A PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER ABOUT CONTROL, CHOICE, AND THE ILLUSION OF FREE WILL



THE FIFTH MOVE

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WHO CONTROLS YOUR DECISIONS?

RADIM KAUFMANN

A PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

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p

A Psychological Thriller

Radim Kaufmann

THE FIFTH MOVE
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Quinta vis non frangit. Curvat.

This book is dedicated to the person reading it.

You are not a variable.

Or perhaps you are.

The Fifth Move

Foreword **ix**

I THE INTRUSION **1**

1 The First Pattern **3**

2 The Second Variable **13**

3 The Equation **25**

4 A Move That Shouldn't Exist **35**

5 The Observer **49**

6 Controlled Outcomes **59**

7 The Archive **69**

II THE NETWORK **81**

8 The Man Who Refused **83**

9 The Drift **95**

10 The First Intervention **103**

11 The Network **115**

12 The False Choice **127**

13 The Architect **143**

14 The Pattern Break **159**

15 The Four Moves **175**

III THE ALIGNMENT **189**

16 The Shift **191**

17 The Alignment **205**

18 The Gap **219**

19 The First Failure **233**

IV THE COST **247**

20 The Pressure **249**

21 Inside the System **257**

22 The Cost **269**

23 The Fifth Move **283**

V AFTER **295**

24 After the Fracture **297**

25 The New Rule **307**

Afterword: Notes on What Is Real, and What Is Not **319**

Acknowledgments **321**

About the Author **323**

Glossary of Terms **327**

A Note on Vienna **331**

The Latin Epigraph **335**

Foreword

There are four fundamental forces that govern the universe: gravity, electromagnetism, the strong nuclear force, and the weak nuclear force. This is what we are taught. This is what we believe.

But what if there is one more?

A force that does not move matter — but moves decisions. A force that does not bend space — but bends will.

Let us call it *p*.

You will never see it. You will never measure it. But every time you believe you have made a choice, it was there.

This is not a story about freedom.

This is a story about who actually has it.

The Fifth Move began as a thought experiment. I was sitting in a café in Vienna — one of those quiet, marble-tabled places that have outlived the centuries around them — when I noticed a man at the next table refuse a third cup of coffee that the waiter had not yet offered him. The waiter paused. Turned. Walked away. The man returned to his newspaper.

It was the smallest thing. But for a moment, in the hush of that room, it seemed to me that the man had decided to refuse the coffee not in response to its offer, but in advance of it. As though something in him had read the next ninety seconds of the room — the waiter's path, the timing of the offer, his own answer — before any of it actually occurred.

I dismissed it, of course. We all dismiss such things. They are noise.

But I never quite stopped thinking about that pause.

The protagonist of this novel is a man named Daniel Mercer. He is a behavioral analyst — the kind of person who, professionally, builds the very models that try to predict what people like the man in the café will do next. The story begins on the evening Daniel discovers that his model is being interfered with. Not by a bug. By something else.

I will not tell you here what that something is. The pleasure of a thriller is in finding out.

What I will tell you is this: writing this book required me to take seriously a question I had spent most of my adult life avoiding. The question is not *whether* we have free will. That question is exhausted. The question is: *if our decisions are being shaped by something we cannot see, would we even be able to tell?*

I do not know the answer.

I am no longer sure I want to.

— Radim Kaufmann Vienna, 2026

PART I

THE INTRUSION

CHAPTER 1

The First Pattern



Daniel Mercer didn't believe in coincidence.

Not because he was arrogant. Not because he needed control. Because the world had always made sense to him — and that sense was the only reason any of it worked at all.

Patterns existed. Systems behaved. Outcomes followed structure. A leaf falling from a tree on a windless afternoon could be predicted, given enough information about the leaf, the air, the small disturbances in pressure that human beings called *random* only because they had not bothered to measure them. Coincidence, in his view, was simply the name people gave to a pattern they had not yet been disciplined enough to see.

For most of his adult life, this had felt like a quiet superpower.

