

ELIJAH

A Written Creative Work submitted to the faculty of
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In partial fulfillment of
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Master of Arts

In

English: Creative Writing

by

Cynthia Ahart Wood

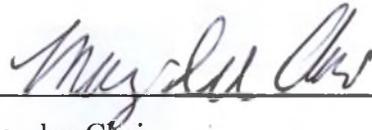
San Francisco, California

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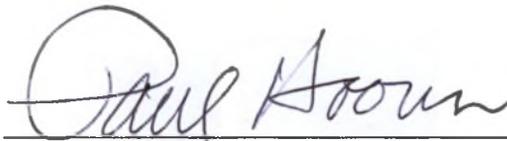
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read ELIJAH, by Cynthia Ahart Wood, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in English: Creative Writing at San Francisco State University.



May-lee Chai
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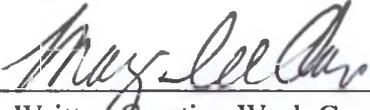
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ELIJAH

Cynthia Ahart Wood
San Francisco, California
2019

ELIJAH is a novel about Kealani Charles (Charly) Bancroft, an inventor and computer science genius, who breaks Silicon Valley's rules by self-funding her new company and by keeping predatory investors and intrusive press at bay. When Bancroft's secure software and hardware platforms are quickly adopted by government agencies and Fortune 500 companies, she seems on track to build the "Bechtel of secure communications" till mutinous employees see a way to break off a piece of the company for themselves. In the midst of personal turmoil, Charly realizes that to reclaim her vision she must destroy her company.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this written creative work.



Chair, Written Creative Work Committee

4-17-2019
Date

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Part I. 2009

1.

When I saw the big, greige blob of scum spinning at the center of the hotel hot pool, I lost all interest in the soak I'd craved all afternoon. The group of guys who'd beat me to the water had created a flotilla of sebum and bacteria as thick as pancake batter. Foot skin, dandruff, errant pubes: stuff I couldn't see but knew was there.

The Rosewood Menlo Park had just opened that spring and was still on its shakedown cruise as Lenoir|Ross Ventures partners gathered twenty-odd start-up teams for a two-day, alcohol-fueled funding contest. Given the demands of the event and the random acts of minor vandalism in the as yet unsurveilled hotel hallways, the Ph imbalance in the hot pool had been overlooked.

Chemistry was not my thing, but I'd grown up around pools. And my parents still argued about the chemical balance of their pool. Too much chlorine fried the ends of my mother's tinted hair and bronzed her black spandex bathing suits. Too little, and Dad was out scrubbing tile all weekend.

At least at home, you knew whose skin flakes were floating on the water's surface.

I shrugged off my disappointment and rummaged around for a drink in a silver-plated cooler adjacent to the towel station.

The guys in the tub had already consumed the decent beer, leaving a couple PBRs, the Coors Lite no one would drink, some wine coolers, and an unappetizing selection of canned mixed drinks. I popped the top of a melon-mint margarita, kicked off my sandals, and walked to the other side of the round pool.

Behind the bathers were piles of clothes, shoes, wallets, phones, ID lanyards, and crushed beer cans. I kept my neon orange Calorifi T-shirt and camo-print board shorts on and dropped to the tile coping next to Ben Carlin, one of my Calorifi partners. With shins and ankles circling underwater, my chest cantilevered over my knees, I strained to hear snippets of conversation over the roar of pool jets.

Even though my team had made it to the final round of the 2009 Lenoir|Ross pitchfest, I'd given Calorifi, our food-delivery app, a fifty-fifty chance of surviving the next six months. With or without L|R backing. As a contractor, without the incentive of equity, I needed to be agile. Any data points from my competitor-peers could be useful as I lined up my next gig, but talk was sporadic. All that beer chasing the hard stuff from that evening's open bar reception had taken effect.

Calorifi – Ben, Morgan Oyette, and I – would be competing the next day against the self-appointed executives of six other disruptive, world-changing technologies left standing after two days of pitching. After working the drinks reception and dinner buffet, most of our cohort was either huddled in tête-à-tête negotiations with L|R principals or locked in hotel suites tweaking PowerPoint slides for the morning bakeoff. Only a handful of us had migrated to the Rosewood pool area.

There was Nash Ordman, a Stanford MBA who had spent a few years at Google. His team earned a berth in the finals with his pet diagnostic app (“WebMD for dogs”).

Next to him were the pair of serial entrepreneurs who'd met at Kellogg, Wester Flagg and Michael Wen. Those two were still in the running with GRE and LSAT prep in app form.

Jake Forester, a freelance engineer I knew from random Valley job fairs, had pitched a self-paced, twelve-step program for social media addicts. He had stayed for dinner even though his team hadn't made the cut. It was 2009, after all, and the idea of quitting social networks was as ridiculous as cutting the cord on cable TV.

Of course, Ric Bellan was there, his curly black hair slicked back with pool water, his brows dripping. He was the front man for EasyBurger, a fast food map-and-order app. It was an idea he'd probably stolen from someone at LoMoCo, the college humor content site we'd both worked for a few years back. Gregarious and always ready to party, Ric came off as the eternal frat house recruit chair: lubricating relationships, scoring favors. He worked hard at what he did, but he didn't seem to get any biz dev results at LoMoCo. And he always had an excuse for missing revenue quotas.

EasyBurger was Ric's first go as an entrepreneur, but it was his fifth or sixth job in as many years. I know, par for the course in Silicon Valley. But usually, MBAs (Ric earned his at Haas in the nineties) chose better – either for career track trajectory or for guaranteed payout.

The guy next to me, Ben Carlin, co-founder and CEO of Calorifi, had drafted me for his project when we were both working at Influx, a short-lived big data start-up. Ben was the antithesis of Ric: quiet, serious, thoughtful. He had a finance degree from some school in one of the Carolinas and had earned a CPA at Deloitte before heading to Stanford for his MBA. He wasn't particularly creative, but he was solid with numbers.

With their shoulders low in the water and their ears below the level of the deck level, none of these guys heard the gate crash at the far end of the lap pool. I leaned back and squinted toward the noise.

Through the porous scrim of potted greens dividing the hot pool area from the lap pool deck, I tracked a girl in a shapeless white spa robe as she picked up a small table pyramided with rolled towels and carried it toward the water's edge.

A two-liter Nalgene water bottle she drew from her pocket sparkled like an aquamarine gem as she settled it on the dark stone coping outlining the pool. Her silver-toned watch glinted in the low light as it slid from her wrist to the deck next to the water bottle.

She shook the robe from her shoulders and tossed it over the table stacked with towels. And then she reached up, arms bent, back arched, to tie her wavy, shoulder-length hair into a low, floppy loop. In this pin-up pose, she was a Silicon Valley Venus: long and lean, her skin, her hair, her features colorless, but illuminated to an otherworldly radiance by the amber pool.

It was easy to imagine her naked. The faded abstract print of her high-neck Speedo was barely readable in the dim, undulating light reflecting up from the pool. But the outline of the suit, the way it creased her hips and shoulders, was unmistakable.

"Hey, Ben. What time does your team go tomorrow?" Ric Bellan asked. The mission of his app, EasyBurger, was to help drivers order fast food from chain restaurants situated along major highways. Voice recognition wasn't built into the iOS API yet, so the app was

pretty lame. An EasyBurger user would map his location, text an order to an intermediary, then drive to a participating Wendy's or Taco Bell to pick up his food. It was an over-programmed alternative to scouting gas-food-lodging exits, which were already well-marked in California.

"Ten or eleven," Ben said.

It was important to pitch before noon, before the VCs evaluating us grew logy after another sumptuous lunch or started withdrawing from caffeine. Whether they bought in to Calorifi or not, our team needed to make a positive, memorable impression that might serve any one of us in future dealings with L|R.

"We need to trade with the eleven," Ric said. "We're bringing in burgers from Buck's."

I caught Ben's eye and gave him my eyebrows of death.

"Didn't realize Woodside was so close to the 101," Nash Ordman said. His group had a solid demo for their PetRx app and one of the early time slots, too.

"We don't say the 101 up here," I said. "It's just 101."

There were few Bay Area natives in Silicon Valley. Everyone around me had migrated from the east coast and spoke a different language from mine. They'd called the state "Cali," refer to the Bay Area as "the Bay," and apply Spanish phonetics to place names like San Rafael and Paso Robles. It drove me nuts.

"Shut up," Ric said, exposing his belligerent streak. "If EasyBurger was yours, you'd order In-N-Out for the most important pitch of your life."

"If EasyBurger were his, he'd fire you," Nash said. "If EasyBurger were mine, I'd support it with a pop-up burger chain."

"A mobile pop-up burger chain," Wester Flagg said.

"A mobile pop-up burger chain at Coachella and Burning Man," Michael Wen added.

"Watch out," Wester said. "Everything you say can and will be used against you in his pitch tomorrow. Bellan hasn't had an original idea since he took his thumb out of his mouth and stuck it up his ass."

"And even then..." Nash said.

Everyone, even Ric, laughed.

Nash leapt from the hot pool, briefly exposing his junk to the rest of us before skipping toward one of the molded concrete planters lining the deck. While he urinated, I turned to the lap pool.

The girl had packed her hair into a dull silver beehive-shaped swim cap and was snapping goggles over her eyes. She adjusted an invisible strap high on the back of her head as she moved to the edge of the pool.

She curled her toes toward the water, relaxed her muscular legs, and bounced her knees.

Next, she rolled her shoulders and windmilled her arms with the precision of a cheerleader, reaching up, back, and forward in opposite directions. She shook out the muscles in her upper arms and thighs and stretched her neck. Bowing fluidly into starting position, she touched the coping on either side of her feet before throwing her fingertips straight out over the water.

Her body slid through a fissure in the mirrored plane and slipped under the water's surface, her entry nearly splashless. The sound of impact didn't carry over the noisy rumble and fizz of the hot pool, but I felt its reverberation in my joints. The frisson made me shiver.

My eyes went back to the bubbling pool and I kicked my feet under the water while Nash stared into the planter and the others, lethargic, remained hunched in that hot, gooey water.

I checked my watch. It was nine-thirty, but it felt like midnight. I took one last pull from my melon-mint cocktail, letting the sweat from the can run onto my face.

When I lifted my legs out of the water, everyone looked up.

"I'm done," I said, pushing off the pool's edge with one hand and jumping back to a dry patch of the deck.

"Me, too, Wyatt," Jake Forester said. He sloshed across the hot pool bench to the stairs. I threw him a towel and took one for myself.

"You staying another day?" I asked him.

He shook his head. I dried off my lower legs and feet before scooting my toes into my leather flip-flops.

“Nah,” he said. “Driving back to the city tonight. Gotta update LinkedIn and all tomorrow.”

“Maybe you can repurpose some of the code,” I said.

“It’s all off-the-shelf,” he said. “Nothing to hold onto. You know. See you next time.”

“Yeah,” I said.

The rest of the men started moving out of the hot pool. They slogged up the steps or maximized water displacement by lunging over the side. They pawed at the pile of towels, wiped their faces and necks, and swaddled their hips before bunching up clothes, loose wallets, phones, and room cards into their hands. Nash dipped back in the hot pool, swished around, then hopped back out toward the towel station.

“Look at her,” Ric Bellan said, as he caught sight of the swimmer. Last to the towel rack, he dried his belly and draped two towels around his body. He tented a third towel over his head.

“She’s naked,” he said. “She’s naked and she’s fast!”

No one needed to correct him. Even from twenty feet away, it was obvious the girl was wearing a bathing suit in the low-lit churning water. But the men started hooting and howling anyway. They pranced toward the lap pool, threw their stuff on chaises near the pool, and started sashaying up and down the deck in the swimmer’s wake. They snapped their towels and posed, gestured, and shook their hips toward the anonymous woman swimming back and forth across the pool. A tribe in Turkish terry loincloths, they dared each other to jump in, to swim over her, to swim under her.

But no one had the nerve to dive in, as if each one of those guys — each one of us — had already figured out there was no keeping up with her.

She had the form and cadence of an elite swimmer. Even a circus of naked men couldn’t distract her from her objective.

“Show us your backstroke!” someone yelled.

For a couple of years, dozens, perhaps hundreds, of men claimed to have been there that night and swore she was the one who had been drunk. They uniformly distained her angular boyish build and her small breasts. They called out over-developed, muscle-bound shoulders and a thick swimmer's neck.

Then, the stories changed.

An ever-growing chorus of witnesses labeled her a curvaceous Silicon Valley vixen with Corten steel-colored hair and lingerie-model legs. They'd say they watched her from a hotel balcony while she seduced Ben Carlin with a private water ballet.

When I'd overhear any of this, I'd interject that I'd been there, that none of the stories were true, lamely defending her. But people would just laugh and dismiss me, begging the storyteller for more lurid details.

The buzz was everywhere I worked and everywhere I went. As talk became more widespread and more explicit, I realized that no one ever described how she swam. How she plied the water with practiced ease, raising her elbows with efficient, even effort, driving her straightened fingertips forward through the water. How she sucked in air on alternate sides every fourth stroke and revolved toward one hip as one cheek came up, then toward the other, trailing bubbles as she faced the bottom of the pool. How she kicked a steady, fluttering beat, flipping into a turn within arm's reach of each end of the pool, and flying upward through the water into each new lap, powered by a sinuous, undulating dolphin kick.

As I watched her, I remembered feeling the bubbles on my own arms, the power of my own high school swim-meet kick.

"Hey, Ric," Ben said. Ric Bellan walked to the pool's edge and stood next to him. They spoke in low voices, so that only the harsh tones of their laughter carried to where I stood, back by the hot pool, fishing a couple mineral water bottles out of one of the big silver-plated coolers.

"Let's go," I said as I walked past them toward the gate. "Leave her alone."

"No," Ric said. "I'm waiting here till she gets out. I'm going to hand her my towel."

Ben laughed again and the two of them scraped a couple of heavy teak chairs along the deck to the far end of the pool where the swimmer had left her water, her watch, her robe, and that stack of towels.

“Okay. Goodnight then,” I said.

“Can I have your slot tomorrow?” Ric asked. “Oh, right, you’re on Ben’s team.”

“You don’t have to ask him,” I said. “The answer from both of us is no.”

I let the gate close behind me as I walked toward one of the low-slung hotel buildings next to the pool. Behind me, the gate slammed three or four times as the group dispersed. By the time I reached the stairs to my second-floor room, the only sounds coming from the pool area were the rhythmic sluicing of the swimmer’s stroke and the low roar of the hot pool.

From the balcony that fronted my king-bed room, I had a partial view of the big pool. I couldn’t see the swimmer -- she was invisible behind a curtain of greenery -- but I could see Ben Carlin and Ric Bellan, draped like sultans in mountains of hotel towels, in their deck chairs. It wasn’t ten o’clock yet. I reset the timer on my phone, hit start, and headed to the shower.

That summer, I would turn twenty-seven. I’d been making decent money as a coder for about five years and had been banking close to fifty percent of my take-home pay. I’d already scored one equity payout from a quick-hit start-up that had sold its IP assets early. I’d paid off my student loans and had parked four hundred thousand and change in an S&P index fund. I’d been lucky.

To reach my financial independence/retire early goal, I was practicing a monastic level of frugality. So, at the time of that LJR pitchfest, I was living in one of the early tech dorms, renting a top bunk and sharing a bathroom with five other guys up in SoMa for twelve hundred a month. It was cramped and dirty, with exhaust silt from the freeway outside our windows coating every still. It was worse than college or summer camp. I craved the luxury of a clean, private bathroom, and unsullied towels.

The marble and glass bathing temple adjoining my Rosewood room was a total escape from my Spartan reality. I'd already taken two showers that day. One before breakfast and another before the afternoon demo session. I'd probably take a bath in the morning.

Now, I washed my hair, soaped my entire body, and let hot water run till steam filled every inch of the cavernous bathroom. This indulgence probably cancelled out a lifetime of conscientious water conservation, an ethos defined by generations of drought-fearing Californians.

I dried off and wrapped up in a thick terrycloth robe before turning back to the animated shimmer of the pool. Ric and Ben were still there, auditing laps, but nodding in a way that told me they were fighting sleep.

According to my phone timer, the swimmer had been at it for more than an hour. In high school, I could swim faster than two miles per hour, but my speed would fall off in the second hour. She was going for a three-mile workout, I guessed.

I dragged a blanket from the bed to the chaise outside. As my mind rewound to my team's presentation earlier that day and the briefing that lay ahead, I pulled the blanket tight around me.

That swimming marathon went on for nearly four hours. I awoke as the stroke rhythm changed and a whoosh announced the swimmer's exit from the pool. I reached for my phone to verify the time before standing to search the pool deck. Ben and Ric's sentry seats were vacant. The hot tub jets had quieted.

The swimmer stayed largely hidden behind the shrubbery surrounding the pool, the filtered movement of a white towel and her white robe were all I could make out. After a few minutes, I heard the slap of rubber flip-flops on cement and saw her leave the pool area by the far gate.

2.

My big white buffet plate was already loaded with cheese blintzes, smoked salmon, and artichoke frittata when the swimmer appeared on the Madera terrace the next morning. She was a Technicolor version of the woman I had seen in shadow the night before: taller than I had imagined and her hair — vivid in bright daylight — was coppery red streaked with gold.

She collected half-moon crescents of melon and pineapple from the buffet before tracking down a server, speaking with him briefly, then claiming a high table at the shaded end of the space reserved for the L|R conference breakfast. She put her plate down and shimmied onto a leather stool.

I filled a white ceramic mug with coffee and wandered back to a table at the opposite end of the terrace, where I'd left my black vinyl messenger bag. I forked some blintz into my mouth, pulled out my laptop, and tickled the machine's track pad to wake its screen. My search started with the email and document trail on the conference, looking for an attendee list. There were eighty people on the registration list; of those, three were women and I could identify them all. Valleywag, Recode, and a few of the other high-traffic tech blogs had a little about the Kellogg team's product launch, but otherwise, there was nothing to help me identify the swimmer by name or by the product she was presenting to L|R.

Given the gender make-up of the L|R players I'd met so far, I assumed that this red-headed swimmer wasn't one of the VCs, but I searched the Leadership, Team, About Us, and Press pages on the LenoirRossVentures.com site anyway. Nothing.

I swished tepid coffee around my tongue while I Googled "distance swimmers." I pored through images, filtered a dozen different ways, till I found her, red-headed and blue-eyed with a pageant princess smile, heaped with orchid leis, an enameled medallion pressed close to her cheek.

Kealani Charles Bancroft.

According to the news clipping dated July 1999, she'd swum the twenty-six-mile Kaiwi Channel from Molokai to Oahu at fourteen. That made her twenty-four.

Twenty-four. Same age as my sister.

I checked back through the L|R site to see if there was a Bancroft partner, to make a father-daughter connection. Nothing.

Her trail ran cold after two short *Honolulu Advertiser* stories: one about an Intel science award she'd picked up for a small tidal-powered desalination project, the other about her English Channel swim while undergrad at M.I.T.

By cross-referencing names from the clippings, I learned her dad was chairman of Bancroft Lines, a privately-held shipping company in the Islands. Bancroft Lines had spun off a supply chain logistics software company and had taken it public in 2004 as Bantrac, Inc. A couple of years later, Oracle bought Bantrac and subsumed the brand.

But I couldn't get a fix on Kealani Bancroft's job history. Nothing on LinkedIn. Nothing on Facebook or MySpace. Addresses popped up for her in Hilo, Cambridge, Palo Alto, and San Francisco. She seemed to be living in a part of the city I knew well, near the Panhandle in the Haight. At twenty-four, she might still be in grad school at Stanford or Berkeley.

I glanced toward at her. We were still the only two people on the terrace, the only early birds, so no one was there to see me staring at the plate a waiter delivered to her. It looked like she had ordered a salad. Spinach. It was spinach and poached eggs. And there was a small white china teapot within reach of her right hand.

She tucked a hank of red hair behind her ear and pushed the rest of her mane over her shoulders so that it fell in waves down the back of her black jacket. When she reached for salt or pepper, a man-sized stainless-steel watch – the one I'd seen at the pool – gleamed under the left cuff of her stark white oxford button-down.

I went back to my screen and pulled up her Cambridge dates. She'd lived there till 2002, meaning she'd either dropped out or graduated at seventeen.

My laptop was grinding through its shut down protocols when Jim Lenoir, the guy paying for this two-day boondoggle, glided past my table. His wiry, toned frame draped in an untucked white knit shirt and loose khakis, his patrician nose and chiseled chin aloft, he made a bee-line for Kealani Bancroft, his arms outstretched.

“Charly!” he said. “Can if I join you?”

As soon as my screen went black, I hit the start button again.

I Googled Charlie Bancroft, then Charly Bancroft. She seemed to be chazbot@bancroll.com. Bancroll, an unreleased electronic payment app prototype, had been acquired by Wells Fargo in January.

I looked over the list of companies pitching the L|R partners this week. None of the companies had a Ban- or Banc- prefix.

Lenoir leaned in close to Charly Bancroft, practically nuzzling her as he chatted her up, while I pushed breakfast around a cold plate. By the time a waiter came by to splash coffee into my mug, the terrace had started to hum. Teams of entrepreneurs gathered in groups of two and three, outfitted for the occasion in matching Ts or polo shirts, each silk-screened or embroidered with the logo of a dot-com start-up. Ric Bellan's group was wearing yellow, red, and blue knit shirts straight out of the Hot Dog on a Stick uniform inventory. Our team had chosen long-sleeved chambray shirts with orange embroidery above the left breast pocket.

Ben Carlin found me as I finished my coffee and the two of us went to meet Morgan Oyette, the third member of our team, to prep for our presentation.

3.

Calorifi, our start-up entry in the funding contest, was a DIY Jenny Craig: a nutrition-tracking utility and distribution channel for dozens of fast food restaurants, meal delivery services, and local food trucks. You'd enter the calorie range for your meal — say, six hundred to six hundred fifty calories for a lunch — and the app would come back with options that could be delivered to the user's location or picked up within a ten-block radius.

Three of us — Ben Carlin, our chief executive; Morgan Oyette, our finance guy; and me, playing the part of chief technical officer — filed into the twelve-seat Cypress boardroom right at eleven a.m. Opposite seats designated for us sat Jim Lenoir, restyled in a tightly tailored navy suit, and five of his all-white, all-male Lenoir|Ross partners. Diversity had no currency or urgency among these rarified ranks yet.

In a few years, there would be women and people of color at the table and none of these guys would wear anything more formal than an open-collar plaid sport shirt under an all-weather Patagonia vest, but for this event each of them was a dutiful Lenoir Mini-Me.

Outfitted in similar dark suits paired with pastel shirts and coordinating Hermès or Charvet ties, the partners had accessorized with shiny objects that would be easy to price out on the web. Cufflinks from Tiffany and Cartier jangled against the edge of the meeting table. Oversize gold- and stainless steel-cased watch faces set on matching metal bands sent planetarium pinpoints of light dancing across the ceiling as wrists snapped and rotated. BlackBerry and iPhone 3GS smartphones lined up in pairs on the table in front of each partner, along with fetish collections of gold-plated Cross and black-resin Montblanc pens poised to blemish fresh piles of tangerine Rhodia graph paper pads, Louis Vuitton Epi leather-bound A-5 sized Filofaxes, and canvas-covered composition books with light-green pages.

Ben distributed the six iPhones we had preloaded with Calorifi demo software, while I plugged my laptop into the room's a/v system. We introduced ourselves and sent business cards sliding across the table in every direction. I lined up the VCs' cards in seating order and made small notations on each about their pen and notebook preferences.

"Let's get started," Lenoir said, clapping his hands.

Ben led the group through a fictional origin story about a non-existent fiancée who wanted to lose ten pounds before a fall wedding date. We had a slide featuring a picture of a bikini-clad Bar Refaeli, that year's *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit cover model. While the VCs looked at the picture and nodded, Ben went through some nonsensical calculations of calories his non-girlfriend would have to cut from her diet to reach her goal, which was to look like Bar Refaeli when they went on their fictional Bali honeymoon.

He concluded that his fiancée could consume about fifteen hundred calories per day for ten weeks. The sample menu slide showed a three-hundred-twenty calorie breakfast (toasted bagel, scant schmear of cream cheese, black coffee), a four hundred fifty-five calorie lunch (Subway turkey sandwich, apple, Diet Snapple iced tea), and a seven-hundred calorie dinner (two Chevy's grilled fish tacos, one lite beer).

Ben walked the VCs through the Calorifi iPhone demo, pointing out how calorie reconciliation, meal planning, and ordering functions worked. When he directed them back to the Keynote presentation, I was ready with renderings of next-phase interface designs and features — all pure blue sky.

As Ben finished his spiel, Morgan distributed a sheaf of spreadsheets. The L|R team flipped ahead to the five-year revenue projections page as Morgan plodded through our five-year pro forma. As he was talking about customer acquisition, partner marketing, and our revenue model based on revenue sharing (we had all agreed that “revenue sharing” sounded much more lucrative than “commissions”), I heard the sound of the conference room door closing.

I checked the top of my screen. Eleven-thirty. Twenty minutes too early for the next team to barge in. I turned, expecting to see Ric Bellan pushing a hotel luggage rack full of box lunches, but it was Charly Bancroft who had slipped in. She settled into a chair against the wall behind me.

“Is she under N.D.A.?” Ben asked. Morgan pushed my laptop screen down and the projection went black.

“Gentlemen,” Jim Lenoir said. “You know Charles Bancroft — or you know about her.”

I was the only one on our side of the table who nodded.

“Charly is the genius behind Bantrac and Bancroll. None of the projects she has in development are remotely competitive with Calorifi. She’s here as a consulting associate. And yes, she’s covered by L|R non-disclosure. Charly, Ben Carlin, Morgan Oyette, and Wyatt — “

“Melohn,” I said.

Morgan resumed babbling about profit margins and exit strategies, while I flashed on the probability that Charly hadn’t decided whether to park her Bantrac or Bancroll money in any of the Valley venture funds yet. Her presence in this room, even as a try-out associate meant she was already sitting on hundreds of millions.

Ben kept craning his neck to get a look at Charly.

“Is there a problem, Ben?” Lenoir asked.

“Sorry, no,” he said. “I thought Charles Bancroft was —”

“Older, maybe,” Lenoir said. “Charly wrote Lava, the Java encryption code, and developed Bantrac while she was still in high school. What did you do in high school, Ben?”

“I played lacrosse.”

“Oh, and Charly swam the English Channel.”

Lenoir had exaggerated her timeline, but more important, Ben had eaten into our precious audience with the Valley’s strongest funding team. We had to get on with our pitch.

“Here’s the list of partners we’ve engaged with,” Morgan said, pointing to the slide on the screen. “Calorifi already has MOUs from the companies bolded here, so we have high confidence in meeting Q1 launch deliverables.”

