s like a freaking Zombie attack,” he said.

By now none of the SWAT team members appeared to be standing, and yet the
beating continued. The protesters were on them like a pack of animals tearing apart prey.

The sight rekindled memories she had been fighting hard to suppress. About ten
years ago in Washington, she and her friends were protesting against a free trade bill and
when the rally turned violent, police chased them down a street that was teeming with
agitated anti-riot officers. None of them escaped the beating that ensued, the mindless
violence by the hands of the state.

Ever since that experience, her feeling for the police oscillated between the two
extremes of fear and hatred, never seeming to settle for the middle. For many years she
fantasized about revenge, about hunting down those who had beaten her to pulp and
return them the favor. Now watching the SWAT team being pummeled into submission,
she tried to find pleasure in it. But all it did was made her feel their pain, their sense of
helplessness, their humiliation and seeing the police go through what she had experienced
rekindled in her the fury she had reserved for her tormentors.

“We’ve got to help them,” she said, more to herself, but Jack’s head spun around.
“No, we don’t,” he said. “We’re not the police, let them fight.”

“It’s not much of a fight Jack. And if we don’t help them, Rafael will escape, and he will take Tyler with him.”

“So what? We’re reporters, we don’t meddle with the people we cover. If Rafael escapes then that’s what we write about. If FBI takes him down, then that’s what we write about.”

Jack had a point – just not good enough, not with Elliott in danger, not with the city’s fate at stake. She was already checking out the SWAT van. It was one of those old, boxy vans that courier services often use and which was big enough to protect the SWAT team inside and block the side entrance.

“We can use this van here,” she said, “you drive and I let the officers in through the back doors.”

“Hey, have you even listened to what I just said?” Jack said, grabbing her by her arm. “It’s not our job, and it’s too dangerous.”

“Okay so it’s not my job,” Bridget said, “but I’m going in to save Elliott.”

This must have struck a nerve for Jack let go of her arm. She put her camera inside her bag then climbed into the van. If Jack wouldn’t come along, she would have to drive the van by herself. The driver had left the keys in the ignition and she started on the engine.

She would have to maneuver the car out of its tight parking spot. Putting the gear into reverse, she bumped into the car behind her and pushed it back, then did the same with the car in front.

“Hey, hey!” Jack was banging at the door.
She slid the window pane aside.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” He asked. “Get out of there.”

Ahead she saw the protesters had already pushed the two police cars away from the side entrance and were now working on removing the chain lock around the doors. She was running out of time.

“Only if you drive,” she said.

Jack jumped up and down. She could tell he was playing with the idea. “Come on Jack, what’s it gonna be?”

“All right, mover over.”

She opened the door. “You must drive the van right where the side entrance,” Bridget said as she gave up her seat.

“I got it, now move over.”

She let him take over the wheel, then walked between the front seats into the back of the van, passed the two benches toward the twin doors at the rear. She used her bandana to cover her mouth and nose, and from the backpack retrieved her mini pepper spray, which she slipped into her jacket pocket.

Jack pulled the van out of the parking spot but then turned it around to face the opposite direction away from clash.

“Jack if you’re -.” The van made an abrupt stop and she almost fell.

“Hold on,” he shouted back and the van moved again.

Looking through the glass pane on the rear doors, she watched him driving backward at full speed. By the angle of his approach, he was going to ram the van
through the circle of police cars at a sidewalk slant, then use the length of the vehicle to block the entrance. Her job then was to get the SWAT team inside the van fast.

Seeing the protesters jumped out of their way, she braced for the impact and a second later was almost lifted off her feet as the van crashed through. She looked out again to see the van had stopped right next to the side entrance.

Bridget opened the rear doors, jumped out and was immediately stung by the waft of tear gas. Around her, wounded SWAT officers and protesters lied on the ground, their eyes looking at her in surprise. *Yes, this is not the reinforcement, it’s just me.*

She pulled down her bandana. “Everyone inside!”

Bridget grabbed the nearest officer by the shoulder and dragged him toward the van. The others officers slowly rose, helping each other get on their feet and move towards the van. Agent Fry lied next to a police car and two officers carried him over. They didn’t have time. The protesters, having retreated to about thirty yards away, must by now have realized that the van didn’t bring in reinforcement.

The first stones started to fly in, and when some protesters made an attempt to storm the team again, two SWAT officers drew their guns. Real bullets or not, the gesture alone kept the horde away.

Bridget climbed inside the van and hauled the wounded officers in. She was helping the officers put Fry down on the bench, then heard above her a smattering of stones hitting the van’s roof. The remaining officers clambered inside and away from the protesters who went after them.

The van seemed to move forward. “Jack??” Bridget shouted.
“They’re pushing the van,” he shouted back, “I got the brakes on. This thing won’t move.”

But just as the van stopped moving forward, it began to rock from side to side instead. Stuck between the officers, she couldn’t see outside. She tried to make her way to the front, squeezing herself through the officers.

“What’s going on?” she asked as the swinging got wilder.

“They’re trying to kick us over and access the side entrance,” a voice replied from the back, then all of the sudden he shouted “Molotov!”

Bridget felt a whoosh of heat sweeping over her from the back. She turned around to see flames licking through the cracks in the rear doors.

“Where’s the fire extinguisher?” someone in front asked.

The heat and smoke sent the officers away from the doors, crowding them up front and just then, the van tilted dangerously to the right, and for a moment seemed to balance on only one set of wheels before finally crashing to its side.

The weight of SWAT officers came down crushing her. It sucked the air out of her and the fumes from the burning doors began to fill the van’s interior. Officers were coughing and someone next to her opened a latch on the van’s roof that now faced sideways. He pushed Bridget toward the opening.

“Get out of here while you can,” he said. She reached for the opening and with his help scrambled out through latch.

She hadn’t even made it halfway out, when she saw the foot coming. It kicked her in the stomach. Hands pulled her up on her feet and before she could see who it was, someone punched her in the face, “bitch!” A second punch hit her left eye, and she
staggered back against the van. She deflected the third punch with her forearm then pushed her attacker away, providing a moment of reprieve as everyone else stepped back.

Behind her, the officers were helping each other escape through the latch. She was about to help them, when she noticed the protesters around her. They were dozens of them, wearing improvised body armor and wielding all sorts of blunt weapons. The first man to charge at her swung a pipe. Before he could land a hit, she grabbed his arm, pulled him toward her and kicked him in the groin. He sagged to the ground, and kneeling, she twisted the pipe out of his hand then jumped to her feet with pipe swinging to keep the horde at bay. Bridget knew the protesters were seizing her up, not sure who she was but clearly perceiving her as the enemy.

Two figures dislodged from the crowd. A man wearing a ice hockey mask and carrying a baseball bat, and behind him, a woman in a black hoodie wielding no weapons but her fists.

The man swung his bat wide, exposing his front to her. She threw the pipe at him, and as he flinched she dived in, grappled his knees and lifted him off his feet. He landed face up and she quickly clambered on top of him. Holding his baseball bat down, she pulled out her mini pepper spray and released a shot through the eye holes of his mask. From nowhere a kick to her hand sent the pepper spray flying, and she rolled off the man, jumped back to her feet just in time to deflect and evade a barrage of kicks from the woman. Arms raised in a boxing defense, Bridget staggered backward against the van. The woman unleashed a combination of punches, kicks and knee strikes. Bridget’s thick jacket diffused some of the battering but she began to feel the pain coming through. She had to break out, and when the woman stepped back to make room for a powerful kick,
Bridget lunged. She grabbed the woman by the collars and arm, and planting her feet between her legs swept her off the ground and over her hip. The woman landed on her back and as Bridget moved to finish her off with an arm lock, she got punched in her face.

