

**KNIGHTS** OF THE  
**SQUARE TABLE** 

*Only those who attempt the absurd  
can achieve the impossible.*  
—Albert Einstein

When the plane ran into trouble, it was over the Atlantic Ocean just south of Iceland.

The Knights of the Square Table, the ninth-grade San Francisco all-star chess team, were sitting toward the middle of the plane. The three girls, Natalie, Cindy, and Alexis, sat together. Natalie was in the middle, Cindy was by the window, and Alexis was on the aisle. The guys—George, Liam, and Spider—were in the row ahead. The team was heading home after spending eight days in Europe for the International Youth Chess Championship.

At the first lurch, when the plane tipped sideways, Natalie gripped the armrest so hard her fingers hurt. As if that would help one bit in an actual plane crash. A small child toward the front shrieked, “We’re *frashing!* We’re *frashing!*”

“Oh, my *God!*” someone shouted.

“Everyone needs to keep calm,” Cindy said in a small, squeaky voice.

“Yeah, *right!*” Spider said. Spider’s real name was Michael, but nobody except his parents called him that. “Michael is a *beautiful* name,” his mother said once. “I will *not* call him Spider.”

The plane heaved and tipped farther. Alexis fell onto Natalie, and Natalie fell onto Cindy. A woman screamed—a long, piercing, blood-chilling scream. Next came general pandemonium: more gasping and screaming, the thunk of objects falling and rolling.

One of the flight attendants shouted something from the back of the plane, but there was so much noise Natalie could catch only a few words, not enough to know what she was saying.

All the oxygen masks dropped.

“Oh, Lord,” Alexis said, “we’re losing altitude!”

It took Natalie a moment to realize that *losing altitude* was the same as *falling*. Never in her life had she been so terrified. She was so frightened she was numb. Completely petrified. It took great effort to reach for her mask. She felt she was putting on her mask in slow motion.

Again the flight attendant shouted something, but Natalie couldn’t hear what.

“What’s she saying?” someone demanded.

“She’s giving instructions,” Cindy said. “Make sure your seat belts are tight. Get into emergency position. First, put on your own mask, then help anyone who needs help.”

That was when Natalie realized Cindy had read—and memorized—the emergency instructions. Cindy was not only supersmart but also the type to spend part of the flight reading the emergency brochure, including the parts in small print, the stuff most people don’t bother with. She also had a photographic memory, which, as you can imagine,

helps when the plane tips to the side, and objects go flying, and a child starts screaming, and your heart is suddenly racing so fast you think it's going to jump right out of your chest.

The problem was that Cindy was shy by nature, and she spoke so quietly nobody except those close to her could hear her.

"Louder!" Natalie urged her.

"Stow everything that can move, including eyeglasses," Cindy said, raising her voice. "Bend forward until your head touches your legs or the seat in front of you. Put your feet flat on the floor. Lock your hands over your heads. Pull in your elbows."

"We all *better* bend over," said Spider. "Bend over far enough to kiss your butt good-bye!"

Leave it to Spider to make a joke. Who else could even *think* of making a joke at a moment like this?

"Put on your mask!" George said. "Lean forward!" George was the team captain.

Natalie checked her seat belt even though she knew it was secure because of how hard it pinched against her waist. Without the seat belt she would have rolled out of her seat. She leaned forward so far that her chest rested on her legs. She locked her hands over her head and pulled in her elbows, just as Cindy said. Alexis, next to her, did the same.

"Cindy!" Alexis said. "You need to say all of that even louder! People didn't hear."

Cindy repeated the instructions, but she had trouble shouting, so Alexis repeated what she'd said in a booming voice. Alexis had no trouble yelling

when necessary. Soon others in the plane were repeating the instructions.

It was clear right away why this was the best position. The plane lurched and rocked, but instead of being thrown around, anyone in this position remained steady. Thank God Cindy read that card, Natalie thought. And thank God she had an amazing memory.

The plane lurched again.

Nobody was screaming now, probably because everyone had their masks on. Some were no doubt saying their final prayers. Others were probably kissing their butts good-bye. Occasionally Natalie heard someone repeating Cindy's instructions.

You know that horrible feeling you get when an elevator goes down too fast? That's what it felt like just then, except they weren't in an elevator. They were in an airplane over the Atlantic.

Suddenly Natalie had the strangest feeling that the plane was moving faster. She heard a loud swishing sound outside. It was almost as if they were coasting down a runway. But how could they be? And why hadn't she felt the bumping of wheels on the ground?

From outside came a whining and roaring. Natalie didn't dare lift her head, but she turned to one side far enough to see out the window. Mostly she saw sky, and the tips of snowy peaks. She braced for a crash.

Then the plane gave such a powerful jerk that everyone was thrown forward. Natalie's head hit the

seat in front of her, but because she was only inches away, she wasn't hurt, just dazed. After the mighty jerk, the plane came to a stop.

Tentatively Natalie lifted her head. All around, others were doing the same. Out the window were rolling hills of snow with an occasional rocky peak and a piercingly blue sky. The sky was so bright and clear it seemed to be made of glass. In the distance the hills were surreal shades of blue and purple and white. Rock formations looked like heaps of iron ore, glittering as if sprinkled lightly with gold.

As if by magic, the emergency door swung open.

"We *landed?*" Alexis asked, removing her mask.

This must have been how Dorothy felt when her house landed in Oz. Well, except for the blast of freezing air that came in through the door.

The air from outside brought in a distinctive crispness that reminded Natalie of pine needles, even though there were no trees in sight. She was still trembling from fright. Now she shivered from the cold. Cindy, sitting next to her, hugged her arms.

All around was stunned silence.

Alexis reached for her cell phone and turned it on. Cindy and Natalie didn't have cell phones. "No service," Alexis said. Then: "No surprise, I guess."

"How the heck did we just make a landing?" George asked, his voice shaky. "Weren't we in the middle of the friggin' Atlantic Ocean?"

People were standing up, pulling on jackets, and wrapping themselves in those paper-thin blankets the flight attendants had passed around. But there was

no stampede to exit the plane, as you might expect. Perhaps because outside was nothing but snow and rock formations, and because of the piercing cold coming in from the open doors.

The cockpit door opened and the pilot came out. It was clear, at a glance, that he'd just come through an emergency. His forehead was moist with perspiration, and his face was flushed.

"Is everyone all right?" he shouted. "Anyone hurt?"

There was silence. The pilot looked around.

"Janine took a fall," said a man from the back. Natalie didn't turn to look. She assumed the speaker was the male flight attendant.

"I'm all right!" a woman called out. "A little bruised. I think I hurt my knee. But I'm fine!"

"The copilot took a pretty good knock on the head," the pilot said. "Are there any doctors?"

Everyone waited. Nobody said a word.

A flight attendant, one of the women, went down the aisle toward the front. She spoke quietly to the pilot, then went into the cockpit.

"Let's get the door closed," the pilot said, "to keep heat inside." People nearby obediently rose to close the doors. The doors were so heavy several people were needed to close them.

"That's not what we're supposed to do," Cindy said quietly. "We're supposed to exit in an orderly manner because of the possibility of toxic fumes."

The pilot didn't hear her, so George said, more loudly, "Excuse me, sir. We're supposed to exit in an



orderly manner because of the possibility of toxic fumes.”

The pilot gave George a very respectful look and said, “Ordinarily that’s true, son. But my sensors indicate that there are no fumes or toxins in the plane, and because of where we are—in the subarctic in March—keeping warm is a priority.”

The pilot raised his voice to address everyone, and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, we just made what is known as a forced landing. Something went wrong with our avionics system, the system that controls communication, navigation, and power in the cabin. That’s why we kept tipping. It’s also why I couldn’t speak on the intercom. We knew we were south of Iceland, so we flew north, searching for a place to land. We saw this island with a perfect runway of snow, so we seized the opportunity to make a safe landing here instead of risking a ditching in water.”

Natalie had never heard the word *avionics* before. Having recovered from the terror of expecting a crash, she now had to adjust to the idea that they were on a snow-covered island somewhere near Iceland, which, until now, had never meant anything more to her than a cold island way up on the edge of the map.

“Are we going to be able to take off again?” asked someone toward the back.

“I am afraid not,” the pilot said. “We will have to wait for a rescue.”

“How long will that be?” asked someone else.

“That depends on whether the control tower

knows where we are. If they know where we are, help should be here within a few hours.”

“What if they *don't* know where we are?” asked the mother of two small children, her voice shrill. “How will they find us?”

“They’ll start searching. Our black box sends signals to help with a rescue.”

“But how long is it going to *take*?” the mother asked.

“I can only guess. We’re a few hundred miles off course. If we are where I think we are, the nearest airport is in Iceland. We may be closer to Greenland. If there’s no rescue in three hours, we’ll have to come up with an emergency plan.”

“If that war starts in Asia,” one of the passengers said, “we may be here forever.”

About the time they boarded the plane in Frankfurt, the headlines and news announcements were all about what news networks were calling the Asian missile crisis.

The pilot suddenly looked very tired. He seemed to crumple a bit inside his uniform. He had a broad, kind, dimpled face and seemed like the kind of person who ordinarily smiled often. His hair was white and thin. His eyebrows were gray. If anything, it seemed to Natalie, he might be *too* nice—if he were a teacher, he’d be the kind who couldn’t control his classroom.

“I just got homesick,” Cindy whispered.

Natalie wasn’t homesick. She was scared. She squeezed Cindy’s hand for comfort and looked out

the window. The sight was breathtakingly beautiful: the sun glittering on the ice, the clear blue sky, the air so clean and crisp you had the feeling you could see for miles and miles. It was like a fairy wonderland.

“We can try to look on the bright side,” Natalie said. “We’re alive.”

“When being alive is the only thing you can think of on the bright side,” Alexis said, “you have to admit the situation is pretty gloomy.”

The San Francisco all-star chess team first came together the summer before, the best players entering ninth grade from all over the city. They already knew a lot about each other from seeing each other at tournaments, playing against each other, and reading about each other on local news blogs.

The first time they met as a team was in the Lowell High School cafeteria. The first order of business was to select a captain. That was easy. George was the only one who *wanted* to be captain. “I don’t want to be the captain,” Alexis had said. “I want to be the person who tells the captain what to do.” It wasn’t clear whether she was joking. She had a very take-charge attitude and often stood with her arms akimbo.

Next, they needed to decide on a name. That wasn’t as easy. Liam, a longtime fan of King Arthur, suggested the Knights of the Square Table.

“I like it,” George said. “Cute, but not too cute.”

“But knights are not the most important pieces,” Alexis said.

“What do you want to call us?” George asked. “*Kings* of the Square Table?”

“I am not a king,” Alexis said. “I am a *queen*.” She folded her arms across her chest.

“Don’t get any ideas,” George warned her.

Spider chuckled. “I can see the headlines now: ‘The *queens* of the square table *rule* the tournament.’”

“No way,” George said. He turned to Liam. “Come on, help me out here, bro.”

“But knights are *not* the most important pieces,” Alexis said. “Why should we name ourselves after lesser pieces? The queen is the most powerful. The game is all about the king.”

“That might be true,” Natalie said, “but the knight is the most *interesting*, and the most unpredictable, and the quirkiest.”

“That makes the name perfect,” Spider said, slapping the table, “cause you gotta admit we’re all a little weird.”

“Speak for yourself, dude,” Liam said, although with his love of the saxophone and poetry, Liam was one of the quirkiest in the bunch.

“All right,” Alexis said. “But why a *square* table? I get that the chess board is square, but the point of the round table in the King Arthur story was that a round table meant nobody could sit at the head. Everyone was equal. Nobody was the leader.”

“It’s *obvious* why our name has to be *square*,” Spider said. “Square is the word my grandmother uses for nerdy.”

“Speak for yourself, dude,” Liam said again.

“Maybe we should vote yes or no on the name,” Natalie said.

Everyone wrote their vote on a piece of paper and put their paper in a pile. When the votes were opened, all six of them voted yes for Knights of the Square Table.

George looked at Alexis. “You liked the idea after all,” he said.

“I never said I didn’t,” she said.

George looked bewildered. Spider laughed.

The meeting was over, but nobody got up. Alexis turned to George and said, “You know, you could improve your game if you stopped being so afraid to move a knight to the edge of the board.”

“A knight on the rim is dim,” George told her. “Everyone knows that.”

“That’s sometimes true,” Alexis said, “but if you don’t *leave* the knight there, if you’re putting him there to position him for a move to the center, it can be a strong move.”

“I don’t think so, Alexis,” George said. “Sometimes you can’t avoid moving a knight to the rim, but it’s never a *strong* move.”

Spider said, “I think it’s time for this argument to go *knight-knight*.” Then he laughed loudly and slapped his knee.

\* \* \*

Spider got his nickname because he liked to climb. He climbed rocks, mountains, anything at all. He was strong with a wiry build and long spindly legs and arms that did, indeed, make you think of a spider. When a reporter from the *San Francisco Chronicle*

asked them each to send a picture, they all sent their class pictures—except Spider, who sent a photo of himself climbing a sheer rock wall.

Spider also liked taking things apart and putting them back together. He'd started doing this as a toddler when—if not watched carefully—he would take apart small household appliances to see how they worked.

Spider was also restless by nature and easily bored. That was why, after about an hour sitting in the plane, he felt he was about ready to climb up one of the walls.

George and Liam were content to play a game of chess. The girls were reading. Spider really wanted to go out, but the pilot wanted the door kept closed until it warmed up a bit outside. They briefly opened the door to throw out a bunch of brightly colored garments the pilot had collected from passengers to make it easier for a rescue plane to see them, but otherwise, here they were, cooped up inside.

Spider stood up and walked over to the emergency exit. He wondered how the door had opened by itself when they landed even though nothing else in the plane was working right.

“Leave that door closed, young man,” said one of the passengers, a man in a business suit.

“I will,” Spider said.

Spider didn't open the door, but he tugged, pushed, and lifted the handle, and inspected the hinges. “I get it!” he said. “Natalie, come here. I want to show you.”

Natalie was his favorite teammate. She was the most easygoing and agreeable. In fact, she was so sweet and gentle, with no rough edges at all, that she didn't even seem like the type to be on a chess team. It was only after you got to know her that you realized how smart she was.

Spider also thought she was pretty. He liked how her curly hair fell down her back. Sometimes he wanted to touch her curls. She was so tiny, and her dark eyes were so thickly lashed, that when she looked up at him he sort of melted.

Natalie stood up and walked over to the door.

"Didn't you wonder how those doors opened by themselves?" he asked her. "Well, I get it now. The doors open in so the air pressure keeps them closed tight when the plane is in the air. But when it lands, there is no more pressure. The lock is electric, see?" He pointed to a box with cables over the door. "So if there is an emergency landing and no electricity, the moment the plane lands, presto, the doors open by themselves."

"Cool," she said.

"So the door can't open when the plane is flying," Spider said. "If a passenger is confused, or drunk, or just plain stupid and thinks the emergency door is the bathroom door, he can't possibly get it open. But after an emergency landing you don't even have to say *open sesame* and the door opens."

"Very cool," she said.

He looked at her, and she smiled.

Spider thought she was smiling because he was so



clever. What she was thinking was this was exactly why she loved being on the chess team. Loved it, loved it, loved it. Everyone on the team was smart, way smarter than her, and this made her feel at ease. She agreed with Spider when he said being on the chess team was liberating. You couldn't be *both* cool *and* on the chess team, so there was no point worrying about your image.

Until sixth grade, when Natalie was able to attend San Francisco's premier charter school on the other side of town, kids on her block used to threaten to beat her up unless she let them copy her homework. After a while, they didn't need to threaten. She avoided trouble by passing around her homework. When the cheating was discovered, the others blamed Natalie. She was the only one who got into trouble.

The chess team was the first time she felt valued for her intelligence. In fact, it was the first time she truly felt valued. She was one of seven children, so she often felt overlooked at home.

Someone in the back—a man with a large booming voice—said, "It's looking like nobody's coming. Now what are we going to do?"

A woman said, "I doubt we have enough food on this plane to last more than a day or two."

"I think we should divide the food on the plane right away," someone else said. The speaker was a woman in very high heels.

"I don't," said someone else. "I think the pilot should ration it."

“The children should get more,” said the mother of the two little girls.

Natalie whispered to Spider, “Something tells me this situation could get ugly.”

Cindy had never been away from home this long. What she missed most was her bedroom. Sometimes she just needed to be alone. She had her own bedroom—a rare luxury in her part of town, a corner of the outer Sunset district where most houses had only two bedrooms—so she had lots of room for her collections. Cindy collected everything: photographs, books, old maps, knickknacks.

She had large eyes that gave her the appearance of an owl. She usually wore her hair in a ponytail, which seemed to make her eyes look even bigger. She was watchful and quiet by nature.

She looked around the plane. The passengers who weren't arguing about how to distribute the food were agitated and nervous. Some were pressing their cheeks to the window to peer up at the sky. Others milled about, getting up to walk down the aisle, forming lines at the bathrooms.

The pilot came from the cockpit and asked if there were any engineers or electricians—or any scientists at all—in the plane. He'd been trying to fix the avionics system, but was stumped. One man with a German accent stood up and said, "I'm a chemical engineer. I can have a look at your system, but I

doubt I can help.”

A woman said, “I do desktop computer support. I know a little about electronics.”

“Let’s see what we can do,” the pilot said.

Once the three of them went into the cockpit, Cindy listened to the adults arguing about what to do about the remaining food, and sighed deeply. The pilot said the temperature outside was now in the thirties, but the plane was getting colder. People were tense and getting more and more irritable.

She knew they needed to do something about the food situation, but she didn’t know what. She’d seen something like a stream over to the left while they were landing.

“I wonder if there are fish in the stream over there,” she said to Natalie.

“If there are,” Natalie said, “I’ll bet Spider would know how to get them. Let me see your tablet.”

Cindy handed Natalie her electronic tablet. Natalie turned it on. In Cindy’s electronic library was an encyclopedia. It wasn’t as complete as George’s, but it had lots of articles about almost everything. Natalie searched until she found what she was looking for: an article about fishing techniques. The article described fishing with nets—which gave Natalie an idea.

She stood up and slid around Alexis to the aisle.

“Hey, everyone,” Natalie said to her teammates. “Read this. I wonder if our laundry bags will work for fishing nets. Cindy thinks there’s some water over there.” She pointed to the west. “A stream or

something.”

Natalie handed her tablet to George, who was sitting in the middle. Alexis stood up and read over the back of the seat.

“Read it fast,” Cindy told them. “I don’t have much power left.”

Natalie and Cindy sat back in their seats. Natalie smiled at Cindy and whispered, “Just wait.”

Soon George said, “Using our laundry bags is a great idea! We can use the drawstrings for the rope.”

“But do you think we can get the nets open wide enough?” Alexis asked. “The ones they talk about in the article open like a parachute.”

“I think so,” Spider said. “C’mon! If there are fish, we’ll get them. Let’s get the right clothes on and go!”

Cindy shot Natalie an admiring look. “Good work,” she whispered.

Alexis, Liam, George, and Spider pulled their luggage from the overhead bin, and put on boots, extra socks, gloves, and scarves.

“Natalie, are you coming?” Spider asked.

“I think I’ll stay, if nobody minds.” She was embarrassed to admit it, but she didn’t want to go out in the cold.

“I’ll stay, too,” Cindy said.

“Are you *sure*?” Alexis asked.

“I’m sure,” Cindy said. “I don’t think the pilot will like it if we all go.”

George agreed with that. “Someone needs to stay to keep an eye on what’s happening here.”

Alexis, Liam, Spider, and George were bundled up when Spider said, “Problem number one. Our laundry bags are in our suitcases in the cargo hold.”

“Solution to problem number one,” Alexis said, “is the extra laundry bag I have in here.” She pulled one out of her carry-on.

Cindy handed Alexis a belt that tied and said, “You can use this.”

Alexis, Spider, Liam, and George walked down the aisle to the door.

“Do you think they can do it?” Cindy whispered to Natalie.

“I think so,” Natalie whispered back. “Spider’s strong. Alexis, too. They’re all smart. They’ll be fine for a little while, as long as one of them doesn’t fall in. George is not the most coordinated guy on the planet.”

All went well until Spider and Alexis tried to unlatch the door.

“Where are those kids going!” a woman demanded.

“Don’t open the door,” warned one of the men in a business suit. “You heard what the pilot said.”

“We’re going out, sir,” George said firmly. “We know what we’re doing.”

George spoke so confidently that anyone listening would have thought that a few ninth graders carrying a mesh laundry bag and exiting a plane stuck in the snow on an island in the subarctic was the most natural thing in the world.

“You heard the pilot,” one of the men told him.

George smiled and said, “Really. We know what we’re doing. It’s okay.”

George spoke with a compelling authority. He was accustomed to telling adults what to do. His Mandarin-speaking parents didn’t know much English, so from the time he entered an English-speaking preschool, George had been the family translator. He grew up giving his parents instructions.

He’d started running for class office in fifth grade. His family assumed one day he’d be president of the United States, and they joked about the day they’d all be living under the George Cheung administration. Except George’s name wasn’t really George. It was Xiuying, but many of his classmates could not pronounce his name—and just *forget* spelling it right—so he decided to be George. “Good name,” one of his uncles had said. “Americans like voting for guys named George.”

Before anyone could stop him, Spider, all by himself, had the door open. He slid to the ground. When the emergency door had opened, an inflatable slide had popped out. Alexis, George, and Liam followed. After all four of them were out of the plane, Cindy and Natalie pulled the door closed.

“Are those kids out of their minds?” one of the men demanded.

“I don’t think so,” Natalie said.

The pilot came down the aisle. “Did someone leave the plane?” he asked.

“Four kids,” Cindy said. “Our teammates—”

“Get those kids back here, now!” the pilot said.

“I can’t have them wandering all over, getting lost!”

“I don’t think they will,” Natalie said. “This is Cindy, the girl who gave the emergency landing instructions.”

The pilot looked at Cindy with new respect. “People told me about you,” he said. “You were amazing. Do you realize how many injuries we may have had if everyone hadn’t been in crash position?”

“Yes,” Natalie said. “Cindy was great.”

“So what are they doing out there?” the pilot asked.

“They’re going to see if there are fish in that water,” Natalie said. She pointed in the direction Cindy believed there was water. “Lots of people are worried about food. If there are fish, everyone will feel a lot better, right?”

The pilot rubbed his chin. “Well, it’s not a bad idea. Probably better than sitting around here doing nothing. How do you know they won’t get lost?”

“You said the island isn’t more than a mile or two across,” Natalie said. “Right?”

One of the passengers standing nearby wearing a business suit asked, “Who are these kids? Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts or something?”

“No, we’re not,” Natalie said. “I’ve only been camping once, on a fifth-grade field trip.”

The pilot stooped down to look out the window in the direction Spider and the others had gone. Then he looked back at Natalie. “Are any adults traveling with you?”

“We had chaperones in Europe,” Natalie said.



“Liam’s parents and two teachers. The teachers had to take an earlier flight. Liam’s parents stayed in Switzerland for a vacation.”

The pilot checked his watch. “If they’re not back soon, we’ll have to go get them.”

“I’m sure they’ll be back,” Natalie said.

The ground was closer than Spider expected. As soon as he slid down into the snow, he saw that the plane had landed with its wheels still tucked under the body, coasting like a giant sled. The pilot had selected a thick patch of snow in what appeared to be a long shallow valley. Elsewhere were rocks and boulders and patches of dry ground. Many of the rocks were black.

