

3.

Their first visit to the central offices of Pacific Bank & Trust demonstrated to Alex all the reasons why he enjoyed working with Amelia Halcyon. Being with Amelia was a front-row seat in a theater where human behavior was the headline act. In her presence, veils were dropped, pretenses abandoned. And no one in Alex's entire history of working with Amelia had done this so thoroughly or fantastically as Reverdy Harper, chief investment officer of Pacific Bank & Trust.

With the first session over, he and Amelia were waiting for an elevator to take them back down to the lobby. Three full elevators had arrived and departed already, without a single person making way for Amelia and her chair; not the corpulent, pink-toned men, nor the women—stiff-backed and tightly wound, despite thrice-weekly yoga classes. Their expressions were all the same, changing from surprise to revulsion to forced impassivity. It would have required no effort at all for any one of them to step out of the elevator. It would have cost them only minutes to wait for the next one—or, heaven forbid, to take the stairs—and yet, not one of them did.

The fourth elevator was empty. Alex couldn't wait to get to the lobby. There would be a crowd of people waiting there, none of whom expected to see a woman in a wheelchair, much less a woman who looked like Amelia. Their faces would be billboards of unedited shock.

Alex was not disappointed. When the doors opened, a woman who was tapping away on one of the new iPhones, not looking at all where she was going, walked right into the wheelchair and dropped her phone right into Amelia's lap. Amelia, lacking sufficient mobility in her fingers,

could not pick it up quickly. Alex would take care of it, of course, but first he was going to enjoy this woman's reaction.

Her hand went to her mouth. Her face turned the color of a stop sign. She took a step back, colliding with the man behind her. It was entirely possible, Alex realized, that she might vomit.

Amelia kicked the side of Alex's leg. He reached down and plucked the phone from between Amelia's thighs.

"You dropped this," he said, offering the phone to the horrified woman. She snatched it and fled in the same direction she'd come from. A man who had been standing behind her put his hand over the elevator door to stop it from closing and stepped out of the way.

"Thank youh," Amelia said. The man nodded, smiling benevolently. Alex followed Amelia out of the elevator, past the security guard, and out to the sidewalk.

"Youh shouldhn't hahve done thath."

"Done what?" Alex asked.

"Leth thath phoor woman aghonizhe. Peophle dohn't mean to do whath they do."

Amelia believed that people contained a pure, unblemished essence of goodness that revealed itself under the right conditions. Her calling, as she'd once described it, was to provide these conditions. Alex admired her perspective, and her sense of mission that sprung from it, but he did not believe in essential human goodness—or essential human anything, for that matter. Sure, people occasionally performed deeds that benefited others, but those were accidents or random side effects of self-interest.

"I apologize," Alex said.

“Youh dohn’t need to apologhizhe to *me*.”

“*If* I see that woman again,” Alex said, “I will apologize to *her*.”

Amelia turned toward Market Street, cruising slightly faster than Alex’s comfortable walking pace. “Were you succsesshful?” she asked once they’d crossed to the next block.

“It wasn’t easy, with everyone standing outside the cubicle watching, but yes, I got it placed.”

“I tried to dishtract them.”

“Mr. Harper wouldn’t take his eyes off me.”

“Thaht’sh your own fauhth. You madhe him anghry.”

“That was *after* we went to Mr. Gray’s cubicle. When we were back upstairs in the conference room.”

“No. You pissed him off before I even goth there.”

The problem was that Reverdy Harper was just too easy a target. All Alex had to do was refrain from blinking for half a minute, and Mr. Harper was squirming in his seat. It was just a parlor trick, really. Mr. Harper didn’t even know what it was that was freaking him out.

“We have to be nicshe, Aleksh.”

“Mr. Harper doesn’t like you, either.”

“Yesh, buth for differenth reashonsh. I’m honeshth andh dhirechth. Mr. Harpher ishn’t hushedh to thath.”

“I’m honest and direct, too.”

“Abhouth the wrong thinghsh.”

“What are the wrong things? What are the right things?”

“You know whath I mean. Sheriously. Thish ish our bighesth one yeth. We needh to be charefulh.”

She was right, Alex had to admit. Reverdy Harper’s ass might be permanently raised, just waiting for a kick, but he was still a client. Alex would need to restrain himself.

They arrived at the entrance to the MUNI Metro station. Amelia turned her chair to face Alex. “When will youh be shtarting?”