A blow to her back sent her stumbling forward straight into the surging tip of a boot. That last kick right in her stomach sucked the air out of her, and as she fell to her knees another punch to her face sent her collapsing sideways. Not again.

Curving into a ball, she knew what was coming. Pain. Her back, legs, the sides of her stomach, shoulders, arms received the share of beating that her face had already suffered from, and she prayed for it to stop. Strangely amid the pounding she could feel the phone in her jeans pocket vibrating. Someone out there was thinking of her. She sunk her thoughts into that sensation on her thigh, her only connection to friends and family. Dinner must be ready by now and she was expected at home. How could she not come?

Make it stop, make it stop.

Then, powerful hands grabbed her by her shoulder, dragging her away from the beating, then turning her around on her back. She opened her eyes and started into the brutal visage of Bertrand. No, not him again. The giant let go of her, and she crept backward, too weak to stand up.

Bertrand looked at her, then picked up his sledge hammer. Facing the van with her back against the crowd, she noticed how quiet it was behind her. She looked back and saw that the protesters had formed a half circle with SWAT officers hunkering in small groups amongst them. They were all staring at the van and she turned around.
Standing on top of the van was Rafael and his men. They carried baseball bats that were wrapped around the tip in some kind of cloth. Xavier was holding Tyler. More of his man were climbing on top. No one paid attention to her. It was eerily quiet. *What’s going on?*

She heard shots from somewhere down the street and the protesters started to become nervous. Peering through the cracks in the crowd, she saw in the distance the arrival of the blue uniformed, body armored officers of New York’s Strategic Control Group.

“Here they come,” shouted Adrienne. She flicked a lighter and held it below the tip of her bat. A single lick of the flame was enough to set ablaze the cloth around the tip. She passed the lighter around.

Rafael and his men jumped off the van. Bertrand lit his sledgehammer on fire and swung it left and right, creating a wide arc of fire and heat. Then he looked at Rafael who nodded.

The giant raised his sledgehammer into the air and let out a mighty shout that drew yells from the crowd. With every shout the crowd grew wilder and as the air was filled with uproar, Bertrand swung his sledgehammer one more time and charged. Bridget covered her head and turned away as Rafael and his men barreled passed her like an unstoppable train of war, heading straight for the incoming wall of anti-riot police officers.

#

Elliott and Katherine watched from the second floor the chaos unfolding below. The last time they’d checked on Rafael, they saw his team and the protesters behind them
plowing through an army of about a hundred anti-riot police officers. Rafael’s men pierced through the wall of police riot shields in a V-shape formation spearheaded by Bertrand, his sheer size and the heft of his flaming sledgehammer pummeling down any resistance. With protesters and officers enmeshed in a brawl, police hadn’t been able to use their crowd control weapons. But a floor down later, the table was starting to turn.

Standing by the window in an empty office room, Elliott heard the sound of the big diesel engines then saw two armored-personnel carriers, practically eight-wheeled tanks, rolling in. Below him, Katherine was crouching with the M-16 rifle slung around her back and observed the arrival of the armored vehicles with a grim look on her face.

“Rafael is trying to make a run for that alley over there,” Elliott said, pointing to the narrow opening between two buildings across the street. The arrival of the armored vehicles with their mounted machine gun turrets now prevented them from crossing the 20-yard stretch that separated them from the alley. “Do you think the police will fire at Rafael with those machine guns?”

“As long as Rafael doesn’t pull out his handgun, they won’t shoot at him or other protesters,” Katherine said. “Still, it’s impossible to get pass these tanks and the riot police. Do you see Tyler anywhere?”

Elliott shook his head. In the chaos he couldn’t spot the financial comptroller. If police had somehow managed to rescue Tyler, Elliott would lose his opportunity to interview him today. His best chance for an interview was to stick with Rafael and perhaps get him to release Tyler. But seeing how Rafael might not make it out of here that opportunity too was slipping away.
“What do we do now?” Elliott asked. “It’s pointless now to join Rafael on the street if he’s about to get caught.”

Katherine didn’t answer. She was inspecting the content of her lady office bag: three magazines, a knife, and two flash grenades. She released the magazine from her M-16 assault rifle, looked at it, then shoved it back in. “I have about seventy rounds left,” she finally said.

“Rounds as in bullets?”

“Yes, now I need to find a spider hole.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Listen, go and find Tyler and get that interview. He must still be out there. I need to buy Rafael time, or else he’s not going to make it to the extraction point.”

“How?”

Katherine tapped the side of her rifle.

The implication of her intent crystalized in him straightaway. She wanted to lure the SWAT team away from Rafael, draw everyone’s attention on her in what he knew would be a suicide mission.

“Bad idea,” he said. “They’ll find you.”

“Don’t worry about me. When I’m done, I’ll sneak out, and meet you at the extraction point.”

“Yes but -.”

“You know the way out right? Follow Rafael’s exit. Just make sure you stay away from the police.”

“Katherine..”
“Just go!”

She kept him at arm’s length and he knew better than to insist. He turned around and walked out of the room. There was no telling whether he would ever see her again, but he must banish any thoughts of her and focus on finding Tyler.

Making sure no one was around, he went downstairs to the first floor and headed for the side entrance where just half an hour ago Rafael had made his stand. The hallway leading out to the side doors was now empty except for the blanket of bullet casings that showed the fire power the SWAT had unleashed on Rafael’s men. He hurried down the hallway and pushed at the door, which didn’t open wide because of the SWAT van blocking it. He squeezed himself out the door, then climbed up the van and jumped onto the street.

The faint sting of tear gas made him cover his nose and rub his eyes, but there was no way of avoiding it. Elliott hunkered behind a parked sedan that no longer had windows. He looked around to orient himself. A forty yard gap now separated the police and the protesters who occupied the east side of the street behind him. Up front, facing the protesters, was a phalanx of police officers and before them the two armored vehicles. While protesters were shouting expletives in the direction of the police, the latter retained a stoic silence in the face of provocation.

Glass splinters and rocks littered the street with damaged windows along stores on both sides. The air smelled of burning rubber and black smoke rose high from the four police cars that were still burning. Protest banners that said HOUSING FOR THE POOR were left lying on the ground and then he noticed by the curb a lone body of a protester covered an American flag. This is madness.
There was no sign of Rafael and for a moment the thought occurred to him that he might have managed to escape. But then he noticed that the alley Rafael was trying to reach was located behind the armored vehicles and the line of police officers. That meant Rafael and his men had either joined the crowd of protesters or were caught in the middle and were hiding somewhere in one of the stores inside the forty yard buffer zone.

The blare of a horn sounded from far behind the line of police officers, carrying a similar wailing sound that had before marked the protesters’ signal. He stood up to get a better view of the police and noticed the commotion. The police formation was breaking up as riot officers in the middle were fleeing from something and a moment later he saw what it was. Bursting out from between the two armored vehicle was the horse in full gallop and riding him was a man whose face was painted in the tribal markings of red and black. He dashed toward the protesters and ducked under a new hail of stones flying over him at the police.

It happened fast. As the stones were still in midair, he noticed movement through the broken windows of a Starbucks café across the street. Rafael, his men and Tyler came rushing out with riot shields covering them, taking advantage of the disarrayed police line and the exposed alley. But midway through, one of the armored vehicles moved and rolled backwards toward the alley in an attempt to block them.

