

## **CHAPTER 1**

"Whole thing reminds me of Ted Kaczynski."

"Who?"

"Ted Kaczynski. The Unabomber."

"White guy? From a long time ago?"

"Yeah."

"Wrote that manifesto thing?"

"Yeah. Only this guy's worse. Nobody knows his name. Not his real name, anyway. At the end of the document, he just signs it 'the Author.'"

"Afraid to sign his real name, I guess."

"Or, could be, he wants to control your concentration. Keep the emphasis on the document, not on who wrote it. Right, Shade?"

Two a.m. February 6. Washington, D.C. 16<sup>th</sup> Street. Downtown, off Scott Circle. Gleason and Singh. Two FBI agents, in the back of a white Volkswagen camper. Closer than pickles in a jar. The Bureau'd replaced the camper's seat, mattress, closet, and dinette table with wires, computers, and surveillance equipment. And Shade? He had plenty of legroom up front in the driver's seat. Even when they addressed him by his real name, Shade

didn't automatically acknowledge them. The Shade. Unresponsive up there in the dark. But his reputation told them he wasn't asleep.

"Shade doesn't care. And how come your little white buddies over at Enterprise Architecture..."

"You're a racist," Gleason said. "Did I ever tell you that?"

"My apologies. Let me rephrase. Your little Internet geek buddies over at E.A. How come they can't track this guy down?"

"Because he's good. When the Bureau can't find you for seven years, it's because you're good."

"That's not it."

"You got a better theory?"

"I'll tell you why they can't find this guy. Because he's dead."

"Or, could be, he's patient. He said there'd be more chapters. The public's been waiting. Maybe he's getting ready to spring the sequel."

"Tempest in a white tea pot. Who cares?"

"Are you kidding? This is bigger than politics. It'll topple everything. Our whole system of government could go down the tubes."

"Not the United States. Only little governments go down the tubes."

"Little governments like ancient Egypt, the Roman Empire, the Soviet Union..."

"Knock it off and get ready," Shade announced from the front seat.

"Here he comes."

\* \* \*

Inside the Bradlee building. First floor. Main computer room. Capital Data Devices, Inc. Thomas Bridger turned away from the window. "Here he comes."

"Who?" Lisa asked. "One of your little imaginary friends?"

Bridger's smile tightened.

Eventually, Lisa gazed up at him through her hair. Jaw-length. Blond. With six inches of brown root. Her pickpocket eyes crouching somewhere within the strands, all the while keeping her head lowered, as if she were trying to scrutinize her own eyebrows. "O.K. O.K. I'm sorry. Who is it, really? The pizza guy?"

"Yeah."

She resumed working on the printer. Set the multimeter's scale to fifteen. Crossed the probes. Watched the meter's finger twitch with calibration. "Well," she said, "I'm taking my fair share of the pizza home. Tyler's probably peed all over the floor by now. You know, when I first saw him at the animal shelter, I thought he was a Scottie. The owner never clipped his ears. I didn't know miniature schnauzers even came in solid

black. Anyway, the price was right. But they forgot to mention that he needs to pee twice a day." Her lips puckered sideways. "You do have money for the pizza, right?"

Bridger indicated the window. "I'm telling you..."

Her stare broadcast its own history.

Bridger sat down in front of his computer. Only five lines of text were on the screen. Portions of a cryptography algorithm that didn't work. Not yet, anyway. He deleted the code and typed the rest of what he wanted to say on the blank screen.

*IBF. Out there. ETIHW REPMAC.*

Lisa approached. Leaned over his shoulder. "What's that? Part of the algorithm?"

Bridger's index finger underlined the capitalized letters.

Right to left.

Giving Lisa only a few seconds to comprehend, Bridger backspaced over the entire message and rebooted.

"Come on, Bridger," she laughed. "Why would they be out there this time of night?"

"Because. They know what we're working on. Especially now. It's an election year." He got up and drifted toward the window. Parted the beige curtains. Wiped a finger's worth of condensation off the cold glass. "That's why they..."

"They who?"

"The government."

