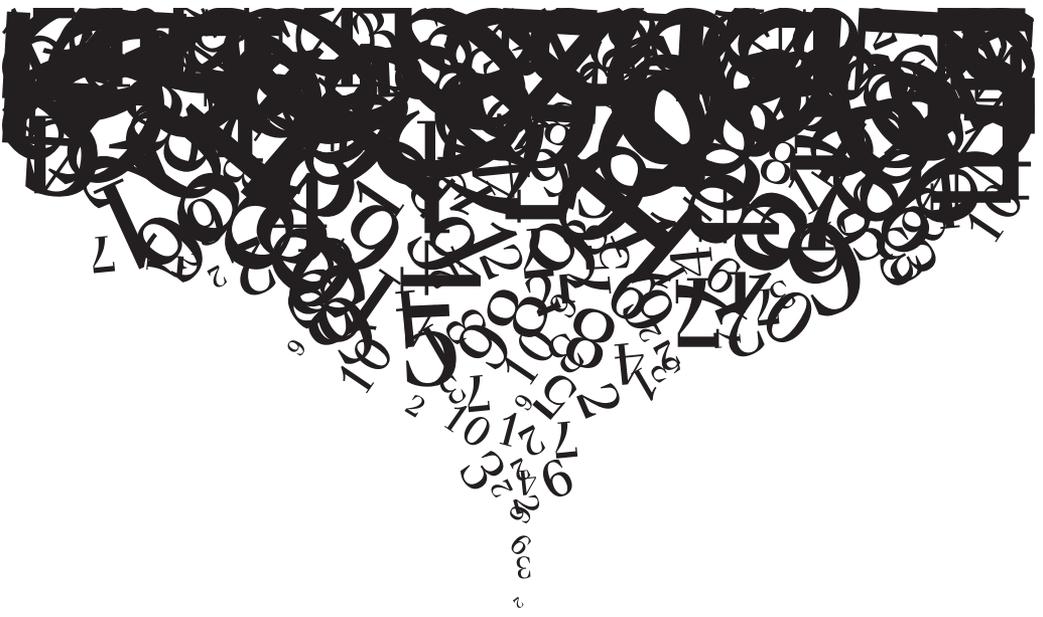


A MEASURE OF SERENITY

BRYAN PROSEK

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CamCat
Books

CamCat Publishing, LLC
Brentwood, Tennessee 37027
camcatpublishing.com

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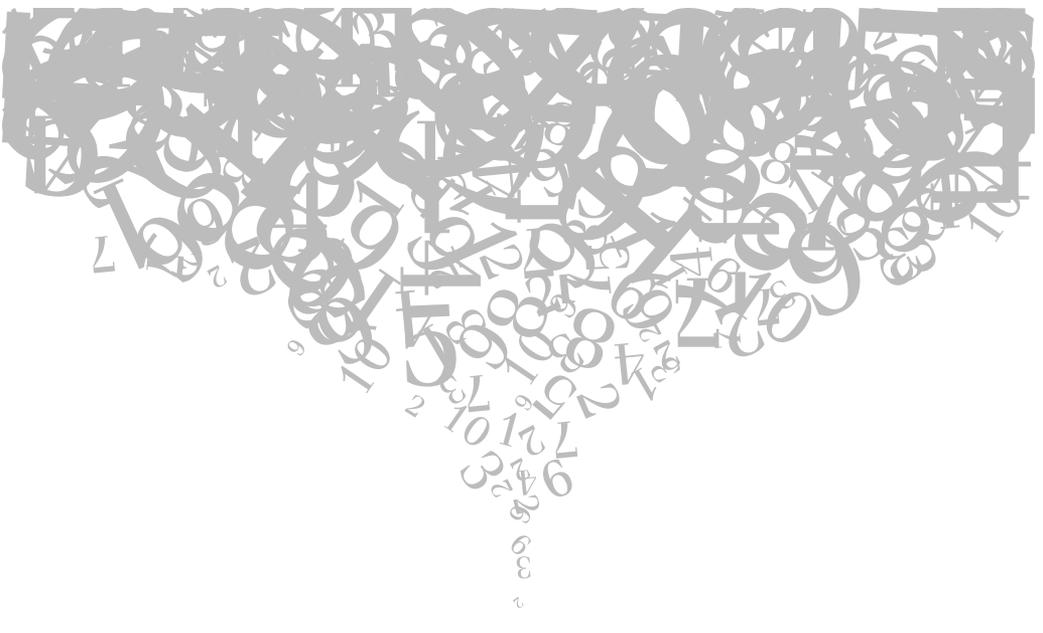
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Hardcover ISBN 9780744303629
Paperback ISBN 9780744303896
Large-Print Paperback ISBN 9780744303551
eBook ISBN 9780744303414
Audiobook ISBN 9780744303797

