

**laptop #8**

# **shut down!**

**True courage reveals the laptop's truth**

**by Christopher P.N. Maselli**



**Zonderkidz**

*To Gary Richardson, for having the courage to  
innovate a new series for boys.*

---

*And to Gwen Ellis and Gloria Kempton, two  
editors who had the courage time and again to  
turn my messes into something truly special.*

**Zonderkidz**®

*The children's group of Zondervan*

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*Shut Down*

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# Apprehensions

The inventor worked long and hard to destroy her own invention . . . or at the very least, those who would misuse it. She knew eventually her rest would come. The question was: at what cost?

## Wednesday, 6:52 p.m.

"Your knee's shaking."

Matt stopped shaking his knee. "No, it's not."

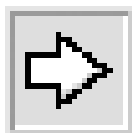
Isabel Zarza stared Matt straight in the face. He looked away from her swallowing brown eyes.

"C'mon, Matt," Isabel pressed him, her voice sounding like newly-spun honey. "I know you. What's wrong?"

Matt's knee started shaking again.

*I'm just a bit on edge, he wanted to say, because this Saturday I'm going to more than just a wrestling tournament. I'm about to encounter a very dangerous situation because a mysterious woman I barely know but implicitly trust, asked me to. I'm Superman. Saving the world without anyone ever knowing it.*

Isabel let out a long breath. She looked across the room. Matt followed her gaze; their youth pastor was getting ready to start youth group. Matt loved youth group, and he loved talking to Isabel . . . but tonight he was, well, just a bit on edge. *All because I'm responsible for saving the world*, he thought again.



"I know things will go fine at your tournament," Isabel encouraged him. "I'll even pray that God will give you strength just like before."

"Thanks," Matt said with a genuine smile. He wasn't afraid; that wasn't it. He just wasn't sure if he had what it would take to save the world. *That's kind of a heavy thing to lay on the shoulders of a thirteen-year-old*, Matt thought.

Isabel returned his smile, her eyes twinkling, but worry marks wrinkled her forehead. Matt hoped this wouldn't be the last time he saw her smile.

### Wednesday, 8:27 p.m.

"Your knee's shaking."

Matt stopped shaking his knee. "No, it's not."

Pastor Mick Ruhlen, youth pastor at Enisburg Community Church, stared Matt straight in the face. The youth service was over and Matt's stomach was still in knots. "What's going on, dude? You can tell me."

Matt sighed. *Not this time*, he thought. He looked at Pastor Ruhlen's chia-pet shaped hair up close. It was orange tonight.

"C'mon, dude," Pastor Ruhlen said emphatically. "I know you were hardly payin' attention during the service. That's not like my guy, Matt. What's wrong?"

Matt looked across the youth hall at bleach-blonde haired, 200-and-some-pound bully, Hulk Hooligan. The big lug had his hand under his shirt, making armpit noises.

"Why single *me* out?" Matt said defensively. "Hulk never listens."

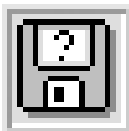
"Right-e-o," Pastor Ruhlen agreed, laying his surfer-dude talk on thick. "But *you* do."

Matt shrugged. "I have a lot on my mind," he admitted. *For instance, what if this mission Sam roped us into doesn't go as planned? What if something goes wrong? What then? How will I handle it? And how will I forgive myself if the laptop gets into the wrong hands?*

"Well, friend," Pastor Ruhlen comforted, throwing a lanky arm around Matt's shoulders, "whatever it is, you can be sure that God will be with you."

"Yeah."

Pastor Ruhlen jumped up suddenly and ran to the podium at the front of the room. He grabbed his



sermon notes and ran back to Matt. "Here ye go," he said, stuffing them into Matt's hand.

"What's this?"

"That's my message from tonight. I call it 'Cougar Courage.'"

"Why?"

"You really weren't listenin', were ya? 'Cuz you're a 2:52 guy. Remember Luke 2:52?"

Matt recited, "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."

"Right-e-o!" Pastor Ruhlen shouted. "Jesus grew smarter, stronger, deeper, and cooler! And you're growin' the same way. One thing about growin' deeper is knowing that God has given us courage like lions. Read the notes."