"You don't have any right to go on and on about the government. You don't even vote. Pretty funny for a guy living in DC. Besides, your father..."

"Why should I vote?" Bridger asked. "Nobody believes an election's gonna solve their problems anymore. When Barkley got elected president, only fifteen percent of the registered voters even bothered. And they're the ones who don't get it. A candidate just tells people what they want to hear until he gets into office. Then, he either follows his own agenda, compromises, or turns into a hedonist. Pretty soon, the media uncovers the particulars. The masses pretend to be shocked for four years, vote him out of office, and replace him with somebody new. Who proceeds to do exactly the same thing. It's a cycle. Know why it continues? Because people want to believe they have a voice. What the cycle really does, though, is protect the hidden elite."

"Hidden elite?" she asked.

"The unelected. The secret club of fifty individuals who make all the really important decisions in this country."

"Jesus," she said. "Where's that pizza guy?"

"You still don't believe me?"

"I believe I'm hungry. And I believe you should save the rest of your I-know-what's-wrong-with-the-world speech until you run for office."

"Never gonna happen."

"Has to happen."

"Says who?"

"Says your DNA, Bridger."

His eyes ricocheted elsewhere.

"O.K., I'm sorry," she looked up through her hair. "But I'm really getting tired of this spy-game shit. Every time I try to be nice, I end up going home late. Very late. And that means wiping up Tyler piss with a paper towel and spraying lilac air freshener above the scene of the crime. So prove it. Once and for all. Put your money, if you really have any, where your mouth is."

"You don't need any money," Bridger said. "You father's still sending you enough to buy your Louie Ramón jeans and your Donaldson Lodge jackets. Evidently. You sure don't make that kind of money around here."

"I'm not after the money. My goal is to get you to shut up. And if we're gonna bring fathers into it..."

Bridger held up his hands. "O.K. I surrender."

"Good. Convince me. Once and for all. Prove the bogeyman's out there, or get back to work on that algorithm."

Bridger tapped his ear. Then, he pointed at the cathedral ceiling twenty feet above them. Specifically, at a discolored stain about the size of a thumbtack.

Lack of understanding forced Lisa to shrug.

He walked to the window again. Parted the curtains. Tapped the frozen pane with a fingernail. "You know, I think I will. I'm tired of this, too. Winner pays for the pizza?"

Lisa came over. Bent past him to look out the window. "You don't have any money, do you?"

"Winner pays?"

"You're on."

Bridger whispered in her ear, "All right, then. Go along with everything I say."

\* \* \*

One block down from the FBI camper, parked on the street among the Solar Mercedes and the Audi Ventures and the MidMillenium Chevys, was a class 'C' Recreational Vehicle. Originally white. Severely rusted. Horizontal blue stripe. Virginia tags.

"Here he comes," Tray said, removing his wireless headphones. He swiveled the driver's seat around. "You guys ready?"

Tus yawned. "You can't be serious."

"Yeah," Deadeye said. "It's cold out there. Can't we just turn the engine on, stay in here, and get a little heat?"

"Why are you two still sitting down? I've had Bridger under surveillance for a week. I didn't break in there and put a C7 Thumbtack mike on the ceiling of his office for nothing. Besides. Know what I just heard? Something that's gonna make this whole thing pay off. Big."

"What thing?"

"Yeah. I don't remember why we..."

"Just do what I...", Tray said.

"What'd you tell us to do, again?"

"Yeah. I don't remember why we..."

Tray stared hard enough to stop the old man mid-sentence. "I haven't told you yet."

Tus middle-fingered his glasses up the bridge of his nose. He was seventy-two years old. Tall, but his posture was rubbery, as if his bones had been soaked in vinegar. The white frames of his glasses were wider than his face, but matched his goatee. "O.K., O.K.," he flapped his legs. "But first, I got to go to the bathroom."

"My third wife used to say that before we went anywhere," Deadeye said, rubbing his own right leg. He was seventy-eight. A slight hunch in his back kept his shoulders a little too close to the sides of his face. When he cocked his head, his right eye resembled a stained golf ball, and his left eye

looked like a clam, protecting a tiny pearl. The frames of his glasses reminded Tray of maple syrup. Unfashionable. Donated by Prevent Blindness America. Never slid down his nose. But the glass was so thick that the magnified distortion always made Tray think of an Internet cartoon series called *Marijuana Iguana*. "Know what else she used to say?"