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
available upon request

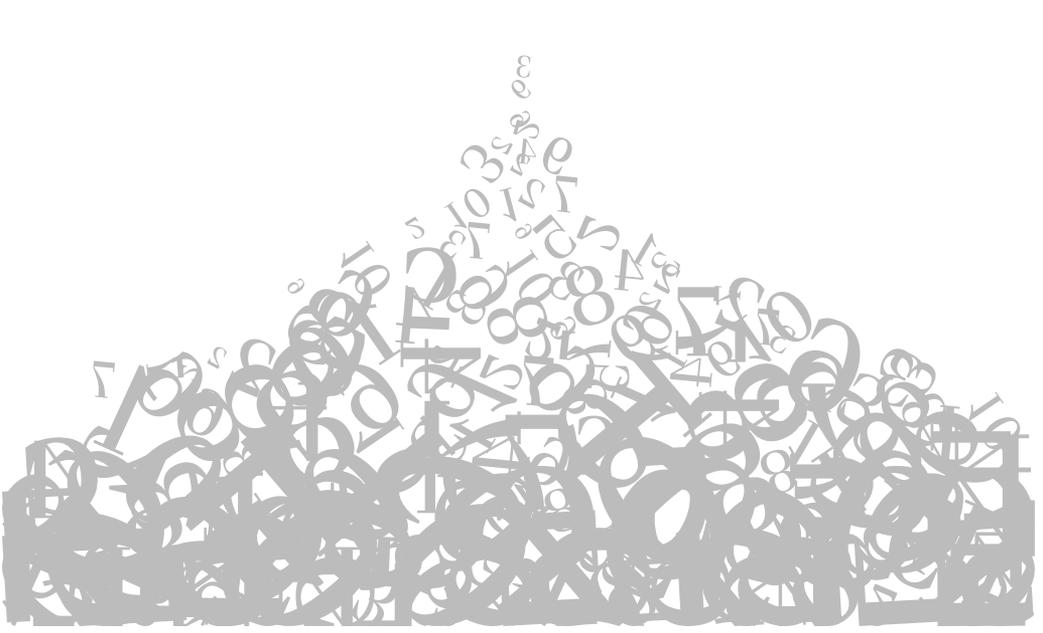
Book and cover design by Maryann Appel

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*To my wife and kids, DeAnne, Luke, and Lucy,
for putting up with all of my late-night writing and their
support and encouragement to write.*

*And to my Aunt Jan and Aunt Bev for being such huge fans
and inspiring me to not give up.*





PROLOGUE

My mind replays that night for me like a movie, whether I want it to or not. I can never erase an image, no matter how hard I try, especially not this one.

I was staring out the backseat window of our family car. The October night was as black as the cat on my Halloween T-shirt. The wipers intermittently creaked across the windshield, removing drizzle so my dad could see. I liked the darkness. I zoomed in on my reflection in the window—a ten-year-old girl with blonde hair and blue eyes trying not to calculate and count everything in sight. The mirror image helped me relax, and my eyelids grew heavy, my head dropped forward. My reflex jerked my head up and opened my eyes,

just to repeat the process. It had been a long drive from New York City to Hancock, New Hampshire, but we were so close to Grandma and Grandpa's farm and I didn't want to fall asleep. I leaned my head against the glass. Wisps of fog skated over the window, adding an eerie tone to the darkness outside.