“How are you managing data outside the iOS API?” Charly asked from behind us. Her voice was low and even. She hadn’t asked if she could ask a question. She hadn’t prefaced her inquiry with self-effacing filler. She hadn’t made her voice rise to defuse her authority.

None of the VCs across the table looked at her, they kept their eyes on Ben as he addressed them in profile, half-turned toward Charly.

“User data and all transactions are dumping into SQL. For now,” Ben said. His right ear, the one I could see, had turned red. “We’re using some custom filters to compare usage to census data to help us target marketing and biz dev efforts.”

“Which one of you is the engineering lead?” she asked.

“Wyatt?” Ben said.

I hadn’t expected to talk, but here I was, the contractor playing chief technology officer at a three-man company. I put an arm over the back of my upholstered chair and faced Charly. It was startling to see her face up close: the dense freckles; the wide nose; the faint, golden smudge of her eyebrows; the blackened lashes framing wide-set, deep blue eyes striated with gray. And it was disarming to recognize the frankness of her expression: She

knew everything about data management and the restrictions of the API we were working with. Embellishment wouldn't play.

"We want to be able to share certain tranches of user data with our partners, but we need to protect most of it. So, as a customer orders from Subway, for example, her basic information — her name, identifying phone number, and transaction amount — is shared with the vendor. We explain to users in our privacy language that this is information that Subway would have collected from them for any direct phone or web order anyway. Subway will be able to serve offers to mutual Calorifi customers only if those customers have opted in for their promos. Or if Subway already has its customers' email addresses in their own proprietary opt-in database."

I'd been coached to mention Subway, even though we hadn't approached the company yet.

"Will you manage data for partners like Subway," she asked.

"No, we'll feed them specific data on a transaction-by-transaction basis," I said. "It's up to them to capture it. We aren't going to be their back up. Although we will serve offers to mutual customers on their behalf."

"How does the U.S. Census overlay work?" Charly asked.

"We're building the analytic software now, which is IP we'll be able to license to other companies who use public data," I said. "We want to know how Calorifi users fit into gross population statistics as well as block-by-block social and economic demos. As we're successful, we'll use statistical algorithms to focus biz dev and marketing on those metros or regions for more customers."

"Wyatt and I, we both worked at Influx before this," Ben interjected.

"You're doing all that in SQL?" Charly asked without taking her eyes off me.

"Pretty much. It talks to iOS. It's the quickest way for us to build the backend we want before launch," I said. "What would you use?"

Her lips flattened into a line and her eyes widened. Maybe I flattered myself, but I read this as a connection.

"We can talk about that offline," she said.

I nodded and turned back to the VC jury.

“What is the rollout plan?” Lenoir asked.

Ben started improvising. Before he ran out of adjectives, our time was up.

Charly left the room as stealthily as she had appeared. Her chair was empty when I turned around after our pitch.

After our performance, Ben, Morgan, and I huddled over burgers on the Madera restaurant terrace.

“That wasn’t too bad,” I said.

Ben shifted a big bite to his cheek.

“Yeah, we made the second round and there weren’t any questions we couldn’t answer,” he said. “I give it a seventy-five percent shot.”

“How much input do you think they’re going to take from that girl?” Morgan asked.

“Clearly, Jim is trying to bring her in as an associate. He’s going to test her hunches against his, but he will be the decider,” Ben said. “I’m sure of that.”

“Was she the girl in the pool last night?” Morgan asked between bites. “You guys were there.”

I watched Ben redden again.

“She was working out while a bunch of us were in the hot tub. You heard Lenoir. She’s a distance swimmer.”

“I heard she dove into the pool naked,” Morgan said.

I shook my head. Ben said nothing.

“At least no one asked you about your fiancée, Bar Refaeli,” Morgan laughed.

“Let’s get back to work,” Ben said. “Meet at my place in about an hour. We’ll wait for Jim’s follow-up questions. If we’re on his short list, we’ll come back down here within the week. Jim needs to make a lot of noise about his first-mover start-up investments. It’s been a while since he made some early round picks.”

I wondered how the term “first-mover” or even the cobbled mash-up label “best-of-breed” applied to Calorifi, which was essentially a speed-dial app. But as a contractor, I didn’t need to weigh in.

Ben signed the lunch check with his room number, knowing Lenoir|Ross would pick up the charges, and the three of us ambled toward the bell desk in V formation.

Through the hotel’s wide wood-framed front doors, I saw Charly Bancroft again, her red hair now ablaze in the sunlight. She took a set of keys from the valet while a bellman stowed a leather-handled gray nylon duffel and a black leather briefcase in the trunk of a vintage Mercedes 300 wagon. The car, at least as old as Charly herself, was in mint condition. It’s cream-color finish and sparkling chrome hardware, its undented hubcaps, and its oiled tires unusual alongside the sleek Benz convertibles, supercharged BMWs, whale-tailed Porches, and Italian novelty cars stacked up around the hotel entrance.

I threw the strap of my messenger bag over my head and grabbed my backpack when it came out of the luggage room. When I scrolled through my phone for messages, there was one from chazbot@bancroll.com.

*Lenoir won't be funding Calorifi, so let's talk about one of my projects.
LMK if you can meet in SF tomorrow afternoon. Peoples Café on Haight @
3:00.*

Regular capitalization. No exclamation points.

Even then, I knew I’d give anything and everything to work with her. I hit reply but waited till Ben and Morgan had passed their tickets to the valet before I composed a message.

Part II. 2017**1.**

Charly shouldered the metal-framed frosted glass door, jamming her heel against its base as she pushed her turquoise carbon-frame bicycle in a tight arc from the gray concrete apron outside onto the spatter-patterned black and gray Japanese linoleum inside. She let the door swing closed within centimeters of her rear tire.

With a quick survey of the open-plan storefront space — the glow emanating from a single brushed-aluminum task lamp at the rear of the room, the pulsing beep of the stainless steel-trimmed microwave in the Pullman kitchen, and the half-open acrylic thermostat cover — she knew Wyatt was already in. Or more likely, still here. None of the other Cabana engineers ever felt it necessary to pull all-nighters. In crisis or crunch, midnight was the cut-off for everyone but Wyatt, who seemed to live at Cabana.

Charly guessed he was reviving himself with a shower back in the wet room or smoking out on the deck behind the office.

She propped her bike against a melamine desktop near the front of the loft-like space and pulled off her black knit hat, releasing a tousled nest of short gold-burnished copper hair. With the stiff, cold fingertips peeking from her fingerless white leather gloves, she combed the flattened parts of her hairdo upward, twisting random locks into an asymmetric headdress of spikes.

She slipped off her black nylon backpack and silver Uniqlo down puffer, emerging in her sleek office uniform of crisp white cotton button-down shirt, black microfiber blazer, and stretchy form-fitting utility pants.

A security panel blinked at the rear of the space, on the wall near the stairs to the mezzanine server room. Charly clattered across the floor in her stiff cycling cleats and punched a code into the device, activating the card reader on the front door and deactivating the perimeter alarm. She turned when she heard Wyatt's footfall.

"You said you'd be out of here by nine last night," she said.

Wyatt Melohn blinked at the flashing red and white Xenon lights on Charly's bike, while Charly took in the pockets under his cola-colored eyes. The purple streak in his chestnut hair seemed to have faded to violet overnight.

"I got through the build by about ten," he said. "Then got rolling on the task queue backlog. That whiteboard we've been using is now in 3.9."

"Great."

While Wyatt went through a litany of what he'd checked and recoded overnight, Charly checked her wrist:

5:43 a.m.

56° F

Ben.Jammin missed call

There were no new messages — or at least, no new messages in the twenty minutes she'd been pedaling across the leaden city from her family's Lake Street house, down Twenty-fifth Avenue through Golden Gate Park, to Cabana LLC's modest headquarters at Irving Street and Forty-seventh Avenue headquarters.

"You should be able to check it now. There are two versions of the current build on the server. One with and one without that whiteboard."

Charly nodded.

"I've got a call with Homeland in about fifteen minutes, so after."

"Okay."

Charly clattered toward her nylon mesh ergonomic chair, where she plopped down to kick off her cleats and slide into a pair of shiny black patent leather loafers parked within toes' reach.

"Lights were on at Mimosa when I went by. Call them for coffee," she said.

"Sure. Tea for you?" Wyatt asked.

"Darjeeling. Shareen just got some."

"Want breakfast?"

"No. I'm good."

She watched Wyatt rub sleep from his eyes and massage the corners of his mouth with the heels of both palms. He hunched over his desk, dialing his mobile phone with his thumbs as the boot-up chime sounded from the computer tower under Charly's desk.

She retrieved her bike, switched off its lights, and walked it back to the vestibule behind the kitchen where neon-bright surfboards, black neoprene wetsuits, and another couple of bikes hung from ceiling-mounted racks. Atrium windows and another set of glass and metal doors appeared frosted in the scant light of dawn, but it was a low, heavy blanket of marine mist that blocked Charly's view of the broad deck and Mediterranean garden behind the building. All was gray in this block, just a few hundred yards from Ocean Beach.

"I'll get that," Wyatt said. He moved toward Charly and put his hands on the bicycle frame.

"No, I've got it," she said.

"Look, I'm in last night's clothes. This isn't about chivalry, it's about laundry."

She snorted a shorthand laugh and relinquished her grip, stepping back to watch Wyatt hoist the bike into its place.

When Wyatt returned from the café down the street, Charly was deep into her six o'clock call. She watched as he swiped the outside card reader with his back pocket and pushed into the office holding a molded fiberglass tray. Steam billowed from stainless steel carafes and white paper napkins fluttered as the door closed behind him.

He delivered a mug and a carafe to Charly's desk.

"Uh, huh," Charly said. She gave him a thumb's up as he walked his breakfast to his desk. "Our next build has that whiteboard feature plus a couple more.

"Good work," Bill McHenry said. "I look forward to seeing it."

"We actually listen to your team -- they give us good, constructive input. We'll have another development meeting with them after they take a look at 3.9."

"Excellent. It's a rare thing to get what we need, Charly," he said.

"I'm sure," she said. "Anyway, we should be pushing that upgrade tomorrow morning. I just want to go over it myself for a few hours before we release it."

"Demo at four your time tomorrow good?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. She hadn't reviewed the upgraded software herself, but trusted it was ready.

"How many participants your end?" he asked. "I'll have Nancy send videoconference numbers now."

"We'll be on speaker here. One dial-in should do it. Me, Wyatt, maybe Marco," she said. "But give us a spare in case someone needs to take the call remotely."

"Okay, then," he said. "Talk to you tomorrow."

"Thank you, Admiral McHenry," Charly said. "Bye."

Charly pressed a button on her headset to release the call and turned to Wyatt, mid breakfast burrito. He wiped his mouth on the back of his left hand and drove his mouse with the right.

"Okay, Charly, it's yours," he said.

"Thanks," she said. "Go home and get some sleep. I'll call you up if I need to."

"Nah, a little red-eye action and I'm good 'till at least noon," he said.

She scanned Wyatt's desk while he polished off his burrito, his almond croissant, and his espresso-fortified coffee. A box of Nicorette gum peeked from under his monitor stand.

"Thought you were quitting," she said.

He followed her gaze to the box and pushed it out of her view.

"Yeah, I am," he said.

"But are you quitting the gum or quitting the cigarettes?"

"Right. I quit the patches with the gum. Now I'm quitting the gum by smoking a few cigarettes."

"Most people wean themselves off cigarettes with that other stuff."

"I hate smoking," he said. "Just a couple more days and I should be clean."

Charly shook her head. Only Wyatt would think of using OTC nicotine patches as a focusing agent. They had gotten him through months of code crunching code. She

estimated he had lost about fifteen pounds he didn't need to lose and wished she had figured out what he was doing much earlier.

"You should see a doctor, Wyatt," she said. "It's covered by our insurance. Our HR person will find a specialist for you at UCSF. At least, get a physical."

"I'm okay, Charly," he said. "I'm down to two cigarettes a day. I only chew the gum when I'm here late."

"Look, I don't want to sound like a mother, but I am a mother. You need to take care of yourself."

"I know," he said.

She turned back to her own desk, squaring a fresh yellow legal pad in front of her. As she listened to landline and mobile phone messages through corresponding headsets, she made a list with a Japanese rollerball pen:

*Jim Lenoir
Friday lunch
12:30 Madera*

✓*Bill McHenry*

*Rick Ric? Bellan
Biz Dev
650-555-0963*

*Karla
Chaos - April 22
415-555-6241*

She tapped a button on her mobile.

"Good morning," she said. "You up?"

She could almost hear the bristle of her husband's beard scratching the glass face of his device. He grunted.

"If you drive Elijah this morning, let me know where you leave the car, okay?"

"Charly, I really need my own car," Ben Carlin said.

“Why? You have the wagon ninety-nine percent of the time. One car works for us.” She stood and walked toward the front of the office space, both arms crossing her chest, her back to Wyatt as she spoke.

“It only works for you. Since I’ve been home full-time, it’s become more of a hassle to share that car.”

“But, Ben, this is the first time I’ve needed it this month — and it’s to pick up Elijah.”

“I can’t take a Lyft or the bus to every one of these classes.”

“Why not? Can’t you carpool with one of the other — ”

“Look, if you want me to take care of your son full-time, I need to be able to make time for myself. And to maximize that time, we need a second car.”

“The car is not the issue, Ben,” she said. “From what I can reconstruct, Elijah is *our* son. If this stay-home arrangement isn’t working for you, you can change it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that we still have a part-time nanny. We can see if she can work more hours. You can give yourself more time to get your yoga certification, open a studio, do whatever makes you happy.”

“Or, I can get a job. Isn’t that what you want?”

It had been six years since Ben had sold his gaming company for four million dollars to Zynga and two years since he had stepped away from his consultancy, telling friends he was planning to be Elijah’s primary care-giver and write a book about conscientious parenting. So far, neither of those ambitions had come to full or dependable fruition.

“I’m not telling you what you can or cannot do, Ben. You can make your own decisions. You can buy your own car. But I do need the car we own tonight to pick up Elijah. Or I need you to drop off his car seat.”

“That works,” he said. “I’ll bring the car seat by.”

Charly returned to her desk and scribbled “Elijah 5:30” on her yellow pad. She leaned over her keyboard to set an alarm for four thirty on her screen.

“Thanks, that’ll buy me some time here,” she said. “Is Elijah up yet?”

“I hear him moving around.”

“Ask him to call me on the way to school.”

“Sure.”

Charly knit her arms tightly across her chest again. She straightened them as she glanced toward Wyatt, who had clamped a pair of headphones over his ears.

“Love you,” she said.

“Bye,” he said.

Charly reached toward her phone to end the call, then pulled her hand back as the sound went dead in her headset. She sucked in some air and let go of her shoulders as she exhaled.

She pulled a white iPhone from her backpack and turned it on. A Cabana logo appeared on the screen. She tapped the envelope icon, then addressed a text message to Jim Lenoir:

In the office. Call whenever. CBC

At the bottom of the message was the advisory:

Cabana encrypted. Do not reply without Cabana handset or system key.

She reached back into her backpack and turned toward Wyatt.

“Hey,” she said. When he looked up, she lobbed another white iPhone toward him.

“Back to the future,” he said. “This one’s mint.”

“Yeah, they clean up pretty well,” she said. “We should be able to salvage a few hundred thousand from stock in Long Beach.”

“How many of them do we need?” Wyatt turned the phone over in his hands, looking at the wide charger receptacle, feeling for the power switch.

“Homeland is good for fifty thousand units to start but could use close to a million with all the ancillary services they work with,” Charly said. “I had ten of these put together for us to test. You can send messages to anyone but can only call another handset for the time being.”

Wyatt turned on the handset and logged in using his Cabana admin password. He poked at each of the four icons: The envelope, the phone, the camera, and the whiteboard.

At the top of the screen, where the signal strength bars should be, were a stack of wavy lines indicating the strength of the radio frequency channel these prototype phones used.

“What is this? A three?”

Charly nodded. “A 3GS body. They have fours, too,” she said. “I gave one of these to Elijah. Go ahead and message him, then try to hack into the system or his set.”

“Today?”

“Anytime in the next week. I want to get any initial weaknesses out of the software before we turn it over to the professional hackers.”

Wyatt’s lips turned up into a smirk as he typed with the index finger of his right hand.

“The CalPoly kids are alright,” he said.

“We’ll have a couple of them here this summer,” she said. “If they can find someplace to stay.”

“There’s always that loft you promise to build out upstairs.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to encourage you to live here full-time, Wyatt.”

“Elijah at Cabana.com?” Wyatt asked.

She nodded as Wyatt entered the address into his white Cabana phone.

Charly returned to her computer screen, double-clicked the Cabana 3.9 icon on the shared server, and started loading demonstration data sets into the latest version of her company’s secure communications suite.

As she worked through testing protocols, the rest of the Cabana team appeared.

Marco Murphy and Jeremy Shopar, the pair of forty-something Lockheed Martin engineers who worked as a team and carpoled up from Redwood City, arrived together by eight.

Linden McFerrin and Brianna Corbett, user-interface specialists poached from Apple, slipped in on different sides of nine.

Corinth Sosa, a recent graduate of MIT who had been a recipient of a four-year Bancroft Trust scholarship, rolled her bike through the front door a few minutes after ten.

Charly was peripherally aware of them arriving, booting up their computers, conferring with Wyatt, tapping away at their work, going to and coming from Mimosa with cups and dishes that eventually clanged together in the sink. But she didn’t look up. She

stayed focused on the work before her, breaking and repairing code, stressing and puzzling the synapses of her encryption algorithm to see if she could stall or crash any of the features as they ran simultaneously.

A neon orange two-liter Nalgene bottle posed to the right of her monitor was half-empty when Charly finally took a break. Close to two o'clock, she pushed back from her desk and shook out her legs. She stood behind her chair and did a few slow lunges while her staff, deep into an almost meditative work mode, maintained library calm.

Charly let her eyes rest on each engineer, nodding to herself as she mentally reviewed each person's workload.

She took a few steps around to the bathroom behind the kitchen, where she took a long look at her face in the mirror before splashing cold water on her cheeks. As she combed damp fingers through spikes of her hair, she assessed the faint signs of age encroaching on her freckle-dappled face. There were already stray grays in her brows and at her hairline. The creases under her eyes when she squinched her nose, the perceptible-only-to-her slack in her otherwise still-plump cheeks, the deepening creases in her neck all added up to a need for more sleep. She bit her lips to restore color to them as she washed her hands.

Back out in the office, she grabbed a banana from a basket on the kitchen counter, and toured desk by desk, checking in on the Cabana team, finding out what glitches each engineer was encountering, consulting with them, reinforcing their decisions, and encouraging them to work out problems on their own or with each other. These open conversations and the private one-on-one meetings Charly took during long bundled-up walks on the beach, had knit the group together, but more important, demonstrated her confidence in, and loyalty toward this hand-picked crew. This was the original Cabana team, the six that had helped her build Cabana 1.0, had seen the product through a dozen iterations, and were now managing external technical resources: remote engineering teams in Detroit, Huntsville, and Albuquerque.

Here in San Francisco, it was easy to still think of Cabana as a small company, but with close to forty off-site programmers and hardware designers, plus six out-sourced support professionals, the business had a two-million-dollar-per-month burn rate.

Charly did the math on the first-year revenue from the Department of Homeland Security, National Security Agency, and Wells Fargo Bank contracts. She would be reimbursed herself for the development costs she'd fronted for about five years altogether and start funding the company's growth out of cashflow in about three years. The short-wave handset project, a side business for Cabana, would become a separate company with outside financing. She would finally give VC suitors, who circled Cabana endlessly, something to fund.

When Ben Carlin pushed through Cabana's front door at three carrying Elijah's blue corduroy booster seat in front of himself like a cake box, six pairs of eyes followed his movements. As he made his way toward her desk at the back of the office, Charly watched her team's eyes sweep up and down the length of Ben's loose-fitting tobacco-colored tunic and T-shirt knit drawstring pants, taking in his mirrored sunglasses and the leather thong sandals that skimmed the linoleum. She looked away as her colleagues exchanged glances over their monitors and half-glasses, then popped up to meet her husband.

"Thanks," Charly said. She took the seat from Ben's hands and held it dangling from one of hers, so that it grazed her knee. "Want coffee?"

"No, I've got to meet some people before my class," he said.

"I'll walk you out," she said, depositing the seat near the front door.

The couple left silently; Charly aware of heads shaking in her peripheral vision.

"See you later," she said, as Ben jumped into the double-parked Mercedes wagon. Had he said anything to her? Something about meeting some people — other people — before his class. She wondered if any of these others would be going on the four-week silent meditation retreat in Bali next month.

She listened to the familiar rumble of the diesel engine as Ben coaxed the car down the block. It was an old car. It was old when she bought it to transport her boards and surfing equipment nearly ten years ago, when she first moved to California.

Ben didn't have a car when they married, primarily because he'd lost his license the year before they'd met. As long as he was working, he got by. He'd either jump on a white double-decker shuttle to work in Silicon Valley or ride the 1 California Muni bus downtown as he needed to. Once their attorney had helped him regain his license, he seemed happy to share her iconoclastic vintage car on weekends.

But now, she realized that sentimentality, never a factor in any of her other decisions, was the only reason she'd kept the old Mercedes for so long. It was time to trade it for an EV or some kind of hybrid. That big old wagon needed to be scrapped.

As she stood in the middle of the sidewalk, Charly tapped out a quick text to her virtual personal assistant.

Look into best EVs and plug-in hardware/requirements. Thanks. CBC

She watched for the "delivered" receipt, then tapped again.

Ask Lulu if she can work afternoons, 3:00-7:00+ – or if she has friends looking. Asking my mother to come (guest room) while Ben in Bali. Will have travel dates later this week. Talk tomorrow. CBC

Charly ignored the closed sign at the Mimosa Café, the breakfast and lunch diner that had become the de facto Cabana commissary. Shareen Xiang, the owner, looked up from wiping down the long chrome-trimmed pink laminate countertop.

"Hi, Shar," Charly said. She took a thin red leather wallet out of her jacket pocket and walked around the counter to read the numbers on a small white pad next to the register. She totaled Cabana's running tab, scribbled "paid" and her initials at the bottom of the page, then laid eight twenties and a five on the sill of the register drawer.

"Thanks, Charly," the woman said. "You know, I can invoice you on a monthly basis. I know you're good for it. Need coffee?"

"I'd love some, but don't turn the machine back on for me."

"I just turned it off. It'll be ready in a minute."

Shareen moved to the chrome-plated espresso machine behind the counter and flipped the buttons across its brow.

“Decaf?” she asked.

“Yes. Double cappuccino, please.”

The machine’s steamer arm shouted and sputtered into a stainless-steel pitcher dripping with the condensation of ice-cold milk, while two shots of syrupy decaf dribbled into a white ceramic mug. Shareen layered frothy milk over the top of the coffee and placed the mug on the counter, handle facing Charly.

Charly drew another five out of her wallet and tucked it next to the other bills on the register.

“Thank you,” Charly said.

“You’ve had a long day,” Shareen said. “I saw you go by here before Wyatt came over for your tea.”

“Yeah. East coast clients mean early calls.”

“We’re keeping the same hours,” Shareen said. “That is, if you go home now.”

“I’m leaving early,” Charly said. “I’m picking Elijah up at five-thirty at the JCC. But I might as well just go get him now.”

“You need a full-time sitter,” Shareen said.

“I know. That’s what I told Ben. I’m on it.”

“Why can’t he be on it?”

“He just can’t. Figuring out his own shit is a full-time job. Being a full-time Dad isn’t working for him – or for any of us.”

“You know I’m not sympathetic.”

“You don’t need to be. It’s what everyone goes through. Business is a lot easier.”

“Bring Elijah by sometime.”

“I will, if you’ll teach him how to pour a heart onto the top of my cap like this.”

Charly cradled the coffee cup in both of her hands as she walked the half-block back to Cabana.

“Marco, would you try breaking 3.9? I’m going too easy on it,” she said as she pushed through the door. “Just give it an hour or so.”

The man with salt and pepper hair nodded.

“And Jeremy, you too. Divide this up. I’m releasing it to DHS and NSA between midnight and four. If you see anything, call me.”

“You got it,” Jeremy said. “We’ll stay late, if we need to. We’ve discussed it.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that. Ping me when you’re done. Or phone if there’s anything that you can’t fix tonight. We can stretch the delivery date to the end of the week.”

Charly finished her coffee after punching a few buttons on her mobile phone. She closed the windows on her desktop and shut down her computer, grabbed her down jacket, zipped up her backpack, and left the white ceramic cup in the kitchen sink at the back of the workspace.

She picked up the car seat at the door and walked out to meet a white Prius idling near the sidewalk.

2.

“Do we have to go back to Cabana now?” Elijah asked. “Is that why you’re so early?”

As Charly and her son walked through the automatic doors at the Jewish Community Center onto California Street, she pointed to a double-parked white Prius.

“No, I don’t have any work tonight until after you’re in bed,” she said. “But I might get a call from Jim. Remember the guy with the big pool?”

“The one where you can swim from outside to inside? Into his living room?”

“That’s the one. I’ve been waiting all day for him to call me.”

“Why?”

“Business stuff. It won’t take long. Did you have fun after school?”

“I think I’m getting too old for this JCC play group,” he said.

“You’re seven, Elijah. You’re already tired of swimming and jumping on trampolines?”

“No,” he said. “I’d just like to go home and do my homework there. Maybe have kids over that don’t go to the JCC. Go to the playground. Go to the library. Get ice cream.”

“That sounds reasonable to me.”

“Make Dad get a job and get Kirsten back.”

“Kirsten is already working for another family,” she said. “But we can get Lulu to work more hours or find someone else to bring you home from school. I’m thinking Gramma can come for a few weeks while we’re figuring it out. She’s already planning to be here next month while your Dad’s away.”

Elijah pushed back into the booster seat and buckled the seatbelt over his waist and chest. The driver took off at the sound of the click.

“We’ll call her tonight after dinner to see how much earlier she can come.”

“Okay,” he said. “When is Dad going away?”

“Next month,” she said.

“Why doesn’t he want to talk to us for four weeks?” he asked. “Can we text him?”

Ben’s pursuits had become more and more esoteric over the years since he’d stopped working. Distance and silence would help him reset, he had told her. As he edged closer to forty, she knew to tread lightly. He was worth the trouble.

“He’ll be sleeping when we’re awake and awake when we’re asleep,” Charly said. “We’ll have to put notes in his luggage, so he remembers us.”

“I’ll put some of my buttons in his bag.”

“That sounds good. Maybe we can make him a headband together,” she said. “Now more important, what do you want to eat tonight?”