“Tonight,” Alex said. “The file is already populating, I’m sure. But we’ve never worked with a bank before. Things might be encrypted that aren’t usually encrypted.”

“I have faith in you,” Amelia said. “I will shee you thomorrow at then o’chlock, yes?”

“What?”

Amelia reminded him that they were having their closing meeting at the offices of Neurosoft, their most recent client.

“Right. Yes. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Goodh. Push thath buhton, pleashe.”

The elevator door opened, emitting a foul breeze. The odor of human waste, both solid and liquid, wafted over them. Amelia wheeled right in. Alex understood that she had no real choice about it, that it was her only option for getting down to the train station. Similarly, the people who had used the elevator as a toilet in the first place didn’t have much choice about *that*, either. Both they and Amelia were forced into corners of urban existence that most residents of the city preferred to ignore.

Alex waved goodbye to Amelia. The heavy doors slid shut. Through the hazy plexiglass windows, he watched Amelia descend.

On any other day, Alex would have headed straight home to start working. But there was a familiar thrumming sensation in his head, a gentle pressure from just beneath his scalp. It was the woman he'd spoken to on the train that morning. She was *bothering* him.

Where had she really been headed this morning? Before her detour? Judging by her clothing—multicolored skirt, black leggings, and those blindingly red boots—it was somewhere with people whose opinion held some weight for her, but not too much weight. What occupation called for such a costume? The clothes, plus her hilarious attempt at negotiating the crowd in the Montgomery Street station meant she wasn't a lawyer or a banker. Her regular stop was beyond that, possibly Civic Center, where all the social workers got off the train. But this woman didn't look like she was in social services, either. There were hoops dangling from her ears, and people who work with the mentally ill never wear hanging jewelry. She'd been on the train too late in the morning to be a teacher, a barista, or a waitress (the boots eliminated that possibility). Was she in retail? That was a strong possibility; Powell Street station, where all the department stores were, was one stop beyond Montgomery. And her mode of dress would appeal to visiting tourists as stylish and 'hip.'

That had to be it. She was middle management at one of those Union Square shops whose *modus operandi* was the repackaging of urban hipness. The skirt and boots made sense now, as did the worn-out shoulder seams on her leather jacket.

But no. Somehow, that didn't seem quite right. Some piece of the puzzle was, for the moment, invisible.

“Can I help you, son?”

Alex turned to find a policeman glowering over him. Being mistaken for someone younger was common for Alex, but that was just fine with him. Indeterminacy was a state he aspired to. He looked the policeman in the eye.

“No, thank you. I’m fine.”

“You’ve been standing here for a while now.”

“Yes. I’m thinking.”

“Thinking,” the policeman repeated, as if thinking was a new concept. “About what?”

“Does it matter?”

The cop looked Alex up and down. “*That,*” he said, pointing at the elevator door with two leather-gloved fingers, “goes to BART *and* the MUNI Metro. *Two* mass transit systems.”

“That it does,” Alex said.

“So, since nine-eleven, anyone standing here for more than a few minutes—standing here *thinking*—means I have to ask.”

Alex looked at the man’s badge. It only took a moment to memorize the number, but he let his eyes linger, just to get the desired effect. And it worked; the policeman took a step back. Alex bit down on a smile.

“How about you just move along now?” the cop asked.

“Certainly, sir.”

Alex made for the stairs. He knew that he generally came across as a jerk. Incurring dislike was a price he was willing to pay for being who he was, but problems arose when he unsettled people in a way that caused them to ask questions. He did not want to invite curiosity,

especially now. If he was standing for conspicuous amounts of time in front of elevator doors without realizing it—if he was *bothered*—it meant he was starting a new Project.

#

Alex's Projects never used to be a problem. They were a problem now.

The first troublesome Project was the Watch Project. For a period of about two months, while working for a client on Sutter Street, he and Amelia would walk past a shop window that contained an elaborate presentation of wristwatches. A sign at the bottom of the window featured a slogan for the brand of watch on display:

Keeps time better than time itself.

Alex couldn't be sure whether it was the slogan's tautological nature or its sheer stupidity, but it immediately caused him to notice that none of the watches in the window were synchronized. They were all within a minute of each other, but that still wasn't consistent with the claim on the sign.

