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Don't be evil.

Mr. Sinister cruised the length of the mall like a hungry shark hunting prey. It was Saturday afternoon and he was swimming against the tide of weekend shoppers. The instructions were to strike when the place was busy. This would give him more chance to find what he was looking for...and more chance to slip undetected, back into the sea of humanity after the deed was done, but now he was here, all he sensed were more eyes. More witnesses. More chance of getting caught.

He swung past the great glass-walled atrium of the human aquarium, that's when he caught sight of what he was searching for. Early teens, hair casually brushed back behind her ear revealing a tiny white earbud. Distracted by her phone, changing music or texting a friend, she didn't notice him rapidly reducing the gap between them. She was already standing near the entrance, a quick strike and he could have her outside and in the van before she or anyone else realized what was happening.

He increased pace.

The girl still hadn't noticed him close within range. She looked up from the screen. Smiled at someone. A friend swam into view through the glass doors at the mall entrance. The girl pulled out one earphone and the two of them turned into the dress shop opposite.

He swept past the storefront. They were safe inside.

He kept walking, reached the escalators to the lower floor, and descended to the depths of the food court in the hope of finding a fresh target.

Scouring the floor, taking in the smells, pretending to peruse the meals on offer, while surveying the positions of security cameras.

He was getting hungry and impatient. He needed to remain calm. He purchased some fries, sat alone at a table in a blind spot at the edge of the food hall, and waited.

He upended a bottle of ketchup. Red sauce splattered across fries like wounds. Perhaps today was not the day. Maybe he should return tomorrow? But that was not the plan which had been agreed with the Marketing man. A contract was a contract. So he waited.

A half-hour passed. The light faded from the lower floor carpark outside. The murmur of shoppers on the floors above began to die. The crowds were starting to thin.

He watched a young girl in a yellow and red Charcoal Chicken uniform wiping down tables. Her blonde hair was tied back in a ponytail revealing delicate unadorned ears. As she worked her way closer she leaned over the tables and he felt his eyes drawn to the half-lowered zipper at the front of her blouse. A crisp cut 'V' revealed the top of pale breasts between which an ornate gold cross dangled. He watched mesmerized by the rhythmic back and forth movement of the cross while fragile arms vigorously worked the cloth across the Formica.

Left...bounce...right...bounce.

His gaze traced the alabaster skin of her arms until it reached her hands and he pondered whether she stroked her boyfriend with the same rigor.

He stole a glance back to the counter. The cashiers at the Charcoal Chicken were packing up, leaving the storefront unattended. The girl reached his secluded booth.

"Can I take that?" She pointed to the empty cardboard carton on the table in front of him.

He pushed it toward her. She reached for the box and for an instant he held it, forcing their hands to touch. Her fingers were warm against the coldness of his own. Perhaps it was the warm water from the cleaning cloth. She recoiled and he released the container, allowing her. She was pretty. But she wouldn't do.

He needed to keep moving. Lingering in one spot would attract scrutiny. He continued trawling the mall. Searching. Fishing. Careful to stay in the shadowy still waters at the edges of the plaza. Staying close to the exits, somewhere he could disappear quickly with his catch.

A show finished at the cinema complex. He stopped beneath the red and green LED signs at the base of the stairway pretending to study the upcoming sessions. A group of teenagers drifted past, texting each other in a wave of stale-smelling popcorn. They were too tightly schooled. He needed to find a way to separate one or two from the main shoal. Even then the task would be risky. Perhaps he could follow, wait until they went their separate ways then take one down in the carpark. A few stragglers trailed. His eyes fell on an outlier. A kid on his own, dressed in a designer sweatshirt and carrying the latest phone, one of the large screen models

beyond a practical size to fit easily in a pocket. He checked the direction the adolescent had come from at the top of the stairs. Toward the Gold-class lounge. Rich kid, face scarred with acne, tall, but gangly looking. Not too strong. Too socially awkward to be one of the main crowd but enough of a rebel to sneak out to the movies while mommy and daddy think he's still home studying. The kid brushed past him without even noticing, too busy hunting for something in his open backpack. He pulled out a pair of the latest headphones, emblazoned with the distinctive stylized letter 'T'-logo, placed them over his ears, and switched the on button. Expensive. Noise-cancelling. Perfect.