I had started to nod off again when my little brother's cry startled me. He was strapped into a baby carrier in the seat beside me. My mom unbuckled her seatbelt and twisted around to stroke his little arms and legs. "It's okay, Jona. Mommy's here. Go back to sleep."

Just as quickly as the crying started, it stopped. I leaned to my right to look through the windshield. The fog was lifting some, at least on that stretch of road. I could make out trees along the side of the road. I recognized the thickly wooded area. We were getting close. My stomach churned a little with excitement. I would have no problem staying awake now.

My mom turned back around to rummage through the glove compartment.

"What are you looking for, Mom?" I asked.

She did not answer but continued to search.

My dad turned his head to the right to look at me.

"How are you doing back there, Peanut?" he asked.

Peanut. That was his special name just for me. I loved it. So much more playful than Serenity, my real name. "Just fine. I cannot wait to see Grandma and Grandpa. I know we are close. How much longer until we get there?"

My dad looked at the instrument panel and then turned back to me. "We have twenty miles to go, and I'm driving fifty-five miles per hour."

"Twenty-one minutes and forty-nine seconds," I said without hesitation.

My mom laughed and shook her head as she looked up from the glove compartment, probably rolling her eyes at my quick math, when suddenly she screamed, “Look out!”

My dad swiveled forward, and his back and shoulders tensed up as he slammed on the brakes.

In the middle of the road, illuminated by the headlights, everything was distorted. The landscape wavered, moving as things seem to do when one looks at the horizon on a hot summer day. Except here, everything wavered within an area about the size of a double garage door. Objects inside it appeared to change shape, undulating while remaining recognizable. The road in front of us, the trees just off to the side, and a speed limit sign all wavered. And a slight haze covered everything, too.

I took in all of this as the car skidded on the blacktop. I heard the horrible screeching sound of the tires against the road. My dad turned the steering wheel sharply to the left. We spun. The sudden turn threw me into Jona. I felt myself turning upside down. The seatbelt pressed hard into my shoulder as it held my body weight. Then I felt myself roll again, stopping right side up. Jona’s screams pierced my right ear. I looked at him. He seemed fine, still strapped into his carrier, which was fastened tightly to the seat. Then I looked forward. Mom was turned completely around with the back of her head resting against the dash, her legs on the seat, her back wedged against the open glove compartment. She didn’t move, eyes closed, blood covering her face. She had not put her seatbelt back on after caring for Jona. I looked behind the steering wheel. My dad was no longer there.

I had to help my mom. But something I must have read somewhere popped into my mind—*save the youngest first*. That was Jona. But my mom was bleeding. My mind immediately jumped to another

thing—*help the person with the worst injuries first*. That was Mom. Like a computer caught in a feedback loop, my mind argued with itself. *Stop analyzing*, I tell myself every time I relive this memory, even though I know I cannot prevent what happens next, *stop analyzing and just act!*

The right side of the car began to waver just like the road and trees and sign. Even my mom's figure moved and contorted. I heard the sound of metal crunching. The front of the car was being crushed slowly, and the dashboard was moving toward me. I felt the back of the car pushing against me as well. The car was wedged crossways in the middle of the wavering area, and the force was crushing it as if caught in an industrial car crusher.

Get out, I thought. *I have got to get out of here, or I will be crushed*. I had to get Jona out, too. And my mom. But who was I to help first? I ran through the steps in my mind necessary to get Jona out of the car first, then return to help my mom. Based on all of the variables, I had a seventy percent chance of saving Jona and a twenty percent chance of saving my mom if I proceeded in that order. If I helped my mom first, then Jona, my odds of getting my mom out increased to thirty percent, but because of the time that would take, my odds of saving Jona fell to forty percent. Therefore, I needed to attempt to help Jona first. Those were the better overall odds. But then, I realized that I had not factored in the car being crushed. That made it a moving target. Why was I calculating all of that? I needed to move. But I could not. My mind would not let me. Not until I had weighed all the factors and run all the calculations. I hated my mind!