The place had the feel of being completely wild and remote. Spider loved it immediately. He felt so nimble and his legs felt so light he wanted to run or climb something, but there was just no way to move quickly through the snow. He thought of Natalie and Cindy, back on the plane. It just didn't make sense that anyone would *want* to sit in a plane instead of being out here, where the air was crisp and refreshing, and all around were enticing hills and cliffs and tall rock formations.

They trudged through the snow toward the place where Cindy thought there was water.

"This is harder than walking on a sandy beach," Alexis said.

“Speaking of beaches,” Spider said, “we can’t be far from a beach, and where there’s an ocean, there’s plenty of food.”

He often went deep sea fishing with his grandfather, so he knew a few things about getting fish from the ocean. They didn’t have any of the right equipment, of course, but with a little ingenuity, they could figure out something.

“Maybe being stranded on an island in the middle of nowhere isn’t going to be so bad,” Spider said.

“I’d say this is more like the edge of the earth,” said Alexis. “If this isn’t bad, what is?”

“Well,” Spider said, “we could have gotten dumped in the ocean and we could be trying to swim right now. *That* would have been no fun.”

“And this *is*?” Alexis demanded. “You call this *fun*? Being stranded in the Arctic?”

“The subarctic,” George said.

“That makes a big difference,” Alexis said. “When I’m freezing, I’ll have to remember we’re not actually in the Arctic. That way I can feel warmer.”

“Some people do this for fun, you know,” Spider said. “They do survival camping, even at the North Pole.”

“Knowing some people are crazy doesn’t make me feel better,” Alexis said.

About fifty yards from the plane, they came to a bed of rocks. Some of the rocks were slick, but most were rough and grooved. Walking on the rocks was a lot easier than walking in snow.

Just beyond the next hill, a slow-moving stream

meandered through the rocky terrain. Mostly the stream was too wide to jump across, but in a few places it narrowed enough so that someone who dared might be able to take a running leap and make it to the other side. Alongside the stream were pools of water. On the surface of the smaller pools were sheets of ice. The largest pool had only a bit of ice on top.

They stood at the edge of one of the larger pools and looked down. The pool was deep and clear with a distinctly fishy smell. Inside were lots of fish. Not the biggest fish ever, but not tiny things either. The fish were brownish, and most appeared to be between four and six inches. There were smaller ones as well, darting among the larger fish.

“There are probably even bigger ones down deeper,” Spider said. “Not that it matters. I don’t see how we could catch fish much bigger than those with laundry bags.”

“What do we do?” George asked.

“We’re going to need some weights,” Spider said. “Or the bags will just float and we’ll just have to wait for a fish to decide to jump in. I say we use rocks for weights. We can work the rocks into the piping.”

So they gathered rocks and stuffed them into the piping with the drawstring. Spider tested the bag by dangling it into the water. Sure enough, the rocks pulled the net down. Next he tied the belt and handbag strap together, then tied the belt to the drawstring.

He let the net dangle. They waited and watched.

Then they waited some more. Alexis shifted her weight from one foot to another. “At this rate it’s going to take an hour,” she said.

“It might,” Spider said. “Fishing takes patience, even with the right equipment. And this isn’t the right equipment.”

At long last, a curious fish swam near the net and seemed to be biting at it. Spider watched and waited. When the fish was directly in front of the opening, he jerked the bag forward, caught the fish inside, and pulled up the bag. Inside, a small brownish fish not more than five inches long flailed and flopped.

“You got him!” Liam said.

They stood for a moment, watching the fish.

“Poor thing,” Alexis said.

Spider shot Alexis a look and said, “Big fish eat little fish. That’s the law of the jungle. That’s also why it’s good to be a big fish.”

“All right, so we have a fish,” Alexis said, “and I have cold hands and feet. Let’s go back.”

“Yeah,” George said. “I want to show off.”

Cindy hugged her blanket tighter around her shoulders. She looked out the window, up at the sky. There was nothing but blue streaked with wispy white clouds. No rescue in sight.

She slouched deeper into her seat. That was when she noticed a newspaper sticking out of Natalie's bag. "Can I read this?"

"Sure," Natalie said.

Cindy opened the paper and read about the missile crisis, which started in a small Asian country recently taken over in a military coup. The country's new name was difficult to pronounce, so the newspapers translated the name into English as the Democratic Republic. The country had a sophisticated manufacturing plant and a high-level science lab. Combining the two resources, their scientists figured out how to build a nuclear bomb. Nobody knew how they got the materials.

"Do you think that guy, the dictator, is really going to fire his missile?" Cindy asked Natalie.

"Everyone seems to think he will," Natalie said.

Cindy didn't want to read any more. The news

was too distressing, so she folded the newspaper and handed it back to Natalie.

She stood up and looked around the plane. People were nervous and agitated. One woman's head was bent as if she were praying. Some people milled about, getting up to walk down the aisle, forming lines at all three bathrooms, talking nervously, their voices too highly pitched. The copilot was stretched out in the first row of seats with a towel on his forehead. The mother with the little girls was walking the children up and down the aisle. The only other small child on the plane was a boy who seemed to be about eight years old, sitting with his parents.

The pilot came down the aisle, carrying a large screwdriver. Several passengers followed him. Cindy, curious, slid around Natalie and went to see. She gathered that the pilot was pretty sure if the panel of the bathroom facing the back of the plane were removed, it would be possible to climb down into the cargo hold. Some people had been asking for their suitcases.

Just then, someone from the front of the plane said, "Those kids are back!"

Cindy hurried to the door. The pilot and a few others followed. Natalie came up behind her. They both peered out a window.

"Did they get any fish?" Cindy asked.

"I can't tell yet," Natalie said.

Soon Alexis and the guys were close enough to see that, yes, Spider had something in the mesh

laundry bag.

When Spider and the others reached the plane, the pilot and another man pushed open the door and reached down to help them up. The first up the ramp was Alexis. With her came the smell of snow. Next came George and Liam, and finally, Spider. With Spider came the strong, distinctive smell of fish.

Spider held up the bag with the single, still-flailing fish. “Check. It. Out!” he said, triumphant.

There was silence.

“We got a fish!” George said.

“Very resourceful,” the pilot said.

“I *hope* we’re not going to be *fishing*,” said one of the passengers. “A rescue plane better get here pretty soon.” Her tone said, *or else*.

Another said, “I just don’t understand what’s taking so long.”

“I explained,” said the pilot. “We’re way off course. They have a lot of ocean to search.”

“After a while they may just give up and leave us here,” someone said.

“They won’t give up,” the pilot said. “They’ll keep searching, even if they think they’re searching for the remains of the plane after a crash.”

“If there *isn’t* a rescue pretty soon,” Alexis said, “it’s a good idea to figure out how we’re going to eat. Right?”

Again there was silence.

“It’s only *one* fish,” said the woman with young children. “There are probably eighty people on this plane.”



“There are lots more fish out there!” Spider said.  
“There’s a whole ocean full of food!”

As if Spider hadn’t spoken, someone else said,  
“The plane is already cold. We’re going to freeze.”

“The Eskimos manage just fine,” Spider said cheerfully.

“Eskimos have fur coats!” a woman said. “They have sleds and dogs!”

“We can always build igloos!” Spider said.

Again there was silence. Cindy and Natalie exchanged glances. Cindy didn’t like the idea of building an igloo, or figuring out how to catch and cook fish, but she thought the passengers could be a little nicer about how hard Spider and the others were trying.

“I just don’t see how we will be able to cook anything,” said the elderly woman. “There are probably just burners in the plane but no electricity.”

“So we build a fire,” Spider said. “I just don’t see the problem.”

Everyone looked at him. Gently, Natalie said, “Spider, there *are* a few *small* difficulties.”

“Nothing we can’t solve,” Spider said.

A small child fussed. Otherwise, there was silence again. This time it seemed to Cindy that the silence was stunned, and respectful.

“Who *are* these kids?” one of the passengers asked. She was a middle-aged woman, evidently traveling with the elderly woman, who seemed to be her mother. Both women had icy blue eyes and white hair.

George gave one of his flashiest smiles. “We are San Francisco’s all-star chess team. And I’m the team captain. Here’s what I figure. If there isn’t a rescue soon, we’ll have a lot of work to do. We have to figure out how to build a fire out there. I didn’t see any trees. Just lots of those little shrubby things. We can divide up the work. We have to figure out how to join laundry bags together to make a bigger net. We can go fishing in shifts. If everyone pitches in, we can manage.”

“I don’t see how I can go fishing,” said one of the businessmen. “All I have are suits.”

The mother said, “I have two small children! I can’t go fishing.”

“You’re not getting me out there,” someone else said.

“I’m sixty-seven,” said a white-haired woman. “I can hardly bend over.”

“I’ll help!” shouted the boy sitting toward the back with his parents. “I’ll go fishing!”

“I’ll help these kids,” said the boy’s father. “Of course.”

“Well, gee, *thanks*, everyone,” Alexis said. “That’s only *two* people, including one little boy!”

“*Hey!*” Spider said, swinging the laundry bag for emphasis. “Instead of Knights of the Square Table, we should have called ourselves the *Little Red Hens!*”

Cindy laughed out loud. She couldn’t help herself. Most of the passengers, though, were *not* amused. Then Cindy felt an ache in her stomach. This was certainly *not* going to be easy.

The flight attendants distributed a packaged meal to everyone. All that remained was enough food for everyone to have one more meal.

Spider said, “We better go exploring to see what we can find. We may need to do some more fishing.”

Alexis agreed. “I think we should all go this time.”

They put on jackets, mittens, and hats and went to the door. Spider pulled it open, and one at a time, they slid to the ground, landed in the snow, and brushed themselves off. Someone up in the plane closed the door behind them.

“I’m going to climb that peak over there,” Spider said, “to see what’s around.”

They walked to the base of the peak. Once there, Spider handed George his backpack, then pulled himself up onto the lowest ridge. The others stood watching as he climbed. He climbed carefully, testing each rock or bit of earth before hoisting himself up higher.

“He really *is* like a spider,” Natalie said.

When he got to the top, he turned slowly in all

directions. “The beach over there is rocky. Not many trees, but lots of those little bushes everywhere. Over there”—he pointed—“are some green shrubs. They look like tiny pine trees or something.”

“That’s *all*?” Natalie called up to him.

“What did you *expect*?” he asked.

“I was hoping for a fishing village,” Natalie said.

Alexis laughed. “I was hoping for a Hyatt Regency hotel.”

“As long as we’re wishing,” George said, “why not just wish for an international airport?”

“I’m going up there, too!” Alexis said.

“Come on up!” Spider said. “I’ll give you a climbing lesson!” He started back down.

“I’ve rock climbed before,” Alexis said. “At the climbing gym. Just stay out of my way.”

So he stood aside and watched as she pulled herself up. Once she reached the top, she looked around, and said, “Awesome! Except for the no Hyatt Regency and no airport part.”

Alexis came down first, and then Spider. When they were both back with the others, Cindy said, “Maybe we should head to the beach and walk around there. It might be easier.”

“Which way?” Liam asked.

Alexis pointed west. “That way, the beach is closest.”

As they walked west, there was less snow. They walked over one low hill, and then another, past the stream with fish. Occasionally they came upon a thick patch of snow in valleys and gullies. Some rocks

were slick because of ice, but mostly the rocks were rough and grooved.

At last they stood on the precipice of a small hill, looking down at the beach.

The beach itself was almost entirely made of rocks, many deep inky black in color. Some were small, spread smoothly on the ground. Here and there were large boulders. Scattered around were clumps of seaweed and kelp.

The sky all the way to the horizon was a pale, clear blue without a touch of haze or fog. The entire place was completely still and desolate, except for a flock of seagulls on a large rock. The water was calm with only gentle waves. Without the pounding and breaking of waves, it just didn't seem like an ocean.

"It's like another planet," Natalie said.

They walked carefully down the rocky slope to the beach. Once they got to the beach, Spider stepped out on a rock in the water, then stepped on another rock deeper in the water. He bent down and pulled something off a rock.

"It's *blue*," he called. "It's a mussel."

He tossed the mussel to Liam, who showed it to the others. The blue was bright and glittering. Once you looked for them, you could see lots of them on the rocks in the water.

"There's always seaweed," Cindy said. "We better read up on which kinds can be eaten before we run out of batteries."

"I'm pretty sure you can eat any seaweed," George said. "Some kinds taste better than others."

The problem is how we're going to get fresh seaweed without getting wet."

Cindy thought about eating seaweed, fish from the pool, and mussels from the ocean. She looked upward as if a rescue plane might suddenly appear. Everyone else did the same. Nothing.

"What next?" George asked.

"Is anyone hungry now?" Spider asked.

"I am *not* eating raw mussels," Alexis said.

"No worries!" Spider said. He unzipped his backpack and pulled out a box of Chips Ahoy cookies. "Look, plenty for everyone." He took a cookie and handed the box to George.

"You brought *Chips Ahoy* cookies to Germany?" Alexis asked.

"No!" Spider said. "I bought them *in* Germany."

Alexis looked confused.

Spider said, "I saw these in one of the stores. I wasn't sure what was in the other boxes. What did you buy?"

"Natalie and I bought *real* Swiss chocolate," Alexis said. "It wasn't hard to figure out what was in the boxes, Spider. *Nobody* comes back from Europe with Chips Ahoy cookies!"

"Well, obviously *somebody* does. Are you saying I have no class? Okay, so I *like* Chips Ahoy cookies."

"I prefer Swiss chocolate," Cindy said to Alexis. "So I hope you still have some."

"I do," said Alexis. "In my suitcase."

"Me, too," said Natalie. "I also have salted almonds."

“I didn’t bring anything,” Cindy said. “The airline said they had meals.”

“Everyone who gets on a plane should pack extra food,” Spider said. “You never know when you might end up stranded on an island in the middle of nowhere.”

“I have a few packages of cheese,” Liam said. “My parents wanted me to bring it back.”

“Cheese and chocolate and almonds and Chips Ahoy cookies!” Spider said. “We’re all set!”

“Till tomorrow,” Alexis said. But Cindy breathed a sigh of relief. They might not have to worry about eating mussels or seaweed for at least another day.

“We’re all set,” Alexis said, “except for the plane getting colder. Too bad there isn’t a fireplace in there!”

“If smoking is against airline rules,” Spider said, “I have a feeling fires are *really* against the rules.”

“The problem isn’t airline rules, dude,” Liam said. “The problem is how you keep everyone from dying of carbon monoxide poisoning without chimneys to let the smoke out.”

“And how you would keep the plane from catching fire,” Alexis said. “Practical little details like that.”

Natalie thought of the chocolate and almonds in her suitcase and said, “I’m ready to go back.”

They headed back over the rocks and hills. When they reached the stream with fish, Spider walked to the edge and put his hand into the water.

“There’s something odd about this water,” Spider

said. “Where’s it all coming from? Rain? Snow melt? It’s a small island. I’d expect less water, and for it to be colder.”

“What do you think?” Natalie asked him.

“Let’s find out,” he said. “We’ll just follow the stream to the source.”

That seemed easy enough—until they rounded the first bend, walked through a clearing, and saw a small waterfall, which meant walking uphill. Spider and Alexis seemed to get more energetic the more difficult the climb became. Cindy felt herself slowing down. Her canvas shoes were slippery. Her feet were wet and cold.

Just when Cindy thought the hill would continue getting steeper, they followed the stream around a small hill and the terrain flattened, making the walk easier.

That was when George said, “We should give this island a name.”

“How about Mars?” Natalie said.

“Hey, I like that!” George said. “It’s cold and far away and rocky.”

“I like it, too,” Spider said. “Later, when we’re back in San Francisco, we can talk about the time we spent on Mars!”

Cindy felt grateful for Spider’s unbounded optimism. It was nice that *someone* felt sure they were going to make it back to San Francisco alive.

They followed the stream up another slight incline, where they came to an astonishing sight: an irregularly shaped pool of water set among the



boulders and rocks. Steam was rising from the water.

“It’s *hot*,” Cindy said. “It’s a hot spring!”

They all stood looking, amazed at the sight of steam billowing against a background of snow.

George walked over to the edge. “Careful,” Spider said. “It could be very hot.”

George removed a glove and touched the water with his index finger. A big grin crept across his face. He submerged his hand. “It’s the temperature of a nice, hot bath,” he said. He peered in and said, “The water is very clear.” He stood up, shook the water off his hand, and dried himself on his jacket.

“It looks like we are in luck!” Spider said. “Hot baths for everyone in pure spring water!”

“I’m putting my feet in,” Cindy said. “They’re freezing. I can dry them off with my scarf.”

“Good idea!” Natalie said.

They sat on rocks, took off their shoes and socks, rolled up their pants, and dipped in their feet, slowly getting used to the heat.

“This,” Cindy said, “feels *great*.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Mark, one of the passengers, when they told people on the plane that there was a hot spring up in the hills. “There are hot springs all over Iceland. Something about the geography in this part of the world that makes hot springs common.”

Meanwhile, Natalie wanted her chocolate and almonds. Now that the pilot had removed the panel from behind the toilet, she could kneel down and peer into the cargo hold.

“I guess I have to climb in,” she said to Spider, who was standing just outside the bathroom door. She put her legs through the opening, feeling for the first suitcase. Once she felt it, she stepped down on the pile. The suitcases were in containers without lids. She had to dig through each container, looking for hers. The cargo hold was dimly lit by a few highly spaced windows. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness.

“I see it,” she called up to Spider.

“Can you get it?” he asked.

“I think so.” She pushed aside a few smaller bags, pulled hers to the top, and opened the lid. She could

see at a glance, even in the dim light, that someone had already opened her suitcase and rummaged through. She had left her clothes neatly folded and now they were a mess. She felt along the side for the pocket where she had put her chocolate and almonds.

They were gone. Stunned, she sat back on her heels. Then she rocked forward and felt again in her suitcase to make sure. Yes, indeed, the compartment was empty. She pressed her fingers against her forehead and tried to think of what to do. She felt a pain in the pit of her stomach.

Her suitcase was too big to fit through the opening, so she pulled out a few warm sweaters, some leggings, a scarf, and extra underwear. She wrapped them in a bundle, and tucked it under her arm. She crawled back to the opening.

Spider poked his head in. "Did you get it?"

"I got some clothes and stuff," she said.

She handed him the bundle. "Spider, can you go get Liam? Tell him he has to come here."

"What's the matter? Tell me! I can help."

She felt touched by his instant concern. But she didn't want to tell him. Not now. "Just get Liam, okay? Please? Hurry. I don't want someone to use the bathroom while I'm down here!"

"All right," he said.

She crawled around, moving suitcases, searching for the bag in which Alexis had put her chocolate. She found the bag and opened it. Alexis's chocolate was also gone.

A few minutes later, Liam poked his head inside. “What’s up, Natalie?”

“Can you come down? I think you should get your cheese now.”

Liam lowered himself into the hold and searched for his suitcase. “I don’t see it,” he said.

“What does it look like?” she asked.

“Dark blue.” They moved suitcases aside, and at last found it. Liam pulled it to the top of the stack. Then he took a small key ring from his pocket, unlocked the case, and unzipped it. Watching, Natalie felt relieved. It had never occurred to her to lock her own suitcase.

Liam pulled out a plastic bag containing three large chunks of cheese wrapped in wax. Then he asked, “What’s going on, Natalie?”

“I’ll tell you later. I just want you to keep your cheese with you.”

He pulled a few more things out of his suitcase, and locked it back up. He crawled back to the opening. She followed. First Spider gave Liam a boost up, and then he reached inside for Natalie. She put her hands in his and let him pull her up. She ducked her head and stepped back into the bathroom. Liam had already gone back to his seat. There wasn’t room for both her and Spider in the tiny bathroom, so once he pulled her up, he backed into the aisle.

“Will you tell me?” Spider asked.

“Later, please.”

For all she knew, they could be rescued in the

next hour and then it wouldn't really matter. Meanwhile, she wasn't ready for trouble, and once the word went around that there was a thief on board, there would be trouble.

She followed Spider back down the aisle, glancing over the passengers, wondering which of them had taken her chocolate and almonds. When she reached her seat, she checked her handbag. Her wallet was still there, which made sense. Nobody right now wanted a wallet. They wanted food.

\* \* \*

George settled into his seat and turned on his electronic tablet. Liam was sitting on one side of him and Alexis on the other. Natalie looked to see what they were reading. They had the electronic encyclopedia open and were reading an article on starting a fire with damp wood.

Cindy had her tablet on as well. She was reading about survival in the subarctic. A natural hot spring, mussels at the beach, and fish in the river would make things a lot easier, but they still had the problem of keeping everyone warm.

George snapped his fingers and said, "Hey, check this out!"

They all tried to crowd around his tablet, but couldn't. "Just let Cindy read it," George said. Cindy took the tablet and stared intently at the screen, scrolling down to the end of the article.

When she was finished, she turned off the tablet. "Tell us!" Alexis said.

“The article was about surviving in the cold,” Cindy said, then started reciting: “One way to keep warm at night is to place football-sized rocks in a fire and heat them for two hours. Next, remove bedding materials from the tent and dig a trench one foot wide by one foot deep and place the hot rocks in the trench. Bury them. Wait until the moisture has evaporated from the ground, put the sleeping bag on top, and spend a warm night.”

“Brilliant!” Spider said.

That’s when Natalie noticed passengers nearby had gathered around to listen.

“But, wait,” said the mother, who had been walking her children down the aisle and stopped to listen. “We don’t have bedding material and we don’t have tents!”

“We just bring the rocks in *here*,” Spider said. “They’ll heat up the plane!”

“Like a sauna,” said a man sitting across the aisle. “That should work!” He waved to the pilot. “These kids have an idea. I think it’s a good one.”

The pilot came and Cindy explained.

“Are there any dangers?” the pilot asked.

“Hot rocks in the plane?” asked the mother. “I should say there are dangers. What if someone touches them or falls on them?”

“We’ll have to be careful,” the pilot said.

“There is another danger,” Cindy said. “The article said be sure not to heat up rocks from a water source because they might explode.”

“It looks to me,” George said, “like it’s time to

find some rocks not from a water source and start heating them up, which means it's time to go out there and figure out how to build a fire, which means time to gather firewood."

"That's gonna be a challenge," Alexis said, "seeing that there aren't any trees on this part of the island, just those shrubby bushes."

The pilot clapped his hands together. "Listen, people. We have a plan for warming up the plane. I need some volunteers to gather firewood. Anyone want to stay warm in here? We need some help."

The first to volunteer was the little boy, Joel. He came with his parents. About twenty others came, including the pilot, all three flight attendants, and, of course, the Knights of the Square Table.

Gathering wood wasn't easy. The shrubs were firmly rooted in the ground. Many of the branches were stubborn and refused to break. There were broken branches on the ground, but you had to hunt for them. Most of the broken branches were nestled in gullies and up against bluffs and boulders.

Cindy didn't mind the work. Moving around kept her warm. She just wished she had better gloves. Like Natalie, all she had were knit mittens that were soon wet.

Janine, the flight attendant who had gotten bruised during the landing, limped when she walked. She kept saying, "I'm okay, I'm okay. If I'd have known that girl was giving everyone crash instructions, I would have stayed in my seat and saved myself a few bruises."

One of the men who had joined them and introduced himself as Jack said, “It sure would be nice to get a fire lit. But the branches are wet. Did you kids think of that?”

“We did,” Cindy said. “First thing we need to do is split some of these bigger pieces, I think like this.”

She put a crack into the wood and split it so the inside was exposed.

Following Cindy’s instructions, they split the branches in half, exposing the middles. Indeed, the middle of the wood had a softer texture.

Jack looked at Cindy and said, “You learned all that from reading an article? Very impressive.”

“Yup,” Spider said. “Cindy aces all her tests. She’s also a killer chess player. If I ever get plane-wrecked again, remind me to have a girl along with a photographic memory.”