“Sliders and fries,” Elijah said.

Charly smiled. She ran her fingers through his tousle of loose strawberry curls and traced the freckles along his cheeks. He looked back at her with half-moon shaped eyes. His azure irises matched her own.

It had been a long time since she’d had dinner out with someone other than a venture capitalist, publicist, reporter, or former colleague. Someone was always trying to give her

money, ask for money, find out about Cabana, or angle for a job. Charly had stopped assuming that any of her business acquaintances or college classmates were real friends.

“Your vendors, your suppliers, your employees are not friends,” she would tell business school classes when she lectured on entrepreneurship. It was a truth that had taken her years to recognize. “Establish a culture of trust with the people you pay – but limit those relationships to the workplace.”

“Are you sure you don’t want a burrito?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “Burgers. Fries. Shakes.”

“Sounds like Mel’s or the Cliff House. Or I know. Let’s go to the Presidio Social Club.”

“Where’s that?”

“Uh, the Presidio.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s go home first. I need to change. You have homework?”

“Just words. You can help me with it at dinner. We can make flash cards.”

The Prius pulled up to the Lake Street house that Charly and Ben bought just before Elijah’s birth. It was a crisp white Edwardian with the squared bay windows and geometric dentil trim reminiscent of a Kensington row house. Two lollipop-shaped boxwood topiaries flanked the black lacquered door and a polished nickel-plated pendant fixture cast soft light on the black, white, and violet terrazzo porch and stairs.

Charly came around the car to open Elijah’s door. He jumped to the curb and chuffed up the steps while his mother unmoored the car seat and said goodbye to the driver.

When she was halfway up the steps, Elijah tapped a combination into the pad on the front door and entered the house as the security system bleated its warning.

“Hurry,” he said.

“Sixty seconds is a long time, Elijah,” Charly said as she deposited the booster seat near the front door and reached for the alarm system keypad. “Maybe we should leave a

step stool here so you can reach this thing. At the rate you're growing, you won't need it very long."

Elijah watched her open the front of the white plastic alarm panel.

"Are the numbers the same as the front door?"

"No, this one is your birthday. You already know that by heart, don't you? Here," she said. And she walked across the lavender-gray entry hall to a coat closet jammed with yoga mats and Styrofoam blocks. She extracted an industrial gray two-step stool from the back, dislodging a tower of blocks. "Let's practice with this one."

Charly reset the alarm and pulled the big black door closed after the two of them had stepped back out onto the porch again.

"Count to sixty," she said.

Elijah complied, skipping the numbers forty-six and fifty-four.

"Okay, now let's go back in," she said.

The boy punched in the door code, walked into the house, and clambered to the top of the step stool. He opened the white panel door and punched in four one eight.

"No, it's month, date, year," Charly said. "Zero four, one eight, one zero."

Elijah hit the numbers using the index, middle, ring, and pinkie fingers of his left hand sequentially.

"And another one to turn it off."

The alarm pad beeped again, then went quiet.

"Excellent."

"Can I try again?"

"Sure."

They repeated the procedure. Elijah closed the plastic panel when he had disarmed the alarm for the second time.

Another white Prius delivered Charly and Elijah to the clapboard-faced former barracks just inside the Presidio gate on Lombard.

Elijah approached the podium first and stood on tiptoes to address the hostess.

“We probably have a reservation for Charles.” He glanced back at Charly who had styled her hair close to her head with a palmful of gel and had traded matte lip balm for a smear of cherry gloss. He smiled at the hostess.

“Of course,” the girl said. “This way, Charles.”

They settled into a small table near a window that gave them a view of car traffic streaming into the Presidio. Charly took a seat on the banquette, Elijah sat on the straight-backed chair opposite her.

“We can order right away,” Charly told the waiter as he filled their water glasses. “Or do you want to see a menu, Elijah?”

“No, I want the burger.”

“Two cheeseburgers, then. With everything. One vanilla shake and a mojito for me.”

“We could do this more often, Mom,” Elijah said.

“We can,” Charly said. “The business is in a good place now. I’m hiring people to manage the outer offices and take most of the travel off my calendar, so I should have a better schedule for things like this.”

“You mean, things like me?” he asked. “Are we still going to Washington?”

“Of course,” she laughed. “We’re booked for ski break in February. What do you want to see there?”

“I want to see Air and Space. And I want to see Senator Harris.”

Charly laughed.

“Why Senator Harris?”

“I want to see where she works.”

“Will see what I can do.”

“You should wear a necklace like hers.”

“You like that double strand of pearls? Or the black ones?”

“The white ones. They make her look happy.”

“I am guessing she is happy, but that necklace is beautiful on her.”

“You should ask her where she got it when we see her.”

Charly laughed. "If you'd like to make me a gift of a double strand of pearls, Elijah, we can pick them out together."

"On Saturday?" he asked.

"This Saturday," she said. "I promise I'll wear them every day."

Jim Lenoir made a beeline for Charly's table as soon as he recognized her, leaving his party of three logo-shirted guests at the bar. Lenoir's wind-burned and sunbaked face matched the red twill of his sailing jacket. His pomaded silver hair made him look like a 1940s film star, like Fred Astaire, Charly thought as she extended a hand toward him.

"Sorry, I haven't had a moment to call," Jim said. "I was blissfully untethered all day."

"Looks like it. Jim, you know Elijah," she said.

"Good to see you again, Elijah," Jim said.

Elijah smiled, his cheeks reddening under his mother's gaze.

"You both have wet hair," he said.

"You're right. We must have the same hairdresser," Charly said. "Excuse us, Elijah."

She turned to Jim Lenoir. "I need quick answers on two things, Jim. First, I'm thinking about hiring Ric Bellan for the account management position and I need your honest opinion of him. Secondly, we're acquiring about half a million recycled iPhones from Commcon and need to build a facility up here or near Long Beach to strip them and install new chips. That piece of business, the real estate and light manufacturing, I'd like to set up separate from Cabana with venture funding."

"That's it?"

"Yes," she said.

"Okay," he said, "I can tell you a few things now and we can catch up on the rest at lunch Friday. Do you mind, Elijah?"

Elijah plumbed the last drops of his milkshake with a black-and-white striped paper straw, making a gurgling sound as he nodded ascent.

Jim scooted onto the banquette next to Charly, close enough that she felt his body heat and could smell his citrusy cologne and Chloraseptic throat spray. She felt her shoulders

rise an inch closer to her ears. Her visceral response to Jim Lenoir had become more pronounced in the last couple of years.

“Ric is a good choice,” Jim told her. “Looks the part, can manage high-end contacts. But he is expecting an equity stake. Be sure you tell him your exit strategy isn’t an IPO.”

“He was one of those guys at the LJR funding contest nine or ten years ago.”

“Yeah, but he’s not one of the ones who talks shit about you. Sorry, Elijah. Besides all that died down years ago.”

“Why has he had so many jobs?”

“It’s the market, Charly. A guy like that is usually brought in to set the team, hit early revenue milestones. Cabana’s the only place that can afford him long term.”

Charly shook her head. “I’ve got a recruiter checking his references.”

“That’s smart,” Jim said. “Now about the manufacturing project: Money is no problem. Send your proposal. If you want one of my people to draw up a term sheet, call Angie and give her the specs. Why aren’t you using Steve Stamates as legal counsel?”

“Aside from his conflicts of interest? He’d just stick me with associates.”

“That’s definitely not true.”

“Which part? He juggles way too many conflicts; he holds equity stakes in too many competitors or potential partners.”

“He’s the best and he knows everyone. Those are benefits worth paying for.”

“I don’t see it that way and I don’t pay any of my vendors with equity.”

“That’s shortsighted.”

“I think there are going to be consequences to how Stamates does business. Loyalty has to work both ways.”

“You haven’t cornered the market on loyalty.”

“Maybe not, but I try to protect the people who work for me and the people I work for. They trust my judgment.”

“And if I didn’t trust Steve’s judgment, I wouldn’t be recommending him,” Jim said. He paused for a moment.

Charly picked up her drink and realized it was empty.

“I appreciate your advice,” she said. “Oh, and one last thing, Jim. Do you think one of your daughters would want my old Mercedes?”

“That wagon? I’ll check,” he said.

Jim rose and Elijah put out his hand, now slick with French fry oil and hamburger grease. Jim took the boy’s hand in both of his.

“Nice to see you, Elijah. Make sure your mother gets home safe.”

“I will,” Elijah said.

3.

“So, you coming on board?” I floated the words across the sidewalk out in front of the office as Ric Bellan let the frosted glass door slip from his grip and swing shut behind him.

“Wyatt,” he said, putting a little more music into two syllables than was necessary.

Of course, he remembered me. Guys like Ric catalogue names and faces for a living. We had dozens of mutual contacts on LinkedIn as a result of coincidental tenure at LoMoCo, had lifted our chins toward each other at random all-hands meetings, and had shared that poolside moment at the Lenoir|Ross pitchfest back in 2009.

“Yeah. What do you think?” I said.

“What do you think?”

“Personally, I’d hate to see you come in and fuck everything up.”

He huffed, dismissing me by hurling air in my direction.

“Cabana is the perfect next step for me,” he said. “Pre-exit, no funding issues, no board, nothing but upside.”

“Upside if you do your job,” I said. Ric hadn’t performed at LoMoCo, had only stalled that company’s plan for the six months he kept a seat warm there. He got canned after trying to sell unexercised LoMoCo options through a third-party intermediary.

“You don’t think I can run business development?”

“She's keeping it private.” I couldn't imagine his motivation to work for Charly. Female managers at LoMoCo constantly complained about how he'd go over their heads to speak with male principals.

“That's a red herring,” he said. “As they say, ‘everyone has a price.’ She'll want to recoup her money at some point. She just hasn't decided whether she'll sell or go public.”

“She'll get her money out of profits. She doesn't need an IPO.”

“Yeah, well, whatever.” Ric put his arm out to the side and a black matte chalkboard finish Tesla's lights flared behind him. “Deals are the only currency in Silicon Valley.”

“She's talking to other people. She doesn't have to do Jim Lenoir the favor of giving you a job,” I said. “He doesn't have skin in this game. Go ask him for a gig at one of the baby blockchain starters he's incubating.”

It surprised me that he hadn't already turned toward his car.

“What are you going to tell her?”

“What did you leave off your resumé?”

He exhaled again and folded his arms over the nipples visible through his white knit shirt.

“Charly is going to hire me. She needs me. You engineers know zero about business. She's lucky she's gotten this far,” he said. “Count the days. When it's my turn to run this show, Wyatt, you are so out.”

“Fat fucking chance,” I said. I threw my cigarette butt toward the curb. It skittered across uneven cement, a miniature comet with a flaming tail of red sparks.

“Glad we had this talk.” He grinned and held out his hand, palm down. I hesitated, then dug my hands into my pockets.

“How's Chloe?” I asked. Chloe was a name that I'd retained from years ago. He'd undoubtedly moved on, but it was all I had.

Ric pirouetted away, shaking out his product-stiffened curls and giving me a view of the small pothole of baldness blossoming at the top of his head.

Ric reached his car with deep strides, slid into the driver's side door, and was gone in seconds.

I traced his steps down the street, past the Asian guy who spent most afternoons sitting outside the front door of his apartment building in a folding camp chair, an insulated coffee mug in one cup holder, a pack of cigarettes and lighter in the other. I nodded to him but couldn't read if he was conscious behind the aviator shades.

A few doors down, I pushed a bentwood chair out of the doorway at the Mimosa.

"Hey," I called as I entered the café.

Shareen jumped up, brandishing her mop like a martial arts master. I watched her alarm soften to recognition.

"We're closed, Wyatt," she said.

"I know. I just can't go back right now."

I took the mop out of her hands and put my weight into the line of baseboard running the length of the café. The rinse water turned the color of cement as I swished the mop around the bucket. After wringing out the water, I returned the mop to the floor.

"What happened?" Shareen asked after I'd covered most of the floor.

She was still standing where I'd left her, hovering over the bucket in the middle of the diner.

"Nothing," I said. Nothing had happened. Yet.

"Go on. Fix yourself a red eye. I haven't thrown out the cold coffee."

"Thanks," I said. "Want one?"

"No caffeine for this girl. I'm going to ride this exhaustion straight to a good night's sleep."

I walked behind the counter and switched on the espresso machine, loaded two shots in the metal filter, and, while I waited for the ready light to come on, nuked a white mug full of cold coffee for forty seconds in the microwave.

At the back of the café, a toilet choked on mop water. I tamped down the coffee grounds, fit the metal receptacle into the machine and hit the button. Coffee extruded like molasses from two spigots into a paper cup.

I married the espresso with the reheated coffee and took the rag from under the machine to wipe down the chrome and loosen the Italian roast grit plastered onto the underside of the high-pressure valve.

“If you ever need a job,” she said. “Let me know.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Could be any day.”

I scribbled the price of an Americano red eye on the pad next to the cash register before I kneed the bentwood chair back into place on my way out of the Mimosa.

By the time I’d swiped back into the office, I had an idea. A way to delay any business-side hires. I let the last dregs of espresso drip down my throat, stashed my mug in the sink, zipped up my sweatshirt, and pulled my bike off the ceiling.

“Jesus. You get called up for your mission in Zimbabwe?” Charly was standing behind her desk, still bundled in commute layers, when I pushed through the office door the next morning.

I looked down at the constellation of grape and tangerine flecks on my graphite silk-and cotton-blend tie. That gray was just a little darker than the shade of my starchy spread-collared shirt, one of three coordinating shirts I’d acquired the night before. The other two shirts were still wrapped in tissue paper and tucked inside a Nordstrom shopping bag in my apartment. I’d return those shirts and pull the plug on two pairs of pants and another jacket – all chalked up and ready to alter – if this conversation didn’t go the way I wanted it to.

Charly had covered her mouth with a cycling glove when I looked up.

“Oh! I’m sorry. Did someone — are you —?”

“No,” I said.

The Uber driver who’d dropped me a block from the office had asked if it was my wedding day. I laughed. I’d gone overboard with executive fantasy cosplay.

Charly responded with a smile that stretched her lips into narrow pink slashes.

“So, what’s the occasion?” Her smile faded again. She squinted. “You’re quitting Cabana?”

I shook my head as I crossed the empty office. Unbuttoning my jacket with the thumb and middle finger of my left hand as I sat down was reflexive, one of those suave moves boys learn from their fathers and James Bond movies. I felt the urge to light one of my cigarettes with a gold-plated lighter, but what I needed was a fresh fourteen milligram nicotine patch just to keep me focused.

“What is it then?” she asked, leaning toward me, her knuckles, no longer gloved, were white as they held the back of her chair. “You starting something on your own?”

I played with my tie. Flipping it up and smoothing it down as I swiveled in my chair and took in the empty, half-dark room. When my eyes came back to hers, her expression was neutral, her forehead untroubled, her brows relaxed, her hands resting somewhere between her hips and pants pockets. The lines around her mouth, animated when she laughed, flattened. Neither hopeful, nor accusatory, I felt she was waiting for me to explain my new sixteen-hundred dollar digital gray tweed jacket, my four-hundred dollar tropical-weight wool pants, my shirt and tie, my suede belt, my soft leather loafers -- all chosen in a purposeful frenzy the night before by an ad hoc team of stylists, tailors, and seamstresses who kept me captive in a Nordstrom’s dressing room long past closing.

“What is it, Wyatt?” Her voice was nearly a whisper, a tone I imagined she used most frequently with Elijah.

“I am not leaving Cabana, Charly.”

I watched her sink into her desk chair. As she let go of a well of stored breath, her shoulders drooped.

“I have no plans to leave Cabana,” I repeated, but I do want to talk to you about how I can bring more value to this project.”

“You bring plenty of value already,” she said.

“I know,” I said. “But I can do more.”

She cocked her head.

“As you start hiring more staff – adding account management positions, for example — I want you to consider promoting me into one of those positions.”

She remained silent when I paused.

“I know the Cabana platform inside out. I know the principles of the company. And I’m already working with Boeing, Northrup, and Homeland on a day-to-day basis. I know the installation protocols. I can do this, too.”

She didn’t respond, she just stared through me toward something in the infinity beyond my desk.

So, I waited. I waited long enough to realize how much I wanted coffee and nicotine. My adrenaline, primed for more than twelve hours, was already crashing.

“Here’s what I propose,” I said. “I’m here every other week managing the engineering team in Detroit remotely — I’ll switch with Linden; she can take Albuquerque. Alternating weeks, I fly north to Seattle or east to D.C., circling back through Detroit when I need to. We bring on those integrators from that defunct VAR in Houston and pair engineers in Huntsville and Albuquerque with them to train. You recruit more engineering staff, not sales or marketing people who can’t understand our business.”

“This is about Ric? All this is about Ric?”

“It’s not just about Ric, but, yes, I feel very strongly that you shouldn’t hire him. Sales guys like him never get it, they undercut the brand by never learning enough about the platform, then discounting the software. I’ve seen it over and over again.”

Charly nodded and looked down at her hands. She twirled the diamond band on her left ring finger with the thumb hooked behind her palm.

“You’ve put some thought into this, Wyatt,” she said. I had to fight the urge to argue my position, to tell her what I knew about Ric’s performance at other companies: how he’d bottleneck the engineering pipeline with client requests for custom features, how he’d falsify reports, how he’d hit on women in the office. If I sounded petty or territorial or jealous, I’d lose the point. I had to trust her to do her homework.

“You are very important to this organization. I rely on you — and need you to be the standard bearer here at Cabana,” she said. “You are my second set of eyes and hands. If you leave the engineering team or OD on those stupid nicotine patches, it would be tough to replace you.”

“But you would,” I said, blowing past the flattery to make my point. “If I were leaving to start my own company, you’d figure it out. In fact, you probably already have a couple of engineers in mind to add to the staff here.”

She nodded.

“If keeping this company private is really your long-term plan, then you have to start thinking about how you’re going to push the people you know and trust to take on more responsibility. I’m ready for more responsibility now,” I said. “I already have some informal executive oversight. So, let me grow with the company.”

She was still nodding. I kept my eyes on her as she gazed off toward the office door.

“We’ve had the luxury of expanding organically, at our own pace,” she said. “I’ve wanted to keep loose reins on the company, to see what it could become.”

She turned back toward me.

“For the next couple of years, I want to accommodate as many new installations as we can. And get this handset product built and into distribution,” she said. “Essentially, I want Cabana to be the Bechtel of secure communications.”

“Enterprise-focused and private.”

“Yes, private. I’ve said that from the beginning.”

“So why is Ric Ballen talking to you? All he does is skip around, fishing for equity.”

“What is it about Ric?”

“You know.”

“The pool thing?” she asked. “If that’s it, I know all about it. I was there, remember? If he works for me, he’ll have to start playing defense to quash those stories, won’t he?”

“You’d hire him to shut him up?”

“Of course not,” she said. “I’ve never cared about those pool stories. And even if Ric was behind any of it, he’s learned I’m a bulletproof target. All that talk has zero effect on me or my ability to build Cabana. He also knows Cabana is the right place for the long term. He’s getting too old to play the start-up game. I think he’s motivated to be a top performer and a loyal employee.”

“But you are checking him out,” I said.

“Yes, I’m checking him out,” she said. “And yes, I know business people are not like us. They take a long time to get up and running, regardless of experience. They’re moody. They don’t always play nice. But we have to bring on a bunch of them to maximize Cabana’s potential — and corner the market before some other company comes after us.”

She looked away briefly, while she swiveled in her chair.

“So, Wyatt, your idea is good. Our clients deserve knowledgeable, accessible reps. I can’t be hands on day-to-day as we grow. And Ric is not the person who can jump in with the authority someone like Admiral McHenry at DHS expects from us.”

“No, and he’ll never be that person.”

“Okay, let’s figure this out. I think Corinth would be a good junior partner for you in this. We’ll add a couple more engineers in this office and in Detroit for you.”

“That surf shop across the street is moving,” I said. “You might want to get the lease on that space.”

She laughed.

“I’m way ahead of you there. I bought that building last month when I realized I didn’t have enough room for the interns this summer.” She made a note on the yellow pad sitting to the right of her elbow. “Anything else, Wyatt? You need a new title to go with that jacket?”

I looked down at the salt-flecked gray wool.

“Not right away,” I said.

Before the rest of the staff ambled in, I’d hung my jacket in the back closet, removed my belt and tie, unbuttoned two buttons, and had rolled up my shirtsleeves. In the bathroom mirror, I saw that the look was still too formal. I untucked the shirt and messed up my hair.

“Nice pants, Wyatt,” Marco said later, as I left the building to catch a smoke and a coffee. “When are you going to learn to shave?”

Despite my limp protest, Charly hired Ric Bellan. She assigned him to sales and made him Chief Revenue Officer — giving him the only C-level title in the shop. Charly insisted on keeping the title of President.

A few weeks after I'd dropped six Gs on a new wardrobe, Ric arrived at the office on a Monday, dragging a folding canvas beach wagon piled with banker's boxes and canvas boat bags. His personal effects took up so much real estate that he needed to commandeer an unused desk to form an L-shaped return. All of the engineers on Ric's side of the office had shifted their desks six feet closer to the front door to accommodate his set-up. He now sat to the left of Charly and I remained on her right.

I'd seen Ric's collection of family photos, miniaturized SEC filings frozen in acrylic tombstones, stuffed fish, and drink tumblers at LoMoCo, where we worked together before I met Charly, and at Campus, where we crossed paths again after I started doing contract work for Charly.

I looked over his exhibit one night after everyone else had gone home and wondered how long Ric would last at Cabana.

It was disturbing to me that he hadn't updated his gallery (or curated the tchotchkes) in the three or four years since I last saw it. Family had always been his brand, but these sun-bleached pictures of his wife, his kids, his perfectly-groomed golden retriever, seemed like forensic evidence of some previous life. In the photos, Ric is much younger and thinner, with thicker hair and darker stubble. His collar up, his eyes dancing on the lens, his grin says he knows where the party is.

Vanessa, his sleek blond bride corseted in a Disneyesque, fluffy-skirted dress, holds a Yale law degree and general counsel title at one of a legacy Silicon Valley firm. She is his double threat: a trophy and a safety net.

His twin sons, Trevor and William, preschoolers in the silver-framed photos, must be seven or eight now, close to Elijah's age. Just seven or eight years from prep school exile.

I picked up a couple of the frames and ran my finger along the velvet backings. Suddenly, I remembered the stash of Ecuadorian coca leaf tea Ric always had in his desk at Campus. In one of his utility cabinet drawers were Altoid boxes filled with chocolate-covered nonpareils (the musty aroma of cannabis distinct), tiny white pills (generic Xanax), and a couple of perforated, water-stamped, lickables (picked up at some Valley launch

party). The coca leaf tea bags, South American contraband with a subtle but lasting kick, were in a Ziploc lodged under his college-issue HP graphing calculator.

I carried one of the bags back to the kitchen and dropped it into a clean mug filled with on-demand scalding water. With the tea steeping, I returned to Ric's workstation to poke through a collection of greeting cards and correspondence stacked vertically between his monitor and a Haas School of Business pint glass jammed with cheap stick pens. Ric still had the farewell cards from the LoMoCo, Campus and four other companies (all embellished with generic best wishes, epithets, and crude drawings); several sets of paired identical birthday cards from his sons (crayon scrawls, penciled letters, ink signatures indicating passage of time); a Valentine card from his wife ("It just gets better. Love, Vanessa"); an embossed notecard from an out-of-business private dining club on the Embarcadero with a \$50 coupon inside (signed by the general manager); and a bedazzled card depicting a bottle of champagne on its cover from an illiterate cybergirlfriend ("My have for you, Lover Chloe"). This might be a new card from her, or one he's been carrying around for the last decade. In any case, I'd seen most of this stuff before.

Between sips of tea, I wedged the cards back into place and closed all the drawers I'd opened.

At my own workspace, I woke my computer and hit restart as the coca leaves began to work their magic.

At first, Ric was Mr. Congeniality. He brought in boxes of baked goods when he returned from lunches around town or meetings down the peninsula. He worked slowly through a long list of warm leads that Charly had collected, while he also worked his way through his own contact list, pitching partnerships and acquisition deals that he'd pitch Charly every few days. The ideas he floated proved two things: (1.) That he didn't understand Cabana's product or value proposition, and (2.) that he was out there fishing for finder's fees or equity payouts from other companies.

"Roktel is interested in building a Cabana handset," he announced one afternoon.

"Rocktel?" Charly had asked.

“Yeah, it’s a Lenoir|Ross start-up. They’ve got a couple of industrial designers from Frog in house working on a lozenge phone — perfect for Homeland.”

“We’re already manufacturing chips for the first twenty thousand iPhone refurb,” Charly said. “I want Cabana to tap into the recycle-reuse thing. But thanks.”

A few days later he was all about linking up with a marketing automation platform to develop an encrypted alert system. We had built an encrypted alert system into Cabana 1.0 and the latest version of that feature would be shipping soon in Cabana 4.0. Ric was three years too late with that idea.

“I love that you’re thinking outside the box, Ric,” Charly told him. “But you know, we are self-sufficient on the development end of things.”

Charly did her best to teach, reinforce, and pound the Cabana gestalt into Ric. She took him for long beach walk talks, spent hours demonstrating technology, and regularly invited him to sit in – silently – on high level calls with established clients. Ric’s government security clearance was still months away, if it came through at all, so information about the DHS installation in particular was never shared with him.

About three months into his tenure, Ric decided that he couldn’t sell Cabana without a proof-of-concept demo. Scheduling Skype sessions with one of the engineers for live demonstrations of the platform wasn’t working for him. He wanted a public-facing, simplified Cabana that he could show from his phone, his iPad, or any laptop. A site he could link to in emails. Essentially, the pre-launch Cabana demo, which Charly dredged up from her archive.

This was nothing new, this idea of a sales executive needing “something to sell.” Even though the roster of Fortune 500 companies and government agencies using Cabana had grown to fifteen by this point — and the number of seats using Cabana 3.9 was nearing half a million — Charly decided to give Ric what he wanted.

“Look, Wyatt,” she said, “if he can use this prop to sell into ten businesses we haven’t thought about, I’m fine with it.”

On its face, MyCabana was a stripped-down social networking app that delivered messaging and video sharing based on the basic Cabana structure. An outside interface

designer refreshed the original demo's interface, making it look more like the current version of Cabana. Four of our San Francisco coders reengineered features so that profiles were visible in-message, information packets were stored temporarily on user devices, and message trails dissolved in timeline order after about thirty minutes, alleviating the need for Cabana to lease off-site server and storage capacity. Charly pulled in a couple favors with her Apple and Google contacts to expedite App Store and Google Play distribution of the app.