"I thought you said it was 'Cougar Courage.'"

Pastor Ruhlen opened his hands in front of him. "Well, yeah. But 'Lion Courage' just didn't sound as good for a title. Now, c'mon, roar for me."

"Huh?"

"Rowrrr! Rowrrr! Rowrrr!"

Matt looked around to see if anyone was watching.

"Say, 'I've got Cougar Courage! Rowrrr!' Do it!"

Matt whispered, "I've got . . . Cougar Courage."

"Rowrrr!"

"Grr."

"Okay, that'll do, dude! It'll grow! Just promise me you'll read the notes."



Matt nodded, pushing them into his pocket. Come Saturday he would need more than notes. Much more.

### Thursday, 9:52 a.m.

"Your knee's shaking."

Matt stopped shaking his knee. "No, it's not."

Matt's best friends, Lamar, Gill, and Alfonzo grouped around Matt's locker as he pulled out books for his next class.

"Okay," Matt finally admitted, "maybe it is. I'm just a bit nervous about this weekend."

"You'll do fine in the tournament," Lamar encouraged.

"It's not the wrestling tournament I'm nervous about," Matt said softly.

"Oh, right," Lamar said as though he'd forgotten about their mission.

"I'm not nervous," Gill offered with a big smile on his face. His eyes popped and his red hair bounced. "I'm bringing my spy bag."

"Please *don't*," Alfonzo pleaded.

"Are you sure we have to go through with this?" Lamar asked Matt. "In this way?"

"It *should* be no big deal," Matt replied. "All we have to do is be Sam's eyes and ears. We don't have to do anything dangerous. She promised."

"That's real comforting," Lamar said with more than a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

*Slam!*

At once, Matt's locker crashed shut. Matt had barely pulled his hands out before getting them smashed.

"So ya nervous 'bout wrestlin', Calhan?!" Hulk Hooligan shouted loud enough for *everyone* to hear.

"Cal-a-han," Matt corrected his last name.

Hulk pushed Matt's friends aside and leaned into Matt's face. "Good ting I'm on yer team," he said, sounding like Rocky. "Or I'd squash ya like a bug!"

Matt and his friends stayed quiet.

"What?" Hulk asked.

No one said a word.

Then Hulk pressed, "Ya plannin' somethin' tomorrow I should know about?"

"Uh . . . no," Matt said truthfully. Tomorrow they were taking a school bus to the wrestling tournament, and then wrestling most of the day. Their plans were for the *next* day . . . *Saturday*.

Hulk leaned back and smiled. "C'mon, tell me."

"Not on your life," Alfonzo said quickly.

"So ya *are* plannin' somethin'!"

Matt's eyes darted to Alfonzo.

"Ya don't haveta tell me," Hulk said coolly. "I'll find out soon enough. I'm not takin' my eyes off ya."

And with that, Hulk stomped off, shaking the hall floor with every step.

"Great," Matt said, squeezing his temples with his fingers. "That's all we need."

"Don't worry about it," Lamar said. "We'll lose him."

"We'd better," Matt said with a nod.

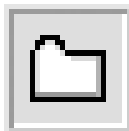
"We will," Gill said optimistically. "'Cuz I'm bringing my spy bag!"

### Thursday, 5:13 p.m.

After a long day at school, Matt stood beside his mailbox, thumbing through the letters addressed to "Occupant."

"Hi."

Matt smiled, then looked up to see Isabel standing across the street at her own mailbox. She reached in and pulled out a small clump of mail that looked identical to what Matt held in his own hand.



"Hey." Matt walked toward her.

Isabel looked exactly as she had the night before at youth group, her midnight black hair tumbling down her back like a waterfall. No matter how many times Matt saw Isabel, she always seemed to take his breath away. That was one of the strange things about turning into a teenager. Matt used to run the other way when he saw a girl. Now . . . he was strangely interested in just . . . hearing her voice.

"You doing better?" Isabel asked, shyly peeking up from her letters.