Think Different

“Gentlemen, it’s fair to say that Transonica Mobile is for the first time in its history facing a crisis,” Graeme Millward announced from his seat at the head of the boardroom table. Behind him, a large overhead screen depicted an image of a bar graph, its colored pillars descending from left to right in a series of grim descending stairs.

“For the last four quarters in a row sales revenue has fallen steadily across all geographic and demographic sectors. This only reinforces the conclusion of our industry partners. The mobile phone market has reached saturation. Our latest model to bring to market, the highly anticipated M series, with nearly two hundred million dollars in research and development, is our most expensive and most technologically advanced handset on the market today. And do you know what gentlemen? So far it’s been a monumental flop.” He paused, to let the gravity of his message sink in to his fellow executive board members. “So where does that leave us?”

The ashen faces around the room stared at the rosewood table in front of them, either assuming the question to be rhetorical or not daring to interrupt and face the wrath of the CEO, a man who’d built this company from a bit player in the market to a multi-billion dollar corporation.

Millward continued. “Development cycles have shortened. We’re bringing new handsets into the market at an ever-increasing pace to keep up with the competition, but the changes are becoming more incremental. A few more megapixels in the cameras. A few more processing cycles in the chipsets. You know what? Nobody cares anymore. Joe public doesn’t want to spend a thousand bucks on a new handset that looks exactly the same as the last one. Unless we can evolve as a company, find new markets, or establish new products, then we might as well be finished.”

His hand reached to remove his glasses. One or two of the stone faces around the table noted the slight trembling in his fingers, perhaps the beginnings of Parkinson's in the aging company patriarch, or perhaps from a resignation that for the first time in the company's history, he no longer knew what to do.

"It's a bloodbath out there." Millward stood and walked slowly to the thirtieth-floor window as if to emphasize his point. He pulled the blind back, exposing a view of the city skyline and continued talking with his back to the others at the table.

"Tomorrow afternoon I have to give an earnings outlook to the AGM. The share price is already in freefall. And it's not just us. Even if we can sell more product, the best case is we manage to grab some of our competitors' market share, or more likely cannibalize our own. We're eating our own company alive!"

His heavy jowls flapped like sails in the wind at this last statement, sending tiny flecks of spittle against the tinted glass of the window. "I'm afraid gentlemen, the outlook is grim."

"I respectfully disagree." Behind him, a figure resplendent in a dark blue Armani suit and matching Hermes tie stood from the table. John Dolion, VP of Marketing strode confidently around the table and pushed a small thumb drive into the laptop at the front of the room. A new series of colorful animated slides burst into view on the projector screen at the end of the boardroom. "Based on my projections, we aren't even close to sales reaching peak."

Millward slammed his fist against the credenza next to him. "Dolion, were you even listening to what I just said?"

"You said we needed to find new markets."

"Yes, but the market's saturated. We've got nowhere to go!"

"What about Youth Wealth?"

"Wealth is already tapped. They've got the money, but there's no desire there to get locked into continuous cycles of upgrades, and as for Youth, there's limited scope to move on price at the entry-level market, and therefore limited potential to increase margin or profit. Besides, they're two extremes of the scale, you're confusing your market demographics."

"I'm not confusing market demographics, Graeme. I'm creating a new one." He clicked the presentation remote in his hand and a new brightly colored slide materialized on screen.

"Youth Wealth."

“Youth Wealth? There’s no such thing as *Youth Wealth*. The wealth is in the older demographic. They’re the ones that can afford the premium end of the market. That’s where the margins are.”

“But that isn’t our target.”

“It isn’t?”

“Those aging baby-boomers may have all the money, but they don’t understand the technology. They have no appreciation of the effort that goes into delivering a new product feature. Why would they? They don’t even use half of them.”

“I don’t care whether they use them or not, so long as they’re prepared to buy them!”

“You said it yourself, they’re not prepared to pay a thousand bucks for a new phone every twelve months that looks the same as the last one. There’s no point in us producing new features they need some kid in a store to demonstrate because they don’t understand them. And they’re no longer receptive to the power of peer pressure of status, of desire. But Youth, the millennials, are.”

“But millennials don’t have money, with the exception of a few spoilt brats, and that’s a small niche.”

“Then we make the niche bigger.”

“There’s no demand.”

“Then we create demand.”