Kids found out about MyCabana through social media — I guessed it was Marco's teenaged daughters who initially spread the word at their Peninsula private school about our parent-proof note passing app — and before we could hire a product manager to scan traffic stats, we had two million users who had downloaded the app, registered, built profiles, and had invited friends to share messages, photographs, videos, live streams, and calendars over the platform.

What set MyCabana apart from the big, established players in the social network space was its encryption — the entire thing was built using Lava 8, so even passwords like “password” were unhackable — and its AI filter set, which eliminated the need for live moderators. It wasn't Facebook or Instagram and in 2017, that was a good thing.

As soon as the press got wind of MyCabana and the safe, secure features that detected and rejected nude photographs, flagged hate speech, and alerted user groups to the depression or mania of a member, more kids — with the approval of their parents — downloaded the app by the thousands. Then the millions.

“There are eleven million MyCabana users online right now!” Ric crowed one morning.

“Yeah,” I said. “And they're all under fifteen.”

“That's okay,” Ric said. “The point is to show off the clean design and potential of the platform.”

“It's a dumbed-down version of Cabana,” I said.

“A perfect demo,” he said.

Our filters were strong enough that the platform didn't need much maintenance, but we tasked paid computer science interns recruited from San Francisco State — the closest school with a CS department — with monitoring algorithmically flagged content round the clock. This little demo project of Ric's had cost Cabana about a hundred and fifty thousand dollars so far. He had yet to make his first sale.

4.

Vanessa Bellan checked her message feed in the dark. In the hours before she awoke in California, her British and Swiss colleagues had been at it, leaving threads of cover-your-ass email memoranda that serially reported, litigated, and resolved dozens of regional licensing issues.

As Ric's shallow breathing became a soft snore, Vanessa slipped from their bed, letting the violet silk satin of her bias-cut nightgown fall smoothly over her thighs. She adjusted the spaghetti straps, reached for a white spandex Lululemon jacket, and tiptoed out of the room, phone still in hand.

Three doors down the hall, she peered in on their six-year-old twin sons, still sleeping side by side in matching four-poster beds. Vanessa wriggled her nose, Trevor and William had already developed that stale, boy-specific smell. Trevor would say that their room "smelled like ass," but to Vanessa, it smelled like mildewed towels and decomposed sneakers. She left the door ajar and continued toward the curved staircase, grabbing hold of the gold- and pewter-toned Empire-style metal balustrade.

The stairs, once honey-stained mid-century oak now custom-finished Italian travertine, were cold beneath her bare feet. She stepped down to the first floor, passed through the dining room, and pushed the swinging door into the kitchen, fixing it against the wall with a magnetic doorstop. She felt for the light switch, then waited in semidarkness for the recessed lighting and the Venetian glass chandelier over the twelve-foot Kolkata marble island to slowly illuminate the room.

Vanessa didn't hate the kitchen, but she was still irritated by every single cost overrun on this phase of an extensive, two-year home remodel project. She could remember to the penny the price of each of the forty-eight French zinc cabinet knobs, the milling charges on the fourth and fifth set of bird's eye maple panels ordered for the side-by-side Sub Zero refrigerators, and the customs broker's fees on the misrouted container bearing their antique French oak flooring.

She flipped on the automated espresso maker. Anyone could buy one just like it, but not in this finish. The pearlized gray enamel that didn't match but "went with" the aniline-dyed cabinetry had been custom ordered. As had the anthracite enameled hood over the anthracite cast iron AGA stove. Each element of the kitchen was beautiful and bespoke, but taken together, the composition of the room was grossly unsatisfying. Sterile and overwrought at the same time. Like Ric's parents' Greenwich, Connecticut, house on steroids.

Vanessa put a cheerfully glazed Italian ceramic mug under the coffee maker's spigots and pressed a button. The primary colors and primitive artwork of the De Simone-signed cup clashed with the sophisticated appointments of its surroundings, but it was one of the few objects in the house that made her smile. As she waited for the steamed milk to spill over the top of her espresso, she looked at the bright red boats and yellow fish on the mug and decided she hadn't smiled enough lately.

Truth was, Vanessa was exhausted. For ten years, she had held up her end of the marriage as principal breadwinner and house manager. She had built a career and a modest portfolio of pre-IPO stock options at three start-ups before taking her intellectual property expertise to HP. Now, with a seven-figure comp package and a steadily growing retirement account, she provided security and prestige to her family.

Vanessa put her mouth on the edge of the mug and inhaled the aromatic steam. The coffee was still too hot to drink, so she just tilted a little milk foam onto her upper lip.

If she were the chief executive of the limited partnership that was the Bellan household, she thought, then Ric was its procurement officer. It was Ric who bought the cars crowding their driveway; who engaged architects and contractors to enlarge and renovate what had been a modest California ranch-style home; who acquired the cocaine,

marijuana, and other recreational substances kept under lock and key in the three-hundred-fifty-square-foot walk-in closet adjoining their master bedroom.

Where Vanessa was a stellar performer and provider with a focused mind and an unbridled ambition, Ric had leveraged prep school, college, and family connections — and acting skills that masqueraded as personality — to navigate the ever evolving and revolving tech start-up world. He landed jobs easily and cast them aside quickly with reasons for quitting that most people found believable. He'd cite shoddy technology, an IPO off track, a shake-up in the C-suite, disagreements with new management, an untenable travel schedule, or unpaid bonuses. Only Vanessa knew how many times Ric had actually been asked to resign or had been fired.

She gripped the handle of her mug and carried it back up the cold white stone stairs.

“Mommy, who makes Elijah’s pancakes?” William bulldozed a piece of banana flapjack through a pool of thick grape-colored syrup.

“Hmm?” Vanessa responded.

“Who makes pancakes at Elijah’s house?”

“Oh, Elijah’s daddy does. Or his Kallista,” she said between sips of her second robot-barista latte. She set her mug on the kitchen counter behind her and moved around the marble island to push the boys’ hand-forged iron stools closer to their plates, careful not to let them put their sticky fingers on her beige linen sheath dress or the bright green cardigan she wore over it.

“Why does he have a nanny?” Trevor asked. “Elijah’s daddy is home all the time. He doesn’t have a job.”

Vanessa watched the twins play with their breakfasts. They deconstructed and reconstructed their meals, filched bites from each other's plates, and dropped altogether too much food on the floor. It was impossible to figure out how much food either of them had eaten.

“Ben’s job is taking care of Elijah. I think Elijah’s nanny is just part-time.”

“Why does he have a nanny at all?” Trevor asked.

It was a question often debated among adults. When someone in Vanessa and Ric's circle elected to be the stay-at-home parent, but still relied on live-in childcare to manage logistics of drop-off, pick-up, meal preparation, and homework help, there were a lot of judgment calls. So, it was no surprise that the ashram-devoté husband of Ric's current boss was a curiosity to children, too. He seemed nice enough when Charly and her family came down from the city for a barbeque that past weekend. But once the conversation had veered away from yoga and fitness, Ben didn't have much to say about business or politics or books or even movies. He'd been an entrepreneur himself and hadn't been out of the workforce that long but had zero interest in Cabana. Vanessa wondered what it was about high achieving women and their under-performing husbands. Was it instinctual to pick up the slack and overachieve when a mate couldn't keep up? She tried to imagine Ric taking care of their kids, but she wasn't in the same league as Charly, financially, and knew Ric would take up more expensive hobbies and unsavory playmates given the opportunity.

With the kind of money Charly had in the bank, and was soon to be making at Cabana, maybe it was only fair that Ben kick back and enjoy life.

Vanessa decided to ignore the nanny question and wait for the winds of curiosity to change direction.

"You know, 'Kallista' is Kallista's stage name," William said. He drew a line on the marble with a purple finger. "Her real name is Lisa. I've seen her wallet cards."

"I know," Vanessa said. "It's not unusual for people to prefer names other than the one their parents gave them."

"'Ric' is Daddy's stage name," Trevor said. "His real name is Richard."

Vanessa returned to the other side of the island and faced the boys. Leaning into the bullnose counter behind her, she encircled her mug with both hands.

"'Ric' is Daddy's nickname," Vanessa said. "It's not the same thing. You can shorten Richard a lot of ways. Ric and Richard are the same name."

"Grampa calls him Richie," William said.

"Richie, Rich, Rick, Rico, Dick," Vanessa said. She held onto the final consonants for emphasis.

“Dick!” both boys sang, laughing uproariously.

She had to smile as the mirrored images bobbed before her: two lean bodies with the angular features of her side of the family and the transparent, greenish-hazel eyes of Ric’s side. Their long black lashes, now wet with tears, formed star points. Vanessa wished she could still bundle the two of them into her arms at once.

“Is Daddy going to work today?” William asked.

“Of course, he is,” Vanessa said.

“When does he get up?”

That was another good question. She was usually gone before the boys had breakfast, before Ric was even in the shower — and she was generally in the office hours before Ric needed to make an appearance in an office somewhere along the Highway 101 corridor. Sales jobs gave him a lot of leeway to report in when he wanted.

“Daddy doesn’t have to be at work till later,” she told them.

The boys worked their plates while Vanessa finished her coffee and placed the mug in the deep porcelain sink under the soaring Palladian window — another cost overrun — that faced the garden. The formal rose and hedgerow landscape was more structured than suited Vanessa’s taste or her young family’s needs. She had long imagined a pool and guesthouse behind their home, but that project had to wait until Ric hit a sizeable payout at one of his jobs. Or until he cut his personal expenses.

Her income covered the mortgage, taxes, insurance, private school tuitions, the nanny, the housekeeper, the gardeners, an annual summer trip to Nantucket, and Christmases on Kauai. But Rick had become an expensive third child with his forty-six foot sailboat, marina slips in San Francisco and Kauai, the Maserati convertible, the Range Rover SUV, the Ludicrous Mode Tesla S, two country club memberships, an endless and expanding collection of golf and ski equipment, and a sizeable wardrobe of custom-made shirts and suits that he no longer had occasion to wear.

“Are you taking us to school?” Trevor asked.

“No,” Vanessa said. “Kallista is just at the dentist. She’ll be back in time to take you. If you’re done, go brush your teeth.”

The boys slipped off their stools and ran toward the foyer. She heard them galloping up the stairs toward their bathroom, then listened for the faint rush of water through copper plumbing as they washed their hands, faces, and teeth.

Vanessa cleared the boys' breakfast dishes and sticky juice glasses. She sprayed the counter with bio-friendly, non-acidic cleaner and wiped the syrup spatter off the creamy, honed marble surface with a paper towel.

Her heels clattered across kitchen oak and foyer marble as she made her way to her study off the sunroom. There, she moved her briefcase from the floor to the center of her desk and began exhuming files, mentally running through the day's agenda. She checked her white ceramic Chanel J12 watch and calculated how long the San Mateo to San Francisco drive would take if she tacked on a school detour.

"Where's Kallista?" Ric's raspy morning voice made Vanessa jump. He stood in the doorway in his sleep uniform: a faded Red Sox T-shirt and a pair of loose-fitting, lobster-print boxers. His eyes, still puffy with sleep, appraised her with practiced insouciance. With the physique of a college rugby player, Rick was sexy enough at forty-two, but he wasn't as appealing to Vanessa as he had been ten years earlier. Still the surprise of seeing him made her body attentive. She smiled in self-recognition.

"Dentist appointment. She should be back any minute," Vanessa said.

"Don't worry, I'll take the kids."

"I've got time," she said. "I've got a status conference in the city at ten. I hadn't planned on going to the office anyway."

She resented this non-negotiation: She knew that he knew that she wouldn't take him up on his offer. He knew that she knew that he couldn't get through his shave and shower routine in less than forty minutes. It took more time for him to diffuse-dry his hair — and obscure that little bald spot — than it took her to blow-dry hers.

As he padded away from her study, his bare feet slapping travertine, Vanessa took stock of her disappointments and grievances. Something had to change, but she wasn't ready to retain counsel, file for divorce, and deal with years of bloodless diplomacy. Yet

in idle moments, she composed mental checklists: The minute she had the chance, she would donate his Hawaiian shirts and his cache of college-vintage ski equipment to the Goodwill. She would send his Maserati and the boat to auction. The garage would be cleared to make room for her BMW wagon. His office would be repurposed as a homework station for the boys. The master bedroom would be redone in coral.

She looked up. Her husband had brought her a fresh latte in another brightly glazed De Simone ceramic mug, this one covered with flowers and kites.

“Go ahead,” he said. “I’ll take the boys. I need to see a guy on Sand Hill this morning.”

“Already looking for another job?” Vanessa asked him.

“No, this one is going to pay out,” he said. “I need to prod it along a bit, but it’ll come in. Deals are currency, baby.”

Vanessa eyed him. “Charly seems set on keeping Cabana private,” she said. She’d talked to Charly about her complex royalty-share equity and succession plans and had taken the name of the attorney she used for her corporate work. “You see an opportunity for a non-linear extension as a spin-off?”

“I sure do. Charly’s just another engineer trying to run a start-up with no idea of how to monetize assets.”

“Sounds like she’s doing okay,” Vanessa said. “I watched a TED talk she did on management. They wouldn’t have her lecturing at Stanford on entrepreneurship if she wasn’t focused.”

“She has no idea how valuable MyCabana is.”

“Ah. The consumer-facing social network.”

“MyCabana should *be* the core business.”

“And your strategy is to license MyCabana and run it yourself?”

“Pretty much,” he said.

“And she’ll just hand it over to you?”

“She will,” Ric said.

5.

“Welcome to Chaos 2017!” Karla Ito shouted above thumping dance music and the tumult of forty-five hundred sitting, standing, and floor-sprawling attendees. Amplified by the Moscone Center sound system, her reedy voice stunned the crowd into a collective grimace before they erupted into applause, whistles, and cheers.

Karla adjusted the mic cantilevered over her left cheek and panned the room, swiveling her neck one-hundred-eighty degrees, while shading her thick black-rimmed eyeglasses from spotlight glare with both hands.

Down in front, plopped on felted carpet tiles, were members of local and national business press, their legs, bags, laptops, and camera equipment arrayed about them. Their wireless microphones and smartphones, set to record, fringed the edge of the stage.

Calculating registration revenue for this year’s Chaos had been Karla’s calming mantra for the last three months. Now, thanks to her exclusive keynote “get,” the conference was completely sold out. There were more than four-thousand paid attendees in the Esplanade Ballroom — double last year’s attendance — at a thousand dollars a head. Sixteen sponsors had covered all site and production expenses, including the security detail, which sported IDLock logowear this morning and would change to SecureID uniforms this afternoon.

Beyond the ballroom, another twenty thousand viewers live-streamed Chaos’s keynote session. Most of these people were new premium-rate subscribers to Karla’s *Chaos* newsletter, her daily round-up of rumors and reporting from the heart of the tech world. She knew few of these new subs would hang on as regular readers, but what counted was their up-front money. Karla was confident this morning that she could keep *Chaos* going — and independent — through another couple of years thanks to the financial triumph of this one conference.

“Good morning,” she said. “I’m Karla Ito, chief content officer at *Chaos*, and this standing-room-only event is the beginning of a kick-ass three days we’ve planned for you. We’ll be ideating, sharing, and hearing from emerging leaders who are reshaping and reenergizing our industry.”

Yes, she considered herself a part of the technology industry, even though she still had to call Apple customer support to get through the basics of rebuilding her desktop every time malware nested in her libraries or whenever her shared calendars crashed or stopped linking with her partner's devices. She knew nothing about computer science, other than what she'd learned about HTML on the copydesk at the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, back in the nineties. Even her personal WordPress site had been built by a 99Designs.com-contracted freelancer.

But Karla knew she had influence. She talked to people all up and down the chains of command at the world's most-watched tech firms. She had an eye on the money stream. She could smell an IPO or merger. She traded favors, introduced people, and made things happen.

Karla raised the clear acrylic clipboard she held in her left hand and began extemporizing from a page of handwritten notes decoupage with neon-colored Post-its.

"First, a little housekeeping, to recognize our generous sponsors and orient you to some of the fun just outside this room." She pushed her black glasses up her nose and ran her hand through her signature blue-black bowl-cut hair.

"BigFish is sponsoring the coffee bar on the terrace between sessions this morning. And we have Uber Eats bringing in lunch for all gold-level attendees. That lunch will be in the marquee over at Yerba Buena gardens. Right straight over the bridge from here." She pointed to the back of the room with four fingers, like a flight attendant. "There's a map is on the back of your badge. Oh, and the *Chaos* After-Dark CBD lounge opens at six in a location we'll be texting to the mobile number on your badge. Make sure that number is correct. If you need to have it updated, we'll need to see your phone and your ID at the registration desk downstairs."

While people pawed at their lanyards and broke into short conversations, Karla unclipped the page she'd just read, balled it up with her right hand, and rolled it like a bowling ball toward stage left, where Charly Carlin stood, cued up for her intro as if standing at the edge of a diving board, toes aligned just inside the shadow demarcating backstage.

Charly's short, straight bob was asymmetrically layered and tucked behind her left ear. She had well-shaped eyebrows and purposefully applied eyeliner. Her white cropped workman-style jacket, the tailored ankle-length black pants, and that pair of butter yellow sling-back pumps, made Karla think of all the other fashion-forward female executives she'd interviewed on stages like this one. Professional stylists were part of the team that developed a woman's casually formal — or formally casual — image, gave her confidence, and helped her establish authority in the spotlight.

Karla saluted Charly with two fingers and reappraised the white jacket, the cropped pants, the chunky-heel shoes. Could be Everlane, she thought. Could be something Charly scouted online herself or picked up from the Valencia Street store. Karla cocked her head back toward her audience, her mouth a zig-zag.

You never knew with these rich tech execs. Handbags, she thought, those were always the giveaway. Hermès, Balenciaga, Valentino, Chloé — those marques were clear evidence of a stylist's hand.

Karla turned back once more and looked for leather. A bright orange tote bag was hanging from the elbow of the Chaos green room coordinator. She shook out her hair. Banana Republic, she decided.

"But you didn't come for the catered lunch — or the after-school cannabis tasting," Karla said into her mic as audience chatter grew louder.

She crossed her arms around her clipboard, bowed her head and waited for quiet, letting a curtain of hair hang over the brow of her eyeglass frames while she evaluated her own outfit.

Karla had plucked her clothes from a warm dryer that morning. A long-sleeve black crew neck T-shirt and pair of Old Navy camouflage-print chino cargo pants were the obvious choice because she knew they'd fit. Unstyled, unpressed, but unstained, Karla believed a certain level of dishevelment — and a pair of lime green Crocs — lent an air of authority and authenticity to her credentials as a tech journalist.

She looked up and showed the audience her teeth and gums without letting her eyes change expression.

“Where was I?”

The audience laughed.

“Oh, yeah. It’s time for our special keynote convo with Charles! Bancroft! Carlin!” Karla’s voice escalated into a shout, making her sound more like a corporate cheerleader than a trade newsletter reporter. She raised a traffic signal hand toward the wing of the stage to keep Charly from coming out.

“Chaos’s one-on-one interview is a first. Yes, you’ve seen the TED talk and have read short profiles about Cabana and Cabana’s president.” Karla panned the room. “How old-school is that, she calls herself ‘president’?”

“You’ve read statements issued by Cabana on her behalf, but you have never actually seen an interview with Charly Carlin. Anywhere. Before today. Not in the *Journal*, not in the *Times*, or *Fortune*, or *Forbes*, or even my own *Chaos* newsletter.

“I’ve worked on getting this interview for you for three years, since word first got out about Cabana and the development Charly Carlin was quietly funding. On her own. With her own money.”

There was a murmur in the audience. Someone guffawed mid-ballroom. Karla could just make out a pod of bobbing heads.

“Now 33, she’s been on Sand Hill Road radar for more than twenty years.

“I know, hard to believe, right?” Karla looked directly at the camera centered in the middle of the room before referring back the clipboard tucked into her left elbow.

“Charly was born and raised on the Big Island of Hawaii. She attended the prestigious Hawaii Academy Prep and was a swim and surf champion there before graduating at fifteen. Her other extracurriculars are what brings her here today. She won two Intel science awards before she went to college: one for a working model of a tidal-powered desalination plant; the other for Lava, her take on JavaScript, which was the forerunner to Hula, Cabana’s encryption backbone.

“Yes, instead of watching *Gossip Girl* on cable or sitting up all night in the dark playing EverQuest, Charly spent her early teen years building software to help her dad manage the family’s shipping company. Her after-school project became Bantrac, the

logistics software now used by FedEx, Amazon, leading manufacturers, distributors, retailers, and shipping companies worldwide. Bancroft Lines spun off Bantrac, then took it public in 2004 — when Charly was nineteen. Oracle acquired Bantrac four years ago for four point six billion dollars.”

The audience quieted. Real money had that effect. Now all eyes trained on Karla. She pushed her glasses up again.

“Charly did go to MIT. Shocker? But she didn’t take the CS route, like you’d think. Instead, she took undergraduate degrees in structural engineering and history — and she lectured on language development on the side.

“Now we all feel like losers, right?”

Karla watched heads weave from side to side. Another murmur ran through the audience and a chorus of chuckles surged into laughter from the back of the room.

“Since college, Charly has developed a secure payment software platform, which she sold to Wells Fargo about ten years ago. According to her, she’s been tinkering on secure communications for about eight years. Now, of course, she’s running Cabana, a locally-served, Slack-like communication suite.

“Like you, I’ve wondered for years what makes Charly so productive – and why everything she touches goes platinum. This morning, we have an opportunity to find out directly from her, where her ideas come from, what her process is – and if she’s hiring.

“So now, ladies and gentlemen, friends and family, boys and girls.” Karla’s overdue inhalation was audible over the sound system. “Let’s meet Charly Carlin!”

House music and applause exploded as Charly emerged from behind the black nylon satin curtain. She stopped after a few steps and smiled, waved with both hands over her head, then walked toward Karla and took her hand. Karla thought she looked like a pre-Yahoo Marissa Mayer, she had that same freshness, but with red hair, better cheekbones, and at least two more inches in height. Charly towered over five-foot-nothing Karla.

“You good?” Karla asked.

“Ready when you are,” Charly said.

The women took their seats, side by side, in two basket-like silver metal chairs mid-stage. They adjusted their legs and body weight, bouncing in the hammock-like chairs as applause diminished.

“Thank you for joining us, Charly. We have so much to talk about, I almost don’t know where to start,” Karla said. “But let’s start with how we met. I actually had some help booking you for this session.”

“Your daughter, Pomona, told me you were desperate to find a keynote,” Charly said. Laughter rippled through the audience.

“Kids,” Karla said. “I never told her I was desperate, but I must have asked her a hundred times to mention it.”

“To put this in perspective, you have to know that Pomona, this insistent character, is seven,” Charly said facing the audience.

Women in the front row smiled.

“Our kids have been classmates since kindergarten,” Karla said. “You and I met at a fundraiser last fall.”

“You donated that great silent auction prize, an after-hours slumber party at the Apple store downtown. How’d you get that?”

“I have friends,” Karla said.

A smattering of laughter and clapping broke out in the first few rows.

“You had the high bid for the slumber party and Elijah made that his birthday bash, right?”

“His dad did the bidding, but yeah. We had ten seven-year-olds in VR headsets playing Twister. All night. We had to herd them over to Sears for pancakes before the store opened in the morning. They were all zombies.”

“That’s a successful event for seven-year-olds.”

“It was, but seven-year-olds think hunting snails in the backyard is cool.”

Karla laughed.

“Is Elijah doing any coding yet?”

“No. But he’s a field tester and product reviewer.”

“Really?”

“Really. We have something in the works he's carrying around with him now. It's fun for him. It makes him feel connected to Cabana.”

“Is that product —” Karla described the parallel sides of a rectangle with her hands. She made it smaller and smaller till it was phone-sized.

“I'm sure your source is under non-disclosure and in a lot of legal trouble if you say any more,” Charly said. It was a mock warning, but Karla demurred.

“There are no secrets in the Valley, Charly,” Karla said. “In fact, word is on the street that you're grooming Elijah to run the company, right?” Karla asked.

“Not quite yet. It's something I hope he considers it in about twenty years.”

“Which means you're serious about keeping Cabana private, not negotiating a multi-billion dollar exit in a few years.”

“Yes,” Charly said, nodding.

“A lot of people here think that's crazy and wonder why you self-financed – and are still probably pouring millions of dollars into this company. Wasn't venture capital money available to you when you started Cabana?” Karla asked. “Why would you break the sacred rule about always using other people's money?”

Charly continued to nod.

“There is plenty of money available. Crazy money,” she said. “Cabana has been a target of Sand Hill Road VCs from the beginning, but I never liked their terms. I wanted to take my time with R&D, build a team I could trust, test concepts, and not wake up every morning owing a group of investors an exponential return on capital.

“Cabana *is* a great investment. I just happen to be the investor.”

“And how much have you invested, Charly?” Karla asked. “My back-of-the-envelope says you have twenty employees at median Silicon Valley salaries, with San Francisco rent and overhead. Your burn rate has to be somewhere between five hundred and eight hundred thousand dollars a month. My guess is you've invested tens of millions of your own money.”

Charly laughed.

“Is my estimate inaccurate? Or are you laughing because, for you, tens of millions isn’t a lot of money?” Karla asked.

“Cabana is privately held, so our size, our expenses, our revenue projections are not shared publicly.”

“Why wouldn’t you take VC money right now to scale faster and anchor your market advantage?”

“For the same reasons I didn’t take outside money at the outset,” Charly said. “First, I value autonomy. If I had two or three — or five or six — equity players involved in Cabana by this point, I’d have to vet every decision with a board not entirely of my choosing. I’d have to weigh the tradeoff between quick revenue and quick scale every quarter. And I might be forced to take Cabana in a direction I don’t like or can’t support. I’ve been a contractor, off and on for the last fifteen years. I know how soul crushing it can be to compromise personal standards.

“By avoiding outside financial entanglements, I can hire whomever I want. I can partner with other companies without running into investor conflicts. I can scale at a pace that doesn’t overtax my team. And I’m able to build a sustainable workplace.”

“What do you mean by ‘sustainable workplace’?” Karla asked.

“By sustainable, I mean secure,” Charly explained. “Jobs and careers are secure. And clients are secure because the threat of key executive turnover or reduction in service that happen in an acquisition or IPO isn’t there. I’m committed to Cabana for the long haul.”

“But you are the only one getting rich if there’s no IPO.”

“That’s not the point of most businesses,” Charly said. “Historically, men and women have gone into business as a means to support themselves and their families. Small businesses and big businesses have always had a place in the fabric of a community. And family or employee succession has been the most common exit strategy.”

Karla nodded.

“My brother is president of Bancroft Lines. It’s the company our grandfather started, that our father took over when we were children. It’s successful. It has employed a lot of people in Hilo, Honolulu, and Long Beach for generations.