That’s when the first shot rang, loud and distinct. Katherine. The sound of another shot and another pierced through the air. The shots stirred a fine dust of coating on the armored vehicle, probably not even causing a dent. But it was enough to catch everyone’s attention.
Rafael was making a run for it, and this time Katherine’s switched to automatic fire, spraying bullets that mostly hit the walls above the police officers.

The second armored vehicle sprang into action and rushed forward, meeting an incoming blanket of stones and a smattering of Molotov bombs with contemptuous indifference. It drove passed Elliott and stopped just a few yards before the protesters who jumped back at this beast of war. The gun turret rotated and Katherine stopped firing as the barrel of the big-caliber machine gun began to rise toward her. It unleashed a barrage of fire that shredded Graemer Center’s window façade. Glass shards and chunks of concrete rained from a cloud of dust under the ferocity of gunfire that betrays an appetite for murder.

Katherine. It seemed unlikely that she could have escaped such a force of destruction unscathed. From across the street, a SWAT team was moving toward Graemer Center. He should move and find Tyler but the thought of Katherine alone, and possibly hurt paralyzed him. His priority was to stop the housing reforms program and that meant securing Tyler’s interview. Katherine was a terrorist who knew the risk of taking on the SWAT. It would be wrong to go back, and yet.

Then he saw Bridget. Half running, half hobbling, looking injured yet not stopping, with rocks flying over her head, she was crossing the street through the smoke, heading straight for the alley where Rafael must have gone in. Bridget going after Tyler, never giving up. There’s a sudden urge to follow her, but something held him back and when the machine gun stopped firing he knew what to do. He had to go back for Katherine.
He returned to the SWAT van, clambered up the vehicle and through the side entrance was back in the building. The SWAT team must already be inside as well and he paused to listen for their movement. Then he went up upstairs and returned to the room where he had left her. The glass façade was gone and the walls were riddled with bullet holes. On the carpet were two empty magazines and blood splatters. He banished the thought of her being injured.

He moved to the next room and the one next to it, then considered calling out her name. That’s when he heard the sound of metal dragged along the floor in the corridor. He followed the sound and found her walking toward the stairway using the rifle as support. She had an improvised bandaged wrapped tightly around her left leg.

“Katherine.”

She turned around.

“Elliott, I told you to get Tyler.”

“We’ll go after him together, Bridget is -.“

A loud bang from somewhere behind him reminded him that they weren’t alone.

“We have to go,” Elliott said.

“No kidding,” Katherine said. “Help me walk then.”

Her left leg was completely useless. “Not the bullets but it’s all that flying glass that got me,” she said.

Elliott wrapped his arm around her shoulder to support her while she held on to her rifle. They took a few steps and once they managed to move in lockstep, they picked up the pace and went down the stairways.
“We won’t make it to Rafael on time,” Katherine said through her teeth. She was in pain. “You should have left me.”

“I will carry you if I have to,” Elliott said.

“I can’t use Rafael’s exit, can’t climb the van,” she said. “There’s another way out though.”

Above them they could hear the SWAT team going through the rooms. It’s just a matter of minutes before they would make their way downstairs and find them. They were heading to another side entrance on the other side of the building. Elliott shoved open the door out to the corridor on the first floor and Katherine nodded at the door at the end of that corridor. “That door should lead us out,” she said.

They haven’t made it halfway through, when shots rang out from a room just ahead of them. Katherine held Elliott back and raised her rifle. Heavy footsteps, then stepping out of the room was a man with a face painted in the red and black markings of a tribal warrior. It was the horse rider. Katherine shoved Elliott away.

“I’ll deal with him,” she said.

#

Running hurt, breathing hurt, thinking hurt. The pain had grown inside her like a new organ that was pulsating with every step she took. Bridget had locked her will into finding Tyler and switched everything else off as she scampered across the street, and into the alley where she had seen Rafael and his men disappear.

Behind her the battle raged on with stones and Molotov bombs flying and police officers marching forward to drive back the protesters. Up ahead where the alley met the street, she saw Rafael’s men walking around the corner and out of sight.
Bridget walked faster until she heard the rumbling of a truck engine up in front. Ignoring her pain, she began to run and when she turned around the corner, she saw Rafael climbing onto the trailer of a semi-truck about ten yards down the street. His men were already inside and were ditching their baseball bats for assault rifles.

There was no sign of Elliott and Tyler. The truck began to roll, and when Rafael turned to close the rear doors he spotted her.

“Rafael,” Bridget shouted, walking toward the truck. This was her only chance to convince him to let go of Elliott and Tyler. “Rafael stop.”

The truck was gaining speed and she had to run to maintain her distance but Rafael simply stood there and watched her running.

“Where’s Elliott?” she shouted as the truck increased its distance.

Still Rafael didn’t respond. *Why isn’t he saying anything?* She saw her chance slipping with every yard the truck pulled away from her. If she couldn’t make him stop the truck, she would have to convince him about Elliott’s story while running.

“We’ll run the story. Rafael listen to me, we’ll run the story.”

She was out of breath, it hurt to run and he kept watching her, not saying a word. Yet she picked up her pace, pushing aside the pain in her legs, around her ribs, in her arms and on her bloody face so she could close the distance and tell him to let Tyler go. But all she could do was maintain eye contact with him and it was then that she noticed the expression on his face turning from curiosity to indifference.

“Rafael,” she tried again and when the truck accelerated she saw the eyes that were staring back at her were the eyes of a stranger.
“Rafael please,” she said one more time as she watched Rafael closing the doors and the truck driving off.

She slowed to a stop and sat down on the curb, breathing hard. She looked at her hand, at the dried blood around her fingers. Her face must look like a mess and all this for nothing. The hot flare of anger filled her but she was too tired to vent it. Taking a deep breath as though to quench the anger inside, she then stood up and walked back to the alley.

She had lost Elliott and Tyler and that’s all she could think of now. Her throat was parched and when she licked her lips, she tasted blood. She needed a drink so badly.

Back in the street she noticed that police had dispersed the protesters all the way to the far end of the street. Small groups of protesters however were still loitering about by Graemer Center. She walked toward the building and spotted her camera bag on the roof of a police cruiser that must have just arrived. Walking toward the cruiser, she heard someone calling her name. She turned to see Jack emerging from a group of police officers who were chatting by the corner.

“Oh shit Bridget,” Jack said. “We have to take you to the hospital.”

“I’m working here,” she said, picking up her camera bag which someone, probably Jack, had put on the police cruiser.

“No you’re not,” Jack said. “I’ve already lost Elliott, Anad will kill me for not watching over you.”

“Why do you care? You don’t work for Madison Vanguard anymore.”
The clatter of hooves caught her attention and she turned toward the sound. Just then, a horse came dashing around the corner with Katherine riding it hard down the street, and sitting behind her holding tightly onto her waist, was Elliott.

#

The sun lingered somewhere behind shreds of clouds hanging low in the horizon, leaving the sky permeated in the grayish hue of the pre-dusk hour. Elliott was holding on to Katherine as they rode through the desolated streets of Downtown. Everywhere he looked he saw burnt car wrecks, smashed store fronts, and items on the ground people had dropped or left behind, from bikes, clothing, to bags, riot shields, phones. Smoke and the ever present whiff of tear gas lingered like traces of destruction in the air. But no soul was around.

Katherine rode the horse slowly as she observed the damage around them.

“They must have fought hard to break through the police lines,” she said. “Gaining access to this street must have been vital. Now it’s no man’s land.”

