

EXCERPTS FROM DAVE EGGERS' *THE CIRCLE* (2013)

Excerpt 1: Chasing Mercer

"Keep her safe," Mae pleaded with the mob. "Has someone called the police—the constables?"

In a few seconds, sirens could be heard, and when Mae saw the two cars race across the parking lot, she checked the time again. When the four officers reached Fiona Highbridge and applied handcuffs to her, the clock on the Great Room screen read 10 minutes, 26 seconds.

"I guess that's it," Mae said, and stopped the clock.

The audience exploded with cheers, and the participants who had trapped Fiona Highbridge were congratulated worldwide in seconds.

"Let's cut the video feed," Stenton said to Mae, "in the interest of allowing her some dignity."

Mae repeated the directive to the techs. The feeds showing Highbridge dropped out, and the screen went black again.

"Well," Mae said to the audience. "That was actually a lot easier than even I thought it would be. And we only needed a few of the tools now at the world's disposal."

"Let's do another!" someone yelled.

Mae smiled. "Well, we *could*," she said, and looked to Bailey, standing in the wings. He shrugged.

"Maybe not another fugitive," Stenton said into her earpiece. "Let's try a regular civilian."

A smile overtook Mae's face.

"Okay everyone," she said, as she quickly found a photo on her tablet and transferred it to the screen behind her. It was a snapshot of Mercer taken three years earlier, just after they'd stopped dating, when they were still close, the two of them standing at the entrance to a coastal trail they were about to hike.

Excerpted from: Eggers, Dave. *The Circle*. Vintage Canada, 2013. Print.

She had not, before just then, once thought of using the Circle to find Mercer, but now it seemed to make perfect sense. How better to prove to him the reach and power of the network and the people on it? His skepticism would fall away.

"Okay," Mae said to the audience. "Our second target today is not a fugitive from justice, but you might say he's a fugitive from, well, friendship."

She smiled, acknowledging the laughter in the room.

"This is Mercer Medeiros. I haven't seen him in a few months, and would love to see him again. Like Fiona Highbridge, though, he's someone who is trying not to be found. So let's see if we can break our previous record. Everyone ready? Let's start the clock." And the clock started.

Within ninety seconds there were hundreds of posts from people who knew him—from grade school, high school, college, work. There were even a few pictures featuring Mae, which entertained all involved. Then, though, much to Mae's horror, there was a yawning gap, of four and a half minutes, when no one offered any valuable information on where he was now. An ex-girlfriend said she, too, would like to know his whereabouts, given he had a whole scuba apparatus that belonged to her. That was the most relevant message for a time, but then a zing appeared from Jasper, Oregon, and was immediately voted to the top of the scroll.

I've seen this guy at our local grocery. Let me check.

And that poster, Adam Frankenthaler, got in touch with his neighbors, and quickly there was agreement that they had all seen Mercer—in the liquor store, in the grocery, at the library. But then there was another excruciating pause, almost two minutes,

where no one could figure out quite where he lived. The clock said 7:31.

"Okay," Mae said. "This is where the more powerful tools come into play. Let's check local real estate sites for rental histories. Let's check credit card records, phone records, library memberships, anything he would have signed up for. Oh wait." Mae looked up to see two addresses had been found, both in the same tiny Oregon town. "Do we know how we got those?" she asked, but it hardly seemed to matter. Things were moving too quickly now.

In the next few minutes, cars converged on both addresses, their passengers filming their arrival. One address was above a homeopathic medicine outlet in town, great redwoods rising high above. A camera showed a hand knocking on the door, and then peering into the window. There was no answer at first, but finally the door opened, and the camera panned down to find a tiny boy, about five, seeing a crowd at his doorstep, looking terrified.

"Is Mercer Medeiros here?" said a voice.

The boy turned, disappearing into the dark house. "Dad!" For a moment Mae panicked, thinking that this boy was Mercer's—it was happening too quickly for her to do the math properly. He already has a son? No, she realized, this couldn't be his biological child. Maybe he'd moved in with a woman who had kids already?

But when the shadow of a man emerged into the light of the doorway, it was not Mercer. It was a goateed man of about forty, in a flannel shirt and sweatpants. Dead end. Just over eight minutes had elapsed.

The second address was found. It was in the woods, high up

a mountain slope. The main video feed behind Mae switched to this view, as a car raced up a winding driveway to stop at a large grey cabin.

This time the camerawork was more professional and clear. Someone was filming a participant, a grinning young woman, knocking on the door, her eyebrows dancing up and down with mischief.