“We definitely made enough money on Bantrac, we didn’t have to keep Bancroft going to support our immediate family. But that relatively small company provides livelihoods for employees, contractors, and other local businesses.

“Succession is not a simple or passive strategy. It’s an ethical alternative that provides economic continuity.”

Applause punctuated the end of her statement.

“This is what Silicon Valley calls a ‘lifestyle’ company,” Karla said.

“I don’t think the Bechtel family ever thought they were limiting their scope by remaining private. Try to think of Cabana as the Bechtel of organizational computing tools. None of the large-scale construction companies in this country — or abroad — are publicly traded. It’s not because they couldn’t raise plenty of capital and bask in exponential valuations, it’s because they don’t need to. They don’t need public funding or the validation of shareholders to maintain and grow their footprint or their prestige.”

“They also skip the expenses that comes with being a public entity,” Karla said. “But what about Cabana employees. Do you think you can retain highly skilled engineers, for example, without offering equity?”

“In an at-will marketplace, where people are at constant risk of losing their jobs — either because funding doesn’t come through or because management is trying to shed complexity in preparation for a sale — stability is the game-changer. Good mortgage-paying wages and solid benefits are a reasonable tradeoff for fantasy equity.

“A number of Cabana employees have exercised options or sat out holding periods with vested stock, then lost money because they either invested their own cash or left wages on the table to take a deeper equity cut. It’s always a gamble. In the Bay Area, our cost of living makes salary more important than pre-IPO equity. My engineers are paid well, get good benefits, and, as we build the company, they’ll share a profit pool.”

Sustained applause lapped the edge of the stage.

“So, you pay a lot.”

Charly smiled.

“Cabana pays fairly. And we have six weeks of PTO on top of annual holiday closures.”

Karla nodded. “I’m going to have to renegotiate my contract. Six weeks sounds about right.”

“I agree. You’ve had a career that’s required you to change jobs to get to where you are today, right? And you’ve given up seniority at every step. If you’re only getting ten days of vacation, you should feel undervalued.”

“But there are companies with unlimited vacation time,” Karla said.

“‘Unlimited’ has its limits,” Charly said. “You should have a panel on this.”

“You’re brimming with ideas, aren’t you?” Karla asked. “So, what else do your employees get?”

“They get medical, dental, vision, 401K matching, and profit sharing, which should kick in next year,” Charly said holding up crossed fingers.

“What about food?”

“The most important stuff, right? We’re a little different on the food front. We don’t have a very big kitchen, so we use four or five cafes and diners near our office as cafeterias. People charge breakfast, lunch, dinner, all-day coffee, Rice Krispy’s Treats, vegan burritos — whatever — and Cabana pays for it. With a small staff like ours, it’s the only way to cater to varied tastes and appetites. This policy gives us an opportunity to know our neighbors and support their businesses, too.”

“I know your office is in the city,” Karla said. “But I also know you don’t like to publicize the location.”

“No,” Charly said. “It’s easy enough to find us, but for the moment, we like being slightly under the radar.”

“Cabana is so ‘under the radar’ it doesn’t have a web site.”

“Do we need one?” Charly asked.

Karla realized she was speechless. Every corporation, every small business, every therapist, and every dog walker had a web site or Facebook page of some kind.

“We’d publish what, exactly? Outdated brochureware?” she continued. “Post staff biographies to make it easier for recruiters to identify and poach staff? Post video demos to give our competitors a clearer look at what we do? List our clients, most of which cannot legally endorse any product? Put up a mission statement that either overstates or understates what we do?”

“You’ll have to do another TED talk on that specific subject,” Karla said.

“Marketers are educated by their results,” Charly said. “Building a corporate website would distract us from the work we do for our clients.”

Karla looked down at her clipboard.

“So, I hear you’re a swimmer,” she said. “That’s been the word on the grapevine for some years, now.”

The audience responded with laughter and a smattering of catcalls.

“Good segue,” Charly said, laughing. “Was I getting too cranky? I am a distance swimmer. I train every few years for a long open-water swim.”

“You’ve done the English Channel?” Karla asked. “Is it swam or swum?”

“Yes, I swam the Channel while I was still at MIT. Since I’ve lived in California, I’ve swum the Channel Islands down south and the Farallones to Muir Beach here.”

“Those are what, twenty miles or so?”

“The Farallones course is about twenty-seven if you don’t get pulled too far off course.”

“How long does that take?”

“Seventeen, eighteen hours.”

“What do you think about when you’re out there?” Karla asked. “Beside sharks – the swimming kind or the two-legged kind.”

Women’s laughter wafted up. Charly smiled and turned to acknowledge the support.

“I work out coding and interface problems while I swim. Some of the British Romantic poets like Keats and Shelley composed on walks. I find that the rhythm of swimming — or the monotony of it — frees me to think through and think ahead of whatever is currently in production.”

“So, Cabana is an idea that came to you whole, while you were out splashing around?”

“Almost.” Charly smiled. “I’d been working on encryption for a long time and had started to think about the vulnerability of unsecured networks. I developed Cabana as a secure-server product after I talked to a handful of corporate and government organizations.”

“So, you took a step back. Away from the cloud. That’s counterintuitive.”

“I like to think I made a decisive commitment to what works. The solution to the problem I was hearing more and more about already existed.”

“You’re talking about hacking?”

“Hacking, loss of data due to user or vendor error, remote system failures, power grid erosion.”

“When you add all that up, you make it sound like the right strategy.”

“Thanks. Like every engineer, I think my way is best.”

“So, what does the Cabana platform give your clients that they can’t get anywhere else?”

“Control. They have complete administrative control over their communications system. They switch features and users on and off, as required. Upgrades are screened and deployed by them, when they’re ready to deploy. Every installation has dedicated in-country technical support, available live twelve hours a day now, but we’re taking that to twenty-four/seven in the next few months.”

“Maybe that’s not so different from what other enterprise providers offer.”

“Maybe not, but we’ve created demand for this platform. We’re growing faster than expected and that tells me we’re doing something different.”

“And you have no one to answer to on that but yourself. You don’t have the investment community pushing for scale.”

“No. Cabana scales as contracts clear.”

“And what about MyCabana,” Karla asked.

Charly uncrossed her legs and shifted position, making her chair bounce again.

“MyCabana is a consumer-facing product that’s out there as a proof-of-concept demo,” she said. “Our sales lead wanted it, so we built it. It’s also a lab for some development that will eventually roll into the enterprise version of Cabana.”

“MyCabana is on the App Store?” Karla asked.

“I don’t know if it is right now,” Charly said. “We are trying to calibrate usage. It’s not meant to be a full-blown social network. Competing with Facebook is not the goal.”

“But it looks like you might have something that could replace Facebook if you’ve thought through privacy and security issues.”

“It’s outside Cabana’s wheelhouse for now.” Charly shook her head. “But we do own the IP, so maybe it’s something to revisit in a few years.”

“Or sell.”

Charly hesitated.

“We are concentrating on the enterprise opportunity,” she said. “That’s where the revenue is.”

“So serious! Aren’t you having fun running this company?” Karla asked.

“Of course. Life’s too short not to have fun. I’m grateful to have a team that works hard and works well together. We are in a sweet spot right now.”

“Well, good luck with that, Charly. It’s a rare moment.” Karla looked over Charly’s shoulder to a producer who was pointing at her wrist. “I’m getting a signal that we’re just about out of time, but I did want to take a quick look at audience questions texted in during this interview. Let’s throw them up on the screen.”

Karla and Charly turned toward the video screen at the back of the stage.

“Jesus,” Karla said as text scrolled up the screen.

“Surprised?” Charly asked. As she read through the profane comments and intimate questions, the big screen went black.

“Well, looks like the consensus here isn’t very flattering. A number of people in this room want to know why you’re such a cunt,” Karla said as a burst of hooting came from the back of the audience. “Or do you want to know why I am such a cunt? Why do you guys think this is so cool?”

Charly shook her head. Her smile didn't fade.

"What's funny is that everyone here knows how easy it is to trace these 'anonymous' messages on your website. You've got all the attendee log-in data and can pinpoint who is physically here in this room through reg logs."

"There are too many trolls," Karla said. "And they're not worth the effort."

"No, you're right. Unfortunately, we have to work with them every day," Charly said.

"Thanks for being with us today, Charly," Karla said.

"Thank you." Charly stood up and took Karla's hand, pulling her up. They turned toward the wave of applause for a few moments, then walked offstage together.

6.

Charly was out of uniform.

She was wearing a black and white outfit, but from top to bottom everything was different. The jacket was white, not black. It was short, collarless, and open so you could see a swimsuit-cut white tank top and her pearls underneath. Her pant legs were cut above the ankle and she had daffodil-colored shoes on. Heels.

Her look wasn't unusual, but it was different for her. As was the make-up that hid her freckles, emphasized her eyes, and tinted her lips.

I never thought of Charly as plain. Or pretty. But she was original. Never particular about her appearance, it seemed, she arrived fresh, unembellished, every morning. Sometimes, if she'd clocked an early workout at the U.S.F. pool, her hair might still be wet. On days when she'd break for an hour to surf Ocean Beach, she'd return to the office, shower off the sea gunk, dress herself, and reappear as crisp as she had appeared that morning.

Her unvarnished style made her seem girl-like at thirty-three. She definitely wasn't a classic beauty, but today, pulled together for that on-stage interview with Karla Ito at Chaos, with the red hair brushed straight, the blue eyes framed in black, the downtown outfit, the pearls, and the big orange purse, Charly looked powerful.

As she let herself into the office that morning, everyone stood and clapped. We had streamed the interview and had gathered in groups around a couple of desks. The eight of us, heads bobbing as she repeated things we already knew about Cabana, raptly attentive as she spilled personal details we didn't know.

"Thanks," she said. "I'm glad that's over."

"It's not over at all," said Marco. "Your picture's up on Bloomberg, CNN, and SFGate."

"And the Daily Mail," Kimberlee Victor, the new hire, said. "InStyle picked up a release from Everlane IDing your jacket."

Charly rolled her eyes in my direction.

"Couldn't you have said more about MyCabana?" Ric asked. "It was a major opportunity to get press on this."

Charly turned toward Ric; the broad smile she'd had for our ovation evaporated.

"MyCabana is purely a demo product," she said. "I'd be happier if we had ten million fewer users."

"It's not a demo product, it's a real consumer product," Ric said. "It could be bigger than Cabana."

Charly shook her head.

"Bigger in terms of user base, bigger in terms of resource drain," she said. "Building a viable consumer social media platform is an expensive, long-term proposition. Do you see yourself selling advertising, Ric? Creating native content? We don't need to compete in that market, and we can't afford the distraction."

"We could get VC money overnight."

"Think about that," she said. "Did you hear me this morning at Chaos?"

"I have a revenue plan," he said.

"That supports product scale?" she asked. "Send it to me. And while you're at it, download copies of the last couple of Facebook annual reports to find out what the revenue-to-expense ratio is there."

I'd stopped wearing my headset during office hours so I wouldn't miss conversations like these between Charly and Ric. But lately, I also found myself paying closer attention to the budding bromance between Ric and the two senior engineers, Marco Murphy and Jeremy Shopar. It was odd that the three of them had become office buds, I hadn't pegged Marco or Jeremy as joiners. I rarely saw them talk to each other.

Ric initially took his technical questions to whomever was available, then narrowed his attention on Marco and Jeremy. He'd have one of them dial into his sales calls to live demo Cabana and would ask their opinion on companies he was targeting for Cabana sales.

I understood the affinity Ric had for guys close to his own age — and the respect he had for a couple of engineers who built software for NASA — but, the golf swings and end-zone dances were annoying. And recently, they'd started going to lunch together outside the neighborhood. I knew, because after the second time they went out together, I ran the bases between Mimosa and Outerlands and the few places in between that carried our accounts.

None of the rest of us fraternized at Cabana. That was a major perk at this company: We didn't have to drink together till we divulged embarrassing blackmail-worthy personal details or play paintball in the desert or craft aspirational treasure map posters for the walls behind our desks. We came, we worked, we went home when we wanted to. We cashed decent checks. We took long vacations. We took turns using Charly's house on the Kona coast and a company ski chalet rental at Tahoe. It was low key. And it was a place where I felt I belonged, till Ric arrived and started cherry-picking his own team.

While Ric played Chief Revenue Officer, promising to bring in fifteen or twenty prospects he'd been cultivating, Charly quietly closed fifteen installations on her own in the same six-month period. We were up to nearly a million seats with probably another two-hundred thousand in the installation queue.

"It's a long-lead sale," Charly would tell me whenever I'd ask about Ric's progress. "He's doing fine."

But I wasn't impressed. I had to keep an eye on him.

That morning of her keynote at Chaos, Charly spent about an hour in the office before she left for lunch. She'd only blocked a few hours on her calendar, so she'd be back.

While the Cabana engineering team drifted out to lunch, that new girl, Kimberlee Victor, a recent USC communications grad, was dealing with the barrage of press calls that had been hitting the Cabana landline all morning.

Kimberlee was Ric's hire, and so far, his only direct report. In her first week, she had converted a Keynote presentation to PowerPoint, had made a dozen coffee runs, and had ordered customized samples of insulated Cabana-logo mugs, quilted Cabana-logo shooting vests, and burlled maple Cabana-logo humidors. She was a light-weight, entry-level hire who seemed extraneous to Ric's assignment.

"No, Charly's not in the office right now. Can you put your questions in writing," she'd say, dropping the T in writing in a way that made my brain hurt. "Email them to me at Kimberlee-at-cabana-dot-com?"

She'd always pause a moment, then tell the caller that there were two Es in Kimberlee, even though there were three.

"Would you like to talk to Ric Bellan?" she'd ask as the party disconnected. I could tell that was the case by the way she'd cut one or two syllables off Ric's name before fitting the handset back into its cradle.

Kimberlee kept a list of reporters' names, numbers, and email addresses on a lined yellow pad, which Ric would peek at every twenty minutes or so. He'd lean over her shoulder and touch each new entry on her list. About every half hour, she'd send a round-up message to Charly's email, which I'd see crossing the top of Charly's left-hand monitor. Charly would almost immediately shoot back a reply, cc'ing herself, turning down all interview requests and Kimberlee would jump into action, calling each and every press person to tell them that "Ms. Carlin is unavailable."

I spent that afternoon checking the filter settings on MyCabana, sifting through Cabana 4.0 code, and lining up travel for my next few business trips.

“Anyone you want me to see while I’m in D.C. at the end of the month?” I asked Ric as we walked back from the Mimosa with our three o’clock last-call coffee orders.

“Are you asking me what I have in the funnel in the D.C. area?” he asked.

“No. I’m telling you I’ll be there in a couple of weeks and I can make time to do some follow-up for you. Do a demo. Put another face on Cabana. I’m not the one getting commission here, I just want to get the most out of the airline ticket.”

“Thanks for the offer, Wyatt,” he said. “I’ve got it covered.”

Charly returned a little after three in jeans, white button-down, the pearls, and a grey San Francisco State sweatshirt one of the MyCabana content moderators had brought her. She also wore an immaculate pair of white Stan Smith Adidas. I remember how clean they were because Elijah, who was with her that afternoon, was wearing a totally scuffed, dirty gray pair of the same shoes. He’d tagged his with marking pen drawings of rockets and fish and planetary objects. He carried a rectangular metal box under his arm that looked like a Scottish shortbread container.

Until Kimberlee arrived, her desk had been Elijah’s. Now his Cabana mug full colored pencils and highlighters sat at the far end of Charly’s desk.

Charly reached into the file cabinet under her desk for an orange-covered Rhodia dot pad, while Elijah walked around the back of all the other desks in the horseshoe, saying hello to each person he knew.

“Hi Ric,” he said to Ric.

“Hey, big guy,” Ric said. “Trevor and William were talking about you the other morning.”

“Can they come up to play this weekend?” Elijah asked.

“Maybe not this weekend,” Ric said, “but soon. They really had fun with you.”

“Me, too,” Elijah said. “Can I use your computer while you’re out?”

“No,” his mother said. “That’s personal. You can sort your buttons or draw while I finish up a few things.”

Ric grabbed his sport coat off the back of his chair and made his way toward Irving Street, giving a little index-finger pistol salute to Jeremy and Marco as he left.

“What’s your name?” he asked Kimberlee.

“Kimberlee,” she said. “Your mother must have looked like you when she was li’le.”

Kimberlee needed to get a job at Olive Gar’en.

I zoned out for a while to update the shared task queue, a digital Post-it board that was Cabana’s interoffice to-do list.

“Want to see what I’m doing?” Elijah hovered at my elbow when I looked up from my monitors. He’d transferred his drawing materials and that flat metal box from his mother’s desk to the edge of mine.

“Sure,” I said. “What are you making?”

There were piles of small white mother-of-pearl buttons on the edge of Charly’s desk, some stacked like hand-hewn coins a few inches from where her workspace ended and mine began. “First I’m sorting. I do that every time. Some of them have two holes, some of them have four.”

“Then what do you do with them?” I asked.

“I put them on things.”

“With glue? You make pictures or necklaces?”

“No. Not yet,” the boy said.

Elijah bent forward over the buttons, moving them with his index finger from one pile to another, making rows of them, flipping each one pearl-side up, dark side down.

“They’re only shiny on one side,” Elijah said. “But I like the side that looks like a fossil or a piece of petrified wood, too. Want one?”

“Sure,” I said. I rolled my chair closer to Elijah and held out my hand.

“Which one do you want?”

The buttons were all different, hand-hewn. Some had a bluish pearlescent cast, some tinged with pink. A few were dulled and cracked from years of the harsh detergents and the rough handling of commercial laundries.

I picked up a few four-hole buttons that had raised edges like dinner plates and jangled them together in my palm.

"I'll take these," I said and rolled backward toward my computer. The buttons fit in the space above the function keys of my keyboard. I pushed them around like abacus beads.

"That's not how it works," he said.

Elijah had leaned back in his mother's big ergonomic chair so that his toes dangled a few inches from the floor. He looked at the buttons on my keyboard, then at me, his blue eyes wide.

"Okay. So, how does it work? What do I do with them?" I waited for Elijah to determine the next move in this shell game of his.

Elijah opened the lid of the red, white, and blue Union Jack-imprinted tea caddy that held even more buttons and took out a spool of bright red silk thread. He sluiced his stubby fingers through his treasure until he found a piece of postage-stamp size purple felt that held a couple of fine silver-toned needles. He carefully withdrew a needle from the felt and placed it between his lips, where he held it tightly while he unfurled a length of silk that he clipped with small bird-shaped, gold-plated scissors. Elijah held the needle close to his face, his eyes nearly crossed, as he threaded it. As he pulled the red silk through the slim eye, he took a deep breath and exhaled hard.

"Do you want those on your shirt or on your pants?" Elijah asked.

I looked down at my faded, threadbare Weezer T-shirt and my loose black jeans.

"How about this shirt?" I grabbed the semaphore-yellow chamois shirt off the back of my chair. "Do you tag the sleeves or what?"

"You'll see."

I rolled back to my desk again, leaving Elijah to his handiwork. The boy hunched over the shirt with his needle and thread, expressing his exasperation with short cartoon-character exclamations as he pricked his fingers or knotted the thread or found that he had stitched through his work to his own clothing.

Forty minutes later, Elijah stood beside me with the yellow shirt in his hands.

"Here," he said.

“Let’s see, Elijah.” I held the shirt up by the shoulders, but there was no discernable alteration to its front. Then I turned it around and there, along the yoke of the shirt were five mother-of-pearl buttons, stitched on with even red cross-stitches.

“Thank you, Elijah,” I said. “This looks great.”

“Will you wear it?”

“Course I will. I wear this shirt almost every day.”

“You wear that shirt every day,” Charly chimed in as she passed behind the two of us.

“Where did you get all those buttons?”

“They were Gramma Bancroft’s. She gave me the box with all her buttons in it and I sorted out these. They’re made from shells.”

“I know. They are – or used to be – handmade.”

“Mom got me some more of them on eBay.”

I laughed.

“You can never have too many of these,” I said. “You can put one on my pant leg, if you want. But I don’t want you to stick me with the needle.”

I kicked my left foot out of its sandal and landed it on my desk.

“Your foot smells,” Elijah said, wrinkling his nose.

“Okay, so no button on my pants.”

“No, I’ll do it. But I’ll have to hold my breath.”

“You are a beast!” I said.

I reached for Elijah and tickled him under the arms as I pulled him into my chest.

“Owwwww!” Elijah shrieked as I made contact. Everyone looked up from their monitors and craned toward the cry, displacing headphones, removing half-glasses, rolling back, ready to act.

I dropped my hands and Elijah cocooned himself in his own arms. Tears coursed down his face as he panted for breath. He inhaled, choked, and shuddered.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think I...,” I didn’t know what happened.

Charly crouched beside her son. She put her arms around his shoulders and drew his head into her neck. She put her cheek against his ear.

“Elijah, is it that same place that hurts?” she asked.

“Uh huh,” he said through tears.

I stepped away from them. I’d picked Elijah up to put him on my shoulders not that long ago. Maybe a week ago. Physical play between us was natural. Not rough. Not creepy.

But maybe Elijah was too big, getting too old, for this kind of familiarity.

“I’m sorry,” I said again.

“It’s not your fault,” Charly looked into my eyes, then through them, like she was trying to calculate the solution of a non-linear equation. “There’s something going on with Elijah. I think he might have broken a rib or something. He’s got an appointment with his pediatrician in a few days, so we’ll figure it out.”

She turned back to Elijah. “It’s tender, isn’t it?” She stood and cradled her son’s head against her belly as she stood.

Elijah nodded as tears splashed from his chin down the front of his T-shirt.

“I’m ready to go,” she said. “You can leave your buttons here for Wyatt to sort tonight.”

“No, I’ll pick them up,” Elijah said, wiping tears and snot off his reddened face with the back of his hand.

The boy scooped the buttons into the tin box and returned his needle to its place on the felt rectangle.

Elijah eased his left arm into his jacket, then thrust the right in quickly.

“Bye, Wyatt,” he said.

“Bye, Elijah. Sorry I hurt you,” I said and made my mouth into an upside-down U.

“I’m okay,” Elijah said. He managed a tight-lipped smile before he followed his mother out the office door.

7.

Wyatt packed his laptop and four iPhone 3 refurbis into his reflective vinyl messenger bag. He dug a few of his business cards out of his file cabinet and stood to button the placket and cuffs of the yellow shirt he wore over a faded anthracite AC/DC T-shirt.

The office, empty at a little after six, was the way he liked it. Quiet, calm, and ordered. Cabana's engineers were a fastidious bunch. They adhered to the paper-free desk imperative, each using a second monitor for reference when they were coding to spec. Wyatt surveyed the horseshoe arrangement of melamine desktops and rolling file cabinets.

He took a few steps to Charly's desk and drove her wireless mouse a few inches to wake her monitors. The two screens came to life with updated threads of mirrored email messages. In the right-hand corner of her left-hand screen was something he hadn't noticed that afternoon: A small window running livestream webcam video. He enlarged the screen and clicked off the mute button.

"You'll feel better in the morning." Charly's back was to the camera as she perched on the side of a twin-size bed. Her left arm caressed a small form under a blue and white maze-print Marimekko duvet cover. Wyatt couldn't see Elijah's face, but could hear the child's shuddering whimper.

Ben moved back and forth in the foreground of the video feed, ferrying clothes and books from one unseen side of the room to the other.

"You have to take it easy while that rib heels," Ben said. "No climbing, no scooters, no dancing, no yoga."

Wyatt scanned the screen. The camera angle made the room look trapezoidal, the visible corners acute with a porthole-shaped window at the apex of a dormer alcove. The walls were a primary blue, the upholstered headboard covered in a bright Marimekko print featuring multi-colored cars on a white background.

Elijah was talking, but Wyatt couldn't make out what he was saying. His father stopped at the foot of the bed, his back obliterating everything in camera range. "Life is Good," the T-shirt motto printed between Ben's shoulder blades, remained static for a few long seconds.

“I might swim early,” Charly was saying. “I can swim early and be here when you wake up.” Wyatt watched as Ben moved toward the head of the bed and Charly leaned over the boy, then stood. She reached for the light and the picture on the computer screen went to X-ray vision black and white as Ben bent down to kiss his son.

Charly turned and looked directly into the camera lens, an infrared specter.

“Oh, I must have left my computer on,” she said.

Wyatt felt his ears and jawline tingle, even though he knew she couldn’t know he was watching her.

She reached toward the camera, her hand twice as large as her face as she batted toward the switch.

“No,” Elijah said. “Leave it on. I’ll spy on Cabana tomorrow while I’m home.”

“You can do that if you want to, but I’m turning — ”

The screen went black.

Wyatt went back to his desk and pulled a hoodie out of a file drawer. He threaded his arms through the sleeves and looked over his shoulder, past Charly’s desk, at the haphazard stacks of file folders, *Wall Street Journal* Tech sections, bound leather notebooks, and binder-clipped presentation decks on Ric’s desk.

Wyatt had been too busy, or away too many days, to notice what had been accumulating on that side of the office. He tugged the sleeves of his sweatshirt off each of his arms and sat down in Charly’s chair.

A message copy appeared at the top her left-hand screen addressed to Wyatt from Charly:

May take Elijah to dr tomorrow. Working from home. Avail as always. Have a great trip. /c

He threw his sweatshirt onto his chair and made his way around the L of Ric Bellan’s desk. He withdrew his phone from his pants pocket and snapped enough pictures of the files, notebooks, and papers to document how they were stacked, where they were

positioned before he sat down. Then he went through each stack of paperwork, page by page.

There wasn't much to read. There were dozens of these folders, but each held no more than a single sheet of jagged rip-top sheets of lined yellow paper. Ric's limited notes, in illegible scrawl, included a date and time, a full name, a title, and an x-y graph. In each graph, the x appeared to represent budget. The y was changeable. That was the "challenge" axis and could be labeled "security" or "project management" or "open channel communication" or whatever the contact had told him was the corporate IT priority. Ric had plotted a coordinate dot on each thumbnail graph that ranked low on the x axis and high on the y.

Ric's notebooks were full of lists headed "Prospects," "Partnerships," "Biz Dev," and "Opportunities." Most of the companies on those lists were the same ones in different order.

After Wyatt had reordered the files and notebooks using his photo app for reference, he turned to the collection of personal correspondence stacked next to Ric's single monitor. Nothing looked new. Among the business cards were a smattering of restaurant cards and one bearing the name of a Lenoir|Ross partner. He had another VC contact, a Tristan Victor, with a managing partner title. Kimberlee's father, Wyatt thought.

Wyatt pressed a key on Ric's computer and wiggled his wireless mouse. He stared at the screen for a moment, then typed in his administrative ID and password. It didn't take long to break through to Ric's home screen, littered with blue file folders captioned in capital letters.