“Where’s everyone?” Elliott said.

“I hope they’ve made it to City Hall by now. That place was off limit for protesters. We may have to cut through parts of the city that’s crawling with police if we want to make it to the extraction point.”

Elliott sighed. He didn’t have the slightest interest to run into the police again. They had been lucky to come across the red-faced horseman. It didn’t took long for Katherine to explain to him who she was. The horseman had already suspected that the shooter was Frank, and when the SWAT team moved in, he’d simply followed them. The man patched up Katherine’s leg with bandages and told them the exact location of the
extraction point on West Broadway before lending them his horse. Rafael would know that she’s on her way.

Katherine spurred the horse into a small gallop. They were about midway through the street when from their right a police cruiser sped across the intersection in front of them and disappeared to their left. Katherine stopped and a moment of silence passed. The police cruiser came reversing back into view, stopping only after it slammed into a lamp post on the other side of the street. The car’s wheels turned to face their direction.

“Katherine.”

“I know.”

She turned the horse around and prompted it into a gallop.

“Hold on,” Katherine said as they dashed down the street.

Elliott looked back and saw the car gaining on them fast. At this speed, they would soon be overtaken. Katherine made a sharp turn right and behind him the cruiser lost control and smashed against a bunch of parking cars before pursuing them through the narrow street. At the end of the street, he noticed a crowd of police officers.

“Cops, cops! Elliott shouted.

“Too late,” Katherine said.

They dashed out of the street, surprising the officers who watched them barreling through with a police cruiser on their tail. Great way to announce themselves.

As they entered Beaver Street, he heard the sirens behind him. He looked back and this time counted four police cruiser chasing them. They were somewhere south of West Broadway and taking the direct route to the extraction point would mean passing
through open streets where the horse was no match for the cars. They had to get off these streets even if it meant taking a detour.

Up ahead Elliott noticed repair works with barriers narrowing access to the street. He tugged at Katherine’s arm.

“At the subway station, turn right,” he shouted.

“What? Why?”

“Turn right, just turn right.”

She did and they stumbled into an alley undergoing repair works. With scaffolding over their heads and planks below, she charged the horse through the tunnel that was hardly wide enough for three people to walk abreast. They came out on the other end that opened up to a wider street. They had to move and disappear fast before the police cars made their way around the block.

“Where now?” Katherine asked.

“We need to avoid wide and empty streets,” Elliott said and pointed to another alley up ahead.

Katherine heeled her horse’s flanks and they galloped into the alley. She slowed to a trot as sirens approached from ahead. Two ambulances passed by. Katherine didn’t move and instead stopped.

“What’s wrong?” Elliott asked.

“I’m losing blood,” she said. The left side of her pant had taken on a dark color and he could see the blood dripping down on her feet. All that hard horse riding must have loosened the bandages. They have to stanch the bleeding.

“Put pressure on your wound, focus on that. I’ll handle the reins.”
“I thought you can’t ride?” Katherine asked.

“A high-school friend gave me basic lessons for free, that’s about it.”

Katherine let go of the reins and put them in Elliott’s hand, placing his fingers in the correct position.

“All right, I’m good,” he said.

They came out of the alley with Elliott turning the horse to the left, realizing belatedly the four police cruisers coming at them. Katherine spurred the horse to run faster.

“Keep her steady,” she said.

Tires shrieked as Elliott steered the horse straight through the cars and when he looked back they were still breaking.

On Beaver Street he saw the first protest banners, which should take them to City Hall Park. He pulled the horse across a small park, passed the bronze sculpture of the Wall Street Bull and into Broadway. It’s a straight run of wide open street all the way to City Hall. However the closer they got to City Hall Park, the more protesters Elliot expected to meet and the more crowded the street would become.

The sirens behind them grew louder as the police cruisers were back on their tail and gaining on them fast. They would not be able to outrun the police, but the sight of a man and woman charging on a horse through Broadway began to attract the attention of groups of protesters who were walking toward City Hall. Soon enough the protesters realized that the two were being chased by a pack of police cruisers. Crowds on both sides of the street were cheering them on, yelling and whooping as they dashed passed them. Behind them, the police cruisers were hackled and booed.
Elliott was right, the crowd grew in size along with their show of support, with protesters spilling onto the street as he steered the horse straight through their middle. Looking back, he saw the police cruisers slowing down and protesters throwing stones at the cars.

Far ahead he could no longer see the street but a wall of people filling up the entire width. That must be the heart of the protest and by now Katherine had to slow the horse as there were too many people on the street. Elliott couldn’t hear the sirens anymore and looking back he saw only one police cruiser chasing them. The same one that had been on their heels from the beginning. It continued to push forward, wading through the crowd that had become so thick that people were banging on its hood, shouting at the driver, and spraying paint on its side.

At last the horse slowed to a trot and protesters had to make way for it to move forward. Elliott and Katherine found themselves surrounded by people with some patting the horse as they rode pasted them. Protected by the masses, Elliott could no longer see the police car.

He heard faint music playing somewhere in front and saw the tips of banners and flags waving in the distance. Then, all of the sudden the crowd opened up and before them laid City Hall Park.

Tens of thousands of people occupied the park, filling every inch of space. He could hardly see the street nor the trees. Protest banners and American flags waved proudly against the backdrop of the City Hall building. People chanted, yelled, sang and danced.
Elliott kept the horse trotting up Broadway and watched around him the festivity which stood in contrast to the apocalyptic state of the rest of Downtown. It’s as if all of New York had gathered here.

He turned to a man who was filming his surrounding while walking next to the horse.

“What’s going on?” Elliott asked him.

“You don’t know?” The man looked surprised. “The council canceled voting today. The councilors couldn’t get in here so there was no quorum. We managed to stop them from voting.”

“What about the housing reforms?” asked Katherine.

“I heard Mayor Alberta will look into the agreement. But whatever, we’ll stay here and occupy City Hall until they cancel the reforms,” the man said and finished off with a “of the people, by the people, for the people” yell.

Elliott thanked him and they rode on. There were too many people in the way for him to ride faster and he had difficulty navigating the horse around. Katherine took the reins again and he placed his hand on her wounded thigh, making sure the bandage didn’t come loose.

“Rafael’s plan worked,” she said, leaning against his chest.

“Will he still be needing Tyler then?”

“Yes. Unless you can convince him otherwise.”

Considering the trouble Rafael had gone through to kidnap Tyler, Elliott’s argument about giving the media another chance to stop the housing reforms deal might land on deaf ears.
“Katherine, do you believe me if I say I can pull this story off?”

She looked over her shoulder at him.

“What are you trying to say?”

“Let Tyler go and let me interview him. Madison Vanguard will run the story and Mayor Alberta will have no choice but to drop the housing reforms agreement.”

“I believe you, but it’s Rafael you have to ask.”

Should he meet Rafael, he will have only one shot at convincing him to interview Tyler and expose the political dealings behind the housing reforms that was threatening the homes of thousands of New York families. Rafael’s methods had so far been successful in stopping today’s voting and now he had to tell him to give the media another chance.

“I need you to talk to him,” Elliott said. “You’re Frank, Rafael knows you.”

“Rafael doesn’t know me personally. We’ve never met as partners.”

“But you captured Tyler for him, you practically took a bullet to save him and his men. He’ll trust you.”

Katherine didn’t immediately answer. He felt her taking a deep breath. “All right. I’ll do it.”

“Thank you.”