It also explained why, at forty-two, he was alone in his study at half past nine on a Wednesday evening, while the rest of Vienna prepared to forget the day. The other lights in the building had gone out one by one over the previous hour. He had heard them, in the way one hears anything in an old apartment — not through the walls, exactly, but through the slight changes in pressure, the small adjustments the building made to itself when its inhabitants stopped moving. He had grown fond of those adjustments. They felt like punctuation in a sentence the city was still writing.

The rain had been falling for three hours.

It moved in steady, parallel lines across the tall sash window of his study, each drop tracing a path that looked random only from a distance. He had watched the rain for a long time when he was younger, trying to find the exception — the drop that had decided, against all the others, to fall sideways or to stop. He had never found one. The rain, like the rest of the world, knew what it was doing.

He turned back to the screens.

Three monitors, arranged in a wide arc on the dark walnut desk. Three models. Three versions of the same problem.

The problem itself was small, in the way most professionally significant problems were small. It belonged to a contract he had taken six weeks earlier, work for a financial firm that wanted to understand why one of its predictive systems had begun, in March, to lose accuracy at a rate that nobody at the firm could explain. Daniel had agreed to the contract because he liked the puzzle and because the firm had agreed to his usual fee without negotiation. They had even agreed to his unusual condition — that no one at the firm would attempt to influence his analysis until he had filed his report. He preferred to work in silence. People talking about a pattern, he had found, were the most reliable way to obscure it.

For four weeks the puzzle had behaved itself. The system was losing accuracy because of the kind of mundane reasons such systems usually lost accuracy: a small upstream data feed had begun to round its values to two decimal places instead of four, and the rounding was being amplified through the model in ways that the

original architects had never imagined. He had identified the source on a Tuesday and had spent the rest of that week documenting it.

That was when the second pattern had appeared.

He had not been looking for it. He had simply been running the model again, against a fresh dataset, to confirm a result. The output had come back identical to the previous run. That, in itself, was not strange — identical inputs should produce identical outputs. What was strange was that the inputs had not been identical. The dataset had been freshly randomized.

He had ignored it the first time. Coincidence, he had told himself, even as part of him refused the word.

He had run it again with deliberately different inputs.

Same result.

He had run it a third time, with noise injected at multiple points in the pipeline.

Same result.

That had been four hours ago.

Now the printout of his most recent test sat beside the keyboard, the figures arranged in their neat columns, telling him the same thing they had told him after the previous run, and the run before that. Daniel picked up the page. Set it down again. Picked up his coffee, found it cold, set that down too.

He leaned back slightly, eyes narrowing at the screen.

Ran it again.

Different input.

Same output.

Daniel frowned.

"That's not possible," he said quietly. He often spoke aloud when he was alone. It was a habit Eva had teased him about, gently, when they had first started living together. He had explained that he did it to test whether a thought sounded as solid out loud as it did in his head. Half the time, he had told her, it didn't, and that was useful. The other half, it was even more solid out loud, and that was useful too.

This was the second kind.

He leaned forward again, fingers moving quickly across the keyboard. New dataset. Randomized variables. He pulled in a fresh feed from a public source he had not used before — atmospheric data from the Berlin observatory, a year's worth, irrelevant to the underlying question but technically valid as input noise. He let it propagate through the pipeline. Adjusted weights. Altered the input streams. The model recalculated.

Output: identical.

Daniel froze.

Not physically. Internally. There was a moment, in the work he did, that he had come to recognize as the *threshold moment* — the instant when a result stopped being an interesting anomaly and became something he would not be able to walk away from. He had felt it perhaps a dozen times in his career. It always arrived in the same way: a small, cold settling in the chest, as though the room had been waiting for him to notice and was now relieved that he had.

He felt it now.

Because this — this wasn't error. Errors scatter. They distort. They collapse under pressure. An error, exposed to varied input, would have produced a varied result that *looked* coherent until one looked closely. This was not that. This was stable. Precise. Repeatable. The kind of result one expected from a controlled experiment in a clean laboratory, not from a financial-modeling pipeline being deliberately fed atmospheric noise from the wrong continent.