"Mercer?" she said to the door. "Mercer, you in there?" The familiarity in her voice was momentarily unnerving to Mae. "You in there making some chandeliers?"

Mae's stomach turned. She had a sense that Mercer would not like that question, the dismissive tone of it. She wanted his face to appear as soon as possible, so she could speak to him directly. But no one answered the door.

"Mercer!" the young woman said. "I know you're in there. We see your car." The camera panned to the driveway, where Mae saw, with a thrill, that it was indeed Mercer's pickup. When the camera panned back, it revealed a crowd of ten or twelve people, most of them looking like locals, in baseball hats and at least one in camouflage gear. By the time the camera arrived back at the front door, the crowd had begun to chant. "Mercer! Mercer! Mercer!"

Mae looked at the clock. Nine minutes, 24 seconds. They would break the Fiona Highbridge record by at least a minute. But first he had to come to the door.

"Go around," the young woman said, and now the feed followed a second camera, peering around the porch and into the windows. Inside, no figures were visible. There were fishing poles, and a stack of antlers, and books and papers in piles by dusty couches and chairs. On the mantel, Mae was sure she could see

a photo she recognized, of Mercer with his brothers and parents, on a trip they'd taken to Yosemite. She remembered the photo, and was sure of the figures in it, because it had always struck her as strange and wonderful, the fact that Mercer, who was sixteen at the time, was leaning his head on his mother's shoulder, in an unguarded expression of filial love.

"Mercer! Mercer! Mercer!" the voices chanted.

But it was very possible, Mae realized, that he was on a hike or, like some caveman, out collecting firewood and might not return for hours. She was ready to turn back to the audience, call the search a success, and cut the demonstration short—they had, after all, found him, beyond the shadow of a doubt—when she heard a shrieking voice.

"There he is! Driveway!"

And both cameras began to move and shake as they ran from the porch to the Toyota. There was a figure getting into the truck, and Mae knew it was Mercer, as the cameras descended upon him. But as they got close—close enough for Mae to be heard—he was already backing down the driveway.

A figure was running alongside the truck, a young man, who could be seen attaching something to the passenger-side window. Mercer backed into the main road and sped off. There was a chaos of running and laughter, as all the participants assembled at Mercer's house got into their cars to follow him.

A message from one of the followers explained that he'd put a SeeChange camera on the passenger window, and instantly it was activated and appeared on-screen, showing a very clear picture of Mercer driving.

Mae knew this camera had only one-way audio, so she couldn't

speak to Mercer. But she knew she had to. He wouldn't know, yet, that it was she who was behind this. She needed to assure him this wasn't some creepy stalking expedition. That it was his friend Mae, simply demonstrating their SoulSearch program, and all she wanted was to talk to him for a second, to laugh about this together.

But as the woods raced past his window, a blur of brown and white and green, Mercer's mouth was a terrible slash of anger and fear. He was turning the truck frequently, recklessly, and seemed to be rising through the mountains. Mae worried about the ability of the participants to catch up to him, but knew they had the SeeChange camera, which was offering a view so clear and cinematic that it was wildly entertaining. He looked like his hero, Steve McQueen, furious but controlled while operating his heavy-duty truck. Mae briefly had the thought of some kind of streaming show they could create, where people simply broadcast themselves driving through interesting landscapes at high velocity. *Drive, She Said*, they could call it. Mae's reverie was interrupted by Mercer's voice, filled with venom: "Fuck!" he yelled. "Fuck you!"

He was looking at the camera. He'd found it. And then the camera's view was descending. He was rolling down the window. Mae wondered if it would hold, if its adhesive would trump the strength of the automatic window, but the answer arrived in seconds, as the camera was shaved off the window, its eye swinging wildly as it descended and fell, showing woods, then pavement, then, as it settled on the road, sky.

The clock read 11:51.

For a long few minutes, there were no views of Mercer at all. Mae assumed that at any moment, one of the cars in pursuit

would find him, but the views from all four cars showed no sign of him at all. They were all on different roads, and their audio made clear they had no idea where he was.

"Okay," Mae said, knowing she was about to wow the audience. "Release the drones!" she roared in a voice meant to invoke and mock some wirchy villain.

It took agonizingly long—three minutes or so—but soon all the available private drones in the area, eleven of them, were in the air, each operated by its owner, and all were on the mountain where, it had been surmised, Mercer was driving. Their own GPS systems kept them from colliding, and, coordinating with the satellite view, they found his powder-blue truck in sixty-seven seconds. The clock was at 15:04.