The next time they walked past the window, Alex took out his yellow legal pad and number two pencil—sharpened that morning—and quickly copied down the time on each of the twenty-three watches. He did the same thing on the following morning. When he did it a third time, Amelia finally asked him what, exactly, he was doing.

Alex explained that the battery-driven analog watch had been around since 1969, and while that had been the standard for small-scale timekeeping accuracy for decades, the improvement in electronic digital watch technology during the 1980's meant that analog watches

were now merely quaint, possessed and worn for purely aesthetic reasons. That said, it was clear that the watches in this window were, at one point, synchronized. Now they were not, but they had not de-synchronized at different rates—each one showed a different time—so if the variances in de-synchronization could be tracked, as *he* was now doing, there were things to be learned, discerned, and understood. Unfortunately, there were only twenty-three watches in the window, and the ideal sample size for his purposes was, according to his calculations, no less than one hundred and six.

Amelia patiently asked him what he was trying to learn, discern, and understand.

Every now and then, like a flash, Alex caught an unobstructed glimpse into the deepest machinery of the world. These glimpses challenged his belief that the universe contained no fundamental truths, no god or gods, no objective morality. Any system that humans created for measuring reality—rulers, thermometers, clocks—all of them broke down. There was always a point beyond which they could not be trusted. And this was because the things they measured were not, in and of themselves, real. Neither were concepts like *love* or *joy* or *hate*. Like time and distance, they were mistakes of human perception.

But here and there. Tiny fissures. Infinitesimal cracks. When they appeared, Alex was helpless to look away. They showed him that, way down through the capricious gates of his five imperfect senses, there was something wonderfully, gloriously real. This is what he saw, in the tiny variances between the watches in the window. If the process of temporal deviance could be calculated, Alex could widen the crack. He could make a door. The truest workings would be laid plain before him. This was the goal of every Project. But it was not what he told Amelia, as they stood before the window of watches.

“I don’t really know,” Alex said. “I’m just curious.”

“Well. Jusht don’t th leth ith geth in the way of our workh,” she said.

Alex did his best to honor Amelia’s request. He kept the Watch Project under control, right through to the moment when the inevitable occurred. One morning he came to the window, looked at his meticulous notes, and found that a fog had descended over them. His efforts to widen the fissure had failed. The desynchronization pattern contained no mystery at all, only an indictment of the watches’ timekeeping abilities, of the ridiculous slogan on the sign.

The Watch Project had ended, just as all of his other Projects had ended, leaving Alex in a state of existential confusion. What had he been thinking for the past few weeks? Why did he think a collection of poorly made watches could tell him anything about anything? It was a hare-brained theory, no better than astrology, theosophy, or Chinese acupuncture. For a few days, it was difficult to get out of bed. Eating took more effort than usual. He took bad weather personally. His professional responsibilities were his sole fingerhold in the world.

And then it passed. As with all the other times before, he told himself that any notion of something essential in the center of the universe was not to be trusted, and he would never go down that path again.

Other Projects followed. The Highway 101 Exit Ramp Project. The Lake Merritt Dog Walker Project. The Powell Street Tourist Project. The Valencia Street Restaurant Bathroom Project. Each one started with a *bothering*, a feeling that the ground beneath his feet had narrowed to the width of a balance beam. The tiny cleft in reality was back. He did his best to keep the Projects from competing with his work with Amelia. And since Amelia never complained, Alex assumed he was successful.

Then came the Walnut Creek Traffic Light Project.

He and Amelia were working with a AAA branch office in Walnut Creek whose bathrooms—it was always the bathrooms—were not up to compliance. The office manager, a small, tightly wound woman named Ms. Carcetti, was so uncomfortable with Amelia that she wouldn't enter a room with her unless Alex was present. During a lunch break, while eating a sandwich on a sidewalk bench outside the office, Alex noticed that all the traffic lights within his line of sight were programmed to follow a sequence. The sequence was maintained for fifteen minutes at a time. Over the subsequent five minutes, however, things got random.

Or so it appeared.

There were four sets of lights visible in either direction. Not the best sample size, but a good start. Alex dropped his sandwich on the ground and took out his pad and pencil.

He succeeded in keeping the new Project hidden from Amelia until the day of their last meeting with Ms. Carcetti. Alex had every intention of showing up on time, but three blocks from the office he'd gotten distracted. Amelia found him leaning against a parking meter, pad and pencil in hand, as he watched the lights change from green to yellow to red and back again. When she ran her front wheel over his shoe, he nearly jumped out of his skin.