Matt pursed his lips. For a brief moment he had forgotten about his impending mission with Sam . . . now it had come back to smack him in the face.

"I'm doing all right," he said softly.

"Look," Isabel said suddenly, "I know it's none of my business, but I've been praying for you guys—you, Lamar, Gill, and my brother Alfonzo—and I just don't have a good feeling about this weekend."



Matt felt the envelopes slip from his hand. They hit the pavement with a slap. He quickly bent down to pick them up. "Y-you think I'll lose the wrestling tournament?" he stammered, picking up the letters one by one.

Isabel bent down and met Matt at knee level, her long hair draping in front of her. "No, not just that. It's . . . something else. I don't know. When I prayed, I could just . . . tell. You need to be careful."

Matt looked up and his and Isabel's eyes locked. He didn't want to dismiss her. She was a girl, and Matt's mom always told him that girls had a built-in suspicion . . . or something like that. *Girls just "know" about stuff*, his mother had said.

"This is just . . . something I have to do," Matt stated, not quite sure if that would make any sense

to Isabel. As far as she knew, he was simply traveling up the coast to a wrestling tournament. That was all.

As they stood again, Isabel said, "I understand facing hard stuff. Really, I do. When we were in Mexico City, we didn't want to leave, but we knew it was something we had to do. Papa said it was time. So we left and came here for his new job."

"I'm sure it wasn't easy."

"It was terrifying! But Papa said we had to be courageous and do it, so we did. And you know what? We found this house completely by accident and now we feel safe."

"How about that," Matt said. Still, the last thing he felt was "safe." Day in and day out, danger hung over him. Things hadn't been safe since the day he had turned thirteen. He didn't know how he would do it, but somehow, he needed to make things safe again. And while he didn't have the kind of "suspicion" Isabel did, he somehow knew that what he was about to do with Sam could change everything. It could literally change the course of the world . . . or keep it from taking a wrong turn, anyway.

"Do me a favor?" Matt asked Isabel.

"Anything," she said completely serious.

"Keep praying. Saturday's coming awfully quick."

"Saturday?" Isabel said with a smirk. "You mean tomorrow: *Friday*. By Saturday, the tournament will be over."

Matt nodded thoughtfully. Then he said, "Still . . . pray for Saturday, too."

With a double take, Isabel softly bit her bottom lip.

### **Thursday, 7:04 p.m.**

Matt sat at his kitchen table across from his mother and father. He didn't feel much like eating. He just pecked at his meatloaf.

Mr. and Mrs. Calahan exchanged glances.

"You all right?" Matt's dad asked.

Matt shrugged. "I guess."

"You don't look all right," Matt's mother observed.

Matt wiped his mouth with his napkin and sat back. "I guess I'm just not hungry."

"You're nervous, aren't you, honey?" Peggy Calahan said. "I noticed when you sat down your knee was shaking."

Matt stopped shaking his knee. He gave her a weak smile.

"It'll be fine, Ace," Mr. Calahan comforted.

Matt stared at the meatloaf on his plate. They thought he was worried about his upcoming wrestling tournament, same as Isabel. Only he, Lamar, Gill, and

Alfonzo knew their trip was much more than that. Tomorrow they were leaving and wrestling . . . and the next day it would begin. *The mission.*

After his parents downed a few more bites, Matt felt compelled to ask, "How do you know if you have enough courage to do something that's hard?"

Mr. and Mrs. Calahan exchanged glances again. Matt's dad set down his fork. "Well," he said. "Sometimes you don't know. But what's important is to do what's right—*because it's right.*"

Matt looked up at his dad, a square-jawed, broad-shouldered, black-haired man who wore a plaid shirt. "And then you're courageous? Because you do what's right?"

Stan Calahan nodded. "It takes courage to do the right thing."

Matt's eyebrows furled. *The right thing.* "That's not always easy though," he said.

Mr. Calahan looked down. "It never is."

"Stan," Mrs. Calahan spoke up, "you should tell him."

Matt looked at his mother. "Tell me what?"

"You mean—" Matt's dad began, then stopped.

Matt's mom nodded.