They had reached the end of City Hall Park and the crowd was thinning out again. Elliott took the reins again and led the horse to the left into Duane Street. The intersection at West Broadway up ahead was their extraction point. Katherine spurred the horse into a gallop.
They were coming out at the intersection when from the corner of his left eye, Elliott saw a police cruiser charging straight at them. He braced for the impact, turning the horse away then heard the brakes screaming and the sound of metal crashing onto concrete.

#

Bridget swayed on the edge of consciousness, holding on to bits of sensory input to stay awake. Blood was running down her temples, over her closed eyes, her nose, and dripping down from her cheek. Squinting, she was only able to get a blurred image of her surrounding, but even as her vision sharpened she failed to recognize what had happened. Everything around her, the glass splinters, shreds of metal, plastic parts, and the weird white fabric around her face had fractured into puzzle pieces that didn’t fit together. Gravity pulled her weight to the side with the seatbelt pressing against her shoulder and her hip. Her arms were out of sight. A sharp pain shot up along her ribs and she let out a moan that grew into a jumble of screaming, cursing, crying. But filtering through the sound of her own screams, was the clatter of hooves and Elliott’s voice calling her name.

#

It was her screaming that caught Elliott’s attention. Looking back to where the police cruiser had veered passed him, he saw the car tipped on its side at the intersection, its wheels spinning and undercarriage exposed like a belly. He dismounted and ran over and through the cracked windshield saw Bridget trapped in the driver’s seat, her face touching the window that was resting against the street.

“Hold on Bridget, I’ll get you out,” he said. He didn’t even want to think about what she’s doing in a police car.
He climbed onto the top of the passenger-side front door and pulled at the handle. The door opened and he peered inside. Bridget sat partly facing him with only her seatbelt keeping her glued to her seat. Hair and blood covered her face and looking back at him with apparent difficulty was one swollen eye.

“Oh shit Bridget.”

Her arms were flung about but everything else seemed to be in place, no open wounds, no broken limbs. He heard Katherine trotting over. “Can she move?” she asked.

“Bridget talk to me,” he said. “Can you move?”

She looked at herself, tracing the contour of her body, then shook her head.

“She can’t,” Elliott told Katherine. “I’m going in.”

He climbed inside by holding onto the dashboard and the seats, then eased himself toward the car’s center consol. On a normal day he would have called 911 but now he had to find a way to get her to a hospital by himself. He bent forward, careful not to touch her, and reached over to locate her seatbelt releaser. He was trying to push away the deflated airbag when amid her whimpering she spoke a few words he couldn’t understand.

Elliott paused and leaned over. “What is it?”

“Hey, how do you like my new look?”

*Damn it, Bridget you’re such a trooper.*

“I hate it. What do you call it?” he asked, trying to get her thinking of anything else but the pain.

“My hangover look.”

“Good Lord, your hangovers must be epic.”
She managed a soft giggle but stopped immediately. “It hurts.”

“I know Bridget, I know,” he said. From the corner of his eye he saw Katherine hobbling toward the windshield.

“Look there’s Katherine,” Bridget said. “I thought you were her hostage.”

“No, we were trying to get to Rafael and Tyler. This intersection here is supposed to be the extraction point for Rafael. But they’re not around.” Turning to Katherine he shouted “Where’s Rafael?”

Katherine leaned with her arms against the windshield, looking down on him and Bridget.

“He’s gone,” she said, shaking her head. “We must have missed him.”

Bridget sighed. “Tyler.”

“Don’t worry,” Elliott said, as he fumbled with the buckle. “He may just be late.”

He had found the seatbelt releaser but looking at the door on the passenger side above, he should have first figure out how to get Bridget all the way up and out of the car before releasing her from the seat. Katherine tapped on the windshield. She must have noticed Elliott looking at the door.

“You won’t be able to drag her up and out the door,” she said.

“You have a plan?” he shouted back.

“Keep her away from the windshield.”

“What?”

Katherine took a step back and he realized what she was about to do. He covered Bridget with his shoulder as best as he could while Katherine picked up her M-16 then fired four rounds along the side of the windshield in front of the passenger seat. The glass
was still intact but the line of bullet holes had weakened its structure and he should be able to kick the entire windshield out of the way.

He let go of Bridget and, leaning his shoulder against the side of her seat, used his right leg to kick. The cracks running out from the bullet holes spread wider but the windshield didn’t budge. Katherine stepped forward and banged her rifle against the glass.

“Elliott,” he heard Bridget saying. She tugged at his arm, her gaze set on something outside on the street. Elliott looked out and saw ahead a group of SWAT officers approaching on foot with weapons raised.

“Shit! Katherine!”

Katherine stopped banging against the glass and looked at him. Before Elliott could warn her, she turned around.

They opened fire and the shots hit Katherine with such a force that she smashed backward against the windshield before sliding along the glass down to the ground.

“No, no, no.” Elliott was scrambling to get out of the car. Bridget held him back.

“Don’t.” Her voice was barely audible but firm.

Katherine laid on her stomach facing the car. Her eyes met his, and her mouth were forming words he couldn’t hear. He tried to break free from Bridget but she held on.

“I can’t..” Elliott said.

“They’ll shoot you,” Bridget said.

Four SWAT officers walked up with their rifles trained at Katherine’s body but when they noticed him and Bridget inside the car, they pointed their weapons at them.

Elliott slumped back against her seat and felt Bridget’s arm around his head,
stroking his hair.

“I’m sorry Elliott. I’m so sorry.”

#

Elliott stared at the two ambulances up on the street with their blue and yellow sirens swirling in silence against the fading daylight. Bridget was in one, Katherine in the other, the horse was gone, and he was sitting in the backseat of a police cruiser. Agent Powell had said he would be right back. But after five minutes he began to wonder why the ambulances hadn’t left for the hospital yet.

From the other side, he heard the passenger door opening and saw Agent Powell poking his head in.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Powell said. “We’re trying to figure out a safe route to the nearest hospital that isn’t overflowing with patients.”

“Safe? Who would want to attack an ambulance?” Elliott asked. “I’m sure protesters will let them pass.”

“Yes, but protesters might attack the police cars that will escort them. A SWAT team will come along in case those terrorists try to rescue Katherine on the way to the hospital. She’s sort of like a high-valuable target, so we’re not taking any chances.”

Outside Elliott saw about a dozen SWAT members with assault rifles forming a defensive ring around the two ambulances.

“How are they?”

Powell gave a puzzled look. “Who?”

“Bridget and Katherine. How are they holding up?”
“I haven’t checked with Bridget again, but don’t worry about her she seems okay. As for Katherine, I was told that she will survive.”

Powell withdrew his head from the car as a police officer across the street called out his name and gestured for him to come over.

“I got to go, I’ll be back,” the agent said and closed the passenger door.

Powell was right. If Rafael knew that Katherine was Frank, he might attempt to rescue her from the police. Unless, Elliott realized not without a tint of disappointment, Katherine didn’t know enough about Rafael and his group to risk mounting a rescue mission. After all, Rafael had already won. As he’d told him, his mission was to stop the housing reforms programs with its unjust incentive deal and today’s protests succeeded in doing just that. He kidnapped Tyler and in all likelihood would use his disappearance as a warning to scare any official from signing a housing reforms deal until the city either negotiates a better deal for New Yorkers or drops the reforms altogether. So why risk going after Katherine? Or was he wrong?

He was pondering about the odds of Rafael trying to rescue Katherine, when his ear registered a disturbance in the air. It grew into the sound of rolling thunder in the back. Elliott turned around in his seat to look through the rear windshield.

