

9.

Neurosoft's offices, on the second floor of a loft space in South of Market, were always freezing. There wasn't a stitch of insulation in the entire building, with its brick walls and exposed pipes on the ceiling. All of the workspaces and conference tables were out in the open, without any cubicles or walls to separate them. How this approach to interior design had attached itself to the so-called new economy, Amelia couldn't understand. She was disappointed that it hadn't been swept away in the tide of the dot-com crash.

"Can I . . . uh, get you anything? Coffee? Sparkling water?"

This was Dylan McManus, the CEO of Neurosoft. He and his lawyer were seated across from Amelia, at one of the free-floating conference tables, next to one of the massive, warehouse-style windows. They were all waiting for Alex, who was now almost twenty minutes late.

"No thank you," Amelia said.

"I mean, if we're just waiting for interpretation," Dylan said, "I think I'm good to go."

Amelia would have a number of problems if Alex failed to show, but Dylan was right. Being understood was not one of them. "Very well," she said.

"Great! So! What's your, uh . . . overall assessment?"

"My assessment is excellent," she said.

"Thanks," Dylan said. "I was also sort of asking about me. Myself. In particular."

Amelia wasn't sure of Dylan's precise age, but she figured he was somewhere in the early twenties. He'd started Neurosoft with a few of his college friends just before the crash, and

managed to survive it by having an actual business model; something to do with “memory-enhancing online games” connected to heavy advertising. In this way, Neurosoft had retained the venture capital that had dried up for everyone else. But when one of his employees returned from a Lake Tahoe vacation with a broken leg and a fractured arm and discovered that his work station was only set up for right-handed people—and that the bathrooms were completely inaccessible to him—he blindsided Dylan with a lawsuit. The building owner refused to pay for renovations, pointing to a clause in the tenancy contract that held Dylan responsible for work that didn’t require structural changes to the building itself, a detail missed by Dylan’s lawyer—another college friend, fresh off the bar exam. Amelia had walked through the relevant ADA requirements, helped them manage the negotiations with the opposing lawyer, and connected Dylan with an experienced contractor to make the renovations. Throughout the entire process, Dylan was like an A-student who had just received his first F. He was chastened, embarrassed, and determined to do better at the next available opportunity. He was more than willing to pay Amelia’s fee, and participated enthusiastically in his private sessions with Amelia, facing down each of his ignorant, misguided assumptions like a bullfighter. He was a star pupil. It left Amelia dissatisfied, deprived of the pleasure she took in her clients’ discomfort, hammering through their resistance until they finally began to feel the full weight of their privilege.

“My assessment of you in particular,” Amelia said, “is also excellent.”

Dylan beamed.

“Well, we couldn’t thank you enough,” his lawyer said. What was his name? He had a standard prep-school look about him that prevented Amelia from ever remembering it. “As I

mentioned in the last email, the plaintiff's lawyer has agreed to drop the case, pending the renovations."

Across the room, on the far side of the office space, the elevator dinged. Alex burst out between the opening doors, sprinting a zig-zag path between desks, turning heads in his wake. He arrived at the conference table, breathlessly, and pulled out a chair.

"I'm really sorry," he said. He was wearing an orange San Francisco Giants baseball cap, which he did not take off when he sat down. Dylan's lawyer eyed him curiously.

"No problem," Dylan said, "we were just about to discuss the renovations."

Amelia tried to ignore the cap on Alex's head. "When will those renovations begin?"

"When will those renovations begin?" Alex said.

"The ambidextrous work stations are already in place," Dylan said to Amelia, "and the bathrooms are being done next week. I think."

"Excellent," Amelia said.

"Excellent," Alex said.

"You know, I think I've got this now," Dylan said to Alex. "You don't have to, uh . . . *interpret* anymore."

"Well then," Alex said. "If you don't mind, I'd like to inspect one of the new workstations."

"Go right ahead," Dylan said.