The drones' camera views were now brought on-screen, giving the audience an incredible grid of images, all of the drones well spaced, providing a kaleidoscopic look at the truck racing up the mountain road through heavy pines. A few of the smaller drones were able to swoop down and get close, while most of them, too large to weave between the trees, followed from above. One of the smaller drones, called ReconMan10, had dropped through the tree canopy and seemed to attach itself to Mercer's driver-side window. The view was steady and clear. Mercer turned to it, realizing its presence and tenacity, and a look of unmitigated horror transformed his face. Mae had never seen him look like this before.

"Can someone get me on audio for the drone called ReconMan10?" Mae asked. She knew his window was still open. If she spoke through the drone's speaker, he'd hear her, know it was her. She received the signal that the audio was activated.

"Mercer. It's me, Mae! Can you hear me?"

There was some faint sign of recognition on his face. He squinted, and looked toward the drone again, disbelieving.

"Mercer. Stop driving. It's just me. Mae." And then, almost laughing, she said, "I just wanted to say hi."

The audience roared.

Mae was warmed by the laughter in the room, and expected that Mercer would laugh, too, and would stop, and would shake his head, in admiration for the wonderful power of the tools at her disposal. What she wanted him to say was, "Okay, you got me. I surrender. You win."

But he wasn't smiling, and he wasn't stopping. He wasn't even looking at the drone anymore. It was as if he'd decided on a new path, and was locked into it.

"Mercer!" she said, in mock-authoritative voice. "Mercer, stop the car and surrender. You're surrounded." Then she thought of something that made her smile again. "You're surrounded..." she said, lowering her voice, and then, in a chirpy alto, "by friends!" As she'd known they would, a burst of laughter and cheers thundered through the auditorium.

But still he didn't stop. He hadn't looked at the drone in minutes. Mae checked the clock: 19 minutes, 57 seconds. She couldn't decide whether or not it mattered if he stopped, or acknowledged the cameras. He'd been found, after all, hadn't he? They'd probably beaten the Fiona Highbridge record when they'd caught him running to his car. That was the moment they'd verified his corporate identity. Mae had the brief thought that they should call off the drones, and shut down the cameras, because Mercer was in one of his moods, and wouldn't be cooperating—and anyway, she'd proven what she intended to prove.

But something about his inability to give in, to admit defeat, or to at least acknowledge the incredible power of the technology at Mae's command . . . she knew she couldn't give up until she had received some sense of his acquiescence. What would that be, though? She didn't know, but she knew she'd know it when she saw it.

And then the landscape passing beside the car opened up. It was no longer woods, dense and moving quickly. Now there was all blue, and treetops, and bright white clouds.

She looked to another camera-view, and saw the view from an overhead drone. Mercer was driving on a bridge, a narrow bridge connecting the mountain to another, the span rising hundreds of feet over a gorge.

"Can we turn the microphone up at all?" she asked.

An icon appeared, indicating that the volume had been at half-power, and was now at full.

"Mercer!" she said, using a voice as ominous as she could muster. His head jerked toward the drone, shocked by the volume. Maybe he hadn't heard her before?

"Mercer! It's me, Mae!" she said, now holding out hope that he hadn't known, until then, that it was her that was behind all this. But he didn't smile. He only shook his head, slowly, as if in disappointment most profound.

Now she could see another two drones on the passenger-side window. A new voice, male, boomed from one of them: "Mercer, you motherfucker! Stop driving, you fucking asshole!"

Mercer's head swung to this voice, and when he turned back to the road, his face showed real panic.

On the screen behind her, Mae saw that two SeeChange cam-

eras, positioned on the bridge, had been added to the grid. A third came alive seconds later, offering a view of the span from the riverbank far below.

Now another voice, this one a woman's and laughing, boomed from the third drone: "Mercer, submit to us! Submit to our will! Be our friend!"

Mercer turned his truck toward the drone, as if intending to ram it, but it adjusted its trajectory automatically and mimicked his movement, staying directly in sync. "You can't escape, Mercer!" the woman's voice bellowed. "Never, ever, ever. It's over. Now give up. Be our friend!" This last entreaty was rendered in a child's whine, and the woman transmitting through the electronic speaker laughed at its strangeness, this nasal entreaty emanating from a dull black drone.

The audience was cheering, and the comments were piling up, a number of watchers saying this was the greatest viewing experience of their lives.