“While everyone else was panicking,” the pilot said, “these kids were reading articles. I’ve studied and memorized hundreds of pages of emergency procedures. I could land us safely without a working avionics system. But there was nothing in our pilot training about getting fish from a stream or starting a fire with damp wood.”

They selected a place for the fire in a flat area surrounded by slight hills.

“It will be like a real campfire,” George said.

“Except for the marshmallows and hot dogs,” Spider said.

“Yeah, what’s up with that?” Liam asked. “Where are the marshmallows and hot dogs?”



That was when Natalie realized the sun was sinking low. Soon it would be time to eat their last packaged meal. Then it would get dark. She sighed. She definitely had to tell the others about the chocolate and almonds. As soon as they were all alone, she'd tell them. She couldn't put it off any longer.

The stars glittered brightly. The night was crisp and cold, but tucked into the nook between the bluff and some boulders, with the fire blazing and crackling, Liam was warm. He looked around at the others. The girls were no longer shivering. When the wind blew he felt cold again, but the wind never blew for long, just a short gust, and then just as quickly the flames warmed him back up.

The burning wood had a spicy, balsamic smell. Liam liked the scent. He also liked how the fire sounded, crackling as if it were alive. They'd built the fire big enough so that all the football-sized rocks were roasting in the flames. As the rocks absorbed heat, the fire became warmer. The plan was to rotate the rocks. In two hours, when the rocks were warm enough, they'd put them inside and start another batch heating. When the second batch heated up, they'd rotate the rocks, bringing the cooled-off rocks in from the plane and heating them up again.

Liam figured the only thing missing—other than hot dogs and marshmallows—was music. Liam played three instruments. His favorite was the

saxophone, but a campfire like this called for a guitar. He liked to think they'd end up singing those sappy campfire songs, like *kum-ba-ya*, or the one about how the winds were blowing and rain was falling, but joy was filling the air.

Liam noticed Spider kept looking at Natalie. He also noticed that Natalie avoided looking at anyone.

She obviously had a secret.

Liam also had a secret: he was enjoying himself. Like everyone else, he'd been terrified beyond his worst nightmares when the plane tipped and rocked and the oxygen masks fell. When they landed and he realized they were stranded on a remote island, he hadn't shared Spider's optimism. But now he was surprisingly relaxed—and happy.

He was usually lonely at home, an only child in a big house with parents who worked constantly. But now, with a warm fire, and fish in the pools, and mussels at the beach, he felt completely warmed and unafraid. He enjoyed the feeling of camaraderie. Nobody was talking much. Liam assumed everyone else was enjoying the peaceful moment. He also figured they were all as tired as he was. Well, it had been quite a day, after all.

In the distance, passengers were pulling luggage from the cargo hold and hoisting it up the inflatable ramp into the plane. The only sound nearby was the snapping of the branches as George broke pieces and put them in the fire. Liam figured they'd have to sleep in the plane. But how much nicer it was here.

Spider said, "I think I hear someone yelling up

there.”

Liam listened. Sure enough, there was a fuss in the plane. Liam had no desire to go find out what was going on. He wanted to stay right here, where it was warm and peaceful. He glanced at Natalie, who had her face in her hands.

*C'mon, Natalie*, he urged silently. *Tell us.*

Cindy stood up. “I’m curious. I just have to know. I’ll be back.”

“I’ll come with you,” Spider said. “Let’s get some cushions.”

She and Spider headed over to the plane. George went back to feeding small twigs and pieces of leaves into the fire.

Spider and Cindy returned, each carrying an armful of seat cushions.

“So what’s going on in there?” George asked.

“A great big fuss,” Cindy said. “I guess someone in there is stealing food. A bunch of the snacks were taken from the flight attendant’s area in back. Someone’s water bottle is missing, along with someone else’s power bars, and who knows what else.”

Natalie shifted. She drew in a deep breath. “Okay,” she said, “I have something to tell you guys.”

For one terrible moment, Liam thought she was about to tell them that she was the thief. Instead, she said, “Someone stole my chocolate and almonds. Alexis’s too.”

“*What?*” Alexis asked. “How do you know?”

“When I went to get mine, it was gone. So I checked your bag. Liam’s cheese was still there because his suitcase was locked.” She turned to Liam and said, “That’s why I wanted you to get your cheese. I didn’t remember which one was your suitcase. And I didn’t *know* your suitcase was locked.”

“Why didn’t you tell me my chocolate was missing?” Alexis demanded.

Natalie looked away, then dropped her face into her hands. “I’m sorry,” she said, her voice muffled. “I knew there would be trouble. I just didn’t want trouble.”

“You bet there’s going to be trouble!” Alexis said, standing up.

“We should think this over before we do anything,” Natalie said.

“I don’t know what there is to think over,” Alexis said. “I want to go in there and find out who took my chocolate before they eat it! Natalie, I think you should have said something as soon as you knew.”

“I’m sorry,” Natalie said again.

“Can we go up there and tell the pilot, please?” Alexis said.

Natalie groaned.

“Natalie!” Alexis put her fists on her hips. “Putting your head in the sand just isn’t a good way to avoid trouble!”

Liam looked around. George opened his mouth and closed it again. Cindy was as still and alert as a deer, her eyes larger and rounder than usual. Everyone was looking from Alexis to Natalie.

Alexis folded her arms across her chest. She was ready for battle. “Come on, you guys. I’m going in, and I think we need to stick together. I think you all need to come with me.”

The fire crackled and popped. A slight breeze made the flames dance.

“Natalie,” George said. “I think Alexis is right.”

Alexis realized she'd been holding her breath. When the others stood up and brushed themselves off, she exhaled. She still felt a little dazed.

What had Natalie been thinking? Alexis couldn't fathom it. Alexis herself had no fear at all of confronting people, and she just couldn't understand those who did. Once when her parents didn't think Alexis could hear, her mother had said, "That child may be stubborn and outspoken, but she stands up for what is right." After Alexis got over the sting of being called stubborn and outspoken, she liked what her mother had said. She did stand up for what was right. Or, at least, she *tried* to. She also understood that being outspoken went hand in hand with standing up for what was right. Even the stubborn part was necessary. You couldn't stand up for what was right if you backed down the moment someone didn't like what you were saying.

They all walked toward the plane, with Alexis leading the way. What she felt just then was pure anger that someone had gone into her suitcase and taken something belonging to her. How *dare* that

person?

Someone had tied a heavy rope to one of the door hinges and let it dangle down the inflated ramp, so they could hold onto the rope to help with walking up the ramp.

Alexis grabbed the rope, climbed up, and rapped on the door. Someone pulled it open.

Everyone inside seemed to be in a heated discussion. The pilot was standing in the aisle, facing most of the passengers, many of whom were in their seats. A few, though, were standing in the aisles. When the Knights of the Square Table were all inside, Spider and another passenger closed the door.

“Ask them, too,” someone said to the pilot, pointing at Alexis and her teammates. “Maybe one of them knows about it.”

The pilot said, “Someone was in the cargo hold going through suitcases. Someone, we think the same person, stole snacks from the flight attendant’s station in the back. We’re trying to figure out who did it.”

“That someone also took our chocolate and almonds,” Alexis said.

The pilot sighed. “I think we’re going to have to start searching.”

“Almonds?” said a man toward the back. “In a red canister?”

“Yes!” Natalie said. “Those are mine! Where are they?”

“I saw someone with them,” he said, then pointed. “It was her. She had them.” The woman he



pointed to slumped down in her seat so far that Alexis could see only the top of her head. Her hair was mousy brown and looked as if it hadn't been combed in days.

Everyone started talking at once, particularly those near the woman. Then the woman screamed—a chilling, blood-curdling scream. “Leave me *alone!* Just leave me *alone!*” She got up from her seat and headed up the aisle toward the door, elbowing her way roughly past people.

“Hey! Knock it off!” someone said.

The woman's face was red and contorted with anger. She had a wild, terrified look. She got to the door and pounded on it.

“Let me out of here!” she shrieked. “Let me out of here.”

She pushed on the door, but couldn't open it. She fell into a heap by the door. Everyone stared, shocked.

“Hey, here's the stuff,” someone called from the seat where she'd been sitting. “A half-eaten package of chocolate. An unopened package of chocolate. A bottle of water. A power bar. The wrapper of a power bar. A handful of airplane snacks, pretzels and cashews.”

“The bottle of water is mine,” someone said.

“The power bars are mine!” someone else said. “She ate one!”

Meanwhile, the woman who'd done the stealing was in a heap on the floor, sobbing. Alexis felt something tug inside. She hated, absolutely *hated*,

seeing people fall apart.

Spider went to retrieve the chocolate and almonds. When he came back, Natalie took the half-eaten box and gave Alexis the unopened box.

“What are you doing?” Alexis asked.

“That one is yours,” Natalie said, pointing to the unopened package.

“No,” Alexis said. “We share what’s left. We’re in this together, remember?”

“If I had said something earlier, we might have stopped her before she ate it.”

“Well, you didn’t,” Alexis said. “God knows why you didn’t, but you didn’t. She ate half a box. We split what’s left.” Alexis stood firm. She wasn’t worried about an argument with Natalie. She knew she’d win. Natalie was the type to give in.

One of the flight attendants was trying to get the sobbing woman off the floor. Meanwhile, a discussion had started up among the passengers of what to do with the thief.

Someone said angrily, “If she steals anything else, we should throw her out.”

Alexis spun around. “I don’t *think* so! She’d *die* out there!”

“She went through my suitcase!” someone else said.

“Well, she ate *my* chocolate!” Alexis said. “It wasn’t real nice, but it wasn’t exactly the crime of the century! Maybe we should just throw everyone out who didn’t want to help us build a fire! That would be lots of you, wouldn’t it?”

Alexis put her hands on her hips and lifted her chin. She was right, and she knew it. Throwing the woman out of the plane for stealing was worse than stealing, as anyone with a brain should be able to figure out.

“You tell them, Alexis,” Spider said, punching a fist into the other palm. Then he pointed to Alexis and said, “That girl’s on *my* team.”

“All right,” said the pilot. “Let’s all settle down. Nobody is throwing anyone out. People are a little upset, a little stressed. I understand.”

The woman’s sobs quieted a bit. Natalie and a few others joined the flight attendant in trying to get the woman back to her seat. Hysterics certainly weren’t going to help.

When they lifted her up, Alexis got a good look at her. The woman was middle-aged, and seemed average in every way. Her hair was streaked with gray. She seemed to be of average size. There was nothing particularly noteworthy about her. No wonder Alexis hadn’t noticed her before. She seemed to be traveling alone.

“We’ll have to keep an eye on her,” the pilot said.

To Alexis, he didn’t sound nearly authoritative enough. Who’d listen to a guy who talked so wimpy? That was why *she* should be in charge. She didn’t want to be a politician like George. She wanted to be the boss. She understood there was a difference.

The hot rocks warmed the plane enough to take the deep chill out of the air. The problem was it was hard to sleep sitting up in these seats. Spider, who was so much taller than the others, had a particularly difficult time, even with his legs stretched into the aisle.

The plane was one of the newer economy models. There was no first class. The pilot and copilot had the only truly comfortable chairs in the plane. The copilot remained in his chair—he was injured, so nobody wanted to move him—but the pilot gave his seat to the elderly woman and sat in the first row.

Several times during the night, George was awakened to the sound of one of the little girls fussing. People around him shifted and groaned.

George opened his eyes at the first light of dawn. Spider and Liam were still sleeping. George lifted himself so he could look back at the girls. They were sleeping. Cindy's head was against the window. Alexis and Natalie leaned against each other.

George rose from his seat and carefully stepped

over Spider into the aisle. Once in the aisle, he stretched. The pilot and flight attendants were awake, gathered together in the back of the plane, where there were a few empty rows. Seeing George, the pilot waved.

George walked quietly to the back of the plane, stepping carefully around the rocks. A few windows had the shades up, so he could see outside. The cloud cover was dark and heavy.

“Join us, son,” the pilot whispered. He gestured toward an empty seat.

“It looks like it’ll rain!” George whispered.

“Or snow,” said one of the flight attendants.

“Either way,” said the pilot, “it will be a lot harder for a rescue plane to find us with all that cloud cover.”

“If it’s going to rain or snow,” George said, “we have a lot to get done this morning. By noon we’ll be out of food.”

“You know,” the pilot said, “you kids have been pretty amazing through all of this.”

“Yes,” George agreed. “We have been.”

George’s mother often said modesty was a virtue, but George disagreed. His friends *had* been amazing, beginning with Cindy getting everyone into crash position when nobody could hear what the flight attendants were saying, straight through to Alexis making sure people didn’t gang up on that absolutely pathetic hysterical woman.

As every politician knows, when you or your friends do something great, people need to hear

about it. He imagined a television sound bite: *The Knights of the Square Table were amazing during the entire first day Flight 620 from Frankfurt to New York City was stranded on a remote island, later very appropriately named Mars.*

\* \* \*

Breakfast was the last of their airline packaged snacks: pretzels, cashews, peanuts, or crackers, whichever you happened to get, and a cup of drinking water, which was ice melted and boiled. The melted ice had a distinctive smell, slightly pungent, like the smell of wet pennies.

Natalie wanted to wash at the spring, but figuring out how to get food would have to come first. The pilot evidently had the same idea because he clapped for attention. “I’m not going to assign work. I’m going to ask for volunteers. If you want to stay warm and you want to eat, you need to help. We need to gather wood and build a fire. We have to catch fish. What am I missing?”

“Gather mussels at the beach,” Alexis said.

“Right,” he said. “Mussels at the beach. All right, everyone. Just think about it. Any time you go out of the plane to take care of personal business over in the bushes, bring back a handful of branches and wood. Just think about the situation and ask yourself. Do you want to stay warm? Do you want to eat? Then please help.”

He then announced that they were going to wire the toilets closed—from now on, they would have to

leave the plane and find secluded places to use for toilets.

George didn't think it was the best pep talk ever given, but it wasn't bad either. Not everyone got up to help, but George figured that was to be expected.

Quietly to Cindy, George said, "If we're here longer than a day or two, we'll have to get everyone helping."

"Yeah," she agreed. "But how?"

"I have no idea," he said.

What helped was that Spider didn't think fishing *was* work. He was eager to get going. Soon a large group was ready: the pilot, about a dozen of the passengers, and all the Knights of the Square Table—except Cindy. She said she was going to stay and gather firewood. Already they'd used all the wood they gathered. Without a fire going, they could freeze.

The others had been gone for at least an hour, and during that time, the only people who came to help Cindy gather wood were the little boy, Joel, his parents, and Janine, the flight attendant who had been injured. The other passengers were sitting in the plane, doing nothing.

Cindy and the others had been working nonstop, but the pile remained pitifully small. To keep the fire going so they could keep heating up the rocks to warm the inside of the plane, they ended up burning the wood almost as fast as they could gather it. Cindy started to feel the hopelessness of the task. What were a few more sticks and branches when they

needed to keep a fire going every hour of every day?

If everyone in the plane would help, the work would get done.

Soon an idea came to her. The problem was that her idea required her to take charge, the way Alexis or George might. Cindy didn't like speaking in front of people, and she just wasn't the type to give orders.

She steadied her nerves, drew in a deep breath, then went up into the cabin and pulled her electronic reader out of her carry-on bag and turned it on. She had some battery power left. Not much, but enough.

She found the article she was looking for. She went to the front of the cabin and clapped her hands for attention. After enough people were looking at her, she said, "I've been out there collecting wood for a fire but I don't have much. Can people please come help? Any volunteers?"

To her own ears, her voice sounded shaky and uncertain.

"I'll help," said the copilot, from the cockpit. He had been resting his head. He tried to stand up, but winced and sat back down.

"I don't think so," Cindy said. "You really are hurt."

She looked at those who remained in their seats, at least twenty passengers. One said, "A rescue will be here any time."

"But maybe it won't," Cindy said.

"It will."

"We might freeze to death before it gets here." She didn't have George's gift for speechmaking, so



instead she said, “I have an article I’d like to share. It’s on *frostbite*.”

“We know all about frostbite,” someone said.

“I don’t,” Cindy said. “I’m from San Francisco. We don’t have frostbite there. So this is all new to me.” She cleared her throat, and, as loudly as she could manage, she began to read:

*Frostbite is the medical condition in which damage is caused to skin and other tissues due to freezing. Frostbite is most likely in body parts like fingers and toes farthest from the heart and more likely to be exposed. The first stage of frostbite, frostnip, is when the surface of the skin is frozen. If the freezing continues, the skin hardens. If the area continues freezing, the muscles, tendons, blood vessels and all freeze. Purplish blood-filled blisters appear and turn black. Nerves can be permanently damaged. Extreme frostbite may result in fingers and toes requiring amputation if the area becomes infected with gangrene. If the frostbite goes untreated—*

“Stop!” someone cried. “What are you *doing*?”

“I am reading about frostbite,” Cindy said.

“Why?” asked a woman in a business suit.

“So we can all think about what will happen if we freeze in this plane,” Cindy said.

“Is that girl out of her flipping mind?” someone asked.

Janine, coming up behind Cindy, said, “She’s right. What we need is every single one of you out

there gathering wood—unless you all want to freeze to death in this plane. Got it?”

“We can all work together,” Cindy said, “or we can all freeze together.”

*That wasn't bad*, she thought. In fact, it was kind of catchy. Maybe George wasn't the only one with speechmaking in his future.

To Cindy's delight, her idea worked. When Janine went through the cabin saying, “Come on, everyone, out,” people stood up.

“I don't have the right shoes,” someone said.

Summoning her courage, Cindy walked over to the speaker, a woman, and asked, “Do you need help figuring out a solution?”

“I *cannot* walk through the snow wearing these.” The woman pointed to her feet. She was wearing high heels.

“Hey, Joel,” Cindy called out to the little boy, who had followed his mother into the plane. “Come here a minute.”

Joel trotted down the aisle toward her. “Joel, this lady is wearing high-heeled shoes. She wants to help but she can't figure out what to do. Can you think of an idea for her?”

Joel looked at her feet and said, “Maybe instead of wearing those shoes she can wrap plastic bags around her feet to keep them dry.”

“How old are you, Joel?” Cindy asked.

“Eight and three quarters,” Joel said.

She turned to the woman and said, “An *eight*-year-old thought of a solution.”

“And three quarters,” Joel added.

A few people just weren’t going to get up. Some she understood, like the mother with the small children, and the elderly woman. Her daughter could have worked, but was just too surly and angry. The thief, whose name Cindy learned was Veronica Hollick, had her cheek pressed to the window glass. She could have been sleeping for all Cindy knew.

Cindy decided not to worry about the people who just weren’t going to help. Enough people followed her out of the plane and got to work gathering sticks and branches.

With so many people working, the pile grew quickly. She felt entirely pleased with what she had done.

Then, from inside the plane, she heard a shriek, then a shout: “That woman stole my daughter’s crackers!”

“Oh, no,” Cindy said.

“I’ll go see what happened,” said Janine. Janine threw her handful of branches onto the pile, and headed over to the plane.

Cindy went on gathering branches, glad she could stay out here, instead. After her stunt with the frostbite article, she had no energy left for another confrontation.

The others returned with bags of fish and mussels. As soon as they came close enough, they could hear the shouting on the plane.

“What’s going on up there?” asked the pilot.

“Another fuss,” Cindy said. “Something to do with that thief, Veronica.”

The pilot sighed. “What are we going to do about her?”

“There are people up there who think we need to punish her,” Cindy said.

“How?” Alexis demanded. “Whip her? Starve her? Hard to put her in jail when we’re all sort of in jail. She’s obviously got a problem. Is *punishing* her going to help?”

The pilot sighed again. “I’d better go up.”

Most of the others followed, including George and Alexis.

Natalie, Spider, and Liam went to the fire to warm up. They removed their gloves and held their hands toward the flames.

Cindy sat with them. “I have good news, for anyone interested.”

“Please tell me some good news,” Spider said.

“Check out all the wood,” Cindy said, pointing to an enormous pile. “There’s another, bigger stack on the other side of the plane, under the other wing.”

“Amazing,” Natalie said. “How did you get so much?”

“I got *almost* everyone working. Not everyone, but almost everyone.”

“But *how*?” Natalie asked.

“I found an article in my encyclopedia on frostbite and what it feels like to freeze to death. I went in the cabin and read it loud. I guess I scared them a bit.”

“A bit?” Spider said, admiring the large pile of wood. “Looks to me like you scared them silly.”

\* \* \*

When the pilot went into the cabin to investigate the situation with the thief, Alexis followed immediately behind him. She wanted to make sure things were handled correctly. She didn’t know quite what she thought *should* happen, but she knew lots could go wrong.

Not that she wasn’t furious at Veronica for stealing and refusing to help. It wasn’t fair to sit around and do nothing, and it certainly wasn’t right to steal food from other people. But that didn’t mean Alexis thought Veronica should be thrown out in the cold. Alexis figured someone should just talk some sense into Veronica.

George came right behind Alexis. She supposed

he, too, wanted to make sure nobody got carried away.

They entered the plane through the cargo hold. Now that the pilot and a few others had gotten the door open, it was easier to enter and exit this way. She stepped up on the suitcase that served as a stool and pulled herself through the opening into the bathroom.

People in the plane were arguing, but so many people were speaking at once that Alexis could catch only snippets of what they were saying. They were obviously furious at Veronica. They were also arguing over how food should be divided.

“What’s going on?” the pilot asked.

“We threw her out,” one of the women said.

“*What?*” Alexis demanded. “Are you out of your minds?”

“What she did wasn’t that bad,” said Janine, the flight attendant. “She took a package of crackers, but before she could even get the package open, someone noticed and grabbed them away. There was a scuffle that turned the crackers into crumbs, but the package wasn’t opened. We returned it to the rightful owner.”

“That was me!” shouted one of the little girls.

“She took a *child’s* crackers,” said another of the passengers.

Alexis looked at the pilot. He seemed to be searching for something to say.

Since he was obviously at a loss, Alexis took over. She walked up to the woman who was speaking and

said, “Seriously? *You* threw her out? How much work have *you* done? Who are *you* to make rules?”

“She’s not going to stop stealing,” someone else said.

“Then we need to watch her,” the pilot said, “to make sure she doesn’t.”

“I’m going to get her,” Alexis said. She marched to the front of the plane and turned around and spoke loudly enough for everyone in the plane to hear. She put her hands on her hips and said, “If anyone else throws her out, or does anything else cruel or stupid, do you know what we’re going to do? My friends and I will go set up camp somewhere. We’ll keep all the firewood *we* gather and all the fish *we* catch and all the mussels *we* gather. You all can starve and freeze. Do you like that? No? Well then knock off the stupid stuff. Nobody gets thrown out.”

Alexis tried to open the door, but needed help. One of the men came forward to help her. Before exiting, she turned and, still speaking loudly enough for everyone in the plane to hear, said, “I’m going to get her. She’s staying right here. One of you with the lazy butts can have the job of watching her.”

With that, she exited the plane. She slid down the ramp, and saw Veronica not far away, sitting in the snow with her back to a rock. She marched over to her and said, “What’s your problem? Why do you keep doing things like that?”

“I heard what you just said to them,” Veronica said quietly.

“I can yell loud when I need to,” Alexis said.

“Obviously you can. The fish out in the ocean probably heard.” She gave Alexis a look that Alexis couldn’t read, and said, “Thanks.”

“Come on back up,” Alexis said. “And just knock it off, okay? Don’t steal anything else. Got that?”

Veronica looked directly at Alexis. Alexis felt startled by the steadiness of her gaze. She thought Veronica was about to say something. Instead, Veronica lifted the corners of her mouth into what was almost a smile.