“That simple, huh?”

Dolion shrugged. “Isn’t it?”

There was a collective sniggering around the table.

Millward held up a hand. “Wait. It sounds Dolion’s got a plan, which is more than anyone else here has come up with. So go on John, I’m listening.”

“There are numerous ways you can create demand. Millennial tastes are fickle, granted, and they can change in a heartbeat, but remember they’re still immature.”

“Hard to read.”

“But easy to manipulate. If their tastes change, we change the offering to match and sell them something new. They practically do our job for us. But we can still create demand. Make the phone a status symbol. Make it go viral,” he said, making commas with his fingers. “A thing of beauty is a joy forever. So let’s make our handsets objects of desire.”

“All the desire in the world doesn’t change the fact that these kids don’t have money.”

“Don’t underestimate *these kids*. This is the most educated, most tech-savvy, and above all, the most resourceful generation, ever. *These kids* have grown up for the first time in history home alone while both Mom and Dad are out working to provide for their education, their designer clothes, and the new Volvo in the driveway. They’ve learned right from their first drop off at daycare, how to fend for themselves. They’ll challenge authority. Question old ways of doing things and find new ones. If required, they’re prepared to cheat the system to find a way of getting what they want, and if they desire something sufficiently, they will find a way to get it. All we have to do is make them want it badly enough.”

Millward returned to his seat at the head of the table. “And how exactly do you plan to do that?”

“I have some ideas already in train, but I can’t elaborate on the specifics.”

“Why not?”

“There’s potential...implications. I can’t afford for what we’ve got planned to leak. But I promise you this, if you give me full and complete authority for this campaign, we can turn sales revenues around.”

“What do you need?”

“Give me the seed funding to get started, the authority to hire whoever I need, and three months to implement.”

Millward leaned back in his high backed chair and clasped his hands behind his head. “I think you’re crazy, but then again, what the hell have we got to lose? I’ll give you a month. But Dolion,” he leaned forward again placing his hands on the table, “If you fail, I’ll make sure you go down along with this company.”

“That,” Dolion replied. “Is not going to happen.”

3

Just do it.

Diamond Heights is one of San Francisco's wealthier neighborhoods. Family-friendly, boasting large modern homes occupied by young professionals with access to parks, coffee shops, and the best public schools. On a good day it epitomizes the American dream.

Today was not a good day.

On days like today, it was exposed to the damp winter wind and fog that drifted in from the bay.

It should be called Wuthering Heights, he mused to himself. But with thick fog came the unexpected benefit of reduced visibility, even at this late hour. Nevertheless, he killed the lights and pulled into the curb at the other end of the block. No point in tempting fate. This was a well to do community, and that always meant the chance of security cameras, though he hadn't found any evidence of them on either of his two previous reconnaissance visits. He leaned over to the passenger's side, reached into the glove compartment and retrieved a pair of previously unworn gardening gloves. He'd bought them at a hardware store, a chain brand, on the other side of town he'd visited on another job during the day several weeks ago. They were a cheap make, but he liked the combination of grip and freedom of movement they provided. Thin enough to still feel the sensation of skin through. Most importantly, they were common. He pulled them tight over his fingers, then reached into the glove compartment again and removed the knife. Like the gloves, there was nothing distinguishing about its plain brown wooden handle or the sharpened, edge that curled up at the tip in the traditional Japanese Gyuto style. Nothing special to anyone else perhaps, but to him, she was an old friend. He watched as the streetlight danced along the length of the blade as he held her in his gloved hand. She was his favorite.

He opened the door, stepped from the vehicle, pulling the grey hood over his head and tucked the hand holding the knife carefully into the front pocket of the sweatshirt.

He walked briskly along the sidewalk until he reached his final destination. A two-story weatherboard house which in any other neighborhood would be considered expansive, but by Diamond Heights standards might be described by the local real estate marketers as bijou.

He paused just long enough outside the low iron gate to the narrow pathway leading to the front door to check no one else was around, but at this time of night, the street was deserted. He didn't bother with the latch on the gate. The old rusty hinges screeched. He knew this from an earlier visit. He'd managed to wake one of the occupants of the neighboring houses and had been forced to hastily abandon the undertaking with his thirst unsated.

There would be no such mistakes this time around.

