

# Part 1

June 1, 2025

Carol's fingers moved across the keyboard without her permission, typing meaningless numbers into endless spreadsheet cells. The motion was hypnotic, automatic—each keystroke precise yet somehow disconnected from her will. She studied her hands as they worked, wondering who was really in control. Her mind, or the work itself?

The beige walls of the office stretched endlessly in every direction, broken only by faded motivational posters with eagles soaring over mountain peaks and tired platitudes about “persistence” and “teamwork.” The whole space felt washed out and lifeless, like a photograph left too long in the sun. Fluorescent lights hummed overhead, casting everything in a sickly pallor that made her skin look corpse-gray in her monitor's reflection. The air-conditioning wheezed through dusty vents, recycling the same stale breath of dozens of coworkers.

Carol had perfected the art of being forgettable here—a mere shadow drifting through the corporate wasteland. To her colleagues, she was just another piece of office furniture, as unremarkable as the wilting potted plants and generic wall calendars. And that's exactly how she preferred it.

None of them suspected her secret: while they barely registered her presence, she knew them more intimately than their spouses, their therapists, their own mothers. She didn't merely observe her coworkers—she lived inside their minds, experiencing their thoughts as if they were her own.

As a child, Carol had discovered this gift during one of her deep, solitary expeditions into her own consciousness. While other kids filled their rooms with books and games, she would spend hours exploring the vast landscape of her own mind. Like a spelunker descending into underground caverns, she followed each thought deeper and deeper, discovering hidden chambers of consciousness most people never knew existed. It was during one such journey that she first sensed another presence—someone else’s thoughts echoing in what she had believed was her private mental space. That was when she realized the truth: consciousness wasn’t isolated. At the deepest levels, individual minds touched something larger, a shared substrate where boundaries dissolved.

Carol had learned to recognize the pattern: the quieter someone appeared on the surface, the richer their inner world tended to be. Greg, just one desk away, was a perfect example. To his colleagues, he was just another quiet guy who kept to himself. But inside his mind, Carol found elaborate business plans for a food truck, detailed recipes he’d perfected in imagination, even conversations he’d rehearsed with future customers. His inner life was so rich and fully realized that Carol could spend hours exploring it.

The loud, gregarious ones, by contrast, poured all their energy outward. Their minds were echo chambers of external validation—what others thought of them, how they appeared, what they should say next. Miranda was the worst: her thoughts were like static—loud, erratic, filled with petty grievances and social calculations. Carol found these minds exhausting, all surface tension and no depth.

They never sensed her presence as she folded herself like a phantom into the crevices of their thoughts. She drew their hopes and fears into herself, feeding on their inner lives. This wasn’t mere escapism—it was sustenance. Her own dull existence expanded through theirs, and increasingly, she found herself drawn to the quiet ones, the deep thinkers who had learned to find fulfillment in solitude.

The trick was to descend far enough into her own psyche that she could emerge into someone else’s. Across the room, she let herself sink deeper into her own awareness, past

surface thoughts, past familiar memories, down into the profound stillness where her individual consciousness began to blur. Her breathing slowed, her peripheral vision dimmed, and the constant hum of the office—keyboards clicking, phones buzzing, the coffee machine gurgling—faded to a distant whisper. And there, in that liminal space between waking and dreaming, she found the opening into Stacy’s mind.

Stacy from accounting sat three desks away, her sharp blouse and careful smile concealing a maelstrom of doubt. Her hand hovered over the mouse, indecision sparking like static as she debated whether to send Jim from IT a casual email. Carol could feel it all—the quickening pulse, the heat of embarrassment at imagined consequences, the way Stacy’s fingers drummed nervously against her desk. *Just do it*, Carol thought, as if her silent encouragement might nudge Stacy into motion.

Stacy had a pattern—men who drank too much, men who shouted when they shouldn’t, men who only talked about themselves and made her feel like an accessory. Carol had lived through each relationship from the inside, experiencing Stacy’s emotions as if they were her own: the dopamine rush of new attraction, the slow erosion of self-worth, the bitter aftertaste of another failed connection. She had felt Stacy’s hope kindle and die so many times that the cycle had become predictable, almost mechanical. But watching Stacy’s trembling indecision now, Carol sensed something different—a readiness for change. *Maybe this time*, she thought. Jim might be simple, even tedious, but he was kind. Stacy deserved that kindness.