The car slowly caved in on itself. Jona. He was right there. No more calculating. I unbuckled my seat belt. The front seat started pushing against my legs. I reached over to unbuckle Jona's carrier, but

the buckle was jammed. I pressed hard with my thumb, then both thumbs. I tried to sit up to get more leverage, but my legs were caught. Thumbs aching, I pressed as hard as I could one last time, and the buckle popped open. I grabbed the handle of the carrier.

As I struggled against the weight of Jona and the carrier, I tallied the contents of Jona's diaper bag which were strewn across the back seat. Five diapers, eight different toys, and a spilled container of Cheerios. Forty-three Cheerios rattling on the seat.

Stop it!

Metal squealed around me. I gave up on trying to lift the carrier and unbuckled the safety belt instead as Jona screamed and squirmed. Finally, I got my arms around him. Numbing pain crept into both my knees. The front seat was now pressing hard against them. I could not lift Jona from this angle, so I dragged him out of the carrier onto my lap. My ears ached from the sound of metal being crushed and Jona screaming. I twisted around to the door, but my legs would not move. I had taken too long deciding what to do. Now I was pinned. I could not save Jona. I could not save my mom. I could not even save myself.

Suddenly, my door was wrenched opened. My dad's big hands reached in. One grabbed me by the upper arm, and the other grabbed Jona. A sharp pain shot up my leg as I was lifted out of the car and then heaved over my dad's shoulder as he ran.

The car exploded into flames behind us. The heat from the explosion stung my eyes, forcing them shut. When I opened them, the wavering had stopped. The road, trees, and sign were solid in the fire's glow.

"Mom!"

1

THE PROJECT

I love the feeling you get during the last class on a Friday afternoon. The small, rectangular window next to my seat is cracked open, just enough to let in the slightest chill. It cools my face. The classrooms are always overheated this time of year.

The trees are in full color outside. Everywhere I look, there is beautiful foliage, vibrant colors. Red, orange, and yellow leaves with a just hint of green. It is a perfect fall day to end the week. I focus in on one particular maple tree that has turned a brilliant shade of red. Its bright red leaves contrast against the deep blue sky. The beauty and peacefulness of nature help me to relax. And, more importantly, I do not count. Not the leaves on the tree, not the birds playing in the

branches, not the white landscaping pebbles around the shrubs next to the building.

Everywhere I look, there is always something to count or calculate or analyze. Right now, I am relaxed. But I know it will not last long. It never does.

I can rarely find a place where, for any length of time, I am completely at ease—not thinking, not counting, not calculating, not analyzing, not hearing, not worrying. Not doing any of the things my mind does on its own. I wish I could always find that place. I wish I could be normal.

“Serenity?” The professor’s voice brings me out of my trance. “You’re the only one who hasn’t given it a try. Can you save the class and give me the answer?”

He wants the answer. I did not even hear the question. I look around the room. Some classmates are looking at me, others are writing notes or typing on their laptops.

I look at the professor. “Could you repeat the question, please?”

He grins slightly from behind his desk and shakes his head but responds.

“One of the solutions to the equation $x^2 - 54x + 104 = 0$ is two. Can you find the other root using Vieta’s formulas?” He stands up and walks to the front of his desk. “And as a bonus, if you get it right, the class is dismissed. You all can leave a little earlier.”

The rest of the class suddenly becomes restless. Most of the students sit up in their seats, paying more attention now. The professor looks around the class and then repeats himself with emphasis.

“Only if Serenity answers it *exactly* correct. None of the rest of you did.”

I overhear whispered conversations.

I can tell each person who is talking, even at a whisper. I have heard everyone in the room talk before, at least once, so I know which voice belongs to which person.

“She’ll never get it right,” Jasper whispers.

Andre replies, “Are you kidding? That’s Serenity. Have you ever talked to that chick before? She’s a stinking genius.”

I hear multiple conversations at the same time.

“I think I know the answer.”

That was Alex whispering.

“You just got it wrong yourself, you idiot,” Marcus responds.

I hear Jasper and Andre again.

“That chick is only eighteen,” Jasper says. “Kind of young for you. Plus, I hear she’s quite the nerd.”