He placed a foot on top of the gatepost and jumped into the yard. Quickly he skirted the front of the building and made his way down the thin access way between the house and the fence to the neighboring property. When he reached the back of the house he looked up to the second floor. The bedroom window was dark and lifeless, but he knew she would be there. There was a faint movement. Despite the cold misty night she'd left the window above slightly ajar and the single net curtain drifted lethargically to and fro in the breeze. She lived here alone. He knew this from her file. She would be in bed and already in a deep slumber before waking early, so she could squeeze in a run through the still darkened streets of the leafy suburb before her fellow residents arose and began their morning commute to Downtown. He knew this because he'd watched her run past his stationary car parked three blocks away the previous Tuesday morning shortly before five-thirty am.

And the Tuesday before that.

On each occasion she'd worn the same body-hugging neon pink sweatshirt over the top of a pair of black compression tights with their familiar swoosh logo. He wondered if it was going to be the same uniform of choice tomorrow morning. Perhaps they were already laid out beside her bed, waiting for the pre-dawn alarm. He'd know soon enough.

Either way, she wasn't going to need them.

He fumbled beneath the pot plant at the back doorway where he knew she kept a spare key wrapped in cling film. He slid the key into the lock, turned it a half-turn and pushed.

Inside, the door opened into a small tiled downstairs laundry. On his left a small pile of clean washing sat neatly folded atop the dryer. The last time he had been here, when he had been forced to leave in a hurry, it had been dirty. He crossed the black and white checked floor,

carefully, calculating his next move like a game of chess. He stopped at the base of the wooden stairway leading to the bedroom upstairs and listened.

Silence.

He savored this moment of absolute stillness. The last instant a decision could be made before events were set in motion and the adrenaline kicked in. Like sex, the real magic wasn't the execution of act itself, but the anticipation. Beyond this point they would both be committed. He felt his fingers curl reflexively around the wooden shaft of the knife in his right hand and started up the stairs.

As he reached the upper landing an ancient floorboard groaned in protest. He froze, listening for any sound of disturbance. At the top of the stairs a passage ran the length of the upper floor. Halfway along, a wedge-shaped patch of light spilled across the floor from an open door on the left. There was only the faint sound of the curtain dragging across a windowsill from inside. Assured she was still sleeping undisturbed he advanced until he stood alongside the doorway.

He peered around the doorframe and into the bedroom. A plain wooden dresser lay to his left. A large mirror hung on the wall opposite the doorway. As he slipped into the room the movement of his silhouette in the mirror caught his eye, and for a split second the thought crossed his mind that he wasn't alone. Instinctively he slid from the moonlight, retreating into the protective blanket of darkness behind the door.

Of course he wasn't alone.

He checked the mirror. From his current vantage he could see the mounded sheets on the bed, rising and falling in a steady rhythmic tide. He could hear her breathing now. Steady repetitive sighs. He reemerged from behind the door. The anticipation, along with his confidence, increasing. He crossed the room, stepping over tights which lay sprawled across the floor like the chalk outline of a body. The top was a light powder blue, not the pink he had watched her wearing the last time. Now he stood alongside the bed, by the window, looking down at the figure half-covered in sheets beneath him. She was wearing a pink satin night slip. Simple, but expensive. It would be a shame to ruin it, but needs must. He watched her breasts gently rising and falling. Her exposed skin shone like alabaster in the moonlight. He took the knife from his pocket and watched it shimmer in the light from the window. He traced a line with it through the air until it came to rest in front of her delicate lips, close enough to see her breath

tracing little lines of condensation along the blade. Writing out a final message in a secret language only spirit could understand. Resting on the nightstand next to her, where he now stood, were four items. A small reading lamp. A novel by a little known author with the picture of the Archangel Gabriel on the cover, a dog-eared sticky note protruding from the pages about half-way through. A glass of water, and a mobile phone. He drew the knife away from her face and picked up the phone. He turned it over in his hands. For a moment he thought about the Marketing man. Perhaps he could kill two birds with one stone? But it wasn't what he was looking for. Not tonight. She was his alone. He placed the handset back on the nightstand. There was one last thing he needed to make sure of. Outside the window, the moon was swelling to near full size. So was he. He reached up to the base of the sill and pulled it closed. Beside him, a pair of startled blue eyes flickered open.

“Hello my dear.”