"What?" Matt asked again.

Mr. Calahan let out a long breath.

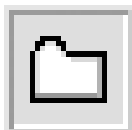


"Several months ago . . . around the time of your birthday . . . your mother and I . . . well, we were having some troubles, Matt."

"What kind of troubles?" Matt asked quickly.

"Parent troubles," Mr. Calahan said.

Matt wanted to scream, *Are you kidding me!?* He didn't . . . because inside, at the time, he had known.



"It was really hard," Matt's father said, clearing his throat.

Matt's mother tightened her lips, staring down at her iced tea.

"What'd you do?" Matt asked softly.

"We made it through," Stan Calahan said. "We knew it was the right thing to do—for our family. For us. So, as hard as it was, we made some changes and we mustered the courage. And we haven't regretted a day of it." He smiled softly at his wife, who looked up and smiled back, her eyes glistening.

Matt blinked and looked down at his meatloaf again.

*The right thing.* Matt knew what the right thing to do was in his situation. It was to go on the mission. It was to help by being Sam's eyes and ears. It was to be a part of saving the world from evil. But he couldn't help but wonder . . . would he have the courage to do it?

### **Friday, 4:30 p.m.**

Matt cracked his fingers. Away from home, quite a way up the West Coast, Lamar had just wrestled, Gill had videotaped it, and Alfonzo was keeping score. Coach Plymouth called Matt to the mat. He stepped up.

He wrestled with the competition and won the match without breaking a sweat. Nothing about the wrestling tournament could rattle him. Not even a whole slur of jeers from Hulk, his own teammate. Matt was sure this was small potatoes compared to what was coming.

### **Friday, 11:58 p.m.**

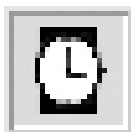
Amid the snores of his teammates, Matt quietly prayed. For the umpteenth time, he went over the plan in his mind.

Tomorrow morning, during their free time at the beach, they would rent jet skis and meet up with Sam, who would be cruising in her boat. Matt would bring his laptop and the wireless network card Sam had given him. They were the keys to a successful mission, to helping Matt be Sam's guidance from a distance. If everything went like clockwork, evil would be thwarted and they would be on their way back to the beach in a flash.

*If everything went like clockwork.*

“Cougar Courage,” Matt muttered to himself. “Just do the right thing. Help me, God, to do what’s right.” As he drifted off, though, Isabelle’s words came back to him: *“I just don’t have a good feeling about this weekend.”*

He appreciated her concern, but why couldn’t she have kept her “suspicions” to herself?



# Saturday Rendezvous

**Saturday, 11:02 a.m.**

*Ker-splash!*

Matt Calahan's eyes shut tight as Hulk Hooligan flipped sideways on his jet ski, crashing into the Pacific Ocean water like a killer whale.

"Will he be all right?" Matt shouted to Lamar, who was driving their jet ski.

"He'll be fine!" Lamar shouted back. "Now let's get out of here before he gets back up!"

"Go! Go! Go!" Matt yelled. "Follow Alfonzo and Gill!"

Lamar kicked the jet ski up a notch and fell in line behind Alfonzo and Gill, also on a speeding jet ski.

Behind them, Hulk shouted something unintelligible as his jet ski circled back to him. Matt glanced back over his shoulder once more, his hair whipping in his eyes. Yes, Hulk would be fine—and finally, after trying to lose the big lug for an hour, Matt, Lamar, Gill, and Alfonzo could get on their way

alone. The wrestling tournament was over; Matt could barely remember it. He was too fixed on what was coming up next.

"Do you think he'll kill us for ditching him?" Matt wondered out loud.

Lamar laughed. "Probably. But it's for his own good."

Matt nodded.

As they sped away, wrapping around a peninsula and out of Hulk's sight, Lamar asked, "How's the laptop?"

Matt shifted the backpack on his shoulder, feeling the weight of his laptop rub against his spine, right through his life jacket. "It's fine."

"How're you keeping it dry?" Lamar asked. "Did you vacuum-seal it?"

Matt laughed. "It's just sealed in a baggie. You've seen the commercials. It should be fine."