She laid into him. Their line of work didn't leave room for overpowering obsessions that resulted in missed meetings, she said. She'd been perfectly indulgent up until now, but that was over. Amelia ended up having to deal with Ms. Carcetti by herself, who spent every second of the meeting halfway out of her chair, trying to flee the room. Amelia did manage to close out the contract, but there was no way she could retrieve Alex's device, for reasons that Alex could probably figure out, even in his oblivious state.

“I’ll just go get it now,” Alex said.

“It’sh afther five o’clockh. The offishe is closed.”

“Oh. Shit.”

“Youh whill returnh all of our profitsh.”

“That will attract attention.”

Find a way, she told him. And when he was done? He needed to seek professional help, or he could expect never to work with her again. Alex nodded, and was about to respond with some self-effacing nonsense, but he suddenly realized that Amelia had rested her foot against his shin, gently. She had never done that before.

“Alexsh,” she said, “takhe a vachation.”

“I—”

“Fohr me.”

The pressure from her foot increased, just a bit. Then she turned her chair away.

Alex obeyed Amelia’s first order. He meticulously transferred every cent back into AAA’s accounts, reversing and deleting each transaction. It took the whole night and most of the next day. Amelia’s second order, Alex obeyed in name only. He distrusted medical professionals, and hated taking medication. It carved him out in the middle, made him feel like his senses were operating from somewhere outside his body. He did schedule a physical, though, but he did not mention his Projects to the doctor, and came away with a clean bill of health.

As for Amelia’s third order—to take a vacation—Alex decided it was a good opportunity to follow up on an invitation to visit New York.

#

Alex had met MemphisJoe in an online forum for surveillance enthusiasts. Most of the participants were adolescent blowhards who bragged about webcams in women's bathrooms, microphones in downstairs neighbors' ceilings, or dormitory sex acts caught on video, but there were just enough genuine experts who contributed just often enough to make it worth the slog. Alex was only a lurker on the forum, until he read a comment from MemphisJoe on a thread about miniaturization. A group of regulars were engaged in a masturbatory debate about whether and how a combination of nanotechnology and superconductivity might lead to the smallest possible microphone. MemphisJoe shut down the entire argument with a single post:

Not much use to a mic smaller than the shortest audible wavelength. Besides, one sneeze and the damn
thing is gonzo.

Alex clicked the FOLLOW button next to MemphisJoe's username. Perusing his comment history, it was clear that MemphisJoe's favorite activity was cutting off idiotic ideas at the knees, but he was also a font of strange opinions: the FBI was a collection of amateurs; the Federal government didn't plan the September 11th terrorist attacks, but they knew they were going to happen; and the Stasi had the most sophisticated nationwide surveillance operation of the 20th century. He also thought the obsession with the new iPhones wouldn't last more than a few months, and Apple would be stuck building expensive computers that no one wanted to buy, with operating systems that no one wanted to use. To Alex, this looked like a combination of willful ignorance and age—which, given MemphisJoe's odd interest in the Stasi, was probably not inconsiderable.

But what attracted Alex the most about MemphisJoe was his interest in device miniaturization. Alex had worked hard to get his own transmission device down to the size of a jewelry box. He knew it was possible to produce an even smaller one, but the ways and means were eluding him. MemphisJoe appeared to possess the knowledge to help him out.

Alex sent MemphisJoe a private message, with no response. He sent another one week later. Three days later, he sent one more. Finally, Alex wrote MemphisJoe with a step-by-step guide to cracking an iPhone and setting it up with a service provider other than AT&T. The next day, Alex had a response.

What do you want?

Alex wanted help. He sent a schematic of his most recent transmitter, outlining the trouble he was having with making it smaller. In exchange, he offered to walk MemphisJoe through the nuts and bolts of iPhone construction—which, Alex gently suggested, MemphisJoe was wrong to dismiss as a fad.

MemphisJoe took Alex up on his offer, telling him to book a flight at his convenience. One week later, Alex was in New York City. He'd wanted to book a room close to MemphisJoe's apartment, but he'd refused to give Alex an address until Alex was actually in New York—and even then, only when Alex called using the hotel's land line—so Alex, knowing absolutely nothing about the city, had simply looked for the best deal on a room. MemphisJoe, as it turned out, lived in Green Point, Brooklyn, about an hour's train ride from Alex's hotel.