At their initial meeting with the Neurosoft lead team, Alex had sized up the IT director—yet another friend of Dylan's from college—and quickly concluded that the young man was out of his depth. Alex had installed a script on one of their servers that ran a digital

shell game, slicing away a tiny piece of every financial transaction and disguising it as a payment to a company called Tayback & West, LLC (with offices in Tallahassee, Florida). This occurred before the money came anywhere near Neurosoft's accounts. Even if the script was uncovered, according to Alex, the IT director did not possess the wherewithal to figure out how it had gotten there.

While Alex rooted around underneath one of the workstations, Dylan and his lawyer went through the final documents. Signatures were acquired, copies were made, and the final check was written.

"I really can't thank you enough, Miss Halcyon," Dylan said. "We're already working on new hiring policies. New workplace standards. I'm looking into sensitivity training for everyone."

Where had he acquired this fawning, deferential attitude? Amelia had never seen anything like it. It was irritating. She knew she ought to be glad that Dylan was such an easy case, that she'd gotten to him while he was young and malleable. The changes he was talking about showed that he'd made the mental shift that Amelia wanted him to make, that she wanted all of her clients to make. But Amelia also wanted a tussle. She wanted to sink her teeth in and twist. And Dylan hadn't offered her anything to bite.

"That ish goodh to hear," Amelia said.

"I think we are done here, then?" the nameless prep-school lawyer asked.

"May I shake your hand?" Dylan asked Amelia.

That would be fine, Amelia said. Dylan stood up and came around the table. He slipped his hand into Amelia's and gave it a quick squeeze. Amelia smiled at him.

#

As soon as they were outside, Amelia spun her chair around and parked it on Alex's foot.

"Why are you wearing that hat?"

"I saw it on a rack," he said. "I liked it."

Under other circumstances, Amelia might have believed him. Alex was prone to behavioral quirks, and they didn't always point to trouble. But combined with the late arrival, the hat was a very bad sign.

"You'll tell me, right? You'll tell me if something is happening."

"What do you mean?"

"Check the crap, Alex."

"Yes, Amelia. I promised you I would tell you if something was *happening*. And nothing is *happening*. Would you please back your chair off my foot now?"

He was looking her in the eye. She searched for signs of the jittery presence she knew from previous rounds. He was lying about the hat, she was sure of it, but the Alex she knew and depended on was still in there. Amelia retreated off Alex's foot.

"Did you retrieve it?" she asked.

Alex took his hand out of his front pocket. He opened his palm. The transmitter was there.

"Excellent."

"I don't know what you're so worried about," Alex said. He returned the transmitter to his pocket. "Do you want to talk about our new client now?"

The street they were on was narrow and tree-lined, a quiet connector between two busy South of Market thoroughfares. There was no one else on the block.

“Yesh pleashe.”

Alex had acquired George Gray’s username and password, he said, but seeing as Mr. Gray was only a mid-level qualitative analyst, the internal addresses that appeared in the data from his machine probably only contained moderately sensitive information. It was a good start, though, and Alex figured it was enough to help him make educated guesses about how to access more useful locations.

“We are looking for shomething differenth thish time,” Amelia said. “I want voicemailsh, emailsh, and documentsh.”

“What kind of documents?”

Anything related to the purchase of new property, Amelia said, especially if it had to do with the purchase of the building 1726 Haight Street.

Alex took out his phone. Naturally, he had an iPhone. He’d probably taken the whole thing apart and put it back together by now. Amelia watched him move his thumb back and forth across the screen.

“That address is . . . it used to be a falafel shop.”

Amelia stiffened. “Yesh, it wash.”

“You’re saying that Pacific Bank & Trust owns that building now?”

“Yesh.”

“Why do we care about this?”

“Chan you dho ith?”

“George Gray probably doesn’t have direct access to anything that has to do with buying property. It’s not the most straightforward thing. But you’re not answering my—”

“Chan you dho it?”

“Maybe. It doesn’t help that you’re not telling me why you want this stuff. There might be more than one route to the information you’re looking for. If I knew more, I could give you a better answer.”

Amelia said nothing.

“Do you agree,” Alex said, putting his phone away, “that your orientation towards this client has been unusual?”

“Yesh,” Amelia said.