Carol had been in Jim’s head before—his thoughts were a constant stream of random trivia and computer facts he was desperate to share. He was the kind of person who filled every silence with obscure knowledge about server configurations or medieval weaponry from his Dungeons & Dragons campaigns, oblivious to whether anyone actually cared. Jim was exactly the kind of needy, attention-seeking personality that Carol found exhausting—someone who mistook talking for connecting, who needed constant validation for his intelligence. But beneath all that desperate chatter, she had glimpsed genuine loyalty to his friends, an almost puppy-like eagerness to please, and a complete absence of malice. He would bore Stacy to

tears, probably mansplain Linux to her over dinner, and never quite understand her need for quiet moments. But he would also never hurt her, never make her feel small, never disappear for days without explanation. For someone with Stacy's history, maybe boring was exactly what she needed.

"Karen! I didn't know you worked here! How long have you been at this place?"

Carol froze, the delicate tether connecting her to Stacy's mind snapping with an almost audible recoil. That voice—shrill and invasive—felt like nails on a chalkboard. The taste of copper flooded her mouth as her teeth clenched involuntarily. Turning slowly, she forced her expression into something polite, though her stomach churned with irritation. Standing by her desk, wearing an ill-fitting blazer that reeked of cheap perfume and desperation, was Miranda. Her smile was too wide, too bright, like a fluorescent bulb about to burn out. Miranda always got her name wrong, so often that Carol suspected it was deliberate.

"It's Carol," she said quietly. "And about five months now."

"Carol! Right. Sorry, you're just so..." Miranda paused, tilting her head. "Quiet. You blend right in." Her laugh was too sharp. "I always wondered what happened to you after Syntech. One day you were there, next day—poof. Gone."

Carol could feel Miranda's thoughts pressing against her awareness like static electricity—a chaotic jumble of social calculations and petty resentments. Even without trying, fragments leaked through: *still the same weird loner... bet she makes half what I do... why won't she look at me?* The mental intrusion left a metallic taste in her mouth.

"I don't like long goodbyes."

"Goodbyes?" Miranda's smile sharpened. "Who said anything about goodbyes? Though I guess some people do have a talent for... disappearing when things get complicated. You always were good at watching from the sidelines."

The words hit like ice water. Carol's pulse quickened, and she could feel sweat beginning to bead along her hairline. *What does she mean by that?* "I really need to finish this report."

"Of course you do. Always so focused." Miranda leaned closer, her voice dropping to

barely above a whisper. The cloying scent of her perfume mixed with stale coffee breath made Carol's stomach lurch. "We should catch up properly sometime. I bet you see all sorts of interesting things from that quiet little corner of yours."

The interruption left her unsettled. Miranda always had a way of making her feel small, cornered, exposed. Carol refocused on Stacy, who was now speaking animatedly into her phone. *Damn, I missed it*, Carol thought. *Did she send the email?*

Stacy's thoughts were spinning around that simple email to Jim. Carol dove deeper, past the surface stream of scattered thoughts into the murky undercurrent of memory. She called it "free diving," and it was always a gamble. The deeper she ventured, the further she drifted from her own tether. Memories floated like glittering coins glimpsed through water, shimmering with the allure of secrets. But they could drag her in too deep if she wasn't careful.

Treading cautiously, she let Stacy's latest decisions ripple toward her. There it was—a flash of elation as Stacy clicked "send," followed instantly by spiraling doubt. *What will he think? Did I sound desperate?* Carol surfaced quickly before the dissonance could overwhelm her, the familiar weight of her own body settling around her consciousness like a heavy coat.

*Good for you, Stacy*, she thought. Maybe Jim wouldn't respond, but at least Stacy had taken the step.

But Miranda's words still echoed in her mind: *too observant for your own good*. The phrase gnawed at her, a splinter of anxiety she couldn't dislodge. To calm herself, Carol did what she always did when her own thoughts became too uncomfortable—she escaped into others'. She opened her mind wide, letting in the familiar chatter of all the minds in the office. Dave from accounting mentally calculated his next bonus. Susan nervously rehearsed an apology to Mr. Newman. In the far corner office, someone's mind was busy categorizing and filing away. The mundane concerns of her coworkers washed over her like white noise, soothing in their predictability.

However, there was a hole in the office chatter—a deep, dark, silent pit named Fredrik.

She watched him now, standing at his cubicle, showing his cubicle neighbor Dan something on his phone. The wrongness of him hit her like a physical blow. His movements were too precise, too calculated, as if each gesture had been programmed rather than felt. Every motion was perfectly calibrated—the exact angle of his wrist as he held the phone, the precisely measured distance he maintained from Dan, the way his head tilted at mathematically perfect intervals. He laughed along with Dan, a perfect, hollow sound that made her teeth ache and her molars grind together involuntarily. The laugh had all the right inflections, the proper duration, but it emerged from nothing. No amusement sparked it, no joy sustained it. It was the sound a machine might make if it had been taught to mimic human pleasure.

When Carol's awareness brushed against Fredrik's mind, it was like reaching into a grave. No conscious stream, no reservoir of memories, not even the basic subconscious patterns that formed the foundation of human minds. Where there should have been the warm hum of thought, there was only a void so complete it made her skin crawl. Fredrik, as far as Carol could tell, wasn't human—at least not in any way that mattered.