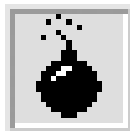
Lamar turned and shot a doubtful glance at Matt. His black skin glistened with water droplets.

"There!" Matt pointed to the west.

A bright red speedboat cut through the ocean water like a knife through frosting. Its driver was standing and steering, her dark sunglasses masking her mysterious face. Her shoulder-length golden hair criss-crossed in the wind, blowing behind her. She wore a shiny black diving suit.

Matt waved and the driver, Sam, returned the greeting with a nod. She pulled back on the throttle and brought the speedboat to a gurgling stop. Lamar and Alfonzo pulled their jet ski up to the back of the boat. Sam swiftly helped Gill and Matt aboard, then Lamar and Alfonzo. They slid the jet ski onto a small ramp, facing outward. How did Sam know to get a ramp that worked so perfectly? But then he dismissed the question. If Matt had learned anything about Sam, it was that she was resourceful.

With everyone safely on the speedboat, Sam smiled and nodded to the boys. Matt quickly noticed his friends staring at her.



“Oh!” Matt cried, realizing they had never actually seen her before—at least not without darkness or shadows hiding her features. Matt turned to his friends. “Lamar, Gill, Alfonzo—this is Sam. The *real* Sam.”

Lamar smiled weakly. Gill scratched his head. Alfonzo said, “Hola.”

“Hello.” Sam’s soft voice was a bit raspy, barely heard over the waves that rocked the boat. “I know . . . it’s been a rough ride. But I appreciate you coming.”

“We’re here for Matt,” Lamar said.

Sam nodded and glanced at Matt. “I know.”

Alfonzo’s head tilted and he touched the side of his face.

Sam mirrored the action, rubbing the long scar under her fingertips.

Matt's eyes widened. "Alfonzo!"

"It's all right," Sam assured Matt. "It's just a scar, remember?"

After a long moment, Matt asked, "So now what?"

Sam brought her hand to her mouth, hiding a sudden smile. The boys looked at each other.

"What?" Matt asked.

Sam tried stifling a laugh, but it escaped anyway. "I'm—I'm sorry. But you look like Twinkies."

Matt, Lamar, Gill, and Alfonzo surveyed each other. All four of them wore bright orange life jackets. Underneath they wore gray shirts and black swimming trunks—the *same* gray shirts and black swimming trunks.

Sam's giggling eased the tension.

"Er . . . they're from school," Alfonzo explained. "They're our wrestling shirts."

Matt shrugged. "And Wal-Mart had a sale on black swimsuits."

"So I see," Sam said, wiping away her smile.

"Lamar," Gill said a bit too loudly, "she doesn't seem mean and manipulative at all."

"Gill!" Lamar shouted.

"Hey," Gill defended himself. "She *knows* she creeps us out."

"I'm sorry," Sam said. "That's in the past. No more creeping. I promise."

Sam told the boys to sit down as she started up the engine again. The boat rumbled in the water as they took off, splitting the waves in two.

"So how'd you finally manage to get here?" Sam shouted to Matt.

Matt tapped his temple with his forefinger. "Well, I heard about the wrestling tournament, so I used the laptop to get our school invited and into a nearby hotel." He popped his eyebrows up and down.



"Our tournament was last night," Lamar added. "Coach gave us free time today until three."

Sam looked at her digital watch. "Three p.m.? That's not much time."

"It's all we've got," Matt said.

"Then it'll have to do," Sam replied. "Is the laptop in your backpack?"

Matt nodded.

Sam shook her head. "I wish you wouldn't rely on the laptop so much, Matt," she said, raising her voice above the roar of the engine

Matt shrugged. "It does a lot of good. Without it, we couldn't have all got here today. I even got Gill to come so he could help record the tournament on video."

“It does a lot of bad, too,” Sam quickly reminded Matt.