“An eighteen-year-old senior at Harvard,” Andre replies. “Who’s ever done that before? And maybe I think nerds are hot.”

The professor takes control. “All right, everyone. Quiet down so Serenity can answer.”

I slide forward in my seat and look around the room again. Now, all eyes are fixed on me. I do not feel even the slightest bit nervous. I never do when it comes to academics. I have never seen this question before, and I do not recall ever studying or even reading about Vieta’s formulas, but I must have skimmed over it at some point, speed-reading a textbook or research materials.

“From Vieta’s formulas, we have negative, open parenthesis, x one plus x two, close parenthesis, equals negative fifty-four, so x one plus x two equals fifty-four,” I say, trusting my voice to unreel what I saw. “We substitute x one for its value and get two plus x two equals fifty-four. Therefore, x two equals fifty-two.”

The professor has a look of astonishment on his face, which quickly turns to a look of satisfaction, as if he is responsible for my answer. “That would be correct, Serenity. Excellent job.”

Everyone in the class immediately starts to gather their things with a few soft shouts of “Yes!”

“Don’t forget your homework assignment,” the professor says, raising his voice over the bustle of people heading for the door. “It’s on your syllabus.”

The professor stops me as I walk by his desk. Everyone else files out of the door. A couple students give me a thumbs up or whisper “Thanks.”

“Serenity,” he begins as he leans against his desk, “how would you like to take part in a special project that the university is undertaking? We’re selecting only three students for it. It’ll look good on your resume when you graduate next spring.”

“What does it involve?” I ask.

“It’s a research project at a Harvard facility. The one where your father works.”

Where my dad works? Maybe this will give me a chance to learn something about the “secret” project that Dad cannot talk about although it has consumed him for so long.

“What is the research?”

He straightens up. “I can’t answer that myself, but Mr. Bailey is running the project.”

“Dirk Bailey?” I interrupt, stepping back.

“Yes, is that a problem?”

Mr. Bailey brought my dad to Hancock, New Hampshire to work on a project the year after Mom died. I guess I should be thankful for that. Now, it’s just a short drive to see Grandma and Grandpa on their

farm. When we lived in New York City, we only visited a few times a year. There was too much commotion for me in such a large city. Even if it did have some of the best neurosurgeons, neuropharmacologists, and therapists in the world, they had done all they could for me. So, moving us to Hancock was a blessing, but that was eight years ago, and Mr. Bailey still wants my dad to focus on that one project all the time. And whatever Mr. Bailey wants, Mr. Bailey seems to get.

I regain my composure and adjust my bookbag on my shoulder. “I just thought Mr. Bailey was pretty high up at the university to be leading a research project with a group of students.”

The professor grins. “Well, I’ll let him explain. Like I said, I don’t know the details. He just asked me to see if you might be interested. His office is just down the hall. Why don’t you stop by?”

I start toward the door. “Thank you, Professor.”

“Good luck with it. And Serenity,” he pauses, “excellent job in class today. For someone your age at the finest University in the country, you continue to amaze me.” He gives me a genuine smile.

#####

“Serenity,” a voice calls from down the hall as I exit the classroom.

I glance in that direction but do not turn my head. It is Shawn Patterson. I would recognize his tall, lanky frame at any distance. I look at my watch. I need to see Mr. Bailey *and* try to miss rush-hour traffic. I do not want to make my hour-and-forty-five-minute commute any longer.

“Serenity,” he calls again, this time much closer.

I turn to face him. His blond hair bobbing with each step.

“You never returned my snap from this morning.”

I hesitate, not sure how to respond. “I am sorry. I was in the middle of something for my dad and have not had a chance yet to respond.” I did not lie. I was completing the app I developed for my dad’s project so he can test it tonight. “I have had a lot on my mind lately.”

His face softens. “I know. I understand. No worries.”

“Is everything okay?” I ask. “Did you need something?”

Shawn shakes his head. “No. I had no special reason to . . . I snapped you because . . . I just wanted to say hey and see what you were up to.”