He took a picture of the screen before he opened the files, one by one. Each file held a copy of the same blank, unexecuted Cabana NDA agreement.

In email, Wyatt ran through sent mail files. He sorted messages by recipient and spot-checked a few dozen identical introductory messages. Follow ups, headed "Take Two" had gone out to each of his contacts within a week of the initial intro.

Wyatt fished a pen out of Ric's business school glass and began making a list of names and emails, then he reordered the sent mail by date and moved back to Ric's inbox. He

scrolled down to the timeframe of Ric's initial intro emails and counted undeliverable messages. Twenty-five intros, eighteen bounces.

Wyatt ripped the page of names and email addresses off the yellow pad. He stared at the screen. Then picked up the pen again and wrote little Bs next to each of the addresses that had bounced.

He sorted the inbox by sender. Most of the active correspondence was between Ric and his wife, Vanessa, and it covered the gamut of family finances and child logistics.

Next came sets of messages with TV@VictorVentures.com and SalRahmanzai@LenoirRoss.com. Wyatt printed these out and forwarded copies to his own email account. He checked sent mail for the trail of forwards, deleted them, and emptied Ric's trash folders.

After logging off Ric's computer, he moved on to Kimberlee's desk, where he shuffled through her drawers full of blank supplies: letter-size manila folders, a stack of shrink-wrapped yellow legal pads, a stapler, a box of staples, and a handful of #2 Ticonderogas all sharpened to perfect points. She had stocked Tylenol, contact lens wetting solution, a plastic hairbrush, and a pair of opaque black tights in the back of the file drawer. Wyatt helped himself to a piece of wintergreen gum, stuffing the wrapper into his pants pocket.

A red and gold mortarboard tassel hung from Kimberlee's task lamp. A shallow porcelain dish, decorated with a gold outline of the Eiffel Tower, held her watermelon-flavored lip balm, a blister pack of cucumber-flavor Juul pods, and an assortment of business cards. There was one Victor Ventures card with Tristan Victor's name on it. The rest bore the names of tech executives up and down the Peninsula. Her tidy sorority-script notes on the back of each card indicated that she'd collected the cards in the course of her job search.

A yellow legal pad in the middle of Kimberlee's desk listed tasks assigned, anticipated, or made up:

1. *CBC bio and headshot - Annie Leibovitz?*
2. *Fortune magazine cover story pitch*
3. *Coordinate RB lunches with M. Zuckerberg, E. Musk, M. Moritz*
4. *Get video and transcript from Chaos.*

Wyatt stood up and left Kimberlee's desk without turning on her computer. He picked up the pile of correspondence he'd printed and packed it into his messenger bag. He shut down his desktop computer and reached over to turn off Charly's, too.

8.

There was a rhythm to my business travel and the project management Charly had assigned to me. I'd put in two days in D.C., two days in Detroit one week; spend the next week in San Francisco; then I'd be Seattle or Houston or wherever we had a new installation the following week.

I got to know the cities I visited frequently, hounding out craft breweries and local music, eating way too much sausage in the Midwest.

I stayed on top of what was going on in San Francisco by using those uninterrupted hours in airports and inflight to handle email and keep up with the Cabana task queue, making sure there were no outstanding dev issues or festering client asks. I liked to download the Cabana task board before my flight's wheels were up, while still in range of airport wi-fi, so I wouldn't be at the mercy of a Gogo sky connection. Then I'd pore over the queue to see who's doing what, what had been scrubbed, and what had been added in however many hours since I'd last checked.

But on this one trip back from Albuquerque, I boarded just before last call, closed my eyes the minute I buckled in, and slept till I felt the landing gear grind into position for touch down at SFO.

The woman next to me looked over as I raised my head.

"Did I snore?" I asked.

"No," she said. "For a while I didn't know if you were breathing."

"Guess I needed the nap," I said.

She pressed a few numbers on her phone, said her name, and told someone that she'd landed. She put the phone down.

"Any relation to Gary Galbraith?" I asked. She looked enough like him to be his sister.

She gave me that look people muster when they've been caught giving away personal information in public.

"Gary's my brother," she said.

My head went back with a snort.

"Gary and I were in the same class at Acalanes."

"Wyatt?"

"That's me."

I dragged my messenger bag up from the floor and landed it hard in my lap. Too hard.

"You live in the city?" I asked.

"No, I'm in Albuquerque now. I'm just visiting my parents for a few days."

"They're still in Lafayette?"

"Yep. And Gary's in Orinda."

"Good for him. What's he doing?"

"He's at Goldman Sachs. I'm not exactly sure what he does."

"Gary? I can tell you. Right now, he's waiting for the next wave of IPOs and counting his millions. That's what they do there," I said. My eyes were dry, and my lips were sticking to my gums, but I had to play through. It would be great to have someone to hang out with in Albuquerque. "What do you do in Albuquerque?"

"I'm a social worker. I can actually own a home there on a social worker's salary. And travel. And it's nice. Summers are close to unbearable, but I can spend a lot of those months at my parents'."

"Someone picking you up?"

"Yeah, Gary's car service."

"Sweet," I said. This apparition from my childhood was making me revert to high school vocabulary.

"Parents still in the neighborhood?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah. Sarah and I are going to have the place rezoned as a mausoleum when they die. They'll never leave."

“Why would they? It’s like they live at a resort. I didn’t appreciate it, till I moved away.”

I’d never considered anything about the suburbs resort-like, but it wasn’t a stretch. There were an awful lot of people out there that seemed to be on an endless vacation, dressed in expensive gym clothes, perpetually shopping, or on an eternal coffee retrieval circuit.

“Enjoy yourself,” I said, as I scooted out of our row and reached up for my duffel bag.

“I’ll tell Gary I ran into you,” she said.

“Yeah. Have him give me a call.” I had the presence of mind to fish into my wallet for a business card while we waited for a bottleneck further up the aisle to clear. She pointed to a red polycarbonate bag in the bin a few rows ahead and I grabbed it for her.

We talked a little more as we raced each other toward the terminal curb, then said our goodbyes as she jumped into a black sedan and I headed toward the car-share island.

I checked for new messages as I jumped into a Lyft.

Charly was downtown at The Battery with Jim Lenoir and wanted backup, if I could meet her. It was nine-thirty, I rerouted my ride.

9.

Charly felt Jim Lenoir’s eyes following her as she returned to their table in the Musto Bar at The Battery, a private social club where both of them had memberships and could count on a quiet corner on a Wednesday night.

He stood as she approached and made room for her to squeeze back into place next to him on the violet crushed velvet settee, but she ducked onto a low leather-upholstered pouf opposite him instead and reached across the small resin-topped table between them for the fresh mojito he’d ordered for her.

Charly counted. This one made three. She torqued her body sideways, losing purchase on the slippery stool for a second. A waiter noticed her recovery and came toward her.

“Would you bring me a glass of water, please?” she asked him. “No ice.”

Jim Lenoir had taken off his glasses.

“There’s not much more to cover,” Charly said. “The chip sets are already on the water. We’re ready to manufacture.”

“Okay,” he said. “So, now you don't need money? I don't understand what happened to our deal.”

“We never got to the deal,” Charly said. “Sometime between the third and fourth round of term sheets, my client decided to foot the bill on the first fifty-thousand units. We were too far along with the project to wait for you.”

“Who knew the government could move faster than we would?”

“I'm sorry it didn't work out for you, Jim. But it worked out better for our client this way. Much quicker and much cleaner.”

“But you have no ownership of the handset business. It’s theirs.”

“No. We own all the patents and IP. Licensing fees and the manufacturing oversight contract are better for us than the mark-up we'd make on the handsets,” Charly said. “It's a win for everyone but you.”

“Don't rub it in. I should sue you for breach of contract.”

Charly shook her head. “You should wait till you are sure you didn't just dodge a bullet. Apple isn't going to like seeing their cases repurposed. They would have made it hard on some of your other portfolio companies.”

“You'll hear from them. It'll be the day you ship, after you've spent fifty-million dollars.”

“We're ready. We've done all our due diligence on precedents concerning reuse of abandoned goods.”

“Next time you ask for money, I'll pull out a checkbook,” Jim said. “You know I've been ready to jump in for years now.”

She nodded, but she didn't smile. Jim had missed out on a lot of solid early round investments lately after losing big bets on labor-intensive pseudo tech like food delivery.

“How's Ric doing?”

“I don't think he's hungry enough,” she said.

“Isn’t he working out?”

She shook her head.

“You know my expectations are low for business-side hires. I’ve given him plenty of time to ramp up his understanding of the platform, to develop the market on his own, but he’s not closing.”

“Ric knows a lot of people. Ask him what he needs. Maybe he’s feeling under-supported.”

“He’s got plenty of support. We just hired an admin for him, and he’s got the MyCabana demo – which I would have shut down by now if it weren’t such a great live lab for some of the experimental AI the Albuquerque team has been working on.”

“Albuquerque?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know the Cabana layout. I know you’ve got friends inside. You talk to Ric. And you still talk to Ben, don’t you?”

Jim rubbed his eyebrows, then reached for his frameless glasses. He drew the fine gold temple pieces around his ears.

“You’re quite a girl, Charly. I still think we could be partners on so many other things,” he said. “There’s no one else like you.”

Charly pushed her cocktail away and picked up the water glass as it was delivered to her. She was aware of the shape of her lips as she pressed them to the glass and withdrew them without ingesting any water.

The server returned to their table.

“Wyatt Melohn here to see you, Ms. Carlin.”

“Who?” Jim said.

“Wyatt works for me,” Charly said. “He just got off a plane and I thought we’d spend a little time here – after our meeting – debriefing.”

“Sure,” Jim said. He waved his response toward the server without making eye contact with him. “So, you’re dismissing me?”

“Dismissing you?” Charly laughed. “It’s a school night and you’ve got a long drive ahead.”

“Why do you think I have a membership here?” he said. “There are rooms upstairs.”

Charly felt her face tingle and her stomach lurch toward her throat. She stood to take Jim's hand as Wyatt appeared at her elbow.

“I'll talk to you soon,” she said. “If I need any other help with the handset project, I'll let you know.”

“Good night, Charly,” he said. “Nice timing, Wyatt.”

Wyatt threw his duffel bag and messenger bag onto the settee and sat opposite Charly.

“Perfect timing,” she said. “We finished our business hours ago.”

“What's going on?” Wyatt asked.

Charly looked behind her to make sure Jim Lenoir had left the room.

“Nothing,” she said. “I wanted a witness. He was more unpleasant than usual.”

“I could tell.”

“Really? Sometimes I think I just imagine it.”

“Well, there had to be a reason why he was the one on the comfy cushy couch and you were the one marooned over there on an uncomfortable little tuffet, an ocean from your bag.”

Charly grimaced.

“Hey, I have a sister, I've been called in to referee the players before.”

“Silly, isn't it?” Charly reached for her mojito, now watered down by melted ice. She took a slug. “He tries to intimidate me and I humor him. He's a complete waste of time.”

“Ask me about Albuquerque,” Wyatt said. He flagged down the server and ordered a pint of local craft beer.

“How was Albuquerque?” she asked.

“Good. Nothing new, nothing unusual. I took a look at that AI incubator near Los Alamos.”

“Any talent worth scooping up?”

“Plenty. There's one start-up that's ready for another round. We could probably buy them out and keep the principals.”

“Okay, let's get them on the phone later this week.”

“Anything happening in the office?”

Wyatt nursed his beer, while Charly updated him on MyCabana development status. The site now had a governor that limited its population. Inactive user profiles would be dropped from the site after forty-eight hours. The goal was to lower the user base to about four million through attrition. A new set of AI filters were sifting and blocking hate speech, nudity, and violent content. Live human monitors were only reviewing messages, images, and video content shared by two hundred or more users.

Wyatt listened and nodded.

“And I thought you were going to shut down MyCabana after a few months,” he said.

“MyCabana is a great real-time lab for that filter set. We’re way ahead of everyone with our AI — even the government,” she said.

“So, we’ll sell the filters as modules for intelligence gathering?”

“Filters work both ways.”

Wyatt drained his beer. “What else is going on?” he asked.

She glanced at her wrist.

“I’m going to have to do something about Ric,” she said. “He’s not a good fit culturally. He’s dividing the staff in some weird way I haven’t been able to understand.”

“He encourages people to complain,” Wyatt said. “Has he brought in any new clients?”

“Nothing,” Charly said. “That’s it. I need to talk to him, but what I want to do is fire him.”

“So, do it.”

“Do you want another drink? Or can we go?”

“We can go. I’m beat,” he said. “Did you drive down?”

“No, I grabbed an Uber. Ben had something going on.”

“You should hook Jim up with Ben. They could hatch some kind of business that keeps both of them busy.”

She laughed. “I’m working on it, but Ben’s days as an entrepreneur are behind him,” she said. “If he could invent the SoulCycle of yoga franchises, he’d be set.”

“He’s already set,” Wyatt said.

“Yes, I suppose he is,” she said. “Let’s go.”

On their way through the lobby of The Battery, Wyatt veered toward the hotel reception desk. Charly couldn’t hear him as she waited by the door, punching in her Lyft order.

“Do you want to know or not?” he asked when he returned to her.

“Know what?”

“Whether Jim Lenoir took a room in the hotel tonight.”

“He did. He told me he was staying upstairs.”

“Well, he had a reservation, but he cancelled it on his way out.”

“Could mean anything,” she said.

They stood outside The Battery for a few minutes while Lyfts and Ubers flew past them, loaded with tourists heading for Fisherman’s Wharf hotels.

“Why do you humor him?” Wyatt asked.

“Jim?” Charly asked. “Or Ben?”

“Let’s start with Jim.”

“He’s the only insider friend I have in the Valley. He gives me good advice — most of the time — and has helped me line up some of Cabana’s vendors. I know his interest in me isn’t personal or sexual. He wants a piece of Cabana and he doesn’t have any principles when it comes to getting what he wants,” she said. “Besides, if I stopped talking to every man who’s coped a feel, pushed me up against a wall, or propositioned me, there’d be no one left to do business with.”

“He’s pretty sure of himself,” Wyatt said.

“You all are,” Charly said.

“And what about Ben?”

“We’re fine. Marriages are like hot house flowers. They need a lot of air and sunlight.”

A gray SUV pulled up, passenger window down.

“Charles?” The driver directed his attention to Wyatt.

Charly opened the back door and dropped onto the seat.

“Good night, Wyatt,” she said before she pulled the door toward her.

10.

“I would stay till after Elijah’s doctor’s appointment tomorrow,” Elinor Bancroft said.

Ben looked up from his olive drab canvas duffel bag, which brimmed with Swiss cotton interlock T-shirt tunics and pull-on pants in peacock colors: teal, gold, bronze, emerald, sapphire.

“I’m sure it’s just a bone bruise or a rib fracture he got at school,” Ben said. He layered two microfiber towels on top of his clothes. “It can’t be serious.”

“What time is your flight?”

“Eleven,” he said. “I’m getting a car around eight.”

“Or Charly could take you. I’ll be here with Elijah.”

Ben looked up again. His mother-in-law dropped her arms out of a tight chest lotus and dug her hands deep into the pockets of one of Charly’s sun-faded MIT sweatshirts. He recognized the look on her face: it was the knit-eyebrow, thin-lip grimace Charly threw his way when she disagreed with his decisions.

“We’ll figure it out when she gets home,” he said.

Elinor retreated into the hall and Ben waited, motionless, until he heard her footsteps on the narrow back stairs leading down to the kitchen. He rolled the duffel onto its side, forcing its zipper’s brass teeth together, and yanked the pull from one end of the bag to the other.

With the bag hoisted over his shoulder, Ben angled through the bedroom door. At the top of the broad main staircase midway down the hall, the bag thudded to the carpet.

Ben rubbed his shoulder and examined his giant, bulging duffel. He’d packed only the lightest stuff, but he’d packed too much of it. He could get by with fewer clothes. On these silent retreats there was plenty of time to do hand laundry.

He dragged the bag back to the master bedroom and unpacked the two micro towels, half of the yoga wear, his plastic containers filled with nuts and dried fruit and protein bars.

Repacked, the half-empty duffel was shapeless and floppy. Ben left it on the floor of the bedroom and climbed down two flights of the narrow back staircase, passing Elinor in the kitchen, to reach the luggage storage closet in the garage. He considered each of the

four-wheel Pullmans and the light-weight backpacks, the expandable carry-ons and the garment bags. He wrenched a mustard yellow pack out of the mix and was examining its seams as the garage door opened, flooding the space with late afternoon daylight and cold air.

He moved aside as Charly's old Mercedes inched into the tight space outlined in blue paint on the cement floor. He raised his hand as her bumper reached the edge of the line at the back of the garage.

"Hi, Dad!" Elijah crowed as Charly opened the rear door for him.

"Hey, bud," Ben said, patting the boy's shoulders. "How you feeling?"

"I'm okay," Elijah said.

"Packed?" Charly asked.

"Over-packed," Ben said. "Way over-packed. I need to streamline."

"Take one of the spinners," Charly said as she crab walked around the car.

"Nah," Ben said. "I want to be low-key."

"Other people will have wheels on their suitcases."

"I know. We only have the big ones and the small ones."

"The backpack then," Charly said. "I can airfreight whatever you can't fit into the backpack."

"That's not the point," Ben said.

"Are you taking a solar charger?"

"Hadn't thought about it," he said. "I'll probably have to lock up my phone when I get there. Do you still have those little packets of Woolite?"

"Yeah, somewhere," she said. "I'll look."

Elijah disappeared down the hall toward the stairs. Ben could hear him stomping, step by step, then yelling "Gramma!"

"What's Mom been doing all day?"

"Mostly watching me pack," he said. "She thinks I should postpone the trip till after Elijah sees Dr. Pahlavi tomorrow."

"We'll be fine," she said, shaking her head. "Go forth and be mindful."

"I'll stay, if you think I need to. If you want me to. I can join the retreat a day late."

"Nah," she said. "Connections in that part of the world are problematic enough when you're on schedule. Don't worry."

"How is he?"

Charly pressed the button to lower the garage door.

"He's still complaining about his ribs hurting and he won't let me touch him on that side, so something is going on," she said. "Whether that's a bruise or some kind of pulmonary thing, I have no idea. But he'll either have to wait out the healing process or take antibiotics."

"He doesn't have any other symptoms?" Ben asked.

"You were with him this morning," Charly said. "Nothing's new this afternoon."

"What do you want to do for dinner?" Ben asked.

"I'm hoping Mom wants to cook," she said. "But we could always order something special for your last earthly meal."

Ben laughed.

"Elijah always wants a burger," he said.

"Okay, then. I'll order. You're cheddar, grilled onions, and everything else, right? Shake?"

"Yeah, everything, two sides of fries, and a double chocolate shake."

Charly gave him two thumbs up before rushing down the hall toward the stairs.

Ben reevaluated what he needed for his trip, while Elijah sewed mother-of-pearl shirt buttons along the side seams of his yoga pants, one, two, or three per pair.

"Why do you want to go away to quit talking?" he asked. "You have quiet time here when no one's home."

"I guess I do," Ben said. "But I won't just be silent on this trip, I'll be doing yoga and I'll be meditating. I'll be recharging."

Elijah put his sewing down in his lap.

"Can Mom and I go, too?"

“Mom could go, if she weren’t so tied up at work. But I think this trip would be kind of boring for you.”

“I’ve been on long plane rides before.”

“I know. You’re a good traveler, but you have school and you have a doctor’s appointment tomorrow afternoon. And you are never quiet.”

Elijah picked up his needle and examined the knot at the end of his thread.

“Are you going to come home?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll be home in a few weeks. Before you’re out of school for the summer,” Ben said.

The boy picked a pair of pants from the pile of neatly folded clothes on the bed.

“You know Mommy plays the piano?”

“Yes, I know.”

“You know why she doesn’t play it when you’re home?”

“I don’t know.”

Elijah nodded.

“I do know,” Ben said. “She doesn’t want me to know that she’s better at it than I am.”

“She’s good at a lot of things. But she isn’t good at them on purpose.”

Ben sat next to his son so that their thighs met.

“Sometimes I forget that.”

“Sometimes you both forget.”

“Elijah, I know Mommy is special and that she does a lot of things I don’t.”

“You say ‘special,’ but you mean ‘weird,’” Elijah said.

“Why would I mean that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you worried about us, Elijah?”

“I like being with you. I like being with Mommy. I just wish I could be with both of you at the same time.”

“You make it sound like we’re divorced.”

“You don’t have to be divorced to be broken.”

Broken. That’s exactly what Ben felt had happened to his relationship with Charlie. It was cordial, friendly, but broken. They were operating independently of each other and had been since Cabana had staffed up.

“I think you know too much.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think you watch me and Mommy too closely sometimes,” Ben said. “We’re okay, we haven’t broken up, we’re both just busy with different things. And you’re busy, too.”

Charly’s voice came up the back stairs from the kitchen.

“Ben! Elijah! Food’s here in five!”

As his father stood up, Elijah slid off his parents’ bed, bent slightly to his right, and walked toward the back stairs.

“You okay, Elijah?” Ben called after him.

“My side still hurts.”

“Dr. Pahlavi will get you fixed up tomorrow,” Ben said. “And I’ll talk to you when I get to the airport in Bali.”

11.

Tears sprang to Elijah’s eyes as the doctor gently felt along his ribs.

“I’m sorry, Elijah,” she said. “I need to see if I can feel anything bumpy or lumpy in there. Did you fall down? Do you remember banging into something? Did anyone hit you?”

Elijah shook his head as the doctor buffeted him with questions. She had cold hands, but warm brown eyes. A picture of Leila Pahlavi’s own family was on the wall in the examining room: the doctor, her husband, two girls somewhat older than Elijah with coal black hair like their mother’s.

Dr. Pahlavi felt along the boy’s neck and jaw, probed his armpits. “Anything hurt in here? Here?” she asked.

“No,” Elijah said. “Just my side.”

“It’s easy enough to take a quick look,’ she said, scribbling an address on a small pad of paper emblazoned with the logo of a pediatric antidepressant. “Go over to CPMC for an X-ray – I’ll call in the order. You should be able to just walk in. They’re up a few blocks from here, on the other side of California Street.”

Charly nodded. “Thank you, doctor. Want us to bring the results back?”

“Really, Charly? You think these things are still on film?” Leila Pahlavi smiled. “It’s an X-ray selfie. They’ll send it right to my phone as soon as they take it – then I’ll call you!”

Elijah and his mother left the pediatrician’s office behind the Laurel Shopping Center and walked up to California Street. The radiation lab was in the hospital two blocks west.

“Want anything to eat before we go over there?” Charly asked Elijah.

“No,” he said. “I just want to go.”

The receptionist took Charly’s insurance and credit cards while Elijah looked through a pile of dogeared magazines on a low table. A radiology technician called Elijah’s name before Charly could open an ancient issue of *The New Yorker*.

Elijah followed the man in the white lab coat down the beige hall, looking back every few steps to make sure his mother was with him.

In the X-ray suite, Elijah let his mother help him take off his shirt. Her idea to get the arm from his good side out of its sleeve first made it easier to deal with the side that hurt.

X-rays are more like school pictures than selfies, Elijah thought. You stand one way, then the other. You put your hands out and back, but you don’t have to smile.

He put his shirt back on while his mother talked to the radiologist. When he was dressed, he followed her out of the lab and back onto the street. They caught an electric bus, one with long metal antennae that hummed along California and Lake Streets and dropped them a block from their house.

Elijah had punched the code into the front door pad before his mother’s phone rang.

“Hello, Doctor,” Charly said as she put her mobile phone to her ear. She followed Elijah through the front door, and he felt her steady the step stool as he climbed up to disarm the beeping house alarm.

“You don’t have pneumonia,” she said to him, then she was silent for a few beats. “Yes, he’s right here. Okay.”

Elijah expected her to hand the phone to him, but instead, she walked down the hall toward the kitchen. He heard her moving around, opening the refrigerator, closing drawers.

“When can we get that done?” she asked. “Let me take that down. Okay. Can he eat breakfast in the morning?”

Elijah made his way down the hall toward the kitchen by sliding his feet along the carpet. He held his breath as he pressed his body against the wall so his mother couldn’t see him.

“Thank you,” Charly said. “Yes, I’ll be available at this number all day tomorrow. Thank you, doctor. Bye.”

Elijah waited for his mother to say something or move her feet, but she did neither thing.

“Mom?” he said.

“Yes,” she said.

He walked toward her, but she didn’t look up. She stared at the phone on the kitchen counter until he asked a question.

“Why don’t you call Dr. Pahlavi by her first name? She calls you ‘Charly’?”

“People just call doctors ‘doctor,’ out of respect. It’s old-fashioned, but it’s nice to give them points for sticking it out through med school.”

“Do I have a broken rib?”

“No, Elijah. It doesn’t look like it’s broken,” Charly said. “We’re going to go have some different kinds of tests done tomorrow to try to figure out what’s going on with you.”

“But it really does hurt,” he said.

“I know. We’re going to find out why.”

“Who will take me?”

“I will,” she said. “I’ll work from home in the morning, then we’ll go together.”

“Will it hurt?”

“No. This next test is like an X-ray, only the machine is bigger. I think you get to lie down while they take literally a million pictures of your bones.”

“Are you tired?” Elijah asked.

“No, why?”

“You look tired,” Elijah said.

“Well, maybe I should go to bed early,” she said.

“Is Gramma coming home for dinner?”

“No, she’s downtown for a lecture. It’s just us and the lasagna she made.”

Charly turned on the oven and stripped plastic wrap off the Pyrex baking dish layered with pasta, Marinara, and cheese. She put the casserole into the oven and set the stovetop timer for forty-five minutes.

“I’m going up to change,” she said.

Elijah watched her disappear up the tight, steep staircase at the back of the house and listened to the sound of her steps as he climbed onto a metal stool at the kitchen counter. He put his head in his hands and waited for the buzzer to announce dinner time.

12.

The morning we go to the hospital for the first time, Gramma cooks eggs and pancakes. Mom doesn’t eat. She cleans the stove and puts dishes in the dishwasher. Her necklace hits the side of the counter when she leans over.

“We should take some fruit or some snacks with us,” Mom says. “Just in case.”

Just in case of what? I wonder. I don’t ask her what she thinks is going to happen.

“Where’s your water bottle?” she asks me.

Gramma finds it. She fills it with ice water from inside the refrigerator and puts it in my backpack with a banana and some fruit roll-ups.

“We’ll call Ben tonight,” Mom says. She is talking to Gramma, because she never calls him Ben when she talks to me. “If he calls, tell him we’ll call him.”

“He won’t be in Bali for another nine hours,” Gramma says. “You’ll be back.”