This was a recurring theme with Sam. As the previous owner of the laptop, she had seen it do more harm than good. Matt had received the laptop months ago for his thirteenth birthday. It was the “perfect” gift from his parents; he had always loved writing, and now he could write anytime, anywhere. But then Matt and his friends discovered something powerful . . . and dangerous. Whatever Matt typed into the laptop actually *happened*. They didn’t understand *how*, but it *did*. Soon, they found themselves using the laptop to help others.



Sam didn’t share their optimistic intentions.

Sam had seen another side to the laptop. She had seen it in the hands of someone evil. From what Matt had put together, she had seen it used for extravagant personal gain—and even to hurt people. By her silence, Matt could only imagine the depths.

And that was why they had gathered together: for this *mission*, as Sam called it. She said those who had used the laptop for evil still had records of the laptop’s technology. Those records had to be destroyed . . . or the world could forever be in the shadow of danger.

Matt wasn’t sure if she was being melodramatic or not. “Save the world” seemed a bit melodra-

matic . . . but Sam did not. He had never met a more serious person.

"That's why we're going to do this," Sam continued. "I need your help to destroy all the evidence and research connected to the laptop. We must make sure this technology never gets into the wrong hands again."

Matt felt the weight of the laptop in his backpack. "What about the laptop itself? After the records are destroyed, what do we do with it?"

"That's up to you," Sam said, steering the boat left. "It's yours now."

"Are there a lot of records?" Lamar shouted.

"Yes—they're extensive, but fortunately, they're recorded on nine encrypted discs. They're unable to be duplicated. I did that on purpose."

"What do you mean *you* did that?" Matt asked.

Sam didn't answer. Instead, she said, "The discs are in the Records Room on the back side of the Facility."

"Hey Sam!" Gill shouted, apparently having lost all inhibitions. (It never took long for Gill to warm up to a stranger.) He whirled his small backpack off his shoulder. "I brought my spy bag! Just like the TV spies have!" He unzipped the bag.

Lamar and Alfonzo, sitting on either side, peeked in. "So we *finally* get a peek into Sherlock Gillespie's spy stash. . . ." Alfonzo said.

Matt leaned over and took a peek. "Rope, a flashlight, a screwdriver—good thinking, Gill."

Alfonzo dug deeper. "Hairspray, Groucho Marx disguises, marbles—obviously, you've *lost* your marbles."

"Ha-ha," Gill said dryly.

"You brought Pooka-Dookas?" Lamar leaned back at the sight of the downright disgusting tasting cookies with green goo filling.

"I got a lifetime supply for my commercial," Gill said.

"I'm sorry," Alfonzo said.

"I'm not," Gill admitted. "My dog likes 'em."

"Hershey's Cocoa mix?" Alfonzo asked, pulling a packet out of the spy bag.

"That's to get the Pooka-Dooka taste out of my mouth."

"Ah." Yes, now it all made sense.

"I'm ready to stop the bad guys!" Gill exclaimed.

As they put the items back in the bag, Sam pulled Matt toward her. "Listen," she said into his ear. "If something goes wrong . . . if I'm stopped . . . It's not worth the risk for one person. I want you boys to get *out* of there. You don't want to mess with these people."

Matt nodded. "I know. Gill's just excited."

"I have no intention of putting you boys in danger," she pressed. "Your job is to stay outside, where it's safe."

"Is that why you wanted us all to come?" Matt challenged her.

"There's safety in numbers, Matt." Then, "There it is."

Each of the boys' heads popped up and looked straight ahead as Sam slowed the speed to a crawl and quietly approached.



The Facility was a monstrous stone and dark glass building, at least five stories tall, straight down to sea level. The entrance, Sam explained, was on the other side, several stories up, on the cliff. An eerie, enclosed walkway stretched from the main building to a series of steel warehouses not far from a few old, creaking docks.

Matt gulped. He was glad he wasn't the one going inside.

### Saturday, 11:25 p.m.

"So I thought the Records Room was in the back," Lamar noted. "Why is Sam going in the front?"

"She said it's the only place her access card will work," Matt replied.

"How'd she get an access card?" Alfonzo asked.

"Sam can get *anything*," Gill said.

"She's full of surprises," Lamar said plainly.