I slide my bookbag off my shoulder, unzip it, and peer inside to see if I have to stop by my commuter locker to pick up any books for the weekend after I see Mr. Bailey before heading to my car. I need to make a quick getaway in order to beat traffic.

“Will you be at fencing club tonight?” Shawn asks.

Fencing is one of the few things Shawn and I have in common, besides our blond hair and being seniors at Harvard. He is a regular senior, unlike me, majoring in business to take over the reins of his family’s medical supply business when his father retires. I am studying to do research in the field of medicine and have no idea where I will work or what I will do. He pretty much has everything handed to him, but he does not act like it.

“Sure,” I say, zipping up my backpack and swinging it back onto my shoulder. “I will be there.”

“Great.” Shawn smiles. “Where are you heading? I’ll walk with you. I’m done for the day.”

I look at my watch, then at Shawn and nod in the direction of Mr. Bailey’s office.

“Actually, I am just heading down the hall. I have to meet with someone.”

Shawn's smile disappears. "Oh, okay, well, maybe next time."

I try to smile just enough that he can see I care about him as a friend but not enough that he will think that my feelings go any further than that. I do feel bad though.

He is my best friend outside of my family, and the one individual that I have not driven away by telling him everything he is going to do before he does it or because I cannot force myself to use contractions. The formality of my speech patterns makes me sound stuck up. But I cannot talk any other way. I cannot even think any other way. "Sure," I say. "I would like that."

#####

The door to Mr. Bailey's outer office is open, but the chair behind the secretary's oak desk sits empty. Nobody is in the room, so I walk past two empty chairs and a large plant toward Mr. Bailey's door and raise my hand to knock.

"Yes, I can hear you clearly. Can you hear me?" Mr. Bailey says, apparently on the phone. "The connections are getting stronger. This is the first time I've been able to remotely form a connection through the facility. Go ahead and put him on." He pauses. "Hello, Mr. President."

Mr. President? President of what? The university? No, he would not call Angela Turner "Mister." I turn and look through the open door behind me. The hallway is empty. I hear nobody coming this way. But still, I should not eavesdrop. What Mr. Bailey says is none of my business.

"Yes, Sir. I will have Phil Ashdown working around the clock now until it's activated."

Dad?

I am certain it has something to do with the project he has been working on for so long. What does Mr. Bailey mean by “strong connections”? A connection through the facility?

I have heard enough. As I escape back toward the hallway, I hear Mr. Bailey’s door open.

“Serenity, come on in! What brings you here—the new research project?”

Slowly, I return to Mr. Bailey’s office. His secretary’s small outer office pales in comparison to what sits behind this door. I cannot even take in the whole room without turning my head to scan it. I believe he has turned a former classroom into an office. And he spared no expense with his mahogany desk and floor-to-ceiling bookshelf on one wall.

The sun shines in through a wall of windows on the opposite side. On one wall is a framed picture of Mr. Bailey and Wes Masterson, President of the United States, jointly holding a plaque that I cannot read from this distance.

Mr. Bailey motions toward a leather chair facing his desk. “Please, have a seat.”

I sink into the cushioning of the chair, my hands rubbing the soft leather of the arm rests.

Mr. Bailey sits in his tall chair behind his desk. “I haven’t seen you in a while. How are classes going?”

“They are going well, thanks.” I reply.

I am terrible at small talk. I never know what to say. I probably should ask Mr. Bailey how he is doing, but instead, I sit and wait for him to speak again.

“Your father says you graduate in the spring, is that right?”

“Yes.”

“What’s you major again. I think Phil told me, but I forget.” He leans forward, folding his hands and rests his forearms on the desk.

I sit up straight. “Nuclear Medical Technology and Chemical Engineering.”

He smiles. “A double major in two of the most difficult fields. Impressive. I believe you are perfect for the new research project I have.”

“Thank you,” I say, not looking at Mr. Bailey but rather, looking at his telephone. Something troubles me about the phone call I overheard. It was probably just something typical with my dad’s work, but everything related to my dad’s work troubles me. One thousand one hundred ninety-two books on the bookshelf. I look out the window. Forty-three students and six faculty members in sight, making their way across campus. I see the maple tree outside my classroom, now from a different angle. A sparrow is perched on one of the branches. Eighty-nine thousand seven hundred fifty-six. Just looking at the tree, I know the number of leaves.