“Well, he has a stopover in Bangkok, so, he could call.”

“He’ll call your cell.”

“And if I don’t answer, he’ll call here.”

“Don’t worry,” Gramma says. “Everything will be fine.”

We drive to the hospital. It’s new and still smells like school paste and paint inside. We take an elevator and get off on a floor that looks like the floor we started on.

I go into a room and take off my shoes and pants and shirt and put on a paper thing. I keep my own socks and underpants on. The paper thing isn’t a robe. It’s like a costume, but stiff. It doesn’t keep me warm in the cold X-ray room.

I stand in front of a machine and hold my breath when they tell me to. I do this three or four times.

Medicine is a lot of holding your breath and guessing.

We go back to the hospital the next morning after no breakfast. It is even colder in the room where they do the scans. They give me a pill that makes me feel like I’m dreaming, even though I am awake. There is a shot I don’t like, but somehow, I keep forgetting about it even while it is pinching my side. Then they help me up on another cold table that I have to lie on. I fall asleep and they wake me up right away with a box of juice and some graham crackers.

I get dressed and wait in the cold room for someone to come find me. A nurse brings me some blankets that have been warmed in a microwave. I stop shivering.

13.

My Mom leaves her deskcam on all day and all night. I check the app on my iPad to see if she's in the office.

If she is, we make faces at each other. Or she leaves a stack of things on her desk so I can see them.

One time, she had three broken sand dollars. She found them on the beach. They were still wet when I saw them.

Another time, she made a smiling face out of buttons.

When she's not there, I like to see if she's left a sweatshirt on her chair. Or if the mug I made for her birthday is still on her desk. Behind her desk is a kitchen. It is never in focus, although I can zoom in.

There.

Now I can see a basket of protein bars. The lights are dim — it might even be dark in the office — but the camera picks up the net on the back of Mom's office chair.

Wyatt walks by the desk and stops. I think he's looking at me in the corner of my Mom's screen, but I'm not sure. He's not moving.

I take a Magic Marker off the table next to my bed and write "Hey, Wyatt" on a pad of yellow paper. I hold it up so that the webcam on the shelf above my head sees it. I watch Wyatt nod his head and smile. He's chewing gum or eating something.

He sits down in Mom's chair and I see his forehead as he does something with her mouse and keyboard.

"Hey, punk."

His voice sounds like it's in a tin can. It's coming from the webcam speaker. I don't know if he can hear me.

I say "Can you hear me?" without making any noise. I only move my lips.

"I could hear you if you said something out loud," he says. "I can hear your TV."

I don't think Mom turns the sound on when she's working. For the most part, we look at each other. Sometimes I hold up a picture of a dinosaur or something I've drawn. She holds

up her stapler or a paperclip. Or she looks right into the camera and crosses her eyes. I see her look down at the little screen to watch me laugh.

“What are you doing?” I ask him.

“Compiling code. Waiting for a burrito delivery.”

“I see you there almost every night.”

“Well, yeah.”

I’ve known Wyatt since I was little. He and Mom worked together on what Mom called “little projects.” Cabana is the big project they work on now.

Wyatt is kind of weird. I don’t think he has a girlfriend or boyfriend or house. He works all the time. He always wears the same clothes.

I see him walk by Mom’s computer the next night.

“Hey, want to play Blast or Laser Shark?” I say real loud.

We’re looking at each other, but we’re not looking at each other. The camera sees us, but we have to look at the bottom of our screens to see each other’s foreheads and whatever else the camera picks up.

“You play online?”

“Yeah. I’ll invite you to a game. Are you Wyatt at Cabana?”

“Yeah. You play for money?” he asks me.

“No,” I say.

The next night, Wyatt sits in Mom’s chair and plays with the keyboard.

“Why are you still up?” he asks.

It’s not that late. I’ve been in bed since five o’clock or so, since I got home from the doctor. The iPad screen says it’s ten now.

“I don’t think I really have a bedtime anymore,” I say.

“You should,” he says.

“Well, I pretty much sleep when I want to, so I can be up whenever I want.”

“Is that working for you?”

I laugh.

“No, because sometimes I’m hungry at four in the morning.”

“Tell your Mom to bring home some of these.” He holds up a chocolate bran bar.

“Those are barfy.”

“Why do you think I ordered a burrito?”

I am laying down on my pillows with my iPad propped on my stomach. Wyatt can’t see my face because I can’t see the camera on my bookshelf from this angle.

“Are you hungry now?” he asks me. “I could swing by with some ice cream or something. Who’s there with you?”

“Mom’s asleep. Jocelyn is here tonight, but she’s in her room. She only checks on me every few hours.”

“So, ring her bell or whatever. Tell her I’ll be there in half an hour with a burrito and some ice cream for you.”

“That’s okay, Wyatt. There’s food here.”

I try to sit up, but that’s when I feel awful, like a shark is biting my side. It’s a quick bite, but deep. It surprises me every time.

“I’m going to go,” I tell him.

“O.K.”

He turns the camera off over Mom’s desk and a message pops up on my screen saying that I’ve lost access to the Kahuna Kam. But I know Wyatt is still watching – or can – because the red light is still on the camera on my bookshelf. I look up and stare right into the camera.

Wyatt makes the eye of the lens open and close. I shake my head and turn off my iPad.

It doesn’t bug me that Wyatt can watch me from the office. In the middle of the night, when I can’t sleep, I turn on my iPad and look at what’s on my Mom’s desk. I’ll have to email him to tell him to turn the camera back on before he leaves.

I remember he can hear me.

“Hey, Wyatt,” I say. “Turn the camera back on.”

Nothing happens.

“Please?” I don’t want to sound like a baby, so I say, “while we’re young,” like my dad says sometimes.

I see him standing by my Mom's desk.

"How's that?"

"Good," I say. "Good night."

"Good night, Elijah," he says.

14.

I'm like an alien. There's a hole in my chest. A nurse plugs a hose into it and feeds me power crystals. But I don't feel stronger, I mostly feel sick and my side still hurts.

They have these playrooms all over the hospital with different machines and stuff in them. Usually, there's some kind of game table or video game console. Sometimes they send in people who know card tricks or magic. I don't know if they're doctors or nurses. Everyone who works here wears short-sleeved pajamas.

It's a long day, waiting for the medicine to get swallowed in my chest. Mom sits on the floor with a computer on her legs. She gets up and goes into the hall when her phone rings even though I don't care if she talks about business. I like to hear her voice.

We have been in a room just like this one every day for five days. Mom takes me home after, then brings me back. She told the doctor that was what we wanted to do. I guess I like sleeping at home better than sleeping in the hospital. It's always cold here.

15.

"Just get in," Marco said through the passenger window.

Jeremy opened the car door and ran his hand along the fabric car seat as he settled in. He reached between his legs to reposition the seat, sliding back until his knees were no longer touching the glove compartment. He felt along the side of the seat and jerked the backrest up to a ninety-degree angle, then held the button on the car door till the window closed.

“What is this?” he asked as he scanned the insignia on the steering wheel. “An Impala?”

Marco frowned.

“Where’s your BMW?”

“I left it at the airport.”

“That’s the first clue we shouldn’t be doing this.”

The two men rode in silence from the Redwood City train station, about fifteen miles south of the San Francisco airport, zig-zagging through residential neighborhoods till they reached El Camino Real. They traveled eight miles north, stoplight by stoplight, more than doubling the time the trip could have taken via Highway 101, an eight-lane artery running parallel to El Camino.

When they reached the town of San Mateo, Marco pulled over near Central Park to unfurl a paper AAA map. He pointed to a pair of crossing streets.

“Here’s Ric’s house,” he said. “Can you navigate?”

“Why didn’t you just let me bring my phone?”

Marco shook his head. “Just get us there,” he said.

“Okay, left at the light,” Jeremy said.

“Left?” Marco echoed, as he pulled away from the curb.

“Now stay to the left at the Y,” Jeremy said.

“Left at the Y,” Marco affirmed.

They continued this way, Jeremy issuing instructions, Marco repeating them, until they spotted Ric Bellan’s address on a granite marker next to a twelve-foot hedge. Marco inched further down the block and parked near the corner.

“This is such a bad idea,” Jeremy said, looking up and down the deserted street.

“We’re just talking,” Marco said. “We haven’t committed. We’re just listening.”

Jeremy kept his head down as he followed Marco through the open gate and up the oiled asphalt driveway toward a four-car garage. A wide flagstone path running between the garage and the house led to a lushly landscaped rear yard. Jeremy looked up for a moment to take in the scale of the house, augmented and enhanced from its modest mid-

century ranch-style origin into a two-story pseudo-Prairie style statement with a long, narrow footprint. High-arched windows and folding glass doors opened onto a wide-plank deck featuring a stainless-steel grill set into a polished granite waterfall counter.

“Ric told me he’d meet us in the casita,” Marco said, leading on through the rose garden as pea gravel crunched under foot.

“Hey,” Ric said, as he emerged from French doors behind the garage to motion the men inside. “Coffee?”

Jeremy looked around the spacious room as he entered it, nodding in acknowledgement of the leather couch, the fifty-inch flat screen, the round, matte-stained oak table with ladder-back chairs, the efficiency kitchenette. A pair of parted barn doors offered a view of a queen-sized bed swathed in ecru linen. It would be a perfect two-hundred-dollar Airbnb overnighiter.

“Cream and sugar?” Ric asked. He handed a black mug to Jeremy.

“No, black is fine,” Jeremy said.

The men sat at the oak table. Marco put his leather portfolio in front of him but didn’t open it. He slid his arms out of his black microfiber Burberry knock-off jacket.

“Here’s the deal,” Ric said. “I have the money we need for MyCabana lined up. Both Lenoir|Ross and Victor Ventures are interested in a piece of it. We’ll set up here, temporarily, then find some space mid-Peninsula to make our commutes easier.”

“Can we talk through how much time we’ll need to code an entirely new platform?” Marco asked.

“You mean, if Charly won’t license Hula or any of the existing MyCabana code?” Ric said.

Jeremy put his coffee down and squinted toward Ric.

“Exactly,” Marco said. “We have to assume that she won’t let this piece go. We have to be ready to build from scratch, worst case.”

“Look, she’s already said she can’t support a full-on consumer mission,” Ric said. “I’m banking on her not wanting to have anything to do with the platform after we start driving the site.”

Jeremy looked back at Marco.

“Yeah, but she owns the underlying language and essentially all of the code that was developed with her money. She owns everything outright – except for some of the AI we got from the Albuquerque team,” Marco said.

“Wait,” Jeremy said. “How are we going to ‘drive the site’? What do you think should change about the current spec?”

Ric leaned toward Jeremy. “MyCabana is stuck at about ten million users since Charly had you guys put a limit on registration. We need to take that off and let the user base grow. It’s perfect to do that now, while she’s busy with Elijah.”

“She’s going to notice,” Jeremy said. “She’s hands on. She’s not in the office more than a few hours a week, but she’s on the servers all the time. And she talks to everyone.”

“Right. But she’s got her hands full with installs,” Rick said. “And I’m bringing in five new clients this week just to keep her eye off the MyCabana product.”

“With that kind of success, she’ll make good on shutting down MyCabana altogether. She said it’s only up till you learn —” Jeremy stopped himself.

“Till I learn how to sell Cabana?” Rick shook his head. “Please. I’ve got my end covered. And I’ve built a plan and found investors for MyCabana as a freestanding product. We’ll push her to spin it off – that is our best-case scenario.”

“And Plan B?” Jeremy asked.

“We build it from scratch. You and I wrote enough of it, we have the template,” Marco offered. “We can find another encrypted language to license, so we maintain the privacy value point. We’ll turn the interface and rest of the code inside out, so that it’s not a line-by-line, sequential copy. And we’ll come up with a new name.”

“She can still sue the shit out of us,” Jeremy said.

“She won’t,” Ric said. “She’ll fold. Elijah’s cancer is not going to resolve itself for months, if not years. Jim Lenoir thinks she’s going to be relieved to hand this piece of the business over. And she’s not going to have the time or energy to sue anyone. Jim’s willing to negotiate on our behalf. He’ll put Steve Stamates on any of the legal tie-ups we might encounter.”

“Will money be in the bank before we start tinkering with the site?” Jeremy asked.

Jeremy watched Ric’s face and shoulders slacken.

“What is it, Jeremy?” Ric asked. “It’s not like any of us have that many more years left to make another big hit in this business. We’re in our forties. This could be our last chance and we have to be aggressive. It’s worth the risk.”

Jeremy held Ric’s gaze.

“It is a risk,” Marco said. “But all we’re really risking are jobs we might not have ever had.”

“If not for Charly trusting us,” Jeremy said. “We do this and — either way — we’re definitely not working anywhere again.”

“We didn’t think we’d work again when we got axed at Lockheed,” Marco said.

“Look,” Ric said. “Nothing is going to happen. An IP lawsuit isn’t worth it for Charly. She’d rather sell or license MyCabana. Trust me.”

Jeremy toted up his assets: His Lockheed pension would kick in about seventeen years from now along with full benefits and Social Security, if he took it all at sixty-five. His house was nearly paid off. The last of his kids was finishing college. Household expenses were covered by his wife’s job as a pharmaceutical rep. He had nothing to lose. Elijah’s illness could push Charly to sell Cabana or put in a new CEO – either move would threaten Jeremy’s job security.

“We have a chance to cash in big. We’ll each keep ten percent equity,” Ric said. “Undiluted.”

“Yeah, till we’re diluted,” Jeremy said.

“Marco, talk to him,” Ric said. “If you don’t want in, Jeremy, we could probably recruit one of the Albuquerque AI guys – and that would save us some money.”

“What’s the timeline for this?” Jeremy asked.

“We have to work around Wyatt’s travel schedule,” Marco said.

Ric opened the notebook in front of him and ran an index finger down a list he’d prepared.

“We take the registration governor off next week,” he said. “And get the app back on the App Store. Then we start strategically disabling the AI filters. We’ll need a new top-four video booster built out, something based on the Post-it note task boards in Cabana. Whole thing has to come together before Wyatt leaves for Washington at the end of the month.”

Jeremy scanned the back of Ric’s house as he followed Marco out of the guest quarters. Handblown glass fixtures in the kitchen refracted rainbow beams of light through the kitchen’s arched beveled windows. A dozen double casement windows on the second floor were uniformly matched and evenly spaced; the lining of each window treatment matched the color of the exterior trim.

As he walked down the driveway with Marco, Jeremy estimated the value of Ric’s house, his property taxes, his maintenance costs, his insurance, his car payments. He determined that Bellan had a lot more at stake than he did. Ric’s overhead on this place had to be the motivation for wanting to pirate MyCabana.

It was true, he and Marco and Ric had pretty much aged out of the Silicon Valley job market. The three of them were lucky to have the jobs they had, but that idea of the main chance – in this case, the last chance – was an irresistible siren. No matter what they did, Charly would still have Cabana. She would still have her millions from Bantrac and Bancroll. She wouldn’t miss the MyCabana piece of her empire. No one would lose money. No one would go to jail.

Jeremy slid back into the rental car and watched Marco pull the stained seatbelt across his chest.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“I think it’s easy enough to go along with him,” Marco said. “We can always correct, blame one of the young engineers for messing with the wrong lines of code, and —”

“Pretend we weren’t part of a mutiny?” Jeremy asked. “I need to sleep on it.”

“Go ahead,” Marco said. “Just don’t talk to Charly – or Wyatt – about this. It’s too sensitive. We could abort at any moment and I don’t want to be fucked by someone with a conscience.”

16.

Hey, Wyatt.

The boy glances toward the webcam mounted on the bookshelf over the desk. The iris of the camera remains rigid, neither narrowing, nor widening its focus.

“Hey, Wyatt,” he says out loud.

The camera is immobile.

“Been awake long?” his mother asks from the hall.

“No,” he says.

“Hungry?” she asks.

He thinks about the question. Eating means barfing, but he wants to clear the acrid taste behind his tongue.

“How about a milkshake?” she asks.

Ice cream was the worst thing. He looks back at the camera.

“Oatmeal with a little honey?” His mother is standing at the foot of his bed now, her hair in a short, low ponytail that looks slept in. Her thin body draped in a loose turquoise and white striped shirt unbuttoned to the middle of her chest over a pair of flamingo pink leggings. These were clothes he hadn’t seen since a beach vacation months ago. His mother was always in black and white, or jeans and a T-shirt.

“Okay,” he says.

“Let’s take your temperature first.”

The boy relaxes into the pillows as his mother rubs the head of the electronic thermometer across his brow.

“Ninety-nine,” she says.

It's like a game to him. Every day, the numbers go up over the one-hundred mark, then down again. His highest number has been one-hundred-six. That was in the hospital. His lowest, ninety-seven.

"Can I see?" He takes the thermometer from his mother and rubs the inside of his arm, then his belly, then his forehead.

"Here, take mine," she says.

The boy sweeps the instrument slowly across his mother's forehead, from temple to temple, watching the flutter of her eyelashes, smelling the wave of perfume and perspiration that arises from her open-collared shirt.

"There," he says. "Ninety-six point eight."

"I'm always low," she says.

"Does that mean you're sick?"

"No. It means I'm a lizard."

He likes this time alone with his mother, just the two of them, in the quiet of the big house, her body so close that her heart can beat for his, pumping life back into his veins where poison has stripped his strength.

"Do you want to come downstairs?" she asks. "I can carry you."

"I'm too heavy."

"Not anymore my little man," she says.

"You're too skinny to carry me."

"We are on the same diet," she says. "But I'm still getting more protein than you are."

"Okay," he says.

He feels his mother's arms under his knees and around his back as he lifted up from his bed. He shivers.

"Ah, you need to be bundled up," she says, letting him drop back down among the pillows and tortured blankets. "Here, I'll make you into an Elijah burrito."

She pulls a blanket loose from the bedclothes and tucks it around him, folding the end of the blanket up over his feet.

Her arms are around him again. Cradling him against her shoulder, she steps slowly down the narrow stairs.

17.

My toes definitely don't hurt. I can wiggle them in my socks, feel all the toes, windshield-wiper my feet. Ankles, feet, toes: good. My butt, my legs: good. This is where I usually stop for a breath and decide how much further I want to go.

Hands, wrists, elbows: okay, even though my arms are pretty beat up. Mom says I'm tenderized meat from the shoulder down, but today, they don't hurt.

Neck, jaw, lips, eye sockets, nose, back of my head: all good.

It's that area between my neck and my butt, I don't want to test.

I move my right hand along my chest from left shoulder to nipple, then down to my belly. My body feels like a skeleton, but nothing hurts on that side. I run my left hand down the other side, hitting the bandaged place where the port used to be, the scar under my ribs. Those places are tingly.

I lie back and pull the blanket up to my chin, then cross my hands over my chest, like a vampire in a comic book.

18.

Hello?

It's her voice, but not the voice I know. Or used to know. It's deeper, more largo, my piano teacher would say.

Yes, this is she.

The voice I know has always been a quiet voice, but in a brighter key. C major, not B flat.

Yes, of course. I've been waiting for your call.

She hasn't lowered her voice for my benefit. She sounds as if she's had a bad cold. If she had to yell "fire" right now, she would only squeak.

I see you.

She's right here next to me, I see her, but she seems so far away. Her words fall like stars, one by one, burning out before I can hold them together into the shape of a sentence.

Yes, I'm here.

I forget why.

He seems to be comfortable. His color is better.

Yes, I remember.

The list today starts with my toes, where it never hurts.

His temperature is stable. Just under one hundred and one since this morning.

My toes.

You've already talked to his nurse?

My toes. My ankles.

Yes, yes, I know. And the latest blood work?

My ankles. My legs. I flex the muscles in my legs, but they feel loose like the licorice ropes at the ball park.

Yes. Of course.

My fingers, my hands, my arms. Mom says they look like tenderized meat, but they don't hurt.

Then we resume treatment after the infection is completely gone?

I remember.

How many weeks?

It hurts where the tubes are. But only if I move. There's the one in my side and the one in my wiener. I cried when that one went in.

And then we start over?

If I don't move, I don't feel anything. I pretend that the air mattress on my bed is floating in the ocean, drifting up and down as the waves form. It makes me a little dizzy. The roar of the ocean rings in my ears.

Thank you. Yes, we'll talk tomorrow.

I feel her fingers on my face. They're wet. I taste the salt of my own tears. Her words attach to me, one by one and then fall away.

One of us is playing the piano. It can't be me, my fingers are here, in bed. Cold. Almost blue with cold. The pianist is my mother. She plays in a way that melts the notes into each other. I am bathed her music.

She is playing Schubert. A piece I don't know how to play. Yet.

It's hard to imagine my mother learning to play the piano. Everything she does she just does. She was born building companies and playing the piano.

19.

I knew why she was calling and what she was going to say before I hit the green button on my phone. The statement would be declarative, past tense, unalloyed with adjective or apology. But in the moment, I couldn't hear — or at least couldn't retain — any of the words. I just remember the rumbling roar of a furnace, of an engine, of sluicing water that deafened my ears to her voice and to the percussive ambiance of the airport security screening area.

Right in front of me, bags were being slammed onto short conveyor belts. Wands were whooping and beeping as they were drawn along outstretched arms. Broken plastic luggage wheels scraped linoleum. Mouths of all sizes shaped a slurry of conversation. I heard nothing.

I looked down at the phone in my right hand and felt my left press the headset earpiece firmly into my ear. For a second, I thought I was having a stroke. The aura of a blackout was advancing without application of drugs or alcohol. I slipped off my jacket as I passed my phone from hand to hand.

“Wyatt?” The voice at the other end of this tunnel was clear, but foreign. I wouldn’t have recognized it if I hadn’t seen Charly’s name on the screen. Her tone was lower, flatter. A certain quality – a brightness, the confidence I knew – was missing. She sounded spent.

“Yes,” I said. “I am so— “

My brain thumbed through its thesaurus for higher-value synonyms for “sorry” and “loss,” while Charly filled in the blanks.

“I know,” she said. “He was very brave, my little—“ She stopped herself, probably to look through that same thesaurus for words she could share with a colleague, someone not a member of her family, not a lifelong friend, not a husband or father.

“Elijah was tough guy, but that infection was a wildfire. The only good news is, once it got rolling, he had no idea what was happening.”

“I leave Detroit in about twenty minutes,” I told her. “Want me to make some calls or handle anything?”

I’ll need you to manage the offices and the task boards for a few more days. Cancel any travel you have next week. I’m not sure when I’ll be back in. Probably Tuesday or Wednesday.” I remembered it was Thursday. I shook my head and rubbed my eyes. “I’ll send an email around to the team. And I’ll get to our clients.”

“I can handle clients,” I said. “I’ll send texts tonight and follow up in the morning.”

“Thanks, Wyatt.”

The conversation ended and the roar resumed, wrapping my head like a tight bandage. I was seeing everything through gauze when I looked up from my phone. I slipped the device back into my messenger bag and sat down hard on the metal bench behind me.

“You alright, dear?” An older woman, about my grandmother’s age, was next to me. Her brown eyes burrowed into mine when I turned toward her. Before she could fish a Kleenex or aspirin or a cough drop out of her shiny red handbag, I shook my head.

“I’m fine. Just got some sad news about a sick friend,” I said. I took in a deep breath and let it go.

“Looks like you need a drink before your flight,” she said

“No time,” I said. Jesus. Was I being hit on? “My gate’s out in concourse C.”

“Here,” she said. She rummaged in her deep bag. “I have scads of these Delta and United drink coupons. They expire next month, and I can’t use them all.”

I drew two wrinkled Delta coupons from her fist. My upper lip was doing some uncontrollable dance as I smiled at her.

“Thank you,” I said. “These will help.”

It was almost nine p.m. when my Lyft ride dropped me in front of Cabana. I figured I’d spend a few hours in the office to make up for my passing out on the plane and to get as much done as I could for Charly tonight. I yanked my duffel out of the Prius’s hatchback and rearranged the messenger bag hanging off my shoulder. As I approached the door – a new, clear-glass door, a replacement for the frosted one that had been there before I left for Washington and Detroit – a security guard stepped out of a black SUV parked at the curb.

“Need some ID,” he said.

“ID? I work here,” I said. “I’ve got keys to this place.”

“We’re in lock down,” he said. “There’s been some problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“I can’t give you any details. I just need to see my ID.”

“If you’re not going to let me go in, why do you need to see my ID?” I opened my wallet anyway and the guard unhooked a long barreled black flashlight from his belt. He shined it at my face, then at my driver’s license.

“Wyatt Melohn.” He pronounced it “Mel-hawn” and I didn’t correct him. He turned off the light. “I’m sorry Mr. Melohn, but you’re going to jail.”

“Excuse me?” I pulled out my office keys and crouched down to open the door.

“I’m supposed to call the police now, Mr. Melohn. There’s a warrant out for your arrest.”

“What?” My key jammed halfway into the new lock and I couldn’t understand what could have happened in the five or six hours since I’d boarded my flight. The pieces weren’t fitting together fast enough. I scooped up my bags and caught the edge of a piece of glass

under my fingernail as my hand grazed the sidewalk. “Jesus. I’ve been out of town for the last four days. What the hell could I have done? I don’t even have any outstanding tickets.”

I peered into the office. From what I could see in the darkened space, nothing was in disarray. Monitors were where they belonged. I could just make out the profile of computer towers under a few of the desks. Bicycles were still hanging in the back. The rent-a-cop punched numbers into his mobile phone, too many numbers to be 911.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll go. You don’t have to call anyone. This will all be straightened out in the morning.”

The guard kept the phone to his ear as I turned toward the corner. Once I was just out of his line of sight, I peeked back around the edge of the building. The guard was still holding the phone to his head as he slid into the driver’s seat of the SUV.

I hustled down the dark residential block between Judah and Irving. Outerlands was still open, but the restaurant was quiet. I let myself in the side door and waved to Rufus, the house manager.

“Hey,” I said. “I just need to check a few things on my laptop. I’ll be out of here in five minutes.”

“Kay,” he said. “Want a glass of wine? Menu? Kitchen’s about to close.”

“Sure,” I said. “Thanks.”

I sat down at a narrow two-top and pulled my laptop out of my bag. While the machine booted up, I scrolled through my phone apps. Since I’d left Detroit, there were no new voice messages, no emails, no Cmails, no incoming messages of doom of any kind. Nothing had come through from Charly or anyone else at Cabana.

From the laptop, I logged into the company’s virtual private network, then tried logging into the Cabana server. When my access credentials failed, I tried my admin login. That one also failed.

My hands hovered over the keyboard, shaking.

Rufus came out with a wine glass and half-empty bottle of Cabernet.

“On the house. Big spender brought it in and left it,” he said. “Hey, your hand’s bleeding.”

There were splotches and smears all over the keyboard. I hadn't noticed.