Alexis felt bewildered. There was something weird and creepy about the way she smiled. Alexis wondered if she was capable of more than stealing. What if she did something *really* bad?



One of the passengers, Ben—a sales representative returning to Los Angeles after a company conference in Berlin—said he knew how to cook mussels. You’d think Spider would have known something about cooking mussels. His grandfather’s pizzeria served mussels as an appetizer. But Spider only knew how to get them from the ocean, and eat them from the plate his grandmother served him in the kitchen.

Ben sat near the fire next to the large pile of mussels.

“All right, everyone,” he said. “First you have to make sure the mussels are alive. If the shells are open, tap on them like this”—he picked up a mussel that was slightly open, and tapped on the shell with a small rock. Instantly the mussel closed.

“If they don’t close when you tap on them,” Ben said, “throw them away because they’re dead. Next you’ve got to pull off all the seaweed and barnacles. After that, you soak them in cold water to clean out the grit and sand.”

About twelve people were assembled, all the

Knights of the Square Table and a bunch of other passengers. They all set to work, cleaning off the mussels and tossing them into a pan of cold water. Meanwhile they heated a tray of water on the stones over the fire.

After the water was boiling and the mussels had been soaking a while, Ben said, "Now you throw the mussels into the boiling water."

"Excuse me," Alexis said, "but that is totally *gross*."

"What's gross?" Ben asked.

"You throw a living animal into boiling water?" Alexis said. "Eew."

"Alexis," George said. "It's just a *mussel*. It's nothing but a moving blob."

"Maybe someone thinks *you're* just a moving blob," Alexis said.

"Wait until you see," Ben said. "You are about to eat a delicacy." After they'd filled the boiling pan with mussels, Ben checked his watch. "It doesn't take long," he said.

Sure enough, after about six minutes in the boiling pan, the mussels started opening. The smell was so spicy and fragrant Spider's mouth watered.

When all but a handful of the mussels had opened, Ben said, "All right, they're done. If they didn't open, throw them away. Something's wrong with them."

"How do we eat them?" someone asked.

"Like this," Ben said. "Take one mussel to use as a tweezer." He demonstrated how to turn a mussel

into a tweezer. “Use the tweezer to yank another mussel out of its shell, like this.” He grabbed the meat of the mussel with the tweezer. “Then pull out this little grisly thing called the beard, and pop it into your mouth.”

Alexis tried it. She was amazed at the taste. It *was* delicious!

“See,” Spider said. “We’re not going to starve.”

\* \* \*

The passengers inside cheered when the pilot and several others carried trays of steaming mussels into the cabin. One person, however, was not happy. “I don’t *like* fish!” one of the little girls kept saying. “I don’t *like* fish!”

“Under the circumstances,” Spider said quietly to his friends, “I’d say that’s a little bit of a problem.”

“I’ve been thinking about something,” Liam said to his teammates. “I didn’t like seafood either when I was a little kid. I’m going to give those kids some of my cheese. Does anyone mind?”

“I don’t,” Alexis said. She didn’t mind giving cheese to the little kids. She would, however, mind if he gave cheese to the passengers who had been sitting in the cabin instead of coming outside to help.

“Go ahead,” Spider said.

Liam’s cheese was still in Spider’s backpack. Spider opened the backpack and took out the package already half eaten, and tossed it to Liam. Liam went to the front of the cabin, where the mother and little girls were sitting.

“I have some cheese for the little girls,” he said.

The mother was genuinely moved. “*Thank* you,” she said to Liam. “Thank you *so* much!”

Liam broke off two good-sized chunks and handed one to each of the girls, and the boy. Alexis felt proud. She figured anyone watching also felt moved. Everyone knew the Knights of the Square Table were doing more than their share of work. And here was Liam giving away some of his cheese.

“All right!” a woman shouted loudly. “That’s it! I can’t stand this anymore!”

The speaker was the elderly woman traveling with her daughter, the one who’d slept in the pilot’s seat. She tried to stand up, but couldn’t. “Can one of you young men get my gray suitcase from the bin up there?” she said.

A man standing nearby reached up and pulled down a gray suitcase about the size of an old-fashioned hatbox. He handed it to the woman, who took a key ring from her pocket. The key ring was attached to her belt with one of those retractable key chains. She unlocked the suitcase, and took out a metal canister.

“Dried fruit,” she said. She held the canister not far from her face so she could read it. “A four-pound box. That should be several large pieces for everyone.”

“*Mother—!*” her daughter said. “What are you *doing?*”

“I’m sharing the fruit, that’s what I’m doing.” She handed the canister to George. “Take a few pieces

for each of your friends, and divide the rest. Make sure you kids get a few extra. I don't need any. Neither does my daughter."

The younger woman—whose hair was nonetheless as white as snow—gave a little shriek and reached for the canister. "Mother, are you *crazy*?"

"*Stop* it, Norma," her mother said. "I know what I'm doing."

For a moment there was stunned silence in the plane. George cleared his throat as if he were about to make a speech. His instinct was to milk a moment like this for all it was worth. Instead, he opened the box and distributed the fruit, giving a few extra pieces to Spider and Liam. They had the biggest appetites in the group.

Later, when the Knights of the Square Table were back around the campfire, everyone was quiet. George figured they were all amazed by what had happened.

Finally Liam said quietly, "This isn't how it's supposed to happen, you know. The longer we're here, the more savage we're supposed to become."

"Yeah," Alexis said. "I guess we all read *Lord of the Flies* in advanced eighth-grade English."

"Our community is supposed to sink to into chaos," Liam said. "Our baser instincts are supposed to take over."

"We haven't been here long," Cindy said. "It could still happen."

The Knights of the Square Table decided to sleep that night in the cargo hold on cushions. The good part was they could stretch out. Also the place was small enough so that it didn't take many rocks to keep it warm. The bad part was that people coming from the plane might step on them.

As it turned out, they all slept comfortably. Not many people left the plane, and they slept far enough from the door so they weren't bothered. Liam was the first one up in the morning. He woke up feeling cold. The fire had gone out. He wiggled out of his blanket, stepped out of the cargo hold, and took a handful of the dried-up twigs and grass they'd stashed inside the cargo hold. He pushed aside the ashes until he uncovered warm embers. He put the twigs and grass on the embers and blew softly.

Just like magic, flames sprang up. It worked! This was *great!* They could conserve their matches for emergencies. He fed twigs and leaves into the fire to build it back up so the others could wake up to a warm fire.

The skies were cloudy, but the clouds were

wispier and whiter. Gone were the dark storm clouds of the day before. If the sky would clear up, a rescue plane might find them. He stretched and waited for the others to wake up, eager to get started.

Spider was the next one awake. He stretched himself from his blanket and looked at the fire, already blazing. He smiled and gave Liam two thumbs up.

“Let’s go fishing,” Spider whispered.

“All right,” Liam said.

“We need something to eat,” Spider whispered. He reached into Natalie’s bag and took a handful of almonds, then handed the bag to Liam. “Natalie won’t mind.”

Liam took a handful and popped them into his mouth, then put another handful into his pocket. He filled his water bottle with the drinking water from the pan.

A few passengers came through the cargo hold, no doubt leaving the plane to look for a secluded bush to use for a toilet. Alexis sat up and stretched. “Where are you going?” she whispered.

“Fishing!” Spider whispered back. “Wanna come?”

“Sure,” she said.

They hiked to the stream, then went to the place where the stream narrowed enough to stretch their net across. Alexis and Liam held the net on one side, Spider on the other. Then they waited.

The first few fish that came into their net wiggled so hard they got away. At last, though, a fish about

ten inches long hit the net and Spider was able to grab hold of the net and fling the fish clear out of the water.

Alexis grabbed a spare laundry bag, ran to the fish, and bagged him.

“Way to go,” Spider said. “See, fishing is fun.”

“Sorry,” Alexis said, “but I don’t call it fun. I call it better than being hungry.”

“A few more that size,” Liam said, “and we’ll be in great shape!”

Spider looked closely at the fish and said, “It’s salmon!”

They took the net back to the stream, stretched it across the opening again, and went back to waiting. Some of the clouds to the west parted, revealing the moon not too far from the horizon.

It took a long time, probably twenty minutes or more, before they got another fish, this one much smaller. Meanwhile, Liam kept checking the position of the moon.

“Dude,” Spider said, “why do you keep looking at the moon?”

“The encyclopedia said low tide corresponds with moonrise and moonset. I figure there must be tide pools on this island, with all the rocks and boulders on the beach.”

“That is a good idea,” Spider said. “I can tell you, Liam, with a brain like yours, one day you’ll be earning the big bucks.”

“Nah,” he said. He wasn’t particularly enjoying his programming class, and from what his parents



said, coding was the way to earn big bucks. “I just want to play the saxophone.”

While waiting for another fish to hit the net, they ate the rest of their almonds and drank the water Liam brought.

After they had seven good-sized salmon wrapped up and stashed in Spider’s backpack, they headed to the beach. They couldn’t see the moon anymore because of the clouds, but Liam figured the moon had either set, or was just about ready to set.

There was less snow than the day before, which made walking a little easier— except for the muddy slush in places. They arrived at the beach. The water had receded at least fifteen feet. The rocks and boulders were wet, covered with barnacles and seaweed.

“Look,” Alexis said, and pointed out toward the sea. There on a large rock was a cluster of seals.

They walked out on the rocks. After crossing about fifteen feet of rocks, Alexis said, “There are more.” She pointed to the right. Sure enough, another cluster of seals was on a low rock jutting out of the sea.

Alexis had no trouble walking across the slick rocks. She was almost as sure-footed as Spider. Liam, though, was so shaky that Spider said, “Look, bro, you wait right here. Alexis and I can check it out. It looks to me like there could be a tide pool just past those rocks.”

“All right,” Liam said. He stood on a rock and watched as Spider and Alexis climbed easily over the

rocks. They reached the tide pool and bent to look. Alexis shouted, “Wow!”

Spider turned back and waved to Liam. “Dude!” he cried. “You gotta come see this! Take your time. The rocks are wet. But wait until you see!”

Liam arrived and looked down. The tide pool at his feet was teeming with life. There were starfish of different shades of orange, sea anemone, and lots and lots of seaweed. Darting across the bottom were crabs of the palest shade of gray, so pale they seemed to be a transparent, translucent white. Spider was right. The sight was amazing. Liam looked around. There were tide pools scattered as far as they could see.

“They’re toad crabs,” Spider said.

“Are they edible?” Liam asked.

“Yup,” Spider said. “But you have to boil them live, like the mussels. I’m not sure how we’re going to catch them. But it can’t be *too* hard. Can’t be harder than getting fish out of that stream.”

“At least we can get the seaweed,” Alexis said. “Tons of it. Plenty for everyone.”

They took off their gloves, rolled up their sleeves, reached into the water, and pulled up seaweed.

Pulling up the seaweed and filling the bag was ridiculously, absurdly easy. They filled two garbage bags with as much seaweed as they could without risking the bags breaking. Even with eighty people, this was surely enough for at least one full meal for everyone, maybe more.

“Pulling this stuff up,” Spider said, “is almost as

easy as opening a full refrigerator and taking out a gallon of milk, a loaf of bread, and a jar of peanut butter.”

“Well, not quite,” Alexis told him.

“I’m really hungry now,” Spider said. “Let’s go back.”

It was definitely time to go. They’d been gone longer than they had planned. The others might worry. But none of them moved. The sight of the tide pool teeming with life was so stunning they stood for a long time, just looking.

Quietly, Liam said, “I could stay here.”

“I know what you mean,” Spider said. “Me, too.”

Alexis, amazed, looked closely at both of them to see if she correctly caught their meaning. She had. They wanted to stay here, on this island.

And not go home.

\* \* \*

After breakfast, the three girls—Natalie, Alexis, and Cindy—walked up to the hot spring to wash. Before going back, they sat on the rocks, rolled up their pants legs, and dangled their feet into the water.

The hot water was so soothing, even with its pungent metallic smell, that Alexis relaxed. It was hard not to agree with Spider and Liam: if they had to get stranded somewhere, they’d lucked out with this island. When you considered the fact that the world might be on the brink of a nuclear war, the island seemed that much calmer and more peaceful.

According to Baxter family legend, Alexis's great-great-great (she wasn't sure how many *greats*) grandfather had come to San Francisco in 1849, a dirt-poor young man from the Ozarks seeking his fortune in the gold rush. He didn't strike it rich, but he found enough gold to get himself to San Francisco. Once he had a taste of life in San Francisco, which even by then, was a good-sized-city, he had no desire to return to the hills of Arkansas.

Alexis's great-grandfather became a builder in the 1950s, when the San Francisco's Sunset district was still sparsely populated and consisted mostly of sand dunes and coastal scrub. He started out as a hired hand for an established builder named Henry Doelger. After a while, Alexis's great-grandfather knew enough about building to start his own company. Mostly he built single-family row houses. He built several apartment buildings as well.

Great-Grandpa Baxter kept several of the apartment buildings for rental income. By the 1970s, rents in San Francisco were rising quickly. By 1980, he could call himself a millionaire.

Alexis's father inherited two of the buildings.

Everyone knew Liam's parents were rich because he lived in a big fancy house. Alexis, on the other hand, lived in the much more modest Sunset district, in an apartment building where people rented. What nobody knew was that her parents owned the building *and* another on the block.

Alexis's father was content to spend his days fixing leaky plumbing, and repainting and repairing apartments when they were vacated. He needed no other job. He dressed for work each day in carpenter's overalls splattered with paint. The tool belt around his waist and the keys on his ring clanked when he walked. Her mother did the paperwork and balanced the checkbook and figured out how to invest the money they collected from the tenants.

Her father never evicted anyone who ran into trouble and couldn't pay. He just gave them jobs around the complex. They always had several tenants who weren't paying.

Alexis grew up playing with the other children in the building. Most of her playmates had no idea that her father owned the building in which they all lived. Her family lived a block from a main streetcar line, so they didn't even own a car. Alexis approved of living modestly.

Alexis believed she'd learned about social justice from her parents, and that was why she took such a keen interest in Veronica.

For example, later that morning while she and the others were sitting by the fire, cooking seaweed soup,

Veronica came through the cargo hold, jumped to the ground, and walked briskly away from the plane. Alexis could see that nobody paid much attention to Veronica. People were always leaving the plane to find a place to use for a toilet. But Alexis watched and wondered where Veronica was going.

Two women came from the cabin and said, “Have either of you seen Veronica? We’re supposed to be keeping an eye on her.”

“She went that way,” Alexis said, pointing in the direction Veronica had gone.

“By herself?” asked one of the women.

“Yup,” Alexis said.

Evidently satisfied that Veronica couldn’t do any harm off by herself, the women returned to the cabin.

One of the passengers, a woman by the fire, watched George stirring the pot and said, “Why don’t I find the thought of seaweed appetizing?”

“That’s because in English, it’s called *seaweed*,” George said. “Think of it as sea *vegetables* and your mouth will be watering.”

“Sorry, dude,” Spider said. “My mouth waters when I think of gummy bears. And Italian ice. And Chips Ahoy cookies. My mouth does *not* water when I think of vegetables.”

George handed Alexis her cup of soup. She smelled it, and took a taste. George was right. Seaweed soup tasted good. The smell was odd, reminding her of the beach—sandy, salty, fishy, a scent like iodine. It just didn’t smell like food. But the

taste was mild and savory.

A woman returned from a walk in the woods and put an armful of branches down on the pile. “*Danke*,” George said to her.

“*Bitte sehr*,” the woman responded, and climbed into the cargo hold and up into the cabin.

“I didn’t know you spoke German,” Cindy said.

“Just a few words,” George said.

“Haven’t you heard him?” Alexis asked. “He’s been practicing with that German couple.”

“Call me weird,” George said, “but I *like* languages!”

Spider, who was then counting how many crabs he had in his bucket, looked up and said, “How many times do I have to tell you guys? *Weird* has no meaning on a chess team!”

Natalie laughed. “If anyone here *isn’t* weird, it’s George. He’s as normal as can be.”

“Yeah, right,” Spider said. “He’s just an ordinary guy. Nothing unusual about him. Being fluent in four languages, just your everyday guy.”

“I’m not fluent in *four* languages.” George said. Everyone waited. In a quieter voice, with less bravado, he said, “Only *three*: Mandarin, Cantonese, and Taiwanese.”

“And Spanish,” Spider said.

“I am not fluent in Spanish,” George said. “Just what I learned in school.”

“And German,” Spider said.

“A few words, that’s all,” George said. “A few words isn’t fluent.”

“George,” Spider said sternly. “Since when are *you* modest? Natalie’s the modest one.”

“I am not modest,” George said. “I am truthful. If you had my relatives, you’d know Mandarin, Cantonese, and Taiwanese too. If I said I was fluent in German, you might hand me something to read, and I wouldn’t be able to, unless it was real simple. Look, I admit that I’m good with languages. I just don’t know all that many, especially when you consider how many languages there are out there.”

Spider gave George an amazed look.

It was only after everyone on board had dipped their cups into the pot of soup several times and sat back satisfied that Alexis realized Veronica had never returned. Curious, she went up to look in the cabin. Her seat was empty. “Did Veronica ever come back?” she asked the people in the nearby seats.

“I haven’t seen her for a while,” someone said.

Alexis decided to go look for her. She didn’t tell anyone what she was doing, though. When she marched away from the plane, people would just assume she was searching for a place to use for a toilet.

The terrain in this direction was flat with large boulders and only the slightest hills. Alexis could see a long way in every direction. Unless someone squatted down behind a boulder, there was no place to hide. Veronica was nowhere in sight.

Alexis searched first in one direction, then another. She took care to keep her bearing so she wouldn’t get turned around and lost. She was about



to give up and head back to the plane when she spotted Veronica sitting in the snow, leaning against a large rock. She was hugging her legs, resting her forehead on her knees, a posture that suggested utter despair. Her handbag was next to her in the snow.

Alexis walked over to her. "Veronica?"

"Go away," Veronica said.

"You're going to freeze out here."

"Would you just leave, please?"

Alexis stood there, considering. She put her hands on her hips and said, "Veronica, can you please stop being so difficult?"

"No, actually, I can't. Is there anything you want to know, Miss Fix-Everything?"

"You need to tell me what's wrong," Alexis said. "This is just kind of weird. Did you steal something else?"

Veronica didn't move. Alexis took that to mean *yes*.

"I'm going to look in your purse to see what you stole, okay?"

"Just go *away*."

Alexis reached down and picked up Veronica's purse. Alexis hesitated. Veronica didn't move. So Alexis unzipped the purse and looked inside. There wasn't much there: a package of tissues, a set of keys, and a wallet. Alexis didn't bother looking in the wallet. Then she saw an empty prescription bottle.

"What's this for?" Alexis asked.

"Go *away*."

An empty medicine bottle was not a good sign.

“What’s this for?” Alexis asked, showing her the empty medicine bottle.

“Can you just mind your own business?”

“I *could*,” Alexis said. “But I don’t want to. I want to know what’s wrong.”

“What’s it to you?”

That was a good question. What was it to Alexis? She wasn’t quite sure. There was something about Veronica that aroused her curiosity, and also her pity. Alexis had a pretty good sense of things, and her sense was that Veronica was deeply troubled by something. Not that she didn’t have a good reason to be troubled, of course. If you thought about it, they all had a good reason to be troubled, stranded on an island for who knew how long.

Alexis tried to read the writing on the medicine bottle. She puzzled over the writing for a moment before realizing it was written in German.

“What kind of medicine was in here?” Alexis asked.

“My psycho meds, okay? Now are you happy?”

“Are you really a psycho?” Alexis asked.

“Obviously someone thinks so.”

“What kind of psycho?” Alexis asked.

“What are you, a newspaper reporter?”

“Well, you don’t have to get nasty about it.”

Veronica slumped down further and put her head on her knees. She looked small and weak and helpless. The problem was, Alexis just couldn’t get used to thinking of Veronica—the *thief!*—as weak and helpless. Even if she claimed to be psycho with

an empty medicine bottle as proof.

Alexis looked back into her purse. Inside was a folded piece of paper. She unfolded it and saw that it had the name and address of a clinic in Switzerland across the top. “You were in Europe to see a doctor?” Alexis asked.

“So now you know everything, Miss Snoop. My aunt came up with the money to send me. She thought it would help. Now are you happy?”

“Look, Veronica. You need to come back. You can’t just die out here.”

“Who says I can’t?”

She had a point there. Some of the passengers had *wanted* to throw her out. Veronica’s shoulders were hunched as if she genuinely wanted to die. Alexis just couldn’t understand it. She searched for something to say, but felt genuinely stumped. At last, she said, “Just think how bad your mom would feel. And your aunt.”

Veronica lifted her head and gave Alexis another one of those amused, penetrating stares. Veronica’s eyes had dark circles. Her skin was very pale.

“You really are something else,” Veronica said. “You act all tough, but you’re really a softie, aren’t you?”

Alexis folded her arms across her chest. Nobody in her entire life had ever called her a softie. She was used to being called abrasive and tough and outspoken. She was stocky and walked with a swagger. She kept her little sister in line. A *softie*? Pffft. Then she remembered the fish thrashing out

their last moments of life. Okay, maybe she was a *little* bit of a softie.

“I just think you need to come back.”

Alexis reached out her hand. For a long time, Veronica didn't move. Alexis shifted her weight and said, “Come on.” She reached down, took Veronica by the hand, and pulled her to her feet.

They walked back together.

\* \* \*

Each morning, Cindy put a pebble into a cup to mark the passing of time. The morning she dropped the seventh pebble into the cup, she realized how much had changed. And it wasn't just the abundance of food.

First, everyone was much more relaxed. The mother of the two girls relented and let the girls play in the snow. Well, why not? They had a warm fire now. If the girls got cold and wet, they could always dry off. A few people built another fire near several large boulders that they used for drying clothes—they put the clothing on the nearby rocks, kept wood on the fire, and before long, their clothing was dry. People found their own large rocks to heat up and keep close to them in the plane. Anyone who wanted warm water for washing could walk up the hill to the hot spring.

Even Cindy had adjusted to what felt like living in a fishbowl. She, the girl who needed so much time alone, had almost no privacy. Sometimes she even went with Natalie or Alexis to find a place to use for

a toilet and to change clothes. Oddly enough, not only did she get used to living this way, she stopped feeling as shy, even with passengers she hardly knew. She joined in conversations about the Asian missile crisis, and she speculated with passengers about when a rescue might come. She listened eagerly when the pilot told a group that he thought he and a few others may have gotten the electronics system working well enough to send a few signals.

Veronica came and went without anyone paying much attention to her. What could she steal at this point? Crabs? There were plenty in the tide pools. Fish? There were plenty in the stream. In fact, a little later when Joel came out and said he was hungry, George boiled some water and cooked him some mussels.

“Unbelievable, isn’t it?” Cindy said. “We have enough food. Almost everyone is helping. Veronica hasn’t stolen anything for a while.”

“Yeah,” Natalie said. “I keep waiting for something to go wrong.”

As if to emphasize that, for a brief moment, anyway, life on Mars was perfect, Veronica walked by on her way to the cabin. She patted Alexis’s shoulder affectionately as she passed and said, “Hey, kiddo!”

After she’d climbed back into the plane, Natalie and Cindy both looked at Alexis. “*Kiddo?*” Natalie asked. “She called you *kiddo?*”

“Yeah,” Alexis said. “We’re buddies now.”

“So what’s up with her?” Natalie asked. “What’s her problem?”

“She’s not well,” Alexis said. “But I really can’t say anymore. It wouldn’t be right.”

*Something is going to go wrong, Cindy thought. I just know it. Things are too good. They can’t stay this way.*

The sun hadn't yet risen, and the Knights of the Square Table were on their way to the tide pools.