*What animates you?* she thought, her hands trembling slightly. *What force puppets those fingers, curves those lips into smiles?* The questions clawed at her sanity. If Fredrik could walk and talk and charm his coworkers without a single conscious thought, what did that say about the rest of them? Were their minds—her mind—just elaborate illusions? Optional decorations on bodies that knew exactly what to do without them?

She called these creatures “zombies,” though the word felt pathetically inadequate. It suggested something shambling and grotesque, something obviously wrong. Fredrik was none of those things. He was charming, sociable, one of the most well-liked people in the office. He remembered birthdays, brought donuts on Fridays, always had the perfect podcast recommendation. Management was even considering him for Newman's replacement—a thought that made Carol's blood turn to ice water.

The most terrifying part wasn't that Fredrik lacked consciousness. It was that he didn't need it. His body performed flawlessly without a pilot, navigating social situations with

mechanical precision that put most actual humans to shame. Sometimes Carol wondered if this was evolution—if consciousness was just a vestigial organ, like an appendix, waiting to be discarded by a more efficient model.

But the deeper horror gnawed at her: *How had Fredrik become this way?* Had he always been empty, or was this the inevitable endpoint of corporate existence? Perhaps it was the gradual erosion of inner life under the relentless pressure to externalize everything—endless meetings that demanded performative engagement while thinking became optional, social media that rewarded surface charm over genuine connection, smartphones filling every quiet moment with mindless entertainment. Even the open office plan seemed designed to make solitude impossible, starving the mind of the deep introspection that fed consciousness itself.

At that moment, Fredrik’s head turned toward her with the smooth, deliberate motion of a security camera. Their eyes met, and he smiled—that perfect, empty smile that never quite reached his eyes. Carol looked away quickly, her stomach lurching. *That smile is a lie*, she thought.

Shaken by the encounter, Carol needed refuge. She reached for Mr. Newman’s mind in the upstairs office—her usual sanctuary. The department head was widely considered a bumbling fool, but his mind was a blissful safe haven. Newman had already half-checked out from his managerial responsibilities, his thoughts unburdened by work stress. Instead, his mind dwelled on family—three children, the oldest preparing for college, and his wife Giselle. Carol could feel the genuine warmth there, the quiet respect he held for her after all these years. Slipping into Newman’s thoughts was like pulling on a warm jacket: comforting, familiar, wholly nonthreatening.

But when she reached for him, she stumbled, catching nothing. The void startled her. *That’s odd*, Carol thought. *I saw him come in this morning, but I can’t sense him. Maybe he snuck out early?*

At that moment, Newman’s deep baritone voice boomed across the office.

“Can I get everyone’s attention for just a moment, please?” The murmur gradually

subsided, keyboards falling silent. “Please come, gather around. I’m getting too old to project all the way back there.”

Carol glanced toward Newman’s office and saw him standing near the elevators with an unfamiliar figure in an expensive-looking suit. After an awkward pause, the reluctant shuffle of bodies began. Carol sighed and followed, weaving through cubicles toward Newman and the stranger whose presence already felt somehow wrong.

“I’d like to introduce you all to Mr. Ramon...”

As Newman spoke, Carol studied his face. He looked exactly the same—rumpled shirt, coffee-stained tie, the same tired eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses. But something in his expression felt rehearsed, mechanical. The warmth she had always sensed from him, that gentle bumbling quality that made him endearing despite his incompetence, seemed to have drained away. He spoke with the same inflections, used the same gestures, but it felt like watching an actor who had studied the role too well.

The stranger, Juan, smiled disarmingly. “You can just call me Juan,” he said with a silky Spanish accent.

“Juan here is from Corporate,” Newman began, his tone unusually earnest. “As you know, I’ll be retiring in seven weeks, and Juan will be interim director while they search for my replacement. He’ll be meeting with each of you individually to evaluate performance and optimize our workflows.” Newman’s voice took on that hollow corporate cadence that made Carol’s skin crawl. “We want to ensure we’re maximizing our human capital and creating synergies that will drive Q4 results.”

Juan stepped forward, his smile widening. “I’m here to facilitate a smooth transition from Mr. Newman’s exemplary stewardship to the next phase of our department’s evolution. Indeed, they’re going to need a giant to fill these shoes,” he said with a self-amused wink. “I look forward to getting to know each of you personally. I believe the best way to understand an organization is to understand its people—their motivations, their aspirations, their unique perspectives.” His eyes seemed to linger on each face in the crowd. “Starting tomorrow, I’ll



be scheduling one-on-one meetings with everyone. Think of them as informal conversations rather than evaluations. I want to hear your thoughts, understand your challenges, and explore how we can unlock the full potential of this team.” He paused, his gaze finding Carol’s. “After all, the mind is our most valuable asset, wouldn’t you agree?”