His annoyance only lasted until his first trip on the subway, where he was amazed to find the Metropolitan Transit Authority patrons' behavior simultaneously idiotic and perfectly logical. When trains arrived, the men and women on the platform simply rushed the opening

doors. Never mind that getting on the train would be easier after the off-boarding passengers had departed. Alex was so impressed by all the self-interested jostling and jockeying that he couldn't help but join in. He stepped on toes, elbowed ribs, intentionally wedged his satchel between his hip and the occasional backside. No one objected, complained, or even cast him so much as a sidelong glance.

Alex was correct about MemphisJoe's age. He was an old man, with a hint of an eastern European accent and a low opinion of the recent changes in his neighborhood. He referred to its newer, younger residents as *suicide bicyclists*, *trust fund philosophers*, and *people with opinions about coffee*. He wore white undershirts over plain khakis, walked around shoeless, and kept what was left of his grey hair buzzed short. His small apartment was neat and clean, but the close, heavy air smelled of old pipe tobacco, even though Alex never once saw him smoke. When Alex shared his observations about the New York City subway, MemphisJoe dismissed Alex's remarks with a jab at the soft and accommodating attitudes of the San Francisco Bay Area.

This brought Alex up short. He had not mentioned where he lived, had never given MemphisJoe a phone number, and used a ghost IP address for his internet connection, which changed each time he logged on.

"Oh, come off it," MemphisJoe said, "it is the very oldest trick."

"What's the trick?"

"To understand people. Which you do not do."

Alex pointed out that he'd spent the morning analyzing subway etiquette, or lack thereof. MemphisJoe dismissed this with a tired wave. "This subject is not part of our exchange."

Alex spent three days with MemphisJoe, and spent his trips in and out of Brooklyn experimenting with subway culture. He stared at people, flagrantly disregarding the injunction against eye contact. He sat down on the floor of crowded trains. He asked people to give up their seats, watching the way they looked him over for signs of insanity. Reactions to these requests varied from hostile glowering to verbal abuse to, on one occasion, a threat of violence. Alex was amazed. Elbowing, shoving, and pushing were considered acceptable behavior, but the more subtle rules were well-policed.

On his visits with MemphisJoe, they sat at a small, linoleum-topped kitchen table, situated next to a window with a surprisingly intimate view into the apartment across the alley. Mornings were devoted to Alex's dissection of an iPhone, both the hardware and the software. In the afternoons, MemphisJoe brought out his toolbox and showed Alex how to construct low-frequency transmitters that could draw off an existing power supply and hide their outgoing signal in the surrounding magnetic field.

Neither of them took notes.

For lunch, MemphisJoe brought Alex to a café two blocks away, where he was a regular. On each visit, within moments of sitting down, the owner, who appeared to be the café's only employee, brought out a plate of pierogi, pickles, and sauerkraut. MemphisJoe only had to nod in order for an identical plate to appear in front of Alex. Neither of them spoke while they ate, which came as an immense relief to Alex, as he found small talk to be one of civil society's most oppressive activities. When MemphisJoe was finished eating, he would excuse himself and disappear through a curtained doorway behind the counter. On the first day, Alex went up to the counter and tried to pay for their meals. The owner was sitting on a stool, reading a

foreign-language newspaper. He shook his head. Alex insisted. The owner shooed him away without looking up from his newspaper.

From behind the curtain, Alex heard the sound of fingers working a heavy plastic keyboard. Alex realized that he hadn't seen a computer anywhere in MemphisJoe's apartment. If he went back and looked at the timestamps on MemphisJoe's posts to the surveillance forum, he'd probably find that they were all right around now, Eastern time.

On their final afternoon, with the iPhone fully reconstructed, MemphisJoe's toolbox put away, and the blue foam table cover on which they'd been working rolled up and returned to the cabinet, they both stood up from the table.

"I do not shake hands," MemphisJoe said.

Alex was relieved. "Neither do I."

"Well then. Godspeed."

Alex had never felt so much at ease in his own body. New York was a city full of people who behaved the way they ought to. No need for all the coddling politeness, the energy wasted on the sham of interpersonal respect. There were probably a hundred MemphisJoes in Brooklyn alone, passing their lives in efficient little apartments, expending the effort of conversation only on the people they wanted to. On the flight home, as Alex watched the New York City skyline fall away from his window, the depth of his disappointment surprised him.