The four boys sat in the grass a great deal away from the entrance, behind a clump of trees and several

rocks. They stared into Matt's laptop. It was fully booted and Matt alternated between two screens. One contained a map of the Facility—lines and dimensions—clearly identifying hallways and rooms, vent systems and camera placement. Matt would use the map to figure out the exact locations of the cameras. The other screen was a direct feed into the Facility's camera systems via a wireless network card. Matt could actually watch Sam as she made her way through the building . . . and warn her if anyone was around the next corner. *This* was the main reason Sam



needed the boys' help. And Matt was glad this was all she needed them for, because it was enough. Matt had already dealt with several days of feeling sick in anticipation of his responsibility. He knew he couldn't mess up, or Sam's life could be on the line.

Matt looked up. He could barely see Sam by naked eye anymore. She was at the front of the stone building, sliding her card through an access slot. Matt hoped it would work and get her in. The building was just as ominous from the front as it was from the back, though not nearly as tall. They were actually viewing only the two top stories—the bottom three stretched down the cliff in back. Nearby, Matt heard the buzz of generators behind a steel fence.

"I'm in."

Matt spoke into the two-way radio. "Good." Then he stared at the screen on his laptop. He watched the front door open from the inside, and spied Sam entering the building. No one lurked anywhere near, as best as Matt could tell. He switched to the map and back. "Okay, I don't see anyone down the next two halls. Which way are you going?"

"Left."

Matt switched back to the map and looked at the lines representing the hall she walked down. He identified the closest cameras: #056, #057, #124. He switched back to the camera screen and punched the numbers into the laptop. The three cameras popped up on the screen beside one another. They were all empty. Matt felt beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

"This is a cakewalk," Alfonzo said. "No one's around."

"Thankfully," Matt replied. "That's why she chose Saturday. She says there should be just a handful of guards."

"So far, so good," Sam whispered through the two-way radio. "We'll be fine unless we run into—well, never mind."

"What? Who?"

"Nothing. Let's concentrate." On her end, Sam had an earpiece and a microphone hooked to the two-way

radio on her belt so she could hear Matt and talk to him without anyone knowing about it.

Suddenly a deep voice boomed, "What're ya guys doin'?!"

Matt, Lamar, Gill, and Alfonzo screamed like girls as Matt slammed his laptop shut. The boys nearly fell over each other.

"Hey!" the voice boomed again.

Matt flipped around in fright. His mouth dropped open. "*Hulk?!*" he shouted in disbelief. "What are you—how did you find us?!"

"I followed ya here," Hulk said boldly. "Ya almost lost me when ya got in da boat, but I was onta ya. Told ya I wouldn't let ya outta my sight, Calhan."

"Oh, *great!*" Matt shouted, upset.

Alfonzo grabbed Hulk's arm. "Get down!" he ordered, pulling.

Hulk's legs collapsed underneath him as he plopped down beside them. Matt felt the ground shake.

"So what're ya doin'?!"

"Shhhh!" Alfonzo hushed Hulk.

"This is just *great*," Matt huffed again.

From the two-way radio, Sam said, "I'm turning right, and down the next hallway, I'm going left again."

"Who's da chick on da radio?" Hulk asked.

Matt looked at Hulk. He didn't have time to explain. He sat up straight, opened the laptop again

and switched back to the map. #074, #111, #003. He switched back to the camera screen and punched in the numbers. The cameras popped up.

"It's clear."

"How do I look?"

Matt scoured the camera feeds with his eyes.

"Where are you?"

"Second hall already."

"You're doing great. I can't see you at all."

"Good," Sam replied. "Because if *you* can, *they* can."

Hulk's face scrunched up. "What is dis? Who're *they*?"

"Very bad men," Matt said, sticking to the point. "Very bad."

Hulk looked at Matt, blank-faced. Matt couldn't give him a detailed answer, because Sam had never given *him* one. But Matt could see it in Sam's eyes every time she mentioned "them." They were the faceless entity that wanted nothing more than to get the laptop back—so they could do whatever they wanted with it. All Matt knew was that he couldn't let them have it. No matter what the cost. No matter what the loss.