A low murmur rippled through the air, tension crackling like static. Carol could feel anxiety simmering in the room.

“Juan, would you like to say anything about your background?” Newman interjected. “I think the team would appreciate knowing more about your experience.”

“Of course,” Juan said, his accent lending a musical quality to his words. “I’ve spent fifteen years in organizational psychology and change management across three continents. My specialty is understanding what makes teams tick—the underlying dynamics that drive productivity and innovation. I’m particularly interested in cognitive patterns and how different minds approach problem-solving.” His gaze swept across the faces again. “Every mind is unique, and I find that fascinating.”

Newman glanced at his watch. “We have time for a few questions if anyone has them,” he said, nodding toward Juan.

“Fire away,” Juan said, his eyes scanning the crowd.

A few hands went up tentatively. Juan pointed to someone in the back.

While her colleagues peppered Juan with predictable questions, and he responded with even more predictable answers, Carol decided to slip into his mind for the real answers. Entering a stranger’s mind was always exhilarating—like stepping through a hidden door into an uncharted world.

She eased into Juan’s consciousness, expecting the usual rush of impressions. Instead, she found something disorienting. His mind shifted constantly, like a storm of fragmented thoughts colliding and scattering. At first, he seemed consumed with surface anxieties—performance reviews, first impressions. But something felt wrong. The thoughts were too tangled, too fleeting, as if borrowed rather than lived.

“What about our performance reviews? Are those still happening as scheduled?”

“Excellent question,” Juan replied smoothly. “For now, everything continues as normal. I’m here to observe and understand, not to disrupt. However, I do believe in continuous improvement, so I may suggest some adjustments as I get a better sense of...”

As she concentrated harder, the storm transformed. New threads emerged, disconnected yet oddly familiar. She found herself immersed in calculations about bonuses and lunch schedules—Dave from accounting’s thoughts. She reeled back, her grip faltering. The thoughts didn’t belong here. Just as she recognized the pattern, the mental current shifted again, dragging her into an echo of Stacy’s insecurities about the email to Jim.

Carol’s pulse quickened as realization struck. These weren’t Juan’s thoughts at all. He was mirroring them—pulling fragments from others’ minds the way she did. But unlike her, he wasn’t immersing himself. He was collecting, weaving them together like threads into a single, seamless fabric.

Carol withdrew abruptly, her heart pounding. She stared at Juan across the room, his easy smile concealing the uncanny truth. *He’s like me*, she thought, *but stronger*.

“Will these changes affect our current projects and deadlines?” someone asked nervously.

“Not at all,” Juan replied, his voice smooth as silk. “My role is to enhance, not disrupt. Though I may suggest some... optimizations as I get to know each of you better.” He paused, that practiced smile never wavering. “I find that understanding how people think leads naturally to improved efficiency.”

The unsettling realization hit her—he could be reading her thoughts right now. She forced herself to focus on spreadsheets, running imaginary calculations, thinking about anything dull and uninteresting.

*Stay shallow*, she thought. *Don’t let him see too much*.

But then she felt it—an odd sensation brushing the edge of her awareness, as if someone were staring at her through a one-way mirror. Her pulse quickened. It was such a peculiar feeling, alien and invasive.

*Spreadsheets, spreadsheets, spreadsheets...* Carol repeated silently, trying to drown out the feeling. Then, as suddenly as it had come, it was gone. The weight lifted, the sense of being watched faded. He had shifted his focus elsewhere.

“Alright then, let’s get back to it,” Newman said with a clap. “Juan will be reaching out to schedule those one-on-ones starting tomorrow.”

As the crowd dispersed, Carol settled into her chair with a hollow feeling gnawing at her. Her mind churned, replaying the experience. *I’m not alone*, she thought, the realization heavy and sharp. She had always wondered if she might encounter someone like herself, someone with the same abilities. But she never expected it to feel like this.

She had imagined relief, even joy, at finding a kindred spirit. Instead, all she felt was overwhelming smallness and terror. Juan wasn’t just like her—he was stronger, more deliberate, terrifyingly efficient. His mind moved like a machine, methodical and unrelenting, scanning and absorbing thoughts with precision that left her breathless. It wasn’t the chaos of diving into someone else’s mind that she was accustomed to. With Juan, it was something cold and calculated, as if he were sweeping the room with a net, collecting and cataloging every detail.

*He’s not just reading*, the thought burned in her stomach. *He’s harvesting*. A deep unease filled her, a creeping sense that she was vulnerable in a way she hadn’t realized. Her abilities, which she had once thought made her safe and in control, now made her feel exposed.