And while the cheers were growing louder, Mae saw something come over Mercer's face, something like determination, something like serenity. His right arm spun the steering wheel, and he disappeared from the view of drones, temporarily at least, and when they regained their lock on him, his truck was crossing the highway, speeding toward its concrete barrier, so fast that it was impossible that it could hold him back. The truck broke through and leapt into the gorge, and, for a brief moment, seemed to fly, the mountains visible for miles beyond. And then the truck dropped from view.

Mae's eyes turned, instinctively, to the camera on the riverbed, and she saw, clearly, a tiny object dropping from the bridge over-

head and landing, like a tin toy, on the rocks below. Though she knew this object was Mercer's truck, and she knew, in some recess of her mind, that there could be no survivors of such a fall, she looked back to the other cameras, to the views from the drones still hovering above, expecting to see Mercer on the bridge, looking down at the truck below. But there was no one on the bridge.]

"You doing okay today?" Bailey asked.

They were in his library, alone but for her watchers. Since Mercer's death, now a full week ago, the numbers had remained steady, near twenty-eight million.

"I am, thanks," Mae said, measuring her words, imagining the way the president, no matter the situation, has to find a medium between raw emotion, and quiet dignity, practiced composure. She'd been thinking of herself as a president. She shared much with them—the responsibility to so many, the power to influence global events. And with her position came new, president-level crises. There was Mercer's passing. There was Annie's collapse. She thought of the Kennedys. "I'm not sure. it's hit me yet," she said.

"And it might not, not for a while," Bailey said. "Grief doesn't arrive on schedule, as much as we'd like it to. But I don't want you to be blaming yourself. You're not doing that, I hope."

"Well, it's sort of hard not to," Mae said, and then winced. Those words were not presidential, and Bailey leapt on them.

"Mae, you were trying to help a very disturbed, antisocial young man. You and the other participants were reaching out, trying to bring him into the embrace of humanity, and he rejected

that. I think it's self-evident that you were, if anything, his only hope.]

"Thank you for saying so," she said.

"It's like you were a doctor, coming to help a sick patient, and the patient, upon seeing this doctor, jumps out of the window. You can hardly be blamed."

"Thank you," Mae said.

"And your parents? They're okay?"

"They're fine. Thank you."

"It must have been good to see them at the service."

"It was," Mae said, though they'd barely spoken then, and hadn't spoken since.

"I know there's still some distance between you all, but it will collapse with time. Distance always collapses."

Mae felt thankful for Bailey, for his strength and his calm. He was, at that moment, her best friend, and something like a father, too. She loved her own parents, but they were not wise like this, not strong like this. She was thankful for Bailey, and Stenton, and especially for Francis, who had been with her most of every day since.

"It frustrates me to see something like that happen," Bailey continued. "It's exasperating, really. I know this is tangential, and I know it's a pet issue of mine, but really: there'd be no chance of that happening if Mercer was in a self-driving vehicle. Their programming would have precluded this. Vehicles like the one he was driving should frankly be illegal."

"Right," Mae said. "That stupid truck."

"And not that it's about money, but do you know how much it'll cost to repair that bridge? And what it already cost to clean

Excerpt 2

EXCERPT 10000
Eggers, Dave: The Circle. Vintage Canada, 2013. Aprint.

"I don't know anything about you."
 "I'm sorry I didn't tell you who I was. But I didn't lie."
 "You told me your name was Kalden! That's not a lie?"
 "Besides that, I never lied."
 "Besides that? Besides *lying about your identity*?"
 "I think you know I have no choice here."
 "What kind of name is Kalden, anyway? You get it off some baby-name site?"
 "I did. You like it?"

He smiled an unnerving smile. Mae had the feeling that she shouldn't be here, that she should leave immediately.
 "I think I need to go," she said, and stepped toward the stairs.
 "I feel like this is some horrific prank."
 "Mae, think about it. Here's my license." He handed her his driver's license. It showed a clean-shaven, dark-haired man with glasses who looked more or less like what she remembered Ty looked like, the Ty from the video feeds, the old photos, the portrait in oil outside Bailey's library. The name read Tyler Alexander Gospodinov. "Look at me. No resemblance?" He retreated to the cave-within-a-cave they'd shared and returned with a pair of glasses. "See?" he said. "Now it's obvious, right?" As if answering Mae's next question, he said, "I've always been a very average-looking guy. You know this. And then I get rid of the glasses, the hoodies. I change my look, the way I move. But most important, my hair went grey. And why do you think that happened?"