Why not relocate?

Before joining up with Amelia Halcyon, Alex had earned his living from a variety of sources, one of which was small electronics repair. Thanks to his minimal sleep requirements, lack of a social life, and disregard for weekends, he turned most jobs around in under two days.

He also farmed out his programming abilities to overseas pharmaceutical companies. It took Alex almost no time at all to replace a legitimate website's Google listing with an advertisement for Viagra, Cialis, or Levitra. The work was boring, but the money was solid, and Alex was simply unable to sustain any kind of traditional employment. He disliked most people, and the feeling was almost always mutual.

Amelia had changed all of that. The situation he had found with her was, to put it mildly, unusual. He was more likely to get hit by lightning. Working with her, he made more money in six months than he'd made in two years from all of his other gigs, combined. And then there were the less tangible benefits—the opportunity to ride in her wake, watching the faces around her, getting to see people for who they really were.

Alex turned these things over and over in his mind during the six-hour flight, staring out at the featureless gray strata below. By the time the wheels touched down at SFO, Alex's mood was the same shade as the clouds.

He met with Amelia. They had a new client lined up: Neurosoft, an internet startup, run by children. Alex prepared by disassembling one of his old transmission devices and rebuilding it using what he'd learned from MemphisJoe. When he was finished, it was one-fifth as large, no longer required a battery, and looked like nothing more conspicuous than an ethernet adapter. At the Neurosoft offices, under the guise of a workstation inspection, he slipped it on to one of the computers. It worked brilliantly. Within twenty-four hours, he had a username, a password, and root access to Neurosoft's servers.

But this did not improve Alex's mood. He had visions of MemphisJoe's kitchen, his linoleum-topped table, the pale light from his window, the quiet solitude. He searched Craigslist

and found a table identical to MemphisJoe's, for what was probably too much money (what did *retro* really mean, anyway?), but Alex was happy to pay it. He discarded his utterly functional IKEA table and replaced it with the new one.

Alex felt better for a few days. But then, out of nowhere, for reasons Alex could not understand, Amelia began waffling about whether to stay above board with their next client—a mid-sized bank, whose central offices were right downtown. It was uncharacteristic of her. It made him nervous. If they were suddenly going to be legitimate, there wasn't any need to keep him on board. New York was beginning to look better and better.

And then Amelia waffled right back. They would be pursuing their usual tactics.

Fine, Alex said. In the meantime, he made a project (lower case *p*) of applying a New York lens to the Bay Area. Ascending the steps to the BART platform on his way to meet with Amelia, he noticed, in a way he'd never really noticed before, the neat lines of passengers waiting for the next train. Sure, edge of the platform had black tiles to indicate where the doors would be when the train arrived, but people were still *deciding* to line up in front of those tiles, without discussing it, and with no enforcement. When the train arrived, those who were nearest the door would step aside to make room for disembarking passengers. And the deferential behavior would continue on the train, with seats willingly surrendered to the disabled, the elderly, and the pregnant. The patrons of the BART system were choosing to manage things this way.

What would happen if Alex chose the other way?

Alex selected a line of passengers and stood off to one side of it. There were glances in his direction, but no one said a word. When the train arrived, he bolted for the door, snatching

the first available seat well ahead of the person who had been first in line. He scanned the faces of his fellow commuters, but no one so much as scowled at him. The investment in the social order was so thorough that it persisted even in the face of a flagrant violation. Alex expected it to be more fragile.

There had to be a breaking point, Alex thought. He would have to continue the experiment.

The very next day, Alex violated the rules again, parking himself alongside one of the lines. Amazingly, a woman began yelling at him. Alex wondered if one person breaking ranks would encourage others to follow, but the opposite happened: the assembled passengers turned against the woman. Alex wanted to get his pad and pencil right then and there, but he worried that any change in his demeanor would upset the unfolding of events. And the young woman was on fire, raising her voice at him. First, she appealed to *the rules*. Then she called on his hypothetical sense of propriety and respect for the social order. Finally, she resorted to insults. Alex had been called *asshole* so many times that the term barely registered. Even Amelia thought Alex was an asshole. Having that word hurled at him on the BART platform meant that his experiment was proceeding perfectly.