About thirty yards away, a dark Bell Huey helicopter flew around the corner of the building and hovered above the intersection, almost touching the garble of lamp posts, street signs and cables. For a few seconds it hovered there, then with its nose pointing slightly downward, it flew in their direction. Like a metallic thunder, it swept over him and the police on the ground with a loud rumbling that shook the windows in the cruiser. Small cylinder like objects fell onto the street and almost instantly exploded,
sending a blast of pellets in all directions that knocked off police officers. Agent Powell struggled to get up on his feet, his face distorted with pain. A blanket of smoke rose from the ground and engulfed his cruiser until he could no longer see Powell lying across the street.

Silhouettes of hooded men emerged through the smoke. He pressed his face against the window and even though he could barely make them out he knew who they were. Rafael and his men must have been hiding near the intersection all this time, waiting for their ride. Walking with weapons raised, they passed by him in silence like ghosts shrouded in fog. And seeing them disappearing in the smoke toward the sound of the helicopter, a thought occurred to him: Tyler.

Elliott stepped out of the car. The ground was littered with pellets, which he could only guess were blasted out of non-lethal grenades that the helicopter must have dropped along with the smoke grenades. Here and there he heard the moaning of the wounded officers with glimpses of them lying and sitting on the street. Gunshots pierced the silence, three controlled bursts of fire from somewhere in the front.

Elliott edged forward, following the sound of the helicopter in front. He passed Bridget’s ambulance and to his relief saw the rear doors were shut. Further ahead, he came by Katherine’s ambulance. Its doors were open and when he approached it, he found that it was empty. They must have taken Katherine then.

Not far ahead he could see the blinking light of the helicopter’s tailgate signaling its location through the smoke. Elliott picked up his pace but as he got closer, the helicopter’s swirling blades pushed the smoke into his eyes, forcing him to raise his arm for cover while he pressed on.
He called out Rafael’s name but the sound of the helicopter’s whirling blades drowned out his voice.

He hadn’t walked ten yards when he noticed that the sound’s location had slightly shifted and when he peeked over his arm, he saw the tailgate’s lights were blinking at him from above already. A wave of panic hit him. He was this close to getting Tyler. Elliott staggered forward and bumped into the empty ambulance stretcher where Katherine must have laid. He pushed it aside then noticed that the smoke was beginning to clear. Through the smoke, familiar shapes reappeared, the width of the street, the outline of cars and buildings, the vertical silhouettes of lampposts. But no Rafael.

Standing at the intersection, he watched the helicopter vanishing, taking with it his last hope to interview Tyler. Elliott turned around to head back but then heard behind him someone coughing. The smoke cleared out well enough for him to make out the silhouette of a man kneeling on the ground. He walked up to him and saw that it was Tyler. Rafael had left him behind.

EPILOGUE

For three days the protesters had gathered at City Hall Park, refusing to leave the site of their resistance despite renewed attempts by police throughout Sunday afternoon to disperse them. By evening all that had been cleared was a section of Broadway, enough for traffic to pass through and restore some normalcy into Downtown. Mayor Alberta then instructed police to retreat to a defensive position, and with the passing of the second day, the rioting subsided to sporadic clashes at the fringes of the rally.
As Monday morning rolled in, the thousands of protesters at City Hall Park awoke to the smell of fresh, cold air and the tingling sensation of facing a new start and an uncertain future. For the first time police allowed groups of volunteers to enter the park and set up field kitchens, medical stations and portable restrooms. The morning brought in the full account of the damage that two days of rioting had done. Seven protesters dead, more than a hundred injured, and property damages estimated in the millions of dollars. That morning too, protesters awoke to Elliott’s story on the front page of Madison Vanguard.

The headline read HOUSING DEAL TICKET TO MAYORAL RACE: TYLER. Pushed out on every social media platform, the story spread like wild fire among the protesters at the park and by midday hundreds of them clashed with police as they attempted to storm City Hall.

It was amid these clashes that Mayor Alberta responded to Madison Vanguard’s story, calling Tyler’s duplicity a “betrayal” to the city. She had been holding marathon meetings with the city councilors and investment bankers to salvage the housing reforms deal. The revelation of Tyler’s political dealings however rendered any previous agreements he had made with the bankers as unacceptable, forcing her to renegotiate from scratch. The city had only until the end of the day to pass the housing reforms deal to regain access to the debt market and avoid a default on its $530 million bonds. Faced with the impossible task of renegotiating the housing reforms within that short time span, Alberta walked out of the meeting and went down the stairs of City Hall to speak directly to the protesters.
Accompanied by the city councilors, the mayor met with a group of people who organized the rally and who could negotiate on behalf of the protesters. By the end of the one-hour meeting, she walked up to an improvised stage and was handed a microphone to address the crowd before her.

“I hear you New York,” she said, to the cheering of the crowd. “Today we will decide on the future of our housing and the future of our city.”

Alberta then explained her meeting with the protesters’ representatives and laid bare the difficulty of the choices the city faced, all of which boiled down to the threat of bankruptcy. Without a housing reforms deal, investment bankers were unwilling to arrange New York’s bond sales and without access to external funding to refinance debt and fund its operations, the city would have to file for bankruptcy. She spelt out what it meant for New York to go bankrupt: no funding for social spending such as health, education, and public works, a debt restructuring that could force the city to sell public assets to repay debt, and it might take another a decade before New York could ever raise money from the market again. The pain would be shared among all citizens, across all social programs.

“I am ready to drag New York into this difficult period if you are with me,” she said. “Are you with me?”

Her question elicited some cheers from the crowd but most stood in silence as they were still digesting her sober assessment of New York’s fate. She was asking New Yorkers to prepare to suffer, and she let that realization sink in for a moment before continuing.

“This is the final housing deal we could come up with,” the mayor said, while
holding up a document. “I cannot force the market to lend us money so this deal is all we
have. It no longer contains the incentive deal, however, your interests are still
compromised by Tyler’s earlier involvement. It is therefore a tainted agreement, and by
all accounts cannot be considered as having been negotiated in good faith. And after one
of the biggest and bloodiest protest we have seen in New York, I feel compelled to no
longer support the housing reforms. Considering all the above reasons, the city council
and I have decided to reject the housing reforms deal.”

Alberta paused and her gaze swept the crowd from left to right, perhaps hoping to
see people celebrate her announcement. But the silence persisted as though they knew she
wasn’t done. And they were right. For what Mayor Alberta was about to say next, she
would receive scathing criticism, even as some commentators later viewed her statement
as a brilliant albeit risky political bet.

“I have rejected the housing reforms deal, and am prepared to face the
consequences of a bankruptcy /If you follow me/,” she said, giving the crowd a hard stare.
“Think carefully about it, and tell me whether you’re prepared to have New York file for
bankruptcy under your name, because if you’re not, then I will have no choice but to
approve the housing reforms.” She looked at her watch. “You have twelve hours until
midnight to decide, and when you make that decision, whichever it is, I will hear you
New York.”

And so, the countdown began.
Elliott ran up the stairs to the newsroom. It was just after 2 p.m. and the office was bustling with reporters hammering on their keyboards as if deadline was already knocking on the door. Anad had given him a two-hour break to visit Bridget in the hospital, and in that time Mayor Alberta had delivered her controversial speech, financial markets had tumbled on concerns New York will go bankrupt, Tyler had held a press briefing to confirm his doomed plan to run for mayor, and Bennett, at last, had signed the agreement to sell Madison Vanguard. If anything, however, these were just the opening salvos of today’s events.

Adam was already typing away on a story when Elliott sat down at his desk next to him.