“Good. Because I think it has been *very* unusual. There’s been a lot of back and forth from the start. The terms keep changing. This isn’t normal for you. It’s making it difficult for me to do my job.”

Amelia asked him, one more time, why he was wearing the hat.

“I already told you—”

“Dochumentsh, emailsh, and voicemailsh.” She turned her chair around. “I will see you tomorrow.”

#

Alex was right about the back-and-forth. It wasn’t like Amelia to be so inconsistent, but right before she’d been approached by Pacific Bank & Trust, Salih had managed to extract a promise from her.

“I have decided to apply for permanent residence,” he’d said.

“That’s wonderful,” she said. They were lying in bed together, after Amelia asked if they could take a break from doing it in her chair.

“And so I am wondering if I can ask a favor of you.”

“Of course. Anything.”

“I would like you to stop your other business.”

“Why?”

“When I submit my application, there will be background checks. Investigations. They will look into things. The work that you do—the other work—it makes things more risky for me.”

“For how long?”

Salih paused before speaking again. “Forever, I am hoping. But at least for the time my application will take.”

How long would that be, Amelia wanted to know.

“Applications like mine can take a long time. They are not accepting a lot of Iraqis right now. It is embarrassing for them.”

“Weeksh? Monthsh?”

“Years.”

Amelia let this sink in. “We should get married,” she said quietly.

“Before September 11, that would have been fine. Now that kind of marriage is investigated. Besides—” Salih kissed her on the cheek. “I want us to get married the right way.”

“What is the right way? What is the wrong way? Who says which is which?”

“Amelia my love, your other work. It is not safe—”

“My parthner ish a professional. He and I are very chareful.”

“I am sure you are. But you and he have also been very lucky. You may not be lucky forever. Your work—it is too risky. For both of us, now. There are other ways to make the money you need.”

“It’sh not justh abouth the money.”

“I know that. This vengeance you take—”

“Ith ish *noth* vengeanshe. It is *justishe*.”

“—is it making you happy?”

This was a larger conversation than she was willing to have. The amount of time she and Salih had been seeing each other—that she had actually *known* him at all—seemed suddenly very short.

“I thinkh you needh to gho,” she said.

“Go? You mean, leave?”

“Yesh.”

Salih sat up in bed. “What have I said? Are you ending this right now?”

No, Amelia said, she was not ending things, but he had given her some things to think about, and she couldn’t think about them with his naked body pressed up against hers.

“I can understand that, but this is very abrupt.”

“I will chall you.”

“I am sorry if I—”

“*I will chall you.*”

Salih got up from the bed. Amelia didn’t watch him get dressed.

Over the next few days, she turned Salih's words over and over in her mind, worrying them like a coin she'd found in her pocket and couldn't remember to take out. Vengeance? Where had that come from? Amelia never thought about her work in those terms. She was opening minds, instigating change, and the money she displaced and redirected was the price. It was a fair exchange, even if it was invisible to the people whose minds she was changing.

But what he said about risk, how it would now affect both of them . . . Amelia couldn't just toss that one away. Even if she hadn't let Salih in on her other work, his application for full residency would still be affected by it. If they were going to be together, then his entire relationship with her would affect his chances. The reverberations of her decisions—*all* of her decisions—would travel much, much farther than they did before.

Was this what it meant to love someone? The new space inside her, the space that she had allowed Salih to create, all the bright and new dimensions of the world that were just now revealing themselves to her . . . she would lose that. If she refused Salih's request, she would have to give that all up.

What were the things that brought her the most happiness?

Amelia went to Zaid's. It had been three days, the longest amount of time she'd gone without seeing Salih since they'd gotten together. It was dinnertime. There was a line going out the door. Amelia took her place. Once she was inside, she saw Salih. He was at the counter, moving back and forth as he took orders, assembled them, and worked the register. He was too busy to notice that she'd come in the door. Amelia settled into the quiet joy of watching him without him knowing it. His body flowed in the rhythm of his work, his fingers and hands moving with focused precision. He smiled as he bantered with his customers, turning

occasionally to shout requests back to Khalid in the kitchen. Before coming inside, Amelia had been uncertain about what she was going to do. The decision was enormous, and she'd changed her mind at least five times between her door and Zaid's. But now, seeing Salih for the first time in three days, there was no longer any question.