“Serenity?” Mr. Bailey’s voice brings me back to the conversation. “Are you okay? Can I get you some water or something?”

I blink my eyes and shake my head. “No, thank you, I am fine.” I must have been completely ignoring him. “I am sorry, I was just trying to think what your project might be about.” That is not true, but it is the best I can come up with.

He leans back in his chair and swings it sideways. “Have you heard of Doctor Friedrich Gruber?”

I nod. “Yes, he is a German scientist. He developed the quantum theory of astrological advancement.”

Mr. Bailey smiles. “Of course, you would know all about him. I should have figured that. In other words, Doctor Gruber theorizes that time travel is possible.”

I lean forward. Now that we are past the small talk and on to discussing academics, my mind turns on. I can discuss this with anyone forever.

“That is his *theory*,” I say skeptically.

Mr. Bailey swings his chair back around to face me directly. “You don’t agree with him?”

I clear my throat. “Mr. Bailey, I have read every book, journal, research paper, and note that I had access to that were written by Doctor Gruber and anyone else analyzing his work. I have run all the equations and did the math myself. No, I do not agree with him. I do not believe that his theory will work.”

My intent is not to be confrontational with Mr. Bailey. I do not like confrontation with anyone.

But I cannot lie about something like this, and so I just state the facts.

Mr. Bailey grins. “That’s exactly the attitude I am looking for, in at least one member on the team.”

“Is the project to prove or disprove Doctor Gruber’s theory?”

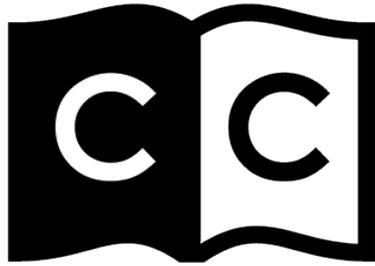
Mr. Bailey shakes his head. “No, not exactly. But it does involve Doctor Gruber’s theory. It will be easier to show you than to explain. The other two students are meeting Professor Poiter at the facility Monday morning. Are you able to meet then as well? I understand that it’s lab day for you. This would be in place of your lab.” He pauses and shifts in his chair. “Professor Poiter is the on-site point person on the project. I believe you’ve had a class or two with him?”

I nod. “He is a very competent professor. And yes, I can be there.”

Mr. Bailey claps his hands once and stands up. “Great! Once you see what Professor Poiter has to show you, I’m sure you’ll be on board. I’m excited about it. And you students will get a lot out of the

project.” He walks around the desk toward me. “I hate to run you off, but I need to jump on another call.”

I look out the window at the maple tree as I stand up to leave. The sparrow has one thousand nine hundred eighty-two feathers.



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A MILLION THOUGHTS, BUT ONLY ONE RIGHT THING TO DO.

EIGHTEEN-year-old Serenity Ashdown has a brilliant mind: she counts, calculates, and analyzes everything, even when she doesn't want to. Her memory is also far beyond photographic, surpassing her physicist father's abilities. But her world was otherwise normal right up until dimension-hopping enemies forced her into a parallel reality. The feds she meets on the other side claim to want to help her go home. All she has to do is use her memory to reconstruct the right sequence of codes. But it's soon clear they want something more: a gateway for invasion, because this version of Earth is dying.

Serenity can't risk returning home with a deadly force behind her, but the feds aren't about to let her escape. Then she learns that the "other Serenity," her alter-ego in this dimension, was a resistance leader recently betrayed and killed. She has a chance to assume her alter-ego's identity and use her unique ability to lead the resistance in their fight against the tyrannical super-government that is poised to invade her universe. Serenity has no idea how to be someone she's not, but she has to try—or she may not even have a home to return to.



**CamCat
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Cover Design: Maryann Appel
Illustration: Grandfailure

Young Adult/Science Fiction \$14.99 USD

ISBN 978-0-7443-0389-6

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