"Yer breakin' in!" Hulk whispered, his eyes wide.

"It's not like that," Lamar quickly corrected.



"Yeah, sure," Hulk guffawed. "Like I care. Hey, dis is cool. I am *in* wit' cha!"

Gill reached into his spy bag and pulled out a Groucho Marx disguise: large glasses with a big nose, a mustache, and fluffy eyebrows attached. "Good, then wear this."

Hulk took the glasses from Gill. "You want me to wear dese?"

"I just wanted to see if you would."

Matt spun around. "Look, you want to help us?" he demanded.

The bully nodded enthusiastically, completely in his element.

"Okay, then," Matt said. "Go back to the boats. Put your jet ski on the ramp of the boat we came in on—with ours. Make sure everything is ready to go. We may need to get out of here *fast*. Got it?"



Amazingly, Hulk didn't bulk at Matt's authority. Apparently, he didn't want to lose out on being a part of the danger. "Yeah! Calhan, I got it," he said. He hopped up and bounded off, giving Matt a thumbs-up in the process.

Lamar's eyebrows shot up. "Way to get rid of Hulk."

"It won't last long," Matt said.

"Hopefully long enough."

"Oh man!" Gill exclaimed. "He took the disguise with him! I hope Sam won't need hers."

"I'm sure that won't be a problem," Alfonzo said.

From the two-way radio, Sam's voice said, "Okay, I'm going straight for a while. Just clear the hallways ahead—to the South."

Matt checked the map and corresponding camera numbers. He punched them into the camera screen. The hallway was empty all the way down. Matt pressed the button on the two-way radio. "Still clear."

"At this rate, I'll never get to use my spy bag," Gill said.

Matt switched back to the map screen. He memorized some new numbers and switched back. He input the numbers.

"Whoa!" he shouted into the two-way radio.

"What?"

On screen, on camera #038, a man in black walked briskly down the hall.

"There's someone coming your way," Matt said.

The man left camera #038 and appeared in #066.

"He's moving fast."

The boys waited, watching the screen, holding their breath.

"Sam?"

No response.

"Sam?"

"I'm in the bathroom."

"Oh, sorry," Matt replied.

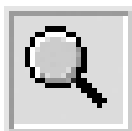
"I'm not *going* to the bathroom. I'm hiding."

"Oh, right."

Alfonzo slapped Matt's arm.

Matt switched to the map and found the bathroom. He switched back. The guard had passed her. Matt let out a long breath, then checked the nearby cameras once again. "Okay, I think it's clear."

"You *think*?"



Matt checked again and wiped his brow with the sleeve of his jacket. "It's clear."

Matt viewed the next two cameras ahead. Nothing. It was totally safe.

He switched back. Suddenly, his eyes grew wide. A guard popped back onto camera #038. He must have appeared when Matt was on the map screen. Then another guard. Camera #021. Matt squeezed the two-way radio. "Sam! Get out of there!"

"What?"

"Ahead of—"

*Whoosh!* On screen, the guard in camera #038 drew his weapon. Matt's heart pounded hard as Sam appeared in the center of camera #066. The guard drew closer. He was shouting something. The guard in #021 turned and closed in. The third guard came running into view. Matt, Lamar, Gill, and Alfonzo gasped.

As the guard in #038 became the guard in #066, he held his gun steady, Sam in his sights.

“Whoa!” The boys jumped back as Sam leaped into the air and kicked the weapon out of the guard’s hands. The weapon flew across the tile.

“Sam!” Matt shouted.

But she was too busy. She side-kicked the man in the shin and he went down.

Sam whirled around, dodging a punch from guard #2. She charged forward, knocking him in the chest with her shoulder. He flew back, nearly plowing into guard #3. Sam turned around again and started down the hall at full speed.

But she wasn’t fast enough. Guard #3 drew his weapon and fired. Sam darted right at the sound, and the boys gasped when she dropped to the floor, holding her arm tightly. The second guard pulled her up from behind, and threw an arm around her neck. He pulled down and suddenly Sam was defenseless, her back arched in the center of camera #066.

She was caught.