Amelia arrived at the counter. Salih looked up and saw her. He looked startled for a moment. Then his features flooded with joy.

"Hello," he said. "What would you like tonight?"

"You," Amelia said.

"I am not on the menu right now."

"How long dho I have to waith?"

He turned and looked at the clock on the wall. "About three hours."

"In the meantime, chan I geth my usual?"

"Maybe. It depends on some things."

Amelia looked him in the eye. "I will shtop," she said.

"You will?"

"Yesh. I will."

"Hey, this is real cute, but can you all get your flirt on another time? Some of us are hungry."

The voice came from somewhere over Amelia's shoulder. She didn't bother turning around to find out what kind of face it belonged to.

"One usual," Salih said to Amelia. "Your number is fifty-three."

Amelia brought her dinner home. Brian was her help that evening. She told him that he only needed to take care of the dishes and the laundry. She would not need help getting ready for bed.

“Gotcha,” Brian said. “Tell Salih thanks again for working on my bike.”

During the blur of days that followed, Amelia was contacted by a Melissa Kendrick, who identified herself as the assistant to Reverdy Harper, the chief investment officer for Pacific Bank & Trust. Was Amelia available to consult with them on a recent internal development? Yes, she was. There were emails and phone calls. A contract was signed, and a date for their first meeting was put on the calendar. It was over two months out. Mr. Harper was very busy, Melissa explained apologetically, and this was the earliest they could manage. Amelia, lost in the haze of romantic disorientation, did not mind in the slightest.

And then it dawned on Amelia that, before their first meeting with Mr. Harper, she and Alex would need to have a conversation.

They met in Amelia’s favorite café on Valencia street, their customary location for initiating a new account, where she informed Alex that they would be staying above-board with Pacific Bank & Trust.

“Really?” Alex said. “Why?”

The straw for Amelia’s orange juice was still lying on the table, unopened. Alex had many talents, but day-to-day courtesies were not among them. “Wouldh you ophen thath for me, pleashe?”

“I mean, it’s a financial institution. A cog in the wheel of American capitalism.” Alex tore the wrapping off the straw. He put the straw back down on the table. “I can’t believe you’d turn down such a ripe opportunity for wealth redistribution.”

Amelia asked Alex to please put the straw into her orange juice.

“Oh. Sure.” He pushed the straw through the perforation in the plastic lid. Then he folded his arms on the table. “So.”

“Sho whath?”

“Are you going to tell me what’s behind this decision?”

Amelia began by enumerating the risks and consequences of their work—vaguely, as they were sitting in the middle of a busy café—and pointing out that they’d had a string of fantastic luck so far. It was time to back off for a bit, play it safe for a little while, lose any attention they might have attracted along the way. Besides, this was a bank. Unlike their previous clients, money wasn’t merely the goal of their business, it *was* the business.

Alex listened patiently. When Amelia was done, he raised a finger.

“First of all,” he said, “we haven’t been *lucky*, we’ve been *smart*. Smarter than our clients. Second of all—” Another finger went up. “—we haven’t attracted any attention. If we had, neither of us would be sitting here right now. Third of all, the risk. Of course there’s risk. There’s always risk. But who cares?”

“*I* chare.”

“How many busy streets did you cross to get here today? You could have been hit in one of those crosswalks. How many people were on the bus you took to get here? You could have

been sitting next to a religious fanatic with a bomb under his coat. How many minutes have you been living in San Francisco? There could be a massive earthquake at any time.”

“But those are all—”

“Calculated risks, yes. The risks we take with our clients are also calculated. It’s not a matter of kind, it’s a matter of degree. We consider the degree of the risk and weigh it against the potential gain. People do this a million times a day without even thinking about it. And some of those risks are enormous. If we actually stopped to consider the enormity, we’d never get through a minute of our lives. Really, Amelia, I’d bet that crossing the street is a much, much more dangerous activity than our current business model.”