They'd been on the island now for ten days. Nobody talked anymore about when the rescue might come. Some people even started using the word *if* when they talked about a rescue, instead of *when*. By now, their families probably assumed they were dead.

They climbed a slight hill. Once they were at the top, they could see the ocean. They were facing west, so the horizon was still dark. There was enough light, though, to see the white of the gently breaking waves. A cold wind blew. Natalie pulled her coat up so that the collar protected her face.

They walked until they reached the rocks, then climbed over them to the first tide pool. They all stood, staring.

"See how much food is in there?" Spider said. "We could live here a long time if we had to."

From a cluster of rocks came the sound of seals. Three seals had climbed on the rocks and were calling, "Ar! Ar!" A flock of pigeons lifted into the

air.

That was when Natalie heard the unmistakable sound of an airplane.

“Did you hear that?” Alexis said, gasping.

They all tipped their heads upward, scanning the skies. The sound of the airplane drew nearer.

“I hear it!” George said. “But I don’t see it. And that means it can’t see us.”

The drone of the plane was closer now. Suddenly, a small airplane broke through the clouds. It was so close you could see the wheels and propeller spinning in front. The airplane had a red band around the front, and red patches on the wings with a blue star set in a ring. The plane was too small to hold more than a few passengers.

Alexis whipped off her red knit hat and waved it at the plane. Natalie waved, too.

The plane circled the island twice and then flew northward, out of sight.

For a strange moment, Natalie felt abandoned. “Where did it go?”

“It’s going to get help,” Cindy said. “If it landed, it wouldn’t be able to take off. They’ll probably come back with helicopters, or if we’re not too far, a boat.”

Spider let out his breath in what sounded like a deep sigh. “I never built that igloo,” he said.

Natalie felt stunned. All along she’d assumed that the natural reaction to the sound of a rescue plane would be joy. What she saw in Spider’s face was regret. Liam and Spider exchanged glances. She saw the same regret on Liam’s face.



That was when she realized that she, too, would miss Mars. Perhaps it was easy to look back, now that a rescue was on its way, and think there had been something special about the time they'd spent here together, figuring out how to live and find food and take care of each other.

They all stood, staring northward, in the direction the plane had gone.

George cleared his throat. "Ladies and gentlemen," George said quietly. "Boys and girls. Members of the San Francisco all-star chess team. It looks like we're going home."

Now there was nothing overhead but clouds. The only sound was the cawing of seagulls.

“Maybe it *wasn't* a rescue plane,” George said.

“Yeah, right,” Alexis said. “Some plane just happened to be out for a pleasure cruise circling over an island in the North Atlantic.”

“Let’s go back,” George said, “and we’ll find out.”

They walked back to the plane in silence. When they came over a small hill and saw the plane in the valley with the door to the cargo hold open, they could see people opening and closing suitcases.

When they drew closer, one of the passengers in a business suit called out to them, “Did you see that airplane?”

“We saw,” George said. “Where’s Don?”

Spider turned to George. “Who is Don?”

“The pilot,” George said. “He said to call him Don. Look, there he is.” George pointed.

Don came around from the other side of the plane and waved to them. From his jubilant expression, it was clear he didn’t doubt the plane

they'd seen was on a rescue mission. "Pack only what you really need," he said. "Just a small carry-on bag. If helicopters come for us, we'll need to travel light, and be ready to go."

Don seemed too nervous to sit still. Or maybe he was just excited and relieved. It was hard to tell. He never stayed inside the plane for long. Every few minutes he climbed down through the cargo hold to see how everyone outside was doing.

Everyone was doing fine. The small children were playing in the snow. The passengers who had packed were sitting around the fire. Anyone who was thirsty dipped a cup into the pan of drinking water.

"I wish I could take some pictures," Spider said. "It's like a tropical island paradise. Except for the tropical part."

"Here," Alexis said, handing him her phone. "I had it shut down, so it should have some battery power left."

Spider powered up the phone, and walked around the plane, snapping pictures. Then he walked over to a small hill to take pictures from there.

Don squatted down by the fire and warmed his hands. "I've been expecting this each hour since we landed," he said, "but now that it's really happening, it seems too good to be true."

"I will be so happy to get off this island," said the mother of the small girls.

"I think we'll all be pretty happy," Don said. "Richard also needs a doctor, badly." Richard was the copilot.

That was when they heard the distant drone of helicopters coming from the north. At the sound, those who had been sitting around the fire stood up to watch. The small children stopped playing and gazed up at the sky. Passengers came from the plane.

Three helicopters broke through the clouds, followed by three more, then another two, for a total of eight. The noise was deafening, a steady pulsing of motors. The children and a few others clasped their hands over their ears. The sound made Cindy realize how quiet the island was.

The helicopters were gray with navy and crimson stripes. Cindy had never seen a helicopter up close. These were larger than she expected—the size of small buses, landing on metal legs that looked like skis.

The doors opened and one or two people came out of each helicopter, mostly men but a few women as well, all wearing the kind of green and gray army uniforms that looked like they'd been splattered with paint.

Don walked briskly forward to meet them. He and one of the men clasped each other as if they were familiar, but Cindy sensed they were perfect strangers overcome with emotion. They talked briefly. The helicopters, while somewhat quieter now, were still deafening.

Don came back to talk to the passengers. He had to shout to be heard over the helicopters. “Each of these helicopters can carry eighteen people,” he said. “We are about two hundred miles from an airport in

Iceland. The way these helicopters fly, we'll be there in under an hour."

He paused for cheering and clapping. One of the women wiped tears from her face.

The first to board were the elderly, the injured copilot, and the families with small children. The Knights of the Square Table boarded the second helicopter with Veronica and eleven others. A small white ladder with only three rungs led to the open door. Cindy was first to climb aboard. A man in uniform helped her up. She stepped inside, surprised by what she saw. The interior was much more luxurious than she expected. "Wow!" she said.

"Yup, these are real nice whirlybirds," said the man in uniform.

The inside looked like a small city bus, but with plush, cushioned seats. There were two seats on each side of the aisle, as in a small airplane. Small square windows lined the sides. Cindy walked all the way forward and sat next to the window in the row directly behind the pilot. Natalie sat next to her. Alexis and Liam were in the first row on the other side of the aisle. Spider and George sat just behind Cindy and Natalie.

A man in a uniform whom Cindy took to be the pilot boarded last and closed the door. He was youngish and tall with blond hair. He stood facing the passengers and said, "Welcome! We are sure happy to see all of you! We've been searching for ten days."

The passengers clapped.

“Everyone buckle in,” the pilot said. “We have a phone to pass around, and Red Cross care packages for everyone. This is my copilot Lieutenant Simpson. Once we’re on our way, he’ll pass around the packages and everyone will get a turn to make a phone call. We’ll let the kids traveling alone use the phone first, okay? I happen to know there are some *very* worried parents out there.”

Cindy watched as the pilot and copilot buckled themselves into their seats, then pushed buttons and pulled levers. When they lifted straight up into the air, the upward motion of the helicopter pushed her down into her seat. She had the strangest sensation that they were magically levitating. She looked out the window. From the air, she saw just how small the island was, and how jagged the coastline. Even from here, she could see the steam rising from the hot spring.

Once they’d lifted high enough so that they could no longer see the island through the clouds, Natalie said, “Good-bye, Mars!”

“Mars?” the copilot asked without turning around.

“That’s what we called the island,” George said. “Does it have a real name?”

“I don’t believe this island is on any map,” said the copilot. “If it ever did have a name, I’m sure nobody knows it.”

The copilot took out a few cardboard cartons and said, “Packages from the Red Cross. Pass these around! There’s plenty!”

He handed one carton to Natalie and another to Alexis, who sat just across the aisle from Natalie. Inside was a sandwich consisting of two slices of soft white bread, a slice of bologna, and a packet of mustard.

Next the copilot handed Cindy a black box connected to the pilot's dashboard by a coiling wire. Attached to the box was a phone. "Everyone take a turn."

Cindy dialed her mother's cell phone number. When her mother said hello, Cindy said, "Mom, it's me!"

"It's *Cindy!*" her mother said to someone. The connection was bad, but Cindy could hear shouting and whooping in the background. It sounded like a dozen people, at least.

"Oh, Cindy!" Her mother said, "It is so good to talk to you. Are you *okay?*"

Her mother's voice sounded faint and far away.

"I'm fine!" Cindy said.

"What did you say? I could hardly hear you!"

"I'm fine!" Cindy shouted.

"What did you *eat?*" her mother asked. "How did you *manage?*"

"We caught fish," Cindy shouted. "We found mussels. We built a fire. We found a hot spring. I've gotta go, Mom! It's someone else's turn! We're on our way back! I'm in a helicopter going to Iceland. Bye!"

She hung up, and handed the phone to Natalie, who dialed and said, "Hi, Dad!" Soon after, she, too,

shouted, “We did fine! We caught fish! We found mussels!”

The copilot turned and looked around. “Mussels, huh? No wonder people aren’t so hungry for bologna with mustard on white bread. Mussels on the half shell sounds better, if you ask me.”

“It wasn’t bad at all,” Spider told him. “It goes great with seaweed soup. Served in the best restaurants on Mars.”

When it was Alexis’s turn to make a phone call, she, too, said, “We did fine! We caught fish! We found mussels.”

“We should have sent out a group message!” Spider said.

“Reporters are going to be asking you the same questions,” the copilot said.

“Speaking of reporters,” Cindy said. “Are there any newspapers around?”

“I have yesterday’s paper,” said the copilot. “Here.” He reached into a satchel and pulled out a folded newspaper. “I’m finished with it. You can have it. You and your friends have been on the front pages since last week.”

Cindy opened the newspaper to the front page. The headline ran: “Search for Flight 690 enters the tenth day.”

From the article, Cindy learned that investigators had known from the nature of the signals received from the transmitter that the airplane had electronic failure. They also knew that, just before losing touch, the plane had started a gradual decline. They



concluded, therefore, that as soon as the avionics system showed signs of failure, the pilot immediately looked for a place to land. When, on the fourth day, the investigators detected weak radio signals, they believed the airplane was intact, and most likely off the southern coast of Greenland. After concluding the plane was not in waters near Greenland, they shifted their search toward Iceland.

The second article was about the crisis with the nuclear bomb. According to the article, the people of the Democratic Republic felt they were being crushed by hostile economic policies and they were tired of it. They were ready to strike out.

Cindy didn't believe the people of the country were ready to shoot off a nuclear missile knowing there'd be plenty of retaliation—unless a whole country was crazy and suicidal, and that just didn't sound right to her. On the second page was a photo of the nuclear bomb. The missile looked like a gigantic bullet. It was mounted in a horizontal position on top of a stout one-story building, resting on what looked like an enormous rectangular box. The whole apparatus seemed rickety. The rooftop launchpad looked like it was made in someone's backyard.

When Cindy realized that Natalie was reading the paper, too, she shifted so Natalie could see better. "It just looks so *crude*," Cindy said to Natalie.

"It's not the most developed country," Natalie said. "But they have a lot of smart people, and a few good labs and factories. I guess if you get the

material, a huge bomb isn't all that hard to make.”

Spider, listening from behind, said, “That’s one way to get the attention of your neighbors.”

“And the whole world,” George said. To Cindy, he said, “Can I see the paper after you?”

“Sure,” she said, handing it to him.

She didn’t get the newspaper back until the copilot announced they were landing. She folded it and put it in her handbag. She watched out the window. When they broke through the clouds, she saw that the terrain was hilly, with mountains not far away, still mostly covered with snow. The peaks, like the mountains on the island, seemed mostly made of dark rocks jutting from the snow.

Occasionally she opened the newspaper and looked back at the article.

“Why do you keep looking at that bomb?” Natalie asked.

Cindy hesitated. If anyone except Natalie had asked, she might not have said anything, but Natalie was not the type to judge others harshly. “I think we can do something about this,” Cindy whispered.

It took Natalie a moment to answer. She was probably trying to figure out whether Cindy was serious. At last, Natalie whispered, “About that bomb?”

“Yes.”

“What can we possibly do?”

“I don’t know yet.”

After the helicopter landed, Cindy saw a crowd of about twenty people just outside a glass door. Some had cameras.

“They’ll hold the reporters back so nobody will talk to you,” the pilot said. “Until you’re all home, the pilot of your flight will speak for the group. But the reporters will be snapping pictures. Are you all okay with that?”

There was murmuring of “yes,” and “we’re fine.”

“Look how many there are!” one of the women said.

“They’re probably glad to be covering a story with a happy ending,” the copilot said. “Once we’re inside the terminal, someone will be there to lead you to the right plane. Ready, everyone?”

Again there was murmuring of “yes” and “sure!”

The copilot opened the door and a group of reporters standing behind a rope snapped pictures and shouted to them. Cindy was the last to climb out. She could see other passengers from Flight 690 were smiling and waving to the reporters. Cameras were clicking and flashing. Having her picture taken by a

bunch of reporters was, for Cindy, a very strange feeling. One of the reporters even called to her by name.

Special airplanes belonging to the United States Coast Guard were there to convey them home. About twenty passengers were flying all the way to San Francisco, including Veronica, whose final destination was Lodi, in California's central valley. Those heading to the West Coast had a plane to themselves.

On a counter, Cindy found a map of Iceland and the surrounding ocean. It was an ordinary map, one a tourist might buy for a few dollars. She asked one of the men in uniform if there was a place she could buy one. "Take that one," he said. "I'm sure it's no problem."

She approached one of the helicopter pilots. "Excuse me," she said. "Can you show me on this map where the island was?"

"Certainly," he said. He took out a pencil and made an "x" in the ocean southwest of the mainland. "Somewhere around here," he said.

She thanked him. When they were called to board their plane, they walked past the group of reporters. Cindy tried not to look at them, but George smiled and waved.

They boarded the plane by climbing an outside staircase. There were enough seats for about sixty passengers, which meant there was enough room to put up the armrests and lie down across a few seats. Unlike the helicopter with its cockpit fully open to

view and the pilot and copilot sitting just an arm's reach away, this cockpit was separated from the rest of the plane. The door to the cockpit, though, was smaller and more lightweight than on a commercial airplane.

The Knights of the Square Table sat by themselves toward the back of the plane. Shortly after they boarded, a man in uniform gave them each a laptop computer with Internet access that plugged into their armrests. "You can write email," he said. "You can send text messages. You can surf the web."

"Cool!" said George. "Thanks!"

"When you get hungry, there are sandwiches and drinks in the refrigerator in the back of the plane. There's enough for everyone."

Immediately most of the passengers went to get their sandwiches, even though they probably weren't hungry yet. Then it occurred to Alexis: it was because Veronica was on board. Well, from where Alexis sat, she could keep an eye on the refrigerator and Veronica. She intended to make sure Veronica took one sandwich, and only one.

They all turned on their computers and either opened web browsers or sent text messages and email to family and friends.

Soon Spider and Liam were hungry. The sandwiches they found in the refrigerator were freshly made and delicious—dark, thick-crust bread, creamy cheese, and crisp cucumbers. Glass bottles contained juices and flavored water.

Another passenger, a man, came to get his

sandwich. He stopped by and said, "I always meant to ask. How did you kids do in your tournament?"

"Not as good as we could have," George said. "We came in sixth."

"Sixth in an international chess tournament is great!" the man said.

"Spider was positive we were going to come in first," Natalie said. "He's the team optimist."

"Next year we *will* come in first," Spider said. "Alexis went all the way through the finals. Next year, all of us will."

"You may have to replace me on the team," Natalie said. "If you want to win." To the man, she said, "I lost my second game and got disqualified pretty quickly."

"No one is replacing you," Spider said. "We just have to help you develop your killer instincts."

"Ha," Natalie said. "Good luck with that."

After the man returned to his seat, and the six of them were alone again, George said, "Look what Don said about us!"

George had been checking the news blogs. Aloud, he read:

*"The younger passengers were largely responsible for the survival of the group," said pilot Donald Bradford of Flight 690. By younger he meant very young: The ninth-grade chess team heading home from a tournament in Germany. "They didn't panic," said the pilot. "They were the ones who figured out how we could find food and stay warm."*

“That was cool of him,” Liam said.

“Hey,” Natalie said. “I got an email from a reporter.”

“I got one, too,” Liam said.

There was a clicking of keyboards as they all checked their email. They’d all received email to their school accounts from reporters, asking if they would answer some interview questions. Spider looked over the questions. The reporter wanted lots of details: What happened when the plane ran into trouble? How had they managed on a very cold, very remote island?

“We’re not supposed to answer these, right?” Natalie asked. “Don is supposed to talk for everyone until we get home.”

“That just means we shouldn’t send them now,” George said. “But we can work on our answers.”

Spider had no desire whatsoever to work on answers. “I nominate George to speak for the group,” he said. “How about it, George? Do you mind?”

“That’s fine,” George said. “I’m the team captain. But if someone else wants to, I don’t mind.” The others were happy to let him represent them all. So George read the first question carefully and began composing an answer.

\* \* \*

It was late afternoon in California when they approached San Francisco. The sight of the city, so

white and sparkling in the sunlight, caused Natalie to draw in her breath. There were all the familiar landmark buildings: Coit Tower, the peak of the Transamerica Pyramid building, the clock tower on the Ferry Building. She could see the Bay Bridge and, further back, the Golden Gate Bridge. Nothing looked real from up here. The bridges were like sculptures, graceful and flowing. The entire city looked as unreal as the Emerald City, or a work of art encased in a glass globe, so peaceful and lovely.

They landed at the San Francisco Coast Guard air station just south of the city.

As they coasted on the runway, the pilot welcomed them to San Francisco. Once at the gate, they gathered their stuff and walked through the boarding bridge to the terminal.

Stepping into the terminal felt like walking into a surprise party. There were shouts and squeals, streamers and balloons, and homemade “welcome home” banners. All their family members were there—parents, siblings, grandparents, cousins—anyone related to them had been allowed in.

Cindy was swept into a group hug with her parents and sister and grandparents. Everyone was talking and laughing. She learned that the families had been in constant contact as they waited for news, so they’d gotten to know each other. Once Liam’s parents learned the chess team was on its way to Iceland, they boarded the next plane heading for San Francisco to meet him there.

As everyone around her talked and laughed,



Cindy noticed that a television mounted on the wall was turned to a news station. The banner said, "Asian Missile Crisis." People frequently looked toward the screen nervously. Cindy was curious about what the announcer was saying, and wanted to slip away to listen.

Just then, though, an older woman walked briskly to the television, reached up, and turned it off. "Who needs bad news right now?" she asked nobody in particular.

"Cindy," her mother said. "I have a surprise for you."

Her mother took out a box and handed it to her. Inside was a cell phone.

"I want to be able to call you any time," her mother told her.

"That will work," Spider said. "As long as she's not stranded on a remote island in the North Atlantic."

"Look," Natalie said. "I got one, too."

Cindy programmed Natalie's phone number into her phone. Soon Natalie had text messages from both Cindy and Alexis.

Spider stood watching. He was trying to think of a way to get Natalie's phone number without being too obvious about it.

He decided on the open approach. He stepped forward and said, "Let me give you guys my number!" He reached for Cindy's phone first. She handed it to him and said, "Sure." Spider put his name and number into Cindy's contacts. Then he

said, “What’s your number? My phone is in my suitcase.”

She wrote her number on a piece of paper.

That done, he turned to Natalie and handed her the paper, so she could write her number, too. He watched as she wrote her number. Then he tucked the paper into his pocket, feeling clever and pleased with himself.

\* \* \*

George and Liam were at the terminal vending machines, buying candy bars. Cindy went to join them. She had a newspaper in her hand.

“Look,” she said, showing them a photograph in the evening paper.

“I know,” George said. “I saw that on the news in the plane.”

“I saw it, too,” Liam said.

The latest—which Cindy hadn’t seen until she picked up a copy of that day’s newspaper that someone had left on one of the chairs—was a change in the position of the missile. The missile was no longer resting horizontally on the metal rectangular launchpad. It was now lifted at about a forty-five degree angle, obviously positioned for launching. Other countries responded by moving nuclear submarines to the Pacific just off the Asian coast.

Cindy felt ready to tell Liam and George what she thought. “We need to do something about this,” she said.

George and Liam looked blankly at her. Then

Liam said, “*We* need to do something about *this* bomb?” He pointed to the photograph in the newspaper.

“Yes,” she said.

George and Liam exchanged glances. Cindy could see plainly from their expressions what they thought.

They thought she was crazy.

If you've ever traveled halfway across the world by plane, you know the feeling of jet lag. It's an exhaustion like no other. That special tiredness hit Liam just about the time the sun was setting. He was sitting in a restaurant with his parents, having dinner. His eyes kept closing. He'd jerk to wake himself back up.

It had been a very long day, literally. He'd woken up that morning at the crack of dawn more than seventeen hours earlier, and the sun still hadn't set.

Liam's father handed him the dessert menu when the exhaustion hit him as powerfully as if he'd swallowed a sleeping potion. He simply could not keep himself awake.

"We'd better get him to bed," his mother told his father.

He fell asleep during the drive home. When they arrived, his father nudged him to wake him up. "I

can't carry you to your bed," his father said. "I'd like to, but you've gotten way too big."

So Liam leaned on his father for support, walked up the two flights of stairs to his bedroom, and collapsed fully dressed on his bed. He was too tired to change clothes, and too tired to appreciate sleeping in a real bed for the first time in ten days.

His mother's words, though, did register on his weary brain when she said, "And don't worry about school tomorrow. Sleep as late as you need to. I don't think any of you will be expected at school."

\* \* \*

Liam woke up the next morning to a text message from Cindy. She sent the message to him and George. "I think we should call a meeting and figure out what to do about that bomb."

Liam knew right away why she had sent the message to him and George. She wanted George to call the meeting because he was the team captain, and she wanted the meeting at Liam's house.

His house was the perfect place for a meeting, particularly if Cindy had some sort of completely zany idea. Here they could have privacy. He knew without checking that his parents were at home, waiting for him to wake up so they could eat breakfast together. They might hang around a while, but then they'd go to work, as usual. Most weeks, they worked seven days.

Something strange had gotten into Cindy, that was for sure. She was usually so level-headed. She

just didn't seem the type to get bizarre ideas. Maybe being on the island had inflated her self-confidence. Maybe she thought that because they'd solved all those problems on the island they were suddenly qualified to solve an international crisis. But solving an international crisis was much harder than, say, figuring out how to get fish out of a stream or keep a plane warm so that stranded passengers wouldn't freeze to death. The word that came to him was *grandiose*. And frankly, a little crazy.

Liam stretched himself awake. Before responding to her text, he opened the news app on his phone to read the latest update on the crisis. International peacekeeping groups were unable to solve the crisis. Diplomacy was not working. Nobody knew what to do.

And Cindy thought *they* would know what to do?

He sent George a text message saying, "I think she's nuts but oh well."

George wrote back, "May as well have a meeting. Your parents will be at work, right?"

"Will be soon," Liam wrote back. "I'll let you know when. Tell everyone to meet here." He next checked his email. He received four more email requests from reporters, asking for an interview. He forwarded the messages to George. Then he went downstairs, where his parents were waiting for him for breakfast.

\* \* \*

Spider woke up with a start to realize he wasn't on

the island. He was in the bedroom he shared with his brother. What he felt was intense disappointment, and not just because he preferred the outdoors to school. He'd gotten used to seeing Natalie and talking to her every day. He wished they went to the same school, or even lived in the same part of town. He lived in North Beach. She lived way over in the Mission area. A bus went directly there, but it wasn't like he could say he happened to be passing by her house.