Outside, the rain intensified. The streetlamp at the corner of the courtyard threw a long, wavering line of yellow across the wet stones. Daniel watched it for a moment without seeing it.

"Daniel?"

He didn't turn immediately.

"Daniel, you've been here all day."

Eva's voice, from the doorway. Soft. Grounded. Real.

He had a small, almost embarrassed sense of returning from a long distance. It often happened when she found him like this. The work had a way of taking him somewhere that was not, strictly speaking, the room he was in, and Eva had

developed a particular kind of patience for it. She did not interrupt while he was traveling. She simply stood in the doorway, like a lighthouse, until he noticed.

He finally turned.

She was in the soft gray cardigan she liked to wear in the evening, the one with the slightly stretched cuffs, holding a mug in both hands. The light from the hallway behind her made her hair look almost black, though in daylight it was the warm dark brown he had spent years failing to describe to people. She leaned slightly against the door frame in a way he had always loved without ever quite saying so — half there, half not, watching him as a wife watches a husband she has long since stopped expecting to come home on time.

"You're still working?" she asked.

Daniel hesitated.

"I found something."

Eva stepped inside. Slowly. The way she always moved into his study when he was working — as though entering a room where another person was sleeping.

"What kind of something?"

He looked back at the monitors.

"The kind that shouldn't exist."

A pause.

She crossed the room. She stopped just behind him, close enough that he could feel the warmth of her shoulder against his and smell the chamomile of her tea. She set the mug down beside the printout, at exactly the spot on the desk where she always set it when she came to find him in the evening. He had never had to ask her to put it there. They had simply, over the years, agreed on it without speaking.

She looked at the screens for a long moment. Then she looked at him. Not the data. Him.

"But it does," she said quietly.

Daniel nodded.

"Yes."

Another pause.

"Which means either I'm wrong..." He leaned closer to the screen. "...or everything else is."

Eva didn't answer. She didn't need to. They both knew — he was rarely wrong. Eva was a clinical psychologist; she had spent her career listening to people describe their lives in ways that would have to be untrue if everything they were saying were also true. She had a professional respect for the rare moment when a person came to her and said, without flinching, *I have looked at this carefully and the answer cannot be what I expected*. She did not, on those occasions, argue with the person. She simply tried to understand what the world looked like from where they were standing.

She stood beside him now, looking at the screens, and tried to understand.

The rain outside intensified. Faster now. Sharper. The streetlamp at the corner of the courtyard guttered briefly, the way old fluorescents sometimes did when a tram passed too close, and then steadied.

Daniel stared at the output again.

Same numbers. Same structure. Same result.

He had seen, in his career, every variety of bad data. He had seen results that looked too good to be true and turned out to be exactly that. He had seen results that looked impossible and turned out to be a typing error in the third line of a config file. He had seen, on one memorable occasion, an entire Bayesian inference engine produce stable and confident outputs for three days because someone had accidentally set the seed of its random number generator to the constant 7. The world contained, he had learned, an almost infinite supply of explanations for why a result that should not exist nevertheless appeared on a screen.

He had checked all of them.

The seed was not 7. The config file was correct to the last character. The data feed was clean. The math was clean. The pipeline was the same pipeline he had used the previous week, when its outputs had varied appropriately with its inputs.

No deviation. No drift. No uncertainty.

And for the first time, he felt it. Not curiosity. Not excitement. Something else.

A hesitation.

Because if the system was right, then someone — or something — was making sure it stayed that way. The model was producing the correct answer for *this question*, even when the inputs no longer warranted that answer. Which meant either

the model had become a perfect predictor of an underlying reality whose changes the inputs failed to capture — which was, mathematically, absurd — or the *output side* of the model was being held in place by a force the inputs could not see.