Amelia sipped her orange juice.

“You still want to hold off.”

“Yesh.”

Alex fixed his gaze on her. Amelia had seen Alex scrutinize other people this way. She wasn’t used to being his subject.

“What’s the *real* reason?” he asked.

If Amelia told him, he would dismiss it the same way he’d just dispatched the notion of luck. “It’s a personal reason,” she said.

“Which means it’s not a rational reason.”

“Maybe not. But it’s still my reason.”

“Well then,” Alex said, reaching for his satchel, “I think I better sit this one out.”

“Whath? Why?”

“If you want to stay in the clear with Pacific Bank & Trust, then you don’t need my help. You handle yourself just fine on your own.”

Amelia sat in stunned silence.

“Oh, but what about Neurosoft?” Alex asked. “Do you want to stay above board with them, now, too?”

The fact that they were in the middle of working the angles on Neurosoft had not penetrated the romantic haze in which Amelia had been swimming since she’d made her promise to Salih.

“The script is already running,” Alex went on. “I could shut it down if you wanted me to, but since risk is now such a huge concern, you should know that might cause more trouble than just leaving it where it is.”

“Leave it, then,” Amelia said, “but this will be the last one.”

“Okay.” Alex began standing up, then glanced at her plastic cup, still two-thirds full of orange juice. “Do you need anything before I go?”

A temporary improvement. “No, thank you.”

“When is your first meeting with the bank?”

“In two weeks.”

Alex shouldered his bag. “Then there’s still time for you to change your mind. And I hope you do. Acting on irrational reasons only brings irrational results.”

Amelia, of course, disagreed. Her time with Salih was a hurricane of ecstatic irrationality, and the results were undeniably wonderful. And now she was especially thankful for the distraction, since she didn’t really understand what had just happened with Alex. What was the

future of their work together? It was true that his role as her interpreter was just a gloss, and she didn't really need him for the legal side of their work. But they had been working together for so long now that she couldn't imagine engaging a new client without him. *I'm going to sit this one out*, he'd said. Was he now going to sit *all* of them out? These were things they would need to discuss, she thought to herself.

But they never did have to discuss them. Amelia did change her mind, as Alex had hoped she would. It started when Salih tossed an envelope down on Amelia's kitchen table.

"What ish thish?" Amelia asked. It was dinnertime and she was hungry. Salih was supposed to bring takeout, but the envelope was, apparently, the only thing he'd brought.

"Take out the letter inside and see for yourself," he said, pacing the kitchen.

Amelia told him that it would save them both a lot of time if he did it for her. Salih stopped his pacing just long enough to yank the letter out of the envelope and drop it in her lap. Amelia picked it up. There was a formal letterhead. A real estate law firm. The letter was addressed to Khalid, and stated that the firm was writing on behalf of a client who was interested in purchasing Khalid's building, and was prepared to make a substantial offer, if Khalid was open to selling.

Amelia hated the idea of a Haight Street without Zaid's. But other than that, she didn't see just what Salih was so upset about.

"My uncle does not want to sell. This is where he lives. This is where the business is."

"Sho he shouldhn'th shell, then."

Salih pointed at the letter in Amelia's hand. "It is a threat."

Amelia didn't see anything threatening in the letter. Threatening letters from lawyers don't contain inquiries, she said, they contain threats.

Salih smiled in a way Amelia hadn't ever seen before. "As an American citizen, you can say that. For me, even an inquiry is a threat, if it comes from a lawyer."

This was a real estate lawyer, Amelia observed, not an immigration lawyer.

Again, the smile. Was it derision? "Once more," Salih said, "spoken as a citizen."

Amelia swallowed her annoyance. "What is Khalid going to do?"

"He's already done what he is going to do. He called up the lawyer's office and told them he is not interested in selling."

"Well, that should settle it, right?"

"We will see."

Salih still hadn't sat down. Amelia gently asked him if he wanted to go get dinner.