"Shut up!" Tray yelled.

"Well, yeah, she said that, too, but..."

Anger shimmied Tray out of the driver's seat, up a stairstep, and into the RV's tiny kitchen area. He turned off the X-Quad, the Multiplexer, and the Digital Surveillance System, then grabbed the pistol lying on the foldaway dining table. Poked the butt at Deadeye.

Deadeye held the pistol up to the glow of the streetlight coming through the blinds. "Smith & Wesson. 910 semi-automatic."

"That," Tray said, "you remember, huh?"

"Yeah. Long time ago, I used to have one exactly like this, Tray. Where'd you get it?"

"Out of your duffle bag, stupid."

A finger poked Tray's back. "Tray, I really got to go to the..."

"Don't tell me about having to go to the bathroom again, Tus, or I'll wrap a rubber band around that thing so tight you'll think it's a ripe strawberry."

Tus batted his eyes, then flapped his legs even faster.

Tray opened the kitchen cabinet and removed the Super-Shorty 12-gauge shotgun. Held it by the pistol grip. Verified two in the magazine, one in the chamber. Handed it to Tus, then bent past him to look out the RV's side window. Ice had patterned the corners of the glass. "All right. Pay attention. The guy that just pulled up..."

Deadeye peeked through the blinds. "Says Midnight Pizza."

Tus brought his three-day-old coffee-breath to the window, too.

Tray fanned away the odor. "And from what I just heard, this guy's delivering more than pizza."

"Bread sticks?" Deadeye licked his lips.

Tus raised an eyebrow. "Jalapeno Dippers?"

Tray vibrated with anger. A groan turned him toward Deadeye. "How many times do I have to tell you guys to put your coats on and get ready to go?"

"My lumbar turns into a rusty cowboy spur when the weather gets cold," Tus said.

"Yeah," Deadeye massaged his own leg and grimaced, "and I sure can't go."

"Why not?"

"Because. My leg's asleep."

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As if she were reading from a melodramatic script, Lisa addressed the stain on the cathedral ceiling. "Is that really him? Is that really 'the Author?'"

Bridger aimed his voice upward, too. "Yeah. And thank God the FBI doesn't know he's here."

"So you know who 'the Author' is? You've known all along?"

"Absolutely."

The doorbell rang.

Again.

"Hurry up. Get the door," Bridger said. "Geniuses don't like to be kept waiting."

"No wonder they never caught him," Lisa said, poking her arms into the sleeves of her Donaldson Lodge. "A pizza delivery boy."

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Inside the FBI camper, Shade fingered the tiny adjustment cylinder on his NightVisions. "Make sure you got backups running. Audio. Video. Inside the building and out."

"Red light says we're recording, Shade."

"Make sure nothing's fogged up. Make sure the lens isn't covered with rain."

"Check."

"Now, look in the bottom drawer. Right beside the audio cables. Get out the ski masks and the white vests."

"White vests? What for?"

Shade ignored the question. "Then, take out your pistols. Both of you. Click off the safety and get ready to go."

"Go where?" Singh asked.

"Stop asking questions," Gleason whispered.

Shade was tracking something beyond the clouded windshield. "What the...?"

"What is it, Shade?" Singh asked.

Shade yelled into his mike. "Central? What the hell?" He smeared condensation off the windshield. Cursed. Then, wriggled over to the passenger seat. Rolled the window down three inches. Fingered his NightVisions to F1.2 infrared. 50 yards. "They're half a block behind the pizza guy," he said into the mike. "Three other people. Coming toward the

Bradlee. One white male, mid-twenties. Two additional white males.

Seventies. I don't know, maybe eighties."

"Did you say eighties, Shade?"

"Shut up," Gleason whispered to Singh. "He's not talking to us."

"That's exactly what I said, Central," Shade continued. "I need a definite. Are they ours, or not?"