He sat with that thought for a long time. The room was very quiet. Eva did not move. Outside, the rain continued.

"You're holding your breath," Eva said.

Daniel exhaled. He had not realized.

"What does it mean?" she asked.

He turned to her, slowly.

"It means," he said, "that I have been told, for several hours, by a piece of software I built myself, that the world is responding to a particular question with a particular answer no matter what question I ask it."

Eva watched him.

"And that's bad?"

He almost smiled. It was the wrong word, and they both knew it, and it was also somehow exactly the word.

"It's not how systems work," he said.

She nodded. She did not pretend to understand the technical detail. She had learned, over the years, that her role in moments like these was not to follow him into the math. It was to remain on the surface, where the human meanings still lived, and to wait for him to come back up.

"Then what do you do," she asked, "when a system that shouldn't behave that way behaves that way?"

It was, he thought later, the question that began everything.

"You run it again," he said. "You run it again, and you find out what kept it the same."

He reached for the keyboard.

Stopped.

Just before touching it.

For a fraction of a second — long enough for his hand to hang in the air — he didn't know what to do next. The list of things to try, the procedure he had run through hundreds of times in a hundred earlier puzzles, simply was not there. His

mind reached for it and reached for it and found only the same flat surface he was looking at on the screen. He could not, for that instant, decide whether to type *recompile*, or *restart*, or *kill*, or *log everything from the beginning of the run*. There were no preferred options. There was only the screen and his hand above the keys.

That was new.

He had been a man, for forty-two years, who knew what to do next.

Eva did not see it. She was looking at the rain.

He let his hand come down to the keyboard, finally, and typed, slowly, the command to start the model again. The cursor blinked in the corner of the dark window. The fans of the workstation under the desk began their familiar low hum. The first lines of output appeared, quickly, in the white type he had been staring at for hours.

It would, he knew, return the same answer.

What he did not yet know was how he was going to feel about that, and what it would cost him, by the time he understood what it meant.

Eva, beside him, picked up the cold mug of coffee from the corner of the desk, and carried it quietly out of the room to make him a fresh one. She did not say anything as she went. She had been with him long enough to know, when he was at the edge of one of his thresholds, to leave him alone with it for a few minutes. That was how she helped. That was the thing she had learned to give him.

In the study, behind her, the screens went on showing him the same answer.

The rain went on falling in its parallel lines.

And somewhere in the city — though he did not yet know it, would not know it for several days, would not really *know* it for several weeks — a man at another desk in another building was watching a different model show him a different version of the same impossible thing, and was reaching, as Daniel had reached, for a keyboard, and was hesitating, as Daniel had hesitated, in front of his own first instance of not knowing what to do.

It would be one of the small, terrible features of the thing Daniel was about to discover that, by the time he understood what it was, the question of whether he was the only person it had happened to would no longer matter.

For the moment, he was alone in the room with it.

That was enough.

He began, slowly, to take the model apart.

CHAPTER 2

The Second Variable



Daniel didn't sleep.

Not because he couldn't. Because there was no point.

The model kept running in his head, the way a song runs in a person's head after they have heard it once and then refused, against their own better judgment, to listen to it a second time. Same inputs. Same outputs. No deviation. The figures from the printout he had set on his bedside table at half past three in the morning had, by half past four, organized themselves into the white type of his mental display, and had begun to run, in his closed eyes, with the same steady rhythm they had run on the screens. He had tried, for an hour, to make them stop. Then he had given up and watched them.

It didn't just repeat. It *insisted*.

By seven, Eva had risen, and dressed, and gone for her morning walk in the courtyard garden, and returned, and made the small, careful breakfast she made on weekday mornings when she had a full schedule of patients ahead of her. She did not, when she came back, ask him whether he had slept. She had stopped asking that particular question several years earlier. She had decided — she had told him at the time, gently — that it was an unkind question to ask a man who was working out a problem, because the only useful answer to it was *no*, and asking for that answer only forced him to confirm a thing he was trying, for the duration of the problem, to ignore.