"I am not hungry," he said. He went over to the window and looked out, as if he expected to find someone there, standing in the tiny space between the buildings and peering inside.

Amelia wasn't sure what to do. She told him that she needed to eat soon or she might pass out.

"I need to take a walk," he said, seeming not to hear her, "by myself. Would that upset you greatly?"

It did upset her. "No," she said.

"Okay. I will call you tomorrow." Salih leaned over and kissed her on the mouth. No tongue. Then he was gone.

Salih did not call the next day. Amelia figured he needed some space, and so did not call or text him. Nor did she stop by Zaid's, despite being sorely tempted to do so. She tried not to take his silence personally. He'd been in a mood she hadn't ever seen before; dismissive, almost bitter, more interested in pointing out the differences between them than looking at where they might see things in common. It was a mood better left undisturbed, she thought. It would pass on its own, and Salih would be back to the joyful, passionate devotee that she knew and loved. Then another day passed with no call or message. Amelia decided to text him.

I know you're upset and I'm sorry. I love you and miss you and I want to know what's going on.

Amelia put her phone in her backpack and went out to run some unnecessary errands, promising herself that she would not check her phone until she returned home. The errands only took an hour. Not long enough. The charge indicator light on her armrest was still green—not that it mattered, as Salih had installed her on-board charger a couple of weeks ago, and all she needed now in the event of a low battery was a friendly café with an available plug socket—so she decided to head into Golden Gate Park. She hadn't been over to Stow Lake in ages, and making her way there and back would kill even more time. She made it one and a half times around the lake before giving in and checking her phone.

Nothing.

Amelia went home. Luckily, her help that evening was Frances. Keeping her feelings to herself would be no trouble at all. Frances brought Amelia through the nightly rituals and

ablutions like a silent, well-oiled machine. Once Frances was gone, though, Amelia knew right away she was in for a long night. She kept waiting for her phone, on the night table, just inches away from her head, to burst to life with a text message, a voicemail, a pillar of fire, anything at all from Salih. She couldn't imagine what could be causing him to keep her at such a distance for so many days—okay, two days, but comparatively speaking, that was a really long time. There wasn't any reason for him to behave this way, especially after leaving so abruptly the other night. And now it was robbing her of sleep. Insult to injury.

Eventually, Amelia was roused from a semblance of unconsciousness by the sound of David coming into the apartment.

“You're just waking up?” he said from the bedroom doorway. “Everything OK? Are you sick?”

Amelia thought about saying yes, just to keep the conversation short, but she needed to get dressed as soon as possible. She told David she'd stayed up too late watching a movie instead.

“Oh? What movie?”

Amelia dragged up some title from her memory, something that may or may not have actually ever been a movie. David, whose knowledge of movies was encyclopedic, definitely didn't believe her, but Amelia met his sideways look with a glare of her own, and he dropped it. When he asked her if she wanted breakfast, she said she was going out. He helped her bathe and get dressed.

“Keep me posted,” he said, just before leaving. Amelia waited for the sound of his footfalls on the stairs to recede, and headed out the door.

Amelia had never been inside Khalid's home, where Salih was living. It was on the second floor of the building, right above Zaid's, and so completely inaccessible to her wheelchair. Salih had offered to Amelia to carry her up the stairs himself, but that would have meant leaving her chair out on the sidewalk, which was out of the question. Salih was disappointed. She assured him he'd have plenty of opportunities to carry her up and down stairs that didn't require her to abandon her chair on the street. She thought of that conversation now, as she rolled up to Khalid's door and rang the bell.

And rang it again.

And again.

And a fourth time.

Finally, Amelia thought she heard the sound of a door opening inside. Through the window in the door, she saw a pair of slippers on the stairs. The legs came into view, distorted by the old, rippled glass of the window. But she could tell they were not Salih's legs. As the body revealed itself, Amelia saw a pair of white boxer shorts and a white t-shirt, and then the face. It was Khalid. Halfway down the stairs, he ducked down to see who was there, apparently deciding whether it was worth finishing the trip. Amelia smiled. Khalid came down and opened the door.