The irate passenger ended up sitting next to him on the train. She'd tried to avoid taking the seat, making use of the BART social hierarchy by offering the seat to an elderly woman, and grew flustered when the object of her attempted generosity turned her down. Once she realized that *not* taking the seat would be more embarrassing, she gave in. For a few minutes she was visibly uncomfortable at having to sit next to the source of her rage. But after she calmed down, Alex realized she was looking him over.

She tried to be surreptitious, but with the lateral flicking of her eyes, the slight turns of her head, she might as well have blown an air horn in his ear. Her attention moved from his hands to his arms, up his neck and to his face. Alex was not used to being scrutinized at such close range, and the attention made him feel like he'd forgotten to put his pants on before leaving the house. And then she remarked on, of all things, the aspect of his appearance he disliked the most.

If this woman hadn't said something about his eyelashes, he would have just let her stew in her seat until it was time for one of them to get off the train. He would have stood near a different line on the platform the next day to see if he could get a reaction out of someone else. Alex knew his eyelashes were long. People noticed them, using words like *lovely* and *gorgeous* and *oh my god why are those being wasted on a man*. He'd tried plucking them once, but it was too painful. He'd tried trimming them, but it looked all wrong, and they grew back quickly anyway.

So now he had to admit that the woman had annoyed him. He gave in to the annoyance, responding in kind, toying with her. It was like killing an ant with a steamroller. At the slightest interrogation—all he did was ask her to repeat her remark about his eyelashes—she backpedaled, she equivocated, she fell all over herself. The lie about being on medication was particularly cheap. And then, out of all proportion to anything that had happened that morning, she followed him all the way to the offices of Pacific Bank & Trust. She tried and failed to be inconspicuous, again. Somehow she was completely unaware of how her frizz of red hair and her costume with the red boots caused her to stand out in any crowd.

And now the red-boots woman was *bothering* him. She possessed that ineffable quality that clamped down on his attention like a bear trap. Just like the watch collection in the display window, she was trying to apply an organizing principle to something that could not be measured or controlled. In her rage, Alex now realized, he'd seen a glimpse of that *thing*, that indivisible material that existed at the center of everything. Whatever annoyance Alex had felt at her observation of his eyelashes was now fully eclipsed.

This red-boots woman. She was a path to what he was looking for. She was *the* path. He needed to come up with a plan.

#

Alex picked up his mail from the box in his building's vestibule and went inside. Right on cue, Miss Mikonos opened her door.

"Good afternoon, Alex!"

"Hello, Miss Mikonos."

"Gone into the city today?"

"Yes. I had work."

"With that poor woman? It's so *good* of you to work with her."

"Yes," Alex said, "it is good work."

Alex knew that this conversation, identical to at least one hundred others, was a prelude to something more interrogative.

"Alex dear, I'm wondering if you've noticed something."

"I probably have."

“Yes, you probably have. I’m wondering if you’ve noticed what time the recycling was picked up this morning.”

“It wasn’t picked up by the time I left the house,” Alex said.

“And what time did you leave this morning?”

She already knew the answer. She was simply asking for confirmation. “Seven fifty-three,” Alex said.

Miss Mikonos raised her chin. “They are coming later than they are supposed to.”

“I wasn’t aware there was a deadline.”

“They used to come before four a.m. *Before* the vagrants with the shopping carts. Making all that racket.”

Alex found Miss Mikonos’ attitude towards homeless people baffling. According to Alex’s research—which he’d done before signing his lease—she’d been born and raised in Berkeley, had attended the university, and was among those shot at, tear-gassed, and arrested in the 1969 People’s Park protests. She seemed to have spent most of the 70’s getting herself arrested at every public protest within a ten-mile radius, including the White Night riots. Her distrust of institutionalized authority was the reason why he didn’t object to her outsized attention to his comings and goings, or to the mish-mash of religious paraphernalia—prayer flags, Buddhist statues, a Venus of Willendorf, candles depicting the Virgin Mary—with which she’d decorated the building’s vestibule.

“They do make quite a racket,” Alex said.

“I’d hate to have to go to the city about it,” Miss Mikonos said, “but it wakes me up all the time.”

Alex had no objections to vagrants with shopping carts. Their scavenging practices were an efficient means of transferring resources. “That’s unfortunate. I don’t hear them, myself.”