She set a small white plate of toast and chamomile honey at his elbow at the desk and kissed the side of his temple and went out the door at twenty to nine, the way she went out the door every weekday at twenty to nine. Daniel listened to the door close. He listened to the small, brisk click of her heels on the courtyard stones. He listened to the distant whirr of the elevator on the floor below. He listened, after that, to the silence of his own apartment.

He did not eat the toast.

After a long time, he stood up. He showered, slowly. He dressed, slowly — the long charcoal overcoat, the dark trousers, the dark leather shoes that needed polish but had not been polished in three weeks. He stepped out into the corridor of his building. He took the stairs instead of the elevator, because the stairs gave him another thirty seconds before having to be in the world.

Morning came slowly.

Vienna unfolded under a pale grey sky, the rain reduced to a fine mist that blurred edges and softened movement. The cobblestones of the courtyard were dark with overnight wet. The chestnut trees were dropping their last yellowed leaves, in the slow, deliberate way they did in late October, and the leaves had collected against the small iron gate of the courtyard in a thin, irregular line. Daniel paused at the gate before opening it. He looked down at the leaves. He counted them, without meaning to. He stopped at thirty-seven, because thirty-seven was the kind of number that meant nothing — that one could not, in any reasonable interpretation, find significance in.

He stepped outside.

The air felt colder than it should have. Or maybe — he was noticing more.

People moved around him. Commuters. Tourists. Routine. The first wave of the morning, in the inner districts, was always heavy with the kind of small administrative motion that pre-war Vienna had refined into a low, almost balletic art: men in suits walking briskly toward tram stops, older women carrying string shopping bags from the bakery, students with backpacks heading uphill toward the university buildings, the occasional uniformed nurse going off-shift in the direction of the trains. Everything looked normal. That was the problem. He could not, looking at any of it, find an exception. He had spent the last twelve hours preparing himself to look at the city again with new eyes; what he had not prepared himself for was the possibility that the city would, in turn, look back at him, perfectly arranged.

He stopped at a crosswalk.

The light was red. A small group of people had gathered beside him to wait — five, perhaps six. No one spoke. No one looked at each other. There were small adjustments of weight: a man with a briefcase shifting from one foot to the other, a woman in a long burgundy coat half-turning toward the shop window behind her and then turning back, a teenager with headphones swaying very slightly to whatever music she was hearing. The ordinary, tiny choreography of people waiting for a light to change.

Daniel watched them.

Not casually. *Analytically*.

In any normal observation, the small motions of a waiting crowd would distribute themselves randomly across a several-second window. People did not check their watches at the same instant. People did not adjust their bags at the same fraction of a second. The waiting at a Viennese crosswalk was, in its small way, a thousand independent micro-events, statistically uncorrelated. It was the kind of natural noise against which any reasonable observer-analyst could verify their own sanity.

The man checked his watch. *Too early.* The light had not changed; there was no reason, at that precise second, for him to look at the time. The watch-check had

the small, slightly-off quality of a movement performed not because the person had decided to perform it but because the movement had been *cued*.

The woman adjusted her bag. *Too precisely*. She did not adjust the strap absent-mindedly, the way a person re-positions a bag whose strap has been digging into the shoulder. She adjusted it once, exactly, in a single discrete motion that began and ended without any of the small over-corrections of an unconscious gesture.

The teenager stepped forward. Half a step. Then she stopped. The light had not yet changed; she could not have known it was about to. She had, Daniel saw clearly, *anticipated* the change. She had begun to move toward the curb a fraction of a second before the green man appeared on the signal across the street.

Daniel's eyes narrowed.

Timing. Everything was — *aligned*.

The light turned green.

People crossed. Together. Not in sync — the small irregularities were still there, the slightly different walking speeds, the slightly different starting points. But not random either. The group as a whole moved as a *system*. The man with the briefcase walked at a pace that left exactly the right gap between himself and the woman with the bag. The teenager, despite her earlier half-step, did not in fact reach the far curb first; she fell into a position behind the man, in such a way that, when a cyclist swung around the corner from the side street, the teenager was already half a meter to the right of the cyclist's path, and the man was already half a meter to the left, and the cyclist passed cleanly through the gap that had, somehow, been left for him.