He'd gotten so used to sleeping in brisk, icy air near a campfire, the air in his room seemed stale and close. How strange not to stretch himself awake, and then look around to see if his buddies were up yet.

He reached for his phone, and saw he already had a text message from George: *We're having a special meeting of the Knights of the Square Table at Liam's house at 10:00.*

Spider sprang from the bed and headed for the shower, whistling cheerfully.

He was soon ready to go. He walked out of his house, in the direction of Russian Hill. It was easy to get to Liam's house from Spider's—as long as you didn't mind walking straight up one of the steepest hills in San Francisco. He left his house, crossed Columbus, and headed straight up Filbert. Once he got to the top of the hill, he turned onto Jones and kept walking.

He stopped at the intersection of Pacific and Jones and ducked into the mini-market on the corner. He browsed through the fruit, keeping a

watch outside the windows.

He knew Natalie would come on the Muni-12 bus, and get off on this corner. There was a quicker way to get to Liam's from where she lived, but she'd have to take rapid transit, which cost more. He knew how she traveled. She rode in her father's taxi—he and both her uncles drove cabs—or she rode a bus paid for by her monthly student pass.

Just then the Muni-12 wheezed to a stop at the corner. He handed a dollar to the cashier and bought a banana, then pocketed the change. He peeled the banana and had eaten half when Natalie got off the bus.

He walked toward her. Anyone watching would think it a coincidence that he happened to be there. After all, they were going to the same place at the same time.

She saw him and waved. She waited while he crossed the street. He ate the last few bites of his banana, then dropped the peel into a trash can.

They greeted each other, and walked together toward Liam's house. Spider searched for something to say, but was at a complete loss. He didn't have much time. They'd be at Liam's in a few minutes. Should he wait? Maybe he could call her and do this on the phone. No, he wanted to know. So he summoned his courage and said, "Um, Natalie?"

He stopped walking. She stopped too, and looked at him.

*Now*, he told himself.

"Now that we're back, maybe we can do



something together—just us? I know a *great* path up to Coit Tower. Or we can just go to the park.”

She didn’t speak right away. She just looked at him sadly. Not the emotion he wanted to see.

“We could,” she said, but he knew from her tone and the way she was hesitating that she understood why he was asking, and she didn’t want to encourage him.

“Oh, Spider,” she said gently. “It’s not that I don’t like you a *lot*.”

“I understand,” he said. To his own ears, his voice sounded tense and too highly pitched. They continued walking.

He wanted to ask more questions. He wanted to ask if she had a boyfriend. He didn’t think she did. But he felt too nervous for questions like those. Also, once they turned the next corner, they were directly in front of Liam’s house, so there was no more chance to talk.

As Alexis rode on the streetcar toward Liam's house, she kept thinking something felt wrong, and not just the impending nuclear disaster in Asia. Other things felt wrong too. Not at home, of course. There all was well.

The night before, from the moment Alexis and her family arrived home from the airport, they'd had a steady stream of visitors. Friends and neighbors came to see Alexis and tell her how worried they had all been. When the jet lag started to hit her, her mom escorted people to the door, thanking them for coming, saying, "You can imagine Alexis is very tired. We're *so* happy you all came."

After their guests left and Alexis was ready for bed, she still didn't want to go to sleep, so she fought the exhaustion for a few more minutes so she could sit at the kitchen table with her parents and her sister. The table—built-in with cushioned benches—was just large enough for the four of them. It was their favorite place to sit in the evening. The art on the walls was mostly pictures Alexis and her sister had drawn when they were younger that her mother had

framed.

Alexis's mom fixed them all hot chocolate. Alexis enjoyed telling her parents and her sister the details of life on Mars, how they'd solved the problem of keeping everyone warm by heating rocks in a fire, and how they'd found food and melted ice for water. Everyone laughed when she told them Spider kept wanting to build an igloo.

They were sitting in the kitchen when Alexis's phone rang. The caller introduced herself as Tammy Hollick. "I'm Veronica's aunt," Tammy explained. "I'm calling to thank you for everything you did for Veronica on the plane. Veronica told me all about you."

She talked to Tammy for a few more minutes. When she hung up, she told her parents about Veronica. Her parents were sympathetic.

No, there was nothing wrong at home.

But now, riding the bus through the city to Liam's house after spending ten days on the island, everything seemed different. The city seemed dirtier and grittier. Take the homeless people, for example. The sight of people wearing rags and sleeping on the streets had always bothered her deeply. This morning, it bothered her even more. On Mars she would never have let anyone sleep outside in the cold, even the people she hadn't liked. She'd *threatened* not to share her food with people who were cruel to Veronica, but she could never really let people starve.

Pedestrians on the sidewalks of San Francisco got so used to stepping over homeless people they just

didn't seem to see them anymore. It was sad, and wrong. Her family did the things most families did. Each year they gave money to homeless shelters and charities. Each winter they gave warm winter coats for the coat drive. She and her sister donated toys for children who had none. But it seemed to Alexis that deeper solutions were needed.

She got off the streetcar and waited for the bus that went to Russian Hill. An app on her phone told her exactly when the bus would arrive. The bus came on time, stopping right in front of her. She got on and sat by a window. When she arrived at the bus stop nearest Liam's house, she had four blocks to walk.

She turned a corner and there, up ahead, were Natalie and Spider, walking together. Right away, she thought there was something strange about the way they were walking. They seemed awkward. They were walking together, but not looking at each other.

What could have happened in such a short time? Just yesterday they'd all been completely relaxed, with such an easy camaraderie it was as if they'd known each other forever instead of less than one year.

She caught up to them just in front of Liam's house. They greeted each other, and when they reached the door, Alexis rang the doorbell.

While they waited for Liam to buzz them in, Alexis said, "I got a bunch of email from reporters this morning, asking to interview me."

"Me, too," said Natalie. "I'm just sending everything to George."

Moments later, a buzzer sounded, indicating that they could push open the door and enter. Inside were what appeared to be real marble floors, with a marble tiled staircase leading to the main part of the house. A large glass chandelier hung overhead, reflected in the tall mirrors on the wall.

“I’d feel like a princess if I lived here,” Natalie said quietly.

To Alexis, the interior seemed austere and unfriendly. It was done in the modern style so popular in San Francisco. The surfaces were hard and cool—lots of tile, metal, and simple shapes. She thought it seemed big and empty. Alexis felt a little sorry for Liam in this big house without siblings, with parents who were usually at their offices.

From somewhere high up in the house, Liam shouted, “Come on up!”

At the top of the stairway was a living room with white furniture and framed multicolored paintings on the walls. The room looked like a spread from *Architectural Digest*.

“All the way up,” Liam shouted from higher in the house.

Another staircase led to an oval-shaped landing. Several bedrooms opened to the landing. One more flight led to a large room that was a combination office and library.

Cindy and George were already there, sitting around a sleek white table. A bowl of apples, a bowl of grapes, a glass pitcher with orange juice, and cups were on the table. Lining two walls were long, deeply

polished wooden desks. Three computers were set up on the desk lining the north-facing wall. Two other walls were lined with books.

Alexis and Spider sat down, but Natalie walked to the north-facing window.

She was feeling badly about the conversation with Spider. She supposed she'd known that he liked her that way, but she'd just avoided thinking about it. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt anyone's feelings.

From the window she could see the Golden Gate Bridge and rolling hills of Marin County across the bay. The house was high enough to have a panoramic view, but unlike the view from the plane, she was close enough to see the city pulsating with life: crowded sidewalks, cars, buses, and streetcars, boats on the water. From the plane the city had seemed like a fantasy world, an imaginary crystal city or a lovely sculpture. It had seemed restful.

From this vantage point, the city was anything but restful. While she couldn't hear the honking of cars or the clanking of the streetcar, she saw the clash of billboards and the exhaust from the cars and the posture of people in a hurry.

"All right," Alexis said. She put her hands flat on the table. "So what are we doing here?"

Natalie went to the table and sat down.

"I think we're having an executive board meeting," Spider said. "And if you ask me, this is the perfect place for an executive board meeting." He leaned back in his chair, put his feet up on the table,

and clasped his fingers behind his head with his elbows out.

“Okay,” George said, “I hereby call to order the executive board meeting of the Knights of the Square Table.” He tapped his fist on the table.

“What is the agenda?” Alexis asked.

“You tell them, Cindy,” George said.

Cindy said, “We’re here to think of a solution to the Asian missile crisis.”

“Dude!” Spider said. He put his feet back on the floor and sat upright. “*Seriously?*”

“I believe we can come up with something,” Cindy said.

They all looked at each other.

“How come you have so many computers?” Natalie asked Liam. “Are those mini-computers over there?” In Natalie’s house, there was one computer. She always had to wait her turn.

“My parents are in high tech,” Liam said. “Sales reps are always giving them samples of the latest models.”

Spider leaned forward and helped himself to an apple from the fruit bowl. For a few moments, the only sound was Spider munching his apple.

“Do you think that guy is really going to shoot off his missile?” Alexis asked.

“It’s looking that way,” Cindy said.

“In that case,” Spider said, giving his apple a shake for emphasis, “I think we should be figuring out how to get back to Mars.”

“Bro!” Liam said. “That’s not a bad idea.”

“Why isn’t the government having people prepare if there might be a big war?” Natalie asked.

“I don’t know if there’s much you *can* do to prepare,” George said. “You can stockpile food, but if the government says to do that, there will be a rush on grocery stores.”

“Yeah,” Cindy said. “I don’t think they want to create a panic.”

Spider leaned forward. “I make a motion,” he said, “if we can’t figure out how to stop that dude from firing off his missile and starting World War III, we figure out how to get back to the island.”

“How in the world would we get back to that island?” Cindy asked Spider.

“I dunno,” Spider said. “But I can tell you this. Figuring out how to get back to the island is a heck of a lot easier than figuring out how to solve the missile crisis.”

“He has a point there,” Alexis said.

“So how are we supposed to come up with an idea, Cindy?” Liam asked. “What do we use for inspiration?”

“How about the Internet?” Cindy said. “You have enough computers for everyone.”

“All right then.” Liam walked over, picked up a few of the laptop computers, and handed them out. Then he gave everyone a legal pad and pen.

“I guess we’re going to brainstorm with Professor Google,” Spider said.

Spider opened Google and stared at the screen. He had no idea what to do.



He did not consider this a good way to be spending a day free from school. From where he sat, he could see Angel Island. He considered taking the boat to Angel Island and going for a hike a much better way to spend the rest of the day.

He found himself glancing over at Natalie. He leaned back in his chair so he could see her screen.

She was looking at a map of the North Atlantic.

Meanwhile George was busy poking around the Democratic Republic's government website. The official language of the Democratic Republic was a dialect similar to Mongolian, a language he wasn't at all familiar with, but the scientific languages were English and Mandarin. Most of their scientists and intellectuals had been educated in northern China. Recently the borders had changed, so the capital of the new regime was very close to the new Chinese border. The new country was landlocked, and also shared a border with Russia.

By trying different URL addresses, George opened what looked like a private login page. The heading was written in a language he didn't know, but the part of the URL after the dot was in Mandarin, as were the characters for "login" and "password."

"Look at this," George said. Alexis, sitting nearby, scooted over next to him.

Liam pushed his chair over so he could see. "What is it?" he asked.

George pointed. "That says 'login' and that says

‘password.’” Then he looked at Liam and said, “You don’t speak *any* Mandarin?”

“None,” Liam said.

“What does your dad speak?” George asked.

“Taiwanese is his first language. He speaks some Mandarin, but he isn’t fluent.”

Alexis leaned toward the screen. “That doesn’t look like a place you’re supposed to be,” she said.

“I’m on the Democratic Republic’s government website. See, look.” He pointed to the URL address. “But you can’t get here from the other pages.”

“How’d you find it?” Alexis asked.

“I just kept trying different URLs,” George said.

“Clever,” Alexis said.

“So how do you guys know so much about this stuff?” Cindy asked.

“My parents started out as programmers,” Liam said. “They’re always talking about this stuff. Plus I’m in a coding class.”

“I’ve only had an intro,” George said, “and even I can see I’m on a page where I’m not supposed to be.”

Liam leaned over and hit a few command keys to test the page. Suddenly a bunch of code popped up on the screen.

“Holy guacamole!” Liam said. “Quick, Cindy! Read it!”

Cindy, who had been standing behind Liam’s chair, leaned forward and stared intently at the screen. There were dozens of lines of code, filled with symbols and characters. Then, seconds later, the

symbols disappeared.

“Where’s a pen?” Cindy asked.

Natalie handed her one. Quickly she scrawled about a dozen lines of symbols and characters. She’d written about ten lines when she said, “That may be all I can remember.”

Alexis leaned forward and looked at what Cindy had written. “It’s Javelin,” Alexis said.

“What the heck is Javelin?” Spider asked.

“It’s a new computer language,” Alexis said. “You can tell it’s Javelin because of all those ampersand symbols.”

Cindy thought hard for a moment, and added a line to the others she’d written:

```
if login == "admin" & password == "
```

“Cindy,” Alexis asked. “Do you remember what comes after the open quote?”

“There were four Chinese characters,” she said, “but I don’t know how to write them.”

“Someone please tell me what this means!” Natalie said.

“In a minute,” George said. “Let her try to remember.”

“Can you try to describe the characters?” Liam asked.

“The first two symbols had peaks at the bottom, like this.” With the pencil she drew two mountain peaks. “Over the peaks were vertical lines.”

“Like this?” George drew a Chinese character. Cindy shook her head. George tried a few more characters. Cindy shook her head. Then George drew

two characters, one after the other, both with a configuration of vertical lines over the peaks.

“Yes!” Cindy said. “That’s it!”

“That’s the traditional Chinese character for Baize,” George said.

“What’s Baize?” Cindy asked.

“I’m not completely sure,” George said. “Some creature.”

“I found it,” Natalie said, looking at her laptop. “Wikipedia says the Baize is a mythical creature that lives in the mountains of Kunlun. It’s snow-white in color. It speaks human languages and understands the nature of all living things. It is rarely spotted unless a wise king is governing the nation.”

“Do you understand what they’re doing?” Spider asked Natalie.

“Nope,” Natalie said. “Not a clue.”

“Me, neither,” Spider said.

“There’s a bug in the program,” Alexis said. “It caused the embedded code to appear on the screen. Most people wouldn’t be able to read it because it disappeared too fast.”

“Can you remember anything else?” George asked Cindy.

“There were two more characters,” Cindy said. “The first one had three horizontal lines. I honestly can’t remember any more, but I’d probably recognize it if I saw it.”

George started trying various Chinese phrases beginning with the characters for Baize. Cindy kept shaking her head no.

Meanwhile Natalie googled Javelin. “Listen to this,” she said, and read aloud:

*Javelin was released one year ago. For the first six months it appeared to be the most secure programming language ever written. Then, shortly after governments started using it, including part of the United States government, security bugs popped up. Nine months after the product’s release, the company that developed the software was sold. When the new management hired engineers to fix the bugs, they made things worse. Among the bugs is that occasionally a visitor to the login page clicks a control button and text from the code appears on the screen. The occurrence is rare, and is said not to be a security risk because of its rarity and because, when the bug appears, the code shows only for a few seconds, not long enough for someone to copy it down or print it.*

Natalie looked up and said, “The code might not stay on the screen long enough for someone to copy it or print it, but it might last long enough for a girl with an amazing memory to be able to reproduce some of it.”

George went to a website of traditional Chinese characters and scrolled through. “Okay, Cindy,” he said. “What about this one?” He pointed to four characters, then wrote them together.

Cindy said, “I think that’s it. Yes, it is! What does it mean?”

“It means ‘Baize lives.’”

“Now,” Cindy said, “please tell me what this all means!”

“We may have just figured out the administrative password to the Democratic Republic’s government website,” Alexis said.

“Do you mean we can use the website?” Cindy asked.

“No,” Liam said. “Much better than that. We may be able to get in as an administrator.”

“But what does that *mean*?” Cindy asked. “What can you *do*?”

“It might mean that we’d have access to all their code,” Liam said, “or a lot of it. We won’t really know what we can do until we see if we can get in, and when we see what’s there. For all we know, this is the site that controls their finances. Or maybe it’s where they store information. They probably don’t have too many different systems. It’s a small country after all, and new. There may be nothing here at all.”

George took a deep breath and cleared his throat the way he did when he was about to make a speech. “Ladies and gentlemen. Boys and girls. Members of the San Francisco all-star chess team. We may be about to hack in to the Democratic Republic’s computer system.”

“Wait just one minute,” Alexis said. She stood up and put her fists on her hips. “Do you realize what we’re talking about doing?” She paused for emphasis, then said, “We are talking about hacking into a foreign government’s computer system!”

Everyone looked at her. Nobody said anything.

“You want to know how many laws we’d be breaking?” Alexis demanded. Her elective that semester was criminal justice. “About a million, that’s how many! Anyone here want to go to jail?”

Spider grinned. He had entirely changed his mind about wishing he could go hiking on Angel Island. He was now thoroughly enjoying himself. “I don’t think we’d go to jail, Alexis,” he said. “If we hacked into their government system, I think the CIA and the FBI and everyone else would try to hire us!”

“This isn’t funny, Spider,” Alexis said. “We’d be international *criminals*.”

“Or heroes,” Spider said, “depending on who you ask and what we manage to do.”

“We’d be criminals,” Alexis repeated.

“Technically we wouldn’t be criminals,” Spider



said. “You’re not a criminal until you’re convicted. Innocent until proven guilty!”

“This isn’t funny,” Alexis said.

“Really,” George asked, “what’s the worst thing that could happen?”

“I can think of something pretty bad,” Alexis said. “I can think of something worse than being an international criminal.”

“What?” Spider asked.

“Messing with the code,” Alexis said, “making a mistake, and accidentally firing the missile!”

“That isn’t going to happen,” Liam said. “There *has* to be another level of security. Otherwise any of the programmers can get in and set it off.”

“But what if we *did* accidentally launch it?” Alexis demanded. “Do you want to be responsible for the death of millions of people?”

“If we *do* get into the system,” Liam said, “and if we *are* able to mess with the code, we’ll be very, very, very careful, Alexis. Okay?”

“I don’t *think* so,” Alexis said.

“I think you’re outvoted,” George told her. “Let’s get ready. If we do get in, we shouldn’t stay in there long.”

“How do we get ready?” Cindy asked.

“We need Alexis on board,” Liam said. “Alexis, you’re the only one who knows Javelin.”

“I only know the basics,” Alexis said.

“That makes you the official team expert,” Liam said.

“You’d better get a list of the commands,” Alexis

said. “I only know a few.”

Liam and George searched for Javelin manuals, selected a few that looked good, then cut and pasted hundreds of commands into a searchable document so they could find what they needed easily. They made sure everyone had a computer on hand so if they needed to search for something in a hurry, several of them could work on it.

“I don’t like it,” Alexis said, “but I’ll do it.”

“We’re not doing anything yet,” George said. “We’re just going to look.”

Liam, Alexis, and George sat together, shoulder to shoulder, at one of the long tables.

“Is everyone ready?” Liam asked.

The silence lasted a few moments. Then another. At last Alexis said, “I am. I think.”

“We need to be very careful,” Liam said. “We’ll do all the hacking on this computer.” He pointed to the laptop in front of him. “When we’re done, I can get rid of it.”

Liam opened the login page and typed “admin” for the user name, set the keyboard to Chinese, and passed it to George.

George typed four characters and hit return.

The screen changed to show rows of code.

“Dude!” Liam said. “It *worked*.”

“I’m scared,” Natalie said.

Liam, George, and Alexis read through the code, looking for something familiar. “The good news is there’s a lot here,” Liam said. “So there’s probably something here we can mess with. But the bad news

is there's a lot here, so how the heck do we find what's important?"

"Can we do searches?" Cindy said.

"Good idea!" George said. Then, after a moment, "But what do we search for?"

"I don't think a search will work until we have a better idea what we are looking for," Liam said. "We just have to keep looking to see if we find something interesting."

Natalie looked carefully at a few rows, then said, "It's pretty hard to look for something interesting when you don't even know the language or the letters."

"Yup," Cindy said. "It looks like gibberish to me. The only thing I recognize are numerals. And there aren't many."

Natalie forced herself to look at each symbol. She got tired and just skimmed. She was near the bottom of the screen when she sat up straight. "Look!" she said. "There's the number 46. Aren't those the symbols for *degree* and *angle*?"

"Yes!" Liam said. "George, what does the rest say?"

"That character means lift," George said, pointing to the screen.

Alexis opened a website showing a photograph of the missile. "The bomb does look like it's aimed at about a forty-six-degree angle."

"If this is the command that aims the missile," George said, "can we just change the degree to zero so it isn't aimed anymore?"

“But all they have to do is get in and fix the code and lift it up again,” Alexis said.

“Unless we reset the administrative password and mess things up so nobody can log in,” Liam said.

“Do it, bro!” Spider said.

Liam changed the angle to two degrees. “That’s better than zero because it will be harder to find,” Liam said. “Nobody will launch it if it will only go straight and hit the nearest thing on the ground.” He looked at Alexis. “Did I do it right?”

“I think so,” she said. Then: “There’s a lot of data stored in here. Does anyone know what any of it is? George?”

“I could figure it out,” Liam said. “If I had enough time.”

“Maybe we should just print it,” Alexis said. She did a ‘copy all’ command, pasted everything into a blank file, inserted page numbers, and printed it. A high-speed laser printer began whirring, churning out paper.

“Make sure it’s printing right,” she told Liam.

He went to the printer and checked. “Looks good,” he said.

“This is exactly how people hack into websites and steal credit card numbers,” Alexis said.

“I never knew a life of crime could be so easy!” Spider said.

“What we should do,” Alexis said, “is add a line of code making it impossible to aim the missile. We can hide it in a block of code. That might mess them up for a while after they figure out how to get back

in.”

“Do it!” Liam said.

Alexis flipped through their manuals and composed a line of code. “This should work.”

“Okay,” George said. “Now change the administrative password.”

Alexis scrolled back to the administrative password. First she deleted the codes allowing users to access the system. Then she said, “I’m not feeling so good about this.” She handed Liam the keyboard and said, “Type a new password.”

Liam typed a new administrative password, a long one. The password needed to be typed out twice. That done, he said, “We better save everything and get out of here.”

Alexis hit a few more keys. The screen returned to the login screen. They all looked at each other. The laser printer was still churning out paper.

“Okay,” Cindy said. “Sorry I’m slow with this stuff, but there’s something I don’t get. I understand we messed with the code that controls their computer systems and set the angle of the missile to two degrees. I also get that we fixed it so if they hit the button that usually allows them to raise the missile for launching, it just won’t work. The missile will stay horizontal, or practically horizontal.”

“Exactly,” Alexis said.

“But can’t they just fix what we did?” Cindy said.

“Yeah,” Alexis said, “but it may take a while, since we locked everyone out and inserted some mess-everything-up code.”

“If it works,” George said, “it’s a place to start. Obviously it’s not going to solve the whole problem forever. It will just keep them from firing their missile.”

“It will keep them from firing it *for now*,” Cindy said. “Well, let’s watch the news so we can see if we did anything.” They all switched their browsers to news blogs. Commentators were discussing the crisis of a nuclear missile positioned to launch.

“So, Liam,” Spider said. “What’s the new administrative password?”

“It’s a wonderful world,” Liam said.

“*That’s* the new password?” Spider asked.

“Yup,” said Liam. “I typed the first thing that jumped into my head. I have no clue where it came from.”

“It came from your subconscious,” Natalie told him. “Your subconscious was imagining a world where it isn’t possible to launch a nuclear missile.”

Liam glanced at her, amused.

“It’s a good password,” Spider said. “Nobody will *ever* guess.”

They switched to different news blogs. Still nothing.