“Well. You are a better sleeper than I am. But will you keep an eye out? I want to see if the recycling truck keeps it up with the lateness.”

“I will.”

Alex waited to see if she was going to ask him anything else. Allowing her to end their conversations, rather than ending them himself, kept him in her good graces.

“You have a nice rest of your day now,” she said, finally.

“You too, Miss Mikonos.”

The door closed. Alex went up the stairs and unlocked the door to his apartment.

The red-boots woman. He would have to follow her. He would go to the BART station at the same time tomorrow morning and maintain a safe distance. It was a lousy plan, with too many variables, but it was enough of a plan to help him return his attention to his work. The first thing he needed to do was check on the data coming in from the transmitter he’d installed on George Gray’s computer at Pacific Bank & Trust. If Alex really was starting a new Project, it was crucial that it stay hidden from Amelia.

At the opening of the door, Alex’s orange cat Nikolai jumped down from his perch by the window. He walked partway across the carpet, stretched, and then finished his journey to Alex’s feet, where he arched his back and rubbed against Alex’s shins. After accepting a minute of head, chin, and neck scratching, Nikolai bounded over to his food dish by the refrigerator, took a few bites, and then returned to his spot by the window.

Alex put his satchel down next to his desk. He took off his tie and hung it on a hook in the closet, leaving it knotted. He carefully unrolled his sleeves before unbuttoning his shirt and taking it off. Then he poured himself a glass of water from the Brita filter in the refrigerator and turned on his computer.

It had taken two point three seconds to install his transmitter on George Gray's computer, three tenths of a second slower than his best practice time. There had been so many people watching, and he'd had a hard time pretending that he wasn't tampering with a computer owned by an institution whose reason for being was the transfer of money from one location to another. In other words, Alex had been nervous. An unusual sensation. He did not like it.

Alex logged on to the IP address where all the information from the transmitter was being sent. A long column of letters and numbers appeared. Each entry in the column was eleven characters long. He heard himself exhale. Everything was working just fine.

George Gray's computer was busy. The transmitter had been in place for all of three hours and there was already enough data for Alex to do his job. Alex printed a hard copy of what he had so far. There were fifteen pages of data, all encrypted. He taped them to the wall over his desk.

Alex stared at the lines of numbers and letters. The sensation of his back against his chair and his butt against the seat cushion faded away. The light disappeared from the windows. Soon there was nothing left in the world except the information. Even the pages on which it was printed had dropped out of existence.

When he was at his best, Alex apprehended the data directly with his mind, unmediated by his eyes—which were so poorly designed, with their suspensory ligaments, their lenses that

weakened with time, their rods and cones that failed over the years. This kind of bodiless perception was impossible, he knew, but that was how he experienced it. It was the nearest thing in Alex's life to transcendence.

#

It was night. Nikolai was on his lap. Alex had turned on his desk lamp and pointed it at the sheets of paper taped to the wall, though he did not recall doing this. The clock read eight minutes after eleven. Alex reached for a pen from the white ceramic Neurosoft mug on his desk—a silly thank-you gift—and was surprised to see that he was already holding something: the fine-tipped red Sharpie, which he usually reserved for the Sunday crossword puzzle.

The cap was off.

Alex looked around. Had he written something down while he'd been working? He nudged Nikolai off his lap and looked beneath the desk for stray notes. He stood up and checked his chair. He searched underneath the chair. He looked at his hands. Nothing.

Alex stared down at the pen in his hand, as if it might not actually exist. He hadn't ever done this before.

Getting upset wouldn't do. The most immediate thing was to record the items he'd gleaned over the past few hours, before they faded from his mind. He took one of the pieces of paper down from the wall and wrote down George Gray's username and password, which was a combination of his late wife's name and what Alex figured was probably her birthday. There was also a pair of URLs he'd pulled out that looked like possible Pacific Bank & Trust intranet sites. A few other interesting sequences had come to him, unidentifiable for the moment, but which would probably make themselves clear with a little nudging.

But first he needed to eat. He went into the kitchen, put on a pot of water to boil, and went into the bathroom to wash his hands.

He looked in the mirror.

Alex hadn't been thinking about the red-boots woman while he'd been working on the data from George Gray's computer, but right there, in the mirror, was evidence that his new Project was moving forward, independent of his conscious awareness. Written on his forehead. In red Sharpie. And backwards, in order to be read correctly:

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