"I have no idea," Mae said.
 Ty swept his arms around, encompassing everything around them, the vast campus above. "All this. The fucking shark that eats the world."

"Do Bailey and Stenton know you're going around with some other name?" Mae asked.
 "Of course. Yes. They expect me to be here. I'm not technically allowed to leave campus. As long as I'm here, they're happy."
 "Does Annie know?"

"No."
 "So I'm—"
 "You're the third person who knows."
 "And you're telling me why?"
 "Because you have great influence here, and because you have to help. You're the only one who can slow all this down."
 "Slow what down? The company you created?"
 "Mae, I didn't intend any of this to happen. And it's moving too fast. This idea of Completion, it's far beyond what I had in mind when I started all this, and it's far beyond what's right. It has to be brought back into some kind of balance."

"First of all, I don't agree. Secondly, I can't help."
 "Mae, the Circle can't close."
 "What are you talking about? How can you say this now? If you're Ty, most of this was your idea."
 "No. No. I was trying to make the web more civil. I was trying to make it more elegant. I got rid of anonymity. I combined a thousand disparate elements into one unified system. But I didn't picture a world where Circle membership was mandatory, where all government and all life was channeled through one network—"

"I'm leaving," Mae said, and turned. "And I don't see why you just don't leave, too. Leave everything. If you don't believe in all this, then leave. Go to the woods."

"That didn't work for Mercer, did it?"

"Fuck you."

"Sorry. I'm sorry. But he's why I contacted you now. Don't you see that's just one of the consequences of all this? There will be more Mercers. So many more. So many people who don't want to be found but who will be. So many people who wanted no part of all this. That's what's new. There used to be the option of opting out. But now that's over. Completion is the end. We're closing the circle around everyone—it's a totalitarian nightmare."
"And it's my fault?"

"No, no. Not at all. But you're now the ambassador. You're the face of it. The benign, friendly face of it all. And the closing of the Circle—it's what you and your friend Francis made possible. Your mandatory Circle account idea, and his chip. TruYouth? It's sick, Mae. Don't you see? All the kids get a chip embedded in them, for safety, when they're infants. And yes, it'll save lives. But then, what, you think they suddenly remove them when they're eighteen? No. In the interest of education and safety, everything they've done will be recorded, tracked, logged, analyzed—it's permanent. Then, when they're old enough to vote, to participate, their membership is mandatory. That's where the Circle closes. Everyone will be tracked, cradle to grave, with no possibility of escape."

"You really sound like Mercer now. This kind of paranoia—"

"But I know more than Mercer. Don't you think if someone like me, someone who invented most of this shit, is scared, don't you think you should be scared, too?"

"No. I think you lost a step."

"Mae, so many of the things I invented I honestly did for fun,

out of some perverse game of whether or not they'd work, whether people would use them. I mean, it was like setting up a guillotine in the public square. You don't expect a thousand people to line up to put their heads in it."

"Is that how you see this?"

"No, sorry. That's a bad comparison. But some of the things we did, I just—I did just to see if anyone would actually use them, would acquiesce. When they did buy in, half the time I couldn't believe it. And then it was too late. There was Bailey and Stenton and the IPO. And then it was just too fast, and there was enough money to make any dumb idea real. Mae, I want you to imagine where all this is going."

"I know where it's going."

"Mae, close your eyes."

"No."

"Mae, please. Close your eyes."

She closed her eyes.

"I want you to connect these dots and see if you see what I see. Picture this. The Circle has been devouring all competitors for years, correct? It only makes the company stronger. Already, 90 percent of the world's searches go through the Circle. Without competitors, this will increase. Soon it'll be nearly 100 percent. Now, you and I both know that if you can control the flow of information, you can control everything. You can control most of what anyone sees and knows. If you want to bury some piece of information, permanently, that's two seconds' work. If you want to ruin anyone, that's five minutes' work. How can anyone rise up against the Circle if they control all the information and access to it? They want everyone to have a Circle account, and they're well on

their way to making it illegal not to. What happens then? What happens when they control all searches, and have full access to all data about every person? When they know every move everyone makes? If all monetary transactions, all health and DNA information, every piece of one's life, good or bad, when every word uttered flows through one channel?"