“Who owns us now?” Elliott asked his neighbor, as he powered up his computer and unwrapped the sandwich he had bought for a late lunch.

Adam shrugged. “No idea,” he said, “but I heard Bennett will introduce us to our new owners tonight.”

Why anyone would want to buy a dying newspaper when the economy was in shambles was beyond Elliott. Though right now, he didn’t care. Sitting at his desk and staring at his two monitors felt like returning home. He had spent the past four days out of the office with most of Sunday answering questions about Rafael at the FBI office and in the evening playing card with Bridget, who despite a mild concussion, a fractured rib, cuts to her head and arms, and bruises too many to count, showed no interest of resting.

Wolfing down his lunch, Elliott opened the websites he used to monitor news and read the stories that had happened while he was out of the loop visiting Bridget today.
Metro Desk was in charge of monitoring the on-the-ground situation at City Hall Park, which by the third day of protest, resembled a camping ground that was attracting supporters and volunteers and even celebrities. From ordinary citizens to famous actors, to politicians, they came down to show their support, with some bringing along food, while others just wanting to talk to the protesters, and others still riding the wave of sympathy to pose for the camera. Two Madison Vanguard reporters, Laura and Peter, had been at the park since Saturday, scouring for anecdotes, voices and color for the main story, while occasionally interviewing city officials who dropped by. In the office, Adam compiled their reporting and sent them over to Anad. Elliott’s assignment was to interview civil society leaders, political analysts and city officials about the significance of a New York bankruptcy, while making sure their comments also covered the alternative outcome should the city approve the housing reforms deal. Anad and his deputy metro editor Ridley were on writing duty, preparing two scenarios, one of bankruptcy, the other on a housing reforms deal.

With Alberta setting a midnight deadline for protesters to decide, Chief Editor Hernandez had secured a twenty-minute delay from the printing operator, allowing enough time for the paper to report on the city’s decision in case of a midnight announcement. National desk was in charge of writing the front page story that would encapsulate today’s events with metro and business desk providing comments, analyses, anecdotes, voices and colors as needed.

Business desk dealt with the ensuing frenzy in the financial markets. Investors, fearing other cities would follow New York’s step and default on their debt, dumped municipal bonds and sought the safety of holding cash. The selling spilled over to the
stock market as New York’s bankruptcy sparked concern of a credit freeze that would deprive companies of working capital, threatening manufacturers that rely on credit when ordering supplies. The Dow Jones industrial average tumbled six percent, the biggest decline in seven months, while the NASDAQ composite and the S&P 500 both lost five percent.

It was therefore of little surprise when shortly before 4 p.m. Madison Vanguard’s Washington correspondent, Thomas, called the office to notify that President Bolton would hold a press conference later today to talk about New York. The news helped stem losses in the markets as investors now speculate the President would approve a federal bailout to avert a New York bankruptcy.

The possibility of a federal bailout also shifted the dynamics of the story. The question of whether New York would escape bankruptcy no longer rested solely on the willingness of protesters to accept the housing reforms deal. If President Bolton agreed to bail out New York, protesters could still reject the reforms without plunging the city into bankruptcy.

That however was of little assurance to Asian markets which plunged in their opening trade just as U.S. markets had closed. Investors took their cues from declines in the U.S., fearing a credit freeze would cut demand for Asian goods from U.S. manufacturers, while a plunge in municipal bonds would hurt international banks holding these securities.

By 10 p.m. reports started to flow in of Chinese and Japanese senior government officials urging Washington to put an end to the New York fiscal crisis, adding pressure on President Bolton to approve the bailout.
Still, it had been six hours since Thomas called to say that President Bolton would hold a press briefing. By now it had become clear that if Bolton were to address the nation, it would be close to midnight.

“Bolton doesn’t want to approve the bailout just yet,” said a political science professor and commentator at the University of Delaware whom Elliott was interviewing on the phone. “Federal bailout sets a bad precedence for other cities to demand similar treatment.”

“Bolton is hoping protesters will compromise and approve the housing reforms deal to avoid a bankruptcy, in which case there would be no need for a bailout,” another political analyst said by phone. “The problem is that protesters have adopted the same tactic. They are hoping Bolton will approve the bailout to avoid bankruptcy, in which case there would be no need for a housing reforms deal. This stalemate means we won’t see a decision until close to midnight.”

Elliott was in the middle of transcribing the last few comments when Adam threw a crumpled paper ball at him. Putting down the earphones, he saw his neighbor tipping his head to the glassed office of Chief Editor Hernandez. Bennett was inside talking to the paper’s top brass.

“Looks like we’ll be meeting our new owners soon,” Adam said.

“This late?” Elliott asked, checking his watch. It was 11:05 p.m. “Why don’t they just drop by tomorrow afternoon?”

“I heard they want to see the newsroom in action when the big housing reforms decision comes at midnight.”
An unusual request, but then again, the whole acquisition of Madison Vanguard was a peculiar affair. Elliott put on his earphones, and threw himself back to work, transcribing pages after pages of quotes. It must have been about twenty minutes later that he noticed something was off.

Looking up, he saw Anad standing across his desk, staring at him and to his right Adam too was staring at him. When he noticed Bennett and Hernandez to his left, Elliott hit the stop button on his recorder and put down his earphones. Why is everyone staring at me?

“Hello Elliott,” said a woman’s voice from behind him, a voice he recognized. He turned around in his chair and his jaw dropped. Standing before him was Lisa Cheung, his former girlfriend. Dressed in a blazer and a skirt, and with her shoulder length hair, she looked stunning that it almost hurt.

“It’s been a long time,” Lisa said.

Elliott rose from his seat, his mind still trying to grasp the sight of Lisa standing in front of him. How long had it been the last time he saw her? Three, four years?

“Well, it seems like you know each other already,” Bennett said. “Elliott here is our youngest reporter, but he’s been the driving force behind our housing reforms coverage.”

Elliott extended his hand but she hugged him instead, then stepped back and took a good look at him.

“You haven’t changed a bit,” she said, “you still dress like you used to at college, shirt and blazer.”

He looked at his cloth, more a reflex than to actual see what he wore.
“Lisa what are you doing here?” He asked.

Bennett stepped in. “Miss Cheung is the founder of the collaborative search project, Meridio One, and she is here on behalf of Mr. Davidson, the new owner of Madison Vanguard, who unfortunately can’t come tonight.”

Lisa turned to Hernandez. “Is there somewhere Elliott and I can talk in private for a moment?”

“Of course,” the chief editor said. “This way please.”

He let them to Lambert’s old office which hadn’t been touched since Bennett fired him four days ago. Hernandez must have figured that with Bennett no longer in charge, Madison Vanguard would rehire their old chief editor. Lisa took a seat by the couch and Elliott sat down in a lounge chair beside it. Hernandez left and closed the door behind him.

“So,” Lisa said, straightening her skirt. “Your story has caused quite a stir.”

“Tyler was selling out the city for his political gains, so yeah that’s a big deal,” Elliott said.

Whatever Rafael had told Tyler while he was his hostage, it had turned the comptroller into a compliant source who willingly committed political suicide by admitting to the deals he struck with the backers of the housing reforms program. Elliott however didn’t and couldn’t have predicted Mayor Alberta’s reaction to his front-page story. The story was merely one trigger in a chain of events that was now hurling New York toward the finale of its housing reforms saga.