“Maybe some music will help,” Liam said. He switched on his handheld music player, and plugged it into the speaker. Jacy Skye, his favorite popular artist, was singing “Not the Way It Goes.” He wanted something calmer, so he skipped ahead until he found some classical piano. He turned the volume down low.

“I’m shaking,” Natalie said.

“Yeah,” Cindy said. “Me, too.”

“I’m more scared than anyone,” Alexis said. “I seem to be the only person who understands we’re breaking the law. I nominate George to do all the talking for the group when the FBI comes around.”

“I’m fine with that,” George said.

They all went back to watching the screen. Nothing happened. Cindy hit the refresh button on a page entitled “Breaking News.” Still nothing.

“This is taking a looong time,” George said. “Wouldn’t you think news satellites would be watching that missile? Maybe we didn’t move it after all.”

They went back to staring at the screen. Cindy sighed deeply.

After a while, Liam said, “Anyone ready for food?”

“Me!” Spider said. “What have you got?”

“I’ll go see,” Liam said.

“I’ll help,” Cindy said. She felt she needed to stand up and move around. Sitting there watching a screen was just too nerve-wracking. She walked with Liam downstairs to the kitchen.

“I still can’t get used to being home,” Liam told her as they entered the kitchen, which was large and modern, with glass-fronted cabinets. “It feels strange to be able to open a refrigerator if I feel hungry.”

“I know,” she said. “It’s so easy.”

The other thing Liam couldn’t get used to was having a house full of people. He liked it. A lot. He had joined the chess team because he’d gotten tired of spending so much time by himself. When he was very young he used to write plays and perform all the roles himself. He’d taught himself to play chess from manuals and a computer program.

Liam opened a cabinet. “How about a box of crackers?” he asked Cindy. “Or some trail mix.” He opened the refrigerator and said, “Does anything in here look good to you?”

She peered inside. “How about those mozzarella sticks?”

“Okay. Grab the whole package.”

“Do you cook for yourself?” she asked.

“Yeah, sometimes.”



“Are you good at it?”

“Let’s put it this way. If burning food didn’t have smell, I might not know when it was done.”

She laughed.

“Okay, seriously,” he said. “When I’m paying attention, I’m pretty good at it, but I get distracted a lot. I’ve burned a few pots.”

Liam grabbed a tray to put everything on. He paused, as if trying to decide if he should add something else, when he turned to Cindy and said, “Did you notice anything unusual about Spider and Natalie?”

“Yeah,” she said. She *had* noticed. She was surprised Liam also noticed.

“They both seem uncomfortable,” Liam said. “What do you think is going on?”

“All I can do is guess,” Cindy said.

“What’s your guess?”

“I think Spider finally made his move, and Natalie turned him down.”

“Do you think so? I always figured she’d go for him.” He thought Spider was the coolest dude in the group.

“You’ll probably laugh if I tell you what I really think,” Cindy said.

“Try me,” he said.

“Personally, I think Spider would be better matched with Alexis.”

“*Alexis?*”

“Yeah. Don’t you think he’d be happier with someone who likes rock climbing and all that stuff?”

“But they’re so different. Except for the rock climbing part. And except that she’s almost as strong as he is!”

“They’re perfectly matched. She’s got lots of anger. He’s got none. She takes everything seriously. He doesn’t take anything seriously. It would balance out.”

Liam raised one eyebrow and looked at her skeptically. Natalie was the kind of girl all the guys would like. Alexis was the kind who might beat a guy in arm wrestling.

Cindy knew he had his doubts. But the more she thought about it, the more sense it made. Spider’s lightheartedness would be good for Alexis. Alexis’s ideals and sense of justice would be good for Spider. Who else could keep up with Spider with his rock climbing and hiking? Who else would *want* to?

A plan was forming in Cindy’s mind, a way for everyone to be happy. It was not the kind of plan she’d ever share with anyone.

“This should do it,” Liam said. He picked up the tray and together they went back upstairs. He put down the food on a table, and helped himself to one of the mozzarella sticks.

George found a chess set on a side table. “Who wants to play?” he asked.

“I will,” Alexis said.

Alexis wanted the distraction. Sitting here thinking about the fact that they’d hacked into a foreign government’s computer system and messed with code anywhere near a missile about to be fired

just plain gave her the creeps.

She sat across from George and they set up the pieces.

Cindy pulled up a chair to watch. She, too, needed a distraction. Cindy enjoyed watching chess as much as she enjoyed playing. Alexis and George always played an interesting game. They were what Cindy thought of as attackers. They were constantly attacking, always positioning their pieces aggressively. This made it fun to watch them playing against each other. Neither was squeamish. They even had the same weakness: they were so busy on the attack that they tended to slip up by leaving a valuable piece vulnerable.

Alexis and George sat perfectly still, both staring at the board. Chess looks quiet and contemplative, but really, the players are like birds of prey, circling in for the kill, first ruthlessly eliminating the lesser, more vulnerable players, and then positioning the king so he is helpless. Then making that final, fatal move. Check. Checkmate.

Natalie, on the other hand, was a more timid player. Spider was right about Natalie not having the killer instinct. There was always a moment in every game when she squirmed inwardly, usually during those highly intense moments toward the end when the game hangs on a single move, and to win, the player must be completely ruthless. Natalie was able to move her pieces in for the attack, but the sweet part of her always cringed.

Sometimes, though, in a game she became very

intent, concentrating hard. Her brow in such moments was always furrowed. She would sit still so long you assumed she was thinking ahead, maybe five, ten, or even twenty moves. Then she'd make her move. And it was always brilliant. She insisted, though, that in such moments that she was not planning ahead, but instead was going on intuition, evaluating each move and simply picking the one she thought was strongest.

George moved his black knight first. Alexis moved her queen's pawn. George stared at the table for a full minute, then glanced at Alexis, and moved his knight toward the center. She moved her bishop's pawn. It was a perfect opening.

Cindy turned, and hit refresh on one of the news blogs.

Still nothing.

Meanwhile, Spider really wanted to see what Natalie was doing. He knew he shouldn't—he knew he should stay in his seat—but curiosity won out. He stood up and wandered over to see her screen. She was reading a geography article about islands of the North Atlantic. He pulled up a chair and sat down.

She glanced at him and smiled, acting as if nothing had changed—as if he hadn't put himself on the line and she basically turned him down. "Did you know," she asked him, "the climate on islands like Mars is relatively mild considering how far north it is? That's because the Gulf Stream warms it up. The stream originates in Florida."

"See there," he said. "Mars really is a tropical

island paradise, but better because you don't have all those mosquitoes and diseases. And you have plenty of fresh water. All you have to do is figure out how to keep warm."

"Yeah." She laughed. "Easy, right? It's only the subarctic."

"The Eskimos do it," he said. "And they don't even have a hot spring."

She was smiling, but he sensed she was uncomfortable. Well, he *had* moved awfully close to her. As smoothly as he could, he pushed his chair back a bit.

Natalie clicked onto an open window showing a news blog. She refreshed the screen. Nothing had changed.

"I wonder if anyone owns Mars," Spider said.

"I don't think so," Natalie said.

Spider glanced at the others. Nobody was paying attention to them. Natalie seemed more at ease now, so he relaxed a bit in his chair, stretching out his long legs in front of him.

In fact, Spider was wrong. Both Cindy and Liam were watching them while pretending not to. Cindy watched Spider and Natalie while pretending to be completely focused on the chess game. She knew that her guess was right. Spider had made a move, and Natalie had turned him down so gently, or so ambiguously, that he felt uncertain and hopeful. She saw the way Spider pushed his chair back. He might not be the most observant guy on the planet, but he'd obviously noticed her discomfort.

Liam, too, was watching Spider and Natalie while pretending to read a news blog. He felt guilty about the thought that came to him because Spider was his buddy. He felt badly as he wondered whether *he*, Liam—the ultimate geek—had a chance with Natalie.

That was when Liam noticed the headline on his screen had changed. He read the words and gasped. “Oh, my God!” he said. “Everyone look!”

They all gathered around one of the large monitors. The words across the screen read “Breaking news! The Democratic Republic has lowered its missile and appears to be backing away from threats to launch its nuclear bomb.”

“We *did* it!” Liam said. He slapped the table. He and George gave each other a high five. The others sat quietly. Cindy had the feeling they were a little stunned. She certainly was. What felt, in this room, like a game was *real*. They had altered world politics. It was stunning. Astonishing. Unbelievable.

They all looked back at the screen to read the commentary and listen to the announcer. Rolling across the screen were the words “International policy experts struggle to understand this new development.”

A new video appeared on the blog. Liam clicked the start button. An announcer who looked like a manikin wearing a suit and tie said, “When military intelligence sources learned that the Democratic Republic had lowered its missile, allied submarines and battleships dispatched to that part of the Pacific

all did the same thing: they all lowered their missiles and guns, making a point of showing they were no longer targeting the cities of the Democratic Republic.” Next the blog showed people cheering in the streets of an Asian city.

“I guess we averted World War III,” Spider said. You could hear the astonishment in his voice.

“There still might be a World War III,” Cindy said. “It’s just a matter of time before the computer people in the Democratic Republic fix what we did.”

“And having to fix it might make them really mad,” Alexis said.

“Okay,” Cindy said. “Now what do we do? We have to do *something*, or we’ll be right back where we were before.”

“Cindy’s right,” George said. “What we just did was pretty amazing. The Democratic Republic is in *check*. But not *checkmate*. We need to do something else before they get it fixed. But what?”

Nobody had an answer. They looked at one another.

Spider took a handful of trail mix. “I can think better on a full stomach,” he said.

\* \* \*

Natalie stood up, wandered over to the window, and looked down at the city. It was so hard to imagine a bomb big enough and powerful enough to destroy an entire city, killing every single person and burning all the buildings. It was staggering, really. The very existence of a bomb like that struck her as pure evil.



How could the whole world live under the constant threat that at any moment something like that could go off? People couldn't be *normal* under those conditions. Even if they didn't realize they were under stress, they'd have to be affected, right? The usual casualties of war were nothing next to that bomb's potential to cause massive burning of human flesh.

Maybe that was why her sisters liked reading apocalyptic novels. Maybe reading those books was a way of dealing with the fact that it was only a matter of time before there was a massive nuclear or chemical war. Besides, even without a major war, weren't people already destroying the earth?

She wished her friends could hack into every government system in the world and make it impossible for anyone to ever launch another bomb.

Natalie figured she should be the one to come up with an idea for what to do next. She was the mediator in her family, the one who got her siblings to settle their differences. She was good at stopping quarrels because she understood about compromises. What was an international missile crisis, after all, other than a great big backyard quarrel in which both sides had nuclear missiles?

She knew what *should* happen. All the leaders should sit down at a negotiating table and reach a compromise, and that meant everyone had to give something up. If people dug in their heels and became too stubborn, whole cities could be destroyed.

She turned to face the others. “What we need to do,” she said, “is get everyone to negotiate.”

“Okay,” Alexis said. “How? International peacekeeping organizations haven’t been able to figure out how to get everyone to sit down and talk. What can six kids do?”

“It just seems to me,” Natalie said, “they’re not really trying. They imposed sanctions and now they’re too stubborn to lift them. Even if they thought it was a good idea at the time, they must have seen the sanctions were just crushing the people and making the people angry.”

“Sometimes sanctions work,” George said.

“They’re not working this time,” Natalie responded.

“Okay, then what do we do?” George asked her.

Natalie pressed her fingers to her forehead. An idea was coming to her. Sometimes you could force your opponent in a chess game to move a piece he didn’t want to move by giving him no choice at all.

“Here’s what I think,” she said. “The Democratic Republic is not going to want anyone to know that their system was hacked. They’d probably rather pretend that they lowered their missile on purpose. So what if they announce that they lowered the missile because they had a change of heart and want to negotiate?”

“Dictators don’t have changes of *heart*,” George said.

“They do if they have no choice,” Natalie said. “He can pretend he did it on purpose because he’s

willing to negotiate, or he can let the world know his system was hacked. Which do you think he'd prefer? I think he'll negotiate if the only other thing he can do would be humiliating."

"So maybe we should start a rumor that the dictator is willing to come to the table and negotiate," George said. "We'll start a rumor that he lowered the missile because he's had a change of heart and wants to talk things over."

"It would be better," Natalie said, "if the dictator himself says he wants to negotiate."

"Do you have a way to force him to make that announcement, Natalie?" Alexis asked. She crossed her arms over her chest.

"What if we can get a message to the dictator," Natalie said, "that if he comes to the negotiating table, the people who hacked into his computer will never tell that he had no choice?"

"It's sort of like blackmail," George said. "But it might work."

"It's exactly like blackmail," Alexis said, "because it *is* blackmail. But why stop after only committing a few crimes? What's one or two more?"

"If you consider bringing about world peace and stopping a nuclear war a crime," George said.

Alexis sighed. "I guess we could always argue that the end justifies the means."

"I think if you stop a war," Liam said, "the end *does* justify the means."

"Yeah," Spider said. "What's a few strikes if you end up with a home run and win the game?"

“Meanwhile, we have a practical problem,” Cindy said. “How do we get a message to the dictator?”

“Yeah,” Spider said, “I doubt his private phone number is listed on Yahoo.”

George and Alexis gasped at the same time. They looked at each other jubilantly. George grinned. They gave each other a high five.

“Okay, tell us!” Cindy said.

“We have hundreds of pages of data!” George said. “All the data stored in that system!”

Liam took the stack of paper from the printer. He flipped through it and said, "Let's see what we can find. I may as well make a few copies, so we can all look."

Soon they were all huddled over pages densely packed with Javelin code and Mandarin. "I don't even see very many regular numbers," Natalie said.

"Mostly they're using numerals from their local language," George said. "That makes it pretty hard to do searches." He googled, and came up with a list of numerals in the local language. "This should help," he said. "I think we're looking for these."

There was silence and the occasional shuffling of papers. After a while, Spider sighed. "This is harder than a needle in a haystack."

The fruit, trail mix, crackers, and mozzarella sticks were gone. Liam looked at the clock. It was almost two in the afternoon. He went downstairs to get stuff for sandwiches and came back with bread, cheese, cold cuts, and condiments. Then he went back for a pitcher of ice water.

They worked as they ate. Soon Natalie felt ready

to give up. What she really wanted was a nap. “Maybe I’m feeling the jet lag again,” she said.

“I’m not!” Spider said. “I feel great!”

“It will hit you later,” Liam told Spider. “Don’t worry.”

Natalie just couldn’t look at those pages any more. She stood up, stretched, and went back to the window.

Just then, Liam said, “I found something. These look like phone numbers.”

The others moved to look at the page.

“See this?” he said. “Six strings of numbers, each at the end of a block of information. The strings have nine digits. According to Professor Google, the phone numbers in the capital city of the Democratic Republic have nine digits.”

“All right,” Cindy said. “It looks like we have six phone numbers.”

“But we have no idea *whose*,” Spider said.

“They’re important people,” George said. He pointed to a row of Chinese characters and said, “Those characters mean that the information is classified.”

“That brings us to another problem,” Liam said. “When we call, what do we say?”

“That’s easy,” Cindy said. “Just what Natalie said. We tell them if they come to the negotiating table, nobody will know that they had no choice. But we have to be careful because we don’t know who will answer the phone. The person who answers might not even know their system was hacked. So we say

something like, 'If the leaders of your government initiate negotiations, nobody will ever know you *felt* you had no choice.'

"That's good!" Natalie said. "It says everything we need without giving anything away. But it's not enough. Even if they do negotiate, that doesn't mean they'll resolve anything. It doesn't mean they'll come to an agreement."

"All we can really do is get people to negotiate, right?" Spider said. "How can you force people to come to an agreement?"

"You can't force them to come to an agreement," Natalie said, "but you can make them *want* to. I think we need to add something to make them *want* an agreement. We have to end this whole nonsense of pointing missiles at each other once and for all."

"It *should* be enough to tell him that if he shoots off his missile, millions of people will die and the whole world will get poisoned," Alexis said.

"Obviously telling him that is not enough," George said. "Because he already knows that. *Everyone* knows that."

"Okay," Cindy said. "Someone come up with an idea. How do we make them *want* to come to an agreement?"

\* \* \*

Alexis poured herself a glass of water. She drank the water, then sat staring at her computer screen.

*We have to end this whole nonsense of pointing missiles at each other once and for all,* Natalie had said. It seemed so

simple, didn't it? Just stop pointing missiles at each other. Just stop building them altogether. Alexis knew why they were pointing nuclear missiles. It was the ultimate threat. A grand, global game of chicken.

The year before, Alexis's teacher had given the students a writing assignment entitled "Utopia." In five pages, they were to describe a perfect society and explain how a perfect society could be achieved. Most people in the class came up with science fiction ideas: medicine that would take away all illnesses and pain, and magic potions that would let people live forever.

What they discovered later, when they discussed the ideas, was that many of the solutions offered by students were not actually utopian. They were the opposite, dystopias in disguise, because the solutions people came up with usually made things worse. For example, if everyone lived forever, the earth would get way too crowded. They also learned that attempts to create a perfect society often ended up a disaster, and anyway, the whole thing was impossible because one person's idea of a perfect society was another person's nightmare.

Now it occurred to her that a perfect society was just not possible because people were so messed up. What can you do when adults who are supposed to be intelligent and responsible build missiles and aim them at each other?

"I don't know about that password you came up with, Liam," Alexis said. "How could it ever be a wonderful world if adults and world leaders are so



psycho that they think it's okay to build missiles and aim them at each other?"

"Everyone knows that dictator is crazy," Liam said.

"If he is crazy, so is our country!" Alexis said. "Our country has just as many missiles and they're always aimed at cities! If he's crazy, we are too! If everyone is crazy, how can you have a wonderful world?"

Natalie sat back in her chair. "It *could* be a wonderful world," she said quietly.

"Please explain how," Alexis said.

"Everyone just needs to be nice," Natalie said.

Alexis looked to see if Natalie was joking. There wasn't even a hint of a smile on Natalie's face or in her eyes. She was perfectly serious. Alexis put her fists on her hips. She wanted to argue. She wanted to say, *What about the law of the jungle? Aren't humans just jungle animals in fancy trappings?*

Instead she felt stumped. And Alexis did not ordinarily feel stumped. She prided herself on being able to argue with anything. But what answer was there to *everyone just needs to be nice?* Other than *everyone just needs to be nice* might be just about the most naive thing a person could possibly say.

"That's what made things work on the island," Natalie said. "The lady with the canister of fruit. Liam giving cheese to the little girls. You making sure nobody was cruel to Veronica. Everyone relaxing and finally helping. We brought out the best in everyone by being nice first."

“Almost everyone,” Cindy said. “Veronica kept stealing.”

“Veronica doesn’t count,” Natalie said. “She was born that way. She’ll always have issues until someone invents a medicine to make kleptomania go away.”

“Maybe the dictator has issues,” Cindy said.

“I don’t think so,” Natalie said. “It seems to me his motives make sense, when you see it from his point of view. The sanctions are pretty horrible for his people. The sanctions are killing his people slowly. That’s how the whole thing started, right? After the military dictatorship took power and declared the Democratic Republic an independent country, the other countries wouldn’t trade with them because nobody liked what they’d done. They didn’t like the government. They did sanctions to try to hurt the government so the government would do what everyone wanted them to do, but the sanctions didn’t hurt the government—they hurt the people who don’t have enough food and other stuff they need. And maybe the people *like* their government. Maybe they wanted their own independent country.”

Everyone was watching Natalie, waiting for what she would say next. All she could think of was, “Nobody was being nice.” After she said the words, she realized they sounded totally lame.

“All right, Natalie,” Alexis said. “How do we get everyone to be *nice*?”

“We did it on the island,” Natalie said.

“Making a few people on an island be nice is a

little easier than making the whole world be nice,” Alexis said. “How are you going to get everyone in the world to be nice?”

“I don’t know,” Natalie said. “I’m still thinking.”

Everyone waited. Natalie’s frown deepened.

Then she said, “Since the problems, for them, are the sanctions, maybe the leaders of the Democratic Republic should offer to negotiate in exchange for food and concessions for their people. That way they get something, too.”

“But what if nobody sends food or makes concessions?” Alexis asked.

“What about all those reporters calling us?” Natalie said. “Everyone wants to interview us. George can make some speeches.”

George took his wallet out of his pocket. From his wallet he pulled a card. “Yes! This is a Red Cross card. It was in the carton of sandwiches we got on the plane. I saved it. There’s a guy’s phone number and email address. I think we do just what Natalie said! We call the dictator and tell him he should take advantage of the moment to demand concessions. If he does that, it will look like he lowered his missile on purpose. People will be grateful that he backed down. Then, we do a media campaign. We call the Red Cross representative. We call the reporters. Everyone wants to interview us! I’ll go on television and ask everyone to send food to the Democratic Republic, and things the people need! I’ll talk about how it felt on that island when we didn’t know how we were going to eat!”

“Yes,” Natalie said. “It might work. *If* one of those phone numbers belongs to someone important and we can get to the dictator.”

“George has to be the one to call and talk,” Liam said. “He’s the dude who knows all those languages.”

George opened a word processor and said, “Okay, I need my exact words.”

It took a few tries before they settled on what he should say. Eventually they settled on this:

*If the leaders of your government initiate negotiations, nobody will ever know you felt you had no choice when you lowered your missile. This is your chance! Everyone is watching! You can offer to keep your missile lowered and come to the negotiation in exchange for food and humanitarian relief for your people, who have suffered greatly under unfair sanctions.*

Natalie had added the last sentence, which she thought was the best in the whole paragraph. Adding that the sanctions were unfair showed that they sympathized and understood. That, she felt, might make them *want* to come to an agreement.

“I don’t think it can get better than that,” Cindy

said.

“All right then,” George said. “I’ll translate this into Mandarin and I’ll make some calls.”

“But we can’t just call from one of our cell phones,” Cindy said. “They’ll know exactly who called them.”

“That’s true,” Liam said. “We can block the number, but I don’t know how well that works. Besides, they may not answer if the number is blocked.”

“We have to buy one of those prepaid international phones,” George said. “And we’d better do it quick. In a few hours I’ll be expected home for dinner.”

“Yup,” Liam said. “Should I go buy the phone? I’m fine with that.”

“I think it should be George,” Cindy said. “If they wonder why a kid is buying an international phone, he can make up a good story.”

“I can do that,” George said.

The nearest store that sold the sort of prepaid international phone that would work for them was on California Street, about a half mile away. They learned from the store website that the cost of the phone with the thirty prepaid minutes was eighty-five dollars. They figured thirty minutes should be plenty.

Liam found forty dollars in a kitchen drawer. “I’ll think of something to tell my parents,” he said. Spider had another ten. Alexis had the rest.

“It’s a small price to pay for world peace,” Spider said.

George went to the store by himself. After he left, Spider said, “You know, why stop here after achieving world peace? Think of what we can do! Why not solve all the world’s problems? Like world hunger!”

“And war,” Natalie said. “That just has to go.”

“Homelessness really bothers me,” Alexis said.

“Me too,” Cindy said. “I wonder if other cities have as many homeless people as San Francisco.”

“How are we going to solve all *those* problems?” Natalie asked.

“Hacking into everyone’s computers!” Spider said. “Think what we can do!”

“I’m going to just pretend that you didn’t say that,” Alexis told him.

“What really bothers me,” Cindy said, “was that bank that took millions of dollars in illegal extra charges. Did you read about that? They only had to give five million dollars of it back because they settled, even though *everyone* knows they stole way more than that.”

“Except they didn’t call it stealing,” Alexis said. “They said they had a right to impose any charges they wanted. No matter how unfair it was.”