"But there are a thousand protections to prevent all of this. It's just not possible. I mean, governments will make sure—"

"Governments who are transparent? Legislators who owe their reputations to the Circle? Who could be ruined the moment they speak out? What do you think happened to Williamson? Remember her? She threatens the Circle monopoly and, surprise, the feds find incriminating stuff on her computer. You think that's a coincidence? That's about the hundredth person Stenton's done that to. Mae, once the Circle's complete, that's it. And you helped complete it. This democracy thing, or Demoxie, whatever it is, good god. Under the guise of having every voice heard, you create mob rule, a filterless society where secrets are crimes. It's brilliant, Mae. I mean, you are brilliant. You're what Stenton and Bailey have been hoping for from the start."

"But Bailey—"

"Bailey believes that life will be better, will be perfect, when everyone has unfettered access to everyone and everything they know. He genuinely believes that the answers to every life question can be found among other people. He truly believes that openness, that complete and uninterrupted access among all humans will help the world. That this is what the world's been waiting for, the moment when every soul is connected. This is his rapture, Mae! Don't you see how extreme that view is? His

idea is radical, and in another era would have been a fringe notion espoused by an eccentric adjunct professor somewhere: that all information, personal or not, should be known by all. [Knowledge is property and no one can own it. Infocommunism.] And he's entitled to that opinion. But paired with ruthless capitalistic ambition—"

"So it's Stenton?"

"Stenton professionalized our idealism, monetized our utopia. He's the one who saw the connection between our work and politics, and between politics and control. Public-private leads to private-private, and soon you have the Circle running most or even all government services, with incredible private-sector efficiency and an insatiable appetite. Everyone becomes a citizen of the Circle."

"And that's so bad? If everyone has equal access to services, to information, we finally have a chance at equality. No information should cost anything. There should be no barriers to knowing everything, to accessing all—"

"And if everyone's tracked—"

"Then there's no crime. No murder, no kidnapping and rape. No kids ever victimized again. No more missing persons. I mean, that alone—"

"But don't you see what happened to your friend Mercer? He was pursued to the ends of the earth and now he's gone."

"But this is just the pivot of history. Have you talked to Bailey about this? I mean, during any major human turning point, there's upheaval. Some get left behind, some *choose* to be left behind."

"So you think everyone should be tracked, should be watched."

"I think everything and everyone should be seen. And to be seen, we need to be watched. The two go hand in hand."

"But who wants to be watched all the time?"

"I do. I *want* to be seen. I want proof I existed."

"Mae."

"Most people do. Most people would trade everything they know, everyone they know—they'd trade it all to know they've been seen, and acknowledged, that they might even be remembered. We all know we die. We all know the world is too big for us to be significant. So all we have is the hope of being seen, or heard, even for a moment."

"But Mae. We saw every creature in that tank, didn't we? We saw them devoured by a beast that turned them to ash. Don't you see that everything that goes into that tank, with that beast, with *this* beast, will meet the same fate?"

"So what exactly do you want from me?"

"When you have the maximum amount of viewers, I want you to read this statement." He handed Mae a piece of paper, on which he'd written, in crude all capitals, a list of assertions under the headline "The Rights of Humans in a Digital Age." Mae scanned it, catching passages: "We must all have the right to anonymity." "Not every human activity can be measured." "The ceaseless pursuit of data to quantify the value of any endeavor is catastrophic to true understanding." "The barrier between public and private must remain unbreachable." At the end she found one line, written in red ink: "We must all have the right to disappear."

"So you want me to read all this to the watchers?"

"Yes," Kalden said, his eyes wild.

"And then what?"

"I have a series of steps that we can take together that can begin to take all this apart. I know everything that's ever happened here, Mae, and there's plenty that's gone on that would convince anyone, no matter how blind, that the Circle needs to be dismantled. I know I can do it. I'm the only one who can do it, but I need your help."

"And then what?"

"Then you and I go somewhere. I have so many ideas. We'll vanish. We can hike through Tibet. We can bike through the Mongolian steppe. We can sail around the world in a boat we built ourselves."

Mae pictured all this. She pictured the Circle being taken apart, sold off amid scandal, thirteen thousand people out of jobs, the campus overtaken, broken up, turned into a college or mall or something worse. And finally she pictured life on a boat with this man, sailing the world, untethered, but when she tried to, she saw, instead, the couple on the barge she'd met months ago on the bay. Out there, alone, living under a tarp, drinking wine from paper cups, naming seals, reminiscing about island fires.

At that moment, Mae knew what she needed to do.

"Kalden, are you sure we're not being heard?"

"Of course not."

"Okay, good. Good. I see everything clearly now."