"Amelia," he said, looking as though his night had not been all that different from hers. And possibly worse.

"Hello Khalidh. I'm shorry tho bother you, buth—"

Khalid leaned out the door and looked up and down the block. Then he stepped around her. He had a set of keys in his hand. He walked over to the front door of Zaid's, unlocked it, and

motioned for Amelia to follow him inside. Once she had done so, he closed the door and locked it again. He made room at one of the tables for Amelia's wheelchair, then collapsed into one of the seats.

"Ice was here," he said, rubbing his eyes.

"What was here?"

"Ice."

Amelia didn't understand.

"Immigration and Customs Enforcement. ICE."

Oh. *That* ICE. "Why?"

Khalid looked as though the weight on his shoulders had just increased by two tons. "My nephew didn't tell you? About his visa?"

They had discussed it, Amelia said, but she hadn't thought that ICE would actually come knocking, and it didn't seem like Salih thought they would either.

Khalid shook his head. He stood up and motioned for her to follow him again. He brought her around the counter and through the kitchen. There was a tight squeeze around a high metal table, a set of refrigerators, and then out the back door, which was just wide enough for her chair. They were on a narrow patio, surrounded by the adjacent buildings. Khalid pointed toward an alley between the buildings that went back out the street.

"They came through there, and then went up this way." He indicated the wooden staircase that went up from the patio to what she assumed was the back door of Khalid's family's apartment.

"Can you see?" he asked.

“Shee whath?”

Khalid stepped farther back to make more room, motioning up towards the top of the staircase with his chin. Amelia moved her chair until she could see.

There was no door. Or rather, what was left of the door was hanging on its hinges.

“Salih wasn’t here,” Khalid said, shaking his head again. “I thought he was being overly cautious. I said nothing would happen, at least not right away. I was picturing more letters, someone coming to the apartment, maybe. I didn’t think . . . I didn’t think *this*. In the middle of the night. With guns. For an *engineering student*.”

Amelia suggested the possibility that the offer letter and the ICE raid weren’t connected, but if she’d ever had any doubt whether Salih and Khalid were related, the look he gave her dispelled it instantly.

“I’m shorry,” Amelia said.

Khalid nodded, almost imperceptibly.

“Whath are you ghoing to dho?”

“Sell.”

No, Amelia said. He couldn’t just give in like that. These kinds of things can be fought. They *should* be fought.

“I know you’re talking from experience,” Khalid said. “You are probably very good at these kinds of fights. But for me to fight *this*, to fight *now* . . .”

Khalid lapsed into silence again. They stared up at the shattered door. After a respectful amount of time, Amelia quietly asked Khalid where Salih was.

“I don’t know. I called him to tell him what had happened. He said he was OK. But he wouldn’t tell me where he was.”

Amelia’s heart dropped into her stomach.

“I know he loves you very much,” Khalid said. “I was hoping—I mean, I *am* hoping that you and he, someday . . .”

Khalid shook his head one more time, and went back to staring up at the door. The idea that Khalid had been thinking of her this way, as a future member of his family, combined with the current circumstances, gave her a disorienting pang of joy and desolation.

“Well,” Khalid went on, “if that bank wants this building so badly, they can have it. I’ll leave them the door to fix.”

Amelia’s scalp felt hot. “Whath didh you jusht shay?”

“The bank that wants this building. They can—”

“Which bankh?”

“Pacific . . . Pacific Trust? Something like that. Why do you want to know?”

Amelia couldn’t believe what she’d just heard. It was like a tiny white flower on a vast plain of ash. A second ago, she was despairing along with Khalid. Now she felt like the luckiest woman in the world. How many times in one’s life did an opportunity like this present itself? If Khalid didn’t want to take this one on, that was fine. He wouldn’t have to. As soon as she got home, she would call Alex and tell him that she had given their conversation a lot of thought, and he was right: she had been thinking irrationally, it was a mistake, and she had, in fact, completely changed her mind.

A steel wall went up around the pain in Amelia's heart. The locks closed. The gates slammed shut. In order to do what she was going to do, the only emotion she needed was rage.