“I’ve always thought you’re wasting your talents by becoming a reporter,” Lisa said, “but you’re actually good at it.”
She might be impressed but knowing that the new owners had been the ones who
demanded Madison Vanguard run the story, it felt as if Lisa had planned for this all
along. Knowing her, he wouldn’t be surprised if she had.

“Did you have anything to do with telling Lambert that if we didn’t run Tyler’s
story, Davidson wouldn’t buy the paper?”

“Well, Bennett introduced me to Lambert about two weeks ago and then on
Saturday he told me how Bennett scuttled the Tyler story. Obviously Lambert wanted me
to pressure Bennett, but Davidson and I decided that it was important for us to see the
paper be able to fend for itself, and that if it couldn’t then we were no longer interested in
acquiring Madison Vanguard. It turned out your friend Bridget managed to convince
Hernandez and save the day, so if anything you should thank her.”

Elliott sighed as he thought about Lisa had told him. Regardless of Bridget, it was
his paper that Lisa meddled with, and simply thinking of this made him remember who
she was. Lisa hadn’t changed. Five years ago she had convinced him to abandon college
and move with her to New York, only to dump him a year later and run off with his idea
for the collective search project. Working for Madison Vanguard was all he had now.
Lisa’s meddling with the paper’s affairs and her very presence in the newsroom felt like a
hand in his pocket reaching for his wallet.

“What do you want from us? Who is this Davidson guy and what do you have to
do with him?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” Lisa said, seemingly unruffled by his
tone. “Davidson is a venture capitalist, actually a friend of this hedge fund owner
Rentschler whom you mention in your story. Anyway, he and I, or rather Meridio One, are partnering up.”

“What kind of partnership?”

“Davidson has bought Madison Vanguard which we will fold into Meridio One under our newly created media division. In return he’ll receive a share in Meridio One,” she said. “I am still the majority owner of the company though.”

“But why would you be interested in owning a media?”

“Meridio One has millions of users sharing their Internet search history with us, anonymously of course, but that number is growing fast. As you know, they can access each other’s search history, which turns their browsing into this living, self-expanding database of information on the web that anyone can tap into.”

Elliott clearly understood what she meant, for the project had been his idea to begin with. Besides, he had been in contact with Petersson to help Meridio One become what it was today. But in all his conversation with Petersson, he hadn’t heard anything about expanding into the media business.

“And how does Madison Vanguard fit in all this?”

Lisa turned her head away, which she always did when she wasn’t sure how to answer, and with Madison Vanguard’s future at stake this could mean trouble. Elliott leaned forward as she spoke.

“The media is only as good as its source of information and that’s where Meridio One comes in. We want to embed the Internet with the media, vertical integration. From the source of information on the web, the tools to analyze the information, to the presentation of that information to the public, all in one product.”
She sounded as though she had memorized that sentence, however, Elliott recognized the appeal behind this idea. Meridio One was a powerful search engine that could dug out information from the deep web, while its analytics could trace web usage based on users’ profiles that covered personal information from age, gender, location, to profession, and hobbies. Combining this database with the ability to influence public discourse through the media, and it wasn’t hard to imagine an Orwellian nightmare in the making.

“Tell me Lisa, are you sure you want this?”

“The future of media isn’t print, Elliott. It’s with companies like us that deal with information.”

“Don’t give me one of Davidson’s spiel, do you actually believe in this?”

Lisa looked at him and he detected her head tilting for a split second, a no? And in that instance he realized that Meridio One too might be in trouble.

A knock at the glass door broke the silence, and Hernandez poked his head in.

“Sorry to interrupt. President Bolton and the protesters are about to announce their decision,” he said.

Elliott checked his watch. It’s already 11:45 p.m.

“Elliott we’ll have to talk about this,” Lisa said, standing up. “But now let’s see how this housing reforms story ends.”

As Lisa walked over to Hernandez’s office next door, Elliott went to his desk to see if Anad needed his help but the editor shook his head.

“We’re good Elliott,” Anad said. “National desk will handle it from here.”
The editor rose from his seat and together they went to Hernandez’s office. Bennett, Lisa, and Business Editor Philip were standing in front of a large TV screen which showed a live coverage from two locations. On the right side of the screen, the TV news channel split its screen to show the empty podium at the White House press briefing room, and on the left the empty podium at City Hall Park surrounded by the crowd of protesters.

Secretary of Treasury Oliver will announce New York’s bailout decision the TV commentator said. Speaking on behalf of the housing protesters would be housing activist Carla Bronson who’s a long-time resident of a public housing in Brooklyn, she said. Somewhere behind the cameras, correspondent Thomas and metro desk reporters Laura and Peter were ready with their questions.

The radio on Hernandez’s desk played a recorded phone interview with Bronson and the chief editor turned up the volume.

“So what’s going to happen next?” the interviewer asked and Elliott recognized Nancy’s voice.

“We’re waiting for President Bolton to make a move,” Bronson told Nancy over the phone. “If he decides to bail out the city then there’s no need for us to choose between housing reforms and bankruptcy.”

“But what if he doesn’t make a decision by the midnight deadline?” Nancy asked.

“I don’t want to speculate,” Bronson said. “But let me tell you this. If he lets New York go bankrupt, which I was told will impact the rest of the country, then it will be his fault. So I am confident that Bolton will make the right decision before the midnight deadline.”
“Bolton has repeatedly said he will not bail out New York,” Nancy said.

“That was before we took to the streets,” Bronson replied.

Nancy’s interview with Bronson must have been from a few hours ago. Elliott looked at the clock on the wall. It was 11:50 p.m. and President Bolton hadn’t changed his mind yet about saving New York from bankruptcy.

“Is it just me, or does anyone also think that Secretary Oliver and Bronson are waiting for each other to make the announcement first?” Lisa asked.

“That’s exactly what’s happening now,” Hernandez said. “You see, the moment Mayor Alberta had announced she was willing to lead New York into bankruptcy, Washington had no choice but to spring into action.”

“Why?” Lisa asked.

“The federal government can’t afford to let New York go bankrupt,” Philip said. “It’ll hurt confidence in the market and if investors are afraid, they won’t buy municipal bonds anymore or lend money for that matter. We’re talking about a credit freeze that can seriously damage the economy. So there’s more at stake than New York, but Bolton was previously confident that the city will adopt the housing reforms. Now with the weekend riots and Alberta practically handing the decision to protesters, he’s forced to intervene.”

“Quite a move by Alberta,” Lisa said. “So the question is, who’ll throw the towel first, Bolton or the protesters.”

The two podiums at the White House and City Hall Park were still empty.

“This is class war,” Bennett chimed in, causing everyone to look at him. Elliott didn’t expect the phrase “class war” to come out from the tycoon’s mouth. “Clearly you have people in Washington telling President Bolton not to bail out New York because
their ideology dictates them to demand the city swallow the bitter pill of housing reforms. This is why he hasn’t made a decision yet. On the other hand, you have people in New York who don’t want to end up homeless.”

It’s 11:53 p.m. and on the podium at City Hall Park, Mayor Alberta, a number of city councilors and what looked like Bronson walked up the stage and formed a semi-circle behind the podium. No sign of Secretary Oliver yet.

“Both sides however don’t want bankruptcy,” Bennett continued. “It’s bad for business and it’s bad for citizens. So which side fears bankruptcy most? Whoever throws the towel first, it will say a lot about the state of this country.”

At 11:54 p.m. Secretary Oliver stepped behind the podium, adjusting the microphone. A few seconds later Bronson stepped out of the group and walked up to the podium.

“Decision time,” Anad murmured as the clock on the wall struck 11:55 p.m.
Bibliography