Rufus brought me a glass of water and a stack of paper napkins. I wiped the blood off my hands and pressed a clean napkin into the cut on my finger, then I texted my Detroit counterpart.

*Hey, having trouble getting into the server. Was there a problem this afternoon?
/Wyatt*

I could access my own Cabana screen, check email, and see the Post-it board. That was working, so the server had to be doing its job. I just didn't have administrative access to the brains of the operation.

The last email I'd received was around 5:00 local time, it was from Ric asking me to confirm if I'd be in the office Friday, which would be tomorrow. The Post-it board was largely unchanged from when I'd left the office a few days ago. I pored over the tasks to see what had been completed. Marco and Jeremy had not moved any of their Post-its, which was odd. They were usually the ironmen of board clearing.

New passwords issued this morning after you left. Check your Cmail. /Boon

The last couple of diners had left Outerlands and the staff was starting to ramp up its nightly clean up.

*Thanks. Will check. Laptop dying. Can you check to see if you have access
to Cabana and MyCabana files? /Wyatt*

I stared at the screen.

Cabana yes. MyCabana no. /B

Shit. I fired up the MyCabana app on my phone, logged in my ID and password. The feed was empty. I clicked the App Store icon and scrolled down. MyCabana had been relisted and was the Top Free App. MyCabana had never been in the top fifty and now it was ahead of Netflix, YouTube, Google, and Facebook.

I deleted the MyCabana app from my phone and downloaded a new copy, nodding to the impatient wait staff as I sat there, taking up space. Once in, I created a made-up profile.

The software didn't recognize my handset identification, so for all the server knew, I was a new user.

The MyCabana feed was a waterfall of bad shit. Streaming video of kids cutting half-moons and swastikas into flesh, hairy fingers groping children, grim unwatchable sex acts, ropes, guns, zip ties, more knives. I didn't need to unmute my phone; I could imagine the screaming.

I had to call Charly. This couldn't wait till morning.

She didn't pick up her mobile phone. Her home line went straight to voicemail. So, I tried her mobile again, then punched in a text message to her. Before I hit send, I stopped and backspaced over the characters.

In the bottom of my bag was one of the Cabana iPhone 3 prototypes we'd been playing with. I only had Elijah's number programmed into it. I dialed.

Somewhere it was ringing – unless the battery had conked out. I listened and held my breath.

“Wyatt?” Charly sounded even more tired. “What are you doing? I can't — ”

“I know. I hate this, but there's something going on with MyCabana.” My heart pounded as I told her what I'd seen in the last ten minutes.

“Okay, let me take a look.”

“Did you hire the security guard?”

“What security guard?”

I told her about the new office door, the guard, the warrant for my arrest.

“No. I know nothing about any of that. There's some kind of burglary in play or a very misguided mutiny in our ranks.”

I listened while she tapped a keyboard, stopped, tapped some more, stopped.

“I'm not getting onto the server. We need to get the servers and the mirrored back up out of there.”

“Download a fresh MyCabana app to your iPhone,” I told her.

There was silence at her end of the line while she hunted up her iPhone and logged onto the app.

“Jesus,” was all she said.

“Should I call the police?”

“That’s not going to get you through the front door. Let me think.”

I stood up and paced out the side door of the restaurant, to the curb and back. The fog was thick, but I couldn’t feel the cold.

“Where are you now?”

“Outerlands, but they’re closing.”

“Stay there. I’ll call you back on my mobile.”

“No. Let’s keep these messages on the iPhone 3s.”

She was probably nodding. Finally, she said. “Okay. Hold tight.”

Ten minutes later, I got a call on my Cabana phone.

“Shareen’s son is going to swing by to pick you up in a few minutes. Go with him. He’ll help you get in.”

“Shareen’s son?”

“Sonny. That guy next door you share cigarettes with.”

“What?”

“It’s a night of cruel surprises. I’ve got to go.”

Almost before I could hit the button and throw my laptop back into my bag, a faded red Saturn sedan turned the corner and bore down on Outerlands. He idled across the street as I ran up the block and crossed behind the car. I recognized the driver as the Cabana neighbor.

“Hey, I said, as I jumped into the passenger seat.

“Wyatt?”

“I should have known you’re Shareen’s son.”

“Yeah, Mom owns the building next to Cabana. In fact, she owns all the buildings between Cabana and Mimosa.”

I nodded. “She’s a remarkable woman,” I said. “Why is she still working so hard running that joint?”

“What else she gonna do?” he said. “Anyway, the restaurant keeps her busy and keeps her out of my business.”

We came back around the corner slowly.

“Put your head down, he said. I complied. Soon he was reaching for a door opener and we were gliding into the garage of the two-flat apartment building next to Cabana. I waited till I heard the door close before I raised my head.

“The security dude was in his car when I drove in. He didn’t even look up.”

I left my bags in the Saturn and popped out into the jammed garage. I followed Sonny into a dark hallway, feeling my way along paper-taped drywall. He stopped, unlocked a door, and switched on an overhead light. His apartment was as jumbled as the garages.

“Let me get some tools,” he said.

I followed him into a back bedroom, piled to the ceiling with unmarked brown corrugated boxes and plastic laundry baskets overflowing with papers, extension cords, audio cables, car stereo parts, and home electronics of every kind. There, laid out like guns and ammo in a police bust were six different drills, hand-held saws, cordless screwdrivers, bits, wire cutters, rasps, and a lot of stuff I couldn’t identify.

“I do have keys,” I said.

“Yeah, but you never know.”

Sonny dumped the contents of one of the green plastic laundry baskets onto the floor and refilled it with a couple drills and a few handfuls of bits. He threw in one of the circular saws. “Just in case,” he said. He put a coiled heavy-duty extension cord over his shoulder.

I followed him to another cluttered bedroom, then out a sliding glass door onto a broken tile patio.

“You should have your landlord fix this,” I said.

“Sure.” He wasn’t listening to me; he was looking at the fence between his property and Cabana’s yard. He disappeared for a few minutes, then came back with a couple of aluminum ladders.

I took the taller one, maybe six feet tall, and set it up alongside the fence. As I climbed it, I took inventory of the back of the building. Bathroom window, metal doors, roofline skylights. I was overdressed for this caper.

Sonny passed me the other ladder and I positioned it on the other side of the fence. “Come on,” I said.

I hopped over, snagging my pants on a grape stake, and took the bulky plastic basket from his arms. As I moved off the second ladder, Sonny, straddled the fence, then made his way down into the Cabana yard.

I took the keys out of my pocket and climbed the steps to the deck.

“Fuck. They’ve chained it.”

A heavy link chain had been threaded around the handles of the double doors and padlocked inside. I tried the bathroom window – which I always left open after a shower. It was solidly locked. I turned to Sonny, who had started unpacking his materiel.

“What’s under that window?” he asked.

“The shower. Tiled wall.”

“How far over does it go?”

“Pretty much all the way. “

“Guess I’ll have to show you how we do it in the big city.”

“Wait! What about the noise?”

We stopped and scanned the dirty windows of the row of flats behind us.

“Let me see if the key to the alley works, we could go directly into the office from there.”

The backdoor to the alley, actually an enclosed passageway where garbage cans and mops were stored, was unlocked. I walked carefully to the door at the street end and peered at the security car through wooden slats. The guard was still inside, illuminated by a few dashboard lights. He was asleep.

“Okay,” I said, returning to Sonny. “If we get through about here” — I indicated the middle of the wall — “we should be okay,”

But Sonny wasn't listening. He was tapping on the crawl space access panel, an almost invisible doorway wide enough to push the laundry basket through.

"If we go up from underneath, we'll make less noise and will be less likely to hit electrical or plumbing."

I nodded.

He kicked in the crawlspace panel and pulled a flashlight from his basket. There was not much clearance between the dirt and the joists. Maybe three feet.

I grabbed the coiled orange power cord from his shoulder and went back to the yard to plug it into a receptacle on the deck

Sonny passed me a pair of plastic goggles and pulled his down over his eyes. He crawled through the opening and stayed on all fours. I held the flashlight while he found a position that we guessed was outside the bathroom in the locker vestibule.

"Should be good," I said. "What do you need?"

"This won't take long. Just hold the flashlight."

Sonny ate sawdust as the circular saw neatly cut through subflooring and linoleum. He pushed the big square trap door he'd created up and into the office.

"Okay," he said. "You're in."

I rummaged through the plastic bin for a cordless drill and a cordless screwdriver. I picked through the bits.

"Hey," he said.

"Just getting supplies."

"Bring the whole basket."

I dropped the tools back into the basket and pushed it through the crawl space opening onto the dirt under the building, then shoved it ahead as I crawled toward Sonny. I felt the knees of my pants split open.

"I'll go in first and deal with the alarm," I said.

Hoisting myself up, I banged my exposed knee against the wood framing of the hole, drawing blood but not causing any pain. Once on my feet, I walked quickly around the

perimeter of the office toward the alarm keypad. My security code hadn't been blocked. They hadn't thought of everything.

I looked around the room. The light from the sodium vapor streetlight right outside the front door would be adequate for what we had to do and would keep the security guard unaware of our presence. I went back to where Sonny hovered just below the floor boards.

"Hey, could you take a couple servers over to Charly's? If you can do that, I can drill out the drives here while you're gone."

"Sure, put them in the basket."

I took the stairs to the mezzanine two at a time. The lock had been replaced. I went back to Sonny.

"Any trick to cracking a digital lock?"

"One of those keypad locks?" Sonny's belly scraped the side of the hole as he pushed up into the office.

"It's upstairs."

We slunk past the kitchen like a pair of cartoon characters and then ran up the stairs to the server room. Sonny punched in a series of numbers, then put in a series of six ones.

Okay, that should do it.

I tried the door. It was still locked.

"The new code is 1-1-1-1-1-1," he said.

Once in, I pulled four servers off the wall. Two of them went into Sonny's arms, I carried the others. After he'd jumped back through the hole in the floor, I passed him the laundry basket full of servers.

"Want a hand getting them over the fence?"

"Yeah, maybe. I guess these are pretty delicate."

We crawled out and muscled the servers from one side of the fence to the other. The plastic basket sagged with the weight of the machines.

I pulled a business card out of my wallet and wrote Charly's address on the back.

"Go to this address," I said.

"Okay," he said. "See you in about half an hour."

I slithered back under the building, in the dark this time. I'd lost the flashlight who knows where.

Back in the office, I made the rounds, computer by computer, unscrewing the backs of the quad systems, removing the drives, drilling through each one, and moving on around the horseshoe. When I was done, I took my hard drive and Charly's from our respective machines. The back-up server was already on its way to Lake Street.

I took a gym bag from under Ric's desk, filled it with our drives and threw in the rest of his coca leaf tea. There were a couple of refurb iPhones in Charly's file cabinet. I grabbed those, then turned to make my exit. It was only a little after eleven.

In the laser printer behind Ric's desk was a stack of documents. I grabbed those, too, zipped the bag and dropped it down into the dirt.

I had ferried the gym bag and the tools over the fence and had fished the ladder out of the Cabana yard by the time Sonny got back to his apartment.

"How's our friend doing out there?"

"Sleeping like a baby. Nice work if you can get it," Sonny said.

"What work do you do?" I asked him.

"Pretty much what we did tonight," he said.

I nodded.

We made it back to Charly's before eleven-thirty. As I got to the top of the stairs at the Lake Street house, I realized I'd forgotten about Elijah. For the last three hours, I'd been on autopilot, too busy to think about him or Charly.

My stomach flipped. This was the last thing she needed.

Her mother opened the door. She had blue circles under her eyes.

"I'm sorry to intrude like this," I said.

"She's upstairs," Elinor Bancroft said. "At least this is taking her mind off —"

We held each other's eyes until she started shaking her head. I put my arms out, then stopped. I was covered in dirt. She embraced me anyway and I felt my tears overflow. She smelled like Charly. I didn't want to be there.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “He was a wonderful kid.”

“Shareen is in the kitchen,” she said, “if you’re hungry.”

I walked down the hallway.

“How is she?” I asked Shareen.

“Not good,” she said. “When she called me a few hours ago, I figured it would be a long night for her one way or another.” She poured coffee into a glass mug. “I brought some enchiladas and pork buns, if you’re hungry.”

“Not now,” I said.

“Then have some breakfast in a few hours. I’ll be here.”

I started up the back stairs. I’d never been upstairs in the house before and had only seen Elijah’s room through the nest cam.

As I walked the length of the second-floor hallway, I looked into each of three bedrooms. At the back was the master, then a guest room, then a den lined with books. No Charly. I headed up another flight. At the very top of the house were two doors. One was closed: Elijah’s room. The other was Charly’s snug little office.

“This is something,” she said, turning from her two 32-inch monitors.

Charly had the public feed, a four-square display of the current most-shared videos running on the right. It was like watching a war play out in real time.

“So, why is it still happening?” I asked.

“They weren’t running it off a local server,” she said. “I’m just about there with the code to take it down, but I’m going to need a little more time to hack into the service hosting it.”

“What can I do?”

“We could attack the app through each phone carrier.”

“We can booby trap the videos.”

She nodded. “You’ve got that?”

“Yeah.” I took my laptop out of my messenger bag and put it on the long built-in desk next to her. I hadn’t coded a virus since high school – and that was a pretty lame one that only knocked out the school grading system.

“You might want to wash your hands.”

I turned toward the door where the Jack and Jill bathroom adjoining Elijah’s room must have been.

“You can go downstairs. There’s a bathroom off the hall,” she said.

There was no time to shower, so I washed my hands, face, and neck.

When I got back to the desk, Charly had set me up with one of her monitors and another quad machine. We worked the rest of the night without saying a word. When my video virus was ready to launch, I looked over and saw that Charly had built a four-second photo montage, a little count-down reel that would be her signature. Before she let it go, I looked over her code files. She’d named the virus package Elijah.

Charly calmly picked up the phone before dawn to wake her attorney and start dictating licensing and ownership agreements for each of Cabana’s existing clients. She would be setting up a technology consortium owned by Cabana’s twenty-five existing clients. If they agreed to her generous one-dollar buy-out terms, the consortium would take responsibility for the development of all future iterations of the software and server hardware and would pay fixed Hula language-licensing royalties to the Kealani Charles Bancroft Trust. If they wanted to collectively or individually hire any of the Detroit, Huntsville or Albuquerque teams, it was up to them. Charly would consult to the consortium at large as a board member.

Her instructions regarding the immediate discharge of all San Francisco employees were simple. An attorney, our outside talent consultant, and some real security muscle would be on site at Cabana by eight a.m. with paychecks through Friday. Today. Satellite offices would stay intact for a few weeks, but everyone would be on paid leave.

Even two floors away, I could smell cinnamon and butter and bacon in the kitchen. I left Charly on the phone with Admiral McHenry and made my way down the back stairs.

“We’re done,” I told Shareen.

She poured a fresh cup of coffee for me and put her hand to my face as I took it. The steam from the mug stung my eyes. While she plated a slab of coffee cake, I propped open

the swinging door between the kitchen and dining room. There, in the faint morning light were the remnants of Elijah's last few days: An empty hospital bed, an empty I.V. stand, a silent monitor with its leads dangling on the ground. A floor lamp moved from the living room and two dining room chairs set at odd angles.

I turned back to the kitchen and pulled my phone out of my pocket. I fired up the MyCabana app and watched as video played. It wasn't a scheduled suicide, the gang-rape of a child, or the evisceration of a cat, it was a four-second montage of Elijah from birth to age seven. Growing, growing, gone. And the screen went blank.

While I ate breakfast, I took a call from a criminal attorney referred by Charly's law firm. I told him what I knew and by the time I'd taken a shower, he had sent me instructions to meet him at the Hall of Justice and to bring all of my travel receipts with me.

I went back upstairs to use Charly's printer. She hadn't come down for breakfast and she wasn't in her office. But the door to Elijah's room was ajar. I looked in and saw her curled up on her side on his bed, her arms around a pillow pulled into her chest.

20.

The following Monday, two short notices ran in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Cabana, MyCabana Abruptly Shuttered

San Francisco technology start-up Cabana LLC, a secure communications platform used by Fortune 500 corporations and government agencies, ceased business operation over the weekend. Calls to the company's headquarters in the City's Sunset District were not returned.

Cabana's owner, Charles Bancroft Carlin, is the developer of the languages Lava and Hulu.

Elijah Bancroft Carlin**2011-2017**

Beloved son, grandson, nephew, and friend, Elijah died Thursday morning at home in San Francisco. He had been diagnosed with Ewing's Sarcoma just 10 days earlier.

A second grader at Stuart Hall who loved the ocean; his collections of sea shells and buttons; and any meal that included a milk shake and French fries.

In lieu of flowers, please consider a donation to the California Academy of Sciences or to the UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Auxiliary.

Part III. 2019**1.**

The last time I saw her — the last time I would ever see her — was at a little espresso joint on Noriega near Nineteenth Avenue. I was doozy from the usual sleep deprivation routine and desperately needed to revive my synapses with an Americano red eye and the kind of long, hot shower considered illegal in Northern California. An emergency call out in the Avenues had kept me from my home rituals.

My olfactory radar was on high alert, though. The coffee shop's moist environment, heavy with bursts of scalded milk and acrid dark roast, made my eyelashes throb. Then an unmistakable rush of scents that I had long and unwittingly associated with Charly set the hair on my wrists twitching. It was a syrupy citrus perfume, like maple-infused lemon or maybe pink grapefruit rind preserved in pheromone-soaked honey. Hers was the fragrance that hits you on the tarmac in Kauai, minus the jet fuel burn off.

I knew how close she was before I heard her.

"I've got you, Wyatt," she said. Her voice was lower than I remembered, but the tone, commanding and confident, was familiar.

Charly leaned into the counter to order my double shot red eye and her gunpowder green tea. Dishwasher detergent had erased all but the faintest outline of the fluorescent orange Cabana logo on the brushed stainless-steel travel mug she handed to the clerk before tapping her phone on the payment terminal.

"Living out here now?" she asked.

"No, I'm actually renting from Shareen over on Irving. I've got my own king-size bed and everything. Just heading to a job on Ortega."

She smiled and for a moment, I recognized the woman who'd hired me twelve years ago, even though nearly everything about Charly was different. Her short, spiky surfer cut had grown out again and now it hung in a straight, coppery curtain that grazed her shoulders. Her eyes, blanched gray with grief the last time I saw her, had turned a

transparent aqua that hinted at their original deep azure color. Her brows, slick as wet seal fur under a smear of Vaseline were shot through with flecks of platinum.

She looked younger and, even though she was roughly my height, she seemed more compact than I remembered. She'd regained a few pounds and a fresh dusting of freckles had spread from cheek to cheek across the bridge of her nose. Her pearls, tucked into the collar of her white shirt, were just visible at one side of her neck. She had a black nylon backpack hitched over one shoulder of her tailored black microfiber jacket. Skinny jeans accentuated the long muscles in her thighs and calves. She wore black Italian loafers with Japanned hardware details. All as usual.

An employee ID card dangled from the purple lanyard around her neck. Her head was cocked to the right in the picture. The name above her signature read: Lani Bancroft.

She cocked her head. "What's on Ortega?" she asked.

"I've changed careers." I pointed to where my name and a plunger were embroidered in red, yellow, and green thread on my navy twill vest.

Her left eyebrow flew up toward her hairline. "Really?"

"I know," I said. "I just couldn't go back to it after Cabana. How about you, Lani?"

"Keeping a low profile," she said. "While I regroup."

I guessed as much.

2.

She had shut down Cabana officially two weeks after Elijah died. I'd stayed on to clear out the offices, put furniture and hard-drive stripped machines on Craigslist, and hand the keys over to her leasing agent. The personal effects she'd left in the file cabinet under her desk had amounted to one small Amazon box full of random supplies: eye drops, ear drops, cough drops, a stack of business cards, mechanical pencil lead, a pair of swim goggles, a jar of Vaseline, the insulated coffee mug she held in her hand. None of it was important, but I delivered it to her Lake Street house anyway the afternoon she'd returned from Elijah's memorial service in Hilo.

That afternoon, as I tripped up the front steps of the white Georgian-style wedding cake house, I forgot what I'd planned to say. The door cam alerted Charly to my arrival before I could reach the bell.

"Hey," she had said through the intercom. "Be right there."

Through the beveled glass flanking the black lacquered front door, I could see a stack of moving boxes, packed and taped, at the end of the long hall connecting the foyer with the kitchen. Coats were draped over the newel post at the bottom of the stairs. The pendant light fixture that hung just inside the front door was missing its elaborate glass shade.

Charly opened the door after no more than a minute. She was still in the loose sweats I imagined she'd worn on the plane. The oversized pants and zip-front hoodie made her look like a child in adult clothing. I remember thinking that any of her clothes would have been baggy on her then. I stepped into the front hall and gave her the box I'd brought. She took it in both hands and, without lifting the lid, added it to a tower of cartons behind the door.

"Thanks, Wyatt," she had said. "I appreciate all you've done."

It had only taken a few days to inventory and liquidate the contents of the San Francisco office. Another week to fly out to Detroit, then Huntsville, then Albuquerque to coordinate the demolition and dissolution projects in those Cabana offices. Recyclers in each city had picked up the hollowed-out machines; on-demand haulers had dragged the desks and chairs and lamps away. Sonny had picked through what was left in San Francisco, a bonus on top of the cash reward I'd delivered to him on Charly's behalf.

All that was left of her company was in the box I'd delivered to Lake Street: a few dozen drilled out hard drives and some pens and blank yellow pads from her desk drawers.

"Least I could do," I said. "The gig's given me a couple weeks to organize my job search."

"You shouldn't have any problem."

"Three interviews next week." In reality, I'd already registered for the apprenticeship program at the plumber's union. I don't know why I lied then.

"Great. Feel free to use me as a reference — if that seems like a good thing."

“People ask about you,” I said. This part was true. “You’re a legend.”

“I’m sure,” she had said.

I glanced around her living room, taking a quick inventory of what was missing, presumably packed in those taped and marked boxes in the hall. Bookshelves flanking the fireplace were nearly empty and the mantel had been cleared to make room for a gold-toned metal canister dressed with a garland of shiny ti leaves. Amid a pile of small white shells and mother-of-pearl buttons was a framed photograph of Charly cheek to cheek with a young Elijah, the two smiling the beatific smiles of parent and child.

“We didn’t scatter him,” she said. “I couldn’t leave him there alone.”

I walked toward the fireplace to read the inscription on the urn.

Elijah Bancroft Carlin
2011-2017

“Ugly, isn’t it? Looks like it was manufactured to be shot into space.”

The brassy matte finish was scuffed on one side. I traced the rough side with my fingertips and felt the sand that still clung to the base. For a moment I imagined the two of them, mother and son, reaching the break beyond the Kohala Lighthouse and piercing the crest of a wave, as she’d told me she’d promised him.

I picked up the picture.

“He was about four there. You remember,” she said.

Of course. I remembered Elijah as an infant, as a toddler, as a precocious preschooler, as the little man he became. He was the Cabana mascot those last few years, known to all of us between office appearances as the silent webcam avatar in the lower right-hand corner of Charly’s monitor.

“How was it?” I asked.

“Terrible,” she had said. “And I was pretty sure terrible was already over.”

Somewhere a noisy clock or timer was ticking, meting out the seconds between thoughts and words. Motes dancing in refracted sunlight went retrograde, then tumbled forward again.

“Did Ben fly back with you?” I asked.

“Marriage is a competitive sport for some people,” she said. “Ben stayed in Bali. He said they would have a prayer service there.”

If I’d asked more questions, she would have answered them. That’s the way she was. I could have asked her for ten thousand dollars, for a copy of her encryption algorithm, but I couldn’t find the words to ask her about her plans. At least not then.

“Oh, would you make a Goodwill drop for me?”

“Sure,” I said.

She turned and ran up the stairs, trailing her hand through dust on the walnut balustrade.

When Charly returned, she had two big blue Ikea shopping bags in each hand. I let out a sigh when I saw that the bags were full of her clothes and not Elijah’s.

“I wouldn’t have guessed that you had this much fluffy stuff,” I said. Had I seen her wear anything other than dark indigo wash jeans or black pants with her starched white shirts? Did she own more than one black jacket, one black sweater? Maybe there were multiples of those staples in some vast closet upstairs, but in any case, there had never been any indication that brightly colored dresses — evening clothes judging by the volume, the texture, the extravagance — existed for her. One white dress, not quite buried in the mix, had to have been what she wore the day she married Ben.

“Well, when I’m not working, I do branch out.”

“Yeah, this is an especially good look for you.” I nodded toward her baggy sweatpants and bare feet.

“Look who’s talking,” she said.

“I’ll drop these on my way out to the office tomorrow,” I said. “Need a receipt?”

“Nah.”

She gave me two of the bags and helped me load the other two into the trunk of the rental car I’d be expensing on my last invoice. She stood on the sidewalk while I backed out of her driveway and watched me disappear around the corner at Eighth Avenue.

When I received a 1099 tax form at the beginning of the next year, the return address was out in the eighteen-hundred block of the Great Highway.

3.

“Did Ben keep the house?” I asked as we waited for my espresso shots to be pulled and dropped into a rigid paper cup.

“Yep. He can afford it,” she said.

“What about you?” I asked again.

“Working for a living.” She flashed the ID card and this time I read the name of the company. “Got a little house out by Ocean Beach, where I can smell the surf.”

When the W-2 arrived two years ago, I rode my bike out along the promenade that runs between the Pacific and a salt-battered row of mid-century bungalows. Hers was freshly painted, but non-descript.

“Getting out much?”

“Just about every morning. I have an outdoor shower behind the house and a couple extra wetsuits. You should try it.”

“Nah. I’d be shark bait.”

A barista pushed our drinks across the counter on the other side of the register. As I reached for a corrugated koozie for my cup, Charly grabbed my wrist.

Coffee splattered to the floor as her fingers found the mother of pearl shirt button cross-stitched on the faded chambray above my cuff.

She forced air through her nostrils and looked into my eyes, her grief-scarred irises bright.

“He tagged about six of my shirts,” I said. “Some jeans and one pair of chinos.”

She had nodded.

“I still find buttons in my pockets,” she said. “And I’m surprised every time.”

She took a tentative taste of her tea, then snapped the sippy lid closed and holstered the cup in the side pocket of her backpack. We walked out of the coffee shop and headed toward the corner where my yellow Wyatt the Plumber van was parked in a red zone, lights flashing.

“Let me know — “

“Yeah,” she had said. “I’ll see you.”

I finished my red eye and dropped the empty cup into a trash can, then turned to watch Charly walking briskly toward a big white tech bus on Nineteenth. As she took her backpack off her shoulder, the sun glinted off a constellation of mother-of-pearl buttons cascading down the back of her jacket.

The brilliance hurt my eyes.

#