“Come on,” Cindy said, “everyone knows it wasn’t really fair.”

“So we hack into their computer,” Spider said, “get the money they stole, and distribute it to the poor! Easy! Except I don’t know the first thing about hacking, so you guys have to do it.”

“Yeah, right,” Alexis said. “Easy peasy lemon

squeezy. Except for the part about robbing a bank, which is what you're saying. No, thank you very much. I am not going to prison. Wanna know how much time you get for bank robbery?"

"But think of the good we could do!" Spider said. "We'd be modern-day Robin Hoods, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor!"

"I hope you're joking, Spider," Alexis said sternly.

"I'll bet we could find more people to steal from," Spider said, "like gangsters who have drug money. We can hack into their accounts, take the drug money, and give it to homeless shelters! Then fewer people will need to take drugs because they won't be living in homeless shelters."

"Spider," Alexis began furiously. "Even if you're joking it's not funny."

"He's joking," Natalie said. "At least I think he is. Spider, you're joking, right?"

Spider grinned. "Am I? Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe it's time for another Robin Hood. It's been more than a thousand years now. And you've gotta admit this has been fun."

"Some fun," Alexis said. "Maybe I'm the only one here who finds committing crimes a little nerve-racking. Besides, more to the point, the whole Robin Hood thing is a myth. Robin Hood wasn't a do-gooder stealing from the rich to give to the poor. It was all political."

"What!" Spider said. "Don't tell me that! You're ruining my innocence!"

"Yup," Cindy said. "It's true." Suddenly, she



sounded as if she was reciting from memory. “Before the Norman Invasion, the guy now known as Robin Hood was a Saxon nobleman. He lost his power when the Normans took over, so he and the conquered nobles went into the forests and conducted a kind of guerrilla warfare on the Normans. What Robin Hood did was steal from the Norman conquerors and give to the English. So the whole ‘steal from the rich and give to the poor’ is a myth.”

“You know,” Liam said quietly. “If you ask me, what matters is the myth. Not the facts.”

Natalie turned to look at Liam. “That was very wise,” she said. “And I agree. What matters is the myth. He was a true hero.”

“He was an *outlaw*,” Alexis said. “And I do not intend to become an outlaw. If we’re going to fix all the world’s problems, I absolutely insist from now on that we use only legal methods.”

Just then, the doorbell rang. Liam looked out the window, saw that it was George, and buzzed him in. They listened to George’s footsteps coming up the stairs.

George entered the room and said, “I got a prepaid phone with a New York area code. I had to sign up for the phone number, but I spelled my name wrong and transposed the numbers of my address.”

“Good thinking,” Liam said.

George sat down, looked at the phone, and said, “I guess I’m ready.”

“Try to lower your voice,” Cindy said.

George cleared his throat, and said, “How is this.”

“Perfect,” Cindy said. “You sound ten years older.”

George dialed the first number. The others listened to his side of the conversation without understanding a single word he said. With his voice dropped lower, he did indeed sound like an adult. Within ninety seconds, he hung up.

“Well?” Cindy said.

“I couldn’t get his name,” George said. “I don’t think it was anyone important. The guy said he would relay the message.”

George called the next two numbers, but nobody answered. When he called the fourth he had another short conversation, and once more was told his message would be passed on.

When he called the fifth number, something changed in his bearing. He sat upright in his chair. The conversation went much longer than the others.

He hung up and said, “That was him.”

“The dictator?” Alexis asked, amazed. “Are you *sure?*”

“I’ve heard his voice on television. I’m almost one hundred percent positive. He asked questions and talked more than the others.”

“What did he ask?” Cindy said.

“He tried to find out who I was. I said I was a friend of his and a friend of the planet Earth.”

“That was *good!*” Natalie said.

“He seemed to know how I got his phone

number,” George said. “He told me that my antics were not funny. He also said that he doesn’t like being forced. I told him I understand. Nobody likes being forced. I told him that was why it was important that nobody finds out he felt like he had no choice. I told him this was a perfect opportunity to get the things the people in his country needed.”

“That was really good, too,” Natalie said. “No wonder your mom says you’ll be president one day.”

George grinned. “She’s already decided how I should decorate the Oval Office. She keeps saying it’s high time we had a Chinese American president.”

“I’m definitely voting for you,” Spider said.

“So now I guess we need to go back to watching the news to see if he offers to negotiate,” Cindy said.

They were watching news blogs and reading commentary when Natalie’s cell phone rang. It was her mother.

“Natalie!” she said. “Where have you been all day? I just got back and Crystal said you’ve been gone since this morning.” Crystal was one of Natalie’s older sisters.

“I’m at Liam’s house. Want to see?” She switched on her FaceTime app and held up the phone so her mother could see around the room. What her mother saw was everyone sitting at computers with news programs on the screens.

“Are you all doing *homework*?” Her mother sounded amazed.

“Yeah, sort of,” Natalie said. *No, mom, she thought. We’ve been hacking into government computer*

*systems, telephoning dictators, and figuring out how to achieve world peace.* Sometimes, when the truth is preposterous, you just have to lie.

“We’re eating dinner in an hour,” her mother said.

“Okay, I’ll be there. Bye.” She hung up. To the others, she said, “What else do we need to do? George is calling reporters, right?”

“We need some good slogans,” George said. “They have to be simple. A good slogan has no more than six words.”

They looked at each other, waiting for someone to suggest a slogan. Then George said, “I thought of two. How about *feed them, don’t bomb them. And help them, don’t starve them.*”

“Perfect!” Natalie said.

Alexis said, “Obviously we don’t tell anyone what we did. Ever. No one. Even if this all works out and the FBI doesn’t come to arrest us, and people might think we’re heroes.”

“*Obviously, Alexis,*” George said. “That would be betraying what we promised the dictator. We told him if he comes to the negotiating table, nobody will ever know he was forced.”

Just then, the words “breaking news” flashed across one of the large monitors. Liam, who was closest to the monitor, bent to look. “Listen to this!” he said, and read aloud, “In a dramatic change in policy and stance, leaders of the new regime of the Democratic Republic have announced that they are ready to enter peace negotiations in exchange for

badly needed concessions for their people. Officials in the government have confirmed the reports.”

Liam and George gave each other a high five. Spider jumped up and danced around the table, shaking his hands like tambourines and singing, “Oh, *yeab!* Oh, *yeab!*”

Alexis sat down. She wanted to celebrate with the others, but she was really, really worried. Okay, they’d averted nuclear war. That was great. Nobody could deny that averting nuclear war and bringing countries about to bomb each other to a negotiating table were very good things.

But meanwhile, you couldn’t get around the fact that they’d broken a few laws along the way. You couldn’t deny someone probably had ways of tracing what they had done.

But the others weren’t worried. Now they were all whooping and dancing around the room, giving each other high fives, singing “Oh, *yeab!* We *rock!*”

George put on a suit. He was standing in front of the bathroom mirror, fixing his tie, when the doorbell buzzed. “The reporters are here!” his mother said.

He’d given most of the interviews via email, writing out answers to the questions. He’d gotten the idea to email Alexis for all those photos Spider had taken with her phone just before the rescue. Now a few reporters from major news networks wanted to film him for television. He was happy to oblige.

He checked his notes, but he knew he wouldn’t need them. He came into the living room, where the reporters had already set up lights. There were two men with cameras, and a bunch more people, some with microphones.

“Ready?” one of them asked him.

“Ready!” he said.

\* \* \*

Spider sat at the counter of his grandfather’s pizzeria. Here he was, on a stool at the counter, just an average guy wearing jeans and a tee shirt. Nobody would know, to look at him, that he and his friends

had averted global disaster.

This, he figured, must have been how Clark Kent felt going to work at the *Daily Planet*, with no one guessing that underneath his ordinary clothes, he was really Superman, ready for action. Spider looked around the restaurant. He enjoyed pretending he was an ordinary guy and not part of a superteam saving the world.

His excuse for coming to the restaurant was that he wanted some of his grandfather's amazing garlic bread. Really he wanted to be near a television in a public place so he could hear people talking about George. He'd already listened to George at home with his family. The news programs were showing George over and over.

One of the cooks took a large pizza from the oven. The smell of perfectly baked crust and tangy, spicy tomato sauce was mouthwatering. The restaurant was typical of North Beach: red-checked tablecloths, as many tables and chairs crammed into the small space as could possibly fit. On the walls were framed pictures of Joe DiMaggio, the local hero. Spider's own great-grandfather had known Joe DiMaggio right here in this neighborhood. Frank Sinatra played on the sound system. On warm afternoons and evenings, there were tables and chairs on the sidewalk outside as well. On the window, stenciled in red, white, and green lettering, were the words, "Good eats! Best in North Beach!"

"Hey," said a man sitting at the counter, "can we change this to the sports station?" The man was a

regular customer. He came in often on his way home from work. He always ordered two slices of the sausage pizza and a beer. He liked sitting at the counter.

Just then the news came on. “Just one minute, okay?” Spider said. “I want to see my buddy again.”

There, on the screen over the bar, was George, facing the camera. Behind him was a bookcase in what looked to be his living room. Across the screen in red lettering were the words: “Boy stranded on island for a week makes passionate plea for the world to send humanitarian aid to the people of the Democratic Republic.”

“That kid was great,” the man at the counter said. “But we’ve heard him! Let’s catch the game.”

“Just one minute,” Spider said. “Please?”

The screen showed a close-up of George’s face. He was saying, “—that’s why we think it’s so important to send food and other necessities to the people of the Democratic Republic. I, for one, feel so grateful that the leaders are willing to sit down and talk. My friends and I know how it feels to wonder how you’ll find your next meal. I think we all want to make sure that there is peace in the region—”

Someone just off the screen with a microphone asked George, “Can you tell us a little about how you kept everyone warm while you were stranded on the island?”

“We weren’t at all prepared for an outdoor survival experience,” George said. “We were ready for a hotel in Germany. We didn’t have the sleeping



bags, or snowshoes, or anything you're supposed to have—”

Someone at one of the tables said, “Can you turn that up? I want to hear that kid.”

Spider grabbed the remote and raised the volume. Now they were showing the photos Spider had taken of Mars. There was their campfire next to the plane. There was a shot showing the inside of the cargo hold.

Spider's uncle, who came to ring a bill on the register, pointed to Spider and said, “You know who this is, right? My nephew was one of the kids on that plane.”

“You kids did well,” said one of the customers said.

“Thanks.” Spider grinned. They'd done much better than anyone knew.

The news clip was nearing the end. George turned and looked directly at the camera and said, “It seems to me we should feed them, not bomb them. We should help them, not starve them.”

George was good. He was relaxed and confident, but animated, knowing how to pause for drama. His smile was warm and sincere.

“If you ask me,” said a customer at one of the tables, “that kid's right. We should be sending food to that country, not trying to starve them, even if we don't like their government.”

“I *totally* agree,” Spider said.

“Now can we change to a sports station?” asked the man at the counter.

“Sure,” Spider said, and handed him the remote.

“Yup,” said another customer. “Feed them, don’t bomb them. Help them, don’t starve them.”

*A slogan needs to have six words, at most,* George had said.

Spider looked around at the customers in the restaurant, amazed. Was it *that* easy to get people to think just what you wanted them to think? Just make sure the slogan is short? Suddenly, instead of feeling powerful, he felt a little sad. If people were that easy to sway, well, *anyone* could do it. You couldn’t very well have a wonderful world if people were that easy to manipulate.

\* \* \*

Cindy started to fall asleep during dinner. She excused herself to go to bed early and closed her bedroom door almost all the way. She’d learned that if she closed her door all the way, her parents wondered what she was doing and came knocking. If she left it open five or six inches, she could have privacy without anyone asking what she was up to.

She unpacked the newspaper articles about the missile crisis she’d brought home from the trip. She unfolded them and smoothed them out and added them to the pile. She’d been saving links to articles from online blogs and sites.

The souvenirs she’d bought in Germany were still in her suitcase on the island. For all she knew, her suitcase would stay there forever. She put the map she brought home from Iceland on her stack of

maps. Other maps from the news showed the location of Mars more precisely.

She stretched and yawned, and closed her eyes. She thought about what they managed to do that afternoon. The others had thought she was flat-out crazy when she said they could do something about the bomb. She turned out to be right, but only because her teammates were so smart. They were beyond smart. They were brilliant, every one of them. She fell asleep smiling.

\* \* \*

The next morning, when Cindy's alarm went off, she had a hard time waking up. Her mom came into her room already dressed for work, her heels clicking across the wood floor. "First day of school for you in weeks!" her mother said. "Rise and shine!"

Waking up felt like pulling herself through a fog. Must be the jet lag. She'd slept so long and so deeply she felt that she was still asleep even as she shuffled to the kitchen for breakfast with her brother. They got out their cereal, the same as always, as if so much hadn't happened since the last school morning they'd sat together at the breakfast table.

Suddenly the memory of what she and the others had done the day before hit her like a jolt. She sat upright. "What's up?" her brother asked.

"Nothing," she said, but as if a switch inside of her flipped on, she moved faster. She finished her breakfast, and showered and dressed as quickly as she could. She figured she had better wait until she was at

the bus stop before turning on her phone and checking the news. She grabbed her backpack, put her telephone and lunch inside, told her brother good-bye—he went to a different school and rode a different bus—and ran out the door.

Her bus—the Muni-29—came almost as soon as she arrived at the corner. She got on, found a seat by herself, took out her phone, and turned it on. Her intention was to open the news app, but instantly she saw she’d received more than a dozen text messages from members of the chess team.

“OMG,” George wrote. “That’s all I can say!”

“WOW!” came from Liam.

“Check. It. Out. Right here on Channel 14,” came from Spider.

The other messages went on in the same vein, exuberant and joyful, except the one from Alexis. “Listen you guys don’t say ANYTHING. If anyone finds out . . .”

Something was definitely going on. Cindy’s hands were shaking as she clicked open her news app.

The thing about living in California is that by the time you wake up, most other places in the world have been awake for hours. It was seven thirty in the morning in California, but ten thirty in New York, and evening in Asia.

The list of news stories that came up under “breaking news” told Cindy that a lot had been happening in the world since she went to sleep:

*Food and humanitarian aid poured into the Democratic Republic during the hours since the regime*

*lowered its missile . . .*

*Grateful and relieved when nuclear war was averted, people around the world sent food and other goods to the people of the Democratic Republic, who have long suffered under economic sanctions imposed by the rest of the world . . .*

*World leaders plan to meet with the head of the new Democratic Republic in Switzerland Sunday to discuss how to open trade relations with the Democratic Republic . . .*

*Xiuying Cheng, known to his friends as George, was one of the youngsters aboard Flight 690, the flight missing for ten days off the coast of Iceland. In a passionate and moving speech, George Cheng urged world charities and individuals to send food and aid to the Democratic Republic. He is credited with inspiring many of the donors to send humanitarian relief to the people of the Democratic Republic. . . .*

*Experts believe the Democratic Republic will be willing to enter into a missile control treaty.*

Cindy giggled aloud with relief and happiness. They had done it! In the next moment, she sank down into her seat, furtively looking around. With relief, she saw that nobody was paying attention to her.

She knew how Alexis felt. There was something scary and weird about this whole thing. But she felt positively jubilant. Who would believe it? Who would possibly imagine that a group of ninth graders had pulled off the stunt of the century?

Don, the pilot, sent an email to all six Knights of the Square Table. He said he was going to be in San Francisco the following week, and wanted to take them all out for an early dinner, if they were free. He offered to send a message to each of their parents. He suggested a seafood restaurant near Fisherman's Wharf that he'd heard was good.

Their parents gave permission, so they picked a place to meet. At the designated time and place, the Knights of the Square Table sat on a bench near the wharf, waiting for Don. They were close enough to Pier 39 to hear the barking of the sea lions. The place was crowded, as always, mostly with tourists. Festive flags flapped in the breeze. An ice cream vendor went by with his cart. The air had that salty, fishy smell of the sea.

"Next," Cindy said, "we'll take care of world hunger."

"Just call on me," Spider said, flexing his muscles. "I'll take care of little problems like world hunger for you, anytime."

"I'm just not sure you're joking," Alexis said.

“What we did was great, I admit that. But saving the world every single day—” She shook her head. “I just don’t know.”

“I understand, Alexis,” Spider said. “Being a superhero is hard work. But *someone* has to do it.”

“Look!” Natalie said, pointing. “Here comes Don!”

Don was walking briskly toward them. He wore his pilot’s uniform, complete with hat, tie, white shirt, and jacket with gold braids. They’d never seen him looking so crisp and tidy. Cindy had a sudden memory of how he had looked coming out of the cockpit just after they’d landed on Mars, his face flushed and wet with perspiration, his uniform rumpled.

They greeted him, and walked toward the restaurant Don had selected. “I called ahead,” he told them, “and asked for a table with a view of the water.”

“Nice,” Alexis said. “Thanks.”

They sat at a round table near the window facing the bay. Don was relaxed all through the meal, making polite small talk. He asked about the flight home, school, their families. He revealed that he’d recently become widowed. “Very recently,” he said. He also said he was ready to retire. “I was already worn out. That incident on the island put me over the edge.”

After they’d eaten, Don ordered a sampling of desserts. “I’d like a cup of coffee if you don’t mind sitting another few minutes,” he said. “I’m flying out

of San Francisco later tonight.”

“No problem,” Spider said.

They ate the desserts while Don drank his coffee.

Then Don backed his chair away from the table, positioning himself so he could see all six of them at once. “There are a few things I’d like to say. The first is this. I owe you all, big time. If not for the six of you, I don’t know what would have happened on that island. Passengers on planes in trouble have been known to panic. The situation could have gone very badly.”

“Thanks, Don,” George said. “We appreciated the things you said about us.”

“I am in your debt. All of you. To say I owe each of you a favor is an understatement. So I’ll say this: if I can ever do anything at all for any of you, please call me.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out some business cards. He handed one to each of them. He’d written his private cell phone number and personal email address on the back of each.

“I’m not sure what kind of help you might need,” he said, “but as a pilot I could probably get you aboard a plane if you needed to go somewhere.”

He took another drink of his coffee. “One more thing. Not to alarm you, but there’s a rumor that someone hacked into the security system of the Democratic Republic.”

Cindy’s heart thumped in her chest. What she felt was pure terror. Were they about to get caught? She wondered how Alexis was taking Don’s comment.



She wanted to glance at the others but she didn't dare. If they all started looking at each other, they would appear guilty.

Fortunately George was able to answer. "Really?" George asked.

"Yes, really," Don said. "A few news blogs have picked up a rumor that parts of the Democratic Republic's government website failed just about the time the regime lowered its missile and agreed to talks. There is speculation that they were hacked."

"Interesting," George said.

Cindy thought George did an okay job of acting innocent. But he wasn't completely convincing. He seemed to be trying too hard. Not that she could do better. If she'd tried to answer, she would have probably stammered and stuttered.

"There's an additional rumor," Don said, "that the hacking came from San Francisco."

Now Cindy felt genuinely faint. She concentrated entirely on breathing normally and keeping her face relaxed.

"If you're thinking that *we* did anything like *hack* into a government computer," George said with a laugh in his voice, "that's just absurd!"

George was doing better now. He'd caught himself, adjusted to Don's questioning, and appeared more relaxed.

Don took a sip of his coffee. "Look," he said, carefully placing his cup back down on the table. "I spent ten days stranded on an island with the six of you. When you spend that long on a small island with

people, you get to know them, really well. Do you know what I mean?”

He expected an answer, so George said, “Sure! We all got to know each other real well.”

“I learned what kind of stuff you kids are made of.” He looked at each of them, one by one. “But don’t worry. Your secret is safe with me. I’ll never tell anyone.”

Liam gave a little laugh. “Don, you *way* overestimate us.”

Just then the server came to their table and asked Don if he wanted more coffee. “No, thanks,” Don said. “Just the bill please.”

When the server walked away, Alexis said, “So how is the copilot?”

“Richard had a concussion,” Don said, “as I suspected. But he’ll be fine. The doctor said he may just need a few weeks of rest. Richard said he may take an early retirement, too. He feels a lot like I did. That adventure was just a little too much for him.”

For the first time, Cindy ventured a glance at a few of the others. The others were doing their best to show nothing in their faces.

“I’m glad he’s going to be fine,” Alexis said. “It could have been so much worse.”

The waiter brought the bill, which Don paid. They walked outside. Don used the taxicab app on his phone and said, “A cab should be here for me in two minutes. How’s that for service? Can I offer any of you a ride?”

They all said no thank you. Cindy said, “We go

different ways. We're fine on buses. We have our student passes."

A taxicab pulled to the curb. Don opened the door and said good-bye, and slid into the backseat. Just before closing the door, he said, "Remember. Call if you need anything."

Don waved as the cab merged into traffic. They stood and waved until they could no longer see his cab.

"He knows," Cindy said.

"He doesn't know *for sure*," Alexis said.

"He knows for sure," Liam said. "But I don't think he's going to tell anyone."

"Let's go," Spider said. The easiest way for each of them to get home was to take the F Market streetcar toward the Embarcadero. From the F Market, they'd all go different ways. Fortunately it was past rush hour, so the streetcar would not be crushingly packed. They stood at the corner, waiting for the light to change so they could cross the street.

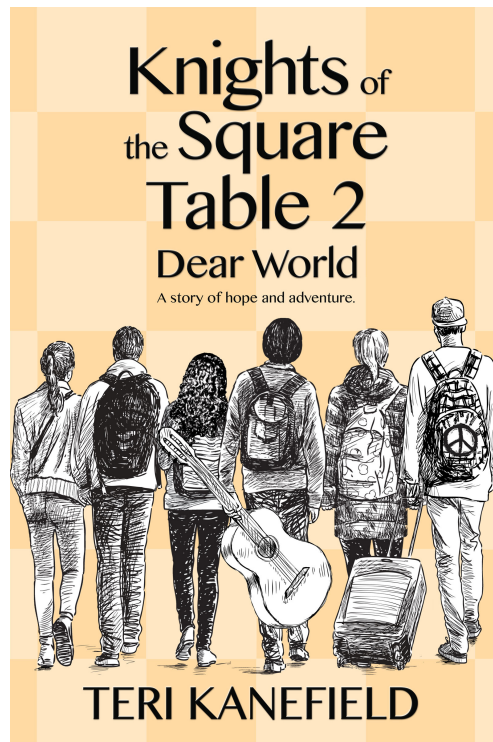
That was when Cindy said, very quietly, "We did an awesome job. We prevented a nuclear war. But there are thousands of nuclear missiles in the world. You know, I really think we can do something about that situation."

Nobody could answer because just then other people joined them at the corner. The light changed so they could cross the street. The streetcar appeared, clanking and rattling.

Spider glanced at Alexis to see how she was responding to what Cindy had said. Alexis smiled and

gave a good-natured shrug, as if to say, *Who knows?*  
*Maybe Cindy's right.*  
Maybe it *could* be a wonderful world.

*Knights of the Square Table 2* is now available:



Empowered by their experiences while stranded on an island, six teenagers call themselves modern-day Robin Hoods and set out on a quest to right the wrongs in the world.

When unconventional—and illegal—methods get them into trouble, they find themselves on the run.

A story of hope and adventure.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Teri writes novels, short stories, essays, stories for children, and nonfiction for both children and adults.

Her recent books for young readers include *The Girl from the Tar Paper School*, which won the 2015 Jane Addams Book Award and was named a Silver Honor Book by the California Reading Association. Her first novel, *Rivka's Way*, was a Sydney Taylor Awards Notable Book.

Her stories have appeared in publications as diverse as *Education Week*, *Scope Magazine*, *The Iowa Review*, *The American Literary Review*, and *Cricket Magazine*.

Teri lives with her family in California near the beach.