Daniel didn't move immediately.

He stayed at the edge of the curb. Observing.

A car approached from the side street. *Too fast.* The car was over the speed limit; this was Vienna, where the local police enforced even minor speed violations with a kind of chilly professional rigor; the car was, by the laws of the city, in violation. Someone should have hesitated. Someone — the man with the briefcase, the woman with the bag — should have noticed the speed of the car, broken stride, looked to the side, perhaps stepped back. No one did. The crossing pedestrians

continued at their existing pace. The car continued at its existing speed. The collision was, by any normal calculation, two seconds away.

The car slowed.

Not abruptly. *Just enough.* The driver did not brake. The driver did not flash his lights. The driver did not, as far as Daniel could see, notice that anything was happening. The car simply *eased*, by the smallest discernible margin, in a way that put it perfectly out of phase with the crossing pedestrians. Then it accelerated again.

Daniel stepped forward.

He took a single, exploratory step off the curb. Not into the path of the car. Not toward any of the crossing pedestrians. Just one step. He wanted, he understood as he was doing it, to *see* what would happen.

The car slowed.

Just enough.

Daniel's breath caught.

That wasn't chance.

He stepped back onto the curb.

The car accelerated again, in the same fluid, undeliberate-looking way, returning to its previous path. The flow resumed. Perfectly.

Daniel did not move for a long moment. He stood at the edge of the curb with his hands in the pockets of his overcoat and his breath held tight against the inside of his ribs, and he watched the intersection complete its small choreography, and he watched the next group of pedestrians gather on the other side, and he watched a tram approach from the boulevard and slow at the appropriate distance, and he understood, in a slow cold settling, that what he had just done had not been a *test*. It had been a *measurement*. He had done what he had done in order to confirm a hypothesis that, in the long sleepless hours of the night, had been forming itself in him without his permission.

The hypothesis was: the world is responding.

Not to the question. To *him.*

"Interesting."

The voice came from behind him.

Calm. Measured.

Daniel turned.

She stood a few steps away. Dark hair, loose to the shoulders, slightly damp at the tips from the mist. A face he could not, in his first half-second of looking, have described. Pale. Very pale, in the particular porcelain-white way of southern Italian women whose families had originally come from somewhere along the Adriatic coast. High cheekbones. Full mouth, neither smiling nor not. Dark eyes — neither hostile nor warm — that watched him with the kind of attention one normally reserved for a chess move one had been waiting for. She wore a long camel-tan trench coat over dark clothing. She wore no jewelry. She was, he saw, unreasonably still. She had the kind of stillness that absorbed attention rather than inviting it; in any other context, he would have walked past her on the street without consciously seeing her.

She was, in this context, the first person his attention had truly fixed on in twelve hours.

"You saw it," she said.

It was not a question.

Daniel didn't answer immediately. Instead, he studied her — her posture, her stillness, the absence of hesitation in the way she had spoken. He had, in his career, met perhaps three people who held themselves as she held herself. Two had been senior researchers at quantitative firms; one had been a former intelligence officer he had once consulted with on a problem of pattern detection in financial fraud. All three had shared this particular quality. They had not, when speaking to him, performed any of the small social adjustments most people made when speaking to a stranger. They had not tilted their head a few degrees. They had not let their eyes drift, briefly, to gather a second's worth of judgment about him before locking back. They had simply looked at him and said the sentence they had decided to say.

"What did I see?" he asked.

A faint smile. Not warm. Not cold. The smile of a colleague.

"A variable that shouldn't behave that way."

Daniel's jaw tightened. "That's one way to describe it."

She stepped closer. Not into his physical space — she stopped a careful distance away, enough that he did not feel that he was being approached. But somehow

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